

How To Become A Successful Freelancer — Part 1

 nathanello.com/advice/how-to-become-a-successful-freelancer

We're living in the gig economy. Haven't you heard? Us young professionals are now placing more value than ever in creative fulfillment and our quality of life when looking for work. With each day that passes, more and more of us are realizing **we don't need the traditional nine-to-five office gig to fulfill our needs** anymore.

Want proof? Head on down to the nearest hipster-approved coffee shop tomorrow afternoon and take a look around — I'm willing to bet you'll find, at least, a half-dozen small businesses operating from that very room.



Why's that, you ask? Well today, **being a freelancer doesn't elicit the same side-eyed skepticism that it used to** even just a few short years ago.

In fact, many of us from the creative and tech fields are finding that venturing out on our own can be a much more lucrative option, and not just for financial reasons either. I think this is largely due to the fact that us freelancers know our own capabilities and expertise better than anyone else.

We're no longer limited, motivationally or financially, by whatever (often vague) job title we've been assigned to sit at a desk and trade hours for dollars. Heck, I'm living proof of this, my last nine-to-five job title was "creative strategist" which roughly translates to "complete 100 different tasks, adequately".

Anyways, what I'm really trying to point out here here is that **freelancers can pursue the projects they want to work on**, not those that they're forced to work on. Now instead of completing many tasks adequately, they can complete fewer tasks exceptionally. Add it all up and you've got the recipe for an extremely rewarding and fulfilling career.

These exact thoughts were racing through my mind, for the first time I found myself seriously considering leaving my cushy agency job. But why? Well, **I wanted to build something that was all mine** — my network, my skills, my successes. Fast forward to today and it's been roughly ten-months since I embarked on my journey to become a full-time freelance WordPress developer. It ended up taking me six-months to fully achieve my goal, but today I can proudly say I'm a full-time freelancer without a "real job".

Making the transition from full-time employee to full-time freelancer has hands-down been the best decision I've ever made for my career. If you know what you're doing, freelancing doesn't just replace your salaried position, it runs a big truck full of cash right over it.

I'm not sure about you — but for me, this big truck full of cash has forever changed the trajectory of my life.



With that said, I also want to make it clear that **the intent of this post is to inspire, not to boast**. If you only learn one thing about me from this post I want it to be this — **I'm a firm believer that transparency trumps secrecy**.

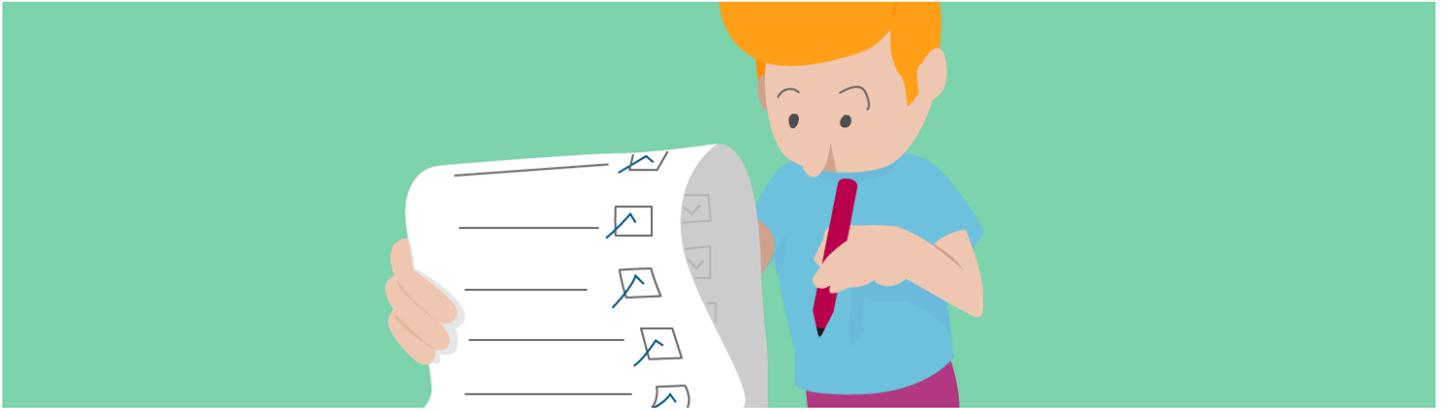
So, in the interest of full disclosure (and so you know the advice contained in this post isn't coming from someone speculating on the financial benefits of freelancing) I can tell you that in my first ten-months as a freelancer I've completed 488 projects which generated \$133,064.60 gross revenue. And yes, these numbers look outrageous to me, too...

