

# Start & Run a Rural Computer Consulting Business

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# 1



## Escaping the Urban IT-Support Rat Race

This book is a step-by-step guide for computer support professionals working high-stress information technology jobs in large cities. It's intended for the ones who plan to or just dream about moving out of the city to a small town — and actually making a living as an independent rural computer consultant.

This was exactly what I did in 1999, when I left one of Houston's most successful network integration firms, moved to rural Brenham, Texas, and started a one-man computer consulting firm.

Most IT jobs are located in cities. Compensation is good — but there's a price to be paid for it. There's also an alternative, which I'll tell you about later in this chapter.

### **Urban IT Grinder: The Dark Side of a Bright Industry**

We've all seen the IT guys with their identification badges hanging from their necks on a vendor-provided band and a cluster of

smartphone, PDA, and beeper on their belts. Their faces have a concentrated look, and they all walk fast to get to their next technology firefight.

These are the hardware and software professionals who keep corporate America's bits moving in an orderly and dependable fashion. Many have degrees, most have certifications, and some have both. The vast majority, around 90 percent, are men, and most of them are younger than 40 years of age. Their employers are usually companies with 50 or more employees and are generally located in cities with populations of at least 50,000. The denser the city's population, the more information infrastructure is required to serve the workers, which in turn increases the need for information technology talent.

This is why the mother lode of IT positions is in metropolitan areas. I started my IT career at Houston's Control Data Corporation in 1981 and was fortunate not to be transferred or to have to chase a job to another big

city, which allowed me to maintain strong contacts with my family and longtime friends. Only by choice in the late 1990s did I move out of the big city — which led me to write this book.

So if you are or want to be an IT person, odds are you are or will be working in a metro-area company dealing with a boss and some level of traffic. Along with city living comes the higher cost of housing, taxes, and other services, as well as a higher rate of crime. Though many urban IT pros may work downtown, they probably live in the suburbs where housing is more affordable. This is where the traffic comes into play, since many IT pros have an average 30-minute commute each way to work.

The younger tech-support staffers just getting started usually get apartments close to work so they can respond fast to work needs, like being “on call.” As they age, get married, and have kids, their home square-footage requirement grows, which pushes them farther out of the core areas into more affordable housing markets — which in turn increases their commute time.

These are the issues for the internal support professionals who have a single fixed place of employment with little travel required on the job. The other group of cyberhounds, however, includes hourly billable consultants and contractors, who have to go where the short-term technical work is located. Many times they will actually fly out Sunday night or early Monday morning to a remote client site, work like dogs all week, and then fly back late Friday afternoon to their homes. During the workweek, they fight the city’s unfamiliar traffic patterns and deal with the hidden crime dangers while driving a rented car and finally

crashing in a lonely hotel room, which may or may not have a working high-speed Internet connection.

Traffic hurts IT people more than workers in most other industries because there are so many instances when we have to make a second trip to the work site to fix a problem or to work on a project outside of prime time. During some troubleshooting events, I’ve had to make multiple trips back and forth to work, chasing an intermittent networking problem that seemed to pop up again only after I arrived back home. It should come as no surprise that big IT job centers such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle, San Jose, Houston, Dallas, Atlanta, New York, Chicago, and Boston comprise the top ten worst traffic areas in the United States.

I make such a big deal out of the traffic issue because it really is a big deal. Sitting in traffic while commuting to and from work is wasted time. It is frustrating, upsetting, and sometimes maddening. I have not only witnessed but also (unfortunately) participated in road rage on more than one occasion.

Basically, commuting to our IT jobs really inhales immensely (i.e., it sucks!), and traffic congestion in the urban and metropolitan areas in which we work is constantly getting worse. Keep reading, and I can show you an alternative to your daily gridlock and gruel.

Once you actually get to work, it is likely you have a single primary superior or boss to deal with on a daily basis. You hope this person is a moral, fair, and understanding human being who is familiar with your job requirements, your professional capabilities, and your personal commitments and needs. I have been very fortunate at the companies I’ve worked for to have had great bosses who

not only treated me fairly, but also mentored me and looked out for my best interest. They all wanted me to progress, learn, and eventually move on to bigger and better things. I was constantly given opportunities to grow my skill sets, and my mentors nurtured my personal communication techniques to better deal with customers and peers.

