# THE 2026 CONSULTING ALMANAC: THE OPERATIONS REPORT

What 86 independent consultants told us about how their practices actually run.

vivid
OPERATIONAL ADVISORS

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the spring of 2026, 86 independent consultants answered a survey about the operational side of their practices. This report summarizes what they said and the opportunity in growing their practices and impact.

The respondents are experienced and small. Most work solo or in practices of fewer than six people, most have been consulting for years, and most run under $250K in annual revenue. The friction they describe does not track with inexperience. It appears at nearly every tenure level, which means it is not a beginner's weakness. It is the natural frontier of people who have already grown past their original setup.

## A FEW PATTERNS HELD ACROSS THE SAMPLE

Most consultants run every function of their business themselves. 71 of the 86 handle all operational work personally, and they do it while keeping nearly every client commitment. **That is one of the strongest findings - these are superhumans who can, and often do, accomplish more than even they expected.**

Operations tends to live in improvised places, most often the email inbox, spreadsheets, and the consultant's own memory. These are the systems that got the practice this far. They are also the layer with the most opportunity for supportive growth.

The most common self-assessment is steadiness. 52 describe their operations as keeping up and 50 describe their current approach as working okay. Only 2 say it is working very well. Stability is a platform most businesses never reach, and this report takes that plateau seriously.

The most common cost is delayed growth rather than visible failure. 49 report that friction has delayed their growth and 24 report burnout, while lost clients (4) and missed deadlines (9) are rare. The growth is unclaimed rather than lost, and the fact that the delivery core holds means the foundation is sound enough to build on.

Outside help is not yet part of how this group solves operational problems. When operations break, 0 of the 86 turn first to a consultant or agency. That is a mark of real resourcefulness, and it means an entire avenue remains available and unspent.

What follows walks through each of these, often in the respondents' own words, where they say it better than any summary could.

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## ABOUT THIS SURVEY

The data comes from 86 independent consultants who completed a voluntary online survey in the spring of 2026, distributed through independent consulting communities and the firm's network.

A few things are worth stating plainly, because they shape how much weight any single number can carry.

- *This is a self-selected sample, not a random or representative one.* The people who answered chose to spend twelve minutes reflecting on their own operations, which likely skews the group toward practitioners already thinking about the subject.
- *The survey captures a single point in time.* It shows what these consultants reported in early 2026, not how any practice changes over time.

- *The analysis is descriptive*. Where this report notes that two answers appear together, that is an observed pattern, not a claim that one causes the other.
- *One frame in this report is borrowed openly.* To make sense of the "working okay" finding, the report leans on the idea of languishing and flourishing from the psychologist Corey Keyes. That is a construct about individual wellbeing, used here as a lens on the operational state of a practice, not as a diagnosis of any person who answered. It earns its place because it fits the pattern in the data, and because it points somewhere useful.
- *Several questions allowed more than one selection,* so those totals exceed 86. A few questions drew fewer than 86 answers, and the respondent count is noted alongside each finding.

## A CHOSEN PATH, AND A GROWING ONE

Before any of the findings, it is worth naming what these 86 people have in common beyond the survey. **Each of them looked at the traditional version of a career and decided to build something of their own instead.**

They are part of a movement that is larger and faster-growing than most people realize. The number of independent professional-services consultants in the United States has reached roughly 11.5 million, a 55% increase since 2020, according to MBO Partners' 2025 State of Independence research.

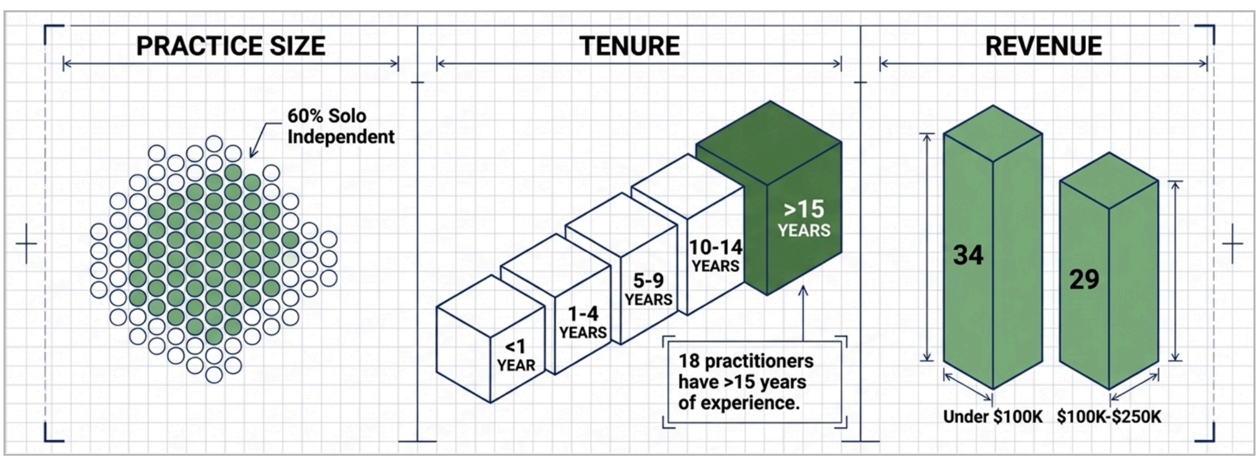
The count of full-time independent workers has roughly doubled over the same period, from about 13.6 million in 2020 to 27.6 million in 2025. This is not a wave of people who ran out of options.

