How to Work Alone
(and Not Lose Your Mind)

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Preface

I’m writing these words in the middle of the coronavirus crisis. It’s too early to say what it will do to the world in the long run, but there is one thing I am sure of: it will change how we work. It is now inconceivable to argue that remote or flexible work is impossible when people have been doing it, against all odds, for months. Millions, if not billions, of people have had their first taste of working alone. Some will have fallen in love with it. Others will have struggled. Many will have done both. Still others will have lost their employment and started something new, by themselves.

I started this project years before most of us even knew what a coronavirus was, but my hope, now, staring this crisis in the face, is that it will be more useful than I could ever have imagined. Because this book was always meant to be for anyone who works alone, whether for a few hours a day in the corner of a bedroom, once a week at a rented desk in a shared office, in a workshop, studio, van or garden, or all day, every day and everywhere, with a laptop and a phone. It’s not about whether to become a limited company, how to set up a website or when to pay your taxes. Instead, I want to help you cope with the demands of solitary work, using the best and most recent ideas in psychology, economics, business and the
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social sciences to create a new and resilient way of thinking about and coping with working alone.
I want to help soloists work and live well.
Introduction

Working for yourself is wonderful. Going solo is one of the best decisions I ever made. Working for yourself gives you the opportunity to do whatever it is you’ve always dreamed of doing and the chance to choose how, when and where you work. Working for yourself means having no boss to stifle your big ideas. Working for yourself is creative, self-directed and potentially more meaningful than working in the same old company, with the same old team, and in the same way every day.

Working for yourself is also terrifying. Working for yourself requires dredging your soul to find wells of self-reliance, bravado, optimism, hope, patience and grit. Working for yourself is tedious and monotonous, tiring and nerve-racking. Working for yourself means always working, always being on, always checking your emails. Working for yourself means having dozens of bosses, all thinking they are your first priority. Working for yourself means working at the weekend, working on holiday, working when you’re ill. Working for yourself is lonely. Working for yourself is very, very hard.

All of these things are true, often all at the same time. I’ve been solo for 11 years, after six years working as a journalist for the Observer. I have done or felt all of the above, as well as elated, desperate, despondent, confident, confused, fierce,
scared, knackered, proud ... and 100 per cent committed to never going back to working in an office.

Five years into freelance life, I reached what felt like a terrible impasse. I had been working without pause, writing articles and books, often until eight or nine at night, or later if I was attending a work event. On Sundays, 48 weeks a year, I got up at 6am and made my way to a TV studio in north London, where I appeared on a live breakfast show (for the same reason, I hadn’t been on holiday for several years). I’d be home in time for a late lunch, giving me Sunday afternoons to regroup (or, um, drink unhealthy amounts of wine) before an early night in preparation for doing the whole thing again the next week. The years were rushing by in a haze of deadlines and presentations (under-) prepared in the back of taxis.

I felt an overwhelming need to say yes to every bit of work that came my way – even work I hated; even work that paid badly – because I was desperate to become established and fearful of losing my precious clients if I ever said no, or asked for a fairer fee, or a deadline extension. I wanted all my clients to think of me as the person who always delivered what they wanted, on time and to the brief.

I was making pretty decent money, particularly for a freelance writer, but I wasn’t very happy on my hamster wheel. I was neglecting all the good things in life – my friends barely saw me, my family felt left out and my partner and I didn’t seem to be having much fun at all. Like me, he is self-employed, as a freelance photographer. Like me, he worked all the hours he could, and then some, bending until breaking point to keep his clients happy. Like me, he talked about work at the breakfast table, and we muttered about it when we turned the light off at night.

We finally talked about it one evening in our local pub.
Over burgers and red wine, we made a plan; a set of rules about when we would work, in the hope that they would ease the pressure slightly: no working or talking about work before breakfast has been eaten; no working after 8pm; and no talking about work after 8pm either (we were allowed to break this one once a week, only if it was really necessary). No working at weekends (we were allowed to break this one once a month, and only in emergencies).

