

Me, Inc. – THE survival strategy for today’s workers

This chapter is focused on helping workers change their attitude about the changing relationship between employers and employees and the important implications for you and your career. Above all, it requires a change in your self-perception from “company employee” to “free agent.” But before we explore the difference between those two concepts, let’s look more closely at the changing trends and their impact on the average worker and why this even matters.

Among the more significant trends is the declining level of commitment of employees to their employers. That loyalty will continue to drop as workers give much less emphasis to working for companies that provide a long-term career and pension, and far *more* emphasis to working for an organization that allows them to be challenged, to learn, and to broaden their experience.

Employer loyalty will continue to drop as well. Corporations will rely less on full-time, long-term employees and further develop an employment model that gives them the best talent for a specific function for a specific time frame (often pre-determined—perhaps to build a new capability or complete a project, for example). This model allows the corporation to maximize the flexibility in their cost structure, minimize hiring and severance costs, and minimize “fixed” costs, which Wall Street always appreciates and rewards.

I’ve spent much of the last six years coaching and supporting many unemployed workers and others in career transition for a variety of reasons (fired, laid off, or just deciding to quit). While the traditional, full-time/permanent option is always a possibility, workers are wise to consider less traditional alternatives. That could mean becoming an independent contractor or a temp, or even changing career paths entirely. It also means being aware of the job marketplace dynamics and adjusting their career strategy accordingly.

In order to do that, it will be necessary to dispense with some stereotypes. Contrary to popular opinion, for example, temp workers are not limited to clerical and industrial job positions. In fact, the Bureau of Labor Statistics data shows that technical and professional jobs (including computer programmers, managers, executives, and financial-services professionals) are two of the fastest-growing occupational categories in the temporary staffing industry.

Human resource professionals are one example that reflects this change in the market. This job function has been caught in the “perfect storm”; it has been among the toughest job categories in recent years. Corporations have continued to find creative ways to automate previously labor-intensive HR functions (payroll, health care benefits, pensions plans, etc.) via web-based enrollment and management tools. As a result, thousands of HR professionals have been victims of the corporate downsizing that tends to follow these productivity improvements. There simply are not as many HR positions available as there once were, particularly at the same level and pay. These workers have at least four options:

- Patiently wait for an opportunity to replace the job they left; but that could take too long.

- Take a lower-level (and lower-paying) position in HR—perhaps even entry-level.
- Look for an entirely new career path that leverages their skills and interests.
- Look for alternative employment arrangements (part time, job sharing, project based, etc.).

It's time to deal with the reality of this trend – and not “hope” that you'll be able to find the same job in the future that you had previously – it may not exist any longer (or at least not as commonly).

The employer-employee trends today are not simply a corporation-driven phenomenon. American workers themselves have also decided in ever-increasing numbers that they would rather be free agents. Some estimate that these free agents will represent one-third of the workforce by 2010. This trend is so pervasive because people desire more control of their destiny. Most workers want not only more control but also better balance between career and the rest of life (family, church, recreation, etc.). One way to accomplish that is with a new paradigm. Your mindset about your employment needs to change from that of being an employee of one organization to contributing your core skills to one or more organizations simultaneously. Better yet, think of yourself as “Me, Inc.”—i.e.. Paul, Inc.; Mary, Inc.; Anybody, Inc.!

This shift in attitude requires you to stop thinking of yourself as a small, unimportant employee of a large, important organization. Instead, begin carrying the confidence that you are a valuable entity in the total equation, and you provide your skills and experience to a business that can benefit from them. If you don't make this mental adjustment, you'll continue to think of yourself and your career as a small cog in a huge gear system. You'll always assume others are responsible for your career, your personal development, and even your well-being. Your destiny will be largely dictated by others. There's a better alternative....more on that in the next installment!

Take a marketing approach to your product: You

Think of it like this: *you* are a product—a valuable, marketable product that has many capabilities and can be utilized for many different functions, potentially in a variety of companies. You are an entrepreneur responsible for the success of this product called “Me, Inc.,” and your job is to optimize the five Ps of marketing: Product, Packaging, Promotion, Price, and Place—all of which are grounded in your overall strategy of how to maximize your success.

- Investing in your **Product**—You'll want to ensure that your product has the best capabilities, the best features, the most marketable skills, and the most knowledge to accomplish the goals you aspire to achieve. This will require your time, your energy, and in many cases your personal investment in training and development. Personal development won't happen overnight; it will likely involve a lifetime of commitment.
- **Packaging** your product—You'll make certain that your product (you, of course) is well understood by the available market (potential employers). You'll do this by ensuring that your “features,” your “benefits”, and your “fit” are clearly defined and that the market recognizes how and where you can best contribute.

