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5 Ways to Help Get the Most Out of the Gig Economy

The gig economy grows more competitive as more people embrace the idea. Use these strategies to help build a successful freelance career.

[Rodika Tollefson](#)

Freelance writer and journalist



More people are embracing the freelance lifestyle by choice rather than necessity—but the downside of this booming gig economy is higher competition. To compete successfully, take a more strategic approach to your freelance career rather than looking at your gigs as individual projects.

“People are willing to sacrifice the stability of the perks that come with full-time employment because they want more control. But you have to come into it with the mindset of being an entrepreneur,” says Matt Cooper, CEO of [Skillshare](#), an online learning community where freelancers can learn a variety of business and professional skills.

From managing cash flow to finding the right market niche, an entrepreneur’s job is never done. Here are some ways to help get most out of the gig economy.

1. Build your 'business of one.'

“People who are going to find success approach the freelance economy in a more deliberate, thoughtful way,” Cooper says. “You have to [think as a small-business owner](#)—and build a business of one.”

For starters, show up to your office on schedule and ditch the pajamas, recommends [Carol J. Alexander](#), a Shenandoah, Virginia-based journalist and writer. Alexander, who started freelancing in 2007 so she could homeschool her children, decided to commit to running her business full-time two years ago.

“Ask yourself, if you worked for someone else, would you show up to work 15 minutes late, check social media while ‘on the clock’ or even wear your pajamas,” she says.

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She approaches her workday as anyone who works in an office.

“Since I started keeping office hours and enforcing them with family members who were accustomed to me being available 24/7, I have been able to make amazing strides in my business,” Alexander says.

Presentation and marketing designer Roni Ayalla says your internal mindset impacts “how you present yourself to the world.”

“Unless you’re thinking about yourself as a business owner, then other people won’t see you that way,” says Ayalla, whose business, [Sandpaper Productions](#), is based in Austin, Texas. “From a more practical standpoint, that means investing time and money into figuring out the best project management tool for you as an individual business owner —so you can feel more legit.”

2. Create a strong brand and positioning.

Like any company, your business needs to differentiate from the competition and show customers the unique value you provide. Cooper says even gig workers like rideshare drivers can do this by creating an experience that customers should expect.

“That’s everything from your pricing to account management, to how hands-on you are. Do you want to be high-cost, high-quality, or focus more on the affordability spectrum? Think about how you want to position yourself in your specific market,” he says.

Your branding and positioning will drive the type of customers you attract. Ayalla, for example, brands her services as creative strategy, presentation and marketing design rather than graphic design.

“One of my unique selling points is that I can help customers flesh out their ideas even if they only have a seed of an idea,” she says. “I take more of a strategic approach to visual design and it’s a collaborative process with the client.”

Part of the experience that brings her customers back is Ayalla’s comprehensive onboarding and communications process.

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“Your customer sales process doesn’t end when you get a new client,” she says. “Make sure your customers know what to expect from you and how to work with you. “

She says even a little thing, like sending holiday cards or checking in on how a project or presentation went, helps keep customers happy and builds strong relationships.

3. Don't put all your eggs in one basket.

If you’re offering a service, don’t expect clients to knock on your door—you’re likely to spend as much time [marketing](#) as you are working on projects. Cooper’s advice is to have a mix of strategies. That’s one reason why many freelancers gravitate to online platforms and create profiles on multiple ones.

“You have to think about your acquisition marketing channels and how you’re going to generate income over time,” says Cooper, who’s worked for two freelance platforms in the past.

A steadier cash flow is another appeal of the online marketplace. Freelancing makes it tough to have steady working capital and many freelance platforms both expedite and streamline customer payments.

If you decide to sign up with a freelance platform to find projects, research it carefully. The quality of clients and projects varies greatly from one marketplace to the next, as do the fees—some charge none and some have steep commissions.

4. Find a niche you enjoy.

You may start out as a generalist so you can attract a broad client base at first, but narrowing your niche will help you attract higher-quality clients.



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Cooper, who's been involved with many startup businesses, draws a parallel between freelancers and startups. To survive, at first startups do whatever they need to but as they scale and figure out where they're strongest, they become more focused and unique.

"Whether you're a freelancer, a startup or a major company, the more specific you are, the higher the offering and the stronger the value proposition you have," he says. "Just make sure it's a big enough vertical and you're not narrowing yourself so that there's no work out there for you."

Choosing a niche doesn't mean you have to be locked into it for the rest of your career. Many freelancers explore different niches, as well as the type of services they focus on.

Alexander started out with what she knew, sustainability and farming, and a decade later "fell" into the remodeling niche when one of her editors asked her to take on a home-development project. Luckily, her father was a builder, as are her sons. She fell in love with the home improvement niche.

Her advice for those new at choosing a niche is to write down a list of everything you've done in your life (including family or personal experiences) and circle your favorite experiences. Then, with another color pen, circle the things you're most experienced with.

"For your niche, start with something that has both colors, because you have the experience and [you also won't burn out since you enjoy it](#)," she says.

5. Do something for personal and professional growth.

Ayalla believes that what you do in your downtime also matters.

"You don't have to be working on the business 24/7, because that's not healthy, but what you do in private to help you with your business owner's mindset is crucial," she says.

Here are some ideas for personal or professional growth activities in your downtime:

- Take a class, whether in person or online, to master a professional or personal skill, or to learn something new.
- Plan a personal or professional retreat—not too far from home—so you can physically get away for a weekend or a couple of days, leave project deadlines and household chores behind, and contemplate your professional or personal goals and plans. (Make sure you go with an agenda and a list of things you want to accomplish.)
- Share your expertise by giving a presentation, teaching a workshop or mentoring someone interested in a career in your field.

One thing Ayalla plans to do more of is general networking. She feels that events geared to small-business owners are a great way to find inspiration.

"A lot of people look at networking as going in with a stack of business cards to find some clients today, but don't lead with that," Ayalla recommends. "You want to get to know people as individuals, and you never know what may happen down the line."

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