

Welcome to the Zeitgeist

by Nan Stone

Free Agent Nation: How America's New Independent Workers Are Transforming the Way We Live

by Daniel H. Pink

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Some books are meant to be debated. *Free Agent Nation: How America's New Independent Workers Are Transforming the Way We Live* is one of those books. In fact, I'd be willing to bet that in short order you'll have heard the author, Dan Pink, on at least one talk show, clicked through to any number of related Web sites, and read lots of reviews besides this one. So given all that, what's left to say? Read the book and decide for yourself. Not whether free agency is the zeitgeist of the '00s. It is. But rather, whether the reality (as well as the zeitgeist) makes sense for you, and what you think it means.

Pink's book is partly a coming-of-age story. At 33, Pink was Al Gore's chief speechwriter. He also was exhausted, starved for time with his family, and less and less able to persuade himself that his work made a difference. Sound familiar? So on his 34th birthday, he declared independence, and traded in his pass to the West Wing for an office on the top floor of the Pink house and the freedom to write "speeches and articles for just about anybody whose check would clear."

One of his first clients was *Fast Company*. With its editors playing Queen

Isabella to his Columbus, Pink set out to discover a brave new world. He called it Free Agent Nation.

The first report of his journey appeared as the cover story in the magazine's December 1997/January 1998 issue. It was a series of profiles, portraits of pioneers, the men and women who had abandoned the world of 9 to 5 (or, more likely, 8 to 8) and struck out on their own. The tone was ebullient; the message inspiring, especially for anyone stuck in Dilbertland, however luxurious the cubicle. "Life is not only possible out here," they said, "it's better. We'd never go back."

Now that article has become a book by a smart, engaging writer. Pink conceived of *Free Agent Nation* as a 21st-century version of the country's first census, conducted by Thomas Jefferson in 1790, which yielded results (in the future president's words) "very near the truth." By



Before *Free Agent Nation*, there was... this.

Pink's deliberately conservative count, some 33 million people, or one in four Americans, are free agents. His tabulation starts with 16.5 million soloists, people who work for themselves, usually on their own. Their ranks include plumbers, graphic designers, computer programmers, publicists — virtually anyone who works on a project basis for one or more clients. You know these people. You — like me — are one of them. We also call ourselves *freelancers, e-lancers, or independent professionals*.

Next come approximately 3.5 million temporary workers. They fall into two groups: highly skilled people, like doctors and turnaround CEOs, for whom temping is both fun and lucrative; and clerical and other less-skilled workers, many if not most of whom would gladly forfeit their freedom for full-time jobs with health insurance. Finally, Pink adds in the country's 13 million microbusinesses, enterprises (many of them home based) that employ fewer than five people and sell everything from fat-free cookie dough to dog toys.

Whether Pink's figures are "very near the truth" is a question best left to demographers and statisticians, who doubtless will debate it six ways to Sunday. Even if he has erred on the high side, it's clear that Free Agent Nation is a very real place. And

that means that more interesting and important than its absolute numbers are its history, mores, and institutions — topics better addressed by a field guide than a census. And at its best, that is precisely what Pink's book is.

Behind the birth of Free Agent Nation, Pink reminds us, lie the enormous economic and social changes that have swept the United States since the end of the 1960s. On the economic dimension, two phenomena stand out: One is the growing number of countries that have taken or are taking their place as actors on the world's economic stage. (This is sometimes described as the end of America's economic hegemony. Although the consequences continue to unfold, I doubt they will ever be as stunningly dramatic as

they were in the 1970s and 1980s, when industry after industry in the United States succumbed to foreign competition and moved offshore.)

The other is the ongoing wave of innovation and invention set in motion by the computer's bits and bytes. As networks capable of transmitting information more quickly (and often more reliably) than human messengers became available, the rationale for elaborate managerial hierarchies and large back offices grew less and less compelling. (That's the story of reengineering in a nutshell.) On the other

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hand, the same technology that hollowed out corporate headquarters allows talented individuals to work productively on their own, especially now that it has been amplified by the connectivity of the Internet. Today, for many kinds of work, organizations not only are unnecessary; they actively get in the way.

As for the social changes fueling free agency, they're probably best summed up in the form of an obituary for the Organization Couple, the man in the gray-flannel suit and his helpmeet in an apron, the Beaver's mom. Caricatures, by definition, are never portraits. But they invariably begin with some kernel of truth. In the zeitgeist of the 1950s, conformity trumped individuality. A man's status was determined more by the company he worked for than by the work he did. And women with any pretensions to status weren't supposed to work at all. Many of today's free agents are the Organization Couple's sons and daughters. That many of them have been rejecting their parents' lifestyles since the end of the 1960s hardly needs saying.

