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Career Makeover

Switching to freelance puts stress out of sight

An eye ailment triggered a change in thinking, forcing businessman on a new path.

Brian J. O'Connor / The Detroit News


People like to say a hard-charging businessman has fire in his eyes, but for David Berger it was lightning.

The flashes of light and dimmed vision weren't signs of success. Instead, they were symptoms of a stress-induced rupture behind Berger's right eye that quickly ended his career in the high-pressure world of high-tech.

"The doctors told me I had two options. Option One was keep doing what you're doing and you'll be virtually blind in that eye," says Berger, 43.

Instead, the Ann Arbor resident took his second option -- finding a way to balance the demands of being a top-flight marketing and business development executive while avoiding the stress and strain of the corporate arena.

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Along with recovering his vision, he's found time to spend with his wife and friends, befriend beagles and work with the kinds of clients he enjoys.

"It's nice to be appreciated once again," he says.

Where he came from: Berger showed his first signs of business savvy in the early '90s at Eastern Michigan University, when his dorm-room electronics repair business blossomed into a full-blown business. When the university landlords warned him to close the business or move out. He chose moving out and opened a repair store in Novi.

The electronics business led to work installing television-captioning devices aimed at Japanese business executives. A chance conversation with one client turned into a stint selling heavy machinery for the next five years.

By 1996, Berger had his degree and landed a short-lived job at IBM, then moved into the emerging world of e-mail marketing with an Ann Arbor startup firm.

As the Internet boom hurtled toward its conclusion in 2000, he became business development manager for an NEC Systems startup, Auraline Rich Media eMarketing in San Jose, Calif.

"I was commuting one week there to San Jose, then one week here, back and forth," Berger recalls. "I was handling sales and marketing strategies, building sales teams and doing brand building. I was wearing multiple hats, calling anyone I knew and trying to recruit them."



Donna Terek / The Detroit News

David Berger works from his home office, always surrounded by his four rescued beagles. [See full image](#)

David Berger

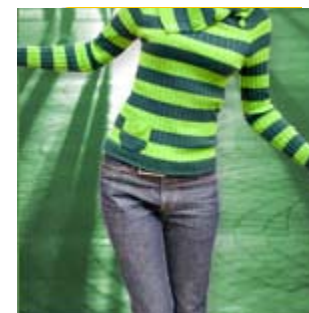
Home: Ann Arbor, married with several rescued beagles

Born: Detroit, 1963

Education: Lakeland High School in Commerce Township, 1981; Eastern Michigan University, 1996

Old career: Marketing and business development executive

New career: Freelance marketing executive and consultant



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What changed: "By 2000 the whole momentum was going," Berger recalls. "This balloon was ready to pop."

Unfortunately, so was his eye. Berger had developed central serous retinopathy, a condition where a blood vessel was leaking into his eye. The buildup of fluid caused layers of his retina to detach, leaving him with gray vision in his right eye and visual distortions like lightning strikes. "It was like a sparkler going off," he says.

A doctor told him the condition was nicknamed "executive eye syndrome." Mostly seen in men between 20 and 45 years old, the cause often is stress.

Moment of truth: "The option was, 'Dave, either you change careers or we're going to have to go in and toast your macula,'" Berger recalls, referring to the center of the eye's retina that handles tasks like reading.

After six months, his vision wasn't back but his short-term disability expired. Although his wife had a good job with benefits, their life hadn't been built around one income.

"I'm really in trouble," Berger recalls thinking. "I can't work like this but I don't have any income."

The solution was to ease into work part-time as his eye healed, building up his personal Web site (www.a2.com) as a marketing tool and building an e-mail database to sell his executive skills.

In addition, he built up a Web site based on a book he had written about faxing documents over the Internet, and started receiving commission checks from fax services listed on the site.

Stumbling blocks: Besides the usual freelance -- or "free agent" -- issues like being stiffed by deadbeat clients, Berger has found problems being categorized as a "consultant," a dirty word in many corporations.

Instead, he works to position himself as a part-time executive, hired to handle specific projects.

"Instead of working for one company full time, I work for two or three part-time," Berger notes.



Meadows [See full image](#)

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Being able to choose clients gives him control, and cuts the stress and drudgery of being a full-time, captive employee, Berger says. When he does get difficult clients, he doesn't keep them for long.

"At the end of the day I'm glad I don't work for these jerks," he said. "They don't own me."

Words of wisdom: Find something you really enjoy doing and make a go of it is Berger's advice, especially if you can find a creative way to bring it about.

"As long as you do what you really enjoy doing, what will happen is that you'll spend so much more time doing it -- and you won't even know you're spending the extra time -- that, consequently, you'll be really great at it."

But don't think that a low-stress approach eliminates every problem of working for a living.

"It doesn't mean I don't have challenges, it's just that I look forward to figuring out how to solve these problems," says Berger.

But there is one difference, he notes: "Every day I wake up and I think, 'I really love what I do.' "

You can reach Brian O'Connor at (313) 222-2145 or boconnor@detnews.com.

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