I Am Not *an* Applicant

How to Build a Freelance Presence
on Upwork Without Competing on
Price, Volume, or Desperation

Ramon Stoppelenburg

I Am Not an Applicant

Copyright © 2026 Ramon Stoppelenburg

This book reflects the author's personal experience and professional observations. It is not affiliated with, endorsed by, or sponsored by Upwork Global Inc. All references to Upwork are made for commentary and educational purposes. Nothing in this book constitutes legal, financial, or business advice. Results on any platform depend on individual circumstances, positioning, and execution.

www.hereigoagainonmyown.com

This is not a step-by-step course.

Read it slowly.

Reflect between sections.

Revisit chapters when behaviour slips.

Introduction

The Begging Economy

Upwork looks like opportunity.

It presents itself as open access to a global market. No gatekeepers. No geography. No résumé required beyond what you choose to write. In theory, competence should be enough. If you can deliver value, there is work waiting.

That promise is not entirely false. But it is incomplete.

I know what the platform promises because I came to it having already built things. Letmestayforaday.com, a travel project I launched in the early days of the internet, eventually became part of the Dutch National Library's UNESCO-recognised digital heritage collection. I later founded and ran independent cinemas in Cambodia. I understood audiences, credibility, and how to create leverage from scratch. I was not arriving as a beginner.

And yet when I entered Upwork, I felt something I did not expect: compression.

For many freelancers, the experience follows a recognisable arc. They join with optimism, create a profile, send out a few proposals, and wait. The first silence is easy to rationalise. The second is slightly irritating. By the tenth, something shifts. They refresh their dashboard more often. They start adjusting their rates. They widen the types of jobs they apply to. They tell themselves that momentum is around the corner.

Soon, the platform that looked like leverage begins to feel like judgement.

There is a peculiar psychological effect to entering a marketplace where you are one profile among thousands. Your prior achievements become condensed into a thumbnail. Your experience sits next to people charging a fraction of your rate. The environment subtly encourages comparison downward — not because anyone tells you to, but because the architecture of the platform makes equivalence feel inevitable.

At one point, after sending proposals that received little response, I considered lowering my rate "just to gain traction." The phrase sounded practical. It sounded strategic. It was neither. It was insecurity dressed as pragmatism. I caught it before I acted on it, but only because something about the reasoning felt off. It took longer than I would like to admit to understand exactly why.

That moment mattered because it forced a question: what game am I actually playing here?

Most advice about Upwork focuses on effort. Send more proposals. Optimise your keywords. Compete aggressively. Accept smaller projects to collect reviews. Write a better opening line. Personalise each message. Post at the right time of day.

These suggestions are not malicious. Some are even occasionally useful. But they share a common flaw: they focus on activity without addressing positioning. The internet is full of this material — Reddit threads comparing response rates, YouTube tutorials on perfect opening lines, coaching programmes promising to unlock the algorithm. The volume reflects something real. The frustration is widespread. What is striking is how rarely the answers point inward.

The standard playbook treats Upwork as a volume game. Send enough proposals and the law of large numbers eventually delivers a client. There is logic in this. It is the logic of someone playing defence.

This book is not about tricks. It is not about hacks, scripts, or simulating a confidence you do not yet feel. It is about understanding how professional positioning functions in a marketplace built on perception — and then rebuilding yours deliberately.

Once you understand the actual game, the tricks become unnecessary.

Upwork is not merely a job board. It is a perception marketplace.

A job board functions as a directory. You list your skills, clients list their needs, matches emerge. Competence is the primary variable. A perception marketplace operates differently. Clients are not conducting thorough evaluations. They are scanning, filtering, making rapid judgements about risk — often within seconds, based on signals that have nothing to do with your actual ability.

The question clients are implicitly asking is not: is this person skilled? It is: does this person reduce my uncertainty? Those are different questions, and they demand different answers.

Uncertainty is reduced by signals. Specificity is a signal. Pricing is a signal. The way you write is a signal. Even what you decline to say is a signal. The freelancers who understand this — who manage their signals deliberately — operate on a different plane from those still competing on price and volume.

Most freelancers are invisible not because they lack skill, but because they misunderstand this dynamic. They present themselves as flexible generalists. They compete on price. They use interchangeable language. In doing so, they blend into the very noise they resent.

When silence follows, the instinct is to compensate. Increase volume. Lower standards. Broaden scope. That response feels active. It feels responsible. It is often the beginning of what I call the begging trap.

The begging trap is not dramatic. It does not announce itself. It develops gradually, through a series of small concessions that each feel rational in the moment.

You begin to think of yourself as an applicant waiting to be selected rather than as a professional evaluating opportunities. You accept terms you would not normally accept. You adjust your positioning downward to match perceived demand. You describe yourself in whatever language you think the client wants to read. You become more available and less defined.