Oh, I should probably also point out that I did **not** complete 488 full-on, A-to-Z, website builds within ten-months, c'mon that'd be a ridiculous amount of work (not to mention ridiculously cheap). Only 1% of the projects I took on during this time were full website builds, the remaining 99% were either fixing something that broke, or adding a new feature to an existing website. Truth be told, my average task size was just \$359.08 over these first ten-months and I completed a little more than 70% of these projects within 24-hours.

5/5	07/2015	488
Overall rating	Joined Codeable	Completed projects

One of the greatest perks of being a full-time freelancer is having the ability to set your own schedule and work from wherever you want, but today we're not here to talk about secondary benefits. We're here to talk about bank accounts. Specifically: yours, and some hard and fast rules you absolutely must follow (or at least consider, then bend to fit you individually) as you make your transition into the world of full-time freedom as a freelancer.

As you continue reading please keep in mind that I'm not your life coach, what I mean by this is that I can only tell you what worked for me. These are the first eight rules I followed diligently to ensure I'd never have to sit at another desk, or at least one that I didn't **want** to, ever again.



Rule #1 — Make sure you have enough money saved to do this.

What, did you really think you could just up and quit your day job without having a financial game plan first?

Look, I get it: you've budgeted your entire life around your salary, and it can be hard to break the chain if you'll be asking for rent extensions in a month. **I was right there with you, ten-months ago**. So, if you're currently peering over the edge of the proverbial cliff and considering making the switch to full-time freelancing I'd encourage you to ask yourself a few financial questions first.

Can you pay next months rent? How about the next six-months? Will the lights stay on? Will you make your car payment on time? How about your insurance? Okay, you get the the picture... The point here is that **you must account for doomsday** — no incoming work. You don't want to learn this life lesson the hard way, trust me.

So, how long could you survive? What luxuries would you have to cut back first? It's important that every new freelancer understands that **day-to-day income** is often less-than-predictable. On a bad day you'll literally make nothing, zero. On the good days, well, you'll make significantly more than that.

Here's the bottom line — **make sure you have a solid financial game plan in case you-know-what hits the fan**.

You might not like to hear my strategy for self-funding your leap to full-time freelancing, but it's what many of us ultimately have to do. Basically, I worked two full-time jobs. One, my standard nine-to-five at the agency. The other, my five-to-nine (and then some) at home, finding freelance clients and supplementing my income.

From day one I committed to tucking half of my freelance earnings into a savings account and then pretending it didn't exist. **I stuck to this financial game plan for six-months** while sacrificing pretty much my entire social life too. After a short six-months had passed, I'd managed to save enough money to keep all my bills paid for a full year even if I didn't earn another cent.

Financial freedom, even in a limited sense, is very comforting when you first start off as a freelancer .

In the interest of continued transparency, my gross revenue during these first six-months of freelancing, **while still working a "real job"**, was just shy of \$81,000. As for my bills — I'm a 27 year-old guy, with no kids and no mortgage... So, I was feeling pretty comfortable about making my transition from employee to freelancer.

Now I realize everyone's situation is different, so **your cushion number is likely different than mine** .

If you've made better financial decisions than me in the past, it might not even take you six-months to reach yours either. No matter your situation, never assume your current means must dictate your ability to venture off on your own. In the wise words of Henry Ford, **"Whether you think you can, or think you can't, you're right"**.

