



Living on the edge

How do you define a serial entrepreneur? In Paul Collins' case – and probably many others – it's someone who's prepared to risk all for the sake of starting and running successful businesses. Not just one business, but several, preferably with two or three running at the same time.

When Mr Collins left Birmingham University with a degree in electronics and electrical engineering, he could only have guessed at the roller coaster ride that his compulsion to launch companies would take him on. Right from the start, he spent all he had on a seminar in a top London hotel to tell businessmen about world class manufacturing. If only a few had turned up, he would have been sunk. Luckily, 400 came, the event was an outstanding success and Mr Collins' first company, World Class International (WCI), was launched.

But about four years later, he was on the edge of losing everything again as another company he had started spiralled into liquidation and Mr Collins and his partner pumped every bit of cash in, to try to save it. "I remortgaged my house and my father's house and my partner did the same," said Mr Collins, who lives in Farnham,

Most consulting companies do not think they will have a future value they can sell to anyone else

Surrey. The failing company was threatening to drag WCI – which by this time was doing well – down with it. Again, lady luck stepped in and Mr Collins survived.

Fortunately, the staff at WCI knew nothing about what was happening and Mr Collins remembers with some pride how, despite the company's desperate finances, everyone was paid on time. He eventually sold WCI for £50 million and looked forward to retirement as a rich man in his early Forties.

But something was wrong. "It is a very strange thing," said Mr Collins. "Overnight I had gone from working with 350 people at WCI and receiving hundreds of emails a day to nothing. I went from being wanted and needed by everyone to floating in a vacuum. It is a horrid feeling." An office was built on to the side of the house, and Mr Collins tried to keep up his tennis and go fishing every day. But the entrepreneurial spirit was still very much alive. He took three months off and spent another three months researching the internet for what would be his next start up.

Eighteen months ago, Consulting Development was up and running alongside an internet start up which needed some attention. The rationale for starting Consulting Development was sound: by

that stage, Mr Collins had bought three companies and sold three – so he had experience of acquisitions and disposals as well as organic growth. He had also made valuable contacts at seminars. "I had been asked to tell the WCI story at seminars," said Mr Collins. "When I left, people organising seminars asked me to tell the self same story, so I had a ready made audience of prospects to sell to."

Essentially, Mr Collins values the businesses he works with and provides an equity growth plan: by attending quarterly board meetings and collaborating with his 12 associates on anything from marketing to human resources, he will help build the company until the time is right for a sale.

With his former number two from WCI days, Mr Collins has built a data base of about 7,000 UK consulting firms which is fed daily by various subscription services and gives updated information about merger and acquisition activity. "We fed the database with Companies House data which says there are about 80,000 consulting firms in the UK. Our aim is to be able to understand every single one of those. If one comes up for sale, we will know which business is in the best position to want to buy them. We will broker the deal between the company which wants to sell and the one which may be interested in buying."



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Vital Statistics	
COMPANY	CONSULTING DEVELOPMENT LTD, soon to be re-branded as EQUITEQ
SIZE	Mr Collins is managing director with two partners, a marketing manager/PA and 12 associates
PRODUCT	Working with the owners of consulting and IT service firms who want to grow and realise their value in a sale
STARTING CAPITAL	About £150,000 from salary sacrifice over the last 18 months
CURRENT TURNOVER	About £500,000
INSPIRATION	As the chief executive of a big consulting firm, Mr Collins found there was a lack of service firms who could help him understand how to grow the value of his business and sell it. "I thought I could do it better."
ADVICE	"Don't start companies if you have a wife and three kids. Do it whilst you are still single because you have to dedicate your life to it and it takes up all your time."