For a while, fencing in the time that we were allowed to do work and talk about work really helped. As anyone who has ever had to collect their kids from childcare, or care for an unwell or elderly relative, or had any regular and immovable commitment, will already know: you get more done when you have a finite and fixed amount of time in which to work. Conversely, as anyone who works alone from home will have experienced, when a working day can easily drift into being a working evening, with nothing in particular to stop it, it can be tough to buckle down and focus. (I later found out that enforcing start and end points on the working day, whether real or arbitrarily self-imposed, is a very popular topic in the productivity literature to which I am now happily addicted.)

As time passed, though, it was clear that the rules were not going to be enough – although they stopped us actually doing work, the rules couldn’t stop me thinking about it, chewing it over, silently, alone or in the dead of night. In theory, I loved my job and outwardly it looked as though I was living a freelance dream, but it was getting more and more difficult to find joy in what I did – something which made me feel both ungrateful and, frankly, kind of cheated. I’d worked so long and so hard to get here – so why did it feel miserable? Why wasn’t I revelling in the fact that I had a job I was supposed to love? Why was I incapable of taking time
off? Why was my phone always in my hand or my pocket? Why did I need to check my emails before I’d got out of bed each morning? What was wrong with me? Why couldn’t I be happy with what amounted to a really good life?

Meanwhile, several of my friends decided to try working alone as well. Some actively chose to go solo and some were made redundant. Others changed career and because of what they wanted to do, had no choice but to work alone, even if they might have preferred a regular pay cheque. In the current job market, it’s almost impossible to find a permanent job if you want to be a personal trainer, tree surgeon, private chef or writer. A friend, a lawyer, started a consultancy business of one, because he couldn’t see himself working in the cut-throat, corporate world of large legal firms for the rest of his working life. Lou, a friend from university, found that the only way she could control her career as a senior aid worker was to leave the international charity she’d joined and become a consultant, helping non-governmental organisations respond quickly to humanitarian disasters. A successful marketing executive retrained as a make-up artist. Colleagues from my time working on newspapers became fiction writers and copywriters, or jacked in writing completely to run bed-and-breakfasts by the sea.

We sometimes talked to each other about how tough we often found it, how remote we often felt, even though we knew that for most of us, it was still better than being traditionally employed. We wondered how to assess our careers when there was no one to give us a performance review; we tried to figure out how, apart from checking our bank balances, we could tell if we were where we should be, when we had no idea what our new and novel career paths should look like.
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I couldn’t stop looking for answers. This seemed to be such a common problem, coping with the weirdness of working alone, that I was confident someone would have looked into it and written a helpful book already. But I was wrong. I love a good life hack, and thought I knew where to look for solo-working versions. But I couldn’t find a single book or even article which could answer my exact questions. There are dozens which address one aspect or another of working for yourself – how to manage your time, how to chase clients who haven’t paid, how to do social media ... as well as hundreds on how to be happy, how to pursue success or how to work mindfully, but none which looked at everything through the one lens which mattered to me.

Buried within all this material, as well as in articles by brilliant scholars but published in obscure or inaccessible academic journals – are the makings of a whole new way of thinking about working alone. But it is hidden from most of us, and that’s a sad thing for solo workers. That’s why I thought: I’m a journalist. Perhaps my greatest skill is gathering and synthesising information and making it understandable, navigable. I will write this book.

Today, at the time of writing, there are more self-employed people than ever before – since 2008, the number of self-employed British workers has increased by almost 25 per cent, according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS). Fifteen per cent of working Britons are self-employed. Thirteen per cent of working 25–49-year-olds are self-employed. In London, over 17 per cent of the working population is self-employed; in the south west it’s 16.8 per cent and in the south east it’s 16.2 per cent. In America, there are 15 million self-employed people today, and up to 68 million who classify in one way or another as freelancers (American labour statistics
are notoriously tricky to pin down). Research by FreshBooks in 2018 predicted a further 27 million Americans would have left traditional employment and be working for themselves by 2020, which would make up over 30 per cent of the US workforce. Almost 17 per cent of the Australian workforce is self-employed. The most recent figures from the European Union date back to 2016, when 33 million were classified as self-employed.

That’s an awful lot of people grappling with these problems on their own.

