1:31

Alexey

**This week, we'll talk about doing data freelancing. We have a very special guest today, Dimitri. Dimitri is an independent data consultant. He has worked for both corporate and startup companies, in six countries across Europe, before he made the transition to becoming a full-time freelancer in 2019. Since then, he has worked with over 40 clients, ranging from small businesses to Fortune 500 [companies]. Today, we will talk about his journey, and he will share everything he learned – well, not everything because we only have one hour, but the most useful parts. Welcome to our interview.**

2:11

Dimitri

Alexey, thank you for having me.

2:13

Alexey

**The questions for today's interview were prepared by Johanna Bayer. Thanks, Johanna, for your help.**

# Dimitri’s background

2:20

Alexey

**Before we go into our main topic of becoming a freelancer and surviving as a freelancer, let's start with your background. Can you tell us about your career journey so far?**

2:32

Dimitri

Sure. I started off studying business administration and marketing. I got my first job in a marketing position, but it turned into a data position very fast. After that, I joined…

2:48

Alexey

**How did it actually turn into a data position? Well, I imagine that in marketing, you have all these paid marketing campaigns – all these different campaigns – and you need to effectively measure that. This is how you ended up in data, right?**

3:01

Dimitri

No. [chuckles]

3:03

Alexey

**No, okay. [laughs]**

3:04

Dimitri

Very simple. It was a French startup, and they just wanted to translate their website into different languages. So I translated the website for them. My goal was to then, after the translation, attract users and customers to the platform. I have done the translation and, let's face it, I wouldn't call it marketing, I would call it more spamming. After I've done this for a month, more or less, my big question was, “Who did I attract? Who’s using our platform now?” And everything like that. It was a startup for people.

I was the only marketer, besides the founder. So my goal was basically to learn SQL, make the first requests, do some analysis (cohort analysis and so on) and that's basically how I did it. I built some very nice infographics. We actually used those later on to get featured in some newspapers (French newspapers). That was pretty successful. The founder was basically very happy with that, so he asked me to keep digging into the data instead of doing marketing.

4:24

Alexey

**You’re originally from France?**

4:26

Dimitri

No, I'm half German, half Italian.

4:30

Alexey

**And now you live in Spain. And before that, you lived in France.**

4:35

Dimitri

Correct. And before that, I also lived in Malta and the UK. Yeah, a little bit everywhere.

4:41

Alexey

**That's amazing. Okay, so you joined the company (the French startup) as a marketing person. You became a data person because the founders really liked the results that they saw (the dashboards) so they told you, “How about you do this full time?” Right?**

4:59

Dimitri

Again, I was there full time, but in that sense, yes.

5:02

Alexey

**I mean just data.**

5:04

Dimitri

Yes. Because they started learning about their own users, what they have done – about the French market, because the French market was their main market. They never thought about… Again, if you start a business, most of the time, they have the one priority – to survive, get clients. But they never had time to look at the data. Again, they actually had pretty good data at the time and that was enough to learn more about the clients, about their behavior, so we could build more and better customer profiles.

5:42

Alexey

**And then?**

5:43

Dimitri

And then, after that experience, I wanted to see the opposite side of the startup world, so I joined Hewlett Packard – the corporate world. I joined their data department in Barcelona. That was basically a data department of their sales team. They had 140 people on the sales team – they had regional managers, a big head of that, and I was directly reporting to that head, and I was basically supervising those 140 people of the sales team.

That was pretty interesting, because we did a lot of… There was a lot of BI involved, but also some analysis – we did specific campaigns where even the salespeople had to compete against each other. So it was their phone activity, their CRM data, combining everything together, specific performance KPIs that they had to hit, and we had data about it – sales data. We put it all together and it was great fun. That was basically my corporate experience at that time.

6:50

Alexey

**Do you need to speak Spanish to work there?**

6:52

Dimitri

No, at that time, my Spanish was very basic. It was basically speaking Italian and just adding an S to the end [chuckles] and making it sound Spanish. But in the team, everything was in English.

7:06

Alexey

**Okay. Because sales, Hewlett Packard, clients – it sounds like something that requires the language that is spoken in the country.**

7:17

Dimitri

Definitely, if you're part of the sales team. But again, it was a European-wide sales team, so they had German speakers, Italian speakers, Norwegian, Swedish people – it was a big team, again, 140 salespeople covering all of Europe.

7:34

Alexey

**Then did you become a freelancer after that, and you had a few others?**

7:38

Dimitri

That was the time, basically, where I was a business person, let’s say, and I had very rudimentary technical skills – I just learned SQL, basically. I had done tons of online courses around programming and reading up on Big data and Data science at that time. At that moment, I said to myself, “I really want to learn more about this world. I can’t do it only by myself, and I can’t do it only after work. I need to dive deep, full-time, into this.”

I decided to do a Master's program that basically covered data science topics such as supervised learning, NLP – various statistical classes. I did this at University College London. It was a very challenging year, but I learned a lot. Basically, that year led me to my next position, where I earned the title of a data scientist, which I was very proud of at the time. Then I joined something between a startup and a corporate – I call it a scale-up. At that time, it was an online casino based in Malta.

