

# Freelance Toolkit

The definitive guide for those setting out in careers in film, TV, VFX, animation and games.





# Freelance toolkit

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# What is freelancing?

## Definition of a freelancer

A freelancer is someone who works on a series of separate contracts each year. These contracts could be one after the other or they could be concurrent, depending on the role. The one thing that brings all freelancers together is their need to source their own work.

Unlike a permanent contract of employment, where it is the employer's responsibility to provide work for their employees, freelancers are hired for a specific role for a defined period of time, and usually because of their specialist skills.

## Differences between employment and freelancing

<b>Freelance working</b>	<b>Employment</b>
Contracted for specific work/ amount of time	Permanent contract of employment
Paid by the job	Steady income
Irregular income depending on work – but often paid higher than regular employment	Salary paid regularly
Likely to submit tax return each year and then pay any taxes and National Insurance owed	Tax and National Insurance deducted at source by employer
Self-funded pension	Company pension scheme
Uses own equipment	Company provides equipment
Sources own work	Employer provides work

What this means is that, for a freelancer, there is extra work to do over and above your day job; you've got to manage your finances on an irregular income, plus you've got to market and sell yourself to find work. It's likely that you will have to complete a tax return to finalise your taxes.

You are also expected to have the equipment you need to do your work. In the same way as you'd expect a plumber to turn up with the tools they need to do the repairs at your house, you need to have the tools, or access to them, so that you can deliver your work.

That doesn't mean you need to own a whole set of expensive kit, but it does mean you need to have access to the right equipment. A good relationship with a local hire company can provide just that. At the bare minimum

you'll need a smart phone with a decent battery life (or a juice pack) and a computer (ideally laptop) with basic office software.

## Why be a freelancer?

Freelancing can be very rewarding – you get to work with a wide range of people on a variety of different projects. You may also have much greater autonomy to define your own hours, schedule and workplace to make your work, work for you.

## Why freelancing is common in the screen industries

Some people are freelance by choice, and others freelance because that's the only way they can work in the screen industries. Screen industry work is primarily project-based: it has a start (pre-production), a middle (production) and an end (post-production and exhibition / transmission / publication). What this means is that most companies hire by the project rather than into permanent roles. This is particularly common in film, TV and animation where you are taken on for a set period of time during the production. The length of time is determined by your role and the part(s) of the production process that you are involved in.

However, in the games sector you are less likely to be freelance as the time frames in games development are much longer, and development teams need to continually re-evaluate, propose changes to, prototype and test the game past its launch.

This leads to big differences in the numbers of freelancers between sectors in the creative industries and even within screen. Statistics from the ScreenSkills Workforce Survey show that, in 2018, approximately 28% of the total screen industries workforce (excluding games) were estimated to be self-employed. However, in film and TV production 50% of workers were freelance.

Put this into context with the overall workforce where only 15% were self-employed<sup>1</sup> and it's apparent that if you pursue a career in the screen

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<sup>1</sup> [www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/trendsinselfemploymentintheuk/2018-02-07](http://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/trendsinselfemploymentintheuk/2018-02-07)

industries you are far more likely to be freelance, more often by necessity than design. Since the coronavirus pandemic, self-employment levels have fallen across all industries to 13%, however this is following two decades of growth, and is largely due to workers reclassifying their labour market status to 'employee' with the introduction of the furlough scheme.<sup>2</sup>

## What are the core skills of a freelancer?

**Your core skills divide into three basic types: technical, professional and other skills.**

Your **technical skills** are the ones specific to the work you want to do. For example, a camera operator's technical skills are in camera operation, while a VFX production manager's technical skills are in organising the VFX production. ScreenSkills offers a wide range of [training courses](#) for all levels and departments that can help you further develop your technical skills.

Your **professional skills** are your interpersonal and communications skills. These are often transferable across many industries, sectors and jobs. They include communication skills, working with and relating to others, problem solving, applying initiative and IT skills. Having a good sense of humour and being a great person to work with goes a long way too.

Your **other skills** are all the other skills, knowledge and hobbies you have. It could be that you speak another language, have a passion for medieval history or are a devoted gardener.

When you are first starting out, if you show passion and hunger for working in the sector and can articulate how your **professional** skills are transferable, it can counterbalance having less hands-on experience – especially if you have valuable **other** skills that add specific knowledge into the production.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/understandingchangesinselfemploymentintheuk/january2019tomarch2022>

## Other qualities needed for successful freelancing

A good freelancer has a balance of **skills**, **passion** and **financial drive**.

- A **passion** for the screen sector and a love of the content created
- The **skills** needed to play their part in creating the content
- The **financial drive** to earn a living working in the sector

Financial drive is a vital ingredient in this mix, since without it you simply have a hobby. Your financial drive motivates you to earn your living in the sector.

## Motivation and discipline

Good freelancers are motivated and disciplined people. They are punctual and reliable. They communicate in a timely fashion with their clients. They know if they have the capacity to take on more work or if they need to recommend a colleague.

