

MAKING A START

Yes, you can be a successful freelance introvert. No, you don't need a personality transplant, and it doesn't have to be a trauma either. And it all starts here.

Are you an introvert?

Do any of these sound familiar?

- I'm happy in my own company most of the time.
- I have just a few really good friends, mostly from a while back, and that suits me fine.
- I really love my friends and family, but sometimes I just need to be alone.
- I'm happy to let others lead the conversation, so I tend to stay quiet in company.
- It takes me a while to get to know people. Trusting them takes even longer.
- I prefer one-on-one meetings. Two's company, three's a crowd.

- If I spend too long with people, I start to feel strung out and off balance. Then I start acting crabby and withdrawn. That's when I know I need to get away and spend some time on my own to recharge my batteries.
- If I don't get time alone, I can't process stuff. I need to talk things over with myself before I can work out what I really think. I don't like being pushed into a decision before I'm ready.
- Since I spend a lot of time reflecting on my own thoughts and feelings, I feel like I know myself pretty well. I'm rarely surprised by my own thoughts, feelings or actions.
- I like hobbies and activities that I can do on my own. I'm not big on clubs and teams.
- Sometimes, I want to support a good cause, but I'm put off by the communal aspect. I look for ways to help without getting involved, like making a donation.
- When I'm learning something, I like to practise on my own until I'm ready. If I'm working on a personal project, I like to get it finished before I show it to anyone else.

If some or all of these statements resonate with you, you're probably an introvert.

The word 'introvert' is from the Latin *intro*, meaning 'inside', and *vertere*, meaning 'to turn'. So an *introvert* is someone who tends to turn inwards, towards their own

thoughts and feelings, rather than outwards, towards other people or external events.

Some psychologists say that introverts find external stimulation overwhelming. So they look for places and activities where they can retreat from overstimulation. A situation that's easy or enjoyable for one person can be way too much for an introvert.

Introversion and extroversion aren't binary types, but two ends of a sliding scale. You can be very introverted, very extroverted, or somewhere in between. You can also pass through different states or moods – feeling outgoing one day, hide-in-your-shell the next.

Some people are ambiverts, with a balance of introvert and extrovert traits in their personality. If you felt that only some of the statements above applied to you, or if you felt that they only applied to certain times or situations in your life, you could be an ambivert.

If you're not sure whether you're an introvert or not, you could take a test like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) to find out. The MBTI is based on the idea that each of us has a preferred quality within four categories: introversion/extroversion, sensing/intuition, thinking/feeling and judging/perception. That leads to 16 personality types overall, including eight different introverted types. You might recognize yourself as one of these.

Being an introvert isn't quite the same as being shy. Shyness is about being tense and awkward in company, sometimes unbearably so – and even extroverts can feel

that way sometimes. In contrast, introverts can deal with company if they have to. They just prefer not to, at least for a lot of the time.

If you're an introvert, you're in the minority.

Research suggests that extroverts outnumber introverts three to one.¹ Maybe that's why introverts are so misunderstood, and are often seen as being different or even deficient in some way.

Extroverts, in particular, often find it very hard to relate to introverts. They see them as arrogant, cold or aloof, and can't understand why they don't enjoy company. After all, the more the merrier, right?

To sum up so far: as an introvert, you like to live a certain way. Your way doesn't always fit with how life is, or what other people expect. That's fine as long as you have choices. But things can change when it comes to work.

Introverts at work

Many of us think of work as something we don't like, or would prefer to avoid. But we still spend around a third of our lives working (3507 days on average, plus up to 14,053 hours commuting).² So work is a big part of our lives, whether we like it or not – for introverts as much as anyone.

¹ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1550830716000379>

² <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/british-people-work-days-lifetime-overtime-quit-job-survey-study-a8556146.html>

Do any of these sound familiar?

