

**1) As a graduate student, I feel I don't have enough experience to be able to prove my capabilities and build my network. How to get started in this case?**

There are a number of ways to begin embarking on a freelancing or consulting career. For instance, one of the panelists at our event talked about how they started working as a receptionist to get to know the industry and people. This approach can help you in developing a reputation, while you learn what you like and don't like and start building your professional network.

Another approach is to start with research. Look at industries where your interests and skills are being applied and find people who have jobs that interest you. Ask these people if they'd be willing to do an informational interview with you. In these conversations, you can find out what worked or didn't work for them in breaking into the field, what they like and don't like about their jobs, and where they see opportunities in the industry. From there, you can better understand what you might offer in a particular sector.

You can apply the same approach to other freelancers or consultants—reach out to request informational interviews with people who have built successful freelance careers, find out how they got to where they are. With this kind of information, you'll be better informed as you set your own goals and build a plan to reach them.

Before either of these approaches, though, you need to spend some time reflecting on yourself. Figure out what you like, what you are generally good at, and what you'd like to do with your business.

**2) Every freelancer or consultant I look up seems to have something I don't—how do know if I have what it takes?**

The short answer is: you don't. However, the longer answer is: you may be under-estimating yourself.

The American Historical Association lists “intellectual self-confidence” among its Career Diversity Five Skills, or the [five skills](#) necessary to career success, whether inside or outside of academia. They define intellectual self-confidence as the ability to “think flexibly and creatively about how one's existing skills and knowledge can be applied to a problem at hand.” Many, if not most graduate students have the capacity for such confidence—whether they realize it or not. Graduate study teaches you to recognize what you don't know and to fill knowledge gaps through research. It teaches you to be flexible and adaptable in your thinking. You can use these same skills to build a footing and find confidence as an entrepreneur.

There are many meaningful similarities between writing a dissertation and becoming an entrepreneur. [Erica Machulak](#) argues that entrepreneurial skills like expressing a value proposition, responding to market needs, and enduring uncertainty are all learned in the PhD—it's just a matter of reframing these as skills and understanding how they work together.

**3) What are the differences between starting out organically versus planning and creating a business plan?**

Consulting and freelancing experiences may be different for everybody. Some people are lucky enough to encounter a niche with a large demand for their work without doing much preparation in advance. In that case, opportunities may come organically and a business or organization may evolve as the work demands improvements or a more professional structure.

However, there is a learning curve in conducting your own business. By taking an organic approach, you may try new things and make more mistakes as you learn and adjust. These mistakes can have a big impact. For example, you may charge too little at first because you are not aware of industry standard practices or you don't have much confidence in your capabilities. As you develop relationships with clients, it may be harder to charge fairly later because the client now expects a certain price and may have also shared your rates with their networks. This is why it can be important to take a more planful approach to building your business.

If you had conducted research in advance, you would be familiar with industry standards. As such, you can make more informed decisions as you build your business and hopefully avoid mistakes like under charging for your services. By doing research, you might also learn that a certain industry doesn't pay well on the whole and might not allow for a career that would cover your bills. In that case, advance planning might have led you to consider investigating other areas to focus on that are more aligned with the lifestyle you wish for yourself in the long-term. By doing this kind of research, you gain invaluable time in the long run by focusing on what really matters to you.

A well-designed business plan helps you, first, reflect on your real goals, then plan the steps you need to take to get there. It also helps you with risk mitigation and contingency plans, in case something doesn't go as expected. You don't need to spend a lot of time creating a business plan. You may start simple and add more details as you go, but having some structure helps to keep you on track. The [How to Start Consulting and Freelancing](#) course has some guidelines on how to create a business plan. And, if you need help, the Arts Amplifier Team can support you with your plan through [1-on-1 appointments](#).

*"A goal is a dream with a deadline."*

— Keith Ferrazzi, *Never Eat Alone: And Other Secrets to Success, One Relationship at a Time*