

## The Joys and Frustrations of Being an Independent Info Pro

Way back when I was considering whether being an independent info pro would be right for me, I talked to a number of people who had been in business for a while, and I lurked on the electronic bulletin board of the Association of Independent Information Professionals ([www.aiip.org](http://www.aiip.org)). What I really wanted was to get a sense of the highs and lows of this business—what made this such a rewarding profession and what caused people the most aggravation.

As you are reading this chapter, think about how important each of these aspects of the business is to you. Some of the negatives almost everyone experiences, such as isolation, the lack of a steady paycheck, and the constant need to market yourself and your business. Likewise, some features of the entrepreneurial life almost all independent info pros find rewarding—the ability to work from home, the relationships we establish with clients, and the personal satisfaction of knowing that we have built a business ourselves. If, as you read this chapter, you discover that what we find rewarding doesn't resonate with you, then this may not be the best choice of profession for you.

### The Thrills of Being an Independent Info Pro

For many of us independent info pros, one of the biggest thrills is knowing that, single-handedly, we have built solid, successful businesses. Except for the lucky few who were already luminaries in their field when they started out, most of us didn't

have clients flocking to our door on our first day of business. But gradually, we learned the best ways to attract customers, keep them happy, and build our revenue year after year. We know that we always have competitors, but our clients want to call *us*, and that can be very satisfying.

One of the often-mentioned benefits of being an independent info pro is the ability to manage your workload and have a more family-friendly schedule. I'm not persuaded that this is always a realistic expectation, but it is possible to build more flexibility into your schedule than can be done in a traditional work setting. As you can see from reading Chapter 2, *A Day in the Life of an Independent Info Pro*, I value the ability to take breaks during the day for non-work activities like running with a friend or walking the dogs. Although it's not always feasible and it takes a lot of cooperation on the part of one's family, some independent info pros are able to build their schedules around their children's school schedules—by starting their workday before the kids get up, enforcing the “no talking to me while I'm on the phone” rule, tackling administrative work in the evening, and building a client base that doesn't expect them to be available in the afternoon when school gets out.

### It All Depends ...

A friend and colleague of mine, Alex Kramer, is a public records researcher. Until recently, almost all of her work involved going to courts and other government offices and conducting research in document files. I, on the other hand, almost never need to leave my home office, and do most of my research online. Alex would often tell me that she thought she had the better deal, since she has to stop work at the end of the day when the government offices close. She never got stuck working far into the night; knowing that she could only work during normal business hours meant that she stayed particularly focused during the day.

I would respond to her by saying that I had the better deal, because I could take time off in the middle of the day and make up the time in the evening or during the weekend. “Think of how much more flexibility I have,” I would tell her. “Look at how many nights and weekends you work,” she would respond.

Which type of work schedule works best for you?

Many independent info pros value the freedom to travel and to work from any location. If they have a phone line, they're in business. In fact, on my last vacation to a mountain cabin with my family, I speculated on whether I could run my office from the ranger's look-out station at the top of a nearby mountain peak. A wireless modem and a cell phone would keep me connected to the world. My only problem was that the nearest post office and FedEx drop-off location were several hours away; as wired as I am, I still need to send and receive hard-copy material every few days.

Of course, the advent of global wireless access has its disadvantages for the mobile info pro. We now feel obligated to travel with cell phone and laptop, because our clients expect us to remain in touch even when we're out of the office. On the other hand, we are the ultimate telecommuter. We can work from home. We can use voice mail, e-mail, and pagers to stay in touch while we're traveling. As long as we're willing to stay tied to our electronic leashes, we can look like we are hard at work in the office while we are working on our tans on Maui, or taking the grandchildren to the zoo.

Although I will mention this later as a drawback of being independent, I also consider the opportunity to work from home one of the joys of the business. My clothing budget has dropped to a fraction of what I spent as an employee. My commute is 15 seconds on a bad day. I can throw a load of laundry in the washer while waiting for a document to print. I can take a coffee break and water the yard. In good weather, I can open the door and windows of my office above the garage and hear the birds singing and the gurgle of the waterfall in the fish pond.

One of the most frustrating aspects of working in a traditional job, at least for me, was the bureaucracy that inevitably slowed down innovation and change. If I wanted to introduce a new service, it required meetings, proposals, focus groups, and approvals. A certain amount of structural inertia is built into almost any organization. While that provides stability, it also means that change takes time. As a one- or two-person business, you can turn on a dime. Want to offer a new service to your clients? Institute an e-mail newsletter? Refocus your marketing to a different client base? No problem! You can be fearless in your approach, because you know that you can regroup if you see that something doesn't work. Such flexibility is particularly valuable during economic downturns. If you find that one group of clients has been hit hard by a slowdown in that industry or niche, you can reevaluate your strategy and target another market. If you notice a sudden interest in a particular type of research—pre-employment screening of job applicants, for example, or the ability

to analyze and read between the lines of company Web pages—you can retool and refocus your marketing efforts much more quickly than a larger competitor could.