- Mondays are bad enough without all the office small-talk. Everyone's like, 'How was your weekend?' All I want to do is get to my desk and lose myself in some work.
- Our office is so noisy. People just walk up and start talking to you. You can't get anything done.
- Big meetings and brainstorming are the worst. Everyone wanting to have their say. I usually just sit there quietly, waiting for it to end.
- The things I dread most are team-building exercises, away days and office parties. Being forced to work or socialize with people I just don't like.
- Team projects just aren't for me. I like to work on things on my own, and only show them to others when I'm ready.
- I really wish I could work at home. I'd get far more done. But my boss would never allow it.

If you recognize some of these, you already know: working the nine-to-five can be really tough on introverts.

First, there's the simple and obvious fact that an organization is a group of people. So unless you work alone out on the road, or are lucky enough to get your own office, you'll spend most of your working day in the company of other people.

However, that's only the beginning. On top of that, many modern trends make working life even more social than it needs to be.

Open-plan offices put you in the middle of a chattering beehive. Anyone can interrupt you, any time, and they almost certainly will. Even at your desk, you're constantly distracted by the noise and movement around you.

Then there's the modern obsession with teamwork. More and more managers believe that they'll get better results by putting people together than allowing them to work on their own. As you know from your own experience, that's not necessarily true. Yes, a team can bring diverse people together, and throw up new ideas. But it still forces them to work as a unit, in the same way, at the same speed. What helps one team member may hinder another – and since introverts are frequently in the minority, they tend to come off worst.

A team dedicated to a project might just about work. Maybe you'll only have to meet once a week. But what if you get sent on an away day to 'build team spirit'? For an introvert, that's pure torment.

Sometimes, workers have to manage their own feelings and expressions in order to carry out their jobs. Sociologists call this *emotional labour*. For example, servers in a restaurant are usually expected to be cheerful. If they bang the plates down on the table or insult the diners, they're not considered to be doing their job properly.

Many workplaces make demands that are easy for extroverts to deal with, but constitute emotional labour for introverts. If the firm lays on a Christmas party, you're expected to enjoy it. If a colleague starts chatting in the kitchen, it's rude to walk away. If your team holds a brainstorming session, you're supposed to make a contribution. This endless effort to take part and fit in saps your energy and erodes your morale, making you dislike a job that you might otherwise love.

Fight through all that, and you might eventually get to sit down and concentrate on your work. But escape is still impossible, thanks to technology. You'll still be plagued by the constant pings of emails, calls or messages. It's supposed to be more efficient – but it can feel like you never get five minutes to think.

The strange thing is, you probably still do a lot of your actual hands-on work on your own. Sure, you spend a lot of time *talking* about it. But when it comes down to actually *doing* it, you're usually alone.

- If you're a designer, you create your layout alone.
- If you're a salesperson, you meet clients alone.
- If you're a manager, you put together your plans and presentations alone.
- If you're a craftsperson, you create your handiwork alone.
- And if you're a writer, like me, you tap out your drafts alone.

In other words, there's a tension between *where* you work and *how* you work – that is, between the nature of your workplace and what you actually do there.

That tension is even more painful if you're an introvert. You really *want* to use your skills and make a difference. But because you like to work alone, your workplace is always against you. While you just want to lose yourself in your work, working life keeps pulling you out.

But what if there was a way to resolve that tension?

Freelancer envy

Before I went freelance, I worked in a publishing house, and then a design studio. Along the way, I worked with many different freelance editors, writers, designers and photographers. And for many years, I looked at their lives with a profound feeling of envy.

I was stuck in an office designed by someone else, which always seemed to be either too hot or too cold. They worked comfortably at home, with total control over their environment.

I wore a shirt and tie. They wore jeans and hoodies.

I was grateful for my four weeks' holiday and flexitime. They came and went as they pleased, finishing work at 3pm for a swim or jetting off to the ski slopes for weeks on end.

I was under my boss's thumb. They seemed to choose what they did, and who they worked for.

Basically, I got all the crap that comes with work, with few of the benefits. But they seemed to get all the benefits with none of the crap. No wonder I thought, 'If only I could work that way!'