I was lucky, but many others are not so fortunate and have to deal with bosses, superiors, team leaders, and other higher-ups who seem to be complete jerks. This brings me to another point of concern common to many urban IT-support positions: the “single point of economic failure.” The vast majority of IT professionals — not to mention most employees of companies in any industry — have a single boss to report to who has almost unilateral control over their immediate future. That one boss can limit your professional growth and opportunities, or worse, can terminate your employment and cut off 100 percent of your income without warning.

Let me emphasize this point. It only takes one obnoxious manager assigned as your superior to stop your paychecks and send you home, stunned and suddenly unemployed. How much of the money you’ve saved for the kids’ college or a new home will now be needed just to pay the mortgage, car notes, and other bills? Will you have to move and take the kids out of their school midyear? Can you even sell the house now and recoup what you’ve put into it? Is the IT market in your area already saturated with pros like yourself barely holding onto their jobs? How long can you go until the next paycheck is deposited into your soon-to-be-shrinking bank account?

This may sound like doom and gloom talk, but I have heard and seen it from too many of my IT peers since the technology industry crash of 2000. Since many of us are monstrous consumers, we have the bills and debt to go with that high earning and spending lifestyle. We all seem to need the largest house we can afford at the time of purchase, multiple SUVs, and expensive vacations just to get away from the computer world at least once a year. All this costs more than we can usually pay in cash, so we put it on credit. But lose your job and this single point of economic failure will kill you financially and possibly devastate your fiscal plans for years.

Becoming a rural computer consultant can not only get you away from the metropolitan traffic nightmare, but can also eliminate this single point of economic failure. There are thousands of small rural communities similar to the one I am flourishing in. Note that 80 percent of workers are employed by small companies with less than 50 employees. You can be the IT pro for a number of those small companies in a rural town or cluster of towns far away from the big city.

Later in this book I will describe in detail how to get these small businesses as paying clients, effectively getting multiple monthly paychecks instead of having to rely on one source for 100 percent of your income. Remember, this is real work for real people and not some B.S. work-at-home scheme or MLM (multi-level-marketing) plan. You already have an existing IT skill set. I will explain how you can expand that skill set to serve small businesses in rural areas — allowing you to change your life.

## Rural Computer Consulting: A Brand-New Niche

A rural computer consultant is the jack-of-all-computer-trades. He or she has to be able to fix, configure, install, test, and troubleshoot everything and anything electronic that businesses use on a day-to-day basis, and do all this for numerous customers that make up a client base.

During my years as an urban enterprise-level consultant, I never imagined doing what I do now or doing it where I do it. My perception during the 1990s was that only big cities had enough computer-related jobs and projects to support full-time information technology personnel. What I've learned is that a small town (or cluster of small towns within a 30-mile radius) big enough to warrant a Wal-Mart and a McDonald's is fertile ground for computer consulting experts.

I grant you that most small-town environments will only support one or two multi-skilled consultants, but odds are that should you decide to become a rural computer consultant, you won't find much competition. One of the reasons I can say this with confidence is that while I was researching this book, I was not able to find any other books describing IT or computer consulting in rural areas. There were, however, numerous books in both hardcover and paperback related to general consulting, IT consulting, and starting small businesses in various IT fields. The common thread to all these books was the need for medium-to-large metropolitan areas as a marketplace.

Another way I learned that there are not many computer consultants working solely

in rural environments was by roaming chat rooms and newsgroups. What I've discovered is that ever since the IT bust of 2000, many of my peers have had to really scrounge for work just to pay their bills. They've had to take almost anything, anywhere, even if it required flying out to the client site on Sunday nights and back again late Friday afternoons. Others have simply given up and taken work in non-IT environments. The past five years have certainly culled many single-skill-set workers and/or poor performers from the IT industry.

Rarely, if ever, did I hear or read of urban IT professionals leaving the city for the country and successfully providing computer consulting and services. If you're willing to accept some risk, however, the rewards can be great.

