

The challenges of working alone on site

“I do it all the time”, some of you will be thinking, and if your business is just you, then you don’t have too many options. However, if you work for a larger organisation, and are used to being part of a team, then a solitary assignment can be a challenge.

Whether you are used to it or not, the first challenge you face is that you have no one to talk things over with, or use as a sounding board. If your client comes up with a tricky question, you’re on your own. This is where deferral tactics are critical. You sound confident in your response, but there are just one or two things to check on, so you’ll get back to them in whatever timeframe you agree. Make sure it’s their timeframe wherever possible, not yours. Do not offer to respond immediately, if they are happy to wait until next week! Ask – do not volunteer!

“Shane – that’s quite a complex question, I’ll need to check on a few things. When do you need the information?”

Now the challenge is to find the person you are going to check with. In a large company you will probably have the resources internally, but if you work alone then this is where you rely on the resource network you have built for your business - people, organisations, associations, reference information, all there for you to call on when you need to. Most important is a “buddy” or mutual mentor – someone with whom you can readily bounce ideas around and not worry about saying the wrong thing. The arrangement is that they do the same for you, so there is balanced give and take. If you work alone, this is a vital relationship, if you work for a larger company, it’s still a very useful arrangement to set up.

The next on-site challenge is the danger of getting sucked into the client organisation, so that you lose your objectivity and distance, and therefore some of your value to them as a consultant. If you are self-employed, working for a single client for a long period has tax implications (IR 35) you will want to avoid, apart from the narrowing of your perspective.

If you are an employee of a consulting organisation, then this can go one step further, as you cease to identify with your company, and take the client’s view instead. This is known as going native, and is easy to slide into without really noticing until something – usually a conflict between your employer’s interest and your client’s, makes you realise whose side you are on!

Client: “Right, Nadia! Can we sit down and decide what training these supervisors need? I know your company does a course on employment legislation for managers that would be just the thing!”

Nadia suddenly realises that she feels more loyalty to the client than to her employer.

“Well, John, they do have that course, but I’m wondering if the official programme from the Institute would be better?”

“So what’s wrong with your course, Nadia?”

At this point her loyalty switches back to her employer. She wants to tell him that they've never run that course before, that the only person who could have run it has just left, and that it isn't her company's strong point. In fact she says:

"Nothing's wrong with it, John, it's just that the Institute course has a good reputation, and all the very latest on the law, and I didn't want you to think that I would just recommend my own company's courses as the only option."

This goes down very well, and the client is even more keen to use her company for the training, so Nadia's wavering has had a positive effect. Now she needs to speak to her manager, and tell him or her all her concerns, before she is tempted to change the client's mind.

Had she been totally disloyal to her employer, it would not have been unusual, at this point, for the client to offer her a job. This can be the right solution. If it's not the route you want to follow, then you need to work at staying in touch with your company. Insist that you go back to the office for meetings, and that people come to see you too. It is so easy to slip into the mindset that you have to stay on site – the project is so urgent, etc. etc., but often, if you make the effort, you can get away.

A further consequence of this distance is that you often feel neglected as an employee. You don't know what's going on in the company, can't be spared for training courses, never have time for a career discussion... all of this leads you in the direction of your client. To redress the balance, discuss the problem with your manager, and then take some initiatives. Do not sit and wait for people to remember you. If you had a really good manager, you would not be feeling like this in the first place, so assuming your manager is the normal mix of good intentions and poor execution, give him or her a hand. Ring HR and ask them to find out about that training course you want. Find out from the MD's office when the schedule of company meetings is set, so that you can plan for them well in advance, and do not rely on the email sent out the week before. Then you can combine your trip to the company meeting with an appointment in HR, etc. Tell your manager you are going to take the initiative, and then keep them informed, but just do it!

If you are self-employed, you may think that this does not apply to you, but in fact it is very easy to keep working on a long project and pay no attention to your personal development. You do not have managerial complications, but you do not have company resources to help you either, so you have to do all the planning and research yourself, and pay for it too!

The final challenge of working at length on site is your exit strategy. It may be that the project has a clearly defined conclusion, or it may just keep on going. Some clients become dependent on you, and it may be in both your interests to sever the link. Of course, it would be mad to turn down work, if it really needs doing, but sometimes the project becomes a habit, and the client will think very highly of you for the conscientious way you consider their time and finances. So highly, that either another project will materialise, or a good referral will – so even if there is some short-term pain, you will almost certainly win in the long run