

Finding Freelance Work

By BNET Editorial

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Freelancers depend upon their ingenuity and their networks to build and maintain a work pipeline. Often, a person pursues a freelance career because he has a particular skill that one client—maybe a past employer—finds valuable. However, an arrangement that depends on a relationship with one client doesn't offer long-term security. For this reason, it's important for freelancers to spread their wings and offer the same work, or a related version of that work, to a wider audience.

Since many freelancers are independent, sometimes solitary people who have difficulty networking, they need to think of ways to easily and efficiently find work. Thankfully, there are many opportunities to make connections before the first handshake, including professional gatherings that facilitate selective introductions with prospective clients.

What You Need to Know

I am starting as a freelancer after having been laid off. My first work is with my former employers. Should I get them to sign a contract?

Having a contract does not guarantee payment but it does manage expectations on both sides. Make sure you include the scope and standard of your work, the delivery time, and the value of the contract. You might also include payment terms and cancellation conditions. Once you have created a suitable contract, save it as a template so that you do not have to reinvent it each time.

I have been offered a huge project and I really want to do it, but it's going to take over my life for a while. What can I do to manage this?

Do you work to live or live to work? Sometimes these opportunities arise and we feel that we have to handle them all ourselves. Try to balance the peaks and troughs so that you can enjoy this time of bounty. Perhaps there is a freelancer in your network who can help you with some aspects of the project, or perhaps you have sufficient professional standing to negotiate the timelines and boundaries of the project. See if you can find a way through that allows you some time and space as well.

I am so tied up with what I'm doing now that I don't have time to market myself for the future. How can I devote sufficient time to make sure I have a pipeline?

There is nothing more absorbing and distracting than a current contract and of course, this prevents you from putting your energy into creating future work. However, if you market your activities as if they were part of your work, you will see them as your obligations and be more likely to do them. Perhaps you could put aside half a day each week to increase your visibility as a freelancer.

I'm thinking about leaving my full time employment and joining the world of freelance. How do I know when to take the plunge?

Make sure you have a good business proposition and a receptive market before you leave the security of your employment. This means knowing what you have to offer and who will value your offering. You might try running your full time job alongside some freelance work for a while just to see if it is viable, or you might take a short sabbatical so that you can put all your energy into exploring freelancing. Whatever tack you take, make sure you have the financial resources you need to tide you over until you build momentum.

What to Do

Understand the Current Climate

The world of work is changing. Organizational structures continue to flatten, and project work has become the preferred working style, that is, if the work is not being outsourced or contracted in. Flexible, mobile, working communities mean that there are more people "unemployed," yet more people working than ever before. Although entry into this new professional paradigm can be threatening and fearful, many of those who enter the freelancing culture find that they thrive in it and would not go back to conventional employment if they were paid! So what can you do to increase your security and ensure that you have a constant stream of work?

Build Your Brand

It is important that you know who you are because *you are your brand*. People will buy you just like they would buy a commodity or service. They will have an image of you as a freelancer. It may be that they see you as: professional, disorganized, competent, attentive, relationship driven, unreliable, energetic, positive, negative...and so on. If you fail to decide upon and manage your brand, people

will conjure it up for themselves, and they will do so from the signals and cues that you unwittingly give them. These will include your idiosyncrasies and your foibles. The trick is to have a brand that you can align yourself with authentically. When you know what it is, you will need to ensure that you build it with your actual and prospective customer base so that they know when and how to approach you when they have a need—and they know how to talk about you to others who may be interested in buying your services. By giving your professional acquaintances “a story” to tell, you will be able to manage their expectations. If you fail to give them a story, they will make it up for themselves, and it may not serve you in the way that you’d wish. So, the challenge is to manage your brand rather than letting it manage you.

Spread Your Reputation

You will know what your skills and capabilities are and to what extent you can apply these to meet your clients’ needs. However, they will only see the small part of you that is defined by your current contract. If you have more skills than the ones you are currently using, make sure you let people know, otherwise you will get bracketed and boxed, and it will be almost impossible to expand your freelance repertoire. Be clear about what value you can add and be on the constant lookout for opportunities to send messages about the breadth of your abilities.