Motivation is easy in the midst of a busy production, but much harder in down time between contracts when you need to look for the next project or sort out your finances.

If you aren't by nature the most disciplined person you will need to work hard at this to ensure you keep abreast of everything you need to do. Equally, even the most self-disciplined people can be guilty of putting off the least interesting tasks.

## Reputation

You are only as good as your last job, which means that professionalism and reputation are everything. Freelancers deliver their services to their clients: there's no company to hide behind. Your reputation is your currency so make sure you value it. It invariably arrives in the room before you do in the form of recommendations from colleagues and clients.

This is a demanding sector to work in, often with long hours and away from home. Don't underestimate how important it is that people find you easy to get along with.



## Flexibility

Freelancers need to be able to cope with change and be ready to respond. The business landscape is constantly shifting and so are clients' needs. Not to mention that every piece of work is slightly different. As you take on assignments for different clients you will see how the 'same' job can be remarkably different depending on how the client company operates.

The other side of flexibility is that you have to hit it off straight away with the client and their team and get on with the job. You rarely know anything about each others' lives and what might be going on. Managing the relationship when you are all working hard for a short period of time means there is little incentive to build long-term working relationships – the primary focus is getting the work done.

This means freelancers often worry about whether they are delivering what they are supposed to. Therefore, to ensure they do the best job, they over-achieve in compensation, which can lead to high levels of anxiety and stress. Finding ways to get your client to give feedback on your work at regular intervals can alleviate these worries significantly.

## Sector knowledge

It's not enough to know you want to work in the sector. You must have a good understanding of the role you are looking to work in, a passion for the content produced and an opinion on it. Whichever department you work in, or want to work in, you need to be aware of how different content is realised and be able to talk about it. That doesn't just mean the storylines: it can mean the lighting, camerawork, artwork or gameplay. In particular, when you are going to meet clients about future work make sure you know everything you can about their recent work. And be sure that you have watched the content or played the game and that you are able to discuss it.

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**“Pay attention to the industry. Having that awareness is the best qualification.”** Joe, development executive

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# Different types of freelancers

You can consider yourself a freelancer because you work a number of contracts over a year and don't have a permanent employer, but as far as **HMRC** (His Majesty's Revenue and Customs) is concerned, there are different types of freelancer for Income Tax and National Insurance purposes:

- Sole trader
- PAYE fixed-term contract
- A mix of sole trader and PAYE
- Limited company

Whichever way you operate, you will be required to pay tax and National Insurance on your earnings.

## Sole trader

As a sole trader you work for yourself, invoice for your services and complete a self-assessment tax return at the end of the financial year. You will be paid inclusive of Income Tax and National Insurance. You are responsible for registering yourself as self-employed with HMRC. You do this on the **Government Gateway**. Once you are registered as self-employed, HMRC will send you a 10-digit Unique Taxpayer Reference (UTR) number.

## PAYE fixed-term contract

If you work on a PAYE fixed-term contract then your employer will deduct Income Tax and National Insurance at source and pay you through their payroll on a specific date, usually monthly. There is an exception to this, known as the seven-day rule, for short contracts in the entertainment industry.

## A mix of sole trader and PAYE Fixed-Term Contract

If your work splits between sole trader and PAYE fixed-term contracts then, like a sole trader, you will need to complete a tax return annually. However, you may have paid tax and National Insurance up front (via your PAYE work) but you will still owe tax and National Insurance from your sole trader work. Your tax return will calculate this for you.

## Limited company

If you are considered self-employed, an alternative to sole trader is to run your freelance operations through your own **limited company**. This is a more complex arrangement that requires professional advice and support from an accountant. It may be something to consider as your career develops. There are advantages (such as it limits your liability) and disadvantages (additional cost and complexity) and therefore isn't right for everyone.



# Understanding the UK tax system

## Tax return

Your tax return is the official document that you (or your accountant) prepare at the end of your financial year, where you report details of your taxable income and any capital gains, and claim tax allowances and tax reliefs together with your National Insurance contributions. Your taxable income is your income after you've deducted allowable expenses. You pay National Insurance contributions to qualify for certain benefits including the State Pension.

Your tax return is done once per year every year and many freelancers adopt the same year-end as the UK financial year – choosing to start each year on 6 April until 5 April in the following calendar year. You are responsible for registering yourself with HMRC. You do this on the [Government Gateway](#), the secure online platform where you file your tax return.

## Accountant

An accountant is a professional who acts on your behalf and is qualified to advise you on financial matters, prepare accurate financial accounts and ensure your taxes are paid properly and on time. It's not essential to hire an accountant to assist you with filing your annual accounts or tax return, but they can often save you more money than they cost as they know the rules regarding legitimate business expenses.

