

Your Guide To Outsourcing: Why You Should Outsource and How to Get Started in the Next 20 Minutes

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Celes

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Recently, I've fallen in love with outsourcing. Today, I'm going to share about the process of outsourcing and how you can outsource too. With online portals like Upwork today, anyone can outsource a job and get good responses in a matter of hours.

Why Outsource?

In my recent [The Superstar Effect](#) article, I wrote about the importance of focus. Focus on the one big thing you are doing now and don't concern yourself with the rest. Outsourcing is one of the ways to help you focus.

I can't begin to tell you how much outsourcing has benefited me. I toyed with the idea of outsourcing last year but only fully embraced it in February this year, after I returned from my seven-month long travel.

Tasks I outsource regularly today include graphic design (mainly for the [manifestos](#)) and administrative work (a lot of it). With effect from next month, I'll be outsourcing the creation of the daily inspirational quote images, though I'll still select the quotes and determine the visual direction. Tasks I've outsourced before but stopped include marketing and video editing (for [Celes Show](#)) because they were not value-adding for me.

Here are the benefits I've gotten from outsourcing:

1. **More time** for myself and my interests. This includes writing, creating high value content, meeting people, and generally living it up.
2. **Increased focus**. I'm no longer distracted by low value work.
3. **Better prioritization skills**. Knowing what matters and what doesn't. When I'm in the thick of things, this can be hard to tell. But when I'm directing the plans from the back seat, it becomes obvious what are the things that are redundant and what are the things that aren't.
4. **Ability to create higher value output** because I'm no longer distracted by the small stuff.
5. **Sanity from not having to juggle multiple things**. Priceless.
6. **Management skills** as it's like having my own staff.
7. **Higher level of fulfillment in life**. Due to the above.

In fact, the more I outsource, the more I see its value.

To be honest, I wish I did this earlier. Looking back, one big reason why I held back from outsourcing was because I [overthought the process](#), as I shared in [Are You Self-Sabotaging Yourself?](#) I also didn't know what I should do with the free time I would get from outsourcing. It seemed as though I should just do everything since I could afford the time.

Now, I know better.

Who Should Outsource?

Outsourcing isn't just for people with businesses. Anyone can benefit from outsourcing, including you.

For example:

- Want to write a book? Outsource the design, copy editing, and publishing work.
- Have research you need to do for your thesis or your work? Get someone to help you find and compile the data so you can analyze it easily.
- Want to convert documents to other formats? Get an admin to do that.
- Need someone to set up your site? Get an IT guy to do it.
- Need to have a website designed? Hire a web designer.
- Got a vacation to plan? Get an assistant to do it for you.
- Need to have someone vet your writing for errors? Hire a proofreader.
- Have a dinner this Friday but not sure of the nice vegetarian restaurants? No problem, get your assistant to look them up.
- Want to look for some videos and mp3s? Yep that's right – get your assistant to help you with it!

For every task you are ready to offload, there will be someone who is more than willing to do it for you, at a fixed rate or hourly rate (which can go as low as \$5/hour). Of course, the more specialized the work is, the more it will cost. Why drown yourself with work that is not of pertinent value to you when you can outsource it for \$5, \$8, or \$10 an hour (depending on the work involved)? Outsourcing is a no-brainer.

The sky is the limit when it comes to outsourcing. Once you start, you'll know what I mean.

Suddenly, all the things you thought *have to be* and *can only be* done by you can be done by others too, sometimes more effectively. It's just a matter of whether you want to offload those tasks.

6 Common Myths of Outsourcing, Debunked

Some of you probably have reservations with outsourcing. I used to have them too. But [they are mainly limiting beliefs](#). Here are six outsourcing myths, debunked:

