





How to win clients and influence people

No matter whether you're a fresh-faced student or a seasoned professional, now may be the time to consider going self-employed. **Mark Ramshaw** assesses the appeal of freelance life and reveals the success strategies of leading freelancers

Artists have earned their crust as either contracted creatives or paid employees for almost as long as ink and paint have been put to paper. Little has changed in the digital world. While the 3D industry is powered by teams of in-house modellers, illustrators, animators and composers, the freelance community has been crucial to its ongoing growth. Now, as the industry continues to mature, more artists are realising that the role of artist for hire can bring increased job satisfaction, a better quality of life and increased opportunities for fame and fortune.

While the global recession hasn't yet changed the state of play in all 3D markets, some might rightly wonder whether now is the time to consider what freelancing has to offer. But Helen James, founder of the Freelance Alliance networking service, believes the credit crunch might actually be beneficial to the freelance workforce. "Talented freelancers who understand that their business skills are as important as their creative skills can positively thrive in recessions," she says. "Businesses need the flexibility that freelancers offer them

in terms of speed, which enables them to react fast in challenging times, and their cost-effectiveness."

Special skills

There is no single simple way to define what a freelance artist does or how they work. Each artist is likely to have their own approach, defined by their work and lifestyle choices, their own skillset, the clients they work for and the projects they become involved with. "It helps to think of the world of freelance versus staff as a continuous graph, with a stay-at-home, individual freelancer on one end, a full-time employee on the other, and lots of permutations in-between," says freelance character animator Igor Choromanski.

Generally speaking, the stay-at-home freelancer is one whose skills can be harnessed by clients remotely, without the need for constant monitoring or direction. A brief will be provided, milestones may be set, and the artist will be left to produce the work. It's an approach that's particularly suited to 3D illustration and architectural visualisation work. "I create artwork for

clients all over the US. With some projects, I never meet or talk to the person other than via email," says illustrator Mike de la Flor. "Having a website, email and FTP frees me up to work with anyone, anywhere."

The videogame industry has also become an increasingly viable option for remote freelancing. Traditionally this sector has favoured full-time staff, but things are changing – even at the larger studios. "When the bigger studios go with an individual like myself, it's to access a specialist skillset," says freelance game modeller Spencer Boomhower. "Also big companies tend to farm outsource art in bulk to art houses, which then subcontract."

By contrast, artists serving the broadcast and film production industries are more likely to work on-site. Choromanski says this approach is particularly appealing to studios right now. "They've shifted towards a 'small, essential core' model, where anything from 50 per cent down to five per cent of artists are on staff, and the remainder are hired per day, task or project."

Contracted as both a 3D modeller and a creature designer, movie industry veteran >>

How to succeed in freelance

Videogame artist



Name Spencer Boomhower
Freelance for Four years
Website boomhower.com

What first steps should a 3D artist take before making the leap into freelance?
 I'd consider setting up a limited company, but this can wait until you get your feet wet.

What's your best tip for finding new work and clients?

Ask around. A network of freelancers is one of your best resources for finding clients, and the ones you find will be more trustworthy. No one wants to recommend a bad client, and clients won't want to let down whoever made the recommendation.

How would you advise new freelancers to price their services?

A blunt but effective formula for figuring an hourly rate is to take what you think you should be getting for a yearly salary and divide it by a thousand. I also use AllNetic Working Time Tracker (allnetic.com) to keep track of little jobs. Looking over past time sheets helps me make realistic estimates on future work.

What are the key things you do when you first make contact with a new client?

Ideally there's a mutual personal connection – someone who can give you a recommendation. Or there's always Google.

What's the most important lesson you've learned as a freelancer?

I've learned to empathise with the client, understanding that it's a leap of faith for them to risk time and money on someone they might know only by reputation.



Environment art created by freelance artist Spencer Boomhower for an Intel demo, available at whatif.intel.com

Level design for the title Yourself! Fitness. "Mostly I find work via word of mouth," says Boomhower. "I've also garnered a surprising number of leads from a couple of character packs I did for GarageGames"



» Jelmer Boskma has experience working on-site and remotely. "When working remotely, an obvious benefit is the control you have over your own time... you can plan your days as you want," he says. "The big downside for working remotely is that it can be a very reclusive existence. There isn't anyone to inspire or push you."