- 63% of independent workers say they are self-employed by choice

- Close to 80% say they plan to stay on this path or grow their business.
- The people who leave to build something of their own tend to stay, and tend to be glad they did. 86% report they are happier working on their own, and 59% say they earn more than they did in a traditional job.

That movement is the backdrop for everything this report describes. Every person who answered had an idea about how work could be better and then did the hard, uncertain thing of actually going for it. **That takes a particular kind of nerve, and the data says it is paying off for most of the people who try.** What follows is an honest look at how these practices run, so that the thing each of these consultants built by choice becomes something they can sustain, and then grow, on purpose. This report is on the side of the people in it.

## WHO ANSWERED

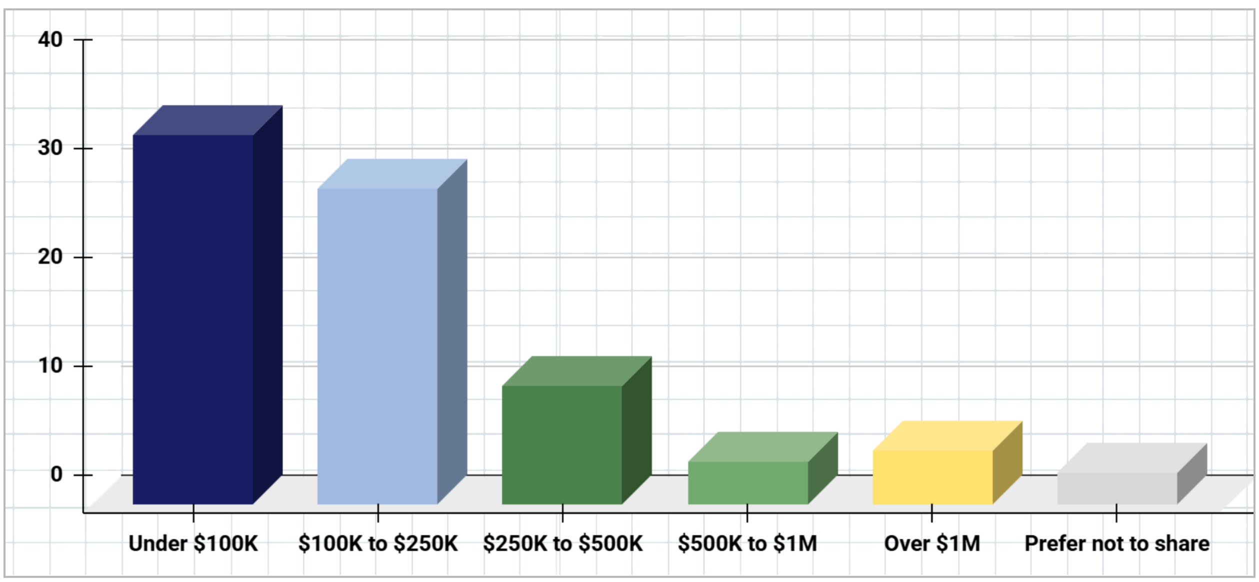



The typical respondent is a solo operator with real experience. More than 60% describe themselves as solo independent consultants, and 46 of the 86 are a practice of one. Add in the practices of two to five people and you have the overwhelming majority.

Boutique firms with partners or employees account for 18, and the rest identified as agency owners, coaches, or fractional executives.

They are not new. 18 have been consulting for more than fifteen years, and the rest spread evenly across every tenure band from the first year to the fifteenth. This is worth pausing on, because it reframes everything that follows. **The friction in this report is not concentrated among the inexperienced. It shows up at almost every level of tenure, which means it is not a skills problem waiting to be outgrown.** It is the frontier that opens up precisely because these practitioners have already succeeded at the earlier version of the job.

On revenue, the group looks the way a room full of established entrepreneurs looks.