When you set those experiences in the context of several decades of almost-uninterrupted prosperity and economic growth, the fundamental assumptions of free agency fall readily into place:

- Don't trust a big company to look out for your interests. Ma Bell isn't your mother, and Kodak (known in Rochester as the Great Yellow Father) isn't your pa.
- The most successful organization in the world won't and can't take better care of you than you can take of yourself. The only real security lies within.
- As a free agent, you build the future every day with your hard work, your skills,

and a little help from your friends — personal and commercial.

Pink's ability to look at the familiar in unfamiliar ways, and to get you to do the same, is one of the things that makes *Free Agent Nation* stimulating as well as fun. For many people, especially wage slaves, Starbucks is a cup of good, if pricey, coffee. For the citizens of Free Agent Nation, the coffee's the least of it. What we're really buying is a place to hold a meeting, do research on the Net, or find potential clients. That's why Starbucks has been able to open so many stores without saturating the market. It's not a coffee shop; it's a piece of the infrastructure that makes free agency work.

Even more critical, says Pink, is the virtual infrastructure: the myriad associations, confederations, and clubs that free agents create to help one another develop business, raise children, and do just about everything in between. People are social creatures, and the change from the ready-to-hand community of a workplace to the solitude of free agency can be tough. But as Pink points out repeatedly,

Pink in a box

In the four years he's been working solo, Dan Pink has become an authority on living the free-agent life. One thing he's learned is that time is an all-too-scarce resource. That's why he ends every chapter in *Free Agent Nation* with "The Box," a lexicon-in-a-nutshell for time-deprived freelancers. Here's where you'll find:

- The Crux, a summary in 150 words or less of what the chapter has to say.
- The Factoid, a revealing statistic.
- The Quote, a representative sound bite.
- The Word, a new phrase from Free Agent-ese.

This last bit is especially helpful if your vocabulary doesn't already include terms like the *Peter-out principle*, *new-economy 7-11s*, and *unschooling*.

working on your own doesn't mean working alone. The people who manage free agency most successfully are men and especially women who can connect — and stay connected — to lots of other people in all sorts of ways.

At one level, never-ending networking is simple self-interest: After all, IPs can't have too many leads to future clients and work. But Pink also sees all these voluntary organizations as reprises of an earlier form of American community, the kind Alexis de Toqueville wrote about when he visited the United States in the 1830s. In *Democracy in America*, the Frenchman held a mirror up to the young republic to show its citizens how useful — and unusual — their habit of forming associations for every activity under the sun was proving to be, politically and economically. In *Free Agent Nation*, Pink uses his conversations with hundreds of free agents all across the country to make the same point.

I hope he's right.

What gives me pause is that unlike Toqueville, Pink not only has moved to the country whose customs he's describing; he wants everyone else to move there, too. *Free Agent Nation* is a field guide, it's also a recruiting document. Imagine anthropologist Margaret Mead joining forces with pamphleteer Tom Paine, and you have a pretty good idea of the book's impassioned rhetoric and scope. That's a problem on a couple of counts.

First, free agency isn't for everyone. In part, it's a matter of mindset. Some people actually don't like not knowing where their next paycheck is coming from. Others need the structure and stricture of a 9-to-5 job to keep them on task. But

even more, it's a matter of economics: Will the market come to you? Does it want what you're offering? Or do you need what organizations offer, not only to keep free agency from becoming an exercise in subsistence living but also to allow you to do your best work? Many highly skilled people need the resources of an organization to earn a fair living — witness the perma-temps at Microsoft — and to achieve their potential. Think about the extraordinary equipment biochemists need to do their cutting-edge research. Pink recognizes this reality, but the point is pretty easily lost in his call to arms.

Moreover, organizations are an essential part of the free-agent ecosystem, the yin to the IP's yang (or vice versa). Companies — often very big companies — are clients, the source of much of the prosperity that keeps so many solo enterprises running. Healthy societies need healthy organizations as much as they need healthy individuals.

And that brings me to my last point. The values of free agency are not the values of free agents exclusively. You don't need to be a free agent to respect your own autonomy and that of others; to hold yourself accountable for your actions and choices; to look for meaning in your work and find it; or to forge your own definition of success, independent of titles, possessions, and an MBA. These are fundamental human values, and practicing them is hard work whether you choose to do that work on your own or inside an organization. **1099**