## Income tax

The amount of [income tax](#) you pay will depend on how much you earn each year. If you are a sole trader, this will be calculated on your gross profits, which is your total turnover for the year less any allowable expenses. It is therefore a good idea to keep records of your business expenses over the year. HMRC has a [ready reckoner](#) that can help you budget for your tax bill.

## Personal Allowance

Your [personal allowance](#) is the amount of money you can earn as income in any financial year without having to pay income tax on it.

## National Insurance

You pay **National Insurance** contributions to ensure you qualify for certain benefits and the state pension. It is mandatory if you are over 16 and earning above certain thresholds. If you are PAYE, it will be deducted by your employer; if you are a sole trader, it will be worked out as part of your tax return and the payments are all made together.

## VAT (Value Added Tax)

If you earn over the **VAT threshold** in a tax year, you're legally obligated to register for VAT. You can opt to register for VAT if your earnings are below the threshold. VAT is a surcharge on goods and services that goes straight to the Government. Once registered, you'll need to charge VAT to your customers and clients, but you get to reclaim any VAT paid on business expenses. An accountant can advise you on VAT matters.

## Record-keeping

You must keep records of your business income and expenses for your tax return. You'll also need to keep records of your personal income. Legally you have to keep 'accurate records', but these can be kept digitally, so there's no legal requirement to keep physical receipts. Make sure you have a back-up just in case.

You'll need to keep records of:

- all sales and income
- all business expenses
- VAT records if you're registered for VAT
- PAYE records if you employ people
- records about your personal income

You do not need to send your records in when you submit your tax return, but you need to keep them as proof in case you are asked to show them.

There are many app-based products that can help with record-keeping and tax returns, such as receipt trackers and accounting software and banking. Examples include: [Starling Bank](#), [Monzo](#) and [Coconut](#). These will track your income and expenditure over the year and estimate your income tax and National Insurance liability for you.

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**“You have to be organised. I didn’t do it in my first year, but I am doing it now.”** Charles, cinematographer

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## Student loans

When you take out a [student loan](#), you’re automatically enrolled on to a plan. The plan you’re on will determine when you have to pay back your loan and the different thresholds you’ll be charged against. Repayment amounts will depend on your earnings, when you took the loan out, the nation in the UK you were living in, and whether you studied an undergraduate or postgraduate degree.

If you are PAYE, the payments will be deducted through payroll. If you are a sole trader, it will be calculated on your tax return.

## Pensions

Pensions are long-term investments that you put money into regularly (e.g. monthly), typically into funds that buy bonds or shares with the aim of growing your pot exponentially over the years. Pensions are a big challenge when you are a freelancer. Cash flow can be very erratic, which means it can be hard to find a set amount of money to lock away on a regular basis, and on top of this you must research and set up any pension scheme yourself – a qualified financial adviser can assist you with this. There are also apps that can make it a lot easier to set up your own pension scheme and contributions.

## Specific information for film and TV

There are very complex arrangements with HMRC about the employment status of different roles in the film and TV sector and to this end HMRC publishes an [Employment Status Manual](#) for the sector. The company contracting your services will be aware of these guidelines and should contract you accordingly.

If your work involves different roles, depending on the size of the production, you may find that you undertake a mix of roles – those that are self-employed and those that are PAYE.

For example, on a short film you are a production manager, which is a self-employed role, but on a bigger, factual series you are a production co-ordinator, which is a PAYE role.

## Seven-day rule

The [seven-day rule](#) applies to those whose work is within the entertainment industry, with a succession of different employers, and who are engaged for six days or fewer for each contract.

Employers need not deduct income tax from payments made to these employees. However, National Insurance will be paid in the usual manner.

## Lorimer letter

Sometimes referred to as an LPI0 Letter or Letter of Authority. If you are a freelance worker, not a head of department or supplier of specialist equipment, and work for many companies simultaneously, you may be eligible for a letter from HMRC that grants you eligibility to be self-employed. Its name comes from a TV vision mixer, Ian Lorimer, who won a court case to prove his work should be classed as self-employed. The BBC website has details of [how to apply for an LPI0 letter](#).

## HMRC film and production unit

For more information about tax and self-employment in film and TV, you can contact The Film & TV Production Unit.

The Film & TV Production Unit  
HM Revenue & Customs Floor  
2, Weardale House  
Washington  
Tyne and Wear  
NE37 1LW

Phone: 0300 123 2326

Email: [a.filmproductionunitmailbox@hmrc.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:a.filmproductionunitmailbox@hmrc.gsi.gov.uk)



# How does the money work?

You're likely to have a number of different work contracts over the course of any year. How many will depend on the type of work you do and the size and scale of the projects you are involved with.

You will be paid by the job, and when you agree the work with your client (employer) you should agree payment terms for your work so you can plan your personal budget accordingly. It's likely you will have gaps between contracts so you'll need to manage your money to ensure you can cover the downtime as well.

## How much do I need to live on?

Taking ownership of your personal finances and knowing how much you really need to live on will allow you to work out how much you need to earn each year. A good starting place is a spreadsheet that adds this up.