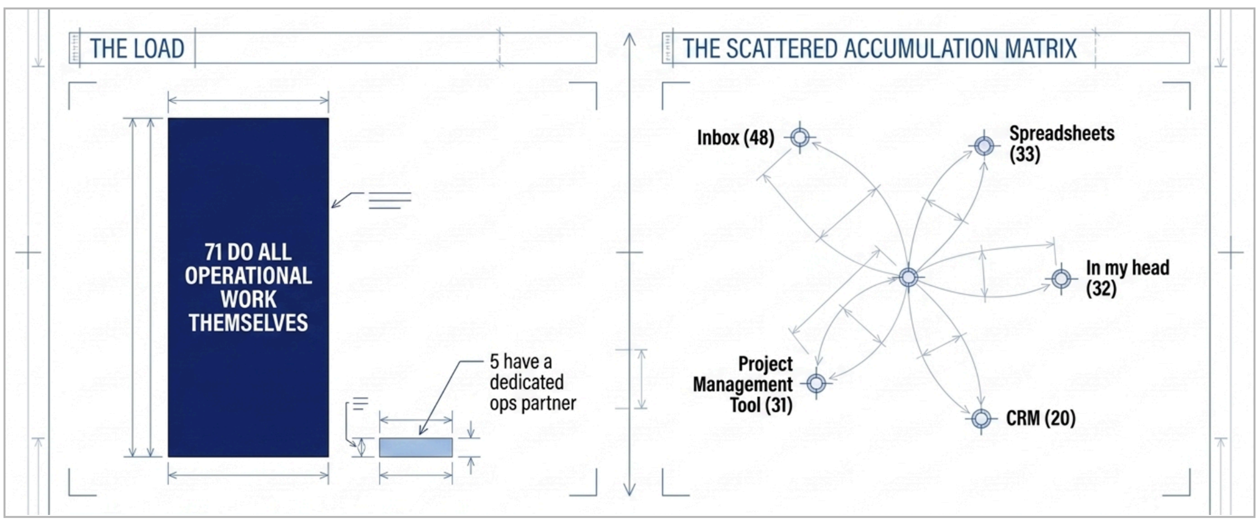



Most of this profession is a person, or a person and a few helpers, running a practice that produces a real professional living. That is a considerable thing to have built, and increasingly a common one. It is the platform underneath every finding that comes next.

## THE FUNCTION THEY GREW INTO

The first finding is a portrait of range. 71 of the 86 consultants handle all of the operational work themselves, the whole of it rather than the parts they enjoy. Only 5 have a dedicated operations partner. **Read one way that is a gap. Read against the delivery data, it is a feat.** These are people who sell the work, deliver the work, set the strategy, manage the calendar, chase the invoices, keep the records, and remember what happens next, all at once, and still hold onto nearly every client. Very few businesses of any size ask one person to carry that many functions and stay standing.

Where that work lives tells you what got them here:

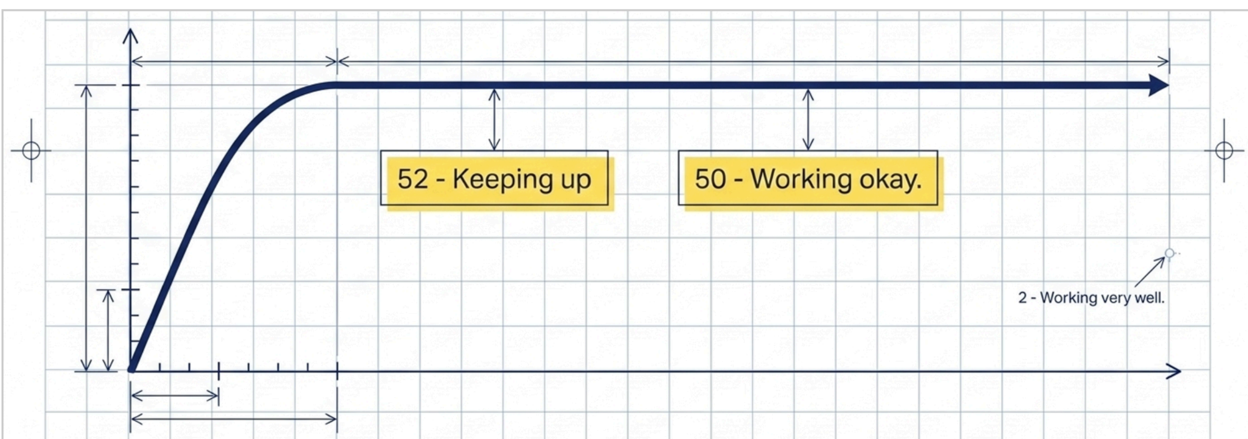



**These are not failures of a system. They are a system, the one a resourceful person builds in motion while the business is growing underneath them.** The practice was designed to deliver client work, and the operational layer grew up around that delivery in whatever tool was open at the time. One respondent described a homegrown setup with real fondness, a weekly dump into an AI tool that updates a spreadsheet with several tabs. Another wrote simply “sticky notes." Both are running real businesses on solutions they invented, which is its own kind of competence.