- **Promotion** and sales—You’ll also take responsibility for publicizing your capabilities to ensure that potential employers know who you are and how to find you if they need your skills. To succeed, you must become adept at clearly stating your value, your unique capabilities, and your commitment to serve your clients. You’ll need testimonials from organizations that have experienced the benefits of your product are telling other companies that might also benefit. Many people struggle with this because it isn’t comfortable for most of us to brag about ourselves. You’ll have to get over it. Promotion will also likely require you to develop strong networking skills to help identify opportunities (more on that in Chapter 11).
- **Price**—With the Me, Inc. mindset, you’ll have a good sense of your worth in the job market and what companies are willing to pay people with similar skills and attributes. And your product’s value is likely greater (at least in terms of dollars per hour) to a company than it would be for a more traditional “permanent” employee.
- **Place**—Where is your product available, and how can an employer buy some or all of your available time? Your physical presence may be needed at the company you are working for, but it’s increasingly possible to deliver your knowledge and skills on a somewhat “virtual” basis, largely because of advances in communications, the Internet, and related collaboration tools.

Remember, each of these dimensions applies equally to the worker who is working full time for one employer as it does to the person who chooses to leverage their skills across more than one company. It simply represent a new paradigm for all of us.

Think ‘Me,Inc.’

Taking ownership of your career

Too many people feel as though someone other than themselves is responsible for what happens in their career. But you’ll be sadly disappointed over the degree that others (including your employers) care about your future. Some workers are fortunate enough to have a genuinely caring manager who shows a sincere interest in their advancement and personal development, but those managers are the exception, not the rule. The reality today is that we all need to take ownership of our career.

I recall visiting with Harald a couple of years ago when he was between assignments. He’s an IT professional who got tired of working for organizations that would hire him and then, a few months later, decide they no longer needed his help. He was being hired and managed as a temporary employee of sorts without any of the advantages. So he developed a strategy: “I decided I was better off focusing my efforts on becoming an IT contractor and began marketing myself through multiple IT contracting organizations. Now I have control over who I work for and how long I accept an assignment, and I’m less dependent on any one employer for my livelihood. And, I make an income premium of 30 percent more per hour for being a contract resource than I would make as a ‘permanent’ employee.”

The issue is who's going to navigate your destiny. When I use terms like "take ownership," "take control," or "navigate your destiny," I'm obviously not referring to that spirit of independence many people have about being in charge of their own plans without regard for God's will. What I mean is having the freedom to pursue the directions God has called you into without being compromised or stifled by employer expectations or feeling stuck in the status quo. Too many people let their career be guided by a company or a work culture rather than proactively seeking God's will and maintaining the freedom to follow it. That's the kind of control, or stewardship, God calls each of us to have.

In the first 10 years of my career, I can remember a couple of instances when I felt I wasn't being treated fairly by my employer—perhaps disappointed that I wasn't considered for a key promotion, or that my pay increase wasn't adequate. It was easy to feel like a victim. Easy, that is, until I realized that nobody cares as much about my career and my success as I do. I went from the passive approach ("I hope they have my best interests at heart") to the proactive approach ("I need to help make things happen"). That doesn't mean you can force things to happen or that God isn't ultimately guiding your career. But we're still required to be the best contributors we can possibly be in any role assigned to us. In fact, excellent work gives us the credibility to be proactive.

The biggest leap I made personally was when a friend of mine, Bill Morganstern, challenged me to give myself "permission" to not think about myself as an employee, which I spent most of my career doing. Bill, who specializes in helping executives work through career transition issues (finding new work, starting a new business, transitioning to retirement, etc.), instead encouraged me to allow myself to consider alternative career paths—including my current career in the sales training and consulting business.

Tip: Learn to think of yourself as a marketable resource, not a hired hand

When I initially joined The Complex Sale in 1998, it was the first job I'd ever had that didn't pay me a salary. I've learned that with this arrangement I can work as hard as I choose to in order to meet the personal and professional goals I've established. If my goal is to make a high income—and with the college and wedding expenses of three daughters in the foreseeable future, I've been pretty motivated—then I'll put in the time and effort to achieve these goals. On the other hand, when I reach the point where I want to spend more time on my other projects (with Crossroads Career Network, writing this book, or something else), I have the flexibility to make these personal choices, and I'll be satisfied to earn less money. That's the liberating part of this type of arrangement.

It was hard to make this transition at first because I had, for so many years, become accustomed to a steady, predictable paycheck that was directly deposited into my checking account every two weeks, no matter what. What I've learned about myself in the last few years is that this "highly leveraged" role (i.e., no salary) suits me extraordinarily well because I'm at the steering wheel and don't feel the sense of duty of a salaried position driving me to workaholic tendencies. I've said to Devonie on more than one occasion, "If my employer is going to pay me well to do this job, I want them to get their money's worth." It's the way God built me—for better or for worse. A no-salary position takes that dynamic out of the equation.

How can you take more control with a “Me, Inc.” approach? It doesn’t mean you have to leave the employer you’re currently with. You may want to continue full-time with one employer. It does mean, however, that you take more ownership for the valuable asset you represent to your current employer or others. Your gifts and talents are not an accident, and your career shouldn’t be accidental either.

