

Episode 102: Launching a Consulting Firm After Being Independent—with Diogène Ntirandekura

Deb Zahn: Hi. I want to welcome you to this week's episode of the Craft of Consulting podcast. All right. So this week we're going to talk about transitions and we're going to talk about transitioning from being an employee to being an independent consultant to then taking another leap and becoming the CEO of a small consulting firm. And I brought somebody on who's going to talk about what that has looked like for him and what his lessons have been. So I brought on Diogène Ntirandekura, who is going to talk about what that journey has been. And there are so many lessons that he talks about that actually... There's at least one or two of them that are going to cause me to change what I'm doing. So it's great stuff. Let's get started.

I want to welcome you to the show today. I want to welcome a fabulous guest Diogène Ntirandekura.

Diogène Ntirandekura: Thank you. Thank you, Deb, for inviting me to the Craft of Consulting podcast. I really like your show so it's an honor to be one of the guests there.

Deb Zahn: Thank you. And you obviously have a podcast which I also listen to, which is for consultants, which is podcasting lifestyle, which is also fantastic. So we enjoy each other's company. We already know that.

Diogène Ntirandekura: Yes. And you have been a guest, of course, on the show. Yes.

Deb Zahn: That's right. Had a great time on your show. So let's start off. Tell my listeners what you do.

Diogène Ntirandekura: I mostly do two things we just mentioned. Indeed, I have a podcast called Consulting Lifestyle, that goes about B2B consulting. So pretty similar subjects as what you have on the Craft of Consulting. Otherwise, I am also a consultant in digital transformation. So what is meant by there is...behind this word is working with businesses in trying to get them to be more productive and focusing more on their core business through the implementation of different systems and processes. So it's mostly that.

Deb Zahn: That's wonderful. And I know you've had quite a journey into consulting, which I think would be great for folks to hear about. So starting as an employee and then an independent contractor and now the CEO of a small consulting firm. So let's actually, if we could start off, your leap from being an employee to an independent contractor. What led you to do that?

Diogène Ntirandekura: I've always had in my...in the back of my head, since I was very young, I would like to have my own company. I didn't know necessarily what, but I was like, yeah. I would love to have my own company. I would like to travel, etc., etc. So it stays in my head. And I knew when I started as a consultant, and I was a consultant more in big four consulting firms like IBM and Deloitte, I knew at some point I would like to become independent. Just really becoming independent. And I was not totally aware of what it means in terms of the type of contracts I will have, the conditions that I would have if I was forced to build in an LLC, if you call it like that in the U.S. So I mean that corporation, or if I could just do it as an independent and it's added on my personal income. I was not totally aware of all those things. But I was reaching a tipping point, I think.

So I started as an employee consultant...we were in early 2017. And I was like 33. And when I was 32, it was actually in the summer of 2016. In my head, I was like, "Oh man, you're in your 30s. You keep wasting time. You should now do the things you really want to do." And that's when I actually decided to do that. I spoke with a coach, a business coach, I'm still in touch with her actually. And she forced me to put in place a business plan. I've not followed, but still...

Deb Zahn: Confession time.

Diogène Ntirandekura: Yeah. But still it forced me to think about, OK, what would be the price, or who would you sell to. And when I look at the business plan that I wrote, I was thinking, how do you call it seven sky or whatever...

Deb Zahn: Oh yeah, you're sky high.

Diogène Ntirandekura: Sky high because I was thinking I could sell everywhere in the world so easily and so fast and I could do everything at the same time. But it's not...It was a feeling not true. But at least it really forced my decision to become an independent contractor. And one thing that a lot of people that want to become independent contractors should do that I have not done is if you can do it, try to secure your first clients before you resign. I did not do that. So what happened is that for 10 years, I was used to having a salary every month. And the week after I resigned or the week after I finished my period of employment, I was scared. I was panicking. And I wrote to my coach say, "What can I do to get some money? Can I have some funding somewhere?" Because I had no salary. I had to search for a contract. Now I'm much more comfortable with that. But if you know you're risk-averse try to secure a first contract but even if you're not risk-averse, it's always good to already have a contract before you walk out.