Once you know how much you have going out each week or month, you can add up all your expenditure for the year. This tells you how much you need to earn, after tax and National Insurance, to live the life you want to lead.

It's quite common when you are starting out to do other, non-industry work alongside your screen sector work. This work can provide you with valuable professional skills relevant to the sector in addition to much-needed income.

## Bank accounts

To keep your finances in order, it's a good idea to separate your personal banking from your business banking. In this way you can easily identify your income together with any allowable expenses that you've accrued during the year, as they will all have gone through your business account.

Having a separate business savings account as well means you can put aside any tax liability you have incurred in the year.

## Financial prudence

Freelance work can be sporadic – it can feel like either feast or famine – so it's a good idea to try to build up an emergency fund to cover you for those lean periods and/or any unexpected costs such as a boiler or car breaking down.

If you can save up three to six months of living expenses, it will give you a cushion to fall back on. You can then use a quieter time to work on your personal development.

## Outgoings spreadsheet

Estimated outgoings	Weekly	Monthly	Annual
<b>Household</b>			
Mortgage and/or rent			£
Council tax			£
Water			£
Gas/electricity			£
Broadband/TV /home phone			£
Insurance - home/business			£
Mobile phone			£
Other household			£
<b>Transport</b>			
Car - hire purchase agreements			£
Car insurance & road tax			£
Fuel			£
Parking permit			£
Service & maintenance			£
Public transport - season ticket			£
Other transport			£

Continued overleaf

Estimated outgoings	Weekly	Monthly	Annual
<b>Personal</b>			
Groceries/household supplies			£
Entertainment (meals, drinks, cinema, theatre etc)			£
Health & fitness (membership/classes)			£
Technology			£
Holiday expenditure			£
Gifts for family & friends			£
Clothing & beauty			£
Books, magazines, subscriptions			£
Other - snacks & incidentals			£
<b>Financial</b>			
Savings plan			£
Loan repayments			£
Credit card payments			£
Pension			£
Other financial products			£
<b>Other</b>			
Other expenditure			£
Contingency 15%			£
<b>TOTAL outgoings</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>£</b>

## What is my rate?

Currently in the UK there is no simple answer to this question as different genres and sectors within screen pay differing amounts for the same job title. For example, a production co-ordinator in drama will be paid a different rate to a production co-ordinator in factual. This will be due to the

different amount of skill and experience needed to perform those roles and the differing budgets. Likewise, a concept artist with ten years' experience in animation might be paid double a concept artist just starting out.

[Bectu](#) has suggested rates for most roles and genres operating in film and TV. However, it's up to each individual production company, and often the individual production, to determine budgets, so rates can vary considerably.

There is lobbying work going on to ensure rate-parity across productions, but it remains a work-in-progress. An example where this works well in the UK is with the Advertising Producers Association ([APA](#)): production companies have agreed to work within these suggested rates.

It's never easy, especially when you are starting out, to know what rate you should charge and then express that to a client. By doing your work, you will be adding value to the production and that is worth being paid for. Understanding your value is an important part of being able to express what your rate should be when you meet a client about a new project. Don't be afraid to negotiate.

## National minimum wage

While there are pay differences between roles, the UK does have a [National Minimum Wage](#) that details the minimum hourly wage a worker should receive. If you are over 23 then you are entitled to the [National Living Wage](#).

**It's a criminal offence for employers to not pay someone the National Minimum Wage or National Living Wage.**

If you think your pay is below the correct minimum wage rate you should talk to your employer in the first instance. If this does not solve the problem, you can ask the employer in writing to see your payment records. You can take someone with you **and** make copies of the records. If an employer owes you any arrears, they have to pay these to you.

You can contact [Acas](#) to help you solve a payment dispute. You can also [make a complaint to HM Revenue and Customs \(HMRC\)](#) about your employer or employment agency, or complain on behalf of someone else.

## Holiday pay

Whether you work a day, a week, a month or longer, if you are PAYE or a sole trader then you are entitled to paid holiday for every day you work. It doesn't matter what role or rate you are working at. If you don't take your accrued holiday entitlement by the time you complete the contract then you should be paid for this untaken holiday (known as 'payment in lieu').

Here's an example: A runner is employed for two weeks. They start to accrue holiday entitlement from day one but take no holiday leave during the two-week period. At the end of their contract they should be paid in lieu for all holiday accrued during this two-week period.

There is a [holiday entitlement calculator](#) on GOV.UK that can be used to calculate paid leave. Workers who are in employment for a full leave year are entitled to [5.6 weeks' statutory leave](#) subject to a cap of 28 days.



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# How do I get paid?

You will be paid in different ways depending on your role. For example, a researcher on a factual series with a 20-week fixed term contract would be likely to get paid monthly through company's payroll, whereas a camera operator doing a two-day shoot would be likely to invoice on completion of the work and be paid in accordance with the company's terms and conditions (often 30 days after receipt of invoice).

