Will Search for

by Linda Formichelli

Every day, the ranks of independent professionals are gaining in number, and so are the businesses that want to buy their skills. The problem: getting IPs and clients together. A solution: project boards — Web sites where IPs can post their qualifications and troll for gigs.

Sounds smart, yes? But are project boards, which promise IPs an easy way to find gigs, all they're made out to be? To answer that question, I signed up at a number of Web sites and spoke with several board-surfing IPs and representatives of the online project emporiums. Here's what I learned.

What's Your Type?

First, a little background. Online gig boards differ along three dimensions: target IPs, methods, and fees.

Some project boards target certain professions. At Experts.com, for example, the work is related to the law; and MarketIt Right.com helps marketing professionals find projects. I even found a board for freelance water-and-sanitation experts (the Water Experts Network, water-experts-network.org). Many industry trade groups also post work offerings on their Web pages. Other sites, like Guru.com and Sologig.com, list projects for everyone from financial planners to real-estate agents.

Although all of the boards are determined to get you work, they go about it in different ways. Some of the sites run auctions. Not eBay-like auctions, mind you: No one's bidding on Pokemon cards or Atari cartridges. Think service auctions. Clients bid on your fine services, or you bid on their fine projects. Two of the better-known auction sites are Bullhorn and Monster Talent Market. Certain sites do the matchmaking for you: When you register at eWork Exchange, for example, the site automatically brings up project possibilities.

Then there's the issue of dough, bread, bacon, clams... a veritable grocery list of fees. Many of the sites —

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■looking for new work? you may want to look online

FreeAgent.com and Guru.com for instance — are free. Some of these services, such as eWork Exchange, do charge for goodies like a prettier résumé or an additional profile. Others charge IPs, but they don't normally charge much. For example, Freelance Online charges $15 a year, and Bullhorn assesses (that's a fancy way of saying *grabs*) a 5 percent commission.

Reasons to Hit the Boards

Project boards do have their strong points. First, they're user-friendly. Most take about 15 minutes to join. You just fill in a registration form, and then you get to post a profile. Thankfully, many of the sites hold the registration form to one page, so you don't have to keep clicking to get to the next section and then wait five minutes — which can feel like forever in Internet time — for each page to download.

Second, the price can be right. As I said, many of the sites have that all-important quality for cash-flow-conscious IPs: They're free. Free sites make their money by charging the businesses that are looking for help or by selling advertising on their pages. And those that aren't free are usually cheap.

Finally, project boards never sleep. To make a living as an IP, you have to market yourself 24/7. It's very time consuming sending off sales letters and making those dreaded cold calls. No more. Project boards can be working away for you while you're otherwise involved — doing work or even catching up on some much-needed Zs.

for free

Reasons to Hit the Boards — Not

Sure, these sites have their pros, but they're so outnumbered by their cons that it's just not a fair fight.

Let's start with bugs . . . and more bugs. Take my experience a few months back, when I signed on with Monster Talent Market. Every time I tried to post my multipage profile, I got an error message. And when I tried to get back to a working page, the site gave me hell (that bug may have since been fixed). Another site, IntellectExchange, kept prompting me to register when I tried to log on using my user name and password — even though I had already signed up.

On some sites you can wander around freely, but that doesn't help you find what you want. The information may be there, but good luck trying to find it. Only after I signed up at MarketIt Right.com, for example, did I learn that the board charges IPs whenever their proposals are accessed by potential clients. And nowhere on the site — and I looked in all the obvious places, including the site map and the FAQs — could I find out how much the board charges. I ended up sending an email to the support desk for the information. So maybe the lesson here is that the first project on lots of boards is uncovering the terms of using them.

Another drawback: Project boards make it easy for lousy leads — prospects who suck your time and knowledge and give you nothing in return — to request your contact information, samples, fee list, and references. "I got lots of tire-kickers, especially prior to posting my hourly rate at Guru.com," says IP writer Diana Burrell, of Boston, who has used Guru.com and Content Exchange. "My feeling is that content buyers go through those places, gather a lot of names, send out a mass email, and collect the information they need for whatever reason, and then forget about you."

Jane Dvorak, a PR master based in Lakewood, Colorado, received only four inquiries in the year her profile was posted on a project board, and none of the prospects ended up hiring her. Either they were Lookie Lous, just exploring their options, or they misunderstood what a PR person does.

According to the *1099* Index, an annual survey of independent professionals, fewer than 2 percent of IPs actually find work online. Bill LaRocque, a topical cartoonist in Washington, D.C., knows the truth of that fact. He hasn't won a single gig in the year he's had his profile listed on Content Exchange. And in six months, IP writer Phil Britt of South Holland, Illinois, found just one project on Bullhorn that interested him enough to place a bid.

That's not to say that there are no sweet gigs to be found on the project boards. Burrell got lots of nibbles and one excellent assignment from Content Exchange, and many others have too, myself included. And IP Web programmer Peter Freeborn, of Houston, was contracted by a large commercial-insurance broker that saw his profile on Monster Talent Market.

