

UXPin

Creative
MARKET

The Field Guide to
Self-Employed Web Design





&



The Field Guide to **Self-Employed Web Design**

Copyright © 2015 by UXPin Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication text may be uploaded or posted online without the prior written permission of the publisher.

For permission requests, write to the publisher, addressed “Attention: Permissions Request,” to hello@uxpin.com.

Index

Introduction	6
The Good, The Bad and the Ugly of Being a Self-Employed Designer	8
Be Sure to Leave Old Habits Behind	9
Don't Forget About Your Family	11
Persevere Through the Lean Times	11
Don't Fear the Competition	12
Figure Out What Makes You... Well You	13
The Design-Side of Being a Self-Employed Designer	17
Make Your Work Good	18
Master Your Tools	19
Have a Process	19
Design for Client Success, Not for Dribbble	21
Know Your Strengths and Weaknesses	22
The Business-Side of Being a Self-Employed Designer	24
Business Development	25
Business isn't a Bad Word	25
Be Clear on What You Offer	26
Onboard Your New Clients	27
Read the Fine Print	29
Keep Track of Those Hours	31

Building a Working Relationship With Clients	33
Don't assume, and don't let them assume	34
Time apart and lack of attention are relationship killers	35
Invest in your relationships	36
Collaborating as a Self-Employed Designer	38
Be Clear About What You Bring to Collaboration Projects	39
Be a go-to for designers for other designers	39
Be Clear With Yourself About Where You're Going	40
Conclusion	41
Staying Motivated While Working From Home	42
Get Some Rest	43
Get Some Exercise	44
Create an Inspiring Environment	45
Set Boundaries	47
Reward Yourself	48
Staying Motivated is a Decision. Are you ready?	50



Adam Fairhead

Adam Fairhead is the founder of [Fairhead Creative](#), a creative web design & marketing company that helps online business owners motivate their visitors to buy online. Adam is one of UXPin's contributing writers. [Follow him on Twitter!](#)



Laura Busche

Laura Busche is a brand content strategist at [Creative Market](#), a platform for handcrafted, mousemade design content from independent creatives around the world. She has written the book [Lean Branding](#) and has published numerous articles for [Smashing Magazine](#). You can see more of her work [at her website](#). [Follow her on Twitter!](#)

Introduction

One of the beauties of the web is that you can choose your own adventure. You can work in-house as a designer. Or work at an agency. And if you wanted to, you could break out on your own, where you have total control over when and how you work.



For many, their dream job is to choose their working hours based on whatever else you happen to have going on that week. Need a vaca-

tion? Work another project or two and go take one. Or just take the afternoon off and head down to the beach.

In this pocket guide, as somebody who has owned both types of business, we're going to take an unbiased look into that second world: a day in the life of a self-employed designer.

For the love of UX Design,
Adam Fairhead

The Good, The Bad and the Ugly of Being a Self-Employed Designer

I started in the world of design as a self-employed designer. There's a huge amount of autonomy that comes with it, if you can make it work for you.

For me, the greatest advantage was the freedom of movement it gave me. As an Englishman who met a very lovely lady from Long Island NY, my self-employed status allowed me to work anywhere – my home, her home, airports, Boeing 747s. It didn't matter. It also allowed me to remain gainfully employed when we moved to sunny Florida and married.



I got to work while the beaches were full to the brim with people, and go for a swim while everyone else was stuck in offices.

I later married my passion for design with my passion for business to build [Fairhead Creative, a creative web design agency](#) that offers design & marketing services that genuinely help businesses make more money online.

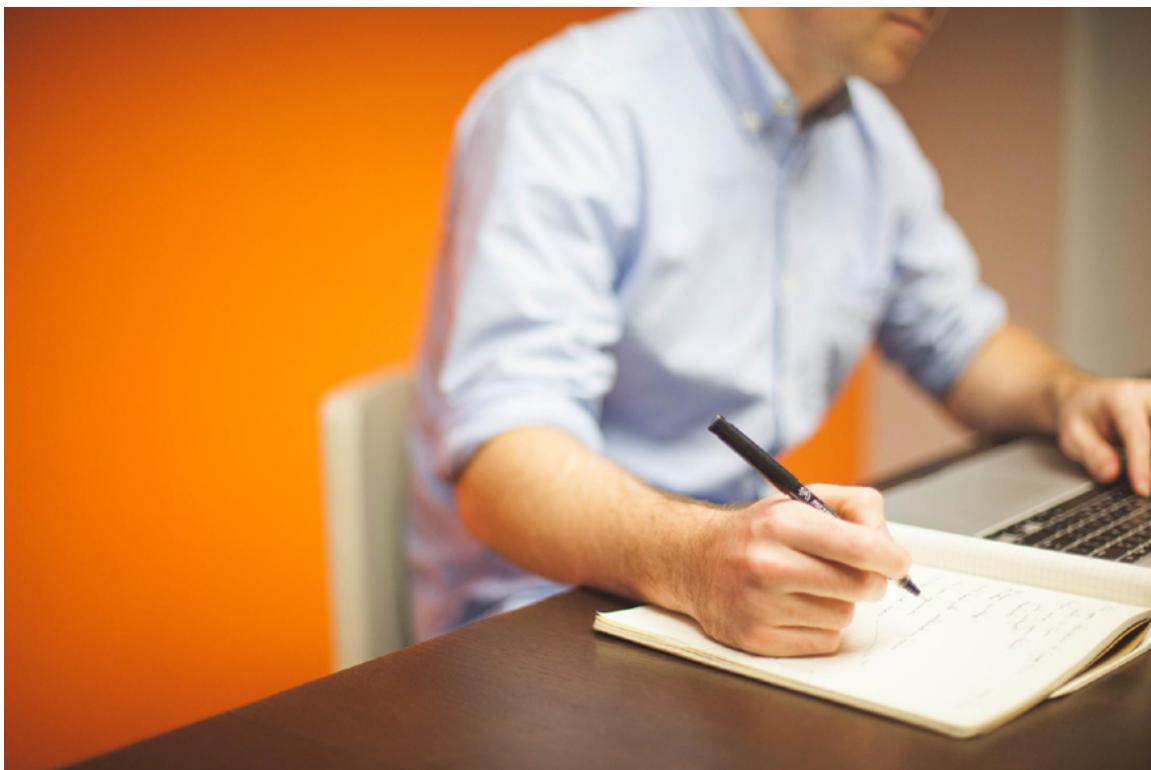
I could have continued as an independent designer – nothing forced me to grow the business, other than my personal vision. If you put the work in, and you're smart about how you do that work, you can absolutely operate as an independent, self-employed designer for the long haul.

