

# **Part-Time Freelance to Full-Time Freelance:**

## **A Guide for a Successful Transition**

Being a freelance designer is a great job. It brings a lot of freedom and flexibility, which draws many designers, experienced and inexperienced, to pursue freelancing as a way to earn a living. But there is also a ton of competition, and many freelancers struggle to find enough work to make a comfortable living.

Starting as a part-time freelancer is a great move, for reasons that we will look at very shortly. If you're currently freelancing part-time or considering pursuing freelance design, this e-book covers the reasons why it is beneficial to start your freelance career on a part-time basis and also provides plenty of tips to help get you through the challenging times and on to a successful full-time freelance business.

From my own personal experience I can tell you that when I started freelancing on the side I had no idea how I would ever be able to make it my full-time job. But I learned a lot during that time, and before I knew it I was at the point where I could quit my full-time job with a very low level of risk. I hope the information and tips provided in this e-book will prove to be highly valuable for you in your own work.

Before we get started, there is a basic assumption that is made throughout this e-book. The e-book is written assuming that you currently have a full-time job that is sufficient for covering your living expenses. Over the past few years I have spoken to a number of people who are employed full-time as a designer, or employed in some other industry, and they want to know how they can make the move to full-time freelance. My advice is to start part-time and follow the tips covered here.

## **Why Starting Part-Time Is a Great Move**

Everyone has a different situation. Unfortunately, not every freelancer is able to start part-time (for example, someone who has lost a full-time job), but most of us are able to work our way into full-time freelance gradually rather than making a quick plunge.

Part-time freelancing can be a great stepping stone, and we'll look into the details of why and how in this brief e-book. Whether you are a full-time employed designer, a full-time worker in a different line of work, or a student, beginning with part-time freelancing will help to reduce the risk of your move into the freelancing world, and as a result it will increase your chances of success.

Here we will look at a number of reasons why you would be wise to start freelancing part-time, rather than choosing to go full-time freelance right away.

### **Less Pressure to Earn Money at the Start**

If you currently have a full-time income from a job you will be able to freelance on the side and not feel the same pressure that you would experience if you were to quit your job and go full-time freelance. Even for those who are highly talented, earning a living as a freelancer can be a challenge, and it usually takes a little bit of time to get to the point where you are comfortable living on that income.

Having a stable full-time income that will pay your bills will free you up to take more liberties with your part-time freelance work, which we will look at in more detail throughout the points in this e-book.

If you're a full-time student, you can get a head start on your career by taking some freelance projects on the side. Most students/freelancers will tell you that they learn a lot more by actually working on real projects for clients than they do in the classroom. If you're able to get some of that valuable experience while you are still in school you will be much more prepared for a career either as an employed designer or as a full-time freelancer upon graduation.

### **Focus on Experience While Building a Portfolio**

If you're planning to use part-time freelancing as a bridge to full-time freelancing, or if you are hoping to use it as an opportunity to help land a job with that design agency that you have always wanted to work for, building a quality portfolio is key.

One of the significant benefits of part-time freelancing is that without the pressure to earn a living right away you will be able to place more emphasis on things like building your portfolio. If you jump into full-time freelancing right away you'll have to take whatever projects are available in order to help earn enough money to live. These projects may or may not be ideal for your portfolio.

As a part-time freelancer you will have more flexibility to take projects that you think would add a valuable piece to your portfolio. Maybe the project doesn't pay as much as you would need if you were full-time, or maybe the scope is rather small. Maybe this particular project will give you some experience that you have been looking for and it will allow you to add a specific type of work to your portfolio.

As a full-time freelancer you simply won't have the flexibility to base your selection of projects on how it will impact your portfolio. But as a part-timer the benefit may be much more significant than compromise that you are making to take on the project.

## **Establish Your Processes and Procedures**

There is a lot more to being a successful freelancer than simply being a good designer. Even the most talented designers can have a hard time achieving success as a freelancer without being able to run their business effectively. Fortunately, you don't need to be a business guru, but you will need to have some organization.

Working on freelance projects part-time will allow you to get some valuable experience managing projects and clients, and you will be able to develop some processes and procedures for running your business. This can include things like preparing quotes, invoicing, customer service, contracts, budgeting, and even your workflow on projects.

