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BY MICHAEL H. COOK, Editor

## THE AMERICAN DREAM: BEING A CONSULTANT?

Are you thinking about becoming a consultant? Hardly a week passes without my receiving a call or letter from a training director or human resources manager seeking information or advice on how to make the transition from the humdrum life of the training practitioner to the "glamorous and exciting" world of the *independent* HRD consultant. My advice is always the same: approach with extreme caution!

Granted, consulting is one of the fastest growing and most profitable fields in America today. And, the potential is even greater for providing these types of services on the international HRD scene. However, unless you are prepared to deliver a high-quality, professional product or service on a *regular* basis, you might think twice about making consulting a full-time venture!

Referring to the consulting opportunities currently available, Walt Mahler, president of Mahler Associates, Midland, N.J., points out, "It's a very fertile field right now, even with the present state of the economy. However, a practitioner contemplating the consulting role must identify a specific area of expertise within his or her background and must be able to segment that area from the HRD market before he or she can begin to think of doing this (consulting) on a full-time, independent basis."

### How About Part-Time?

Consulting on a *part-time* basis, outside of regular job responsibilities, can provide you with an excellent hedge against inflation. In addition,

this approach requires little start-up capital. Many successful consultants reap impressive profits while working out of their basements and attics. More importantly, taking a "getting only your feet wet" approach to consulting can offer you the experience and contacts needed to eventually focus your efforts on a full-time basis.

Len Nadler, professor in the School of Education at the George Washington University, Washington, D.C. and president of Nadler Associates, remarks "You must have or be willing to develop a high tolerance for *ambiguity* as well as for *frustration!*"

Regarding consulting opportunities within the HRD field, Dr. Nadler points out, "Lower-level organizations are using fewer consultants, mainly due to inflationary times and resultant budget cuts. However, higher-level organizations are utilizing more consultants in upper levels of the corporate structure. These organizations are finding that they can get the job done by an 'expert' while not having to worry about the costs associated with employee overhead."

"I run into a lot of people who ask if they should quit their jobs and go into consulting," says Frederic Margolis, director of the Institute for Planned Change, a Washington, D.C.-based consulting firm. "My first reaction to most of them is DON'T do it just because it looks romantic and easy! In addition to dealing with ambiguity and frustration, one must be able to deal with a high degree of *insecurity*, while exhibiting both a *dedication to the pro-*

*fession* and a sense of *entrepreneurism*.

"Instead," adds Margolis, "many of these people simply take a rate that a consultant has charged their organization, multiply that figure by 365 (days), and are halfway to the bank before they have thought through the entire process. Many years ago," he continues, "Malcolm Knowles raised two qualities he felt should be characteristic of a consultant: a sense of professionalism and flair. Many people are extremely competent and are not making a living as consultants. On the other hand, if you're all flair and no professionalism, forget it!"

I think all will agree, there are a great deal of consulting opportunities available in the HRD profession today, even during these inflationary times. Training people has become a popular practice in most organizations and there aren't enough good training practitioners around to do the job effectively; organizations are looking for good courses and good instructors. As an independent consultant, whether full or part-time, you have a chance to turn this opportunity into dollars . . . *if* you have a marketable and professional product in yourself!

In an upcoming issue, we will take an in-depth look at the lives of several HRD consultants, focusing on their work, life styles and tips for success. In that same issue, we will ask several "clients" to share: what types of consultants they currently use, what they expect from a consultant and how much they will budget for these services in 1982.

