



PARALLEL LIVES

Justin Quirk on professional multi-tasking

The serial entrepreneur is old news. The future belongs to the parallel entrepreneur.

Henry Ford made cars; Thomas Edison invented electrical devices; Andrew Carnegie built the steel industry. And they didn't do much else (although Carnegie did have a sideline in philanthropy). You might have had Renaissance Men in the arts, but in industry and the professional sphere you pretty much did one thing and you concentrated on doing it well. And that's the way the world worked, until recently. Now that model is starting to unravel. In common with other parts of the economy that have become more fragmented and atomised – the “sharing” model pioneered by Airbnb, the move from PAYE to self-employment (now standing at a record 15 per cent of the UK workforce), the post-Uber economy where almost any hobby or life skill might become a second income stream – the top tier of business and entrepreneurship is being similarly transformed.

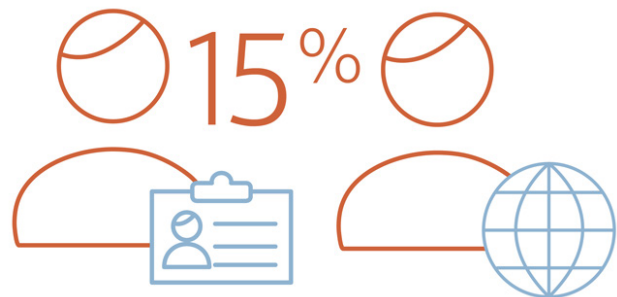
Where a successful man or woman may have once made a breakthrough and their fortune, then spent a lifetime refining and profiting from that single idea, the new model suggests assembling a portfolio of different interests, with new and different challenges. Crucially, this isn't just serial entrepreneurship, moving from one success to the next, but parallel entrepreneurship: stretching your skill set, spinning professional plates and developing a cross-fertilising feedback loop. The job for life is being replaced by the portfolio career.

“I think there are a couple of different phenomena”, explains John Mullins, associate professor of Management Practice in Marketing and Entrepreneurship at the London Business School. “There are the younger generation, millennials who seem to want to work without attachments. They're happy to drive an Uber, put together a few different things and make a life that way. That's a cultural shift that many younger people are embracing. But I think the second model is quite different: it's people in good solid jobs, who deep in their hearts want to be an entrepreneur.”

Mullins says that kind of diversification traditionally required going out and raising capital before the business had really made progress, a process he describes as “pretty onerous”. “You don't get good terms, and it's hard to raise money for some-thing which is just a Powerpoint deck,” he continues.

With many developed economies still struggling with sluggish

15 percent of the UK workforce is now self-employed rather than PAYE.



Source: Office for National Statistics

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growth and sclerotic lending, a new model – what Mullins terms “customer funding” – is gradually emerging. Now you can launch a new idea or service to a limited market of upfront payers and interested parties while keeping your core business going to underwrite the new venture. It's a launch model that moves more slowly but that lends itself to diversified business as a necessity.

Mullins sees other advantages for entrepreneurs in working this way: “They retain control, they're not giving anything away, they're not dealing with meddling venture capitalists.” And at all levels of the economy, platforms and innovations



The Uber taxi driver has become the poster boy of the "gig economy". Credit: Shutterstock

“Those with jobs that are hard to automate – lawyers, for example – may be safe for now, but those with more easily automated white-collar jobs, like paralegals, are at high risk. In the greatest peril are the 60 per cent of the US workforce whose main job function is to aggregate and apply information.”

have emerged – from peer-to-peer lending to co-working spaces – that have lowered the bar for creating new businesses in new fields.

The larger driver of this kind of diversification is, of course, new technology. The phrase “technological unemployment” was popularised in the 1930s by John Maynard Keynes to discuss human workers being displaced and superseded by machines, but discussion of the problem dates back as far as Aristotle in fourth-century-BC Greece. In the first book of Politics, Aristotle speculates how sufficiently advanced machines could ultimately remove the need for human labour. So while the issue is not new, it now seems more pressing and more tangible, as whole swathes of once-familiar industries have been outsourced, mothballed or computerised. And this tectonic shift is only just beginning: a 2013 study titled *The Future of Employment: how susceptible are jobs to computerization?* by Carl Benedikt Frey and Michael Osborne analysed 702 occupations and found that around 47 per cent of total US unemployment was at high-risk of automation while another 19 per cent faced a medium level risk.

Crucially, the jobs that will be affected in the next wave of automation won't be un-skilled manual labour but “good, solid” white-collar work. As Alec Ross, former advisor on technology and innovation to Barack Obama and Hilary Clinton and author of *The Industries of the Future*, has it: “Those with jobs that are hard to automate – lawyers, for example – may be safe for now, but those with more easily automated white-collar jobs, like paralegals, are at high risk. In the greatest peril are the 60 per cent of the US workforce whose main job function is to aggregate and apply information.”

Even if you wanted to keep doing the same thing, and only that thing, for the rest of your career – or running a business that does a single thing – the irresistible advance of new

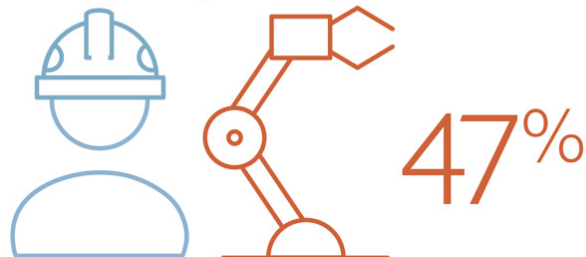
technologies won't let you. The ground will have moved beneath your feet.

