The Coder's Path to Wealth and Independence
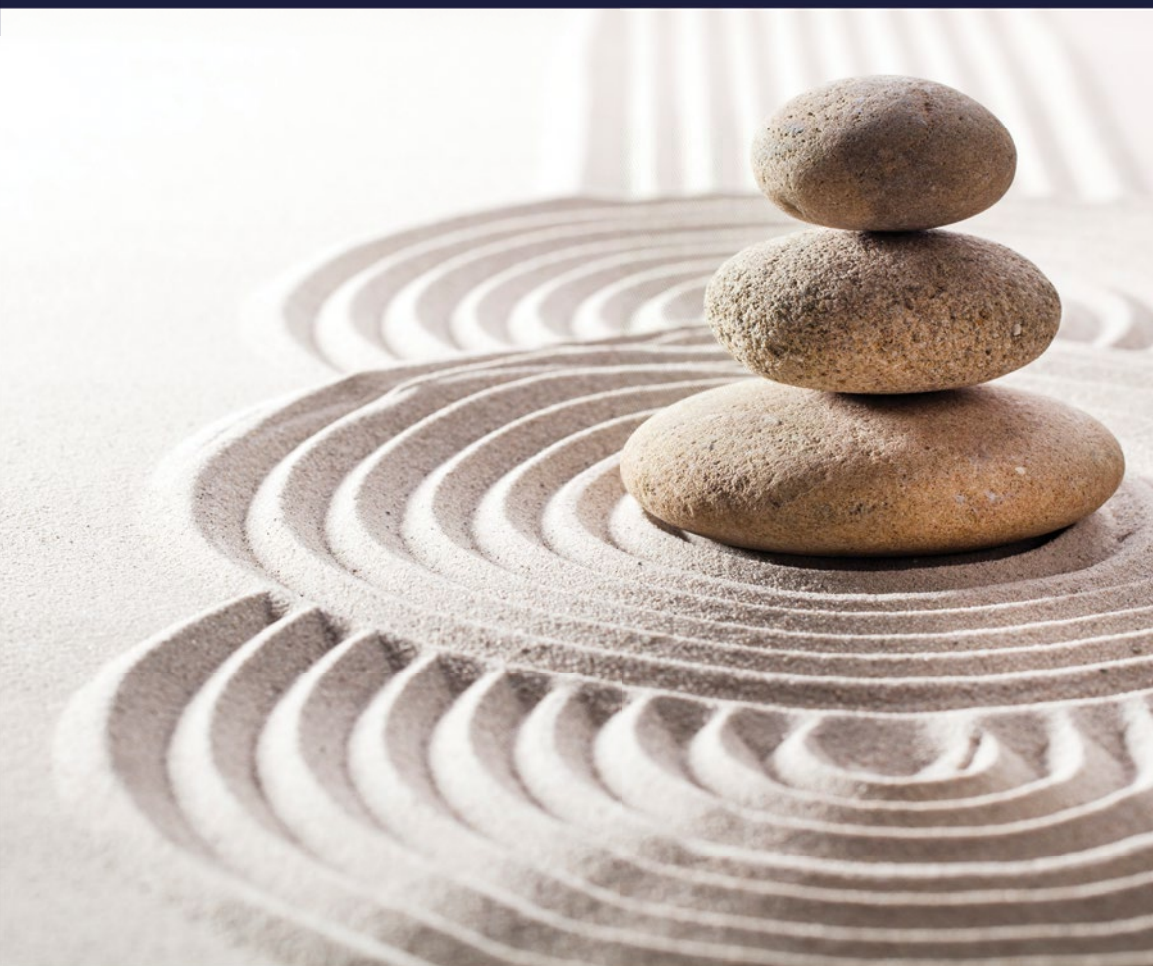
MARK BECKNER

For your convenience Apress has placed some of the front matter material after the index. Please use the Bookmarks and Contents at a Glance links to access them.

friendsof

apress®

Contents

Introduction

This book is for coders who want to take control of their personal and professional lives.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in *The Social Contract*, wrote, "Man was born free, but everywhere he is in chains. This man believes that he is the master of others, and still he is more of a slave than they are." The reason that most people are in chains is that they do not know the path to freedom. My purpose in this book is to show you the path to freedom through the use of your technical skills.

This path harnesses the inherent power of business to enable you to reach personal and professional independence and wealth. With this wealth and independence, you will have the freedom to pursue any activity, attain any goal, and realize any dream that you choose.

I cover many topics, always emphasizing that your ability to succeed in the pursuit of wealth and independence is contingent on your whole state of being, professional and personal. Your thinking, your discipline, your dedication, your health, and your use of resources play a direct and significant role in the success of your business, and will determine whether or not you will be able to achieve the goals that you set for yourself.

