Thinking About Becoming a Freelancer?
Human Psychology May Make It Harder Than You Think

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Does the idea of leaving your office job so you can work as a freelancer or entrepreneur appeal to you (or have you already made that move)? With new technologies making it easier for people to leave their traditional workplace and to work from almost anywhere, more and more people are making that choice. And it's hard to deny the attraction of being able to work at whatever time and from wherever you want, make your own decisions, build a product or service you believe in, and see if you've got what it takes to succeed.

Working independently, however, come with a few mostly-unrecognized psychological challenges rarely emphasized in the media. These challenges include staying motivated and on task, avoiding a sense of social isolation, and maintaining a sense of subjective well-being. A common misconception among those in the work force may be that *lack of independence* is the main source of these problems and that going it alone will provide a solution. It's tempting to look with unsympathetic criticism at freelancers who fails because they're depressed, unmotivated, or lonely because one obvious external source of blame—an incompetent boss or badly run company—no longer exists: there's no one else to blame but the freelancer, even if that freelancer is you and you're blaming yourself. Yet in fact—contrary to popular media portrayals and perhaps contrary to your own expectations—the life of an independent worker is prone to these psychological challenges to a far greater extent than when working for someone else. Furthermore, it's often not a character flaw that explains these challenges, but rather external circumstances common to independent work, circumstances for which most people are not psychologically well suited.

Why is freelancing more psychological challenging than working for someone else? Shouldn't we expect to be happier and more motivated when we define our own jobs and are accountable only to ourselves? Probably not. Across human evolutionary history until recent times humans have been deeply embedded in closely knit social networks with relatively well-defined roles and expectations for work. We should not be surprised if working independently in a role we have to define for ourselves is associated with decreased psychological functioning, and there's extensive research to suggest this is the case. The vast majority of us will perform at a higher level when have regular social interaction (physical, not just web-based), when we're involved with a task for which the expectations and the job at hand are clearly defined, when there is regular feedback about expectations and performance, and when there is some degree of external accountability. All these features are hallmarks of a well-run company, and all of them must be recreated from scratch the moment one leaves that environment to become a freelancer.

So is there a solution? If you go the freelancer route and find that you're struggling with loneliness, with a lack of self-discipline, or with depression, does that mean you're not cut out to be a freelancer and you should do something else? Again, probably not. When the esteemed psychologist Walter Mischel looked at the propensity for delayed gratification among young children (could they resist taking one marshmallow now in order to get two later, for example), one important finding was that the successful children were *not* the ones who had an easy time of it. They were the ones who actively resisted. They kicked their feet, looked away, covered their eyes, sang songs, and did other things to distract themselves. All things the kids who ate the marshmallow were not doing. The successful kids acted on their environment so that the psychological factors didn't get the better of them. The same lesson can be applied to freelancing: the key to success is not to be the kind of person who *doesn't need* social interaction, external accountability, or regular feedback. Nearly all of us need those things by virtue of being human. Instead, *act on your environment*, change how you're working so that your life as a freelancer includes the regular social interaction, external accountability, clearly defined goals, and regular feedback you gave up when you left your traditional job.

While that may be easier said than done, there are a number of tools out there to help. Get a career or personal coach (http://www.coachfederation.org/find-a-coach/) to help you keep your vision and stay focused on what you need to do to succeed. Implement external incentives using freely available online software (see http://www.stick.com for an example) or find work buddies by posting the request to social networking sites. In my opinion the best solution is to join a coworking space (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coworking). Full disclosure: I run a coworking space. I do so because my psychology training has convinced me that coworking provide just the environment necessary to help entrepreneurs and freelancers do their best. Prague has four coworking spaces and they all provide professional-quality office space at an affordable price in an open environment where you'll be surrounded by other talented, creative freelancers who don't want to go it alone, often with educational talks and other social events to help build community and promote professional success. Perhaps you need a combination of these options, or some other solution altogether. The point is to remember that it's not a character flaw to struggle with motivation, a sense of isolation, or depression: that comes with the territory of being an independent worker, and the best solution is to change that territory to make it a little less independent.