Deb Zahn: I was fortunate that...because I was at a firm, not one of the big ones, but I was at a national firm and I already had clients that I was able to transition with the firms switching to a subcontractor. So my first step out the door as an independent, I had what you were talking about. And it was so much easier. But even if you're employed somewhere, as long as you aren't doing anything that violates whatever company policy is, you can often secure a first client. You are out networking, you can do a whole bunch of things. So how did you actually get your first client?

Diogène Ntirandekura: It's funny. It's funny because it was...My first client was actually IBM. So I was a subcontractor for IBM in the project.

Deb Zahn: Not too bad. If you've got to have a first client.

Diogène Ntirandekura: Yeah. It's because in the...So it was a big SAP implementation. So SAP is management software, business management software, just to make it clear for people. And how I got them, the funny thing is that I was in touch with them months before I stopped my employment because they were thinking about hiring me as an employee.

Deb Zahn: Oh, nice.

Diogène Ntirandekura: At that time I said...I thought about it and I said nope. And then two months after I was out of full mandate, out of contract, they called me back and they said, "OK, we would like to...we

are still looking for people in the project. We were thinking of hiring you, and you can come as a contractor.” So, that's how I started. That's how I got my first contract.

Deb Zahn: That's great. And I...We haven't mentioned that approach on this show before, but I've actually encouraged others to do it, which is if somebody sends you, somebody says, “Hey, this would be a great job for you.” Maybe they need something in the meantime. Maybe they don't really want to hire someone if they can get it a different way. Or maybe they need somebody to serve a bridge and you can serve that bridge, or you can help whoever that new person is get cooking. So I think that's a fantastic strategy to get a new client.

Diogène Ntirandekura: True, true. Looking at job posts can really be a clients' recruitment strategy for a consultant. Sometimes, even now with the pandemic, we used to have the facilities. We were renting a lot of equipment, etc. for employees. Now companies are realizing that maybe they could be leaner with their costs. And one way to be lean is also to be a consultant that could come on and solve the problems that they have. And maybe instead of hiring someone full-time with all the benefits and all the costs that are around it, they could hire you as a consultant for a limited period. Or you could have some kind of retainer with the clients that would cost less than what it would cost if they had to hire someone there full-time.

Deb Zahn: Yeah. I saw on social media, you recently shared an article about the shift in a lot of big corporations thinking about a more flexible workplace. But I hadn't actually thought of looking at job descriptions, but it's brilliant because it tells you what they're willing to pay for. That's wonderful. That is wonderful.

So you were an independent contractor and how did you build up your pipeline of business over time after you got your first big fish?

Diogène Ntirandekura: Actually, it was before. So maybe that's also one good lesson, is even while you're an employee, build your network already because that's very important. So depending on which specialty you want to consult on, try to subscribe to groups. Go to, when it will be possible to do it in person, go to events and meet people. Even if you're an employee of whichever company because all those people a year, a year after two years, two years after they could become the person that we refer you for you to get your client or the person that will directly hire you as a consultant. So actually I did not start to build a pipeline after I quit my job. I was actually building the pipelines almost since I arrived in Canada.

Deb Zahn: That's so smart.

Diogène Ntirandekura: At that time, I didn't know that I was building a pipeline, but then I noticed I did because...So usually what I was doing was, when you talk about the transition, was doing SAP consulting. And when I was looking at all the people that I know in all the big consulting firms, I have almost one...at least one key contact in every firm. But I did it before even becoming a contractor. So I think that's very important and you're in a better...I think you're in a better position as well. You should do it while you're employed, rather than when you're a contractor looking for her or his first assignment.

Deb Zahn: That's right. Because then you're doing networking when you're not asking for something and you might be in a position to give something, which is great. So you've made another recent transition.