1. **I don't know who I can outsource to.** There are online portals such as [Upwork](#) where you can find contractors from all fields. As long as there's something to be done, chances are there is someone willing to do it at a fee.
2. **I don't know how to go about outsourcing.** It's very simple, really. All you need to do is create a job and list your requirements. Then, sit back as you wait for the proposals to come in. (The second half of the article includes a video tutorial.)
3. **It takes time to find a good contractor.** There are plenty of good contractors out there. What does take time is finding someone who matches your requirements and fits your style. This is where outsourcing portals come in handy because you can see the full job history of each contractor who applies, including reviews left by past clients, overall earnings, average hourly rate, and so on. These enable you to do a robust screening. My current graphic designer and VA (Virtual Assistant) team were actually my first picks on Elance (now Upwork). They've been with me ever since. (It's been over four months.)
4. **I can do this myself.** I don't think outsourcing has anything to do one's inability to do the tasks, though some people might outsource for that reason. All the stuff I outsource today is stuff that I'm capable of doing myself. Yet, I outsource because it makes me more effective. It helps me focus on the high value, 20% tasks that make the biggest impact in my life. The point isn't that you can't do your work, but that outsourcing it enables you to do more valuable stuff.

5. **I don't want to waste the money.** If you're getting good quality work, that's money well spent. See it as a necessary investment to achieve a better outcome. Of course, make sure you're getting the best rates for the outsourced work too. Be ready to spend, but be prudent with how you spend.
6. **It's faster if I just do it myself.** It's faster *if you do this one task by yourself*. But if you look at your life as a whole, what's going to help you achieve your goals faster is if you engage the help of others. Multiple hands make light work. Noah's Ark was not built by one person. Rome was not built by one man. The largest companies today would never be so successful if not for their people.

What Can You Outsource?

Pretty much anything can be outsourced, from the simplest task to the most specialized job.

Commonly outsourced work include:

- **Administration:** Data entry, Email management, Social media account management, Customer support, Miscellaneous tasks
- **Research:** Data collation, Data analysis
- **Design:** Logos, Banners, Posters, Book covers, Illustration, Web design
- **Marketing:** SEO (Search Engine Optimization), Social media, Web promotion
- **Writing:** Article writing, Ghost writing, Book writing, Proof reading, Copy editing
- **Order fulfillment:** Logistics, Shipping, Filing
- **Video:** Video editing, Video production, Animation, Flash
- **IT:** Programming, Web development, Software development
- **App development:** Facebook, iPhone, iPad, Android phone
- **Legal advice:** Patent, Trademark, Copyright, Licensing
- **Translation Work**
- **Finance:** Financial analysis, Financial planning, Financial modeling
- **Accounting:** Audit, Tax, Bookkeeping

Here are two simple examples of the many tasks I outsource weekly:

Outsourced Task #1

Last week, I wanted to get some new fonts to create my inspirational quote images. All I had to do was visit Google.com, search "fonts download", and scour the top results.

However, this was yet another administrative task which would take time. Even if it only took 30 minutes to an hour, that was 30 minutes to an hour away from doing things which were more valuable. I would much rather spend time on things that really count and pay someone to do "the other stuff". Doing the real, high value work would also help me earn more money which would fund for outsourcing.

So I fired this message to my lovely VA team:

Hi Amit,

I've a new task for the team: "Downloading fonts". I would like the staff to help me download some new fonts. My criteria are the fonts must be (a) readable (not too cursive or difficult to read) (b) not weird looking, comical, or unnatural looking.

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Please help me download about 20-25 different fonts. They should be a mix of (a) handwritten/script-like fonts and (b) formal/professional looking fonts. On top of that, please help me to look for a font called "Rage Italic". All fonts should be windows compatible (.ttf), unzipped into 1 folder as .ttf files, then finally sent to me as 1 zip file so I can easily copy and paste all the fonts and install them on my computer. Please allocate no more than 1 hour for the task.

Let me know if there are any questions about the task. I'd like to have it by Friday. Thank you!

(I sent the task on Wednesday afternoon.)

The next morning (Thursday), I received a new message in my inbox:

Hi Celes,

We have completed the "Downloading fonts" task, have attached the details, please review.

Regards,

Amit

Attached: Fonts-14-June-12.zip

Awesome. Click, download, install, done. Now, on to my real work.

Outsourced Task #2:

I recently introduced a new option on PE Quotes where readers can purchase inspirational postcards of their favorite quote images. The link can be found below every quote image.