The data suggests that the operational role is the one function that never got designed on purpose, because it was always being absorbed by someone already doing four other jobs. There is a familiar observation about small consulting firms, that when you ask who is responsible for the internal process, the honest answer is the founder, and also nobody.

## WORKING OKAY, AND WHAT THAT ACTUALLY NAMES

**The next finding looks like good news at first glance, and part of it is.**




Asked to describe their operations relative to what the practice needs right now, the most common answer was keeping up, chosen by 52 of the 86. Asked how well their current approach was working, the most common answer was working okay, chosen by 50. Only two responded "working very well".

Start with what is genuinely good here. **Stability is a real accomplishment.** Most small businesses never reach a state where the operations simply hold, week after week, without a fire to put out. These consultants have. That steadiness is a platform, and it is the reason they have the freedom to think about growth by choice rather than by emergency.

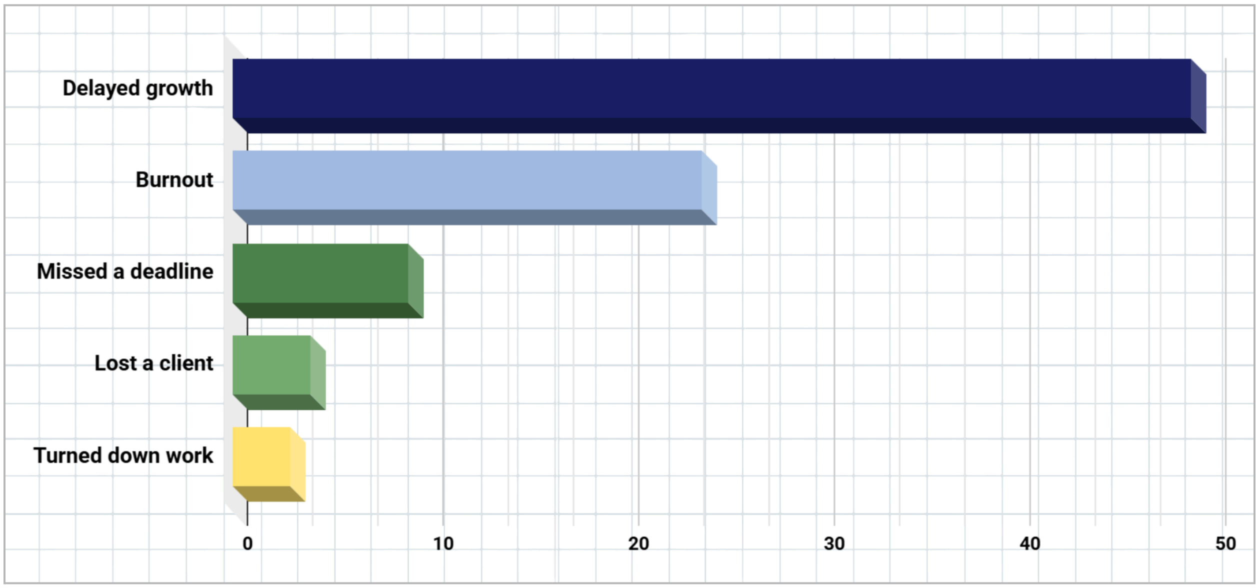
The honest part sits right next to that. There is a name for the flat, steady middle that is neither struggling nor thriving. The psychologist Corey Keyes called it **languishing, the state between distress and flourishing**, where things are functional and fine and quietly stuck. Keyes' work is about people, not practices, but the shape transfers cleanly.

**"Working okay" is the operational version of languishing. It is stable, it is sustainable, and it is not where anyone actually wants to stay, because it is the one state that never generates a reason to move.** A system that fails outright produces a crisis, and a crisis produces change. A system that works okay produces a plateau that can hold for years.

The useful thing about naming it is what it implies. In Keyes' framing languishing is the near neighbor of flourishing, closer to it than distress is, and reachable from it with intention rather than rescue. That is exactly the position these practices are in. They are not in trouble. They are steady, which is the hardest part to achieve, and one deliberate step away from something better than steady.

## THE COST IS REAL, AND THE GROWTH IS RECOVERABLE

Asked whether operational friction had caused anything specific in the last twelve months, respondents reported the following (more than one selection allowed):




Look first at the bottom of that list, because it is genuinely reassuring. Almost no one lost a client or missed a deadline. The delivery core is intact. Whatever friction exists, it is not reaching the work these consultants do for the people who pay them, which means the foundation is sound. That is the strong base the rest of this rests on.