Talk about moving from being an independent contractor to now having a firm and you're now a CEO.

Diogène Ntirandekura: Yes. So there's one thing that you said that is very true as well. Even if you're alone you're kind of a CEO.

Deb Zahn: Exactly.

Diogène Ntirandekura: I totally agree.

Deb Zahn: You may not know it, but yeah. Absolutely.

Diogène Ntirandekura: Which is absolutely true. Just that the difference when you're the CEO is that now when you talk about talent and colleagues, you really have other people. Other physical people. Other human beings.

Deb Zahn: It's not just moving into another chair.

Diogène Ntirandekura: So one thing that is important is that I get to think about things I wasn't thinking before. So the first one is time management in a sense that some of your time is spent on tasks that are not income generating. So when you're a contractor, you could really well say, "OK, I have an accountant. I outsource my payroll to whichever HR tool. And I just execute my work on contract. And that's all I do." You could really have your consulting business like that. But now when you start to involve other people, you have to think about how much did they cost you and how much revenue should you get per person, if you want to be profitable and how much time do you want to spend on prospecting and trying to sell versus all the other activities.

So it's totally recent. We are now at the end of January 2021. And it's literally at the start of the year, it's at the start of this month that I made the transition. So now what I am...I want to say battling, but it has a negative connotation. But one thing that I am really trying to master is how I manage my time and my energy. So out of the 40 hours, 40 normal hours, how many hours are actually spent trying to prospect? How many hours are actually spent doing what I do now? Like according to marketing. So being a guest on a podcast, how many hours are actually spent training and developing the other people? That's really something that you need to figure out.

And also you need to be more on your numbers. If you're a contractor that doesn't live a very expensive lifestyle, or usually quickly pretty comfortable which is great. But now you have more expenses, even though they are for the office. But you have more expenses. So you also have to really think about how much does your business cost and how much you need to just be profitable.

Deb Zahn: That's right. And I'm curious, so that's a lot to suddenly say. And now I have all of this on my plate as well. So there had to be compelling reasons why you wanted to go down that path. So what made you want to take that leap from being independent to now having an actual firm?

Diogène Ntirandekura: What I really want to achieve in life in general is improving my community and trying to show that it's not because you're an immigrant or coming from a poor country that you have to hide your whole life and not trying to do something big. And I was feeling that if I was doing my work in a big consulting project, and I was kind of one fish in the ocean. And even though I live comfortably, but I'm kind of one fish in the ocean, maybe I'm not really true to my potential. And I know that I'm a bit afraid of, I'm usually afraid of trying to do that. But the reason is because when you really want to discover your potential very often, you end up thinking that if you want to reach your potential you need to collaborate with the other people. So why not trying to do now? That's what I was...

Deb Zahn: I love that. That's a great answer. Let me ask you this. You're a month in what have been the big lessons because I'm sure a month into being the CEO of a firm, there's already been some big lessons that you've learned. What would you share that you've learned so far?

Diogène Ntirandekura: OK, one particular lesson is inside the house. We are working...I'm working from home. A lot of people. And I have a new...it's strange to say that, but I have a daughter. I have a daughter and she's two months old now. So yeah, a little toddler. So for sure, I am involved in taking care of her but the mom is doing a bit much more than me. So one thing that I had to really learn is communicate constantly and clearly with my wife, with regards to all the things that we need to take care of the baby and with the house. So I know it's not a business answer, but I think it's...

Deb Zahn: But it's a life answer. That's essentially two “enterprises” at the same time. Wow. And so, and again, I absolutely applaud you for doing what's in your heart to do because even though there's a pandemic, even though you're a new dad, there's no reason not to do what your heart and your mind tell you is possible and you most want to do. I think it's fabulous.

So how do you envision the process of getting business now? Does that change now that you're in a different role and you're not just the doer?

