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## How to Leave the Cube Farm

Insight from Nathan Zeldes, May 29, 2014

**It's a scary change, there's no denying that.** The move from a stable corporate job to a self-employed new career is complex both practically and emotionally, and when seen from the comfort of a cubicle can seem forbidding indeed. Many people are going through with it in today's work environment; people in their 50's tend to become consultants or other small businesses, and this article focuses on that situation. Others are mortified that they may need to join this trend. Still others don't even consider it as an option: when they say things like "if you lose your job when you're over 50, you will never find work", their view is so limited that they don't even consider self-employment as "work"!

I went through this change over five years ago to build my practice as a solo consultant and lecturer, and it was an amazing, exhilarating ride; not always easy but forever fascinating. In this article I want to share some of what I learned. This is by no means a complete guide – there are entire blogs, books, and businesses that provide that. This is more like what I might tell you if we sat over coffee to discuss it (which I often find myself doing with one friend or another who has realized they need to move, or who just has).

**Disclaimer:** Your Mileage May Vary. Considerably, and in either direction. But you'll have a lot of say in the matter too!

### Why you should consider the outside world

**Whether or not you plan to leave salaried employment,** you certainly need to be knowledgeable about this transformation and self-aware about its implications for you. Here are a few reasons:

- **You may not have a choice in the matter.** The reality of lifetime employment is a fading memory, and the new world of work can be brutal indeed. What's more, in recent years I've noticed how the **X** in the phrase "once you're over X you will never find [salaried] work" has been creeping steadily down, to well below 50. Preparing for the eventuality of a possible layoff is prudent soon after you're 40.
- **It makes you prepare.** By considering what it means to start your own business, even if you put it aside for now, you'll start doing things a bit differently – building a brand, nurturing connections, learning the right skills – so when the day comes and you decide to leave (or someone else decides it for you), you can land on your feet, running.
- **Doing it may be an excellent choice for YOU.** For the right people, a self-employed career can be hugely rewarding in every sense. It can allow them to develop faster, to learn new things and apply themselves at their best, to experience satisfying interactions and to have a level of freedom they never suspected could exist before retirement. And how will you know if you're one of these "right people" if you never consider it?

- **NOT doing it may be a disastrous choice for YOU.** For many people, a job that was once exciting and new can become stifling and disempowering after a decade or more. Many people suffer in quiet desperation through a corporate career that they dare not leave. For some, going Solo would be a liberation. How will you know if you're one of these?

### **Pre-requisites: what it takes**

There are a number of things that are, if not absolutely necessary, then at least helpful in making the move work. Think of it as a checklist:

- **Clear headedness.** To make such a drastic change after a long career, you need your head about you. I doubt you can succeed by being impulsive. You will need to analyze your situation and your goals, in great detail. You will need to make rational decisions. You will need to face your fears. Your mind is your main tool in all that, and you want it to be well honed!
- **Openness to change.** This is about your personality. You need to be able to embrace change, learning, and a measure of risk taking. Some people aren't cut out for it – I've seen people who obviously were suffering in their job who couldn't bring themselves to face leaving it; and then I know people who thrive on the excitement of starting something new every few years. And you?
- **Value to sell.** As a small business, you'll be selling people what you have that can bring value – to them. You need to have a clear idea of what that value will be, and better sooner than later (eventually you'll find out – more on that below).
- **A nest egg or equivalent.** The first year in a new business is much work and little income. You need the financial backing to survive it – whether as savings you can spend, a spouse who can feed the family in the interim, or a willingness to cut spending for a while.
- **Preparation for the move.** Admittedly, you may not have time to prepare, if your job disappears... but if, as in my case, you make the decision while still employed, you'd do well to take some time – months – to consider your options, map the lay of the land, and make plans and preparations. If your situation allows it, talk to your boss (and HR group) early and learn what they can do for you to ease the transition. I spent almost a year, with my employer's blessing, planning and talking to many people whose opinion I valued – and it sure came in useful later.
- **Financial awareness.** Salaried employees [used to?] have it easy: you work, you retire, you get a lifelong pension. The payroll department takes care of the details. Most cube dwellers lack a minimal understanding of their long term finances. As a self-employed person you will need to take care of putting your remaining years on a sound financial basis – or else. I could tell you what funds I'll live on every year of my life... because I had to make the effort – and seek the advice – to figure it out, not just the numbers, but how they are computed. I know what I need to earn, what happens if there's a recession and I make less, where to put the money if I make more... a professional investment advisor is indispensable in all this.

