

Reid Hoffman & Ben Casnocha. The Start-Up of You. New York: Crown Business, 2012, 272 pages.

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Subject Area: Entrepreneurship

Does everyone have an entrepreneurial mindset? Is each wired for innovation and creativity? What about risk-taking? Is it somehow in the DNA? ***The Start-up of You*** is based on the premise that the will to be entrepreneurial is encoded in each person's DNA. The authors assert that to adapt to the changing environment of the today's professional world each of us must 'rediscover our entrepreneurial instincts'. Where in generations past long term employer-employee pacts and life-long employment security was the norm, in the second decade of the 21st century the rules have changed. 'Personal' start-ups are frequently an imperative as employees are 'downsized,' laid off and terminated. This quick, easy read provides perspective, inspiration and hope to each age group navigating the uncertainties of careers and employment in the professional world.

It is clear from the opening pages that the intended audience is broad. The authors believe the message is valuable no matter the career stage. It provides thought-provoking dialogue for:

- those fresh out of college looking for their first job
- those angling for a career move
- as well as those launching a new career late in life by choice or necessity.

Hoffman and Casnocha promise strategies to expand a professional network, gain a competitive edge and land better professional opportunities. They stress that the 'conditions in which entrepreneurs start and grow companies are the conditions we all live in when fashioning a career.'

The most appealing book feature has to be the numerous narratives throughout. The introductory tale of the rise and fall of Detroit provides great perspective as well as some serious food for thought. Throughout the book, as Silicon Valley veterans, they aptly demonstrate points using what they have learned from living in the trenches. The stories from companies such as Flickr, Zappos, Starbucks and PayPal each bring a real-world view. Each chapter brings out key points pertaining to one aspect of entrepreneurship. The authors move back and forth comparing the parallels between a business start-up and personal start-up. Just when the reading may get tedious, they find the right illustration.

As each chapter unfolds the examples and points build their case, justifying the assertion that there is an entrepreneur inside each one. As Chapter 2 unfolds, the authors discuss the idea that competitive advantage is formed from assets, aspirations and the market realities. Soft assets are those such as knowledge, connections, and reputation that are difficult to quantify but critical to developing an advantage. The hard assets are cash, stocks and physical

possessions. What each individual is selling is in reality his/her brain power, skills and energy. Aspirations are those deepest wishes, goals and dreams regardless of the external world or the existing personal asset mix. Assets and aspirations must be combined with a thorough understanding of the market dynamics. Using the marketing metaphor, only by being first, faster, better or cheaper will someone find a niche and form a competitive advantage.

While a niche is essential, it is not sufficient. Planning is also vital. The authors declare that planning is essential even if the plans are not firm. This is referred to as being in a 'permanent beta state.' So a niche and a plan are critical. But even if those two are in place – the lone ranger will fail without Tonto. The authors distinguish between being a relationship builder versus a networker. Relationships should be built on complementary strengths and interests. Even weak connections are valuable if they offer new information and opportunities.

So the niche, the plan and the network is in place. What remains? Finding the opportunity. Making opportunities requires being connected. The individual must look for high quality, commonality, geographic proximity and a sense of sharing and cooperation. If opportunities are not seized they are lost. Even if one opportunity does not pan out it will likely open up multiple other opportunities. Though they are often inconvenient, uncertain, or ambiguous, opportunities should be seized. Taking the risk, understanding the market and seizing the opportunity – exactly what an entrepreneur must do – is critical to a personal startup as well.

While the content creates a compelling argument, one of the greatest benefits of this book is that each chapter ends with 'Invest in Yourself' self-assessment tasks. The book itself is a quick read but the assessments may take considerable time and introspection. Each end of chapter provides activities for the next day, next week and next month. If used to its full benefit, the book will likely be dog-eared and well marked.

Though at times it appears a bit of a sales pitch for LinkedIn® (Hoffman is a co-founder) this book does provide great food for thought regarding the business world upheaval and how to successfully respond. The self-assessments add an element that would make the book valuable as a small group study. The book provides value wherever someone may be in their career and makes sense given the business environment of the second decade of the 21st century.