

Consulting Do's and Don'ts

The world of consulting offers a variety of opportunities for food and nutrition professionals who are interested in being their own bosses and regularly seeking out new challenges. Consulting with individuals and families, providing expert feedback to grocery store chains, and assisting food manufacturers in achieving regulatory compliance are just a few of the possibilities open to those interested in entering consulting. For those who want to explore the field, several registered dietitians (RDs) offer their opinions on how to achieve success.

WHY CONSIDER CONSULTING?

For some RDs, consulting fills a desire for a different atmosphere than might be found in clinical work. "I wanted to work with people in wellness and was much more interested in education and disease risk reduction," says Liz Marr, MS, RD, an independent consultant and cofounder of Marr Barr, a Colorado-based food and nutrition communications company. "I knew I didn't want to work in a hospital."

Karen C. Duester, MS, RD, president of Food Consulting Company, a California-based company that provides food companies with nutrition analysis, food label development, and

Food and Drug Administration regulatory support services, was attracted by the ever-changing workload and flexibility. In addition to being able to express her creativity through her own company, because she owns her own business, there is no ceiling on her income.

"I reached the top of my pay scale at age 25, after working in a clinical environment for just 2 years," says Duester. "I absolutely loved the work, but I came to understand that to increase my earning power, I had to increase my value and probably be working in a for-profit environment." Duester founded her company in 1993.

For Margaret Roche-Dudek, MS, RD, FADA, a partner in Illinois-based Roche Dietitians, founded in 1986, the excitement of the business world served as a factor in her decision to become a consultant.

"I wanted to combine my passion for dietetics with an interest in business," says Roche-Dudek, whose company has 30 RDs on staff who provide services to a variety of companies, including food manufacturers, hospitals, and assisted living facilities. Having her own business also allows Roche-Dudek freedom from the bureaucracy that can sometimes accompany working for a large health care facility. "There are zero politics," she says.

PERSONALITY PLAYS A PART

All those interviewed for this article stressed the importance of honestly evaluating personal strengths and weaknesses before venturing into consulting. Having a strong work ethic, great interpersonal skills, and an adaptable personality that enjoys change are key.

"My dietitians have to navigate a huge metropolitan area, figure out where to park the car, where to meet the client, and that's before they have to acclimate to the client's work environment," says Roche-Dudek. "They're meeting new people everyday, and there may not be a predictable schedule." Those who like a 9-to-5 schedule may not be well-suited, she adds.

"One day you may be in jeans and clodhoppers with an agricultural client and the next day you're sitting in a corporate boardroom," says Amy Barr, MS, MEd, RD, cofounder of Marr Barr.

Adds Duester, "It is not for people who are not self-driven, who need a lot of direction." And if owning your own consulting company is your plan, it is also not for those who are uncomfortable with risk. If security is a premium for someone, says Duester, he or she may want to reconsider independent consulting. Duester also adds that those who enjoy working with lots of people may not enjoy the potential loneliness that sometimes occurs when working for yourself or with a few other people. Working from home may also provide challenges for the work-life balance. "I have an office in my home, and when I am done working, I have to turn off the light and shut the door and say, 'The office is closed,'" she laughs.

Barr says being willing to stay current on trends and changes in nutrition is essential. Those who seek a comfort zone in their work may have a difficult time succeeding in consulting. "Your client can quit tomorrow or get taken away," says Barr. "You, too, are a brand. You cannot rely on one or two clients."

The upside to the uncertainty? "I'm never bored," says Barr.

If after assessing your background and personality type you feel you lack a necessary skill, such as being able to develop a budget or working with the latest technology, Marr suggests taking a class to get caught up or teaming up with a business partner who can complement your skill set.

Perhaps the most critical personality trait is confidence. "You've really got to believe in yourself to succeed," says Marr.

BE BUSINESS SAVVY

Staying current on trends both in nutrition and business is a must for any great consultant, say those interviewed for this article. Constant learning

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makes you a more marketable and desirable choice for clients. Recently, Roche-Dudek had to advise a longtime client on a diabetic dessert product.

