

## Business Owner Profile: Valerie Southern



*Valerie J. Southern is President of [Valerie J. Southern-Transportation Consultant, LLC](#) (VJS-TC), a consulting practice located in Fairfax, Virginia, that provides transportation planning and traffic engineering. A 30-year member of WTS, she is the co-founder of the WTS Chicago Chapter and has served on the WTS International Board of Directors. WTS sat down with Valerie to find out why she started her own practice and where she found support.*

**WTS:** *What inspired you to start your own business?*

**Southern:** Prior to establishing my private practice, I worked for 20 years in increasingly responsible positions in the public sector, such as Deputy Secretary of Transportation Planning and Capital Programming in Massachusetts, Deputy Director of Policy for the Governor's Office in Rhode Island, and in Seattle, as Manager of Transportation Planning for the King County DOT. These and other positions were richly rewarding and challenging. After 20 years, however, I decided it was time for a new career direction less dependent on the twists and turns of government; and one that satisfied my passion for sound and competent transportation planning.

**WTS:** *What were your fears about your business venture, if any, and how did you overcome them?*

**Southern:** My greatest fear was that my new transportation practice would be over shadowed in the crowded field of established, larger firms. This was unfounded. I learned that, while it may take longer than you envision, if you pursue your discipline with faith, optimism, efficiency, and integrity, you will succeed. My one-person practice in Seattle grew quickly to 22 employees. I recently relocated to Virginia and am starting over on a much smaller scale in an entirely new market. With my previous business experiences as my compass, I believe I'll do fine in this market as well.

**WTS:** *Did you have any mentors or groups you affiliated with on your journey to becoming a business owner?*

**Southern:** Yes. In addition to the support I've received over the years from my WTS membership, the greatest influence in the early years of my practice was the chamber of commerce. I served on my local chamber's regional transportation committee and eventually became its chair. From there I was named to the Board of Directors. I greatly enjoyed the interest, camaraderie, respect, and advice of the chamber members during this time—a good percentage of whom were women business entrepreneurs—and was eventually named Business Person of the Year. When I relocated to Virginia, I

immediately signed with a local chamber and retained my WTS membership—a *must* for any progressively minded transportation professional! During my time in this new market, I've also enjoyed excellent professional training, networking, and mentoring from the Institute of Management Consultants (IMC) and the Virginia Transportation Construction Alliance (VTCA).

My advice for under-utilized small professional consulting practices owned and operated by an African-American female, such as mine, is to take the time to introduce your services to the small business officer in the agency or firm that you are marketing. Not all, but some of these officials are great at what they do. They can help to open the creaky doors that you must pass through in pursuit of your work and business objectives. One example of such a person is Ms. Linda Fennell, the small business administrator for the District of Columbia Department of Transportation.

***WTS: What's the most important advice would you give someone looking to start their own business in the transportation industry?***

**Southern:** Persistence pays.