

Survival Guide to Freelancing and generally being an ok technician



Belinda Saville and crew

A couple of years ago Belinda Saville, a Project Manager and Technical Events Coordinator from Durban, put together a lighthearted yet useful Survival Guide for freelancers (see below). Belinda is known for her generous heart and she is often involved in helping people within the industry especially when they are faced with a crisis. Enjoy the read.

Survival Guide to Freelancing and generally being an ok technician (this has nothing to do with your talent!)

The reason I've put together this list of helpful hints because I've realized, although this is mostly common sense with some sarcastic antidotes, that common sense is like a superpower and not everyone has it!

So here goes..

As a freelancer or a technician – **you are the business**, so how you dress and act is your calling card. You get one chance. It does not matter how good you are, if your attitude sucks, if you look like you slept in your clothes, smell like the party you left two hours ago, have the remnants of last night's dinner crusted on your face or clothes, no one's going to want to employ you. And for goodness sake, be polite and act like you actually like your job.

So, let's start with you.

Respect yourself ... and this means...

Always be neat clean and presentable.

Wear black on show day.

Try and avoid band/ company/slogan's on shirts (no heavy metal on a Gospel gig – and yes, this has happened!)

Presentable Cargo pants/shorts.

Black steel-toed work boots- you don't want to lose those piggly wiggles.

A good pair of gloves.

And simple things like:

No drinking on-site / work

No taking drugs / work

(You would think people would know but it seems I have to write this down. Superpowers people, superpowers)

Invest in yourself ...

Good hardhat

Safety boots

Bag

Laptop

Tools (we'll go there later)

Training – if you can't afford to go on courses, then read. Look up stuff on the inter web, it's all there and some products come with free tutorials – do them. Expand your knowledge.

Respect the people you work with

Always be on time.

Never bad-mouth other companies or other jobs you have worked on.

When you arrive for a job – get stuck in, don't spend the first hour having cigarettes and drinking coffee ... (she says whilst sipping coffee and smoking a cigarette).

Put your cell phone on silent and only take urgent calls.

There is nothing worse than paying a freelancer who spends half their time on the phone, taking pics and posting them on Facebook about “their” projects – this goes back to respecting the people you work with.

Social Media

Never post anything on social media without the express permission of the person or company that you are working for.

If you are allowed to, always give the company that you are working with credit. It’s easy to want to “overstate” i.e. standing like a boss in front of the FOH console / LX console and tagging “me – another day at the office” – allowing people to assume that you are that person, while meanwhile, you’re an usher/ caterer/stage hand. It annoys people and makes you look like a complete idiot.

Selfies at work with bands/ celebrities / your favourite DJ..... **JUST DON’T.** And if you don’t know why, don’t read any further. Further to that, taking videos of celebrities backstage is a complete and utter NO! You might find yourself banished from this industry for a few gigs, at worst, find yourself in jail. This is our JOB, we are not just visiting and being social.

Food / Catering

Not every show has catering, and if you are working less than an 8-hour shift, it’s a normal day – so come prepared and bring lunch and juice. No other industry buys you lunch for showing up and then listens to you complain about how crap it is.

If you are on a client’s gala banquet – do NOT help yourself to the food, this is for the clients’ guests. You are paid to work, not attend the event. If the client offers your crew boss food for all the crew or they provide catering, this is something completely different.

(And never eat the fish ever!) There are so many stories on this I could write a book called FISH – The crew catering guide on how to get gippo guts on a very important conference!

And never, and I mean never, even if offered by the client, drink on the job. You will not be able to function, beside the fact that it is completely illegal to operate equipment whilst inebriated.

Bookings / Rates:

Make sure that you quote a company first in writing, once they sign off the quote, invoice them promptly.

Make sure that you are both aware of what your rates are for load-in days, show days and travel days (if they are different). Assumption is the worst, and you could get a call, agree to work, assume that your rates are known, only to find out afterwards that they have paid half your rate, as that is what they pay, and assumed that you knew. This has happened too many times to mention.

Don’t be afraid to talk about money – you are your business. You run your business, not anyone else. Don’t be afraid to negotiate – we all do. I’d rather have more work for slightly less pay, or work on a project I really want

to, because I've negotiated my rates.

There are plenty of Quote and Invoice templates online for you to work with. And just a tip, don't forget to number your quotes and invoices – this helps when you have to look them up (says someone who used to 'number' their invoices by date).

Always ask the company upfront what their payment terms are so that you can plan financially, and also decide whether the conditions are favourable or not. There is nothing worse than working on a job and assuming that you will be paid immediately only to find out that the company pays at the end of the month or when the clients pays (which could be never), or weekly (weakly ? get it ... bad joke).

If you don't know what the going rates are, ask a few people. Your peers – some will inflate rates – others will downplay them. So, ask a few people from different companies and freelancers and you will soon get a feel. Bear in mind that most people pay on skill level, so the better you are at your craft, the more money you earn.

Make sure you know how many hours you are working and what contingent there is for "overtime" – I know this is a dirty word in the industry and hours worked is a touchy subject but sometimes if you work longer hours, you might not be able to get transport home and this should be addressed prior as to what course of action is available. Will transport be provided home, if not, do they provide money for a taxi etc.

Always ask what the dress code is.

