

Career shift: Employment to freelancing

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Abstract

There are often social stereotypes and mental barriers associated with a decision to be a freelancer. For me, flexibility and autonomy are the main values for choosing the path of freelancing; however, high standards and work ethics must be maintained with discipline. One way of practising discipline in freelance work is to keep a double identity: as a boss and an employee.

When the word *freelance* appeared in the 19th century, its usage was confined to describing mercenary soldiers.¹ Soldiers holding lances in the Middle Ages are now replaced by people carrying laptops in the contemporary era. We frequently hear the phrase “I am a freelancer” at social gatherings, which gives the impression that freelancers work less and enjoy their “free” time in exotic places. However, not many people are ready to jump at this immediately because oftentimes they would soon realise that they know nothing about life as a freelancer. During the decision-making process, the relaxed image of a freelancer is quickly obscured by fog. Here, I would like to discuss the mental barriers and inner battles when working towards becoming a freelancer.

Recently, I saw a friend who gave me a translated book about freelancing. The original book's title is *Free Agent Nation* by Daniel H. Pink.² I wondered why she chose that specific book, which was quite outdated since it was published in 2001. I then learnt that she left the consulting firm where she worked and started her own business as an independent policy consultant. Although the book was about the



“new” era to be led by freelancers in the early 2000s, it can still serve as mental support for newcomers in the field now. Welcome, my friend!

She said, “It is exciting to become a ‘solopreneur’ but I am also sceptical about my decision”. Interestingly, she chose the term “solopreneur” instead of “freelancer”, about which I will mention later. We discussed the reasons for her scepticism and concluded that it stems from the lack of social recognition for freelancers, rather than the typical reasons, such as uncertainty of failure or success. The lack of social recognition does not mean that people do not know the presence of freelancers; rather, it

refers to the fact that most societies are not yet ready to accommodate the rapidly growing, diverse populations of freelancers.

Stereotypes

The superficial understanding about freelancers and their various social standings play as obstacles that contribute to many professionals’ hesitance in their decision-making process.

In spite of the enormous growth in the number of freelancers, they are still classified as unconventional workers, strange geeks, or outsiders who cannot fit the traditional 9-to-5 jobs. As Daniel H. Pink pointed out, the freelancing sector has grown both in scale and

variety in the United States; the number of freelancers doubled within the last two decades and now it is estimated to be more than 50 million according to various sources.³⁻⁵ Hence, the term “freelancer”

is not alien to most. Moreover, similar terms have emerged, such as self-employed workers, contingent workers, independent professionals, independent contractors, digital nomads, on-demand workers, solopreneurs, micro-entrepreneurs, etc.^{6,7} All these terms refer to people who do not belong to an organisation but work for themselves; however, they can be divided into many subcategories. Some people are forced to freelance temporarily until they get hired again by a company, some people represent their own business but work for one client for a permanent period, and some people voluntarily choose to be a service provider for many clients to do what they do best. The complexity of freelancers’ jobs varies greatly, from micro tasks, such as filling out a survey on Amazon Mechanical Turk to comprehensive assignments like statistical analysis and developing a research protocol. Because of the wide spectrum of tasks and different freelance business models, it is difficult to define the term *freelancers*.

Introducing oneself to others, especially those who do not share similar professional backgrounds, with a sentence “I am a freelancer” or “I am a freelancing medical writer” usually prompts for more explanations.

To some, the image of freelancing is rather distant from the image of serious professionals. As previously mentioned, people usually associate freelancers with someone living a relaxed lifestyle. As a freelancer, it’s common to hear from acquaintances “why don’t you come over my place to have a lunch as you have more time than me?” or “I envy you, you have a free soul to leave your job like that!” People also associate freelancers with the terms containing *free*, such as free folks or freeter, which does not convey the ideal image of an expert in any discipline. The fact that the term starts with *free* does not mean that freelancers are free from time pressure or professional responsibility. Hence, to overcome the stereotype surrounding the term, some freelancers, especially professionals who are used to have fancy titles on their business cards, choose different terms like solopreneur to

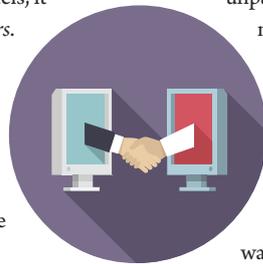


emphasise their entrepreneurship and to impress others.

Considering all these mental barriers (and not only the real-life challenges to setting up a business), you may wonder why I chose the path of freelancing. For me, the main reason was the flexibility and autonomy I can have over my work, and I still believe these two elements are the crux to becoming a freelancer.

Life in an organisation

When I was working as a full-time medical writer in a pharmaceutical company, I had to deal with uncomfortable social norms imposed on all the employees: wearing business casual, trying not to fall asleep after lunch, participating in after-work gatherings, being exposed to unhealthy snacks delivered by colleagues who frequented a convenience store on the first floor of the building, etc. Initially, I tried to adhere to those annoyances as a trained docile lamb in a culture of collectivism, but soon I found my ways of dealing with unpalatable situations. For example, I wore modernised versions of the traditional Korean dress called Hanbok, the loose fit of which gave me more breathing space than the typical tight business casual. To survive sleepy afternoons, I left my desk with my laptop and pretended that I was having a meeting in the conference



hall next to a breastfeeding room. Since all those who visited the breastfeeding room had quite regular schedules in expressing their milk in bottles, I was able to find some quiet time to refresh my mind for a fruitful afternoon. Sometimes I would call several female colleagues to join me in the main conference hall when it was empty, and we would dance salsa together. Besides, I did many things to make my office attractive to me, like installing a fish tank or growing herbs. I also formed a rock band with colleagues to avoid meaningless alcohol gatherings after work so that we could excuse ourselves for the band rehearsals. These anecdotal stories may sound like I did not enjoy my work. In truth, I liked my work very much and the company also appreciated my work (believe



me, I always got the best score at the annual work performance evaluation). What I did not like was the work environment and the social norms that was expected to be followed by all employees. This realisation struck me after almost 6 years of adapting to life in the organisation. I concluded that I would be more productive in a flexible work environment, which meant my own office, and this inevitably led me to starting my own company.