Quantity is one issue; quality is another. Some of the projects that are posted on the sites are just no good. For example, MarketIt Right.com listed several projects under the heading "E-mail Campaign." What does

that mean? And one fine project that came up under Sologig.com's Marketing category trumpeted that you can "WORK YOUR OWN HOURS YOU GIVE YOURSELF A RAISE WHEN YOU DECIDE YOU'VE EARNED ONE! WE CARRY PRODUCT 'ONE OF ITS KIND' NOW YOU CAN MAKE MONEY AND HAVE FUN!" Er…yeah.

Crowd control is a real problem. Because no one screens out unqualified IPs, "many of the people who post their services are nonprofessionals," says IP Web designer Mark Lassoff, of Austin, Texas, who has made 189 bids and won 4 on FreeAgent.com, Monster Talent Market, and eLance. "My guess would be that up to 85 percent of the listings are 'amateur night,' which leaves the rest of us full-time Web designers trying to stand out among the hundreds of listings of people who are working on an old hand-me-down computer in their basement."

In the November 1999 issue of *Fast Company* magazine, Zerita Rodriguez, an IP graphic designer and owner of Black Lava Graphics, said that 10 percent of her income came from projects she bid on at eLance. No longer. In fact, the Aurora, Colorado – based Rodriguez has stopped using project boards altogether. She says, "I'm a highly skilled graphic design professional, and I felt that the reputation of my work was being compromised by bidding in an arena that included many amateurs. Many overseas contractors have listed their services at embarrassingly low rates with samples of very poor work."

Another thing about the IP wannabes: They price their goods like Wal-Mart. One writer on eLance worked on eight projects and earned a total of $470. That's an average of about $60 a project, not enough to pay the rent. "When I bid on work, my bid is often substantially higher than the bids of those who are less

or for fee >>>>>>>>

Bullhorn (bullhorn.com)
Target IPs: Creative talent.
How it works: You post your portfolio and ask for exactly the kind of project you want: the kind of work, the rate, the deadline. Bullhorn notifies you whenever a project that meets your criteria is posted to the site. Then you can review the project, make a bid, and submit samples.
Cost: No charge for posting a portfolio, but Bullhorn charges IPs a 5 percent transaction fee on all projects won through the site.
User-friendliness: Registration takes about 10 minutes. You must have at least three sample files in your portfolio to place a bid. It took me a while, but I eventually got the hang of uploading files. Once that was done, bidding was quick and painless.
Quantity: Not enough to cut down on infighting. On one recent visit, I found no voiceover projects and just three copywriting, two logo-design, and three graphic-design projects. An assignment for a legal article had 48 bids from IPs; and a project to create "sexually transmitted disease animation for $1,000 to $2,500" had 66 bids.
Quality: The projects all appear to be legit, and the prices seem fair in most cases. But the bidding process may encourage employers to cut rates. The legal-article client expected to pay $250 to $500 for a 1,000- to 2,000-word article, not exactly market rate.

Content Exchange (content-exchange.com)
Target IPs: Writers and editors.
How it works: You can create a free profile in the Talent Database, search the database, or place an ad.
Cost: Profiles and searches are free; ads run from $14.95 for one week to $299 for one year.
User-friendliness: Registration took about 30 minutes, including one easy-to-make change in my profile.
Quantity: Until recently, the project-posting classifieds were sparse. The company hopes that a new partnership with mediabistro.com will increase the work postings.
Quality: Most of mediabistro.com's offerings are for full-time jobs, but there are some good projects for IPs with companies like CNBC.com and *Sales & Marketing Management* magazine. You also can use the board to see who's hiring wage slaves and offer them your IP services.

eLance (elance.com)
Target IPs: Accountants, administrative assistants, graphic designers, lawyers, techies, writers, and more.
How it works: You can post a portfolio or search for and bid on projects. The open auction lets you see all of the bidding activity.
Cost: No charge for posting your portfolio or for searching. If you win a bid, a transaction fee of 10 percent of the project amount is debited from your account.
User-friendliness: To post a profile, you have to fill out several different pages, but the whole process took only about 20 minutes. A neat feature is eLance's verification of your credentials through USSEARCH.com. There is a charge for additional verifications.
Quantity: Too many IPs — too few projects … at least in some categories. A lone event-planning gig had 30 bids. I found four projects under Database Design and Development, including one that got reposted because of "poor results." Photography listed five gigs with several bids.
Quality: The companies are serious, and the projects are real and detailed. For example, a Scottish information-technology start-up wanted a logo that would get across the local nature of the business … but "no tartan, please"; an IT-consulting firm was looking for basic bookkeeping services; and a man in New Orleans wanted a photographer to build a modeling portfolio for his son.

eWork Exchange (ework.com)
Target IPs: Office and business service providers, software developers, editors and writers, Web-site developers and designers, and more.
How it works: You post your profile, and eWork Exchange matches your skills to its projects.
Cost: The first profile is free; there's a charge of $25 for each additional profile. An extra $10 gets you a larger, more colorful profile.
User-friendliness: The registration form runs several pages but takes only about 15 minutes to fill out. I'd gotten used to keyword searches on other IP project boards, so I found eWork Exchange's matching process confusing at first.
Quantity: After I finished my profile, eWork Exchange brought up 14 projects, but only 2 were reasonably close matches. When I filled out another profile, pretending to be a database developer with five years' experience, I got 16 matches — but again only 2 of them were close.
Quality: The projects looked legitimate, but some write-ups were sketchy and

didn't include rates. For example, this description came up for a database-development project: "A bookstore on-line, not for sales up to know, search capabilities by categories, title, author, or description all these with an admin interface for updates, and categories changes as well details." I don't understand what it means either.