More importantly, if you can learn to love the good, bad and ugly of working on your own, then you'll make it. With that, let's take a look at the pros and cons of being a designer-for-hire.

Be Sure to Leave Old Habits Behind

If your old job gave you an office, a start time and a health insurance package, you likely formed habits to keep yourself in good standing with the company. And good for you!

But now you're a self-employed designer. You get to throw away those habits and start anew.



Sure, you'll likely need to pick up the phone and call people you don't know. You'll need to pitch your services to prospects. You'll need to manage your own projects and meet your own deadlines. But you make the schedule.

Take the opportunity to create new habits, and create them around your work and your family. Who says you can't take off Thursday afternoons to hit the beach, then make the time up on Saturday? Nobody!

Similarly, the tools you offer and the approach to rendering services you take are also open to change. Choose your platforms, tools, philosophies and brand of your own design. Make it uniquely yours, and make it the best you can.

Don't Forget About Your Family

Time with your family is a commodity you won't get back. With most of my family living overseas, I'm hyper-aware of the value of family time: you just can't afford to miss it.

As a self-employed designer, you have the autonomy to give your family attention, thanks to a more flexible work schedule, and (hopefully) a larger paycheck. It's logical, but depending on how you're wired, it's not always easy.

I find it very easy to become a workaholic. I love my work, and the hours fly when I feel I'm making a difference. I've been fortunate enough to have married a very understanding lady, who cares enough to help me step away from work when I'm on the slippery slope.

Society praises the workaholic, but forget all that: keep family a focus. You'll be happier and your work will be more productive because of it. You'll also find ways to become efficient at what you do without sacrificing value to your clients.

Persevere Through the Lean Times

As a self-employed designer, there were times where work was slower than others. Managing finances during the ups and downs is something you need to be "on top of", otherwise it'll turn into sleepless

nights and spouse fights. Perseverance and #4 of this white paper will help keep these times to a minimum.



"Being good with Photoshop" may land you a job in somebody else's firm, but it won't keep you warm and dry when you're self-employed. You need to identify what makes you unique – special – and let everybody you meet know that.

Don't Fear the Competition

Lots of people are "getting into web". Outsourcing is easier than ever, with some charging ridiculously low prices for their work. And others are diluting the field with the title "freelancer" as an alternative to "unemployed".

While competition is fierce, there's room for you, if you make room.

- **Study your market.** Learn about who's playing in your space, and who's satisfying their clients. What sells well? What niches of the market aren't being served as passionately or completely as others?

- **Think like your prospective clients.** The more time you spend researching from the eyes of a prospect, the more you'll spot where those prospects could be served better.
- **Look for opportunities in the market.** Perhaps there's a certain niche that gets less service because they aren't 'hip'. Or maybe your competition isn't communicating in a way that your market understands. Maybe you're better at educating prospects. Or maybe you provide significantly more value than they do.

The list goes on, but the point remains: the better you understand what's available, the better you'll understand what's not. There's your opportunity to stand out from the crowd.

Competition may fierce, but that doesn't mean you're the one person who doesn't get to play.

Figure Out What Makes You... Well You

Everyone that's fighting for a piece of the client pie says they're good. And you're going to have to cut through that noise and stand out.

"We offer quality web design services." – Everyone

To make yourself unique, you need to consider: what makes you unique, how do you pitch that to prospects, how do you sell that on your marketing site, and how do you position yourself as an expert.



Even if it's true, it doesn't make a difference because everyone else is saying it.

Back before responsive web design was a thing, I remember selling responsive web design to prospects. It was like magic, and when coupled with the rest of our offerings, it was the icing on the cake. Now, responsive design isn't a nicety, but a necessity. The work may still be valuable, but if everyone else is also doing it, the magic is lost.

A few ways you can get around this:

- **Case studies.** Don't just file away past client work. Use it to your advantage and write case studies that highlight how you solved a particular problem. Don't just showcase work, walk through the steps that got you to a solution. Design agency Fairhead Creative uses [cases studies like this one](#) that do just that.

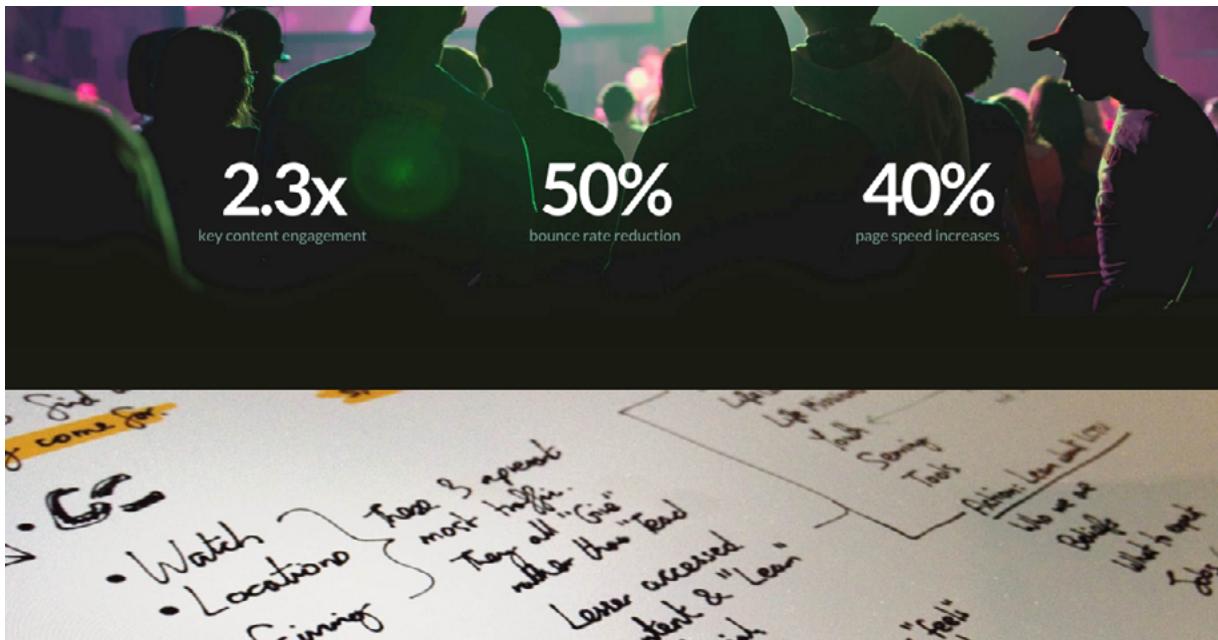


Photo credit: [Fairhead Creative](#)

- **Testimonials from past clients.** In addition to a well-written case study, you can make the case (pun fully intended) for you. Social proof goes a long way in getting others to trust in your skills. Never underestimate a juicy quote from a past client on your abilities.

