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## Are You Trapped By Your Life as a Consultant?

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One night a few weeks before I started writing this article, I was nearing the end of another in a series of very long days. I had been up since 5:00 AM and it was now almost 10:00 PM. Except for meals, I had been at it non-stop, including time spent tending to the needs of my two young children. And this wasn't the first 16+ hour day I had "enjoyed" recently. In fact, lately it seemed all my days seemed the same. I found myself wondering why I had given up my "cushy" company job for this grind.

If this sounds familiar to you, the following article is intended to reassure you that, as a consultant, it is both normal and fixable. (For purposes of this article, the term consultant and business owner will be used interchangeably.) In order to do the latter, you have to be able to recognize the traps that turn what had been a burning desire to be your own boss into a painful nightmare of endless mind-numbing days. By the time you finish reading, you will be able to get back the energy and passion for what it was that made you want to strike out on your own. You will be better equipped to realize your dream without losing your way. And if you haven't fallen prey to any of these traps yet, you'll be better able to identify them and take corrective action before they ensnare you.

In order to be able to escape the seven deadly traps, you must be willing to reframe the thought processes that make you perpetually try to separate your work life and your home life. This way of thinking belongs in the "regular" work world, not in the world of small business. This is particularly crucial if you are like many consultants who work from a home-based office, but it also applies to any small business owner who is the typical combination of President, CEO, CFO, Marketing Director, Sales Executive and Production staff all rolled into one. If you don't change your thought patterns now, you are going to have a hard time achieving one of the most common goals most people identify as to why they left the traditional work world in the first place - the desire to have the flexibility and freedom to make your own work rules.

Face it, as a small business owner, you never really leave your job at the end of the day. Whether you work from a home-based office or have a formal office that you commute to on a regular basis, when you are home with your family and friends, your work is always with you. But that's the beauty of being a consultant, not the beast. Instead of getting caught up in visualizing this fundamental fact as

a noose that keeps you tied to your company and your business so that you can never take a break, look at it as an advantage that allows you to smoothly flow from a work task to a personal task and back again. Think of your home life and your work life as being fused together and you will be better able to manage the demands and pleasures of both. Getting out of the seven most common and deadly traps that follow (Or staying out of them if you are already in.), will enhance your ability to achieve a seamless work/life fusion and will greatly improve your success as a consultant.

The first trap involves perpetually wondering what you should be doing next. It is simple to fall prey to the burning need to keep moving and keep working, in part because you really are passionate about what you are doing, but also because you think it is the only way to make your business successful. However, you need to remember that your “to-do” list will never be finished. This was an “aha” moment for me personally about a year and a half ago. Ever since then I find that it frequently pops into my head at those really overwhelming times when I am most vulnerable and am considering putting together a resume to answer the want ad I saw in last Sunday’s paper.

Remember that you will always keep adding to your ‘to-do’ list; many times you will be adding more items to it than you are taking away. Just like any traditional job, there will be periods when you have peaks and valleys in your workload. When you catch a valley, enjoy it and relax. Go see a movie, meet a friend for a cup of coffee or read a good book. Didn’t you branch out on your own for the flexibility? Grab it while you can.

During my recent work crunch, when I was wondering what possessed me to strike out on my own, I finally sat back and took a closer look at my schedule. Although I knew that I was in the middle of my busiest quarter of the year, I had become so wrapped up in the day to day grind, I couldn’t “see” that the end was near and things would soon ease up considerably. Once I scheduled myself for a fun weekend away with my kids at the end of my current busy period, I felt re-energized to keep going and get through the last of my tasks without feeling deprived and worn out.

The second trap is not being prepared for the times when work isn’t fun. After all aren’t you doing something you are passionate about? Shouldn’t you love every minute of it? It would be great if that were true, but it is most certainly not based in reality. Think about it this way, if you are a parent, aren’t there times when you wish you could send your children away for a while, despite the fact that your love for them is powerful and unconditional? Give yourself the same break as a consultant that you do as a parent. Expect, and prepare for, the fact that there will be times when it isn’t fun. As long as those times do not begin to be the norm, ride it out, finish the task and move onto something else.

The third trap is failing to plan for and schedule time away from work. As a business owner, you need to be careful not to work all of the time, as tempting, (and as pleasurable for some people), as it may be. Being a workaholic is not a good thing; there will always be something to do. If you find yourself unwilling to take time away, perhaps you need to examine yourself and your personality more closely. Is your entire ego tied up in work? If it is, you may need to examine why you work such long hours. For some people, it's not so much that there are important things to do, but that they find status and refuge in simply being *busy*. If that describes you, maybe you need to spend some time really learning to value yourself for more than the work that you do.

The fourth trap lies in not clearly defining your priorities so that you understand and accept where your time should be going on a day to day basis. When I first started on my own, I had two very young children. My plan was to work part-time, slowly increasing my hours so that I would be ready to return to full-time work as they were ready for school. For me, the priorities in the early years were family first, work second. For someone else who might have worked out a deal with their partner to really gun it out for a year or two in order to establish themselves and their company or for an unattached person who doesn't have a family to answer to, the priorities may be entirely different. You need to know and understand how your unique set of priorities affect the day to day decisions you make regarding how you spend your time.