8:54

Alexey

**That’s how you ended up in Malta, after the UK.**

8:58

Dimitri

Yes, correct. Are you trying to map out my journey? [chuckles]

9:02

Alexey

**I think it's quite common for online casinos to be either in Malta or Cyprus, right?**

9:08

Dimitri

Yes, correct. Due to legislation and the whole ecosystem overall. Yeah, so I basically joined them. There, the goal was, again, connected to marketing, connected to data science. It was the first more data science-y project. The marketing basically evolved. It was, again, not any smaller data team – it was already a bigger team – we were 12 people with 4 data engineers, several data scientists, statisticians, and some BI specialists. We were all supporting each other and learning from each other, so that was a very great experience. But it was a short experience because, at the time, my now wife moved to Germany and I wanted to follow her. In that case, I switched and made my last move (my last step) before becoming a freelancer.

That was a Google partner consulting firm. So now I'm at the Google partner consulting firm. They were basically specialized in digital analytics and conversion optimization. They were working with all the Google Marketing Cloud, and that was basically their core business. But as they had very good ties to their clients, and they learned a lot through them, they basically didn't want to stop the relationship once those Google products were implemented. But now they wanted to offer additional services. That's why they started building up the small data science team, which I was part of. While I was there, I basically learned everything to start off my freelancing business. Again, it was my first touch point with the world of consulting.

11:10

Alexey

**This company – the Google partner consulting firm – they were already doing consulting and you thought, “Hmm. Interesting. I can do this myself, too.” Then you saw how it actually works, and you made the switch, right? This is how it happened?**

11:25

Dimitri

More or less. I mean, the switch also happened because of, let's say, who I am and my nature. I enjoyed all the places where I worked – I made great friends, which I'm still in touch with today – but I have this nature, where I always thought that it could go better. I was often, sometimes loudly, and sometimes just internally, complaining about how businesses should use data. I saw things that I thought, “This doesn't add any value to the business. These are just Ivory Tower, fun projects, but have no value.” After you complain to your wife for many nights, she will tell you to basically do it better and “Do it yourself, then.”

That was basically the motivator after so many years, because I felt like I was in the short range, I was jumping around from one company to another. On the one hand this was great, because I learned a lot, but on the other hand, your corporate CV doesn’t look that great, because every time you interview, companies ask, “Are you going to stay here or are you going to move on?” Which is, of course, a totally expected question.

12:39

Alexey

**For a freelancer, they kind of know the answer, right? [Dimitri agrees] Because they hire you for a short amount of time, so they don't even ask that.**

12:48

Dimitri

Yes, and I think the value of a freelancer is exactly that – you have seen lots of different scenarios, or very similar scenarios at different companies. That's exactly the reason why they hire you, because you've seen it more than once.

13:04

Alexey

**You were complaining to your wife about not liking certain things and she said, “Do it better yourself.” And then you were like, “Okay, I'm becoming a data freelancer.” Correct? [Dimitri agrees] What happened after that? What were the steps you took after this discussion? So your wife kind of approved. [cross-talk]**

13:29

Dimitri

Yes. I mean, there was not one discussion, but multiple. At some point, I told myself, “Now, it's about time.” I resigned from the company. I had, if I remember right – four months, six months (I don't remember exactly the notice period). In that period, basically, I started reaching out to anyone I could think of or find…

14:00

Alexey

**So you resigned, but you did not have a client yet.**

14:04

Dimitri

No, I just resigned because I was a little bit frustrated at that time. I thought, everything starts off by basically pulling out the bad tooth. That was basically the reason.

14:16

Alexey

**You needed to make the jump. [Dimitri agrees] I had this conversation with a recruiter – it was like four years ago, maybe. I remember I had a business trip to Amsterdam, and then in Amsterdam, they called. What he told me was, “Hey! I have a bunch of amazing clients and your data science expertise will be very helpful for clients.” And he said that they give something like 1000-1500 per day, which is an insane amount of money. And I was like, “Okay, okay – where do I sign?” Then he said, “What's your notice period?” And I'm like, “Yeah, four months.” And he responded, “We actually need somebody next week.” I started asking him, “How can I become a freelancer?” Because this particular client who would not wait for me for four months, right? And he's like, “Yeah, you first quit, then you wait for your notice period, then give me a call. Maybe we'll have another client for you.” And I'm like, “Uhh… I'm not so sure about that.” [chuckles]**

15:29

Dimitri

Sounds risky, right?

15:31

Alexey

**Yeah – because I already had a job and this was a well-paid job. I liked my job. Quitting it and waiting for four months for something that *might* be available or might not be – it's not clear… There is so much unknown there, right?**

15:50

Dimitri

Yeah, definitely.

15:51

Alexey

**And you made that leap, right?**

# The first steps of transitioning into freelance

15:53

Dimitri

Yeah, I made the jump. I just jumped into the cold water, basically. I handed in the resignation. I was already swallowing down a big something that I thought, “Okay. Now, I have four months to get ready for this. What should I do next?” I did my research, I reached out to, first of all, people in my network. At the time, this was the startup network that I've met. I told them that I was going freelance, but, of course, I didn't hear anything back from those people.

