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Share

Print-Friendly
NewsletterSearch
Back issues

CONTENTS

[Issue Notes from the Editor](#)

by Bill Ely

[From the Chairperson](#)

[Being Little in a World of Too Big to Fails](#)

by James Ramenda

[Top 10 Steps to a Thriving](#)

[Local Consulting Practice Without Travel](#)

by Jay W. Vogt

[Building Your Business](#)

[Through Social Media Networking](#)

by Connie Golleher

[How to Become a Better](#)

[Actuary](#)

by Rod Bubke

[Medical Loss Ratio: An](#)

[Entrepreneurial Approach to Health Care Reform](#)

by Mark Florian

[Annuity Clearinghouse](#)

[Proposal](#)

by Beverly J. Orth



Top 10 Steps to a Thriving Local Consulting Practice Without Travel

by Jay W. Vogt

Some years into building my practice, I met a consultant with a national reputation whose work I had long admired. Since I didn't work nationally, and was little known outside of Boston, I was a trifle meek. We exchanged pleasantries about our practices and much to my surprise, he said, "I envy you. You have a local practice. I travel way too much."

Not long after, I met two partners whose books are legendary in my field. We had the same exchange. I was startled. How many consultants had I long envied in secret, all of whom were quietly wanting what I already had? If you love your travel schedule, you can skip this article. If you dread your next flight, read on.

I used to live in a working class neighborhood in Boston. I was the only management consultant for miles. Now I live in an affluent suburb west of the city. Organizational development consultants are a dime a dozen. Yet I rarely meet them. They are never around. Their spouses are always alone. They are always on the road.

I've had a thriving local practice for 25 years now. It means I sleep in my own bed at night and eat dinner with my family. It means I drive to see clients or take the train, but rarely fly. My wife knows what city I am in and I can make a social plan—and keep it.

It also means I don't make top dollar, don't work only with top tier clients, and can't always stay up-to-the-minute in my field. I don't lose myself totally in the fascinating worlds of my clients, because I am always

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coming up for air at the end of the day.

Here are 10 lessons I've learned the hard way about how to have a thriving local consulting practice, without travel.

1. **Don't work for a consulting firm.**

At one point, fearing I was missing out, I interviewed with several consulting firms, picking the most family-friendly ones I could find. Travel was a sore spot even at these firms. No one had control of their schedules. They told me travel was a necessary evil and it came with the job.

Firms are organized to make money, so placing consultants on-site wherever clients can afford to pay them always trumps family values. If you work for a firm, quit, and go out on your own. Without a large firm's overhead, you can still earn six figures, without travel.

2. **Keep your ego in check.**

They say that an expert is somebody who comes from at least a hundred miles away. Many of us travel because we want the glory that comes from being the pro. We want a national (or even a global!) practice so people everywhere will think of us when they think of our specialty.

Here in Boston, we think a Harvard degree is no big deal. Out of town, it still carries a lot of weight. How many of us go to where we are rare, so we can feel special? Find some new ways to get strokes for your ego, like hanging out with your family or giving time to your community.

3. **Keep your greed in check.**

Face it. It feels great to bring down a big day rate. The bigger your rate, the better you are, right? True or not, that equation runs many of us.

Many of us travel so we can pick only the very best paying clients, which then boosts our annual salary and props up our egos. What if we aimed for having a life, not supporting a life style? Could we make do with less? I think so.

4. **Deal with issues at home.**

A recent book on the new American workplace concludes that workers spend long hours at work because work is less stressful than home. Ask yourself in the quiet and dark of your next flight: Am I running away from something at home?

I remember an apocalyptic story from the world of coaching. A master teacher met a drunk who asked him for a dollar. The teacher refused politely, instead giving him his card, saying, "Call me when you know what you will do when you stop drinking." The question both encouraged and confronted the man, haunting him until he could name what he truly wanted to do, and knowing that, so the story went, he quit drinking and called to thank the teacher.

Call me when you know what you will do when you stop traveling.

