

How Side Hustles Are Redefining Careers and Shaping the Future of Work

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Side hustles are here to stay. In 2024, 36% of American adults have a side hustle, with an average of \$891 a month in earnings, a 10% increase from 2023 to 2024.

But side hustles are more than just a way to pocket some extra cash – they are an onramp to the increasingly independent workforce and freelance career path. In my last article, I broke down recent data from MBO Partners showing that 27.7 million individuals in the U.S. are full-time independent workers. A number that has doubled since 2020. This steady growth highlights a lasting shift, persisting despite widespread layoffs, a remote work reckoning, and an uncertain global economy.

What does this mean for you, an ambitious individual? It means that at some point, you'll be freelancing, side hustling or going full-time independent.

As an individual who's bounced between corporate executive track, venture-backed founder, and freelancer, trust me when I say that your future can be flexible. You can climb the corporate ladder by applying freelance principles to drive impact, or you can scale a startup from bootstrapped beginnings to acquisition while freelancing and hiring freelancers. And if you enjoy managing a portfolio of two to five clients, you can join the 4.4 million U.S. freelancers earning over \$100,000 and continue running your sole

proprietorship.

I know this may sound abstract and a bit academic, but I'll make it clear in this article. I'll explain why having a side hustle is essential, how you can transition from a side hustle to an independent career, and why freelancing, full-time roles, and everything in between are converging into simply work.

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Side gigs signal a new future of work

Navigating careers has seldom changed in the past 75 years.

We prioritize different skill sets. My parents prioritized mechanical engineering and accounting. I prioritized STEM. We prioritize different industries. My parents prioritized Wall Street. I prioritized Microsoft and tech. But the way we navigate careers has seldom changed. My parents and I were expected to have a paper resume to attract employers. My parents and I were expected to pass numerous interviews before getting the job. And my parents and I were expected to have one job with one employer and at least 2+ years with each job, or else risk being branded as a "flight risk."

Today, this paradigm has changed. Rather than one job, a survey from Paychex found that 47% of Gen Zers, 33% of millennials, and 28% of baby boomers have three or more jobs. The same study finds that 93% of Gen Zers hold down multiple gigs. While your gut reaction might be fear or repulsion that individuals are working multiple jobs to survive, the individuals themselves are happier, healthier, and wealthier than their full-time traditional alternative.

The impact of this change is that individual loyalty and merit are shifting away from individual employers and towards

specific skill sets, technologies, or industries. Michael Morris, CEO of Torc, recently explained to me that loyalty among software developers has changed from allegiance to companies and logos to the ecosystems they rely on. He cited examples like AWS, ServiceNow, Salesforce and iOS as the new focal points of loyalty for developers.

This isn't unique to software development. Ryan Bettencourt, CEO of Growth Collective, also told me that the evolution of marketing has led to the emergence of various channels and tools. He said that the most successful marketing freelancers tend to specialize in specific industries, such as legal services or FinTech, or concentrate on particular marketing channels, like paid search or influencer marketing.

What is your niche, skill set, or industry focus?

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Side gigs are an onramp to a digital career with platforms as an enabler

Whereas full-time jobs have one contractual structure, the future of work seems limitless in how individuals can make money.

Freelancing is a popular path that I believe is the easiest path for individuals and companies to meet and build their careers or workforce. I define freelance as consulting or professional service-oriented work, where the worker is external, the engagement can fluctuate up and down depending on client need, and the individual worker typically has 2-5 clients at one time.

A common difference between freelance work and other future

work-related segments is the prominence of freelance talent platforms for finding work, building a strong client base and quantifying your impact through client ratings and reviews.

I think of freelance talent platforms as three things. A place to get started. An outsourced sales team, since their main business is finding clients to hire you. And potential protection since they manage invoices and potentially triage client issues. This comes with a price – typically a 5 to 35% fee. But in most cases, this is still lower than building your own sales and operations team. For large enterprises, platforms provide insurance and indemnification coverage that an individual can't cover.

Freelance talent platforms are here to stay and increasingly niching into building specialized and cutting-edge talent pools. MBO Partners found that in 2023, 40% of freelancers used an online talent platform to find work, and 47% plan to. Platforms themselves are a good business. Grand View Research estimates freelance talent platforms to be a 4.39 billion dollar industry, with an expected compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 16.5% from 2023 to 2030.

It is unclear what talent platforms will become. Will they always be a place to find work? Will they be a place to build your business? Will they be a place for community? Will they be a place to find collaborators that you can refer work to or build your own teams with? There are many different potential values platforms can have for freelancers. What's clear is that talent platforms have a place and will increasingly be personalized for your unique value.

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Side gigs can replicate the corporate executive track

What if you don't want to be a coach, content creator, or consultant? What if, instead, you want the executive career path? What if you want to manage teams, own strategies and roadmaps, and increasingly build up the responsibility to sit in the C-suite one day? Is there a future for this track with a digital career path?

Five years ago I'd say this type of career would be tough to replicate through a freelance track, but today a "fractional" career path is one of the fastest growing aspects of the freelance economy. Fractional individuals span all skill sets. They can be fractional chief marketing officers, sales officers, and operations executives. They can do everything from creating plans to leading teams and even transition their role to be ready for a permanent executive that is or isn't them.

The only consistency is your digital storefront

Whether today or tomorrow, you stand to benefit from a digital career in the future of work. Whether that's freelancing, a solopreneur business, or combining full-time work with side gigs, the path is yours to decide.

A simple search related to the gig economy, creator economy, poly work, or others will result in numerous self-help related advice. This article isn't that. This article is meant to make you aware, contextualize your side gig into the greater future of work, and start your search for what's best for your personal situation.

What I can tell you is that what is consistent across all

potential paths is that your merit is now quantified, digitized, and compounds to create opportunities. Conceptually think about LinkedIn at the most basic level. Now think about a GitHub repository if you're a developer, a Behance profile if you're a designer or a freelance platform profile, depending on which one best suits your niche. No matter what, your work and the impact you capture compounds across all these platforms to create your digital storefront. It's up to you what you want that storefront to become.

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