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Considering consulting? Look before you leap

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November 17, 2008 ([Computerworld](#)) Many IT professionals will leave large corporations over the next few years. Some will seek escape from the frustrations of corporate organizational structures, bureaucracy and politics. Others will work part time or move to more desirable locations. Many will be laid off, and some will retire. As a result, it's likely that these IT professionals, both management and technical staffers, will consider consulting as a career alternative.

There are several types of consulting firms, and they all offer various advantages and disadvantages. Before leaping into consulting, consider these differences:

Large, established firms. These companies enjoy name recognition and offer comprehensive services. Their structures, processes, policies, support functions and benefits are similar to those of any big corporation. Wages, bonuses and promotions are fairly predictable.

Unfortunately, large consultancies also harbor corporate levels of bureaucracy and office politics.

Technical staffers who move to these firms may not notice much difference on a day-to-day basis from corporate environments, except for out-of-town work and management changes with each project. But they usually have more opportunities for career growth than they would in corporate positions. However, some large consultancies still operate on an "up or out" policy: Earn promotions regularly, or leave the firm.

IT executives who join these businesses are expected to sell engagements and manage client relationships. Actual project work is delegated to staffers. An extensive set of contacts is required, and a full-time commitment is usually expected.

Boutiques. Small firms vary widely in all aspects. They usually employ fewer than 100 people, and they may consist of just a few highly talented individuals. If a boutique's partners have aligned goals, internal politics are minimized and the firm can be extremely successful. Conversely, warring partners can easily tear apart a small firm.

Boutiques are more likely to accommodate part-time work or other quality-of-life issues, and they can finalize negotiations or make critical decisions quickly, often in a single day.

The workload, however, can be feast or famine. Virtually everyone works on client projects, and *everybody* sells. But it's difficult to sell new engagements while consulting full time, so revenues can swing wildly.

Income is correspondingly unpredictable. Many of these firms pay consultants a percentage of the fees they bill rather than a flat salary. But few have enough money to pay employees when there is no consulting work. On the upside, many boutiques share profits with all staffers, not just partners.

If the firm provides consulting services on a wide variety of issues across industries, consultants gain extensive experience and responsibility quickly. Unfortunately, at narrowly focused firms, you may gain deep expertise but not broad experience. Few boutiques offer training programs or multiple career options, and

career paths may be limited.

Midsized firms. These consultancies have various combinations of the advantages of larger and smaller firms. A big downside, though, is that the really interesting consulting contracts tend to be awarded elsewhere.

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Boutiques attract work because of their specialized skills and personalized service. Large firms win contracts because their reputations protect decision-makers in case of project failure. Midsized firms typically get more prosaic assignments.

Consulting offers career alternatives for many IT professionals, but firms vary in many ways. For long-term career satisfaction, match your needs and expectations with the benefits each type of firm offers.

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