“Fairhead Creative is, hands down, the best freelance relationship I’ve ever had. They are always on top of our projects and quickly turnaround beautiful work.”

— Brandon, ZURB

Photo credit: [Fairhead Creative](#)

- **Keep your skills fresh.** Always be learning. Stay on top of trends and the latest techniques, some of which you can brush up on in this ebook [Web Design Trends 2015-2016](#). It’s the only way you’ll stay competitive.

- **Capitalize on your strengths.** Have a think about what you bring to the table that others don't, or won't, or can't. With an industry as big as this one, there's lots of different ways to do things, and lots of opportunities to stand out.

There will always be others waiting to eat your lunch. But at the end of the day, the only person that you're competing against is yourself. If you know the market, then you can capitalize on the opportunities. But to do so, you have to keep up your skills and sell yourself on your strengths.

The Design-Side of Being a Self-Employed Designer

The design-side of being a self-employed designer affords you a healthy dose of both form and function. As a solo operator, you'll need to keep both in mind at all times.



At [Fairhead Creative](#), we routinely create strategies for our clients in an attempt to find the most effective ways to communicate with their target audiences. Our process focuses more on strategy and on crafting the emotional connections than on visuals and aesthetics.

You can do this too as a self-employed designer. Here's a few steps that you need to keep in mind.

Make Your Work Good

After having looking for design hires in the past, I can confidently say that “[the middle](#)” is *huge* in this industry. There’s a lot of OK work, and a lot of frankly quite lazy workers.

Everyone promises great design, and great results. These things are seldom proven, or even true. It’s tricky to find design hires or contractors that genuinely do good work. Perhaps it’s one of the reasons some companies try to bring the good ones in-house, even if they don’t have much design work to be done.

You’ve got to break out of obscurity – out of “the middle” – by having design work that not only looks great, but also performs well for your clients.

This isn’t just about meeting the client’s goals. But going beyond them and bringing value to the table. It’s your job to think on another level than the client, looking for opportunities that they might miss. You have to understand the client’s goals – whether its to increase conversions, to lower attrition, or something else entirely – and then ask the right questions to figure out solutions to those problems. Play the role of problem solver, not implementer.

Master Your Tools

Time spent wrestling with your tools is time you won't get back. Design tools tend to have a lot of nuances, quirks and features that are baked many levels deep. There's often a faster, better way to do things that take more than a few keystrokes to do.

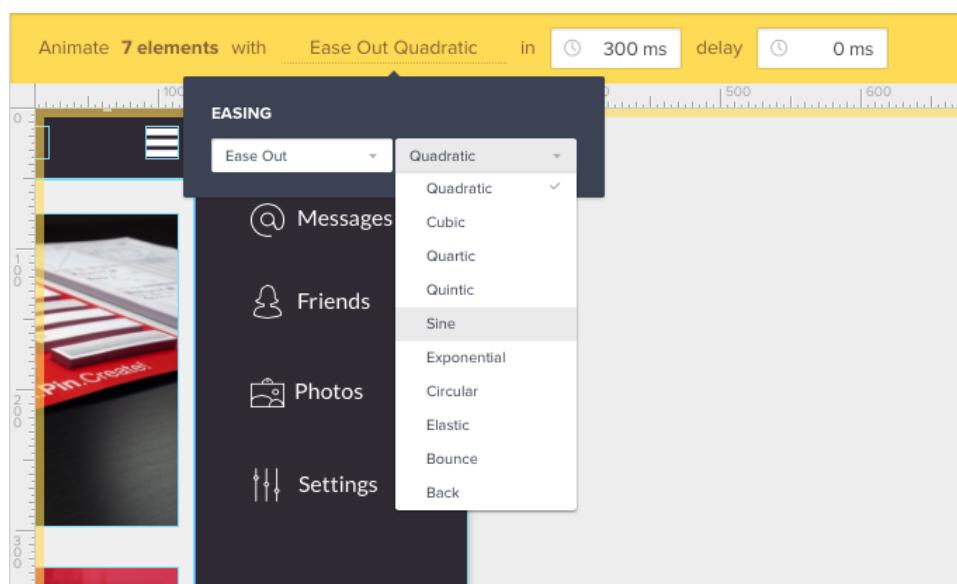


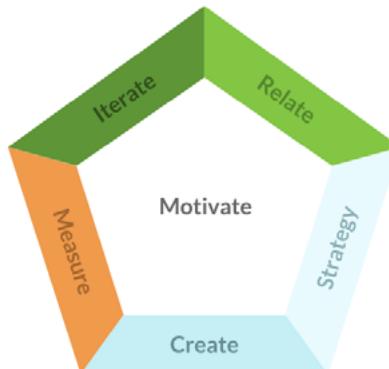
Photo credit: UXPin

If you use tools like Adobe Photoshop & Illustrator, or even [UXPin](#), take the time to learn the shortcuts and hidden features that will easily save you at least an hour a week – an hour you can spend adding even more value to your clients, pushing their dollars further.

Have a Process

As described in the free white paper [10 Pro Tips to a Smarter UX Design Process](#), a solid process will allow you the confidence to forge forward when things become difficult.

When I interview potential design hires, it amazes me how few of them have a process. I lose interest fast when I see this.



Our Process

Achieve your goals by helping your visitors achieve theirs.

