



ON BEING INDEPENDENT

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I've spent more than 20 years—almost my entire working life—as an independent. For all of that time, my goal has been to help people understand, use, and make better decisions about new technology. I do that mostly through speaking and writing, although I do some consulting, too. For the work I do, being on my own is just perfect.

HOW I GOT HERE

Even though my undergrad degree is in economics, I spent college focused on becoming a musician. When I got there, I didn't much like it. Playing music is a great avocation, but it's a lousy profession. I next got a job as an economist, which proved to be equally boring. When my employer asked me one Friday whether I could write code, I said "Sure", then took a book home over the weekend. I returned to work on Monday morning as a fledgling software developer. Like so many of us, I quickly became obsessed, eventually going back to school to get an MS in computer science.

I never much liked having a regular job. While I did work as a developer for a couple of years after graduate school, I took the chance to go out on my own as soon as possible. I gave training seminars for quite a while, wrote a few books, and eventually found myself in my current role of independent speaker, writer, and analyst. It's a good fit for me.

BEING INDEPENDENT: THE BASICS

If you have a technical job today—software developer, application architect, or whatever—your primary focus is probably on technology. You might imagine that if you become an independent, you'd still have a primarily technical focus. The big difference, you hope, is that you'd have a much better boss.

This is not correct. The reality is that the company you currently work for does all kinds of things that let you focus solely on technology. They find customers for what you create, they keep the business going when you're on vacation, and much more. If you become an independent, all of these things fall to you. You might begin as an independent contractor with a company that finds work for you, such as a training company—this is what I initially did—but even then, things like paid vacations disappear. To be successful

over the long term, you'll need to learn how to find work yourself. In other words, you've got to learn how to sell.

If this idea troubles you, you're not meant for the independent life. There's no shame in this, so don't feel bad. If the idea doesn't bother you, but you're not sure how to do it, well, that's how pretty much every technical person feels at first. It took me years to get comfortable with the sales aspects of my job, and the learning process was sometimes painful. Even now, I wouldn't count this as one of the things I do especially well. But you don't have to be great at sales, just good enough to keep yourself in work.

Some kinds of independent work, such as the writing and speaking that I mostly do, are inherently public. Potential clients can directly see what you do. This makes it easier for them to figure out whether they'd like to work with you. Other kinds of work, including designing and writing software, aren't usually so public. People who might like to hire you often can't see the quality of your work in a direct way. This makes marketing those skills harder. Unlike more public work, which is essentially self-marketing, you'll need to devote significant time to selling yourself outside of actually doing the work. This is perhaps one reason why so many independents who work in technology gravitate toward the more public kinds of work—it's easier to sell.

Another important aspect of leaving traditional employment is deciding what you really want to do. Is your goal primarily to work on your own? Or do you want to start a company, one with employees who carry out business processes independently from you? There's a lot to be said for creating a new company: You can (eventually) take vacations and maybe even sell it at some point. But it's much more difficult than having a career as an independent, and it takes a quite different skill set. While it's certainly possible to change course midstream, it's always useful to have a clear sense of which route you're on. I'm full of respect for people who choose the build-a-company path, but staying independent has been right for me so far.

Whatever path you choose, expect the separation between your self and your business to become much blurrier. I guarantee that you'll feel differently about your work when all of the benefit—and all of the downside—flows to you rather than your employer. You also need to amp up your reliability. If you don't like being available on email pretty much all of the time, you probably won't do well as an independent. On my honeymoon in Bali, I checked my email every single day, and I was happy to do it. (Having a spouse that's okay with this is important, too.)

One of the great truths of being an independent is that everybody follows a unique course. Each of us has different interests and different skills, and each of us starts in a different place. Forging a career as an independent means figuring out what your idiosyncratic strengths are, then following through on the path those strengths put you on. There's no one right way.

BEING INDEPENDENT: STAYING IN BUSINESS

I often hear technical people express disdain for the human interactions that determine so much of career success. "Politics", they say, "I hate politics". If you feel this way, once again, you're not cut out to be an independent. In fact, you might as well resign yourself to a limited career, whatever job you're in. Working well with other people—the essence of "politics"—is essential for success in nearly every role. Like it or not, this is especially true of being an independent consultant.

The truth is that being good at the work you're hoping to do is just the ante for getting in the game. People who are technically strong are a dime a dozen. Much less common are people who are technically strong, are good to work with, and can effectively sell those attributes.

Another important aspect of remaining successful is keeping current. Much of the time, clients hire you because you have specialized knowledge. In fact, plenty of people I know (including me) went out on their own because at some point, the specialized knowledge in their heads let them make much more money as an independent. No matter how hot your specialization is when you start, however, I guarantee you that the value of that knowledge will decline. If you're lucky, that declining value won't start for a couple of years, but it's absolutely certain to happen. When I first went out on my own, for example, I was a specialist in something called Open Systems Interconnection (OSI). It was a hot technology at the time, and it let me get a good start. But within just a few years, OSI was completely dead. If I hadn't moved on, I couldn't have survived as an independent.

The challenge is to get yourself up to speed in new and in-demand areas while still making a living with your existing knowledge. One way to do this is to regularly devote some unpaid time to learning new things. Doing this is essential, but it's seldom enough. You also have to find a way to get clients to pay you to learn new things. You might, for example, look for work in emerging areas that are conceptually next door to whatever it is you're already doing. Maybe you're a specialist in large databases, and you run across an organization that's looking at the emerging options for cloud storage. You don't know much about these, but neither does anybody else, and your background makes you a natural fit to move into this new area. (I'm not suggesting that you hoodwink clients into paying for your on-the-job training, but rather that you look for win/win situations—they certainly exist.) Doing this successfully comes back to sales: You need to learn how to get customers to offer you this work. But whatever you do, don't think that the specialized knowledge and skills you start with will see you through an entire career. Plan to change.

Ultimately, sustaining a career as an independent in technology is much like sustaining a successful career in any other area. You need to do some things really well, but you have to do everything at least passably well. And you need to differentiate yourself, which like every business means one of two things: Doing different things from your competitors or doing the same things in different ways. Whatever approach you choose, the goal is always to provide a unique competitive advantage, a compelling reason for clients to choose *you*.

I have moments when I think everybody should be self-employed. It keeps you solidly in touch with what's really valuable, both to your customers and to yourself. And the freedom that comes with being on your own is a wonderful thing. I wholeheartedly recommend it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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