## PAYE Fixed term contract

If it's a PAYE role according to HMRC's [Employment Status Manual](#), then you will be paid on the company payroll, usually monthly, in the same way as permanent employees. It's worth checking with a company what their payroll dates and cut-offs are so you know when you can expect to get paid.

For example, most companies have a cut-off date in the middle of a month when they run the payroll, with payments being made towards the final few days of the month. If you start work there in week three or four of the month, you might find that your first payment won't be paid to you until the end of the following month and will cover both months' work.

## Sole trader

If you are self-employed then you will be expected to send an invoice to the client company for your services. You will need to quote your 10-digit UTR (unique taxpayer reference) to show you are [registered as a sole trader](#) with HMRC.

Your contract should detail who and when you should invoice. Once your invoice has been received by the company, it will need to be approved by the budget holder and then sent to accounts for payment.

You will then be paid in accordance with the company's terms and conditions. Typically these are 30 days after receipt of invoice. If you are doing a big job or one that requires up-front costs for you to deliver the work, you can ask for an initial payment to cover these costs.

## Limited company

If you run your freelance operations through your own limited company, then, just like a sole trader, you will be expected to invoice for your services before you can be paid.

## Invoices

Legally, an invoice must contain the following information:

- The word 'invoice'
- A unique identification number (invoice number)
- Your freelancer service's name, address and contact information
- The name and registered office address of the client
- The date of the invoice
- A purchase order or contract number
- The date the goods or services were delivered (supply date).
- A description of what you are charging for
- The amount(s) being charged net of tax
- If you are charging VAT then add in your VAT registration details and the amount of the VAT
- The total amount payable
- How the invoice should be paid – your bank details
- When the invoice should be paid – e.g. please pay within 30 days

(See example on the following page.)

## What do I do if I don't get paid on time?

If you don't get paid on time, politely nudge the finance department to find out where you are in their system. They will be able to advise you when you can expect payment or tell you if it has not yet been passed for payment. If the latter, get in touch with your client contact to ascertain what the delay is and try to resolve it.

If you still don't get paid then it's time to send a firm reminder to both your contact and the finance department, explaining the payment is now overdue for no legitimate reason and that you want it settled within a specified period (e.g. 14 days).

If the invoice is still unpaid after this period then send a final demand. Write again, this time expressing disappointment that they haven't paid and outlining the amount owed. Again request payment within a specified period (e.g. 14 days).

Follow each of these stages up with a phone call. As a last resort, you might need to take legal advice on how to claim an unpaid debt – many industry bodies include legal support with their membership.

Whatever happens, don't start a new project for the client if they haven't paid their last invoice.





# Marketing and selling yourself

Marketing is telling your potential clients that you exist and are available to work with them. Selling is the final stage of marketing where you seal the deal.

Marketing works in either a push or a pull way – you can market yourself (push) to potential clients or clients can reach out to you (pull). Whichever way it happens, you will want to ensure you have a consistent and clear presence online. This is in effect your personal brand, which needs to be up to date and demonstrate your skills and experience. The first thing a potential client will do is research you online.

Your personal brand, whether you use your name or a company name, should be consistent across all your marketing and communications.

## Email address

This should be professional and easily identifiable as you, so it's best to avoid nicknames. Using a free mail service, such as Gmail and iCloud, will do the job, but if you are going to go to the effort of having a website, you could use an email associated with that domain.

## CV

An up-to-date and well laid-out CV is essential. Generally it should be no more than two pages, ideally just one. After your contact details, follow with a short personal statement. Then detail your relevant experience with roles and responsibilities. Follow this with your education/training/qualifications and finally your hobbies and interests. Don't underestimate the value of hobbies and interests – that's where you show your personality and other skills that you think the reader will value.

For film and TV, your credits are your calling card, so there's usually little need for explanation as to the exact duties on each role. If you are starting out and have few credits to list, it can be unclear what role you might be looking for, so make sure it is clear in your personal statement.

Make sure you can be contacted easily, and if you are happy for your CV to be shared more widely then include a GDPR statement such as “This CV may be kept on file and distributed for employment purposes”.

There are many great resources online, including [Facebook groups](#), that can offer sector-specific CV advice. ScreenSkills has advice on [approaching employers](#).

## Showreel/portfolio/website

If your work is in a creative department then a showreel and/or portfolio is an important part of showcasing you and your brand. Keep it fresh and up-to-date as you never know when a potential client will want to discuss a new project with you.

A website isn't essential for everyone, but it can be a great way to showcase your portfolio of work. Take a look at [how to build a portfolio](#) for information on showcasing your skills, depending on your industry and role.

## Social media

This is a great way to follow what is happening in the industry, whether it be following key people on Twitter or joining the many Facebook groups that exist by department and by region. Increasingly, many job roles are posted in relevant Facebook groups rather than through formal advertising so these can be a vital source of opportunities.