"They'd met the sugar-free goal, but the carbohydrate profile was not there yet," says Roche-Dudek, who was knowledgeable about current trends in diabetic meals because of her regular research and reading. "We saved them a lot of trouble in the end. If we hadn't kept up, we wouldn't have been able to do that."

"I read *Advertising Age*, *PRWeek*, and *The Wall Street Journal*," adds Barr. "I have to be well-rounded and well-read to keep up with my clients."

Those interviewed say consultants need to remember that their clients are primarily concerned with the bottom line. "You have to understand corporate culture," says Roche-Dudek. "Even if nutritionally you have ideas for a product, it ultimately has to make money for your client."

If you're running your own business, you may want to take accounting or business courses if you believe you need to strengthen your skills, say those interviewed for this article. Duester invests in a business coach she found through the International Coach Federation. She speaks with her coach regularly and calls it "the best money I've ever spent."

Despite the steady flow of clients, Duester also never stops marketing her business. "We have a monthly newsletter that goes out, no matter what," she says. "Emergencies, busy times, fires in southern California, it goes out. There have been many times when it would have been easier not to do it, but it's an important part of our marketing strategy. Clients come and go, and there is no guarantee."

Marr believes that being a successful consultant also means being a strong personal financial manager. "When you work for a company, you know what your paycheck is going to be," she says. "When you're working for yourself, you have to plan for the good times to put that money away for when times aren't so good. When those come, you can go out and look for new business instead of stressing out." In addition to managing finances, consultants who work for themselves need to be able to handle their own taxes, retirement, and benefits. If they hire employees, they have to take on added responsibilities.

"That is a lot to put on your shoulders, to generate enough income to pay for your employees," says Marr. "We have always been very careful about when is the right time to hire."

FIND YOUR NICHE

In addition to being business savvy, it's also important to know what aspect of consulting you want to focus on. Often, the most successful consultants are the ones who clearly state their specialty and market it strategically, say those interviewed for this article. "You have to decide your expertise and specialty," says Barr.

Knowing how to network is key for every industry, and consulting is no different.

Adds Duester, "You must define your niche. I see some dietitians who don't want to limit themselves. But you may end up as a jack of all trades and a master of none. You have to be specific and clear to your clients." Duester adds that referring clients who don't fit your specialty to other consultants who can help them is a great way of building business through referrals. "If you refer to others, then you yourself will start getting referrals," she says.

It may take some research and soul-searching to discover what you want to focus on. When first beginning her career, Marr spent time interviewing RDs and doing research to best decide in which aspect of the field she would be most interested. She knew that combining nutrition and communication would be a perfect match.

NETWORKING IS KEY

Knowing how to network is key for every industry, and consulting is no different. All those interviewed for this article are members of various dietetic practice groups, including Consultant Dietitians in Healthcare Facilities, Dietitians in Business and Communications, and Nutrition En-

trepreneurs. All have also been involved in local dietetic associations.

"You want to volunteer strategically," says Marr, who is currently chair-elect of the Food & Culinary Professionals dietetic practice group. "Don't fritter away your time. Tie your volunteering to your goals. You can learn about teamwork, group decision making, and small business management."

In addition to picking up tips, volunteering builds reputation. "If you do good work, others will notice," adds Marr. "Your reputation is your best selling point."

Marr also advises that consultants network in the right direction. "Put yourself in front of the gatekeepers," she says. "If you're interested in consulting individuals or doing outpatient work, you need to connect with doctors, clinics, and hospitals. If you want to be in private practice, you may at least look for part-time work first in the industry you're interested in. Pay your dues to make those personal connections."

"Networking is everything," says Barr. "In nutrition, it's not six degrees of separation—it's three." Barr also suggests getting involved outside the food arena, including joining the local chamber of commerce or another business group.

Consulting can be a rewarding career for those food and nutrition professionals who choose to pursue it. Perhaps the best aspect of consulting, say those interviewed, is the unlimited opportunity for growth.

"The most important thing is not to sell yourself short," says Duester. "Go as far as you can see, and when you get there, you can see a little further. New doors will open up. New vistas will open up."