



A Global Economy Puts the Spotlight on Personal Brands **It's Time to Manage Yours**

By Mike Cook

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This is the Age of Self-Management and the Personal Brand. It arrived unannounced and largely unanticipated in the mid-1980s as three global forces converged. The first two—democratic ideals and capitalism—had been around for centuries. The third force, the Internet and the inexpensive technology that allowed for easy access to it, literally exploded in our consciousness, and catalyzed the spread of the other two beyond anyone’s imagination. In the wake of that convergence, we are now learning how to live and work together in this new reality.

In the Age of Self-Management we have unprecedented levels of inexpensive information and affordable technology with which to create economic opportunity. Mankind has never experienced so much freedom. So what do we do with all this technology and choice? We are rapidly learning that along with the new freedoms come expanded responsibility and complexity, and many more choices. Many of us were not ready for any of this and don’t quite know what to do with it now.

The Game Has Changed

We live increasingly conscious of a growing anxiety rooted in an awareness of our vulnerability. If all this freedom is available for us, then it must be available for everyone—and thus the world we live in is now vastly more competitive. No longer can we think in terms of company vs. company in a given market. Now it is me vs. you. The market is my skills, talents, and knowledge vs. yours. In effect we are all commodities among commodities, and that makes us replaceable.

Who we are, and who we are not. In today’s labor force, both newcomers and experienced workers alike may be operating at a significant competitive disadvantage; especially if we are not in possession of highly specialized and prized skills or knowledge. Most of us are reliable, regular, garden-variety people with limited ability to distinguish ourselves from the pack.



Our competition is no longer solely in our backyard. Thanks to the Internet and globalization, we are faced with the invisible competition of people with similar qualifications living in other parts of the world. These people can make themselves available, in many instances, much less expensively than we can.

Maybe now it is easier to understand the anxiety.

Your Formula for Success Must Change

How do you prepare yourself to compete in this almost hand-to-hand competition for economic stability? First, shake yourself loose from the habitual mental practices that have been the source of your success—until now.

Begin by dismantling the mindset of ‘employment.’ In the state of mind encouraged and accepted in the ‘employment’ reality, you have come to expect that there will be *employers*—people or organizations who will offer you a reward in exchange for your time, the use of your education and talents for their purposes, and your complete cooperation. In the global economy, this expectation can be debilitating and self-limiting. You *can* continue to work in someone else’s organization without being disabled by your mindset, and without compromising your freedom. However, you must get clear about what you want and prepare yourself to negotiate for it.

Confront your complacency. By accepting the ‘employment’ mindset, you created your own vulnerability by allowing yourself to become dangerously disconnected from the levers of opportunity. In order to reconnect, you need to focus on what you really want for your life and future, as well as how you can grasp economic opportunity.

You can no longer afford to be comforted by the hypnotizing mindset of employment.

Think ‘Brand You!’

Freedom from the old definition of employment has revealed a need to ‘be valuable’ instead of simply being reliable. In the Age of Self-Management, being valuable continues to include reliability but it also means being known. To be known we need to be connected. There has always been a case for ‘who you need to know,’ but now there is an even larger need to account for *how you are known*. When focusing on self-management it is important to ask, what is *your brand* and how are you managing it? What is your value and how is it packaged?

Managing ‘Brand You’ requires developing your *vision* for you. Where are you headed? What are your benchmarks for achievement? What will you need to learn along the way? The answers to these questions will help determine who you will want to know and how you will want to be known by them. Your vision is the basis of ‘Brand You.’

The currency of opportunity is *performance*. On a global basis we are moving closer to a meritocracy than ever before. This new reality will define connection in terms of mutuality of contribution, not dependency. We no longer work with each other just because we have history together. Our history allows for some forgiveness, but our future together must be



based on performance. Be prepared first and last to earn your keep and give up the need or desire to be kept.

Seek out *collaborators* on the basis of mutual purpose, respect, and value added. Many people may support and respect you, but you need people who can also collaborate with you in a mutually beneficial fashion. You won't want or be able to work with everyone. Now is the time to get picky.

Be *your word*. There is no room for 'trying hard' in the new economy. Make sure you promise. Deliver as promised or be willing to be held accountable. Don't rely on asking for forgiveness or understanding; ask for the opportunity to satisfy. Be vigilant about whether your collaborators are getting the value they were promised and are always open to renewing a partnership with you. Brand is everything and simply put, Brand is Reputation.

You now have more freedom and information than you could have ever imagined having—and so does everyone else. How come it doesn't feel better than this? Maybe all this time you were wishing for freedom when what you really wanted was a competitive advantage. Using your newfound freedom and embracing responsibility for your brand, *you* get to create the advantages you've been seeking. The choices are *yours* to make.

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