Your social media profile(s) should be professional. Many freelancers have a professional profile for work and a private personal one for just this reason. Increasingly, your social media profile acts as your portfolio.

## Professional databases

There are many sector-specific databases where you can register your services, often for free. Some are national, while others are geographically based so that those filming in a region can find the details of local talent for the production.

National organisations: [Wales Screen](#), [Northern Ireland Screen](#), [Screen Scotland](#) and [Creative England](#).

Regional examples include [Bristol Film Office](#), [Film Birmingham](#), [Film London](#) and many more.

It's worth taking time to complete databases carefully and update them regularly – they will often be a potential client's first interaction with you and may well inform whether they contact you or someone else.

# Who are my potential customers?

Successful freelancers build long-term relationships with their clients and will often work with them on a regular basis on a range of different productions over a period of many years. This works well for both the freelancer and the client as they know each other's working style and requirements and they know they complement each other.

It can be challenging when you are either new to the industry or looking to step up and find new clients to work with. This is where having a focus on a particular genre and doing an analysis of your full skills profile can help you identify which companies would value you most highly, because then you can target them with your marketing efforts.

Do your research thoroughly, focus on specific people – either freelancers or within production companies – and write to them. Explain why you are the best person to solve their needs, but keep it short. Quite simply, less is often more. You are looking for the clients that are the best fit for you and to build long-term relationships with them – which ultimately means more regular work for you with less marketing effort.

Remember, if you don't get along with the client and you can't gel, it's going to be difficult to produce great work together, so consider whether working with them really is right for you.

## Collaborating not competing

As well as building long-term relationships with clients, it can work well to build good relationships with those who do the same role as you. It might sound counter-intuitive to build relationships with your competition, but if you are hired on a big project, you may find that you are working as part of a team – where there is more than one person doing your role – so you'll need to collaborate. Also, you can refer each other for work when one of you is busy. Again, building long-term relationships will stand you in good stead.

## Networking

Once you are clear on the people and/or companies you want to market your services to you need to find ways to get in front of them and pitch

yourself. This can take place in a number of ways: You can go to events and conferences they are attending and/or you can contact them directly via email or direct message. You'll need to have a short, compelling pitch ready that centres around why they should want to work with you and why you are the best person to solve their needs.

In addition to approaching people directly, you can use your networks. If you can see that someone in your network is connected to a person you want to meet, ask if they will introduce you to them. Your introduction then comes with a built-in endorsement, which makes it all the better. Word-of-mouth is one of the most valuable ways to get in front of new clients.

This can be hard when you are just starting out, but you will probably have more people in your networks than you think. If you've studied media at any time, it's likely you'll have tutors who have networks they can introduce you to, and chances are you'll also have had guest speakers who are happy to be contacted as well. So contact them! ScreenSkills runs its own [networking events](#) as well as attending other organisations' events around the country. It also offers further tips on [how to network well](#).

If you are looking to grow your networks further, there are many regional organisations that organise local events within the sector, such as screenings, masterclasses and socials. Find out what is happening in your area and make the effort to go along and meet people. Don't be afraid to ask someone who has been working in the industry for a while if they will mentor and support you as you find your feet – ideally someone in a role in a similar area to you as they'll likely be keen to build their networks with new talent.

ScreenSkills offers [mentoring support](#) which can also assist with building your networks.

# Managing yourself

## Managing your time

When you are working for yourself and selling your services, you have a finite capacity on what you can deliver. There are only 24 hours in a day and you do need to sleep and eat. You can always turn down a project, whatever your reasons. A simple “I’m fully booked at the moment” can go a long way.

Be careful not to overload yourself with work. It’s better to do a small number of projects with full energy and a clear head than a large number of projects with not enough attention. You run the risk of losing clients if you don’t do your work to the standards expected.

Before you get started, make sure you and your client are clear on what you are expected to do, over how long and for how much. This should be in writing – ideally on a contract or purchase order, but at the very least on an email. If the client is slow at sending you a brief, they’ll usually appreciate you sending them an email with the outline of what you propose – it can often speed up getting things started too.

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**“Be realistic about what you can handle. Recognise that you can take time off.”** Coco, production assistant

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## Managing your health

Finding time to manage your health and wellbeing can be a challenge when you are a freelancer but it has to be a priority because if you aren’t well enough to work you then won’t be able to earn.

Freelancers often don’t have anyone else to back them up on a big job. This is where building a support network of like-minded creatives will stand you in good stead. Not only can you look after each other, but if you are struggling to deliver a job, you’ve got an in-built network of great people who may be able to step into the breach.

## Managing your mental health

In an already-competitive industry, it can feel difficult to talk to a client about a mental health issue. Work-related stress can be a breeding ground for mental health issues. Add in to this the typical work in the screen sector, which consists of long hours, often away from home and working with people you don't know well, who probably won't see signs that you may be struggling, as well as the worry that you'll be seen as a 'problem person' and that clients won't want to work with you again. All this can lead to high levels of stress and anxiety.