### **Some hurdles (and pseudo-hurdles)**

**Change is hard**, and there are a variety of issues you'll have to face with this one – some real, others imagined but no less difficult to confront. Here are a few.

## **“I have nothing to offer!”**

**If you’ve spent your life** in a job integrated into a large company – say, you were a Lithography Engineering Manager at a semiconductor plant – it may well seem you have nothing to do as a freelancer. Take me, when I transitioned: I spent 26 years at Intel in many jobs, but ask my coworkers and they’d characterize me as a “Change agent” and “Thought leader”. So, I reasoned, what do I do – look at the wanted ads under “C” or “T”? Scary!

**Here’s the truth:** if you spent over 10 years doing anything well at a serious company, you have a great deal to offer. To figure out what, do what I did then: I scrutinized all my monthly reports from 26 years, and methodically created a table (yes, in Excel) of everything that was a *deliverable*, especially if I’d initiated it myself. I then classified these into a dozen professional fields: Total Quality Management, Education and Community Relations, Technical Leadership Development, High-tech Startup incubation... after some cleaning I had a list of over 100 real achievements – things I’ve done, created, driven, delivered... things that made a difference, all of indubitable value. Things I could help clients do for their own companies. Suddenly, it wasn’t about offering “Change agency”; it was about having done things like “Initiated, developed and drove adoption of the [Telecommuting program](#) that is now an integral part of HR practices across Intel Corporation”. That’s not value?!

You should create this list for yourself before you can realize all that you’ve done and are worth. You can see [my own list](#) on my site – I’m proud of it and posted it for all to see!

## **“I couldn’t do Marketing to save my life...”**

**This is what everybody says.** I certainly did. Me? What am I, a used car salesman?

**This fear is quite unfounded.** Sure, as a freelancer you need to market your offerings. But there are many ways to do that, and most are nowhere near the used car example. You are a serious professional, and you’re selling deep value to serious managers. I was delighted to find out, after a while, that once I get in a meeting with a prospective client – typically, a senior or middle manager of some kind – all I need to do is describe honestly what I’ve done in my career, and what I’m doing with clients now; somehow the value comes across by itself, because in five minutes we’re discussing whether there’s something we can do together. No self-promotion is needed at all.

Of course, there’s also the online side to marketing, and there you need to do a decent job – have a professional online presence and keep it alive; but hey, for a geek like me that’s more fun than work, and is certainly not a burden. Here, too, some folks build self-promoting sites full of swagger (amazingly, I believe it does work for them), but if you prefer you can keep the tone to whatever you’re comfortable with. Believe me: the need to market is not half as bad as you might think.

## **You have to put your past career in perspective**

**This was a surprise.** I spent 26 years at one of the leading hi-tech Fortune 500s. Intel has a magnificent track record in both technology and business, and has a sophisticated complement of cultural processes that got it there. I’d helped build it from a struggling small company to where it is today, and I truly admire what it does well, and how it does it; naturally, when I started talking to clients outside, I assumed my experience of all this would be a major asset. Guess what: many managers, notably in small to midsize companies, eye it warily. “This is not Intel”, they’d say, and “Can you give us insights from other places”... The sheer size and presence of my old company was intimidating! Of course I still use my experience to good effect, but I build on it rather than flaunt it,

and I'm careful to remember that there are other company cultures, and many situations where different approaches are needed.