Photo credit: Fairhead Creative

See which of these scenarios is the commentary of your brain when you work:

1. “I’ve been on the clock for 5 hours now and I still don’t have any good ideas for this project! Oh my gosh, none of them seem to be what the client wants. If I keep this up I’ll have nothing to show for it, perhaps I’m not cut out for this designer stuff, oh my gosh...”
2. “I’ve been on the clock for 5 hours, and I have 4 ideas, 3 of which made it past the first steps, 1 of which passed two. If that one doesn’t pan out, I’ll go back and dive into the other 2. In any case, I’ve learned a lot about what the client is looking for.”

Process is the difference between stressing about a project because you couldn’t jump from A to Z in a single leap, and methodically working your way to the right solution.

Fairhead Creative uses a [web design process](#) that takes clients through a clearly defined six step cycle. All clients go through this cycle, and we know which step each client is in, with each project. This helps us avoid the mess of the former example.

Design for Client Success, Not for Dribbble

The work you do needs to work. Don't just design something for the sake of design. You should be solving problems, not causing them.

**HOW TO RECOGNIZE
Great UX Designer?**

 Deeply cares for people he/she designs products for.	 Understands mysteries of the human mind.
 Performs qualitative test to precisely understand problems of people.	 Analyzes behavior of people basing on quantitative data.
 Visualizes his/her ideas in a clear form as a sketch, diagram, wireframe, or prototype.	 Has a great, up to date, knowledge of Psychology, HCI, Information Architecture, Usability....
 Communicates his/her ideas efficiently. Works well with others.	 Understands that great designs are achieved iteratively.
 GREAT DESIGNERS DESIGN GREAT, EFFICIENT & COMPELLING PRODUCTS	

Great UX Designers use **UXPin** - The UX Design App (<http://uxpin.com>)

UXPin

Photo credit: UXPin

It needs to look good too, of course, but looks are no substitute for results. Many designers spend significantly more time about kerning and border radii than potential conversion rates.

Both are important – as a craftsman you of course want all the details to be right.

But a perfectly crafted hammer won't get results if what the client needed was a screwdriver.

Know Your Strengths and Weaknesses

Are you a web designer + developer + video editor + animator + flash game programmer + songwriter + iOS developer?

Who can also sing?

Don't try to be everything to everyone. I've interviewed people who say they're a master of a huge list of things. There's a place for generalists, but as a self-employed designer, you need to know what you bring to the table that makes you a better choice than your competition.

Even unicorns know they're better at running than climbing trees.

Whew! That was a long section. Let's review:

- **Do great work.** The world has enough 'good enough' work to choose from.
- **Invest the time in knowing your tools.** It'll speed up your turn-around times, it'll give you confidence to try new things, and you'll be able to give your clients more for their dollar.

- **Don't fall for every shiny new designer-thing.** There's a new one every month, and you won't have time to use them all. Be mindful of what you spend your time on: are you playing or are you getting things done?
- **Have a process.** It gives you a roadmap and it gives your clients confidence in you.
- **Remember the purpose of your designs.** People hire designers for results, not art. Please your clients, not your Dribbble followers.
- **Know why a client would choose you.** If you're not sure, it's time to place yourself in their shoes – what makes you different to everyone else?

The Business-Side of Being a Self-Employed Designer

Don't skip this part!

That needed saying: I've worked with designers before that literally tune out when the subject of business comes up. I've never understood why.



Photo credit: Plantoo47, Creative Commons 2.0

If you're one of the thousands of self-employed designers that don't take this part seriously, you could be one of the thousands of self-employed designers struggling to get by. You don't want that, and I don't want that for you.

There's some parts of being a self-employed designer that just have to happen:

Business Development

This means different things to different people. For a self-employed designer, business development is a question: *"How can I give even more value, to more of my niche?"*

When it's positioned like that, it's far more palatable for the self-employed designer. How can you help more people? How can you leverage your design skills to make more of an impact for your clients? How can you reach more people to make an impact for?

I gave this the #1 spot because if you don't read any of the other points, I wanted you to read this one.

Business isn't a Bad Word

Business simply means '*the activity someone is engaged in*' – you're in the business of helping your clients communicate visually. How can you do more of that?

Whether you're a self-employed designer or a business owner, you're either going to be passionate about your product or service, or you're going to be passionate about the people you serve.

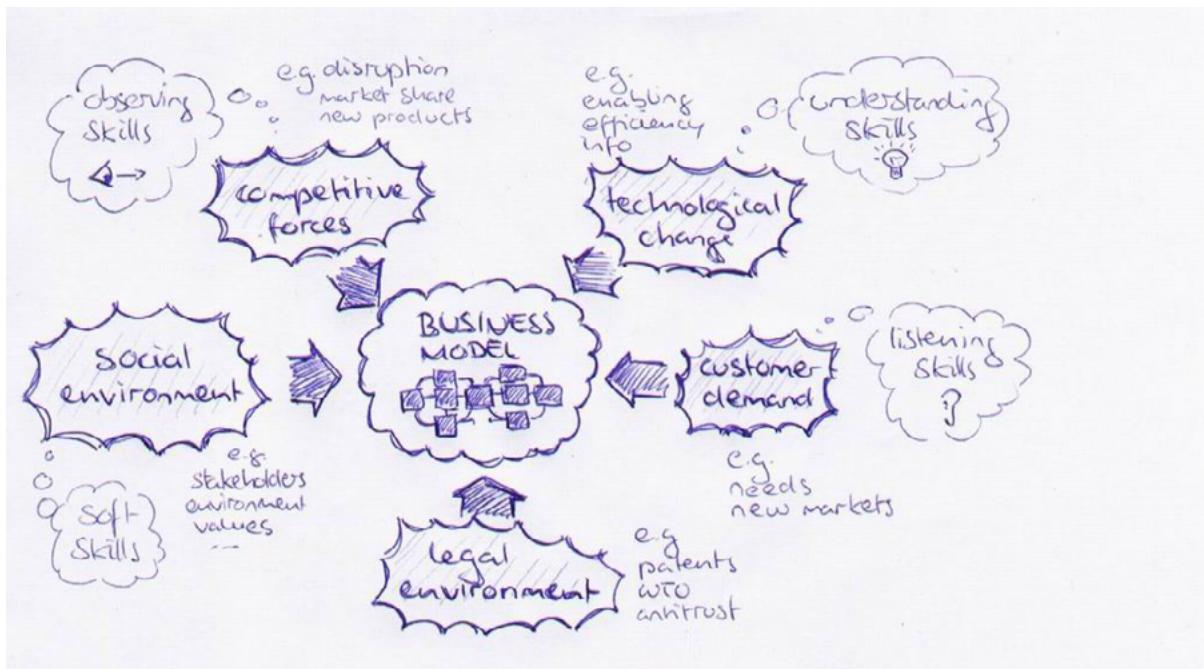


Photo credit: Alexander Osterwalder, Creative Commons 2.0

I believe it's even more important for self-employed designers to love their clients more than their tools, than it is for many other types of business owner. The reason is this: the design world moves so fast, and changes so quickly, that it takes passion to keep up. That environment breeds passion for your craft – and rightly so! Remember to channel all that passion and energy back at your clients.

