

Notes on Self-publishing*

Abstract

This note summarizes what I have learned about self-publishing.

Keywords

self-publishing, publishers, cost

Over the past couple of years I have gotten pretty deeply into the world of self-publishing. Even before that I drafted a book using a professional typesetting system, although the traditional publisher of that book retypeset it for actual publication.¹

The purpose of this note is to summarize what I have learned and some thoughts I have about self-publishing. I originally drafted these notes in mid-2007, and I believe what I say here was accurate then. However, technology and publishing economics are changing rapidly; also I am not a publishing expert. Thus, after reading these notes, the reader should do enough additional research to form his or her own views about the validity of the various issues I raise relating to self-publishing.

Publisher options

Communications and transportation technology is leading to disintermediation (elimination of middle men) in many fields. Publishing is no exception. Let's look at the options an author has.

A traditional publisher

If you are an author and you want massive PR and bookstore distribution for your sales, then you need a traditional publisher.² Except, they won't give you massive PR unless they think your book is going to be wildly popular or you are already a wildly popular author. You should also seek a traditional publisher if you want someone else to foot the development bill (editing, illustration, permission, design and layout, indexing, printing, and perhaps an advance for you). Except, it is hard to get a traditional publisher interested in you (you probably need an agent or personal contact). (Of course, the amount of effort to self-publish is considerable; if your book has a decent chance of being popular enough making a substantial profit, putting that same amount of effort into finding a pub-

lisher rather than into self-publishing may well result in you finding a publisher.)

If you succeed in getting a traditional publisher, the publisher is going to want you to sign a contract that gives it the worldwide rights in all media, and your work may well be tied up so you have to ask the publisher's permission to reuse a chapter elsewhere. For books on specialized topics (e.g., scientific, medical, technical, or professional), the publisher may ask you to promise to buy some minimum number of copies (e.g., 1,000) to cover their costs.³ If the book is no longer selling many copies (i.e., is essentially out of print), you will have to ask the publisher to revert the rights to you, and there is a possibility that the publisher will refuse. With the possibility of print-on-demand or POD (where one can order single copies of a book to be digitally printed⁴), I suspect publishers increasingly will use POD to keep books technically in print, selling a few copies per year in the later years when doing large lithographic print runs no longer makes sense.⁵

Working with a traditional publisher, you may get 10 percent of the list price after returns (in the publishing industry in the United States it is apparently traditional that book stores can send back for full credit all the books they ordered even if they are damaged). With certain types of books, the author's percentage may be after returns and on the wholesale price (i.e., 45 percent of list price) with a proportional decrease in the return to the author.⁶

A subsidy publisher

One alternative to a traditional publisher is "vanity" or subsidized publishing where they make their money by having you pay for their book development services, you get a few books, and that's the end of it; they typically don't make their money by selling lots of copies of your book. They may have a website where your book is sold, but you won't get a very big share of the price. Also, they are the publisher of record, which ties you up in various ways. With this option the odds are against you making enough money to justify having given up control. Nonetheless, it may be the right option for someone who just wants to create a few copies of a book to give to family members and friends.⁷

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Self-publishing

Another alternative to a traditional publisher is self-publishing. People have always done self-publishing when they thought they had something to say and could not interest a regular publisher or when they simply wanted a few copies printed and didn't want to get involved with a subsidy publisher. Googling for "famous books that were self published" will show several links to famous books that were originally (and perhaps permanently) self-published.⁸

In self-publishing you acquire the book's ISBN number yourself, and you do the development work yourself or hire someone to do the various parts for you. You control how the book is printed and by whom, the distribution, and what limited rights you give to other people as it is beneficial to you. Self-publishing can be an excellent option in appropriate situations.

The rest of this article is about self-publishing.

Ease of printing in the digital age — an example

Initial publication

In the fall of 2006, I self-published the book *Breakthrough Management* (by Shoji Shiba and me — www.walden-family.com/breakthrough). I chose to self-publish primarily because I wanted to experiment with the breakthrough technology of self-publishing and digital printing; this seemed appropriate given the topic of our book. Also, my approach to authorship, even for a traditional publisher, involves designing the book and typesetting it for submission to the publisher.⁹ Thus, I did not anticipate a lot more work if I went the route of self-publishing. My co-author and I also had an existing, highly targeted market — people who already know my co-author and me and our previous writings, or who are introduced to my co-author at one of the management classes he teaches throughout the world.

In general, I was pleasantly surprised with how easy it was to have a book printed that was prepared in LaTeX.¹⁰

I sent the PDF output of LaTeX to the printer in Delhi chosen by our publisher in India (where my co-author was doing much teaching and which provided the ISBN number for the book), and the book was printed without any additional interaction by me except to check a printer's proof (which was fine). The Indian print run was 1,000 copies using lithographic printing because, purportedly, print-on-demand was not available in India.

(Again, see the first paragraph of the section "Printing options" on page 56 for the distinction between offset and digital printing.)

In the United States, I wanted to use print-on-demand

where I would not have to invest in and find inventory space for a print run of 1,000 copies. I requested by email quotes from eight printers who advertised themselves as POD printers, using the general quote format suggested in Pete Masterson's book, *Book Design and Production: A Guide for Authors and Publishers* that is aimed at small publishers and self-publishers. I received several plausible quotes by return email.

One of the geographically closest printers (Ames On Demand of Somerville, Massachusetts, about 60 miles from my home on Cape Cod) also had nearly the best price. I phoned him and asked him two questions: (1) I told him I already had a ready-to-print PDF and wondered if I would have to make any adjustments to my page layout (e.g., text block size) for him to print the book on his presses; (2) Could he send me an example of a photographic image that had been printed on his presses (Xerox 6180 for the black and white text and iGen3 for the color cover) so I could review the reproduction quality of an image.

The printer suggested that I send him my PDF file and he would send me back a proof. I was thinking he would print a page with a photographic image and send it to me. I was happily surprised when the overnight delivery truck arrived two days later with a finished, bound proof of the whole book including my cover art.¹¹ Obviously this is an advantage of digital printing. Since finished copies are being printed a page at a time rather than on large offset sheets with multiple different pages on each sheet, it is easy for the printer to run a complete copy of a book through his digital printer (just like he would do successively for hundreds of copies).