The next step was, I reached out to other data freelancers that I could find on LinkedIn, for example. Unfortunately, I couldn't find that many – I found some, but not as many as I was hoping for. Those that I found were kind enough to jump on a call. Basically, I asked them a bunch of questions on how they started off and any advice they could give me and…

17:00

Alexey

**Those were people you already knew, or?**

17:03

Dimitri

No.

17:04

Alexey

**So you did cold outreach. [Dimitri agrees] They have a “freelancer” in the title, then you would probably craft a welcome message [Dimitri agrees] – a connection message, when you connect with somebody on LinkedIn, “Hey, I want to start freelancing. Can I ask you a few questions?” Something like that?**

17:22

Dimitri

Correct. Exactly that. I always like to use my little Google trick, where you write things site:LinkedIn/in, so whatever you type afterwards, you only get LinkedIn profiles. Then I just wrote down “data freelance” or “data scientist freelancer” and different terms like this. Then I got a couple of profiles – I was making sure that they are, at that time, based either in Germany or in Europe, because I was still in Germany at the time and I had to register as a freelancer in Germany. I wanted to make sure that their experience and their advice was relevant to my field.

18:01

Alexey

**That’s why you moved to Spain, right? Because it's so difficult to register in Germany as a freelancer. [chuckles]**

18:06

Dimitri

I don't remember that it was that difficult, but I made it. I made it in the end.

18:14

Alexey

**There are companies who you can pay to do this for you because it's not easy.**

18:20

Dimitri

Yeah, indeed. But in the end, I made it. I got some great advice from the few people that were kind enough, at the time, to talk to me. The last thing that I was doing was similar to what you just said – you talked to a recruiter who told you that your experience is relevant. I had some reaching out to me before, which also kind of encouraged me that there's a need for me out there as a freelancer. That's why I thought, “Hey, let me reach out to that recruiter, and not only him, but also all others that I could find, and tell them ‘Hey, on this date, I will be a freelancer. Find me a project’” That was how I started before I actually started, officially.

19:07

Alexey

**Was it just one recruiter? Or multiple?**

19:08

Dimitri

Multiple. Again, I had four months, so…

19:11

Alexey

**[cross-talk] …DBT, right? You can be with multiple recruiters.**

19:16

Dimitri

You can be with multiple recruiters. But if you apply for a project, you should apply only through one. Otherwise, you eliminate yourself – because two recruiters will present your profile and they kind of have a conflict, so they will have to eliminate you. That's why you can only go with one recruiter if it's for the same position.

# Working with recruiters (contracting)

19:42

Alexey

**So there is a company, and you know that this company is looking for a freelancer. With the recruiter – you select the recruiter who you like more and then ask them to represent you?**

19:55

Dimitri

More or less. Again, just to make it clear for the listeners – what we’re talking about now, I would call this “contracting” and it's a part of freelancing. But again, I think it's a specific route that I think just needs to be addressed. Contracting is usually when a company says, “I need to hire someone, but this person is not a full-time employee but a freelancer that I can hire for 3, 6, 12 months. After that period, I can basically let go of that person.” And you don't…

20:35

Alexey

**That’s called contracting, right?**

20:37

Dimitri

Yeah, that's contracting. Again, you have a specific contract with them and sometimes it can also be that you are working 40 hours a week for them. So you are kind of a full-time employee, but you're not. [cross-talk]

20:51

Alexey

**Your contract is limited, right? It's only for a certain amount of time. I guess both sides can end this contract sooner, right?**

21:01

Dimitri

Yes. Correct.

21:02

Alexey

**You don't need to wait till the contract is over – you don't need to have this notice of four months. I assume it's much faster.**

21:10

Dimitri

Correct. There are also things tied to that – you have to be careful as a freelancer if you go through this route. There are things like “fake freelancer” – different countries have different names for it. Basically, it's like a fake freelancer, where the company saves lots of money because they hire someone external and they basically just pay them the project fee. You, as a freelancer, basically only depend on the salary of one client. Actually, the client (the company) should pay the typical legal contribution to healthcare and so on, but in this case, they don't. That's why the freelancer needs to be careful not to tap into this fake freelancing thing, once they do their tax declarations. Just throwing it out there, for those who have thought about it. It's always important to have multiple clients. And if one is interested in going that contracting route, it's just something to be aware of. Don’t put all your eggs in one basket and focus too much on this contract.

22:27

Alexey

**Going back to the recruiter situation, because I am a bit confused. Let's say you get a call from one recruiter, they get your CV, and then you get a call from another recruiter, and you also share your CV with them. They kind of both represent you, right? There is a company where you want to work – I understand this is called contracting. But how exactly do you deal with this two recruiters situation?**

22:55

Dimitri

Well, the way it usually works is – it starts off with a company that wants to hire a data analyst or a data scientist or a data engineer, let’s say. Especially in the corporate world, most of the companies that reach out to recruiters have their own recruiter network. They basically send them out an email to all the recruiters saying, “Hey, recruiters! We are looking for this type of profile. Find us someone.” So now the recruiters get that profile and they basically send it to their network, where there could be a freelancer like me. I could be in the network of two different recruiters. Now both of them send this profile to me and say, “Are you interested in applying for this profile?” I can talk either to one of them, or both of them, and ask them who the client is and get some information.