IntellectExchange (intellectexchange.com)
Target IPs: Everybody from statisticians to writers to marketing consultants. There are 48 categories to register in, plus "other."
How it works: You'll be notified by email whenever a project in your field is posted, or you can browse the database for projects and to submit bids. Clients have a choice of specifying how much they are willing to pay, or asking the selected experts to submit bids for their consideration. The Web site helps the user in all aspects of hiring.
Cost: IntellectExchange receives a commission based on the size of the transaction.
User friendliness: The whole process took about 15 minutes. I did get a little lost looking for the project search. Actually, I spent half an hour wandering around the site. Every time I clicked on "Expert login," it prompted me to create a profile, which I already had done. The site map had no pointer to the projects page. The help desk told me to log in as an expert, which is what I had been trying to do.
Quantity: I couldn't log in or find the damn project-search page.
Quality: Again, I never had the chance to find out.

MarketIt Right.com (marketitright.com)
Target IPs: Marketing service providers.
How it works: MarketIt Right.com creates marketing plans that help small businesses know what to do and when to do it, and matches businesses with vendors to get it done.
Cost: $25 to $50 every time a client looks at an IP's qualifications and agrees to contact the IP.
User-friendliness: Several pages, but it took me just 10 minutes to go through them. And as soon as I finished, the site brought up several projects that fit my qualifications. If you're interested, you just click on a project, and your qualifications are on the way.
Quantity: When I signed up, there were 54 companies looking for advertorials, newsletters, and other things I could do. Within two days, I got an email saying

there were 55 projects that matched my criteria.
Quality: The assignments seemed good, with respectable pay rates for the clients that listed them (many had no pay rate listed); one company listed a rate of $10,000 for an ad banner — excessive even for the best ad designer — making it hard to determine whether the stated rate represented the company's entire marketing budget or the rate for the project at hand. And some project descriptions were sketchy — things like "E-mail Campaign."

Sologig.com (sologig.com)
Target IPs: All kinds of IPs, from architects to transportation specialists.
How it works: You can post a profile or search the site for projects.
Cost: Searching is free. Posting a profile is $25 a month for a basic membership and $100 a month for a deluxe membership, which also gets you business cards and digital-subscriber-line Internet access.
User-friendliness: The registration form runs several pages, but it's easy to fill out. Searching can be hit or miss: One day my search for event-marketing gigs brought up several related projects; the same search later on brought up three writing assignments, none of which had turned up in an earlier search for writing projects.
Quantity: There were 10 training gigs, only 1 of which was off-site. Of the 11 writing gigs, again, only 1 was off-site. In both cases, the single off-site offering was for selling skin-care products from your home, which has nothing to do with either training or writing.
Quality: When I first checked, the site seemed to attract tightwads and multilevel marketers. A search on "writer" brought up just a few gigs, including a newsletter project with an abysmal pay rate of $100 and one for a "top 100 news portal" for a laughable $50. "Event marketing" brought up what looked like two MLM schemes. A search for training gigs brought up a project description that bellowed: "WE ARE LOOKING FOR FOLKS WHO ARE WANTING MORE OUT OF LIFE. . . . NO SPECIAL SKILL IS NEEDED. WE PROVIDE YOU WITH EVERYTHING. YOU PAY NOTHING."
To be fair, when I went back a few weeks later, the situation had improved. This time, "event marketing" brought up 2 serious full-time jobs, 1 consulting project, and just 1 MLM posting. There also were now 16 writing listings — some full-time jobs and some IP projects. The projects included everything from technical writing to creating "model" term papers for undergrads. "Training" brought up 9 real projects (mostly on-site) plus the all-caps posting noted above.

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experienced," says Lassoff. "This drives down the hourly and daily rates."

The clients suffer too. When anyone with two brain cells to rub together can make bids, potential clients can be deluged with IPs. "There are often so many bids on any given project that I've seen a number of prospective clients give up the review process and close their auctions without even choosing a freelancer," says Rodriguez.

Take a Flying Leap
Bottom line? Project boards have potential that's not being realized, at least not yet. The owners of the sites need to wake up and smell the stink of IP dissatisfaction. They should work less on getting freelancers to sign up and more on attracting legitimate clients. After all, the success of a board lies not in how many IPs it registers but in how many IPs land gigs through its service.

Despite all the hassles, should you spend precious minutes registering on a job board? Yes, says Burrell: "If you get that one account, so what if you get a lot of annoying inquiries? That one job cancels out the debate." **1099**

Want even more project-board information? You got it. Go to 1099.com/boards for a comprehensive list of online options.