Now, if these freelancers had been a completely different type of person from me, none of this would have mattered. If they were barnstorming, go-getting extroverts, talking loud and pushing hard, I would have understood. I can't have what they've got because I can't do what they do, or be how they are.

But they weren't like that. They were like me.

During meetings, they listened a lot, only speaking to ask questions or confirm the brief, and left once they had the information they needed to start work.

However, they were more than just yea-sayers. They had plenty of ideas of their own to put forward, and they weren't afraid to raise objections. Indeed, that was why we worked with them in the first place: because they brought us a strong and independent perspective that we just couldn't obtain in-house.

And yet, although they added real value to our team, and were practically recognized as members of it, they still maintained their independence and control. They helped our firm but without becoming part of it.

Clearly, freelance life was good to them. They didn't look like they dreaded every working day. They had demanding deadlines to meet, yet still seemed pretty chilled. And despite their introversion, they seemed confident and content.

I'd been told that freelancing was terribly insecure. But for these guys, it was all gravy. Business just seemed to flow to them, as if by magic; some were even supporting a family. Meanwhile, even though I was in full-time employment, I was sharing an apartment with a friend and permanently overdrawn.

How had they *done* that? How had they made the journey from a life like mine to a life like theirs? And how did they make it work now?

Since I didn't know, I was destined to spend my life as a cog in the machine, grinding out the nine to five.

Or so I thought.

Yes, you can be a freelance introvert

It's easy to see why freelance life appeals to introverts.

You work alone most of the time. You have no teammates, no colleagues, no boss. You decide when and how you meet people – if you meet them at all. You could easily go days, if not weeks, without speaking to another human about work. Yippee!

In terms of the work itself, you choose which projects to take on. You decide when and how to work, so you can use your time to best effect. You decide which calls, emails and messages to respond to. You are the boss of you. And you set up your workplace the way you want it.

Sounds like heaven, right?

However, there's a flip side to the coin.

As a freelancer, you're running a one-person business. No-one else is going to give you direction, organize your schedule or set your priorities.

That means going out to hustle for work from people you don't even know. It means setting your own prices and chasing for payment. It means actively managing your time and the way you work with clients. And it means building a network that will give you the opportunities and support you need.

Doing all that is hard enough for anyone – but it's particularly difficult for introverts. So while freelancing can be great for introverts, it still takes work.

You'll need to find the right balance between doing the things that feel natural to you, and pushing yourself to do the things you find a little bit more challenging. You'll need to learn some new skills and ways of thinking. And you'll need to build up the confidence to make it through when times are rough.

In this book, I'll share what I've learned about making that happen.

Who I am and why you should listen to me

I'm a lifelong introvert. As a child, I preferred playing alone – most often, writing and illustrating my own stories. I had a few friends, but not many. I didn't like team sports or group activities and I still don't.

When I grew up, I drifted towards office jobs where I could work on my own. My first ‘proper’ job was at a publishing house, and I moved on to a small design studio. When I was made redundant, I saw my chance to go freelance – and 15 years later, I’m still here. Through my work as a freelance copywriter and editor,³ I’ve been fortunate enough to enjoy a good standard of living and support my family throughout that time.

Despite my introversion, I partnered with another (more outgoing) freelance writer to set up a trade organization for copywriters.⁴ Managing the membership and organizing events took me way outside my comfort zone. On the whole, I’m happy I did it – but I was even happier to hand the reins over to someone else, refocus on my freelance work and watch the community thrive as a member rather than its leader.

I’m still an introvert. In fact, the older I get, the more introverted I seem to become. I love solo activities like running, cycling, gardening, gaming and writing. I still have a handful of friends who I’m close to, and rarely make new ones. And although it’s ridiculous, I get anxious before going to pretty much any meeting or social occasion – even when I’ll only see old friends.

³ Visit my website at <https://www.abccopywriting.com> or connect with me on LinkedIn at <https://www.linkedin.com/in/abccopywriting/>

⁴ Find out more at <https://www.procopywriters.co.uk>

I feel vaguely guilty about all this, but what can I do?
The heart wants what it wants.

