

SECTION EDITORS



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Out on Our Own

Welcome readers,

This issue brings me pleasure and inspires me greatly, as I hope it does for our readers. Three freelancers-turned-entrepreneurs have taken the time and effort out of their very busy schedules to write in this edition of Out on Our Own about their very quick transition from being a sole freelancer to employing people and developing a business or two. Lesley Taylor decided after years in the industry as a senior medical writer she'd take a risk to go out on her own, and very shortly her ex-colleagues decided to join her to develop a business. Bruno Walter took a similar leap of faith,

leaving his job as a senior product manager for a medical device company to pursue his career as a medical writer. Very quickly, projects were flying in, and he had to expand his team to meet the demands. Lastly, Bilal Bham didn't necessarily think of becoming a businessman, but while freelancing, he enrolled in many business courses and is now the proud director of two businesses.

Becoming a freelancer, you're faced with an array of challenges but, as I can say from my experience and from hearing the stories of numerous others, the challenges are well worth it. Taking it that step further to develop a

successful business from your client base and employing others to take on the projects really requires courage and faith. These three entrepreneurs show us it can be done and done with a huge success. Of course, it isn't all plain sailing, and many skills need to be learnt along the way but working with a team that you have chosen, who follow your principles and passion for communicating science has to be a huge career and confidence boost. Well done to all of them and others out there who have taken this transition. I'm in awe!

Read their insightful journeys!

Laura A. Kehoe

Going it alone, but not for long!

My story as a medical writer began in late 2011. I had been a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Aberdeen studying cannabis-based compounds and their role in breast cancer when my husband, also a researcher at the time, was made redundant. We were expecting a baby imminently, so at 8 months pregnant we relocated to central Scotland for him to take up a new post which required country-wide travel. That was au revoir to my career in academia.

Around 6 months after having my son, I received a message from a former connection in the cannabinoid field. She was working for GW Pharmaceuticals (GW); a company developing cannabis-based compounds for various indications. They were looking for a medical writer, and my former supervisor (thank you Prof. Ruth Ross) had put my name forward. Apparently, this was a perk of having written up my PhD thesis in 3 months! An interview with Heather (who became my boss) ensued, and I was offered the role.

Becoming a medical writer was a steep learning curve. It took me around 2 years to wrap my head around everything, especially all the terminology relating to clinical research. The patient element of drug development was so different from academia, and there was much to learn. Over the following 7 years at GW, I had the opportunity to

write a wide variety of regulatory writing and medical communications projects and was promoted to Senior Medical Writer after a few years. Latterly, I was the medical writing lead for GWs clinical pharmacology programme, which involved line managing staff, being part of the department's leadership team and overseeing medical writing activities for a large volume of trials.

A career highlight was being involved in the successful NDA application for Epidiolex®. This was a huge achievement for the company and for our team, who had been actively involved in module writing and Advisory Committee

preparation. When things were stressful, I would joke with Heather that we should start our own medical writing company. We called the medical writing team 'the dream team', as we had such a good rapport and worked well together. My husband even joined as a medical writer a few years into my tenure!

Following FDA approval of Epidiolex®, the stars aligned, and in late 2018 I finally decided to try my hand at running my own business. Before I made the leap, my first port of call was to ask some fellow Scots what the market was like for freelancers. I used the EMWA Freelance Directory to search for local EMWA members and picked up the phone to Allison Kirsop (Scientific Writers Ltd) and Iain Colquhoun (Medeco). Both were extremely friendly and helpful and let me know that there was plenty of demand for freelance medical writers. They also gladly helped me with follow-up questions around dealing with

clients, billing, and bringing in business. Allison pointed me towards a series of books called *Freelance Medical Writing* by Emma Hitt-Nichols, which I duly purchased.

The book series was a great starting point.

It gave a step-by-step guide on how to set up a freelance medical writing business,



including advice on choosing a name, building a website, bringing in customers, buying equipment, and much more. After devising numerous lists, I put the wheels in motion and started developing content for my website, had professional pictures taken, registered the company name, spoke to an accountant, had a logo designed, and did (or crossed out) the other 50 items on the list. The book gave me the confidence that everything would be okay. For that reason, I would recommend it to anyone considering taking the leap.

In early 2019, the stars aligned again. Not long after starting Alchemy Medical Writing Ltd, my former boss Heather, who had been the Head of Medical Writing at GW, approached me about working together. So less than 3 months after starting my new business, one director became two. Five months after that, two became three, when my former colleague and long-time friend Lauren Whyte also decided to join the business.

We are still in our first year of owning and operating a small medical writing firm. So far, it has been great. The highlights for me have been engaging with lots of new people (although it can be quite daunting speaking with CEOs, COOs, and other executives), learning new therapeutic areas, and diversifying the types of documents I get to work on. I can also be much more flexible around my young family, which is very important currently. The upside of having business partners is having people I can chat to, joke around with, bounce ideas off, and who are at the end of the phone if my attempts to beat a document into submission aren't going to plan.

The downside was the pressure to quickly build a client base so that there was enough regular work to keep us all busy, but that really didn't take long!

For anyone considering taking the leap into freelance writing, I would say buy yourself the book I recommended. If that makes you feel confident, then you are probably ready. And don't be afraid to team up with great people.

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Out on my own, but never alone: From freelancer to managing director of a medical writing agency

This rainy Monday morning is a hectic one: The phone is ringing constantly; a rather pushy woman was just trying to persuade me to invest millions in her company; the mailbox is overflowing; the deadlines of two projects are breathing down my neck; the suspiciously friendly headhunter with the too-good-to-be-true candidate is calling for the third time; and then an employee's computer crashes. Terrific!