Since there is no way to automate this in the service that I use, I've engaged my VAs to do this. Every day, they take the latest quote image on PE Quotes and create a postcard based on it. They customize the design, title, description, and tags based on my past instructions. Then, they add it to my store.

While I had to walk them through the process in the beginning (necessary whenever you start a new task), they are able to do the work by themselves today without any involvement on my end. I occasionally review the output to ensure everything is going fine, but by and large everything is on autopilot. My VAs know what they have to do, what time they need to do it, and where to get the information.

If I were to do this myself, I don't think this postcard feature would see the light of the day.

3 Questions to Determine if You Should Outsource

Here are three questions to help you determine if you should outsource a particular task:

1. *Is there other work which you can do and create more value with?* If so, you should do those higher value tasks and outsource the lower value work.
2. *Is this really the best way to spend your time?* If this isn't a good use of your time, outsource it. Do something else with this free time.
3. *Can this task be done with better quality and in a faster manner by others?* If so, outsource it. Let the experts take over.

In addition, here are four pointers to get you moving:

Tip #1. Let Go of the Need for Control

“Control freaks” tend to have the most difficulty embracing the concept of outsourcing. I used to be that way. Control freaks also tend to be people with [perfectionist](#) mentalities.

What changed was when I saw how much I had limited myself by not engaging other people. I was wasting so much time with low value work which could be better done by others. I was distracted by things that were not the core of my business to begin with. I was constantly busy but not productive.

Yes, it might be hard to let go of the reins and allow someone else to take over the work. However, you can't make as much impact by yourself as compared to if you have a team of great people working with you. You can do every single thing in the world, but have you ever asked yourself if you are creating the maximum output with your time?

At the end of the day, outsourcing is meant to (a) make you more effective and (b) give you more free time so you can do the things that matter.

Like I mentioned at the start of the article, outsourcing has brought me many wonderful benefits. In the past, I worked extremely long hours, which made me tired and unproductive. Outsourcing gave me more free time which I now use to either create high value content and create new business ideas or pursue my interests, such as exercising, connecting with friends, and meeting new people.

Tip #2. Leave it to the Experts

There are people who specialize in doing some of the things you do. If you can afford the cash, and if what you're doing isn't your core work, outsource it.

For example, being incredibly good at troubleshooting site issues [doesn't help me to write better articles](#). Neither is being a great graphic designer. Hence, I outsource these tasks to people who can do them better than me. Even if I have to pay for the work, that's money well spent. I'm more than happy to pay for good quality work charged at affordable rates. As for the free time I get from outsourcing, I use it to grow my business and earn more money. It's a positive, virtuous cycle.

Then there's copy editing. I sometimes make grammatical and structural mistakes that I'm blind to. I read grammar articles to improve my grammar, but ultimately I learn much faster if I have an English expert telling me where I'm going wrong and why. This is why I recently roped in the help of several PE readers, who are masters of the English language, to copy edit my writing. They are doing this for a couple of months until I get a handle of my blind spots in the English language. It's been only two weeks so far but I feel I have learned so much. (Thanks Becky, Larry, and Susan!)

Tip #3. Automate if You Can

If something can be automated, then automate it. There's no point in outsourcing something if it can be handled by systems in the first place. All my outsourced tasks are activities that can't be automated.

Tip #4. Outsource as Much Low Value Work as Possible

In Habit #1 of [The 8 Habits of Highly Productive People](#), I shared that you should ruthlessly cut away the unimportant tasks and focus on the important ones. That's the same thing I proposed in [The Superstar Effect](#).

However, there are times when you have low value tasks that can't be cut away. They simply have to be done. That's what outsourcing is for.

Most people have the mentality that they don't need to outsource because they can do everything. Remember, the more low value tasks you outsource, the more time you have to do higher value stuff. It all boils down to this: Outsource → More free time → More time to do higher value work → Ability to achieve more results.

If you are outsourcing as part of your business, the last step should ultimately lead to an increase in revenue, which can then offset whatever cost you incur from outsourcing.

How to Start Outsourcing in the Next 20 Minutes

Now that we've gotten the basics of outsourcing out of the way, how can one outsource?