While there may be many paths that can lead to financial prosperity, I guarantee that if you approach your work as outlined in this book, you will not only be able to make significantly more money than most others in the technical field, you will also be able to achieve great things in your personal life and will be an asset to the world. You will have abundance, and will be able to give abundantly.

You are in a position to control your life. The technical industry affords freedoms unlike any other trade, and it is completely up to you whether you pursue these freedoms or let them pass you by. You don't have to be a slave of any system, or at the command of any boss. You no longer have to work in a cubicle, commute by plane, live apart from your family, or sacrifice your health for an unrealistic project timeline.

In short, this book will show you how to be the master of yourself, slave to no one. Pursue wealth and independence and live to your highest potential.

—Mark Beckner
October 29, 2014

Travel

The Power of Staying in Motion

An object at rest stays at rest, and an object in motion stays in motion with the same speed and in the same direction unless acted upon by an unbalanced force.

—Sir Isaac Newton's First Law of Motion

The coder's path to prosperity and independence is paved through continual movement; there is nothing more critical to your success. As Newton's First Law states, an object at rest stays at rest. Therefore, to overcome the inertia and stagnation that can show up easily in any career, you must put yourself in motion; be part of the power that fuels your personal and professional growth, and embrace the opportunities that present themselves to you.

This book opens with a chapter on business travel, because motion is at the core of your ability to prosper and grow professionally. Your work begins by moving from a typical coder's stationary existence to a mobile, professional lifestyle. After you've determined how to become mobile, you must understand the difference between nonessential travel and travel critical to the success of your business. Mastering the art of business travel takes time and constant review, and it is best complemented with a pattern of thought that is also fluid and mobile. You should be open to opportunity, view everything as transitory, and look constantly at how to alter your environment to better your situation.

Your goal should be to push yourself into profitable and meaningful motion—while avoiding unnecessary and wasteful travel—and let the momentum carry you to the highest levels of success.

■ **Rule**   Business travel is critical to your ability to achieve a high level of success. It is essential to your growth and prosperity. It is also the very thing that can limit the flow of opportunity, drain your time and vitality, and ultimately create an unfulfilling, marginally lucrative, and highly dependent professional life. You must balance the necessity for business travel with the underlying need to grow your business and your options.

From Rest to Motion

As a coder, you very likely come from a background that is not dependent on travel. Coding generally starts as an autonomous occupation—developers are hired into companies that provide them a cubicle and expect them to move as infrequently as possible. Those of us who are attracted to this job are often introverted. However, although the reality of coding in a nonprofessional environment may be that it is a solitary endeavor, in the professional world—especially in later stages of a career path—the work environment is made up of constant interaction, meetings, dialogues, and social activities.

CASE STUDY

In college, when I decided to focus on computer science, one of the deciding factors was that I wanted a career in which I could work alone, with limited social interaction. My understanding of the programmer's environment was wrong. Computer science is a highly interactive and social environment, especially for those who wish to become prosperous in the field.

Going from a stationary resting position to a mobile position takes some effort, but it is an essential step to moving toward independence. You must harness the power of travel to aid you in your growth and success. There are several ways to get yourself in motion. Consider the following:

1. **Reach out to your contacts**. You've worked with companies and individuals in the past and, assuming you haven't burned all of your bridges, you have many potential opportunities available. Reach out to these contacts. Let them know where you are in your career and what type of work you are looking for. Tell them how you can help them; make them aware of your evolving skill set and availability. Letting people know you are alive, that you are available, that you have current in-demand skills, and that you are looking for opportunities is the quickest way to making things happen.

2. **Take a trip.** This strategy might be new to you, but it could help generate new business leads. Visit your contacts—past clients and employers—periodically. Offer to take them to lunch. Few people will turn you down. Use that time to catch up and indicate your willingness to take on new work. These networks are important to maintain. Spending money without any immediate payback may be new to you, but it may help you reap rewards later. This strategy puts you into the energetic flow of where you want to be, and it will open doors that wouldn't open under other circumstances. Sometimes you simply have to pack your bags and hit the road to make things happen.

3. **Take on contract work.** For those of you who have no contacts and are just getting started in your career, consider engaging in contract work at a remote location. There are thousands of temporary onsite jobs in the information technology (IT) world, with companies looking for individuals with a specific skill set to augment their teams—and this type of work is fairly easy to find. Although remote contract work is career suicide after you have established your successful business, it is an option for getting yourself in motion early in your career.