The irony is that this behaviour reinforces the very signals that reduce your perceived value.

Desperation leaks into language even when you are trying to conceal it. It shows up in excessive gratitude for small inquiries. It shows up in pre-emptive justifications for your rate before anyone has questioned it. It shows up in an eagerness to accommodate that reads less like flexibility and more like anxiety. Clients do not always identify what they are sensing, but they feel it. And what they feel shapes whether they trust you with real work.

The begging trap is also self-reinforcing in a structural sense. When you lower your rate to attract entry-level clients, you attract entry-level clients. Those clients generate reviews, patterns, and positioning data that anchor you further in the entry-level tier. Climbing out later is not impossible, but it requires effort that could have been avoided with better initial decisions.

This is not an argument against starting where you are. It is an argument for starting deliberately.

I did not write this handbook because I believe Upwork is perfect. Nor did I write it to defend the platform against criticism. I wrote it because I built a sustainable freelance income there without following the standard playbook. I did not flood the system with proposals. I did not compete on price. I did not pretend to be something I was not. The turning point was structural, not motivational.

The article I later wrote about Upwork unexpectedly became the most-read piece on the subject outside of Upwork's own domain. The response was revealing. Many freelancers felt relieved to hear that the platform was not inherently broken — that their difficulties were not proof of their inadequacy, but symptoms of misaligned strategy. Others were defensive. A few were hostile.

What struck me most was the pattern in the reactions. Frustration was common. Reflection was rare.

The comments divided roughly into two groups. The first examined what they had heard and began asking questions about their own approach. Their follow-up messages were different in tone — more specific, more curious, less oriented toward blame. Several later reported meaningful shifts in how they were operating.

The second group rejected the framing entirely. The platform was rigged. Clients were cheap. The algorithm favoured established profiles. Competing with lower-cost regions was impossible. There was always an external variable sufficient to explain the problem.

I am not dismissing those concerns. They are real. The platform does have structural biases. Rate differentials between regions are genuine and significant.

But those conditions are constant. They affect everyone equally. The difference between freelancers who build something sustainable and those who remain stuck is not that one group faces easier circumstances. It is that one group responds with structure, and the other responds with escalation.

This handbook exists to address that gap.

What follows is not a self-improvement manual. There are no affirmations here, no encouragement to believe in yourself more aggressively. Mindset language has its place, but it tends to locate the problem inside the individual and offer internal solutions. That is insufficient. The problem is often structural — in how you have positioned yourself, how you price, how you write, and what kind of work you pursue. Structure requires structural solutions.

This book examines why capable professionals become invisible. It dissects the mechanics of the begging trap and how to exit it. It reframes proposals not as persuasion exercises but as strategic filters. It treats pricing not as a number but as a signal. And it shows how to build leverage so that the platform becomes a launchpad rather than a dependency.

The progression is intentional. Visibility comes before proposals, because a strong proposal built on vague positioning accomplishes little. Pricing comes after proposals, because what you charge must reinforce the identity you have built. Leverage comes last, because it is the product of everything that precedes it.

If you are looking for scripts, you will not find them here. If you are hoping for reassurance that the platform is unfair and that your lack of traction is purely external, this book will likely irritate you. But if you are willing to examine how you position yourself — and how that positioning shapes perception — then what follows may change how you operate.

The difference between invisibility and deliberate visibility is rarely talent. It is structure.

And structure can be rebuilt.

One more thing before we begin.

This handbook is written from a specific experience: a bilingual professional operating in Dutch and English, with a background in writing, editorial work, and cross-cultural communication. The platform dynamics I describe are universal, but the examples are mine. Your field is different. Your rate, your client base, your competitive landscape — all different.

What is not different is the underlying logic. Positioning, perception, leverage, and posture operate the same way whether you are a translator, a developer, a graphic designer, or a video editor. The mechanics are the same. Only the surface details change.

The freelancers who get the most from this book are not the ones who recognise themselves in every example. They are the ones who stop and ask why a particular passage feels uncomfortable.

Discomfort, in this context, is usually a signal worth examining.

Before moving to Part I, do three things.

Pull up your current Upwork profile. Read it as a stranger would — someone scanning it for the first time alongside a dozen others. Ask yourself: does this signal a specific expertise, or a general availability? Would you remember it ten minutes later?

Think about the last three proposals you sent. Not the content — the posture. Were they written from clarity about why you were the right fit, or from anxiety about needing the work? You will know the difference when you reflect on it.

Write down your current rate and ask yourself one question: does this number reflect what I believe my work is worth, or does it reflect what I was afraid to charge above?

No action required yet. Just the questions.

This book is independent commentary. It is not affiliated with Upwork. It is written from direct experience operating within the platform as a freelancer.