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Succeeding as an Independent Evaluation Consultant: Requisite Skills and Attributes

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Abstract

Independent evaluation consulting offers autonomy, lifelong learning, and gratifying work. It is lucrative, and the market is growing. So why are not all evaluators independent consultants? Evaluation requires one set of skills; independent consulting another. Evaluators conduct evaluations; independent evaluation consultants also operate a business, solicit work, and market their brand. To be successful, they must tolerate the greater risk, manage the increased stress, and balance the heightened work–life demands of being independent. This chapter presents some of the key skills and attributes required to be a successful independent evaluation consultant. Distinctions between the skills needed to conduct research and those required to be a successful consultant are delineated and the attributes of successful consultants are explored. Research findings are interspersed with anecdotes from successful evaluation consultants throughout. Thoughts from three evaluation consultants representing different geographic areas, ethnic and racial backgrounds, and experiences are also highlighted. Though not for everyone, with the right skills and personal attributes, independent evaluation consulting is a viable career path. © 2019 Wiley Periodicals, Inc., and the American Evaluation Association.

Independent consulting is lucrative; in 2017, the U.S. market valued at \$59 billion and the global market was estimated at \$250 billion. Both markets had increased by over 6% from the year prior (Global Consult-

ing Market, 2018). This economic trend has made independent evaluation consulting a popular fulltime career choice for evaluators, and a means by which many earn additional income. The interest in independent evaluation consulting is reflected in the size of the Independent Consulting Topical Interest Group (IC TIG) membership, which has been among the largest TIGs of the American Evaluation Association, averaging 1,120 members over the past 8 years (AEA, 2018).

What is a Consultant?

The best servants of the people, like the best valets, must whisper unpleasant truths in the master's ear. It is the court fool, not the foolish courtier, whom the king can least afford to lose.

- Walter Lippmann

Peter Block (1981) defines a consultant as, “a person in a position to have some influence over an individual, a group, or an organization but no direct power to make changes or implement programs” (p. 2). Cohen (2009) argues that a consultant is “anyone who gives advice or performs other services of a professional or semiprofessional nature in return for compensation” (p. 191). Alan Weiss (2003) surmises that whereas most clients know what they want, few know what they need, and the difference is the added value. He then defines a consultant as the person who provides that added value. This definition best describes what independent evaluation consultants do. They provide added value by assessing the value, merit, or worth of a program (or policy, strategy, etc.) with a focus toward improving the program and its outcomes (Scriven, 1991).

Benefits and Drawbacks of Independent Consulting

Every year in consulting is like three years in the corporate world because you have multiple clients, multiple issues - you grow so much.

- Indra Nooyi

With low start-up costs, independent evaluation consulting is an attractive career for those seeking change or part-time work. However, evaluation is one skill; independent consulting is another. In addition to conducting evaluations, independent evaluation consultants operate a business, solicit work, and market their brand. To be successful, independent evaluation consultants must tolerate the greater risk, manage the increased stress, and balance the heightened work–life demands of being independent.

Becoming an independent evaluation consultant has many benefits. One can choose how to work (intermittently, part-time, fulltime), with whom to work (non-profits, public schools, private corporations), and

where to work (in an office, from home, at a co-working space). One has the autonomy to manage one's workload, work hours, and type of work one does. Working with several clients, programs, and organizations provides multiple learning opportunities. Viola and McMahon, in *Consulting and Evaluation* (2010) identified five reasons why the 15 independent evaluation consultants they surveyed were drawn to independent consulting. They were: (1) seeing the impact of one's work, (2) broadening and enhancing one's professional life, (3) having the flexibility to work wherever one chooses, (4) working for one's self, and (5) enjoying clear indicators of success. Exhibit 3.1 shows responses from three AEA IC TIG members whom the author asked to share the biggest benefits they have experienced by being an independent evaluation consultant.

Do not be fooled, independent evaluation consulting is hard work. As one IC TIG member describes it, "Being an independent evaluation consultant is great! You get to work wherever and whenever you want for whomever you choose—it's the best 75-hour work-week you'll ever work!" Among challenges noted by independent evaluation consultants are the time and effort required to manage a business, market one's self or firm, find viable work, and weather variable work/cash flow (Viola & McMahon, 2010). Because of these challenges, evaluators who wish to become independent consultants should equip themselves with the requisite consulting skills.

