

Stronger Together

Going solo may sound like the right way to build a career, but is it the best way to thrive?

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Problematic workplaces have become so pervasive that it's no wonder that many in the beauty industry work alone.

Through personal experience or industry lore, we can all relate to the stereotypical salon in which the owner, licensed or not, acts like an arrogant bully or a clueless friend. In either circumstance, the word *toxic* comes to mind. Is this the best the beauty industry has to offer? Of course not!

Having worked alone myself, I completely understand the appeal. My first work experiences (nearly 30 years ago) involved five different hair salons in five years. In each case, the salon owner worked as a full-time licensed cosmetologist, and others rented individual stations. The opportunity for employment was not an option.

To build clientele quickly, I wanted to be the only manicurist working among busy hairstylists. As booth renters, we each took responsibility for handling our individual businesses: maintaining our licenses and insurance, purchasing products and marketing services, scheduling clients, collecting payments, paying taxes, etc. While we supported each other through referrals, our efforts were not coordinated to represent the salon as a whole. Some coworkers were not as professional as they should have been, placing a burden on the rest of us. For example, we made excuses to annoyed clients for a stylist who repeatedly slept in, missing the first appointment of the day.



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Salon owners tolerate behaviors that would be cause for dismissal under normal employment situations, but nothing is done in salons unless the terms of a rental agreement are violated. Even among independents, no one is so important that others should endure disruptive and destructive behavior—especially when those behaviors describe the salon owner. At that point, it's past time to move on.

Blaming a lack of communication for discord among salon owners and renters makes sense, but a more substantive problem is the lack of structure; specifically, clearly defined roles and expectations. Salon owners may lack specific training for salon ownership and/or management. Many rely on past experience to guide decisions, and for better or worse, their personalities influence their management style.

Without training or aptitude for business, how can beauty pros have confidence that they will be successful salon owners? To answer this question, let's go back to beauty school. In the excitement of entering a new profession, many envision themselves capable of making decisions, controlling their work environment, building a clientele, and doing what they love, all while supporting themselves.

Opening a salon has never been easier. However, operating a legal and profitable salon has become more challenging. Not to minimize the accomplishment of completing beauty school, but graduating from school does not compare to—or prepare you for—signing a lease, purchasing equipment and products, and spending limited resources and countless hours on your craft. Your investment marks the point when the real work begins, which is why I encourage new licensees to seek salon employment as their first position after beauty school, especially if they aspire to salon ownership.

Despite my best efforts, I have not enjoyed much success promoting the benefits of employment. Granted, there are a limited number of salons that employ, but that's not the primary reason that many reject the option. Instead, too many in the salon industry lack patience and overestimate their abilities and worth. While naive optimism might sustain them initially, optimism can also mislead. How else would you explain those who persist in our industry while struggling financially and professionally?

After my experiences as a booth renter, I transitioned to working alone in my own salon while eight months pregnant. Eight years later, I moved again and expanded to employ others. But as the main service provider, challenges remain—even with employees. As an independent, you must consider: How does your business function without your physical presence? What happens when you get sick, have an emergency, get called for jury duty, or take a vacation?

Even as we seek career stability, more beauty pros are choosing the uncertainty of working alone. What does this growing trend mean for our industry when we already segment ourselves according to license type, specialties, brand preferences, and geography? If the last time we surrounded ourselves with colleagues on a daily basis happened in beauty school, I worry for the future of our industry. In the absence of real-life opportunities to come together, like beauty trade shows and educational events, we increasingly rely on social media and virtual interactions for professional support.

Collaborating with others, even while maintaining your independence, could be the change you need to engage in the industry more fully.

Despite the convenience and affordability, technology cannot replace the quality and depth of more direct interactions with other beauty professionals. While avoiding conflict and having control may be reason enough to work alone, some would acknowledge that they feel lonely, uninspired, and burdened. In that very real sense, independence may limit professional growth and decrease job satisfaction.

We cannot allow the increasing number of independents to damage our collective identity, or place individuals at further disadvantage. Isolation does not serve anyone well when we need quality information, access to resources, and more representation.

Collaborating with others, even while maintaining your independence, could be the change you need to engage in the industry more fully. If you're waiting to discover the perfect salon, business partner, boss, employee or coworker, why not create that experience for yourself and others? There is no amount of time, training, or money that qualifies someone as a "good" salon owner; there is only progress toward creating the best possible work environment where professionals thrive, clients receive excellent service, and owners meet all their financial and legal obligations. ✕