

Striking Out on Your Own

by Paul Dickson

Self-employment is the daydream of the decade. The same look of those of the fifties, the wistful envy directed through the windows at the professionals in the offices, can now be seen on the faces of those inside, staring toward the seaside loft where the sails are rigged, or the writer's garret, or the beach-umbrella rental outlet, toward a place where a person can become not a better part of a whole but rather a whole unto himself or herself. To everyone, from the lay-off prone, sick-of-it-all missile designer to the memo- and regulation-crazed bureaucrat, the aspiration to break away is gaining in popularity.

But the boom in self-employment aspirations parallels and equals the boom in office construction. Perhaps it is always this way—the dreams of going back to the farm, self-sufficiency, the Bresodi system, gushed from the American subconscious at precisely the moment that the family farm was being annihilated by machine agriculture. The Bresodi system of family farming captivated imaginations of the 1930s, and a few people actually followed through on the dream, but more generally, the fantasies mesmerized the others, permitting them an

easier way of denying that the day of the small American farmer was over.

For many, the thought of self-employment is a counter-current that permits the heavier flow of traffic in the other direction, towards institutionalized work. Ironically, it is often an exaggerated belief in oneness that is the greatest obstacle to the possibility of breaking away, as more and more people envelop their aspirations in an impossible dream trap. All it takes to bait this trap is to set up an unattainable goal that in your heart you know cannot be realized except through reincarnation in the next life.

This trap comes in many shapes and sizes. One of the most common and most longingly discussed variations is the Big Moment Trap, in which the subject waits for Opportunity to come crashing through his or her door. Like the eager starlets of yore, these victims are mentally perched on the drugstore stool at Hollywood and Vine awaiting discovery. Another variation is The Great American Novel Trap, which is largely self-explanatory and tailor-made for those who need a goal so big it precludes starting. Finally, there is The Weekly Newspaper in Vermont Trap, best described as an aspiration for those who need a convenient nice-sounding rustic dream that flies in the face of reality. It is usually held by those who don't know that the back pages of *Editor and Publisher*

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show that country weeklies in Vermont (Oregon, Maine, and other parts of Pepperidge Farm country) are folding, not being created. These schemers never make demographic sense and consider it heresy to talk about ventures in booming areas such as northern Virginia, Long Island, and suburban Atlanta, because these areas might really be able to support a folksy, muckraking weekly newspaper.

There are, of course, Vermont weeklies that prosper and people that get discovered, but these are long-shots and, crudely put, long-shots seldom pay the rent—a goal that is not simply attained even by those with possible dreams.

For beyond the impossible dream trap, there are other, more formidable obstacles to independent work that are also growing along with the urge to be self-employed. These may not be discovered until after the decision to break out, because most people employed by organizations do not notice their dependence on the cradle-to-grave security provided by the company, the unthought-of compensations of professional life. But for people who have broken out, the security gap is frightening and widening. At one time, the differences in benefits between the self-employed and the corporate types were in the areas of niceties and the lack of certain petty irritants that could be easily made up for

by any person who had the will to go out on his own. Job advertisements emphasized “fringe” benefits—luxuries at the edges of human experience that could be dispensed with for the luxury of rewarding work. But as the advantages of institutional life have grown, so has the corresponding insecurity of the outside world—as more and more people expect the needs of existence to be filled through the office, it is more difficult to fill those needs outside. People who break with organizations have to cope with benefit shock.