Now the top of the list. More than half the group named delayed growth. Friction here does not show up as something breaking, it shows up as something not happening, growth that was available and did not get claimed. The important and hopeful distinction is that delayed is not lost. The client base is stable, the reputation holds, the capability is proven. The growth is not gone, it is sitting unclaimed on the other side of a system that has not been built yet. That is a far better problem to have than a leaking one, because recoverable potential is exactly the kind of problem that responds to a deliberate move.

The burnout number is also real. 24 consultants named burnout as a consequence, and among the 51 who reported both that they are keeping up and that their approach is working okay, 12 reported burnout anyway.

That is the human cost sitting quietly inside the steady-looking middle, and it is the finding this report takes most seriously, because it is the one that is about the person and not the practice. A frame built on wellbeing does not get to look away from this. It is, in fact, the clearest argument in the entire dataset for why moving out of the plateau is worth doing. Not for efficiency, and not for revenue, but because the one person the whole practice depends on is carrying weight that a built system is supposed to carry instead.

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## THE FELT PROBLEM AND THE REAL PROBLEM

Asked in their own words for the one operational problem they would most want solved in the next 90 days, 82 people answered, and the responses cluster hard around a single theme. **They want clients. Not systems, not documentation, not tech. Clients.**

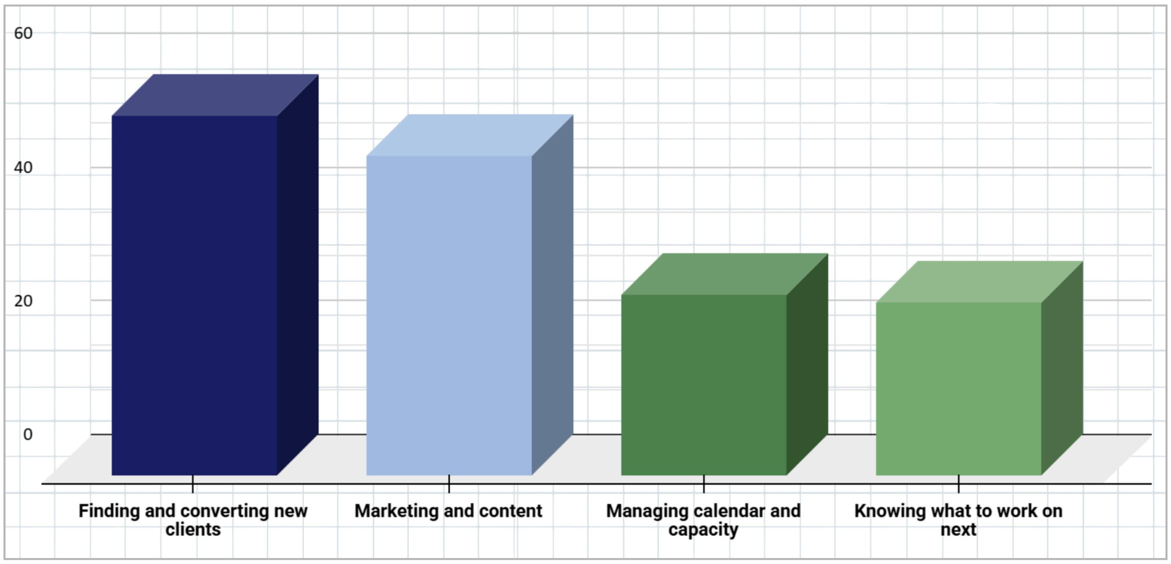
**"I need clients so that I can actually survive."**

**"More visibility and a pipeline of clients."**

**"A consistent lead generation process."**

**"Finding new clients who align with my bandwidth and timeline."**

The thing consultants most want solved is the front of the funnel.  The closed-response friction data agrees (more than one selection allowed):




Read only that far and this looks like a marketing report, and the fix looks like better outreach. One layer down, the open text tells a more interesting story. A good share of it describes a demand problem in the language of an operations problem.

