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10 Tools That Can Help Make Your Gig Business More Productive

Working smarter, staying organized and saving time are all benefits of using tools like apps, but you need to choose wisely.

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Whether your freelance gig is a side hustle or a full-time solo business, working with multiple clients means you have converging deadlines, competing project priorities and a complicated schedule of deliverables. As the owner of a small business, you're also wearing other hats, from marketing to accounting. Tools can help you stay on top of all it all—as long as you're selective.

But using too many [tools](#) may waste time rather than make you [more productive](#). So how do you choose them wisely?

[Hailey Hudson](#), an Atlanta, Georgia-based freelance writer specializing in fitness, marketing and education industries, says she's figured out the few tools that work really well for her and have staying power. Two she uses daily are Trello for focus and Slack for client communication.

"I did experiment with several apps when things first started ramping up for my business, but I decided less is more, so I stuck with only the apps that just felt like a natural fit," Hudson says.

Like other people, when Hudson gets excited about a new app, she spends a few hours setting it up and experimenting, then never looks at it again.

"If an app holds my attention for longer than a few days, I know it's a winner," she says.

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Whether you need tools to help you focus or better manage finances like your business credit cards, here are some to try out—and find your own winners.

Trello

Trello is a great tool for a visually pleasing and efficient way to organize projects, resources, thoughts, lists and more.

It takes some effort to figure out all its capabilities, but once you do, you'll keep finding new ways to use Trello's features. Especially since you can sync the app to all your devices—and take your lists and deadlines with you when

you're away.

With Trello, you can:

- Organize projects into boards and cards.
- Include checklists and comments; attach documents.
- Specify deadlines (and integrate them with your calendar app).
- Add team members to collaborate or assign projects.

Integrations, called “power-ups,” add functionalities, but the free version allows only one.

Trello alternatives include Asana, Basecamp and Smartsheet.

TopTracker

Even if you don't charge by the hour, tracking time spent on deliverables will help you evaluate your pricing model. To identify areas that demand too much time, you should also track how long business activities like marketing and administration take.

A free tool, [TopTracker](#) is easy to use and has a reporting feature for a long view of tracked activities—so you can analyze what clients or projects were your revenue drivers over a specific period.

Things you can do with TopTracker:

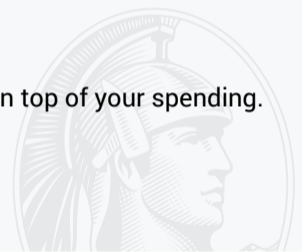
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- Capture screenshots or webcam shots.
- Generate invoices and receive payments through Payoneer.
- Get a centralized view of your tracked work.

Toggl, Harvest and Timely are some other time trackers to explore.

Slack

Email communication is cumbersome with multiple people involved in long discussions. Consider using [Slack](#) to communicate with clients while working on projects that have several moving pieces and collaborators.

The app, which syncs to different devices, is organized in “workspaces.” Create individual ones for each client or collaboration group, and invite users to join the workspace.

The free version allows 10,000 messages, but as a solopreneur, you'll take a while to get there.

Some of Slack's features are:

- Topic threads—create different ones for each project.
- File uploading, as well as file preview for Google Docs links.
- Direct messages to anyone in the workspace.

Slack alternatives include Microsoft Teams, Google Hangouts, Discord and Flock.

Evernote

[Evernote](#) is especially helpful if you read or research online a lot. With a browser extension, you can “clip” an article, link, screenshot or page, and Evernote creates a “note” for each one.



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—Hailey Hudson, freelance writer

Notes are searchable and organized in notebooks. Make a notebook for each project, add comments to your clips, and you'll never lose your research again.

That's just one aspect of Evernote — you can do a lot more with it.

A few examples:

- Write entire articles (many people use it for note-taking).
- Record a memo or take a photo right from the app and embed in a note.
- Add attachments like PDFs.

Evernote syncs to multiple devices but currently there's a limit of two with the free version. Upgrading to premium removes the limit while unlocking features such as PDF annotation, search inside Word and PDF attachments, and presentation mode.

Alternative bookmark clipping apps include Pocket and Diigo, while Microsoft OneNote and Google Keep are among other note-taking tools.

QuickBooks

Manual invoicing and bookkeeping is fine when you're getting started, but as your business grows, you need a better tool. [QuickBooks](#) is a popular accounting platform that has both desktop and cloud-based options. It comes with many bells and whistles, so if you want something simpler, try other apps.

Besides the typical invoicing, reporting, and accounts payable and receivable features, QuickBooks includes:

- Integration with some of the major business cards.
- Option to automatically download your online bank transactions.
- Payroll, should you plan to add employees later.

Other accounting options for solopreneurs include FreshBooks, Xero and Wave.

Five More Useful Tools

A few others that are worth mentioning (some don't directly [impact productivity](#) but will certainly save you time when something goes awry):

[SpiderOak](#): For secure cloud backup of documents and other computer files, SpiderOak is great because you can share designated folders among multiple endpoints—perfect if you use both a desktop and laptop and also want quick access to a file on your mobile device. Additionally, SpiderOak keeps older backups—download a previous document version if you need to undo something.

[Private Internet Access \(PIA\) VPN](#): If you have a “mobile office”—that is, you like to hang out with your laptop at a coffee shop—a VPN (virtual private network) is an absolute must for data security on public Wi-Fi. PIA is a popular choice, but there are many other providers.

[HelloSign](#): Recommended by Hudson, HelloSign gives you an easy way to sign PDFs online. Never again worry about printing and scanning contracts and other paperwork.

[HubSpot](#): Without marketing, you can't grow your business. At some point, you may want to stop tracking prospects and interactions via a spreadsheet. HubSpot packs many customer relationship management (CRM) features even in the free version, including Gmail and Outlook integration.

Calendly: Ever go crazy with all the back-and-forth emails trying to schedule a client meeting? Calendly, or a similar online scheduling tool, makes it simple.

So many choices, it's easy to let the too many tools run amok. Before adopting a new one, ask yourself: Will this truly help you run your business—and how?


Photo: Getty Images

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