By starting part-time you will be able to adjust your processes and learn on the fly with lower risk or impact on clients. If you're starting full-time freelancing right away without any processes and procedures in place it can quickly become difficult to manage if you are working with several clients at a time.

## **Choose Your Projects More Selectively**

Not every project that comes your way will be a good fit, regardless of whether you are freelancing part-time or full-time. However, the benefit of starting part-time is that you won't be in the situation where you have to accept a project that comes your way simply because you need the money.

Maybe you'd rather choose to work on a project that will give you an opportunity to develop new skills or strengthen your existing skills in a particular area, as compared to a project that would pay more but not offer the same type of opportunity. As a part-time freelancer this is up to you.

As you're able to choose your projects selectively for a while you will be able to gain experience and develop the skills that you feel will be important to your success when you make the move to full-time freelance. It's also likely that your portfolio will benefit from this ability to choose which projects are a good fit for you.

### **Learn Things About Pricing and the Business Aspect of Design**

One of the most challenging parts of being a freelancer, particularly when you are new, is pricing your work. Making good estimates on how long the project will take and what will be involved is not always easy. Any experience you can get with this will prove to be very valuable down the road.

Many freelancers tend to undervalue their work when they are concerned about missing out on a project because or being undercut on price by another designer. By starting part-time you can get a better feel for what your work is worth and how you can secure clients without working for pennies.

All freelancers learn lessons about pricing their services and running their business, but by working through these situations before you go full-time you will be avoiding headaches and complications down the road, and you'll be able to more effectively run your business.

### **Build Up Savings for When You Move to Full-Time Freelance**

If you have a stable full-time income while you're getting started slowly as a freelancer, you'll be able to use that money that you're earning on your freelance projects to help with the upcoming move to full-time freelance. We'll get into this in more detail later, but by thinking ahead and preparing for the transition to full-time freelance you can make things much more comfortable.

## **Improve Your Skills**

This point really depends on where you are at in your development as a designer.

While there is a constant need in this industry to be improving yourself, regardless of whether you are an employed designer or a freelancer, this opportunity to improve is most valuable for those who do not have extensive experience already.

Some employed designers can make the jump to full-time freelance with no need to improve on their existing skill set (at the moment any way) but this is not the case for most of us. Working as a full-time freelancer you will have to be able to produce high-quality, professional work for your clients. If you need some time to get to that point, part-time freelancing can be a good stepping stone. While your clients will still be expecting quality work from you, the projects that part-timers typically take on will be less demanding than the projects of the average full-time freelancer.

## **Start to Build Your Network**

Networking is a key component to the success of any freelancer. If you're able to start building your professional network while you are freelancing on the side you should be far more connected by the time you move to full-time freelance work.

A strong network has a lot of benefits for freelancers, including referrals and increased client work, but it takes time and effort to build that network. It's something that you will want to continue throughout your career, but having a head start is a good thing.

## **Start to Build a Client Base**

Many successful freelancers get the majority of their work from referrals. Most of those referrals come from past clients, and without having any past clients it's impossible to get these referrals. So by starting part-time you will be able to build up

your client base, and hopefully if you have done a good job for that client it will lead to more work in the future. By the time you are ready to move into full-time freelancing you should be seeing some results from client referrals.

In addition to referrals, building a client base can be key because it may lead to on-going work with some of those clients. Most projects will be a one-time thing and when you are done with the project you may see minor work from the client here or there as they want some tweaks or additions, but other projects will be on-going. Some clients have a need for someone who will provide services on a regular basis and this can be an excellent situation for you as you look to move to full-time freelance work. Any project that you can get with on-going work will help to reduce the amount of new projects that you will need to secure from other clients.

## **Trial**

The last benefit that I want to point out about part-time freelancing is that after you have had some experience working on these side projects you may decide that being a freelance designer just isn't for you. In this case there is really nothing lost except for the time that you've spent on these projects; but you've learned something very valuable and found out early in the process that it's not for you.

Many designers choose to go into full-time freelancing because they like design or because it's something they're good at. But when it comes time to run a business or manage clients they may find out that it's not quite what they expected. If the jump to full-time freelance has already been made there is likely much more at stake than if this had occurred while working as a part-time freelancer.

