

Time to Fly Solo?

by Dr. Stuart G. Walesh, *Indiana Delta '63*, P.E.

IS YOUR JOB SECURITY FADING? Is the corporate bureaucracy getting you down? Are you increasingly concerned about how much you work and how little you earn? How about how hard you work and how little you learn? Are you tired of talk about pay for performance? Are you stagnating intellectually? Do you want autonomy? Do you increasingly think, “I could do it better?” Are you retired but still “have the itch?”

Then maybe now is the time to “fly solo,” to go out on your own—to start a sole proprietor, individual practitioner, or free-lance consulting business that builds on your experience and vision. Remember, you go around only once.

“Going out on your own” as a consulting engineer is a major undertaking. As part of your “go or no go” decision, you should consider many factors. Four of the most important ones are discussed here. They are: reasons to consider flying solo, characteristics of successful sole proprietors, marketing, and the possibility of failure.

ARE YOU BECOMING UNEMPLOYABLE?

Unemployable has various meanings within the engineering profession, such as overly qualified, technically obsolete, and unreliable. It can also mean that you, a competent, accomplished, and regularly employed professional, are increasingly finding working for someone else intolerable. Consider seven reasons why you may be becoming unemployable.

1. *Insecure employment*: Job security, as symbolized by gold watches, is history. While job security is an oxymoron, career security doesn't have to be. The individual consultant simultaneously serving several clients typically has more security than the full-time employee of an organization.

2. *Bureaucratic excess*: One symptom is cumbersome decision-making, and another is being spread too thin. You are asked to do more and more with less and less. Will you continue to do less and less on more and more until you are eventually doing absolutely nothing on everything? Another questionable bureaucratic practice is excessive reporting on what you are doing, or trying to do, which leaves even less time to be productive.

3. *Inadequate net worth*: Playwright Tennessee Williams said, “You can be young without money, but you can't be old without it.” Your net worth is growing too slowly to assure you of a comfortable retirement. Even though you are prudent, you won't make the necessary net worth unless you significantly increase your income. If you're going to work as hard as you do, you might as well work for yourself and, if successful, reap the monetary benefits.

4. *Stagnation*: You are plateauing in terms of knowledge and skills. There is a growing gap between your desire for challenge and your autonomy to choose challenging assignments. Maybe you need to explore options that will enable you to unilaterally select challenges, acquire more knowledge and skills, and become more productive and happier in the process.

5. *Shackled by success*: You've made significant, high-profile contributions to your organization in a relatively narrow area. For example, you've worked hard to become a regionally or nationally recognized expert. Frankly, you're tired of this and want to take on completely new challenges.

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But you are perceived by the principals of your firm as being able to do only one type of specialty work. You've repeatedly told them about your other goals, but the message doesn't register. You are their guru.

6. *Dismissed, bypassed, demoted*: Being unexpectedly dismissed by your employer is truly a “sign” that you need to explore options. While being bypassed or demoted is likely to be less traumatic than being dismissed, each can have serious consequences—a bruised ego and reduced income. This individual is likely to go through a series of strong, mostly negative feelings—anger, anxiety, depression, despair, fear, inadequacy, jealousy, sadness, self-doubt, shame,

shock, and surprise. Near the end of this process, most professionals will be exploring options. One option is to become an individual practitioner. Maybe this disastrous event can be turned into an uplifting opportunity.

7. *Retired but still “have the itch”*: So you finally retired! You accomplished much professionally and have many pleasant memories (and a few not so pleasant). Frankly, you are happy to have most of it behind you. But there is some unfinished business, and it has to do with business. You miss certain aspects of working. It's different strokes for different folks. Perhaps you can re-enter the professional world as a free-lancer largely on your terms. Maybe you can work on what you want when and where you choose.

Assume that one or more of the preceding motivators apply to you. Then the next step is to consider attributes of successful sole-proprietor consultants.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL INDIVIDUAL PRACTITIONERS

One could argue that of the various opportunities for engineers, consulting as an individual practitioner is both the most demanding and satisfying. The world of the free-lancer is typically dynamic—new problems to solve, new technologies to learn, new clients to serve, and new geographic areas to visit. Success as a sole proprietor may be viewed as requiring these six characteristics: inquisitiveness, responsiveness, self-motivation, creativity, physical and emotional toughness, and *wearing many hats*.