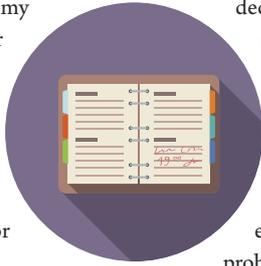
Flexibility and autonomy

After registering my own company, I searched for a physical office. Yes, I was still a slave to a stereotype – a company should have an office. Luckily, I was given a nice office for free for a year by becoming a benefactor of a governmental project boosting intellectual businesses. But I visited the office less and less, and I worked at home more and more. I still maintain a physical office where I can work but I keep that place for registration purposes mostly. Instead, I have established my own home office separate from the space for personal activities. This way, I can use my time more efficiently by removing the commute time. I don’t need to wear uncomfortable formal attire that hampers my work efficiency (the tightness of formal attire causes me migraines). I do not need an excuse to avoid alcohol gatherings, instead, I enjoy ballet classes at night. Unhealthy snacks from the convenience store are now replaced by fresh fruits or natto (fermented soybeans). When I get sleepy, I can have a cosy nap for half an hour without the stress of being found in an awkward place. Surprisingly, I now rarely feel sleepy in the afternoon. I guess it is a result of a healthier lifestyle, which became possible by investing time on physical activities like yoga and ballet, otherwise spent commuting and attending unwanted social gatherings. I can



control my own schedule and work environment, which is hugely important to an unconventional creature like me. In addition to the improved work conditions, I also invest the extra time on creative activities like playing musical instruments, taking photographs, and dancing. The amount of work and my work performance are not hindered by these extra activities, rather they have boosted them. I greatly enjoy the flexibility and autonomy in my

work and these two pillars support my work efficiency. Many other freelancers also value these two factors the most, as indicated in Daniel H. Pink's book: 74% out of 1,143 survey respondents replied that independence and freedom were the main reasons for their choice to be free agents.²



Does my story look attractive to you, especially if you have ever considered becoming a freelance medical writer? If so, I would now like to introduce the challenges a freelance medical writer should overcome.

Challenges when you hire yourself

Your client makes a contract with your company where you are the business owner (let's say, the boss) and an employee at the same time. It may sound strange to newbies, but as a professional, you should keep the two identities without suffering from a *dissociative identity disorder*. Your identity as a boss should assign a reasonable amount of work to your employee, provide him or her with an agreeable salary and a welfare benefit plan, maintain a healthy financial status, and set up a system to guarantee the quality of work. Whereas your identity as an employee should do your best to accomplish each assignment with high standards, polish your skills, and raise an issue if a problem is detected in your company. Both identities must function well to maintain a successful freelance business. In a big organisation, a mess created by an unskilled employee or an unqualified boss may not be visible immediately; however, such a problem becomes obvious within a short time in a one-person company, and it may cause you to lose several clients.



In my opinion, the "boss" should outweigh the "employee" when maintaining your freelance business. That means, you should constantly audit your work, the work system, and the work ethics, analyse the problem and its cause and arrange preventive measures. If we take an example of workload, the "boss" should not take on too many projects and exceed the capability of the "employee". If a freelancer does not separate these two identities, the person usually takes all available assignments without questioning hard enough to make an objective

decision. However, if your two identities are well-maintained, then your boss would push break at certain point or your employee might raise an issue, as either of them would eventually be overloaded to the point that work quality may be affected. This is especially the case when financial problems emerge; the desperate freelancer may accept work that is beyond his or her area or assignments that underpay. However, if you have a fair boss, you would not put your employee in such an unpleasant situation.

Keeping the boss and employee identities separate means having both an objective and a critical attitude to your business, so that you will not overexploit the flexibility and autonomy. For example, you could choose to start work whenever you want; however, your boss identity should not allow you to work between 2:00am to 9:00am because this would cause a problem when communicating with clients in the same time zone. Balancing this double identity in your business can help maintain high professional standards and strict work ethics.

You are not alone

A decision is always accompanied with an opportunity cost. We will never know what kind of journey is awaiting us until we hit the road. If you value flexibility and autonomy in your work and you have confidence in your skills as a professional, a new journey to settle down as a freelance medical writer will be enjoyable. Moreover, your journey would not be lonely as many other medical writers have already lit the light on the road you would take. Social stereotypes of freelancers are not applicable to freelance medical writers.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.



Author information

Hye-Ryon Kim, DVM, started her career as a full-time medical writer in a major pharmaceutical company in South Korea in 2004. In 2010 she decided to change tracks and became a freelance medical writer. Her company, Medical Writing, provides regulatory writing services.

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