An excerpt from *Company of One*

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Published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, hmhco.com

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Prologue

On February 28, 2010 — the final day of the Winter Olympics in Vancouver — I found myself driving a tiny cube-van with my wife, Lisa, heading to a ferry terminal. We had just closed on the sale of our condo, a small glass box in the sky located right in the heart of downtown Vancouver. We had also sold or donated almost all of our possessions, and we were moving to a town in the middle of nowhere, literally at the end of the road on Vancouver Island.

Our new town — Tofino — was proudly billed as "life on the edge." As in truly the edge of nowhere. This island is the setting for the reality TV show *Alone,* where the actors grapple with living and surviving in complete isolation; it's filmed a few hours north of town. Fewer than 2,000 people live in Tofino — mostly surfers, old draft dodgers, and other assorted hippies who are still very happy living in the twentieth century.

At the time — before, after, and even during the move — I was working entirely online as a designer and online business consultant to everyone from Mercedes-Benz to Microsoft to Marie Forleo. My work and life depended on being hyperconnected. But now I was trading all of that for a town with zero other people involved in tech and, even worse, a really awful internet connection.

In short, for someone like myself who was coming from the tech world, this move was going to be a *bit* of a massive adjustment.

The main reason I was hell-bent on leaving civilization was that I had simply had enough of “business as usual” city life and the constant push from others to grow my successful business into something bigger. My wife, Lisa, too, was sick of her daily career demands. We were both done with the constant stimulus and stress of our urban existence — the lights, sounds, and distractions, the constant and incessant “buzzing.” To save our sanity, we made our escape as quickly as we possibly could. And living on Vancouver Island seemed like the perfect tonic.

Yet we soon learned that living in the woods on an island does something funny — it forces you to go deep within your own thoughts. There’s not a whole lot else you can do, especially if you don’t have a television or even Netflix. And at first, exploring your own thoughts is one of the scariest things in the world. (A study at the University of Virginia by Timothy Wilson found that people would rather get electric shocks than simply be alone with their thoughts.) But then again, if you sit with your thoughts for a while, they can reveal some mind-set-changing ideas.

But scaling down wasn’t just a plan for getting rid of our physical belongings; it was also a plan for achieving mental clarity. In creating a personal life that was bare of all but the essentials, parallels to my work started to become evident — what was truly necessary and what wasn’t. By decluttering my thoughts (creating an “inbox zero” for my brain, if you will), I was able to look at my day-to-day business much more clearly because the distractions were now gone. I hadn’t been able to clearly express my reasons for the way I had been working until that moment.

This clarity highlighted something I had unconsciously been doing for nearly twenty years, even before going out on my own, and that was building a business full of resilience, driven by a desire for autonomy and, on most days, enjoyment. In other words, by scaling down every aspect of my life, I realized this was how I had successfully built my business all along. I had benefited immensely by resisting the typical avenues of growth and business expansion. (Hey, I was able to move to the woods on an island.) And now, for the very first time, I understood why.

I had been building a company of one.

INTRODUCING A COMPANY OF ONE

At first, I felt alone in my assumption that more isn't always better. But then, during the writing of this book, I found that there is an amassing army of others who feel very much the same, and whose business decisions are backed up with growing research and studies. It turns out that some of the most successful brand-name companies and individuals are companies of one at heart.

Living in Tofino gave me the opportunity to take up a daily ritual of going for a morning surf. One day I was out in the lineup (the place just in front of the breaking waves where surfers wait to catch rides) with my accountant friend. We were sitting out there, waiting for the next decent wave, and he turned to me and said, "I'm stoked! I've just about made enough to take the rest of the year off to go rock climbing." It was August. Puzzled by what he said, I missed the next few waves that rolled by. Once he paddled back to the lineup, where I still was, he explained that he had calculated what he needed to make in profit in order to cover his cost of living and put a decent amount of money into investments. He had figured out the amount of wealth he needed to be comfortable and didn't feel the need to accumulate more.

Past that, he didn't need any more money — so he'd stop working when he hit his "enough" amount and travel for the rest of the year. He didn't want to grow his accounting business into a bigger company with employees and offices in every city. If he did, his "enough" number would also grow, from having to manage more employees and a bigger business. He wouldn't be able to spend as much time rock climbing (or surfing). His focus in his business was being better, not growing bigger. I quickly began to realize that I had adopted a similar mind-set: I knew what I needed to make to cover my business and my life, so I could decide to slow down when I reached "enough" as well.

It's assumed that hard work and smart thinking always result in business growth. But the opposite is often true: not all growth is beneficial, and some growth can actually reduce your resilience and your autonomy. Just as I learned new skills in self-sufficiency that were far outside my realm of knowledge, companies of one can do the same. Indeed, they'll need to in order to stand out and thrive.