Another joy of being an independent info pro is the opportunity to meet so many interesting people. My clients come from a wide variety of industries, backgrounds, and countries. Some are fellow entrepreneurs; some are CEOs of large companies; some are well-known in their fields. I would not have met any of them if I weren't running my own business. We independent info pros are often brought in (virtually, if not physically) as part of a team for a specific project. The client benefits from an outside perspective, and we benefit from learning how that organization perceives a problem or an industry issue. Seeing the world from the point of view of a number of clients gives us a depth of perspective that most employees don't have an opportunity to develop.

Related to this is the opportunity to see more of the world as an independent info pro. I was never attracted to jobs that required frequent travel; I'm a homebody at heart. But I love the chance to see the world, at least in short visits. I decided to look for speaking opportunities outside the U.S., in order to meet info pros in other countries and find out how the information industry in other places differed from the U.S. I began sending proposals to conference program committees in countries that I wanted to visit, and I have been fortunate enough to have made it to a number of them. Even if you don't like travel and would prefer to stay put, marketing your services internationally—and, yes, that takes some creativity—allows you to meet and interact with clients throughout the world without leaving your neighborhood.

An entrepreneur doesn't get an annual review (or pay raise) from the boss, and the lack of formal feedback and reinforcement can be difficult for some people. On the other hand, you get a lot of satisfaction from knowing that your clients keep coming back to you because they really like what you do and they're willing to pay you to do it. A related benefit is the supportive note that comes when you least expect it. I send out a free e-mail newsletter and, as I was writing this chapter, I received a message from someone on my distribution list telling me how much she appreciates the newsletter and how grateful she is that I take the time to write it. That kind of response makes my day.

Independent info pros also tend to develop strong bonds with other independents. Although we always maintain client confidentiality, we often bounce ideas and questions off each other and get advice and support from colleagues who have addressed similar problems. As a community, independent info pros are remarkably

supportive; we understand the challenges of running a business, and we know how important encouragement is. We also recognize the need for plenty of other independent info pros in the marketplace—for subcontracting and as referral sources—so we are all invested in the success of each other's businesses.

One of the less-tangible benefits of running your own business is the ability to turn down projects or clients that you just don't want to work with ... within reason, of course. Sooner or later, everyone runs into the Client From Hell—someone who makes unreasonable demands, is consistently rude or abrasive, or represents an organization or cause that, for whatever reason, you would rather not work with. Since you're running the show, you can decide that you simply won't do business with that person. (See Chapter 11, *Managing Your Clients*, for more discussion on this topic.) By the same token, you can decide to discount your rate or donate your services to a nonprofit or charitable organization that you do support. Being able to incorporate your personal values into your business can be a gratifying aspect of entrepreneurship.

### The Chills of Being an Independent Info Pro

The thrills of running your own business sound great, don't they? Generally, it is—otherwise, we wouldn't keep doing it. But there are some less appealing aspects of this profession. A lot depends on your own tolerance for risk and uncertainty, whether or not you need external structure to work most efficiently, and whether you can ride out the highs and lows of running a business. But talk to any independent info pro long enough, and you'll probably hear most of what I'm about to say.

Perhaps the hardest part of being independent is that fact that you're *it*. You *are* the company. You have to do the strategic planning, the marketing, the client management, and the administrative work, as well as providing the actual information services. You have to take responsibility for all the difficult decisions and for the occasional really bad error in judgment (yes, it happens to all of us sooner or later). There will be times when no work has come in for a week or two, and you start wondering if this whole information-business thing was just a horrible mistake. There will be times when you wish you had someone else to share the responsibilities and decisions. And there will be times when you suffer burnout, when you are sick of what you do, tired of always having to hustle for new clients, and longing for the security of a steady paycheck. It happens to all of us—usually not for long periods,

but it can feel crippling when it hits. As I mentioned earlier, your info pro colleagues will offer sympathy and encouragement; that is what has always kept me going. But you do have to be willing to reach out for help, which is hard for some people to do.

Related to the need to ask for support from fellow info entrepreneurs when things get rough, some people need the structure of the workplace. They are energized by the bustle and noise of a busy office, they like being able to wander down the hall to bounce an idea off a co-worker, and they're accustomed to going out to lunch with friends or business associates. When you're an independent info pro, you can e-mail a colleague or pick up the phone and talk to a friend, but you don't have regular face-to-face contact with co-workers. Some independents address this issue by developing a business that lets them work on-site with clients—perhaps the best of both worlds. They are in the workplace but not of it, as it were.

Although I consider the ability to work from home an advantage of the profession, it does have its drawbacks. It took a while to teach the neighbors that I really was working even though I was home and dressed casually, and that I wasn't necessarily free to stop and chat. Some colleagues tell me that they find it difficult to focus on work when they know that there's laundry or housework to do. Personally, I'd much rather do research than housework, but I'll take their word that this can be a distraction.

Independent info pros who must take care of children or elderly parents struggle with the need to separate work from home. In most cases, this means hiring someone to come in and handle the caregiving during work hours; trying to juggle work with family-member responsibilities means that neither your clients nor your loved ones get the attention they need.