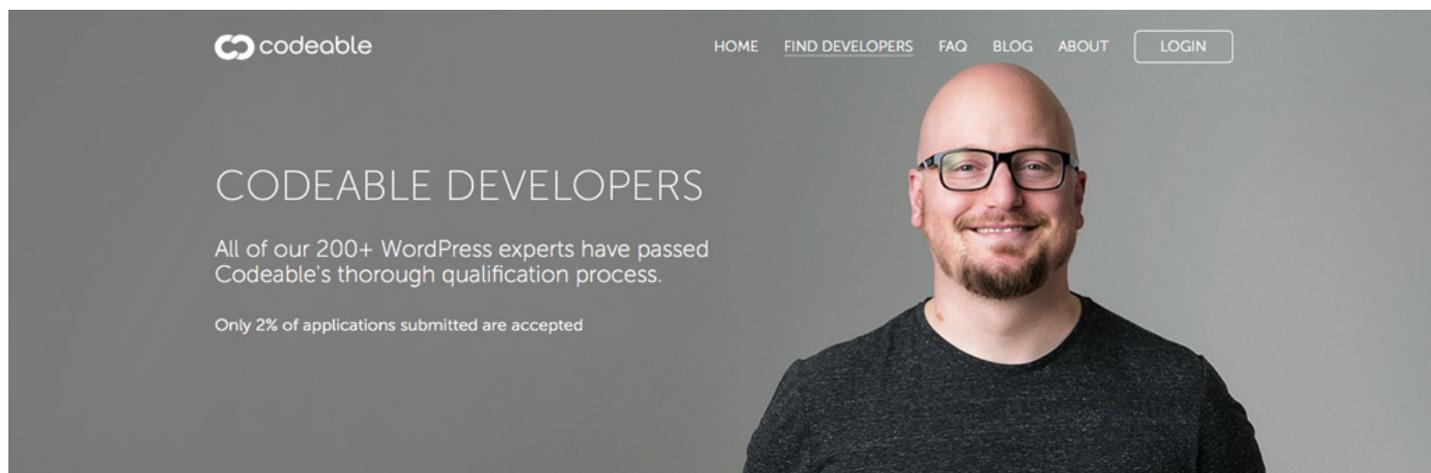
Rule #2 — Specialize at something.

Do brain surgeons feel less capable at their job because they can't perform open heart surgery? Hell no!

You can't be an expert at everything, and when you start freelancing, this is actually to your benefit. Clients might tell you they want the moon and the stars, but at the end of the day they're going to get burned if they hire someone who can only deliver a half moon and a single, dim star.

In other words, own what you're great at and don't get stressed when you can't do it all. Be honest with your clients, but more importantly, **be honest with yourself**. Taking on projects beyond your area of expertise is only going to cause you some unnecessary, easily avoidable stress.

Who in their right mind would volunteer for that kind of thing? It's certainly **not** going to be me.



Personally, I'm a **certified expert WordPress developer** and as you've probably deduced by now, my specialty is in custom WordPress development projects. However, that doesn't mean I'll just accept any project I come across.

I've identified some of the most common requests and curated a short list of tasks that are directly aligned with my skill set. I know with absolute certainty that I can complete these projects with extreme efficiency. These are the clients that I go all-in on, and I'm paid handsomely for my efficiency and effectiveness.

