

IT contractor turns ‘contractpreneur’, building businesses from contracting profits

If you look at [Mark Sweeny's LinkedIn profile](#), you'd see he has the perfect pedigree of a classic IT contractor. But, as he explained in this exclusive interview with ContractorCalculator, what Sweeny did not factor in when he set out on his contracting career was the influence of the two entrepreneurs he helped to launch and build their IT-based businesses.

"I worked with Malcolm Freake, the Australian IT guru, shortly after he first launched the HUON Corporation and The HUON Solution, an ERP/CRM system for the general insurance industry in the UK," explains Sweeny. "HUON was subsequently bought by The Innovation Group PLC, then run by another entrepreneur, Rob Terry."

Sweeny acknowledged that he learned a huge amount about how to start and build a business from these successful businesspeople. This has resulted in him launching his own IT services firm [Certus Solutions](#), as well as an innovative software product, [EmplIndex®](#).

IT contracting apprenticeship

So, how did the IT contractor and IT specialist get there? Sweeny explains: "Straight from school I got my first job working for Lloyds Bank in its IT Operations department. That gave me the kind of introduction to 24/7 IT operations you just don't get in an entry level job these days – it was like an IT apprenticeship."

Following this solid grounding, Sweeny moved on to programming and data centre design and to make himself more attractive to potential employers, embarked on a 7-year night school university career, resulting in a first class honours degree in Business Studies and an MBA from Strathclyde Graduate Business School.

It was a small fast expanding Australian company that ultimately recognised his potential and gave him his first big break: "When I joined HUON, there were only 41 people in the company in the UK – I was the 42nd – compared to over 600 when it was sold in 2001.

"Plus," he says, "as one of the top technical consultants in the firm, I got to work alongside the driving force behind that fantastic growth, Malcolm Freake. When Malcolm wanted to realise his investment and capitalise the equity he had built, I was asked to help with the business sale to The Innovation Group Plc.

"This led to me meeting and working for another inspirational entrepreneur, Rob Terry. I was able to see up-close how a company can evolve to its next stage of development."

IT contracting - a means to an end

Deciding it was time to move on, Sweeny felt he could gain valuable experience through IT contracting, and one of his many industry contacts helped him secure his first public sector role, working for the Ministry of Justice on a project in HM Prison Service.

This opened a new chapter in Sweeny's career: "I was originally hired to spend three weeks sorting out problems they were having with requirements gathering for a new enterprise human resources system. But they ended up extending the contract several times, and I was ultimately given a lead project management role on the award winning Shared Services Phoenix Programme. I was responsible for the delivery of multiple HR business and technical projects, galvanizing teams of IT contractors, civil servants and third party suppliers."

Sweeny quickly discovered that he needed to have an agency that was on the right public sector rosters to continue winning government contracts, and that's when he joined [Parity](#), the IT recruitment specialists. "[Parity](#) is well-liked and respected by IT contractors," says Sweeny, "It pays on time and doesn't mess you about, so I've had no reason to change."

IT entrepreneur and contractor

Sweeny's IT contracting was going well. But, having had a taste of the rewards of being an entrepreneur, albeit second hand, he did not want to remain just an IT contractor. So, he took the lessons from his career as an employee and IT contractor to launch his own IT services business.

"I created Certus Solutions based on the knowledge that any major IT project will stand or fall on the back of the project team," explains Sweeny. "Now, through Certus, I bring together teams of the top IT contractors I've worked with previously to focus on specific client projects, as well as to offer a range of specialist IT services. You can deliver a lot with a few people, if they are the right people."

Sweeny maintains his IT contracting status reinvesting profits into strengthening the business and its brand.

And that's not all, as he explains: "Many of the projects I have completed in the five years that I've been an IT contractor have been deploying human resources solutions. I saw a gap in the market for a hybrid business intelligence solution that can identify employee value and link the total cost of an employee with the delivery of an organisation's business objectives."

Sweeny describes this as, "a human capital dynamics solution, which facilitates the identification, measurement and analysis of employee value, encapsulating the results as an index – the EmplIndex®. It's a bit like the FTSE indexes, but instead of measuring stocks and shares, we measure people. HR professionals are constantly looking for a solution to measure employee value, well now one truly exists!"

First-timers take note

Sweeny's words of wisdom for first-time IT contractors have been hard won and are straightforward. "Get a good proactive agent and agency on your side," he explains. "Never underestimate the part that both can play in keeping you in contract."

"And," he concludes, "you are only as good as the last contract you delivered on, so remember delivery and the way you deliver is everything, that's how you build your reputation."

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Mark Sweeny, Certus Solutions

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