Be Clear on What You Offer

We touched a similar point earlier, when we covered the importance of knowing what you're best at. This one focuses on how you package up what you're best at.

I think this one also requires that you remember the difference between what you do, and what the client gets.

For example, “we do persona development” means nothing to most clients, where “increasing conversion rates by targeting demographics separately” makes a whole lot more sense.

Home Depot sells customers ‘drills’. The customers want ‘a hole in their wall’. Same thing, different terminology.

Some clients will be interested to know what kind of drill you’ll be using, and why you think it’s the best drill for the job. All clients will be interested to know if you’re going to give them the exact hole they want.

Onboard Your New Clients

Have a clear onboarding process for yourself. If you do, and you’re approached by a prospect, the confidence you have in your process will shine through. You’ll know exactly what should happen next, and you can guide your prospect through the steps.

Prospects become clients when they’re confident in you, your ability to deliver results and your value proposition. A solid process will really help you instill that confidence.

Similarly, declining clients that you don’t believe will allow you to deliver results or your value proposition to is equally important.

Perhaps they want something you have no idea how to do (and it's sufficiently out of your wheelhouse for you to learn in a timely manner). Or perhaps their budget is too small. Maybe the product they're selling doesn't align with you ethically.



In any of these cases, it's your role to shut the deal down, rather than compromising your integrity or ethics by delivering bad work or building bad products.

While we're talking about shutting the deal down, there are a few things to look out for:

- Make sure they have the funds to commit to working with you, or at least enough to get started.
- Make sure they're ready ready to start work on the project soon.
- Make sure your personalities can work well together. Otherwise, communication breakdowns are far more likely to happen.

- Make sure they respect you, your work, and your rate. You don't want to work with abusive clients, or clients that will dispute your worth – it's too much hassle.
- Do a quick Google search of their names and business name to see if they're legitimate or spam. Had a friend in the industry text me a recently asking if a prospect of his was spam – a quick Google search revealed that it was.
- Make sure they have passion for their own project. You won't want to work on failures any more than the clients do, even if you are getting paid for it.

Read the Fine Print

You probably know you'll want good contracts in place before you do business with other companies. That's well documented online, and there's lots of great free and paid resources online that can help you get set up with some workable documents.

But the best contract in the world may not help you if someone on the other side of the world decides to disappear without paying you. Have good contracts, have clear payment guidelines, and be wise about who you do business with.

For example, [Fairhead Creative](#) uses simply but comprehensive contract documents that outline when we expect each partial payment, ahead of each piece of work starting, so that we can be paid incre-

mentally as work is completed. Whatever payment details work best for your market, get it in writing, just encase.

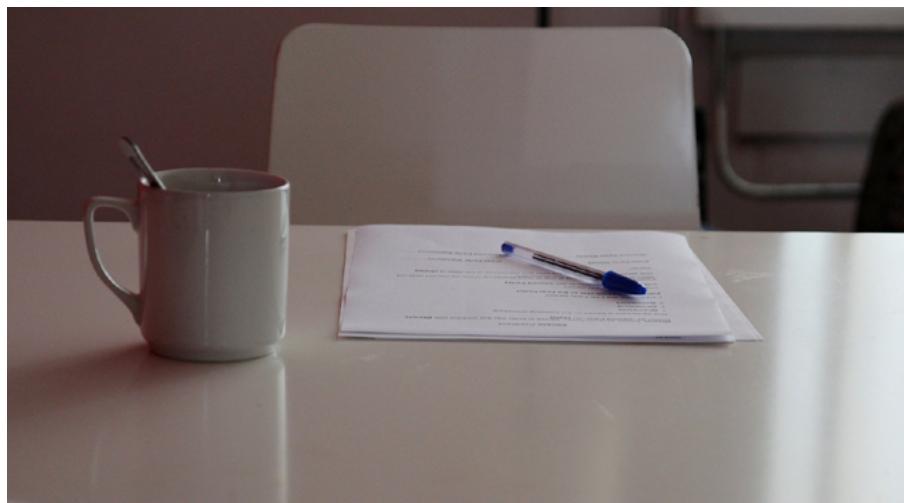


Photo credit: [24oranges.nl](#), Creative Commons 2.0

As depressing as it may sound, I'd recommend brushing up on what the procedures are in your country and state for things like small claims courts and collection agencies. Hopefully you'll never need either, but knowing how to set the process in motion if someone breaks the rules will give you the confidence to tackle problems appropriately, rather than shying away.

- **Think of ways to add more value.** If you're a web designer, perhaps you have a logo designer friend you could offer to your clients. If you're a logo designer, perhaps you can offer brand collateral. Perhaps you could contribute to open-source projects to push your industry's tools forward and demonstrate proficiency to your clients. Whatever it is, find ways to add value.
- **Channel your passion towards your clients.** Design is a labor of love. Be sure to channel that love towards your clients as well as your Dribbble profile.

- **Know what your offer is.** Don't try to be the best at everything in the world. Even unicorns know they're better at running than climbing trees.
- **Set up a clear onboarding process.** Give your prospects confidence in you by having solid processes that give you confidence in return.
- **Get good contracts in place & know the laws.** May you never need to turn to the law. But please don't keep yourself in the dark.

Keep Track of Those Hours

Do you know how long your previous projects took you? How long did you spend on each part of the process? If you were to take away a specific section of the design work, how would that affect the price?



Without this data, you're screwing yourself and your wallet. The better you track your time, the more accurate your estimates become. Become a master time-tracker.

There's lots of great tools online, such as [Freckle](#), [Harvest](#) and [Freshbooks](#), but they'll only be as effective as the person using them: choose a tool, master it, and master your usage of it.

