Why Companies Should Make Freelancers Their No. 1 Priority

Skillful contract workers have proved the difference between success and failure for numerous businesses.

August 19, 2019 5 min read

This story originally appeared on Glassdoor

Freelancers are among the most valuable workers businesses have access to – and many successful companies simply couldn't thrive without them.

Your company may not need a full-time, 40-hours a week graphic designer on staff, but you could easily reach a point where a great corporate design could transform your business. Just ask the freelancer who created Nike's iconic Swoosh. Skillful contract workers, including attorneys, programmers and writers, have proved the difference between success and failure for numerous businesses.

Yet for all that freelancers bring to the table, many companies – whether large corporations or early-stage startups – fail to treat them nearly as well as they do their full-time employees. Every long-term freelancer has a horror story about jumping through hoops and making 20 phone calls just to get paid for a long-overdue invoice. Beyond payment issues, many companies communicate with independent workers poorly (or not at all), and others don't even consider giving them opportunities to grow.

What these companies miss is that this sort of treatment isn't

just bad for self-employed talent – it's bad for their bottom lines. Freelancers are expected to make up about half of the American workforce within a decade. That's a lot of people, and if they're treated poorly, the vast majority of them will underperform at work.

If businesses are hoping to thrive during the coming shift to the 1099 economy, they'll have to start treating freelancers with the same respect and consideration they give to full-time staff.

Freelancers Can Make or Break Your Business

Contrary to popular belief, many – if not most – independent workers don't want a full-time job. They thrive on the freedom and flexibility that freelancing affords them, which includes the ability to turn down work from companies that don't treat them the right way. Good freelancers are in high demand, and if you treat them poorly, they'll simply go work with someone else.

Mistreatment can cause project delays when workers aren't motivated or stop working until they receive an overdue payment. Just as is the case with full-time workers, companies that fail to treat freelancers with respect will eventually develop a bad reputation, making it harder to bring in good people moving forward.

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How Companies Can Thrive in the

1099 Economy

The most obvious way to retain and motivate independent talent is to pay them well and pay them on time. Find a pricing structure that makes sense for both parties before you start working together, then make sure you have processes in place that allow you to pay people in a timely manner. Since non-salaried freelance workers often lack a regular income, a late payment can be the difference between making or missing their rent or mortgage payment that month.

Beyond payments, my experience as both a freelancer and an employer has taught me that freelancers want what all workers want: opportunities to learn, grow and achieve with each job or assignment, and to feel appreciated and respected by the people they work with.

One way to do this is by integrating new freelancers into your team and onboarding them to your tools and processes. Make an effort to set expectations and goals from the beginning, and to communicate as clearly as possible what the worker’s task is and who are the relevant employees for helping them achieve it. It’s tempting to run through these things on the phone, but writing them out in a best-practices email can go a long way toward helping people feel settled.

Consider making your freelancers feel welcome by giving them some of the same perks full-time workers get. If you have an extra desk sitting around, why not let them come in and use it for a day if they’d like? Freelancing can be a lonely business, after all. By the same token, invite folks to lunch and office parties, share company discounts and make introductions when possible.

When offboarding, look to give contract workers a good review and refer them to others if they’ve done a good job. If they haven’t, make an effort to communicate clearly what your expectations were and where they fell short. This can help

freelancers grow, and it reduces the likelihood that they will walk away telling others that you were not the best partner to work with.

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Relationships Matter Most

Every freelancer’s needs are different. Some will be more concerned with being paid quickly, whereas others will most value the opportunity for professional development. The key is to build relationships with your freelancers and listen to what matters most to them.

Ultimately, if you’re rewarding good work and looking for ways to make people feel welcome, appreciated and respected, you’re on the right track. If you treat freelancers like a valued, albeit extended part of your team, you’ll be able to build a roster of reliable, motivated contract workers that can enrich your company for years to come.

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