HOW TO SUCCEED AS A FREELANCER IN THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES
Contents

Introduction
The Freelance Revolution
The Global Picture
Get Educated
Compile a Portfolio

Useful Resources for Creative Freelancers
Finding Work
Getting Advice and Protecting Your Business
Project Management and Productivity
Financial Management
Collaboration

Writing a Business Plan
Business
Marketing
Finance

Getting Clients
Keeping Clients
Get Going!
Introduction

The prospect of working for yourself has undoubtedly run through your head. Flexible hours, being your own boss, managing your own workload – imagining your life as a freelancer can make being self-employed seem like a dream.

Dreaming is always nice, but working out how to become a freelance photographer, graphic designer, illustrator, or creative professional of any other kind, and actually taking the step of going solo is difficult and one that many are too afraid to take.

To help you make the jump with confidence, we’ve put together an ultimate guide taking you through everything about how to become a freelancer – from how to find your first client to how to build your success into an empire. We’ve also compiled a list of over 50 of the best freelance resources to help you set up and run your business as simply and effectively as possible.

The Freelance Revolution

As companies become more trusting of outsourcing projects and realise the benefits of scaling back on in-house employees, the opportunity for freelancers is growing. In 2015, the UK has over 1.8 million people working in freelance roles across all sectors. This upward trend in the freelance market is being welcomed by millions of skilled individuals worldwide for a variety of reasons, including:

- The ability to set their own timetable
- The opportunity to work from home
- The possibility of earning more money
- The option to take holidays at any time
- The chance to work while travelling
- The prospect of working for clients from around the world
- The potential to work on a greater variety of projects
- The free time to work on personal projects

To find out whether you’re more suited for a career as an in-house employee or a career as a freelance creative professional, check out our blog post on the pros and cons of working as a freelance graphic designer. Although this article is specifically related to graphic designers, the main points are applicable to anyone with an interest in the creative industries. If you decide that freelance is for you, good choice! As the statistics below will demonstrate further, there’s never been a better time to go alone.
The Global Picture

The global freelance economy is on the rise and shows no sign of stopping any time soon. The US is often seen as leading the way in the trend with Freelancers Union claiming that 34% of the country’s workforce is now freelancing.

Similarly, in the UK, freelancing is becoming more popular every day, especially among graduates, and the figures from many other European countries tell a similar story:

Freelancing in the UK

- 14% more freelancers in the UK now than a decade ago
- 1.4 million freelancers across all sectors
- Design and multimedia professionals make up 24% of this number (336,000)
- 78% of the UK public think that freelancing and flexible working help promote a good work/life balance
- 72% of the UK public think freelancing has a positive effect on family life
- In 2013 the number of businesses hiring freelancers online increased by 46%
- The average hourly rate for freelancers also increased by 6.7% in 2013

(Source)

Freelancing around Europe

- Across Europe, freelancers make up 22% of workers in arts and entertainment
- Freelancers make up the fastest growing group in the EU labour market, increasing from just under 6.2 million in 2004 to 8.9 million in 2013
- Spain and Slovakia both have freelance rates at 13%
- Italy leads the way with a freelance rate of 21%

Percentage growth of freelancers by country from 2004 to 2013:

- Netherlands – 93%
- Poland – 88%
- France – 85%
- UK – 63%
- Finland – 56%
- Belgium – 53%
- Spain – 51%
- Germany – 43%
- Italy – 12%

(Source)

If the above has got you thinking seriously about getting the ball rolling as a freelancer, then you need to know what to do next. Read on...
Get Educated

You’ll find it much easier to secure work if you have a degree in a subject related to the area you want to work in. Potential clients will respect your qualification and be more likely to use your services. Studying towards a degree will also give you a good grounding in your discipline and help you to plan and organise your workload better. You’ll also be likely to meet fellow creatives from around the world who could be vital in progressing your career in the future.

