

Practical Advice for Starting & Scaling
Your Creative Freelance Business

GOOD WORK!



Pay attention to red flags.

You can't always know up front whether a prospect will be a good client or not, but there are some common red flags that might signal trouble to come, and you'll learn more as you gain experience and learn what works best for you. The pit in your stomach can be one of your greatest allies—don't ignore it.

What are some red flags you might see?

- Clients who complain about the last person they worked with, especially if the complaints seem unreasonable to you.
- Clients who don't show up for meetings or don't respond to emails and phone calls.
- Clients who pay late or don't pay at all.
- Clients who ask you to rush every project or change the agreed-upon timeline. Extra flags if they then sit on said rush projects after you deliver your part.
- Clients who nickel and dime you or try to talk you into decreasing your rates or doing more for less.
- Clients or prospects who ask for free work. A prospective client should be able to gauge your abilities by talking with you and looking at samples that you provide. If they're asking you to do a test project or do free work to get a job, it's possible that they might steal your ideas and not hire you for the full project anyway.
- Clients who ignore personal boundaries, like texting you at all hours of the night.
- Clients who blame you when stuff goes wrong, even if it's their fault.
- Clients who refuse to sign a contract.
- Clients who don't know what they want, can't articulate what they're looking for, or can't give concrete feedback, and who don't respond in a helpful manner when you try and help them understand and articulate what they need. "Give it more pizzazz" is not feedback you can use.
- Clients who micromanage you while you're working, or who believe they know how long something should take and micromanage your time accordingly.
- Clients who change the scope or project direction in a major way (or even minor ones) every time you work together. Extra flags if they don't agree to the pricing increases that result from those changes.
- Clients who are unorganized, overworked, or unable to delegate.
- Clients who have core values or worldviews that don't mesh with yours. Know your limits in terms of racism, homophobia, or extreme political

views, as well as products and services that make you uncomfortable, like smoking, alcohol, or vaping.

- Clients who are disrespectful or otherwise don't practice common courtesy.
- Clients who don't have funding or who have unreasonable goals, and who won't be swayed to adjust their wants or expectations. You can't guarantee that your mailer design will attract 1,000 new clients or that your fundraising appeal verbiage will increase donations by 50 percent, or that your social media campaign will earn them \$5,000 in new sales. Anyone who thinks you can or who wants to pay you according to that expectation shouldn't be your client.

Not all of the items above are necessarily a deal-breaker on their own, but some are. While many of them are general professionalism, some vary based on who you are and your values. Trust your instinct. If you have a gut feeling that signing on with a particular client will bring misery, listen to it. It can be hard to do this when you're just starting out, but as my colleague Alli, a freelance editor, says, "A bad client, no matter how much they pay, will always take time and energy that could be better spent on fruitful relationships."

Over time you'll know which of these are deal-breakers for you and you can say no early on. If a client develops some of these bad habits over time, use your best judgement to decide whether to change the behavior or end the relationship.

✓ TAKE THE Next Step ✓

GOOD

- When your gut tells you that something is up, pay attention.

BETTER

- Write down any flags that you're noticing, and brainstorm some possible solutions that you can share with your client.

BEST

- Decide which behaviors are your deal-breakers. Stop working with clients who are badly behaved and aren't willing to change.

NOTES

Work alone without having to *be* alone.

I work in a home office alone, and I always have (at least when there hasn't been a pandemic classroom in the corner). But I don't feel alone. There were times early in my solo career where I did feel lonely, but I had enough family, friends, and hobbies to fill in the spaces when I wasn't working.

As I got busier and had to spend more time at my desk, there were a few years where I did feel pretty isolated and like I was stuck in my own little bubble. Over time, I've found lots of ways to connect with other folks so that I never felt lonely—sometimes I even feel like I'm getting too much connection and need to scale back.

These are the ways I connect with other like-minded work friends.

Business and trade organizations.

When I started working for myself, I thought it would be a good idea to join the local chamber of commerce and attend meetings. That's what business owners do, right? Yes and no. The group wasn't a good fit for me—my non-profit target market wasn't hanging out there—but I did meet a new friend there who introduced me to a different networking group that was a better fit. Other trade organizations might have meetings that you can attend, and I know other solopreneurs who love groups like BNI (Business Network International) and Toastmasters. There are lots of options!