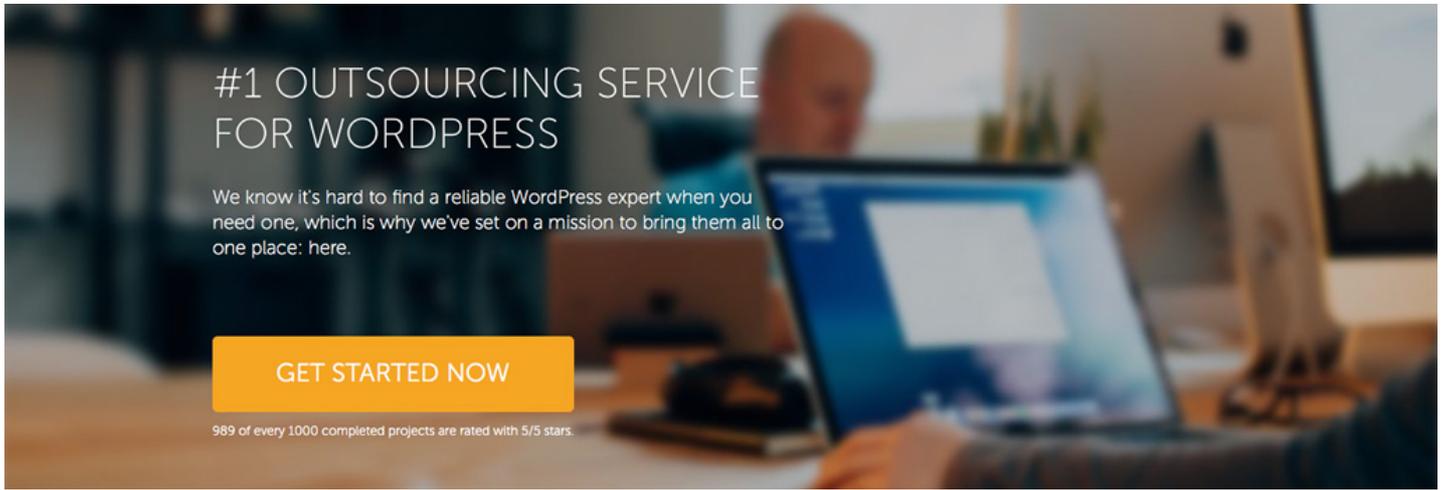
If you stretch yourself too thin (by offering too many services) you'll likely wind up getting hired for more tasks while getting paid less. Conversely, as an expert, you'll command higher premiums while cornering a segment of the market. The difference between an expert and a novice is simple — **experts work smarter, not harder**.

Rule #3 — Join freelancing websites.

Once you've successfully identified what you're the most awesome at, find a network that promotes your skills and gets you in front of potential clients. There are a ton of great networks out there, so depending on your industry, and your skills, some will inevitably be more appropriate for you than others. **Not all freelancing networks are created equal**, invest the necessary time to do your research before you start applying.

A few of the more popular (and less specialized) networks are Upwork, Fiverr and PeoplePerHour. Some of these can get messy with unqualified or under-qualified talent since almost anyone is accepted to participate in these programs. There may also be times on these networks where the project estimation process feels more like a race to the bottom. I know this doesn't sound appealing (and it shouldn't) but, for someone without any freelancing experience these might be good places to cut your teeth and hone-in your communication skills with real clients.

I'd certainly encourage you to apply for more specialized networks as you find them, I've personally found my greatest success via a premium network called **Codeable**. For my fellow WordPress developers, I can't recommend these guys enough. Seriously though, check them out and prepare to have your mind blown.



As with all things in life, each networks you run across will have its own unique pros and cons, but they all have one thing in common — **inbound leads**. The fact that there are already people on these networks, looking for qualified talent, saves you the annoying (and frustrating) hassles of chasing down new clients on your own.

The most common exchange for this unlimited supply of awesome inbound leads is a small portion of your total earnings retained by the network. In my experience, the revenue retained by the network will be somewhere in the neighborhood of ten percent. In my opinion, **this trade-off is worth every penny**, and that's because the best freelancing websites will take care of all the bookwork for you. This means you can finally kiss those accounts-receivable nightmares, that drive so many business owners crazy, goodbye.

Premium freelancing networks, like [Codeable](#), understand that experts, like you, provide the most value to your clients when you're focused on your work. So, the best networks have systems built-in which enable you to focus the maximum amount of your time and energy doing what you do best.

Rule #4 — Engage with more projects initially to build your “street cred”.

