

# A working day in the life of Stewart Kidd

Stewart Kidd was director of the FPA from 1989-97 and is now an independent consultant providing fire safety and security advice to a range of clients. He is also secretary general of the British Automatic Sprinkler Association and registrar of the Security Institute.



'The decision to go self employed is the hardest you'll ever have to make' was one of the best pieces of advice I have ever received. Two years later how are things going? On balance, there can be no regrets. Income is now back to the level it was at when I left full time employment, I go to fewer boring meetings and work in a very pleasant made to measure office where the dress down policy permits shorts (and bare feet!) On the debit side, there can be days when self discipline is needed to make sure that the work quota is accomplished. Much of the consultant's time is spent writing and the skilled procrastinator develops a brilliant line in diversionary activity. I hate filing and I hate doing accounts but when the alternative is starting a 5000 word report for a client, boy can I do a great spreadsheet! (The really clever practitioner of this art can even find that he starts to enjoy doing the laundry...).

One of the best things about self employment and, I suppose implicitly, consultancy is the broad freedom to organise one's own work; to be able to take the odd day or two off without worrying about what will be happening 'back at the ranch'. Even to take on

some jobs that one really enjoys doing at the expense of better paid work which is tedious. (Which would you rather do: 10 supermarket risk assessments or a review of fire safety in a beautiful country house?). The downside is the loss of personal contact – particularly in keeping up with industry gossip – and to compensate for this, be prepared for phone bills that run into three figures as you try to make sense of what is happening in the wider world. The postman, too, assumes a greater importance in your life and when he is late, a frequent event in the tiny village in which I live, I find myself taking walks up the drive for no good reason.

The postman also brings the magazines and newsletters which are your primary link to your old world and it's interesting to compare the attention I now give to the news pages of the trade press. Often in the past, unless captive on a train or plane these tended to be skimmed. Now they are read avidly and the magazines either kept and filed or stories clipped.

It's the post, of course, which brings the cheques with which your clients express their ultimate approval of your work. In the early days of self employment it is essential to make sure that you have a lump of cash in the bank (perhaps from a redundancy payment?), an understanding bank manager or an employed partner – I was triply blessed having all three but even so, things got a bit sticky around the four month mark when cash simply wasn't coming in as fast as it was going out. Most companies seem reasonable about paying their bills and some of my clients were extremely understanding and arranged for my invoices to be paid within seven days. Others, particularly the solicitors, only pay your invoices when the lay client pays theirs.....but it's worth noting that by registering for VAT

it's possible to reclaim tax for much of your office and computer equipment – even if this was purchased before you became self employed. The first quarter's VAT refund has, my accountant tells me, kept many small business afloat. Getting VAT, tax and National Insurance sorted out are essential and here a good accountant is likely to be your best friend – even more so than your bank or solicitor.

The post – and e-mail and the fax – also bring invitations to speak at conferences and some care is needed here. Very few conferences now pay speaker's fees or even expenses so one needs to decide whether or not an outing will be ultimately helpful to the client list or whether the other networking opportunities make it worth while giving up a possible revenue opportunity.

Each day, is of course, very different – perhaps one of the nicest things about the whole arrangement. In my role as the secretary general of BASA I still commute to London regularly to work from their Victoria office and I try to allocate a couple of days a week for this to make sure that the BASA membership gets the support it needs. Consultancy work tends to follow a routine. An enquiry comes in (usually from either an old contact or as a result of a word of mouth referral – I haven't done any advertising since I started – and have been fortunate in my customers who tend to be the source of additional work). This often requires a quote, a cv and list of projects. Then a meeting and, hopefully the assignment. A site visit, an inspection or survey and then a report all follow, sometimes with a presentation. I have branched out into disaster planning training and expert witness work and find the latter particularly interesting. I recently completed my first major case (and given that it involved an arson fire in an empty building resulting from poor security) those who know me will realise how enjoyable that was. At one stage in my cross examination by a particularly able QC I found myself trying to explain to the Judge how sprinklers worked – fortunately the court was one of the few in the UK that is fully sprinklered.

The same person who gave me the first piece of advice also told me to remember that I would never again have to go a meeting for which I wasn't being paid – also true and one of the best things about working for yourself. I recommend it – once you have got over the initial fears and self doubt it's all downhill. If you can steel yourself for some isolation, occasional rejection, tedious phone calls from salesmen and sharpening your own pencils think about giving it a try.

Visit my website at <http://www.risk-consultant.com>

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