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Self-employed workers on rise in Canada

Consultants, contract workers a growing trend among baby boomers

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Casey Plaizier couldn't imagine losing the equivalent of a full work day every week stuck commuting on the gridlocked streets of Calgary. Like many self-employed consultants, he decided several years ago to work for himself out of his home office.

That's not exactly true -- the human resources consultant and partner with Greenhill Consulting Group in Calgary actually has many bosses in the form of clients. However, he is part of the trend toward leaving a steady paycheck to work as consultants, contract workers and in other self-employed roles, which is increasing according to new data.

The Canadian consulting market is growing at a rate of 5.5 per cent annually and rising, a study commissioned by the Canadian Association of Management Consultants (CMC-Canada) shows.

"It gives you a tremendous amount of flexibility," says Plaizier. "Once people make the move from being an employee to the consulting side and they get a taste of it ... they realize this is for real."

No office politics, the ability to work where and when you want, unlimited ability to balance work and personal life, potentially lucrative contracts -- these are all benefits that lured Plaizier to the world of consulting several years ago.

Another study found baby boomers are leading the trend, but they're not alone. More workers appear willing to trade in their full-time jobs for the uncertainty -- and freedom -- that goes along with being your own boss.

A recent Strategic Counsel survey confirms the appeal of the full-time job scenario is losing ground to new career options, such as the "project professional," who does temporary contracts in-house.

Sixty-two per cent of boomers earning more than \$80,000 a year choose project professional or self-employment as the most appealing work scenario, versus 37 per cent who choose full-time employment.

"The desire for work-life balance and new career experiences has led many professionals to consider this career alternative," says Anne Bell, managing director of Resources Global Professionals' Canadian operations. "It provides them with the freedom to have a stimulating professional life and a complete personal life."

"It's not just baby boomers," says Plaizier, adding he knows individuals that range from 30 to 45 years old who are making the switch to self-employment, in one form or another.

Heather Osler, president of CMC-Canada, says the number of mid-size management consultancies is also rising and Canada is seeing a "dramatic surge," with the leading business advisory firms competing directly with the well-known strategy consulting firms.

"The robust market is further supported by the entrepreneurial activity of niche and boutique management consulting firms," says Osler.

Demand for services in the private and public sectors is outpacing global market growth rates, according to the CMC-Canada study, while experienced consultants generally offer a more cost-competitive alternative to clients.

The rising number of self-employed contract workers and consultants, along with those who form strategic partnerships, has created a new dynamic for managers.

Effectively managing this growing segment of the workforce requires different management styles and collaboration techniques, but there can also be financial benefits associated with using consultants or contract workers, since companies can reduce the size of their permanent, full-time, in-house workforce.

Plaizier cautions people thinking about handing in their notice to pursue a career on their terms to carefully weigh all aspects of making the leap well in advance of leaving full-time jobs.

Workers should first begin to develop a strong network of potential clients and research their options.

"In consulting, you are in perpetual job search mode," he says, adding sales and marketing skills are just as important as the field of practice itself.

There is a greater administrative burden on self-employed consultants and contract workers, and it also requires a higher level of self-discipline. It takes time to get established, with a strong degree of credibility in the marketplace.

If you're still willing and able to make the leap, remember that you may not generate any money in the first few months. You also need to research whether there is a market for your services where you're located.

While it's a lifestyle that offers a lot of advantages, the most obvious drawback is the lack of a steady paycheck and benefits. You also have to remember that although you make your own schedule, you always have to be aware of new opportunities to sell yourself.

"True consultants' minds are always working," says Plaizier.

In other words, you reap only what you sow.



Casey Plaizier of the Greenhill Consulting Group revels in his new role as a self-employed human resources consultant. Baby boomers like Plaizier are leading a trend toward self-employment in Canada.

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