Here is a simple video tutorial I've created on how to outsource. I personally use Elance (**Update 2015:** Elance has since merged with Odesk to become Upwork), so it's the sample site I've used in the video. You'll see how simple and easy it is to outsource a job. You can submit a job in as fast as five minutes and get a response within an hour or less, if your job is not too specialized.

The three steps or phases I've outlined in the video apply to outsourcing on any site:

1. Post the job
 1. Describe what the job entails
 2. Post your criteria on the kind of candidate you are looking for
 3. Wait for the proposals to come in!
2. Evaluate the proposals; Select your contractor
3. Start the job!

Where To Outsource

#1. Upwork

Elance and Odesk used to be the 2 biggest outsourcing portals, but they have since merged to become [Upwork](#), which makes it the biggest outsourcing portal.

#2. Fiverr

[Fiverr](#) has a very unique concept: it's a marketplace where people monetize their skills, talents and resources for a fixed fee. Contractors put up proposals of what they are willing to do for \$X (the price starts at \$5). If you agree with the proposal, you place an order. Make the payment and you will get the work in the time stated in the proposal. About 30% of the proposals on Fiverr today are \$5; the rest are more than \$5.

At first I thought this \$5 thing was silly and brushed it off. I mean, realistically, what kind of stuff can you get for \$5? But there are some really good proposals there. For example, when I search "quotes" on Fiverr, there are proposals like "I will provide 1941 inspirational and motivational quotes for Twitter and Facebook for \$5" and "I will send you a big list of 500 quotes on POSITIVITY for \$5". I already have a big pool of quotes for PE Quotes but I can see how this can come in handy for future use. I've yet to purchase anything on Fiverr though I might in the future.

Do a search for terms you have an interest in and you might find something that catches your eye. I've a fellow coach friend who is a big advocate of Fiverr. He has outsourced simple tasks like website installation and e-book designing for \$5 each and has gotten great results.

At the end of the day, like with all things in life, be mindful about how you use Fiverr. It's easy to get distracted by its "wonderful" deals and purchase more than you need. A conscious approach is the key.

#3 People Per Hour

While Upwork is kinda like a "mass" portal where every job, every vendor goes, [PeoplePerHour](#) is a little more premium, and hence tends to attract more serious clients as well as more skillful service providers.

I haven't engaged anyone there yet but I have been looking around for video editors on the site — as well as exchanged messages with a candidate — and it looks very promising. I'll definitely plan to use it in the near future.

How to Maximize Your Outsourcing Experience

I've been outsourcing for over four months now and have my fair share of encounters with good and bad contractors. I've since developed a good sense of what works and what doesn't work in outsourcing.

Below are my tips on what you should do in each phase to get the best out of outsourcing:

Phase 1: Post the Job

- **Be as clear as possible in your job description.**
 - List your requirements for the job and what it's going to entail.
 - If possible, include clear examples of what you want. For example, if you want to have a logo designed and you have a good idea of how you want it to look like, include samples of logos that match that idea.
- **Specify the deliverables.** What is the end output from this job? Having clear deliverables helps to set the expectations straight. You're ultimately paying for the end output, not for time spent on the job.
- **Fixed or hourly rate?**
 - If it's a specific task with a specific output, such as e-book design, designing a website, e-book format conversion, or proofreading, go for a fixed rate.
 - If it's an open-ended job, such as VA work or ongoing graphic design, or if you are not clear about your project requirements and how long it might take, then an hourly rate would be the best.
- **Include a trial task.**
 - If it's for an ongoing, long-term position, I recommend specifying a trial task. This is highly important. The candidate must complete the trial task and show the output as part of his/her application.
 - For example, I recently posted a job for a designer who can create quote images for PE Quotes on an ongoing basis. It's pertinent that the person has a good eye for aesthetics and good typography skills. As part of the application, I require each contractor to send in two quote image samples based on two quotes I've provided. Just by evaluating the sample output, I can immediately tell if the candidate will be a good fit for the job or not. This has been very helpful as I wouldn't want to hire someone only to find out that he/she does not have the right skills later on (in turn wasting time and money).

