

GEOLOGISTS AS INDEPENDENT CONSULTANTS IN THE MINERALS INDUSTRY

Trevor R. Ellis, CPG-6740

Ellis International Services

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INTRODUCTION

Many geologists in the minerals industry have become independent consultants through necessity due to being laid off, or being confronted with unsatisfactory career paths within the corporate world. Some geologists may have actually had long-term plans to become independent consultants, but none of my colleagues in the minerals industry fit that category. Whichever way one gets to be an independent consultant, having the right personality, qualifications, and experience will make earning a living at it a lot easier.

In preparing this paper, I interviewed two other independent consulting geologist colleagues. Although I have expressed opinions, experiences, and perceptions of what the real world is like out there that are largely mine, they very closely match those of my colleagues. Those two geologists are responsible for proposing much of the structure and content of this paper. I will attempt to be blunt in putting forth my perceptions and suggestions, as I don't think being wishy-washy helps anybody. This is not sour grapes. I love my field of work.

The following is the career path which I propose to become a successful independent consulting geologist in today's minerals industry. It closely matches my own, which makes it easier to present. I have been an independent consultant since 1983, so I can claim to have been either a success or a survivor, which to my eyes in this field are the same thing. I began work as a contract international exploration geologist on graduating in 1970.

THE FIRST FIVE YEARS AFTER GRADUATION

Initially, I suggest getting five years of experience working internationally after graduation, in exploration and/or mine geology. This is the easiest time, as generally you don't have the ties to a home base that will probably come later.

Most international assignments that I see in exploration are three months on, one month off back home, with long hours of work expected. This is generous compared to what I had in my early years.

With regional exploration, it helps to be self reliant, self confident, a loner, willing to eat anything, able to put up with discomforts, and not mind risks. Learn vehicle and small motor

repair and maintenance. Learn first aid, survival skills, knots, climbing skills. No OSHA standards apply when you are working in a place like Papua New Guinea. You are often responsible for your and your crew's safety or even survival.

Develop a love of foreign cultures and enjoy learning a foreign language. You may end up living for months at a time, in camps and huts, with members of cultures, tribes, and religions you previously knew next to nothing about. I spent two field seasons living with my ten constantly changing native carriers in the jungles and mountains of Papua New Guinea. You have to be your own judge of whether this is something that you will enjoy. Many geologists find they cannot hack it. Women geologists may need to have their work environment structured somewhat differently than sleeping on the floor of a hut in the middle of 30 Indonesian Moslem men, as I sometimes did.

You must be able to accept the dangers of working in foreign countries, with strange diseases, driving on their roads, and possibly working with helicopters. These dangers are real, and can cost people their lives. On two exploration projects I worked on, covering 18 months in Indonesia, we lost four helicopters, killing six employees. Each accident had a lesser developed country factor as its primary cause. One disease, which physicians here have never heard of, had me within 24 hours of death from total kidney failure.

You need to develop a thick skin and be easy going when working for foreign management. They generally have different styles to the USA, can be much more blunt, and have a different level of temperament. Let things wash off you that you may not otherwise, and treat it all as a fun learning experience.

Think seriously about what you are going to do about romance in a foreign setting for months at a time. This is real life. You may even have a true love back home, which could make things more complicated.

LATER YEARS

In later years you will become either an expert in a specific field, or a generalist like me. Experts get paid higher rates, but can quickly end up delivering pizza when demands change. A generalist can quickly put on a different hat as demands shift. I have retreaded myself many times in my career as demand changes, generally in about three-year cycles. Sometimes it takes additional education.

As an independent, you can work as a contract geologist for project management, or as an independent "expert" for doing evaluations, giving independent geological reports, and providing expert witness testimony in legal disputes.

ATTRIBUTES OF A SUCCESSFUL INDEPENDENT

The personality and skills needed to be a successful independent consulting geologist are:

- ◆ A loner, self reliant, self confident, risk taker;
- ◆ Quick learner, self educator;
- ◆ Strong computer skills, some accounting ability;
- ◆ Willing to work long hours, helps to be able to go without sleep to meet deadlines;
- ◆ Helps to have some marketing skills.