Diogène Ntirandekura: What it changes is that I have to prove that the company has a proper value to offer to its prospects and customers. And I have to prove as well, I don't like to say to prove, but has to demonstrate also the culture, which we want to work. So they are not necessarily buying from me only, but they're also buying a vision. And something that is happening right now, so I don't know when the episode will be out, if it is out, I think early March, I should have the new website up. Otherwise, it is still a...but it should be the same address. But, otherwise, it is still the older, kind of the older format of the website. But we are revamping the website to show a bit more, what is our message and the type of value we want to provide

Deb Zahn: You mentioned value and demonstrating value. And now you have a different way you can demonstrate value because it's not just you.

Diogène Ntirandekura: Yes, indeed. Yes. And it will still require the creation of content, but it should also be asking or telling clients that they can buy into a certain vision or certain way of doing consulting. And also for practical as a practical answer. I am using the software HubSpot. And it's also a...it's a CRM platform. So customer relationship management platform. You could manage your marketing, your sales process or before, during, and after the sale. And also your service if you want to do service to existing clients. And I practice what I preach. So I use it for my business, and I try to implement it for others. And one thing, yes, one thing I feel that is important as well. That's one big lesson, sometimes when you

don't have a...because I was, as I said, I was mostly implementing SAP. So HubSpot is more new for me. And sometimes when you want to find your first client, it's good to be your own first case study.

Deb Zahn: I love that.

Diogène Ntirandekura: Yeah. That's good to do that as well.

Deb Zahn: Talk about being able to talk about pain points in a really clear way because you've actually had them. But one of the things I love is your advantage in this because you didn't discover that systems were important after you launched. You knew that going in because that's the work that you did. But can you say a little bit about having some of those systems? What that enables you to do that you wouldn't be able to do if you didn't have them?

Diogène Ntirandekura: Yeah. So let's take a hypothetical example. Hypothetical story. Let's go back pre-COVID and there is a big trade fair? Yeah, trade fair?

Deb Zahn: We have those. I seem to recall.

Diogène Ntirandekura: Yes. So let's say you are a...you own a manufacturing company. You build laptops. OK. You're not Apple. You're orange, let's say. And at that trade fair, you have met hundreds of potential clients. So they saw your product and they said, let's have a call again, after the fair and you come back with a stack of business cards. You have to touch stuff from others...

Deb Zahn: You didn't have to spray them.

Diogène Ntirandekura: So one thing that a system can help you first is already to maybe scan them in advance. But beyond that, the positive and my point is, let's say you come back with your stack of cards and you say, you write on your notebook, "I'm going to contact all those people next month within the next week, etc." How can you make sure that you remember absolutely every conversation that you have had with the person and how can you...Can you track when you said what and when you heard what from that person? It is possible to do it with systems. Systems that are not necessarily, I want to say expensive, but systems that quickly can show you their added value because you save time. You're more efficient. You're also more, I want to say more convincing to clients, when you have a clear memory of all of your interactions with them. If I make a problem of dating, mostly a man or a man who wants to impress abilities when you remember absolutely every conversation. He goes, "Oh, you really listen to me." So it's a bit the same.

Deb Zahn: Yeah, yeah. It does work the same with clients. And I've had the experience of being on the other side with consultants talking to me back when I was employed, who could not remember what we talked about, didn't really pay attention to what we did. I mean, it was a very, very sloppy approach. And you could tell they had no systems supporting what they were doing. And there was no way they were going to get business from me because I don't want to feel like I'm a generic client. I want to feel like you really get me and you care about me.

Diogène Ntirandekura: And there's a uniqueness of the prospect you talk to. And one thing that it helps you too is not only having that visibility of all those interactions with the prospect or the clients, but you can also automate some follow-up that tracks to-do. Whether that follow-up is an email, whether that

follow-up is a call or a video call or whatever, but you can also automate those follow-ups. So when you go on that trade fair, if we come back to that example, with a software, like for example, HubSpot. You could have said, "OK, all the people that I've met at the trade fair, I will send them, two days later, an email saying, 'I'm very happy to have met you, Mr. X, Mrs. Y. As discussed, I will be glad to have a call with you, blah, blah, blah. And I'll also send you that document, that's the discussion we have had.'" And you could automate that.

