

2023
THIRD ANNUAL

Content Entrepreneur Benchmark Research



ANATOMY OF A CREATOR

What does it take to build a successful creator business? **New research from The Tilt uncovers the key ingredients: timeline, seed money, audience metrics, expected income, and much more.** Plus, we dive deep into the content entrepreneur mindset, and what it takes to build a lasting venture in the creator economy.

IN SEARCH OF RESPECT

Content creators who plunge in believing the path will be effortless or expecting to spend most of their time on creative endeavors will either quit in frustration or find their path to profitability takes longer.

In this third annual report, we want to demystify the process, and answer the most common and most pressing questions. How long will it take to make enough money to support yourself? (Roughly 18 months.) Do you need seed money to get your business off the ground? (Creators we surveyed say \$10K is about right.) How much money does the average creator make after three years? (\$82K after three years; \$104K after six years.) What will your friends think? (They'll think you're crazy or they won't understand.)

And most of all, we want to help the millions sitting on the sidelines take that big leap toward being independent and owning their future — equipped with a roadmap.



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WHO ARE CREATORS EXACTLY?

There's no easy answer, which is why research about the creator economy often misses the mark. We believe most creators fall into these three categories:

MAKER CREATORS

People who create content about their craft or hobby. They may monetize the content, but they also sell *things*. Think artists, craftspeople, chefs, homesteaders, etc. The list is nearly endless.

Maker creators run a different type of business. They have raw materials and inventory, and ship physical goods.

INFLUENCERS

People who operate personality-driven businesses that publish content to monetize their popularity and celebrity.

An influencer business thrives on popularity, not necessarily skill or knowledge. Plus, the business can't be easily sold since it's tied to one person.

OUR FOCUS

EXPERT CREATORS

People who create content about their area of expertise or passion. Expert creators build media companies (even small ones) and monetize their content. Some expert creators also sell a service (e.g., coaching, consulting, educating).



ABOUT OUR SURVEY AUDIENCE

We surveyed 1,043 creators and 397 individuals who want to be creators during the first quarter of 2023. (Turn to page 16 to learn more about our audience's background, industries, and other key demographics.)

In this report, we focus on the "all-in creator," people who spend the majority or all of their working time on their content business. We mention hobby creators from time to time — people who create content on the side, in addition to their primary job — but our aim is to help creators make a living as content entrepreneurs.

Creators shown on the cover, clockwise from top left: Philip Van Dusen, Verhaal Brand Design; Daphne Gomez, Teacher Career Coach; Roberto Blake, RobertoBlake.com.

THE NEW ENTREPRENEURS

Content creators with massive audiences are the 1% of the creator world. What about the other 99%?

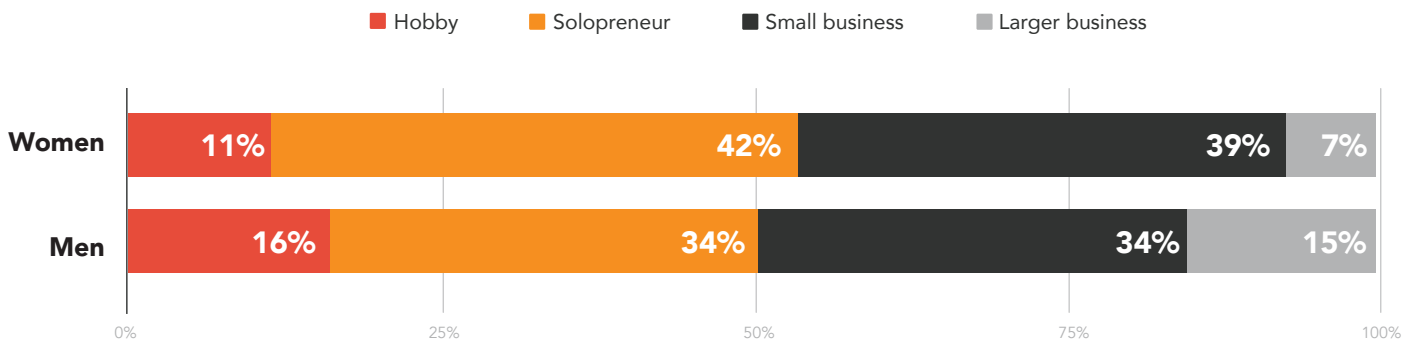
Most content creators don't aim to build big, flashy media businesses with an audience of millions. They seek independence, fewer work hours, and the freedom to pursue projects that inspire them.

By some estimates, nearly 12M people in the US are involved in the creator economy — and more than half (about 7M) earn money in some form or fashion by publishing content.¹ Yet we know very little about them.

Journalists covering the creator economy tend to focus on influencers (people with massive audiences who monetize their popularity). But celebrities are — and our data shows this — the 1% of the creator world, hoovering up big money and big attention, and making content entrepreneurship seem unattainable. What about the other 99%?

Most content creators don't have millions of followers; in fact, our research shows the median is just 4K. Among these "99-percenters," a large portion make a full-time living by monetizing content — providing high-value advice, inspiration, and expertise to their audiences, and doing something they care about.

BUSINESS GOALS BY GENDER



Q: Which of the following statements best describes your ambitions/plans for your creator business? (Shown as a %. Totals may not add up to 100 due to rounding.) Respondents who identified as nonbinary were less than 2% of the total sample.

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45%

All-in creators who say their business is the primary source of their household income

The creator mindset

All-in content entrepreneurs — people who devote most or all of their work life to their creator business — aren't in it for the money or fame. They seek *independence* above all else. As one creator told us, "I'm totally independent from corporate bureaucracy and inefficiency. I get to experiment, fail, and course correct — with no one getting unglued over it. Plus, I get to pick who I work with, which is the ultimate freedom."

Creators we studied are also motivated by quality-of-life factors. They want to enjoy their work life and pursue a passion. And they want flexible working hours. What's not all that important for most? Clout or influence — the motivations many people think of first when they imagine someone in the creator economy.

Our research suggests creators are part of a broader movement of workers burned out by traditional jobs; they want greater autonomy over their careers, schedules, co-workers, and mental health.



You don't just pull out your phone, do some TikToks, and make money. You need to get through an avalanche of work – brainstorming, production, editing, promotion – so that it makes a real impression on an audience.

