

## The Microstock Leap: Becoming Professional

### [The Microstock Leap: Becoming Professional](#) [1]

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Written 11 October 2009  
Revised 09 August 2012



How do we define a [Microstock](#) [2] Professional? Working full-time? Earning more than 50% of your income?

All you have to do is say you are a professional photographer or say you are, or perhaps more specifically earn the majority of your income from photography, but most full time "microstock photographers" did not just quit their day job and dive in. In fact most of them don't earn 100% of their income from microstock. They do microstock in addition to some other photography work, examples include contracted food photography, portraits, travel writing and photography and of course everyone's favourite the "wedding photographer out of season".

You might even be a stock photographer currently selling [RF](#) [3] or [RM](#) [4] at [macrostock](#) [5] prices and considering moving into micro, ([more on that here](#) [6]) for everyone the raw economics of stock photography is the same "**the revenue per image per year**".

### Some Vague Statistics

To start writing this feature I wanted to answer a few questions: just how many full time microstock photographers are there? According to the [2008 microstockgroup survey](#) [7] (pdf) just over 13% of those surveyed (244 people) earn more than 50% of their income from microstock i.e. it's their main source of income. Of course that statistic has a severe bias towards those completing the survey or taking an interest in such a microstock website, they are more likely to be highly involved and less

likely to be a casual microstock submitter. Interesting though that statistic is it's pretty useless other than as a measure of survey demographics.

Next I went to istockcharts.de (update: [microstocktime](#) [8] now have a replacement istock charts service) to have a quick look at the top micrstockers listed there, I thought I would analyse those who have uploaded at least 1000 images. As most microstockers would be delighted to bring in \$20+ per image per year the fact that stock charts list just over 1000 istock photographers with a portfolio in excess of 1000 images is quite interesting, it tends to suggest that the number of full time microstock photographers is quite small. Then I scrolled up the screen looking for extremes of sales with those who had around 1000 images looking to place some sort of average figure on sales per image and noticed the following two extremes:

957	 iobigs <a href="#">New Uploads</a>	<u>7800+</u>	1067	0.21	9	<u>1212</u>	1.14	12-2005
958	 Photo-Dave <a href="#">New Uploads</a>	<u>18000+</u>	1067	0.21	19	<u>346</u>	0.32	01-2005
959	 monkeybusinessimages <a href="#">New Uploads</a>	<u>87000+</u>	1066	0.21	85	<u>619</u>	0.58	03-2008
960	 petzurek <a href="#">New Uploads</a>	<u>500+</u>	1066	0.21	116	<u>366</u>	0.34	03-2008
961	 Wuka <a href="#">New Uploads</a>	<u>11000+</u>	1065	0.21	4	<u>263</u>	0.25	03-2005
962	 HendrikDB <a href="#">New Uploads</a>	<u>3500+</u>	1063	0.21	22	<u>1046</u>	0.98	07-2006

The two contributors [monkeybusinessimages](#) [9] and [petzurek](#) [10] can be compared together: both have the same number of images (Oct 09), both started their accounts at the same time. Knowing the restrictions that istock places on uploading images (25 per week / varies by approval rate) we can guess that the uploads are at similar rates yet these two accounts represent opposite ends of the quality spectrum. One of them has made 174 times more sales, go and have a look at their portfolios using the links above and you can see the reasons why.

All we have learnt so far is that there are no hard and fast rules and you need to do all the analysis yourself, that and full time microstock photographers are a fairly select bunch, although some people might make enough to live on with far less images...

43	 appleuzr <a href="#">New Uploads</a>	<u>130000+</u>	731
44	 enot-poloskun <a href="#">New Uploads</a>	<u>130000+</u>	354
45	 filo <a href="#">New Uploads</a>	<u>130000+</u>	2351

Ranked 44 in overall downloads 354 images generated 130k downloads since August 2005, this is the more exception than the rule, typical microstock earnings are around \$8 per image per year (that figure is open to lots of conjecture!), clearly the figure is a lot higher for 3d renderings and a lot lower if your portfolio is full of eastern European architecture and empty cinema interiors!

## The Dabbling, The Education & The Growth

Unless you are already a stock photographer microstock is a way to step into stock photography through a learning process without risk - keep your day job and test the waters (even if that day job is some other photography genre like weddings or portrait). **Have 100 images accepted by the top agencies and you will very quickly see if you are up to the lifestyle (or lack of it)**, build

the necessary portfolio, or at least enough to make ends meet and understand exactly what you need to do to earn enough to live on. Doing it that way is the safe but takes a long time, or takes a very hard work doing not just a day job but also a 'second day job' producing stock with every second of spare time you have.

Sooner or later thoughts turn to doing this full time, by now all of those microstock [beginners utopian ideas](#) [11] about spending all day taking photos, sitting back and earning money have flown out of the window. You have a good idea of your [revenue per image per year](#) [12] and how it compares to the averages, hence how many images you need to submit to earn your desired income.

