

TIW35 - Maari Casey

Yurii Lazaruk: [00:00:00] Welcome to The Independent Workforce, the podcast where we explore the now and the future of work through the lens of temporary employment, such as freelancers, contractors, fractional experts, you name it. Here we speak with CEOs, recruiters, founders, and industry leaders about how they work with independent talent, the wins, the challenges, and the lessons learned.

My name is Juri. I'm growing the freelance market at freelancemap, an international platform that's been connecting top independent professionals with companies for over 20 years. And my guest is Mari Casey, the founder and CEO of Uncompany, a business she's been building for more than 15 years to help companies work smarter with independent talent, and who wants everyone around her to succeed.

So welcome, Mari.

Maari Casey: Hello. Good to see you.

Yurii Lazaruk: First of all, why Uncompany? Why this name?

Maari Casey: Why the name? Um, everyone always talks about the name, and, um, I'm really happy with the name. It w- it's... The, so the backstory with where Uncompany came from was in 2012, I was, [00:01:00] I'd been freelancing for about five years at that point, and, um, several freelancers and myself were sitting around, right around, like, the holidays, you know, post Thanksgiving, Christmas time here in the US, and we were just kind of complaining 'cause we were like, "It's not fair that all these, like, full-time, regular employed people get to have these amazing holiday parties where, you know, there's food and wine, and it's great, and we don't get to have that."

And so we were like, "Well," like, "let's, let's just have one." And so we ended up calling that party, 'cause we were unaffiliated with a company, we end up calling it the Uncompany Holiday Party. And we pulled it all together in, like, two weeks and had almost, like, 250, 300 people show up from all over the place, and that was really the first time that...

I mean, I obviously knew freelancing was, was awesome. Um, but that was a time where I was, "Oh, this is real confirmation that this is a whole, this is a

workforce that is excited to do what they're doing," and the environment of the party was super positive, and it was just, it was such a great moment.

And then I was like, "All right, we're gonna do something here," and so [00:02:00] pulled the name Uncompany away from that party and used that as a, as a starting point.

Yurii Lazaruk: You know, it's so fun. Mm-hmm. I feel like great minds think alike. Uh, we started doing Christmas Unlocked, as we call it, uh, in- Mm-hmm ... Europe for freelancers exactly because of that point.

Yeah. 'Cause it's just not fair. Everyone having their parties and stuff, and, like, freelancers, are they not people? They are the same people. Right. They're the same humans. They also want to have fun, to drink some beer, wine, whatever they want to do, like, to just chill, relax. Yeah. So I totally get you. And yeah, it's amazing name, so kudos.

Congratulations on that. Thank

Maari Casey: you.

Yurii Lazaruk: And, like, I know that you not started, like, this independent talent, um, workforce related journey right away. So why did you decide to turn into this part of workforce, let's say?

Maari Casey: Yeah. So prior to freelancing, prior to Uncompany, I worked in advertising, um, in just advertising agencies as an art director/designer, and so I did that for some time, and it was awesome.

And I lo- I love working. Like, [00:03:00] I love... I've always enjoyed working. I'm a hard worker. It's, my parents taught me that. And so I really got into work, uh, and I love that environment. But at, after about six or seven years in the agency I was working in, I had this, like, moment where I was working all the time and I had a lot of life stuff happen.

My mom, my mom got sick, and I... This, this is a crazy story, but we had about six months that I call the epic unraveling of all the things. And my fiance, my now husband, him and I were, um, hit by a car walking across a parking lot, and then my mom was sick, and then I got married, which was a good thing, but it was all this chaos.

I had a, we had a death in the family. All this chaos that happened within a really short period of time, you know? And, um, I think everybody has those moments in their lives where it's like something happens. It doesn't have to be catastrophic or tragic, it can just be a big life change. We have to move, or I have twins or triplets or something.

Um, and for me, I, I couldn't maintain the level of work that was being required of me in a full-time job with all of this [00:04:00] external Demands on my time, and emotions, and, like, caregiving, and all this kind of stuff. And so I tried really hard for about a year to make it work, and, uh, my l- my health was failing and all these things were kind of going off the rails.

And then so I kinda say that, say that full-time work, like, pushed me out. It was like, "No, there's a better way to do this." And so at that moment, I was like, "This work is just not working for me anymore, and I ha- I, I have to find another way to do this." And so that's when I really kinda stepped into freelance, and I

Within a couple months, I was just had this, like, come to Jesus moment where I was like, "It's amazing. Everybody should do this. I can do amazing work. I can work with great clients. I can get my hair cut in the middle of the day and get groceries before 10:00 o'clock." Um, and it was really amazing. And so I did, I freelanced for about five or so years, and in the process of doing that, I was really kinda coming to the idea of Uncompany because I had then worked on the agency side and the client side, and I'd now worked on the freelancer side.

And so I saw the issues back and forth with both as far as connecting to [00:05:00] good work, um, you know, being respected for the work I'm delivering, being paid on time. And then on the client side, being able to find the right talent, being able to understand how to communicate to them, how to send them briefs and scopes of work.

Um, and I, I, I saw that and I was like, "Wow, this is really just a hot operational nightmare sitting in the middle. Like, nobody's really working through the process." Um, but I understood then, 'cause I was in that position, I was like, there's so many talented, high level, highly experienced, uh, freelancers that are working that clients just don't know how to get access to, and they don't know how to work with them.

And so I really wanted to build a system that made it relatively fluid and simple and just broke down, broke down the black box, the, you know, the walled

guarded mentality of recruiting around, uh, freelance talent, and make it really, really simple and transparent so that it was kind of a no-brainer for clients.