HOURS PER WEEK FOR ALL-IN CREATORS

Current
hours per week



36.5

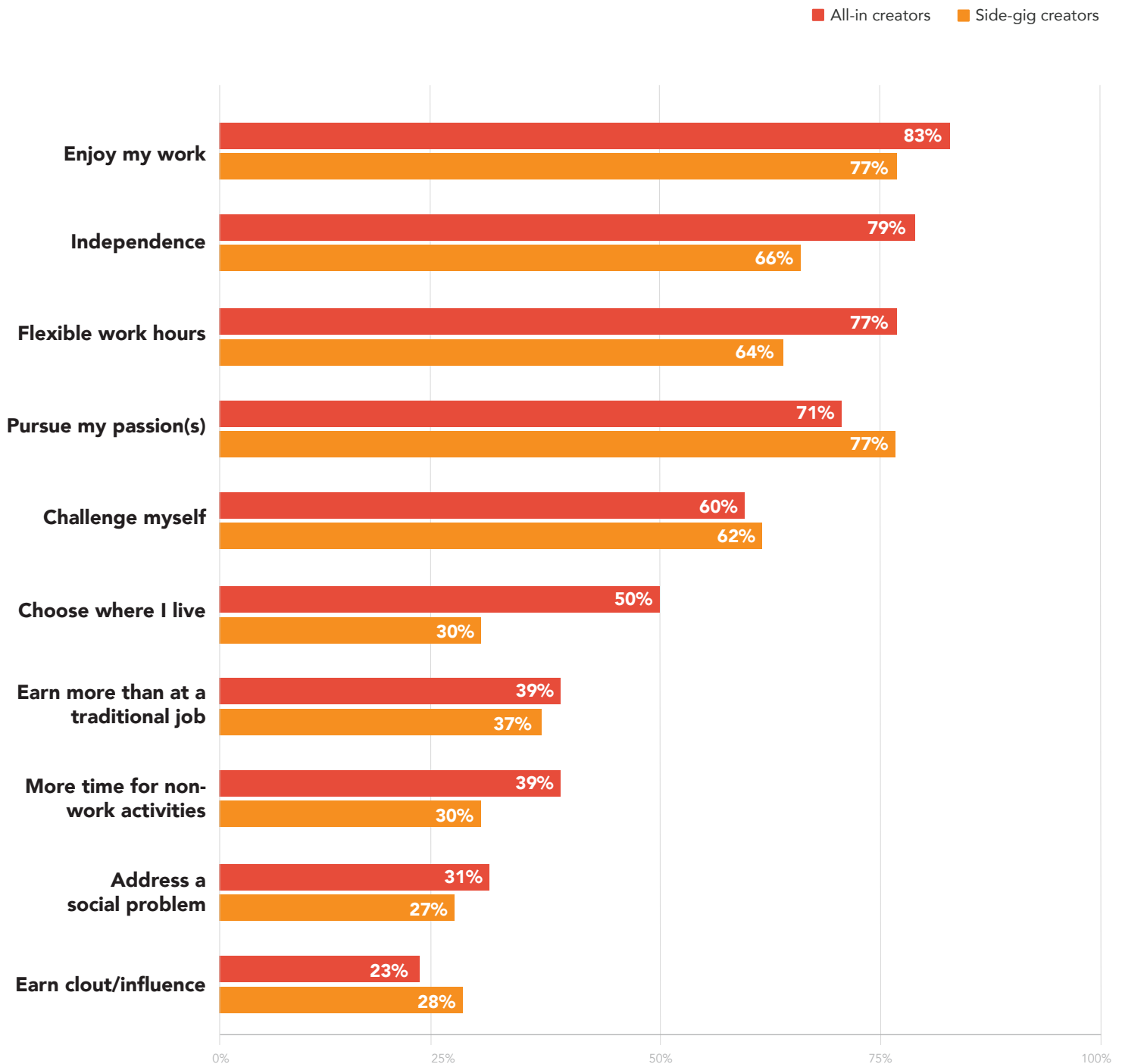
Preferred
hours per week



28.5

BENEFITS OF A CONTENT CREATOR BUSINESS

Enjoyment and independence are top priorities



Q: What are the benefits of running a content creator business? (Top 10 shown.)

Note: All-in creators spend most or all of their working hours on their content business.

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“ *It takes years of hard work — screaming into the void until you catch traction. It is patient work and then once you have your first love encounter with the algorithm, you are hooked. I never stop thinking about the businesses or content — a blessing and a curse (hard to shut it off).*

On average, all-in content entrepreneurs — people who spend the majority/all of their work hours on their creator business — work 36.5 hours per week, slightly below the U.S. average of 38.7 hours per week.² However, they would prefer to work 28.5 hours per week.

Three-fourths (76%) say they use AI tools in their creator business in 2023 — a significant step toward greater productivity. We expect that as generative AI tools improve, creators will rely on them more and more to streamline their content creation process and produce high-quality content with greater efficiency. (Maybe that 28-hour workweek is possible after all.)

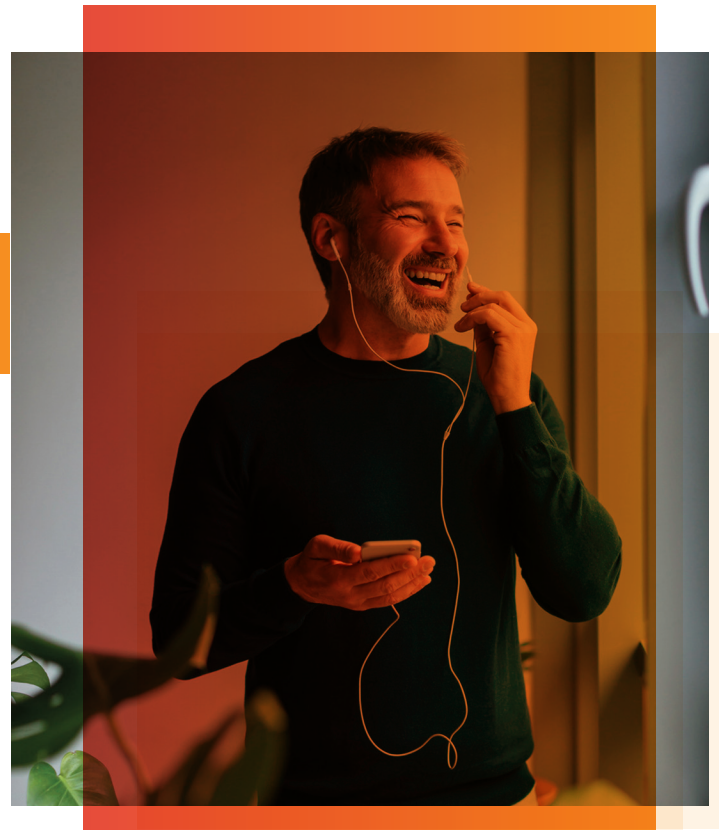
HOW ARE CONTENT CREATORS USING TOOLS LIKE CHATGPT?

The Tilt’s research shows three in four creatives use generative AI tools to help them be more efficient. Applications include:

Brainstorming: Bouncing ideas with the AI tool and getting feedback in real time.

Research: Learning about new topics and organizing key ideas before beginning the creation process.

Co-production: Completing tasks like generating headlines, deploying keywords, and in some cases, writing articles, web copy, or video scripts.



CONTENT CREATORS BY THE NUMBERS

They're entrepreneurial but not in it to get rich. They're passion-driven but adamant they're running a business, not pursuing a hobby. And they feel misunderstood by a world that views them as oddballs.

4,000

Unique followers

4.0

Unique channels

1.9

Revenue-generating
channels

Note: These figures apply to content creators who spend most/all of their working time on their content business. Creators were asked to add up followers across all channels to find their total followers.

