20 freelance problems and how to solve them

Life as a freelancer is filled with ups and downs and pros and cons, so get prepared with our guide to the 20 most common freelance problems and how to solve them...

From the outside looking in, the life of a freelancer looks so inviting, so beckoning. You're in control of your own destiny, you decide when to work and for how long. If you fancy an extra hour in bed in the morning or an extra hour for lunch or want to slip off to the pub an hour early – it's your call. What a great existence: no clocking in, no boss breathing over your shoulder, no gossiping at the water cooler, just freedom to work how and when you like. But is it really that simple, could it be so straightforward…?

The freelance lifestyle may appear all pros and no cons but it really pays dividends to fully comprehend the implications before you clear your locker, rush in to your boss's office, demand your P45 and quit. Face the challenges ahead and be better prepared with our foolproof guide to resolving the most common problems that face freelancers and those that go it alone…

01 Starting up
Knowing just when to start your own freelance career can be the first problem. Do you have enough experience to get cracking straight out of college or would a few months

or even years in the right kind of studio help equip you for the rigours of running your own business?

Rob O'Conner at **Stylorouge** knew when he was ready to start out on the freelance road alone, albeit an amazing 25 years ago. He has a fairly straightforward notion of why it works for him: "Employers can give you the sack," he explains. "Being your own boss means you can give clients the sack!"

02 Jack of all trades

So a freelance designer or illustrator might be your passport description, but the reality is that you'll have to wear any number of hats, from account handler to finance officer, from IT expert to marketing manager – the list goes on…

How does one cope with such an array of responsibilities? Simon Oxley of **I Do Kung Foo** in Japan has a system that works for him: "I make sure that all my working hours are spent in a productive state whatever the tasks ahead," he says, "unless I decide to go out and mingle with society or nature."

03 Nine to five?

It sounds so simple: get up, take a shower, get dressed, wander over to studio and start work… Life, however, has a funny habit of throwing a curveball your way when you least expect it – a little lie-in, breakfast TV, a grand latte at Starbucks en route…

Get organised and create a structure to your day and keep to it. For **Marine** it's the only way. "I make a routine and stick to it," she admits. "Because I work from home, I try not to let the washing-up interfere with my illustration time – it's all about time management."

04 Knowing when to stop

As well as starting work effectively, you really need to know just when to stop too. If you're working all hours of the day and night to get everything done, then pretty soon your work and your health will start to suffer. Be in control and make a decision to stop at a given hour. 'All nighters' are neither big nor clever!

Mr Bingo keeps a lid on things most of the time: "I've learnt to be super organised and fill my diary in advance and be as realistic as possible – of course, I still make mistakes and have to stay up all night because I didn't plan my time effectively…"

05 Marketing your business

Being busy is easy; staying busy is a little tougher. Very few creatives like making marketing calls but if you're going to stay being creative, you'll need to get on that phone and sell your wares. How you do that successfully takes some practice.

Create a time and space in which to make your calls, gather information and get organised. Clear your desk, get a fresh pencil and notepad and start as you mean to go on. For **Hamish Makgill**, Creative Director at Makgill, it's about a structure. "Create a routine and start by getting dressed – making client calls in your dressing gown is not a good look," he states.

06 Chasing pay

So if getting the work in isn't easy, what about getting paid? Strike up a conversation with a freelancer about the good, the bad and the ugly and one aspect that so many agree on is the constant aggravation in getting accounts departments to pay up.

Russell Hrachovec of **CompoundEye** has a method for getting the money in: "Friendly emails and phone calls do the trick 98 per cent of the time. If that doesn't work, get your lawyer friend on their ass!" McFaul's techniques don't differ: "I send out email reminders – our terms are 30 days and our invoices scream that the 30 days shouldn't be overlooked!"

07 Trusting your own judgement

Working alone can mean making creative decisions all by yourself. If you're used to asking everyone else in a busy studio or getting direct input from other designers/illustrators, this can be a harsh reality check for those navigating uncharted territory.

CompoundEye's Russell Hrachovec explains: "You do really have to just trust your own judgement and instincts. Some projects look great one day and the next you may have some reservations. It pays to listen to your clients, see how they react and respond accordingly." Rob O'Conner at Stylorouge agrees: "Just keep as high standards as possible," he explains.

08 Keeping clients

There is no scientific explanation for how to keep hold of clients. There you are merrily creating great work on a regular basis for a client – safe in the knowledge that the job will roll in again same time next month – when suddenly the phone doesn't ring and the email doesn't alert… What's going wrong?

Simon Oxley has a theory to stave off that day. "It is important to nurture relationships with clients and suppliers and establish a sense of trust and ambition," he states. "As a freelance operator in the design industry I believe one has to approach life with an entrepreneurial mindset. Don't wait for the phone to ring or emails to land – take the initiative as an inventor and show new work to clients constantly."

09 Hitting deadlines

Each and every client will want to believe that his or her project is right at the top of your priority list – sometimes balancing client expectations can be a real hot potato.

McFaul knows what it's like to have too many clients demanding artworks. "I generally have ten or so things on at any one time – it does keep the day entertaining," he admits. "So a few hours on this and a few more on that keeps things fresh… and ultimately gets things done."

Asako Masunouchi, an illustrator based in Tokyo, tries to trick herself into completing work on time. "I set myself a deadline at least one day before the actual deadline," she says. Cunning!

10 Keeping ahead of the curve

So how do you stay a step ahead of the competition? You've got your head down

working hard and all's well, the bank manager's happy, the studio rent is paid and even the Inland Revenue are off your case…

Ian Wright, illustrator for over 25 years and still cutting-edge, knows what keeps him focused on new directions in his own work. "I keep motivated because I always feel like I've just started," he states. "That means that there's always a lot of catching up to do and I'm very aware who is coming up behind me."

