

NEWS

Caught in layoff net? Consider working for yourself

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By **Jonathan Hemmerdinger**

Former association leaders who have started their own consulting businesses say that entrepreneurship is often an effective way to generate income and maintain business contacts while hunting for full-time jobs.

"If you are looking for a full-time position get yourself out there and meeting like-minded people. And in the meantime, try to do some consulting work," said Marshall Brown, who operates his own executive coaching firm.

"It keeps you fresh. It builds your network," said Claudia Mansfield Sutton, who launched her firm, the Association, Education and Business Institute, in 2002.

AEBI kept Mansfield Sutton active in business, helping her land executive positions at the American Association of School Administrators in 2004 and the Student Youth Travel Association, a position she accepted on March 4.

In a down economy, outsourcing tends to rise, said John H. Graham IV, president and CEO of ASAE & The Center. Graham said that for an employer, full-time workers can't be matched, but "it is often cheaper to employ the help of consultants who work on short-term projects and don't require as many resources. This is especially true when finances are tight."

While consulting is a way to stay connected to your web of contacts between jobs, it can also be viable long term, according to Mike Smith, who founded four companies, including consulting firm Michael Smith Business Development, in 2000. Before that, Smith worked at public relations firms and associations, including The Manufacturing Institute, where he was executive director.

Smith said that independent consultants can earn quite decent salaries, and he said that a small business may even generate equity and be valuable should you choose to sell.

While potentially lucrative, transitioning from executive to independent consultant isn't necessarily easy. "You can't just go out and say, 'I've been a CEO and now I am consulting,'" said Al Rickard, president of Association Vision, a communications firm that Rickard started with Smith in 2000 after spending 20 years as an association executive.

Rickard suggests a targeted approach to selling yourself: "You have to say, 'here's my experience and here's my company and here's specifically what I can offer.'"

Rickard said consultants should turn strengths into specific services that

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associations need. Former CEOs, for instance, might sell themselves as experts in conducting staff audits, Rickard said.

Don't keep it to yourself

Once you have defined your value, tell the world. "It's networking, networking, networking ... the most important recommendation is to continue maintaining your networks," said Woody Sutton, executive vice president of his wife's firm, AEBI, which he recently joined after serving in the U.S. Department of Commerce as assistant secretary for manufacturing and services, an appointed position he left when the administration changed. Before that, Woody Sutton was president of the Air-Conditioning and Refrigeration Institute, now the Air-Conditioning, Heating, and Refrigeration Institute.

Networking got Mansfield Sutton started. "When AASA reduced force, I sent a business card in my Outlook calendar saying that... I would like to stay in touch, and I'm available full-time and part-time and able to do consulting work," she said.

It paid off. "I had three people who had worked with me that said, 'I can use some help with this or that,'" she said.

Once you have work, build your brand's awareness constantly b

y writing for publications, speaking at industry events, and creating a web site targeted to your market, said Smith. Rickard called a professional web site "essential."

Mansfield Sutton said a successful home business also requires all the electronics of a traditional office, including a dedicated phone line. And, both Mansfield Sutton and Rickard suggest hiring an attorney and possibly a bookkeeper and accountant.

Getting started might sound daunting, but Rickard said it's not too expensive or complicated. "Don't be afraid," he said.

Expect to stumble

Even with professional help there are challenges. Mansfield Sutton, for instance, didn't know how much to charge for her services. Rickard faced the same dilemma. He found if he charged too much, he was uncompetitive, too little and people questioned his value.

To find the right balance, Rickard suggests discussing pricing with partner firms. And if one of your

RUN YOUR JOB HUNT LIKE A SMALL BUSINESS



Managing your executive job search like a small business can distinguish you from other candidates, said

Marshall Brown, a professional career and executive coach.

"Just because you are not a company does not mean you don't have a brand," said Brown. "You have to set yourself up as a business."

Brown, who has coached senior executives from leading associations, said it is important to think about how you are different. "You've got to figure out your unique promise of value. That means, what makes you unique to potential employers. What is going to separate you from your competition?" he said.

Executives, Brown said, need to evaluate—and be able to articulate—the value they can bring to employers and the reasons employers should hire them. "For a lot of folks, I find that they can rattle off their strengths. But, they have a hard time putting stories behind that. Give me an example of something," he said.

Like a small business, you might need to spend a little money on image.

Brown suggests executive job seekers get a professional email address—"I don't recommend a Gmail account," he said— professional business cards, and a professional website with a unique domain name.

And mindset is important. "Don't look

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proposals is turned down, ask the client if price was a deciding factor.

Working from home has pitfalls, too. "It's not the same," Rickard said, comparing his home work space to a traditional office. "You have distractions. There is not the same urgency."

Claudia and Woody Sutton are familiar with that problem. "The biggest trick is disciplining yourself. You have an office and you have work to do," said Claudia. "In order to make it work for me, I have to get dressed in the morning and go into the office. I don't answer the door or the home phone."

Both Rickard and Claudia Mansfield Sutton make sure to leave the house daily. Rickard often takes a swim at noon. Mansfield Sutton runs errands. "I do better if I take a break," she said.

With the challenges come benefits. Rickard likes the flexibility of the job, and he said not commuting means his clients get more of his time. Mansfield Sutton said her home office keeps her busy and sharp. "Do I have more work than I can do? No," said Mansfield Sutton. "But there is enough to keep me fresh and excited, while still looking for a full-time job."

at it as being unemployed. I call it between successes. My job right now is to find a job," Brown said.

Tackle your job hunt in the same way you'd seek to land a new consulting client.

"You have to treat your job search just like you would manage a [business] prospect," Brown said. "Timelines. Action plans. Discipline."