INQUISITIVENESS AND KNOWLEDGE

The consultant is often retained to provide expertise that the client does not possess. On the surface, one might think that consultants are successful primarily because of the *answers* they provide based on their knowledge and experience. However, the *questions* they ask their clients, others, and themselves based on their knowledge and experience are more important than their answers.

Once key questions are asked, the consultant knows how to find the answers. Successful free-lancers are perpetual students, strongly oriented toward learning more about their areas of expertise, the current task or project, the client, and the client's environment. Clearly, the consultant's inquisitiveness spans technical and non-technical topics.

Many engineers and other technical professionals value and enjoy learning. Positive terms like studious, serious, good student, and thinker were applied to them as they progressed through the formal education process. Negative labels were also applied—egghead, bookworm, and professional student. However, time affirms that all of these are positive values. Being a fully functioning individual practitioner means many things, one of which is being a professional student.

RESPONSIVENESS TO CLIENT AND PROJECT NEEDS

You, as a sole proprietor, may be retained because the client does not have the personnel to complete a task or a project. If the effort is late because of you, the principal reason for engaging a consultant is negated. Responsiveness to client needs and schedules requires a strong service orientation.

Although engineers plan, design, construct, fabricate, manufacture, and care for "things," they are doing this for the benefit of people. The individual practitioner can be a crucial link in the interface between the needs of society and the possibilities of economically meeting those needs with the applications of science and technology. Accordingly, effectiveness as a sole proprietor requires a high degree of communication skills, with emphasis on listening, writing, and speaking.

SELF-MOTIVATION

Even though an individual consultant is "working for" a client, the client typically does not have the time or inclination to direct the consultant. Accordingly, most of what sole proprietors do for clients is at the consultant's initiative within the overall framework established by the joint agreement. Clients tend to assume that if they are not hearing anything from "their consultant," the consultant is proceeding with the project in a timely fashion. The consultant must be available on short notice to answer a question, give advice, or provide a status report. Individual practitioners should be highly proactive to the point of being intrusive in their relationships with clients.

CREATIVITY

Theodore von Karman, *California Beta 1902*, the Hungarian-American aeronautical engineer, said, "scientists define what is, engineers create what never has been." Free-lancers must have the ability to be creative, to synthesize, and to see previously unforeseen patterns and possibilities. The typical project involves technical, financial, regulatory, personnel, and other facets, all of which can be easily assembled in a variety of ways, most of which are suboptimal. A sole proprietor's combination of knowledge, objectivity and highly varied experience should enable him or her to propose approaches and solutions not apparent to others.

Variety and richness of one's experience increases value, even if interspersed with failure. We learn when we succeed, but also when we fail. In fact, those who shoot low and succeed probably learn much less than those who shoot high and fail.

PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL TOUGHNESS

The successful consultant needs physical and emotional strength to withstand pressure, long hours, and travel. Some of the free-lancer's meetings and presentations are difficult because they occur in situations charged by personality conflicts, political pressure, financial concerns, and liability issues. In addition, individual practitioners are often not selected for projects, even though they believe they were the most qualified or had the best proposal. Frequent rejection can take its toll on conscientious, competent individuals.

FROM ONE OR A FEW TO MANY "HATS"

Another way of viewing what is needed to be a successful sole proprietor is to review the functions you must perform and the roles you must fill. If you are now employed by a public or private engineering organization, you probably have responsibility for several principal activities. Perhaps you are a designer, project manager, and department head.

One reality of being a successful free-lancer is that you must *wear many hats*, often simultaneously. A partial, alphabetical list of functions requiring attention in the typical engineering sole proprietorship is as follows: accountant, chief executive officer, coach, computer expert, creator, documenter, dreamer, facilitator, friend, integrator, lawyer, listener, marketer, mentor, partner, planner, prime

contractor, project engineer, project manager, speaker, subcontractor, teacher, and writer.

