

What's Wrong with ELANCE.COM

by
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THERE ARE only three reasons for a company or an individual to use an online freelance jobs market: convenience, money, and talent. The Internet ought to be able to supply solutions to all three.

A job needs to be done. Traditionally, this meant either hiring talent or contracting with an outsource agency for the work. How much more convenient it would be to find an individual creative or technical person to do the work, all at the click of a button. The contract would be simple and the complications minimal, especially compared to the hiring process or the convoluted deals with a graphics shop or an ad agency. What could be nicer than a direct one-to-one relationship between the client and the creative?

Cost enters into the matter. Solving the need online, getting that face-to-face (metaphorically speaking) with the creative — none of that involves extensive phone calls, newspaper ads, interviews, paperwork in the human resources department, or a salary. Even an agency couldn't beat the individual's low cost; they've got all those suits to pay for. The client receives the same quality work at a fraction of the cost of the traditional sources.

The Internet's everywhere, it's freaking WORLD-WIDE! Just think of the hot talent a client could find: a hip web designer in New York City has three days to kill before his next big thing begins, he can squeeze a little work in for an extra buck; then there's a graphics artist in Seattle, she needs the work and she's good, an award winner; finally there's a novelist in the middle of the country who wants to earn a few dollars before starting his next novel. Such talent couldn't be found in any one place, in any one city. The Internet can bring them together for a few days to benefit a client they've never met.

THAT'S THE dream. A smart-ass would say: "That's only a dream." In the case of elance.com, he'd be right. The site fails at the three very things it must succeed at: convenience, money, and talent.

CONVENIENCE. I've spied on this site over several weeks — this is not a snap judgement. Say you want to post a project, put something up for bid. You do so and come back in a day or so to check. It is entirely possible you may have to wade through two hundred separate bids; people are coming out of the woodwork to bid on your lousy little project. You don't know who they are, not until you click on each entry, to go to a separate information page for each damned one of them! You also have to chop your way through their comments, both on the bids and on a separate bulletin board; it'll take you hours and hours to get the information you need.

The elance site treats creativity as a commodity. There is no attempt to reference the quality of the work the bidders produce, other than a lame steal from ebay, rating the bidders on their previously successful bids; but with no concern for their work outside elance, as if that matters not a lick to anyone.

Not only is the workload of chewing through the mountainous piles of bids a time-consuming, onerous chore, there is no assurance of reliability of quality in the winning bid, other than the dubious information the bidders themselves supply.

What's needed in such an enterprise as this, needed desperately, is an automated referral system. A stored, interleaved web of referrals could lead the client to the right people in only a few clicks. Such a thing could be self-managed by the site automation and the creatives themselves. Each creative, when joining the site, has to complete an extensive profile; this profile includes a page of references, recommendations, referrals, and connections. The creatives tie themselves together in this way, they create the connections that supply them with sustenance.

MONEY. Lower costs are irrelevant if the quality is poor. The costs in fact go up. Bad graphics arrive, which have to be replaced; ad copy or articles arrive late, not at all, or so badly written they have to be heavily edited; technical matters are so deeply screwed, the work has to be thrown out. In a market which treats creative work as a commodity, the second-rate hack work of a junior in college commands just as much respect as that of a highly-trained professional. This is trouble. Time is wasted and work has to be done again. The costs go up.

Only at the lowest levels does the model of creativity-as-commodity work. You gotta have copy for your web site and you don't care what it looks like; you gotta fill space in the company brochure and it doesn't matter whether it's good or not. When quality doesn't matter, anything will do.

Above a certain minimal, bottom-feeding layer, this attitude will cost the client money.

TALENT. Unfortunately, unlike Jacob, God ain't gonna make you a threshing sledge,

*new, sharp, and having teeth;
you shall thresh the mountains and crush them,
and you shall make the hills like chaff;
you shall winnow them and the wind
shall carry them away,
and the tempest shall scatter them.*

Gotta do it yourself, the hard way. Since writing is my biz, I accessed the numbers of writers who have posted set fees for work. That's not all of them, many more only bid on jobs; but it does give an idea of how much work would be involved in finding just the writers for a project. There were forty-five pages full of them. Those were just the listings, and each listing linked to a separate page containing the *vitae* of each writer. Only the first three pages contained people who had actually gotten work through elance; among those "elites" were an odd mixture of middle-aged women running one-person ad agencies from their bedrooms, juniors in college, and an occasional professional. It was potluck. In a few cases, the true nature of the individual could only be divined after going through multiple layers at elance and out to the person's own web site! Imagine trying to find the right person in this mess. When creativity is a commodity, talent doesn't matter.

The rough draft of this article was written before I had a chance to look at ework.com. Did they read my mind? If so, they only got half the information in my head. The selection process at ework is based on an extensive profile of the person seeking the work. The process depends in part on individual contact between the client and the creative. This is good — only not good enough. From my admittedly cursory inspection of their profile, it has no section for referrals or references from other professionals. Thus the interconnected web of relationships so essential to good

*collaborative work is missing. A very good sign, though:
each iteration of the idea gets closer to the ideal.*

A SOLUTION has already presented itself. Let the creatives themselves organize the site through their profiles. Their own detailed profiles would give a searcher the raw material to find the right choices for a particular project. Who, then, would be the best choice? The creatives themselves have already told you, in their referrals and recommendations, that web I spoke of. There would be an extended list: references for each creative, referrals to other creatives, and recommendations for future work. Those referrals are at the core of functionality for the site. The more referrals, references, and recommendations an individual has, the more work he'll get. The more bound up in the web a creative is, the more work there will be. Not good for crazed loners like me, but good for most everyone else.

Establish the site. Lure creatives to the site. Get them to use it. There is nothing else needed. It will run of its own accord after that.

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