Building long-term working relationships with colleagues and clients develops trust and understanding and, importantly, insight into when a colleague is feeling overwhelmed and struggling to cope.

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**“Put on your own oxygen mask first.”**

Sarah McCaffrey, psychotherapist MBACP

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## Strategies for managing your mental health

When you are busy, in the thick of a big project, it's easy to lose track of time, or even days. This is a quick route to damaging your health – both mental and physical. Look after yourself by making sure you eat well and get regular exercise and fresh air. While everyone is different, boundaries that keep you focused and maintain your work-life balance are important:

- Set a work schedule – you can always adjust the times later to suit your own habits
- Turn off email alerts when you're not 'at work'
- Manage your time between clients, friends and family – they all value your attention
- Take some time out for you to do something that relaxes you
- If possible, separate your workspace and living space to help you focus



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“Saying ‘yes’ to everything can have an impact on your health.” Emma, animator

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## What happens if I get sick?

When you're sick, you may feel it is difficult to take time out to go to the doctor. Every day that you're not working you're losing money, which means it's all too easy to cancel a dental check-up or doctor's appointment. However, your health should always take priority. Your clients should understand – they face these challenges too – and if they don't, you have to ask yourself if they are a client you want to work with for the longer term. As it is, most freelancers take less time off than employees.

It's a good idea to familiarise yourself with the Government's financial offering for those between-jobs and out-of-work periods, as well as [tax credits and benefits](#) for which you could be eligible. [Citizen's Advice](#) is a valuable resource with trained advisors who can advise you on your specific circumstances.

If you think you need professional help and support, there are many organisations you can turn to:

- Your doctor
- [Film + TV Charity](#) has a dedicated 24-hour helpline offering support to those struggling, and can refer to trained counsellors
- [Mind](#) is a national charity that provides [advice and support](#) to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem
- [Samaritans](#) has a 24-hour helpline for anyone struggling to cope, who needs someone to listen without judgment or pressure

## Dignity at work

Bectu's [Dignity at Work](#) campaign aims to champion workers' rights to dignity, from harassment and bullying to working hours and privacy – all triggers for mental health challenges. Alongside this, the British Academy of Film and Television Arts ([Bafta](#)) and the British Film Institute ([BFI](#)) have published a [Dignity at Work Policy Template](#) for productions and companies to sign up to.

## Bullying and harassment

The screen industries have united in publishing the first set of [principles and guidance to tackle bullying and harassment](#), specifically tailored to the sector. The guidance aims to eradicate bullying and harassment and to support victims more effectively. It has been developed by the [BFI](#) in partnership with [BAFTA](#) and in consultation with a range of organisations including ScreenSkills, guilds, unions, industry member bodies and key agencies as well as employees and freelancers across all roles. In 2021, the BFI and BAFTA also launched an [Action List](#) to support workplaces in tackling bullying and harassment.

The guidance helps employers meet legal requirements and offers a shared vision to promote and maintain a safer, more inclusive workplace environment for everyone working within the screen industries, and recommends adhering to the following principles:

1. Everyone is responsible for creating and maintaining an inclusive workplace that is positive and supportive.
2. We recognise that harassment may be unlawful under the [Equality Act 2010](#).
3. Those of us who are employers accept our responsibilities under the [Health and Safety at Work Act 1974](#).
4. We do not tolerate bullying and harassment, including sexual harassment, and will ensure that processes are in place for the reporting and investigation of these serious issues.
5. We recognise that bullying and harassment can have significant adverse impacts on the productivity, long-term health and well-being of affected people and we will work to eradicate it. This will mean providing adequate protection for complainants and victims, and, where bullying or harassment is found to have occurred, taking appropriate action against bullies or harassers.
6. We value inclusivity, appreciate difference, welcome learning from others, and consider people equal without prejudice or favour. We build relationships based on mutual respect. We will all work to give and receive feedback in a constructive way, which we know will improve creativity and productivity.
7. We understand that reporting bullying or harassment can be intimidating. We will respect confidentiality where possible and aim to make the process of reporting clear and straightforward. If anyone comes forward to report behaviour which might amount to bullying or harassment, we will endeavour to investigate objectively. Individuals who have made complaints of bullying and harassment or participate in good faith in any investigation should not suffer any form of reprisal or victimisation as a result.
8. We will respect each other's dignity, regardless of the seniority of our role in an organisation.

If you are concerned that you have been victim of, or witnessed bullying or harassment at work and you are not sure who to talk to a good place to start is the Film + TV Charity [helpline](#).

If you want to know how to be effective in addressing bullying and harassment, take [ScreenSkills online learning module](#) which is based on the screen industries' core principles. We recommend all people working in the industries take this course. It takes 30 minutes to complete and it's free-of-charge.



