



Escape from Cubicle Nation: From Corporate Prisoner to Thriving Entrepreneur

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Escape from Cubicle Nation: From Corporate Prisoner to Thriving Entrepreneur

Pamela Slim

Escape from Cubicle Nation: From Corporate Prisoner to Thriving Entrepreneur Pamela Slim

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Téléchargez et lisez en ligne **Escape from Cubicle Nation: From Corporate Prisoner to Thriving Entrepreneur** Pamela Slim

340 pages

Extrait

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The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book via the Internet or via any other means without the permission of the publisher is illegal and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions and do not participate in or encourage electronic piracy of copyrightable materials. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated. To Dad, who, when given a photography assignment two decades ago to take pictures of cubicles, turned to his colleague and said, "Charley: twenty years from now, some expert will be discussing the detrimental effects of these things on employee mental health."

Little did you know it would be me. **FOREWORD** I have not worked for a large company for ten years. Even when I did, it was for Apple which is hardly what you'd call typical. However, I know enough to tell you that is unfair to characterize all large companies as difficult places and all start-ups as Shangri-las, but for some people start-ups and small companies are the only way to go. Clearly, you don't have to spend much time in many large companies today to see that, as Steve Jobs would say, "there must be a better way." Meetings are long and painful, decision making is as much about politics as about doing what's right, and the inability to control your destiny is enough to make most people walk around with their teeth on edge. And that's a well-run large company. Many people go nuts in these environments and fantasize about getting out. If you're one of these people, you've come to the right place. However, the mystique of entrepreneurship is more sexy than the reality. No one wants to hear about how hard it is to finish a product, make a sale, or collect the money. Everyone wants to think they are joining the next Google, and the German and Italian cars are a few months away. Pamela Slim is not afraid to tackle the thorny parts of the journey from employee to entrepreneur. Her pragmatism will calm your nerves, and her sense of humor will help you keep moving through the tough parts. She has spent a decade inside numerous corporations and knows the fears you currently face. She's also been an entrepreneur and knows the challenges you will face. No book can promise you your business will be a success if you follow a set of instructions. If it did, it would cost a lot more. However, *Escape from Cubicle Nation* will help you make a good decision about whether to shut up and suck up your current cubicle or strike out on your own. Think of it as a good, hard reality check.

Guy Kawasaki **INTRODUCTIONS** So much of the advertising and marketing about entrepreneurship, especially on the Internet, contains exuberant exclamations like: "Here is a picture of me cavorting with supermodels in the French Riviera in my ten-million-dollar yacht!" or

"I was an oppressed file clerk, bossed around by tyrannical managers until I spent \$399 on a 12-CD training program. Now in just two short weeks I have one assistant just to paint my toes, and my former manager just called, begging to come to work for me!" or

"Here is my large car, parked in front of my large house with my large boat in the garage. None are as large as my bank account, which just keeps filling up, despite the fact that I only work three hours a week." Am I the only one who grimaces at this picture of entrepreneurship? If I were to inject reality into this image based on the last twelve years I have worked for myself, my commercial would be more like this: "Here is a picture of me at five a.m. at the Southwest terminal at the airport, pregnant and nauseated, throwing up on the curb as I prepare to fly to my client's office" or

"Here I am at three a.m. at the copy store, on my seventh sugar/ caffeine roller coaster of the evening, near weeping as I try to get my Word document to print out as it did on my home computer so that I can finish my materials for tomorrow morning's meeting" or