Once I have this information, I could either decide to go with one of them. But I should also, for example, in the past, apply to one client – another recruiter approached me and I told them, “Hey, I already applied for this position through another recruiter.” They will know that, of course, you won’t apply because you don't want to eliminate yourself.

24:11

Alexey

**By “eliminate yourself,” it means that the company sees that there are two recruiters who have the same person and they do not consider this person?**

24:21

Dimitri

Correct.

24:22

Alexey

**Why?**

24:24

Dimitri

Good question. I can't give you an exact answer. I should ask a recruiter. But I only know that they always tell me that. Also, they usually ask if you have applied to this project through another recruiter, or they warn you saying, “Hey, if someone else approached you about this project, don't apply through them.” Maybe it's a fake myth. Maybe it's the way that they increase their chance of placing you with the client.

24:57

Alexey

**I understand, okay. We have quite a few questions, actually. Maybe we can take some of them? I think it's relevant to your discussion.**

25:08

Dimitri

Sure.

# Deciding on what to charge for your services

25:09

Alexey

**How do you know what to charge when you first start out? Say I quit my full-time job and I’m waiting for the notice period. There is a potential client, and they ask, “How much do you charge?” What do I tell them?**

25:24

Dimitri

Again, there are different ways of getting clients. And I have to mention that because that depends on how I charge. Let’s just go through very typical ways of how I could get a client first, and then I’ll answer that question if that's okay. Usually, there are four types of channels where freelancers usually get clients, the first one are online freelancing platforms such as Upwork, for example. There are clients that put the project on, you can create a profile and then directly apply to them.

Here, the pricing I charge depends on my experience, my profile, if I'm new on a platform like Upwork, and I don't have any star rating, for example. Then, of course, it's hard for me to charge very high prices because the client will see my profile and think “Oh is this person actually real? They've never done anything on here.” So, of course, it's very hard to get into that. But it also depends on the nature of the project. If you need some very specific LLM skills, and things that are very new, and only some people are very specialized in that – maybe you can come in at a higher price because then there's not as much competition out there. In this case…

26:42

Alexey

**In this case – I just want to make sure I understood you correctly. So there are these online freelancing platforms like Upwork, and if somebody needs some work, they can create a listing. Then you, as a freelancer, and other freelancers see these listings. [Dimitri agrees] They think, “Okay, this is the job. I can do this job. This is how much I want to charge for my services.” [Dimitri agrees] In the job, you see what kind of things they need, so you can set the price higher if they require something unique that not many people have. Or if it's a typical data science project, and you haven't done many projects in the past on Upwork – you don't have any ratings – then you probably should go for a lower price so they pick you up. [Dimitri agrees] Then you get the project, and you get the reviews.**

27:30

Dimitri

Yes. For every channel (every situation) that depends on the client (and depends on you) needs to have their specific strategy on how you approach it. In this case, for example, if I'm new to a platform like Upwork, and let's say I’m a very average analyst – I can create dashboards, I can create some analysis, but you can’t say, “I have 10 years of special experience,” or “I'm very good, with outstanding experience (or something)” – sometimes you have to compete on price to get started. Because your goal is to increase your reputation, get five-star reviews on those platforms, and that could be one way.

How do you find your rate for this type of channel? Usually, it’s by checking out other freelancer profiles on Upwork, seeing what they usually charge. I believe platforms like Upwork and Fiverr, there's a premium subscription as a freelancer – so you get a little bit more insights about the project. How many other people have applied to it? What bids did the other Freelancer give? What range of projects did they apply for?

28:48

Alexey

**The specific bids? I see.**

28:50

Dimitri

Yes. You can see, “Okay, for this project (let’s just invent a number) people bid $1,000 as a minimum, and maybe the maximum was $3000.” And now you come in with $500 as an example. But again, it's not just price – there's so many other things going on. But I mean, that's how I would approach those platforms. Then, the second channel we just discussed – it's contracting and it's basically talking to recruiters. Here, I would, again, do some research. There are some platforms such as Freelancer Map. I think freelancer.com if I'm not mistaken.

There are directories where freelancers have their profile, and you can go and scout those freelancers, compare yourself to them, figure out what they charge by hour, by day, for example. You can get a good feeling for that. And when you talk to the recruiters, usually the recruiter knows exactly what this client is willing to pay. Usually they tell you, “We have a range between 80-100 euros an hour,” or “100-120”. I mean, usually the client has to tell the recruiter, otherwise the recruiter can’t find a suitable candidate for that. So you can ask the recruiters, “Do you know what the client is willing to pay?” Then, based on that, you can basically pick your number.

30:18

Alexey

**Here, it's more like give or take – you don't really have a lot of negotiating, right?**

30:22

Dimitri

That's sometimes the good part of it, because as long as you tick the boxes and you have the skills that the client is requesting, usually the recruiter has the interest of placing you there. So they just tell you what the client is willing to charge and you can basically say, “Yes, fine with me,” or not.

30:47

Alexey

**Usually, from my experience with interacting with these recruiters – even though I did not lend any contracts in the past – usually they give the sum up front, and usually it's quite a good one. The one I told you about, it was like 1000 or more – it's quite large. I think most of them were lower, but still, they would just tell you upfront, “Okay, it's 800 per day. This is what the client has money for.”**

31:23

Dimitri

Correct, that's why. Their goal is basically to make money out of you or other candidates that they are able to place. They will be very transparent with you. Their goal is to give you good feedback so that your application basically has an impact on the client. The best thing to do is, if you talk to them – be open, be upfront, and ask them the questions. Usually they don't have a reason to hide things. Sometimes they want to be careful at the beginning to – tell you who the client is and things like this. But regarding the application part, they are pretty open about that. As I mentioned before, there are more channels to get clients.

32:06

Alexey

**Two more, right?**

# Establishing your network

32:07

Dimitri

Yes, the third one is usually your network. Often, how I see it, and how other freelancers that I talked to, with the network, we usually don't just mean LinkedIn. People always think that a network is equal to LinkedIn. But usually your network is the companies and the people that work in companies that you actually know and have a very close relationship with, or at least hold a regular relationship with. With those clients or companies that are in your network, if you have a close relationship, you hear what they work on, you hear if they're looking for someone. A network like this, you don't have it from day one, you build it up. It can even start, like what I did. I started out on Upwork, got to know the first few companies there, had very small projects with them – nothing that I'm really proud of mentioning, in terms of making a lot of money, but it helped to get to know the people, get to know the industry, and the business they are in. After delivering good projects, it helped to ask them if they knew other people that needed my services. Basically those people then referred me to other friends or colleagues or other departments – depending on the client. Basically, that was how I built up my network and other freelancers built up their network and got more projects through them.

33:43

Alexey

**And the fourth?**

# Self-marketing

33:44

Dimitri

And the fourth one is basically the magic of marketing. Here, I think, it really depends. Some people try different approaches. Some try the cold approach – emailing people. Others are very innovative. The other day, I read from some other freelancer that they tried to scout data profiles on LinkedIn that are kind of not realistic. We probably have all seen them, where a company is looking for someone that has only one year of experience but knows tons of tools and that type of stuff. The [freelancer] was pretty sure that they wouldn't be able to fill that position, so they reached out to the company and told them, “As long as you are looking for someone, maybe I can help you.” I mean, again, there are different marketing channels, tactics, and tricks, but for me, that’s the first channel where people are very creative.

34:44

Alexey

**So if you would, say, post regularly on LinkedIn, and, among other posts, also kind of advertise your services that would be the fourth channel, right?**

34:53

Dimitri

Yes. For example, self-marketing, let's call it this.

34:59

Alexey

**It's also called outreach. And if somebody finds you through… I guess if it's your friend or another company, then that would be the third approach – network. And if they find you through your LinkedIn post, that would be the fourth one, right?**

35:15

Dimitri

Correct, correct.

# Contracting vs freelancing

35:17

Alexey

**Okay. 20 minutes ago, you said that there is a distinction (there is difference) between contracting and freelancing? [Dimitri agrees] Contracting is the second approach where we have recruiters, but what is freelancing? How is it different? What's the difference between these two?**

35:37

Dimitri

Well, I would say that, first of all, as a freelancer, you are a business entity. Basically, this means that you are independent – independent from other companies. You're not an employee, you work at the time you want, you work for the rate you want, you work at the place you want – no company can tell you where to work from. So that's the first thing. Contracting is just one sub… It's part of freelancing, but it's one, I think, bucket below it, basically, where you can say as a freelancer “Yes, I’m freelancing on Upwork and doing some projects there. I have my network. Maybe I have a contracting project going on with a client.” So there are different ways. But the important part is that a freelancer is independent, in all senses, basically. It's their own business entity.

36:31

Alexey

**Let's say that with Upwork, you don't necessarily have any strict contracts that are 12-20 pages long that you sign, like you do in Germany, right? It's more through the platform. Right?**

36:44

Dimitri

Yes. Well, you sign the terms and conditions.

36:48

Alexey

**But it's not… I guess the contracts there are different from what you would get, let's say, if you worked on-site with a client for only four months, right? That would be the contract. While online freelancing in Upwork, it's remote, more flexible and maybe the contract is different, right?**

37:10

Dimitri

Yes, correct. It all depends on the contract and the nature. Also, each channel has their own nature of projects. As you can imagine, Upwork has tons of projects, which are very small and limited in terms of quick ones to turn around. Yes, sometimes they outsource – smaller companies or even large companies are on there looking for, similar to contracting, where they try to hire you for a long period of time. But the goal is usually – that's the good thing about Upwork – it kind of tries to keep down in terms of a project. Whereas, if you signed through a recruiter, there's usually a very defined contract made through them, between you, the contractor, and the end client.