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# Where to find help

## Building your skills

ScreenSkills offers a range of training courses and workshops for those looking to develop and enhance their skills. Some are free for participants, others are subsidised. You can find them in [Training, events and opportunities](#). Our training is targeted to address skills priorities identified in the industries through our [Skills Forecasting Service](#).

## Building your knowledge

On the ScreenSkills website you can find training resources, which cover different sectors and specialisms, together with e-learning modules and on-demand recordings of previous workshops and webinars. It's a great resource when you need to know more about a topic quickly.

## Bursaries

A ScreenSkills bursary is a cash grant designed to remove some of the practical barriers to making progress in the screen industries. Bursaries pay for training or other costs associated with skills development. We provide bursaries to help ensure the screen industries have access now, and in the future, to the skills and talent needed for continued success.

You can apply for money to pay for most things that relate to training, work and work-related activities, including training fees, accommodation, care, disability access costs, driving lessons, equipment, software and travel.

We aim to offer funding wherever possible, but we cannot promise that all applications will be successful due to limited funding and skills shortage priorities.

Find out more about our [ScreenSkills bursaries](#).

## Further sector organisations that work on your behalf

Unions and trade bodies can offer you legal protection, training and other services, and can support you in disputes with companies.

### Unions and trade bodies

For more information about what a union can offer you, visit:

[gov.uk/join-trade-union](https://www.gov.uk/join-trade-union) or [tuc.org.uk](https://www.tuc.org.uk)

Here are some of the most prominent unions and trade bodies in the screen industries:

- [Bectu](#)
- [Equity](#)
- [Pact](#)
- [Ukie](#)

There are also many organisations and charities that support the screen and creative sector. Some cover a wide range of the sector; others are sector- or department-specific.

### Organisations that cover a wide range of the sector

- [BAFTA](#)
- [Creative UK](#)
- [Directors UK](#)
- [Film and TV Charity](#)
- [Association for independent professionals and self-employed \(IPSE\)](#)
- [Royal Television Society](#)

### VFX

- [ScreenSkills careers and courses information](#)
- [NextGen Skills Academy](#) – courses and apprenticeships
- [Access VFX](#) – helping people get into the VFX, animation and games industries
- [Show Me The Animation](#) – online magazine with information on events and opportunities
- [Bectu VFX branch](#)

## Games

- [ScreenSkills careers and courses information](#)
- [BAFTA Games Guru](#)
- [Ukie](#)
- [TIGA](#) – The Interactive Games Association
- [NextGen Skills Academy](#) – courses and apprenticeships:
- [Ukie and Nesta UK GamesMap](#) – shows games companies across the UK
- [Gamasutra/The Game Career Guide](#)

## Animation

- [ScreenSkills careers and courses information](#)
- [Pixar in a Box](#) – where Pixar artists explain how they make their animations
- [NextGen Skills Academy](#) – courses and apprenticeships
- [Animation UK](#) – part of the UK Screen Alliance, represents the animation industry
- [Show Me The Animation](#) – online magazine with information on events and opportunities
- [Children's Media Conference](#) – UK gathering for everyone involved in creating content for kids

## Film and TV drama

- [ScreenSkills careers and courses information](#)
- [British Film Commission](#)
- [British Film Institute \(BFI\)](#)
- [Bectu, the media and entertainment union](#)
- [Royal Television Society](#)

For a career in sales, marketing and distribution:

- [Independent Cinema Office](#) – UK body supporting independent cinemas and film festivals
- [Film Export UK](#) – trade body for companies with UK offices that sell independent feature films internationally
- [Film Distributors' Association](#) – trade body of film distributors

## Unscripted TV

- [ScreenSkills careers and courses information](#)
- [BAFTA Guru](#) – career advice for games, film and television
- [BBC Academy](#) – training and development for the BBC and wider industry
- [Royal Television Society](#) – bursaries, jobs and training schemes in the TV industry
- [Bectu](#) – the media and entertainment union

## Industry guilds (department-specific)

- [Association of Camera Operators \(ACO\)](#)
- [Assistant Directors Association \(ADA\)](#)
- [Association of Motion Picture Sound \(AMPS\)](#)
- [Advertising Producers Association \(APA\)](#)
- [British Film Designers Guild \(BFDG\)](#)
- [British Society of Cinematographers \(BSC\)](#)
- [Film Distributors Association \(FDA\)](#)
- [Guild of British Camera Technicians \(GBCT\)](#)
- [Guild of British Film and Television Editors \(GBFTE\)](#)
- [Guild of Television Camera Professionals](#)
- [Institute of Professional Sound \(IPS\)](#)
- [Production Guild UK](#)
- [Screen Craft Rights](#)
- [Writers Guild of Great Britain \(WGGB\)](#)



## Acknowledgements

Freelance Toolkit 3rd edition – written by [Alison Grade](#), author of The Freelance Bible.

To access the webpage version of the freelance toolkit with hyperlinks, use the QR code below:







