

In A One-Person Company, The Break Room Is Always Empty

By Susan Weese, Rhyming Planet Inc. April, 2003

The break room **is** always empty at a one-person company, except for the individual who works there. Many of today's organizations consist of one independent consultant working beneath the corporate umbrella. Let's look at the numerous organizational issues surrounding an organization of "one". Primary challenges exist in three major areas, including:

- Building an environment that works for and organization of "one";
- Creating the necessary inter and intra organizational dynamics; and,
- Overcoming the deafening silence of working alone.

In order to collect information from similar companies and individuals doing similar work, I created and emailed a questionnaire to 24 one-person organizations. The questionnaire focuses on gathering information relevant to the three areas of concern when working as a one-person company: building an environment that works for "one", creating the necessary inter and intra organizational dynamics and overcoming the deafening silence that can be found when you are working alone.

Demographic information collected from the questionnaire respondents is as follows.

- 12 responses were received from the 24 professional colleagues in similar solo work situations, resulting in a response rate of fifty percent (50%).
 - All respondents provide Information Technology (IT) focused consulting and training services in one or more of the following areas: software engineering process and approach, web site design/development, project and organizational management and technical writing.
 - The respondents represent a combined 94.5 years of independent work experience, yielding average solo work duration of 8.6 years for each individual;
 - Actual solo work experience for respondents ranged from six months to 21 years;
 - 12 of 12 respondents (100%) earned a Bachelor's degree in a relevant area (BA, BS);
 - 8 of 12 respondents (67%) earned at least one Master's degree in a relevant area (MS, MA, MBA);
 - 2 of 12 respondents (16.7%) are currently pursuing doctoral level studies;
 - 1 of 12 respondents (8.3%) has a Doctoral degree in relevant area (PhD); and,
-

- ❑ 1 of 12 respondents (8.3%) possesses another professional level degrees (JD).

Current publications and articles were reviewed to validate and expand upon questionnaire results. A list of referenced current publications and articles appears in the back of this report.

CHALLENGE 1: BUILDING AN ENVIRONMENT THAT WORKS FOR "ONE"

"I am the CEO and the technical staff and the janitor."

-- Mal Steifel

Building a work environment that works for "one" is a far different challenge than living within an existing, formal corporate structure with many workers. The term "work environment" encompasses several organizational facets. They include:

- ❑ Understanding the advantages and the disadvantages of solo work;
- ❑ Creating and maintaining an organizational structure that supports and nurtures a solo staff member; and,
- ❑ Defining and moving across the numerous roles and responsibilities of the solo staff member in an organization of one.

If you are lucky, you have office space in Lower Downtown Denver (LoDo), preferably in a renovated historical building with soaring ceilings, old brickwork and original wood beams. You obviously want all modern office space amenities: electronic communications, comfortable office furniture and useful office technology. An added bonus is LOCATION – close proximity to restaurants, coffee shops and walking paths is a positive. This allows the solo worker unlimited opportunities for office egress during the workday.

Unfortunately, this "outside the office" experience is only possible when you are in the office. Ninety percent of my own work efforts require me to travel to the client location. The remaining ten percent of work that can be done in my Denver office is my favorite activity.

According to the research findings, the respondents agree that there are numerous advantages to working as an organization of one. Table 1 contains the rank ordered, summarized responses from the questionnaire respondent group, when asked the top three advantages to being an independent worker:

Table 1: Advantages of Working Solo

Control my own time (10)
Work at home (5)
Control my own projects (4)
No office politics (4)
Independence (3)
Learning new things (2)
Variety of work (2)
Work where you want to (2)
Empowerment (2)
Creativity (1)
No communications overhead (1)
Immediate decisions (1)
Ideas taken seriously (1)

Unfortunately, the advantages of working solo are balanced out by a number of disadvantages. Interesting enough, most of the disadvantages are directly linked to the previously stated advantages of solo work. Independence, control and flexibility can easily translate into isolation and time management concerns for the solo worker.

While most solo workers worry about work opportunities, some folks worry about having too many work opportunities! Client demands on your time can lead to excessive travel and even double-booked workweeks. These double-booked workweeks mean that you travel to one client site and provide services there during the day, then return to my hotel room in the evenings and complete remote work for another client. Sound familiar?

Goodman (2003) states that the significant “downs” of independent work are: financial insecurity, bad clients, isolation and a fluctuating workload. According to my research findings,

my surveyed colleagues responded consistently with both my list of disadvantages and Goodman’s view. One notable exception is the omission of “bad clients” as a concern of the research group.

Table 2 contains the rank ordered, summarized responses from the questionnaire respondent group, when asked the top three disadvantages to being an independent worker:

Table 2: Disadvantages of Working Solo

Never not at work (5)
Travel away from home (4)
Isolation (3)
Lack of money and a steady paycheck (2)
Collaboration must be sought out. (2)
Developing confidence to turn work down (2)
High cost of health insurance (1)
Procrastination (1)
Ebb and flow of work load (1)
No income if not working (1)
No sick days (1)
No equity in the business (1)

Another area of focus is the myriad number of duties an independent worker must perform within their solo organizational structure. Administrative and marketing tasks are essential to success in an organization of one, but these activities do not directly generate revenue.