The proof sent by the printer looked great. I asked him to slightly shift the title on the book spine (I sent him an adjusted copy of the cover art), to slightly shift the text block on the page to increase the inside margins and decrease the outside margins (he was able to do this without me touching anything in LaTeX), to bind the book using a matte rather than glossy coating, and to make a one line change to the back-of-the-title page (I provided a single new PDF page which the printer used to replace the previous page in my whole-book PDF file). He did these things, a whole-finished-book proof arrived at my home a few days later, and I gave him the go ahead to print 250 copies of the book (his quoted price was the same per book for volumes of 250, 500 and 1,000 books, so it was an easy decision to print the minimum of the quoted number of copies).¹² A few more days later, I picked up the printed copies at the printer's loading dock with my little pickup truck (I did the pickup myself to save shipping costs).

The printer said he would keep my PDF files as he had adjusted them and could print more copies at any time.

Reprinting

By the spring of 2007, the *Breakthrough Management* book print runs of 1,000 copies in India and 250 copies in the United States had been sold out. Also, a number of typographical errors in the book had been found by that time. Therefore, I updated the LaTeX source files for the book (which was possible with almost no changes in pagination), and the Indian publisher obtained a new 13-digit ISBN number for the book (as of January 1, 2007, the world shifted from 10-digit to 13-digit ISBN numbers).

With the new 13-digit ISBN number in hand, in late June of 2007 I updated the ISBN number and bar code on the back cover part of the cover art work, and I sent the new cover file and interior file to India for reprinting there. Simultaneously, I reformatted the page sizes of the cover and interior slightly to meet the requirements of Lightning Source Inc. (LSI), and sent the files to them to print which in turn facilitates the books being sold via Amazon and the other Internet-based book stores.

(NB: In the spring of 2008, there has been much consternation among authors and self-publishers about Amazon forcing use of its own print-on-demand company, BookSurge; the web page www.writersweekly.com/amazon.php is dedicated to this issue. I suppose that authors about to publish a new book can avoid any problem of using LSI by just using BookSurge for their printing, although there is some discussion of it being more expensive. People already using LSI for a book may have a bigger problem, although presumably other on-line bookstores will continue to sell books printed by LSI. As of April 30, 2008, Amazon was still selling my LSI-printed book.)

The printing from LSI was slightly less sharp than that from Ames, and the photographic images were a bit muddy in comparison to the Ames printing. Nonetheless, this provides a useful alternative path for people to buy the book (from the on-line book stores), and I can order copies myself at the cost of printing plus shipping to me or drop shipping to my customers.

I also asked LSI to make my book available through their UK branch so that I can order books printed and shipped from there if that will reduce the cost to get books to European customers. This worked smoothly without me having to pay anything more or upload my files again. Within a day, the book was listed with www.amazon.co.uk, and a few days later the book was also shown on the Amazon UK website as being for sale from other book stores which were undercutting the Amazon UK pricing for the book.

Another couple of weeks later, the book was also shown for sale at www.amazon.com in the United States. It is also listed for sale by Amazon in other

countries (Austria, Canada, France, Germany, and Japan) and by other book stores with an on-line presence such as Barnes & Noble and Powell's Books.

In parallel with setting up to work with LSI, I sent the new cover and interior files to Ames On Demand where I continue to order books a carton (e.g., 25 or 30 books) at a time and mostly use these for filling bulk orders that come from conferences in which my co-author participates or companies at which he consults.

Financial details

I am not really involved in printing and selling our book in India, except to give the files to the organization there for which my co-author consults.

The development cost of my 280 page book was \$1,450 for editing (a fixed price estimate based on the editor looking over my draft manuscript), \$1,310 for illustration (at a hourly rate), \$575 for proofreading (at an hourly rate), and \$150 for help setting up to use the Minion Pro fonts. (I did the design and layout for my current book myself because I wanted to learn how to do it and wanted to experience "going all the way" with LaTeX). All of those costs seemed pretty reasonable to me, given the quality of service I received. I also paid \$50 for permissions (other permissions were obtained gratis). In total my development cost was about \$3,800 (including some phone, fax, and postage costs but excluding my time).

You can perhaps extrapolate from the figures in the previous paragraph to possible costs for the various functions for a book of a different size. My book had well over a hundred, often complicated, line drawings; yours may have none. My book also was highly technical with lots of references, etc., requiring lots of editing; your book may be simpler and thus less time consuming to edit. A simpler book would also be easier to typeset.

One can get the ISBN numbers for approximately \$300 for a block of 10 in the United States—see www.isbn.org.¹³

I already have a website, and it costs nothing more to sell my book from it. For most books I sell from my website, I get copies of the book in lots of 20 or more from Ames On Demand for \$5.68 per book plus a 5 percent Massachusetts sales tax¹⁴ (they charge no setup fees). This was a good price compared with other quotes I received, and I liked their quality and the fact that they are located near me.

When I sell the book via my website, www.walden-family.com/breakthrough, I quote a price that includes the list price of \$30 and part of the shipping cost (e.g., a total price of \$32.50). Buyers click on an appropriate link to PayPal on my website and pay me either using PayPal or PayPal's capability to accept credit card

payments. In these instances I typically absorb \$2.50 (or a few dollars more) of the shipping costs. PayPal also deducts their fee (something like \$1.50 to collect \$32.50). I don't attribute packing costs to each book, but perhaps such consumables are another dollar per book leaving a net profit of perhaps \$20 per book after printing, shipping, and collection costs. At that rate I made back my development costs after selling about 200 books.

In those cases where a company or conference orders a dozen or a few dozen books at time, I have been giving significant discounts, for instance, selling the books for \$10 each and charging \$5 each for shipping. Even at this very discounted price, I still clear about \$4 per book (not counting my labor).