The only difficult calculation if you are going to make the 'leap of faith' is how many images can you take and upload per year if you work at it full time. Images date an hence you need to keep adding fresh images to your collection, the larger your collection the more you have to take to keep income the same. With just 100 images it's easy to add say 10 more images per year, if you have 3000 that could be something like 300 new images per year to tread water. With 3000 images in your portfolio at say \$6 per image pa. you are earning 18k US per year (before tax!) not a kings ransom by anyone's standards. Remember that this income should be paying for your next camera, internet connection, computers, memory cards etc.

Another factor to remember is your rejection rate (most agencies record this and will show you an 'all time rejection' figure), it's easy to look at a few hundred images that have been accepted to do your calculation but remember you need to calculate that based on the number of images you attempted to submit - that's the actual number of images you spent the time taking. e.g. to get 3000 images accepted with your 85% acceptance you needed about 3500+ images.

## The Realisation



For myself, (and a lot of other people I think) the process was not a giant leap, and for me microstock is just one of several photography related incomes. Making the transition from paid work outside photography to full time 'photographer' was more of a growing dream, hmmm, that's sounds a little romantic, perhaps 'business plan' or 'goal' is a better description. I'd done the maths very roughly back in early 2004 and could at that time see

that if my istock portfolio was not just the 23 images I had uploaded and was something more like 1000 then I could easily cover my living expenses (I don't think the same is quite true now I earn less per image). I continued growing skills in photography, photoshop and internet marketing, perhaps a better description would be 'tuning them' to microstock as and when I had some free time. Then in January 2008 it just made business sense, a lease came up, full time work was.... to use a wonderful Australianism "giving me the shits" and so the time was right, I haven't looked back.

I took advantage of the gradual move into business that microstock offered, by the time I was full-time I had already been "sole trading" for 5+ years in my spare-time, business name registrations, keeping tax records, bank accounts etc. had all been arranged. I'm sure that a few people reading this operate in the "grey economy", their microstock earnings have gradually built to more than just a "bit of pocket money", **sooner or later you need to "act pro" even if you are not doing it full-time.** Microstock is not just photography skills, you also wear a lot of other hats as a freelancer - business accounting, planning and perhaps marketing and promotion too (at least it does if you are doing it properly). Details like finance should be straightened out before you hand in that resignation letter, some of it is time consuming, in some cases registering for Purchase Tax/VAT/GST etc. needs to be done before you receive the money, or at minimum you need to know you will be earning less than the 'threshold' for the coming tax year. For myself it was only when I was completing a tax return and had to select my "*area of business that provides the majority of income*" did the title "photographer" (well "photography" was the actual choice) finally feel like the correct one for me.

(and of course day-to-day I feel more like a marketer and business administrator who does a little bit of photography on the side! lol).

## Tax Tip:

Don't forget all those tax offsets when calculating if you can afford to go full-time. In most cases so long as you are turning a profit for your business, and even if you are only working part-time you can offset the tax on:

- All your photography equipment

Depending on how you use it, and what portion of the use is business you might (depends on tax laws where you live) also claim for at least a portion of:

- Your computer equipment
- Furniture and office equipment and expenses (postage, consumables)
- Internet connection fees (phones, data plans, line rental)
- Utility bills and rental or upkeep of the portion of your home used for work purposes
- Work related transport and travel costs
- Conferences and training expenses, books, software etc.
- Fees at any services you use like smugmug, flickr etc
- Expenses you incurred while taking photos or other business related task

## Related Posts

[Online business for Photographers](#) [13]

[Why not just sell the images direct to the buyer?](#) [14]

[Transition from Macrostock to Microstock](#) [6]

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### Links:

[1] <http://www.microstockinsider.com/guides/the-microstock-leap-becoming-professional>

[2] <http://www.microstockinsider.com/glossary/term/14>

[3] <http://www.microstockinsider.com/glossary/term/12>

[4] <http://www.microstockinsider.com/glossary/term/13>

[5] <http://www.microstockinsider.com/glossary/term/27>

[6] <http://microstockinsider.com/guides/towards-microstock-a-photographers-transition-macrostock>

[7] <http://microstockgroup.com/holdingbin/MicrostockSurvey.pdf>

[8] <http://www.microstocktime.com/tool/stats/is/>

[9] [http://www.istockphoto.com/file\\_search.php?action=Browse&Cache=ca6b4177191c2d573a4ac5312d69b780&page=1&refnum=budgetstockphoto](http://www.istockphoto.com/file_search.php?action=Browse&Cache=ca6b4177191c2d573a4ac5312d69b780&page=1&refnum=budgetstockphoto)

[10] [http://www.istockphoto.com/file\\_search.php?action=Browse&Cache=2781ff59a3b18e31b7336204131058bc&page=1&refnum=budgetstockphoto](http://www.istockphoto.com/file_search.php?action=Browse&Cache=2781ff59a3b18e31b7336204131058bc&page=1&refnum=budgetstockphoto)

[11] <http://microstockinsider.com/guides/contemplating-starting-out-a-microstock-photographer>

[12] <http://microstockinsider.com/guides/topic-how-much-can-i-earn-microstock>

[13] <http://www.microstockinsider.com/guides/web-business-stock-photographers>

[14] <http://www.microstockinsider.com/guides/why-not-just-sell-images-yourself>