4. **Work with a consulting firm.** A short stint with a consulting firm can also have a great impact on your career, your contacts, and your momentum. Most firms require their personnel to travel for work. Most likely, you will have an opportunity to work with platforms and applications to which you may not otherwise be exposed, which will enhance your skill set. In addition, the people you meet and with whom you work will become invaluable contacts, if cultivated correctly. Many of these contacts will go on to greater things in their own career, which could provide you with better opportunities. This strategy, like contract work, is for the junior programmer, and likely isn't something you would do beyond the earliest stages of your career.

The Two Types of Business Travel

There are two types of business travel. The first is *critical business travel*, which allows for high-impact programming, project advancement, relationship building, and sales. Critical business travel is enriching and rewarding, highly valuable to you and your client, and easy to sustain. It is a recurring, positive requirement for the health of your business.

The second type is *noncritical business travel*—an often necessary but bitter aspect of early careers, and a staple of experienced professionals. Noncritical business travel can be wasteful, inefficient, limiting, and invasive. and should be viewed as a toxin that needs to be removed from your environment as quickly as possible if you wish to prosper and attain new levels of professional growth.

■ **Rule**   Business travel includes both long-distance and local client visits. For example, I know people in metropolitan areas that spend hours every day traveling from one client site to the next. In a day or two, they put in more travel time than someone traveling from New York to Los Angeles by plane. In cases when these client visits support the business, bring true value to the client, and lead to more and better work, business travel is worth the investment. But, as a recurring, weekly exercise used simply to have a few minutes of face time or client meetings, these trips are a great waste of time and energy.

Critical Business Travel

Business travel, at any point during your career, should be viewed primarily as a means of gaining and retaining work. Anything related to travel that allows you to build your business, your expertise, and your list of leads and clients should be pursued without hesitation. Anything related to simply filling a seat and being "part of a team" should be avoided. What may be critical travel in the beginning should quickly turn into nonessential travel as your business grows and your opportunities increase.

You will likely be heavily dependent on travel at the start of your independent business career. Establishing relationships and gaining critical mass in the number of projects you agree to support takes quite a lot of effort and requires a bit of initial onsite time. Weekly onsite trips might be considered critical travel at the beginning of your independent career, because you won't have a project otherwise. However, as you acquire a pool of simultaneous projects, you must relegate weekly onsite travel to noncritical business travel.

There are three questions to ask yourself when determining whether travel is essential:

1. **Is the client better off with me onsite?** The client is not generally the best source to answer this question. You must answer this yourself. You must determine whether your time will be well used while onsite. Are there meetings and discussions that simply cannot take place in a conference call? Are you interacting with appropriate personnel and making progress while onsite? If your answer to these two questions is yes, then pack your bags. Often, a majority of developers travel across the country to sit alone in a cubicle and program. This is not a good investment of your time, money, or energy for anyone involved, but it is the norm.

2. **Is the work I am doing something that can be done remotely?** Writing code and working through the software development life cycle is not usually dependent on location. However, if you are a junior developer or a member of an interactive team, you will find most likely that sitting together with others is a requirement of the project. When you are an expert programmer, coding is best done alone at your site, especially if you are fostering your independence in business.

3. **Is this particular trip affecting other areas of my business growth negatively?** The key here is to travel wisely. Every time you sit on an airplane or spend a week in exclusive onsite time with a client, you turn down other potential opportunities. If you are a "one-project" show—where you only participate in one project at a time—then it is irrelevant where you are. If you want to be onsite, it won't impact your business, because you don't have a business—you have a project. If you are working to prosper in your career, then there is never a time when you will have a single project, and therefore you must always be available to take on additional work and also interact with existing clients. Time onsite with a client should generally be viewed as lost time for every aspect of your business, and therefore travel and onsite time must be capable of significant business impact to make it worth your time.

■ **Rule**   Much of your ability to code your way to wealth and independence is dependent on your ability to maximize your time and efficiency. You must be able to support multiple projects simultaneously and ensure all your clients feel like they are your top. This balancing act can be difficult to maintain if travel time is cutting in to your work time. Again, travel wisely.

Noncritical Business Travel

Noncritical business travel often consists of traveling to a client site and spending four to five days a week onsite. In general, you are in a staff augmentation role and are there largely for your presence. There may be occasional status meetings and development discussions, but most often you will find yourself alone in a cube programming, or passing the time trying to stay busy.

In a world in which online meetings are available to everyone, global communication is instantaneous, and system development can take place from anywhere, it is surprising that so many corporations still engage in the repetitive onsite staffing model. However, this is the business model for many companies you might support as a contractor or a consultant.