Studying online

Studying a relevant degree course online offers a fantastic opportunity to experience what life is like as a modern freelance designer. With communication key to your career success, taking part in online forums, working and uploading to deadlines, and pitching projects to your tutors and fellow students from a distance will help you develop desirable skills. The flexibility of studying to deadlines according to your own schedule will also give you a valuable insight into what your working life will be like as a freelance creative.

Study while you work

Another great thing about working as a freelancer is that you can use the flexibility of your schedule to fit in further study, particularly if you study online. By managing your workload, you can take short courses to brush up on skills or even advance your existing qualification to a master’s degree. A master’s degree will often lead to better opportunities and will entitle you to charge a higher rate for your services.

Compile a Portfolio

Your portfolio will be crucial to securing work. With a substandard portfolio you will be unlikely to attract much interest. Studying on a degree course is the best way to create a body of work that showcases the best you have to offer. Having your course tutors and peers give you advice and feedback on your work is incredibly helpful, and graduates tend to have more professional portfolios, with a higher standard of work than non-graduates.

You should also have a large presence online with your portfolio displayed to relevant audiences in various places. For more advice on this, read our guide to creating an online portfolio.
Writing a Business Plan

Writing a business plan will help you decide exactly what it is you want to do and sets in motion the methods you will use to achieve your goals. Every successful business starts with a well-constructed strategy and yours is no exception. Business plans vary with some going into more depth than others. A freelance graphic designer’s business plan will, for example, obviously not go into as much depth as that of a company like Apple, but your plan should cover at least three broad sections: business, marketing, and finance.

Business

This is self-explanatory. Take your time deciding on a business name and let it settle for a few weeks before making it official. If you find out someone else already uses that name, it doesn’t suit what you plan to do, or you simply don’t like it; it can be difficult to change if you’ve already implemented it across your marketing channels and submitted to clients. You will also need an address for your business. Travelling the world might be an advantage of freelancing but you’ll still have to pay tax somewhere.

Find your niche

Find your niche and prove your skills in that niche. That doesn’t mean a niche in your field of work, but in the kind of businesses you target: branding for digital start-ups, logo design for independent cafés, poster designs for bands, etc. If you go for everything and anything at the beginning, you’ll end up with a random and weak portfolio that won’t get you very far. Narrow your focus and don’t be generic. As you progress, you might want to get some secondary skills to make you even more appealing to a wider range of potential clients.

Define your clients

Finding clients is without a doubt the most difficult task a new freelance creative has. Many start off freelancing alongside part-time (or even full-time) work to ensure they have a large enough client base to support themselves financially. If you leave your job with a vague idea that you’ll instantly get a few clients with lucrative contracts, then you’re kidding yourself. In the beginning, you need to find your clients, the clients won’t come to you.

The first thing you should do is find the people who will be willing to pay for the services you offer. This can be tricky if you haven’t quite nailed down what exactly you will be doing. If you don’t know your target audience, marketing your services and pitching for work in the right areas will become confused and result in a lack of opportunities.

When discovering your niche, you should also consider the market for this kind of work. For example, a poster designer will pitch to venues and events companies, whereas a menu designer will pitch to restaurants or cafés. You’ll often need to ‘superniche’ your services to an even smaller market. For example, if you’re creating menus for restaurants, what kind of restaurants? If you’re creating posters for events, what kind of events? By superniching your skills, you’ll get a much better idea of whom to target and how to promote your work to them.

Identify the competition

Who are the people offering a similar service to your target audience. How do you differ from them? Can you compete with them? You should keep a close eye on your competitors and take inspiration from any great work they do in marketing their services. It’s even acceptable to approach them and attempt to form a bond between your two businesses. That way, they’ll be more likely to refer clients to you instead of turning away work during busy periods. Just because they’re your competitors, it doesn’t mean you can’t benefit from working together.
Marketing

Some people estimate that at the beginning you will spend up to 90% of your time marketing. This might be a slight exaggeration, but one thing that’s certain is that work won’t ever come and find you, no matter how talented you are.

