



***You, Inc.: Creating Your Life as a Free Agent***  
**By Terri Lonier**

Since I am a “free agent”, I bought this audio book program from Nightingdale Conant (800-323-5552) to help further my career development. What I quickly realized was that many of the points being made in the program were as valid for my clients and customers as for me.

The person that’s in the greatest demand today, and the one that’s hardest to obtain, is the true self-starter. The person that’s willing to take personal responsibility, to be innovative and to work free of controls. The reason why me, and many others like me, are “free agents” is because we have the belief system that the shortest path to self-actualization is through our own efforts. We work with clients who only need us for our highest and best use. We work with each other when we can form strategic partnerships that add escalating value. The best of us is able to work completely on our own or as team players.

The point is, isn’t that precisely the type of person you want to have work for you? Whether on the payroll or as an independent contractor. If you are not focused on attracting that person the who are you looking for? Someone who wants to be “comfortable”? Someone who is more concerned about “job security” than “career growth”? Someone who is afraid to rely on their own abilities without being told what to do and when to do it? Or, perhaps the person that would rather continue to work for you, even though their career is going nowhere, because they so fear making career changes?

As any of you who have attended one of my *Building Powerful Employment Relationships!* workshops know, my favorite reference for analyzing these issues are the factors of trust, direction, communication and commitment. For example, how are you making sure that you are hiring free agents who have the skills and character necessary to be trustworthy partners with your business?

How do you establish a shared direction with someone who may only be able to grow in your environment for only a few years or perhaps months? How do you structure your communications with free agents in a way that allows them the ability to truly give you their best? And lastly, what are the commitments that free agents and their employers are looking for? I can tell you that job security is not one of them.

To my way of thinking, free agency is a natural outgrowth of the *Death of Control*. Over the last 15 years we have seen the concept of command and control as a management theme come to total collapse. The fact is, I don’t know of a single enlightened business owner or manager who truly believes they can control other people. The best that they can hope for is to empower someone else. Any company that does not fully understand the *Death of Control* has written themselves an invitation to the doorsteps of bankruptcy court.

As I go through some of the program highlights, I will be adding my insights and thoughts to the author's contributions. So, now, without further delay, let's figure out how your company is going to embrace the notion of free agency...

For all you sports fans out there, the term "free agency" first came to the public vernacular in 1973 as the result of a lawsuit filed by St. Louis Cardinal baseball player, Lou Brock. Before that time pro-athletes were treated like most workers, as indentured servants. Sure they may have been paid a little more, but the management style was clear. Do what we say you'll do, or you won't get to play ball.

While free agency in the business sector is a newer concept, there are many parallels that can be drawn. Today's most successful teams, and businesses, are able to draw together teams consisting of wily veterans, high priced superstars, farm-grown talent and role players.

The "free agent" is the owner of their own business (You, Inc.), whether they work for you or for themselves. "Free agency in a company is working for the advancement of your career by giving the best you have to offer to that company." (Isn't that what we've always expected from workers?).

Committee decision making in organizations can often times result in agreeing to the lowest common denominator. Unless someone is extremely passionate about his or her viewpoints or project, chances are the "comfortable", but not necessarily "right", decision will be made.

"By thinking of all of your employees as free agents, your overall company will benefit." I think part of the reason for this truth goes back to the issue of control. Again, while there are people who relish working within a controlling environment (i.e., victims, passive/aggressive, submissives, etc.) and while that type of employee may cater to some control freaks, I would rather see that culture develop at one of my competitors. The secret is to give people just enough structure and just enough resources so that they remain the person most responsible for their career success. As my friend Loy Young says, people have to become the heroes in their own lives.

"In order to be a successful free agent, you have to have something to offer, something to be passionate about and something to be hopeful for." Stated another way, success is defined in terms of mind, body and soul. Appealing to one at the expense of the others causes an imbalance which is simply not sustainable, whether at an individual or organizational level.

- "Being a successful free agent requires you to be a self-starter and outgoing."
- "If you want to be rich and successful all you really have to do is meet two new people every day."

Taken together, these quotes emphasize how important it is for the successful individual or organization to establish new relationships. Simple in concept, far more difficult in application. Some of my random suggestions:

1. Give every employee a business card.
2. Have employees get to know at least one other person every week within your company. Perhaps you can pay for them to go to lunch together.
3. Have employees “own” a customer.
4. Have them survey at least one of your customers every week.

According to Tom Peters, the level of your job security (or perhaps better phrased “career security”) is directly related to the number of names you have in your rolodex (or database). What does your database look like? To what extent are your employees building up their database...and are you allowing them to exploit it?