Like, of course I'm gonna go work with this highly skilled, you know, art director who's gonna deliver work quicker than me having to go through an agency or go through a recruiting process. Uh, and [00:06:00] so really over the last, um, 12 years or so, it's really just been slowly building and perfecting, you know, fixing the, fixing the roadblocks, fixing the friction points, and making it, like, as frictionless as possible.

Yurii Lazaruk: No, it's interesting that you mention this normal work, uh- ... because it was just a previous guest Yeah ... Elina Jutelinen, she was just talking exactly about this, that the moment that you have to care for something or something happens to yourself or you have children, et cetera, you are kind of like not valid for this normal work, but you still have to work, you know?

You still have to make money. Yeah. And there is, like, not one way to be right, and it's always, you have to always move in different directions. That's exactly where independent talent comes in. Mm-hmm. And sometimes they are even more productive than full-time professionals. So you started- Yeah ... you started your own company, like, over 10 years ago already.

Mm-hmm. And you've been through many things. You've been through COVID. You've been through this, like, rise of, uh, online work and these hybrid models, et cetera, and, like, currently AI age. So there are so many [00:07:00] disruptions already happening, and I'm curious, like, in your perspective, what changed during the last 10 years?

Maari Casey: Yeah. It's, it's crazy that it's been 10 years, but it has been a lot of change. I mean, it really In the first several years, it was relatively predictable, the, the hiring cycles of people start hiring freelancers, and they would go freelancers, and then they would pull contractors, and then they would go to full-time.

Then they would over-hire, you know, and then the companies would panic, and then they would lay everybody off, and then we would recycle. And, and, you know, we had that trend for quite a bit. Uh, and I would say in the early days, especially in the US market, a lot of the conversations I was having was to convince our, uh, clients why freelancers made sense, and that they were valid and that they weren't gonna disappear and that it was a better choice.

And so, um, a lot of those conversations we had was really kind of validating the model of freelance and why it's, it's a great scalable solution for so many businesses and so many reasons, especially in the markets we are now. Uh, and then that conversation has shifted, and I would say COVID really played a huge part of that [00:08:00] because y- all of us were just kind of flipped up in the air.

Um, and everybody was working from home. And it was funny because, you know, it was, whatever, Tuesday, and it was like, "Oh, everyone has to work from home." And I got on my team on the Zoom call, and I was like, "All right, guys. Nothing's changed." "We're still doing it. We're all working from home, and we're all kind of doing remotely."

Um, and so for us, it, it was interesting to watch how the world really caught up, you know, with remote working and hybrid working because it used to be m- some of the conversations were about finding freelancers on site, and that was a preference. And then once COVID came in, of course, that question was off the table, and it was never an issue going forward again.

And so now, um, I think a lot of people, because we went through that cycle of COVID and through that flexible working and remote working, um, people are a lot more in line with, "Of course I'm gonna hire freelancers, and of course they're gonna be remote, and they're gonna come in, and they're gonna get it done."

And so my conversations have changed a lot around, it's no longer validating the model. It's more so like, how can we make this work more efficiently? How can we find the right talent and get them integrated [00:09:00] quicker? Um, the industry conversations around AI, I think are still happening and probably will be happening for a while, and it's a lot about, um, how are freelancers integrating AI into their workflow, how is the company using AI into their workflow, and how that operates a lot more efficiently.

And then, um, what- how is that affecting more, like, junior entry-level positions? So we have some conversations now that are more about bringing a freelancer in to work alongside, um, you know, some kind of AI system put in place, and they're, they're overseeing or they're kind of like the, the quality control-type person.

But I, I do feel like there's still a lot around what role does AI play versus the human side of talent and, you know, there, uh, we can h- probably have a whole other podcast around that. Um, but the beauty, the beautiful thing that I think that's come out over the last 10 years is that at least in our market, I ha- I'm not

having those conversations as much around, like, yeah, freelancers are great at what they do.

They make [00:10:00] sense, and they're the future of building a scalable company. That h- that conversation has changed a lot, so that's, that's exciting.

Yurii Lazaruk: In your mind, how does the ideal AI-based system for hiring independent talent look like?

Maari Casey: Um, so you're saying how, how does that work for freelancers? Or give me a

Yurii Lazaruk: little bit of context.

For both sides. So let's imagine- Mm-hmm ... we have independent talent. They have their skills, they have their projects done, and then we have a company that wants to hire them. And, um- Mm-hmm ... somehow they have, like, a project description. Sometimes they don't even know why they need freelancer. They have, like, a title- Yeah

and they think that they ca- can fill the title with a specific person, which is not the case, and, uh, we can talk about it more also. And, like, we have two sides, someone who is seeking job for job to be done, and someone- Mm ... usually independent talent, who can make this happen. So how AI will help them match?

Maari Casey: Yeah. It's actually really cool. This is something that we have, um... So one of our services is to [00:11:00] build custom talent pools for our clients- Mm ... and that's like if you think about the workforce of freelancers, 50 million. Obviously for one client, trying to find someone in 50 million is a lot, so we basically create a smaller custom pool for them.

Um, and then, you know, we're building right now our second version of our software. But utilizing AI, the client can, in theory, come in, drop in a project. We kinda s- we, we say it like they can word vomit a project, blah, blah, blah. I'm not sure this many, but you know how scopes come in sometimes and we're not quite sure what exactly.

It's a little squishy, but the nice thing is AI can take that squishy scope and solidify it into a concrete scope or a brief, and then they can take that, they can go against the database of the, the talent pool we pulled together for them, and

then they can re-score the freelance talent based on, you know, what's, what the scope looks like.

And then that gives us a really good starting point. Uh, in some cases, in, in some of our services, the client can actually go and they can say, like, based on the brief and based on my talent pool, these two are the top recommended people. Um, you know, and it's not foolproof. I think you need a human in place in the middle [00:12:00] who'll be like, "Oh, that person just forgot to put that they do presentation design."