View your part-time work as a sort of trial period that will help you to determine if this is really the direction that you want to go with your career. If you enjoy it, that's

great; you'll get some valuable experience and you'll be prepared to make the change to full-time freelance. But if you don't like it or it doesn't work out like you had hoped, you can always stick with your full-time job or pursue something else.

## **Things to Consider Before Going Full-Time Freelance**

If you haven't yet made the move to full-time freelance, there are a number of things that should be given consideration. Many designers do not give much thought to factors that aren't related to getting new clients, and as a result they are not effectively prepared.

Being able to do a great job for clients is a key part of freelance success, but there is much more to it. If you've been working as an employee there will be significant changes for you and your family, if you have one. Taking the time to consider these factors and to plan before making the move to full-time freelancing will allow you to build your business on a solid foundation.

### **Will You Have Health Insurance and Benefits?**

If you're leaving a full-time job to go into the freelancing world you are most likely leaving behind the benefits that come with that job. Health insurance isn't usually the first thought that comes to mind when considering a change in careers, but it can be a costly new expense, especially if you have a family.

In an ideal situation you'll have a spouse or family member who can carry you on their insurance for a while, but this is obviously not always the case. The best thing you can do is to get some quotes ahead of time from a few different insurance



providers, and compare those numbers to the amount that you are currently contributing for your insurance (since most employers do not cover the full amount). Remember that there are a lot of differences from one plan to the next, so try to compare apples to apples as much as possible.

### **Do You Have the Support of Your Family?**

If you have a family it is a good idea to make sure that you have their support before working towards full-time freelancing. There can be a lot of sacrifices for everyone involved, so it is helpful if everyone sees the benefit of what you're trying to accomplish.

While I was freelancing part-time before quitting my full-time job I had very little time with my wife. I came home from my job and went straight to the computer, and that was how it went every night for about a year and a half. Fortunately, my wife was very supportive and encouraging throughout that time, otherwise I don't think I would have been able to get to the point where I could safely leave my job.

### **What Impact Will it Have on Your Taxes?**

One of the most significant differences of working for yourself as opposed to working as an employee is the tax situation. You'll need to have an idea of what taxes will be due and how much money you should be putting aside.

Only an accountant or a tax professional can really help you to accurately understand the implications of moving towards full-time freelancing. Before I left my full-time job I found an accountant and went for a few consultations to get a clear picture of how I would be impacted in terms of taxes. I highly recommend that anyone in that position does the same thing because it gave me much more peace of mind and I had a better idea of what I need to set aside from my income.

## **What Bank Accounts Will You Need?**

Regardless where you are at in the process of moving towards full-time freelancing, it is a good idea to open a separate bank account for business purposes. Separating your business income from your personal finances can be a tricky situation, and having separate bank accounts will help to prevent potential issues, like not having the money in your account to pay your business expenses.

## **Will You Need a Credit Card?**

Some freelancers also choose to have a separate credit card for business expenses. When it comes to tracking expenses, having a separate credit card will make it much easier. This is not a necessity but it is something that is worth considering ahead of time.

## **Do You Have an Accountant?**

As I mentioned earlier, I highly recommend that you find an accountant. Most designers are not naturally good with finances and taxes. While there are plenty of areas of finance that you can easily manage yourself (such as budgeting and tracking income/expenses), tax is an area where you will usually be better off hiring a professional.

As a business owner there are a lot of potential tax deductions that can legitimately reduce the amount of tax that you owe, but trying to do a good job without having experience in this area is usually not possible. Accountants typically aren't cheap, especially good ones, but they can do the tax work much quicker than you can, and just as importantly, they can help you to save money by knowing what they are doing. In many cases the accountant may save you more money than you wind up paying for his/her services.

## **How Will You Track Your Finances?**

You'll need some method for recording and tracking your income and expenses. Some people prefer to use a simple spreadsheet, and for most freelancers this is sufficient. There are also plenty of online apps and software options that will give you more features and reporting capabilities. Popular online apps include [FreshBooks](#), [Free Agent](#), and [Less Accounting](#).

