

Minding Your Business

Are you self-employed? Would you like to be? This column explores the joys and challenges of managing your own business in technical communication.

ALICE E. FUGATE AND ELIZABETH A. (BETSY) FRICK, *Column Editors*

Is the Independent Life for You?

BY ELIZABETH (BETSY) A. FRICK, *Senior Member, St. Louis Chapter*

Do you have the “right stuff” to be a successful independent?

We ask in the description for our column “Are you self-employed? Would you like to be?” But a more appropriate question might be: “*Should* you be self-employed?” This article examines that question in depth with a list of more questions, answers, suggestions, and still more questions as a guide to evaluating this important decision for current independents and those who are thinking about going the independent route as technical communicators.

A lot of what independents do can be done off site: planning, writing, reviewing, querying subject matter experts, sending and receiving document drafts, even delivering final documents. We frequently communicate with our co-workers, project managers, and customers by telephone, e-mail, and regular mail. The option to work off site makes the independent way of conducting business attractive for many technical communicators. But it’s not the only criterion you need to consider in evaluating your likelihood of career success.

Before you quit your full-time job or leave that freelancing position at an agency to take the plunge into self-employment, be sure you have “the right stuff.” By “the right stuff,” you may think that I mean a business plan, a source for retirement benefits, insurance, office equipment, and a stream of potential customers. You’d be wrong! “The right stuff” is self-discipline. Do you know yourself well enough to know if you are self-disciplined?

Even people who are already self-employed don’t necessarily have the right temperament to be successful as independent business people. Independent contractors and consultants who are struggling, as well as those considering a move to independent work, may want to use the following questions to examine their suitability for this way of making a living.

1. Do you welcome responsibility? You must do more than accept responsibility if you are to be successful as an independent—you must welcome it. How can you tell if you welcome responsibility? Ask yourself the following questions: Do you volunteer for the tough chores and difficult tasks? Are you a natural leader? If no one takes charge of a meeting or project, do you jump in?

According to the results of a 1999 survey conducted by STC, 80 percent of independent contractors are sole proprietors. (For a detailed analysis of this survey, please see the special section, “STC’s U.S. Independent Contractor/Temp Agency Employee Survey” in the June 2000 issue of *Intercom*.) Guess who wears the responsibility hat in these businesses? If you are the boss in an independent business organized as a corporation or limited liability company, you wear the responsibility hat, too. Even partners have to welcome responsibility.

2. Can you work alone? This is a personality issue as much as a business issue. Writing is a solitary profession, so this

one may be a no-brainer for many of you. The STC survey reported that 59 percent of independent contractors work at home, while 5 percent use rented office space. You must be self-motivated to work alone. You must be able to get along without the camaraderie of officemates. A beautiful day cannot tempt you into taking a walk when you have a project due the next day unless you are prepared to work all night.

The 36 percent of independent contractors who work at client sites probably are, in a sense, working alone most of the time, too. When you aren’t part of the corporation, you aren’t as likely to be included in the birthday parties, coffee room chat, and other social aspects of working in an office.

3. Do you get along with all types of people? Are you sensitive to other people’s moods? Ironically, if you work alone, you have to get along with all types of people and be sensitive to their moods, because you have to market your services to many different people, you have to get information from subject matter experts, and you have to deliver work to the printer for distribution or to the webmaster for posting online. These folks may not be just like you, and they won’t always be having a good day. In a corporation or large department, your manager can warn you about the difficult people or serve as a buffer; when you’re an independent, you have to be ready for everybody and know how to work with them. Try listening first. You might be amazed.

A good book on the subject is *Coping with Difficult People* by Robert Bramson.

Do you know what type of personality you are? If you've never taken a Myers-Briggs or other personality assessment test, I recommend it strongly. You need to know yourself to know how to work best with others. Being flexible in the way you relate to others is key to your success as an independent contractor.