Note the use of *attention* in the preceding paragraph. Because of the heavy demand on sole practitioners to *wear many hats*, some develop mutually beneficial alliances with other sole proprietors and companies. These alliances, occasionally formalized as virtual teams or virtual organizations, enable a sole proprietor to attend to some of the hats without actually wearing them.

MARKETING: SLEAZY OR MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL?

The word *marketing* often engenders negative reactions or connotations. The potential sole proprietor sees images of brash, high-pressure car salespeople. Engineers may be repulsed by the thought of *wasting* their professional education and experience doing *sales* work. Nevertheless, you should at least be receptive to the particular marketing model presented here. To the extent you learn to view marketing as earning trust and meeting client needs, which is the essence of that model, you may conclude that marketing is not only an ethical process, but is also a satisfying and mutually beneficial one.

Marketing is a major expense for the sole proprietor and consumes valuable hours and dollars. Therefore, the marketing effort must be carefully planned and executed. Undertake a continuous, proactive, positive marketing process—not a series of sporadic reactions when you need work.

In his book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey explains that the Greek philosophy for what might now be called win/win interpersonal and inter-organizational relations was based on ethos, pathos, and logos. According to Covey¹:

- “*Ethos* is your personal credibility, the faith people have in your integrity and competency. It’s the trust that you inspire. . . .
- *Pathos* is the empathic side—it’s the feeling. It means you are in alignment with the emotional thrust of another’s communication.
- *Logos* is the logic, the reasoning part of the presentation.”

Covey emphasizes that these three elements of win/win interpersonal and inter-organizational relations must occur in the indicated order. That is, earn trust, learn needs, and then follow up logically.

The ethos-pathos-logos sequence provides a positive and effective marketing model for the individual practitioner, provided that the indicated sequence is followed. The rational tendency in interpersonal relations is to start with logos, which usually leads to less than satisfactory results. Engineers in particular are inclined to proceed too quickly with and rely too heavily on logic.

You, as a sole proprietor, should first establish trust, then understand needs, and finally follow up logically. Once trust is earned, potential clients are likely to share their needs with you in response to your questions. If there is a match, that is, if you can meet client needs, then a logical follow-up in the form of a contract or agreement is likely to occur.

If a match does not develop between you and the potential client, then provide assistance by referring the potential client to another individual or organization. Remember, your first goal is to earn trust. Being truly helpful, by making a thoughtful referral, is one way to do that.

Many specific tools and techniques are available for implementing a marketing program. An effective set of tools and techniques must be selected for each of the three steps, that is, earning trust, learning needs and closing the deal. My book, *Flying Solo*², lists 56 marketing tools and techniques, only one of which (“ask for contract”) is selling. Peter Drucker³ succinctly states that “The aim of marketing is to make selling superfluous.” This definition underscores the idea that selling is only one small part of marketing and suggests that if marketing is done well, sales will occur naturally.

WHAT IF YOU FAIL?

Success as a sole proprietor entails risking failure, financial and otherwise. The individual proprietor isn’t risk averse. Risk taking is part of the price of realizing your unique potential and of making significant contributions. Risk is a reality and, like other elements of an individual practitioner’s business, it must be managed. Ralph Waldo Emerson⁴ in his essay “Self Reliance” wrote this about the role of risk in realizing one’s potential:

There is a time in every man’s education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till. The power which resides in him is new in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried . . . God will not have his work made manifest by cowards.

Don’t expect to be successful as a sole proprietor without hard work. Don’t expect to be successful as an individual practitioner without overcoming setbacks. What you initially view as failure may be a setback, a restart, or another tack in a series of tacks. Emerson reminds us that “The voyage of the best ship is a zigzag of a hundred tacks.”

Assume that you worked smart, hard, long, and with integrity. However, no matter how patiently, optimistically, or creatively you analyze it, your sole proprietorship consulting business has failed or is about to. You’ve decided to “call it quits.” You do not want to take another run at being an individual practitioner—at least not now! You want and need to get back into an employee situation. You need the income, benefits, and *security*, at least for a while. But, you fear that your unsuccessful sole proprietorship will hamper your re-entry into the employment market.

