

Out On Our Own - The Risks and Rewards of Self-Employment

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Maybe genetics played a part - family members on both sides of the tree are or were self-employed, and this goes back several generations. Maybe it was the kinds of bosses I kept encountering in job after job after job over the years. Maybe it was always knowing it made more sense for me to find ways to earn money on my terms vs. someone else's. Maybe it was admitting I'm not really the "corporate type," because I'm not really a "fitting in under any and all circumstances" kind of person. Or it could be a combination of these reasons and a thousand more. Regardless of the idea's origin, I think I always knew that at some point in my work life I would be the most content and fulfilled if I earned a living working on my own.

I believe the universe sends us signs to point us toward our next steps in life. I also believe we have to be in a mental and emotional place where we are ready to accept the signs being sent. This takes an even more important belief, which is the belief in oneself, and that things happen (positive or negative) for specific reasons in our lives. Hence, with every work experience that ended, whether positively or negatively, the fact is they always ended. And with every employment situation, starting from the first time I ever took a babysitting job at age thirteen, I have learned things about myself and how I function in a wide variety of work environments. So having amassed years of experience in settings where I worked for others, finally the time came to take that leap of faith to be out on my own. I knew I needed to find ways of earning the money I needed to maintain not only my lifestyle, but also to establish and maintain my emotional, intellectual, and creative balance.

For many of us, "work" is a "four-letter word," with all that the double meaning of that phrase implies! But as I said earlier, each job taught me something about myself. Each work experience further tilled the self-employment soil inside my head. The seed was already planted; I knew it was only a matter of time and opportunity, and then the moment would come for me to take the leap. I have the advantage, with my varied job setting history, of having seen so many types of environments, and it has served me well as I went along on the working for others stage of the journey. I have done my time in the fast food and retail "trenches," did the late hours of a restaurant manager. I've been a summer camp counselor, a waitress, catering server, bartender, cafeteria worker, dishwasher, kitchen prep person, fundraiser, daycare worker, program administrator, secretary, office manager, personal assistant, aerobics instructor, fitness trainer, and telemarketer. And that was all before becoming a psychotherapist!

What did I learn from all of those settings? There was a common thread among all of those jobs and that was the human contact. I always enjoy working with people, and in every setting prior to graduate school there were opportunities for me to be interacting with the public. And thankfully, in at least a few of my prior employment settings, I had supervisors who were supportive and encouraging of me, and for that I'm truly grateful. To this day, I can think back to those few past supervisors and be reassured, knowing they had regard and respect and acceptance for who I was as an employee and as a

person. This sustained me through times when I was employed with less than positive supervisors for whom it seemed nothing I did was right, and it was only a matter of time before I became so uncomfortable under their supervision that I would quit to find a different opportunity. Something else I realized along the way about supervisors in general - I NEVER want to be one for anyone else other than myself. That was another valuable lesson learned while in job setting after job setting. See what I mean? Every experience teaches us something; sometimes it's just as much about what we know we don't want to do as what we know we want to do.

The next step involves, what is for some, a difficult decision. Some people need the security they perceive comes from working within an already established work environment, like a company, hospital, school, or the military, etc. There is an infrastructure, chain of command, promotion track, profit sharing, retirement benefits, office space, desk and chair and file cabinets already in place. No need to reinvent the wheel. The job descriptions are already written, the work hours already assigned, expectations already apparent. The rules are there for one to follow, and the outcome for following the rules should be and many times is pretty clear cut. For some people, things being spelled out about time in the work setting are needed. And for some people, it's about go to work, do the job, get paid, and this works for them. For these people, they might never even dare to imagine a world of self-employment, because in that world, not much of the above exists. There are fewer rules when we work for ourselves, fewer systems already in place, sometimes the wheel does have to be reinvented, and always there is the unknown. That can be too risky or scary or dangerous for some people, or at least this is what their perceptions would be about self-employment.

For those of us who have crossed over to the self-employment side, those words - risky, scary, dangerous - still exist. But the benefits of working for ourselves far outweigh the emotional costs of those words. So in a way, the decision I mentioned above isn't really that difficult. It's just a matter of time before certain of us wind up on the self-employment path. It's a feeling we have, a knowledge of the inevitable. Many times I think about the differences between needs and wants in life. For me, the concept of working for myself was definitely a need. However, it made sense to make the leap from a place of strength. So working for others in order to gain experience in my current field was for me a step in that place of strength process. I know there are many people who have attempted the self-employment journey, only to find that it wasn't a right fit for any number of reasons. And this isn't to say that there may be some people who go back and forth between self-employment and working for others. There are some people who straddle both worlds simultaneously. Still others, having made the leap to self-employment, stay in that world and never look back. Part of coming from a place of strength is knowing that the best decisions are the ones made from a regret-free place, and that life is full of decisions to be made.

