

The courage to go it alone

There are big rewards for those who take the plunge and go into consulting, writes **Melinda Ham**.

Janet Horton changed both her country of residence and career path at the same time. It was a significant leap into the unknown after more than a decade with one company but, three years on, she's loving it.

"I get so much joy out of being self-employed," says the 42-year-old IT expert, who runs Handspring Consulting in Sydney.

"I am gaining a lot of general wisdom and broad understanding by going in and out of many different organisations. Also in the past 18 months, I think I've finally crossed the line and I know it's sustainable."

Five years ago, Horton realised she was ready for change. After starting her career with a technology company in support services in the US when she was 24 years old, she'd progressed up the corporate ladder. With stints overseas in Singapore and Sydney, she had moved into senior management and was the vice-president of client services.

But like many other executives, she realised she was too far removed from what she really enjoyed doing most: working at the coalface. Also, she admits she had become "a slave to her salary".

So Horton made a clean break. She sold her house in Minneapolis

in the US, left her job and headed to Sydney with her cat.

Initially she found work with her old company for a while and then as a sub-contractor for a small boutique consultancy.

"It was like an apprenticeship," Horton says. "It gave me some comfort and let me try out my consultancy skills."

"I slowly found my niche and finally got to the point where I was turning down their work and had enough of my own clients."

At the same time, Horton enrolled in a master of organisational coaching at the University of Sydney. "I did a research essay about how technology can be used or abused in an organisation and that really helped me solidify my area of expertise instead of doing just generic work," she says.

In addition, she took a six-week course at the Centre for Continuing Education on "starting your own business consultancy" and got herself a business coach. "The classroom gave me the knowledge and the coaching helped me develop my personal strengths," she says.

Early on, Horton also knew she needed peer support, so she joined a breakfast networking group. "There are 12 of us and we meet every two weeks for breakfast," she says.



Motivated ... Janet Horton enjoys working for herself as a business technology consultant. Photo: Domino Postiglione

"We've been doing it for a few years now and it's just been invaluable."

"We're all from different industries but they are basically my informal advisory board."

When Horton is putting a new page on her website or giving a speech at a function, she'll try it out first with her breakfast group. "I'll say, 'Does this make sense?' and they'll give me feedback and throw things out there. I know they really understand because they're walking with me in similar shoes," she says.

Having savings to draw from was also really important, she says. "Setting up a consultancy or a business will always take a lot longer than you think," she says. "And it's also very hard leaving a paid job to

work out what you are worth. My clients are business people so they get quotes from lots of consultants, not just me. It's not about charging the lowest rate; if you charge too little, then they can assume you are not up to the job."

It's also vital to establish your professional boundaries early on, says Robert Gerrish, the director of Flying Solo, a support and networking website for solo and micro-businesses (those that employ fewer than five people).

"If you answer the phone at 9pm or jump on an email at the same time and reply immediately, you really need to question whether this is your dream way of working or if you are coming across as too

desperate or too eager for work," he says.

But Horton believes she is now reaching an equilibrium (admittedly after having her moments of panic and self-doubt) where she is doing the interesting work she always hoped to. And, even though Sydney has many consultants, she now offers a significant point of difference.

"It's important not to be a jack-of-all-trades," she says.

"I feel my specialisation is unique: I work with the drivers of change at the executive level but at the same time I am good at rolling up my sleeves and doing the technical stuff. Change management requires both."