

A SELF EMPLOYMENT SURVIVAL GUIDE

1. Pay off every debt you can as soon as you can. Especially your mortgage. Stay debt free. Pay off all your credit cards in the month they are due.
2. Work out how much money you will need to survive for three months. Make sure that this sum of money stays in the bank, and never gets touched.
3. Don't believe that your reputation entirely depends on your last job

Together these will allow you to :-

4. Be selective, Don't say yes to every job.
 - a) Learn to say no. Practice in the mirror if necessary.
 - b) Only do jobs that interest you. Ask yourself, what can I learn from this gig?
 - c) Don't get flattered into taking on jobs. Flattery will not get you nowhere, it will get you somewhere much worse.
 - d) Don't do jobs just for the money - they will always come apart at the seams and you will hate yourself for it.

Plus :-

5. Avoid if possible working on your own - build up a network of colleagues. There are times when you need to have conversations with colleagues. In the absence of colleagues you only have your client to talk with. Sometimes that can be a mistake.
6. Decide your fee rate and stick to it. Don't negotiate it or do cheap jobs - you will get in a muddle and get confused about the relative importance of jobs. Do jobs at your full rate or for free. Michael Scriven reckons that you add three zeros to your hourly rate to get your yearly income. That's 1000 chargeable hours a year. I do less than that because I do a lot of work for free. If you do jobs for free, try to set an approximate amount of your time for free jobs (I do about a third of my time for free).
7. Don't feel guilty about creeping off to the movies at 3.30 in the afternoon. Feel naughty but not guilty. I saw a fabulous movie yesterday afternoon.
8. Don't ever work at weekends. Do something that prevents you from doing this. Take up windsurfing or snowboarding. You'll be surprised how many interesting insights pop into your brain whilst you are trying to get back out of the water, or rolling down the side of a mountain. Rest assured they wouldn't have been there if you had worked solidly.
9. Try and have an office outside your house. Mine is on top of the garage. It has a wonderful view and no coffee making facilities. For that I have to return to the house, or go to a café. Cafés are great places to spot who else your clients hire.
10. Clients vanish. It's just one of those things. I worked in the health area almost solidly for five years and then one day all the jobs stopped coming. Now I do a lot of work for one or two clients, but one day they will start using someone else. The reasons have little or nothing to do with the quality of the work you deliver - a key person leaves, the department gets its own resources or decides not to hire outside people any more, they may just want another approach. Be quite relaxed about that.
11. You get fired. I'm sorry but it happens. Hopefully not often, but it will happen. When it does. Allow yourself to get angry, allow yourself to blame everybody - especially yourself. But only for fifteen minutes. Compose the most venomous letter to the client. BUT DON'T SEND IT. Instead, go to the movies, go sailing, go the gym, take a massage, write sympathy generating emails to colleagues... whatever. Once you have done that sit down and work out how you can reduce the possibility of it happening again. Feel free to judge but be careful with the blame. In my experience the answer will lie in one of three areas. You stuffed up. You and the job were mismatched. You and the client were mismatched. I know this sounds New Agey, but the client is what the client is, the job is what the job is. The only thing you can influence is you. Also remember why you chose to be self employed - you enjoy the

perception of independence, employees enjoy the perception of security. Which is more important to you ?"

12. Tendering for jobs. Tendering for jobs is actually a really good way to suss out the ability of the client to manage contractors. When you receive a tender invite, phone up the person whose name is at the bottom and ask them the following three questions :

- How many people have you sent the tender out to ?
- Who are they ?
- What's the ballpark figure for the budget ?

The answer to the first question will tell you whether the job is a lottery. If there are more than five on the list it is a lottery, no matter how good you think you are. Those who understand the contract world will know that the good people only play Lotto on the weekend. You want to work with people who understand that.

The answer to the second question will tell you whether you will be wasting your time and theirs by submitting a tender. You want to work for people who don't waste your time.

People who won't tell you the answer to the third question are either fools or sadists. You don't want to work for fools or sadists. In the OD or the evaluation business you get what you pay for. People who understand this, don't ask a potential contractor to name a price without clearly specifying what is both necessary and sufficient. It is unprofessional. You don't want to work for people who are unprofessional. I've never quite had the courage to ask if a potential client has actually attempted themselves to construct a budget based on their proposal – but if you are ever drawing up a tender, I strongly recommend you do so, or ask someone in your organisation to do so.

Mike Sherry, mike@contactcentre.com.au adds :

13. Be very clear about your work/life balance. If you want the equivalent of a 3/4 day work week then structure your life around this. When a client queries you on why you cannot spend your whole waking life working with them, have a good, clear believable response prepared.
14. Keep accurate records - records of your experiences in getting, delivering and keeping clients; not just the accounting stuff. This will help you confirm that what you're doing to do the business is the right and useful stuff. It's amazing what you learn and can reuse, without appearing to deliver 'canned' work (clients love to feel that you are all theirs and that what you do with them is unique to them)
15. Invest the effort, the angst and the anguish in developing your own statement of what it is that you offer that is YOU - or in the jargon your USP (Unique Selling Proposition). If there is one lesson it took me far too long to learn it was this. I am convinced that this, combined with point 6 about Fees is the absolute foundation on which your business success is built.

Above all follow your intuition. In my case it is much more accurate than logic. If a job, part of a job, or client relationship feels good, then it will be. If it doesn't it won't be. Simple as that.

Finally, good luck and have fun.