The surveyed colleagues responded consistently, pointing out that staying organized and having additional support were significant contributors to their ability to perform all roles within their organizations. Table 3 contains a rank ordered summary of the survey responses in this area:

Table 3: Performing Solo Organizational Duties and Roles

Stay organized (5)
Spouse helps out (2)
I do them or they are not done (2)
Keep things simple and reduce overhead (2)
Control growth (1)

Advantages in working solo include control of your time, control of your work projects and the ability to work at home. Lack of office politics was also cited as a top reason for working independently. Disadvantages include travel, isolation and the fluctuating workload. The trick will be to minimize the disadvantages while enhancing the advantages. Human nature being true to form, eliminating or minimizing the disadvantages will not mean that the advantages are being enhanced!

The two disadvantages targeted for changes are travel and isolation. Travel can be reduced if work can be performed from your home base. Isolation is a more personal battle, and more opportunities must be found for professional networking and socialization, such as professional societies or other group situations.

CHALLENGE 2: CREATING THE NECESSARY INTER AND INTRA ORGANIZATIONAL DYNAMICS

"Working at home is a hard-to-do change for the spouse (they married you for better or worse, not for breakfast, lunch and dinner)."

-- Buddy Van Doren

In an organization of one, all professional colleagues and clients by definition are not part of your formal corporate structure. Creating opportunities to network and communicate with

customers and peers provides many challenges to the solo worker. The term “organizational dynamics” encompasses several organizational facets, including

- ❑ Creating opportunities for creative problem solving with clients and colleagues;
- ❑ Creating opportunities for collaboration; and,
- ❑ Creating channels for communication and opportunities for being with others.

Independent consulting work provides both collaborative and creative opportunities. Usually, isolation issues arise when you are working from your office and discover there is no one in the next office to walk over to and bounce ideas off of. This informal but essential professional interaction with others requires planning and scheduling.

According to Goodman (2003), the majority of freelancers tend to work through five distinct psychological phases in their solo work lifecycle: euphoria, optimism, anxiety, momentum and wisdom. The “euphoria and optimism phases” are self explanatory, and come early in the lifecycle. They are followed by the “anxiety stage” as doubts begin to rise after the infatuation period with solo work is over. Within two to three years, most freelancers attain a steady stream of work and enter the “momentum phase” where things begin to settle down. After five to six years, most freelancers are comfortable with their solo existence and living within the final phase, known as the “wisdom phase”.

The survey results from the research group of my independent colleagues yielded a group total of 94.5 years of independent work experience, resulting in an average solo work duration of 8.6 years for each individual. Actual time spent working solo ranged from six months to twenty-one years. This places the research group on average well into the “wisdom” phase of independent life.

Ten of twelve respondents in the research group stated that they found the opportunities for creative problem solving to be built into the job itself and the nature of the work they perform. On the flip side, one survey respondent stated that finding opportunities for creative problem solving were the biggest challenge after many years in a more traditional corporate life.

Table 4 summarizes the rank ordered responses to the survey question regarding ways to create opportunities for collaboration, communication and being with other people. Several respondents provided more than one technique that they use to create these opportunities.

Table 4: Opportunities for Collaboration and Being With People

Consulting work itself (10)
Email/Internet (3)
Networking events (3)
Dogs at home (1)
Mentoring (1)

According to Goodman (2003), most freelancers choose to abandon the solo life and head back to the corporate world during the second or third year of being an independent worker. I am in their third year of providing consulting and training services.

Fine tuning the organizational situation is what is needed, not rebuilding the organization or its activities from the ground up. One component of that tuning is building a stronger “virtual organization” comprised of a network of other colleagues doing similar work in similar situations. Although this virtual network exists informally today, strengthening your “virtual organization” would be a benefit. It provides the consistent ability for creative problem solving and professional contact in addition to the existing levels of client contact and work context.

CHALLENGE 3: OVERCOMING THE DEAFENING SILENCE OF WORKING ALONE

"Attributes to succeed as a Han Solo type include a strong desire to set your own pace, a need a need to see your vision of things displayed in an organizational setting, [and] Kevlar-coated nerve endings..."

-- Dr. Hal Kane

There can truly be deafening silence when you are working alone. Even when you are working at a client site or teaching a class, when you leave at the end of the day you transform back into your organization of one. Coping with this binary work life can be quite challenging. Overcoming this organizational and personal silence encompasses several personal and personality-based facets of working alone, including:

- ❑ Physical and mental health impacts of working alone, both positive and negative;
- ❑ Understanding the personal and personality attributes required to thrive and succeed as a solo worker; and,
- ❑ Living with your underlying reasons for transitioning from corporate life to solo worker in the first place.

Working alone with an empty break room is not always a positive factor for physical health. There is no gym at the office and no readily available exercise buddy. Solo workers have to provide their own discipline and motivation in order to stay fit and healthy. As Eddie Nadel pointed out in his research response, "The traveling has had a negative effect; hotel food and airline/airport food with the lack of an exercise routine. This may very well be an excuse and not a reason; there are other [consultants] that have the same routine that I have, and have maintained a better diet and exercise program than I."