DISADVANTAGES OF BEING AN INDEPENDENT CONSULTANT

It can be a lonely existence working in the home office all day long, by yourself, or in that hotel room by yourself at night. Technical assistance is not readily available. To some extent you build a network of associates, but its not the same as having the expert down the hall at the corporate office.

Generally your annual income will be low compared to mid- and late-career corporate positions. In addition, you have to buy and supply everything—computer (maybe two or three), software, fax, communications services, office supplies, publications and reference books, and the business car.

Your income will be cyclical—feast or famine prevails in independent consulting. In a real sense, you are perpetually unemployed, looking for more work.

Keeping yourself employed may require long stints away from your spouse and children. These days, it may be in countries that speak other languages than ours, often with names we have difficulty pronouncing, let alone locating on a map.

You are responsible for your own continuing education, but likely can't afford the time or money for much. Rarely can you afford to travel to another city to acquire it, as the corporate geologists do. So, you have to rely more heavily on the literature. I find myself often using textbooks for bedtime reading.

You can't afford a benefits package equivalent to that typically provided for corporate positions—insurance and retirement plans. You definitely don't receive paid vacation. Liability insurance and insurance for errors and omissions can be a problem area for the independent geologist. If you are doing just straight geology, errors and omissions coverage can be affordable, but if you mix other subjects in there, such as environmental remediation, economics, computer programming, etc., I have found that the cost becomes prohibitive.

Since you can't afford to retire, you will die with your boots on (modified from Gordon “Bud” Presley).

ADVANTAGES OF INDEPENDENT CONSULTING

As an independent consultant, you are your own boss. Generally nobody, except for maybe your spouse, is keeping a close eye on you and your work. If you don't like who you are working for on your current project, you will soon be on a new project with new personalities. You generally get to choose your own hours of work. Night owls and very early risers love this aspect. To some extent you can even choose where in the world you want to work, turning down that assignment in the Philippines without getting your boss irate. Since you have geared your life style to lean and mean, a couple more months without pay while waiting for a new assignment doesn't phase you.

You get to work on many challenging, and sometimes adventurous assignments if you have the aptitude to take them on. You are exposed to much more diversity of projects than in the typical corporate environment.

You have flexibility around family life with your office in the home. I have worked this way since 1983 and find it a major attraction of my life style. Even if I am putting in a 20-hour work day, I am there for my children going to and coming from school, for the sick child, for meals with the family, and for reading the bedtime story (unless of course I am in the field).

Tax deductions are an important aspect of independent consulting. It is a two edged sword. You can deduct most things related to your work that you spend money on—the business computer and its software, and the gasoline for your company car. The IRS does not get much money out of me. But, tax deductions take time and mental energy to track, and the IRS audits me regularly.

THE IDEAL SITUATION FOR AN INDEPENDENT CONSULTANT

The ideal situation is to be independently wealthy and have a spouse who looks after your business. I regret that neither is true for me.

FINDING WORK

Your work will mainly come through your friends and associates—those who know you well enough to feel comfortable with you. As an independent consultant, you are perpetually unemployed, so you are always searching for a new job. Circulate at society meetings. Present an occasional paper about your current field or topic of work, so that your peers think of you as an expert in that niche.

You should make occasional cold phone calls or mailings to help broaden the reach of your continual job search. Limited paid advertising can help. I have found that occasionally surprising things come out of these methods. At the least you end up talking to some people outside of your regular circle, and at the most you may end up with a long term contract with a new client.

THREE BOOKS TO TAKE IN THE FIELD

- ◆ The Australasian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy's *Field Geologists' Manual*.
- ◆ A dictionary of geology.
- ◆ A recent book on the geology of the commodity you are working on.

CONCLUSIONS

Independent geologists in the minerals industry generally lead a lean existence compared to their peers in the corporate world. The feast or famine cycle reigns in our environment. We are in a sense, perpetually unemployed, always searching for the next job. However, the rewards of variety of assignments, being your own boss, and to a large extent choosing your own day to day work schedule, are very important to those of us working as independents.