I was lucky enough to be able to take all of 1999 off from the IT industry so I could investigate various agribusinesses that could be supported on my 115-acre ranch in Brenham. After learning about multiple types of farming and ranching business models such as raising chickens, goats, and horses, or growing fruit trees or cut flowers, I realized that farming and ranching were not my cup of tea.

During those nine months of testing both plant crops and animal raising, I ran the numbers on Excel and discovered a disheartening fact about agribusinesses. Most of these farming and ranching enterprises require large capital investment, are high risk due to uncontrollable factors such as weather, require hard outdoor work seven days a week, and have a very low payout at the end of the year. This is with no major disasters such as drought or illness.

So in 2000, despite having turned down multiple requests for me to do some consulting work in Houston and Austin, I did finally accept a couple of short-term contracts.

Even at that time, I didn't believe that Brenham or even all of Washington County would have enough consulting projects to keep me busy, but I decided to start looking for opportunities locally in our new small hometown. Chapter 13 will address in detail how I was able to get my original 12 clients.

As time went on, I was able to gather more rural clients, and by late 2002, I was able to stop taking new Houston and Austin clients entirely. By early 2003, my 40-plus active rural clients were keeping me hopping, so I handed off my remaining Houston and Austin clients to my consultant friends. My billable time was consistently hitting over \$10K per month from Washington County clients alone. I had arrived at a small-company plateau I never thought possible just a couple of years before.

It was then, around 2003, when I fully grasped what I had become — a rural computer consultant. I had not planned, projected, researched, or read about this new niche. I had just developed it in real time based on the computing needs of the local businesses.

The exciting thing about being the jack-of-all-IT-trades in the country is that you are doing many different things all day long, and you are rarely at one client's site for the majority of the day. My normal schedule consists of four, and sometimes up to eight or even ten client-site visits in one day. This would be nearly impossible in a large metro area due to travel times between clients and traffic limitations. Back in the 1990s in Houston, it was rare indeed when I could visit three clients in a day, let alone four or more.

Another good thing about small-town clients is that they are mostly on an eight- to nine-hour day, five days a week. Some of the larger ones may have a second evening shift that you might have to support, but that is rare. This is a major benefit for a rural computer consultant — being able to work from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday, and still be close to the house or your kids' school.

Some days will start out with you having to resolve e-mail problems for Client A, then driving ten or so miles to the neighboring town to troubleshoot backup problems for Client B. Remember that those ten miles will take only about ten minutes, driving through country roads with nice hay fields and cows to look at instead of glaring red taillights and tall buildings. If you do your planning right, Client C is in that same neighboring town and needs you to pick up an old Windows 2000 PC and upgrade it to Windows XP Pro overnight and return it the next morning.

Some days will be project days with specific tasks and jobs to perform on a schedule. Those days are nice, since you are able to focus, plan, and have the required hardware and software on hand. Other days will be in what I call "interrupt mode" or "firefighting mode," when you go from problem to problem, fixing the computer and network glitches that seem to crop up in threes. Usually, though, after you get a decent client load, you will have days that go as planned and others that are dynamic. You'll learn to prioritize the level of need, rating it somewhere between an emergency work-stoppage situation and a nice-to-have improvement. Deciding which client to hit next when your schedule gets full is almost

an art in itself since you are trying to keep the travel time down and the on-site billing time up.

As I will describe later in this book, the best way to hold on to new clients is by being available and successfully fixing a computer-related problem the business is currently having. If you get a call from a small-business owner who is having network problems and is a friend of one of your current clients, you have got to jump on that one immediately!

Just like any other small-business owner, you must wear many corporate hats. Besides being a computer consultant, you need to also be your own bookkeeper, salesperson, marketing representative, and bill collector,

all wrapped into one. When the phone isn't ringing and your project list is short, your new job for that day or week is marketing!

At the end of the month, with hopefully dozens of invoices to send out, you recheck your billable time and all hardware/software sales, add any applicable taxes, and get those bills in the mail to your clients. Don't forget about your company's bills, since they collect up in your in-box just as fast as your personal bills.

Rural computer consulting wasn't the career I started out in. Nonetheless, my former career in big-city IT was excellent preparation for what I'm doing now. And that's the topic of the next chapter.