

Ellen Grealish – Co-Founder & Co-Owner, FlexProfessionals



Ellen Grealish is a co-founder and co-owner of FlexProfessionals, a flexible staffing company specializing in part-time and project-based placements. Since its inception in 2010, it has grown considerably, making Inc. 5000's 2016, 2017, and 2018 fastest-growing company lists and has been highlighted most recently by the *Today Show* and covered in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *Forbes*. Ellen is responsible for marketing and manages business development and account management. Prior to founding FlexProfessionals, Ellen worked in strategic sales, marketing, and consulting. She spent over eight years at Hewlett-Packard where she led the Sales Development Group for HP's Networked Printing and Digital Imaging Division. Ellen was also a senior consultant for Accenture, working for both the Washington, D.C. and London-based consulting practices. Ellen studied economics and history at Oxford University and has a B.A. from Boston College. She lives in Oak Hill, VA with her husband and three children.

How did the concept for FlexProfessionals come about?

FlexProfessionals is a niche staffing agency that matches growing businesses in need of top talent with professionals seeking part-time, flexible work. Our company was founded in part to change the way businesses hire and re-think what flexibility and benefits mean to today's workers. We advocate for people that don't necessarily need traditional benefits but desire flexible work in order to meet family and personal obligations. We have incorporated this philosophy in our own organization by offering ultimate flexibility to our employees who tell us that this is of highest priority.

There was a void in the marketplace where workers faced difficulty in finding meaningful, part-time jobs. My two business partners, Sheila Murphy and Gwenn Rosener, and I launched our company FlexProfessionals in January 2010 out of

frustration over a lack of opportunity for people who wanted to re-enter the workforce or scale back from a traditional 9-to-5 job into a more flexible role. At the time, we were all women who had left successful careers to stay home, raise a family, and volunteer in the community and schools. As our children grew, we became interested in going back into the workforce but doing so in a way that afforded us the flexibility to be home at certain times. I remember thinking that given my education and experience at Accenture and Hewlett Packard, combined with the fact that I was willing to work at a very competitive rate and no benefits in exchange for a flexible or part-time role, that companies would jump at the chance to have me back! Well, not only did they not jump, they didn't even respond. When my business partner, who has a graduate degree in systems engineering and a Harvard MBA began looking for a part-time role, she was told by one headhunter that if she didn't want to "work hard," then he couldn't help her! We realized that we needed to help fill this void that exists for people who want to contribute at a high level, but need the flexibility of part-time. As we began talking to business owners, we also realized the value that this 'untapped' pool of talent could bring to them, especially those on a tight budget or ones struggling to compete for and retain talent. Incorporating flexibility into their hiring strategy would give their business a competitive advantage in a market where dedicated and high-value employees are always difficult to attract.

How was the first year in business?

We had a couple of key successes and job placements that first year which solidified our belief that we were providing real value not only to job seekers in need of flexible or part-time work but also to businesses who needed access to a new talent pool of qualified and cost-effective resources. Since our service model had limited overhead and we were careful to invest in only the areas that were essential for growth, we were able to recoup our initial investment of \$24,000 and actually made a profit within the first 12 months.

What was your marketing strategy?

Our business model serves two separate audiences: job seekers in need of flexible work and businesses in need of experienced, cost-effective talent. We initially chose a 'grassroots' marketing approach targeting both audiences. Due to a tight budget, we did not advertise or pay for contact lists. We leveraged the extensive local network that my business partners and I had. We reached out to everyone we knew via phone, email, Facebook, and other social media sites to let them know about FlexProfessionals and its mission to be a catalyst for the creation of flexible work options. We started receiving hundreds and then thousands of resumes from people (mostly women/moms and soon-to-be retirees) who were looking to opt in or scale back from the traditional workforce. On the business side, we pounded the pavement attending any and all networking events and local Chamber of Commerce events we could find to let people know that we were offering a new kind of service that did not exist before. We reached out to any business owner we knew and requested a 10-minute meeting in order to describe our new business model and solicit feedback. Initially, no job was too small to take on. We slowly built up our base of clients. Consequently, word-of-mouth among job seekers and

businesses started to take off. We now have over 16,000 job seekers in the D.C. and Boston Metro areas and have worked with over 500 businesses (and growing)!

