

I Am Not *an Applicant*

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

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I Am Not an Applicant

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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 with enough experience to recognise the gap between promise and reality. I had spent years building things from scratch — projects that found audiences, earned credibility, and taught me how leverage actually works. I was not arriving as a beginner.

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

The Arc of Disappointment

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?

What the Standard Playbook Gets Wrong

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.

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