This matters not just because everyone who struggles with aspects of their self-employment could be happier, but also because we are at an important crossroads when it comes to how we work. In order to survive within the modern, rather shaky economic system, we need a productive workforce – we need people who have the capacity to make good decisions, who have the motivation to work well into their late middle age and who aren’t crushed by their jobs. Unless we can help solo workers to do this, they – we – just won’t meet our potential.

But what is the answer? How do we work alone and thrive, without feeling like we are losing our grip on our lives? One answer is ridiculously, absurdly, almost laughably simple (although harder than you’d think to put into practice). Just … don’t. Don’t work alone. Don’t attempt to plough through whatever career or side hustle you’ve chosen on your own. Don’t sit alone all day, don’t stare at a blank page, a blank screen, a brick wall. We are not made for constant, rudderless seclusion. Don’t be alone.

I’m not suggesting that we should all give up on freelancing and return to the grind of an everyday office – and even if I was, it would be pointless and no one would listen, since
many analysts expect that within just a few years, half the UK’s workforce will be freelance. Half! The trend is moving fast, which is why getting a handle on this stuff is so crucial.

It’s a fact that most solo workers don’t think about the way in which they work. If you’re like me, perhaps you set up a spreadsheet for your income and expenses (crossing your fingers and hoping there would be some of both). Maybe, maybe you bought a desk. But the chances are, that’s all you did. After that you just … worked. Like me, you probably didn’t think about support networks and emotional resilience. You probably didn’t have a five- or ten-year plan. You didn’t visualise, or goal set. You didn’t think about the feeling of the space in which you work (the kitchen table? A desk under the stairs? A cafe? Or – please, no – your bed?). You didn’t plan your hours, or your time off. You didn’t strategise. Like me, you barely made a single, conscious choice. There wasn’t time. There wasn’t space. You just … worked.

Most solo workers don’t reflect on the impact of their solitude, but recent research by Epson EcoTank found that 48 per cent of self-employed people find working alone lonely, and 46 per cent find it isolating. A quarter had experienced depression. We tend to think, ‘I work alone, so I am alone in this’. In writing this book I’ve learned how pernicious and – literally – dangerous believing ourselves to be alone is. I’d like to shout this from the rooftops: you are not alone. But it often doesn’t feel that way.

When we work for a business or organisation, we slot into structures which existed before we arrived. Or, if you join a business at the beginning, you might be part of – or at least witness to – the genesis of its ways of being and doing. But ask yourself this: when you started working alone, did you think about the structures and processes you might need for your
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business to function? I didn’t, and I don’t know a single solo worker who did. When you work for yourself, no one writes you a contract, telling you what hours you should work, and at what time and where. No one chases you from your desk if you stay too late for weeks on end (according to the ONS, British freelancers work 40 hours a week on average, while the employed work 38). No one provides a free telephone counselling service, or reminds you to take your holiday days. There’s no one to bitch to at lunchtime when things are going badly. There is no IT support, no social media manager, no office gym, no Friday drinks. There’s nothing ready-made.

However horrible you found line managers and performance reviews, human relations appraisals, health and safety training, dreadful coffee and ugly, air-conditioned bunkers, however much even the idea of office life made you want to race towards the freedoms of freelancing, organisational structures do provide a safety net of sorts. Zealous office managers often enforce structure so rigidly that it becomes stifling, baffling or repressive, but it’s a mistake to reject the idea of structure completely.

Because those structures, services or processes create communities – even if it’s a community brought together by the shared belief that the office canteen’s food will one day kill everyone, or that the accounts department is somehow populated by people who hate making payments, or that no one should be allowed to crunch through a bag of crisps at their desk. (A team I would join, by the way.)

When we stop working within organisations, and step out on our own, it’s extremely rare that we think holistically at how we create our own tiny organisations-of-one. Admittedly, it is hard to do at the very beginning, because when you go freelance or start a new business, it’s difficult to know
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exactly what you’ll be doing. But as time passes, and as soon as you can – and maybe don’t leave it five years, like I did – it’s critically important to remember that it’s up to us to decide what our businesses look like and even more so what our lives could look like. We have a responsibility to safeguard the welfare of our team (that is, you), just as you would if you were the forward-thinking CEO of a massive corporation.