I'm better at leading than managing; better at creating value than counting value. It's probable that you're better at managing than I am, but even if you're not, commit to tracking your time effectively. That was another long section, so let's recap:

- **No assumptions.** You're the expert in your field, so break things down for your clients so they understand all the value you're offering them.
- **Keep in touch.** Don't let your relationships wither and die.
- **Give more than you get.** It seldom costs you much to do. It only requires that you care enough about them.
- **Price to their success.** Whether it's hourly, fixed, retainer, credit, exchange, or something else entirely. Find the best way for your audience.
- **Track your time.** If you don't, every project is like your first.

Building a Working Relationship With Clients

“Client relations” as a term always sounds a bit artificial to me. Let’s call it “relationships with clients” – a small difference, but it’ll make everything feel much more human.



Like any good relationship, you’ve got to earn and build trust on both ends. And that begins the moment a prospect contacts you. As we said earlier, you want your prospects to have confidence in what you’re going to deliver and you’ll want to have confidence in that they’ll participate in the process. When those prospects become pay-

ing clients, they've put their trust in you. You're entrusted with their site, their brand and their online presence – and that's a lot of trust.

It's critically important that we show honor and respect to our clients. They've put their trust in you: let's make certain you're doing everything you can to be worthy of it.

Don't assume, and don't let them assume

If you went to the doctor's office and were told "you have Nasopharyngitis", you'd freak out.

If they used language we understood and instead said "you just have a common cold, nothing to worry about", you'd be relieved.

Same message, different delivery.

You're the professional. They're the client. It's your job to translate their hopes, dreams and goals into tangible deliverables that can help them. For example, don't assume they want a WordPress site because they said "WordPress", that could mean "I want a CMS" to them.

- **Ask follow up questions to get to the root of what a client is actually saying.** Like with the "WordPress," clients may not be able to express what they really want or what's really bothering them. You have to probe, and ask why something bothers them.

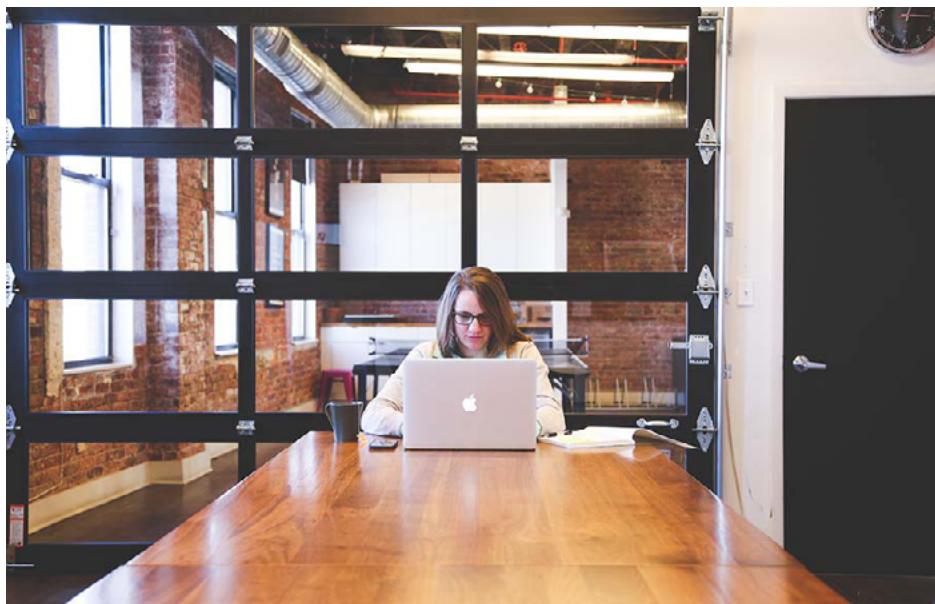
- **Always make things clear, even if they feel obvious.** They're only obvious to you because you're the professional.
- **Be their trusted guide.** As clients negotiate the tricky waters of design, lead them through the process. Don't let them go it alone.

Doing these things will alleviate any uncertainty for the clients. If you don't, then they'll have to face the unknown and fill in the blanks with assumptions.

Time apart and lack of attention are relationship killers

Relationships require time and attention. How many relationships, friendships and marriages, fall apart from a lack of communication and time apart? The things that can also kill a client engagement. Here's what you can do to ensure the relationship doesn't sour:

- **Don't disappear for weeks.** Keep clients continually update as to where the project is at. Weekly updates that outline what work will be done and delivered that same week reassures clients. Design Agency ZURB uses [a five-day rolling forecast](#) to keep clients informed.
- **Repeat back client feedback.** Summarize the major points of feedback, especially if you're on a call or in a face-to-face session. This allows you to double-check whether you accurately captured their feedback. It also allows the client a chance to clarify any points brought up.



Communication is key while working with the client. But, believe it or not, it's also important long after the final work is delivered. If you make a great set of designs for a client, then disappear for years, you're far less likely to be chosen when they need more work doing. Instead, you'll have wasted the time and emotional energy you invested in a relationship.

Don't let your relationships go to waste.

Invest in your relationships

Your clients are people, and people were made for relationships. Be a trusted source in the networks of your clients, and stay in their lives so you can help them however you possibly can, whenever you possibly can.

A few things you can do to keep in touch:

- **Put out a newsletter.** Have an opt-in newsletter that your clients can subscribe to, where you can regularly update them on all that's fit to print about your business.
- **Send a holiday card.** And maybe a gift too. However, something simple as a card lets your clients know that they aren't forgotten. It's also a good way to remind them you're still around.
- **Send business their way.** Invariably we all get asked if we know a guy. Well, if someone you know is looking for a service or product that your previous clients have, then recommend away.
- **Return the favor.** A client may ask you for help in recommending another service or if you know someone they can hire. If you can, return the favor. Help them out and they'll remember you.

For example, I'm often happy to refer prospects that don't fit our company to other service providers – just because we can't ship their deliverables, it doesn't mean they can't continue to see us as a trustworthy, reliable, helpful friend.

Similarly, we're happy to introduce past and existing clients to one another, if one client ever has trouble with something that another could easily solve. By investing in relationships, these opportunities present themselves willingly.

Collaborating as a Self-Employed Designer

Sometimes, projects call for more than one person.

