

You're on Your Own – The Value of Thinking like the Self-Employed

By Sara Litoff

Raymond E. Uργο addressed the question, "Is Self-employment the Answer?" to an attentive audience of over 40 people at the September meeting of the STC San Diego chapter. Uργο, a successful consultant on policies and procedures communications and principal of Uργο & Associates, did not explain the step-by step process of becoming self-employed, but more importantly, the value of adopting the mindset of the self-employed.

Uργο's two objectives of the presentation were to help the audience develop an appreciation of what self-employment truly means and to change the way we approach our career and the way we market ourselves.

The traditional view of employment was once the "cradle to grave" philosophy. The path to success was getting a job at a big company, "climbing the ladder", and finally, retiring from that same company. Achieving success today requires thinking more laterally. You must become a specialist with diverse skills and experience and elbow your way in. This approach is already apparent in our own community. When the audience was polled by Uργο, the majority did not set out to become technical writers by earning a degree and working towards a position in technical communications, but rather they "fell into it." They satisfied a need in their company or within a project with their own experience and skills.

Our loyalty has also shifted from our employers to ourselves, our professions, and lastly, our projects. This shift in loyalty was influenced by "projectization". The projectization of business means that companies are increasingly following the "Hollywood contract", in which people are hired for a particular role in a project based on specialized skills and experience, i.e. a "personal brand". Personal branding demonstrates and quantifies your value. People will remember you and your personal brand after the project ends (leading to more projects).

With the change in loyalties came a shift from a sense of entitlement to an attitude of accountability. Uργο cautioned the audience to be comfortable, not complacent. A member of the audience, Preston Hathaway, cleverly explained the difference between comfortable and complacent, "Complacent" is ignorance – you might be happy [and] good at what you do, but you don't know what is about to hit you...Comfortable is a sense of confidence – you are great at what you do and you enjoy [it]. People want to work with you...but it is an alert feeling, like crossing the street." When you become too comfortable, you lose the momentum you need to remain valuable.

Uργο uses the parable of building the cathedral to urge us to broaden the view of our work in order to increase our value. Are you a bricklayer or are you building a cathedral? As a technical communicator, you are not just writing documentation and training, but you are actively involved in the knowledge transfer that supplies today's "evolving knowledge economy". Technical communicators are especially important because they are involved in all industries.

Think, talk, and walk as if you are self-employed, whether you are or not. Urgo sums up this new paradigm with the acronym: YOYO = You're on Your Own.