

The logo for Tom, featuring the name 'Tom' in a stylized, handwritten font.

The Contrarian  
Entrepreneur Show

Episode Notes

## Episode 016

# Declaring Free Agency

*Note: this document contains the essential content of this episode but is not a complete verbatim transcript. It may also contain other content that was not included in the video or audio versions of the episode.*

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I have been self-employed since 1984 – which is just another way of saying that I haven't had a job in about 35 years.

40 years ago, I never imagined that I would ever be self-employed. But I had a couple of realizations along the way.

The first was around 1982, a couple of years before I made my break. I was a controller for a small manufacturing company. I was number three in the company, behind the two owners, and there was no place "up" to go, because neither of their jobs was likely to become available very soon. So to go "up" meant to go "out", or "elsewhere". And "elsewhere" probably meant some place not very much different from where I was at, because I liked small companies and didn't like big ones.

So I was kind of stuck. And one day I realized just how stuck I was. It suddenly hit me... "This is it. This is all there is. I'm going to die, right here in this chair, right here at this desk."

I remember clearly that my very next thought was an adamant, "Oh, no, I'm not."

I wasn't even sure what "Oh, no, I'm not" meant, but it wasn't long before I realized that I didn't need to be stuck. If I was stuck, it was by choice.

I realized that my fate, my future, my income level, and whatever satisfaction I got from the work that I did depended just a bit too much on other people.

I realized suddenly that I didn't much like the idea of having to worry about how much I was pleasing my boss, worrying about whether he would grace me with a few more dollars in my paycheck if I did a "good job". I realized that I didn't much like having decisions that I knew were good ones shot down just because he was "the boss". I could have good ideas and make good decisions.

Among them, I could choose who I worked for. I realized that my so-called "employer" was really my "client", and that I could work for multiple clients simultaneously, if I chose to. I realized that my "boss" was not my "boss", but merely my primary contact for this particular "client".

I realized that we're really all self-employed; it's just that most people have only one client – called their "employer".

I realized that “unemployed” means that you don't happen to have any clients at the moment.

In 1956, an editor at Fortune magazine named William H. Whyte wrote a book that became legendary in the worlds of both business and social science – it was called **"The Organization Man"**.

It laid out in detail the then-current model for work in America – "the individual who buried his own identity and goals in the service of a large organization, which rewarded his self-denial with a regular paycheck, the promise of job security, and a fixed place in the world." The book preached that career people should, in effect, lower their sights to "achieve a good job with adequate pay and a proper pension and a nice house in a pleasant community populated with people as nearly like themselves as possible."

Belongingness mattered more than individualism.

The organization was mother, father, protector, and benefactor.

The theory was that if you were loyal to the organization, the organization would be loyal to you. And that was true, for as long as the organization was able to. IBM carried the banner of this theory for years, vowing that no IBM employee would ever be laid off -- which was a fine idea as long as steady growth and profitability continued, and as long as products and markets remained substantially as they had been for years, and no other smart young upstart company came out of nowhere and upset the applecart.

But things did not stay the same. Everything changed, and in 1992 and 1993, IBM, having absolutely no other choice but to die, shed itself of tens of thousands of employees.

I have never opted for job security. About 10 years before I made my big break, I worked for the only large company I've ever been with, NCR. My boss at that time was the stereotypical **Organization Man**. He had been with the company for 17 years and had moved on average every 3 years. And not by his own choice.

Then one day, I got the call. "Hey, Tom, congratulations, we're transferring you to Indianapolis!"

I said, "No, you're not."

They said, "Well, there's not really an option -- you have to take the transfer or... leave the company."

I thought to myself, this is not a very difficult decision. Why? Because **nobody** is going to tell me where I'm going to live.

Job security is a wonderful concept, a comforting concept. But there's no such thing as job security, and there never has been -- there was only the illusion of it. The only job security available is that which you create for yourself. And today, millions upon millions of people are realizing that and becoming what one author calls "**free agents**". That author's name is Daniel Pink, and several years ago he wrote a book called "**Free Agent Nation**". Rather than using terms like "starting your own business", or "striking out on your own", he used the term "**declaring free agency**".

