If I’ve learnt anything over all these years of freelancing and chairing the EMWA freelance business group, it 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-weights 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 had always been my favourite part of being a postdoc because it means the completion of months/years of experimentations that are now ready to share the scientific and medical community. Therefore, freelancing in medical writing appeared to me a perfect job.

Writing papers had always been my favourite part of being a postdoc because it means the completion of months/years of experimentations that are now ready to share the scientific and medical community. Therefore, freelancing in medical writing appeared to me a perfect job.

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 trained to understand, analyse, and summarise all types of data. Additionally, we are used to preparing slides for presentations to scientists and lay audiences, and manuscripts for peer-reviewed publications. Therefore, we are 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. 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 definitely 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

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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 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

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.

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.
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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