"Here I am trying to close a big deal with a senior executive, scared as hell but trying not to show it, and hoping that the spinach salad I had for lunch is not stuck to my teeth." You see, although I think it is a tremendous idea to work for yourself and live a life of happiness and financial success, I don't believe that it

is possible to become an overnight sensation with a few magic techniques or systems. Finding work you are passionate about takes time. Building up the knowledge, skill, and experience to be truly great at this work is a labor of intense love and sweat. Creating a business out of this work and building infrastructure, customers, fans, advocates, and mentors requires patience. And despite what a lot of hyped-up marketing material will tell you, *hating your job intensely is not a business plan*. I spent a decade traveling all over the United States and Europe working with large corporations to improve their organizations. While I thoroughly enjoyed my work, I found a very surprising thing: some of the smartest and most successful employees inside these companies, often touted as “the best place to work,” were harboring secret visions of breaking out to start their own business. They would pull me aside after an offsite meeting or corporate training and whisper, “I would love to work for myself, but have no idea how to get started. How did you do it?” What puzzled me about their questions is that there is a tremendous amount of information available in books and on the Internet about starting a business (77,000,000 links in Google when I last checked). So despite lots of information, corporate employees were not getting what they needed to feel comfortable making a change. In 2005, I started a blog called *Escape from Cubicle Nation* with the intention of integrating information about starting a business with my experience working as a life coach helping people navigate personal change. My readership was small—I think the first month my daily visits averaged five readers, including my dad, sister, best friend, a former client, and a random person who tripped over my site while Googling for something else. But over time, the visitors increased, and I began to get a tremendous amount of questions from corporate employees all over the world. Simultaneously, I started coaching individuals who were actually making the transition from employee to entrepreneur and got a detailed and nuanced view of what got in the way of progress. From hundreds of conversations over the years, I developed a framework and process that enabled them to make the leap successfully. And as I suspected, much of what kept them from moving forward was not lack of information, but rather self-defeating thoughts, generalized fears, and outdated notions of what it took to start a successful business in the twenty-first century. As my blog gained popularity, I connected with some of the brightest minds in entrepreneurship like Guy Kawasaki, Seth Godin, Tim Berry, John Jantsch, and Rich and Jeff Sloan. I interviewed scores of experts on topics from personal finance to branding and learned that there is a way to structure a business that is both deeply meaningful to the entrepreneur and tremendously valuable to the market. And I witnessed a lot of hucksters and shucksters who swindled good people out of hard-earned money with fancy programs long on promise and short on results. This book is the synthesis of thousands of these conversations over the last three years. It is my hope that it will be the answer to (real) e-mails I get every day such as this: I’ve been working in Investment Banks for almost 20 years. I have a stable job as an officer in the fixed income controller department. The problem is, I work over 14 hour days and also log into the office from home on the weekends. I feel like I have no life and never really have time for anyone. I have an opportunity to take over a pet service business—walking dogs, boarding, and day care—something closer to what I always really wanted to do as a veterinarian. I should have tried to go to vet school but instead went to business school years ago which was always the “in” thing to do. The pet service business is risky and not as stable. My mom thinks I’m crazy. I wanted to see if you had any advice. Right now I’m torn on what to do. It’s easy to just stay where I am and not give notice. I don’t even want to talk to most of my friends because they’ll think I’m nuts. Like the person above, you are not nuts to want a better work life. The path from employee to entrepreneur is possible. Many people have done it successfully. You can too, if you are willing to work hard and keep your eyes wide open. And with a good business model and smart systems, you can even get close to what Tim Ferriss promises in his *4-Hour Workweek*: escape nine-to-five, live anywhere, and join the new rich. Potential fame, fortune, or freedom aside, there is simply no better way to learn about yourself than starting a business. And when you truly know yourself, you tend to design a business that matches your strengths. Because you are the one in charge, you care more. No longer constrained by a labyrinthine bureaucracy, you think bigger. And given the flexibility to design whatever you want, you are more likely to do something that *means* something to the world. That is what we are all after, isn’t it? Let’s get started.

