

Survive the UAE recession, the freelance way

ally pace

Dubai-based freelance copywriter, Ally Pace, shares her view that freelancing is one of the few recession-proof industries.

It's unavoidable. Every time we turn on the television, flick through a newspaper or open a browser, the world's media reminds us that we are in the midst of the worst global recession since the 1930s.

Understandably, panic rises, as does the fear that soon you or your loved ones may end up at the business end of a redundancy letter. But just as you should prepare financially for a rainy day, so you should prepare for what happens to your career when that rainy day comes around.

Many people daydream about starting their own business or becoming a consultant instead of a wage slave. But it is the fear of losing a regular salary which keeps people locked into their daily commute. If your job is on the line, perhaps now is the time to start searching for your perfect profession? Your worst fear is looming on the horizon – the loss of a regular income – so before it actually happens, it might be wise to scout out alternatives.

Most countries have a firmly established community of freelancers, for many reasons. For some freelancers it is a career choice, a chance to choose your own hours and your own clients. For others it is a stopgap, a way to earn money while they are between jobs, or to supplement an income by working evenings and weekends.

In developed countries such as the UK or the US, this pool of freelancers is essential for the business community. Advertising agencies can immediately call on highly qualified copywriters or designers to give them additional resources during busy times. Conversely, in a lull a full time member of staff may not be necessary. In this situation a freelancer can fill the gap, acting as a part time member of staff without the associated overheads of official employment.

The UAE does not have such a formalised freelance community. Until recently, visa laws have not made full provision for the concept of freelancing. However, times have changed and the UAE's burgeoning pool of freelance workers now has a viable visa option in the shape of a free zone freelance visa.

Whether you are a copywriter, a designer, a make up artist or a marketing consultant, you can now obtain a freelance visa which allows you to live and work legally in the UAE. Relatively inexpensive and simple to apply for, this visa could be the 'golden ticket' which allows professionals to remain in the UAE after experiencing redundancy.

At the time of writing, two free zones in the UAE offer freelance visas. The first is Dubai Media City. As an established media free zone, demand is relatively high as is the associated cost and bureaucracy. The second free zone is Ras Al Khaimah Media City. An hour's drive from Dubai along the Emirates Road, this fledgling free zone offers a competitive deal on freelance visas, and crucially for the majority of UAE-based expatriates, the possession of a Ras Al Khaimah freelance visa does not restrict where you live, bank or work in the Emirates.

So now we've covered the visa concerns, what next? Is there a sufficient market for freelancing in the UAE?

I'd wager yes, and for several reasons. As with the UK and the US, the recent boom years in the UAE saw the nation crying out for additional resources to meet urgent project requirements.

Today's UAE is very different. As the country experiences its first taste of recession, the market has contracted and redundancies have been the inevitable result. This downturn is painful for many; the upside is the maturation of the UAE's job market and a further move towards an established network of independent consultants and freelancers. Having a wide range of professional freelancers at hand enables marketing departments or advertising agencies to assemble their required resources at short notice - and for limited time periods. This allows their businesses to remain agile and flexible in a changing work environment, while allowing the freelance community to flourish even further.

Convinced? So now we are down to the nitty-gritty: how do you go about finding work?

The natural place to start could very well be your ex-employer. If you've been retrenched due to the recession, chances are that your job still needs doing on a part time basis. If you parted on good terms this may be a chance to earn some money doing a job you know well.

How you go about finding external clients is a more of a challenge. Some freelancers rely on networking, some rely on word of mouth, and some advertise. Most freelancers will combine all three as there is no single or foolproof method of bringing in new business.

The next thing to do is assemble a portfolio. Ideally you would showcase this on a website, but if you are just getting started then simply collating examples of your work will be enough to show prospective clients. Just as you wouldn't hire someone without checking out their CV, a client will want to know your credentials before hiring you.

But however you go about marketing your services, you will be on the first step to a whole new career in a virtually recession-proof industry. Here's wishing you the best of luck and a lifetime of respecting your boss!

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About Ally Pace

Ally Pace is a professional freelance copywriter, based in Dubai, UAE. She has over ten years of marketing experience and launched her freelance copywriting business in 2006.

Over the past three years, Ally has amassed an impressive portfolio which includes work for Mercedes-Benz, DHL, Nestlé, Etisalat, Jumeirah, and Emirates. Her full client list and portfolio can be viewed at her website, <http://www.allypace.com>.