

TAKING THE FIRST STEPS:

Your guide to starting work
as a legal consultant



CONTENTS



03

Introduction - Dana
Denis-Smith, CEO
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10

How do you find
consulting work?

04

Why work flexibly?

12

What about the
practicalities?

07

How do you know
consulting is right
for you?

15

Next steps

INTRODUCTION

Dana Denis-Smith, CEO Obelisk Support



Dana Denis-Smith
CEO
Obelisk Support

Since founding Obelisk Support in 2010, I have spoken to literally thousands of lawyers thinking about working as consultants. For some, it's a sensible way to maintain their professional identity alongside the demands of family life, for others it's a lifestyle choice, a way to keep working between permanent roles or an option that lets them monetise their legal skills whilst freeing up the time to start another venture. Most recently, the C-19 pandemic has given us all time to re-think what we want from work and has shown that we don't need to stay wedded to the legal industry's traditional ways of working.

In putting together this guide, my team and I have sought to distill some of the learnings we have gathered from years of helping people weigh up the pros and cons of working flexibly, so we can help you decide if it's the right choice for you. If you decide it is, and you'd like to find out more about working with us at Obelisk, then we'd love to talk to you. However we've tried to make this guide as useful as possible - so we've had a look at all the different ways you might consider working, not just our model.

One of the things all successful consultant lawyers have in common is highly-developed time-management skills, so we've tried to make this guide as succinct and easy to read as possible. Each section closes with some questions to help you plan your next steps. I hope it's a useful map for your future career journey and wish you the very best success in your future endeavours.

Why work flexibly?



Perhaps you're coming back to work after a break, or haven't found a permanent role that suits you. Alternatively, you might've decided that you need more room in your life for other things and being tied to one role with one employer no longer works for you.

Whatever is motivating you to consider working as a legal consultant, there's no denying that one of the major advantages is that it puts you in control. As your own boss, you set the hours you want to work, choose the clients you want to work with and where and how you want to work. Of course, with that control comes responsibility. You need to be able to deliver on your clients' expectations, to manage the professional administration that comes with operating independently and have the discipline to work independently.

Having greater control means that you can potentially make more room for other things in your life, such as study, family/caring responsibilities, developing other career options or travel. Again, this requires discipline; if this is important to you then it's important to understand your priorities and make sure you don't take on so much work that it ends up getting in the way.

Another massive advantage of working as a consultant is the variety of work experiences that you can accumulate. These might include working in different sectors or even broadening out into new areas of law. Equally importantly, working in different companies gives you experience of different cultures, different leadership styles and different working practices - enriching your resume and helping you add more value to each organisation you go on to work with.



Making the move - insights from Lola Moses, Legal Consultant

Tell us a bit about why you initially chose to go into the law and your early career.

I was drawn to a career in law since I was passionate about History and English Literature at school, so becoming a solicitor was a natural progression for me. I trained as a solicitor in local government before moving in-house into commerce and industry. I chose this route because I am equally interested in business as well as law and thought that the in-house route would allow me to develop business acumen, enhance my legal skills and offer greater flexibility than private practice.

So what prompted you to start to work flexibly with Obelisk?

I was seeking greater work life balance and the opportunity to work more flexibly including on site or remotely. I knew that with Obelisk, I would have the opportunity to choose the type of roles that would suit my needs.

What are the best things about working the way you do?

There are several benefits of working this way, in particular, I have enjoyed the variety of legal and business

areas that I have been exposed to. I have the flexibility to work when I want to and control over the type of work that I undertake. A key advantage for me has been the opportunity to work on clear objectives for clients and to deliver results free of the usual bureaucracy or office politics that may come when working as an employee.

Is there anything you miss about working in a full-time permanent role?

Nothing, Obelisk has a strong community of consultants and offers the opportunity to network regularly and to enjoy discounted CPD events.

What advice would you give to someone thinking about going the same route?

I would encourage others thinking about working freelance to join Obelisk, it is a great opportunity to have genuine work life balance, earn more money and work in a broad variety of sectors.

How do you know consulting is right for you?



Consulting is not for everyone. Although there are major advantages, as we've seen, there can also be downsides and it's worth spending some time familiarising yourself with these and be honest with yourself, do the advantages win out for you?