This “Me, Inc” model won’t suit everyone. It requires a person to sell him- or herself more than some are comfortable with doing. And it requires a shift in your mindset.

The Mindset Shift

To begin to adjust to a “Me, Inc.” attitude requires the following mental shifts:

Shift From:	Shift To:
“ I’m an employee and always will be.”	“I have a great opportunity to leverage my skills in multiple environments, perhaps even simultaneously, maybe as an employee or perhaps as a contractor. It might be full time, or better yet, part time, where I have the flexibility to work for more than one company at the same time. This may be ideal for me (variety, less dependence on any one company and its success, or lack thereof), but is also likely as beneficial to those who employ my skills.”
“I’ll do whatever it takes to pay my bills, even if it’s not a great fit for my skills and interests.”	“I was designed by God with very specific talents and gifts. These were not an accident, nor should my career be accidental. Even if today I’m in a role that is not an ideal (or even a close) fit, my goal is to find the role that is consistent with and takes advantage of my God-given talents. This may take time and effort, but it honors God to find the role that allows my light (and skills) to shine for others to see and benefit from.
“I expect to have this job indefinitely (i.e. forever).”	“I expect that the role I currently occupy is for the short/mid-term, and the prudent thing for me to do is to consistently explore other career options and alternatives in order to maximize my opportunities—both short and long-term. This is not being dis-

	<p>loyal or underhanded to my current employer! It's simply a recognition that there is no longer permanence in today's job market, and both employer and employee are best served to understand this reality."</p>
<p>"I will do what's best for my employer, no matter the cost to me personally, to my family, or to my career."</p>	<p>"I must do what's best for "Me, Inc." and ensure that my client (the company I work for in whatever capacity) gets fair value for fair compensation. If either of these does not occur, the relationship will likely be short-lived."</p>
<p>"My employer is responsible for my career development."</p>	<p>"No one will care for my career and my future like I will, so I'll take personal responsibility for my development, including training. To whatever extent my employer can contribute, so much the better!"</p>
<p>"I feel dependent on my employer for my well-being and future."</p>	<p>"I am clearly benefiting from my current employer relationship, but I'm not relying on it to take care of my long-term career. I'm proactively exploring career options; I'm exploring options to create health insurance plans that reduce my reliance on any single employer; and I'm increasingly recognizing that my long term well-being is far better placed in the care of my Heavenly Father—for now and eternity.</p>
<p>"I'll keep doing this job until the next one comes along."</p>	<p>"I'll continue to do an exceptional job in my current role, but I will continuously and actively identify and pursue new opportunities simultaneously for the benefit of all concerned."</p>
<p>"I don't have time to network with people outside of my day-to-day responsibilities."</p>	<p>"I must proactively network with other people, inside and outside of my direct contacts, in order to nurture existing relationships and develop new ones for the benefit of discovering future opportunities and serving the needs of others in the process.</p>

<p>“Since I’m more than 50 years old, I’m just happy to have a job at all”</p>	<p>“Because I’m over 50, I have exceptional skills and experiences. I’m willing to minimize the risk for the employer who is concerned with my energy, health, or my likelihood of retiring prematurely by working on a contract or part-time basis. I will be comfortable, perhaps even eager, for alternative work arrangements that are good for me and my employer.”</p>
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It’s obvious from these contrasts that this will not be a natural shift for many of us because it runs so counter to the way we’ve been taught to think. This shift would not have been needed if the employment environment hadn’t changed dramatically, but it has. It’s imperative for workers to adapt accordingly.

The Benefits of Me, Inc.

Why does this attitude shift make sense? Here are a few reasons discovered by many others who have taken this career route:

- Even if you’re working entirely for one company, a “Me, Inc.” attitude gives you the distinct advantage of being in control of your own destiny. You are responsible for your future, your career direction, and the investments you make to improve your asset (you).
- If, on the other hand, you’re working with more than one company, it reduces your dependency on any one organization’s business conditions. If any single client only represents one-half or one-third of your income, your risks are substantially reduced, particularly if your clients are in diverse industries.
- You’ll likely increase your income potential because your value to multiple organizations in need of your specialty is greater than it is to a single organization. Usually, the rate you can charge is also higher than you would get on an equivalent salary basis, particularly if you provide your own health benefits.
- It also provides you a level of independence and flexibility that few full-time employees enjoy. You have the liberty to choose the work that suits you, to work with the clients you want to work with, and flexibility to take time off—when you want or need it, not at the whim of others.
- This mindset shift is likely to make you more valuable to other companies. The more experience you have, the more valuable you are in the marketplace.

It's time to recognize that the employment dynamics are changing, and those who can make the Me, Inc. shift will be more valuable, more marketable, and more confident, and will fare better, both short- and long-term. Instead of becoming intimidated or frustrated by these trends—regardless of whether you're fully employed, part time, or even unemployed—become proactive in considering how to take advantage of these trends and the opportunities that a “Me, Inc.” mentality can represent.