Consulting Skills

Marketing

Marketing is not a battle of products, it's a battle of perceptions.

- Jack Trout

Before deciding to become an independent evaluation consultant, the most important question to consider is, "How will I find work?" Marketing is one means of finding work and is how one presents one's self or business, that is, one's *brand*, to others (Chapter 8, this issue). Once you identify how you want others to see you, marketing is how you get others to see you.

Frequently, independent consultants' first marketing efforts are to create websites, design business cards, develop brochures, and wait for the phone to ring. They believe that, like in the movie, *Field of Dreams*, "if you build it, they will come." This is a popular fallacy and one reason many consultants fail (Mullen, 2018). To be successful, one needs to reach the "economic buyer," the person in charge of deciding whether to hire you for work (Weiss, 2003).

Marketing is not what most independent consultants want to do; it is what they have to do to find work. It can be intimidating to meet with strangers and convince them that you are the best evaluator for the job.

Exhibit 3.1. Benefits of Being an Independent Consultant: A Mini-Case Study of Three Independent Evaluation Consultants

Question: What are the biggest benefits you have experienced by being an independent evaluation consultant?

Nicole Bowman (Mohican/Munsee), PhD

President, Bowman Performance Consulting (Shawano, WI) and Researcher/Evaluator, LEAD & WEC Centers, University of WI-Madison

“The ability to be autonomous and independent with thoughts, production schedule, and selecting projects/partners when working or writing. This also allows me to be authentically connected with colleagues who have the resources, intellectual integrity, and humanitarian values that I seek to align my precious time with. On behalf of my Tribal Nations and communities I cannot afford to be indecisive, inefficient, or ineffectual in the advocacy through academia work I do in service to my people. It is a sacred responsibility I’ve been given by my elders and those original instructions must be operationalized to the best of my ability in contemporary spaces. Being an independent consultant allows me the freedom to do this.”

Holli Bayonas, PhD

President & Senior Evaluation Consultant, iEvaluate, LLC (Greensboro, NC) and Adjunct Professor, University of Connecticut Online Graduate Certificate in Program Evaluation

“The greatest benefit I have experienced being an independent evaluator is flexibility. I have been fortunate to be able to choose clients that I know will engage in evaluation and be collaborative, and I have been able to conduct the work at hours and days that fit around my personal schedule. If I want to put my hours in at 4 a.m., I can do that, and not have to wait for a typical 8 to 5 workday. I also enjoy the freedom to hire who I want. This means always having a high-performing team.”

Corre Robinson

President, CEO and Senior Research Associate, ETR Services, LLC (Durham, NC)

“I would say the opportunity to build great work teams and partnerships with people that are invested in causes in which they believe. We are very much mission driven and service oriented. We are also a lifestyle organization that provides its team members the space to bring their whole selves to this work. That’s a great privilege.”

Weiss (2003) posits marketing differently, “Marketing is the art and science of creating need. You can reach out to people to do this, but it’s far more effective to attract them to you.” In this definition, Weiss reverses the direction of sales, positing that marketing is not about selling but setting yourself apart such that buyers seek you.

How does one do this? Marketing necessitates actively ensuring that people know you, your brand, and your availability. Several means of doing this are to network, advertise, blog, speak, publish, etc. However, as Weiss noted, the best marketing is no marketing. Based on the author’s discussion with many successful independent evaluation consultants, repeat clients and clients who find them via personal referrals/word of mouth marketing make up the majority of their business.

Business/Financial Management

Leading a business (even a sole consultancy) requires business/financial management skills. These skills include how to project workflow, manage finances when work fluctuates, and budget conservatively. Research by the Small Business Administration reveals that, in the past decade, only 67% of new businesses survived at least 2 years and fewer than half (44%) survived 4 years (Diad Consulting, 2018). According to the National Federation of Independent Business (NFIB), over the lifetime of a business, only 39% are profitable. A recent U.S. Bank study found that 82% of business failures are due to cash flow issues (in particular, the lack of cash flowing to the business). Common mistakes business owners make are: (1) overestimating future sales volumes; (2) overspending during the start-up phase; (3) being passive about past-due receivables; (4) not using a cash-flow budget; and (5) not ensuring a large enough cash cushion for when times are lean (Small Business Trends, 2016).