SECTION I Opening Up to the Opportunities

I Have a Fancy Title, Steady Paycheck, and Good

Benefits. Why Am I So Miserable? At ten o'clock in the morning, my phone rang. It was my dad calling from his twenty-ninth-floor office in downtown San Francisco. It was 1994 and we worked about a city block apart. I worked for a large financial services company and my dad worked for a public utility. "Can you come to the office?" my dad asked. "I'll be right there," I said. I took the elevator down thirty floors and walked through the courtyard that adjoined our buildings. I arrived in my dad's office and was slightly puzzled. The bustling, creative office where he worked was totally empty. Desks with plants and empty in-boxes sat where there were once eleven people. My dad peeked out from behind his cube wall. "They laid off everyone in my department this morning. I am the only one left." My stomach dropped. This moment, more than a decade and a half ago, was my abrupt introduction to the shift in the corporate world where solid, stable jobs were wiped off the map in a matter of minutes. Many of my dad's coworkers were career employees, who had started working for the company out of college. One woman had worked her entire career at the company, as had her father and grandfather until retirement. She came into work at 8:00 a.m., was given a cardboard box to pack her belongings, and was escorted to the exit door by 8:20. That was the moment I stopped trusting the "stability" of corporate life.

You Aren't Crazy I am sure that if you have worked in the corporate world for any length of time, you had your own moment when you realized that your job would never be secure, no matter how hard you worked or how long your tenure. Nevertheless, many people feel quite guilty for expressing dissatisfaction with their corporate job. If it makes you feel better, I will sum up the advice I have given to hundreds of clients and thousands of blog readers over the years: *you aren't crazy*. I understand your train of thought. How can you not feel a little crazy to complain about a stable job with great pay, benefits, smart coworkers, and social prestige? Isn't it selfish to want more when most people in the world would kill for the opportunity to work day in and day out in air-conditioned offices with no chance of getting calloused hands? Logically, you are right. With all of these perks and a stable income to pay your bills, it would seem that you should be content to get up on Monday morning and go to work. So why do you feel so miserable? The essence of the problem is two-fold:

- Large corporations have experienced tremendous change over the last twenty years, which have made them fundamentally difficult places to work, even for extremely smart and motivated employees in an "ideal" job situation.
- Some people are simply not cut out to work in large organizations. You may not have had a lot of direction when you finished school, and just followed the path put out for you by well-intentioned career counselors or managers. My former client said it well: I realized when looking at my entire career since college that I had just fallen into jobs without thinking about them much. I had a vague interest in computer science, but never thought I would end up as a full-time programmer cranking out code in a gray cubicle. How in the world did I get here and how can I get out? Given my entrepreneurial tendencies, you might think that I am one of those "conspiracy by the Man to keep me down" people and reject all corporate commerce. To the contrary, I loved the years that I worked as an employee. I wore my blue suit, nylons, and pearls proudly. I enjoyed the smell of freshly sharpened pencils and packs of multicolored Post-it notes more than is prudent to admit. I met tremendously smart, funny, and creative people whom I am friends with to this day. However, since going out on my own a dozen years ago, I had the unique advantage of observing corporate culture without being part of it. That allowed me to see a number of patterns that, when put together, led me to believe that today's corporate environment has some unique challenges that make it difficult for even the most motivated employees to overcome. Let's start with the first challenge: employees drowning in an alphabet soup of trends, programs, and processes.

Mission Statements, Outsourcing, Rightsizing, and Reengineering Corporations today go through a tremendous amount of change and upheaval. This is necessary and by design, since market conditions continually shift, senior leadership turns over, management practices evolve, customer needs change, and competitors come out of nowhere. I would add, somewhat cynically, that companies also go through change since management consultants need to justify their existence. If they don't cook up fancy new programs riddled with acronyms, matrices, and bulging decks of PowerPoint slides, how can they afford to send their kids to college? In an attempt to explain organization changes to their employees, companies send out communications. Unfortunately, this often makes people more confused, as their explanations sound just like this one spun from the Dilbert Mission Statement generator: Our mission is to interactively