38:03

Alexey

**Let's say you find a company through your network. Let's take Zalando as an example, which is a large online ecommerce platform. There are freelancers who might represent Zalando and there are people in the company who you know – who can tell you, “Okay, we're looking for a freelancer.” In one case, with a recruiter, you have the recruiter who helps you with the process, who probably knows what the contract should look like and all that. And in the other case, there is nobody in-between – it's just you and the company, right? [Dimitri agrees] Is it still called contracting?**

38:50

Dimitri

Good question. I never thought about it this way. You caught me off guard. [chuckles] In that sense, that's the beauty. If you go through a middleman, which is the agency or the recruiter, the relationship is very much defined by them – by them and Zalando. Basically, you're just a service provider. If I have a contract at Zalando, and I can work directly with them, I usually have a whole way of framing the whole project. It might be completely different – maybe they need a marketing data scientist for their media mix modeling, for example. Now they say, “Hey, we need for four months some data scientist that can help us through that.” Then they talk to the recruiter, the recruiter finds me, and I can work with them.

But if they would have talked to me directly, I might have said “Yes, I can build that with you, but I can also bring on maybe some subcontractors that I work with.” Instead of selling my time by the hour, I could have used different pricing models for that. I could have framed those more as a project, for example. So that's the freedom that you have when you can talk directly to the end client. That's why I wouldn't call that contracting that much, compared to the first approach with a recruiter.

# Which channel is better for those starting out?

40:18

Alexey

**I guess each has pros and cons, but for somebody who is starting out, the option with the recruiter is better? Or which one is better?**

40:29

Dimitri

If you start out and you have a contact at Zalando, and you know exactly how to deliver everything, why go with a recruiter? You already know what you're gonna deliver. But most people who start out don't have the network yet. Usually, going with a recruiter is the easy way in. To be honest, yes, the recruiter will take part of the budget, basically. But you also have kind of a secure first project with a nice contract. Usually, it's a safe way in. At least, it gives you some money for the beginning. The agency or the recruiter has their agreement with the end company on how they get the money, and you, as a freelancer, get the money from the agency. Sometimes you have a contract where they pay you out every two weeks, every four weeks, or every month. That could be kind of a small salary, especially at the beginning, I think that could be a nice way in.

# Cutting out the middleman

41:47

Alexey

**With agencies, I assume they have some sort of agreement – “noncompete” or how it's called – where after your contract for four months ended, let's say, and somebody from Zalando, says “Psst. I have a project here, but don't tell your recruiter.” It's probably not going to work. You still need to work through the recruiter.**

42:14

Dimitri

I mean, you don't have to. Contracts are there to be broken. It really depends. If there's such a case… There's also an incentive for both parties to skip the recruiter, because they pay less, you earn more. You basically meet in the middle, because now what the recruiter was taking up, that's what you basically split in half. So there's a benefit for both of you. Usually companies like Zalando also have a strategic interest of having a long-term relationship with those recruiters and that's why they go by these rules and stick to that. They already have their process set up – they're not that easily corruptible. It's a similar thing on Upwork, where you're supposed to do all the projects on Upwork. But who says that after your project, you can’t take the client and you both go outside of Upwork? Now you know each other, you trust each other, and it’s a different thing. That one is also possible, for example.

43:26

Alexey

**I hope nobody from Zalando's legal team is listening to our conversation right now. [both chuckle] This is just an example. We’re using them as an example. [chuckles]**

43:33

Dimitri

Just a fictitious example. [chuckles]

43:35

Alexey

**Yeah. It's maybe a different company with the same name. [chuckles]**

# Where to look for clients and how to vet them

43:41

Alexey

**There is another question. I think you've partly answered it, but maybe there is something else you want to say about that. “How do you go about looking for freelance jobs? Do you have any favorite websites to vet the requestor? Is there any way to vet the requestor to make sure that they actually pay after the project is done?” There seem to be two questions in one. We can start with the first one. “How do you go about looking for freelance jobs?” And I think you kind of gave the answer with the four channels. Is there anything you want to add?**

44:15

Dimitri

No. I mean, I can repeat them for the listener. Basically, again, there are online freelancing platforms such as Upwork, Toptal… I don't know, there are different ones. Then there’s going through recruiters, which are basically already connected to the end client. Then there’s your own network that you build up with any self-marketing that you can do – maybe write your blog, promote your knowledge, have a portfolio online that people can see. That's basically the typical way of getting clients. The second question I think was about…

44:56

Alexey

**It was about how good the clients are – their reputation. You want to make sure that they will actually pay, so how can you do that? Is there any website like Google Maps, where you can see reviews from other freelancers? [chuckles]**

45:17

Dimitri

Yeah. I mean, if you go to online freelance platforms, as mentioned before – Upwork – you, as a freelancer, but also the client, both get the typical star rating after every project. When you apply to a new project, you can basically see how good the other party is (the client that you apply for). If you go through recruiters –usually, they are real businesses and they often have their Google business account Google Maps, so you can also get feedback about them. That basically concludes it.

But to be honest, that's the question that I often hear. I don't know how many people had bad experiences with that. I've been working with clients from all over the world and I haven't had any problem with clients paying. I mean, I've had other types of problems, but not that they don't pay me.