In truth, embracing growth appears to be the easier route more often than not, since it's easier to throw "more" at any problem that might pop up. Want more customers? *Hire more employees.* Need more revenue? *Spend more.* Fielding more support requests? *Build a bigger support team.* But scaling up might not be the best or smartest solution to the basic problem. As a means to generating higher profits, what if you acquired more customers simply by creating more efficiency, so you didn't have to hire more people? What if you generated more revenue by finding a way to spend less (again, for higher profits)? What if you responded to the growth in support requests by finding a better way to teach your customers how to use what you sell, so they didn't have to ask questions as often? What if you didn't have to work more hours to finish a project but just more efficiently, so you could then enjoy more of your life away from work?

Growth, in the typical business sense, isn't always a smart strategy if it's followed blindly. Much of the research reported in this book will strongly suggest that blind growth is the main cause of business problems. It can leave you with an unmaintainable number of employees, unsustainable costs, and more work than hours in a day. It can force you to lay off employees, sell your company at a less than optimal price, or, even worse, close up shop completely.

What if you worked instead toward growing smaller, smarter, more efficient, and more resilient?

Staying small doesn't have to be a stepping-stone to something else, or the result of a business failure — rather, it can be an end goal or a smart long-term strategy. The point of being a company of one is to become better in ways that don't incur the typical setbacks of growth. You can scale up revenue, enjoyment, raving fans, focus, autonomy, and experiences while resisting the urge to blindly scale up employee payroll, expenses, and stress levels. This approach builds both a profit buffer for your company to weather markets and a personal buffer to help you thrive even in times of hardship.

The "company of one" approach doesn't apply only to a single-person business — it's a model for using the power of you to be more self-reliant and more responsible for your own career path. Although a company of one can certainly be a small or single-person business, it's unlike most small businesses, whose end game is usually expansion or growth to hit peak profitability. A company of one questions growth and stays small on purpose.

A company of one isn't simply a practicing freelancer either. While freelancing is a perfect first step to becoming a company of one, freelancers are different because they exchange time for money. Whether they're getting paid by the hour or by deliverables, if they're not working, they're not getting paid. All of a freelancer's relationships are one-to-one, meaning that each time paid work occurs, a freelancer has to do something and use his or her time.

In contrast, a company of one is more in line with the traditional definition of an entrepreneur. If you're utilizing systems, automations, and processes to build a long-term business, you're not trading time for money, but instead operating and profiting outside of the time you spend working and beyond your one-to-one relationships. For example, whether you're creating physical products, selling software, or teaching online courses, customers and users can purchase and consume these products and services without your company of one putting in time for each transaction. While developing products can be time-consuming and iterative, the number of customers can be almost infinite for a company of one, and profit then happens outside of time spent. Where a company of one is concerned, as we'll see in coming chapters, scaling customers and even profit doesn't always require scaling employees or resources exponentially.

A company of one is a collective mind-set and model that can be used by anyone, from a small business owner to a corporate leader, to take ownership and responsibility for what they do to become a valuable asset in any marketplace — in terms of both mental practices and business applications. It's a blueprint for growing a lean and agile business that can survive every type of economic climate, and ultimately it leads to a richer and more meaningful life — no cable-cutting or moving to the woods on an island required.

Just as Michael Pollan's food ideology is summarized in three simple rules — "eat food, not too much, mostly plants" — the "company of one" model can be laid out in a similar fashion: "start small, define growth, and keep learning."

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Defining a Company of One

IN THE FALL OF 2010, Tom Fishburne quit his seemingly great career as the vice president of marketing at a large consumer foods company. He wanted to draw cartoons. This turned out to be Tom's best career move — both emotionally and, surprisingly, financially.

He wasn't just following his passion on a whim, nor did he become some sort of anti-capitalist hippie. He carefully planned out and executed his decision to ensure, as much as anyone could, that he would thrive.

As a child, Tom was obsessed with drawing cartoons — so much so that he would take his doctor father's prescription pad and draw flip-books on the back.

Then, at Harvard, while working toward his MBA, his friends prompted him to submit cartoons to the campus paper, the *Harbus,* which he did for the rest of the time he was at school. Still, once finished with school, he took a job in the corporate world, because it seemed like the logical next step after receiving a business degree. Tom was also part of the SITCOM demographic (Single Income Two Children Oppressive Mortgage), so he figured he needed a "stable" job. Cartooning remained a hobby, however, and he would share with coworkers his cartoons poking fun at corporate marketing — the very industry he was now part of.