Um, but it gives us a really nice starting point, and on our side, it gives us a really great way to, like, streamline the scoping process because, you know, we get all versions of scopes from clients that are sometimes are lots of holes in them, and that it just helps us solidify and then give them something back to react to.

So, you know, there's a lot of wa- great ways to use it as a resource and a, and a tool just to streamline, especially that beginning part where it's, like, getting information and finding the right match.

Yurii Lazaruk: You know, sometimes, uh, companies are making job descriptions with AI, and freelancers are very smart.

They know that. Yeah. They put it into ChatGPT, Claude, whatever, and then like give me the best cover letter that I can apply exactly to this job- Right ... based on my skills, et cetera. So they're not that stupid also. And, uh- Yeah ... I feel like it's an AI battle. AI battle, like one side is fighting with AI job description, another with AI application- Yeah

and then we have, like, a huge mismatch. And then I also see- Mm ... for example on LinkedIn, which is crazy, or, uh, on platforms where people compete [00:13:00] for their, uh, rate or, like, hours, et cetera. Right. Like one project, hundreds of application, and then you still as a human have to go through these hundreds of application.

And I feel like AI doesn't really make it easier for both sides. No. In this, in this process, where exactly human belongs?

Maari Casey: Yeah. We call that, like, the AI slop that's happening with recruiting, and recruiting is such a broken model anyway. It's so... It's already... It was already dehumanized before AI came in, and I think it's made it a little...

It's made it even worse. Um, and that's why we don't do, we don't do the feeding frenzy against pro- projects. If a project comes in, we don't send it to everybody to, to fight against each other. Like, I think that's a broken model, and it's really, it's really predatory to freelancers and their talent and then their, and their compensation.

But, um, yeah, I think with, I think with, with AI, I think we have to know that a human needs to sit in between. It needs... It's gonna be a slower part of the process, but when we're vetting, when we're vetting talent and when we're vetting jobs coming [00:14:00] in, if there's not someone to look through it and actually say, "This is a person and this is..."

This person's asking for this, and this is the right match," like, then it's, it... You're gonna have a lot more mismatches, and I think This has existed previously in old models where it was like a cl- a tag cloud, right? I would go in and I would put in, and I saw this when I first started freelancing and that's why I stopped working with recruiters, 'cause I would put illustrator, you know, in, uh, in my tag, which meant I worked in Adobe Illustrator.

It does not mean I am an illustrator, but I would get served all these illustration jobs, and I was like, as many times as I went back to the recruiter and I was like, "I work in, I can work with Illustrator. I don't, I'm not an illustrator." They didn't know those nuances and they were just doing it based on tags.

I f- I feel like the breakdown with AI, when we lean only on AI for recruiting and for matching is it's gonna be the same kind of stuff. It's like, oh, this A matches A, but w- we don't know that this person doesn't like to do this and this is, you know, there's all those nuances that make us human and make the work better.

Um, but if you don't have somebody sitting in the middle and having those conversations or at least [00:15:00] aware of the differences, then there's gonna be more mismatches and there's gonna be more frustrated clients and, you know, and, and bad project work and things like that.

Yurii Lazaruk: This episode of The Independent Workforce is brought to you by Freelancer Map, the home of freelancing.

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Having this real human conversation is a huge work and everyone tries to avoid them as, like, fire. Yeah. I don't know, everyone is crazy. "Oh, I don't want to talk to people. Let's just use some AI system." It's not scalable. Humans aren't

Maari Casey: scalable.

Yurii Lazaruk: Yeah, it's so weird but, you know, no matter how much you will write AI in the description of the platform, it doesn't mean that it actually, uh, serves the right, uh, use case and, uh- Mm-hmm

it doesn't mean that you, if you write that your platform uses AI [00:16:00] five times, that it makes sense. Sometimes you just- Yeah ... uh, mention AI just because it's sexy and everyone wants AI, um- Yeah ... without even knowing what it does. It's trendy. Yeah, exactly. And, like, what is, if we are talking about this broken hiring system, and once again, there are two things.

First of all, it's like how it's been done for ages, and secondly- Yeah ... still not everyone trusts independent talent. They don't believe that it's a real job. Sometimes people say, "Oh, you're a freelancer. Go take a job." Or sometimes they're also, m- do not trust them in a way that- Yeah ... "Oh, you are not sitting in my office.

I'm not controlling you. I don't know whether you're working on five projects. What if you take my IP data and share it with my competitors?" Blah, blah, blah. So they all have all these biases. Mm-hmm. So what do we, us, I don't know, market have to do to make it work in the right way?

Maari Casey: Yeah. Yeah, I think, um- There's a couple things.

I mean, when [00:17:00] you're dealing with somebody, when we d- when we have a new client come in that's immediately distrustful in a way that's, um, potentially destruct- destructive, usually what we'll say is like, "What's been your experience?" 'Cause usually they're frustrated or distrustful or wary because there's been some negative experience that you have to overcome for them.

Um, and, you know, if you can talk through that, they can say, "Oh, well, I've had a freelancer in the past," this is usually a typical one, "come in on a project, and then ghost me." Like, "Took the files, we worked for a week, and then they

disappeared, and it was a panic and blah, blah, blah." So then you talk to that, and you say, "Okay, well, like, I know Kate.

She'll do a great job. I'm here if something happens. We'll schedule regular check-ins." Like, "We'll hold the files." Whatever it is that you can talk to that. Um, but I think that's where the relationship side of, like, what we do is really important and showing empathy. Like you say like, "Hey, that sucks. Like, that's awful.