Guess what? You will jump to the top of the list of candidates. Why? Put on your *employee-hiring hat*. Chances are, you’ve worn this hat in one or more organizations as an employee. You have screened résumés, interviewed candidates, and hired and coached employees. Which of the following people would you be inclined to learn more about, interview, and probably hire?

- Worked for one public organization.
- Worked for one business organization.
- Worked for one public and one business organization.
- Worked for one or more public and one or more business organizations.
- Worked for one or more public and one or more business organizations; “failed” as a sole proprietor.
- Worked for one or more public and one or more business organizations; succeeded as a sole proprietor.

Get the idea? The preceding scenarios are listed in order of increasing desirability. Variety and richness of your experience increases your value, even if interspersed with *failure*. We learn when we succeed, but also learn when we fail. In fact, those who *shoot low* and *succeed* probably learn much less than those who *shoot high* and *fail*. Put on your *employer hat*. Which one do you want on your team? Someone who, if he or she *shot* at all, *shot low* and made it or someone who *shot high* and sometimes *missed*?

Even if you have, for the time being, *failed* as a sole proprietor, your experience will likely have been far better than the alternative of continuing what you were doing. That would probably have been more of the same as you moved monotonously along the ever-flattening portion of the learning and earning curve. You at least tried to remedy an unsatisfactory situation. You had the courage to take a chance. You learned much in the process. Temporary failure is better than lasting regret. As someone anonymously said: "The opposite of taking risks is having regrets."

Although it may sound like an oxymoron, the preceding discussion suggests that there are *good failures*. There are also "bad failures." That is, some failure modes would be detrimental, if not fatal, to your continuation as a sole proprietor and even to your re-entry into the employment market. Consider three likely fatal failure modes.

- The first of these is to have failed as an individual practitioner because of unethical practices. Unshielded by being a member of a larger organization, your unethical practices are much more likely to be widely known and associated specifically with you.

- A second type of fatal failure is to be frequently found liable for errors and omissions. Again, the focus will be solely on you as the sole proprietor. Contrast this with an errors-and-omissions finding against an engineering organization where the *blame* may be *spread around*.

- A third type of likely fatal failure as a free-lancer is to have *earned* a reputation for not delivering. Missing schedules, exceeding budgets, and failing to provide all deliverables are examples.

The preceding types of fatal failures are certainly not unique to sole proprietorships. However, when they occur in your shop, 100 percent of the negative consequences will be associated with you, the sole proprietor. Avoiding fatal failures alone requires the same kinds of diligence needed to avoid them in a typical engineering organization, namely, disciplined, conscientious, and competent efforts.

CLOSING THOUGHT

If you are becoming unemployable and possess the necessary success characteristics, a sole-proprietor consulting practice may be the next rewarding step in your engineering career. Marketing, which is essential to your free-lance business, can be a satisfying and mutually beneficial experience. Even if you fail as an individual practitioner, you will become a more capable person.

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Stuart G. Walesh, is a management, marketing, education, and training consultant to engineering firms and other technically oriented organizations. Prior to becoming an individual practitioner, he worked for the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (1970-78), Donohue & Associates (1978-85), and Valparaiso University (1967-70, 1985-99). He has functioned as a project manager, department head, discipline manager, marketer, professor, and engineering dean.

The author or co-author of more than 100 publications and presentations on engineering, education, and management, he has also written three books: *Urban Surface Water Management* (Wiley, 1989); *Engineering Your Future: The Non-Technical Side of Professional Practice in Engineering and Other Technical Fields* (ASCE Press, 2000); and *Flying Solo: How to Start an Individual Practitioner Consulting Business* (Hannah Publishing, 2000).

Dr. Walesh is active in the ASCE, currently serving on the task committee on the first professional degree. He received the B.S.C.E. in 1963 from Valparaiso University, an M.S.E. from Johns Hopkins University in 1965, and the Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin in 1969. He was the first President of the Indiana Delta Chapter of Tau Beta Pi.