Perhaps the best description of benefit shock is contained in a recent report from the Institute for the Future, a new Connecticut think-tank, that projects employment and employee benefits in America over the next 15 years and paints a portrait of working conditions in 1985. The three-volume study, resulting from over a year’s effort by a score of experts from fields in which benefit patterns are a prime concern, foresees broadly expanded advantages and predicts that benefits will render self-employment a rarity. One description of conditions in 1985 goes like this:

Employee benefits have merged with compensation, social welfare, and on-the-job amenities; it is difficult to tell where one ends and the others begin. They are integrated in the minds of employers, employees, and the government. In effect, the environ-

ment created by the integration of social-welfare programs and benefit programs required by legislation and existing as a result of agreements between labor and management has guaranteed all employees reasonable wages, more education and leisure, safer and more pleasant working places, and the avoidance of most of the fiscal hazards associated with accidents, ill health, and old age. The programs mesh together: we have translated at least part of our capacity for economic production into *security*. The "rugged" individual who wants to take his wages in cash instead of guarantees against adversity has almost passed from the scene.

The Institute's report is just one of many voices that will rise to tell you that as corporate and government employee benefits increase and on-the-job sweeteners get sweeter, self-employment appears anachronistic and self-defeating. And, if you are self-employed, you can be assured that it will be almost impossible to keep up with those benefits generally available to the employed Joneses.

Some of the specific upcoming benefits that your co-workers will lay on you as reasons for not leaving may include an odds-on shot at a four-day work week, improved health benefits, and periodic raises, but these are peanuts compared to the cornucopia of benefits predicted by the Institute. Assuming that the Institute is roughly correct, in your bout with benefit shock you must not only consider the weight of benefits now provided but add to them those which will be commonplace by 1985:

- Employers will pay about 50 per cent of payroll in benefits.

- Benefits will generally reflect cost-of-living, as escalators will be built into most pension plans to guarantee the pensioner a standard of living rather than a dollar amount.

- The 35-hour week and flexible working hours will be common, and more holidays and longer vacations the norm.

- Corporation-owned leisure facilities will be available to most employees along with many more leisure-oriented benefits.

- It will be common to find

on-site education programs and facilities, and some firms will provide educational leaves and even paid sabbaticals for employees.

- Subsidized housing and company cars will be available to many employees, along with savings plans to which the employer matches the employee's deposits.

- Expansive employee-counseling programs on matters as diverse as taxes, investments, and retirement planning will be everywhere.

- Psychiatric and dental care provisions will be part of the standard package of employee medical benefits.

- Since individual automobile insurance costs will have zoomed out of sight, group car insurance offered through the company will become the norm.

- Inter-conglomerate pension plans will have been established nationally.

Not all of the impetus to join a large employer comes from the irresistible goodies offered and from their wearing, magnetic appeal for the struggling entrepreneur. Less gentle forces will try to club him into the fold, too. His taxes will rise (partly to pay the government portion of other people's benefits and subsidies), the competition will be rough, and he will lack the power to protect himself against a world that is increasingly organized for the benefit of those in large groups. The small farmer was pulled from the fields by the bright lights and big dreams of the city, but he was also kicked there by inexorable market forces. Similarly, the self-employed adventurer and the break-away of high principle must contend with the push-pull, carrot-and-stick attraction exercised by the large employers who advertise the benefit packages.

The Cocoon of the Future

Benefit shock, at best, is a difficult condition to contend with. Such visions of the future have their effect on the currently self-employed, who project the disadvantages and conclude

that they will be relatively much worse off later than now. Such despair can be countered, depending on the strength of one's love for benefit freedom, the feelings not far removed from those held by the unsomatized Mr. Savage at the end of *Brave New World*. Benefit freedoms include not having to do what one is doing now until 1985, not having to make the ethical and lifestyle compromises required by organizations, being unbossed and unbossing, and relying on ingenuity to make up for security (for instance, forming an independent group to buy car insurance as it becomes impossible to purchase it alone). The value of such freedoms may continue to inflate as the price each individual must pay for his benefits in terms of decreasing autonomy becomes greater.