Let's get down to the numbers.

Audience: Our research shows most creators have relatively small audiences. People who run their content business as a full-time endeavor have an average of just 4K followers across all channels.³ For most, it's not the size of the audience, but how deeply engaged they are with the content.

Channels: With channels, more is not always better. In fact, it's not better at all. Our all-in creators use just four channels on average, and they tell us only two bring in direct revenue. One creator explains, "It took me a few years to realize my time was best spent focusing on just a few channels where my audience hangs out most. Once you narrow in, it just takes persistence and patience."

Barriers: Financial fears are a big reason why creators wait to get started (or don't begin at all). Twenty-eight percent of would-be content entrepreneurs tell us financial insecurity holds them back. This is why we spend a lot of time talking about the *runway*. The shorter the runway — the time between launching a creator business and supporting themselves — the more likely someone is to succeed as a content entrepreneur.



They don't understand the time commitment it takes to monetize your work. Starting a class FROM NOTHING takes time. Once you have a workable template it gets easier, but getting the first product going from idea to delivery is a bigger investment than people realize."

Runway: All-in creators say it takes nearly five months to earn the first dollar, and just over a year to begin working full time as a creator. Even someone who works full time in their content business doesn't necessarily support themselves; that takes over 18 months. And hiring people to help with the business also takes roughly 18 months.

Financial support: Given it takes a year and a half on average to be self-sustaining, content creators often need a safety net when they launch the business. For some, this means a cushion of funds in a savings account. For others, safety comes in the form of financial support from a partner or other family.

Seed capital and technology budget: Content creators spend \$10.7K on average to start their business, and most (66%) rely on their savings. Technology expenses alone cost \$2K per year (though in the first three years, technology expenses tend to be half that).⁴ Creators depend on a wide range of tools to manage diverse content types, schedules, and collaborators; tech tools include systems or software for content creation, social media management, content management, email marketing, analytics and optimization, collaboration and project management, and many other business processes.

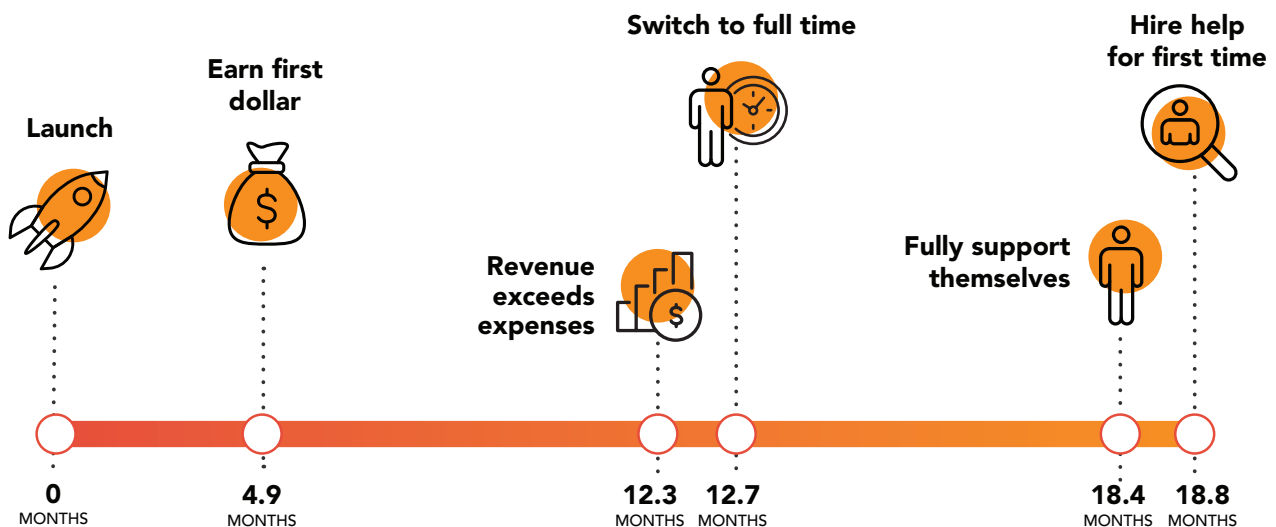
32%

I am satisfied with how much money I'm making as a creator

2%

I regret my decision to become a creator

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO BUILD A SUCCESSFUL CREATOR BUSINESS?



These figures apply to content creators who spend most or all of their working time on their content business.

\$10,700

Seed money to launch*

\$1-\$2K

Annual tech expenses**

\$108,199

2023 expected gross revenue

\$62,224

2023 expected net revenue

59%

Gross margin

*One-time costs for things like branding and professional services (e.g., accountant, attorney)

**\$1K in years one through three; \$2K thereafter

How much do content creators make?

For anyone starting a content business, the inevitable question is: How much will I earn? When we ask content entrepreneurs what the most important benefit of a creator business is, just 6% say they're in it to earn more than they would in a traditional career. A content enterprise is not a get-rich-quick scheme ... it's not even an ever-get-rich scheme for most.

Creators who are "all in" (those who say they spend most/all of their working time on their content business) report they earned approximately \$86K in 2022 — a figure highly dependent on how long they've been in business.

Let's unpack the numbers a bit more. We asked content creators to tell us what they expect to gross in 2023 (i.e., revenue before expenses and salary), how much of that money they'll earn as profit, and the amount they say would be "enough." On average, all-in creators expect to bring in approximately \$108,199 in revenue in 2023 and will pay themselves \$62,224 — a gross margin of 59%. The \$62K figure is a little more than half of what they would like to earn (\$109,250) from the content business.



Many people misunderstand it as a get-rich-quick scheme, which means they're not playing the long game. That will eventually kill the business.

FORMULA FOR SUCCESS

Successful creators are content pros — gifted writers, videographers, and teachers, among many other talents. But it takes much more than creative chops to grow an audience and monetize content.

Our research shows content entrepreneurs spend a little less than half of their week on creative efforts. The rest of the time, they're knee-deep in operations, marketing and sales, content distribution, and other unglamorous tasks.