Like, that's a bad freelancer. Um, that shouldn't happen, and I'm sorry that you went through that, and this is how we can make sure that that doesn't happen if you're working with us and working with our talent." Um- 'Cause a lot of times when there's that kind of vibe, it's [00:18:00] because there's some baggage that you have to get past.

If you can't get past it, if they're still, like, frustrated and distrustful, you probably don't wanna work with them because it's gonna be, you're gonna be having to prove yourself all the way through. Um, and but usually that's the first issue up front is how can we fix, you know, how can we fix the damage?

What's the damage that's been done that we have to overcome with working properly? And a lot of times, not so much anymore 'cause it's, it's being fixed, but the old way of recruiting, the tag cloud, the AI sourcing, the, like, I'm just gonna send 50 resumes and you're gonna have to go through it, that's the old model of, of kind of working with freelancers and placements.

Uh, a lot of times that model damaged them, or they went to a platform where it was this kind of race to the bottom and they just picked somebody who was the cheapest because that sounds great, and that person blew it up and now we all have to suffer the damage. Um, so I think it's, you know, part of it is talking through the issues of the, what they've seen and then how can we make sure that that's not gonna happen going forward.

And then the second piece is just let's, well, let's just start with something really small. Like, let's not [00:19:00] do a whole rebrand of your website. Let's just start by doing a couple one page doc- you know, one-pagers or a presentation deck or a quick 15-second, you know, YouTube reel or something like that. Like, let's start with something small and then that way we can kind of test each other out.

I think, you know, we... I always compare it to the idea of, like, dating and getting married. Like, I'm not gonna walk in and get married the first time I

meet you. You know, we're gonna have coffee maybe. Well, I don't know. The crazy thing is that that's like reality TV. But, like, I'm gonna have coffee with you a couple times and it's, it...

And then maybe we'll move on to dinner. Maybe we'll do something and then we'll, you know, we'll kind of go. So, let's start by having, like, a coffee project, and then that gives you an opportunity as a marketplace, too, and as a freelancer, too, to test the waters and make sure it's gonna work for you. 'Cause it's also about you being happy with working with the client, as well as the client happy working with you.

So those two things, that's kind of how we, we start pro- start relationships with new clients.

Yurii Lazaruk: You know, your analogy of getting married reminded me of the things that, uh, going to this, uh, plat- platform where people are fighting for the rate, it's very [00:20:00] similar to going to Vegas, getting drunk, and then finding-

yourself married in some cheap motel. And you're like, "How, how, how did it happen?" So I- Yeah ... I, I can totally imagine it, like, clearly in my mind. And still, you also told about that, ah, okay, let's be honest, shit happens. Sometimes you- Mm-hmm ... can hire a wrong person, but it doesn't mean that you only can hire wrong freelancers.

You can hire wrong full-time people also. Absolutely. And that's, that's how it works. But for some reason- Mm-hmm ... businesses afraid hiring the wrong freelancers more than hiring full-time, well, whatever. It's their problems. Still, what are the red flags? Like, if let's imagine we are the company, we are the business, or maybe we are a recruiter who is helping their client to hire a company, what are the red flags in freelancers to avoid?

Maari Casey: If you're a client and you're looking for a freelancer, um, if they're late to a meeting, like if it's the first meeting and they're late, I'm very, I'm very punctual, um, without, without there being a reason, you know? I think if you're, if you're talking to a freelancer and you're interviewing and they're coming unprepared, so they haven't done their research, [00:21:00] they haven't, you know, s- learned more about the company, read the scope clearly, um, coming with questions.

So it's, it's also kind of like basic interview skills. Like if I'm gonna come to an interview and I, I haven't researched who I'm talking to, the company that I'm

working for, and done a little bit of thinking about the project itself or the, the, the role, um, then that means I'm not really invested, you know?

And so I think if, if I'm a client and I'm interviewing a freelancer for a potential project and they're not already kind of coming with ideas about the project, "Oh yeah, I did this type of project last year with Nike and we did this, and so reading your scope kind of gave me, has already given me some thoughts," like that, that gets me excited, means they're invested.

Um, so if they come and they're just like, "Oh yeah, this looks great. I can do it," and there's no questions, there's no back and forth. 'Cause for me, I think the biggest thing with freelancers, um, and where I see projects and those relationships go awry is when there's a under-communication. I'm not, I'm not sharing and I'm not asking questions, and same thing on the client basis.

So making sure they're communicating really clearly, um, and that they're coming with a level of professionalism. It's like, "I've read your scope. I have my, [00:22:00] I have my questions. Can- if I can go ahead and go through it. Um, and then here's how I work." You know, I think it's, it's great for a freelancer to set the table and say, "I like to communicate via Slack," or, "Text message only," or, "Don't call me on the weekends," or, "My working hours are between 8:00 and 4:00.

I- is that, does that work with you? Like I can use Asana, Wrike, monday.com, whatever platforms. What kind of platforms do you use?" So just communicating yourself as a business as opposed to like a single person creative who's doing work. Like I- if I'm a business, then I'm gonna come to you as another business and share how my operations work and make sure that they jive with you.

So I think that's a really good sign that you're working with a freelancer that is, is legit and is, you know, is buttoned up and ready to do the work.

Yurii Lazaruk: You know, some companies are hiring the cheapest person on the platform, and then they expect for them to have the best work ever. Yeah. And it's always a question about, like, the rates.

They always compare freelancer rate to full-time rate, but they forget about, like, taxes, they forget about sick leaves, and all this extra, extra stuff. So [00:23:00] in your experience, when you are working, you are working with both sides, so how do you- Mm-hmm ... help to justify the rate of freelancer?

Maari Casey: Yeah. Um, again, that, that conversation has changed a little bit for us over the last couple years, which has been great.