These bulk orders are the most work for me. The buying organization often wants me to provide an invoice and wants to pay via an inter-bank transfer. I have a prepared invoice form in Excel which I modify appropriately for each order and send as a PDF email attachment. The invoice specifies that the buyer must pay all currency exchange, bank and customs fees and will send me my price in US dollars exclusive of those other items. The only additional cost I absorb is the \$10 fee my bank charges to receive a wire transfer (and sometimes I bury that fee in my quote). I have a separate bank account to which wire transfers come and I sweep money out of that account and into another bank account as soon as the money arrives (I am a little afraid of leaving a substantial amount of money in a bank account that can be accessed for a wire transfer). I must pack the books especially well for shipment in heavy boxes (and in one case the books were returned to me and I had to repack and reship them because of a customs mixup in the destination country). I must fill out a larger export form at my post office. And sometimes there is confusion at the sending bank about how to wire money to my bank account, and I have to repeat my instructions to resolve the confusion. (Probably I would be justified in not discounting the book price so much for such orders.)

I also arranged for the corrected printing of the book to be available through Lightning Source in the US and in the UK. They charged setup fees of about \$130 (\$50 for me to submit my cover, \$42 for me to submit the text of the book, \$30 to send me a proof via overnight shipping, and some small fee for a catalog listing). For them, I priced the book at \$30, 24 Euros, and 17 GBP¹⁵ with a 55 percent discount. Thus, for books sold via book stores (e.g., Amazon), I get about \$13.50 per book regardless of what price they sell the book for (I also specified no returns), and LSI subtracts the printing cost (about \$4.55 per book) and sends me the rest. I also am not involved in fulfilling these orders in any way. The book store already has collected

the cost of shipping and passed it to LSI. My only involvement is to note the money arriving some weeks later in my PayPal account and then transferring it to my bank account. Many buyers prefer to buy from a real company like Amazon rather than an individual's website.

When I sell a book via my website but have the printing done via Lightning Source, I pay about \$5.10 per book, plus a \$1.50 handling fee per order, plus the price of them drop shipping the book to the customer (which appears to be more expensive than when I shop books myself except intra-Europe). Thus, my net is still probably about \$15 per book. In this case, I have to login to the Lightning Source website, provide the shipping address and number of books, and provide my credit card information for what they charge me; doing this can take 5 or 10 minutes per order.

My bookkeeping is simple. I keep track of income (minus financial fees), cost of goods sold (printing and shipping books), and development costs in any given year. For tax purposes, the net of the income and costs either adds to or subtracts from the rest of my personal income for the year.

Deal making

In the summer of 2007, I also began talking with a group in Hungary about providing them translation rights to the book, for which I still plan to act as publisher in name but with them paying for the translation, typesetting, and printing, and doing local selling. I am also talking to a couple of people in Spain about publishing a Spanish translation. I don't know if anything will really come of these discussions, but being my own publisher gives me lots of deal-making flexibility.

I also am considering an ebook edition of *Breakthrough Management*, a decision I can make alone.¹⁶

Other issues relating to self-publishing

Printing options

There are several printing options: (a) traditional lithography or offset printing where a sequence of pages (for instance, 16 pages) is printed on a large sheet of paper and the pages are cut apart and put in order later in the process—this is the most economical method of printing (in terms of cost per book) with print runs of perhaps a thousand copies or more, but it also may be necessary for shorter runs of books that have lots of color or non-line-art that you want to print well (line art works fine without lithographic printing); (b) short run lithography which is not economical on a per book basis but may be the way to go if you need the quality even though you may think you cannot sell more than a few hundred books; (c) digi-

tal printing (e.g., sort of like your home laser printer but faster) which can be done very well or not quite as well depending on the care that is taken (I have seen very fine black and white photos done with digital printing). Print-on-demand (POD), where you can buy one to hundreds of copies at a time, typically uses digital printing, and provides the major advantage that you don't have to pay up front for a thousand or more books to be printed and then store them until they are sold.

There are POD printers, e.g., lightningsource.com and lulu.com,¹⁷ which will take your PDF file of the text of your book and the PDF of your cover, charge you a modest setup fee, store your book electronically on their computers, and print one or many copies for you at a relatively fixed price per copy, e.g., \$6, whenever you order them. If I had a book without photographic or fine art images (e.g., a management book or a novel), this would be a good option.¹⁸

Books printed by Lightning Source Inc. (LSI) also reach wholesaler catalogs (particularly that of Ingram which is a sister or parent company of LSI) such that anyone can order the book from the wholesaler.¹⁹ You set the list price and the discounted price, and LSI fills orders as they come in, e.g., from a retailer such as Amazon,²⁰ and basically sends you the difference between your discounted sales price and their printing cost. If you list the book at \$30 and discount it to a wholesale price of 50 percent, they will send you the difference between \$15 and the price they charge you to print a copy for each one that is sold, which will probably net you something like \$10. Note that Amazon, etc., will now list your book but the "brick and mortar" book stores still will not carry it except to order it when a customer prepays because they insist on being able to return books they order for their bookshelves. If only few people order your book from Amazon, Amazon will show a multi-day shipping period which may discourage buyers, but if your book starts to sell well and you offer a wholesale discount Amazon thinks is appropriate (e.g., 55 percent), then Amazon may begin to inventory it and list a shortened delivery time.

The other alternative is just a regular printer (big or small) who gives you the best terms when you ask a few for quotes, but that will not connect you with Amazon without additional steps.

Distribution

I use the word "distribution" in this paragraph in an informal sense, not in the publishing jargon sense. (In publishing, a distributor is a business that typically has an exclusive contract with the publisher, i.e., you, to find places that will sell your book.)

In the case where you use a regular printer, you can sell the book yourself (e.g., as I do via my website), you can consign it to someone else (e.g., your local historical society to sell your book on local history), or you can join Amazon's Advantage program where you ship the books to them for inventory and they list and sell the books and take a commission. In another Amazon program (Marketplace), you inventory the book, they list it, they sell it and send you the order, you fulfill the order, and Amazon sends your share of what the customer paid (e.g., minus their sales commission). (You can also hire order fulfillment houses who will charge you \$3 or \$4 per book, i.e., you initially send the fulfillment house an inventory of your books, you take in the money when you sell a book, and you send them the order plus their fee plus postage for them to mail the book to your customer.)

