

Freedom to Freelance: creative independence

By [Ellie Stevenson](#) Arts Hub | Thursday, December 11, 2008

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Are you focused and motivated, with sufficient flexibility to respond to circumstances? Throw in self-confidence and a disciplined approach and you could have the qualities needed to survive and thrive as a freelancer. In the creative industries, freelancing is far from rare, with over 101,000 freelancers across the sector, of which 45 per cent work in the arts. But before you take that first step, there's a whole host of things you need to be aware of.

Assess your products and markets

Freelancers frequently start off as sole traders, although other options exist (eg, partnerships, co-operatives). You need to decide at what level you're going in and what you're going to offer. What are your products or services? What do you want to achieve? And most importantly, what's your market – what is the demand and who are your competitors?

Assess your skills

You also need to assess your skills and your skill gaps. Nikki Tomlinson, artists' advisor for [Artsadmin](#) says, "You have to be very proactive. You need to be able to talk about yourself and your work. There's pressure these days to be not only the artist, but the administrator, producer, technician, designer and accountant too! It's important to identify what your strengths are and perhaps look for ways to get support in those areas you feel less confident or skilled in."

This is a crucial point: being a freelancer means also being able to deal with other issues such as marketing, IT and finance. If you don't have the expertise yourself, then it's vital to seek relevant professional advice or assistance from others.

Particularly when you're starting out, it's a good idea to contact one or more of the organisations that help people who are setting up their own business. And, as Norma Sales, artist and designer, says, "If you haven't been down this route before, enrol on a short course. The help and experience out there is amazing."

How do I fund myself?

It's important to ensure you've enough money to meet your needs, particularly at first when there's not much work is coming in. Financial insecurity is one of the major challenges of being self-employed. As Nikki comments, "Some people leave higher education expecting they can access funding for their work right away. The reality in London is that people frequently have a part-time job or a range of jobs to support their practice. It's still rare to be earning 100% of your income directly through your practice (if that's your ideal) at any age, regardless of the quality of the work."

Taking on a job to support your main vocation is a familiar pattern amongst the self-employed. If you can, find a job that supports your work, such as a residency, or one that's relevant to what you do (eg, working in a theatre or a gallery). In this way you're building up further expertise and contacts. And because a portfolio career is acceptable now, extra experience adds to your CV.

You may also be able to claim benefits or tax credits as a self-employed person, depending on your circumstances; your local citizens' advice bureau can advise on this.

Other sources of funding include family and friends and a bank loan, but be wary of these to begin with. It's best not to start off with debt if possible. If you're taking a loan from someone you know, you should still have a formal agreement that specifies what's to be paid back and when.

What else do I need to consider?

- Tax and national insurance – as someone newly self-employed you need to register with HM Revenue & Customs within three months. Call 0845 915 4515 or visit their [website](#). You will need to complete an annual Self Assessment (tax) return.
- Insurance, Premises and Health and Safety matters.
- Rights and Copyright – see [Own-it](#) for some intellectual property advice for creative businesses.
- Choosing a name to trade under – Business Link provides useful advice on this on their website.
- Business Plan – an ongoing document and a valuable tool to help you to outline your objectives, products/services and estimated sales and expenditure.
- Pension – one of the benefits you may have received as an employee that you now have to arrange for yourself.

Other key tips

Finance and business

- Maintaining accurate and up-to-date records is essential, including separate details of income and expenditure.
- By law, you're required to keep business records for at least five years and ten months after the end of the tax year the records relate to.
- You will need to keep your business records and your personal records separate. You're not required to have a separate business bank account but it can make life easier and it looks more professional. Shop around for the best value account with the lowest charges.
- Confirm orders in writing, invoice regularly and remember to chase up unpaid invoices. Keeping good records makes monitoring income vs. expenditure easier, and helps you keep track of what others owe.

Information Technology

- Gaining some IT knowledge of your own, especially with regard to web marketing, will help you make more effective decisions about how to promote your work and where to allocate your resources.

Marketing

- Publicity and promotion is crucial – it's essential to spend time on this. As Norma says, “A lot of work can come by word of mouth or by people seeing your work. You need to be out there, no-one's going to come to you.” She undertakes a combination of private commissions and exhibitions as well as entering competitions and finds that sometimes it might be months after contact has been made before it pays off. “It's important to see what opportunities there are to link with other people,” she says. “As artists, it's easy to be wrapped up in our own little bubble. We need to get out into the big wide world.”

Don't be isolated

As a freelancer, it's easy to become isolated so it's important to develop your own network of people who share your interests or expertise. This is also vital for professional development as well as for promoting your work. Join relevant organisations or mailing lists, go on courses and talk to others in your field. You can also be proactive and create your own spaces. Nikki Tomlinson says, “Spaces, organisations and festivals that have been going a long time may look or feel almost like institutions, but they often developed out of (or still are) artist-led initiatives. In London, for example, there are an incredible number of artists' groups, support networks and platforms for showing work. If you can't find the right space or avenue of support for your work, there may be ways to invent it for yourself – in collaboration with like-minded artists with shared interests. It can also be fun!”

Also, “As a freelancer, there are often alternating periods of being a bit on the quiet side followed by being inundated – in this situation it's easy to lose sight of the overall direction you want to go in. Getting a mentor or someone with whom you can discuss your plans or broader issues can help, even if you only meet every few months.” (Nikki Tomlinson)

There's no question - becoming a freelancer is a steep learning curve and it won't be easy. But you won't be on your own and it definitely won't be dull. As Norma Sales says, “With freelancing there's always something new to learn, you never stop learning.”

Source

Creative & Cultural Skills, The Footprint 2006-07: a baseline survey of the creative and cultural sector

Websites

Artquest – Seven Steps to Self-employment

(www.artquest.org.uk/managing-your-career/seven-steps-self-employment.htm)

CreativeCapital (www.creative-capital.org.uk/about.php)

ECCA (Enterprise Centre for the Creative Arts) (www.ecca-london.org)