You first need to figure out how you’re going to reach your target audience. If you’ve spent time doing this earlier on in your freelance business plan, then this should be easy. In the marketing section, you should identify not only who your customers are, but what their problems, often referred to as ‘pain points’, are and what your services can do to provide a solution to this. Answer this question and you’re on to a winning marketing strategy.

Build an online presence

You’ll certainly need to build a website to refer customers back to, but you’ll need to decide whether all your marketing will be done online and what your budget is. A freelance photographer, for example, might want to advertise in the local press to attract local customers; however, many in the creative industries find the best return on marketing spend is online. You’ll have to spend some time testing which method is best suited for your business.

If you don’t have money to spend on advertising, or time to learn how to implement an effective strategy, don’t worry! Effective online marketing strategies can be implemented simply and for free. You’ll just need to spend a bit of time setting everything up.

Social Media

Learning how to use social media channels is the best way forward for a free campaign, but first you should make sure that your target audience are also on social media or your efforts will be pointless. Here are a few guides we’ve put together on how to use the most popular channels:

- Facebook
- Twitter
- LinkedIn
- Pinterest
- Google+
- Behance

It will take you a while to build up a following that’s worth anything, so don’t get discouraged. Learning to handle rejection is a big part of the job at the beginning.

If you have time to start a blog, this is a great way to improve your website’s authority online. A newsletter is also a great way to let your audience know what you’re doing and keep your services on potential clients’ radars.

The content you post on all channels should be relevant to your niche and should be highly targeted towards your audience. Don’t worry if you don’t find instant success, but if you don’t have positive results after a few months, perhaps you should reconsider your strategy.
Tell everyone you know

The most powerful form of marketing is, and probably always will be, word of mouth. You can use this to your advantage by telling everyone you know about your fantastic new business venture. You’ll be surprised by how many clients you get through friends and family, especially at the start of your career. Just make sure you do your best on every job and positive referrals through word of mouth are bound to spread like wildfire. You should also follow up with pleased clients to get a glowing testimonial to display on your website.

Volunteer

If you’re struggling to find any clients at the beginning of your career, there’s no harm in volunteering. Unpaid work is better than no work. Just make sure that it doesn’t become a habit and that people don’t take advantage of you.

Don’t expect work to come to you

Cold calling is a daunting thing to do, but it’s often necessary when starting a business up and leads to results more often than many give it credit for. If you don’t have the nerve for this, sending individually tailored emails can often work just as well. Don’t ever send a mass email asking for work. Nobody will take you on if you don’t take the time to show that you know something about the work that they do.

You might need to spend more time on marketing in the beginning to set your freelance business up, but this will all be worth it when the jobs start rolling in. You need to budget for this period of inactivity, so make sure you have some money in the bank.

Don’t simply rely on your marketing efforts to attract clients either, especially at the start. You need to get on freelance job sites and start applying for work. You might have to take a few jobs that are not quite what you want, but if you do your best on every job, the good clients will come along soon.

Finance

Work out your rates

When asked for your rates, you don’t want to put a client off, nor do you want to undercharge for your services. Remember that you’ll need to be paid more as a freelancer to cover time spent looking for work, marketing, promoting, filing your tax returns, paying into a private pension, and taking holidays. One way to ensure you cover yourself is to first think of your ideal salary, work out the hourly rate, and then double it. Even if your demands aren’t met, this will give you a good starting point for negotiating. Whatever you do, remember you are representing an industry of freelance workers, so don’t drop below the average UK freelance rates:

- Junior – £12 – 15
- Middleweight – £16 – 30
- Senior – £30+

(Source)
How do UK freelance rates compare to the rest of the world?

Here’s a quick snapshot of the average freelancer rates in a few countries around the world:

- UK – £20
- US – $30 (£19.50)
- Germany – €25 (£18)
- Australia – A$30 (£14)
- Canada – C$30 (£15)
- India – R295 (£3.50)

(Source) All figures are intended as a guide only.