You also can do combinations of the above. For instance, as described in the section "Ease of printing..." on page 54, I have Lightning Source print the book which will be wholesaled by Ingram (the largest commercial wholesaler in the United States) or Baker and Taylor (the largest library wholesaler) and simultaneously have the book printed by another (perhaps higher quality) printer or buy copies from Lightning Source and sell them myself in one way or another.

Lightning Source's branch in the UK is connected with the big European wholesalers such as The Bertram Group (www.bertrams.com) and Gardner's Book Service (www.gbsbooks.com). Amazon also has branches in other countries and their Amazon Marketplace (where they list the book but you fulfill the order) also permits you to sell and ship overseas.

Finally, since you control the book when you self-publish, you have flexibility to deal with multiple entities to "publish" the book rather than all rights being tied up with a single traditional publisher, although using multiple "publishing" paths may well not be the best overall marketing strategy. Nonetheless, you could let your local historical society be the "publisher" for your local history book, changing the title page to list them as publisher and having them get their own ISBN number which you will put in your electronic file, selling them copies wholesale, and letting them sell the book locally or to people who order it from them. Simultaneously, you could publish the book yourself (using your own ISBN number) for web-based sales to whomever orders the book from you.

Disintermediation and flexibility

The point of all this is that once you decide the traditional publisher is not for you and you prepare a ready-to-print file for your book, then, in return for your initial investment, you can control everything and make

whatever deals you want, and modern printing and distribution technology offers many options you can use.

Of course, there are advantages in many situations to working with a traditional publisher. The advantages include access to the publisher's editors, indexers, typesetters, art department and established distribution channels, the publisher's payment of the development costs of the book, and not going against the established model for how a book gets published. In my view, the major disadvantages of going with a traditional publisher are (a) the publisher ties up all the rights and the author loses control of his intellectual property, and (b) it is often hard to get a traditional publisher to take you on and let you produce the book you want to produce.

In any case, my experience has made it clear to me that it is now entirely feasible and relatively inexpensive, in cases where one is willing to forego the advantages of a traditional publisher, to self-publish. \TeX , \LaTeX , \ConTeXt , etc., are available for free for anyone who already knows one of them or is interested in learning to use one. (The visually oriented typesetting program Scribus is also free.) PDFs (easily output by all typesetting systems) appear to be a nearly universal way of transmitting ready-to-print manuscripts to a printer; even when the printer uses traditional offset printing with many pages per large sheet of paper, in my experience the printer takes care of whatever is required to turn a sequence of pages in a PDF file into many pages on a sheet. And capabilities like PayPal, Amazon, rapid international shipping, and website-based selling make it possible to sell a book world wide.

Marketing, promotion, and good business

Of course, practically speaking, you still have to promote the book in order to get people to want to buy it.

Marketing and promotion involve all of the things that happen with traditional publishers. If you hope to have the book reviewed, you must send out review copies, typically in advance of publication. Parallel short publications and presentations can help sales. Sending out some sort of notice to targeting mailing lists might help. Some authors have blogs that augment the content of their books. A YouTube video to go along with the book is now possible. Having good positive comments about your book on Amazon.com should help. Having great success with a prior book undoubtedly helps. And so on. Dan Poynter's book (see the next section) has good content on promotion of self-published books.

A nice looking cover can also help sales. Yuri Rob-

bers has written an article (tug.org/pracjourn/2007-1/robbers) that discusses some of the issues of book cover design (you can ignore his discussion of how to use the PStricks system to implement your book cover design). Morris Rosenthal's book (see next subsection) recommends a simple cover that stands out in the small size that will be displayed by the on-line book stores.

Probably you are no more likely to make money self-publishing a book than you are to make money with a book published by a traditional publisher. Most books do not make a lot of money and most authors are not rich. However, since you may be putting up your own funds to develop and initially print a self-published book and may incur other liabilities, you do have to think about it in a businesslike way. You have to understand the difference between fixed and variable costs and the break even point. You probably don't want to invest in a big printing run before you have strong evidence you are going to sell a lot of copies. If you expect to sell a material number of books at a profit, you need to learn how normal businesses operate (e.g., approaches to limiting liability, registering as a business in your state, collecting state sales tax, etc.) so you don't accidentally get into trouble.

If your book does become popular, you may make more money publishing it yourself, and many people apparently do make money self-publishing. Also, by self-publishing and retaining all the rights, you are free to later make a deal with a traditional mainstream publisher, if one becomes interested after seeing the popularity of your book.

Resources for learning more about self-publishing

While I think I have presented some relatively accurate information about self-publishing, I am no expert. Here are a few useful books by experts on self-publishing:²¹

- Dan Poynter's book *The Self-Publishing Manual* has gone through many revisions; he also has a useful website: www.parapublishing.com.
- Pete Masterson's book (mentioned above) on *Book Design and Production, A Guide for Authors and Publishers* is more about the nuts and bolts of publishing (not the writing and promotion like Poynter's book); he also has a useful website (www.aeonix.com) including lots of useful lists, e.g., printers, book coaches, small publishers, etc.
- Morris Rosenthal has a good small book on *Print-on-Demand Book Publishing*; his website (www.fonerbooks.com/contact.htm) also include a reprint of his book's text on the economics of POD publishing versus traditional publishing.
- Robert Bowie Johnson and Ron Pramschuber's

book *Publishing Basics* is a good, short, very basic introduction to things. Pramschufer also has a related business and useful website (where you may be able to get this short book for free): www.selfpublishing.com.

- Aaron Shepard's book *Aiming at Amazon* (available from amazon.com) will be valuable reading for anyone hoping to sell his or her book via Amazon and similar companies.
- Another interesting website is www.gropenassoc.com — click on “Reference Desk”; this is run by one of the three people who moderates the Yahoo Self-Publishing discussion group. Among other things, she recommends several books on the business.

You can also hire people to help you with any of the aspects of self-publishing including hiring a “book coach” to guide you through the process.