Six years ago, I could hardly have imagined this scenario. Six years ago, I quit my well-paid job as Senior Product Manager in the R&D department of a large medical device company to start my own business as a medical writer. I dreamed of more freedom, more independence, more self-determination. But the reality was different: Soon, I was struggling with accounting, legal, and administrative issues. I needed a company name, an office, a logo, accounting software, and all kinds of insurance.

So I started drinking my after-work beer with accountants, insurance consultants, graphic artists, lawyers, and IT specialists. I had expected a comfortable beginning, initially flirting with the idea of a part-time position alongside self-employment, but within two months of starting the company, the project requests literally overwhelmed me. My first Christmas holidays as a freelancer were not spent as a digital nomad on a beach in Bali, but brooding over clinical evaluation reports. Meanwhile, I could count on the assistance of my partner, who supported me from that point forward with administrative tasks. The company grew and grew, and suddenly I found myself in the unaccustomed role of boss. I had gradually morphed from my role as a sought-after specialist to an HR manager, project planner, and process optimiser.

Today I have four employees and am looking for a fifth; I am fully booked for months in advance and have to refuse orders; and yes, I work a lot and earn little because everything generated by the business is reinvested in the company and its employees. But if you want to be successful as an entrepreneur, long working hours and a modest lifestyle are part of the package.

What would I recommend to prospective

entrepreneurs? Persistence. Perseverance. Flexibility. And highly developed tolerance for frustration. Sometimes things don't work out as planned. And yet you have to go on, to dig in. You can't give up and need to maintain both a calm head and a healthy dose of confidence because in the end, things are never quite as dire as they seem.

You also need a lot of patience when you are looking for employees because finding the perfect match—on a professional and personal level—is incredibly challenging. Networking and self-marketing are also indispensable. You have to be prepared to talk about what you are

doing with your company, whether at a children's birthday party or a meeting with an old schoolmate. Opportunities are lurking all around you. All you have to do is recognise and seize them.

And as hackneyed as it sounds, a good work-life balance is indispensable; otherwise, you'll burn out quickly. I now plan my holidays well in advance and then try to disengage myself to the extent that I can and delegate my responsibilities. And I've learned something else: Acknowledge and trust your gut feeling and try to work with clients and colleagues with whom things simply feel right.

Meanwhile, back in the office, the thunder and lightning continues: a customer wants to push the timeline forward by two weeks; the inbox informs me that it has reached its limit; the cleaning lady calls in sick; and then the tax auditor announces himself. Sighing, I accept that I can't go sailing next weekend after all. Admittedly, the work-life balance doesn't always work out. The 4-hour working week suggested by entrepreneur Tim Ferriss feels like a cruel hoax. And yet I love what I do because nothing beats the feeling of satisfaction that flows through you when you lock the office door on Friday evening and realise that in 6 years, you have built a successful company from scratch.

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From freelancer to director of two businesses

The first and only time I wrote for *Medical Writing* was back in early 2012, after having been freelance for about 6 months. One was an article titled "Networking Effectively", and the other was an Out on Our Own article, because I had done well in my first few months! That desire to succeed, not go hungry, and pay the bills meant I quickly (had to!) learned to sell by phone, email, and LinkedIn AND to deliver quality on time!

Initially, I was quite happy being a freelancer, with no big dreams for growth. Like others, I have had my ups and downs and enjoyed not having much responsibility aside earning enough to live comfortably. I didn't think that this industry was where my fortune lay, so I got involved with another business, and I was very successful. I learned a lot about sales, marketing, and branding, and ended up going on a plethora of business courses through local business training schemes.

After this training and success, I set about rebranding my company name from, wait for it – Scripsi Scriptum Ltd – to Bham Pharma Ltd! I thought that having a Latin tongue-twister of a name would help people remember me, which they did, but telling them my email address over the phone became a mission! I chose BHAM because it is the acronym of our motto "Bringing Home A Modern Pharma", (although Bham is

my surname, which I realised afterwards...). I also chose Bham because I wanted to build a remote-working business model, across all of my businesses, present and future!

Changing my offering across all digital media and having a bit of luck with clients looking for more than one writer was key to our growth. Including me, there are three medical writers, and we have a business development manager, so there are four in total as of November 1, 2019. The skills I picked up in my other business and from the trainings I attended have helped me immensely, from team building to time-management, to conflict resolution, to positioning and having a unique offering.

I believe that working remotely using all the digital tools available to us is both the present and the future for business. Office space is often an unnecessary overhead. I also believe in a fair work-life balance, meaning that my team do not have to waste time and money trying to get to and from work, and can contribute quality work to their job whilst taking care of their personal lives. I have parents on my team, and I don't believe it should be an either-or scenario of kids vs job. So far, it is working for us! I have a team that works hard, produces quality, and hits deadlines but still enjoys its personal time. I suppose one thing I should make clear is that

I am a leader and not manager and have a relaxed style of management. My attitude is simple: We set achievable deadlines, you hit the deadlines, no excuses. When working 8+ hour days as we do in our profession, not every hour is billable because of meetings, client calls, and other day-to-day activities, so providing the flexibility to staff whilst making sure clients know what to expect and when is a fine but achievable balance.

I am enjoying the challenge (and headaches!) of running a growing business. I am only getting started, and there's a long way to go, but I am on my way! I also have a fledgling digital media agency, Bham Digital Ltd, which offers compliant medical social media services, and I am using the same model as Bham Pharma for its growth. I am still growing, learning, and developing, but so are my businesses, and I don't want to stop at two, because I believe there are still many new and transformative business opportunities in the pharma, biotech, and medical device industries that can bring value to both clients and employees. Here's to having 2020 vision and beyond!

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