

Focus on Consulting



Life as an Independent

by Christopher Juillet

If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.

—Henry David Thoreau

I am asked on occasion, "What does it take?" to be an independent consultant. The question almost always takes me by surprise, perhaps because of the implication behind the question, that consultants have some quality or characteristic that sets us apart from others.

I usually smile uncomfortably and talk about how working for yourself requires discipline, careful time management, self-motivation, and such. I describe how you have to be willing to go out and "sell yourself" (as if only those of us who are self-employed must present and market ourselves and our skills). I talk about the challenge of running your own business. Then I recognize someone across the room whom I haven't seen in years and quickly excuse myself, retreating to the far reaches of the room to get another plate of crackers and cheese. Maybe sometime I'll say, "Well, I bought this elixir in Chicago, see, and I drank the whole bottle, see, and the next week I was self-employed. I went back to buy an antidote, but the shop had closed, so there you have it."

When I first began to work for myself (a grand misnomer, since I now work for four separate companies, and have four direct and about fifteen indirect managers), I asked a friend and colleague (also a self-employed writer) if she ever stopped worrying

about what she had done to her career, where the next assignment would come from, and the like. She laughed and told me, "No, but I've gotten accustomed to it." *Gotten accustomed to it*, she said, as if being self-employed was like learning to drink Scotch, or developing a taste for strong cheeses. I've since learned that she was exactly right. The concern for "What have I done and what happens next week, next month, next year," never fades, but becomes part of the territory, an old, if unsettling, friend.

It is a cruel irony that in becoming an independent, you become more completely dependent upon those around you than you have ever been in your life. You depend upon your clients, who are often alternately pleased with your work and unhappy with the invoices you present. You depend upon your spouse or partner, who cheerfully goes on paying the bills as you while away the hours and days, wait months for payment, and prospect for new work. You depend upon your colleagues, who now endure your monthly tirades about how no one in their right mind would ever leave their job to go independent (after which you grin mournfully and say, "Well, it beats working for a living."). Mostly, you depend upon yourself and your world in a manner you have never before experienced.

If being a consultant requires anything, it is a predisposition, a temperament toward coping with uncertain circumstances. I've heard it said that an entrepreneur must be

willing to take risks; risks to one's career, to one's financial stability, and to one's self-esteem, since in our culture, we are often judged by others on "what title we have" rather than on "who we are." And, since independents generally do not "have a job" in the way that full-time staff do, one occasionally encounters the colleague who asks whether "consulting" is a way-point en route to a permanent position, or, sometimes more bluntly, a code word for "unemployed."

So then, what does it take to be an independent consultant? I do not know; I wish I did. I only know that working for yourself is not better than, nor worse than, being an employee in a company, large or small. It is, however, quite different from being an employee.

At the beginning, I presented a passage from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, the "different drummer" passage. In a mere thirty-three words, Thoreau was able to convey a basic premise whose truth cannot be denied, that each of us is special, unique, and capable of many wonders if only we allow ourselves to listen to the world around us. As with living life in all its variety and richness, being an independent (or anything else, for that matter) requires no more or less than having the presence of mind to hear the drummer far afield, listen, and step to the music, secure in the knowledge that you are doing what is right and best for you. □

This article is dedicated to the memory of Virginia Beebe, educator, scholar, mentor, and friend. May you find peace in resting and a place far better than ever you have known.

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