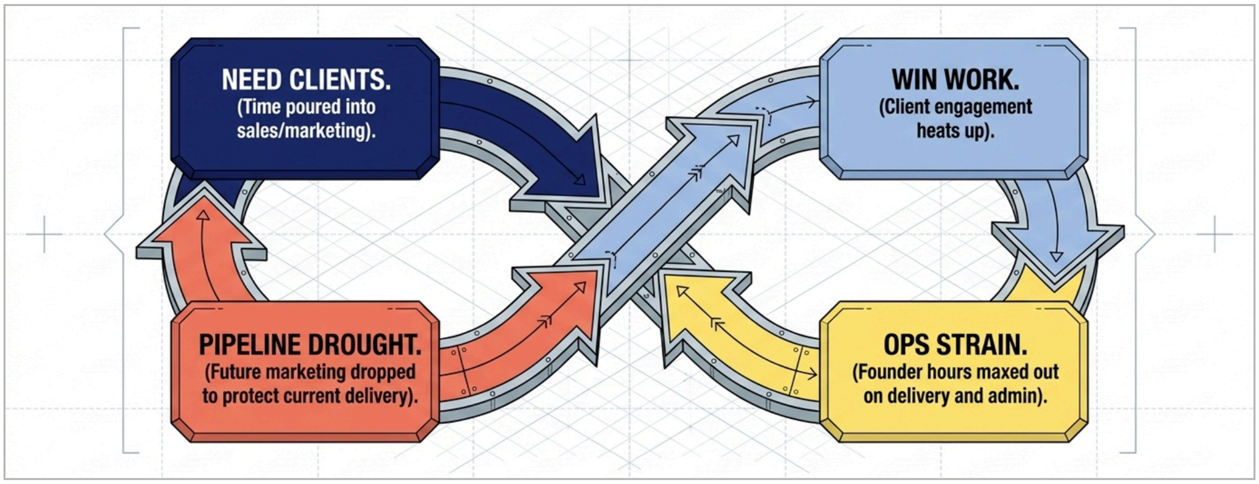
**“A better system for content creation that leads to prospect conversations.”**

**“A tracking system that actually works for my ADHD brain and feminine cycles without depending on brain power.”**

**“A structured, easy to implement plan for pipeline building.”**

**“Systematizing reaching out to prospects.”**

**These are not consultants who cannot market.** They are consultants without a repeatable system for it, so marketing competes with delivery for the same scarce hours and usually loses.

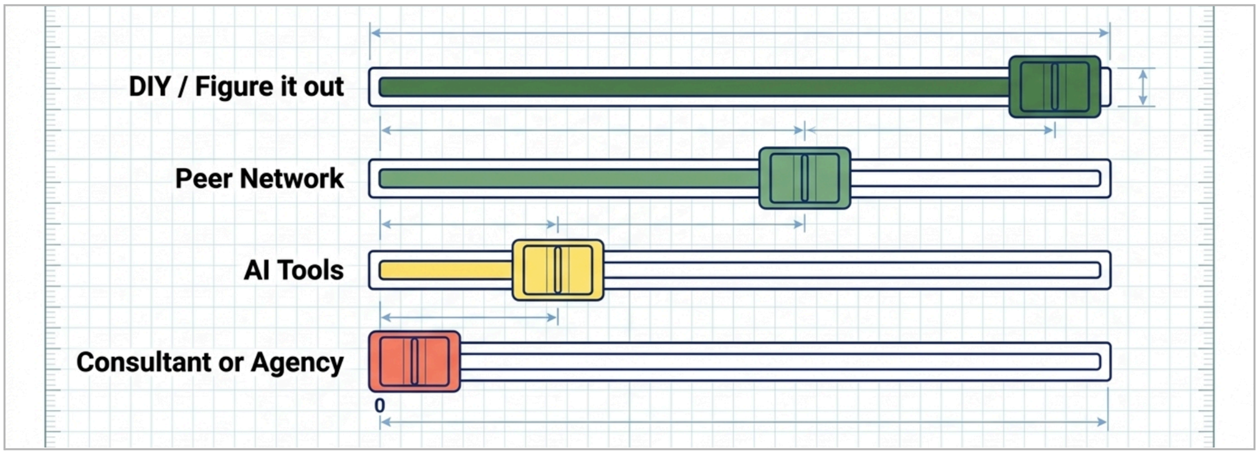



This is the paradox the profession names often and solves rarely. You need clients to earn, so the hours go to delivery. Client work ends, so you also have to keep selling. For one person, those two demands do not sit side by side, they collide. The marketing that would build the pipeline is the first thing set down when an engagement heats up, because the client is present and the future pipeline is abstract, and so the practice moves between full and lean and the practitioner concludes the trouble is sales.

The pipeline is inconsistent because the operational layer under the marketing is inconsistent, and that layer stays unbuilt because the available hours are already committed to the client in the room. The pipeline problem and the operations problem are, in a real sense, the same problem seen from two angles. The encouraging implication is that they also have the same solution. Build the operational layer once, and the marketing that generates the pipeline stops being the thing that gets dropped. The two problems resolve together, which means the leverage here is higher than it looks.

