

WE WORK TOGETHER.

BY THE UNCULTURED

Part of
Producing Liveness in Interesting Times

the uncultured

Due to our collective name, many people think we're a company, with a full infrastructure and some staff. Or that one of us must earn more than the other because we sometimes take holidays at different times. So, we thought it would be helpful to bare our arses a bit and explain how we work together.

We work together on an equal footing within The Uncultured.

We're freelancers who collaborate under a name as that seems like it gives us a bit more gravitas, when really we are just 2 troublemakers drowning in emails. We work side-by-side with no formal, legal structures – mostly because this would be a whole load more admin. It's just us. We have a lot of trust in each other and what she says, goes.

Our Model: In Brief

- **We both try to do similar hours a week** > Ash's need for childcare means we work part-time, reasonably "fixed" hours so that we can book meetings in for each other and work together
- **We split our earnings 50/50** > all of our work is together and all of the money is split down the middle. We lead on separate projects within our portfolio, generally in response to capacity, interest or skill. We trust that we'll do the work needed to achieve the various projects and know we can call on the other whenever we need them. Even if one of us doesn't even touch a piece of work, that money will still be split between us.
- **Our time is valued equally between us regardless of what we charge** > 1 hour of work, whether it's on unpaid website management, or high-level fundraising, is still 1 hour of work. Because all money is split equally it doesn't matter what work has been done, an hour of work is an hour of work.
- **We track our working hours on a shared time log, not so we can see who has been slacking off that week, but so we can see how much actual work we are doing on projects and how much unpaid work we do every month (approx one third of our working time is unpaid every month btw)** > time logs help us pitch for more accurate time on new projects, helps us see how much of our freelance time is subsidised by our free labour (doing invoices, pitching, unsolicited emails etc) and allows us to tell organisations how much extra work we have done so we're all clearer about how much things cost at a fair wage.

Excerpt from a chat we had about working together:

AB: I think as freelancers we were both used to working sort of all the time and never really having much structure to our days, but I really needed something structured to be able to sort childcare. When we decided that you were going to do those same hours too so our time was equal we suddenly had a working week. It's changed loads for me because it means I really do have days off, and can be strict about not letting work bleed into them.

LS: I work less hours now and in a much more structured way cos of your childcare, so it's done me a massive favour. I feel more like I have a work life and value my time when I'm not in front of a computer differently now.

AB: Formalising time was one thing, but having a shared name felt like a big step that was probably only ever going to happen when we had so little to lose in the middle of a pandemic. Having a name, becoming The Uncultured, has allowed us to do some things that are expected of organisations and frowned upon of freelancers - such as having fixed working hours. No-one questions a person in a part-time role at an organisation, but I've been asked multiple times about only working some days a week, or told that it must be nice. As a freelancer on my own this would make me bend and change, but as The Uncultured, I can feel that sense of responsibility to you too and that allows me to think more about worker welfare and our needs. Fixed working hours are about welfare, the choice to have them or not.

LS: Totally. We both inadvertently give each other permission to take time if we need it, or in fact want it. To know that I can move to Toronto and we'll sort it out. To know that you can take summer holidays off. It's how we should all be working but there's a real block for most on making it a reality.

AB: We're really practical people. I need childcare to be able to work and cannot work without it. It's an enormous cost, nearly £2,000 a month with 2 kids in. When we wrote our first business budget together you said that we needed to include an amount for this and I was like nooooo, and felt almost ashamed about it, and spent ages trying to reason it out of you. But you could see that it was the practical thing to do. The fact is that I have a cost I incur to be allowed to work. I'm not paid to look after my contribution to the next generation of people who could be wiping our elderly arses or whatever, so I have to work. To be able to work I need someone else to look after them. It's not shameful.

LS: I've been asked a couple of times how we manage your childcare and the response is often about me being a nice person. This has nothing to do with it, it's practical. Firstly, there's no real loss, we earn more to cover your childcare, we do more to cover it, it doesn't come out of my wage or anything like that. It allows us to be more equitable and make splitting our money 50/50 actually make sense, because otherwise you're essentially paying to come to work and earning less than me. That's shit.

AB: And also, it's quite short termist to assume that my childcare costs are the only thing that might occur as costs to work over the course of our working relationship. There's a myriad of reasons why anyone might have additional costs to work, and if you suddenly had them you would know you'd be protected and we'd find a way to cover those costs for you too.

LS: I took those couple of months off from burnout in 2021 and to be honest the only reason I could do that was because of you. I'd probably been on the verge of it for ages but working on my own I knew there was no-one else to pick up the work, or even just keep things ticking over, so I probably just ignored it. After all that mess pulling apart years of work at the start of the pandemic, I think I would have quit if I couldn't have been allowed to have a period of burnout. So this way of working is the only reason I'm still in the sector.

AB: Apparently I always say this, but it all comes out in the wash, right? You took time off with burnout, I took time off when my mum died. We do track our hours against projects but not against each other. Obviously when I was off when my mum died, you worked more hours than I did, but you've taken holiday weeks at times I haven't so somewhere in the mix it's about the same. And what's the point of working to support each other if you can't burnout or have a period of grief? Again, this is probably about trust and that's really hard to quantify, but we definitely both know that if one of us felt like we were working more than the other unfairly then something would be said and it would be addressed. It's not intended to be utopian, it's just practical and simplistic and allows us to each meet our needs.

LS: Yeh, I think as a result we're super codependent now and I probably couldn't go back to working on my own ever again which is maaaaybe not super healthy, but I feel much more secure knowing I have someone else there. Also I've never earned so much working in the arts as we do now, so I guess it's also making us more ambitious in a way.

AB: ...we also upped our day rate by £100....

LS: Oh yeh that helped too.

AB: But that was based on detailed calculations and research into our working patterns, full cost recovery and sector salary parity. We didn't just pluck it and up it. But even if we had, being able to check in with one another about what we needed, as people living and working today, meant we were emboldened to ask for more I think.

LS: Working with you means I ask for what is more appropriate, and not undercutting the potential of the workforce, which is another reason why I find it better to work together because it helps me visualise the ecology as a whole better somehow.

AB: Yeh, I wouldn't choose to work alone. Even if I changed careers I wouldn't choose to work without you to be honest. I think we've earned more working like this because we can actually strive for better conditions. We've also given each other permission to be more knowledgeable about our work. Through tracking our hours on projects we know when it would be ticking over into unpaid labour, which we're committed to never doing knowingly on a project. Just through having a commitment to that alone we've earned more, which suggests how fucked up everything is while it's completely reliant on over-service and under payment.

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The Uncultured (Ashleigh Bowmott + Laura Sweeney)
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