What are your expenses?

Expenses are something you might not think of when moving from employment to freelancing. The important thing is to keep track of everything you do. If you spend any money on tools, software, hardware, or anything to do with your business, make sure you keep a note of this and budget for it, so your projected income will cover this.

Remember to keep receipts, so you don’t end up paying too much tax. In most countries, you only pay tax on your business’s profit and money that you spend on the business is not deemed as profit. However, it’s up to you at the end of the tax year to prove this, so make sure you are in a position to do so; you could end up with a fine if you don’t.

Make sure you’re covered

Starting out as a freelancer is insecure and financial fears are often what holds people back from freelancing. However, if you go about it the right way, there’s nothing to fear.

You’ll need to make peace with the fact that you don’t have all the rights that you may have become used to as an employee. It’s a good idea to join a professional body relevant to your specialism who can protect you as a freelancer. You don’t want to be left on your own in a difficult situation.

Remember that you’re launching a business, so just like any new business, you’ll need to have some investment to start out. A savings cushion is important to give you something to fall back on, and the average recommendation would be at least enough to keep you going for six months without work. If something happens to you, such as illness or injury, you will be solely responsible for your or your families well-being. You need to adopt a business mind-set or you might end up worrying about your finances so much that you don’t have time to do your job. Getting your finances in order is the most important part of the transition to becoming a freelancer.
Getting Clients

There are a number of ways to get clients, many of which are suggested in the marketing section above. However, you should also apply for freelance work on relevant job sites (a list of these is located in the resources section at the end of this article), ask local services if they need your creative skills, or go along to freelancers’ coffee mornings or events in your local area. When you finally meet a client that is interested in employing your services, don’t jump straight at the opportunity. Remember that negotiating is as much about ensuring you’re happy as making sure they are.

Negotiating

Negotiation skills are a must as freelancer and if you don’t have them in the first instance, you certainly will after you’ve negotiated your way into some terrible positions. Stick firmly on your rates and consult with every client. There are many so-called ‘mills’ online offering freelancers the opportunity to work for rates that are below industry standard. While many find these a useful way of keeping money coming in at quiet times, you shouldn’t rely on them as a main source of income or you’ll end up working yourself into the ground for little gain. These mills have also come under scrutiny from the freelance community for driving down the rates of skilled individuals. If you want to support the industry, don’t become overly reliant on low-paid work from easy sources. Get out there and prove that you’re worth something more!

When you do meet a promising client, make sure you negotiate early on to avoid any problems later. Agree your fees straight up as well as your availability and deadlines. Make sure the client knows exactly what it is you propose to do for them and get them to sign off on anything they agree to. You’ll be surprised how often a client will be unhappy with the results of something they previously agreed to. Getting the work signed off will ensure that you can prove that this is what they agreed to, even if they don’t like it.

Pitching

Many clients will expect you to pitch for the work. Do your best on every pitch and remember that you are up against others who will be doing the same. Follow this designers’ pitching guide from CreativeBlog to make sure you perform the perfect pitch every time.
Keeping clients

Repeat business is the lifeblood of freelance success. Make sure you do your best to impress every client you work for, so that you’re top of their list if they choose to hire a freelancer again. If you’re getting no repeat business, you might just be unlucky, but you could also be doing something that makes you undesirable to employ again. If you meet deadlines, make yourself available when you say you’ll be available, and treat your clients with respect; you should be OK.

Keeping in touch with clients after the project is a great way to encourage repeat business. A simple text asking how they are or if they need anything done can often get great results; don’t do this too often, however, or you could end up annoying them. Other ways to keep on clients’ radars can be less pushy but just as effective, such as sending a Christmas card, liking and sharing their updates on social media, and sending them a copy of your monthly newsletter.

If a client is happy with you after a job, don’t forget to ask for a short appraisal in writing. Endorsements like this sit very nicely on your website and are a great way to attract new clients to your services.