4. Are you a hard worker? This question relates to your productivity, of course, but it also includes the physical aspects of working as an independent. Who moves your office equipment? Who carries the office supplies from store to car to office? Who handles shipping? This item also includes all the organizational tasks that come with being an independent: making travel arrangements, balancing billable work with volunteer work that makes you visible, getting to the customer's location on time, marketing your services—the list is almost endless, and it takes hard work to get everything done.

5. Can you meet deadlines? Customers do not want to hear that the project will not be finished on time. Others are depending on you to do your part. A company may keep an employee who tends to be late and miss deadlines, but customers don't have to put up with missed deadlines from a contractor or consultant. Because return business is what keeps most independents going, you must meet deadlines.

6. Do you make decisions easily? Do you have a process for planning, gathering information, weighing pros and cons, making a decision, and working with the consequences? Or do you wait for someone else to call the shots? Indecisive people are not likely to be successful as independents.

7. Are you resourceful? Obstacles and challenges are a natural part of doing business. What do you do when your printer breaks in the middle of producing the camera-ready copy, or when your online service goes down just when you need to send the documents for final approval? You may scream and cry, but that won't get the project completed.

Can you find a productive way around the obstacles? Do you have a network of associates who can help in a pinch?

8. Are you creative? Do you have the consultant's questioning mind? Are you always looking for better, more productive, and more efficient ways to do a task or complete a project? Do you ask the tough questions that need to be asked about projects? If a customer doesn't understand what you are trying to explain, can you explain it another way? Can you demonstrate the new task?

9. Can you work under pressure? What happens when the deadline is two days away and you haven't heard from the subject matter expert? Can you adjust your work schedule to finish the project? Is there someone else at the customer's location who can give you the answers? How is your health? Do you take care of yourself so that you don't create unnecessary pressures? What is your family situation? Perhaps the time is not right for working independently.

An independent working on a project is likely to get the blame if something goes wrong. Are you able to assume this responsibility, even if the problem isn't entirely your fault? In other words, can you help your customer save face and still get the work done—without carrying grudges?

10. Do you thrive on difficult problems? I love it when a customer says, "We've never done that because Charlie is the only one who understands it. There's no way to put his expertise in a manual, on a Web page, or in a training class." Let me at him! Here's where technical communicators shine, whether we're independents or not. The better you handle difficult problems, the higher the rates you can charge—word gets around that you are the one to call when the going gets tough. You can have a successful independent business doing the same simple things over and over, but you won't be as successful as those who take on the difficult problems and solve them.

11. Are you receptive to change? You have to keep up with the technology—that's a given in our profession. But other changes

can occur: How do you feel when the subject matter experts announce massive changes in the program you've been writing about? How do you react when you arrive for a customer meeting and the customer has left for the coast? Or let's say that you're in the middle of a project when the customer announces that they've been bought out and all contract work is on hold. How do you cope with changes that affect your business?

12. Can you juggle all the balls? Upgrading costs, time to learn new software versions, phone calls, administrative tasks like paying taxes and finding health insurance, keeping a viable network, marketing your services, family responsibilities, social life—they're all part of the mix. Sometimes I wonder how we do it all. But then I realize that, if I worked full time, I'd have to do the grocery shopping on the weekends or in the evening. Now I can do it "on my break." It's all a matter of setting priorities and managing your time.

13. Do you have a thick skin? How do you feel when your friend gets the contract you've been after? How do you react when the customer rips your first draft to shreds? Being self-employed protects you somewhat from the slings and arrows of office politics, but you still must be able to handle rejection gracefully.

Further Considerations

What about those independents who decide they don't have the right stuff?

It's OK. Not everyone is cut out to be an independent. Keep your full-time job. There's a right place for everybody.

What about the independents who, after responding to these questions, realize why they've been struggling?