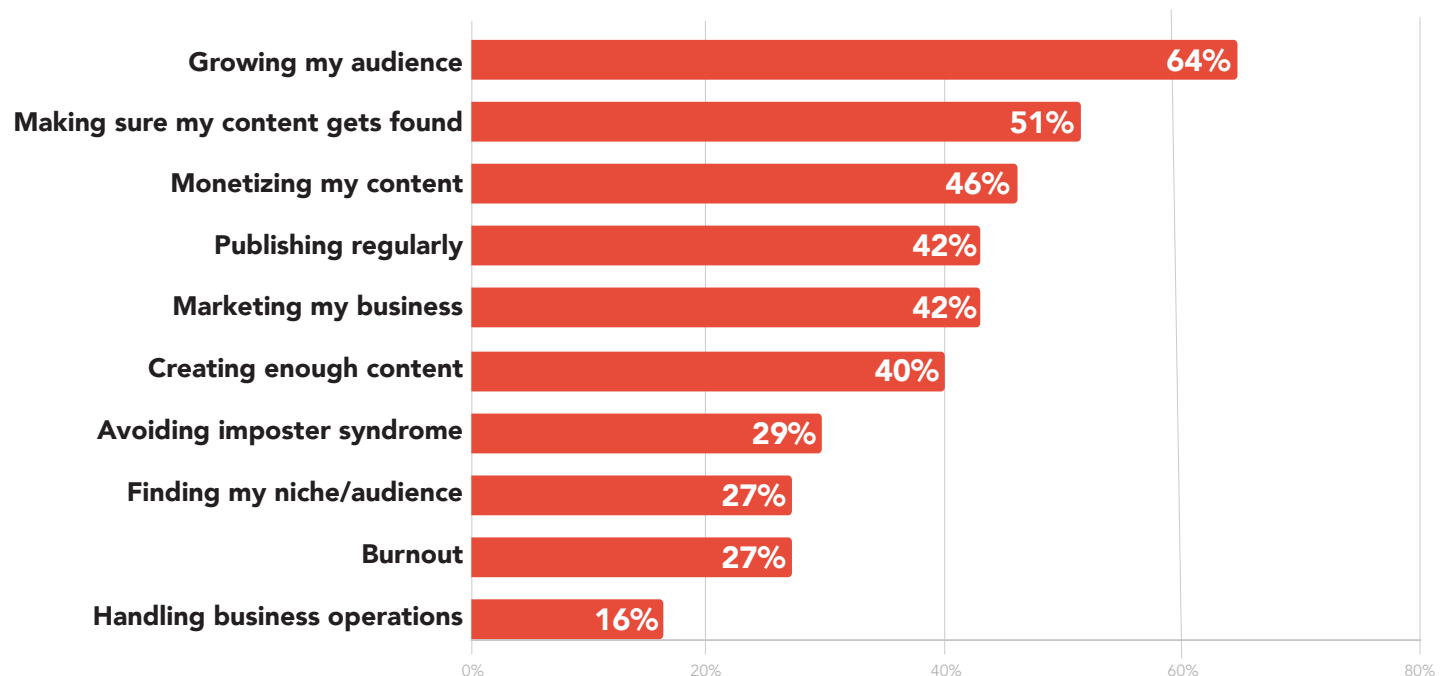
As one person tells us, "I spend most of my time managing people, doing accounting, talking to sponsors, managing editorial calendars, fixing equipment, etc. People think being a creative is all puppies and rainbows — and no one wants to hear you complain."

When we ask creators about their greatest challenges, the decidedly non-creative tasks top the list: growing an audience, optimizing content, and monetizing content.

Content entrepreneurs think too much like editors and not enough like publishers (content creation vs. monetization of audience).

CONTENT CREATOR OBJECTIVE

Audience growth is the most common challenge — by a wide margin

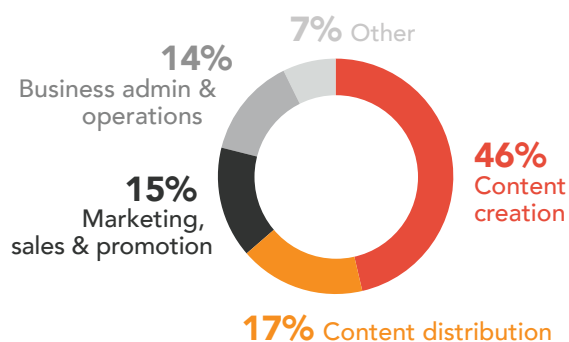


Q: What is/are your biggest challenge(s) as a creator?

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DIVISION OF WORK TIME

Content creation makes up less than half of creators' working time



Q: How do you spend your time on your creator business?
(Totals do not add up to 100 due to rounding.)

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How content creators reach and grow an audience

Most content creators (84%) publish social media content to reach their audiences. Blogging and email newsletters rank No. 2 and 3, though each of those run 25 points behind social media. Creators tell us they use an average of four channels to reach their audience but just two of those bring in direct revenue. And when it comes to revenue, consulting/coaching and publishing books are the most common ways of making money, and both are also the most profitable according to content creators.

When it comes to the social channels used, content creators tell us YouTube, TikTok, and LinkedIn are all rising in popularity. Short-form videos available on YouTube Shorts and TikTok have both surged in the last two years. Similarly, LinkedIn traffic has grown over the last three years, with a strong uptick in usage in the last quarter due to layoffs. Analytics from SimilarWeb found monthly traffic to LinkedIn grew over 60% from January 2020 to January 2023.⁵

CHANNELS USAGE BY BUSINESS OBJECTIVE

After social media, blogging and email newsletters are most used

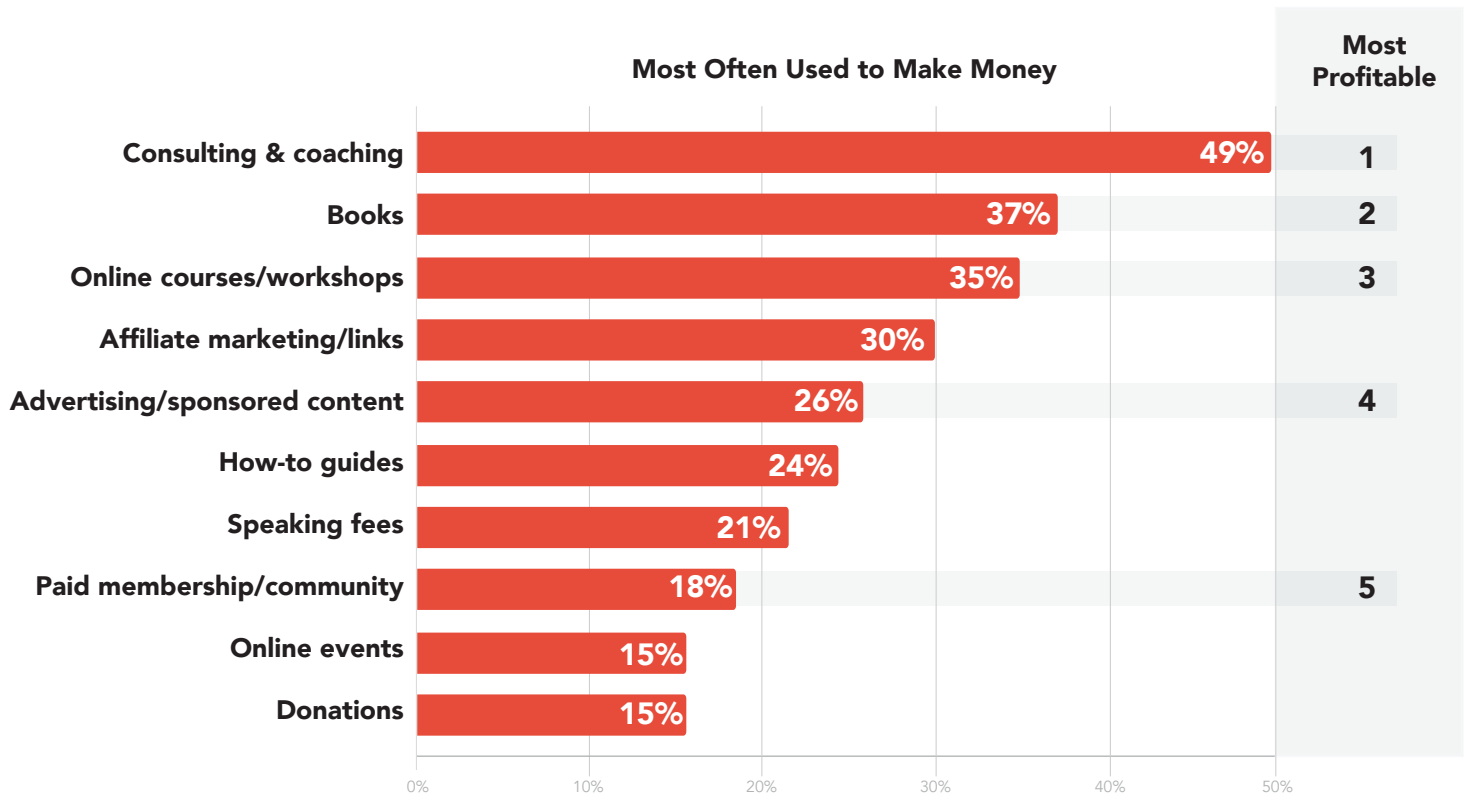
	Hobby <i>Pursuing CE as a hobby</i>	Solopreneur <i>Plan to support one person</i>	Small business <i>Plan to support a few people</i>	Large venture <i>Plan to support many people</i>
Social media	79	82	89	82
Blog	45	62	65	51
Email newsletter	42	59	65	64
Communities	32	32	40	43
Books	35	28	28	28
Online courses	9	27	33	25
In-person events	27	23	29	45
Online events	17	20	31	31
Podcasting	21	20	35	37
Paid promotion/advertising	13	13	20	29