## **What Expenses Can You Expect?**

When you are working as an employee it's easy to know how much money you are making. You probably have a set salary, and your take home pay is most likely about the same each time you are paid. This is much different when you're a freelancer. Not only will your income be less stable, but you will also have business expenses that reduce the amount of money you're actually making.

Business expenses are good for reducing your taxes, but they can also have a significant impact on the amount of money that you actually have left over. Many freelancers make the mistake of confusing income with profit. Income is what you bring in, profit is what you have left after your expenses. Don't forget to anticipate the expenses that you will have and to plan for them accordingly.

## **Will You Lose Any Perks When You Quit Your Job?**

Some people have a cell phone, a car, or some other type of perk from their full-time job. Of course, if you leave the job to move to full-time freelance work you will be giving up those perks. Don't forget to factor in the amount of money that you will have to pay to replace those perks (assuming they are necessary) once you will be footing the bill.

## **Do You Need to Register Your Business?**

Another consideration is whether or not you need to register your business. This will depend on how you are operating and the laws of where you live/operate. In general, if you are operating under your name it is not necessary to register as a business, but this may not be the case everywhere. It's a good idea to check with your state or province to see what is required and what is not.

## **Do You Need to Have Contracts or Other Legal Documents Drawn Up?**

If you have not already done much freelancing, you will quickly learn the importance of having a signed contract before working with clients. The contracts used by designers vary from rather simple to more detailed and complex. You can have a contract drawn up for you, or you can use a template like [the one from AIGA](#). Any template you use will most likely need some customization to suit your needs.

## **Do You Have a Suitable Workspace?**

Most freelancers work from home, which is one of the perks that attract many people to freelancing. You'll need to consider your home and where you will work. It's highly preferable to have a workspace that is separated from your living space, otherwise it can be difficult to avoid distractions and to draw a distinction between your personal space and time and your work space and time.

You won't need a large space to use as a dedicated work area, but ideally it should have plenty of natural light, a comfortable temperature, a door that can be closed to avoid distractions, and a comfortable chair.

## **What is Your Long-Term Focus?**

Freelancing is not always the ultimate goal. Many designers want to use freelancing as a springboard to a better job with a design agency, a stepping stone towards

starting their own design agency, or maybe they just want to freelance for the time being until they decide what path they would like to take with their career.

There is no right or wrong motivation for freelancing, but it is important that you give some consideration to your long-term focus because it will impact many decisions that you make along the way. For a more detailed look at this topic please see our blog post [Is Freelancing Right for You?](#)

### **What Services Will You Offer?**

Although it's very possible that this will change over the course of time, it's a good idea to think about the specific services that you'll offer to your clients. For web designers there are a number of related services that are possibilities, including: print-based graphic design, logo design, branding, web development, illustration, search engine optimization, social media marketing, and the list could keep going on.

Of course, if you're going to offer a service to clients you'll need to be able to do a good job, but if there are particular areas that you would like to explore where you currently have limited experience you may want to identify these areas while you are freelancing part-time. You may be able to offer your clients a discounted rate on these services since you are using it as a learning opportunity, and then you'll have more experience by the time you make the move to full-time.

### **Who is Your Target Audience?**

If you're just getting started it's likely that most of your clients are coming from family and friends, and people that they know. In order to be able to expand and get to the point where you'll be able to support yourself on just your freelance work, you will need to have an idea of the types of clients that you are targeting.

Knowing your target audience will have an impact on how you design your website, the message that it conveys, where you place advertisements for your services, who you network with, the projects that you actively pursue, and more.

## **Tips for Moving from Part-Time to Full-Time**

While many people freelance on the side, making the move to full-time freelance can be very intimidating and challenging. The fear of making the transition and then not having any work discourages many from ever getting to that point. While there is always going to be some risk involved, there are a lot of things you can do to minimize that risk and make the transition as smooth and successful as possible.

Here we'll look at some specific tips to follow when you are working as a part-time freelancer and looking to eventually take it full-time. This was a powerful time of learning in my own business, so I hope that some of the lessons I learned will be of help to you as well.