The prophecies of the Institute for the Future are already beginning to be fulfilled. The men from Hartford, for instance, are not all that excited any more about what they term "non-group individuals." They may be eager to sell you life insurance, but they are less eager to sell medical coverage to the self-employed. In most cases, the independent must employ some razzle-dazzle consumer salesmanship to get such coverage, only one area in which the burden of Willie Loman falls not on the seller but on the buyer. Group health and hospitalization, the only kind people can afford these days, is increasingly bought in large blocks by employers, and when one seeks single-person or single-family coverage, he can expect physicals for all and anticipate "exemptions" that relieve the insurance company of any responsibility for past ailments or illnesses. One can also forget about disability insurance or any policy that pays for working days lost because such things are almost never sold to the unsalaried. In short, in the eyes of the insurance computers and tables, the self-employed becomes a random digit and, as such, an actuarial schmuck.

Other subversive changes on the horizon will increasingly thwart the

urge to self-employment. One of the papers to emerge from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' Commission on the Year 2000 addresses the future of the bureaucracy and predicts that institutions themselves will change, making them less oppressive and more livable. Basically, the authors of the paper hold that the bureaucratic form of organization is doomed and destined to be slowly replaced by an "organic-adaptive" structure in which organizations will be constantly changing in response to specific problems rather than maintain their present mechanical inflexibility. To dip into one more recent futurist document, a large survey conducted by General Electric entitled *The Future Business Environment* predicts that business organizations will increasingly be more directed by the aspirations of their memberships than by the dictates of administrative convenience as is presently true. In short, if the forecasters are right, the promise of new benefits is just part of the subverting influence on those who aspire to become self-employed.

High-Priced Independence

In general, it seems that most of the "futurist's" predictions (even taken with much skeptical salt) and emerging truisms of employment and consumption fly in the face of the lifestyle/workstyle of the self-employed. We are told, for instance, that a checkless, cashless society will be widespread in a matter of years. Even today the self-employed are relegated by the banks and merchants to the untouchable status awarded to those who carry cash. Since nobody trusts anybody with hard cash anymore, it is, as Marshall McLuhan puts it, a "poor man's credit card." To be sure, credit, loans, little plastic cards, and other amenities of this emerging "society" don't come easily to those who have no salary to proclaim and to have garnished, no government service rating to state, and no work telephone number where creditors can call for a

quick fiscal checkup. Should one opt for this financial counter-culture, he is advised to sharpen up the traditional American ability to persuade others to "run up a tab" or "hang on for a few days." Generally, little stores, small companies, dentists, and others who are either self-employed or have some kinship to it, are pretty easy to deal with—but few get away with this dealing with big institutions that proclaim their love for the entrepreneurial spirit.

Similarly, as we move further into the state in which our material well-being more and more becomes a function of being able to meet timed payments and plan ahead financially, the only thing that the self-employed can bank on today is the inability to time his finances and plan financially. Once freed from wages or a salary, one is no longer paid on every second Tuesday or whenever. One's new enterprise will be supplying goods or services to others, and having "sold" something is often a far cry from getting paid for it. Writers, for example, find a veritable payment-policy jungle in their realm as some of their outlets give money in advance, others pay on acceptance, and still others when the article or book is on sale. It is therefore not unusual for the self-employed to be owed relatively vast sums for their labors without having any money in pocket. Meanwhile, as we all know, the clearly established trend is for large institutions to demand payments from the individual on exact schedules. To cite one of many, the person on his own payroll has nobody to withhold his income taxes in small doses so it must be paid in jarring quarterly lumps which come straight from the pocket. Then there is the business of Social Security payments. Not only do the self-employed pay them out of pocket, but they pay more than their salaried peers, whose employers share in the Social Security tax burden. As one's own employee the whole amount is paid by the individual. As a result, to the person leaving a job Social Security deductions

become what is appropriately called "Self-Employment Tax." If in 1970 a person made \$7,800 as an employed worker he had \$404.60 deducted for Social Security; but if he made the same amount on his own, his self-employment tax came to \$538.20. Perhaps \$133.60 is not much but Social Security is going up and it is by no means the only tax on self-employment.

