

How to build resilience as a freelancer

The Southern African Freelancers' Association (Safrea) presented a workshop where freelancers in the growing gig economy could learn how to build a special kind of resilience needed for people working on their own.



Alan Ahlfeldt

Alan Ahlfeldt, executive coach and psychologist, shared tips during this interactive workshop on how to build resilience, understand oneself, build competence, accept that life is tough - and breathe.

“The vulnerability we feel as freelancers is huge as we have people who depend on us. This leads to people putting undue pressure on themselves and they are harsher on themselves than others would be,” said Ahlfeldt.

Tackling Covid-19 pressures

Over Covid-19, these pressures were magnified as freelancers had to be agile and adapt to ever-changing work circumstances.

“As freelancers, we have a lot of autonomy but not a lot of certainty. Therefore adaptability is a key strength as the future world of work no longer lay in fixed jobs, but rather in creating utility and adding value. It is about the ability to find opportunities to add value, and to execute it successfully,” said Ahlfeldt.



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Most people fear change but it is important to adapt to changing circumstances rather than be overwhelmed by them. If you can keep the momentum going so that you and your business are still moving in the direction you want to go, even if slowly, then you are probably more resilient than you realise. It is important to maintain routines, predictability and a measure of certainty. We need it for a degree of control in our lives.

Choose your response to stress

Ahlfeldt outlined people's three instincts in response to a crisis or threat, namely – fight, flight or withdraw and protect. Over the pandemic, Ahlfeldt has seen many more people taking the third path of withdrawal, which could lead to loneliness and isolation.

“We all need help. Don't be shy to ask for help when you need it. Identify what helps you to succeed, whether it is a support group or some form of affirmation. Support groups like Safrea help us to succeed. If you want to be rewarded in the world of work, you have to play the game. Taking on too much work, or the wrong kind of work, also contributes to excess stress.” Breathing techniques and visualising good things, also help to fight stress.

Steps to build resilience

Ahlfeldt regards it as crucial to build resilience, especially in today's tough economic environment. He outlined a few basic steps to achieve resilience:

- Understand yourself: Know what you can and cannot manage and plan accordingly. If you understand yourself and others, you can predict behaviour.
- Build your competence: Keep skills current and be prepared to learn forever.
- Know that it will be tough: Change is always uncomfortable but it can be managed.

“And remember, there is no such thing as work-life balance, as there is always a tension between work and life. However, pay attention to these different tensions on a rotational basis – it is a question of give and take during the different phases of our lives. Each phase has its own complexities and demands,” he said.

Influence vs power

Although you may have some degree of influence over a process or event, if you do not have the power to make the desired changes, you may have to walk away as it can cause unnecessary stress. Therefore, identify what you can control, and what you cannot control. Look at what power you have to start, stop or change things. Then you can allocate the responsibility and ditch the stress accordingly.



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“Freelancers in the communication and media sphere are encouraged to join Safrea. It is a membership organisation professionally managed with five regions in South Africa – Gauteng North, Gauteng South, KwaZulu-Natal, Western Cape and the Eastern Cape/Free State,” said Lynne Smit, chairperson of Safrea.

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