Deb Zahn: Right. And here's a link to schedule with me right now.

Diogène Ntirandekura: Exactly. Exactly.

Deb Zahn: Yeah. It's the...I was explaining this to someone the other day. The importance of reducing friction. So the more steps you want someone to take, and the more you want a client to work, to be able to hire you, the less likely that that's going...there's too many touch points where they're going to fall off because you're making them do work. And you're also not giving them a very pleasant experience. So again, when you started your firm, there's lots of firms that don't have any systems. They have a financial system, they have whatever, but they don't know that you can actually automate all those things. So I think, what an amazing advantage to start with.

Diogène Ntirandekura: Indeed.

Deb Zahn: So what other sort of big lessons or advice you would give to somebody who's thinking, "What I really want is I want other people by my side and I want to have employees and be a firm that can go out and help people." What would you encourage them to do?

Diogène Ntirandekura: Yeah. If you want other people by your side, you have to learn the language of vision. Because someone that decides to work with you when you are not necessarily directly a millionaire or whichever superstar, they really buy into you. And there is a reason why they buy into you. It's because they agree with your vision and they want to achieve it with you. At least that's really what I hope because if they just want the job, for a startup it's difficult. But they really need to buy into your vision. So talking the language of vision is very important and then having a clear vision about what you want to do is very important.

Deb Zahn: I love that also because you want clients that you get to uniformly experience that vision. And if you sell the vision and then somebody shows up, who's just doing a job, they can actually tell the difference.

Diogène Ntirandekura: Yeah. Because I need to tell you one of the vision that I have with the industry. So in the industry of implementing CRM software or our business management software that we call...the jargons are ERP. So Enterprise Resource Planning software, is that you have projects that are too long, too expensive, or even if they have been implemented, after they have been implemented, people have not been trained at all. Or they have not been trained adequately to be able to use it. So you don't really realize the value of the project. And that's a little bit of those barriers that I want to break first, starting with maybe more mid-size companies or teams within big companies. That's the type of barriers that I want to break.

And I really think that in the industry, this firm is too big, but it's totally possible to change it. I think that clients are becoming more and more themselves educated. We are all on our mobile devices, using apps, etc. So clients are themselves becoming educated and we can deliver solutions that realize value for them pretty quickly. And we can do consulting that is really results oriented and not time oriented.

Deb Zahn: That's right. Where it's basically about the billable hour. And if the result happens, it happens. What I love about that is it sounds like what you're really selling is freedom and a sense of accomplishment.

Diogène Ntirandekura: Yes. Yes.

Deb Zahn: Right. I've been in big companies before, small companies, people know what it's like when things take a long time. It drags on. There's "Wait, why are we here? What are we trying to do? Maybe we just run down the clock because this is going to fall to the side." There's so many things that are frustrating that suck up time and energy, and don't yield anything that you can feel good about. And it sounds like what you're selling is you're selling the anecdote to that.

Diogène Ntirandekura: Indeed.

Deb Zahn: I'd buy that. I love that. That's absolutely wonderful. So is there anything, if you had, and again, I know you weekly have new consultants in front of you who are smart enough to listen to your podcasts. Is there any sort of piece of advice you would give people other than what you've said, who really want to make their consulting work? Whether it's starting a firm or independent, that they should always do this and then never do this. All right, I'd love to see both sides of that coin.

Diogène Ntirandekura: OK. The never do this for a consultant is, never assume that what you have seen in the past or what you have done in the past is what you have to do in the present and the future. You can create something completely new and unheard of. You already have the whole freedom to do that. So that will be the first thing. Then what you should do, I will try not to repeat myself, what you should do is maybe pick and choose one or two business models that you are capable to deliver it within the next 12 months.