## A RESOURCEFUL PROFESSION WITH AN OPTION STILL ON THE TABLE

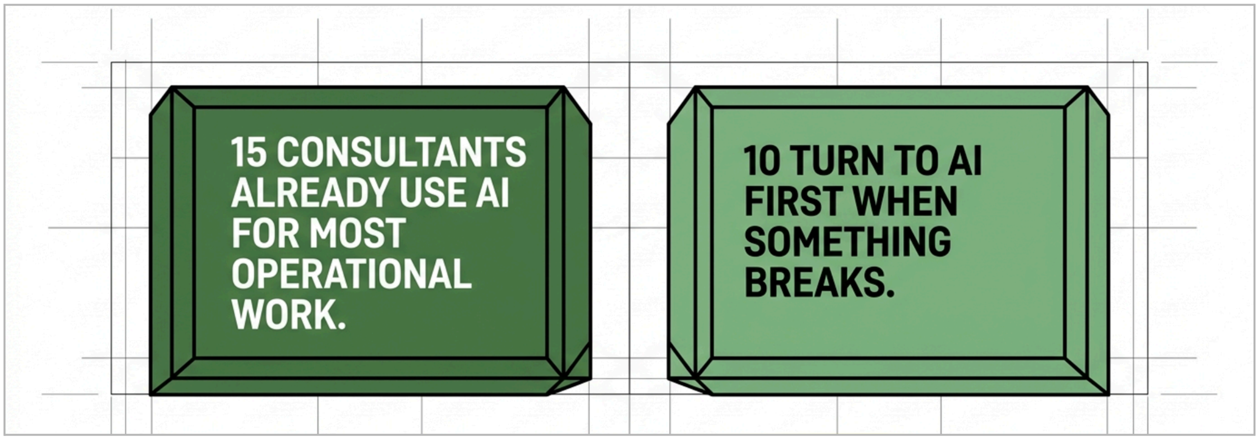
One number in the survey stands out for being absent: 0.  Asked where they turn first when an operational problem comes up, respondents answered:




Not one of the 86 turns first to a consultant or agency. The strengths reading of that number is straightforward and true. **These are people who solve their own problems.** Self-reliance and a strong peer instinct are exactly the traits that build a durable independent practice, and they are on full display here.

This is a capable, resourceful group that reaches for tools, communities, and its own ingenuity first. The reading worth offering is not that they are doing it wrong. It is that one avenue on the menu is fully available and almost entirely unused. For a profession that has already tried building, buying, learning, and community, dedicated operational help is the one lever still sitting untouched, which makes it the one with the most unspent potential behind it. The zero is not a criticism. It is an opening.

## AI, AN OPEN DOOR




AI runs through the survey as genuine intent. And the written responses show the ambition clearly.

> **“Automate my CRM using AI or have AI act as my CRM. Also create agents to prospect and research for me.”**

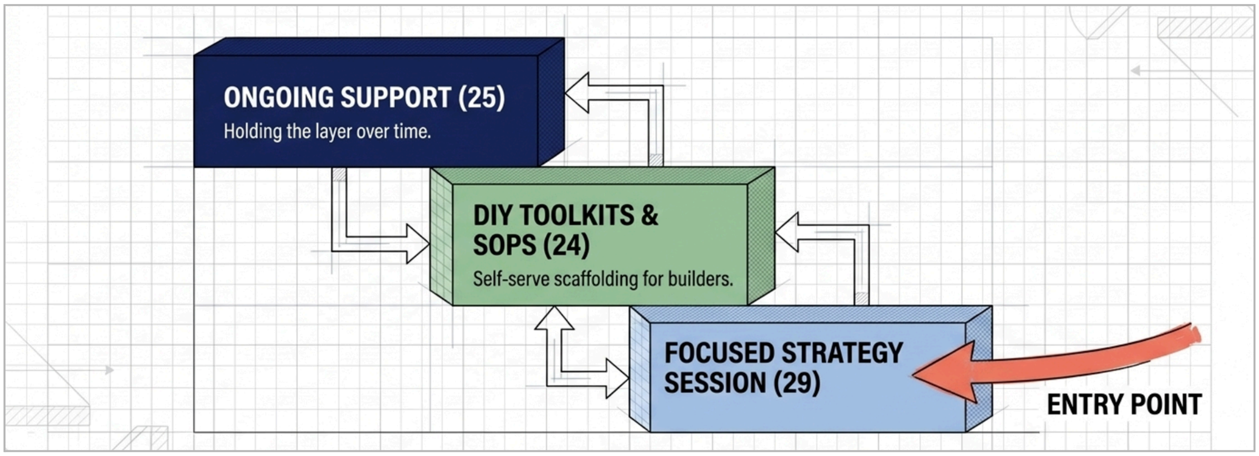
> **“Build a LinkedIn content pipeline that works in a somewhat automated fashion.”**

> **“How to shift my manual, human brain to an AI brain, it still feels easier to do things old-school.”**

The tools are present, the intent is real, and for now the old way still feels faster, so it wins. Read positively, and accurately, this is a door standing open. AI is in these practices as a helper already, which is further than most professions have gotten. The step from helper to infrastructure is not a tooling gap, it is the work of building the system the tools are meant to run inside. That is buildable, and this group is already leaning toward it.