facilitate enterprise-wide products and collaboratively promote long-term high-impact technology to set us apart from the competition. You could argue that in the last thirty years, a combination of market trends and corporate initiatives have improved the effectiveness and bottom line of many corporations. However, for employees who have lived in the middle of an ever-changing environment packed with all-hands meetings, whizzing acronyms, and enough binders to topple an elephant, the impact has been downright painful. Here are some examples: I want to hammer home a point here: the nature of large, global corporate organizations in today's tumultuous markets is such that they *can* and *should* change frequently to stay alive. Strategies will change. Business plans will change. Organization structure will change. Your position is not secure, no matter how well you do your job. As long as you know this and act accordingly, you will do fine, even inside a corporate job.

Leadership Flaws Three years ago, I was taking my son for a walk around the block in his stroller. I was reflecting on all the years I spent inside large corporations and how hard it was to change ingrained leadership behavior. Then, in an inspired daydream, I began fantasizing what I would say in a keynote speech to top-level executives around the world. I could hardly steer the stroller fast enough back to the house. As soon as my son went down for a nap, I started pounding at my keyboard, calling the post an "Open Letter to CXOs Across the Corporate World." Later that evening, I sent the post to Guy Kawasaki, a prominent blogger and venture capitalist in Silicon Valley, because I thought he might find it entertaining. He blogged about it the next morning. I was not prepared for the response; tens of thousands of people flooded my blog within the first few days, and I got hundreds of passionate e-mails and comments. The experience led me to believe that there are some fundamental things that are not being said by employees in corporations that need to be. Here is the post, as it was originally written:

Open Letter to CXOs Across the Corporate World I am writing to you as a newly minted rebel. My main purpose in life is to take your best, your brightest, most creative, hard-working and passionate employees and sneak them out the hallways of your large corporation so that they are free of the yoke of lethargy, oppression and resentment. It hasn't always been this way. I tried for many years as a consultant to YOU to explain the importance of treating your employees with dignity and respect. I encouraged you to speak clearly and to the point, to avoid endless hours of PowerPoint, buzzwords and meaningless jargon like "our employees are our most valuable asset." I was sincere in my efforts as I coached your managers and explained the importance of providing objective, developmental feedback to employees that was based on observable behavior, not personal generalizations. I encouraged you to be open with your business strategy so that your employees could contribute ideas to grow your company. After ten years, I give up. I was banging my head against the wall trying to find ethical, creative ways to train your employees on the merits of your forced ranking compensation plan. No amount of creativity could overcome the fact that it is a stupid idea and does nothing but create an environment of competition, politics and resentment. Whoever sold you on that idea was wrong. So now I want to help your employees leave and start their own business. Regain control of their life. Feel blood pumping in their veins and excitement in their chest as they wake up each day. I honestly wish that it were possible for them to feel that inside your company. But things have gotten so convoluted that I honestly don't think it is possible unless you take some drastic steps:

1. **Don't spend millions of dollars to try and change your culture.** Corporate culture is a natural thing that cannot be manufactured. No amount of posters, incentive programs, PowerPoint presentations or slogans on websites will affect the hearts and minds of your employees. If you want to see things change immediately, stop acting like an asshole. If you see one of your senior managers acting like an asshole, ask him to stop. If he doesn't stop, fire him. You will be amazed at how fast the culture shifts.
2. **Stop running your company like the mafia.** By now, we are all aware that no job in any industry is secure. They can be re-scoped, eliminated or outsourced at any time. And that is the way it should be—no organization can be static in today's environment. But despite this common knowledge, many of your managers act betrayed when their employees tell them they want to leave the company. This is an absolute double standard and should be stopped immediately. If you help your employees grow and develop in their career even if they plan to leave the company, you will create an extremely loyal workforce. You never know where that employee who leaves will go next. They could become an incredibly valuable strategic partner. Their golfing buddy could turn out to be your next huge customer.
3. **Spend a moment**

walking around the halls of your company and look at your employees. I mean really look at them. Don't just pat them on the back and pump their hand while looking over their head at the exit door. Look directly in their eyes. Imagine what their life is like. Who is waiting at home for them? What are the real consequences to their health, marriages and children when they have to work yet another thirteen hour day? What kind of dreams do they have? What makes them really happy? What do their eyes tell you? Do they trust you? Resent you? Think you are full of it? I met precious few C-level executives in 10 years consulting that truly "saw" and cared about their employees. Those that did reaped gigantic mounds of good will and respect.