Time Management

As a freelancer, you need to be organised to succeed. You might be your own boss, but you still need to be strict. Don’t let yourself away with slacking, but at the same time, you don’t want all your waking hours to be working ones. Stick to shifts and try to finish when you decided. If you’ve organised your workload well, you shouldn’t end up working late into the night. Start projects early in order to finish them ahead of the deadline.

Make yourself available

Clients will contact you during working hours and it will seem more professional if you can reply promptly to them. If you’re going to work at night, make sure your client knows this and is happy with communicating with you asynchronously. However, there will definitely be times when you need to meet or speak to clients during their working day, so you need to flexible enough to arrange this.

Stay social

Make the most of your flexible working hours to visit friends and family. Freelancing can be a lonely profession and if you don’t keep up with your social life, you may end up losing your friends along with your social skills. Turning up to a client pitch after 10 straight days of isolation might not be the best idea.
Get Going!

Finding success as a creative freelancer requires a lot of work, but it can be incredibly rewarding when you end up with a steady base of clients providing you with a lucrative salary. With so many opportunities in the modern market for freelancers around the world, you should make your business plan as soon as you can to take full advantage of it. Just remember to be organised. Don’t be too rash either; ease your way into your new career and make sure you cover yourself. Get it right, and, like many modern freelancers, you might never look back.
Useful Resources for Creative Freelancers

The following is a list of online resources that will be helpful in setting up your freelance business; from how to find freelance work to keeping yourself productive:

Finding Work

**Upwork**
A great service linking clients to freelancers.

**Hiive**
Network with fellow creative professionals and potential employers and keep up-to-date with any new opportunities.

**Onsite**
For the more technically minded designer, Onsite is a great place to meet quality clients.

**Elevate**
Run by recruitment specialists, Elevate is doing a great job in promoting the skills of freelancers to the appropriate markets.

**PeoplePerHour**
PeoplePerHour is a place for prospective clients to search for the perfect person to solve their problems.

**Freelancers.net**
A great job board for a variety of freelance opportunities from around the UK.

**YunoJuno**
Sign up to YunoJuno and get access to a number of well-paid jobs from a variety of high-profile clients.

**Aquent**
Based in the US but with a lot of remote positions on offer, Aquent is a place to search for digital creative jobs.

**TaskRabbit**
TaskRabbit is a decent job site to keep you ticking over, but don’t expect to earn in excess of £20 an hour.

**Fiverr**
Again, as the name may suggest, don’t expect Fiverr to make you rich, but it is a good place to find a variety of interesting short-term projects.

**Guru**
Guru tends to be a place for big projects, so if you’re up for a long-term project, you should take a look.
Getting Advice and Protecting Your Business

**Freelance Advisor**
Freelance Advisor is a useful service for getting a good insight into freelancing in the UK and discovering more about how to become a freelancer.

**IPSE**
Join the EU-based Association of Independent Professionals And the Self-Employed if you want help protecting your business.

**FCSA**
The FCSA works to protect a flexible work force in the UK and ensures all members are adhering to the legal requirements of running a business.

**Chartered Society of Designers**
The authority on professional design practice, the CSD is a great organisation to join if you’re a designer of any kind.

**D&AD**
A highly respected international body representing the interests of anyone working in the creative industries.

**ACID**
Copyright is often a complex issue for modern creatives and Anti Copying in Design (ACID) can help if you run into trouble.

**The Association of Photographers**
With over 40 years’ experience, the AOP defend the interests of their members and maintains the reputation of the photography industry.

**British Institute of Professional Photography**
The BIPP is an internationally recognised photography organisation that aims to train, qualify, and support professional photographers.

**The British Institute of Interior Design**
The BIID is a highly respected organisation representing the interests of interior designers internationally.

**The Society of British Interior Designers**
SBID represents the interests of interior designers, manufacturers, and educators in the interior design industry across the UK.