We have a whole rate calculator, um, that our f- that our clients can take and drop in, like, "I need this type of work. I d- need to spend, um, these many hours," and we can recommend, like, "Oh, you should hire this full-time," or, "This is a freelancer. Here's the rate." But, you know, I think they understand the, the burden, the cost burden if they are, if they've run a business long enough to say, like, "Yes, this person hourly seems really high, but if you were to hire this person full-time, here's what that would look like."

And I've done this, I, I mean, I do this all the time, just did this last month with another client, where it's like, "You have a 10-person freelance team that's working with you. This is the average over the last 12 months of what you have spent, which might seem high, but if we were to convert that, these people to free- to full-timers, even sometime part-timers, [00:24:00] here's the burden from a salary, payroll cost, and, and then here's the tax benefits burden, um, if you include that.

And that's a fixed cost, you know? So I just try to, I try to help them understand, like, that a full-timer is a fixed cost. You're gonna be paying it every single month. It's gonna be on a different line item on your P&L. If we're working with investor, uh, investor-funded companies, they really like to have non-fixed costs and more flexible costs, and this freelance pool is all very flexible.

And so just helping them understand that, 'cause a lot of times intellectually they get it and they're like, "Oh, yeah, yeah, that, understand." Um, but the numbers can freak them out a little bit until you kind of walk them through and help them, and also help them justify internally to the people, the finance team that they need to go back to why it's a good deal.

So part of what we do too is give them the tools and the resources to go back and have those conversations in a way that, like, makes sense and, and is understandable.

Yurii Lazaruk: To jump a little bit deeper into this flexible part, how do you exactly, uh, what are the argument that you are sharing [00:25:00] with companies about this flexible part so businesses really understand that it's really flexible?

Maari Casey: Mm-hmm. Yeah, I mean, we... So one of the things that we, we talked about, this was a couple years ago, but we had this model that we were

pushing out that was, we called it an adaptive staff. And so we were like, eh, especially here in the US, I was like, the best staff, and everywhere, the best staff that you can build as a company that needs to be scalable and protected against all the craziness that is in our world is you have your full-timers that are the, like, institutional knowledge bearers.

They're like, they're the pillars, and then you have your contractors that are gonna give you a level of security, and they're gonna do part-time or for six months, eight months, 12 months, whatever. And then you have your freelancers that can kind of come in when there's these project spikes. And so we tell them, we're like, "You know, the nice thing with having this flexibility in this core part of your staff is when you lose a client, you're not having to lay off your full-time headcount.

Or when you have a peak in business, you can ramp up quickly. You can test the viability of a job without having to hire somebody and then fire them 'cause it didn't work out." So a lot of our, a lot [00:26:00] of what I think is beautiful about freelance is it actually really protects the, the longevity of full-time staffers, 'cause I worked in agencies, and so I went through several cycles where we would lose a client and then half the team would get laid off.

And that sucks, right? 'Cause if you've moved your whole family to a location, then now you've gotta up and move everybody out, and that's just like, that's so destructive to, like, just the human side of work. Um, so I love that the flexibility of having freelancers in place can protect that. It's like, okay, well, now you can just transition your full, your fu- your freelancers out, protect your full-timers, because freelancers always have additional clients, right?

They're working on multiple projects, so they've got that flexibility and that transition hopefully built into their business. Um, and, and usually they, they don't under- they don't think about it like that. They don't think about it, freelancers will be protecting your full-timers, um, long term. Decreasing burnout, you know, giving them a place to, like, reduce costs if needed, all those different things.

Um, so that's, that's always a fun conversation to have.

Yurii Lazaruk: I [00:27:00] remember Matt Motola a long time ago told me that, uh, the beauty of freelancers, that you hire fast and you fire fast. Yeah. And there is no hard feelings. Like, it's okay. Yeah. That's, that's the way that they, they work. You don't have to go to court, you don't have to pay severance- Yeah

you don't have to do all this stuff, because you hire them for a project and then you're just out. It's totally good. And if something doesn't go like you agreed, like you are very easy and very open to fire them, which is totally good. Mm-hmm. And everyone understand, you know? Freelancers understand the feedback.

They understand if company's firing them, they did something really wrong, or the company sucks. Uh, sometimes, you never know. Right. Yeah. Sometimes- Or the work just ended. Sometimes the work just ends and that's part of it. Yeah, yeah. Yeah. But yeah, it's, it's, it's like the best case scenario, you know, when the work is ending, like it's, it's, it's pretty clear.

Mm-hmm. And still, still some companies, some leaders, especially hiring leaders, they think that freelancers are just gap fillers. So if someone went on a s- like maternity leave or say you accidentally need to, uh, deal with some project yes- for yesterday and they need this [00:28:00] person. Mm-hmm. And you hire them very, very fast, and then, like, that's it.

But is it really the case for freelancers? Are they really only gap fillers?

Maari Casey: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, I think, I think of freelancers more as, um, as, like, special agents in a lot of ways, where it's if I have a position that I need, and this is kind of in the position we are with a lot of our placements because we're focused on very mid to senior people, um, I'm gonna test the viability of a position or we're ramping up a certain department and I need somebody who can, who has l- like understands how to work directly with, like, this type of influencer or can...

Has done, has experience working on B2C brands that do this one thing. And we can f- That's the cool thing with freelancers is we can find those specific types of people that can go in and narrow in on a role and a need and really fill that out for a, for a team. Um, you know, I... The gap filler idea, like, yes, they are.

That's what makes it awesome, is like we can kind of come in and do it for six months, and then we're out and we're doing something else. [00:29:00] Um, but I think besides just gap fillers, they're also, like, a really good strategic tool that companies that are smart and that are, um, you know, really moving forward are gonna use them as that.