Over the last few years, we have invested more in marketing (i.e. marketing automation software, digital marketing, SEO, etc.) but still heavily rely on that 'face-to-face' and relationship building to grow both our job seeker and client base. One of the best examples of the value of tapping into the part-time workforce is when we hired a re-entry PR candidate (at a rate significantly lower than a traditional PR consultant) who had taken time off from her career to raise a family and now wanted to rebuild her resume. She was able to secure us a spot on the *Today Show*, which led to great national exposure for our company.

How fast did the company grow during the first few years?

We realized 60% year-over-year growth for the first five years in business. For the last three years, we have been named to *Inc. Magazine's* fastest-growing company list and have realized growth every year since we launched in 2010.

How do you define success?

Success is creating value for your customers and exceeding their expectations while creating a great internal company culture and helping everyone within the team to achieve their personal goals.

What is the key to success?

Surrounding yourself with smart people and empowering them to do their job well. We also practice what we preach and empower everyone on our team to CHOOSE when, where, and how they do their best work. We are a completely results-based organization, so we do not have set schedules and offer unlimited vacation time. As long as our clients are being serviced in a timely manner, our staff can create their own work schedules. This leads to the creation and retainment of the most hardworking, loyal, and committed team you can find, which has been the key to our company's success.

What is the greatest lesson you've ever learned?

Integrity breeds trust and loyalty and that is the most important professional asset one can have.

What are some quotes that you live by?

"Success usually comes to those who are too busy to be looking for it." – Henry David Thoreau

Love this quote because if you focus on your passion and always try to do the right thing, you will have greater success than focusing merely on 'success' itself. Success should be the byproduct of accomplishing your goals rather than the goal itself.

What are some of your favorite books?

For professional growth, I tend to read books around flexibility in the workplace and achieving work/life balance, particularly for caregivers.

Unfinished Business by Anne-Marie Slaughter and *Overwhelmed: How to Work, Love, and Play When No One Has the Time* by Brigid Schulte.

Personally, I love historical fiction. Currently, I'm reading *The First Conspiracy* by Brad Meltzer about a secret and obviously failed plot to assassinate George Washington.

I also reread *Not Fade Away: A Short Life Well Lived* by Laurence Shames and Peter Barton every year to remind me of what is truly important in life and to remember to live in the present. Peter Barton was the founder and CEO of Liberty Media (Discovery Channel, BET, QVC, etc..) and died in his early 50's from stomach cancer. His book is more about living than dying – truly inspiring.

Tell me about one of the toughest days you've had as an entrepreneur.

I really can't think of one in particular. I guess I am extremely fortunate!

When faced with adversity, what pushes you to keep moving forward?

What keeps me motivated during both good and difficult times is my passion for the mission. It would be far more profitable for FlexProfessionals to move into full-time staffing. The same amount of work goes into placing someone into a 10 hour a week role as it does a 40 hour a week one, yet in that scenario we only receive a quarter of the revenue (which is the primary reason we don't have almost any direct competitors! However, I strongly believe in the mission of creating flexible work options for all people. We do not advocate that people should stay home while raising children or they should work...we are about giving people a third option that historically has not been offered before and one that allows more people to either stay in the workforce longer or return into the workforce after a break. While this applies primarily to women and moms, we've seen dads and soon-to-be retirees benefit from this model as well.

What advice would you give to young entrepreneurs?

Every day ask yourself, "What problem am I solving for my customers and is it a problem that people are willing to pay me to solve?" Regardless of whether a new technology or service may be cool or exciting, don't be swayed by emotion or a gut feel. Keep asking yourself that question with every decision you make. Stick to your niche and don't try to be all things to all people.