Besides financial considerations like the self-employment tax, there are other societal mechanisms working to discourage the lone worker. For instance, the burgeoning proclivity to zone communities is actually making it illegal to work at home in many areas. More and more "nice" neighborhoods, fearing backyard rendering operations and cottage industries, have zoned out all home-based businesses (although doctors are often exempted).

On another level, there is overwhelming evidence to support the conclusion that we are entering a new age of instantaneous, computerized procedures in which such things as international computer links for detailed transactions will hum away freeing us generally from dreaded clerkships and nagging detail. In contrast to this marvelous world of cybernation stands the self-employed individual, who of economic necessity must languish in an unautomated state wallowing in his own details. Often the margin between success and failure for the self-employed is the ability to note every dime and detail of every transaction in crummy little notebooks. Clear, comprehensive records are required by what the taxmen call "unincorporated small businesses" and if one does not want to be taxed into insolvency he must prove that he, like multinational corporations, has incurred business expenses. Like big companies, certain tax breaks are offered to the self-employed, such as being able to deduct part of the rent as business expense. Such things are worth knowing about, but they require some heavy reading in tax guides.

Generally, the self-employed are thought to be pursuing a specialization, such as writing or painting, but he must devote an increasing amount of time to playing the many roles of an institution. As jobs and roles in society become more specialized, the self-employed must buck the trend by becoming not only his own tax consultant but also his own promoter, salesman, accountant, bill collector, treasurer, secretary, janitor, coffee shop, building maintenance staff, and trash removal service.

Striking Out on One's Own

Despite all of these trends, which range from increasingly traumatic benefit shock to the need to fill a variety of detail-laden commercial roles, the picture is not all bleak because even ganged together they do not *as yet* add up to an insurmountable hurdle. The simple fact that many alive and thriving self-employed people are roaming around is testament to the still-present surmountability of the odds. To be sure, the aforementioned list of trends leads to the conclusion that unless things take a radically new direction the odds against realizing the aspiration to becoming self-employed will grow to long-shots.

As the logistics of breaking away from the job trap become more of a hurdle, the reasons for breaking away remain strong and will as long as bureaucracies and organizations retain their present character. Those major desires of seeking happiness, gaining freedom, and asserting one's integrity that define the dream are still very real. And beyond these major self-explanatory considerations there is another lure which is the indefinite but promising new quality of life offered those freeing themselves from captivity. One's days will change and take on an entirely new complexion. Some aspects of these days are good, some bad, but almost all of one's own doing. In this new realm new considerations present themselves in topical mixtures of incidents, questions, state-

ments, and what can best be termed odds and ends. For many, these daily considerations are as important as the major abstract considerations of happiness, freedom, and integrity and with them make self-employment the only alternative. They become, as many who are self-employed will testify, habit forming.

For openers, there are a host of things that strike one's fancy in the new incarnation. Needless to say these are minor items but help define what may very well emerge as one's totally new sense of humor. First there are the one-liners such as: a *Fortune* article on the problems of excess leisure time, discovering the two meanings of the phrase "striking out on one's own," and the realization that one is too small a business to qualify for Small Business Loans and other Small Business Administration goodies. On another level there are the incidents of one's revitalized fancy. For example, there is the phone report from one's former place of employment in which the quavering voice of a former co-worker says that office politics have degenerated to their meanest level in history. "Not so," you are likely to tell him or her with cruel glee, "just as bad when I left." Then there is the blissful business of listening to morning and/or evening reports of traffic snafus on the radio, just as one imagines the President and other work-at-homes do.