Mental and emotional health is another item that requires attention. In order to thrive as an independent worker, you need to understand your reasons for doing this type of work. It is also helpful to evaluate your strengths and weaknesses relative to working alone.

According to the research findings, the respondents transitioned to solo life for a wide variety of reasons. Table 5 contains the rank ordered, summarized responses from the questionnaire respondent group when asked why they made this transition. Several respondents gave more than one reason for the change.

Table 5: Reasons for Transitioning to Solo Work

Layoff (4)
Retirement (3)
More money for time spent (2)
Burnout (1)
Wanted creative, rewarding work (1)
Ornery cuss, don't like taking orders (1)
Started consulting as interim role, never left (1)
Wanted to work at home (1)

Over one half of questionnaire respondents stated that they were physically healthier working independently. Those who felt that their physical health had declined attributed it to travel, poor eating habits and less regular exercise.

Table 6: Solo Work Impacts to Physical Health

Positive (7)
Neutral (3)
Negative (2)

Three quarters of questionnaire respondents stated that they were mentally and emotionally healthier working independently. Negative concerns centered around working too hard and not taking enough time off.

Table 7: Solo Work Impacts to Mental Health

Positive (9)
Neutral (2)
Negative (1)

Challenges exist when you are traveling and cannot keep a regular exercise routine. I have adopted walking as my first line of defense against solo worker inactivity and found it works quite well. One good aspect of a flexible work schedule is that it allows time for rest and rejuvenation, both mental and physical. This flexibility needs to be maximized and consistently maintained.

The reasons an individual leaves a corporate life and moves to a solo work life directly contribute to the state of mental and emotional health while at work. An involuntary transition to solo life can leave one feeling abandoned and resentful. Feeling isolated and lonely can be discouraging to a solo worker, especially if no one is around in the break room to cheer you up. Relying on a strong, virtual network of colleagues and your significant other seem the straightforward cure for the solo "doldrums".

In his research response, Peter Vogel describes why he made the transition to the solo work life 6 years ago: "As part of the [graduate level] course, I took the Myers-Briggs test for about the third time. In a graph that was presented after the test, one corner had my four-character code – in the diagonally opposite corner was the complete opposite of my code. In each corner were the jobs that people with these codes gravitated to. In my corner appeared "consultant". In the diagonally opposite corner appeared "supervisor". This spoke to me."

Research data shows that the questionnaire respondents agree. In most cases, extreme measures would be required to get these solo workers to return to a more formal corporate existence. When survey respondents were asked what it would take to get them to return to corporate life, their answers reveal a general reluctance to even consider the possibility. Table 8 contains a rank ordered, summarized list of their responses:

Table 8: Reasons to Return to Corporate Life

Money (4)
Desperation (2)
Interesting work (2)
Never (2)
Absolute power (2)
Flexible work hours (1)
Apolitical work environment (1)
Starvation (1)
Extreme duress (1)

AND IN CONCLUSION

Addressing the numerous organizational issues surrounding and organization of "one" requires both time and patience. The challenges existing in three major areas must be both understood, accepted, and dealt with one at a time. Many of the solutions are related to one another, which will yield a positive impact regardless of what action is taken first.

For the first challenge, building an environment that works for and organization of “one”, immediate action can be taken to reduce the travel disadvantage of solo work life by seeking more work that can be done directly from your home base.

Relative to the second challenge, creating the necessary inter and intra organizational dynamics, continued application and focus on staying organized and incorporating “significant other” support into the roles and responsibilities of the company will minimize the administrative impacts of working solo. The approach also provides opportunities to collaborate and solve problems with someone other than one’s own face in the mirror.

Overcome the third challenge, the deafening silence of working alone is the single most important correction that needs to be made. Reducing the feeling of professional isolation by solidifying and maintaining a robust professional network of peers is essential. Building and maintaining a solid “virtual organization” is essential to the organization’s health and well-being. This can be done remotely via email and Internet, as well as at onsite client venues and local networking events.

© Rhyiming Planet, Inc. 2003, All Rights Reserved.

References

Brekke, D. (2003). On the Clock. Working at Home Means Managing Your Career, Your Commitments, Your Friends and Your Family. Guru.com, Article 1

Goodman, M. (2003). Certain Uncertainties. Living with the Ups and Downs of Independence. Guru.com, Article 11021.

Hellrigel, D. Slocum J., and Woodman R. (2001). Organizational Behavior, Ninth Edition. Cincinnati, Ohio: South-Western College Publishing.

Hinton, V. (2003). Time on Your Side. Manage Your Time Effectively to Get More Done. Guru.com, Article 11842.

Myers, S. (1999, April). One Person Shops Have Ups and Downs. Mass High Tech, The Journal of New England Technology.

Nelson, R. (2003). Stressed for Success. Some Stress is Good. Too much is Bad. Here's How to Maintain Your Balance. Guru.com, Article 10661.