

But You'll Be “Unemployed”!

By Christopher R. Edgar

I have a friend who would like to start her own business as an interior designer, and leave her current 9-to-5 job as a computer programmer. She's convinced that she has the skills, the startup capital, the contacts and so forth to make it happen. But she's still too scared to make the change. Why? Because, she says, if she leaves her current job she'll be “unemployed.”

At first glance, my friend's belief seems strange. If she makes the transition she wants, she'll be the owner and CEO of her own company, with total control over the operation of her business. She's saved up enough money to pay her expenses while she builds up a client base. And she'll have made a career out of doing what she loves. Why would she think of that situation as “unemployment”?

The answer is that my friend simply can't accept the idea that it's possible to have a career that doesn't involve going into an office every weekday, remaining there between at least 9 and 5 o'clock, being gradually promoted through a large corporate hierarchy and drawing a steady salary. All the jobs she's held during her working life have had those features. Anything else, to her, is “unemployment,” and her family and friends—having had the same type of work background—are likely to feel the same way.

When I told people in my life I was leaving the legal profession to be an author and success coach, I learned that some of them shared this attitude. “How's unemployment treating you?” one asked. “So when do the unemployment checks start rolling in?” another teased. I explained to them that I was not “unemployed”—I was simply going into business for myself. They smiled and nodded, but it was clear what they were thinking—“yeah, make all the excuses you want—you're still unemployed in my book.”

“Unemployment” has nasty connotations for most of us. We often associate it with being lazy, not being good enough to “make the cut” at work, being on the government “dole,” displeasing our families and friends, being unattractive to potential mates, and so on. Thus, for many of us, the fear that we will be perceived as “unemployed” is enough to keep us in conventional 9-to-5 jobs and prevent us from doing anything entrepreneurial, even if the latter is what we truly desire.

If you're thinking of leaving your current job and starting your own business, I don't want the fear of “unemployment” to stop you. If you're struggling with this fear, take a look at the observations I make below and see if they do anything to change your perspective.

First off, if going into business for yourself makes you “unemployed,” the “unemployed” of this world are quite a distinguished bunch. The founders of Apple, Google and Microsoft—who, as most of us know, are now some of the wealthiest people in the world—were also “unemployed” by this definition during the startup phases of their companies. If they'd worked conventional 9-to-5 jobs instead of striking out on their own, their ultra-successful businesses wouldn't be around today.

My larger point is that no conventional 9-to-5 jobs would even exist if no one had been willing to start a business in the first place. If no one had taken that initiative, there would be no companies to employ the massive legions of salaried office workers in our society. Someone's got to take the financial risks associated with entrepreneurship for our economy to operate at all.

I think that, on some level, most people who fear entrepreneurship because they view it as equivalent to “unemployment” are aware of this. It’s not that they think going into business for oneself is inherently bad or impossible—they simply think it would be “arrogant” or “unrealistic” to believe *they* could do it successfully. They predict that, if *they* started a business, they would end up in the circumstances we typically associate with unemployment—*i.e.*, broke, “on the dole,” having nothing in particular to do, and so on. “Bill Gates may have done it,” they think, “but I’m not Bill Gates.”

In other words, people who suggest that they’d be “unemployed” if they started a business are really just expressing feelings of inadequacy about themselves. And if someone says the same about your entrepreneurial aspirations, they’re probably motivated—at least in part—by envy or resentment. Because they don’t think they have what it takes to strike out on their own, they feel that you’re acting like you’re superior to them by doing what they couldn’t bring themselves to do.

But what if you recognize this feeling of inadequacy in yourself, and it’s preventing you from pursuing your business idea? I recommend that you start by contemplating what would happen if you started your own business venture and it failed. Suppose your company consistently failed to generate enough revenue to cover its costs. What would be true about you, and what would happen in your life, if that worst-case scenario came to pass?

I’ve asked this question in the past to clients who were considering career transitions. Interestingly, their fears surrounding failure don’t usually concern their survival or their financial circumstances. They’re not afraid that they’ll starve to death, be unable to support their children, lose their homes, and so forth. Whatever happens from a financial perspective, they’ll probably find ways to get by. Instead, they’re afraid of others labeling them in hurtful ways. They envision their loved ones, friends, acquaintances and others saying or thinking things like “I always knew he’d never amount to anything,” “see, she’s nothing but a bum,” “he’s like a daydreaming child with no common sense,” and so on.

However, people usually don’t examine why they are trying so hard—even to the point of stifling their career aspirations—to avoid the possibility of others’ disapproval. When I ask them what would happen if their business failed and someone else attacked or ridiculed them for it, they typically give one of two answers. Sometimes, they can’t quite pinpoint what bad things would happen if someone disapproved of them—they just have the gut feeling that they need everybody to like them. At other times, they find themselves coming up with an answer that is irrational or ridiculous on its face—for instance, that they’d die if someone else disliked them.

Either way, when people seriously consider this question, they usually start to doubt that their fears of “unemployment” are a sufficient reason to avoid going off on their own. Understanding what they’re truly afraid of gives them a feeling of freedom to explore career possibilities they hadn’t thought were open to them before.

I invite you to try this exercise. Ask yourself what you’re really afraid will happen if you start a business venture and it fails. I think you’ll find that your fears surrounding “unemployment” aren’t as reasonable or convincing as you’d thought.

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