■ **Rule**   Always consider the nonmonetary costs associated with travel. Travel requires you to give up part of your personal life, and to be apart from your family and friends. It means spending countless hours in airports, airplanes, taxis, and hotels. This expenditure of time and energy may be necessary in many cases, especially when starting on your path to independence, and it is important that you understand the costs to travel beyond money.

During the early days of your career, you need to "do your time"—investing whatever it takes to get things in motion and becoming a viable resource. With time, you need to shed what has allowed you to become successful and begin to move in a different direction. If you are a seasoned professional and you have skills that differentiate yourself from the pack, don't continue to accept onsite staff augmentation roles.

Redefining the Rules

Although noncritical business travel is often a requirement for certain projects, it is certainly not to your long-term advantage, and should—from day one— be something you try to minimize. There comes a time when you must say no to how things are done to achieve growth and progress on your path.

As Albert Camus wrote in *The Rebel*, "What is a rebel? A man who says no, but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation. He is also a man who says yes, from the moment he makes his first gesture of rebellion." At a certain point, you must be willing to refuse to continue to take part in traditional forms of business travel—the thing that made it possible for you to succeed in the first place—and engage in those aspects of business travel that further your primary goals of wealth and freedom.

The essence of being highly successful and independent in the tech field (and in most of life) is working in this way. You learn the game, master the game, and then redefine the rules to continue to engage in the game.

CASE STUDY

A few years into my career, when I was commuting by plane to various projects on a weekly basis, I looked around at others on the plane who were doing the same thing, and had been for the past 20 years. I promised myself that I wouldn't do that when I was their age. My key goals were to eliminate senseless travel and to work remotely, except when there was an extremely good reason to be onsite. I focused constantly on the need to reduce travel and engage at a different level, and I took a variety of steps to make that happen. Combining branding, publishing, business development, and communication changes, I was able to reduce my amount of travel drastically. With thought and willingness to focus on the growth of yourself and your business, you can eliminate noncritical travel.

Seven Techniques to Avoid Unnecessary Travel

Use the following guidelines to avoid unnecessary travel.

1. **Build your business.** With many opportunities occurring at the same time, you won't have the option to travel. If you have a half dozen development projects proceeding simultaneously, you won't be able to step away for a week to sit onsite with one client. Your ability to set limitations on how you engage in your business improve significantly when you don't have to travel excessively.

2. **Be an expert.** Set yourself apart. Through your experience, your professional skill set, your leadership, and your exposure, you can set yourself apart as an expert rather than a commodity. In a pool of resources of equal experience, it is difficult to convince the customer that

you should work remotely. However, if you have enough expertise, and a body of work that validates your abilities and credentials, it's easier to make a case that your clients are better off with you involved, even if it means substantially less face time. As Figure 1-1 shows, the more expertise you have (which equates to value to the client) the less time you should spend in noncritical travel. And as mentioned, eventually, it should be eliminated entirely.
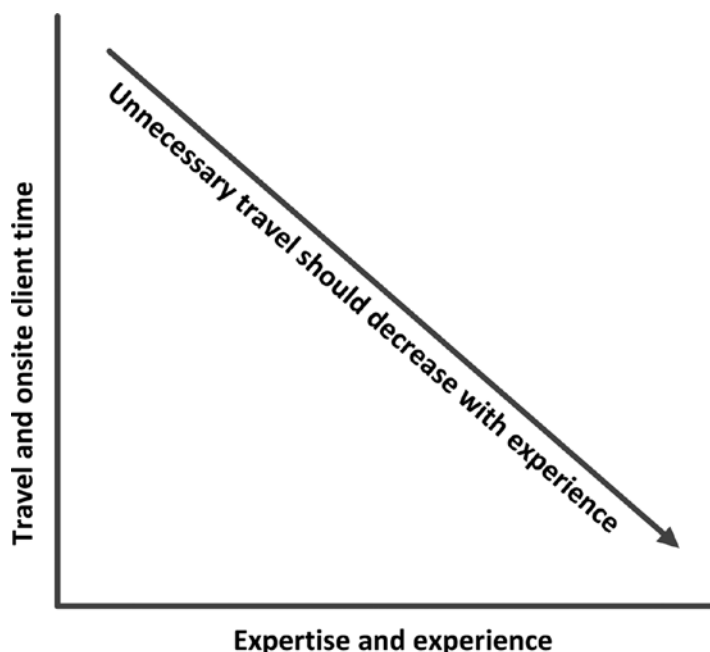

Figure 1-1. Increase your expertise and decrease your travel

3. **Master communication.** Someone who has the ability to communicate effectively and professionally over the phone has a much greater chance of convincing a client that remote work is a viable option. Many coders avoid the phone at all costs, relying on e-mail and other "low-stress" forms of communication. Phone communication, for example, is a learned skill, and should be one of your highest priorities. The ability to make a call, return a call promptly, and communicate over the phone like you are there in person sets you apart from the crowd and allows you to work from anywhere.