Business/financial management skills are also important for determining when to hire staff, where to invest profits, and when to close, as Maack discusses in Chapter 13 of this issue. If one lacks business or financial management skills, one can work with an accountant or bookkeeper to track sales/costs, navigate times when cash flow is variable, and plan for future growth.

Organization

Organizational skills are critical to increasing one’s efficiency and profitability. Such skills include knowing how to prioritize commitments, make schedules, minimize interruptions, streamline tasks, and manage other constraints. If one is managing a business, one needs to ensure that staff use their time effectively; know procedures for contacting clients, developing proposals, and responding to crises; and handle themselves professionally. Organized business owners are successful because they leave little to chance. They draft organizational charts and define staff expectations

and responsibilities in writing. These organizational documents ensure that each employee understands her or his role and that, as a group, a staff functions cohesively. Being organized facilitates more time to focus on paid work.

Time Management

The key is not to prioritize what's on your schedule, but to schedule your priorities.
- Stephen R. Covey

Commonly, independent evaluation consultants juggle multiple projects at one time while marketing their skills, negotiating budgets and contracts, networking with others, blogging, tweeting, publishing, etc. Given these demands, time management is a paramount skill.

Gail Barrington, in her book, *Consulting Start-Up and Management: A Guide for Evaluators and Applied Researchers* (2012), dedicates an entire chapter to managing time. As she cautions, consultants are often unaware of how much time they spend on various tasks. To develop time management skills, she suggests that independent consultants track their time and analyze how much time they spend on which activities. Types of activities include tasks that repeat, such as monthly invoicing or developing monthly status reports, and those that do not, such as hiring staff. Tasks can be further divided into paid tasks (e.g., analyzing data and writing reports) and unpaid tasks (e.g., meeting with one's accountant) and/or tasks that are less time-consuming (updating one's website) versus more time-consuming (developing and piloting instruments). Using these data, one can streamline repeated or unpaid tasks to maximize the time available for time-intensive or more profitable tasks. For independent evaluation consultants, time management through better time forecasting can mean the difference between a profitable business and no business.

Networking

Marketing necessitates actively ensuring that people know you, your brand, and your availability. One way to do this is through networking. Networking involves using one's contacts to increase one's business, enhance one's knowledge, and expand one's sphere of influence. One can network as part of a formal event such as when at a business meeting, national conference, or advertised networking meeting. It is also something one can do informally, such as asking clients for the names of colleagues who may need your services or asking clients to recommend you to their colleagues. Networking with other evaluators is also important. The savvy evaluator recognizes other evaluators as collaborators, not competitors, and thus people with whom they may do business or who may recommend them to potential clients. Per Upton and Maack (2006), over half of IC TIG survey respon-

dents in 2006 had collaborated with another evaluator and 93% of those representing firms with three or more persons had engaged in formal collaborations by subcontracting with independent evaluators.

Consultant Attributes

My greatest strength as a consultant is to be ignorant and ask a few questions.

- Peter Drucker

Not everyone who possesses marketing, business management, organizational, time management, and networking skills has the personal attributes needed to be a successful independent consultant. Barrington (2012) identified five personal characteristics that independent evaluation consultants have: (1) intellectual capacity, (2) self-confidence, (3) moxie, (4) adaptability, and (5) endurance. Other lists note that great consultants are flexible, confident, persistent, studious, disciplined, and sociable, while also being problem-solvers and hard workers (Pauwels Consulting, 2016). If one Googles consulting and personal attributes, one will find many such lists, suggesting that consulting skills alone will not make one successful as an independent consultant; personal attributes are worth considering as well.