5. Redefine success.

I started my practice in 1982. A colleague started his in the same year. It became clear in two or three years that he was building a business. It also became clear that I was not. What was my problem? Was I not up to it? Wouldn't I amount to anything?

It feels almost un-American to admit that you don't want to grow a business. With some reflection, though, I realized that I liked having a solo practice, without an office to rent, a payroll to meet, and people to manage. I began groping for a metaphor that would express what I was feeling in a positive way.

I settled on the image of the "country doctor." Country doctors work alone, or with an occasional assistant, and serve a single town or county. They know their clients intimately and follow them from one generation to the next. They know a little about a lot, and they are loved and revered. Nobody thinks less of them if they don't grow their business and their success is not measured in annual revenues.

Think about what success means to you. Find a positive way to think about yourself as you slow down, let go, and focus locally.

6. Live near a major city.

I have no idea how many organizations there are in the Greater Boston area, but I know there are enough to keep me busy. I reach a lovely hilltop view of the entire city when I drive into town, and as I take it in, I often say to myself, "There has to be a ton of work down there!"

My home is one half hour from the city and minutes from the high technology beltway. I can walk to the library, the theater and the playground, and run through miles of woods and meadows. You can have a good life, in or around a major city, and still live next door to thousands of potential clients. Find a place that nurtures you with a local economic base that can support you.

7. Diversify your clients.

I have a colleague who consults to communities in planning tourism studies. Great work, but how many studies can even a large community support? Traditional marketing smarts says consultants should find a narrow niche and target it well. The problem with this thinking is that niches are invariably small, and offer a limited number of prospects in a given area. Working locally means defining your services broadly, to cast the widest possible net.

I have a colleague, a fellow "process consultant," who likes to say, "I don't know your business, and that's why you should hire me." My practice works with universals—interpersonal relationships and team processes—that are fundamentally similar across all organizations. As a result, I work with government agencies, nonprofit organizations, small fast-growth companies, and large corporations. I don't know their businesses, but I can still help them. All my work comes from referrals and my networks are very diverse.

8. Learn to say NO to non-local work.

This is much harder than it sounds. For starters, most consultants don't know how to say no to any work at all, even if it endangers their health. Then when the work in question is actually interesting work and pays well, that just happens to be out of town, well ...

If you want local work, say no now! Why? If you are good enough to make it working locally, you are good enough to be great working on the road. And if you are great on the road, guess where your next referrals will come from? Taking non-local work while trying to build a local practice is a slippery slope towards a lot of travel. Bite the bullet. Just say no. Don't present at national conferences where distant clients will seek out your business card. Find the strength to say no by remembering that to which you are saying yes.

9. Learn to say YES to local work.

This is much harder than it sounds. You would think that it would be easy, but if it were, maybe more people would be doing it. Consider it likely that the work you will get locally, routinely, will not pay as much or be as challenging as the very best work you could cherry-pick by crisscrossing the globe. Let's assume you can find it if you work at it. Now you have it in your grasp. Will you take it?

If your ego (No. 2) or your greed (No. 3) or your home life (No. 4) or your self-image (No. 5) is not in alignment with this act, you will probably bolt for the airport. If you are clear on the balance and harmony you want, you will take it, with a smile, and never look back.

10. Travel for work as a spice, not a staple, in your diet.

I actually like to travel for work now and again since it is the exception and not the rule. Sometimes I find situations where I can bring my family. I said yes to a trip to Scotland one summer to help a manufacturing plant, bringing my family along for 10 days in the Highlands. I said yes to a client who meets twice a year only at mountain and oceanfront resorts, the work being embedded in a fascinating conference, with child care and fun for the whole family.

I said yes to a recent request to come to a warm place in the winter to do some work I dearly love, just for the fun of it. Right place, right time, right work. Enjoy travel for the delight that it is, once you own a local base.

You can have a thriving local consulting practice, without travel. It may mean giving up some things, and it will certainly mean changing some things. But your sanity is worth it.

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