

Offering Your Valuable Knowledge and Services For Free Comes at a Price – Here's How to Avoid Paying It.

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People enter entrepreneurship with the mindset that their creation will “change the world.” The question is: What is the cost of changing the world, and more importantly, who pays?

Even fictional heroes have to budget accordingly. There's a reason our most recognizable superheroes – the Tony Starks and Bruce Waynes of comic book fame – are all established, generationally wealthy billionaires who have the abundance of time and money to concern themselves with bigger, more worldly problems. Even *Mission Impossible's* IMF team is specifically hired to stop the bad guys for a large chunk of change. Everyone wants to be a hero, of course. But the crux of the issue is that, well, no one can afford to save the world for free.

Truly passionate entrepreneurs can find themselves in a quandary when it comes to monetizing their efforts, especially when their primary motive isn't profit. When the harvest is for the greater good, whether for the gain of one person, the community or humanity as a whole, altruistic entrepreneurs find themselves frozen when forced to put a price on one's creation. The various scenarios where an entrepreneur might work for free:

- **Family or social obligations:** The desire to support and share, coupled with the informal nature of such relationships, can lead to scenarios where work is heavily undervalued or under-compensated.
- **Passion projects:** When an entrepreneur is deeply invested in the results of a project, they might prioritize its completion or overvalue its impact without immediately thinking about the financial costs of the effort.
- **Beta testing:** Offering services for free for a case study or as a beta test could be a way for entrepreneurs to demonstrate results and capabilities to win business in the long run.
- **Building skills and experience:** Growing your skillset and gaining valuable experience can easily incentivize an entrepreneur to work without compensation as an apprentice or mentee, especially when it also offers a pathway to a new industry or network that isn't typically accessible to them.
- **Market penetration:** Offering free trials and sample work can help individuals and newer companies enter into a new market, launch a new product and attract a hard-to-reach customer base.

The list of why an individual might work for free is exhaustive, and it can include many more incentives like strategic partnerships, philanthropic contributions and even educational purposes. The 2021 Volunteering in America Report found 60.7 million adults (23.2%) volunteered 4.1 billion hours. For an entrepreneur, unpaid or lowly paid work, though rich with potential, demands a slice of the entrepreneur's most precious resource: time.

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A currency of its own, time is paradoxically boundless and yet finite for the entrepreneur. The essence of the entrepreneurial spirit – ambition, passion and a relentless

drive – can veer into murky waters if unchecked, especially when commitments continue to stack on top of one another.

Many entrepreneurs work 60+ hours each week serving clients, juggling business operations, managing employees, volunteering and balancing family and friend obligations. But doing it all doesn't get a medal or the front page of the newspaper. In a survey of startup founders around the globe, Startup Snapshot found that 72% of founders struggle with mental health – with over 37% suffering from anxiety, 36% experiencing burnout and over 81% reporting that they feel the need to hide their stress, fears and challenges from others. Superheroes rarely count the toll their battles take on their psyche, and entrepreneurs too can overlook the mental and emotional expenditures of their quests.

Another unintended dark side of entrepreneurial hero work is one that many so-called “valued” workers have faced before – in that the more that you do, the more that you're expected to do. Many clients, eager to capitalize on the dedication and availability of budding businesses, often feel at liberty to push boundaries, reaching out at all hours and expecting immediate responses. How often has a client called at 10 p.m. – or on a weekend – and expected urgent work to be completed without complaint, or more importantly, without additional compensation? For the new entrepreneurs who prioritize customer satisfaction above all, this could be a sincere opportunity to delight. But in the pursuit of building a reputation that shatters expectations, it begs the question: When does ambition become an exploitable liability rather than an asset?

For an entrepreneur, how your time should be allocated is a decision that must be made with careful consideration – and for any initiative to continue to make a real and notable impact, it must also be financially viable. Time, effort and resources are all uniquely and equally as valuable to a growing business as the passion that fuels it.

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To better navigate the relationship between generosity and professional standards, entrepreneurs can employ strategies that respect both their inherent value and entrepreneurial spirit, while still safeguarding their personal well-being. Here are some tips:

1. **Map out your schedule:** There are only 24 hours in a day with no time-turner. Therefore, it is crucial to set limits around specific times when you are available for various types of work, including unpaid projects. The goal is to help manage expectations and prevent overcommitment.
2. **Set clear boundaries:** Be upfront about the value and/or cost of your time. Communicate clearly when work is being offered as a favor, as a part of a strategic partnership or with the expectation of future reciprocity. Even between friends, a clear contract or agreement can help prevent future misunderstandings.
3. **Prioritize time management:** Utilize time management tools and techniques to ensure that time is being allocated efficiently. Not all free work offers the same return when it comes to exposure, experience or potential business.
4. **Value one's work appropriately:** Understand the market value of your services and strive to maintain that standard. It is always easier to start at a higher price that has a wider scope and work your price down rather than start too small.
5. **Keep tabs on one's contribution threshold:** Regularly assessing one's contribution threshold helps to keep an eye on the entrepreneur's capacity tank. Driven by passion and motivation, a regular check-in provides a moment of reflection to assess whether time, energy and resources exerted are in balance with the benefits

received. An imbalance can manifest into financial strain, lack of personal time or diminished passion for the work.

Balance is imperative for sustaining the impact and viability of your endeavors. When it comes to the success of any venture, entrepreneurs must become comfortable in the space between fervor and practicality. Mastering these dueling motivations is crucial; acknowledging the true value of one's efforts ensures that the vision doesn't just survive the early stages of growth driven by motivation – it thrives with sufficient fuel and funds, without compromising the entrepreneur's mental, physical and emotional welfare in the attempt to change the world.

Generosity in pursuit of vision should never overshadow an entrepreneur's professional worth. Time and energy is not infinite, but rather, finite.

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