

# Working on your small business, not in it

in [Managing](#) by Nigel Bowen

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If small business owners had a dollar for every time they heard "You need to work on your business, not in it" they could probably take early retirement and never have to worry about working on, in or for a business ever again.

Clichés are clichés for a reason. There is much wisdom in the idea that small business operators need to step away from the day-to-day tasks of their enterprise and devote their time and energy to higher-value activities,

such as cultivating new clients and conquering new markets. Here's how you can let go of the reins in order to grab exciting opportunities.

## Commit to doing it

It's easy on an intellectual level to be attracted to the idea of working on rather than in your business, but it's rather more complicated emotionally. It involves making the transition from doing tasks within your comfort zone to undertaking unfamiliar and often uncomfortable activities, such as attending networking opportunities, giving talks at industry events and dealing with the media. If you're not committed to the process you'll quickly find some reason (invariably some variant of "the business just can't function without me there overseeing things") to slip back into the comforting groove of running rather than improving your business.

## Delegate

Time for another old but true business cliché: you need to delegate. If your small business is to function in your absence (and you'll be absent a lot more if you're serious about pursuing growth opportunities) you need to have people there to do what you used to. Take the time to employ competent staff and train them up thoroughly. As long as you've got good hiring and training processes in place, you'll be pleasantly surprised at just how smoothly the business can run without your constant involvement.

## Systematise everything

Even the best-trained staff are not mind readers. If you don't want them pestering you with phone calls and emails while you're out shaking the trees, you better compile a comprehensive operations manual and have clear procedures in place for everything from dealing with an unhappy customer to the temperature the office air conditioner is set to.

## Automate

Related to the above point, technology is increasingly facilitating automation of standard tasks. Whether it's keeping track of accounts, taking customer orders or rostering staff, there is almost certainly some software out there that will help free up many hours of your time.

## Allow yourself and your staff thinking time

While there's a lot of romanticism surrounding the creative process, the reality is that innovative individuals and companies get that way because they devote time and effort to it. Whether it's religiously starting your day with 30 minutes of 'reflection time' during which you read articles about your industry and think about how to improve your own business, or demanding your staff devote a couple of hours each week to participate in an office brainstorming session, the only way you'll harvest the ideas to take

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your enterprise to the next level is by providing a space for them to blossom.

Moving from working *in* to *on* your small business is a major transition and one that a surprisingly large number of owners either never make or quickly abandon. If you can stay the course, you'll reap the rewards and might even end up in a position to retire early after all.

*This article represents the views of the author only and not those of American Express.*

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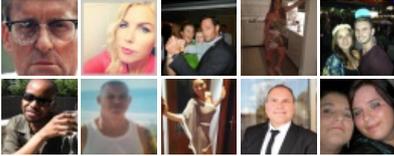
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