7N

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In this article, 7N's Chief Competence Officer, **Anders Søgaard**, discusses the importance of career planning as a freelance IT consultant and what role continuing development, including evolving one's "soft" skills, plays in the success of an IT consultant.

Being a successful freelance consultant is of course a 'matter of opinion'. What constitutes success is very much about your personal value system, but as a guiding principle we can look to the good old Maslow hierarchy of needs:

Self-actualization

Esteem

Love Belonging

Safety needs

Physiological needs
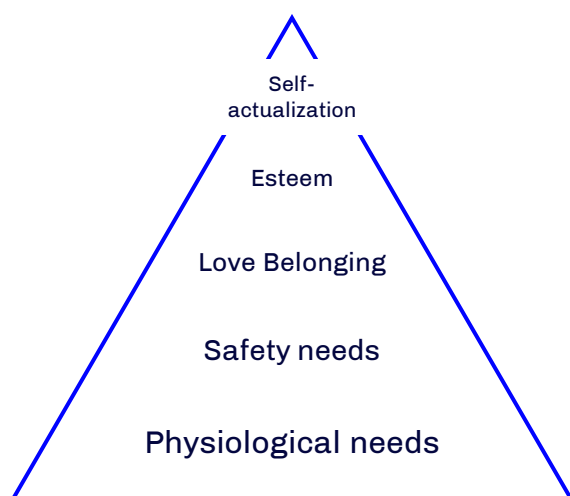
When talking to people considering entering the freelance consulting market, typically their concern is on the two lower levels of needs. Questions such as how much can I earn and how can I be certain about having enough work, are at the heart of many interviews at this stage.

Later on, in their freelance careers, many times we have seen, that some consultants get "trapped" by the love/belonging need.

Love as in respect for the customer and a desire to support them with everything you got. And belonging as in taking ownership of the projects and feeling as a part of the customers success or failure. These consultants, because they are so good, become indispensable for the customer to continue their current platform or projects almost indefinitely. In this period, you might have a premium on your hourly rate, but suddenly the customer changes direction and the role becomes more of a support function, as long as the 'old' platform still exists. And other clients are doing the same thing. So, the consultant is suddenly caught out by not having an interesting profile any longer because they haven't been able to update their skills accordingly during the long tenure with the client.

As freelance consultants 'survive' their first years, the perspective changes from 'survival' to 'development'. The top consultants, in our experience, think a lot about their personal esteem and self-actualization in the form of being very clear about what assignments they accept and how these assignments help develop both their hard- and soft skills. It seems that at this level the consultants are living the "happy consultant life" where assignments are fun, personally developing and commercially interesting, all at the same time.

So, what could help us in understanding what and how to develop over time as IT freelancers?A look at recent studies of the salary development for STEM (1) people and people with social- and humanistic degrees, can maybe tell us something about what to focus on during a career in IT.

Salaries through the career

In the early careers of people with STEM degrees (age 23-25), the salary level is 37% (2) higher than the average salaries of people with history or social sciences educations. But by age 40, the social sciences people have caught up and in fact have bypassed their STEM peers by an average of 5%.So why is it, that in the middle part of your professional life, where you should be the most valuable to a company, the social sciences are more 'valued' than the STEM people?
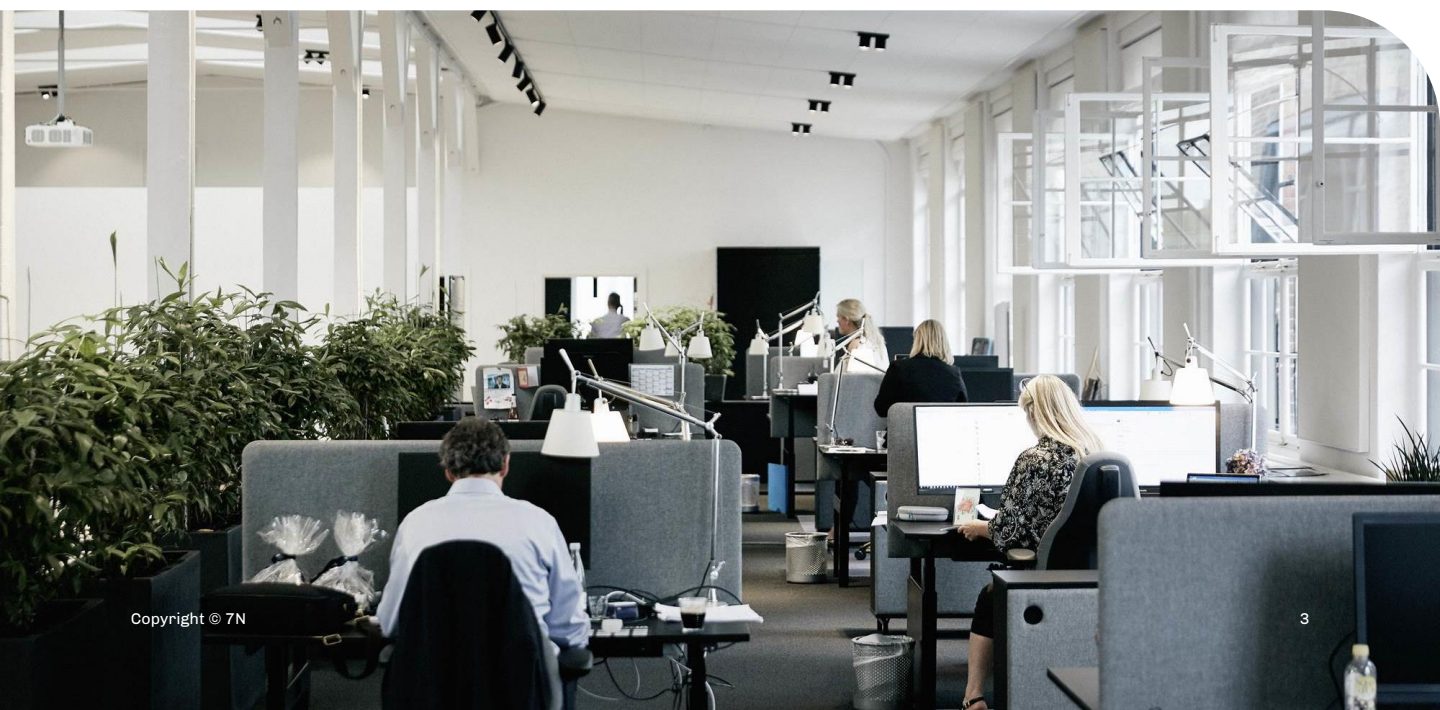
Reason #1: Technologies

