

Living Like a Contractor

by Caroline Evans

Since lockdown we have all been living like contractors! The security blanket that office-based roles provided us had disappeared almost in an instant and left many of us having to face a very different way of working.

I had always worked in a team within an office environment until I became an independent contractor about 7 years ago. So, in many ways, I was prepared for the changes lockdown imposed on us. However, some aspects of the Covid-19 working world were new to me; the shifts were subtle but quite dis-orientating. As we all have had to find ourselves to some extent working in a less comprehensively connected way, it struck me that there were some important factors we were all facing for the first time.

The desire to be in control is often cited as a reason for self-employment. Yet in many ways – and certainly at the start – you are likely to be very much less in control. Practically you have to establish new routines and professionally you have to secure new work. You might think you know exactly what you are going to do to generate income; you've written the business plan and done the marketing. But when you start your first (hopefully paid) project, you may find you are actually doing something very different.

I didn't believe this myself when it was first mentioned to me by a friend who had gone solo about a year before. However, now it's the first thing I say to anyone embarking on their self-employed journey, and I've found they gratefully remind me of it a year or so down the line. They are thankful because my advice prepared them to embrace the ambiguity, fluidity and serendipity that are very much part and parcel of successful independence. Would I have described myself as an events manager, a NED coach, a marketer or blogger on Day 1 of MindLeap? Absolutely not, but all of those titles apply now and I'm delighted they do but I am rather surprised too!

For those used to the continuity and structure of being employed when lockdown struck, Covid-19 not only took away control on the domestic front but also on the professional. It was hard to feel certain of the continued value of your expertise and the remit you held before lockdown, especially if huge adaptations to your role became necessary.

Furloughing, cost-cutting and sickness had all taken support and structure out of business hierarchies and created new reporting lines. Shifting priorities and market uncertainties brought about huge challenges for everyone but especially for those who had previously enjoyed the constancy of longstanding permanent employment.

How many people in this position feel they are now only getting things 'roughly right' rather than expertly correct? How many feel they now only see 'a bit of the picture' rather than innately understanding the machine of the business they work for? Who has found themselves lacking the confidence that comes with communicating with someone they know well, when that someone is no longer part of their reporting line – and the person who is, is new to them? And, how do you maintain external networks and develop new ones when everyone else's position is shifting as much as yours?

Another aspect of independence is to recognise that what you do 'for free' is equally as important as what you are paid to do, provided you manage the balance carefully. Of course, you are in business to do business but in this highly inter-connected world, what you do instinctively can often prove to be the most valuable act of all. Saying no, politely, to a piece of work that you'd love to be able to do but recognise you would not be able to fulfil properly and offering alternative solutions that might involve other people, has always, in my opinion, reaped dividends both professionally and personally. I can vouch for this, as many of the brilliant contacts I'm lucky enough to have in my 'black book' have come to me in this way.

So, whether you return to a more familiar state of permanency or not, start now as you mean to go on. Be open to the new but be honest to meet expectations. Reciprocate, reciprocate, reciprocate. These thin threads can sew strong binds in the future. Those of us who have been contractors for a long while may have a head start, but the onslaught of extreme experiences we have been facing more recently, means that everyone is catching up quickly now.

Finally, to be independent is to be calm but equally on high alert. Be calm in the moment of the project and on high alert to where you might add value in the future. It would be fair to say that this is going to apply to all of us in all aspects of our lives for quite some time.

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