I think one of the best things to do to understand self-publishing is to subscribe to the Yahoo Self-publishing discussion group and read the messages that go by for a few weeks. (They also have an online archive of past messages.) All of the people whose books I just listed and many other very knowledgeable people participate in this list. When it comes to discussing typesetting programs, the Yahoo Self-publishing discussions focus on the commercial typesetting and layout systems, e.g., InDesign and QuarkX-Press. The free Scribus system is also mentioned from time to time. Use of Microsoft Word for typesetting and layout is frequently denigrated in this discussion group, although Aaron Shepard has a book (*Perfect Pages*, available from Amazon) on how to use Word for these functions. The just mentioned systems all use a graphical user interface.

I use LaTeX, based on TeX, as my typesetting system. However, LaTeX uses a fundamentally different paradigm (non-graphical) for specifying how the typesetting will be done. Consequently, it is not a popular topic of discussion within the Yahoo Self-publishing group, although its use is regularly encouraged by one of the group's three moderators (John Culleton²²); John himself does not use LaTeX, which he finds too confining, and instead uses TeX itself and ConTeXt which is also based on TeX.

Hiring people versus doing it yourself

Even though you are self-publishing a book, you can hire some or all of the tasks done for you. What you spend your own time learning to do and doing and what you hire someone to do for you is always a trade-off. However, I would not automatically assume that a “professional” will always be able to do a better job

than you.

“Professionals” in many fields come with a distribution of skill levels. Being a professional alone is not a guarantee of skill level; being a professional may only mean someone spends full time working in the area or makes a living from the area. Some professionals are very expert, most are competent, and some apparently are not really very good (for instance, I regularly see books that seem badly designed or badly typeset, including from big and well known “real” publishers²³). A competent professional typically can handle many different situations in an efficient manner; they also have developed an eye for seeing the issues. However, competent professionals did not get that way overnight. They surely gathered the skill to deal with a variety of situations in an efficient manner over years of implicit or explicit study and actually working on a large number of different projects. They learned new things with new projects. We can do the same thing. And once we amateurs have gone past complete novice-hood in one of the aspects of book publishing, we may be as good as at least some of the professionals. In any case, amateur's level of skill may be sufficient for the book the self-publisher wants to produce, versus the money the self-publisher want to spend for professionals.

Having said that, I think some functions are probably harder to get “good enough” at. The more “crafty” skills (e.g., typesetting²⁴) are probably easier; the more “arty” (e.g., book design) are probably harder. The path to becoming an excellent editor is certainly a long one, while the path to becoming good at doing line drawings with a software package is relatively short.

Typesetting, as one example

Let's look at the particular question of whether one should hire someone to do a self-published book's typesetting or should learn to do it oneself.

First, it seems to me that the issue of book design and typesetting of the book is often too tightly coupled when discussing this question. For the most part, I see book design and typesetting as quite separable issues, although of course they can be done by the same person.²⁵ I suspect most very basically designed books will mostly require quite normal typesetting skills, and the typical fiction book with just lots of text probably doesn't need more than a normal level of typesetting skill.

Thus, deciding whether to typeset a book oneself or hire a professional could involve answering the following questions:

- Are you already hiring a designer who perhaps offers a good rate for the complete package

including typesetting?

- Is typesetting interesting to you (or might it become interesting)?
- How much time versus money do you have?
- How complicated is your project and do you suspect you can learn enough to do a decent job with your project?

Regarding the last point above, I'll sketch how I developed a level of skill at typesetting.

- I choose a typesetting system (LaTeX) that I believed gave the most help in doing the various typesetting functions for me in a standard way. (In addition to being very powerful typesetting systems, the most powerful in some domains, the TeX-based systems are free and don't require more of a learning curve than the commercial alternatives such as InDesign or Word.)
- I then practiced using LaTeX by typesetting some letters, an article, and a book chapter.
- For my first book project, I chose a quite simple design. As in many crafts, copying someone else's approach is an efficient place to start.
- I felt confident that by selecting a sufficiently basic design, I could learn what was necessary (and I was willing to take the time to learn) to produce an adequately typeset (not embarrassing) product.
- I then drafted and incrementally revised my whole book using LaTeX. With each revision I improved the content of the book and made changes to my book design as I learned more about LaTeX.²⁶
- Along the way, I also skimmed some books on the craft of typesetting.²⁷ Eventually, I skimmed a few other typography books and manuals and began to observe how books I bought or borrowed from the library were typeset.
- If I had to do it again, I would assume that I might not be able to see some of the issues, and I would try to find someone with an experienced eye to glance over my output and give me feedback on things that "must be fixed." I would do this with one chapter before typesetting the rest of the book. (In a complicated way, I in essence did this, but not explicitly.)

What I did myself, and didn't do

Although I have done lots of editing, I don't believe I can do a good job of editing my own work; therefore, in developing *Breakthrough Management* I hired an excellent editor with whom I had worked before. More generally, it is probably always a good idea to have someone else edit your own writing—more about editing in a later subsection.

Although I can use Illustrator to create line draw-

ings, to save my time I hired an illustrator I had worked with before to do initial versions of my hundred or so line drawings. I did the corrections to them myself.

I know a decent amount about Photoshop and used it to adjust photographic images for printing.

I hired a proofreader who was recommended to me, as I could not do that fussy job well for a book length document. Like editing, it is probably always a good idea to have someone else do the proofreading, including perhaps someone different than the editor.

If I had had an index, I would have hired an indexer I have worked with before; indexing is a skill I don't have and am not interested in learning.

I did all the dealing with permissions, printers, etc., as I wanted to learn about these aspects of publishing.

I did my own typesetting, as I was confident I could do a good enough job and I wanted the experience of typesetting a book for publication.

I set up my own website for book sales, because I already have this skill (and strong biases about *not* using certain website publishing tools) and because I wanted to learn about selling via PayPal.

I am an experienced (albeit not professional) bookkeeper, so I do my own bookkeeping, invoicing, etc., using QuickBooks.