46:25

Alexey

**Usually, from what I know, and it's also my experience in the community – the problem is not that they don't have money, the problem is that it's very bureaucratic. You often need to wait until you actually get paid, especially in big companies where there is the procurement department, there’s the finance department – they need to talk to each other. Then if somebody goes on vacation, they forget about you, then you need to constantly ping them. Did you have this sort of experience?**

46:58

Dimitri

Not that much. Maybe I haven't worked with too many large companies. But even so, I've worked, I'd say probably at least around 10 of them. Again, so far, they have been good clients – they paid on time, were very simple to work with. But again, very large clients – there are only a few of them. There are tons of medium-sized businesses that do a lot of data work and that have very attractive budgets, and they don't have those strict processes. With them, you can very easily… I mean, you have a project with someone and there could be a chief marketing officer, you send them your invoice at the end of the project (or upfront, depending on how you charge them) and they just forward it to the finance department and they pay it out. Very simple.

47:56

Alexey

**Or if it's a startup, the founder just PayPals you the money. [Dimitri agrees and chuckles]Yeah – job is done.**

# The different way of getting into freelancing

48:04

Alexey

**A question from Alexei. “Is freelance a good idea for a second job?” I guess the question is something like, “I already have a full-time job. After six, it's kind of boring. I just want to lie down on the sofa and check TikTok. I want to do something else. Can I do freelance?”**

48:25

Dimitri

Good question. I mean, you can definitely do freelancing. There are different ways of transitioning into freelancing. Some people do what I call “the weekend freelancer,” let's say. “Hey, let me test the waters.” They usually do it with online freelancing platforms, because there are small projects on them. They only get that small picture of how the whole freelancing world is, because they only spend a small amount of time. But at least they can have very good experiences and find some attractive weekend projects there. Then there's, basically, the transitioning phase where people say, “Hey, I have a part-time job. I need additional income.” So, of course, they have more time to dedicate to freelancing.

There's also the full-time jump into the cold water – the plunge that I did, basically. And there are people that basically try to hustle their way in and every time they’re off work, they have an extra hour – they try to get a client and they try to build this freelancing gig up on the side, until they say “Hey, it's enough to cover my bills. Now I will quit my job and I will move into it.” So there are different ways that lead to Rome. Some are more dangerous than others.

49:52

Alexey

**Yeah, thank you. “Dangerous” in the sense that somebody can notice that you're trying to work two jobs at the same time, right?**

50:02

Dimitri

I mean, that probably depends on the contract you have with the first company. I don’t know.

50:09

Alexey

**It might be okay, or it might not be okay. Right?**

50:11

Dimitri

That's a problem I don't have any more, so… [chuckles]

50:15

Alexey

**But also, it could be health-related, right? Because it's difficult to work – if you do your work properly, it's like eight plus eight hours per day. Or, I don't know, it's 80 hours in a week or whatever – depends on how you distribute these hours throughout the week. But it's difficult for your brain to do all that. Right?**

50:40

Dimitri

Yeah. Specifically, we have to think about why people get into freelance in the first place. For me, it was basically a little bit of frustration on how data has been used in different companies. But also, I always had this, let's say, entrepreneurial urge, where I always wanted to be my own boss and have freedom and free time. Again, I have families in different countries – I don't want to take vacation days to visit them. I just want to go there and work from their place. I think getting into freelancing starts off with a purpose or motivation.

It's not always about getting rich fast or something like this. It is definitely a way where you can make a very nice living. But it's not guaranteed, because you're your own business – there's a risk. One month, you earn a lot of money, and you're very happy and very proud – another month, something happens, and everything is gone, and you have to start from the bottom up again. Again, you’re your own business and I think running a business involves risk. Everyone needs to be aware of that.

# Going back to a full-time job after freelancing

51:51

Alexey

**Will it be difficult for you personally to just get a full-time job now, with this experience?**

51:59

Dimitri

Yes, totally. Totally. The first year I was anxious, “Will I survive? Will I make this work?” This year, basically, my first son was born, I took four months off on parental leave and I basically stopped all my projects until then and I thought, “How is life going to be when I’m back?” I got back and I had tons of requests again because I have good client relationships. I have so many other ideas that I want to implement and I feel like, I don't know… I always like this example – when you learn something new, this new mental mind map kind of starts appearing.

It's like when you used to play Super Mario Brothers and you finish one level – now there's a whole new map opening up, and you start from level one again. It's the same thing with being a freelancer. You don't just work on your data skills and delivering data services, but you do marketing, you do accounting – you do different things. It's never-ending. I mean, if you enjoy that part, it's very fulfilling. I couldn't imagine being part of a company, at least not for now. There are too many things that I want to try out that I enjoy.