When I talk about structures, I don’t mean that you need to replicate the straitjacketed approach to work that many organisations use. But here’s an apparently insignificant example. Obviously, you don’t have to have a dress code if you work at home. If you left office life precisely so that you can work in loungewear for the next 20 years – if that really, truly brings you joy – then go for it. But if you consistently find yourself un-washed and under-dressed at 3pm, because you panic-rolled out of bed and straight into your emails, and if that makes you feel grubby, or guilty, or just desperately miserable, then you need to give your days a bit more form. Whether we realise it or not, everything we do in our working days, as soloists, is a choice – regardless of whether a choice is actively thought through, or not – and those choices create a framework for how we work, and how we feel about that work. Our choices have deep consequences for our mental and physical health, as well as the health of our businesses.

There’s nobody else out there who can make these choices, except you. I don’t care if you get dressed or not: the point is that you have a choice about getting dressed (and dozens of others every working day) and it’s yours to make. If we are going to survive this really quite strange new way of solitary working, then we need to know when we are making choices, what other options might lie beyond what we think we know, and how to choose the things that work best for us.
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How do we make those choices? My plan – my hope – is to convince you that they’re important, and enable you to make good ones, that suit you, your life and the work you do. Wherever possible, I use data, or academic specialists and experts in their field to back me up.

You should definitely cherry-pick the bits of this book that suit you and your life the best – if I’ve learned one thing interviewing the dozens of people for this book, it’s that every solo worker needs to design their own situation, and then constantly adapt and tweak it. The best way to do that?

You have to really get to know yourself – what you need, what you want and who you are, because then you can build your work life around your personality, rather than butting up against things that will never really feel right to you. The soloists who really thrive are the ones who are most open to change, who can be most agile when it comes to how or where or when they work, or at least, who know who they are and what they need to manage themselves.

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We also need to fight against our own and others’ misperceptions, which can include believing we are totally alone, when in fact we are part of complex webs of work relationships; that every other soloist is succeeding completely by themselves, when they too are part of invisible, nebulous teams; and that we should, whenever we are asked to be, be infinitely, endlessly flexible. It’s so easy, in those moments when it feels as though we cannot cope with solo working, to feel as though we are the only ones feeling that way – which just isn’t true, and the more that we can help each other see that, the less painful those moments will be.
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The choices you make will be unique to you and the particular work you do. There’s no one-size-fits-all for solo working (apart from: being utterly alone fits almost no one), which is why this book is packed with ideas and advice from people who have already been where you are today, as well as persuasive science about how our brains and bodies behave, both in work and beyond work. I will use my own life, my own vulnerabilities, wrong turns and idiosyncrasies to tell the story of how solo work affects us, but at the same time, I am very aware that my way is not the only way. Disagree with me – I want you to. All I want is for all of us to think about what will work for us, alone.

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I think we can all agree that humans were not built for office life. We were not designed to sit at a desk for hours on end, in darkened rooms under artificial lighting. (If you’ve found solo work that doesn’t require you to do this – excellent.) This book will try and show all of us ways that we can navigate the fact that sometimes, work doesn’t work for us.

One more thing. I’m not here to tell you how to make a million quid. I’m not even here to convince you to go solo – if you are traditionally employed and love it, fabulous. I’m not here to encourage you to turn your side hustle into a full-time job. I’m not about scaling your business, or generating sales, or making this year the year-you-make-the-most-money-you’ve-ever-made, and nor am I here to tell you that you can become a billionaire working on a beach in Bali. A lot of the stuff in here is simply common sense that today’s world of work has sidelined or forgotten. Words like wellness, optimisation and self-improvement make me feel slightly
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ill. I know there’s a strange tension in that – this is a book about changes, but I don’t want you to think I can or should change you! I don’t want to fetishise your productivity or hack you into an entirely different person. I will talk a lot about productivity, but not because I want you to turn into a workaholic machine, shackled to your desk/workbench/easel/steering wheel all hours of the day and night. I want all of us to be able to work effectively, even happily, that’s all. In fact, I probably think you should work a bit less. Make the hours you do work count for a bit more. Take time off. Try not to think about money. Don’t obsess with success. Rest. Do other things you love doing. Place work a bit further from the dead centre of your life. Paradoxically, you will almost certainly get more done (although that isn’t my main aim), and feel better about it too.

Are you ready?