Free agency is fun. It's the Wild West of Work. But having your own business is scary. My God, of course it's scary. I'm scared all the time – been scared for the last 35 years now.

So why do people do it? Why do they put everything at risk?

Well, various reasons.

But I think the people who have the best reasons are the so-called "pure" entrepreneurs. Pure entrepreneurs aren't in it for the money, or the freedom, or the self-expression, or to escape their idiot boss, or to call their own shots, or to be able to manage their own time.

They're in it for the **game**.

They're in it to see what they can do – to see if they can do more than they thought they could do.

But whatever your reasons, it's still scary. But I can handle the scary parts. I've been down and I've been discouraged, and I can handle that. I've been broke, and I can handle that. And if I should die broke, I could handle that.

There's only one thing that I don't care to experience – what would be, for me, the most emotionally painful circumstance I could find myself in – and that would be to arrive at the end of it all and have to look at myself in the mirror and say, "You don't know what you could have done, because you didn't even try."

So "the game" is to try... to push yourself... to see what you can create... to see if you can be better. Not better than someone else, but better than you were yesterday.

So, can anybody succeed as a "free agent"? Can anyone start his or her own business and "make it"? Nope.

I have often said that if I ever had the opportunity to address a group of 100 people who were intending to "realize their dream" and start their own businesses, the singular goal of my presentation would be to talk 90 of them out of it. Why? Because if I could, in the course of an hour, talk

someone out of going after "their dream", then they simply didn't have the guts and determination to make it anyway, and I would have done them the greatest possible favor, and saved them a lot of aggravation and grief. Of the remaining 10 that I could not dissuade, perhaps 1 or 2 would make it; would survive and thrive and still be in business 10 years hence.

We've all heard the stats on failure rates for new businesses, and they're not exactly encouraging.

Well then, let's just make sure we don't fail. Let's find the "secrets of success". They're right there, right on the shelves at Barnes and Noble, or in the pages of Amazon.com. Well, sorry -- there are no "secrets" of business success. Business is not simple. Go look in the business section at Barnes and Noble, or search "business" on Amazon. If business was simple, there wouldn't be **that** many titles there, ya think?

Could **you** make it if **you** tried? I have no idea.

But I can tell you this – the deciding factor probably wouldn't be your knowledge, education, skills, experience, personality, sales and marketing abilities, or your stunning good looks. It would probably come down to – how much do you want it? How badly do you want to find out what you could do if you tried, and how much are you willing to pay to find that out?

If you want to go into business to get rich, then don't do it, because you might end up poorer.

If you want to go into business to have more free time, don't do it – because you'll probably end up with less.

If you want to go into business so you can be your own boss, just understand that your new boss might be worse than your old one.

And if things go wrong in your business and you find yourself looking around for who was responsible... there's the mirror, over there on the wall. There's no place else for the buck to stop.

So if "living on the edge" seems like it might be interesting and fun...if you're brave enough... or, as some would suggest, foolish enough... then go for it... if you want to...

If you don't know what you can do, and would like to find out... and if you're willing to pay the price, without even knowing in advance what the price will be... then go for it... if you want to...

If you're unwilling to face that moment when you must acknowledge that you don't know what you could have done because you didn't even try... then go for it... if you want to...

Really push yourself. It won't hurt. Well, OK, it will probably hurt. But you never can tell; it might be worth the pain.

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## **THINK**

Think for yourself. If you don't think for yourself, then other people will do your thinking for you, and that's not a good thing.

## **LEARN**

Read books. Read blogs. Watch videos. Watch TED Talks. Listen to podcasts. Learn something new every single day. Never stop learning. You cannot foretell when a piece of knowledge will become useful to you.

## **CREATE**

Create something -- something good -- something that wasn't there before and would never have been there if you hadn't shown up.

# Think - Learn - Create Be Brave - Be Bold



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