As Tom worked his corporate job and his cartoons were shared by his friends, and then by their friends, and then outside their circle, they started to garner attention. He began taking on side jobs to draw during the evenings and weekends for companies that were eager to pay him. It wasn't until he had a safe runway of such clients lined up, and money saved up, that he pulled the trigger to leave his corporate career and start his own venture.

In the seven years since quitting, Tom has made two to three times more income as a cartoonist than when he was an executive. This didn't happen because he grew an agency, or hired more employees, or expanded to having satellite offices around the globe. His company, Marketoon, is still just he and his wife, along with a few freelancers who work only on isolated projects. Tom and his wife work from home, in a sunny studio in their backyard in Marin County, California, where their two daughters regularly sit and draw cartoons in the afternoon with them.

Traditionally in business, growth has always been seen as a byproduct of success. But Tom doesn't care much for how things are supposed to work. He knows the rules of business — he studied at one of the top schools in the world, then put that knowledge to work at a massive corporation. He just wasn't interested in following those conventional rules.

Typically, when a company does well, it hires more people, builds more infrastructure, and works at increasing its bottom line. There's a core assumption that growth is always good, is always unlimited, and is required for success. Anything else is pushed aside as not being a top priority. If Tom had grown his company, even though he has a waiting list of clients wanting to hire him, he'd have less time to draw cartoons (as he'd be too busy managing cartoonists) and would have far less time with his family in their backyard studio. For Tom, that kind of growth wouldn't be smart or logical. It would go against what he values in his life and in his career.

Consumer culture says the same thing — that more is always better. Through advertising, we're sold a bill of goods that requires us to love the things we buy only until a newer or bigger version is put out for sale. Bigger houses, faster cars, more stuff to pack into our closets, garages, and then, inevitably, our storage lockers. But under this hype, this fetishization of wanting more, are empty promises of happiness and fulfillment that never seem to come to fruition. Sometimes "enough" or even less is all we need, since "more" too often equates to more stress, more problems, and more responsibilities in both life and business.

We can easily run a business with less, although to many people that seems counterintuitive. Tom doesn't have to worry about human resources, rent for office space, salaries, or even the responsibility of managing employees. He hires outside people only when a paying project requires them, and they too have other clients and other work; they can fend for themselves when they're not working on a job for Marketoon.

Tom has been able to create a stable, long-term business that's small enough to handle any economic climate, resilient enough to not have to lean too heavily on a single project or client, and autonomous enough to let him build a life around his work (not the other way around). He's been able to grow his revenue without having to also grow the trappings that typically come with it. He's a brilliant businessperson who gets to spend every day with his family, drawing cartoons, with his daughters, for multinational companies that pay him much more than most illustrators earn.

In short, Tom is the perfect example of a company of one.

A COMPANY OF ONE, DEFINED

A company of one is simply a business that *questions* growth.

A company of one resists and questions some forms of traditional growth, not on principle, but because growth isn't always the most beneficial or financially viable move. It can be a small business owner or a small group of founders. Employees, executive leaders, board members, and corporate leaders who want to work with more autonomy and self-sufficiency can adopt the principles of a company of one as well. In fact, if big businesses want to keep their brightest minds in their employ, they should look to adopt some of the principles of companies of one.

I've personally seen the most success in my life when I've figured out solutions to problems without having to do what traditional businesses do to solve problems — hire more people, throw more money at the problem, or build complex infrastructures to support the extra employees. Basically, I'm not interested in addressing problems by throwing "more" at them. Solving with "more" means more complexity, more costs, more responsibilities, and typically more expenses. More is generally the easiest answer, but not the smartest. I've found both delight and financial benefits in working out solutions to problems without growing. Instead, I and many others enjoy handling problems with the resources currently available. Although it can require a little more ingenuity, solving problems this way can set a business up for long-term stability, since less is needed to keep it afloat.

In October 2016, I wrote a blog post saying I wasn't interested in exponentially growing any company I own or build. I felt like the single red fish in a school of green ones. But then an interesting thing happened: replies started to pour in. People doing all sorts of exciting things in business, from selling fair-trade caramels to working at the biggest tech companies to manufacturing clothing, emailed me that they felt the same way—they had resisted traditional growth and had benefited from it. As I started to develop my own ideas around this concept of staying small and questioning growth, I continued to discover more and more research, stories, and examples of others doing the same. I found that there's a silent movement to approach business in this way that isn't just for cash-strapped tech startups or people who make just enough to scrape by. This movement includes individuals and businesses making six and seven figures and becoming happier than most businesspeople are with the work they do. The school of red fish is, ironically enough, growing.