Like, I'm gonna bring in my experiential designer whenever I'm ramping up to event season because this person is busy all year. They're like the special agent

of experiential design, and they go to all these awesome companies, but we have a relationship and I can pull her in. It's a line item and focus on crushing this event for, for our team, you know?

And I think smart companies are gonna start understanding where those, who those people are, but then also what I see with marketplaces is all the marketplaces who do freelance are really starting to niche down in specific areas. And so they're gonna know, like, I'm gonna go to this partner who's gonna deliver incredible content writers at a very niche market, um, and I have that as a resource.

And so I think it's really cool that a lot of companies, especially the innovative ones, are understanding it's so much about knowing the right people, uh, and that's, that, like, superpowers their team

Yurii Lazaruk: I remember the first time we talked, you told me about Freelance [00:30:00] Bench. So tell me more about that

Maari Casey: Yeah, this is, um, so this is a service that came out, I think, after five or six years of in bus- being in business, and it was largely because the model we were running was very...

A scope of work comes in from a client, we find the talent, they, they sign all the things, and then they're off and running, and that was great, but we quickly realized that a lot of the work that freelancers do are these, like, really small projects. Yes, we have big ones, but it's a lot of these, like, tiny little paper cut type of projects, little three, you know, 30 hour of this, and 10 hours of this, and five hours of this, and I need to get this tomorrow.

And it was just crushing us with paperwork, and it was crushing our clients. So the way that we figured out to s- kind of streamline this was like, let's just build a talent pool, build some software that they can go in, they can build projects themselves, and they can tag the people that we've already co-created with them.

And so that's our On Deck service. And basically what we do is before there's any kind of work that the client needs to get done, we get together and we figure [00:31:00] out this, the mix of skills, the hourly rate that they need, any specific experience, location, et cetera, and then we onboard the whole team. So the client gets to meet all of the team, the team gets to meet all of the other people, um, they get all the brand ID, they get all the intel before anything starts, and then they're all set up in our software.

And then, then we give client- the client access to the team, so then they can go in and build as many projects as they want. It's all rolled up. There's no, like, small contracts for every single project. It's all kind of rolled up into one project, into one contract, uh, on an annual basis, and they can just work continually with the team as much as they want.

Uh, and the lovely thing about that is it gives the freelancers this kind of continuous project work in between the big projects. They might be on three or four benches. Um, and it builds a really strong relationship between the talent pool, the freelancers, and the client long-term. So there's a lot of stickiness, which is great.

Yurii Lazaruk: Now also, like, going through this onboarding part, sounds like an unbillable work for freelancers. Mm-hmm. [00:32:00] So is it that way, or how does it work?

Maari Casey: For the onboarding?

Yurii Lazaruk: Yeah.

Maari Casey: Yeah, for the onboarding, it's non, it's not billable, but it's, it's pretty, it's pretty light. Like, it's basically meeting the client. Um, and you know, we always tell the freelancers, like, you can always sneak that in slowly over the course, add ex- a few extra hours in here and there, and they all, they all know those, those tricks.

Um, but the thing that we realized, especially pretty early with freelancers and what causes a lot of clients to have bad experiences, is the hiring for freelancers is, is always very reactive. It's always like, "Oh my gosh, my developer just quit, panic, freak out, hire somebody. I'm up all weekend." As opposed to being proactive, where it's like, I have time to think about the people I wanna work with.

Uh, I have time to interview them. I have time to make sure they have all the right files and all the right access. And so what we try to do with On Deck is make sure... And the freelancer's the same way, because I'm, I'm sure you've experienced when you freelance and you walk into a project and everybody's hair is on fire- All the files are flattened, you can't get access, the [00:33:00] door's cl- locked, and everyone's yelling at you 'cause you're not getting it done.

It's, like, the worst way to start working, 'cause it sets freelancers up for failure. Um, so they like it too because they can work ahead and get to know the client

and make sure they have all of their pieces in place before project work comes in. Um, so proactive is, like, that's something we always try to push, especially with clients who have h- have a situation where they, they might, you know, might have had a bad experience previously.

Yurii Lazaruk: And it also feels like you are making it easier for clients to actually create projects because they've done through this onboarding, they already have people- Mm-hmm ... and they don't have to do this anymore. And then when they have a project, let's imagine they want to delegate something, and then they think, oh, it's like all this paperwork.

Oh my God, no, I will better do it myself, or I will better, like, put it to the team, et cetera. Mm. Yes, it will bring burnout. Yes, it will bring extra billable hours, blah, blah, blah, who cares? Let's do it. But then you are making it easier for them. Oh, I have the freelancers. I will just s- share this project, and we will go through it.

And it sounds like a freelance insurance. Like, you [00:34:00] know- Mm-hmm ... you have some troubles in work, you need some help. Like, we are here for you. Like, go buy freelance insurance.

Maari Casey: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. I mean, and it's... You're, you're absolutely right to catch onto that. One of the things I think causes issues with getting clients to utilize freelancers is we have to make it really easy for them, because they're, they're, they're overworked and underpaid.

Most full-timers are working se- 60, 70, whatever hours a week. They're stressed out. And so for you to stop and say, like, "I would like to work with you, but you have to go through all these hoops to get to me," they're, they're out. You know, you have to almost, like, literally hand your... It's like, here's how we're gonna do.

All you have to do is click this button, and, like, check this box and do this. Here we go. If you can make it easy for them, then it's a no-brainer. You know, when you start asking them to do too many things and upload this and don-... Then, then you're gonna lose a lot of people.

Yurii Lazaruk: We've been talking about freelancers, about full-time, about AI.

Sounds like a blended workforce. So in your experience, what does a smart [00:35:00] workforce strategy look like if we combine all these parts?