“Free agents constantly expand their knowledge base.” Quite frankly, I attribute this factor to my success more than any other. Many of the insights I have gained when it comes to compliance and culture have been gathered from fields outside of these disciplines. For example, while studying how the brain works, I gained added insight as to how companies should structure their organizational charts. While going to a total quality management seminar, I came up with the most powerful tool ever for preventing employee lawsuits. And so on. Joel Barker, in his book *Future Edge*, explains that most breakthroughs come from the outside of an existing paradigm (or norm, or system). It is the outsider’s perspective that is most valuable because they have not lost the forest for the tress. It was this understanding that helped me to design the 60 Day New Employee Survey. (If you don’t already have a copy let me know and I will e-mail you one.)

Unfortunately, the vast majority of training dollars spent in this country go to sales training. Very little learning is encouraged or paid for which goes directly to making that person more valuable to themselves and hence everyone around them. For example, regardless of who’s footing the bill, continuous learning in the areas of finances, communication, personal growth, etc. will pay many unexpected benefits. You can’t expect people to do more unless you help them to be more. In fact, education is the highest form of leverage in any organization.

One reason that I do these book summaries is not just to impress you with how much I have read or researched over the past month. I know that if I want to learn something, one of the best ways to do so is to teach it. What can the free agents within your company learn by teaching to others?

*"The quality of a person's life is in direct proportion to their commitment to excellence, regardless of their chosen field of endeavor."*

*"Vince Lombardi"*

“It is absolutely essential that today’s free agent have a strong sense of ‘self-power’.” I couldn’t agree with this statement or Vince Lombardi more. What is fascinating is the reason why. Before, executives, managers and others in it is “power positions” were able to wield a great deal of control over their constituents. However, with today’s paradox being *the less you control the more you can do*, control is no longer a source of power. The most important control one can have is over himself or herself. To coin a Tony Robbins phrase, it is “personal power”

that makes all the difference. If it were my company, I would pay the \$200 it takes to buy Robbins' *Personal Power* program for every one of my employee. Not only will it help them develop an incredible level of self-esteem and motivation, it will also provide a common reference for sharing insights and learning.

“One of the biggest factors today is the shift from entitlement to empowerment.” Put another way, the shift is from paternalism to enlightenment. Put yet another way, “teach a man to fish...”

Today's free agent cannot define their skill set so narrowly that they lose flexibility. This is true whether the free agent works inside the company or outside of it. One way I have found to remain flexible is to be a “futurist”. Make sure you read futurist publications, trend reports, etc. and then ask yourself, “How will that trend affect me and my potential clients? How can I take advantage of it? Where are the greater opportunities? Who are the pioneers in these fields? What are they doing that I could also be doing?” For example, one of my friends is a health care consultant. He realized that health dot coms would be springing up everywhere and he decided to invest some time to make himself a “dot.com health care expert”. He now has more assignments than ever.

“Always ask for and give referrals. Even a company that has passed on your services may know of someone who may be interested in them.”

One of the greatest factors impacting on the new free agency is the focus on core competencies. It used to be that we outsourced something that we didn't do very well. (i.e. payroll, marketing, financials, etc.) Today however, the trend is to build an organization that from the “get go” only focuses on what they do best, and then outsources everything else. These companies aren't pushed into these models, they embrace them as a business philosophy. This move towards horizontal as opposed to vertical organizational structures will be facilitated by the internet and eventually embraced as the fundamental way to do business.

One of the greatest forces behind the free agency movement is the death of traditional, vertical motivators such as power, money and prestige. Today's horizontal motivators are freedom, fun and family.

Here are some additional insights I thought may be of benefit:

- One of the greatest challenges for the intra-company free agent is not top management, but rather co-workers and mid-level management since these people can make or break a project. (That's why win/win thinking is so important.)
- The free agent has to deal with their concerns and fears related to any change. Especially their fear of loss.
- Ask, “What am I afraid of changing?”
- Another impediment to the free agent is the fact that there are managers who will take credit for a project, even though it wasn't of their making. (I recently heard of a story where a whole series of suggestions were taken by the suggestion officer as his own. The

person giving the suggestions, who was a genius, left the company feeling that he wasn't acknowledged. It was only after the fact that he found out about the misappropriation.)

- For the company executive or high-level manager, this means they must generate a culture of change. Chances are they won't be able to address all the participants to a project on an individual basis. That's why the cultural shift is so important. Let those unaccustomed with change see the rewards that the effort brings – even if it results in project failure.
- Free agents should all have some kind of newsletter (whether inside or outside of the company).
- Know your unique selling proposition. (Do you know yours?)

## **Conclusion**

This program does an excellent job of providing a free agent overview. Because of it's wide reference it was a bit thin on providing new insight for the seasoned free agent. It's greatest value may come in asking how does this new structure affect me as an employer? How can I embrace the *Death of Control* and the notion of free agency? What can I offer those interested in free agency that they cannot get themselves? How can I help them grow and remain committed to our company? How do we redesign work around the answers to those questions? Quite the challenge!

All the best,



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