

How to become a killer freelancer



By [Tiffany Markman](#)

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Whether you're a) already freelancing and looking for a more substantial knowledge base to back you up, b) entirely new to freelancing and wanting to get going or c) still thinking about beginning a freelance career, here, in the first of a three part series, is something for nothing. Enjoy.



1. Just so we're on the same page

Freelancing defined

As you know, a freelancer is a person who is self-employed. And in any given profession, freelancers sell or contract their work to clients. They're often paid by the hour - although jobs with a fixed rate to complete a fixed project are both possible and common, depending on the freelancer's field of expertise.

"A freelancer gets paid per word, per piece or *perhaps*." - Robert Benchley

Why freelance?

Being a freelancer can be scarily different to being employed. It's not for everyone. What's in it for you? Some of the most common benefits are:

1. Being your own boss: this is great for those who like their own autonomy.
2. More money: freelancers are usually paid more than salaried employees.
3. Freedom: freelancers can, to varying degrees, choose when and where to work.
4. Variety: by moving from company to company and contract to contract, freelancers can develop varied experience and impressive CVs.
5. Less tax: freelancers who take good advice can cut down on their tax.

Why not freelance?

Of course, if freelancing were such an easy way to earn a living, everyone would do it - which would defeat the purpose altogether. So what are some of the pitfalls?

1. Less security: freelancers are not protected in the same ways as employees.
2. Uncertainty: there are no guarantees of new work, money or benefits.
3. Hassle: because you're running your own business, there are forms to complete, rules to obey and accounts to keep.
4. Being on your own: as well as the possibility of being lonely, being your own boss means, for example, that nobody pays you when you take a holiday or you're sick.
5. Longer hours: time is money, so if you're a clock-watcher, do something else.

"In the freelance world, you start every day at zero." - Martha Stewart

Useful qualities

Successful freelancing means being able to say 'Yes' quickly - and 'No' when necessary. Time management skills are important and organisational flair is vital. What's more, you need to have a finger in accounting, advertising, promotion, organisation, time management, strategic planning, operations and - oh, yes - the work itself. But fret not. All this sounds hideous at the start but becomes second nature with time, practice, a good few serious stuff-ups, and good advice from other freelancers.

What's in it for the client?

Why would a client choose you over some sorry soul who's already in the building and already costing money? Well, there are several reasons (this is valuable info for those times you'll have to convince a client to use you...)

1. Freelancers are usually more flexible than permanent staff, in terms of hours.
2. Freelancers are easier to hire and fire - and are not a long-term commitment.
3. There's no need to worry about PAYE, SITE or other tax complications.
4. Companies save money: no sick pay, holiday pay or maternity leave.
5. Freelancers offer access to diverse skills that the in-house team may not have.
6. Freelancers complete small or ad hoc tasks that don't require a full-time employee.
7. Freelance work may help companies to satisfy BEE or equity requirements.

2. How to get started

Place a value on your time

There are lots of ways to charge for freelance jobs. If you're working as a copywriter and writing a brochure, a sales letter, a webpage or anything else, you'll usually end up billing by the job or by the hour.

If you bill by the job, it's because you'll have negotiated a fixed fee before you started. For instance, you might have agreed on R350 to rewrite a webpage. In that situation, you're paid the same amount, whether the job takes you three hours or three weeks.

Clients often prefer a fixed cost estimate (CE) like this, because there's certainty about the total of the final invoice. But for a freelancer, especially a new one, estimating a fixed fee in advance can be unnerving.

Unless you know your client very well, and you know accurately how much time various types of jobs will take you, you can end up wasting time (and losing money) if the job takes longer than you'd anticipated.

So try to gauge how many hours you'll need, and then add a few extra hours for unforeseen changes. Multiply the number of hours by your hourly rate. At this point you may look at the figure and think it's a little too high or low... and change it accordingly.

But at the outset, when estimating any job, start with how long the job will take.

Create a basic rate card

Include pricing information, what you guarantee (if anything), turnaround time, payment terms and your general procedure. Granted, you may not have a general procedure just yet, but you will soon and clients need to know how you're going to work with them.

Here's an example of a useful note to include:

Please note that all quotations include one set of reasonable changes by client (vocab tweaks or factual revisions), in anticipation of the final sign-off of the briefed job.

Gather work samples

Not a single freelance job to your name? No problem. Take a look at a print ad in your favourite magazine. If you're looking for copywriting work, rewrite the ad. If you're looking for graphic design work, recreate it with different graphics. This will show a prospective client that you have a creative mind. Be upfront about it, though.

Remember: plenty of people have made it in this business with nothing but sample ads in their portfolio, prior to their first project.

Give stuff away (really)

Offer your services to friends and family, for free to begin with, in return for feedback in the form of written testimonials about your work, service, attitude, etc. This way, you get experience, a basic portfolio and something to show prospective clients when you begin things formally - and your friends and family get something for nothing.

Later, go beyond hourly billing

All too often, freelancers simply set a range of fees for their work and then estimate and invoice accordingly. And if you're new to freelancing, your hourly rate probably reflects the fact that you don't have a great deal of experience yet. But there's a limitation here.

When you estimate jobs according to an hourly rate or typical project fee, you will usually find yourself ignoring a whole different element - and that is the *value* of your work and expertise.

When you estimate and bill according to your value, you can start making a great deal more money than you did before. But you do need to know where your core value lies: at the intersection of your greatest area of expertise and a high-value demand.

Next time: **'finding your niche', 'building your brand' and 'getting that first client'.**

ABOUT TIFFANY MARKMAN

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