4. **Teach people how to get rich like you.** I don't think there is anything inherently evil with money. It would be kind of fun to have my own jet and be able to pick up and fly to New York to watch the opening of a Broadway play or zip to Mexico for a long weekend. But the kind of disparity that exists right now between your employees who do the work and you and your senior team who reap the benefits is not only absurd, it is obscene. I know you work very hard and carry a lot of responsibility for your company. Instead of hoarding your wealth, teach your employees how to make money. Show them how you negotiate large deals. Explain investment vehicles. Explain how your business works and why it is so exciting for you to run. Make them into better businesspeople so that they can grow their opportunities and net worth. And for God's sake share the profits. It is insulting to tell your managers to look a hard-working employee in the eye and say they only get a 3% raise when you take home more in a quarterly bonus than they make in 10 years.

5. **Don't ask for your employees' input if you are not going to listen to it.** I have facilitated offsite meetings that lasted for days where well-intentioned managers brainstormed and argued and edited and wrote flip charts until their hands turned blue. They sweated over creating something that was relevant and for a brief period of time actually were proud of what they accomplished. Until a month later when I heard that you scrapped the whole thing in favor of a plan cooked up by an outside consulting firm. This does not only completely waste smart people's time, it guarantees that you will have hostility and resentment the next time you ask for creative input.

6. **Don't train people until you know what problem you are solving.** I would be rich if I took up all the offers I got to "design and teach a 5-day course on people skills for all of our managers worldwide." Most often, I would get the call from a VP of Human Resources that received the request from their pissed off CEO. And what were the pressing business problems that caused the request? Often it was the threat of a lawsuit based on one manager's egregious behavior. Take the time to analyze what is causing the problems in your business such as high turnover, plunging sales or a huge increase in employee complaints. Usually it is something that will not be resolved by training everyone. Most often it involves firing a person or two who are causing havoc in a department. If you really want your managers to learn how to manage people, put them in tough situations with great mentors nearby. Keep an eye on them. Provide feedback and coaching exactly at the moment that they need it (like before they have to fire someone for the first time and are scared to death). There is a time and a place for training, but it should not be your first course of action.

7. **Ditch the PowerPoint when you have town hall meetings.** No one is excited to see another boring graph or 20-part building slide that describes all the components of your new strategy. If they are interested, they can read the slides at their desk. Your employees want to hear your opinions on things that they think about all the time. Your PR team may have a heart attack, but invite tough questions about the things that you know are really on their mind. Are you going to take over another company? Outsource the Help Desk to the Philippines? Why did you get a huge bonus this quarter when the rest of the employees are on a salary freeze? Did the VP of Sales really get caught with his pants down at the sales meeting in Vegas? Just because people ask the questions doesn't mean you have to answer them all. Know what you can and can't talk about and be direct about that (no, you can't talk about the VP of Sales or you may get sued). You will do wonders for your credibility and I guarantee no one will be sleeping in the back of the room.

