The Cayun Builder and the Jiu-Jitsu Entrepreneur: A Narrative of the Making of an Entrepreneur in the Digital Age

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Abstract: This narrative describes the making of a German electrical engineer, Kurt Beyer, into a micro-entrepreneur. He set for himself the goal of sailing around the world in his own vessel – without being able to afford to buy such a ship. Many people in Germany have in recent years started to build their own sea-going vessels in order to escape from the creativity-stifling and restrictive patterns of their lives and work. Only a few of them have ever finished building their vessels. Firstly, this report describes the experiences of one of those few who have made it. Secondly, it tells the story of how this engineer himself turned into a micro-entrepreneur during the period of yacht-building and how later he started his own charter enterprise, centred around his yacht. Following the model of entrepreneurship described by Dassen-Housen in this issue of AI & Society, the narrative illustrates what it means to run such an enterprise in view of the international competition. Here follows the narrative of the engineer and ship-builder himself (translated by D. Brandt).

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1. Building the Yacht

I am an electrical engineer with some additional training in welding. I have always loved to work with real things: technical equipment, metalwork, and wood. I also like sailing: to feel the wind, enjoy the sea, meet people and see countries beyond the seas. As a professional engineer, I have had several good jobs until I got the offer of a tenured position in a university department at Aachen, looking after the department’s audio-visual systems. It turned out to be the biggest mistake in my life because there was not much of a challenge. I got terribly bored. I asked for a transfer but at that time the department did not want to lose me. I thought of leaving the job but unemployment was high and I had a young family to look after. At that time, about 12 years ago (seen from today), I developed this idea of building my own
ship and sailing around the world. My wife and daughter loved this idea and so we
started on it.

First I had to learn to do the woodwork because we wanted a wooden boat. Wooden
boats are lighter and last longer than, for example, aluminium ships. Thus in my spare
time I did a kind of apprenticeship in a carpenter’s workshop. Additionally I started to
teach myself everything about sailing a ship to Australia. I also had to learn everything
about certain chemical processes because I wanted to use epoxy/glass-fibre to
strengthen the hull of the yacht. Therefore I worked with people who do research on
glass-fibre weaving, and worked with a research team testing different kinds of epoxy.
Thus, my ship became one of their most important research test cases.

Then I had to decide on the design of the boat, which could carry six people.
Therefore I chose the longest hull I could build: to fit exactly into my back garden,
which is 13 m deep and about 8 m wide. The ship became 12.60 m (42 ft) long, and 4
m (13 ft) wide. By chance I met a Dutch designer who was just about to build such a
boat but he had designed it for a metal hull. So I became his test case for wood-

I started building the boat in a tent which I set up in my back garden. I was careful
avoiding my neighbours becoming suspicious, as we live in a typical middle-class
suburb with small houses, garages and gardens. I built the ship upside down. For the
hull I needed 3600 m of cedar wood boards, which I chose from Canadian trees
because of their unique qualities. I cut the trees at the carpenter workshop and
transported the boards on top of my car into my garden. I did all the work on these
boards in my cellar or garage to keep the noise level low. It took me months to
complete the hull. Finally, 10 of my sports friends came along (I am also a teacher of
Jiu-Jitsu) and within 8 hours of hard work we turned the hull around: it just looked
beautiful – more than 12 m of a wonderfully symmetrical wooden structure (Fig. 1).

My friends helped me a lot with the boat-building venture. I returned their favour by
teaching Jiu-Jitsu to them and to their children. I would like to get across this
philosophy of Jiu-Jitsu: It means being successful in life without being aggressive to or
against other people.

The next step was straight plastic compound engineering: to create the sandwich
structure from epoxy/glass-fibre layers inside and outside of the wooden hull. It took
time experimenting with different kinds of epoxy as well as glass-fibre weaving in
order to decide on the optimum sandwich structure, taking into account the months
and years of the ship’s travels in salt water. After sandwiching the hull, I was busy for
about one year just sanding down the hull to give it an absolutely smooth finish.

After this tricky job, I started on the support for the mast. I bought two large oak
trees and cut them up. I re-glued them to create the shape of a bent beam, smoothly
fitting into the centre of the hull. This bent beam was to take up the foot and the two
stays (steel ropes) to hold the tall mast. It took me weeks, first to find the oak trees for
this beam and then to prepare them. I established my own retail firm to buy the wood
and further equipment from large companies, and subsequently I sold the goods to
myself as my only customer.

A major problem was to build the keel. First I went around and collected small lead
pieces left over from wheel aligning. I got four tons (!) of lead without any costs. Next
I built a lead furnace out of a large metal cask and cast the keel in several ‘portions’.
For the keel, I built a reinforced inner structure out of welded steel rods. Finally I had