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I found my voice, now I find others

A visit to an outsourcing site led to the start of a vocal talent agency. You, too, could benefit from online marketplaces

Catherine Wheatley Published: 27 May 2012



Sharon Brogden used a freelance website to find voiceover work (Gabriel Szabo)

Sharon Brogden was jobless and sliding into depression when a chance remark led her to put her vocal cords to work. "Someone told me I had a lovely voice," said Brogden, who was sacked from her telesales job when she became pregnant and missed out on

compensation when her former employer went bust.

She borrowed £150 to pay for a one-day broadcasting course, a microphone and audio software. She made a voiceover demo and loaded it onto Freelancer.com, one of several online marketplaces that link small businesses with remote workers and self-employed professionals.

"I spotted a niche supplying genuine British accents to foreign travel companies that wanted to

produce audio tours,” said Brogden, 46. “Freelancer.com played a big part in getting me started because it connected me with potential customers 5,000 miles away.”

When a client asked her to find a male voice, Brogden decided to start her own agency, the Great British Voice Company. Three years on, she has 41 artists on her books and expects sales to double to about £360,000 this year.

From her office in Liversedge, West Yorkshire, she works with companies in 22 countries, recording corporate presentations, radio ads, audio books and even telephone prompts. Her clients include ITV, Morrisons and the Marriott and Westin hotel chains.

Though the company is thriving, Brogden hasn't turned her back on online marketplaces. “I still find some work through them, but now I visit them to look for freelancers for my own business too,” she said.

A growing number of entrepreneurs are using outsourcing websites to search the global marketplace for freelance services and job opportunities. “The volume of projects posted on these sites, and the number of professionals using them to find work, has expanded hugely over the past three or four years,” said Bharat Vagadia of the National Outsourcing Association.

In the past 12 months the number of British enterprises putting jobs out to tender on [Freelancer.com](http://www.freelancer.com), the world's most-visited outsourcing site according to Alexa, the web information firm, has risen more than 300% to 150,000.

Last month alone almost 145,000 jobs were advertised globally on [oDesk.com](http://www.oDesk.com), the second most popular site, up from 79,000 the previous April. [Elance.com](http://www.Elance.com) and [Peopleperhour.com](http://www.Peopleperhour.com) have reported similar rises as small firms strive to cut costs.

For start-ups on a tight budget, remote workers can provide inexpensive, specialist help on tasks such as data inputting, copywriting and software programming. Companies simply post their requirements and pick a preferred bidder, based on career profiles, customer reviews and cost.

“Small businesses are underresourced and get distracted by side tasks. Outsourcing fuels growth by freeing them to concentrate on what they do best,” said Matt Barrie of Freelancer.com.

The remote workers in India, Pakistan and the Philippines who have dominated these sites are being joined by entrepreneurs such as Brogden, and self-employed professionals such as Hyan Thiboutot, a screenwriter, who use outsourcing sites as business platforms.

Thiboutot, 39, left his job with a film studio in Canada and moved to Edinburgh 15 years ago. Gradually he lost his contacts, so he turned to Freelancer.com and Guru.com, another outsourcing site, to find work. “Britain doesn't have a studio system like North America, but I have found plenty of directors around the world looking for professional writers through these sites,” he said.

Moonlighting employees and retired professionals who want to offer their services should be aware of the tax implications, said Bill Dodwell of Deloitte, the accountant. “Anything sold through these websites is taxable and the onus is on the contractor to report it for tax purposes,” he said.

Also bear in mind that freelancers from developing countries can tender very competitive bids because their living costs are low. On Elance.com, for example, the average bid to design a basic website is \$250 (£160) while copywriting costs about \$20 an hour. Another attraction is that freelancers in faraway time zones can complete jobs for western companies overnight.

Barrie reckons that when British firms outsource jobs overseas they pay between a fifth and a tenth of what a domestic company would charge. “Labour arbitrage is an immense macro trend and we are helping to internationalise the market,” he said. “Outsourcing abroad fuels growth that is worth so

much more than the small sums going offshore. It's creating jobs, not taking them."

There are risks in hiring strangers from overseas, though. "It's not something to enter into lightly because you are relying on someone with whom you have no relationship," said Vagadia, whose own business advisory firm, Op2i, recently used a freelancer to design 200 software icons for \$200.

Most of the sites have review sections or feedback systems that help users weed out timewasters. Some companies interview potential recruits via Skype.

"Once or twice things haven't worked out because people have bid on projects they can't do or they have prioritised other work," Vagadia said. "You need to outsource a process you understand and can explain clearly."

Commissioning non-native speakers can also cause problems, said Gus Desbarats of British Design Innovation, a trade organisation for industrial designers. "Contracting out the design elements that involve culture or context to overseas workers is risky," he said. "We have an abundance of that sort of talent in Britain. Firms that buy design or other creative input on price alone will generally get what they pay for."