I designed my own book cover using Illustrator with some inputs coming via Photoshop (see the figure on page 62). As with typesetting, I felt confident (rightly or wrongly) of my ability to incrementally develop a decent cover, and I was interested in learning by doing.

In general, a cover is something for which I would seek a number of reviews from other people. (In fact, for a future book, I dream of programming my website to randomly display different cover designs, including different title options,²⁸ to see which one results in the most buying interest and then adopting that as the permanent cover for a new book.)

I initially did all of my own shipping, because I wanted to learn about modes and costs for shipping. More recently I have added an option for placing orders for drop shipments to customers via orders to Lightning Source.

In other words, I chose doing things myself where I had or thought I could develop the skill rather than paying to have them done; I hired things done I didn't feel I would do well or was uninterested in doing.

My original decision to self-publish the book was based on there being a built-in market for it of people who know of the work of my co-author and me, and thus I concentrated on sales to the people who already know us and did not attempt more general marketing. (As I refine these notes, it is dawning on me that I should seek a deal with the publisher of the previous books by my co-author and me (*Four Practical Revolutions in Management* and *A New American TQM*) to

cross market those books and our self-published *Breakthrough Management* and another book we are writing now for self-publication.)

The writer-editor relationship

Self-publishers frequently ask for recommendations for good editors and reasonable prices to pay for editing. While these are necessary questions (of course one wants a good editor at a reasonable price), these are not a sufficient set of criteria. Of key importance is the personality and way-of-working match between the writer and the editor.

At the simplest level, does the writer want edits marked with pencil or pen on paper or does the writer want edits done electronically to the writer's source files? I have met editors who will only work on paper and editors who will only work electronically; some editors will work either way. In any case, the writer needs the editor to work in whichever way the writer prefers, unless the writer doesn't care. (Personally, I can accept editing of my electronic files if I am submitting something to a journal that insists on such editing. However, if I am paying the editor, I will find an editor that is happy to do the editing on paper.)

I have worked with three kinds of editors: (1) development editors who gave me general and overall suggestions but did not do a detailed copy edit, (2) copy editors who focus on the grammar, spelling and punctuation but don't really understand the content, and (3) editors who can understand the content and suggest improved ways and organizations for saying what I want to say as well as making the grammar, spelling, and punctuation adhere to a standard and be consistent. I have also worked with editors who (at least) gave the appearance of having respect for me as the author and my way of saying things while helping me improve my document, and I have worked with editors who seemed to be saying that I was just a technical person (I write non-fiction) who couldn't be expected to know proper grammar and punctuation. For a large project where I am paying the editor, I want the third type of editor and an editor who respects me while finding a way to tell me some things I probably don't want to hear but which are good for me.

One way to find an editor to whom you are well matched for a book length project is to try various editors on short projects (e.g., a paper for a journal). Alternatively, you could ask a well recommended editor to edit the preface and first chapter of your book (for an hourly fee), explaining that your goal is for you both to figure out if you are well matched to *each other*. Be sure to include in your practice run some follow-up discussion about some of the things the editor recommends, so you learn how the editor reacts when you

don't automatically accept his or her suggestions.

Regarding a quote, the best thing, I think, is to have a complete manuscript available to show to the editor — as good a manuscript as the writer can do before seeking editing help. From a complete manuscript (including figures, captions, reference citations, etc.), the editor should be able to estimate the number of hours at an hourly rate or the total cost of the job, in terms of the absolute length of the manuscript, the complexity of the manuscript, and the quality of the writing.

Looking forward

My current assessment of self-publishing

I have found my experience of self-publishing *Breakthrough Management* to be successful enough to do it again. Among the self-publishing projects I am currently planning or executing are the following:

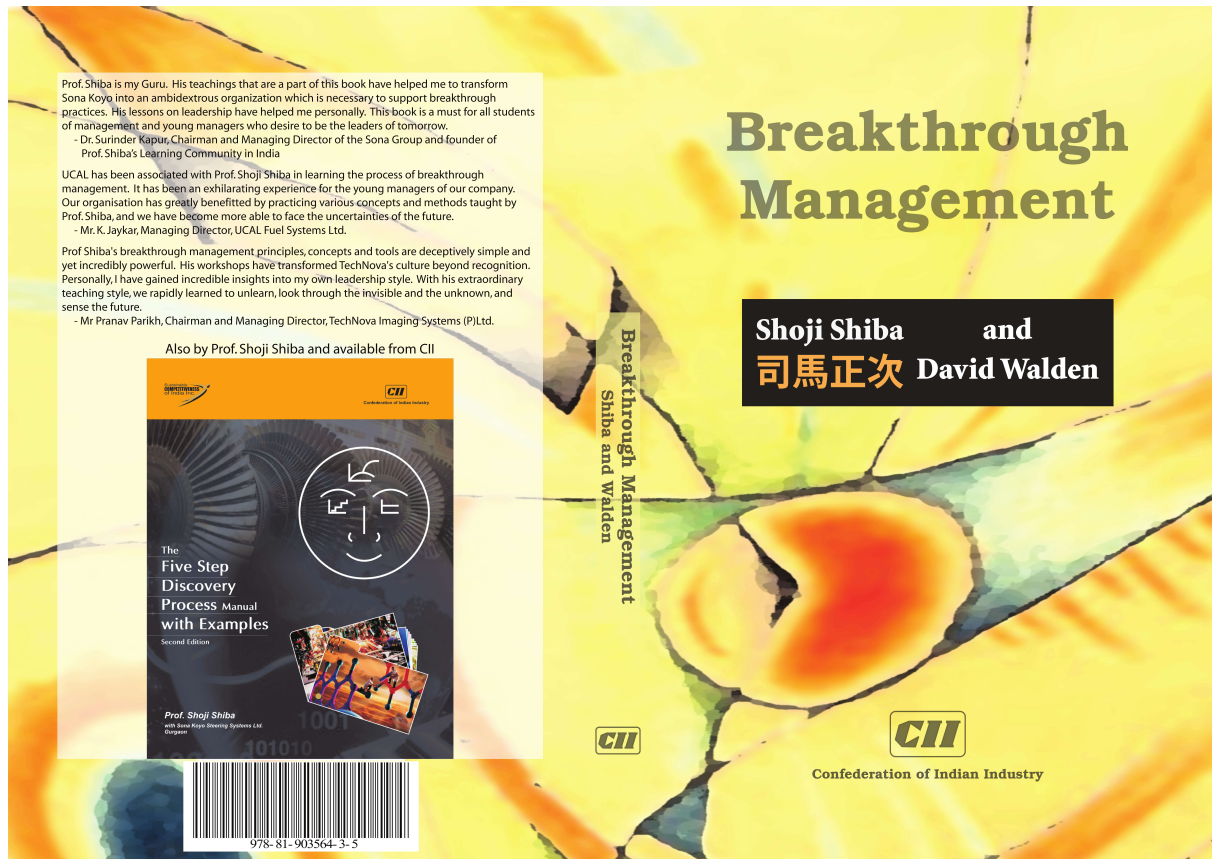
- publishing and selling via the on-line book stores a compendium of chapters on various aspects of the technical history of the high tech company for which I worked for many years; I am co-editing this book and wrote several chapters
- republishing and selling via my website (to relatives primarily) an oral history of my mother that my wife edited and which we privately printed a number of years ago using Xerox-copy printing and binding from a thesis binding company
- ditto for an oral history of my mother-in-law
- publishing and selling via the on-line book stores a picture book about the salt marsh on which I live and which I have converted to a book from a narrated slide show my son and I developed a number of years ago