Q1: Which of these do you use to reach your audience? Q2: Which of the following statements best describes your ambitions/plans for your creator business?

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MONETIZATION TACTICS

Consulting and coaching are top tactics for expertise-driven creators



Q1: Which of these do you use to make money? (Bar chart.) Q2: Of those you chose, which is most profitable? (Rank order.)

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It's a business, not a freelance gig, and it requires a business approach to revenue generation, management, operations, etc. — even at a small scale of one — to be successful.

PREPARE TO TAKE THE LEAP

We spoke to dozens of content entrepreneurs to find out what advice they have for would-be content entrepreneurs, and packaged it into a 5-step plan.

1 | THINK LIKE AN ENTREPRENEUR

Eighty-six percent of creators say they think of themselves as entrepreneurs — and for good reason. Non-creative tasks take up nearly half of their time. As a creator, you need to handle bookkeeping, taxes, SEO, social media management, and much, much more. Research, study, and plan carefully. If you're not comfortable with some of these tasks, do you have the budget to hire help? (Your two most important professional costs: a good accountant and attorney.)

“Spend time understanding the business necessities, such as federal, state, and local certifications and tax responsibilities. These obligations will suck up your time and your profits.”

86%

Think of themselves as entrepreneurs

2 | PLAN YOUR BUDGET AND RUNWAY

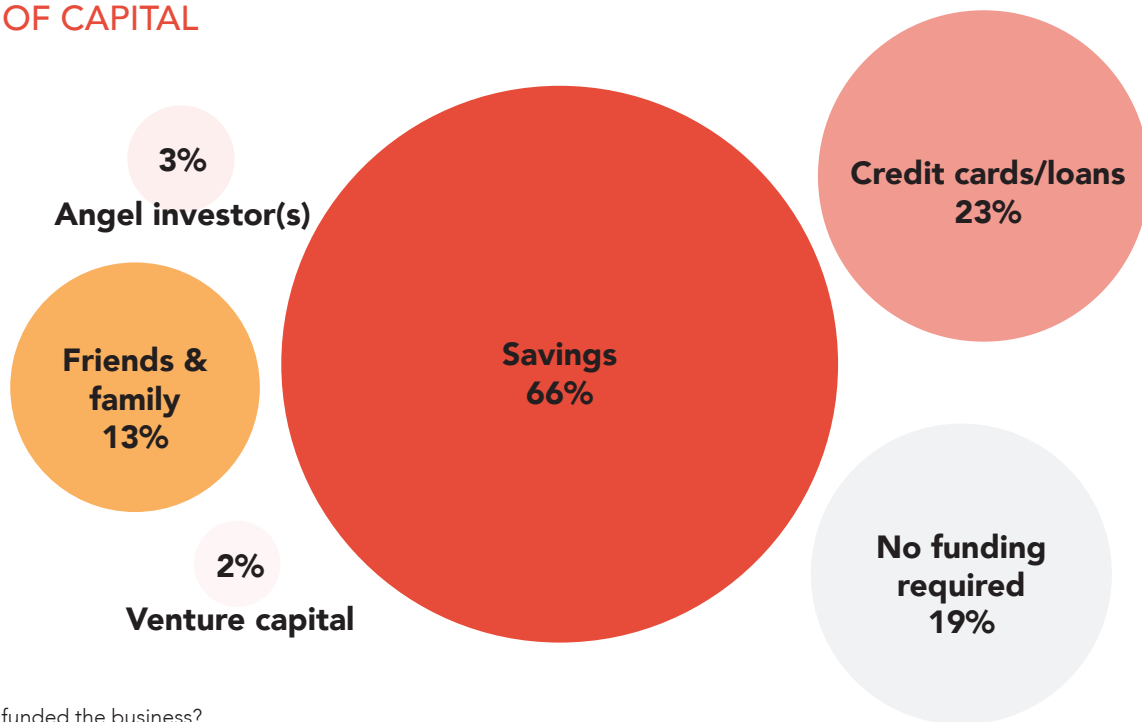
How much will you need to save to self-fund your launch and early, lean months? Create a detailed budget, including technology, branding, and professional expenses like hiring an accountant and attorney. Use our revenue, expense, and timeline figures (page 8) to project your 12- to 18-month runway to self-sustaining profitability.

“Have six months of finances saved before going full time. Also, make sure to analyze what you're good at and where you'll need help. For example, it's better to delegate video editing if it's a task you despise and take a long time to complete. That way, you'll be able to focus on spending time on the tasks of your business where you excel.”

95%

Believe business skills are just as important as creative skills to be successful

SOURCES OF CAPITAL



Q: How have you funded the business?

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“ I spend most of my time managing people, doing accounting, talking to sponsors, overseeing editorial calendars, fixing equipment, etc. People think being a creator is all puppies and rainbows — and no one wants to hear you complain.

3 | ZERO IN ON YOUR AUDIENCE

If you're like most creators, you define your audience and revise it a few months in, and rinse and repeat. Remember: The more niche the audience and the more narrow the topic, the better the odds for success.

Build relationships with your audience by responding to comments, asking for feedback, and creating more of the types of content they respond to. Growing an audience is the most common challenge creators face (64% say it's their biggest challenge).