The harsh reality of getting started as a freelancer online is that no one knows who you are or **why** they should trust you. Unless your mom is calling all her friends to hit you up for help with their websites, your initial pool of clients will more than likely be pretty dry.

Yes, this can be frustrating — you know what you're capable of, so why won't anyone look your way? At this point you're wondering why these other hacks are getting hired for all the projects when you know can do better? The harsh reality (that you probably don't want to hear) revolves around the ratings system.

When you first join a freelancing network you might only convert five or ten percent of all the clients you engage with into paying customers. **This is perfectly normal so don't get discouraged**. The other 90-95% are going to hire another freelancer simply because they have more ratings, and better reviews, than you do.

Think about your search behavior if you had to find a new restaurant to try tomorrow — a similar thought process applies, you're going to read and inherently trust reviews left by others who came before you.

I'll say it again, **don't get discouraged!** The first few months of freelancing are about embracing the grind.

Just because the last ten people turned you down shouldn't affect how vigorously you approach your eleventh prospect, remember customer number eleven knows nothing about your exchanges with the first ten. No matter how hard you work, or how talented you are, it can still be a challenge to convince the first few clients to work with you. There's no cheat code here but if you want to set yourself up on the fast track to scoring your first few projects quickly then you might consider doing the same things I did.

*Tip #1 — **Create a portfolio website**.* You don't even have to include any links to completed projects if you don't have any yet. But no matter what, you must give your portfolio some personality. With regard to your content, it's

far more important to communicate **why** someone should work with you rather than listing **what** your skills and qualifications actually are. If you have eighteen minutes to spare I'd highly recommend you watch Simon Sinek's Ted Talk about this concept (below).

Tip #2 — Engage with as many clients as possible . Accept every project that you know you can complete. Don't be overly picky. Don't complain. **Deliver quality work** . Repeat... Now, I understand that this directly contradicts rule #1 about being a specialist, unfortunately if you want to get your "street cred" up quickly you may need to take on a few projects that you're not 100% excited about. If you're not willing to compromise on rule #1 that's perfectly fine too. However, keep in mind it may take you longer than others to meet the minimum ratings/reviews threshold to tip the scales in your favor and get the majority of clients to take you seriously.

The reason I stressed "**deliver quality work**" above all else is because new freelancers must get perfect ratings and reviews off the bat. Imagine if you were the client — would you hire yourself if you saw that only a few projects had been completed with an average 2 or 3 star rating? Probably not.

So, make sure you take your time with each project. Don't rush, **freelancing is a marathon, not a sprint** . As a freelancer you'll very-likely be working alone on every project which means you're in charge of quality control. Another Henry Ford quote applies perfectly here, "**Quality means doing it right when no one is looking**".

These days, I'm converting between 50-60% of my leads into paying customers (at the time I wrote this post I'm sitting at 54%). My overall project rating after 488 tasks is a solid 4.93 on a 5.0 scale.

Because of my **commitment to quality** from day one, I now have hundreds of awesome **reviews** and recommendations from my clients. Today I have the luxury of being picky, I get to engage with only the clients and projects that interest me the most. If you're willing to put in the work then it's certainly possible for you to replicate this exact same scenario for yourself. Once you get to this point, and from that day forward, you'll never work on another project that you're not 100% excited about again.

Rule #5 — Put in the work.

As a freelancer, your schedule will be undeniably awesome. You'll wake up when you want to. You'll go grocery shopping when there's no one else in the store. It's a life you can get used to easily.



Be careful though — remember, no one is forcing you to work. Personally, I'm still putting in at least forty hours a week to consistently hit my numbers. Now, I do get to choose which forty hours these are, but don't forget **there's a reason this is called full-time freelancing** .

You must understand that my numbers didn't manifest themselves auto-magically just because I switched the

title on my business cards to “freelancer”. By no means is changing your title to “freelancer” a get-rich-quick scheme, nor is any success guaranteed.

Time, energy and effort are still the fundamental building blocks to build your career as a freelancer.