THE RISE OF COMPANIES OF ONE

Technically, everyone should be a company of one.

Even at a large corporation, you're essentially the only person who looks out for your own best interests and continued employment. No one else cares about you keeping your job as much as you do. It's your responsibility to define and achieve your own success, even in a larger framework of employment.

It can be harder to be a company of one within a corporation, but it's not impossible. Companies of one within organizations can thrive and even be responsible for massive progress. Over the years these individuals have been credited with everything from inventing Post-it notes to developing Sony's PlayStation.

The word "intrapreneur" points to one example of a company of one within a larger organization. It describes corporate leaders who come up with their own goals and then execute them. They don't need much direction, micromanaging, or oversight, as they've been given full work autonomy. They know what needs doing and they just do it. They're aware of the needs of the company and how their talents fit, and they just get to work.

Where the term "intrapreneur" varies from a company of one is that intrapreneurs are typically responsible for product creation and marketing — that is, creating something new, with the resources of the company behind them. Companies of one within organizations don't need to be managers or create products — they simply need to find suitable ways to become better and more productive, without more resources or team members. They can certainly be managers or product creators, but that's not the only definition.

Companies of one within larger corporations have a history of helping large corporations make breakthroughs and dominate markets. Dave Myers, who worked for W. L. Gore and Associates, the company that makes GoreTex fabric, was given "dabble" time to develop new ideas within the company and ultimately came up with the idea to use a kind of coating they were already manufacturing on guitar strings. The result was the best-selling acoustic guitar string brand, Elixir (the strings I use on my guitars — they're head and shoulders above the competition). Sometimes companies of one happen by accident. Dr. Spencer Silver, a scientist at 3M, was working to create an adhesive for aerospace. In playing with the formula, he created a lighter adhesive that didn't leave any residue. It wouldn't work for planes, but it was perfect for paper products, and thus Post-it notes were born.

Some large corporations, like Google, give their employees "personal time" to experiment with ideas outside their typical job roles. Facebook uses "hackathons," which typically last several days and bring together computer programmers to collaborate on something big in a relatively short amount of time. It was a hackathon that led to the creation of Facebook's "Like" button, which arguably connects its ecosystem to the rest of the internet.

In a recent study, Vijay Govindarajan, a professor at Dartmouth, found that for every 5,000 employees, at least 250 will be true innovators and 25 will be innovators and great intrapreneurs (or companies of one) as well.

Many large corporations have companies of one hiding within them. If the skills and passion for innovation and autonomy of these employees are fostered, it can greatly benefit the entire business as a whole. But if they are stifled in their creativeness and freethinking, they tend to move on quickly to other employment or entrepreneurialism. They're rarely motivated solely by money or salaries and lean more toward reinventing their job and role in a way that works best for them.

If you're a company of one, your mind-set is to build your business around *your* life, not the other way around. For me, being a company of one means not having to bother with infinite growth, since that was never the purpose of my working. Instead, I just focus on maximizing work in a way that works for me, which can sometimes mean doing less. Work can be done at a pace that suits my sanity rather than one that supports costly overhead, expenses, or salaries. As much as I enjoy growing my wealth, I also realize that there's a point of diminishing returns if I don't also take care of myself and my well-being.

Society has ingrained in us a very particular idea of what success in business looks like. You work as many hours as possible, and when your business starts to do well, you scale everything up in every direction. To this day, this strategy is considered what it takes to be a success in business — solving problems by adding "more" to the solution. Anyone who stays small, in this line of thinking, hasn't done well enough to add "more" to the mix. But what if we challenge this way of thinking in business? What if staying small is what a company does when it's figured out how to solve problems without adding "more" to them?

Growth, especially blind growth, isn't the best solution to any problem a business might face. And going further, growing your business might actually be the worst decision you could make for the longevity of your business.

So a company of one is not anti-growth, or anti-revenue, and it's not just a one-person business either (although it certainly can be). It's also not just working with a tech-focused or startup mind-set, although leaning on technology, automation, and the connectedness of the internet definitely makes it easier to be a company of one. A company of one questions growth first, and then resists it if there's a better, smarter way forward.

Next, let's look at the four typical traits of all companies of one: resilience, autonomy, speed, and simplicity.

Resilience

Danielle LaPorte, a best-selling author and self-made entrepreneur, reaches millions of people each month with her message of conscious goal-setting and entrepreneurship and is one of Oprah's (yes, *that* Oprah) "Super Soul 100" leaders. But in the beginning, she was fired by the very CEO she had hired months earlier.