CASE STUDY

My first job in the tech field was with the help desk of an Internet service provider. At the time, I was extremely uncomfortable on the phone, almost to a point of fear. My first call was from a subscriber asking how to delete e-mail from his inbox. It was so stressful to me to be on the phone that it took about 15 minutes to understand what he was talking about and then walk him through the steps (highlight and click Delete!) to complete it. Now, 16 years later, my business is heavily dependent on phone communication, and I make or take hundreds of calls a month. Many of my clients I never meet in person, and our work and relationship is sustained through phone conversations over months and years. All communication is a learned skill and requires practice. Never underestimate the importance of the phone in your success and your ability to minimize unnecessary travel. E-mail should be for secondary communications, only.

4. **Stay engaged.** The truth is, most clients want their contractors to be onsite largely to keep an eye on them. Many people believe if someone is "working from home" they cannot be productive and won't focus on the work. Your task is to demonstrate to your client that you are involved, and overly productive. Send e-mails documenting your progress and asking questions, which demonstrates your engagement with the work. Make phone calls to fellow members of your team; offer to assist them and ask for their input. Be engaged. Any number of communications takes substantially less time than traveling and sitting onsite, so be liberal with your involvement, and show that you are highly engaged and indispensable.

■ **Rule** The most unproductive times are those spent onsite with a client in a staff augmentation role. When you are offsite, your priority is to be as productive as possible, and work through things as quickly as possible. When you are onsite, the goal is to look busy and conform to the culture of the company. In virtually every case, you will be exponentially more productive when working remotely from your own office. The amount of wasted time in the corporate world is astounding, and it doesn't align with the pursuit of independence.

5. **Be willing to prioritize.** I know a number of people who choose to travel on a repetitive basis, not because the business requires it, but because they want to be on the road. In many cases, they have children at home and they want the break. In other cases, they simply aren't taking an active role in determining how their life will play out. They're on the road because of lack of thoughtful planning. If you are using your work to escape from more important responsibilities, or you travel because you don't have a better alternative, you are failing to prioritize. Take the time to identify what it is you want from life, both professionally and personally, and be willing to rank your personal responsibilities over the nonessential demands of your professional life.

6. **Don't fear losing a client.** Being successful and independent means you are not tied to any one client. Although you should always strive to bring value to a project, and want to be seen as a valuable resource, you also must set boundaries. Client demands can be overwhelming at times, and in many cases unacceptable. Clients who demand too much of your time limit your ability to work with other clients and to find new, and potentially more desirable, work. A client who demands constant travel should be viewed as a less desirable client. Part of building your business is the willingness to part with clients that drain your time and energy.

CASE STUDY

I had an excellent remote working relationship with a client, and he was very pleased with my delivery and project execution. One day there was a crisis with one of their internal systems and my customer asked me to come onsite. He wanted me there on a recurring basis, because his manager decided he wanted in-person time with everyone. I told them that I wouldn't be able to support the travel—especially cross-country in the middle of winter. At first they tried to negotiate with me, but when they realized there was nothing they could offer that would entice me to travel, the manager became irate and began to question all the work I had done. Within weeks, I was thrown off the project. This is an extreme case. Most of the time, you will have reasonable clients, and only occasionally will you be confronted with unprofessionalism and negativity. You are your boss; you get to choose with whom you work. Stay firm in your conviction about what is reasonable travel, and know that your value is high regardless of where you sit.

7. **Be clear about your expectations.** Be decisive with yourself about what you want from your business. Write your own ideals of how you want to engage with clients, and how much time you want to spend on the road and onsite. Unless you know precisely what you are willing to do, you won't be able to be true to your expectations. The world will guide you where it wants, unless you are willing to specify what *you* want. After you set your own expectations , be clear with current and potential clients about how you are willing to engage.

A Word on Staying in Motion Mentally

Movement comes in two primary forms: physical and mental. Physical movement in the business world through professional travel is ubiquitous. Business travel is easy to recognize, to witness, and to engage in. Mental movement, on the contrary, is much less common and requires much more from the person engaged in it.