Running your own business means conducting a fearless self-evaluation at least once a year, to assess your strengths and weaknesses and to figure out how to take advantage of the former and either address or accommodate the latter. You're not expected to be perfect, but you must know yourself well enough to recognize what you don't do well, and then either improve or outsource those jobs. In general, hire outside help for those tasks that are generic and outside the primary focus of your business, such as invoicing, paying bills, designing a brochure or logo, or upgrading your hardware or software. These are all jobs that require specific skills but don't directly involve the operation or direction of your business—as long as you keep an eye on what the person you've hired is doing. On the other hand, high-contact, high-visibility responsibilities such as talking with clients, estimating and selling projects,

and marketing yourself and your services usually cannot be handed off to a third party. These activities go to the very heart of what you do; if you feel that you're weak in one of these areas, focus on developing your skills by taking a professional development course, reading up on the subject, or working with a job coach. See the checklist "With a Little Help from My Friends" for a list of what can and can't easily be delegated to someone outside your business.

### With a Little Help from My Friends

Nobody's perfect at all aspects of running an info pro business. Some tasks can be contracted out fairly easily; others are more difficult to delegate.

What's easy to contract out:

- ◆ Accounting
- ◆ Collections
- ◆ Design and writing of marketing material
- ◆ Web page design
- ◆ Computer maintenance and purchasing
- ◆ Specific types of research at which you're not expert

What's difficult to contract out:

- ◆ Strategic planning
- ◆ Marketing
- ◆ Client contact
- ◆ Estimating cost and time for projects

One of the challenges that almost every independent info pro faces is pricing and cash flow. (I address this in detail in Chapter 12, Money, Money, Money and Chapter 13, Setting Rates and Fees.) Even after many years in business, you will probably find

that some months you're flush with cash and some months (usually, it seems, just before you have to pay your income taxes) you're running low. Besides the obvious need to bank surplus income in anticipation of the lean times, it takes a strong stomach to ride out those periods when you've sent invoices out but none of the checks have come in.

Pricing your services is the other financial-related aspect of the business that many info pros find difficult. Quoting a four- or five-figure estimate for a job can be hard, particularly when you don't know what your competitors are charging or offering. In general, we info pros tend to undercharge, relative to what clients pay for other high-value professional services such as attorneys or strategic planning consultants. Knowing how much to charge, accurately estimating what the market will bear, and setting a price that appropriately reflects the expertise and value we offer is a challenge for many of us.

Related to pricing and cash flow is the issue of marketing. Independent info pros always have to market. When you start out, you will probably spend 90 percent of your time marketing yourself and your business. For some people, this is the most difficult part of running a business: "How can I tell people how great I am without sounding conceited or pompous?" Section Three goes into marketing issues in depth; the short answer here is that running an independent info pro business means being able to look at yourself as a brand, a product, a business. This never stops. Even after you have been in business for five or ten years, you still need to market yourself—although the amount of time you spend on marketing will drop to 20 or 30 percent.

Vacation and business-related travel pose problems for independent info pros. For starters, there is no such thing as a paid vacation for the self-employed. (That's not quite true; I have sometimes arranged to subcontract jobs when I go on vacation, so I do earn the difference between what the subcontractor charges me and what I bill the client. But most vacations mean zero income.) A bigger challenge is what you do with your clients while you're away. Yes, you can try to stay in touch while you are on the road. With call forwarding, cell phones, pagers, and e-mail, you can respond fairly quickly if a client wants to get in touch with you. But is that any way to enjoy your vacation? One reason I look forward to my annual backpacking trip to the Rocky Mountains is that I am unreachable there. If they ever put cell phone towers in Wyoming's Wind River backcountry, I'll have to plan my vacation for some even more remote wilderness.



For those times when you are out of your office and not able to respond quickly to clients' information needs, what do you do? There is no perfect solution, and it is inevitable that some clients will be dissatisfied, particularly those who are accustomed to having researchers available on-call, 24 hours a day. Some independent info pros develop relationships with colleagues, then forward their phones or leave outgoing voice-mail messages directing callers to call "my associate" or "my colleague." Others use their travel plans as an opportunity to contact all their regular clients, tell them that the office will be closed, and suggest that they take care of their anticipated information requests right away. And some hardy souls do attempt to give the impression that they are in the office, even when they aren't. But, as hard as you try, you can't offer the same degree of service that a large company can; sometimes you just can't get back to the client immediately. And that means you will lose clients who expect their info pros to be available 24/7/365.

### The Best and Worst of Being an Independent Info Pro

Before you launch your own business, think about whether, for you, the "bests" outweigh the "worsts":

**BEST:**

- ◆ Pride of ownership; being responsible for the success of your business
- ◆ Flexibility about where, when, and how you work
- ◆ Meeting and developing relationships with a wide variety of clients and colleagues
- ◆ Freedom from bureaucracy

**WORST:**

- ◆ Stress of ownership; being responsible for the success of your business
- ◆ Needing to be available whenever your clients need you
- ◆ Cash flow fluctuations
- ◆ Constant need to market yourself and your business