

# Have you hugged your freelancer today?

 By [Marie Rocher](#)

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*Freelancers.* They're no longer sketchy characters lurking on the outskirts of the workforce but a global force to be reckoned with.

[America's Freelancers Union](#) estimates that one in four Americans is now a freelance worker. In the [United Kingdom](#), the upward trend is similar, with self-employment hitting a 20-year high. 'Working for one's own account' is a trend we're seeing here in South Africa, too, with the [ABSA SME Index](#) estimating that self-employed individuals now make up 10% of South Africa's employed population, the highest level since 2009.

Why this growth in the so-called *Freelance Economy*? Experts put it down to job losses as employers downsize in a difficult economy (I explore more reasons behind this workplace shift in [this article for business owl](#)). given that the labour absorption rate for Matrics and graduates from tertiary education institutions in South Africa is low, and that the [unemployment rate](#) stands at 25.20% and rising, freelancing will increasingly be seen as a long-term alternative to the traditional permanent employment at a corporation.

## Learning to get along

Unfortunately, freelancers often get the short end of the stick when it comes to business relationships. This has something to do with how they're perceived by the companies that use them as hired help there to do the donkey work *cheap-cheap* and then sling their hook when they're done, and by a sort of *learned helplessness* on the part of freelancers, who often fail to see and promote themselves - and act - as a professional business.

But given that companies and freelancers will be doing a lot more business with each other, it's high time we all learned to get along and respectfully work together, for mutual benefit. Here's how...

## Companies...

1. *Don't moan and groan at freelance fees* - freelancers work (hard) to turn a profit, just like you do, and base their rates on the time and skill involved in executing particular tasks. Furthermore, the more experienced and in demand the freelancer, the higher the rates s/he can command. If you can't afford the rates, it's your prerogative to move along and hire someone else. Just remember the old adage, you pay peanuts; you get monkeys!
2. *Pay your freelancer on time* - freelancers are service providers not credit providers, so if you want credit, speak to your bank. While one-man businesses cannot afford to extend terms in excess of 30 days, you will benefit from lower rates and speedier turn-around time than you would if you were to hire an agency.
3. *Brief freelancers properly* - changing the goal posts mid-project or once it's done renders projects undeliverable. To avoid confusion, be specific about what you want. If you're not sure, why not ask the freelancer to input suggestions?
4. *Don't treat freelancers like lowly employees* - would you shove your doctor or attorney around? Probably not. You have too much respect for their credentials and profession. Extend a similar courtesy towards your creative freelancers. At the least, they're your equals and sometimes are even more qualified and experienced than you are.
5. *Call once in a while* - or answer your friendly freelancer's calls. When you're in a fix and need a job done fast, who do you think the freelancer's going to drop everything to help - the person with whom s/he has a genuine relationship or the ratty, demanding corporate employer who only turns up when they want something?

## Freelancers...

1. *Don't be a flaky freelancer* - in short, deliver. When I worked as a book publisher, I had the misfortune of working with a

supremely talented designer. I say misfortune because, despite his considerable skill, one day he simply dropped off the face of the earth, leaving his deadlines (and me) high and dry. Never. Do. This.

2. *State your terms and conditions upfront* - to avoid confusion and to promote a slick, professional image, have a rates card which clearly specifies payment terms and your work process.

3. *Don't bite off more than you can chew* - Know how much you're capable of outputting in a day/week/month and don't overextend yourself. Taking on too much work will compromise its quality and your health and, if you fail to deliver, your professional reputation. Politely inform your client that you're fully booked and when you're able to take on the work, or recommend an alternative freelancer.

4. *Remember that you're a service provider* - whilst it's laudable to stay true to your craft, save making art for your spare time. If the client wants it upside down, and blue with pink spots, take a deep breath and smile. Politely point out why this is a poor idea (jot it down in an email so it's on record) but if the client won't swing it, do the best you can to accommodate their desires. Even the great Michelangelo had to set artistic integrity aside at times and pander to the strange whims of his employers. Remember the adage, he who pays the piper calls the tune.

5. *Don't harass contacts for work* - stay in touch, for sure, but don't overdo the emails and phone calls. It smacks of desperation and is annoying, too. And who wants to work with a desperate, annoying freelancer? Play it cool and (if you deliver the goods, on time, every time) they'll come to you!

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