Being in motion mentally means being aware of what is around you, your relationship with your work, your goals for your professional and personal life, and all the opportunities and paths opening around it. Mental motion means being able to shift directions to meet customer needs and the changing marketplace, being open to shifting directions and plans, and working to reinvent yourself on a recurring basis. A constant reflection on your situation, your desires, what you are doing with your life, what you are doing for those around you (client, family, associates, and so forth) is required for you to be mentally open and aware.

To attain your ultimate goals of freedom, independence, and wealth, you must be open minded, dynamic, and opportunistic—willing to go where the path leads. Coupling a strong mental openness with a purposeful approach to business travel will skyrocket you to the top of your profession.

Nine Essential Rules for Travel

Travel should always further your business. Use the following rules to ensure your travel is building your business, not taking away from it.

1. **Network while in town**. Before and during any trip, try to find as many contacts in the area as possible and offer to meet with them. When you travel a long distance, people often find the time to meet with you on short notice. After catching up with what's been happening in their life (be mindful of them, too), turn the conversation to how you might be able to help them. Perhaps you developed something you'd like to share with them, or perhaps it is simply an offer of a free lunch or dinner. Never, however, approach these meetings with the intent of selling something, rather, view this as an opportunity to reconnect. These connections can open opportunities both for you and for the people with whom you are meeting. Approach their success with the same level of interest as your own success, and unexpected positive options will open before both of you.

CASE STUDY

I was planning a business trip to the East Coast and intended to reach out to a number of old clients for whom I had done work in the past. I had just published a new book, so I offered to stop by and meet with them in person and give them a copy of the book. There was client I hadn't spoken to in several years. Just offering to meet with him and hand him a free copy of my book led to a six-month paid engagement. If I hadn't been traveling in the first place, and I hadn't reached out to him and offering something of value to help him with his work, this opportunity would never have opened up.

2. **Meet with multiple clients**. If you are doing things right, you will have many sales leads at any given time. While working on multiple projects concomitantly, you should have a half dozen others you are tracking to acquire new business and new projects. Whenever you make an onsite trip—either for delivery or for sales—meet with as many clients (or potential clients) as possible. Let every lead or active client know you are in town, and figure out a way to have an in-person meeting with him or her. This is an excellent way to keep dialogue alive, and to remind people of your existence and the work you do.

3. **Use your travel time to be productive.** When you leave your regular life behind and travel across the country, you'll have a great deal of free time. Sometimes the chaos of travel can be to your benefit. Use your time to do delivery, put together advertising material, brainstorm about how to reach out to new clients, and identify new offerings.

CASE STUDY

In winter 2006, I traveled every week. There were many flight delays and cancelations, and I spent much of my time in the Salt Lake City airport. I used the airport time to my advantage. I did almost all the writing and code creation related to my contributions to my first multi-author book while sitting in the concourse cafeteria.

---

4. **Consider travel an investment**. In some cases, clients reimburse you for travel, but as your career progresses, and travel becomes more a part of sales than delivery, you are often required to pick up the tab. In the world of IT, you generally charge top dollar for your expertise, and you need to invest in your business travel accordingly. Don't be cheap. Taking the cheapest flights and staying in the cheapest hotels may save you a few dollars, but it cheapens your overall mindset and persona. The energy you put out in the world comes back to you. If you look for the cheapest way to travel, your clients look for the cheapest resources they can hire. Invest (but don't go overboard) in your travel and yourself, and it will lead to better results.

5. **Look professional**. Coders are known for their informality—and some are even known for their questionable hygiene. When you are a smalltime developer or when you work in the privacy of your own office, dress as you please. However, when you travel to client sites, clean up, dress well, and look like a professional. The way you present yourself is key in personal encounters. If you are trying to sell a high-revenue deal, dress and look like you should be paid a high price.

CASE STUDY

I arrived at a client site well dressed, but not as well dressed as the client or other employees. The company required everyone wear a necktie. That night I bought several ties. Here was an air of professionalism I hadn't seen elsewhere. Shortly after I visited them, I went to another client and decided to wear one of the ties. When I walked in, a group of us eventually sat down to discuss the potential project. One of the group members said I needed to remove my tie or the discussion would go no further. So, although it is always correct to dress well, you never can tell what a client might expect.

---

6. **Be ethical.** There is an entire chapter on ethics in this book (Chapter 4). Ethics apply to all aspects of your professional and private life. However, being ethical during travel is something always to keep in mind. There is anonymity in your person and your activities, and there are many negative things that may call for your attention and situations that will allow you to act in any manner. In all things you do, act as if everyone around you knows you, and that all of your activities and , conversations, and diversions were being made public. Treat people like you would want them to treat you, and as if you will see them again tomorrow.