Deb Zahn: That's great. I love that. I love that. And realistic ones. Because again, the visions that we have at the beginning when we're thinking about it can always be inaccurate, but it sounds like you were smart to get a coach or somebody else to look at it and say, what can you realistically do to build your business?

Diogène Ntirandekura: Yes. Yeah.

Deb Zahn: I love that. So one last question that I always ask folks who are on my podcast is about life balance. And I realize I'm asking a new business owner, plus dad, to answer that question. But I'm going to ask it anyway. So how do you bring, however you currently define balance, to your life?

Diogène Ntirandekura: I don't have a business plan. I have a life plan. And there are six areas in my life. And I have tried a bit that you do this year with your mom time. I try to, every week, look at seriously where have I been? How have I performed in all those six areas? So the six areas or...First is my love relationships with my wife and my daughter. Then there are all my relatives. So the rest of my family

and my very, very best friends. Then there is health. So health from the mental side and health from the physical side and then business and finance is the last one. So I try to be sure that those six...I'm not perfect at all. But at least by tracking, I know where I have to improve. And I try to really do it consistently every week. So for example Fridays or Friday before ending my week. This week, I finish early on Friday. I would have looked at it. But for sure, I guess I've become a dad, I got married a year ago just before COVID.

Deb Zahn: Good timing. Dating is hard right now, from what I've heard.

Diogène Ntirandekura: True, true. And organizing a wedding would have been even the hardest one.

Deb Zahn: I can imagine, Oh goodness. Or you're a super-spreader then...

Diogène Ntirandekura: No. My gosh. Yes, imagine. Oh my gosh, it would have been that. It would have been called a super-spreader.

Deb Zahn: Oh, yeah. We had one where I live. There was somebody who went ahead and had their wedding and dozens of cases came out of it or something like that. And it's like, wow, you should send their present back.

Diogène Ntirandekura: Oh my gosh. Yes. But no, yeah. Having just become a dad with a little daughter and being at home all the time. Balance between life and work. It's not something that you can find 50-50, but you have to choose your imbalances. So choose your non-negotiables and accept some imbalances.

Deb Zahn: So I love that answer so much. And I'm reminded, I actually had a client once who I was talking to him and I'm like, "Oh yeah, sorry. I just rescued a couple new kittens and I'm doing this with my mom and blah, blah, blah." And he asked, "So how do you have time to do everything?" And I sent him a picture of a dead plant in my garden because I'm a rabid gardener. And I said, "This is how. I'm OK that this is dead. I'm OK that I didn't have the time to properly do what I had to do with this because I was in the 80, 90% rage." And that was fine with me.

Diogène Ntirandekura: Yes. Yeah, exactly.

Deb Zahn: The best you could do, and that was a plant. You can't do that in other areas of your life, huh?

Diogène Ntirandekura: No, obviously non-negotiable not to take care of the kid or the wife. This would not be...no it would not be possible.

Deb Zahn: That's right. I appreciate so much you coming on my show, I had such a wonderful time on yours and I'm going to wish you all the success, but I also know I have complete confidence it's going to happen because your wisdom going into it, I think is just wonderful. But thank you for coming on and sharing this with us.

Diogène Ntirandekura: Thank you very much, Deb. I really hope this was helpful.

Deb Zahn: Thanks so much for listening to this episode of the Craft of Consulting Podcast. I want to ask you to do actually three things. If you enjoyed this episode or if you've enjoyed any of my other ones, hit subscribe. I got a lot of other great guests that are coming up and a lot of other great content and I don't want you to miss anything. But the other two things that I'm going to ask you to do is, one is, if you have any comments, so if you have any suggestions or any kind of feedback that will help make this podcast more helpful to more listeners, please include those.

And then the last thing is, again, if you've gotten something out of this, share it, share it with somebody you know who's a consultant or thinking about being a consultant, and make sure that they also have access to all this great content and all the other great content that's going to be coming up.

So as always, you can go and get more wonderful information and tools at craftofconsulting.com. Thanks so much. I will talk to you on the next episode. Bye-bye.