



Making Yourself Bulletproof in the Outsourced Economy

by Mike Cook

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For a brief period of time, in the dot-com era, employment opportunities were so plentiful that company-employed workers saw jobs as expendable. They saw themselves as free agents and lone cowboys—able to take their skills anywhere and grab the sweetest deal around.

Now, however, every month thousands of jobs are moving to countries where they can be done as well for less money. We can't stop it from happening. But we *can* change the way we adapt to this new reality and how we engage with it.

For many employees, these are scary times. They don't have to be. In fact, the outsourced economy is a place where everyone can win.

In his book *The World Is Flat*, Thomas Friedman identifies the factors that contribute to a world in which we can connect and do business instantaneously with billions of others across the planet. Rather than argue with this economic reality, smart employees will find a way to collaborate with it.

Workers who want to increase their value in the outsourced economy must learn to become individual leaders or self-managers who choose to be responsible for their work environment, their business relationships, their personal happiness, and their lifelong learning and career development. This new, "bulletproof" employee will replace the need for job security with a sense of supreme self-confidence.

Put a different way, a bulletproof employee is one who develops the mindset of an entrepreneur—one who expects no economic return until value is produced for another party. This kind of employee becomes extremely desirable to both current and prospective employers.



Old Jobs Paradigm, New Jobs Paradigm

Under the old employee model, workers had limited initiative and a limited role in the enterprise. They were working for financial security. Employees were compliant because they needed employment. They brought only the talents they were asked for, and their approach to problems was mostly to identify them. People used to believe that, if they came to work every day and did a good job, their jobs were secure.

In the present-day economy, employees have had to grasp a hard reality: time served and loyalty to a company are not the currency of the new economy. As it turns out, our jobs were never secure; it was an illusion. The smart employees now understand this, and that truth works to their advantage in the outsourced economy. This new reality necessitates a new paradigm in the workplace.

The new jobs paradigm is based on collaboration. Employees have an emotional investment in their jobs and are fully engaged. They have freely chosen their work, and they bring all they have to it. They work in a democratic environment of shared decision making, where their role is not only to point out problems, but also to offer solutions.

A key difference between the old and new paradigm is that, in the outsourced economy, you choose what you make of your job. By choosing your work and how you operate in it, you actually set yourself free from the old constraints and fears of job insecurity. You become bulletproof.

How to Become Bulletproof

If you want to be a bulletproof employee, here are some ways to prepare yourself.

Pay attention to value. In the workplace, we tend to wear blinders: *this is my assignment, my deadline, my schedule, my issue.* In reality, each of us is working with others, and we are all more or less working toward the same goals. Ask yourself: How did another person's work add value to your process? Was it on time? Was it what you really needed? And, regarding your work: What are you supposed to be delivering to other people? Are you clear, from your interactions (internal or external), when something is needed from you and what that task requires? To be a bulletproof employee, pay attention to how your work adds value to that of others, and vice versa.



Choose your work. The silliness that we labor with throughout our life is the notion that the only way we could be truly free, happy—whatever you want to call it—is if we had complete control of everything we do. “I have to go to work today.” No, you don’t. You don’t have to work where you do. You don’t have to do what the boss tells you. You don’t have to work for what you are being paid. Most people confuse the desire for control with the concept of freedom. The hard reality of life is that we have virtually no control over our circumstances, but we have complete freedom to choose our response to those circumstances. Choosing your work means seeing your circumstances for what they are, accepting your work, and actively participating in it. The real question bulletproof employees ask themselves is this: how do you leverage the realities of your job to accomplish your vision?

Recognize yourself. Do you understand enough about yourself to know what you need from others and what you have to offer others? Until you recognize that there is a lot more to you than the physical space you take up, there can be no real relationship between you and the world of work. Most of us do not develop this awareness until later in life, often after we have missed significant opportunities to accomplish what we had intended. Get to know your abilities and limitations. Know your purpose in life and your passions. Create a life and work mission. Know why you are working where you do. Understand what matters to you and what motivates you. Know what your conditions of satisfaction are, and be uncompromising about them. This is a sure way to become your own best agent in an unpredictable business environment.

Appreciate interdependence. We are educated to focus on our individual success, but the truth is we do not achieve that success alone, despite appearances. So much attention is given to the celebration of the individual in our culture that we can and do become numb to the reality of our interdependence. Realize that independence is an illusion. Recognize and legitimize differences in styles, values, and competencies. Intentionally meet the needs of others. Accept interdependence as the state of being for everything in your world, in and out of work. Interdependence is the latticework that connects you to the outsourced economy.

Generate connection. Most of us do not have the opportunity to choose the people we work with. We inherit the people we work with, and they inherit us. Instead of accepting workplace relationships as they are, work with



others—managers, coworkers, clients, and even customers—to create new connections together. By doing so, you will begin to shape your environment. Work on your listening and dialogue skills. Share visions of a desired future in which everyone wins. Find opportunities in differences and opposition. Develop an authentic desire to know and appreciate the perspectives of others.

Take effective action. To make something happen together we must: 1) say we are going to do certain things by certain times, and mean it, and; 2) ask for certain things by certain times, and mean it. A good metaphor for this is a pair of trapeze artists. Imagine that you are the person who does the jumping and flipping, but you wind up in the net 30 percent of the time because the catcher is often a second late. For a trapeze artist, that kind of unreliability from a partner is unacceptable. In the workplace, you need to become a person everyone can count on. Become an employee who is valued for your competence, collaborative skills, and good reputation.

Be coachable and coach others. In a job, company, or industry in which everything is subject to seismic change without notice, an employee who wants to be truly bulletproof has to be adaptable. This doesn't mean simply rolling with the punches. You need to grow professionally, develop new skills, and be in a learning process at all times. Remain open to the experience and support of those around you. Being coachable and coaching others recognizes that your own success is not of your doing alone, nor is others' success exclusively a matter of their doing. Coaching and being coached foster mutuality and interdependence.

A bulletproof employee is a self-managed employee. The way to thrive in this new economy—to have skills that are portable and desirable—is to be practical, self-motivated, well-informed, reliable, competent, and wise. It is less risky to adopt this self-manager mindset than it is to continue on the path of a willing dependent, unprepared to face the fact that your job was never really secure to begin with. Learning to be adaptable, connected, and self-aware will make you bulletproof in our outsourced economy—a brave new world in which interdependence implies that everyone can win.

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