

CONSULTING TIP OF THE MONTH

ON YOUR OWN – OR AS A TEAM?

by David H. Vahlsing, PE, [Chemical Consultants Network](#)

Some consultants work alone and some join with others to share workload and to create a business entity that can be stronger than the sum of the individuals. How can you decide which form is best for you?

Your client(s) and the personalities of you and your potential partners will probably impact this choice more than any other factors.

For example, if you expect assignments of long duration with a just a few clients, you clearly don't need to team up. You will probably sign contractual agreements (after review by a good lawyer) that could be in place for years. You won't need marketing or much accounting help either. Your client will also provide you with all of the unseen and often unappreciated support systems that keep business humming.

However, if you don't expect to work for just one client, then teaming up with others is worth consideration. Running a small engineering and technology business today is extremely complicated if you have multiple clients, work in several States and produce a work product that must be documented. If your jobs are varied and of relatively short duration, a constant stream of proposals, contracts and finished reports is required and they must be produced in quantity and with attention given to good appearance and accuracy. Nothing sells your next job better than the very well done project, delivered on time and within budget. Can you effectively carry out all of these activities yourself?

If your targeted market is a large variety of clients and you enjoy working with others who have similar business interests, then look for partners with whom to share both the challenges and successes of being in business for yourself. They should be people you know well and respect for their technical and ethical standards. They must be understanding of the difficulties of business startup and have the ability to withstand disappointment when many of your first proposals as a new company are rejected.

Each of the partners should bring a skill set for handling different aspects of your business. For example, I sold our services 75% of my time, sought out prospective new associates, and contributed technically in certain areas of the petroleum refining and energy use fields. Our home office person processed monthly time sheets, client invoices, tax payments to many governments, insurance, salary checks and still occasionally managed to work on projects as a highly skilled Professional Engineer. My other partner managed all client contractual matters, agreements with associates, published all technical reports, created our marketing literature, managed our computerized systems, provided highly skilled technical advice and served as an expert witness.

Your business might require other skills than noted above but many of these activities will be common to any multi client business that does technical work. This three-person owner mix worked extremely well for us...but we carefully and deliberately explored our respective interests and fit before forming HEA, which has since become a division of Becht Engineering. Our early discussions as to business goals and how we each could contribute toward achieving them clearly paid off! You too should evaluate your company options including a single person consultancy, teaming up with partners or joining as an employee of a specialty engineering or research organization.

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Next month's Consulting Tip will discuss combining a consulting practice with a laboratory.