



BUSINESS

How 'fractional work' is becoming the gig economy's next thing

The Twin Cities area has a "critical mass" of fractional professionals.

By Brooks Johnson

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John Arms spoke at a Finn Fractionals Speaker Series event. Arms has written books about fractional work, which he says is a necessary revolution in the American workplace. (Courtesy John Arms/The Minnesota Star Tribune)



Not long ago, Tiffany Putland traded a steady paycheck in management at one of the state's largest companies for a patchwork of part-time gigs.

No regrets.

"I've never been happier professionally to be honest," she said. "I make my own schedule, choose my clients. It's just a way of life that's really, really nice."

Putland is now one of hundreds of fractional professionals in the Twin Cities – an emerging term often used to describe experienced leaders offering high-level skills on a part-time

basis for up to a year, typically.

For small and growing firms across a range of industries, that means access to talent they can't afford, or don't yet need, at a full-time level.

Putland, who lives in Maple Grove and spent the majority of her career at Cargill, markets herself as a fractional project manager for food and ag businesses.

"I'm in the middle of a 12-month contract, and it's a lot like being an employee – I have an employee email, sit in on a lot of calls and travel with the team," she said. "But I'm not in a bunch of other meetings."

Fractional work falls somewhere on the gig economy spectrum – more embedded than a consulting gig, more focused than a temp job.

And it often requires executive skills or experience. Companies have hired chief financial officers and even CEOs on a fractional basis as they take a step toward expanding their full-time executive team.

John Arms, who has written books on fractional work, is a local evangelist for the practice.

"We don't have a healthy relationship with work," he said in a recent interview. "We gravitate to full-time work, because it's the norm, but all those dynamics are shattering."

In the fractional world, Arms said, "Suddenly millions of people are not tethered to places that are toxic, and they have a seat at the decision-making table and they're appreciated."

There are several downsides familiar to anyone who has relied on freelance work: no employer-sponsored health insurance, the lack of 401(k) matching and the endless hustle to line up that next job.

"That's where the hard the work comes in – it's constant networking," Putland said. "The other part of it is being very visible on LinkedIn, so people are constantly reminded of who you are and what you do, and people think of you for a certain thing."

Fraction of the cost

Rob Smith went to LinkedIn not long after being let go from 3M last year and put the "available for work" button on his profile.

Hundreds of messages poured in, including one that changed the trajectory of his career: "Are you looking for contract work?"

Now his LinkedIn profile appears in feeds as Rob (Fractional Digital Marketing) Smith.

As a fractional chief marketing officer – the title may change depending on the job – Smith can be focused solely on growing the business and accomplishing the tasks he was hired for.

"The founders built the company to a certain size, they wear lots of hats, they've not had a vacation in a couple of years and they want extra help," he said. "But they don't want to manage that extra help, they want someone who can step in and do the work. A seasoned tiller with their hand on the plow."

Even better: getting that experience at a fraction of the cost of a full-time executive.

"If they were going to hire this position full-time it would cost 'X,' but hire me it's a quarter of that," Smith, 53, said. "They get me for 25 cents on the dollar, and all my years of insight and experience. That's the value proposition for a company."

Health insurance – needed to cover his wife's ongoing cancer care – was an especially important consideration before making the leap into fractional, Smith said. He worked with a brokerage to buy health coverage and talked to his financial adviser as he waded into the fractional world.

"The best advice is to get help," Smith said. "Find people you trust and ask your network how they made it work."

That's getting easier as the number of fractional professionals "has reached a critical mass in the Twin Cities," Smith said.

Bruce Roles also looked for help before setting out on his own. The experienced manufacturing operations manager now balances a few gigs. He tries to help others navigate the process the way others have helped him.

"I've been fortunate enough that clients find me," he said. "And if I help enough people, I don't know where my help is going to come from, but it will come."

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Since fractional is still a newer concept, Roles doesn't always use the term with clients, who often need to be shown it's an option.

"You set yourself up in business and find some part-time jobs – where they don't know how to do what they brought you in for," Roles, 64, said about his path. "This fractional space to me is a blend of strategic and tactical. You're going to fill a chair that is either on the leadership team or some extension of it."

"It's a beautiful pre-retirement move," he added. "Because I don't have to declare when I retire."

Making a business out of it

While fractional professionals will typically start an LLC for legal and tax purposes, those businesses usually just employ one person.

But some fractional work is done by teams, like the one Stef Tschida has assembled at Tschida Communications.

"I think of us as an outsourced comms team," she said. "When I started I had three laptops on my desk, now I have eight to 10 contractors."

Tschida said the appeal in leaving a stable job – with help from her spouse's health insurance – was to "own my life."

"For me it's the autonomy over my work and how it gets done," she said. "I love this so much my battle is not spending all my time on it."

John Castillo, president of fractional operations company FoodOps, said having a team of fractional workers can give younger professionals opportunities only more experienced leaders are typically offered.

"What I can offer is access to so many businesses where you're going to grow your skill set much faster than you would at just this one company," he said. "And so I find ways to

challenge my team."

Operations is an area many businesses don't prioritize early on during the sprint to grow sales. One founder told Castillo he was head of operations – and production, logistics, warehousing and sales.

"So what are you actually focusing on?" Castillo said.

Arms, whose fractional training business Voyageur U counts hundreds of local members, said his work is just beginning.

"By the time I'm done with this, a million people become fractional professionals," he said. "That's a million people finding self-determination, a million people feeling that freedom."

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Brooks Johnson

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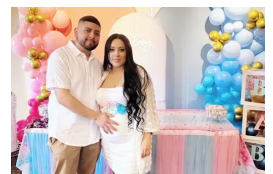
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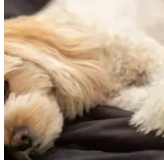
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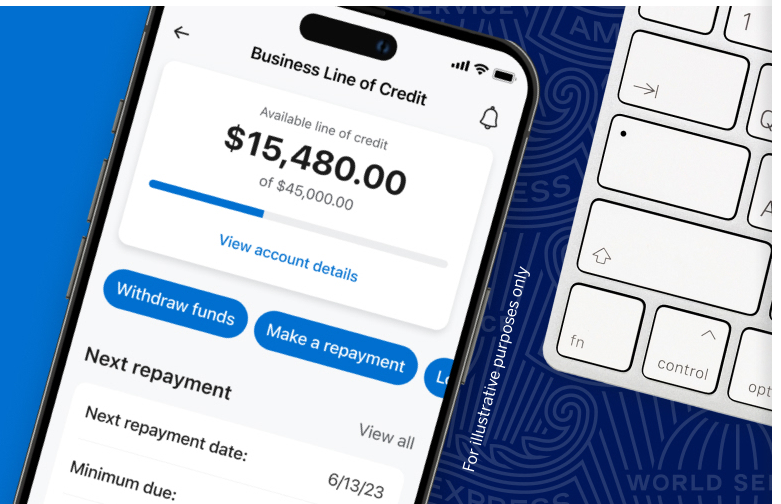


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