You might expect that freelancers who tend to work in-house would find the need to constantly adapt to new surroundings, people and methodologies a challenge. Chad Ridgeway, a film compositor with experience of the freelance market, says not: "In my experience, it's been pretty easy to adapt to new companies, as most VFX pipelines share many similarities. And companies that do things their own way generally provide some training. As for becoming part of the team, it only takes a few long days of cramming together for the camaraderie to build."

Making the move

For students and those looking to remain employed while doing projects on the side, getting started in freelance can be

a relatively painless affair. Artists making the leap from full employment to freelance are obviously taking a bigger risk and must work to get their house in order before committing to a new work plan.

Financial security is a key concern. Having enough savings to ride out any quiet periods is a good idea. So, too, is finding a reputable accountant and lawyer. It's also worth considering the merits of signing up with an outfit geared towards helping and protecting freelancers and small companies. In the UK, for example, the Federation of Small Businesses provides a good degree of support and legal help in exchange for a modest yearly fee.

When it comes to finding work, the usual promotional options – such as sending out resumes and portfolios, building a website, networking online and relying on word of mouth – can be further augmented by websites such as guru.com or elance.com, specifically designed to showcase the skills of freelancers and pair them with clients. Freelancers are advised to weigh up the pros and cons of each site according to their own needs and target market. One

How to price your services

Deciding what to charge as a freelancer can be difficult. Follow this advice on how to pitch your rate just right for the job

01 Look to your peers

"Many will be upfront about charges on forums," says Helen James. "It's also worth talking to recruitment agencies or even 'mystery shopping' the competition."

02 Form a company

Working with a registered company name adds professionalism, enabling you to price accordingly. "It can also protect your personal assets if the stuff really hits the fan," says Spencer Boomhower.

03 Do the maths

"I calculate the cost of a project by multiplying how

many hours I think it will take by my minimum hourly fee of \$65 an hour, then multiply that by two," says Mike de la Flor.

04 Cut rates cleverly

"If a client asks you to reduce your rate, look at ways of providing less or offering more services that only cost you a bit of extra time," says Helen James.

05 Go global

When taking on international work there's more to consider than exchange rates. "Local economies play an important role in client rates," says Mike de la Flor.

How to succeed in freelance ■

3D modeller / creature artist



Name Jelmer Boskma
Freelance for 18 months
Website jelmerboskma.com



■ Designed for a TV spot advertising online store Bol.com, this character was created by Jelmer Boskma for Hectic Electric

■ "As a modeller in film I have mainly worked on-site, as it benefits production to have the interactivity there with the rest of the VFX crew," says Boskma

What first steps should a 3D artist take before making the leap into freelance?

Make sure there's a certain amount of interest in your work already. I would suggest rolling into freelancing, rather than making one leap.

What's your best tip for finding new work?

Publicity. Showcase your work on forums, your website, magazines or books. Keeping in touch with the people you've worked with, whether as colleagues or ex-employers, can lead to new projects.

How would you advise new freelancers to price their services?

Talk with friends and trustworthy colleagues to discuss salary. I try to keep this as open as possible – it's beneficial for everyone to get a better idea of rates.

What are the key things you do when you first make contact with a new client?

I tend to do a bit of research, mainly to find out more about the style they like to see work getting done in. Past projects can be a confirmation of their drive to deliver a level of quality.

What's the most important lesson you've learned as a freelancer?

Projects and the demands within them will be different for anyone you work with, but everyone responds well to kick-ass work and a high level of dedication and effort.

particular problem with some freelance websites is that artists end up competing with one another, to their mutual detriment. "Some of the 'bidding sites' out there do devalue professional freelance work," admits Helen James. "Where projects can be 'won' by offering the lowest bid, it completely misses the point of investing in a good creative to add real value to the client's business."

James says the Freelance Alliance service, launched in the UK in 2005 as the networking component of FreelanceUK, works in a different way. "We don't directly pitch freelancers against each other, and we promote the network as a directory of serious talent. We aim to provide good-quality leads for our members, and we want to see ongoing relationships develop between hirers and freelancers, resulting in profitable work for our members."

Making it work

It's the need to be business-savvy that many considering a new freelance career are most likely to gloss over. David Humphrey, a freelance architecture

visualisation artist, estimates that around 10 per cent of the working day is likely to be consumed by admin work – dealing with enquires, keeping accounts, paying bills, offering quotations and invoicing clients. This may sound trivial, but such tasks are all too easy to ignore when deadlines loom.