Moving into another realm, one encounters new and sometimes contradictory concepts of time coming forth. Normally the self-employed person is plagued by more than one recurring question like, "When one is on one's own is every day Saturday or every day Monday or is every day a little of each?" Then there are a host of pleasurable encounters with time such as: having the exhilarating experience of decreeing Wednesday and Thursday the weekend (and then working on everyone else's weekend); learning anew, like a kid let out for the summer, to see time as one's own and feel the heady burden of contend-

ing with its promises and limitations; realizing that nine and five are just two lackluster digits on the old wall clock; remembering that you can take time off without having "earned" it and without having asked for it; or, after four days of 10-minute lunches, taking a three-hour lunch and finding that there is really nobody to ask where you've been. The newly freed can be prepared for the first time in years to find out what eight hours means in terms of what really can or cannot be done when liberated from meetings, bossing and being bossed, office politics, baseball pools, telephone marathons, collections for the about-to-be-wed lady in accounting and all of the other things that people who use terms like "counter-productive" in their memos must face every day.

An Identity Vacuum

On the other hand, there are unpleasant discoveries such as the first encounter with the pressures of an unproductive day or days. A person on his own is free to look at time as an unstructured, free-form commodity, but he must also ponder the fact that wasted time is charged against him alone. Back at the office, distractions like coffee breaks, bull sessions, and long rambling phone calls were tolerable and even welcome; but the lone worker is hit with the stark realization that such leisure means there will be less finished product at the end of the day. When the breakaway realizes that he must sell his individual product and that he has no organization to blur who really does what, he becomes extremely jealous of time. He may recall wistfully that as a Civil Service GS-11 or whatever, unproductive time meant much less because somebody paid your way through.

No less dramatic than the new view of time are those questions of identity which present themselves to the self-employed. These identity crises and situations normally come packaged in little episodes which occur when

others find that they have encountered a bona fide weirdo without a boss. Typical of these episodes are such situations as these:

■ You are stopped by a traffic policeman to be given a ticket and he asks the name of your employer and you say that you work for yourself. Next he asks, "Come on, where do you work? Are you employed or not?" You say, "Self-employed" with the pride of a robber baron but you know that he thinks you are an able-bodied welfare loafer. He, among others you meet, knows that self-employment is a tired euphemism for being out of work.

■ Your neighbors become curious and somehow nervous about the fact that you are around the house a lot and not tying up traffic.

■ Your alumni group or something of that ilk sends you a computer-readable form to fill out in which you are asked to check the box that describes your occupation. You find that there is no box for you so you scribble something in the margin describing what you do. The machine sends you another form and a note saying that the first form was incomplete. You pencil in another box and write "other" next to it and then check it off. The alumni computer accepts that as will other data and dossier-gathering devices which as a class consider you as undigestable as anything other than "other."

■ You become extremely nervous about meeting new people because of the everpresent question, "Who are you with?" When your answer fails to attach you to a recognized organization like *The New York Times*, or Nader's Raiders, or the Department of Labor, both parties to the conversation often become embarrassed by your obscurity. There is some second-echelon hope for you as, say, a writer, in the recovery question, "Well, who do you write for?" If you have published for an organ of widely acknowledged distinction, such as *Harper's*, things will bounce back quickly and the conversation can proceed. But if

you write here and there, or are still working on your first novel, you will have to learn to live with the "I see" response—and to support your own ego while the doomed conversation struggles through the formalities of termination.

Pleasures of the Self-Made Trap

Still another typical identity problem occurs when, despite other political proclivities, one finds that he or she is thinking in the most starkly capitalistic terms on certain issues. By becoming an unincorporated, unsubsidized small business one's attitudes commonly bend to the point that it is not rare to find oneself watching some jowly, fatcat industry spokesman on the tube pleading for some new subsidy, depletion allowance, or other taxpayer-supplied amenity, and one starts mumbling things like, "socialist creep." In another version of the same attitude, one dreams of addressing the chairmen of the boards of Esso, Lockheed, and GE, to brief them on the thrills and realities of operating in a rigorous free-market economy.