Networking groups.

The idea of traditional networking makes me feel a little ill—so many smarmy salespeople pushing stuff I don't need or want. I've been lucky enough to find a few networking groups over the years that preach connection and generosity versus sales, and those groups are wonderful. I don't necessarily meet clients there, which isn't really my goal anyway. I meet other business owners who are dealing with the same issues I am. Suddenly I have people to vent to or ask questions to, and they understand. I'm currently in two different groups: one exclusively for consultants in the Pacific Northwest who work with nonprofits and one for folks in creative fields. The groups are great places to learn from other business owners, and they provide me with a great referral network.

Business coaching groups.

I've worked with a few coaches in the past, with varying levels of success (whatever that means). One of my favorites was a coach who worked with small, women-owned businesses, and I met a great group of women there—one of whom I'm still friends with ten years later.

Coworking spaces (real or virtual).

I had a membership at a swanky business club for a while, which wasn't a good fit for a number of reasons, but it gave me a place to go to be around other people and get work done in a different setting. I have colleagues who rent space in small coworking offices with other folks, and there are other spaces you can rent for the hour or the day if you want a change of scenery for a while. During the pandemic, virtual coworking became a big thing in my circles, and I love it. I check in with a group on Zoom at the appointed time, tell them what I plan to work on, and then turn off my camera for an hour or two before checking in again at the end. There's something comforting about knowing that other people are working *with* me. I love having the accountability and being able to connect with other people without having to leave my house. Don't have a group of people to cowork with? Use a service like Focusmate (focusmate.com)—with options for different time intervals and locations, you can almost always find someone somewhere to work with.

My mentor.

I've been working with my mentor Ilise off and on for over ten years, and it has been one of the best things I've done. Not only do I get great advice from her and regular contact with someone who isn't one of my clients, but her network has become my network—it's an amazing community of folks that I don't know what I'd do without. Mentors come in lots of formats—maybe it's someone you worked with at a previous company, someone you met through a business contact, or a coach that you hire. If you know people who have mentors, ask how they found them and try a few out.

Accountability groups.

I am great at getting deadlines done for other people, but I'm lousy at doing them for myself. So accountability groups are a big help for me. Sometimes it's as simple as emailing a colleague to tell them that I'm committing to work on x for the next hour, and then checking in when I'm done. I am currently

signed up for two weekly groups: one that forces me to carve out an hour each week to work on new client outreach and one that forces me to carve out two hours for writing (the result of which you're reading right now).

Work at a coffee shop.

I occasionally meet up with a colleague at a local coffee shop—we bring our laptops and work together separately for a few hours. I don't like to do this on my own as I find it hard to focus, but a small café could be a great place for you to sit with a treat and get some work done.

Buddy retreats.

You're self-employed, so if you really want to go big, create your own retreat. My friend Anita (a finance consultant) and I have done our own end-of-year business retreat. We get a room for two nights at a nice hotel and carve out time to work on our own business goals for the year, peppered with spa treatments and lively discussions over fancy meals in between. It's so much fun and so productive! This only works if you're with someone who is also serious about getting work done during the working part of the retreat though.

Social media groups.

Social media can be a little tricky since it's all online, but they can be great places to meet like-minded folks and get advice. Facebook groups like Freelancing Females and Millo Mastermind have been helpful to me in finding contractors to work with or getting advice on how other business owners would handle a specific client issue. And there's almost always someone online, so if you're feeling lonely, you can reach out and someone will most likely be there.

Whatever you try, show up with genuine curiosity and a spirit of generosity. You never know who you'll meet or who they know or where the connection will lead.

TAKE THE Next Step

GOOD

- Try out a coworking space or attend a networking event and get to know the people in your area.

BETTER

- Join a networking group or trade organizations in your particular area of interest, especially those geared towards freelancers and entrepreneurs.

BEST

- Test out some small accountability groups and coworking sessions until you find your people.