



Out On Our Own

Editorial

Another story, another inspiring journey into freelance medical writing. Clotilde Jumelle took a leap of faith and went straight from postdoc to freelancing and has never looked back. In this issue, she tells us about the decisions she's made to get where she is and offers several strategies for other aspiring freelancers who are searching for their first clients and contracts.

If I've learnt anything over all these years of freelancing and chairing the EMWA freelance business group, is that freelancers are extremely motivated and determined people, with a huge amount of resilience. There are many ups and downs, set-backs, and skills to learn (such as accounting and IT). However, if you can manage all that and more, the pleasure of choosing your projects, working directly with clients, and getting their projects realised out-weighs those difficulties.

Clotilde is one of those freelancers. Her pragmatic approach into freelancing and her passion for what she does shines through here, and I'm sure reading her article will encourage other people to step into the freelance world. Even if you're an experienced freelancer, I hope these types of stories stimulate you and make you reflect on your unique freelance journey. Happy reading!

Laura A. Kehoe

A journey from postdoc to happy freelance writer

As a PhD candidate or a postdoc, your advisors expect you to dedicate your life to research. It is extremely rewarding, and I have no regrets that I followed this path. Nevertheless, after 8 years of working in research labs, I ended up feeling irritated, overworked, and unfulfilled. The fact is, I love working as much as I love not working.

Growing up, I was never able to clearly picture how my professional life would unfold – there were so many options out there! – but I was hard working and very keen to get started in higher education, pursue a PhD, and get my first experience as a postdoc in the field of ophthalmology. Then, I had the chance to go to the US as a postdoc at Harvard Medical School to continue my ophthalmology research. Born and raised in France, this opportunity to work in one of the most prestigious universities in the world sounded like a dream come true. But after 2 years, a large chunk of which occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, I realized that working in a research lab under these conditions was not for me. From that moment, I came back to France, and I started looking for the “Holy Grail” of a healthy work/life balance. Writing papers

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had always been my favourite part of being a researcher, because it means the completion of months or years of experiments that are now ready to be shared with the scientific and medical community. Therefore, freelancing in medical writing appeared to be a perfect job. And I was right, today I am more than happy to be “out on my own” because it completely fits the lifestyle to which I aspired. Needless to say, like any other job, there are down sides of self-employment, and I wouldn't recommend it to everybody. Going from postdoc to freelancer can be challenging for your bank balance at the beginning but can also be very profitable in a relatively short time span.

Advantages and limitations of freelancing after a postdoc

My postdoc experience gave me several skills which ended up being particularly useful when freelancing as a medical writer. First, we are trained to understand, analyse, and summarise all types of data. Moreover, we are used to preparing slides for presentations to scientists and lay audiences, and manuscripts for peer-reviewed publications. Therefore, we are

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particularly well adapted to provide this type of service to the clients and luckily for us, there are a lot of needs in this field. However, it can be complicated when trying to diversify the type of work we do. For example, writing regulatory affairs documents represents another type of work, which is particularly sought after, and would require a specific training course for freelancers coming directly from postdoc.

Getting started as a freelancer

Without previous experience working with or for medical writing agencies, it can be hard to know where and how to start, and there is a lot to learn at the beginning. Contacting other freelancers, who had to go through this as well, is definitively the best way to gather advice on how to start. I got the contact details of a few freelancers by word-of-mouth. They were all very kind and helpful and I really feel they are there as a supportive community if I have any questions. They can help to answer the large variety of questions we might have when we start: What are the different statuses for self-employment and which one to choose, how to create a website, the networks/groups to join (it was a freelancer who



To find clients, it is crucial to be resourceful, and to have more than one string to your bow in order to ensure a stable income and lifestyle, and thus decrease any negative stresses.

Image courtesy of Claire Canivet.

recommended joining EMWA!), and how to prepare a quote or an invoice.

Different strategies to find clients

Finding clients is by far the most challenging part of the journey for any freelance newbie, especially when you come from a very different environment, like research labs. Sometimes, it feels like we beg for work; it is often demoralising when we get no response, and we are always wondering if we will eventually find a client. During this phase, it is important to persevere and remain hopeful. Various strategies can be used to find potential clients. Here are three which I used to build my client portfolio in only a few months.

1 The first strategy is a passive strategy – word-of-mouth. Using our network

Most importantly, freelancing gives me the chance to control both the quantity and quality of my work in order to optimise the balance between work and personal life while being profitable.

represents a straightforward, easy, and fast way to spread the word and find clients. In our previous positions, including postdoc experience, we may have had the opportunity to meet or work in collaboration with people that can become potential clients or at least spread the word for us. The advantage is that they already know us, and our skills, and therefore, they are more likely to

trust us, give us work, and recommend us to their network. However, our connections may not be sufficient to provide us the amount of work we are looking for, and more active strategies may be needed.

2 The second strategy is to find potential clients using professional network such as LinkedIn. This strategy can be particularly laborious, but targeting clients directly gives you the best chances to find

someone who actually needs your services. The search tool can help you to target individuals working in a specific medical field or in a position that would require your services (i.e. medical affairs, clinical projects etc.). I spent literally the first 2 months of this endeavour sending teaser emails to the individuals I targeted. The emails were relatively short and contained my background, the types of service I could provide, as well as a link to my website where they could find more information. It is using this strategy that I found my very first and regular client, for whom I continue to work today.

3 The third strategy is to apply for full-time positions for medical writers listed by MedComms agencies. Even if this may sound contradictory with the idea of freelancing, these job offers indicate to us the companies that are currently and actively looking for the services we can offer. I applied to a few of these positions and around one-third of them accepted me as a freelancer. The biggest advantage to work for

MedComms agencies is that it will usually provide a regular work schedule, and constant workflow, which gives us some stability. Moreover, there is the distinct advantage of working for and with a knowledgeable team that we can learn from. Therefore, we do not feel alone in our work and do not have direct responsibilities with regards to the clients. However, although the stability is welcome, these agencies usually have short turnaround times and strict deadlines, giving us less freedom, therefore, a lot of adaptation is required to work with them in the long run.

To find clients, it is crucial to be resourceful, and to have more than one string to your bow in order to ensure a stable income and lifestyle, and thus decrease any negative stresses. I find it particularly beneficial to work both directly with clients and for agencies, since it gives me the perfect balance between freedom and team working.

Conclusion

Being a freelance writer can be stressful and as we frequently work by ourselves, can make us feel lonely. However, much of the stress can be

prevented by having enough experience with science and writing in general, letting us feel comfortable in the field of scientific and medical writing. It also requires soft skills suitable for freelancing such as being proactive, resourceful, and well organised, allowing us to search out and find clients and also respect their deadlines. Working with MedComms agencies can also provide the opportunity to work in a team and prevent loneliness, which is even more important after the shutdowns and distance-working of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some people have also asked me if it is boring to do medical writing, after leaving a very active lab with frequent “eureka” moments. The answer is clearly, not at all! Every day is different: a different client, different project, different medical field. Most importantly, freelancing gives me the chance to control both the quantity and quality of my work in order to optimise the balance between work and personal life while being profitable.

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The opinions expressed in this article are the author’s own and not necessarily shared by his employer or EMWA.

Disclosures and conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.



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After working for 8 years as a researcher in the ophthalmology field, **Clotilde Jumelle, PhD**, is currently a freelance medical writer for Kea Scientific.

Healthy home office

Writing mode



On-call mode

