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What size consulting firm do you feel most comfortable with?

Bigger isn't necessarily better, according to our e-poll this month. The majority of respondents (44%) say they prefer small consulting firms. Thirty-four per cent say they feel most comfortable with a mid-size consulting firm while the remaining 22% say they prefer large consulting firms.

But considering that the largest 10 consulting companies in Canada represent 91% of the overall business (see *BENEFITS CANADA'S* 24th Annual Consultants Report, page 22), plan sponsors who prefer smaller firms may have their work cut out for them.

"Size is an important factor to us for actuarial and pension and benefits work," says Gretchen Van Riesen, director of pension and benefits policy with the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce in Toronto, which uses consulting giant William M. Mercer Limited. "Sometimes a project will come up and we actually have to command armies of people to get the work done in the time constraints that the business requires. We have 40,000 employees and need to be able to ask our consulting firm to turn on the jets and ours does. You cannot do that in small firms."

But smaller consulting firms have an advantage when it comes to being niche players at the local level.

"The advantage [of our size] is proprietary representation," says Kevin McFadden, a benefits consultant with Sigurdson, McFadden & Associates in Winnipeg. "We own our own company. We have a real vested interest in ensuring our clients are satisfied because if our clients aren't satisfied and decide not to deal with us, it impacts us financially."

Marilyn Reddick is the director of human resources at Sunnybrook and Women's College Hospital in Toronto. The hospital, which employs workers from several different unions, uses Buffett Taylor as its consultant. What impresses her about the medium-sized

firm, she says, is its mix of private and public employer experience. "They don't mind thinking outside the box," she adds. "They just haven't been in the business so darn long that they take one path all the time."

Of bigger firms, Reddick says, "I'm not sure they have a realistic or innovative approach to a highly unionized environment. They have lots of creative ideas if you are non-union and have total flexibility in changing and playing with benefits. But in healthcare, we are limited so you really need to come up with different and creative ideas."

Creativity is where small firms excel, concurs David Krieger, president of Krieger and Associates in Toronto. The firm has eight consultants on staff. "Creativity needs space to grow and to exist. We remove bureaucracy and logistics and because we're smaller, we're able to share information in proximity to all levels of staff. I think many new processes and services in the industry originated with smaller firms."