The first thing to think about is your attitude to financial security. Obviously if you're working for yourself, you don't have the security of a monthly pay-check. Plus you have to think for yourself about provisions such as pensions, rather than opting-in to measures provided by an employer. As well as

thinking about your budget and financial needs, and getting some professional financial advice if necessary, you may also want to consider your emotional attitude to financial risk. If a relatively high-level of uncertainty is stressful for you, then you might not find that consulting is a sensible choice for you.

Secondly, you need to evaluate how independent you are. If you're the kind of person who is good at setting up your own structure, finding support and are resilient in the face of challenge, then operating as a consultant is likely to suit you. On the other hand, if the idea of working outside a team and without structures and guidance makes you feel anxious or isolated, again consulting is not likely to be a good long-term choice for you.

As we said earlier, the best consultants are extremely disciplined in how they use their time. They resist the temptation to take on too much work and make sure that they are scrupulous in making time productive for their clients. As a practising lawyer, this is not likely to be new to you, however it's tempting to think that consulting allows you to escape the tyranny

of the six-minute billable unit. It does, but only to the extent that you are now in charge of the time-keeping!

Successful consultants also have high-levels of emotional intelligence, that is they are very good at understanding what makes people tick and pick up quickly on how teams and organisations operate. As a consultant, you need to be able to make an impact on day one, delivering work without the luxury of a long settling-in process. This doesn't only require great technical skills, it also means being very good at understanding your client's needs, challenges and pain points. As well as great powers of empathy and communication, you also need to be highly-skilled at setting and managing expectations.

Finally, you need to be comfortable finding and putting yourself forward for work - and with dealing with rejection. In preparing to work as a consultant, you must have confidence in your expertise and experience, and the ability to present this to potential clients in the most compelling way. You also need to be prepared to invest time in finding the next potential opportunity and in networking.

Step Two. Make sure you are (truly) a consultant at heart

Use these questions to reflect and inform your action plan using the answers.

What are your financial needs? How will you manage an income that flexes month to month?

How good are you at working on your own? Does your energy come from independent effort or do you need to be part of a team?

How would you rate your time-management skills and productivity?

Think of a time where you've had to pick up a project and deliver results quickly - how did you feel? Energised or uncomfortable?

How good are you at putting yourself forward? How much do you enjoy meeting new people and sharing new ideas?



Making the move - insights from Neil Visram, Legal Consultant

Tell us a bit about why you initially chose to go into the law and your early career.

My choice to pursue a career in the legal profession stemmed from an initial interest in practical problem-solving and, in doing so, collaborating closely with others. Working with people to reach a common goal is often at the core of what makes this a challenging yet fun and rewarding profession. There also are so many different opportunities on offer within the legal profession. For example, I started my career as a private practice real estate lawyer, and this in turn has opened the door to in-house opportunities across other sectors, enabling me to develop, now as a commercial lawyer.

So what prompted you to start to work flexibly with Obelisk?

Having spoken to a number of consultants, I had been toying with the idea for some time. Flexible working, a varied work load, great clients and exposure to new sectors; these were all big draw factors, all on offer from the team at Obelisk. It was the arrival of newborn twins into our family however that prompted a real change and a need to work differently, so as to be able to provide meaningful support at home.

Obelisk understood the challenges and were very supportive.

What have been some of the highlights of working as a consultant so far?

I have met some great people and enjoyed some interesting work, all in sectors that I would not necessarily have had the opportunity to gain exposure in previously.

Is there anything you miss about working in a permanent role?

In all honesty, no. Before taking on assignments as a consultant, I had concerns that there would not be the same level of job security compared to permanent roles. However, I have found there to be no shortage of new and exciting work!

What advice would you give to someone who is just starting out as a consultant?

Talk to people who have made that leap. They will have had the same concerns and questions and will no doubt be able to offer some invaluable and practical insight.

How do you find consulting work?

There are a number of ways that you can find work, we've sorted them into two categories: on your own or by joining a service provider.

Going it alone

If you want to be entirely self-sufficient, then you can set up as a legal consultant on your own. In this case, you have two options; either to create a brand and market your services that way or rely solely on contracts from previous employers or contacts in your network.