7. **Arrive early.** In general, always try to arrive the night before an important client meeting. Airplanes get delayed, bad weather occurs, roads get closed. The worst thing you can do is arrive late to a meeting, especially after investing the time and resources to get there. If you are in a staff augmentation role where you show up weekly, it is less important to arrive early, as an occasional delay is expected. But when you are planning a one-time onsite trip, invest the extra time to get there well ahead of when the meeting will take place.

8. **Choose a hotel chain**. Most travel perks are irrelevant. Airline miles, it sometimes seems, can rarely be redeemed for anything but free magazines, and the time invested in tracking various frequent traveler programs are a waste of time. However, there is one exception to this: hotel memberships. When you are in business for yourself and you must cover the costs of hotel stays, you'll find that you can easily redeem free nights with any of the major

hotel chains at any time. Saving $200 a night while on a four-day business trip can add up nicely. Combining frequent stays with a hotel-themed credit card for everyday purchases has a sizeable positive impact on your travel expenses. It also ensures you are staying in a professional, clean environment, and you stay focused on the business at hand.

CASE STUDY

I've spent a lot of time on the road, and I have stayed at a wide variety of places. It took me years to come to the realization that I needed to stick with a specific chain of hotels while traveling. The episode that made me never look again at creative housing options occurred about five years into my career. I had forgotten to book a hotel in advance and I ended up in a small city late at night. All the hotels I could find were booked for the night. Finally, around midnight, I found a little motel that had a vacancy. I walked into the room and I realized I had made an unfortunate error. Although the room was dim, filthy, and filled with bad air, I went ahead and spent the night. My sleep was filled with nightmares, something I am never troubled with. I checked out five hours later and never forgot to make a reservation in advance again. There are mistakes that we make in life only once.

---

9. **Don't use travel as an escape**. I have heard that some people find their sanctuary when on the plane. No cell phones, no e-mail, no pressures from the outside world—in short, a refuge from the demands of the modern world. Some people use travel as their primary escape; they long to be in the air. To me, this is a professional failure. If you want a respite from everything, go into nature, breathe the fresh air, sit on a canyon wall, be alone with your thoughts. If the only escape or the only time to get work done is at 35,000 feet, you most likely need to take a step back and reassess your priorities. Paul Theroux wrote, "You define a good flight by negatives: you didn't get hijacked, you didn't crash, you didn't throw up, you weren't late, you weren't nauseated by the food."[1] If you are defining you travel time by negatives, you are probably on the right track. Be grounded; take control of your life.

---

[1] Paul Theroux, *The Old Patagonian Express. Mariner Books, 1989.*

Conclusion

Travel is critical to your success, but should be done in moderation. Too much time on the road limits your ability to deliver at your maximum capacity; but, too much time in a stationary position reduces your opportunities. Finding the right balance is an art; it requires a thoughtful approach and constant refinement. Successful travel is valuable to both you and the client, and should not be done solely to fill a seat. The cost is too high, both in personal sacrifices and loss of professional opportunities.

Skills

Foundations in Programming and Business

Those who speak against killing and who desire to spare the lives of all conscious beings are right. It is good to protect even the animals and insects. But what about those persons who kill time, what about those who are destroying wealth, and those who destroy political economy? We should not overlook them.

—*From Nyogen Senzaki's 101 Zen Stories*[1]

You have a responsibility to perform at your highest capacity in everything that you do. As you progress along your professional path, and as the years advance, your abilities and capacities will change and your responsibilities will increase. The first step on your path is to build a foundation of understanding and a skillset that will enable you to grow and build a career. After you have built these, you will need to move beyond delivery and begin to create and engage in opportunities at a higher level.

As part of your foundation, you should understand the full software life cycle, and be able to work at an expert level within delivery, testing, deployment, and support roles. Your skillset should also include an extensive base of skills that are not coding specific, skills that enable you to engage in a broad array of project-based work. Throughout your professional life you must constantly expand your skills, your offerings, and your fundamental understanding of the processes and systems at work within organizations and within the world of business.

---

[1]This story can be found in: Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*. Tuttle Publishing, 1998.

If you remain in the same job, never advance to the next stage, and refuse to grow, learn, and expand your capabilities and offerings, you not only limit your potential and positive energy but also negatively affect those around you. As the opening quote from *101 Zen Stories* implies, the person who wastes time and resources is guilty of more than just inefficiencies and sloth. Those who seek a job only for security, and never push themselves to higher achievements, will not be able to harness the creative powers of their trade and of business, and will never attain security, let alone independence or wealth.