## WHAT CONSULTANTS SAY WOULD HELP

Asked what would actually be useful to the practice right now, respondents answered:



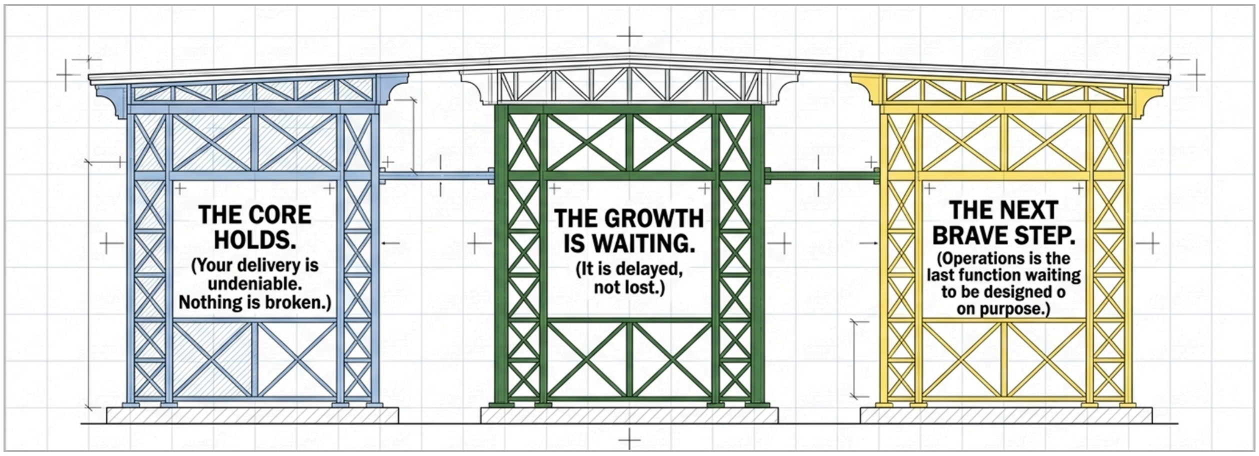

20 people said none of these were useful to them at present, which is worth taking at face value. Some practices really are in a good place.

> **"I feel like I've mostly got what I need, maybe I just need more reminders to myself."**

Read in order, the rest says something clear about how consultants want to move forward.  First a targeted step on one real problem, low commitment and high specificity.  Then, for those ready for it, an ongoing relationship that holds the operational layer over time. Underneath both, a self-serve set of tools for those who would rather build it themselves with some scaffolding.  The appetite is not for a rescue or an overhaul. It is for a first deliberate step, matched to where the practice already is, with a way to keep going once it works. That is the profile of a group ready to move, on its own terms.

## FROM STEADY TO FLOURISHING

### Line up the findings and a hopeful picture resolves.




The independent consultants in this survey have built something genuinely difficult. They run every function of a business at once, they keep their client commitments, and they have reached a level of operational steadiness that most small businesses never touch. That steadiness is the achievement, and it is also the exact vantage point from which deliberate growth becomes possible, because a stable base is what lets you build by choice instead of by emergency.

**The honest part is that steady is not the same as flourishing.** The plateau has a cost, and the cost is real: growth that sits unclaimed, and a person carrying weight that a built system should carry instead.

But the whole shape of the data points the same direction. The delivery core holds. The growth is delayed rather than lost. The instinct to build is already there. The one role that has never been designed on purpose, the operational layer, is the one with the most headroom left in it, and building it is the step that lets the marketing hold, the growth resume, and the person set something down.

It is worth remembering how they got here. **Every one of these consultants is part of a movement of millions of people who decided to bet on themselves, and who by their own account are happier and more secure for having done it.** The nerve it took to start is the same nerve it takes to build the next layer. The operational work is not a retreat from that original bravery. It is the natural continuation of it, the difference between a thing you launched and a thing that lasts.

That is what makes this a hopeful report rather than a cautionary one. Nothing here is broken. What the data describes is a capable, proven profession sitting one deliberate move away from flourishing, on a foundation strong enough to hold whatever they choose to build on it next. The most useful thing a consultant can take from these pages is not a warning. It is permission to treat their own operations as worth building with the same intention and the same courage they brought to going independent in the first place.

That is what 86 consultants described, most of them without appearing to realize they were all pointing the same way, and all of them further along a brave and growing path than any single one of them could see from inside their own practice.

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To the consultants who gave their time to this survey, thank you. You described how your practices actually run, plainly and generously, and every finding in these pages belongs to you.

We built this because the operational layer you have been carrying is worth building with real intention, the same intention you brought to going out on your own in the first place. That work deserves attention, and we wanted to give it some.

With Gratitude,
Erin Peshoff, Founder