Perhaps your business is not going as well as you'd hoped because your personality is not suited for the independent business life. It's OK. Be thankful that we all don't do the same things well. Look for a full-time job, or sign on with an agency.

continued on page 43

March 16–17, 2001

The Atlanta chapter's **Currents 2001** conference will be held at the Atlanta campus of Mercer University. The conference will include the **Region 3 Student Conference, Directions 2001**. For more information, please contact:

Cheri Pullar
pullarcc@cs.com
stc.org/region3/atl/www

March 23

The Rochester chapter's annual conference, **Spectrum 2001**, will be held at the Marriott Thruway in Rochester, New York. The conference theme is "E-Learning, E-Commerce, Egads!" Diane Gayeski, a member of the communications faculty of Ithaca College, is the keynote speaker. For more information, please contact:

Sharon Pelletier, Spectrum Manager
sharon.m.pelletier@usa.xerox.com

March 24

The Central Ohio Chapter STC will hold its annual scholarship fundraiser at Columbus State Community College. The fundraiser, titled "Back-2-Basics," will include two presentations by John Hedtke of the Seattle Chapter STC, as well as sessions presented by local STC members on editing, estimating and scheduling, grant and proposal writing, procedure writing, program management, and sentence diagramming. For more information, please contact:

Brenda McGuire
mcguire@battelle.org

or

Anne Mitchell
a_mitchell@earthlink.net
www.centralohiostc.org

March 29–30

The **International Colloquium on Trends in Special Language and Language Technology** will be held at the Flemish Parliament in Brussels, Belgium. Topics include trends in special language, trends

in language technology, academic-corporate collaboration, and language technology and lifelong learning. For more information, please contact:

Rita Temmerman
Coordinator Centrum voor Vaktaal en
Communicatie (CVC)
Applied Linguistics
Erasmushogeschool
Trierstraat 84
B-1040 Brussels
+32 2 230 12 60
rita.temmerman@ehb.betk.ehb.be

May 13–16

STC's 48th Annual Conference will be held in Chicago, Illinois. Details will be posted on the STC office Web site at www.stc-va.org.

May 22–25

The Association of Proposal Management Professionals (APMP) will hold **APMP's 12th Annual Conference** at the Albuquerque Convention Center in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The theme for this year's conference is "2001, A Proposal Odyssey." For more information, please contact:

David Winton
APMP, Executive Director
apmpinfo@aol.com
www.apmp.org

May 31–June 4

The American Society of Indexers (ASI) is holding **ASI's 33rd Annual Conference** at the Park Plaza Hotel in Boston, Massachusetts. Topics of the conference sessions and workshops will include indexing of books, Web sites, periodicals, and other materials. For information, please contact:

American Society of Indexers
10200 West 44th Avenue
Suite 304
Wheat Ridge, CO 80033
(303) 463-2887
(303) 422-8894 (fax)
info@asindexing.org
www.asindexing.org

July 11–13

The **Technical Communication Institute for Teachers (TCIT)** will be held in Rochester, New York. The conference is designed to help middle and high school teachers and administrators incorporate technical communication skills into their curricula and schools. For more information, please contact:

Lisa Moretto
(716) 461-3617
rgi_lisa@compuserve.com

or

Ron Blicq
rgi_ron@compuserve.com

F.Y.I. provides information about upcoming events and ongoing opportunities for technical communicators. These include conferences, seminars, calls for papers, calls for grant proposals, publishing opportunities, and other items of professional interest. **F.Y.I.** accepts information about nonprofit ventures only. Please send information to intercom@stc-va.org.

Minding Your Business

(Continued from page 39)

Do you have the self-discipline it takes to be a successful independent technical communicator? *You do? Great!* If you're already an independent, keep up the good work. If you want to take the plunge, get going on that business plan, market research, networking, finding insurance, and so on.

Acknowledgments

The questions used as "thinking starters" were developed from Joyce Woods' presentation "Are You Consultant Material?" given at the Professional Conference on Communication (PCOC) held in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, in 1990. **1**