A couple of other self-publishing book projects are also in the works.

Disintermediation and the "publisher"

In this note I have been talking about the distinction between a regular publisher and a self-publisher. Technically, as I understand things, the publisher is the place that goes with the ISBN number.

Historically, the place that provided the ISBN number also was the publisher in a much larger sense: the traditional publisher took a hand written or type written manuscript, edited it, designed the book, typeset it, proofread it, perhaps indexed it, had it printed and bound, marketed it, sold it to wholesalers and perhaps retailers, and also perhaps sold foreign rights. These days much of that is outsourced at many publishers and typically the author is expected to do much (or perhaps all) of the marketing. The publisher still does



incur the financial risk of paying for all that work, except in some cases where it expects the author to guarantee enough sales to cover its risk.

The subsidy publisher also traditionally has done all that work except in many cases they don't do any marketing or sales except to the author and his or her friends and family. The subsidy publishers also traditionally have not taken any financial risk, but rather have made a profit by making the author pay for editing, typesetting, printing, etc., perhaps implicitly in a fixed fee per book.

As noted earlier, there have also always been a few self-publishers — people who felt they had something important to say and pay in money or effort to create a pile of books that could be sold or given away.

It seems clear to me that the boundary between publishing and self publishing is becoming more vague. Sure, the entity that provides the ISBN number is technically the publisher, but with all the outsourcing this may not mean much more than providing the ISBN number for some traditional publishers. The whole processing of publishing a book is no longer tightly tied

to the entity which provides the ISBN number. The individual who does all the earlier steps him- or herself, or hires them done, is not very different from the traditional publisher except that the traditional publisher has more books in its catalog, perhaps better financing, a reputation as being a legitimate publisher, and thus connections to the world of reviewing.²⁹

In the case of *Breakthrough Management*, I did everything myself or paid for it, but I arranged for a non-profit organization in India to provide the ISBN number (it was mutually useful — for them to “publish” my book and for me to have them associated with the book). Am I any less the publisher in fact because the Indian organization is the publisher in name? I don't think so. I did everything including providing ready-to-print PDF files to the printer in India, and I have reprinted the book in other countries without any additional involvement of the Indian organization (but still using its ISBN number, with its permission).

I can imagine that I could take my book to a traditional publisher and, if they like it, make a deal with them whereby they have my ready-to-print files

printed and add the book to their catalog in return for appropriate payment of some kind. This happens regularly with foreign rights. For instance, I know that a 2007 Donna Leon mystery book was published in the United States by the US publisher simply buying the ready-to-print files from the original UK publisher and changing the title page and ISBN number.

There is a lot of discussion in the self-publishing world about discrimination against self-publishers. I think this is wasted angst. If it makes sense for non-economic or economic reasons to self-publish, do it. If it makes sense to seek a traditional publisher, do that. Or do a mix: publish books traditional publishers want to publish with them and publish yourself other books you want to publish. Who knows, a good enough self-published book may be picked up by a traditional publisher, and you may be able to just sell the publisher their ready-to-print files. I suspect that at some time in the future traditional publishers will regularly acquire ready-to-print books from their authors as authors seek more control over their work and better financial return, and have more options for skipping traditional publishers altogether. When Stephen King or Tom Clancy decides to hire his own editors, designers, typesetters, etc., and offer their books as ready-to-print files to publishers, I'll bet the publishers will not be able to resist.

Acknowledgments

Some of these notes were originally published in my "Travels in T_EX Land" column in issue 2007-1 of *The PracT_EX Journal*.³⁰ The following people helped me with those sections: Journal guest editor Yuri Robbers made many helpful suggestions. John Culleton²² reviewed the content on self-publishing for major errors. Marion Gropen gave me many especially useful suggestions for subtle improvement of various points. Karl Berry reviewed one section for content and spotted many typos throughout the paper. The anonymous reviewers provided helpful corrections, as did TPJ editor Lance Carnes. For the current version of these notes, Frans Goddijn pointed out a number of typos, as did Wybo Dekker.

Biographical sketch

David Walden is retired after a career as an engineer,³¹ engineering manager, and general manager involved with research and development of computer and other high tech systems. These days he spends most of his time writing (and now self-publishing). More history is at www.walden-family.com/dave.