Freelancers also need the wherewithal to maintain a good degree of professionalism when communicating with clients; the knack of making each feel like they're the only client that matters (even when working on several freelance jobs at once); and the good sense to set money aside for tax bills and associated costs – not to mention a huge amount of self-discipline, particularly if working in isolation. In contrast to full-time employees, who only really need to sell themselves in job interviews, freelancers must be able to market their technical skills, their creative abilities and even their personality time and again.

Tenacity is also required when it comes to money matters, says Mike de la Flor. "With some clients, you have to haggle and negotiate, while others will give you a budget and you have to tell them what

How to keep the work flowing in

Freelancers have to take the initiative and know how to promote themselves. Following these tips should keep the work rolling in

01 Enhance your reputation

Keep yourself in the public eye by maintaining an up-to-date presence on your own website, CG communities and LinkedIn, as well as IMDb if appropriate.

02 Act like a professional and be friendly

When working on site, remember that your conduct with the client as well as fellow freelancers will influence how many future offers you receive.

03 Collaborate to succeed

Working in isolation doesn't mean you're limited to working solely on smaller

projects. By teaming up with fellow freelancers, it's possible to win larger bids.

04 Send that resume

It may feel like a fruitless exercise to keep cold calling and posting showreels, but it will help get your name in a company's database, and so increase the chances of work further down the line.

05 Look to your market

Some areas of CG favour freelancers offering highly specialised skills. Others will yield more work for those who can offer an all-in-one service. Be realistic about what you can offer.

How to succeed in freelance

Architectural visualiser



Name David Humphrey
Freelance for Four years
Website aspect3d.co.uk

What first steps should a 3D artist take before making the leap into freelance?

Going part-time at first is probably the most sensible choice. If you have some money set aside to start with and you're prepared to work hard, jumping straight into full-time freelance is also an option.

What's your best tip for finding new work?

I think the most effective way to gain new clients is to arrange face-to-face meetings, allowing you to really sell yourself and your work. Mail and email shots are useless unless you find out exactly who to contact.

How would you advise new freelancers to price their services?

Never work for free to secure a new client, and always take promises for lots of future work with a pinch of salt. If they do turn out to be regular clients, you can reward them with reduced rates then.

What are the key things you do when you first make contact with a new client?

I think it's important to be as efficient and professional as possible. Being enthusiastic about their project, and offering ideas about which direction to go can set you apart from the competition.

What's the most important lesson you've learned as a freelancer?

Establishing strong long-term relationships with clients is the key to success.



Visualisation for a redevelopment project and new office building in Maidenhead, created by freelance visualiser David Humphrey for client Gavin Thomas

Establishing what the client is looking for is key to freelance. This visualisation for the Park Lodge Apartment in Worthing was for client JW Stratton



» they can get for that amount. Sometimes I have to educate clients about the cost of doing artwork."

Again, things tend to be a little simpler for freelancers working on-site. "Most of the bigger studios I have worked with have a pretty good idea about the amount of money they want to spend on their freelance recruitment," says Jelmer Boskma. "When I am asked for my rate, I usually provide a daily rate, or we decide on a project price beforehand."

While few clients are likely to be actively dishonest about payments, the golden rule is to prevent problems before they can occur. It pays to check online for news stories, or with colleagues and other freelancers, about the reputation of the company in question. Helen James also advocates performing a credit check, especially if undertaking large projects where non-payment might threaten your business. "Agree payment terms from the outset, including any partial instalments or up-front fees for expenses," she says.

While not required, contracts can be a real help here, making it possible to legally

ESSENTIAL SITES FOR FREELANCERS

Websites to help you find work

freelanceswitch.com
An informative freelance blog

freelanceuk.com
Practical guides for creative freelancers

guru.com
A networking and pitching site for qualified professionals

elance.com
A rival networking and pitching site to broaden your reach

tinyurl.com/5khzf7
Practical advice on working from home from A List Apart

tie client and artist into a payment plan agreement. Usually clients will provide their own contract rather than relying on one supplied by the freelancer. Here it pays to check the small print and request amendments if necessary. (See the FAQs panel opposite for more on legal issues.)

By far the biggest change on entering the world of freelance is that there's no guaranteed monthly salary to rely on. Depending on the payment terms and the size of projects, it might be necessary to go weeks or even months without any money coming in. And even the best freelancer needs to prepare for the possibility of a dry spell in actual work.