When the STEM people are coming directly from university, they have been trained in the latest methodologies and technologies. So, they are 'early experts' within their field, which makes their initial salary higher compared to their peers from social sciences. But technology changes rapidly, which puts pressure on the STEM people to keep up with the latest and greatest technologies on the market. Also, when younger STEM graduates enter the job-market, companies can hire these people with up-to-date knowledge at an attractive price or even turn to outsourcing tasks to service providers abroad.This means that STEM people must continually 'upgrade'

their expertise, which can be hard to do, when you are hired to do something specific within your current area of expertise. As a fixed employee, you often must rely on the company's policies for taking courses and training and spending what we normally call "interest hours", where you use your own free time to become more knowledgeable, but without pay.As a freelancer, your opportunities to add to your knowledge is more available, as it is yourself who decides. The challenge can be to find the time, as well as the cost of taking formal training and courses during the weekdays is quite high, as you cannot invoice those hours. All this results in the turnover of STEM people in STEM jobs being quite significant. STEM majors in STEM jobs falls from 65% to 48% between the ages 25 to 40.

Reason #2: Soft Skills

In the age of the knowledge workers, organizations demand different sets of soft skills for people to be successful. Since work has changed to become more 'organic' in nature, the personal skills to maneuver in these organizational environments have become more important. This is recognized by companies as we can tell from this recent rating of the essential needs of "Career Readiness".

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Competencies	Weighted Average Rating*
Critical Thinking/Problem Solving	4.66
Teamwork/Collaboration	4.48
Professionalism/Work Ethic	4.41
Oral/Written Communications	4.30
Digital Technology	3.84
Leadership	3.65
Career Management	3.38
Global/Multi-cultural Fluency	2.78

*5-point scale, where: 1 – Not essential, 2 – Not very essential, 3 – Somewhat essential, 4 – Essential, 5 - Absolute

Employers Rate the Essential Need of the Career Readiness Competencies (3)

One can speculate, that the reason why the Social Sciences people are bypassing the STEM people at age 40, is that the Social Sciences educations are more focused on the "soft skill side", which is becoming more and more important in general, but especially in management roles. It is this shift into management roles, that makes for the increase in salaries for people with social science majors. Of course, a number of STEM majors also move into management roles, which explains some of the turnover in STEM people in STEM roles. What it tells us is, that over time, soft skills become more and more important for the salary level.

Reason #3: Roles

This article is set out to discuss career planning for IT freelancers. And I would like to make the argument, that as you evolve as a freelance consultant over time, at some point you must make a distinction between whether you want to move down the technological path or the 'managerial' path. You should make a very clear distinction between these two paths. When we talk about technological, we mean as a pure technological expert/wizard. The managerial path could also have a technological 'angle', but you become more of an advisor or architect than a wizard.

To help with these distinctions, we highly recommend something like the SFIA framework (4). This framework describes 104 different roles with 7 different skills-levels for each role. It helps you with making distinctions between what role you are fulfilling, and to what level you are doing it. This again should help you point to a direction for your natural 'next level' of expertise and in some ways, how to attain that level.

In our experience, there is still a "glass ceiling" over how much an IT expert can earn. For some reason this expertise is not currently valued as highly as managerial expertise. Even if it is more rare or critical to the business, both short and long term. So, a change in the role description, that adds more of the managerial skills to the perception of your work, might be one of the keys to help you increase your perceived value and thereby your potential income.

Summary

In summary, I understand of course, that you can't compare on a pure 1-to-1 basis, the nature of Full-Time-Employees (FTE's) and consultants, as well as the development in salaries compared to hourly rates. Also, the basis for this article is the American job-market, so there might be distinctions to be made to where you work in the world.

Still, I believe that the overall conclusion from this is, that being a top-class freelance consultant takes more than purely technical skills. If you are a technical consultant, you should aim at being a true 'wizard' within your technology stack. But you should also aim at developing your soft-skills to an expert level. Especially your team-orientation/collaboration skills, your written- and oral communications skills, your critical thinking/problem solving skills and your professionalism/work ethic. All of these can be trained and developed, and they become more and more important over time for you in your personal- as well as your professional development. And it is taking your career as a freelance consultant seriously and possibly moving up the Maslow hierarchy of needs to both esteem and self-actualization - and that is when freelancing becomes "more than just a job", but a career.

When you work as an IT consultant at 7N, you get a personal agent from the very start. We are dedicated to matching you with the most exciting projects in your field of expertise, continuously helping you develop your skills, and making you part of a community of extraordinary people.

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7N Group is an elite IT consultancy agency with more than 20 years of market experience in serving all aspects of critical IT projects both within the public and private sector.

We have dedicated ourselves to finding the right match between our consultants and the companies we serve – we believe that is how the best results are created. At 7N, we have built a professional community of extraordinary people. A community dedicated to achieving professional and personal development. A place where the best gets to play with the best.

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