If you are setting up a brand, then you'll need to think about what you stand for, what your unique offering is and whether you want to set up a website, design stationery etc as you start talking about your offer.

Whether you decide this is necessary or not, you will want to look at your social profile and check how you are presenting yourself on channels such as LinkedIn and Twitter. Building a network online will help you connect with people who may be valuable sources of work.

Joining forces

An alternative to doing everything yourself is to work for a network like Obelisk Support. In this scenario, you don't have to worry about doing business development yourself, instead you will be connected to roles that match your skills and experience with their clients.

The advantage of working this way, other than the fact that you don't have to do your own business development, is that you benefit from extra support:

- You don't have to do any contract administration with the client, all you action is your own invoicing
- You are covered by a professional indemnity policy without having to buy your own cover
- You have access to a community of other professionals and central staff
- You still have control over your working pattern and hours
- You get to work with clients that you might not be able to access on your own.

Depending on the service you work with, you may also be able to bring in work from across your network but deliver it through them, taking advantage of the infrastructure and indemnity they offer.



Step Three: Decide on the service model that will work best for you

Use these questions to reflect and inform your action plan

Do you want to invest in developing a brand in the industry or do you want a lighter-touch way into consulting?

Do you want to do all your own business development and client administration or would you prefer it if this was taken care of for you?

Have you built up a name for yourself in a particular legal niche already or is this something you will need to work on?

The practicalities

Once you've decided consulting is definitely for you, there are a few more things that you need to work on to make it happen.

Work space and kit

Whilst you might be going into a client's offices and working on their systems, it's more likely that you're going to need to have your own work space and equipment.

As a minimum, you are going to need:

- Somewhere you can work quietly and take calls, either at home or in a co-working space.
- A good broadband speed in your chosen workspace
- A reasonably up-to-date laptop, ideally with a MS Office subscription, an email address you use for professional correspondence only, up-to-date virus protection installed and a soundcard and camera capable of handling video conference calls
- A mobile with a generous data contract, so you can pick up email on the move
- You also need to have secure storage space for your laptop and any client documentation that is "work in progress"

- If you are working from home or using your car for business, you need to check with your insurers in case you need to upgrade your cover.

Given how vital your laptop and mobile will be, you may also want to think about who you can turn to for tech support in case of any accidents or malfunction.

Your CV

Making sure your CV and your LinkedIn profile are both up-to-date (and in synch) is vital. Make sure that you are describing your skills and experience in a way that is most likely to appeal to potential clients:

- Use positive, action-orientated language - for example, "I led a project...", "I took responsibility for...", "I developed and implemented...", "I managed a \$1M transaction..."
- Describe business outcomes arising from your activities - for example, "I led a project that reviewed the way NDAs were created, leading to a cost saving of £350K"
- Share examples of your people skills as well as your technical legal ability - for example, "I managed a multi-national project team, operating on three continents".



Keep your CV concise (ideally two sides of A4) and be prepared to tailor it to specific opportunities, particularly if you have a broad range of experience. Don't waste time on fancy templates, tables or graphics - they tend to get in the way for human readers and, with recruitment processes increasingly automated, they cause problems for machine readers.

Alongside your CV, make sure you feel confident introducing yourself and come up with an "elevator pitch" that summarises your experience and the contribution you can make to a role in a couple of lines. Try this format: "After X years working in Y sector, I am an Z lawyer who specialises in A. I'm looking for my next consulting project right now."

Your finances

Make sure you are on top of your household budgeting and really understand all your expenses. If you have the luxury of preparing to transition to consulting from a full-time role then it is worth building up savings of around six months' household and personal expenses to act as a buffer while you find work. Remember you might also need to incur professional expenses, such as accountant's fees, IT subscriptions or marketing costs.

You will also need to consider whether the work you are proposing to undertake will come inside or outside IR35, the rules HMRC have created to reduce "hidden employment". From April 2021, new rules come into force so you will need to seek advice from an accountant in order to understand the best way for you to operate your tax affairs once you are working.

Think longer-term as well and seek professional advice on providing you and your family with any necessary life assurance, income protection and pensions.

