

SelfInformed

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*NASE Member
John Collins*

Member Spotlight



Dissecting Self-Employment

John M. Collins Jr. is the President and Founder of the Forensic Foundations Group. As a 20-year veteran of forensic science in federal, state, and local crime laboratories, John founded the business in 2013 to help build advanced occupational competencies among employees and administrators working in the forensic laboratory sciences. In 2013, John joined the NASE as he was starting his business and found it critically important to him that NASE advocate for the interests of the self-employed in Washington, D.C. Not only that but also that we keep members informed of what we are doing, which in turn keeps our members informed about what is happening on the Hill and how that impacts their business.

What inspired you to enter the field you are in?

I was 13 years old in 1983, which was the 20th anniversary of President Kennedy's assassination. Because of all of the television coverage leading up to the anniversary, I, for some reason, became very fascinated by the science behind the investigation and the intrigue related to possible conspiracies. Coincidentally, Michigan State University, close to where I lived, had one of the most renowned forensic science programs in the country. So basically, I attribute

my career choice to the timing of the 20th anniversary of the Kennedy assassination, which occurred during a very formative time in my life. My parents were also very supportive of my career choices.

What was the most recent job you held before starting your own business?

It was in 2010 when I returned home to my native state of Michigan to direct the 7 laboratories of the Michigan State Police where I was fortunate to lead the laboratories and their 260 employees to their first-ever international accreditation.

When and why did you start your business?

Over the years, I took an interest in the HR side of forensic science, specifically as it relates to the development of employees and organizations that do forensic science work in criminal cases. Most laboratories fall under the control of a police agency, so the HR function is often lacking in specialized support for scientific personnel. I reached a point where I had developed this niche expertise, and had done so much speaking and writing on the subject, that it would have seemed more ridiculous not to start the business and become self-employed than to actually do it. I finally had to confront the very odd feeling that my own employment was holding me back. I asked myself, “why on earth would I not do this?” and I found the answers to that question pretty unimpressive. So I did it, and am glad I did.

What challenges have you faced in your business? How have you overcome them?

My biggest challenge is also my biggest opportunity. I signed a contract with Academic Press to write the first-ever text book about the management of human resources in forensic science laboratories. This has been an incredibly challenging project in light of the fact that I am also getting a new business off the ground. I have dealt with this by dedicating more time and energy to the management of my schedule utilizing online services and mobile apps to expand my “production-footprint” whenever possible. In other words, I make the management of myself a more important priority than I ever did before.

Is any of your managed time spent on marketing your business?

Yes, my business is marketed through two primary channels. The first is a publication I started about 8 years ago with a close colleague called Crime Lab Report. We write highly thought-provoking articles on criminal justice policies related to the use of scientific evidence. The nature of what we write attracts a lot of attention and readership, which serves as a vehicle through which I can also market my consulting services and workshops that I teach. It is a very robust platform that seems to be working well so far.

What's your schedule like, what's a typical day for you? Do you have high energy moments?

I begin working between 6:30 and 7:00 in the morning by taking care of basic administrative responsibilities such as record keeping. I also like to review my social media presence in the mornings and plan what postings I feel need to go out. As far as energy, it seems that I experience two different kinds: executive and creative. There are times when I feel energized to simply engage in the execution of tasks that are necessary for my business to succeed. This seems to peak in the morning and late afternoon for me. It is the creative energy that is harder to predict. Because of the amount of writing I do, I have to ride the creative waves of energy when they happen. Unfortunately this can come at 11:00 at night or 2:00 in the morning sometimes. But I find that riding these waves of energy is like surfing, and it seems to keep me moving forward more quickly than when I was employed with organizations that simply required me to work a standard day.

Is that surfing the best thing about being self-employed? If not, what is?

This is the easiest question for me to answer. I am more productive now than I ever have been because of two things. First, I have 100% control of my time and energy. Second, my work schedule is no longer based on a clock, but on the energy output I can deliver to a particular work task at any one time. If, for example, I feel a strong creative urge to work on my book at 1 o'clock in the morning, then I do it – and I give it 100% effort for as long as I can. If I



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feel a strong urge to review my QuickBooks records and reconcile my financial statements, then I take advantage of that energy and run with it. So what this all does is help me to work, on average, at a much higher level of energy and motivation than I could by simply adhering to a time-based, or clock-based schedule. Being a scientist by trade, I like to think of this approach as “energy-output-averaging,” which has been the single most important ingredient to the success I have had so far. It has also helped me recognize patterns in which I tend to work more productively and efficiently on certain kinds of tasks at certain times. Obviously, I have deadlines and schedules that I need to honor, but I pay close attention to what my motivations are and how they change through the day, week, month, or year.

Between the science and business management, it sounds like a lot of technology, what role does it play in your business?

Technology basically IS my business. Because of the online platforms and communication services that are available, I am probably doing, right now, what it would have taken four or five people to do 25 years ago. So I think that using the right kind of technology can sometimes have the same benefit as hiring additional people. For my websites, telephone services, social media, and even mailing/shipping capabilities I use software programs that amplify what I can do in any given period of time. It also keeps me accessible when I am traveling. The challenge is learning how to use each platform and keep my eyes open for new ones that might give me a competitive advantage.

We have covered some great topics so far, let’s lighten it up: How often do you get asked about TV shows like CSI?

All the time! It doesn't bother me because it's good that the public understands how important science is to our administration of justice, even if the shows like CSI exercise some creative license for dramatic purposes.

What’s the best compliment you’ve ever received from a client?

That I inspired a student to reexamine his/her priorities and recommit to their chosen profession. Unlike what you see on CSI, forensic science can be a brutal profession. My workshops force students to be introspective, which helps reveal new opportunities for self-improvement. I am often told by students that I helped them “wake up,” which always makes me feel good.

One more before we end, what’s the most important piece of advice you would give to someone starting their own business?

The management of your energy is far more important than the management of your time. Both are important, but energy is what builds and sustains a business. If there are certain things you hate doing, see if you can get help from someone else or maybe do those things when your mind seems to tolerate them more easily. The more time you spend in a heightened state of motivation and energy, the more you will achieve and the more successful you will be.



Learn More in the NASE Small Business Locator

Learn more about John M. Collins Jr., Forensic Foundations Group, and other Self Employed businesses in the **NASE Small Business Locator** directory. You can add your own company to the NASE Small Business Locator in up to three categories at no charge – it is a free benefit to NASE members.