

Employees moving from big corporate to small business can be in for a shock

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Having just earned her MBA while working as a financial-services consultant for a large firm in Toronto, Aneta Filiciak did something unexpected.

She turned her back on big corporate.

Despite years of experience with large companies – PwC Canada, Capco and the Bank of Montreal – Ms. Filiciak had her sights set on working for a small business she could have a big impact on and feel passionate about. A hobbyist photographer, she was delighted when she landed a position with 500px, a small online photography community and marketplace. The 65-person company created a new position to land her.

"When I joined, I had years of experience in the industry I had been in. I felt pretty confident that I was knowledgeable," she said, adding that one of her first lessons was just how much she didn't know about her new environment.

"There were so many things I had to learn. ... I get challenged here every single day," she said, adding: "There is the sense that if you don't perform, that failure will impact the company dramatically. You are really essential and you feel that in a small organization."

Employees who have left large corporations say working for a small business is drastically different from their previous workplace experiences. While every small business is unique, they tend to have more elastic roles and less support, which can result in both stresses and opportunities for employees.

"When I was on the corporate side, I didn't find that it allowed people to succeed based on the results they'd produce," Ms. Filiciak said. "They needed to stay on the clear, linear path that was traditional for a specific role. It was quite limiting ... and very difficult to make the jump into a different role," she said, adding: "I certainly appreciate the opportunity to do that here."

After six months in her original project-management role with 500px, Ms. Filiciak helped create a new product and revenue stream. She ultimately shifted into a new – and unexpected – role to oversee its development.

For Alexis Scott, director of strategic partnerships for Digital AdLab, a 10-person company that provides digital advertising training, the opportunities to stretch across roles is integral to her sense of fulfilment. "Working for a small business, you advance in your knowledge and your career so much faster than someone who works on one single job or task at a bigger place. You don't really have a choice," said Ms. Scott, whose background includes a stint at the advertising giant Ogilvy. "You have to be someone who wants to think outside the box. You want to be able to expand and grow. You don't want to have one role and just that role," she said.

That dynamic isn't the right fit for everyone, though. One young worker in Eastern Ontario found he became incredibly stressed after leaving a corporate job to join a small company with about a dozen employees. The worker – who didn't want to reveal his name as he is currently employed with the company – has had to juggle several roles during periods of employee turnover. As a result, he says he's suffering from depression that he directly links to the new job.

"Sometimes I couldn't meet the expectations of filling those shoes and to go through that was really crippling to my confidence," the worker said. "It became a vicious circle: I needed confidence to perform well but my boss was giving me negative feedback on a constant basis. It just made me perform worse."

He says he regrets not asking questions about how to handle conflict with the company's owner before he signed on. "I never really thought to ask. I was so focused on the vibe. But there's no HR in place, no board of directors. There is just one boss," he said.

Lisa Taylor, president of Challenge Factory, a Toronto-based career-management firm, said employees considering a jump to small business need to understand what they hope to get out of it.

"Being clear about what career criteria is important to you and where you are willing to make compromises will help guide you," she said. "Small business moves at a fast pace. Owners, especially if there is a single owner, can change direction or make quick decisions

and you need to be able to participate in that type of environment," she said.

The nimbleness of MacPhie & Company, a boutique consulting firm with six employees, is what attracted Christi Mertens, who had spent most of her career at large companies.

"What I've found refreshing is that if someone has a good idea, it happens here. You can effect change in a small organization," she said. "If I tried to do that [in a larger organization] it would take months to get a committee together, get buy-in, and even then you'd have to tempt them with a free pizza lunch."

Ms. Mertens also said she appreciates working with like minds. "There are bell curves in large companies – not everybody can be at the top and not everyone fits the bill. In small organizations, you don't survive long if you don't fit. Here, you roll up your sleeves to get things done. You can't call the IT guy, you can't call HR," she said. "You're rewarded for how resourceful you are."