“ Focus on building connections with your audience and other creators. Someone following you is the start of a relationship, not the end result. Someone buying your product is the start of a relationship, not the end result. Be a relationship-based creator, not a followers-based creator. This approach is better for your audience, and drives better results for your business too.

METHODOLOGY:

2023 Content Entrepreneur Benchmark Research is published by The Tilt in partnership with Total Annarchy, Creator Science, Future Freedom, and Lulu. All four partners assisted with distributing the survey to their audiences.

The survey was fielded in February and March 2023. In total, 1,440 people completed the survey; of those, 550 are content entrepreneurs who spend most/all their time on their content business; 493 run a side-gig content business; and 397 hope to become content entrepreneurs in the future. Survey results are not weighted.

GENDER

Female	48%
Male	50%
Nonbinary	2%

GENERATIONS

Generation Z	7%
Millennial	35%
Generation X	40%
Boomer	18%

INDUSTRIES (TOP 10)

Business	17%
Marketing	15%
Education	10%
Entertainment	8%
Health & fitness	7%
Lifestyle	7%
Arts, crafts, DIY	7%
Science & tech	3%
Cooking & food	3%
Finance	3%

YEARS SINCE CONTENT BUSINESS LAUNCH

Less than 1 year	23%
1 - 3 years	36%
4 - 6 years	16%
7 or more years	25%

NOTES:

¹ NewsDirect: "First Ever Sizing Study Reveals 11.5 Million Americans Participate in the Creator Economy, Earning Money from Platforms Like YouTube, TikTok and Instagram," Nov. 16, 2021.

² The Balance: "What Is the Average Number of Work Hours Per Week?" Sept. 7, 2022.

³ We calculated this by looking at the median number of followers in our full-time sample group, not the average/mean. Why? When you use the average, a handful of creators with massive followings will raise the average significantly. Case in point: In our sample, the median number of followers was 4,000, but the average was 90,337.

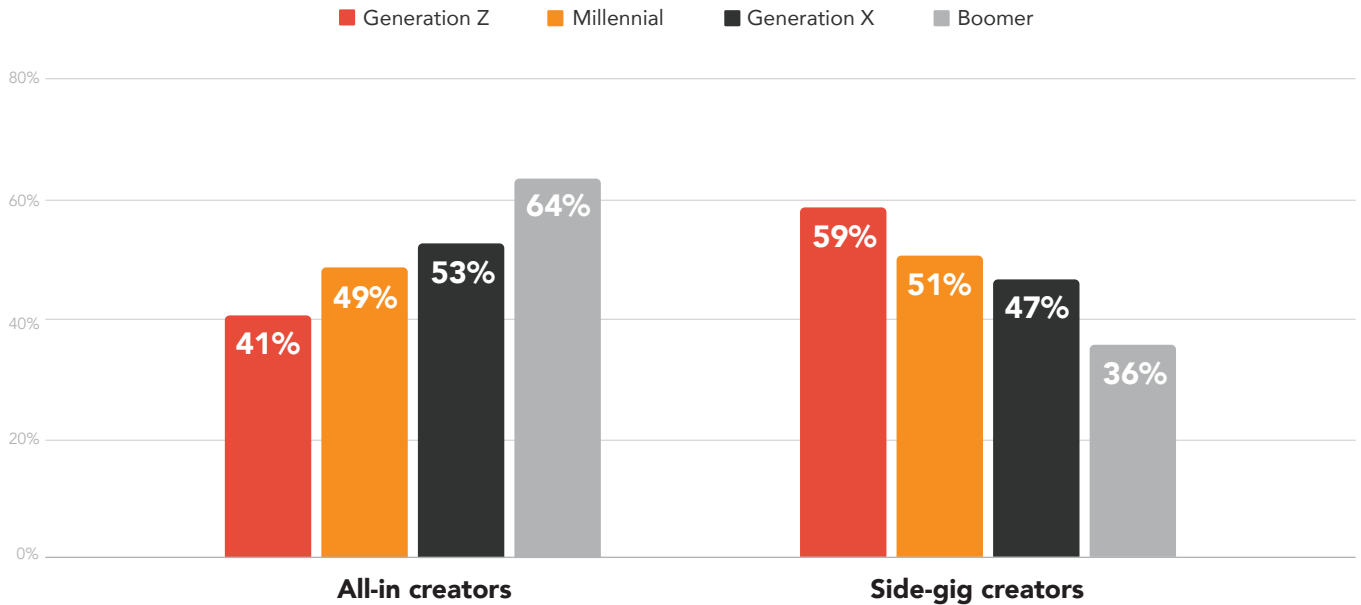
⁴ Median annual technology expense for all-in creators. The mean expense is \$7,444.

⁵ Vox: "Layoffs are making LinkedIn the new hot social network," Feb. 10, 2023.

CHART SUPPLEMENT

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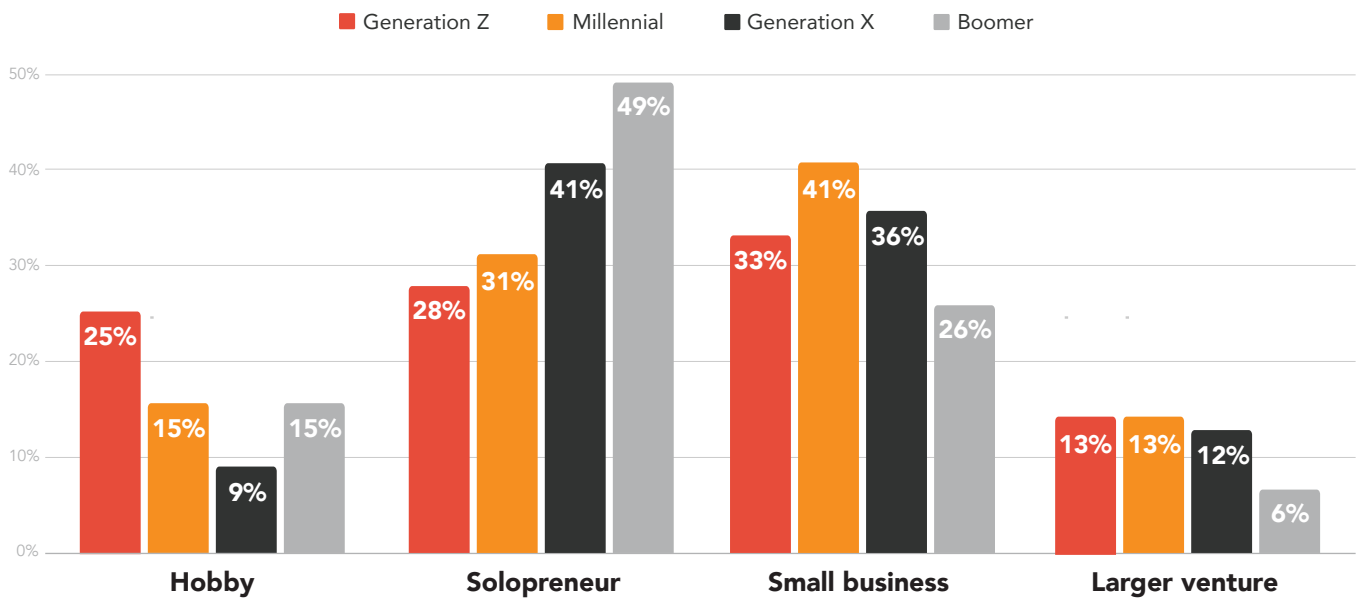
TYPE OF CONTENT BUSINESS BY GENERATION



Q: Which of the following statements best describes your creator business? (Answer choices: I spend most/all of my work time on my creator business; my creator business is a side gig.)