It is your duty to move to higher levels of functioning in your personal and professional life. To do so, you must understand the nature of the world in which you work. It is critical to see the creativity behind coding, and the nearly limitless possibilities for work and opportunity that this skill creates. It is crucial to understand how to move from solely programming to an entrepreneurial role of forming and managing a business built on coding. This requires that you view business as a necessary, transcendent, and deeply purposeful engagement.

In the following sections, you will explore the nature of programming and what it takes to be a coder who can rise above pure delivery and establish your own dynamic business. You will also look at what the nature of business is, and how you can harness the power of this system. By focusing on attaining a broad range of skills in programming and in business, and by understanding the nature of the activities and systems you are taking part in, you will have an excellent foundation from which you can achieve your aspirations of wealth and independence.

The Nature of Programming

Creativity is at the core of programming. Often, people perceive coders as highly logical, analytical, left-brained; and there certainly are those who fit the stereotype. However, the programmer whose entire focus is on the code and who can't come away from the keyboard is not going to be able to rise above the pack and move toward success and freedom. Rather, it is the programmer who is focused on the bigger goals and is willing to alter his or her approach to work and deliverables that will ultimately move on to greater things.

CASE STUDY

I was out with a group of people one evening, and a woman I had not met before asked me what I did for work. I told her that I was a programmer and that I worked with technology. She frowned. "You looked more creative than that," she said as she walked away.

Programming is a creative exercise, but it is a trade, and therefore ultimately a commodity, similar to any other product or service. One coder can easily be replaced with another, and engaging in the trade alone is only enough to sustain a basic career. Your goal is to differentiate yourself from others so that you are not easily replaceable. The more development skills you have and the wider the range of projects you have worked on, the more valuable you are to your current and future clients. By supplementing your skillset and enhancing your business insight and strategy capabilities, you can set yourself apart from the competition and become someone who clients cannot easily replace or consider to be a commodity.

Programming Skills

Your core programming abilities are what make you saleable and what enable you to engage on projects. The broader your offerings across languages and platforms, the wider the array of job options that will be available to you. You can build a business specializing on one platform, but you must be among the best in your specialty to be successful. The following is a list of technology areas that are common in virtually all environments. The more familiarity (or expertise) you have across these areas, the more valuable you are to clients, and the easier it will be for you to find paid project engagements. You will want to broaden your offerings as you grow professionally, so that you are able to accept any opportunity that presents itself.

■ **Rule**   Every aspect of coding and platform development is important to master. There are many coders who can write applications but know virtually nothing about databases. There are many systems integrators who can map data and write SQL but have no idea how to write data access layers or other code-intensive components. There are endless user interface and graphic designers, but few of them have the skills to tie the front end with back-end databases. If you lack the ability to deliver across all the various aspects of applications, your ability to constantly grow and expand your project base will be severely limited. You will have no problem finding a project occasionally, but you won't be able to land multiple simultaneous projects, and clients will perceive you as a replaceable commodity. This is not the path that will lead you to your goals.

---

1. **Languages**. You need to be a master of at least one major programming language and be familiar with many of the others. Among your goals should be to deliver a project in each of the major languages at some point in your career. The major languages for which you need expertise and experience include (but certainly are not limited to) .NET, Java, web-based languages (HTML/PHP/ ASP.NET), database languages (T-SQL, XQuery), and data languages and formats (XML/XSLT). Many people in the technical field have familiarity with platforms and how to configure and deploy them, but only a subset of those people know how to program in a variety of languages. Mastery of structures and principals of coding is a core skill if you intend to be a technologist in business for yourself.

■ **Rule**   The businessperson who has expertise in both coding and development is rare. Being among that elite group will give you an advantage in your business dealings, as you will be able to deliver projects at any level. Sales, acquisition of new work, development, testing, deployment, and support are all skills you will personally bring to the table, which means you can discuss at any level with anyone and come to quick decisions at any point in the sales or delivery cycle.

---

2. **Databases**. Knowing how to build a relational database from scratch (tables, fields, relationships, keys) and how to program various database components (stored procedures, functions, and so forth) will be useful on almost all of your projects. Whether you specialize in database-specific tasks or not, your ability to query data and compile reports will be of value to virtually every client. Databases are common to every company. Having expertise with the major offerings in this space (especially SQL Server and Oracle) will be a great asset to you in finding project work.

3. **Platforms**. You should have deep skills in at least one specific platform. Portals and document repositories (SharePoint, for example), CRM suites (Dynamics, Salesforce.com, and so on), and integration applications (such as BizTalk, Oracle SOA, and Sterling B2B) are the types of platforms that are broad enough to build an entire career on. There are endless options for project work in almost all of these spaces, and plenty of areas in which you can specialize.