### **Try it for a While, Then Schedule the Move**

As I mentioned earlier, starting part-time is a good move because it serves as a trial period. You can get a feel for what freelancing is like and through this experience you will know if it is something that you would like to pursue or not.

If you've tried part-time freelancing for a while and you've decided that it's what you want to do full-time, my advice is to schedule a target date for that move to full-time. This doesn't have to be set in stone, and it doesn't even have to be something that

you share with anyone. Simply keep that target date in your mind as a goal and work towards it.

When you are freelancing part-time with an open-ended possibility of moving to full-time, it's easy to get in the habit of continuing to do what you are doing, and you may find that you're not making much progress. However, if you have a target date in mind you have something specific to work towards. I also found it helpful to have a goal for the amount of income that I wanted to have from part-time freelancing before making the move to full-time.

Depending on your personal situation you may also have other factors that play into to the decision as well. For example you may want to have a specific amount of money saved by a certain date in order to help out as a safety cushion for after you move to full-time.

### **Save Plenty of Money for Tax Time**

Even when you are freelancing part-time you will still be responsible to pay taxes on your earnings. Don't forget to set aside money specifically for that purpose, otherwise you could be in for a bad surprise when you do your taxes.

My advice is to find out what tax bracket you are in and set aside that percentage of your income each month. Have a separate account somewhere so there is no confusion about what that money is for.

### **Save Your Part-Time Income**

While you are freelancing on the side you may be making more money that you are accustomed to. If your full-time job is sufficient to pay your bills it can be easy to view your part-time freelancing income as extra money that can be spent on whatever you

want. However, if your goal is to move towards full time freelancing it is beneficial to set this money aside, for a few reasons.

First, if you get used to making more money (your full-time salary plus your income from part-time freelancing), it will be hard to go back to a lower income. If you decide to move to full-time freelancing it would mean a reduced income because you would lose your full-time salary, and if you decide you want to stick with your full-time job and quit freelancing on the side, that would mean a reduced income as well. So at this point you are stuck if you want to keep the same standard of living.

From my experience the best thing to do is set aside the money that you make from freelancing and don't even view it as part of your income. By that I mean don't adjust your standard of living or get used to buying lots of extra things because you have some additional money coming in. By doing this you'll be giving yourself the best chance to replace your income from your full-time job when you move to full-time freelancing.

Second, by setting aside the money that you are making part-time you can be building up some savings that can be used if things don't go quite as planned when you make the move to full-time. It's a good idea to have enough saved up that you would be able to pay all of your bills and living expenses for a few months if things started very slowly when you move to full-time freelancing. This can make it a much less stressful move, and it will help you to have more confidence that it is the right decision.

### **Be Willing to Consider Lower Paying Jobs**

While you are still freelancing part-time you may want to take advantage of the fact that you can be willing to accept projects that may not pay as much as you would



like. Since you will be concerned with building a strong portfolio before going full-time, you may want to consider certain projects that you wouldn't be able to take if you were freelancing full-time.

This isn't to suggest that you should take every job that comes your way or that you shouldn't value your time and your services, but as a part-timer you probably have more flexibility now than you ever will to take projects for reasons other than the price.

### **Consider Selling Stock Graphics or Templates**

If you have more time than clients, I am a proponent of selling stock items, including graphics and templates/themes. Selling stock items can help to build some on-going income each month which will help you towards the goal of going full-time, and it also gives you the chance to choose the types of projects that you work on.

As marketplaces like [ThemeForest](#), [GraphicRiver](#), [Mojo Themes](#) continue to increase in popularity, more and more designers are earning a consistent part-time or full-time income from stock items. Many designers have also been making money for years selling graphics at stock photo sites like [iStockphoto](#).

For designers, part-time or full-time, staying busy and productive can be a challenge. There are plenty of sites like [Elance](#) where you can go at any time to bid on work, but you may find that you are spending lots of hours just to land one small-paying job. You may be better off taking that time and putting it towards the design of stock items to sell.

### **Look for Diversity of Income**

Along the same lines as the previous point, client work is not the only possibility for

earning money as a designer. Whenever I am asked by part-time freelancers what advice I have for making the move to full-time I recommend that they look to diversify their income.