Over the years as my children have gotten older, the balance in my life has shifted, but it is still not 50-50. So far I have not needed to turn down work to assure that I had enough family time, but I have not spent as much time actively seeking business as I might have if I were trying to replace a full-time income. And frankly, although I own my own business, I am one of those people who work to live, not vice versa. In my mind, I will always be willing to make time for family and fun.

The fifth trap is in failing to fully understand the amount money that it takes to run a business. It is easy to be lured into the high hourly or daily rates consultants charge and multiply that by 40; thinking that with a little off the top for expenses and taxes, the rest is cash in your pocket. Don't forget that every pencil you buy and every piece of paper you use costs you money. Every time your computer crashes you have to either spend your valuable time fixing it, or pay someone to do it for you. And that's if you have the low overhead of a home-based office. If not, you are paying rent and utilities for an office on top of everything else. Suddenly your take-home hourly rate is much lower than you estimated, none of which takes into account the amount of time you spend on non-billable activities like marketing and sales or keeping up with the technical information you need to be able to offer your clients quality services. Before you know it, your net profit slips to half or less of your hourly rate and you are left wondering where all the money went.

If you have already struck out on your own or are still thinking of doing so, stop and take some time to crunch the numbers again with all of the additional expenses taken out. If you still think you can live on that amount, keep going. If not, you either need to raise your rates or increase your billable time. Maybe you can cut your expenses a bit as well.

The sixth trap is not being able to say no. Some consultants are so afraid of turning away business that they take anything and everything, regardless of whether their business is capable of providing the service or not. Then they find themselves under qualified, providing sub-par service and angering a paying client who certainly won't be back for repeat business and who isn't going to recommend your company to a colleague. Sometimes, it becomes a financial issue, particularly in the early stages of getting your business up and running or when you hit the inevitable slow periods and bills are looming that need to be paid. Regardless of the way in which you rationalize your decision, the end result is a losing proposition. Your clients will appreciate your honesty in letting them know what you are capable of doing, both in terms of the skill level and the qualifications of your company as well as in available time and resources. The long-term profitability of your company depends upon your ability to carefully evaluate the various business opportunities that come your way and choose the ones you will undertake wisely

The seventh trap is in not being able to delegate. For consultants, there is tendency to think no one can do the job quite as well as you can. As a solo practitioner, this is more difficult to do, but you may find that hiring a part-time or even as needed administrative person to do invoicing or prepare documents may be well worth it. As the business owner you may feel as though you own the right and/or responsibility to solve all of the problems and do all of the work. This isn't healthy on several levels. First, what happens when you do need to take a break? Maybe you get ill or you have a family crisis that requires you to go away. If you haven't set things up to carry on in your absence, things really may fall apart and you will have to work all that much harder to put it back together again, if you even can.

Second, what happens when you eventually burn out? Your creativity and skill level going to drop dramatically and hinder your company's progress. Do you really want to take a chance that all of your hard work will go for naught? How about your clients? Do you think they feel really good about your company if they know that you are the only one who knows anything about what's happening? Your clients will feel better knowing that your company isn't just you.

It may help if you learn to think more in terms of coaching rather than delegating. As a coach, you retain an important role in the eventual completion of the task and you get to stay involved in it, albeit at a more detached level. Coaching

others to perform certain tasks also allows you to stay passionate about all of the different aspects of running a business.

So how many of these traps have trapped you? If you are like most consultants, probably a couple of them speak volumes about how things are going for you right now. And if not now, maybe last week or last month. If this is the case for you, take the time over the next weeks to think and revise where necessary. Life is too short to miss out on the moments of pure bliss that come from doing what you love, whether it be a traditional work task, taking a walk with your spouse, or lying on the ground with your children and deciding what the clouds look like.

You can do it if you remember that the balance that you are trying to achieve as a consultant is totally different than the one that worked for you as a worker. "Don't treat your business and family as two separate worlds... Instead, recognize that your commitments to these two spheres should enrich one another. After all, the stakes are high in both, and effective strategies that balance home and work can give you the best of both worlds." (*Your So-Called Life: The Overachieving Entrepreneur's Guide to making Time for a Real Life*; by Eric Freedman; posted at [www.entrepreneur.com](http://www.entrepreneur.com); March 1999.)

### **Recommended Readings:**

#### **Books:**

*Do What You Love and the Money Will Follow* Marcia Sinetar (Dell Books)  
*Finding Your Perfect Work*, Paul and Sarah Edwards (Tarcher/Putnam)  
*Making a living Without a Job*, Barbara Winter (Bantam Doubleday Dell)  
*The Passion Plan*, (Richard Chang)

#### **Online:**

[www.Entrepreneur.com](http://www.Entrepreneur.com) (Entrepreneur Magazine)  
[www.startupjunkies.org](http://www.startupjunkies.org)  
[www.startupjournal.com](http://www.startupjournal.com) (The Wall Street Journal Center for Entrepreneurs)  
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