Maari Casey: Yeah. Um, I think utilizing AI, especially to streamline workflow and intake, is great. Uh, and I use it as a... We just did a whole workshop on AI yesterday, which was amazing.

Um, but utilizing to be your, to be your kind of concepting partner, I think, for, for creatives, for freelancers, or just freelancers in general, using AI as a resource of, like, let's get to 80% of an idea is a great way to streamline. So using AI in that way. Um, and then for a workforce, for a staff, I think, again, you need a combination of full-timers, and those are your pillars.

Those are your kind of institutional knowledge. And then you need your contractors who are gonna be here, and maybe they're testing the validity of a position. Maybe they're there covering your project-based clients, um, whatever. Th- those give you some stability. And then you have your freelancers that can kind of come in on a project basis.

They come in the seasons when the seasons get busy, um, and they kind of come in and out. And I think you, I think everybody needs a workforce that's gonna [00:36:00] incorporate all four of those things in the future to really be, like, efficient, scalable, and, you know, and just operationalize things as the future is gonna continue to grow and get faster, 'cause it's, it always is getting faster.

So I think that is the workforce of the future, is a combination of all four of those.

Yurii Lazaruk: Is there anything that companies and businesses should be really be aware of in case of, like, when we are talking about the workforce? Uh, why I'm asking, because once again, AI is growing fast. Uh, more and more people want to be independent talent, especially senior people, because they're like, "Ah, whatever.

I can work with five clients. Why should I be owned by one company?" So what is something you think that can definitely change in the upcoming, like, few years that company has to be prepared now?

Maari Casey: I think, um, companies, uh, companies need to understand that the power shift ha- is happening. It's happened, you know, it's happening, it's happened, depending on where you are, um, that smart workers don't, no longer [00:37:00] think of themselves...

And I, I mean, I'm a, I'm a, I'm in the generation that kind of sat on both sides, right? When my dad worked the same job until he retired, and so I really came in, and you come in as an employee and you're like, "I'm- I work here, and then you take care of me until I retire, and it's gonna be blissful." The people that, people that are coming into the workforce now, and people who have been in the workforce, I'd say under 30, they don't think like that.

Like, we now think, like, me incorporated, um, and I'm gonna choose to partner myself with a full-time job until it doesn't make sense. And I think a lot of times companies, they get, get kind of caught, and they get a little offended when somebody leaves, but it's because they're not protecting their employees in a way.

They're not taking care of them in a way. They're, they're in this position where they're still thinking the power dynamic is in the company, and you need me, I don't need you, and that's not the case. Uh, right? You obviously need people if you're gonna run a business. And so they need to start thinking more about how they're retaining talent.

How are they training them? How are they making it, um, you know, transportable for people to come in and out? Because they're gonna... Businesses are, are losing more talent because people are [00:38:00] opting for freelancing, and that's because it doesn't make sense for them to stay as a full-time employee. So companies need to do a better job making it make sense for them to stay, and also protecting themselves when they leave.

You know, I think if, if a business d- is not looking at who they can re- you know, how they can replace somebody, whether it's with freelance or another full-timer, and they get caught in a lurch when someone leaves, that's on them, because they're not protecting themselves. So again, it, it kind of goes on both sides.

But the, the power shift has definitely happened to where now people who are working are like, "I'm an asset and I can choose to partner with a full-time job, or I can choose to go partner with freelance jobs. But I, both of them are on the table," more so than they ever have been.

Yurii Lazaruk: I feel like talking about how companies should care about peoples they work with is, like, the whole different episode, and we can talk about it forever.

Yeah. Well, yeah, I can talk about that forever. And it doesn't mean that everyone will implement it, because who cares, like, you know? I- we are still having people, we are paying them money and they do job for us, whatever. But yeah- ... you know, there are, like, the difference between businesses that survive years and then those that are going out of the market.

So [00:39:00] I believe that- Mm-hmm ... we'll see more, and more, and more companies who really care about people they work with. And I don't talk about just full-time, but also independent talent, because you still- Yeah ... to ha- to care about them as you care about your full-time, hopefully, as you care about your- Yes

full-time people. But I wish to have the sky as the limit, but time is the limit of this conversation. So what advice would you give to both companies just starting to use freelancers and- Mm-hmm ... to freelancers entering the market?

Maari Casey: Yes. To companies, I would say, um, learn as much as you can from, you know, groups, groups like you, Uncompany, wherever you're located, but learn what the difference is.

So learn how to communicate with freelancers. Make sure that you're set up system-wise within your organization to work with freelancers. Um, make sure you're also communicating internally to your employees like, "Hey, we're gonna start using freelancers. Here's why." 'Cause you also don't want people to be like, "Oh my gosh, my job is a threat."

So, "I'm using freelancers because [00:40:00] now you can go out on a, you know, go out and take a vacation, and now, you know, you're gonna get the fun work and they're gonna get the harder work," or whatever it is. But communication around that to your staff is really important. And then just spend some time, you know, internally figuring out your systems and how that can work and, and what, what your expectations are, all that kind of stuff.

But I would say if you're totally new, then talking to people who understand the world, like us, um, is really helpful, is really essential. It, it'll make that process so much smoother. If you're a freelancer starting out, um, we could do a whole series of podcasts on that, uh, then I would say there's a few things that we always say for people to do.

You need to understand what your numbers are, like how much do you need to make, what does that look like, um, how much do you need to save, and then what clients are there available for, to help you meet that number. So get an idea

of your budget numbers, P&L, all that kind of stuff, and start planning that out early.

If you can get a little bit of money saved before you make the jump so you have a little bit of runway, just like a business, that's great. You should definitely do that. Don't just... I mean, we always, we always wanna like spike our computer and be like, "I'm outta [00:41:00] here" without any, any parachute. But definitely build yourself some parachute.