Phase 2: Evaluate the Proposals; Select the Contractor

- **Evaluate each candidate's profile.** This is why I recommend portals like Elance and [Upwork](#) because you get to see a host of information about the candidate which is highly useful in the evaluation stage.
 1. How does his/her profile read? Does it sound professional? Does it outline his/her skills clearly? Does it read like a meticulous, conscientious job seeker?
 2. What is his/her average rating? Ratings tell you how satisfied their past clients were. The higher, the better.
 3. What kind of reviews does he/she have? Have his/her clients left enthusiastic, highly satisfied reviews? Or are the reviews lukewarm?
 4. What is his/her job history? Does he/she have relevant experience for the job? Or is he/she someone new in the field? You don't have to select a highly experienced person but you want to make sure he/she has the skills to get the job done.
- **Review the portfolio.** Check out his/her past work samples. They give you a good idea of what this person is capable of.
- **Invite contractors whom you think are a good match.** You can be proactive by searching for contractors on the portal and manually inviting them to bid for your job. (The portals make it easy with one-click invites.)
- **Compare the bids.** Make sure you are getting the best bid (quality vs. price). Cross check with other job listings on the portal so you know the standard rate for the job.
- **Interact with the candidate before selecting .**
 - Send a message to each short-listed candidate with some questions. The questions can be anything related to the job and/or his/her experience.
 - The intention for this is three-fold: (a) Get a feel of the candidate's expertise with regards to the job; (b) Test his/her responsiveness; (c) Know more about the candidate attitude and personality. You'll be amazed by how much you can learn about a person by just his/her response.
 - I usually filter out candidates who: (a) take too long to respond (indicates lack of interest or lack of urgency); (b) have a weak attitude (such a lack of conviction or lack of interest in their responses); (c) are unable to address my questions in a convincing manner (suggests they will probably not be able to do the job well if I select them).
- **Be open.** If you come across someone with a great attitude and has the core skills but doesn't have a large portfolio or much related job experience, consider giving him/her a go anyway. Everyone starts off from somewhere. What one lacks in experience, one can make up for it with a more competitive rate and a good attitude. You might find some gems this way.
- **Watch out for shady people.**
 - Very important. Occasionally, you get shady contractors who try to rip you off. I wouldn't pinpoint contractors of any nationality because I think it's more to do with the person's personality than the country of origin. Try to tease out the candidate's personality by interacting with him/her prior to selection (see previous step).
 - For example, I had a contractor who bid for \$X in one of my jobs. Upon knowing that he had been shortlisted and he was one of my preferred candidates, he actually quoted me 10 times of \$X! I told him the price was out of my range, after which he promptly replied to ask me what I was willing to pay instead, which suggested he was purposely quoting an exorbitant fee just to see if I would take it up. Needless to say, I blocked his application right away. I dislike dishonest and mercenary approaches like this. It didn't matter if he was willing to bump his price back down to \$X. The trust was gone. Not only that, you don't know what other dishonest intentions such contractors might have, which makes it difficult to establish any kind of working relationship.

- **Value vs. Cost.** Before finalizing the job, make sure the final value of this task is worth the same, if not more, than the cost you are paying. Value here can be monetary value or other forms of value (such as value of free time). It doesn't make sense to pay money for something if it's not worth the cost to you to begin with.

Phase 3: Start the Job! (Working with the Contractor)