If you don't know ... ask

If you are unsure of something, always ask. Make sure that you ask the right person! Ensure that you know the right line of reporting on a job. You will either have a senior tech, crew boss or project manager. Never keep quiet about something that you are unsure of as it will come back and bite you in the ass. If someone asks you to do something and you can't, or it isn't working – tell them. If a cable/piece of equipment is not working – tell someone. Reporting is crucial. If there is no one there, put a piece of white gaff tape on it and write what is wrong with it, with the date and the name of the production. This ensures that when it gets back to the warehouse, it can go in for repairs (or not, but you have done your job.)

A word of caution here ... your job is not to interact with the client, so always make sure you have the ear of a senior person in the company that you are employed to work for. It's the job of the project manager/client liaison to speak to the client and offer solutions. If the client comes to you and asks you specifically to do something – either direct them to your project manager or crew boss. You cannot make decisions on behalf of the company. And again, never bad mouth the company you are working for to anyone ... even if everyone else is chirping... shut up! Biting the hand that feeds you ends in disastrous always. If you don't like them – just don't work for them again.

On that note

Always, always do the job that you have been paid to do before you do favours for other people on site. If you have plenty of time afterwards and spare equipment, then sure ... give the hot coffee chick an extension, or the hunky caterer some light. Never do this before you have finished the job that you have been paid to do. They are not technicians so will not be able to help you finish your job, and you will get the brunt of it, not them, if you don't have enough LED cans, extensions, multi strips, plug points because you allowed someone to 'loan' the last multiplug that is needed on stage because they have to charge their phone – you're going to be in trouble!

And a side note ...

Never mess with a clients' logo. Don't animate it, stretch it. This is their intellectual property and every company has its own corporate look and feel. So, don't change the colours because you don't like it or try and make it cool with dancing bears in the back. Just don't. If they ask you to, different story. But mess with their logo and it's the quickest way to lose a job.

The Plan ("What?" I hear you asking. "There's a plan?")

Always stick to the plan. Don't alter it because you think you have a better solution. Remember that there is a whole production at play here. If something is glaringly obvious and wrong, bring it to the attention of your senior tech/crew boss or production manager. They can and will deal with it.

Make sure you have all the documents you need before you get to site:

1. Site plan
2. Tech riders
3. Hospitality riders
4. Load-in and load-out schedules
5. Drawings
6. Contact sheets

If you don't, well ... ask for them. If it's up to your crew boss / senior tech to provide you with information...so ask them. If you need them to do your job ... nag. But make sure you get to site prepared.

Safety first!! Seems simple but is it?

It is your responsibility to know Health and Safety standard, from your PPE to what is safe on-site.

Never drive a forklift / cherry picker unless you have the certification to do so.

Always make sure that you have a harness and hardhat if you are above 2m.

Always make sure you have a hard hat.

Always demarcate hard hat areas and tape off areas that you are working in.

If you see something dangerous and dodgy – report it to your crew boss / senior tech or project manager. Do not take photos and post to dodgy technicians prior to doing so.

If you find yourself in a situation – high winds, lightning, flooding – get yourself to a safe place immediately. Do not stop to collect your stuff or try and save the equipment – it's insured – you can't be replaced. Move – fast and effectively.

And, if you are exhausted and have pulling ridiculous shifts and someone asks you to do something outside your comfort zone that could put you in harm's way, politely refuse. No one has the right to ask you to do something dangerous. FULL STOP.

The Groupies

Well, they are not there for you, actually – quite literally put, you are sloppy seconds – sorry mate!

And mostly – it's a myth ... there are no groupies ... and if you were reading up to this point for affirmation on this, read no further!!

Your Tools (Beside remarkable you of course!)

Please make sure that you have the following (because you are a professional and charge professional rates):

A leatherman – cliché but needed. And don't loan it out. Ever

Maglite

A pair of good side cutters

Gaffa Tape – Black, white and silver

A Hammer

Staple gun (and staples)

Some screwdrivers (not the drink you moron!)

Cable ties

Stanley Knife

Quad

Podger

AJ

e-tape

Sharpie

Safety Cables for all tools if you are working at height!

Harness

And Label them!!

Multimeter – you need to ensure that you have power!

Your own laptop!!! Yes, you use company laptops for presentations and programming, but for goodness sakes, if you are comfortable using your own programmes, this is a fail safe-safety net.

A reliable external hard drive (just think of all the music you can get).

You know what they say ... if you can'tgaff it, staple it, or cable tie it, throw it away!

And lastly – keep your site clean as you go, don't leave your empty McD's and cans lying around site – someone has to pick up after you. The last thing to pack is an extra dose of manners. 'Please' and 'thank you' go a long way. So now you're packed – Let's go work!

About Belinda Saville

Belinda Saville has worked in the events industry since 1996. She started at Gearhouse, worked her way up and ended in as Durban Branch Manager until 2009. She has worked with Prosound, Sound Stylists and Kingston Technical Services, so clearly knows her way around a stage or two.

She has worked on many productions from international events to local shows, she is based in Durban (yes, we don't know why – maybe she likes the sea).

Her craft is her passion and she has been involved in many training programs for crew from early days until now. She gives community lectures at the Bat Centre for aspiring technicians and is always willing to give a hand or collaborate towards a good cause – especially when it involves training and education in the sector. She has a wicked sense of humor and loves the colour blue (except on a show of course). She occasionally hangs out with friends (not that she has many after working in this industry for so many years, while her family don't even recognize her!)