Regardless of the choices or method of working for oneself, there are some key components to embracing the self-employment lifestyle. As I mentioned, belief in oneself and one's abilities is probably the first and most important on the list. Without this belief/faith, nothing else is possible, because we need to be out there projecting or

“selling” this belief, and in essence the “product” we are selling is ourselves and our skills. Of course we also have to determine where and what the niche market is for the skills or talents we have to sell. Another reality is that once self-employed; we are not punching a time clock. There are no “regular hours” in the self-employment world. We are much more likely to be 24/7 available in a variety of ways. Even if we are not doing actual work with clients for whom we can bill and/or get paid, there is all the other work involved with constantly and continually marketing ourselves to acquire new business. This work takes place everywhere. I have had conversations with people in the grocery store and wound up giving my card to them. I have been on vacations and conducted video interviews for my website. I never know where the next opportunity/connection is going to come from, so it’s a 24/7 lifestyle. When I’m driving in my car, I’m thinking of ideas for the next article I’m going to write, or the next class I’m going to teach, or the next subject I’m going to interview, or the next space I need to book for a client session, or the next workshop I’m going to give. Being able to multitask is an important skill set, as is being able to have several projects running concurrently. Putting “feelers” out in a multitude of directions is necessary, and sometimes nothing comes from any of those “feelers.” On the other hand, sometimes several leads draw “hits” at one time, thereby engaging another skill set, the ability to prioritize.

Exhausting, you ask? Absolutely! And it’s also exciting, stimulating, encouraging, creative, liberating, empowering, and overall a positive experience. Sometimes it’s hard to stay motivated. Sometimes it’s hard to keep to deadlines, many of which need to be self-imposed, and as someone who admits to procrastination, this deadline management is certainly my most difficult and draining task! Then again, I have certainly made progress in this area - I have no choice but to be on top of deadlines, because they are constant. I also learned that while I prefer a linear approach to things in terms of completion, this isn’t always likely as new things come up and other things must be completed at the same time. Sometimes it’s hard to be positive, because setbacks come and unlike working for others, setbacks have a more profound impact. A setback could mean a loss of client and therefore a loss of some income. A setback could require a change of direction or focus. A setback could be having a difficult client meeting in one hour and then having to bounce back immediately to be “up” for the next client encounter within the next hour. Therefore, along with that belief in oneself, resilience becomes a most important personality trait.

It’s the resilience we have that lends us that “bounce back” ability. It’s the resilience that helps us move from one situation to the next while continuing to stay balanced. It’s the resilience that helps us remember how essential it is to maintain our balance, because without it we have no reserve from which to draw for when things get tough and we need to dig in and find ways to keep moving forward. Even though I’m talking here about self-employment, we have to remember to keep ourselves balanced. Part of maintaining that balance is learning to say, “No.” It’s a simple word; it’s actually a complete grammatical sentence, yet so many of us have such difficulty saying, “No.” And it’s not just within our work life that we need ready access to this important word - it’s in our personal lives as well that for those of us who are self-employed it becomes a crucial concept. The word “no” helps us maintain our boundaries and therefore our balance.

Sometimes using the word “no” in our personal lives may be more difficult but it’s infinitely more important.

How can you decide if self-employment is for you? One resource for you is right here at this website, in the “radio shows” section. There you will find two radio shows, both of which are entitled “[Out On Our Own](#),” and you will hear from six different self-employed women and men, who describe the different components of their own journeys towards and arrivals at working for themselves. Of course the bookstores are filled with self-help books on self-employment and I have several in my home library. My favorite of these is called "Do What You Love, The Money Will Follow", by Marsha Sinetar. I can't say enough about this wonderful book, which was so affirming for me along the way. Talk to as many people as you can who are self-employed. The conversations I had with people who had walked along this road before me were signposts of encouragement along my way. I am grateful to all of the self-employed people who took the time to make suggestions, offer advice and support, and who validated my desire to be self-employed, as they turned those same desires into income-producing realities.

Ultimately the path toward self-employment is unique, as it is tailored to each individual who attempts this choice. I believe it is possible for anyone to find ways to earn income through self-employment. So if you have that feeling in your gut that your own way makes more sense to you, that’s the beginning. From there, the direction is going to be forward, the choices and possibilities are limitless, and the reward is the satisfaction that comes from generating income from yourself and for yourself, while maintaining your life in balance.