The Ultime Data Freelancer Starter Kit

Technical professionals in the data/AI space (e.g. data scientists, ML engineers, data analysts) possess high-value skillsets. This is clear by the 6-figure salaries that come with these job titles.

However, getting a full-time job is not the only way to monetize your technical skills. A growing career path for tech professionals is independent freelance and consulting work.

Whether you are looking for a side-hustle or a new main income source, this guide will cover everything you need to know to get your first client.

Target Audience

While the lessons here will overlap with other technical fields (e.g. software engineering, web development, etc.), this guide is written by and for people working in the AI and data space.

Since this still covers a large surface area, below are a handful of representative examples of how this guide seeks to help.

Who this is for?

- Data scientists who want to work on new and interesting problems
- Data engineers seeking more work flexibility
- Grad students who want to apply their skills to business problems
- Early career data analysts looking for a side hustle
- ML veterans who want to work for themselves

Who is this NOT for?

- People with no data engineering or ML experience

Defining Services

What do I sell?

Who do I sell to?

Notes from meeting: - Ask yourself: What have I done before? * People like to think that they need a very specialized set of skills in AI and data. This perspective is wrong. Actually, you will notice that most skills you have are actually relevant to what you can do in terms of AI and data. Most business skills are easy to implement in data fields. For example, a project manager of any kind will have the necessary know-how to design, implement and maintain complex systems, even if the project was outside the scope of data/AI fields.

- Picking a AI/data sub-domain (e.g. ML, LLMs, agents, data infra, data dashboard)
    - Setting all emotional approaches aside, there are two main ways you can make progress. I don't prefer one over another, it's just two different ways of doing business. They are:
        1) Pick a field in the industry which the companies need to maintain their systems and business. For example, companies will always need to maintain their data infra, making data engineering a solid field. Likewise, the companies will always want a comprehensive understanding of their data, making dashboarding & BI visualization another solid field.

2) Pick a "hype" topic. A field in which the excitement overwhelms the practical gains and tradition, where nothing is predictable until it has started. For example, you can find many businesses willing to work on AI workflows even though they aren't sure how and why they need to have an AI system to solve their problems. This is not necessarily bad. AI can have many (or no) benefits for a company. You can only tell by accepting to carry out an thorough analysis of the business. It should go without saying that making use of the hype does not mean that you should "convince" the business to use AI for everything. It would be wrong to sell them something they do not need. Reliabilty is the best form of long-term marketing. Don't forget that.

- Portfolio
  - There are several portfolios which you can build and utilize:
    1) A landing page with a list of your previous clients included.
    2) A showcase of the demos of the projects you have built for your clients. This can be included in a web page or a platform like Github.
    3) A platform (like a blog, YouTube channel etc.) where you share authentic details about your work. This basically ensures people that you know what you are talking about.
- How do I sell? (wrapping paper, how you pitch, client communication)
  - It is almost always better to follow a problem-first approach. There are two ways you can attain this:
    a. Talk to potential clients. Understand their work. Ask them about their problems.
    b. Act on a problem you noticed yourself and validate your ideas with a demo (or asking around)

Getting Your First Client

Ancedotes

How did you get your first client?

Shaw Talebi

It took me 9 months to get my 1st client. Not because it was challenging, but becuase of procrastination.

I made my Upwork profile in Dec 2021, but didn't actively apply to jobs (i.e. 2 per week) until Aug 2021. Once I did this, it took me 3 weeks to land my first client. It was a small EEG clinic looking for some guidance on using machine learning in their practice, which overlapped with my grad school research.

I ended up having a couple of calls with them and creating a write-up on the basics of supervised learning and decision trees. While it was a simple gig, going through the whole process gave me a ton of confidence and set me up for a future (more lucrative) project on Upwork.

Upwork

Referrals

LinkedIn Outreach

Crafting a Compelling Offer

What's Next?

Ideas for additional sections - Sale pipelines - Proposal/Contract templates - Refining a niche - Maintaining a tech stack - How to grow a team and delegate - Maintaining client relationships/client base