8. **Focus on the work people do, not how or when they do it.** Some positions require people to be at their desk at an appointed hour to answer customer calls or to participate in live meetings. But others can do their work from home, early in the morning, late in the evening or dialing in from the local Starbucks. The turnover magnet you have for losing great employees is not the competitor down the street, it is the idea of freedom and flexibility for the self-employed. Your employees have different biorhythms and working styles and

activities going on in their lives. If you provide flexible work options and don't make people sit unnecessarily at their desk, you will keep some great employees who would otherwise leave. A manager who is afraid to offer telecommuting to her employees because she thinks they will slack off is just showing her own weakness. Great managers build accountability into flexible work plans and manage performance aggressively.⁹ **Watch the burnout.** Many companies measure an employee's drive and dedication by the amount of hours they work each day. I have witnessed people playing video games at their desk until their manager leaves "just so they won't think that I am a slacker." Huh? It is not a badge of honor to work 18 hours a day, it is a sure path to a heart attack or divorce. There are times when employees have to work around the clock to get critical projects done and that is part of doing business. But if they are working long hours just because "everyone does," you are creating a culture of waste, inefficiency and ill health.¹⁰

Forbid people to work while they are on vacation. Of all the pet peeves that I have accumulated over the years, this is perhaps the biggest. Your employees work like pack mules all year long. They send messages via BlackBerry during dinner, take work calls during their kid's basketball games and forgo rolling in the sheets with their spouse to finish a PowerPoint presentation on Saturday morning. When they go on vacation, let them relax. The only way to get the health and stress-relieving benefits of a vacation is to completely unplug from work. As long as they are checking e-mail each morning from the hotel lobby or fielding "urgent" calls in the evening, they might as well be in the office. The worst thing is seeing their kid's eyes as they observe once more that Dad or Mom values work more than family, even on vacation. Shame on you for making this acceptable behavior. I won't entice anyone out your door that does not want to come willingly. Many people will choose to stay in the comfort of your oppressive predictability. But if you lose some smart, creative, entrepreneurial and positive minds, you can't say I didn't warn you. Do any of these issues hit home for you? Based on the 100,000-plus people who read my post and vigorously agreed, you are not alone. Many, perhaps most, corporate leaders are decent, ethical people. But some of you may have had the misfortune to work in a place so rampant with greed and devoid of ethics that it would fit what my college international studies professor Francisco Vazquez said about the "melting pot" of American culture: "Those on the bottom get burned and the scum floats to the top."**You Aren't Meant to Have a Boss** Noted software engineer and venture capitalist Paul Graham goes so far as to say human beings aren't meant to work in large corporations. In his post "You Aren't Meant to Have a Boss," he makes this comparison: I was in Africa last year and saw a lot of animals in the wild that I'd only seen in zoos before. It was remarkable how different they seemed. Particularly lions. Lions in the wild seem about ten times more alive. They're like different animals. I suspect that working for oneself feels better to humans in much the same way that living in the wild must feel better to a wide-ranging predator like a lion. Life in a zoo is easier, but it isn't the life they were designed for.²**The Ill-Fitting Shoe** Complex corporate trends, leadership flaws, and the fact that humans may not be meant to work in large groups might be enough reason to confirm your suspicion that you are not crazy for feeling unhappy in your corporate job. But there may be a simpler answer: *You may not be cut out for corporate life, and don't realize it.* In the late nineties, I conducted career development classes inside network giant Cisco Systems, which at that point was experiencing the benefits of an insane stock price increase. As follow-up to the classes, I had one-on-one sessions with the participants to discuss their personal career aspirations and goals. One meeting in particular stuck with me, as I talked with an extremely successful young woman who had been with the company for a long time. I had remembered in class that she was a little "numbed out," meaning that it was hard to get a real reaction out of her besides superficial comments. In the individual session, it was very different. She started talking: *Présentation de l'éditeur*

Pamela Slim, a former corporate training manager, left her office job twelve years ago to go solo and has enjoyed every bit of it. In her groundbreaking book, based on her popular blog *Escape from Cubicle Nation*, Slim explores both the emotional issues of leaving the corporate world and the nuts and bolts of launching a business. Drawing on her own career, as well as stories from her coaching clients and blog readers, Slim will help readers weigh their options, and make a successful escape if they decide to go for it.

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