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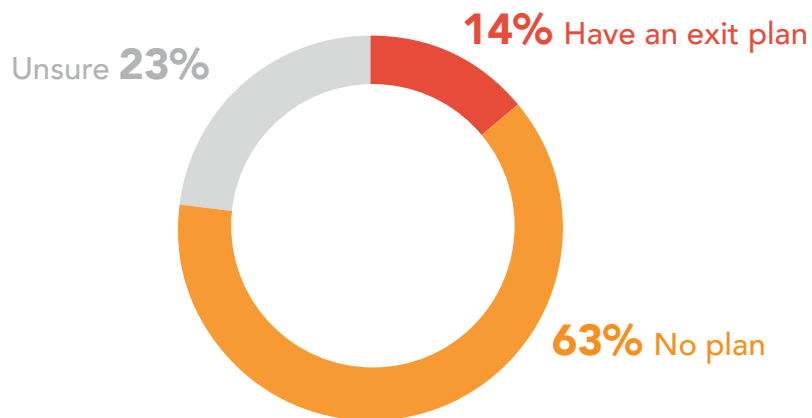
CONTENT CREATORS' BUSINESS PLANS AND AMBITIONS



Q: Which of the following statements best describes your ambitions/plans for your creator business? (Shown by generation; "unsure" responses not included)

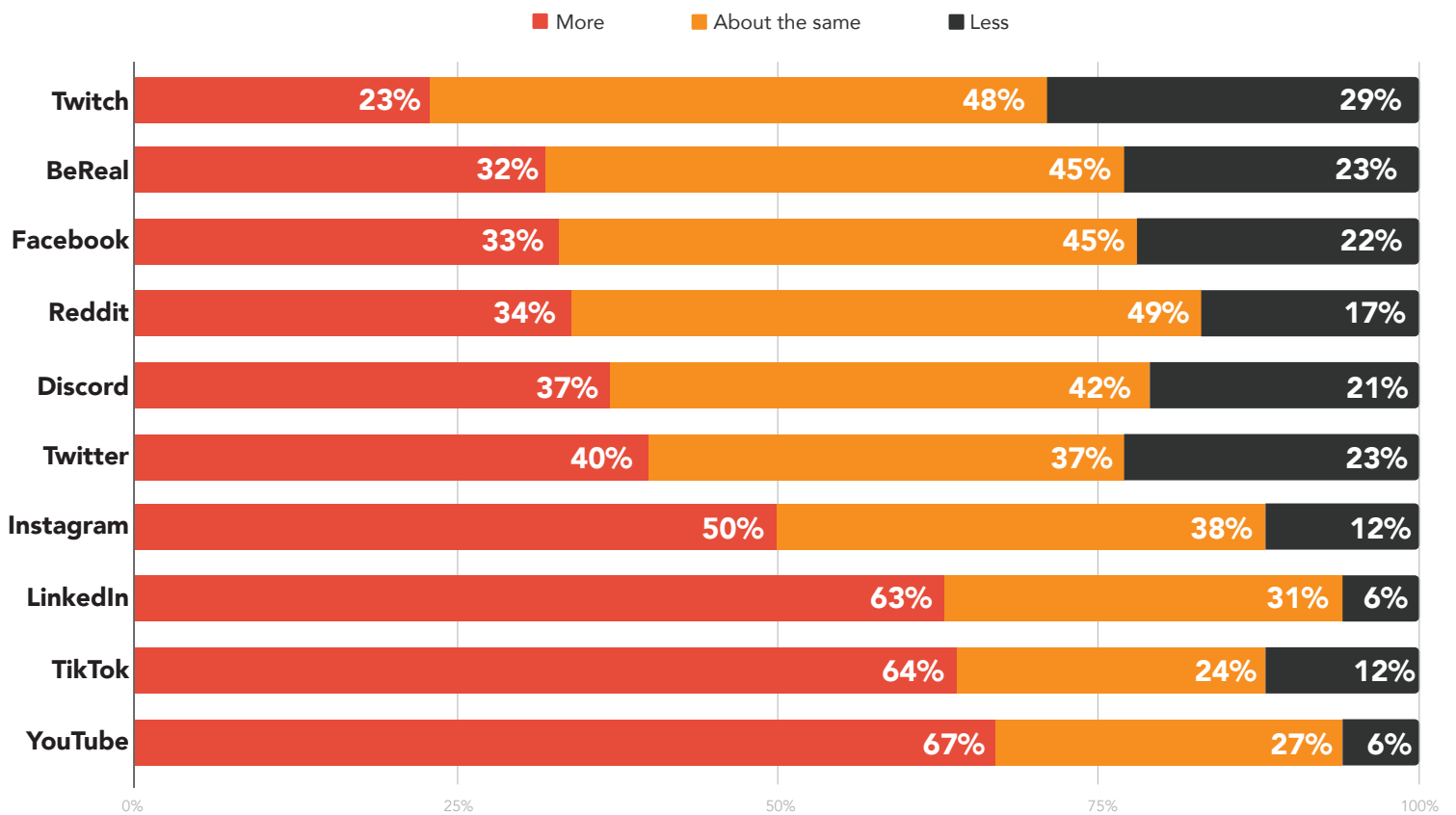
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SHARE OF CONTENT CREATORS WITH EXIT PLANS



Q: Is your goal to eventually sell the business?
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CHANGES IN CHANNEL USAGE FOR CONTENT CREATORS



Q: Will you use these channels and platforms more or less in 2023 compared to 2022?
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SHARE OF HOUSEHOLD INCOME