Pros and cons

For those tiring of on-staff office work, the grass is always going to look greener on the self-employed side, but the reality is that the freelance life carries downsides that make it unsuitable for many. A lack of job security and – in the case of in-house freelancers – the need to be mobile will deter those with family commitments, for one thing. The lack of real creative input on

some projects can also be frustrating. And not everyone is well suited to administration tasks, client diplomacy, self-promotion or self-discipline. "It's easy to become a workaholic if you don't pace yourself and set a schedule for both work and fun," says Mike de la Flor.

However, for many, the pros will outweigh all the cons. "Freelancing is a great way to gain a huge variety of skills," says Chad Ridgeway. "You also have the freedom to choose which project you work on."

It's perhaps this sense of control that ultimately sells it for many. As de la Flor says: "I can make as much money as I want to, and it's totally dependent on how hard I'm willing to work and how smart I am in marketing myself."

The decision to go freelance is not one to be taken lightly. You have to be ready to invest personally, emotionally and financially. But if you do succeed, you will be working on projects you're excited about, working to your own schedule and making more money. No one ever claimed that being master of your own destiny is easy, but it is certainly satisfying. ●

How to succeed in freelance ■

3D illustrator



Name John Shakespeare
Freelance for Seven years
Website johnshakespeare.com.au



▲ The detail provided in a client brief varies widely. For this image created for The Sydney Magazine, John Shakespeare worked from a brief with precise Illustrator roughs

What first steps should a 3D artist take before making the leap into freelance?

Speed and versatility in your skillset is most important. Also knowing how to optimise your scenes and render settings so you can do quick, high-quality renders. A backup computer is also handy.

What's your best tip for finding new work and clients?

I actually get most of my work through an agent. Otherwise I'd recommend building a website of your work and looking up some ad agencies or magazines, then sending an email with your work and site, with a follow-up phone call.

How would you advise new freelancers to price their services?

It usually depends on the client and the scale of the job. If it was a big campaign for Coca Cola, I would charge more proportionally than an illustration for someone's personal webpage.

What are the key things you do when you first make contact with a new client?

I usually get a feel for the person from the first few emails we exchange.

What's the most important lesson you've learned as a freelancer?

Find out the deadline before you accept the work. Advertising agencies are notorious for spending months planning a campaign then leaving the illustration until the last week.



▲ Shakespeare was commissioned to produce these images for a food magazine launch. He was given just two days to complete the job

FAQs: financial and legal issues

Sorting out contracts and other financial and legal issues can be a daunting prospect to fledgeling freelancers. Here Silas Brown, a solicitor at intellectual property specialist Briffa, and Helen James, founder of Freelance Alliance, offer some guidance. Some advice may apply to UK law only

Do I really need to use contracts?

Silas Brown: Freelancers are in a relatively strong default legal position when it comes to copyright – the default position being that they own the rights to work they produce for clients if there's no contract. The only way that the client can become the owner of the IP is if it's agreed in writing. However, it's best practice to have standard terms and conditions in place to ensure there's no uncertainty.

How can I use a contract to my advantage?

Silas Brown: Freelancers can use contracts to their advantage, by linking transfer of work or IP ownership to payments. Such clauses provide a simple, effective incentive for the client to pay promptly.

Could I simply download a template contract from the web and use that?

Helen James: For watertight protection, you need legal guidance based on your business rather than relying solely on a template. The terms may

change from project to project, so spending time understanding and putting this together will put you at a distinct advantage in negotiation as well as protect your business.

What if the client supplies a contract?

Silas Brown: This is relatively common, but remember that in general contracts proposed by the client will be in favour of the client. It's wise to have it reviewed by a law firm, so the artist can request amendments if necessary – a common practice – or at least sign it with their eyes open.

If a client supplies their own contract, do I really need my own?

Helen James: Having your own contract and terms of business, even if the client has theirs, will send a message of professionalism. A solicitor can provide you with a contract and terms of business that you can use with your clients, which sets out clearly in your terms the basis on which you intend to work, how and when you should be paid, what

you should and should not be responsible for and the resulting ownership of assets.

What if the client still rips me off?

Silas Brown: For recovering small debt, you can use a small claims court over breach of contract, but if you're in a situation where you still have ownership of the IP and the client goes away and starts commercialising it, then the action you would bring is for copyright infringement. This can potentially be very expensive, but there are various insurance products out there that offer a good degree of IP protection.

Should I protect myself using watermarking?

Silas Brown: In legal terms, there should be no need for watermarking images or supplying only lower-quality versions until payment has been made, but on a practical level it can be useful if the client turns out to be unscrupulous. Digital watermarks can also be useful if you need to prove anything at a later date.