Not to be overlooked in this discussion are the many revelations made to the self-employed which define cost as a function of a new workstyle. In short, one's consuming habits are going to change radically. Up, one quickly realizes, is the cost of paper clips and other consumables that used to be borrowed from the office. So too are utility bills if one works at home. On the other hand many things come down. In most cases, transportation costs, clothing costs, and lunch allotments are sharply reduced. Often the most dramatic decrease is in what the employed person writes off as "walking around" money or that spent for the bag of M&M's for extra mid-morning energy, the beers after work, overpriced bitter coffee in plastic cups, and the 25-cent chances taken on the St. Bartholomew's raffle for a new Olds.

There are triumphs that mean a lot to the self-employed. These things

carry little importance for those employed by others, but are totally and thrillingly relevant to the self-employed. Among them: paying a bill on time, getting paid for something on time, getting paid (period), noting offhandedly that one might make it through the year financially, finishing one project and launching another without getting 5,000 people to okay the first and getting approval from another 5,000 for starting the second, and avoiding new traps, such as the Easing Back to the Old Job in Pieces Trap and the Big Deal Trap. The first is commonly baited with the offer of a fee for going back to one's old job for a few days to help them out of a jam. No matter how tempting, one learns to avoid it with a polite no. The Big Deal Trap is an occupational hazard of the self-employed, because for reasons that are not altogether clear, people working on their own act as magnets for those who are in perpetual possession of seldom-executed big deals. This trap is rendered harmless when one is presented with a big deal, notes it, files it in his "big deal" file, and plows ahead with his own little deals.

Once such triumphs begin to occur with any frequency, the habit is formed and one concludes that despite a paucity of benefits and the trends of contemporary life one must live with, one has passed the mental point of no return. Then resolve hardens to protect the little freedoms and individual integrity that can surround self-employment. In the other corner, there is a combination of long-run fatigue, the whimsical cruelties of the market, and the push-pull attraction of the security-laden organization. The battle begins in earnest over whether one is to become an anachronism, a new trend, or one of a continuing small tribe. You ask, is all of this self-employment effort just a new trap with its own constraints, limitations, and demands on freedom? Perhaps so, but if it is, at least it's a trap of your own design and for that reason not at all a bad place to live. ■

The International Screw Thread Commission

by Jim Clark

On May 31, 1918, the U. S. House of Representatives spent one hour debating the merits of a bill creating the Commission for the Standardization of Screw Threads. The legislation, sponsored by Representative John Tilson of Connecticut, was greeted with general indifference by the members, but there were a few questions. Several congressmen expressed fear that the screw people might be around longer, and cost more, than they were being assured was the case. At that very time, the Congress as a whole was harboring similar fears about World War I. But Tilson promised his colleagues that the commission would need less than one year to reach agreement on screw thread standards, which, he added, urgently required coordination so that the nuts and bolts of our battle weaponry would fit each other. Thus, the commission was designed not only to end itself quickly but also to help end the war. Besides, said Tilson, there would be no cost to the government, "not one red cent."

The Tilson bill received quick House approval and then was guided through the Senate by Senator Warren G. Harding. Harding ran into minor opposition from senators like

Hitchcock of Nebraska, who observed, "I think it is very objectionable to create commissions. Congress has already created innumerable commissions, which, like Tennyson's brook, run on forever, even when their authority has ceased." Senator Harding promised his colleague that this commission would not last forever—in fact not for more than 60 days, because the war made hasty resolution of the nut and bolt question mandatory. Senator Harding put teeth into his promise right there on the floor by writing a 60-day limit to the commission's lifespan into the bill.

A House-Senate conference committee worked out the differences between the two versions of the bill and finally created a nine-member commission with authority to work six months.

Although World War I ended without standardized screw threads, or even a report from the commission, Congress gave the group three more years of existence on March 3, 1919. That was a big year, as the members made their first trip to Europe to discuss screw standards with appropriate officials from other countries. Travel and staff expenses were contributed indirectly by the federal agencies which "lent" full-time employees to staff the commission. The art of producing the screw thread budget from

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