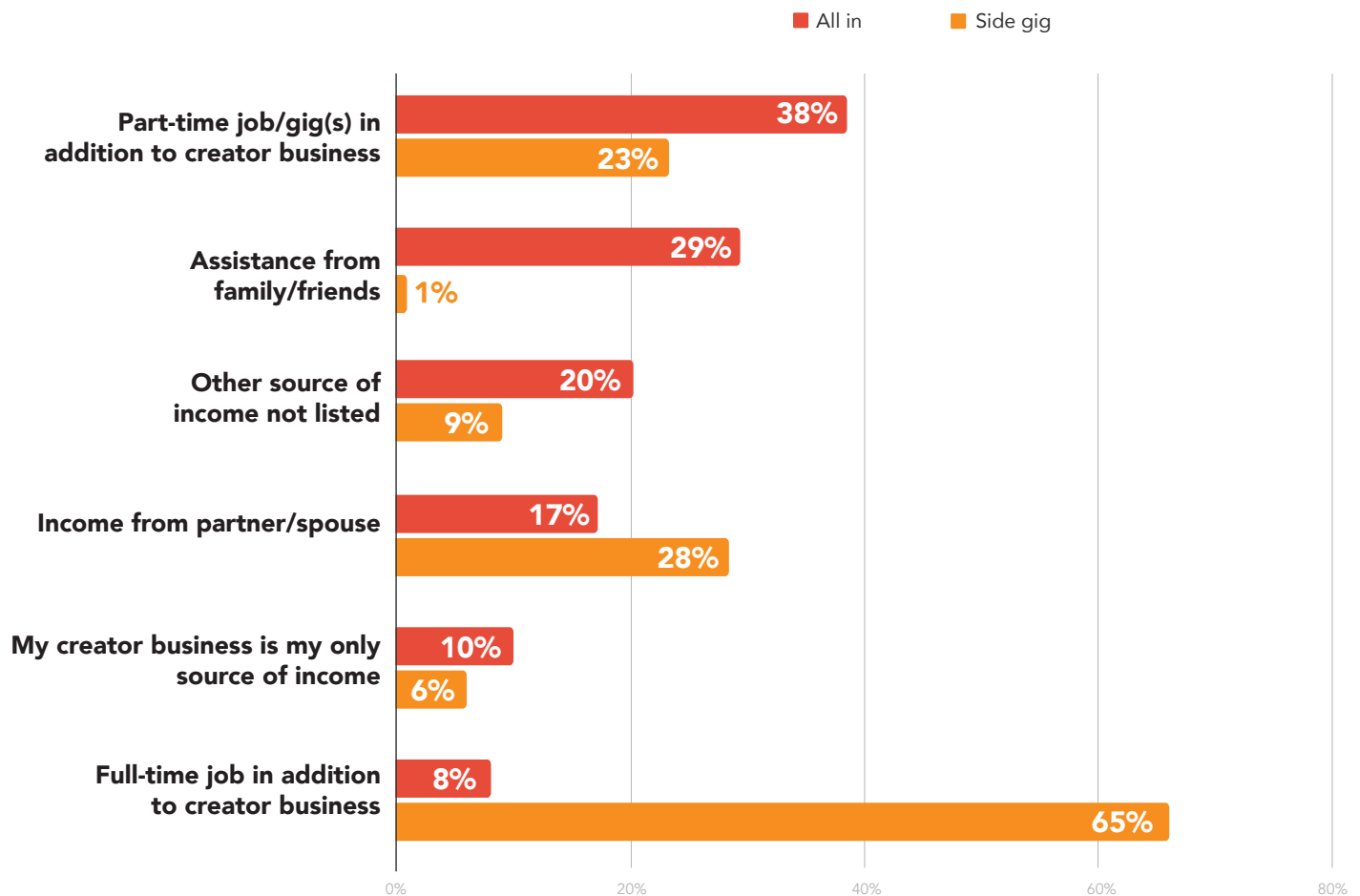


Q: Is your creator business the primary source of income for your household?

Note: Showing all-in creators (i.e., people who spend most/all of work time on content business).

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SUPPLEMENTAL INCOME



Q: Do you have another source of financial support outside of your creator business?

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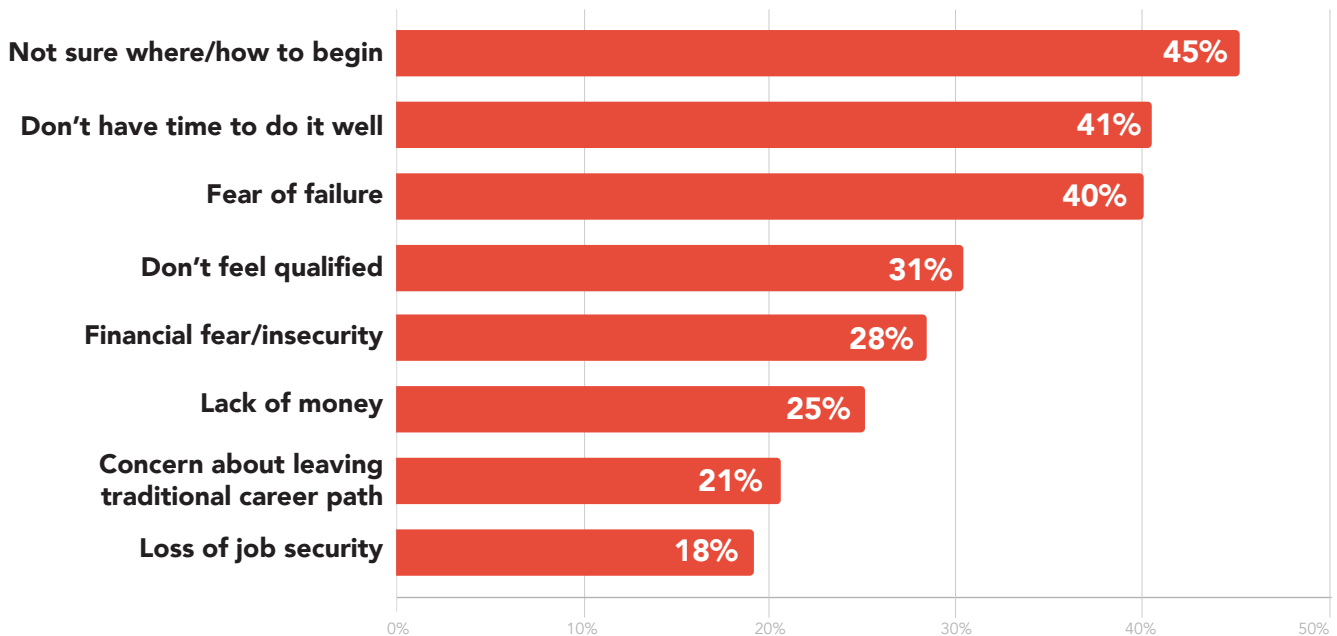
MILESTONES BY GENDER

	NUMBER OF MONTHS TO...				
	First dollar	Full time	Revenue exceeds expenses	Fully support themselves	Hire help
Female	5.1	11.7	13	20.4	20.5
Male	4.7	13.7	11.7	16.8	17.7
Gap	-0.4	2	-1.3	-3.6	-2.8

Q: How many months did it take to reach each of these milestones? Respondents who identified as nonbinary were less than 2% of the total sample.
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BARRIERS TO LAUNCH

For those who want to be creators, lack of knowledge and time are biggest barriers



Q: What prevents you from launching your creator business? Select all that apply.
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CONTRIBUTORS:



The Tilt teaches content entrepreneurs how to grow audiences and communities, create diverse revenue streams, and handle their business operations (legal, payments, staffing, etc.). The Tilt publishes a free twice-weekly newsletter with how-to features, creator case studies and relevant news, and hosts the annual Creator Economy Expo (CEX).

Learn more at www.TheTilt.com.



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