Another prerequisite in becoming a successful freelancer is self-discipline. It’s absolutely imperative you possess the mental capacity to keep yourself on task, because let’s face it, there won’t be anyone else making sure you do.

Rule #6 — Build your network.

Here’s an obvious one — your network will be composed of the clients you work for and the other qualified professionals you meet. It’s best to cast a wide net here in order to meet new associates and make connections with people of various backgrounds. **Referrals are the backbone of the freelance world**, and I have absolutely no problem pointing someone in the direction of another qualified professional whom I trust because I know it’ll come back around my way when the time is right.

Don’t limit yourself to just one copywriter, one designer, or one developer either. If one of your clients needs a service that you can’t provide, it’s nice to be able to refer them to the person in your network who’s the **best fit**, not the only fit you know of.

In my experience, the leads passed between professionals **convert into paying customers much faster** than an average project. As you continue to grow your network you’ll start seeing more and more of these private leads coming in. When this happens you’ll be able to slowly reduce the amount of time you spend trolling for new projects in the public forum.

Another perk of preferred leads is drastically reduced competition — these projects are typically only shared with one or two highly qualified professionals, instead of potentially a hundred or more.

Rule #7 — Make sure your clients can get in touch with you directly for their next project and encourage them to do so.

This is a big one, and I can’t stress it enough. **Repeat business is your best friend**.

Personally, I’ve set up a system where my clients can click one link to quickly **share their next project** with me. Then, after a quick chat, they can **hire me directly** to complete their task. Creating this direct line of communication for your clients ultimately saves them time and allows them to bypass the public forum altogether. This isn’t sneaky at all; in fact, it’s good business. Think about it, Brad Pitt doesn’t have to go cold reading auditions anymore — once you’ve demonstrated the value you add, you’ll very likely earn direct bookings for all their future projects too (so long as you ask for them).

In my experience, clients love having the ability to hire me directly because finding new freelancers to work with can sometimes be more challenging than it sounds. Now, not all of these direct requests will be aligned with your skill set, when this happens refer back to rule #5.

Bottom line — **you must providing your clients with a direct line so they can get back in touch with you**, and encourage each of them to do so. If you don’t, then they might end up hiring someone else next time they’re in need. When this happens, you’re leaving easy money sitting on the table for the next guy.

Rule #8 — Join affiliate programs.

Clients consistently ask me for recommendations on the best website hosting provider, among other things. I’m a huge fan of **WP Engine** and I’ve had tremendous success with performance optimization on their platform for both my own websites and those of my clients. So, I turned my natural affinity for their service into an additional source of income by joining the **WP Engine affiliate program**.

When it's appropriate, all I have to do is introduce the client to [WP Engine](#). For every client who follows my recommendation and creates a new hosting account, I get paid. Pretty simple, right?

Well, not only is it simple, it's also quite effective. On average, I'm earning between \$1,000 and \$2,000 every month just from these recommendations. That money, by the way, isn't factored into my gross revenue from the beginning of this post. If you're already a successful freelance developer and you'd like to learn more about WP Engine's affiliate program then please [click here](#) for more information.

When you decide to join an affiliate program, please do it because you genuinely love the service, not because you think it'll be a quick passive buck. These are professional opportunities, so **don't be a spammer and offer unsolicited advice** to clients with the sole interest of padding your bank account — clients can sniff this nonsense out from a mile away.

In my experience, the best products or service endorsements that you can provide your clients are for those that you actually use yourself, and that you can share success stories about first hand.

Summary

When I made the transition to full-time freelance, I was able to lean on those who came before me to understand the right and wrong ways of going about it. I've discovered a system that works for me and my income over the past ten-months is proof positive of that.

For anyone thinking about making the move from full-time employment to full-time freelance, I hope this post has inspired you take a calculated leap of faith.

And, for those of you who are already freelancing and looking to make the most of every client opportunity, I'll be back in a few weeks with [part-two of this series](#): managing (and maximizing) your client relations.

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