



Overworked, underpaid – and loving every minute of it

She's 32, happily married, has two young sons. He's 47, also married, with two adult children. Brian, 40, is a trilingual married man with two pre-teens. Dan and his partner have never been married and don't have any children, though they've been "best friends for the past 15 years." This other guy is just your average business owner/commercial artist/community leader/musician/host and emcee.

They are all educated to some degree, whether it's high school, or university, or college, or some post-secondary, or a hard knocks life. They work one job, or two. Sometimes three. You'll find them at home and in coffee shops, in store fronts and industrial parks. They regularly punch 10 and 12 hour days, six and seven days a week. One reports "cutting back" to 60 hour work weeks during the summer (it's 80-plus in the winter).

They represent every industry imaginable: food service, manufacturing, massage therapy, graphic design, consulting and beyond.

They are the wiliest of marketers, creatively (and cheaply) sharing their stories on Facebook and Twitter, in blogs and at home shows, through ads in local newspapers and on the radio, via brochures and flyers, press releases and yellow pages. Their biggest coup is when they go viral via positive word of mouth. That, they say, is their "holy grail".

But despite their best efforts and long hours, their innovative thinking and competitive instincts, most make less – much less – than \$100,000 a year in total business revenue. The inadequacy of their personal salaries should make a pensioned bureaucrat blush.

Surprisingly, however, insufficient money is not the hardest part of their entrepreneurial lifestyle. That distinction is reserved for the work that follows them home. That, and wearing all the hats, all the time. Plus always being on call, even for things their employees should be able to decide for themselves. And being responsible for everything – from meeting the weekly payroll to ensuring there's enough janitorial supplies.

But if you flip those attributes around, you'll see that many of those trials and

tribulations are exactly what they love most about being their own boss.

"Having the freedom to create my ideal workspace, and to chose my amazing co-workers," crows one, using an exclamation mark for emphasis.

"The growth of a business from the start to fruition and then to today's growth and success stories," chimes in another, when asked to define their satisfaction. "We did it, we are proud!"

Another references the freedom that would be missed if "I were not in this situation."

"Sharing my perspective and talents to create success and lasting relationships with my clients, my team and my friends and fans alike. It can be lonely at times, staring out the office window long after the rest of the world has gone home, but the victories and the rewards that come from it have been incredible so far, and I can't wait to see what the future holds."

"I love the fact that I have total decision making control of my business. I am the one and only person who decides what I do with my career and how far I want to go with it. I'm not limited to any one particular position or industry, therefore allowing me to expand on my knowledge and experiences through providing a multitude of services to a range of different people and organizations."

Who, exactly, are they? They are your typically atypical Atlantic Canadian small business owners, a loosely affiliated group of A-plus personalities. Though independent to their core, they share a similar drive and persistence, creativity and passion. They are ambitious and positive and sometimes, self-admittedly, a little bit weird.

They rarely get the respect they deserve, even though our economy would have long ago tanked without them. On behalf of everyone here at Atlantic Business Magazine, I'd like to thank you – the small business owners throughout the region – for putting yourselves on the line every day: creating employment, volunteering prodigiously, giving generously.

We dedicate this issue to you. | ABM

The views expressed in this column are those of the author and not necessarily those of Atlantic Business Magazine. Feedback: dchafe@atlanticbusinessmagazine.com

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