For someone who is just getting started, as is the case with most part-timers, finding enough clients can be a significant challenge. However, if you're able to earn some money from a few different types of work you may be well on your way to earning a full-time income. In addition to client work you can consider selling stock graphics, selling themes/templates, selling fonts and typefaces, freelance blogging, and personal projects.

There are an ever-increasing number of design blogs out there that are looking for freelance writers. While writing for an audience can be intimidating, if you enjoy design you are also pretty likely to enjoy some form of blogging, whether it be writing tutorials, writing discussion pieces, covering best practices, or even putting together an inspirational showcase. Freelancing for design blogs could provide a full-time income in itself, but if you are just looking to supplement your income from client work it is a very realistic option. In addition to the extra money, it is a great way to get connected with influential designers, and it will provide you with a nice change of pace from focusing only on client work.

Personal projects are also very popular with designers. Many designers start blogs or other types of websites with the intention of making some money from the site, which will ultimately help with the diversity of your income. For quick results this is not as productive as freelance blogging because it takes time to build a successful website that will actually bring in some money.

While it may seem like a daunting challenge to earn a living designing for clients as a

freelancer, if you have income from a few of these other sources as well it can quickly add up.

### **Focus on Having a Great Portfolio**

One of your goals during your time as a part-time freelancer should be to build as strong of a portfolio as possible. Your portfolio will be one of your most important and influential marketing materials, so it deserves plenty of attention. Quality work in your portfolio will be more effective at selling you as a designer than anything you could say to a potential client.

As was mentioned earlier, while you are freelancing part-time you will have more flexibility to take on projects because they will be good for your portfolio. Think about the type of work that you would like to do for clients. Do you have strong enough examples of this in your portfolio currently? If not, try to identify some potential clients that would provide you with the opportunity to work in this area. Don't be afraid to be proactive and contact businesses or organizations if you think doing working for them would allow you to add a quality piece to your portfolio.

### **Have a Network in Place Before Moving to Full-Time**

In an ideal situation, when you're making the move from part-time to full-time freelancing you'll have a network of professionals that you can contact to let them know what you're doing, and to ask them to consider you if they know of someone in need of your services.

On a few occasions I have received an email from someone that I consider to be a friend letting me know about their own move to full-time freelance, and this is a good practice because that will help to put them in my mind if I come across some that I could refer. In a few cases I have actually referred someone to these people and they

wound up with one of their first clients, but if I hadn't been emailed by them I probably would have referred that client to someone else because I wouldn't have known they were available for work.

Having an established network isn't absolutely critical for making the move to full-time, but it can be a big help. Having a network can also open up some collaborative opportunities (such as a designer and developer working together), and it can provide you with a group of people to contact when you simply need some advice.

### **Look for Long-Term Clients**

While freelancing part-time, when you have a client that you're designing a website for, it's a good practice to offer them some sort of on-going maintenance package. The details will vary from one client's situation to the next, but if you're able to add some on-going work and income it will mean fewer clients that you need to find in order to move to full-time freelancing.

Chris Coyier of CSS-Tricks wrote a brief but very insightful article about how his former employer used to market on-going services – [The Heating Company Analogy](#). I highly recommend that you check out that article (there are also some helpful suggestions in the comments).

By making more money from each of your clients (and of course providing more value to them) you can earn a full-time income with fewer clients than you would need otherwise.

For most designers finding the clients is the most challenging, and often time-consuming, part. Once you have those clients it is highly beneficial to do more work for them and spend your time on income-generating services rather than trying to

chase down new clients.

### **Tell Your Friends and Family What You are Doing**

When you're freelancing part-time or at the stage where you are moving to full-time freelancing, it can be very productive to simply let your friends and family know about the services that you can provide. Within your circle of friends and family there are probably several people that own, work for, or are involved with small businesses or organizations that could be in need of design services. And aside from the people that you know directly, each person you are connected to will know a lot of other people that you don't know.

Most designers get a high percentage of their clients in the early days from friends and family, either directly or indirectly.

### **Conclusion**

As we have seen throughout the course of this brief e-book, part-time freelancing can be a great opportunity for any designer that is considering a move to full-time freelancing. I hope that the information provided here can be of help to you as you pursue your own career.

By Vandelay Premier

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