In believing that exponential growth was required for her business (more on this in Chapter 2), she took $400,000 in funding from private investors with the provision that she had to hire a "*wunderkind* CEO" to run the business. So she incorporated and hired a thought-to-be superstar.

But six months later, the investors and CEO wanted to change the business model, which meant relegating Danielle's role to just a few blog posts a month and substantially decreasing her pay. Note: named after her, the business was a personality-driven brand based on her own unique personality and style.

Once Danielle got over the supreme shock of what happened, which involved a lot of yoga, tears, and good friends, she began to bounce back. She brought on a new team of A-players, created a website within a few weeks, and figured out the fastest way to start making money on her own with a new business that she had full control over. She began offering consulting services that became so popular that she had to create a waiting list, and then she wrote a best-selling book.

In all the success of her new website, she realized that the strings attached to other people's money are often those other people's opinions about your business and your life. In hardship, she was able to find her path to becoming a company of one. Being or becoming a company of one has a lot to do with resilience: the capacity and fortitude to recover quickly from difficulties — like a changing job market, or being fired. Like a shift in a larger company's focus, or the need to adapt to new disruptive technology — or even to avoid being replaced by robots. (No, this book isn't a taking a turn toward sci-fi . . . more on this in a second.)

Dean Becker, the CEO of Adaptiv Learning Systems, has been researching and developing programs around the idea of resilience since 1997. His company found that the level of resilience a person exhibits determines their success in business, far more than their level of education, training, or experience. Contrary to popular belief, resilience isn't something that only a select few are born with. It can most definitely be learned. Resilient people possess three — absolutely learnable — characteristics.

The first trait that resilient people have is *an acceptance of reality*. They don't need for things to be a certain way and don't engage in wishful thinking. Instead of imagining "if only this changed, I could thrive," they have a down-to-earth view that most of what happens in our lives is not entirely within our control and the best we can do is to steer the boat a little as we float down the river of life. For example, I'm not going to stop writing today because my neighbor is using his deafening chainsaw. Rather, I'm just going to close my window, turn on some electronic music, and get back to work. Danielle LaPorte didn't throw in the towel after being fired; instead, she took a minute, regrouped, then started again.

Often, it's easier to accept reality with a bit of dark humor. My wife, a firefighter and first responder, regularly jokes around with her department because they're routinely exposed to the worst day of someone's life — houses burning down, heart attacks, even chainsaw accidents. Their humor is a way of coping that her fire chief actively encourages, not to make light of bad situations, but to *add* a sense of light to bad situations. Their sense of humor is just as important as their ability to save lives and put out fires. However crass it might sound to an outsider, dark humor helps first responders and firefighters accept their reality and therefore keeps them resilient in doing their essential work.

The second characteristic of resilient people is a sense of *purpose* — being motivated by a sense of meaning rather than by just money. Although purpose and money are not mutually exclusive, you're more likely to be resilient when you know that even in awful or stressful situations, you're working toward a greater and larger good. This sense of purpose comes from values that are unchangeable and central to both individuals and companies as a whole. Companies of one know that they can enjoy their work without always enjoying every aspect of it. So, even if work is sometimes stressful, as long as it relates to a greater whole or a greater end result, that tough work is worth it in the end. For example, you may get stressed out on the day you launch a new product or land a new client, but if the product or the client aligns with the purpose of your business, that momentary anxiety is worth it, since not every day will be nearly as stressful.

The last trait of resilient people in a company of one is *the ability to adapt* when things change — because they invariably do. In Canada, 42 percent of jobs are at risk, according to Ryerson University, from advances in automation, and 62 percent of jobs in America will be in danger within the next ten to twenty years, according to the White House's Council of Economic Advisers in 2016. As much as we can joke about "welcoming our robot overlords" (a memorable quote from the 1977 film adaptation of H. G. Wells's short story "Empire of the Ants"), the threat is real. McDonald's has a robot that can flip a burger in ten seconds and could replace an entire crew within a few years. Tesla and other companies are working on self-driving big rigs to replace truckers for long-range cargo delivery. Highly skilled jobs are also at risk: IBM's Watson, for instance, can suggest available treatments for specific ailments, drawing on the body of medical research and data on disease.

However, what's difficult to automate is exactly what makes a company of one great: the ability to creatively solve problems in new and unique ways without throwing "more" at the problem. Whereas workers in "doing" roles can be replaced by robots or even by other workers, the role of creatively solving difficult problems is more dependent on an irreplaceable individual. Regardless of the rise of the so-called robot overlords, this is where the strength of a company of one lies.

A company of one sees coming shifts like the above and can pivot. For example, an interior designer may spend less time measuring and ordering supplies and more time creating innovative design concepts based on a unique client's needs. Or a financial adviser may spend less time analyzing a client's financial situation and more time understanding the client's particular needs and teaching them how best to manage their money.