### **There's less money in it**

**That's a point.** Certainly at first you'll make less money alone than you did in a corporate job, and with less short term stability (at least while your employer isn't cutting headcount). You can build up a tidy income stream – but in many cases, you'll never reach corporate compensation levels, especially if you worked in a successful company with significant benefits. Note that this may be acceptable when balanced with the other pros and cons, depending on your personal priorities and financial situation. On the bright side, whatever happens, your income will depend on your own effort and ingenuity much more than it does in a 50,000 person corporation... and you'll never get laid off!

### **A few personal observations**

#### **It's just another problem to be solved**

**A useful insight I got from an experienced friend** before I decided to leave was this: “what are you worrying about – that you won't have money to put food on the table? Come on – before it gets to that point you'll surely think of something!”

Which in my thinking means this: how to set up a small business and make it succeed is a problem – and solving problems is what people like us do well (there's a reason why my business is branded for that ability). We can't know in advance how it will pan out, but if you have any experience in solving problems – and if you're an engineer or a manager, you certainly do – you know how we do it: careful planning, meticulous execution, close monitoring and data-based course corrections, and the flexibility to make decisions and – on occasion – fly by the seat of our pants; and above all, never surrender! If one thing fails to work, we try another!

Once you look at it this way, you realize that, as my friend pointed out, you don't need a guarantee of success; you need to trust your ability to wrestle with any difficulty and find a solution that works.

#### **You'll need to shed the corporate shell**

**I've observed this in every cube-leaver I know** (myself, of course, included). It's a bit hard to describe, but we all have this psychological shell, a kind of skin we have to crack and shed to attain our true potential in the outside world.

**In a large organization, no matter how well you do**, you're embedded in a matrix of other people, groups, managers, peers, procedures, rules and regulations that all conspire to slow you down. Even your best ideas need to get buy-in from stakeholders near and far; resource requests need to go through channels; external (sometimes even internal) communications need to be approved by Internal Comm and Legal; there are countless review cycles and reports to handle... and at the end of the day, if [you're a change agent](#), you can count yourself lucky if one in three good ideas you create gets to the finish line (fortunately nobody expects more, so you get the reward anyway). I'm not complaining – large companies do need governance and control or all hell may break loose; the better ones actually incorporate structured systems to short-circuit the system where possible. But the effect is there: not knowing any other way, employees become habituated to the fact that they're spending half their time lobbying for their right to do their best – actually less than their best, as a comparison to life in any startup company will demonstrate.

**And then you start your own business.** Now, as your own boss, you can really choose to pursue whatever projects, develop whatever products, as make sense to you. You can be original and creative, or not, as you wish. You can take risks, probe the limits, fail and try something else. The sky is the limit! But after decades in that cubicle, you're so used to not having this freedom, that it takes you at least a year to shed that skin of implicit disempowerment.

And then, Wow!...

### **Do a professional job branding yourself – but don't do everything yourself!**

**There is no way around it:** if you're setting up in business and your email is still *joe3448@gmail.com*, no one can take you seriously. You need to have a professional presence, online and offline; you need a web site and your own domain, where you can share good content – on a blog, preferably – in your field of expertise; you need some marketing collateral; you need a professionally designed business card.

There are many sources you can study on how to do all that, but a piece of advice: don't design everything by yourself, even if you have the technical skill. I did, for my first 3 years out, and though I thought I'd done a fairly good job, I then realized I need to revamp my online assets – and I made one of my best business decisions: I found a pair of capable experts and assigned the design to them. My current brand, [web site](#) and [Facebook page](#) are the result, and have an excellent business impact.

### **A concluding thought**

**I intentionally avoid** doing the pep talk about “why work for someone else when you can be your own boss” and so forth. You can find lots of that online. The truth is, for some people a solo career is great, for others it's not, and for many it depends on when and how it's done. My intent in this article was to help you think about it and share some observations you may find useful. I'm hoping at most to convince you that you **can** do it if you want to, and if you do it right. The decision is up to you.

Enjoy the ride!

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**Nathan Zeldes has been leading improvement of knowledge worker effectiveness** for 20 years, at Intel and for other companies. He's exchanged knowledge with scores of organizations worldwide, and has founded the Information Overload Research Group, which he chairs. He now [advises managers](#) on improving their groups' results through improved tools and work processes.

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