



Why Work Doesn't Work Anymore

By Jack Hughes TopCoder Founder and Chairman

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“There’s something happening here; What it is ain’t exactly clear”*. As the song so aptly points out – albeit in a different era, our world is changing much more rapidly than anyone ever thought imaginable. OK, maybe a few have seen it coming – Google, Amazon, eBay and a host of other companies - and have been amply rewarded for their vision, but most of us just can’t believe the swiftness with which changes are happening. The unavoidable megatrend – globalization – coupled with an equally large technological revolution – the Internet – have combined to turn our world upside down. Everything from the way we sell and buy goods to the price of food and energy is a search for a place of relative stability within this new and changing equilibrium.

To quote another song, and as if the above isn’t enough: “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet”**. In the next few years, the very nature of work – your work – is likely to change dramatically. That stab of fear in your belly is real – it’s the prospect of change knocking from the inside. But don’t overreact; - it’s not as bad as you think. In fact, armed with the right mind-set and approach, it can be very, very good – for you. And, what is good for any one of us – writ large – is good for all of us.

Imagine, if you will, a world in which you can work for anyone at any time. A world in which you can work for more than one employer – in the same day, the same hour; Where your highest agency and best use can be accessed by those willing to pay the most for it; Where you can do what you like, not what you have to. Not because you’re willing to take less, but because those that are willing to pay more can find you. Anywhere. Right now.

Imagine a world where if you don’t like what you do and want to change it, you can find the resources, the contacts, the mentoring and the help to change it - all from your living room or kitchen. Imagine a world where you can find your place; a world where you don’t have to live with a ‘career’ choice that was simply wrong or that you just don’t like; a world where not liking your current employer isn’t going to last for the next ten years; it’s going to last for about the next ten minutes. Sure, the flip side of this is also true: If an employer doesn’t like you, they can find someone new in a virtual heartbeat. But, hasn’t this always been true? Think of it this way: Employers – even the smallest – almost always have multiple people working for them; most employees only work for one company at a time. We used to think this is the way it should be: we trade our independence for security. Well, that didn’t exactly work out. Lifetime employment: gone; Pensions: gone; Job security: gone.

The Internet truly does level the playing field. Now, instead of working for one employer, you can work for two, 10, or 100 – in the same week. Business models of all stripes are popping up that connect you with employers of all types. One day you may be working for some multinational mega-corp; the next you may be working for the sole proprietor of bicycle shop in Singapore. Some of the models allow you to work with one employer for the duration of a job. The job could be a year, a month or two hours. Some don’t even care how long it takes you or how you do it – other than it meets some level of completion and quality that they are looking for. Many don’t care who else you’re working for at the same time.



The implications of this are huge. Think of how much work is done in the average day across the globe. Think of large networks of people getting together to solve specific problems. Need a new green car model designed because sales of the old SUV models are falling off a cliff? It's likely that the people needed to do the job are right there in Detroit – and Kansas and Mexico and China and...

So, what to do? How to get prepared for a world in which you are the brand; you have to sell yourself to the highest bidder? Here are some guidelines:

- 1) Figure out what you're good at and what you like to do. If you don't know, start trying a few things online. Take some part-time freelance work. Brush up your knowledge in areas that interest you. Take a few online courses. Join an online community that interests you. Contribute to a few hobbyist projects to get your feet wet and to learn how to interact with others online.
- 2) Get connected. Join a number of online communities in an area of interest to you. Just like the real world, you have to work to market yourself. It's just a whole lot easier to connect online. A good rule of thumb is that the more interested and passionate about a particular area you are, the more likely it is that you will have something worthwhile to contribute. Don't underestimate how desperate for good people employers are. Don't underestimate how quickly you can be noticed when many eyes are looking.
- 3) Be careful. The 'once-removedness' of the internet gives a feeling of a false sense of security. How you act online and perform at the jobs you take online is just as serious as it is in the real world. The only thing that spreads faster online than a good reputation is a bad one.
- 4) Have fun. If some particular task or online job is difficult because it represents something challenging, great. In fact, be careful to be constantly challenging yourself – it's how your worth improves. You'll ultimately get satisfaction by getting better at it. On the other hand, if it's just plain miserable because you don't like it, take what the Internet is giving you: the chance to do something else.

We've seen e-commerce, search and online advertising change the way products are bought and sold. We've seen many companies that are preparing the next wave of the Internet revolution. Your next employer may just be in an office building you never go to with people you never meet in person.

* "For What It's Worth" is a song written by Stephen Stills. It was performed by Buffalo Springfield and released as a single in January 1967. In 2004, this song was #63 on *Rolling Stone's* list of The 500 Greatest Songs of All Time.

** "You Ain't Seen Nothing Yet" is a rock song written by Randy Bachman and performed by Bachman-Turner Overdrive (BTO) on the album *Not Fragile*. It was released as a single in 1974.

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Jack Hughes is founder and chairman of TopCoder (www.topcoder.com). TopCoder hosts the largest and most comprehensive developer ratings and performance metrics available. The TopCoder community builds software for a wide-ranging client base through a competitive, rigorous, standards based methodology. Through its proprietary programming competitions and rating system, TopCoder recognizes and promotes the abilities of the best programmers around the world.