Notes

1. *Four Practical Revolutions in Management*, Shoji Shiba and David Walden, Productivity Press, New York, NY, 2003 — www.walden-family.com/4prim.
2. Dan O. Snow, coauthor with Dan Poynter of *U-PUBLISH.COM 4.0: A 'Living Book' to Help You Compete with the Giants of Publishing* has a different point of view. In an email of February 24, 2007, Dan said, "[T]here are nearly ten times more outlets for books than bookstores...and they are easier to target, usually pay more, pay faster, and return fewer (if any) unsold books."
3. I know personally of a book where the publisher, John Wiley & Sons, required the authors to purchase this sort of minimum number of copies.
4. See the first paragraph of the section "Printing options" on page 56 for the distinction between offset and digital printing.
5. I suspect this is happening with my book *Four Practical Revolutions in Management*.
6. The royalty percentage figures I use in this paragraph are by way of example. Marion Gropen, who is an expert on the publishing business, in a January 18, 2007, email said:

Royalty rates vary substantially with the type of book. Small houses may pay different rates than the norm; but for larger houses, the norms are practically carved in stone. For example, a trade non-fiction hardback author gets 10 percent of list price (also known as the suggested retail price) for the first 5,000 copies sold, net of returns. The next 5,000 copies yield 12.5 percent of list. And thereafter, the author gets 15 percent of list. Advances are usually calculated to cover something like the expected earnings for the first 6 months of the title's life, although this varies widely.

Mass market fiction tends to run from 5 percent of list to 8 percent. Trade paperbacks are usually between 7 percent and 10 percent. The break points at which the rates step up vary with formats and market segments.

Scientific, medical, technical, professional, and academic publishers generally pay upon net sales (gross sales after discounts and returns). Again, rates and breakpoints will vary depending upon format and market segment.

7. I am sure that there have been some books published using a subsidy publisher which in fact sold lots of books, if the book turned out to be sufficiently interesting to some class of readers. For instance, I have always had the impression that the early editions (ca. 1960) of Marshall Miles' classic and widely read book on contract bridge, *How To Win At Duplicate Bridge*, were published by a subsidy publisher.
 8. www.bookmarket.com/selfpublish.html has a nice long list.
 9. It helps my motivation to keep writing to have successive drafts of the book have the superficial appearance to being pages from a finished book.
 10. I use L_AT_EX as my typesetting system. Most of what I say in the rest of this note would be just as true for a book typeset with a graphically oriented typesetting system such as InDesign, QuarkExpress, or the free Scribus.
- I use L_AT_EX because it is arguably the most powerful typesetting system available, because it is available without cost,

because it does not use an undocumented proprietary data format that can be obsoleted by newer versions, and because it does not have a corporate goal of selling a new version every year or two that obsoletes prior versions.

11. I created my cover art using Adobe Illustrator (which does get obsoleted periodically with the goal of selling new versions).

12. In retrospect, I believe the printer's quote would have been the same for 20 copies.

13. You will have to Google for the ISBN agency for other countries.

14. I don't have a Massachusetts resale number which is required to avoid paying state sales tax.

15. This was before the dollar got much less valuable compared to the Euro and UK pound.

16. Also, on May 8, 2008, in Houston, Texas, at a meeting of the World Alliance for Quality (an organization of several dozen quality organizations), there was a call for breakthrough projects that would help advance the state of quality worldwide. Sarita Nagpal (deputy directory of CII which provided the ISBN number for our *Breakthrough Management* book), my co-author Shoji Shiba, and I responded to the call by offering to provide the PDF print files for the book free of charge to member organizations so they can print it locally and sell it at prices conducive to widespread circulation in their geographic region. We will see how many organizations take us up on this offer of what I am calling "cooperative printing." Obviously, most self-publishers will choose not to give away potential book sales, but self-publishing allows the freedom to take such an unconventional step.

17. lulu.com is not exactly self-publishing, but this is an inexpensive easy way to get some books in print. For instance, this is the approach TUG president Karl Berry has used to make his *Eplain* and *Fontname* documents available in bound hardcopy format. Lulu actually may have its printing done by another company; I am not sure.

18. Purportedly, LSI's print quality is improving over time as they adopt improved technology.

19. However, my understanding is that self-published books printed by LSI typically do not get in a hard copy Ingram catalog that book stores look at as part of deciding what to order.

20. But see NB on page 55.

21. In addition to following up with the resources listed here, simply google on "self-publishing" and "print on demand" to find pointers to a lot of additional resources.

22. tug.org/interviews/interview-files/john-culleton.html

23. Just after I wrote these words, I started reading the book *Girls Like Us: Carole King, Joni Mitchell, Carly Simon — and the Journal of a Generation* by Sheila Weller (Atria Division of Simon & Shuster, Inc., 2008). On page 8 the right justification looks obviously uneven because there is a lot of end-of-line punctuation. Apparently the typesetter did not use micro-typesetting (which my PDFLaTeX system easily provides) which pushes punctuation slightly into the right margin so the right justification *looks* more even.

24. In addition, the typesetting package I use, LaTeX, does an excellent job (better than many books typeset by "real" publishers) without me having to have so much skill at typesetting. The skill with LaTeX tends to be in the area of mod-

ifying the standard templates to get different interior book designs.

25. I also see cover art creation as quite separable (in terms of who does the work) from the design of the interior of a book, although again it can all be done by the same person.

26. I'm not sure how practical it is to draft a book in one of the graphically-oriented typesetting systems. Maybe one has to first draft the book in a text editor or word processor such as Word. I deliberately avoided using Word for drafting. In fact, an important reason for learning about LaTeX was to avoid the clutches of Word. You can read about my experience with this book at tug.org/TUGboat/Articles/tb24-2/tb77walden.pdf.

27. Robert Bringhurst, *The Elements of Typographic Style*, version 3.1, Hartley & Marks Publishers, Vancouver, BC, 2005; James Felici, *The Complete Manual of Typography*, Peachpit Press, Berkeley, CA, 2003.

28. www.lulu.com/titlescorer is fun to try.

29. Somewhere on Dan Poynter's website he says something along of lines that, "You are the publisher of a book if you pay for or do the work to produce the book; if you do several books, you are a small publisher of books; if you do many books, you are a large publisher. In all cases you are a publisher."

30. tug.org/pracjourn/2007-1/walden

31. He was a member of the small team that in 1969 developed ARPANET communications system which evolved into the Internet.

David Walden