We mentioned earlier that you can't be the best at everything. Projects that require skills other than your chosen mastery give you two options: hack it together yourself, or find people who chose different masteries to you.



Photo credit: [_dChris](#), Creative Commons 2.0

I've always enjoyed working with other designers and developers. I've been fortunate enough to have some great friendships come out of these working relationships.

Be Clear About What You Bring to Collaboration Projects

“Web designer” means different things to different people. At Fairhead Creative, we make the distinction clearer, between “visual web design,” “user experience design,” “information designer,” “content strategist” and so on.

Make it clear what specific skills you bring to the table. This will prevent confusion or assumptions about your abilities, and it’ll let you all leverage talents that may have otherwise gone unnoticed.

Be a go-to for designers for other designers

Consider becoming a logo designer’s web designer. Or a brand designer’s graphic designer. Or a web designer’s web developer.

By becoming the go-to for other people in the industry, you’re providing a service both to them and to their clients. This is a great way to add value to the marketplace and to add new streams of potential clients for your business.

As outlined in *Design Collaboration in the Enterprise*, when you better understand what others do, you’ll be able to better collaborate with them.

Be Clear With Yourself About Where You're Going

Collaborative relationship can last as long as a project, or they can last for a long time. It's important, I think, to keep in mind where you want to go in your self-employed design career.

If you want to stay solo, protect that! Don't let the collaboration overtake you and disconnect you from your flow of clients. In any case, be clear about where you want to go and think about what you're creating, every day.

- **Let them know what you can do.** Everyone is unique, so let collaborators know what skills you have to offer.
- **Add value to other designers and their clients.** Give them the opportunity to resell you. If you and the other designer both have the client's best interests, this type of relationship will be very natural.
- **Remember your goals.** Spend your time building towards where you want to go, rather than being carried away by the tide of your peers.

Conclusion

Pour yourself a fruity drink. Take advantage of the blue sky so many don't get to see from their depressing office cubicles. You're a self-employed designer, and you make your own rules.

The world of design has never been more busy and competitive. It's tough. But you can rise up over the competition in your space. It's my hope that you take action on some of the action bullet points above, and grow your self-employed design career into everything you dream it can be.

Design wireframes & prototypes collaboratively (free UXPin trial)

Staying Motivated While Working From Home

Bonus material from our friends at [Creative Market](#)

Written by Laura Busche

Finally, keeping a business going and thriving as a self-employed designer depends on also staying motivated. Persistence is key. But it can sometimes be hard to stay motivated when you're working alone. And it becomes harder when you're working from home.



Photo credit: Stefan and Janni

There are a thousand distractions, and it's easy to soothe the guilt of leaving work half-done when you get sidetrack into something productive, like folding laundry or taking your dog for another walk.

But not all is lost. There are techniques that can keep you focused and motivated. Let's take a brief look at what those are.

Get Some Rest

It can be difficult to pull yourself away from the computer but staying up too late can have an impact on your work.

Stanford psychologist Kelly McGonigal, PhD, has conducted research into the ways sleep deprivation affects our ability to follow through on tasks. In her book "[The Willpower Instinct](#)," she explains that the prefrontal cortex is especially vulnerable to lack of sleep. That's the part of the brain that governs your reaction to cravings and impulses.

If you typically get less than six hours of sleep each night, your pre-frontal cortex simply lacks the energy to keep you on-task. You're a sitting duck for whatever temptation distracts you. The lack of sleep leaves you vulnerable to distractions and procrastination, according to Dr. McGonigal.

To ensure you have the brainpower to tackle each day's work projects, try setting a reasonable bedtime and leaving electronic devices turned off when you settle in for the night. Also, a good night's sleep will do

wonders for a difficult design problem you're trying to solve. Research has found that [sleeping on a problem](#) helps you come up with creative solutions more than if you stayed up and pushed through it. By not focusing too heavily on the problem, and "sleeping on it," you may find that the solution will await you in the morning.

One of the greatest challenges for at-home workers is learning to separate resting spaces from workspaces. If you're having a hard time letting go of your to-do list in order to rest, try removing physical objects that remind you about it. Computers, certain books, documents and writing instruments can be your worst enemy when trying to lead a more balanced lifestyle. Create a special environment conducive to rest and relaxation.

Get Some Exercise

Getting plenty of rest is important, but moving your body around is equally crucial. Neuroscientists doing research for the [Illinois Public Health Institute](#) found a direct correlation between people's level of physical activity and their cognitive functioning. Interestingly, the part of the brain most affected by too much sitting around is the part that handles "executive functioning." That's the function that includes self-control and goal-directed activity.

Every project that you embark on as an independent designer will require a strong sense of self-regulation. Since you're constantly setting your own hours and milestones, it is crucial that your exec-

utive functioning is up to par. While some might think that exercise “exhausts” your mind, it is actually a strong boost for your cognitive abilities. If you set a timer on your work desk and get up every hour for five minutes of aerobics or yoga, you’ll find that you’re actually more productive throughout your entire day.

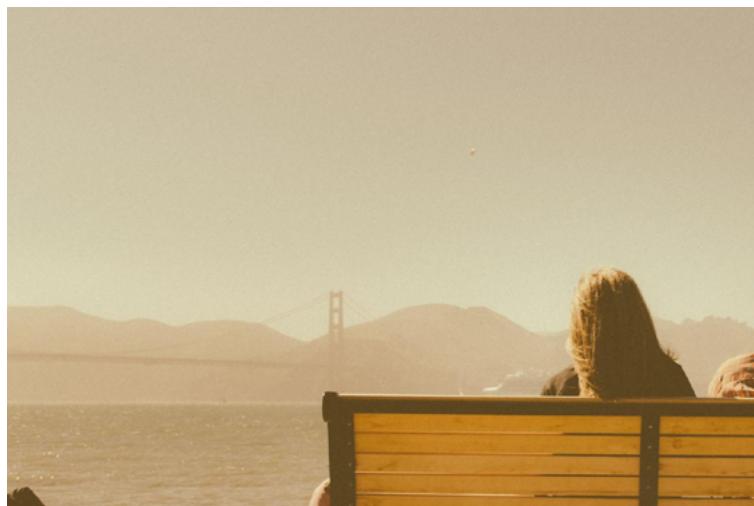


Photo credit: Photocreo Michal Bednarek

Believe it or not, your colleague’s crazy commute might provide opportunities for physical activity that your stay-at-home routine doesn’t. Biking to work or walking to the subway are simply not options when your office is at arm’s length. Since the environment for exercise isn’t there, you’ll have to go ahead and create it.

