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Features



Career interview: Freelance IT consultant

by Helen Joyce



Jason Winborn is a computer consultant specialising in human resource management software PeopleSoft. With a background in accounting and IT, he changed career four years ago and hasn't regretted his decision to go freelance. And the only formal qualification he has ever needed was A level maths.

Opening doors



Choosing A levels was simple for Jason. "I just chose the subjects I was best at," he says, "which was maths, because I had already done an AS level, plus economics and computer studies. I had no idea career-wise, but I was aware that these subjects were opening doors rather than shutting them.

Career interview: Freelance IT consultant

"I didn't enjoy A level maths, but I did enjoy the other two. I couldn't relate to the maths any more – it seemed to be all complex formulas that took forever to solve and mean nothing anyway. When I couldn't see any use for it, it just became an effort."

That he kept the subject, and finally got a D in it, Jason attributes to his teacher. "He rescued me. He said, whatever grade I got in A level maths it would be well worth it. So I thought I'd better get it if I want to do anything else. I should have got more than a D ... but I was predicted to get a U [ungraded]!"

During his sixth form, Jason's school – Enfield Grammar in London – opened his eyes to the idea of going to university. "None of my family had ever gone to university; no one I had ever known had." But after attending some university open days, and discovering what was available and how much fun it all looked, Jason became determined to be the first. He settled on the University of East Anglia [UEA] in Norwich: "It was moving away, but not that far; it was a train journey so I could come home quite a lot."



The University of East Anglia

Jason took a place on a degree course in Business, finance and economics in 1992 – and that A level maths turned out to be crucial. His offer had been dependent on his getting a C in the subject, but despite only getting a D he was still offered the place on the basis of his Bs in computer studies and economics, and the AS level in maths.

He laughs when asked if he had a good time. "Ah, yes! I grew up. I hadn't ever lived away from home and I was fairly immature – basically looked after! Mum did everything. I was the oldest child and maybe that made me mature in some ways, but not in cooking and washing and looking after money! I was pretty good though; a guitar was my one extravagance."

Overcoming a setback

Because of his A level choices, Jason found the first year a breeze. The only subject he had to put much work in on was accountancy, but he found even that came fairly quickly. He picked up the pace in his second year, but then family troubles intervened. "My mum and dad split up and it was a very traumatic break-up. I took the decision to come back home because I had a younger brother and sister." The university were very supportive, suggesting a year out, at the end of which he could return and pick up where he had left off.

However, during his time back with his family, Jason decided to start applying for jobs, including a position as a trainee accountant with a local firm – and again that A level in maths came in handy, because it was specified in the job ad. Although IT was by this time his main interest, he explains that trainee IT jobs are thin on the ground. "In accountancy, if you had done a bit that was great, but they were going to train you, whereas in IT they wanted experience or qualifications, and I hadn't done anything practical." And there were other considerations. "I'd get a qualification. The other jobs I was going for were starting at the bottom, assistant

this and assistant that, filing and stuff."

Jason was offered the job, and ended up staying with the firm for six years. After two years, he had qualified as an accounting technician, but by that stage he had essentially moved over to the IT department within the firm. "In those days, in quite a lot of companies, the in-house accounts department looked after the computing system. Finance was one of the first things where computers came into the office. The company I worked for had a computer system that ran the company from a financial perspective, and so the accounts team were running this. I was more than happy to pitch in with anything IT, I was really interested."



Jason got his chance when the two members of staff who ran the IT system left the company around the same time. "I piped up, saying: 'Don't panic, I can keep things running until you get your replacements.' And then they decided they didn't need to get replacements! They had just lost two big salaries, I was on not a great salary, and everything carried on working.

"I was young and a little naive and initially I thought I could do it. I wasn't thinking about money or the pressure I was under. But if the computer system went down I was the only one to call; I started finding myself coming in at evenings and weekends. The pressure started to get to me, and, typically of me as I've found out over the years, I cracked and said, 'I'm leaving', rather than going to them and talking about it."

But by this time Jason had made himself too valuable to the firm to be allowed go that easily. His bosses talked him into coming back, employed an assistant for him, and offered him a decent pay rise. And for the next three years, Jason and his IT colleague ran the company's IT systems – through two buyouts and one major relocation. "We got taken over by Americans who wanted to merge the warehouse and offices. It did make sense but any office that has warehouses at the back is going to be in a horrible location, and we lost a lot of local staff too. We had been in a very pleasant residential area; where we moved to was an industrial estate with warehouses all around. It changed the company."