Uh, and, and that really goes to like thinking of yourself day one as a business. It's not just you doing skills. You are now a business. You're a business of one, which is awesome. I mean, some of the largest companies in the world started with one person. So think of yourself as a business and operate professionally as a business owner and talk about yourself as a business in a way that's like, "I'm proud of doing this.

Like, this is what I'm doing." And that'll change a lot of the ways that you react and work with clients. And then build yourself a community. Like, you know, get yourself a team. We say find your cheerleader, find your devil's advocate, find your money person, you know, and you can find a lot of those people within these, you know, groups and networks and things like that, and that's essential to survival, especially in the first couple of years, 'cause you're gonna have a lot of questions, and finding people who have done it or are doing it is like saving.

So definitely do those things.

Yurii Lazaruk: To keep the conversation going, name two people I should reach out to to talk about the independent workforce.

Maari Casey: Ooh, [00:42:00] um, let's see Sarah Durin. Um, she's great. Did you already talk to her?

Yurii Lazaruk: Not yet, but I know Sarah. Oh. She's amazing.

Maari Casey: Okay. Yeah, Sarah's awesome. Um, and then Sarah Musgrove, who's another Sarah, in California, um, she's awesome, too.

I think you've already talked to Una. Una's amazing.

Yurii Lazaruk: Yeah, yeah.

Maari Casey: Um, so yeah, those, those folks would be really, really good. Uh, and I have... I can send you a f- a few other ones, too, but those, those two Sarahs.

Yurii Lazaruk: Please do. Send, send me everyone. By the way, exactly because of Una, we are having this conversation, because she connected us-
Love Una

which is amazing. She's the best. Una, thank you so, so much. And last but not least, what is one question that I should have asked you about the freelance market but didn't?

Maari Casey: Ooh, one question. Um, hmm, hmm, hmm.

I guess like how... What have I seen? I don't know. You did a, you asked a ton of good questions. I [00:43:00] can't think of any

Yurii Lazaruk: There are always some questions, you know, but yeah, I totally get it.

Maari Casey: I- I think one of the things we're talking about this summer, this is, this one, is, um, how do you scale? Like, how do freelancers start with as one person and grow, and what does that look like?

We're doing a whole summer of, on scaling, um, and that's a big question for freelancers once they're past year three or four is like, how do I start working with subcontractors? What does that look like? How do you scale my, how do I scale a business when it's a service-based business? And so that's, you know, that's one thing that I think comes up a lot and, and the way to start is by working with subcontractors- Mm

uh, and start optimizing your workflow, so using automations, using Zapier, using AI, so that you can be one person doing a thing, but you're working with subcontractors bringing in work, and then you're just running the system. Um, there's a great book called Built to Sell. Mm. I actually have it on my bookshelf.

Uh, and it talks about scalability from an agency perspective. Uh, it, and it talks about building a repeatable process and a system. And so we've [00:44:00] been talking a lot about scaling, but that's the next piece for freelancers is, how do I build a business that's not just me? When I, when I want to go to the beach, I have to stop making money.

Like, how do I, how do I fill that gap?

Yurii Lazaruk: Feel like there is one more book to add to my to-do, to-read list. There you go. And, um, just one follow-up question about subcontractors. Mm-hmm. How do you think, when freelancers are working with subcontractors, should they tell about it to companies or not?

Maari Casey: Um, that's a good question.

I, usually I will. Um, well, obviously I will, but when I was freelancing, um, I will, usually the way I would position it is if a project came in and it was outside of what I could do or if I'm experiencing, I'm working with subs and I want to, I was like, "Hey, this is a great project. Like, I absolutely can do this.

You know, I also have a larger team that I work with, so I will be managing the project and running it and jumping in on the creative. But, you know, I might have a few people working, you know, working on the project as well. I will still be your main point of contact, but just so you know." Um, and usually, usually a lot of times you'll know that before, you know, and sometimes when I, when I, when you're meeting a [00:45:00] client for the first time, you can also kind of pitch that into the process and say, "Hey, I love this.

This is what I do. I do design, but I also work with a, a larger team. So if projects are bigger than just design, I need to bring in copywriters, and I have a bunch of folks I work with, and you'll have access to that." So make it a benefit for them- Yeah ... that they now have a larger resource.

Yurii Lazaruk: Specifically if they don't have to pay more, so, like, who cares, you know?

Right, yeah. They ha- they have the same things. They have the best results, more experience, and, like, for the same pay. Like, it's only the benefits. And, you know- Make

Maari Casey: it a no-brainer. E-

Yurii Lazaruk: exactly. You know, Mary, I just loved our conversation because first of all, I just can see the energy that you are putting into making it work, into making- Mm-hmm

businesses work with the best independent talent and to grow the market. And, uh, you know, just how your story that you shared with me just screams, "Yes,

that's what I want to do. That's what I love doing. That's what I am happy to continue doing," and that's, I just see the bright future in, in, in, in, in the future.

And you are really Bringing some extra motivation, uh, for people like me, for freelancers out there, for companies to make it work. Because, you [00:46:00] know, sometimes- Mm-hmm ... you just need to do some extra steps. Sometimes you just need to listen to experts like you are. Sometimes you need to get some extra motivation to make it finally work in the right way, and you've done just that.

So thank you so much for this conversation.

Maari Casey: Yeah. It's been... You have great energy too, so we're feeding off each other, each other's energy.

Yurii Lazaruk: Thank you very much. And, um, yeah, see you in the independent talent market. And for listeners, thank you for joining us on this episode of The Independent Workforce. I hope you've taken one step closer to working smarter with freelance talents.

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