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Working for Yourself Can Have Its Challenges

It sounds like the dreamy situation, but you'll need to employ some old-fashioned office discipline to succeed.

By ELIZABETH GARONE | Special to THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

It's hard to imagine a more ideal-sounding work life: working when you want, where you want, and how you want. So, it's no surprise that more and more people are jumping ship, moving from full-time, in-house positions to working for themselves, often in consultant or freelance roles. The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that the number of Americans choosing self-employment will keep increasing, from 12.2 million in 2006 to 12.9 million in 2016. Working for yourself can be an ideal career path, especially in today's tight job market, but it is also ripe for failure if undertaken without the right tools--and mindset.

Your First 90 Days

Create a vision -- and a workspace. It's Day One, and the phone probably isn't ringing off the hook yet. Find yourself an energizing writing spot, and take out a blank piece of paper, says Katy Piotrowski, M.Ed., author of "The Career Coward's Guide to Changing Careers." "Write a vision for yourself about what you want your freelance biz to look like -- what kind of work you'll be doing, who you'll be working with, what your lifestyle will be like. Think big," she says. Ms. Piotrowski also says it's important to describe what's motivating you to take this step. Try to make your vision statement as detailed as possible. "Keep in mind that you can modify it down the line," she says

Once you feel like you have this solidified, spend some time setting up a dedicated workspace. "With any luck, you'll soon be so busy you won't have time to get things organized, so do it now," says Ms. Piotrowski. "Setting up your space will help you feel 'real' in your work."

Market today for business tomorrow. You could be a whiz at what you do and at the top of your field, and still find yourself clientless and with little -- if any -- cash flow during your first few months in business. So, you need to come up with a marketing plan. "As my CPA friend said to me after 15 years as a freelancer, 'I remind myself every day that the purpose of the marketing I'm doing today is to pay the rent for six months from now,'" says Ms. Piotrowski.

Talent and marketing run hand-in-hand. The talent part is easy for most people, but marketing skills may need to be learned. When Ms. Piotrowski started freelancing a decade ago, a business consultant gave her some excellent advice: Experiment with various marketing activities until you find a few that you are good at and like doing. Ms. Piotrowski quickly discovered that while she hated making cold calls, she was more than happy to send out a newsletter on a regular basis and speak to professional associations. Take the time to discover your hidden marketing talents.

Give yourself a raise. Don't sell yourself short. Do the research and see what other people in your area and with your level of experience are charging. Write up and practice scripts that answer, "What do you charge?" "One of the most difficult steps for freelancers to take is telling others their fees," says Ms. Piotrowski. "By having a set script that you

know by heart, you're less likely to undercharge -- a pitfall that can quickly sink your business."

Rely on your former supporters. Throw yourself a business launch party. E-vite your email contacts to your favorite coffee shop or bar to share a drink and celebrate your new venture. Have your business cards and service descriptions laid out. "Keep in mind that these people already know what you can do and can act as unpaid marketers for you," says Ms. Piotrowski. "Let them know what you're doing as well as who you want to connect with."

Don't be shy when it comes to name-dropping (within reason); attendees are likely to be people who want to see you succeed, so let them know how they can help. You'll want to take notes, too. Follow up by creating a database of all of your contacts, new and old. As an independent contractor, there are always hours to fill, and those non-working moments are a good time to work on your database.

Keep realistic timelines and expectations. According to experts, a new business often takes up to two years to really gain momentum and provide a somewhat predictable cash flow. "In the interim, it's essential to have back-up plans for when times are lean," says Ms. Piotrowski. One way to keep yourself motivated is to read your business vision out loud to yourself on a regular basis. It might sound silly, but it works. "This is extremely important, because it's likely that very soon you'll feel confused about what you're doing," she says. "Businesses never go to plan -- you may lose your first client, discover an opportunity you hadn't considered before, or find yourself with a quickly-shrinking bank balance -- and it's essential that you continually remind yourself of what you're creating, and why."

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