Use Your Network

Most freelance work is channeled through current or extended networks. If you think about who you have in your network, you might be surprised at how many people you could contact who may have an interest in what you do, if not for themselves, for someone in their network. Make sure you keep your contacts up to date and remind them who you are and what you do from time to time. Be proactive; do not wait to be invited. Sometimes, it is sufficient just to send a contact a personal note, an article, or a notification of an event to keep you in the forefront of the person’s mind. Networks are powerful structures that are all too often ignored. It is said that we are only five handshakes away from anyone we chose to meet! Your network is also valuable in breaking the monotony of a solitary professional existence. As humans, we are naturally gregarious (to various extents), so make sure you meet and have conversations with others in your field.

Make Yourself Visible

There are exhibitions, conferences, and seminars attached to all sorts of professions, no doubt, including yours. It is worth offering to contribute to some of these to raise your profile among those who can advocate on your behalf. Even if you just attend as a delegate, make sure you contribute to conversations and debates. Follow up on your public conversations by seeking out your allies or adversaries and get their contact details. In this way, you can take responsibility for communicating

with people in your professional sphere rather than waiting for them to communicate with you. By taking charge in this way, you will continue to build a valuable network that will keep you visible and in the minds of potential clients.

Take the Initiative and Promote Yourself

Not everyone likes to write articles but you can achieve a high level of visibility by writing letters and making comments on topical issues relating to your work. You may not feel like “the expert” in your field, but if you are willing to engage with a wider audience, you will eclipse the silent expert who prefers his or her own company and intense involvement in a current project.

Use Your Imagination

Many of us are in the mindset of having to respond to others’ need for work to be done and are reluctant to be seen to go “hat in hand” to a potential client and ask for work. However, clients sometimes do not realize what value you could add to their business. Use your imagination to see how you could bring something new to a potential client’s business; then write a business case that puts you in the center of a project or initiative that you could implement. Put some bottom-line figures in your proposition to ensure you look alluring as a freelance prospect. By taking this proactive approach, you will define yourself, as opposed to those who wait in the wings for an invitation to tender.

Familiarize Yourself with the Internet

The Internet is a powerful research and communication tool if you use it propitiously. Take some time to explore the sites of prospective clients, professional bodies, and networks. See who is advertising their wares and what approach they take. Do you have a Web presence? Think of ways that you can establish yourself in the virtual world. Whether you have a Web Site or not, you could start a blog or join MySpace.com.

What to Avoid

You Rely Too Much on One Client

Relying too much on one client is a common mistake, especially if the work is intense and you have little time to spend networking or building your prospective client base. It is important that you

come up for air from time to time and see what the professional landscape looks like. Plan time for networking and build broader awareness of your skills and capabilities. The longer you are apparently off the professional radar screen, the more people will forget you.

You Say “Yes” to Everything That Comes Along

It is tempting to say “yes” to every opportunity that comes along for fear it may be the last one. If you do this, you will soon become swamped and be unable to meet anyone’s needs consistently and reliably. There are bound to be times of lean as well as times of plenty, but try to keep your nerve and remember that you cannot do everything all the time. See if you can say “no” once in a while.

You Do Not Schedule Free Time

Most freelancers allow their work to extend into evenings and weekends. During weekdays, they focus on their work and in their free time, they attend to the administrative load they have to carry as freelancers. If this describes you, try to plan some time in your diary when you can attend to your financial obligations and marketing activities. Also, make sure you book yourself a vacation and strike the time from your diary.

You Are Not Vigilant About Your Accounting

Not being vigilant about contracting and invoicing can lead to misunderstandings and delays in payment. Make sure you keep an account of all your costs and expenses and include these in your billing. It is too easy to let these things go astray and forget to cover yourself for expenditure related to your contract. Also, be prompt in submitting an invoice on the dates agreed beforehand. Cash flow is so important to someone who wishes to sustain his or her career as a freelancer.

Where to Learn More

Books:

Rozakis, Laurie, *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Making Money in Freelancing*. Alpha Books, 1999.

Drake, Susan M., *Freelancing for Dummies*. Hungry Minds Inc., 2001.

James-Enger, Kelly, *Six-Figure Freelancing*. Random House, 2005.

Ferriss, Timothy, *The 4-Hour Workweek: Escape 9–5, Live Anywhere, and Join the New Rich*. Crown Business, 2007.

Web Site:

gyford.com: www.gyford.com/phil/writing/2006/10/26/a_beginners_guid.php

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