These industry disruptions or market changes aren't a sky-is-falling scenario — they're truly just opportunities to redefine work and adapt to changes. When I was doing web design full-time, each time an economic bubble burst or a recession hit I found myself in a great place to find more jobs because I could offer the quality of work a larger agency could provide, but at a price that had one less zero in it. And not only was I still making more profit than if I had been salaried at an agency, but I could still make the most of the price I was charging because my overhead was almost nothing past having a computer and writing off the second bedroom in a rented condo. And then, when the economy picked back up, agencies were so busy that they had to farm out work, which I was available for. So either way, I had a model for revenue that larger agencies couldn't have replicated without scaling down immensely.

Improvising when change happens or when difficulties arise in the market allows you to make do with what's at hand, without having to add "more" into the mix — as in, more employees, more expenses, or more infrastructure.

These traits for resilience are absolutely learnable, not just inherent. In fact, they must be learned, and then fostered, if you are creating a company of one.

Autonomy and Control

Companies of one are becoming more popular because people want more control and autonomy in their lives, especially when it comes to their careers. This is why so many people are choosing this path: being a company of one lets you control your own life and your job.

But to achieve autonomy as a company of one, you have to be a master at your core skill set. Competence and autonomy are tied together because the opposite — having complete control but not a clue what you're doing — is a recipe for disaster. So just as Tom commanded a knowledge of marketing from his Harvard MBA education and subsequent corporate marketing job, as well as a talent for drawing that he had fostered since childhood and worked at weekly, you have to have a skill set, or a combination of skills, that's in demand. With a well-developed skill set, you'll know what areas will benefit from growth and what potential places for growth don't make sense.

Basically, you have to be good at your skill set before you can expect to achieve autonomy from using it.

Typically, you can't acquire this mastery without putting in some time at the beginning of your career in a job that's less autonomous, offers less control, and requires less resilience, since you're managed by the whims of someone higher up. Companies of one know how to break standard rules for the greater good. Doing so is tricky, however, as it involves learning the rules first. In the beginning, a pre–company of one adopts the mind-set of a sponge — basically, you learn everything you can about your profession, your industry, and your customers, and you work at collecting valuable skills of your trade.

Corporations that excel at creating autonomy for their best employees often empower them to become something like companies of one: these employees work faster and more ingeniously, and they use fewer resources. For example, Google gives its engineers "20 percent time": they can work on whatever project they want for 20 percent of their time. More than half of the products and projects Google releases were created during this 20 percent time.

Other companies set up ROWEs (Results-Only Work Environments), in which employees don't have set schedules, all meetings are optional, and it's entirely up to employees how they spend their time working. They can choose to work from home, they can work from 2:00 AM to 6:00 AM if it suits them, and they can sculpt their job however they want, as long as the results benefit the company as a whole. Cali Ressler and Jody Thompson have defined and then studied ROWE implementations for over a decade, and they find that in these kinds of autonomous environments, productivity goes up, employee satisfaction goes up, and turnover goes down.

For entrepreneurs or those working for themselves, autonomy may seem easier to achieve but can come with several pitfalls. Often when you start working for yourself you trade micromanaging bosses for micromanaging clients. The solution to finding better clients and better projects has a lot to do with your skill and experience, just as I mentioned at the start of this section. When you're starting out and your skills aren't as developed, you won't be able to lead projects or be too picky about the type of work you do. But as your expertise increases and your network grows, you can land better clients — the kind who listen more carefully to how you would do what they're paying you to do — and you can be more selective about the types of customers and projects you want to take on.

Kaitlin Maud, a digital strategist and currently a freelancer, put in her time developing her skills at an agency for five years. She spent that time learning the ropes of her industry as well as building a solid network of contacts, with whom she actively kept in touch. Just like Tom the cartoonist, she didn't venture out on her own until she had enough freelance projects to bring in a relatively stable side income.

Kaitlin thinks that a sense of autonomy looks different on everyone. She herself has created a work life that rewards her for getting her work done quickly. In a typical company, regardless of how quickly you work, you're still required to be there for a set number of hours a day; in other words, there's no reward for productivity or efficiency. Kaitlin has also found that she's able to get work done with more focus from 9:00 AM to 1:00 PM, so she doesn't schedule meetings or calls during that window of time.

