

10 top tips on getting good value from a freelancer

1. Know what you want them for

Why do you need freelance support? Where do you need most help and when? Are there skills you lack in-house? Are the timescales for a project too tight to manage without extra support? The clearer you are about how you intend to use a freelancer, the easier it will be to find the right person and give them a detailed brief.

2. Be clear about your priorities

Knowing exactly what you need a freelancer for will help you set your priorities. These will vary depending on the circumstances. For some jobs, immediate availability, or availability over a particular period, will be most important to you. For others, local or sector knowledge, or an in-depth understanding of a specific subject, will be vital to the success of a project.

3. Find the right match

The right person depends on what you need them for and your priorities. It's also about trust and confidence. Can you work with this person? Can you rely on them to deliver? Your ideal freelancer will immediately grasp what you want from them, have credibility, act professionally, and be able to hit the ground running and be trusted to think for themselves. They may not be the cheapest but they'll save you time and money in the long run.

4. Keep it real

Be realistic about what a freelancer can achieve. Clear expectations on both sides reduce the risk of misunderstandings and wasted time, effort and money – and potentially missed deadlines or worse, damage to the reputation of your communication team and even to your organisation. Be upfront about any possible obstacles, like internal politics, which they may come across. Encourage them to be honest about any concerns they have or specific areas of work where they lack confidence, and to let you know if any problems arise.

5. Involve them early

There's nothing more frustrating for a freelancer than being brought in at the tail end of a project, when everything's been agreed (usually by several committees and consultations) and final deadlines are looming. Too often it can mean making the best of a bad job. This is a wasted opportunity. Why bring in a specialist if you're not going to make the most of their experience, skills and knowledge, plus a fresh perspective and creative thinking?

6. Provide a clear and detailed brief

Your brief should cover not just what you want the freelancer to do and the timescales they should work to, but the thinking behind the project, the specific nature of the target audience and what outcomes you hope to achieve. You'll get much more out of them as a result.

7. Encourage input at every step

While a freelancer is working for you, make them feel part of the team. Listen to their ideas – after all, you're paying for their particular mix of expertise and experience, as well as their individual creativity and ability to offer a fresh perspective. Their suggestions may not be viable, but they might give you food for thought, especially for future projects or if you ever have a bigger budget.

8. Make yourself available

Freelancers aren't mind-readers and even the most detailed brief can't cover every eventuality. Encourage freelancers to contact you with any queries, and respond promptly and clearly. It's better for everyone to let a freelancer know they're on the right track, or if they need to change their approach, sooner rather than later. Ongoing communication will help build an effective working relationship and can save time and effort (and money).

9. Learn from the experience they've gained on the project

You can do this formally as part of the brief, like asking them to produce a house style guide or a template for updates. Maybe there are related projects that can make full use of the work they've already done for you (and knowledge gained in the process), such as rewriting content for a different format or audience, or producing case studies to support a guidance document. Or you could ask them to pass on wider information gleaned during a project – particularly if their role has involved talking to your target audience – such as underlying issues or common concerns.

10. Give them room to breathe

You've brought in a freelancer to do a specific job, and hopefully you've picked the right person to get on with it in a professional manner. Don't overload them with overly stringent requirements for detailed progress reports, especially when time and money are tight. It's better all round to build a relationship with trust on either side, so they let you know how things are going as a matter of course and come to you with any problems or queries as soon as they arise.

When resources are tight, using a freelancer can be a cost-effective option for delivering high-quality communications. But you both need to be clear about their role from the outset and be prepared to put time into building an honest and constructive working relationship that addresses any issues promptly and makes the most of what your chosen freelancer has to offer.