Of course, running a portfolio business, or a portfolio of businesses, demands and develops a new set of skills. That's most of the point. “No matter what the enterprise, successful leadership demands discipline around how that daily triage is run, what gets prioritised and what others can and should manage,” says Jody Greenstone Miller, CEO of independent consultancy Business Talent Group. But, she insists, you should be clear headed about what you can actually bring to any new venture. “The biggest challenge for executives managing more than one enterprise – or executives managing more than one work stream – is knowing where they can add value and what their unique contributions should be. They need to find that intersection between where their skills meet the company's highest priorities.”

“Managers need to ensure that spreading their workload across multiple fields doesn't impact their ability to execute their duties competently or overstretch their legal responsibilities,” says Patrick Woodman, the Chartered Management Institute's head of external affairs. “Around 44 per cent of businesses founded in the UK in 2011 had failed by 2014, with incompetence and bad management to blame for 56 per cent of these business failures. For managers running a portfolio, this risk is undoubtedly higher.”

In an ideal world, you maintain a suite of businesses and ventures that compliment and reinforce one another; in

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Source: “The Future of Employment: How susceptible are jobs to computerisation?” By C.Frey and M.Osborne (2013)

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the real world, the risk is that the new venture ends up cannibalising the first, or both wither for lack of attention.

Despite these cautions and qualifications, however, people are making these new models work at all levels and across all markets. Indeed, in developing economies, where the rigid, linear structures of traditional business may not have

been put in place, entrepreneurs will naturally work in a more fleet-footed way and advance on multiple fronts. Take South African school dropout-turned Forbes “entrepreneur under 30”-lister Rupert Bryant, who launched and remains on the board of South Africa’s biggest internet service provider while also running travel business Accommodation Direct. Paul Graham of Y Combinator (a fund that invests small amounts of money in a large number of ideas twice a year, then relocates them to Silicon Valley for three months to get them started) is ostensibly running a single business incubator while helping to lead multiple start-ups by stealth. Although he might technically be the head of just one company, this new model of patronage makes him the de facto leader of many.

This new way of working can and should be viewed as a positive opportunity: running a parallel career should, if handled properly, make you happier, more efficient and more productive. When Google bought in its “20 per cent” rule, which allowed employees to spend that proportion of their time on side projects, the net result was a more satisfied, more engaged workforce (it also led to a number of significant innovations, including Gmail and AdSense).

“The main benefit of working across more than one field is the opportunity to gain cross-sector experience,” says Patrick Woodman. “Senior managers are typically more productive,



Frédéric Mazzella, founder of Europe’s largest ride-sharing service BlaBlaCar.

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engaged and stimulated, which is often gained through role autonomy and a sense of fulfillment.” Woodman sees this autonomy as crucial to developing the best managers – allowing them to work across different portfolios, building wider networks and developing new skills in a way that they can’t when limited to one role. There’s also the fact that running parallel businesses allows you to maximise the access you have to advisers, mentors and investors.

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Source: “Growing Your Small Business”, published by the Chartered Management Institute (2015)

work. Much of the new normal – self-sufficiency, transnational networking, multiple overlapping projects, a built-in acceptance of failure as a constructive (and inevitable) learning process – has long been the norm for artists and creatives. We increasingly live in a culture where these rules apply to everyone.

Frédéric Mazzella – an IT professional who formed French car-pooling service BlaBlaCar – has described how his venture went through five different models between 2006 and 2011 before lighting on the right way to work (the mantra “Fail. Learn. Succeed” is now plastered on the company HQ’s wall). In a recent online essay, Kevan Lee of social-media management tool Buffer outlined the benefits of applying the creative process to more traditional industries and breaking out of the conventional models of profit-and-loss and immediate returns. “The good news: You don’t have to create a million-dollar company to get your time’s worth from a side project. Spending your time in this way can make you happier, healthier and more productive.”

The genies of deregulation, technological change and demographics cannot be put back in the bottle – we are where we are in the modern business world. And the spoils belong to those who can adapt and embrace the moment. Jody Greenstone Miller stresses the opportunity that exists for the right people right now, but acknowledges the challenges. “It takes an extraordinary executive to recognise his or her limitations and know how to leverage one’s abilities and not get trapped by one’s weaknesses. Someone like Steve Jobs could manage two completely different companies – Apple and Pixar – because he hired tremendous talent and provided the leadership and focus for the areas that were most important to him. Like all great leaders he was able to triage effectively, avoid being a bottleneck and inspire his team.”

“These days, people want to be entrepreneurs,” says John Mullins in summary. He is upbeat about the net effect of this shift in society and the workplace, seeing it as producing better ideas, workers and businesses. “I think it’s good for the quality of work – people who are pursuing their own passion, be they millennials or someone with a day job, they care dearly, they work really hard to learn, and I would say the result is dramatically better work because they’re doing something they really love. There was a book (by Marsha Sinetar), Do What You Love, The Money Will Follow. I think there’s some reality to that idea.”

Main image credit: Illustration by Quentin Monge