

Going Back

Can free agents
return to
corporate life?


By Amy Newman

If you're working as an internal consultant, it's likely that you can relate to one or both of these scenarios: 1) Business is slow, you're tired of competing fiercely for projects, and you feel isolated. Or, 2) You're over-committed, working 70-hour weeks, and can't remember what your kids look like. Sometimes a scenario lasts for months, or years; other times, you're on a roller

coaster ride—barely recovering from the up-cycle before having to deal with another stomach-dropping downturn.

During the highs, lows, and sometimes in-between, many of us think about what we left. We start fantasizing about having an actual job description (what a concept!), being part of a team again, and getting a steady paycheck. But can we—and should we—go back

to corporate life, particularly in this economy?

There are many good reasons to be a free agent  "Choosing Free Agency," *Your Career* (November 2002 T+D). People leave organizations (or managers, as we now say) either by choice or chance. Whether motivated personally or professionally, we find that working independently is the best option at the time. In my case, after working for *Fortune* 500 companies for 12 years, I started feeling as if I were wearing a shirt that didn't quite fit. I felt out of place in the corporate structure, had no desire to take the international assignment that was to be my next career move, and, well, just needed a change. Five years later, I'm still independent and loving it, but I admit to occasionally feeling the corporate pull. Like most people who leave, I never thought I'd do this forever.

The training field offers many career choices and great flexibility. Bill Wells, who has more than 30 years of experience as a corporate executive, has spent his career in a series of internal and external jobs. Wells started out working in a corporate setting and then left to work independently, specializing in HR, diversity, and organization development. After three years, he received an offer he couldn't refuse: vice president of global diversity for a major corporation that, as he says, was "very committed to making real changes." Ah, every learning professional's dream!

Of course, no job can last forever, and Bill is once again president of W. Wells and Associates. But perhaps Bill's route is the ideal career path. Aren't we better employees or consultants if we can offer credibility gained from working within organizations and an objective perspective based on external experience? We must make the best decision for ourselves in each situation, present ourselves well, and hope that hiring managers appreciate the skills that we gained externally.

Pulled back in

The lure of having a corporate identity and being part of something larger than Me Inc. is powerful. I miss walking through Times Square and seeing the lit-up name of the corporation I worked for. And I still troll the job boards, just to see what's available. Some of the descriptions sound perfect for me.

But every career decision has trade-offs, and returning to an internal corporate learning job is no exception. Lorri Zelman, director of recruiting at Strategic Workforce Solutions, suggests that free agents think about what they'd

Look Before You Leap


Before you take down that shingle to accept an internal job, ask

- Why did I first decide to leave my internal job? Are those reasons still applicable?
- What will I miss about being on my own? Do the benefits of the new job outweigh what I'm leaving?
- Am I just having a bad day (or week or month)? How will I feel tomorrow (or next week, next month)?
- What did I learn from working independently? Can I apply that knowledge to the new job?
- What are my expectations of the new opportunity? Can those be met realistically?
- What will it be like to work for someone again? Does the hiring manager appreciate my experience as a free agent?
- Is this the best opportunity for me, or if I'm more patient will I find others that suit me better?

give up by returning to an office job: working in pajamas (sometimes), having flexibility and control over schedules (sort of), and being accountable only to themselves (if you don't count clients).

When Wells returned to a corporate job, he was managing people again. It's great to have someone to delegate to, isn't it? We independents get tired of doing everything ourselves (or relying on Kinko's during those crunch times), but managing people isn't for everyone either. We must make sure not to idealize corporate life. Working as part of a team is great, but only if it's a functional team. If you're like me, you may feel more isolated in a large corporation than when working alone. It's like moving from a small town to a big city: The move itself doesn't guarantee a larger social network.

Returning to corporate life is a big decision, as was leaving. We have to remember the reasons we left and carefully consider what life will be like "back on the inside." As with expatriates returning to their home country, reintegration can be difficult.

Zelman has worked with people who had to make large lifestyle changes after returning to corporate life, including adjusting their sleep patterns. Going from working on our own schedule to the traditional 9-to-5 hours may be the most difficult transition. Fortunately, there are many other options to gain stability, including finding an organization that offers flex time, joining a consulting firm, or looking for part-time work. And we're not exempt from getting professional help. A skilled career counselor can help t+d professionals weigh options and present their experience to hiring managers in the best light.  "Trainer, Assess Thyself!" (July 2002 T+D).

The search

As with any job search, the process doesn't begin when we want a new job. Ideal-

ly, we've been building our network and keeping in touch with recruiters even while working independently. Zelman knows hiring managers who are open to hiring former free agents and those who are not. She suggests that, as with any interview process, we focus on our skills that match the job requirements and be ready to discuss specific projects we completed. The key, Zelman says, is to prove that we successfully ran a business and consulting wasn't just a sideline or something we dabbled in.

Unfortunately, the same economy that leaves consultants without projects leaves workers without jobs. Particularly in a tight job market, we may need to refer to our prior internal roles to show how our experience matches current openings. We'll need to offer all prerequisite skills in order to compete with people hoping to move from internal positions similar to the one we're applying for.

Hiring managers who look only at job titles hoping for an exact match will miss out on great candidates who survive by their own initiative, hold themselves accountable, juggle multiple projects, and meet tight deadlines. When the economy and job market pick up, so will opportunities for independents to return to corporate life. Then some of us will once again enjoy paid vacation time, office gossip, lunch with co-workers, and too many meetings.

And if the job doesn't work out, we can always go out on our own.

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