So, to sum up – I've been an employee, I've been a freelancer myself and I've spoken to lots of other successful freelancers along the way. And I've done it all as a confirmed introvert.

And that's why I think my advice might be useful to you.

Introversion is a strength, not a weakness

Before we go any further, I want to make one thing very clear. It's an important lesson that I've learned, and one you need to learn too.

Yes, you like to be alone. But that doesn't make you a freak, a villain or a psychopath. There is nothing wrong with being an introvert, and you're not inferior just because you are one – whatever you might hear in TV, magazines or social media. Your introversion is not a disease you need to cure, a character flaw that you need to correct or a weakness to be overcome.

In fact, being an introvert can give you many strengths:

- You're independent and self-motivated, and don't need to draw energy from other people to achieve your goals.
- You have a clear-eyed understanding of the world, and don't take your perspective from those around you.

- You listen carefully to what people say, remember what you learn and act on it.
- You take time to make the right decision and prepare for what's to come. You rarely give in to wild impulses.
- You know who you are, what you want and how you want to live. You don't measure yourself by others' opinions.
- You are excellent at focusing on a task until it's done, without going off at tangents or giving in to distraction.
- You're loyal, reliable and trustworthy.

I'm sure you can already see how these talents will help you freelance. Bring them together and you get a thoughtful, effective partner – someone clients know they can depend on. And in a world where too many freelancers are flaky and inconsistent, that's gold.

So you won't succeed *despite* your introversion, but *because of it*. You'll take the strengths you already have and turn them to your advantage. And you'll find ways to build up the areas where you need to improve until you're the complete article.

Introverts win too

When we think of a 'winner', we tend to picture an extrovert.

For example, think about the heroes and heroines you've seen in Hollywood films. How many were

quiet, withdrawn and thoughtful? And how many were loud, outgoing and action-oriented?

The popular idea of a winner is a go-getter who achieves things 'out there' by getting involved, controlling situations and beating competitors. Or, if they don't achieve alone, they're vital members of a winning team. So if you're not really interested in all that, it follows that you must be a loser. Right?

Wrong. Introverts win too. Just look at Albert Einstein, Emma Watson, Bill Gates, Frank Ocean, Christina Aguilera, Meryl Streep, Elon Musk or Warren Buffett, who've all achieved great things as introverts.⁵

If you start thinking that winning equals extroversion, you can easily start to resent extroverts themselves. Just look at them, with their big smiles, easy confidence and winning charm. They're grabbing all the opportunities that should be going to talented introverts!

It's true that extroverts probably are better suited to certain jobs. For instance, it takes a pretty resilient character to sell door to door, or deal with unhappy customers at a service desk. Those high-exposure contexts are the ones where extroverts tend to shine.

However, extroversion has its downsides too. Because extroverts thrive on social contact, they can find it hard to work alone for long periods. Since interaction feeds their energy, they can be easily distracted by needless

⁵ For more on the strengths of introverts, read *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* by Susan Cain, Penguin, 2013.

conversations, calls and meetings. That wastes their time, and other people's too.

In conversation, extroverts feel bound to speak, even if they have nothing to say – which is actually just as likely to hurt their reputation as help it. And because they find listening hard, they miss out on valuable information and insight.

The point is that extroverts aren't better or worse than you – just different. Indeed, there are many situations where you need their strengths, and vice versa.

I called this book *The Freelance Introvert* because being an introvert and succeeding at freelancing isn't an either/or. You can be an introvert, build a great freelance career and enjoy an abundant lifestyle, all at once. And you can do it without changing who you are. You can be – forgive me – a wintrovert.

Now, let's talk about how you make it happen.

Takeaways from this chapter

- If you like to work alone and prefer your own company, you're probably an introvert.
- Introversion isn't an disease, a character flaw or a weakness. It is a strength.
- Freelancing is ideal for introverts, but you'll need to understand your own strengths and weaknesses to make it work.
- Extroverts are not invincible. Introverts win too.