Chance encounters

But when the company was taken over for a second time in 2000, that was one takeover too many for Jason. With the prospect of having to manage IT systems on two different sites, two hours' drive apart, he was ready for a change – when a chance meeting in a pub offered him exactly that. "The company had been weighing up putting in a personnel management system – they allow you log holidays, benefits, everything to do with an employee. It was all there, but paper-based, someone at reception writing things down. When you start getting big, that's no longer feasible." Jason had been charged with reviewing the software available, including the market leader, PeopleSoft. It had quickly become clear that the program was overkill for a small company,

but he had enjoyed playing around with the one-user demo version.



an unlikely venue

At just this time, he met an old school-friend down the pub one evening. The friend had originally become a teacher, but turned out to have given up teaching a year earlier to start working for a small software consultancy, specialising in training consultants on, you guessed it, PeopleSoft. When he heard that Jason was currently reviewing the software, the friend introduced him to the company founders, two ex-employees of one of the large consultancy firms, both of them tired of the culture at their company and convinced they could offer higher-quality software consulting at less astronomical prices.

The meeting turned out to be an informal job interview, and Jason became the fifth employee in the eighteen-month-old business. Again, his employer offered him incentives to stay in his current job, but this time he wasn't persuaded, despite knowing that, the package on offer for staying was a good deal better than what he would initially earn if he left. "The benefit was that I was going to be trained in something and there was the potential to earn a lot more in years to come."

Getting results every day

Jason has now been contracting for Succeed Consultancy Ltd. for nearly four years. "It was a big jump," he says. "The first year was extremely tough." And even now, with considerable experience under his belt, the work can still be exhausting. Comparing contract work to employment, Jason says that, as a consultant, he is paid to deliver something every single day. "If I had a builder round my house, and I was paying him a daily rate, I'd want to see what he had done each day. If he said: 'Today I sat in your garden and had a cup of tea because I was a bit bored,' I wouldn't reply: 'Here's your £100, thanks for all your effort.' I'd say: 'I'm not paying you for today, mate, because you didn't do anything!' That's my ethos behind how I work. Every day I'm applying pressure to myself. These people are paying so much money for me they're going to want something. After a period of time, I get tired – it's mentally draining."

This problem is exacerbated by the way contracts start short and then get extended, sometimes repeatedly. "My last contract was initially a six-week job, creating a specific interface in a specific piece of software. I got it done, got it delivered, and then I had proved to a few key players that I was worth keeping on. The whole project was huge; there was loads more work to be done. I ended up staying there for nearly a year."

When Jason isn't out on a contract, Succeed pay him a retainer to support the consultants who are, and to document what he has learnt from previous jobs for the benefit of all the consultants. "You have so many people out and other people on the bench, supporting the people who are out. You're working for a company, not just yourself."

The most common career route into software consultancy is via the big consultancy firms, because they take graduates fresh from university. Other routes are less straightforward, because IT jobs so often ask for experience, rather than offering training. But as Jason shows, it isn't impossible to change career into software consultancy. "You really need experience, if not in consulting, then on that particular software. And any IT experience is good, because you see how companies do things – good or bad, you can learn from both. You can take that information anywhere. But before anyone will pay you anything you've got to prove that you know the software."

A fast-changing industry

Nothing in software stays still for long, and there are constantly new challenges to face. Currently, the big challenge facing software consultants comes from the trend to outsourcing, to India in particular. Jason has by now worked on two projects that had previously been outsourced, and had failed. "I'm not saying it's just outsourcing that does it, it's just that they can pull the wool over your eyes a bit easier because of the distance and because it's so cheap. Big money people just see the massive savings and think that even if it takes two years instead of six months, or they only get halfway, they'll have saved money. But the two I've worked on, these people haven't delivered. You haven't paid much money but you haven't got very much – or anything at all – and then you have to get the experts in to pick up the pieces and deliver." He is convinced that these are just teething problems, though, and that outsourcing is here to stay. Inevitably, with experience, the outsourced consultants will improve, and he has also noticed a recent trend to part-outsource projects, keeping some key roles in-house while still sourcing some jobs abroad.

But Jason is still really happy with the direction his career has taken. "The job itself throws up challenges and when you nail it you get quite a buzz of satisfaction. It's like being a designer and also being the builder who follows the design. If you've done both, you can look at the whole thing and think: 'I made that.'"

About this article

Helen Joyce is editor of *Plus*. She interviewed Jason Winborn, who contracts for Succeed Consultancy Ltd, in London.



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