According to a study from Upwork, freelancing now accounts for more than one-third of jobs in America. Like Kaitlin, people are increasingly *choosing* to go freelance — that is, they're not using freelance work as a fallback because their job disappeared. Freelancing makes up almost half the jobs being done by younger people, who are choosing to freelance in hopes of gaining more control over their career path. As a society, we're gradually starting to view "work" not as a single place of employment, but as a series of engagements or projects. The millennial generation in particular views the traditional aspiration to a corporate job in an office as something like a satirical sitcom, à la *The Office,* than something they wish to strive for.

With a stable of side project clients and a vast network of contacts in hand, Kaitlin left her agency job and started to freelance full-time. When she started, she first worked at leveling up her skill set before focusing on becoming more autonomous. Since going solo, she's had a steady waiting list, regularly has to turn down projects that are a fit for her values, and has worked with some large companies like Beats by Dre, Taco Bell, Adobe, and Toms. Her work, because she put in the time to become great at it, now revolves around her life. She can focus entirely on the type of work she loves, solving problems with creative solutions online — basically, Kaitlin is the Olivia Pope (of *Scandal* fame) of the internet. She fixes things that no one else can — and she's well on her way to becoming her own company of one.

Sol Orwell, a fellow Canadian, has refused venture capital for his very profitable business, Examine.com, because he doesn't see an upside in relinquishing control to venture capitalists. He doesn't need cash — his company makes seven figures per year. He isn't looking for a quick out or trying to sell — he enjoys his work a great deal. As a majority owner, he doesn't have to answer to anyone except his paying customers. Sol would rather have ownership of his work and the freedom to not have to fill every minute of every day with his job. Success to him means making a great living, but not at the expense of being able to take long midday breaks to walk his dog or attend hourlong dance classes on a Wednesday afternoon.

But bear this in mind: achieving control over a company of one requires more than just using the core skill you are hired for. It also requires proficiency at sales, marketing, project management, and client retention. Whereas most normal corporate workers can be hyperfocused on a single skill, companies of one, even within a larger business, need to be generalists who are good at several things — often all at once.

Speed

Companies of one work best under constraints — because that's where creativity and ingenuity thrive. Companies like Basecamp have a four-day workweek during the summer (no work on Fridays) because it helps them prioritize what's important to work on and what they can let go of. The key for their employees is to figure out how to work smarter to accomplish tasks with the time they've got, not just harder. Companies of one question their systems, processes, and structure to become more efficient and to achieve more with the same number of employees and fewer hours of work.

On the company intranet, Basecamp has a "weekend check-in" where employees can post photos of what they did on their three days off from work. This helps this remote-based company build connections between its employees, who are spread all over the globe.

Speed is not merely about frantically working faster. It's about figuring out the best way to accomplish a task with new and efficient methods. This is the concept at work in the ROWE method: employees no longer have to work a set amount of time, but are rewarded when they finish their tasks faster. By being smarter at getting more work done faster when you work for yourself, you can create a more flexible schedule that fits work into your life in better ways.

Tasks that used to take Kaitlin days to accomplish in the open-office environment of the agency she worked at now take her only a few hours, because she's figured out what needs to be in place to maximize her productivity. This gives her the space in her workday, when she's not at peak productivity, to head to the gym or spend time with her newborn daughter. She's able to accomplish eight hours of agency work in four hours of freelance work, freeing up half her day. She still works hard and sometimes has to work much longer as project deadlines loom, but she enjoys the reality that most of the time on her schedule is her own.

Another aspect of speed in a company of one is the ability to pivot quickly when a customer base or market changes. As a solo worker or small company, a company of one finds this much easier to do, because it has less infrastructure to cut through.

So speed works to the advantage of companies of one not only because they're able to pivot when needed, and far faster, but also because they have less of the corporate mass that often gets in the way. Stewart Butterfield started out developing online games, like Game Neverending and Glitch. Both games failed to gain enough of an audience to become profitable, but both times Stewart was able to pivot his (then) small teams, pluck key features from the games, and spin them off into their own products — the photo-sharing site Flickr and Slack, an internal chat system that is now worth over $1 billion. Facing the limitations of both time and money running out, Stewart's teams managed to hyperfocus on a single solution and bring it to market. By keeping his company small and by paying attention to what was working and what wasn't, he was able to quickly move to spin-offs that ultimately netted great gains.

When I asked Danielle LaPorte if she'd take funding again for a new business idea, she said no. She'd learned that not accepting outside funding allowed her to move faster. Instead, she said, she would quickly release a first version of a new product that would fund iterations on it, keeping her costs and expenses as low as possible in order to move toward profitability as quickly as possible. The fewer staff and less external funding involved, the faster a company can move, whether forward or in a new, more promising direction.