11 Software and hardware
Finding the time to keep abreast of the challenges of changing hardware and software isn't so easy either. It's crucial to be aware of developments, so how you choose to keep the right side of technological advances is the question.

Ed Templeton at **Red** claims that his knowledge is culled by "reading the *News of the World* IT section", while Martin Andersen has his own approach: "Know someone that loves software." Rob O'Conner, however, takes it upon himself to know his stuff: "Read magazines, check out articles on the web, talk with colleagues and be prepared to learn in any way possible," he states.

12 Staying inspired
All work and no play makes Jack a dull lad. Staying creative might seem easy enough when you're stacked full of ideas and energy for new projects, but keeping that enthusiasm can be tough unless you keep yourself topped up with inspirations.

Sanna Annukka, illustrator behind the album artwork for Keane's *Under The Iron Sea*, explains simply that "reading and travelling bring about most of my inspirations." Asako Masunouchi, from her studio in Yachiyo City, Japan, says: "I look through the sketch books and the archives that I keep – they're full of ideas!" London-based illustrator **Natsko Seki** admits that, for her,"Sometimes all I need is a quiet space." McFaul chips in: "I am always gathering inspiration – isn't everyone?"

13 Getting a life
Keep work in perspective and know when to get out and away from your screen. You really must get and keep a life outside of design too – it'll give you a wider knowledge of life and will act as further inspirations for your work too.

Martin Andersen takes a proactive approach to getting out. "I make sure that I take days out of the studio," he explains. "I visit bookshops, galleries and hang out socially." Hamish Makgill admits to failing to get out of the studio from time to time, saying: "More exhibitions and more time behind the camera would be a good start for me."

14 Just say no!
As well as balancing the books, it is as important to keep the right kind of work coming in. Learning to say no to new projects and clients is one of the toughest calls for most freelancers.

"I never take on too many projects at once," admits Sanna Annukka, "because I fear that it'll end up as one great big mess. I'd rather produce a quality piece of work for one project than a bunch of mediocre works for many." Ed Templeton turns away work

when "I know I won't have time to do a good job or I can't see a way of turning the brief into a good job."

15 Keeping your productivity high
Making each day in the studio count makes sense. "Start with a hearty breakfast," jokes McFaul, "and have goals. I have people come into the studio to work with me from time to time who can't believe just how much gets done in a day."

Alex Bec and Will Hudson, the art direction and creative team behind the project **'If You Could...'**, claim that a balance of "early starts, late nights, lists and conversations" is the secret of productivity. For Russell Hrachovec at CompoundEye it is purely "the self-discipline of knowing what your tasks are and not getting distracted." He admits this is easier said than done.

16 Planes, trains and automobiles
It's a global village, and working any corner of that globe has become increasingly popular. Rather than being cornered in the studio, many creatives are finding that they can efficiently work any place nowadays and a culture of working on laptops on Wi-Fifrom a Starbucks in Soho or SoHo has really hit home. Getting an extra laptop battery to work on a flight or train makes so much sense. Using dead time to fine-tune proposals or catch up on invoices, respond to emails – there's plenty of extra-curricular work to be done.

17 Every day is like a holiday
While every day as a freelancer may seem like a holiday for those who are still in full-time employment, it obviously isn't the case, and actually taking a holiday can always be at the end of a very full to-do list.

Ed Templeton at Red now ring-fences time out of the studio to get physical. "I'm taking four months off at the end of the year to go surfing," he admits. "It wasn't always that way, though – for the first six years I didn't take a single holiday." Natsko Seki takes frequent short breaks: "At the end of every project I try to take a break as I'm often working at the weekends," she explains.

18 Goodbye to security
Waving farewell to the Christmas bonus, sick pay, paid holiday leave, health benefits and insurance cover can leave you feeling overwhelmed with the responsibility of keeping it all in the air. Try to stay calm and don't panic – there are always quite a few plates to spin especially when you're starting out, but you have to try and be realistic about your goals and expectations.

Ian Wright is a realist when it comes to his rationale for working for himself. "The best thing about it all is that I get to make my own decisions – it's up to me whether I eat or not," he states. Hamish Makgill understands the problems of running your own business: "It really all depends on how good a boss you are to yourself," he admits.

19 Keeping the faith
It will get tough – of course it will get tough – and then some. How do you keep the

faith when projects are either not coming in or coming in but going wrong, when cash flow isn't great or a long night looms ahead as a deadline approaches?

"I keep motivated," reveals Mr Bingo, "by always loving what I do, and people telling me that they like what I do." For Marine too it is equally simple: when asked how she keeps herself going, she responds without hesitation, "By always having fun with what I do." Natsko Seki has her own quick fix: "If I lose motivation, then I have a nap. After a little sleep I'm ready for work again!" she claims.

20 The secret of success

There's no quick, easy fix for success, and many freelancers will give up the ghost and head for the hills before success comes calling at their door. Sticking to your guns and believing in what the future holds won't guarantee a great independent career but it is the best starting point. Along with self-belief you need strong self-promotion. "Do at least one thing every day to make the world know that you exist," offers Marine.

Be realistic, have attainable goals as well as determination and enthusiasm, and be dependable. Sanna Annukka agrees: "Perseverance, hard work and being passionate about what you do – expect to work hard for what you want, then you are most likely to deserve it!" Ed Templeton at Red is introspective: "The secret to success? I'm not sure I've achieved it yet… Maybe that's the key?"