Willing to Take Calculated Risks

Consultants must be willing to take calculated risks. Risk is inherent anytime one goes out on her or his own to find work. In fact, risk drives many independent evaluation consultants who believe the motto “with great risk comes great reward.” Even successful independent evaluation consultants face risk, as markets fluctuate, new demands arise, or other vicissitudes occur. As one’s business expands, there are risks related to expanding, such as when and whom to hire and whether a new employee will negatively change one’s business culture, practice, and profitability. Being disposed to risk and using it as a catalyst helps many independent consultants succeed.

Self-Confident

Independent evaluation consultants must exude confidence. This confidence should not be false, but rather, stem from the belief that evaluators possess a rare skill that is in demand, that one has those skills, and that evaluation results that are appropriately utilized can transform programs and people. This confidence, sometimes more than any other thing, separates evaluation consultants from one another and affects potential clients’ decisions on whom to hire. As Jack Trout (2015) wrote about marketing, “The perception is the reality. Everything else is an illusion.” Confidence in

one's skills equates to confidence within the buyer that she or he has made a smart investment.

Sociable

Independent evaluation consultants need to be sociable and personable since they must convince others to contract them for work. As the business owner, one's sociability and personability are stand-ins for how one's company is viewed. If clients do not view one as easy to work with and enjoyable to be around, one risks alienating a client and never winning that client in the first place. These attributes are also important in other areas, such as networking, working with other evaluators, and hiring staff. As a friend once shared, "Used to be 50 cents and a smile could buy you a good cup of coffee. Now that 50 cents won't get you anything, but that smile will still take you places!"

Able to Manage Stress/Balance Work–Life

Because variable workflow can be stressful, the ability to balance work–life demands and manage stress is an attribute worth noting. Frequently, work–life demands cause stress while stress causes work–life balances to become destabilized. Effectively organizing one's work and managing one's time are ways the independent evaluation consultant can reduce stress and maintain a healthy work–life balance. Reliably projecting workflow, maintaining adequate cash reserves, and cultivating supportive networks are other ways to reduce stress, allowing one to prioritize work/life demands. Work–life balance can also be a struggle to maintain when we have too much work to do. Moses, in this issue, discusses the importance of saying "No."

Other Attributes

Grittiness, including persistence and resilience, is also an important attribute one must possess as it help one stick to one's goals and passions (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). This is especially true when work ebbs and flows, requiring one to adapt to lean times and busy times. In a sort of corollary of Murphy's law, it often appears that when one is most busy, opportunities for work arise more often. This necessitates that evaluation consultants respond to marketplace demands, even at the most inconvenient times. This and other situations require that consultants be flexible and adaptable, as one is not always in control of when work is available, proposals are due, or meetings get rescheduled.

While the list of attributes of successful consultants can be long, perhaps the best attribute is knowing yourself (see Exhibit 3.2), such that you can decide whether independent evaluation consulting is a smart career path for you.

Exhibit 3.2. Attributes That Have Helped Independent Evaluation Consultants Be Successful: A Mini-Case Study of Three Independent Evaluation Consultants

Question: What personal attributes have most supported your ability to be a successful independent evaluation consultant?

Nicole Bowman (Mohican/Munsee), PhD

President, Bowman Performance Consulting and Researcher/Evaluator, LEAD & WEC Centers, University of WI-Madison

“Neuroplasticity and flexibility, for sure. The interruptions and variances of being CEO, CFO, HR, sales/marketing, Chief Academic Officer, R&D dept, scientist, accountant, bathroom cleaner, employee party planner, legal/contracts negotiator, outreach/ dissemination coordinator, knowledge developer, etc. is demanding on the psyche, body, spirit, and heart! You must also be so solid, clear, and disciplined in your mission, values, and beliefs that you are unafraid to say “no” in order to streamline operations, decisions, resources, etc. to the “yes” that gets you to live the mission daily.”

Holli Bayonas, Ph.D.

President & Senior Evaluation Consultant, iEvaluate, LLC and Adjunct Professor, University of Connecticut Online Graduate Certificate in Program Evaluation

“I think to be an independent consultant one has to be able to set their own deadlines and prioritize. There is no longer the luxury of someone else telling you what the work priorities are, nor checking in to see the progress of the work. In addition, you need to find the extrovert in you. Now that you are a business owner, you are constantly in a position to help someone who wants to improve their program. You can no longer stay in a corner at your spouse’s work parties; networking is a must.”