53:30

Alexey

**The reason I asked this question is – let's say I want to make this leap. I quit my job and then started freelancing. But then in a year, I found out that it's not working the way I imagined. Then, I guess, you kind of still don't lose these skills – you get extra ones, like marketing and accounting and all that. But then, you can still go get back to a full-time job. And like you said – you don't need that because even after a four-month break, you still had a ton of requests, right? [Dimitri agrees] Okay. Interesting.**

54:11

Dimitri

But again, maybe for other people, it's different when you start out. That's why when people want to get into freelance, I always advise them to put money aside. When I started out, I think I had like around eight months that I gave myself time for. It’s an odd number but I told myself, “If you don't make any money by then, then you have to get a job again.” Luckily, I made it work.

# Common mistakes freelancers make

54:40

Alexey

**Yeah, I'm just looking at the outline of the things we wanted to talk about. There’s one that says “typical mistakes”. Maybe it's worth covering as well. What are the typical mistakes people make when they want to become a freelancer – or in general, while freelancing?**

55:01

Dimitri

First of all, if they’re in it for the wrong reasons – they have the expectation that they can earn a lot of money. That's usually the number one that I often hear. They maybe have – I just want to point out some cases that I've seen – maybe they have a PhD, and they feel they're very educated, they have very good skills in a particular field. And now just because they have this skill, they think they can command high prices, they don't know anything about how to position themselves as a freelancer or how to have a project line, but they still think that their value is… They ask way too much, basically. Then, of course, there's this delusion when they don't land any project and, in the end, they blame it on Upwork. “Upwork is a platform where there are only small projects,” or “Upwork has too many freelancers bidding with a small hourly fee. I cannot compete on this level.” Again, those people are in it for the wrong reasons, because they don't want to understand the whole freelancing game.

That's usually the first mistake that I see. I think another very obvious mistake that I often see is, generally, positioning. “I want to be a freelancer. How do I position myself? Do I want to focus on a specific niche and a specific problem that I want to solve? Or am I this generalist that knows some things very well, out of all the different ways that I can connect things?” But again, I’m not saying one way is better than the other. Some people just say, “You always have to find a niche.” That's not always true. It's really about the positioning. Even as a generalist, you can find your way into freelancing – that's just a way how you deliver yourself to the client. What is the value that you provide to them? You have this spectrum of knowledge as a generalist. Maybe you want to go in there at the beginning, compete on price, compete on time to delivery – do you want to give any guarantees to the client? There are so many ways on how you can compete. It's not just the price. Your offering really depends on who you talk to, who your audience is, and just overall positioning. That's something that I see lots of other freelancers that don't survive, let's say, even in the first month.

# Dimitri’s resource suggestions

57:26

Alexey

**How can I learn more about this positioning? Are there resources or do you just learn by doing?**

57:34

Dimitri

I mean, you always learn by doing, especially the hard way. But that sometimes can take too long. I was lucky that I studied business and marketing, where I learned a lot about that. But there are, I think, overall, different resources one could take. First, I think there are some pretty good online marketing courses one could take. The problem is, often those people are also very much motivated into technical data skills, so instead of investing the time in business or marketing skill set, they prefer to do the ChatGPT online course or something like this – prompt engineering.

There are, I think, also lots of mentors to find out about. Even me – I run a newsletter for freelancers, where I try to give advice and try to make sure that the advice is always very diverse. It’s not only on finding clients, but also on mental health, how to stay motivated, how to organize your work, and so on. There's information out there and there are also probably people out there that want to help. But I think it starts with the mindset and the purpose of why you're in it.

58:52

Alexey

**Speaking of skills, what you mentioned is, “If you want to start freelancing, you shouldn't just focus on technical skills (on hard skills, so to say – data analysis, ChatGPT, whatever, these sorts of skills).” You also need to think about, in our example, positioning, and this is a concept for marketing. So then, it's a good idea to go and get a marketing course, right? [Dimitri agrees] Where they say, “How do you position a product on the market?”**

59:26

Dimitri

Yeah. Just to name one – because I do them myself, occasionally, just to stay updated. There's this new online platform out there – I think it’s called Domestika – they basically have pretty nice online courses. Now it's Black Friday. You can find them, and they have some online courses for $8 or €8. I think there's one or two very good ones on positioning. I've done one of them and I've done several ones in the past. I always like to update myself. I like to also see who the instructors are who teach those courses, what type of business they have, and how they position themselves. Even though they might be in a completely different industry – they could be a graphic designer, or other industries. I mean, in the end, we are freelancers, and we all try to be our own business.

60:28

Alexey

**So you are the product you want to advertise, right? Okay, that's all we have time for today. There are actually a lot more questions I wanted to ask you. There are also questions that the listeners wanted to ask you. We still have eight. Is it okay if somebody wants their questions answered, that they contact you on LinkedIn?**

# Reaching out to Dimitri

60:51

Dimitri

Sure. Sure, as I mentioned before. Also subscribe to my newsletter, The Data Freelancer. Usually, I have this part where you get my emails, and if people reply to the emails with a question regarding what I talked about, I always reply back.

61:07

Alexey

**Please do send us the link to the newsletter. We will include it in the description. Yeah, that's all for today. Thanks a lot. Thanks, Dimitri, for joining us today. Thanks, everyone, for joining in too – have a great week ahead!**

61:20

Dimitri

Thank you. Thank you for having me.