

Technical Communication Professionals and the Economy: Is Self-Employment the Answer?

Raymond E. Urgo

4 Forces Influencing Careers

- **Decentralized/Flattening Economy** [Mottos: *Expand your horizons. Variety is spice of life.*]
 - Think laterally, not vertically, by being a specialist with diverse skills and experiences.
 - Elbow in and with allied disciplines.
- **Age of Accountability (Performance)** [Motto: *Be eager to stay and ready to go.*]
 - Shift from entitlement to accountability; be comfortable, not complacent.
 - Demonstrate and quantify your value by focusing on results, not just compliance
 - Be loyal to yourself and profession; be selflessly independent.
- **Need for Human & Organizational Development** [Motto: *Develop your IQ, EQ, and BQ.*]
 - IQ = intellectual (technical or subject matter knowledge and skills).
 - EQ = emotional (behavioral, personality, and communication styles).
 - BQ = business of business (self marketing, contracting, negotiation).
- **Evolving Knowledge Economy** [Motto: *Evolve with the Era of Knowledge.*]
 - Know your business, industry, and professional positioning: doer, follower, problem solver, strategist, leader.
 - Align with “learning” and “knowledge” interventions for evolving economy.

Is Self-Employment Right for You?

- **Experience and values**
 - Most confronting personal growth story of your life; victim-hood will get knocked out of you.
 - Selflessly independent-minded and freedom seeker.
 - Constantly looking at value and belief system about money and life.
 - Have to like to live “not knowing” (good and not so good surprises).
 - Willing to take enormous risk and make sacrifices.
- **You are it**
 - No boss from hell is I.
 - No one to report to or watch after you.
 - Make about 100 to 150 decisions a day.
 - Can’t blame anyone for your situation.
 - Don’t want someone breathing down your neck or controlling your work and life
- **Destiny**
 - You are really in control of your own destiny.
 - Everyone’s story and path (from start to completion) is different.
 - Have to have faith and trust – live by the grace of the universe.
- **Marketing and sales**
 - Consulting is about marketing (relationship development) and rejection.
 - You are selling an intangible; and if to a corporation, it can be a complex sale.
 - Marketing is often unpredictable – it’s a crap shoot.
 - Not for someone looking to be a “millionaire in a minute”.

Three Types of Roles for Contracting and Consulting

Characteristic of Role	Three Roles on the Contracting-Consulting Continuum		
	Contractor ←-----→ Consultant		
	Extra Pair of Hands	Expert	Expert-Collaborator
Other role names	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Job shopper • Contractor • Contract help/labor • Temporary professional 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contractor • Consultant • Professional service provider 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consultant • Authority • Business problem solver • Change agent
Positioning of role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follower • Managed and led 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manages self or own team • Might teach or instruct 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manages self or own team • Leads others and discipline
Examples of technical documentation needs or engagements	Writes a chapter of user guide according to client's time frame, chosen software, and existing style guide	Develops an entire user guide according to a self-designed and managed project requested by client	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborates with client on need and desired business outcome (perceived value) for problem before proposing a solution. • May perform role of expert in fulfilling the desired solution. • Advises on best practices for solving a need.
Marketing approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Markets passively (job listings, recruiters, agencies, documentation companies) • Uses resume 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Markets proactively via reputation-building methods • Uses brochure, website 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Markets proactively via reputation-building methods • Uses brochure, website
Business risk and value level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low risk • Has low impact • Adds operational value 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moderate risk • Has moderate impact • Adds tactical value 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High risk • Has high impact • Adds strategic value
Typical pricing and collection methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commodity based • Hourly • Submits time sheet and/or invoices regularly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commodity- or expertise-based • Hourly or fixed-price • Invoices regularly or milestones 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expertise- or value-based • Fixed-fee or retainer • Invoices at beginning and before completion

What it takes to begin and maintain a self-employed practice

- Reminder: There is never enough time or money; the later you wait, the harder it is to do.
- Advice: Take the jump. Everybody has their own story to tell of how it happened.
- Where to expect time spent: Administration (25%); Marketing (25%); Sales (25%); Fulfillment (25%)
- In the beginning
 - Indulge in reading and learning about business development, consulting, marketing, and sales
 - Obtain a coach, business advisor, mentor, support group, self-employed colleagues, guardian angel
- Planning practice: business and marketing plan, business model, pricing model
- Legal: ownership structure, business license, dba registration
- Finance: insurance, bank account, credit card, accounting system, vendor accounts
- Administration: office/work space, furniture, equipment, supplies, policies and procedures
- Marketing: business image, business card, e-mail, brochure, website, contact database, self-development
- Maintaining: never dedicate all your time to one client; have 6 months backup income; don't stop marketing

Resources for self-employment

- STC Consulting and Independent Contracting Special Interest Group www.stc.org
- SCORE (Counselors to America's Small Businesses) www.score.org/index.html

Raymond E. Urgo, principal of Urgo & Associates, is a consultant and educator specializing in policies and procedures communication in organizations. He dedicates a portion of his practice to coaching and advising business and technical professionals on becoming entrepreneurial in their careers—marketing and demonstrating value, developing business practices, and managing projects and work relations. He holds the honorary rank, Fellow, in the Society for Technical Communication. Contact: 323-851-6600 or urgo@urgoconsulting.com.