Corre Robinson

President, CEO and Senior Research Associate, ETR Services, LLC

“I think active listening and anticipating the needs of clients are crucial. From my personal perspective, as an African American male in this field, I think you also have to do your background research before that first encounter and show up in ways that let clients know you take what you are doing seriously and what they are trying to accomplish seriously.”

Changes in Independent Consulting in the Past Decade

Since the 2006 volume, *Independent Evaluation Consulting*, published by New Directions in Evaluation, two major challenges to succeeding as an independent consultant have emerged. They are the increase in the number of independent evaluation consultants and the increase in the use of independent evaluation consultants. The increase in the number of independent evaluation consultants is likely due to the ease of advertising such services via the Internet, resulting in many persons engaging in consulting as a side gig, or reduced health care costs with the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) in 2010 allowing more persons to become fulltime independent consultants (although legal fights around the constitutionality of the ACA are ongoing). The increase in the use of independent evaluation consultants reflects changes globally in the use of consultants across multiple employment areas and jobs, perhaps as a result of the 2008 global financial crash when companies began utilizing independent consultants, instead of retaining employees, as a means of cutting costs.

The availability of more independent evaluation consultants has resulted in greater competition while the use of independent evaluation consultants instead of internal staff to conduct evaluations provides more opportunities to independent evaluation consultants. However, it is not clear that the use of independent consultants to conduct evaluations negates the impact of increased competition for evaluation dollars. As a result, more than ever, independent evaluation consultants need to market themselves such that buyers are aware that the evaluator has the knowledge, skills, and mindset to conduct the requested evaluation and thus provides the best value to the buyer.

The increased number of persons marketing themselves as independent evaluation consultants has had multiple impacts. In fact, this was stated as one of the drivers to the Canadian Evaluation Society's (CES) decision to develop the CES Credentialed Evaluator (CE) designation in 2009. Another driver was CES's desire to increase the professionalization of evaluators and the recognition of evaluation as a distinct profession. Although to date AEA has chosen not to develop a parallel credentialing program under its auspices, they and many of its members have pushed for greater rigor in evaluations and have sought to situate evaluation as a distinct profession, with some describing it as a meta-discipline (Scriven, 2008). Whether in the future AEA will decide to develop a credentialing program like CES's remains an open question and would have implications for independent evaluation consultants' marketing and skill expectations. In the meantime AEA has developed a set of competencies that was formally adopted by the board in May 2018 in an effort to professionalize evaluation practice and distinguish evaluation as a profession.

Last, while attributes associated with effective evaluations consultants have not changed, expected skill sets have. Since the 2006 volume, much

greater emphasis has been placed on the visualization and display of data, at least among AEA members. This can be seen in the increased proliferation of and attendance at data visualization sessions at the AEA annual conference. In turn, buyers are seeking to ensure that the evaluators they hire have the skills to develop effective graphics to ensure that data displays accurately and effectively convey evaluation findings.

Summary

A business has to be involving, it has to be fun, and it has to exercise your creative instincts.

- Richard Branson

Despite the uncertainty and risk inherent in being an independent evaluation consultant, there are many benefits. Dan Pink, in his book “Drive” (2009), shared the research that shows that autonomy (the desire to direct our own lives), mastery (the urge to make ourselves better or develop our skills), and purpose (the need to do what we do for reasons bigger than ourselves) are intrinsic motivators people seek in their professional lives. Being an independent evaluation consultant ticks all of these boxes. If one can handle stress, adjust to variable work, balance work/life demands, and use risk as a driver or motivator, independent evaluation consulting may be a smart career choice. If one does not like risk or does not want to be responsible for marketing, managing a business, etc. then working for an evaluation firm or as an internal evaluator may be a better fit. Although being an independent evaluation consultant can be difficult, time consuming, and risky, it provides autonomy, offers multiple opportunities for lifelong learning, and can be financially rewarding. With the right skills and personal attributes, independent evaluation consulting is a viable career path.

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