Professional indemnity

If you are not working with a service provider, you will need to make sure that you are covered by a professional indemnity policy. Make sure you get professional advice on the best cover for you.

Step Four. Get organised

Use these questions to shape your action plan and next steps.

Where are you going to work? Is your IT equipment fit for purpose or do you need to add anything?

Is your CV up to date, smart and proof-read? Will one CV do or are there two or three different areas of work you're interested in which each require a different CV?

What highlights from your career so far are you sharing on your CV? How will they add value to a prospective client?

What's your personal elevator pitch?

What financial advice do you need and who can help you with this?

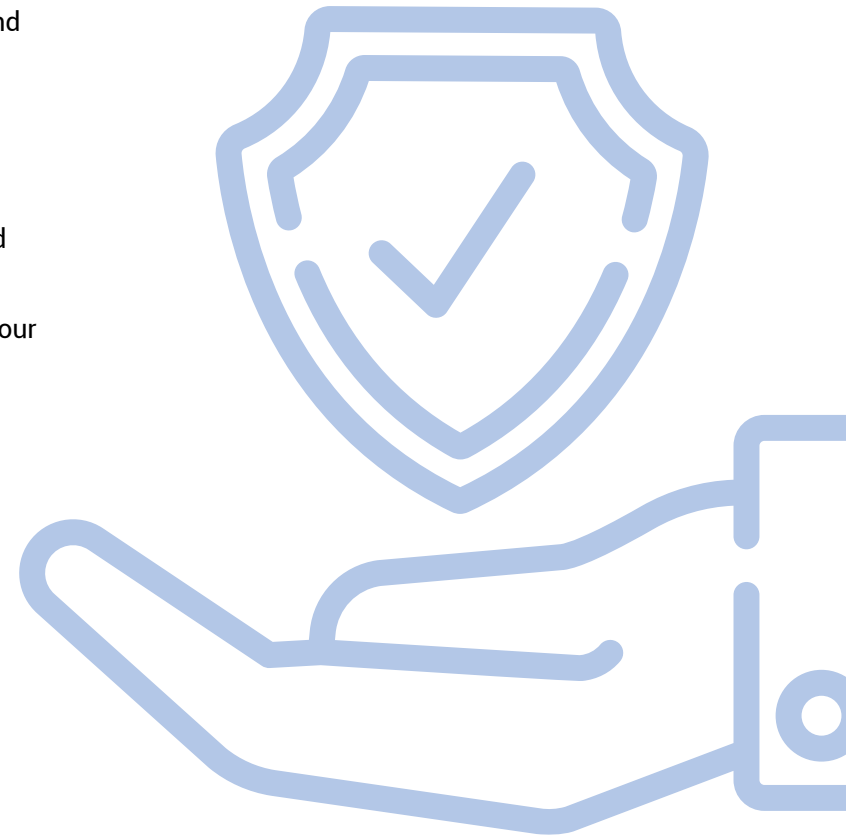
Will you need professional indemnity cover?

Bringing it all together, make it happen!

We hope the information, questions and stories in this guide have helped you reflect and work out the best next step for you. If you think that consulting is the right route for you, then here are the ten next steps to lining up your first consulting project:

- Register with networks like Obelisk Support - give us a call on 020 3417 6590
- Talk about your plans with your network and listen out for opportunities
- Update your CV and LinkedIn profile
- Start to post on LinkedIn and Twitter about relevant subjects aligned to the work you want to specialise in, if you don't already
- Review your finances and commitments
- Source an accountant and any other professional advice you need
- Review your IT set-up and workspace - and prepare for any improvements
- Rehearse your personal elevator pitch
- If you haven't been to a job interview for a while, ask a friend or family-member help you rehearse running through your CV and experience
- Start booking meetings until you secure your first project.

Good luck and enjoy the journey!



About Obelisk Support

Obelisk Support is an award-winning provider of legal services to in-house teams and private practice across 18 commercial practice areas. With a talent pool of over 1,000 lawyers who work flexibly, powered by Obelisk's own work allocation technology, the company has delivered services to FTSE 100 companies, major professional services firms and companies across the UK and worldwide since 2010.

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