- **Set clear expectations.** This includes having clear criteria for the output and deadlines (if any). If you want the job to be done by X date, then tell the contractor. Don't say "Take as long as you need" and blast the contractor when he/she doesn't revert after one week.
- **Use the in-built chat in Upwork.** It allows you to converse with the contractor in real time. I personally don't use it though. I think chat tends to drain time and I prefer to give instructions directly in the workroom. If your outsourcing portal does not have an in-built chat system, use [Slack](#).
- **Use video tutorials to relay instructions easily.** Sometimes, video tutorials make it easier to explain what you want. [Screencast](#) is a free online tool that lets you record videos on your PC along with a voice over. I use it to brief instructions to my staff at the start of every new job.
- **Do a trial batch.** If the task is a recurring one, have the staff do a few samples first and check them before giving them the green light to do the entire task. This is to ensure everyone is on the same page. Otherwise, it will create much rework later on if an instruction is misinterpreted.
- **Have an induction period.** The first week should be seen as a period for you and your contractor to learn each other's style. Hence, don't expect the first round of output to immediately fit your needs (though it's great if it does). If you pay by the hour, be prepared to pay for "learning hours" which don't necessarily lead to usable output but helps you and your contractor to figure things out.
- **Let them learn.** If they make mistakes or if they do things that are not in line with your expectations, let them know that, and have them correct those issues. Do not step in to take over the work. While it might be easy for you to do that, it does not help them learn to create work that matches your needs.
- **Voice dissatisfaction (if any).** If you have any dissatisfaction, voice it out in an objective manner. Work it out with the contractor in a professional manner. This is a job after all and you are paying money for a product/service to be delivered. A reasonable and customer service-oriented contractor will seek to address your concerns because he/she will want you to be happy with the work. Read: [How to Give Constructive Criticism: 6 Helpful Tips](#)
- **Reward good work.** Where good work is done, commend the contractor on a job well done. You can give a bonus, on top of the pre-agreed amount, if you're very happy with the job. I do this occasionally, but not all the time as I don't want the contractor to get used to it.

Tying It All Together

At the end of the day, it boils down to being sharp about how you approach outsourcing. That's where the tips I've outlined above will come in handy. Below are some additional pointers:

1) Be Ready for Hits and Misses

A great way to approach outsourcing is to accept that it can be a hit-or-miss sometimes. It's not a bad thing; it just is the way it is. It's like dating or hiring employees. There are times when you get incompatible matches.

What do you do then? You let them go and you continue looking for more compatible people.

Accept that the misses are necessary to find the hits. Once you adopt this approach, you'll find that outsourcing becomes less stressful and more enjoyable.

2) Handling Lousy Matches

If you get lousy matches, cut your losses, learn from the experience, end the gig, and move on quickly. Understand what you did wrong and ensure you don't repeat the same mistake the next time.

I've had some not-so-positive outsourcing experiences before, such as a contractor whose work didn't meet my expectations, a contractor who tried to rip me off during the bidding stage (as I mentioned above) and a contractor with a bad attitude. Each time, I learn from the experience and move on. I don't waddle too long in it because it doesn't help me recover anything back. I simply see it as a lesson to be learned.

3) Stick with Good Contractors

Look for good contractors who match your style and grab hold of them when you find them. I stick with contractors I like and give them repeat jobs as my way of letting them know that I like their work.

4) Allocate a Buffer Budget

Allocate a buffer amount (say about 10 to 15 percent of your total outsourcing budget) to account for the misses and the "learning hours". Treat it as a learning cost. As you get a good idea of what you are looking for and how to use outsourcing to your advantage, you can then work on scaling down the budget and maximizing the value you get out of it.

5) Ensure Outsourcing is Delivering Value to You

Some people might become addicted to the notion of outsourcing and simply outsource for the sake of outsourcing, without considering whether its value and whether it outweighs the cost.

For example, it makes no sense to pay some hotshot designer \$500 to do an e-book design when (a) you are not sure if you are able to earn \$500 from your e-book to begin with, and (b) you can find other designers who can deliver great work at a significantly lower cost. Similarly, it makes no sense to pay an assistant \$250 every month to maintain your site when there is not much maintenance to speak of and you are not even earning anything on your business (yet). Neither should you be paying someone \$X to design your site from scratch when there are *already* tons of professional website templates out there available at a fraction of \$X.

Embrace outsourcing, but at the same time, be smart about how you use it. As a principle, don't spend more than you are earning. Always look around to ensure you are getting the most competitive prices for the jobs you are outsourcing. Get the maximum value out of your budget. Let go of contractors that constantly miss your expectations and look for new ones. (You hire your contractors to make you effective, not to make things more difficult.)

Final Words

That's it, and I hope you found this extensive outsourcing guide helpful! Outsourcing is a must do if you wish to get more out of your time. It is a fundamental part of the productivity principles I share on PE. Even if you're not receptive to the idea, give it a shot and see where it takes you. You might find it handy in the future.

Image: [Hire me sign](#)