Simplicity

The best example of the power of simplicity comes from two rival social bookmarking services, Pinboard and Delicious. Delicious grew quickly, adding lots of features, and its founder, Joshua Schachter, made investments early on and grew Delicious into a company with approximately 5.3 million users. The company was sold to Yahoo for somewhere between $15 million and $30 million. Unable to make it profitable, Yahoo sold it to Avos Systems, which removed the popular support forums that Delicious users had come to love. A few years later, Avos sold Delicious to Science, Inc., where Delicious users were continually leaving and using other services.

While Delicious was rapidly changing hands, Pinboard was started by web developer Maciej Ceglowski. He offered his simple service to users at $3 per year, a fee that increased over time to $11 per year. Since the beginning, Pinboard has been a one-person company with a limited feature-set and with no investors. Ceglowski operated it as a side business for the first few months, until it was generating enough income for him to move to working on Pinboard full-time.

Then, on June 1, 2017, Pinboard acquired Delicious for just $35,000 and quickly shut it down to new users, offering existing users the option to migrate their accounts to Pinboard instead.

After rapid growth and increased complexity in its offerings and internal structure, Delicious, in which millions of dollars had been invested, was ultimately consumed by a company of one for a tiny price. Pinboard had kept things simple, played the long game, and ended up winning.

Typically, as companies gain success or traction, they grow by taking on additional complexities. These complexities can often detract from a business's original or primary focus, resulting in more costs and the investment of more time and money.

For a company of one at any size, simple rules, simple processes, and simple solutions typically win. Complexity is often well intentioned, especially at large corporations, where, as complicated processes are added to other complicated processes and systems, accomplishing any task requires more and more work on the job and not toward finishing the task. It can be a slippery slope: one step is added to a process without increasing its complexity too much, but then, after a few years of adding steps here and there, a task that once took a handful of steps now requires sign-off by six department heads, a legal review, and a dozen or more meetings with stakeholders.

By contrast, growth for a company of one can mean simplifying rules and processes, which frees up time to take on either more work or more clients, because tasks can be finished faster. With this goal in mind, companies of one routinely question everything they do. *Is this process efficient enough? What steps can be removed and the end result will be the same or better? Is this rule helping or hindering our business?*

For a company of one to succeed, a strategy for simplifying isn't just a desirable goal but an absolute requirement. Having too many products or services, too many layers of management, and/or too many rules and processes for completing tasks leads to atrophy. Simplicity has to be a mandate.

When Mike Zafirovski became the CEO of Nortel, he implemented an unambiguous theme of "business made simple" across the entire company. From reducing costs to speeding up product development, to making it easier for customers to get the latest technology, he wove the idea of "simple" into every aspect of their large company.

Often, complexity can creep in right from the beginning—when you're just thinking about starting a new business. You begin to assume that your business requires "essentials" like office space, websites, business cards, computers, fax machines (just kidding), and custom software solutions. In reality, it's usually possible to start a business — especially the freelance or startup kind — just by finding and then helping a single paying customer. Then doing it again, and again. And only adding new items or processes to the mix when they're absolutely required.

If you have an idea for starting a business that requires a lot of money, time, or resources, you're most likely thinking too big. Your idea can be scaled down to the basics — do it now, do it on the cheap, and do it quickly — and then iterated upon. Start without automation or infrastructure or overhead. Start by helping one customer. Then another. This puts your focus on helping people immediately with what you've got available to you right now. Work on things like sales funnels and automation when it no longer makes sense to personalize your interactions with your customers in surprising and delightful ways.

We've become enamored with new technologies, new software, and new devices, and too often large companies and even solo companies try to incorporate them into their existing structures in an effort to "keep up." The problem here is mistaking "simple" for "easy." Often we try to be simpler and end up more complicated. We add more tools, more software, more devices to the mix to make things easier, without testing or questioning how easy they'll be to use on a daily basis.

Even the latest and greatest HR software, for instance, probably doesn't need hundreds of screens and drop-down menus. A business selling thousands of products can probably cut most of them if the bulk of their sales comes from just 5 percent of their offerings. There may be no need for thirteen company-wide initiatives if three will do.

Start out as simple as possible, and always fervently question adding new layers of complexity. Set yourself up as a company of one that's run to maximize your ability to solve existing problems and to adapt as new problems arise. And then, who knows, perhaps you'll end up acquiring a massive competitor that couldn't keep up with your radical simplicity.

BEGIN TO THINK ABOUT:

- Whether growth is truly beneficial to your business
- How you could solve business problems without just adding "more"
- Whether you really need funding or venture capital for your idea, or are simply thinking too big to start

You can buy the book on the following websites:

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Thanks for reading this excerpt,
Paul Jarvis