**The Association of Illustrators**
The AOI is a membership body that represents illustrators in the UK and campaigns for their rights.

Project Management and Productivity

**MindMeister**
Mind mapping application that’ll help you think through your projects with the option to turn your mind maps into presentations at the touch of a button.

**FreedCamp**
Create shared to-do lists to keep on top of tasks. It’s a great free for all version of Basecamp.

**Evernote**
Evernote is a fantastic resource for staying organised across all your devices. As your freelance business grows, you can upgrade to the plus and premium versions.

**Oh, Don’t Forget**
Schedule messages to be sent to your phone to make sure you don’t forget important deadlines.

**Remember the Milk**
Remember the Milk is a simple but powerful task management app which integrates with Gmail & Siri.

**TeuxDeux**
The minimalist design makes TeuxDeux a popular to-do app. They’ve really stripped it back to the basics.

**Strict Workflow**
Strict Workflow is a plugin for Chrome that enforces the ‘Pomodoro Technique’ – blocking distracting websites for 25 minutes then giving you a 5 minute break.

**Toggl**
Toggl is a simple to use tool that tracks your time. In freelancing, time is money so you need to use a tool to stay well on top of it.

**RescueTime**
Rescue Time is another time tracking tool that gives you a great insight into your daily habits.

**1Password**
Relieve the password headaches by using 1Password to keep them all in one place.

**Dashlane**
Dashlane is another popular tool for keeping all your passwords in one place and across all devices.

**ZenWriter**
As a creative freelancer, you don’t want to spend all day bashing away at the keyboard, so get it all done as fast as you can with a distraction free writing tool.
**Collaboration**

**Trello**
Trello is a great tool for collaboration that allows you to organise all your projects into boards. At a glance, you can see what’s being done and what needs to be done.

**Basecamp**
Basecamp is the tool of choice for professionals who need to keep in touch on a project. It ensures everyone working on the project is up-to-date on what’s been done and what there is left to do.

**Bidsketch**
Bidsketch speeds up the time you take making proposals for projects and submits them to clients with a well-designed collection of templates.

**DropBox**
Sync all your devices to DropBox and store all current project files there to ensure you always have access to everything you need. DropBox also makes it really easy to share large files with clients.

**Docstoc**
If paperwork is not your thing, head to Docstoc where you’ll find templates for every business document you’ll ever need. There’s also a fantastic collection of resources to help you improve your business skills.

**Clarify**
It’s always surprising how many times you’ll need to take screenshots when working remotely. Clarify makes this simple allowing you to take screen recordings as well.

**SnapEngage**
SnapEngage is a live chat app that’s perfect if you get tired of the cumbersome emails. Keep up with your clients or collaborators in real time.

**Hively**
Hively makes it easy for customers to give you feedback. This is not only great for attracting new customers with testimonials but also a great way to ensure you give your best on every job.

**Join Me**
Join Me allows you to share your screen with clients easily, even if they’re not signed up.

**Financial Management**

**FreeAgent**
Free agent is a fantastic service for keeping track of everything and anything to do with your finances. With their support team of accountants on hand and the ability to submit your VAT, RTI, and Self Assessment directly to HMRC, you’ll be able to focus more on getting on with your creative work.

**Freshbooks**
Freshbooks helps you to keep track of billing. Calculating rates and hours can turn into a heated email battle with some clients. Cut out the confusion by letting Freshbooks work it all out for you.

**Shoeboxed**
Shoeboxed makes scanning and organising receipts, business cards, expense reports, and any other paperwork you need to keep track of a lot easier.

**Mint**
Mint is a simple free tool for keeping track of cash flow, budgets and bills. Not as in-depth as many but great if you want to keep it simple.

**Braintree**
Braintree from PayPal aims to integrate payment systems on the internet to make paying for things a lot easier.
Thank you!

Want more interesting articles like this one? You can find more on the IDI Blog.

‘How to Succeed as a Freelancer in the Creative Industries’ is written by Tom McCallum.