Create an Inspiring Environment

Are you trying to work in a crowded back room of your house, cluttered with excess boxes and a smattering of used coffee cups? Your physical surroundings have a powerful impact on your work motivation, according to researchers from the [University of Leeds Business](#)

School. They point out that excess clutter can be especially damaging to a person's ability to concentrate and remain in a positive frame of mind.

You'll feel more focused if you create a workspace for yourself that's clean and peaceful. Even if you can't manage an entirely separate room for your work, you can achieve the same effect by using curtains or a room divider. Adding touches of living beauty, such as a bright bowl of guppies or some healthy houseplants will increase your satisfaction with your environment – and also with your work.

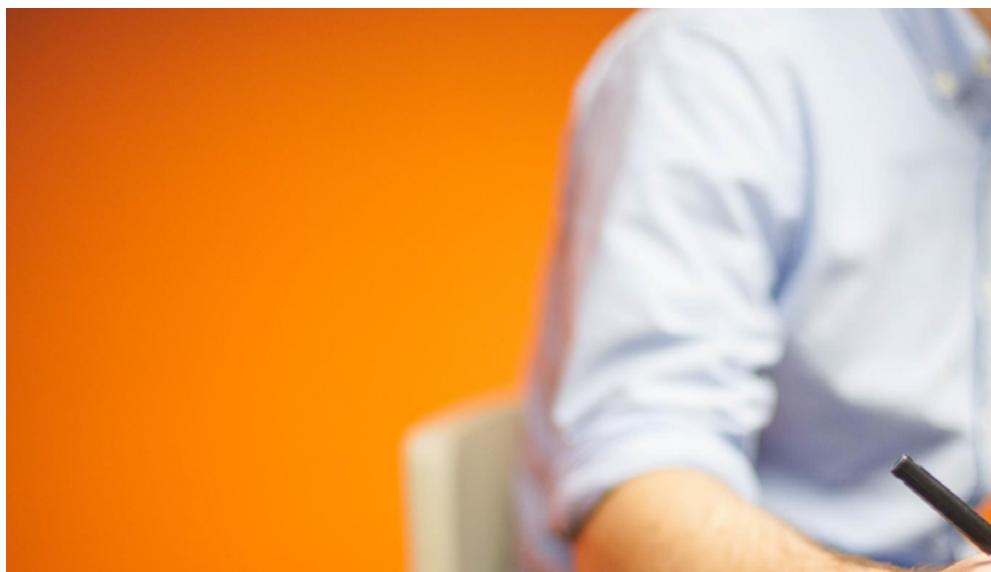


Photo credit: Einenblick

This is not to say that only excessively tidy workspaces provide inspiration. You've probably met designers who enjoy being surrounded by a little mess here and there – perhaps *you* are one of them. Being spontaneous and natural about your workspace makes it unique and inspiring. However, the main idea here is that excess clutter can be a detriment to your ability to focus. Whenever your creative mess is acting against your potential, it's time to rethink the way you work.

Set Boundaries

Working from home may sound luxurious to those who don't do it, but everyone whose commute is 15-feet long knows just how tricky it is to set boundaries. When are you actually at work? Does that mean you don't answer the phone when your friend calls you up? A research team writing for the [Organizational Dynamics Journal](#) found that the ability to definitively step away from work is closely correlated with better attitudes and higher productivity.



Photo credit: Stefan and Janni

You can set time boundaries by creating and sticking to a firm set of work hours. How much time will you work in total? How will you split those hours? Most importantly: are there any specific time periods that you're better off saving for particular activities? Some freelancers find that mornings are better used for brainstorming, curation and concept generation, while afternoons are great for meetings. Once you find a schedule that works for you, make sure you communicate

your availability taking it into account. A golden rule for independent creators is that what you allow will continue. Teach others how you'd like to be treated in a work relationship.

You can also set boundaries by literally closing the door to your office. When you're working, the closed door is a physical boundary that lets people who live with you know you're not to be disturbed – and when your workday is finished, the closed door helps keep you from thinking about work tasks. Many freelancers struggle with the idea of letting their friends and family know that they are busy and can't be interrupted. Closed doors can bring some relief to having to explain yourself to those who live with you every time, but they won't solve for those calling you.

Fortunately, most smartphones have a “Do Not Disturb” feature that sends all incoming calls to voicemail. How does this help? You'll still be able to pull emails and send/receive SMS at your own pace, while being polite about the fact that you are not currently available. Once you're back and ready for calls, remember to turn off “Do Not Disturb”.

Reward Yourself

Although you may find intrinsic rewards in the work you do at home, it can still be a struggle at times to manage your time effectively. [Researchers at University of Southern California](#) have developed and tested a theory that being rewarded (or rewarding yourself) for completing a certain set of tasks is highly motivating if you associate

the reward with personal competence and self-control. Of course the reward itself will obviously bring pleasure (especially if it involves chocolate!), but these psychologists want to remind us that the true reward is your own positive view of yourself.



Photo credit: Histeryk

You should avoid a situation where you only see yourself as working to earn the reward, and instead consider the reward as evidence that you're a hard-working, productive human being. The reward is a means, not an end. It's a positive signal that you are advancing in the right direction. How often are you giving yourself these signals? While you can be mentally aware of an accomplishment, rewarding yourself can make that success *truly* sink in. Find a type of reward that works for you and challenge yourself to reach new heights.

Staying Motivated is a Decision. Are you ready?

The science of human motivation is a fascinating one, and some universities even have doctoral programs studying this topic. While researchers continue to sort out the finer points of what motivates people, they agree on many of the basic points. You can take advantage of these principles and put them to work for yourself in a simple, straightforward way. By following the five easy steps above, you'll give yourself the best possible foundation for building a profitable independent career.

Everything you ever wanted in a **UX Design Platform**

- ✓ Complete prototyping framework for web and mobile
- ✓ Collaboration and feedback for any team size
- ✓ Lo-fi to hi-fi design in a single tool
- ✓ Integration with Photoshop and Sketch

[Start using it now!](#)