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# 9 SECRETS OF SIX-FIGURE FREELANCERS

by Mridu Khullar Relph



What are some of the things that six-figure freelancers do that regular folks don't? In researching this topic for my book *Secrets of Six-Figure Freelancers* and trying to cross over that magical threshold myself, I made a few surprising discoveries.

Turns out, making a six-figure living as a freelance writer or journalist is not only about strategy, it's also about mindset, lifestyle, and habit.

In talking to more than two dozen six-figure freelancers, here are the commonalities I've found.

## SECRET #1: THEY STRETCH THEMSELVES CONSTANTLY.

Ask a six-figure freelancer if they know about content marketing and most of them will list off at least half a dozen clients they have that do exactly that. Crowdsourcing? They've tried it. E-books? Most of them have self-published at least one. Not that the e-books made them any money, mind you, and not even one six-figure freelancer I interviewed said that the e-book added

any substantial weight to their income, but they'd tried it. They'd had the willingness to put in the time and effort into something new, even if it didn't eventually add multiple zeroes to their income.

In fact, trying new things and creating additional income streams was a common goal amongst six-figure freelancers. While most of them identified as writers and journalists, they also brought in money (both large and small paychecks) from websites, traditional book deals, books they'd self-published, speaking engagements, teaching, and coaching. None of them were dependent on one income stream to generate all their income, which also ensured that when one part of their business was generating less cash, they were easily able to make up that deficit through other areas.

Most have pitched and been rejected (or met with silence) by *The New Yorker*.

## SECRET #2: THEY TAKE RISKS.

Many of the six-figure freelancers I spoke to advised that writers create a safety net—

three to six months of living expenses in the bank—before they quit their jobs to go full-time. Yet, did they do the same when they were starting out? Mostly, no, and ironically, many of them attribute their success to that very fact. Quitting their jobs and taking up freelancing full-time when they had no other source of income forced six-figure freelancers I interviewed to hustle like no one's business. They had no safety net, no plan B, and therefore, many of them felt that they had no choice but to earn money, and earn good money at this chosen career path. By taking away the choice, they forced themselves to come up with creative solutions to problems, write when they didn't particularly feel like it, and contact clients for work even when it felt uncomfortable. They showed up to work every single day and performed because not doing so was never an option.

Many of them attributed their current work ethic to these early days and years of training themselves to write even when they weren't in the mood.

### SECRET #3: THEY WORK INCREDIBLY LONG HOURS.

This wasn't particularly inspiring or welcome news, but most of the six-figure freelancers I interviewed worked very long and hard hours. While some managed to hit the magic number despite part-time hours (less than 20 hours a week), most six-figure freelancers work somewhere between 40 and 60 hours, and some even log in as many as 80.

The good news, however, is that many of these six-figure freelancers felt that they

were working these long hours not because of economic necessity, but because they really enjoyed their work and liked putting time into helping their business grow. Most felt they could easily scale back if they wanted to without a massive drop in revenue.

### SECRET #4: THEY'RE IN STABLE RELATIONSHIPS.

Speaking of happiness, six-figure freelancers are typically in stable, happy relationships—many of them happily married for many years—or at peace with whatever relationship situation they find themselves in. For most, a lack of drama on the home front was an important factor in ensuring that they could work through the challenges in their freelancing careers. Further, a supportive spouse or partner was, for many, essential in getting through the lean times and the encouragement they received at home enabled them to go out confidently and perform at work.

### SECRET #5: THEY SET GOALS.

While many six-figure freelancers sailed over the threshold without even realizing it, most actually had that number in their minds for a few years before they hit it. They worked towards the goal, keeping track of their earnings, their most profitable clients, and their hourly rate. They almost always tracked their time, had Excel worksheets filled with data about hours worked, rates per assignment, and most importantly, weekly and monthly income goals that allowed them to stay on track with the big yearly number.

For most freelancers who eventually hit the six-figure mark, it didn't happen the first year they decided to hit this number, not even for the next three. But within five years, most of the freelancers I spoke to had achieved their goal. They stayed committed to it, even when it felt difficult and unachievable, and eventually found that the numbers kept growing, until they were able to hit the \$100,000 mark.

#### SECRET #6: THEY SAY NO. A LOT.

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A side effect of setting goals and knowing what they need to bring in each month, week, and day means that six-figure freelancers often have very specific limits of what they won't accept in terms of compensation. Many I spoke to had a minimum hourly rate that they mentally calculate for every assignment they're offered (typically \$100 an hour) and several had a \$500 baseline, that is, they wouldn't accept any project that fell below that number. Three \$200 projects ended up being a lot more work, they found, than one \$600 project because of the starting and stopping and mental energy that went into the three projects.

Further, not one six-figure freelancer I spoke to felt any hesitation in turning down projects or assignments that they felt didn't move them towards their financial (or other) goals. They considered it a sign of their professionalism to be able to turn down work that didn't meet their needs than to take on everything that came their way. Almost all had turned down work in the last six months.

#### SECRET #7: THEY JOIN AND REMAIN A PART OF PROFESSIONAL NETWORKS.

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Six-figure freelancers believe in mentorship, in professional networking, in creating supportive communities surrounding their work, and partnering with like-minded people in order to work towards common goals. Most six-figure freelancers are a part of two or more networking organizations, groups, or online forums, and frequently join Facebook and LinkedIn groups they feel will help them connect with other writers in their industries.

They're committed to learning, I found, and a huge chunk of that comes from these professional organizations and associations. A large number of six-figure freelancers I interviewed had attended at least one conference in the last two years and several made it a point each year to set aside money for professional training, coaching, conference travel, and online courses. Most had at least two or three freelancers in their networks that they would consider close personal friends that they could rely on for support and advice.

#### SECRET #8: THEY'RE OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE FUTURE.

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It could be argued that any writing professional at that level of income would, of course, be optimistic about the future of writing, their careers, and their earning potential, but in most cases, the optimism came first and the money arrived later, most likely a consequence of that optimism and faith. Writers who believed—and continued

to believe, in the face of adversity and periods of low income—that there was enough work out there for them, were more likely to actually hit that number.

It's pretty simple, really. The six-figure freelancers who believed that there was work out there that could pay well and keep them happy, were also much more likely to turn down work that didn't pay well, to negotiate harder, and to come up with creative ways to find it. They also were much more likely to market themselves regularly because they believed that this marketing would indeed, lead to rewards. Writers who don't believe that their six-figure share is there for the taking are often operating from a deficit mentality, that is, they think that if they don't accept the low-paying work, they may not get any work at all. They're all much more likely to give up on marketing when it doesn't yield results quickly.

## SECRET #9: THEY BUILD RELATIONSHIPS.

Almost all the six-figure freelancers I interviewed had a core group of regular clients that were responsible for a large chunk of their income. Most of them said they had anchor clients, people who came to them repeatedly for work, giving them a guaranteed number each week or month that ensured a steady income and freed up hours for marketing that could be utilized elsewhere. Six-figure freelancers make it a point to keep in touch with former contacts and clients and to continue nurturing those professional relationships in big and little ways, such as calling every now and again, making a trip to New York City to meet all their editors, or sending holiday cards in the mail at the end of the year to each client. These small efforts often led to them being top of mind for clients and got them repeat work.

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