

The grass is always greener on the other side:

Freelance vs employed, experiences from a seasoned medical writer

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Abstract

This article is a short personal piece that attempts to explore the circumstances and triggers behind moving from employment to the freelance world and back again. It highlights some pitfalls and high points along the way and illustrates the pros and cons of each status.

I like proverbs, little common-sense truths ... and this one sums up the freelancer versus employed dilemma better than most: Whether to remain freelancing, or conversely, remain employed, is a dilemma that will affect many of us during our medical writing career. It is a dilemma because each has its own pros and cons, and the pros tug at you from the other side almost all the time. Believe me, I have been doing this for over 30 years, and it doesn't change.

When you are working as a freelancer, you worry a great deal about the next project; you long for the assurance of a predictable income and regular time off. When you are employed, either in the agency or industry arena, it is hard not to feel tied and to long for the freedom of being your own boss. Of course, there are lots of

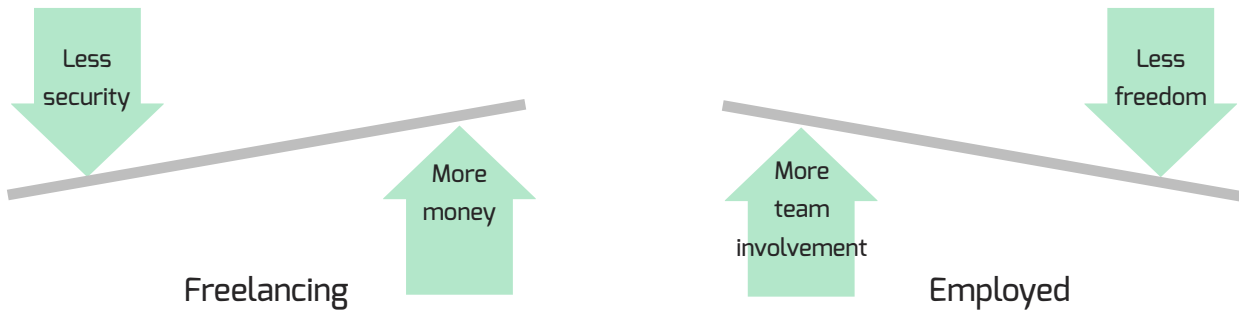
other pros and cons and it seems that for almost every negative, there is a positive, and this almost equal balance makes the dilemma even worse (Figure 1).

Moving in either direction is not difficult in these days of internet, talent spotters, and the seeming insatiable appetite for good writers. LinkedIn is a great resource and a little time spent 'hunting' through contacts and networks is time well spent, even though it might feel like spying.

This is my potted story and within it I hope to illustrate some of the pitfalls and some of the golden moments; neither is better, they are just different. I cannot offer advice; *we* are all different. We have different needs, pressures, and pulls. Moving from employment to freelance and back again simply reflects the ebb



Figure 1: The freelance vs the employed seesaw



and flow of our lives at the time.

I first became a freelancer as a result of circumstance rather than design. I was working in a big pharma company which had just been taken over by an even bigger company, and relocation was on the agenda. This coupled with an attractive voluntary redundancy package made it a 'no-brainer' for me, particularly since I had promises of work from many colleagues. A year in, I was working from home, inundated with

jobs, thoroughly enjoying my freedom, and earning what seemed to be a shed-load of money!

It is interesting to note that daily rates for freelancers have barely risen since then – 28 years ago! I think this has two drivers; there are many, many more of us around, and there is less money in the marketing and medical departments of big pharma today. So, we get comparatively poorer and, because of strong competition, there is an increasing pressure to excel.

The learning and challenge of freelancing

I continued happily as a freelancer for some years, expanding my network, building my reputation, and trying my hand at more and more types of writing. I worked on training programmes, product monographs, resource kits, public relations pieces, advocacy materials, abstracts, manuscripts, presentations, posters, etc. And I worked in many different therapeutic areas from

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vaccines to HIV, skin to respiratory disease, and medical devices to immunology. It was fun and challenging, and I was learning. (I have never worked in regulatory writing by the way – it is far too dry for me).

I think that it was this learning aspect of the work I most enjoyed – always a new challenge, and with it, the chance to hone my skills. I have always argued that medical writers wear many hats; one of the most important is the ability to learn a new therapeutic area very quickly and to be able to explain complex information in straightforward, accessible ways.

Learning and challenge was the upside. The downside was the comparative isolation; my friends and family, by and large, had no real idea of what I did. I was geographically isolated from any other medical writers and my clients, and there was no internet for skype calls. This meant that it was difficult to bounce ideas off other people and difficult to feel truly a ‘part’ of anything. Additionally, I lived alone and I worked too hard. I found it difficult to turn work down and was very poor at taking holidays and days off. This can be a real issue for a freelancer – I remember my first accountant warning me sternly; “you are your only asset” he said, “look after it”.

Needs must ...

Well, I did look after my asset and I got pregnant! Not an accident, but something that would change everything. My partner and I decided to move from gentrified, manicured Kent to the windswept, wet coast of North Devon; we wanted gritty countryside and sea. We wanted our son to grow up in a village community.

We were miles from anywhere. Freelancing was no longer a choice, it was an essential – no agencies or pharma for miles and no internet yet either. Luckily, I had a network of clients and they remained loyal. And happily, after a year or so, I also managed to negotiate a freelance contract with a med comms agency that gave me regular work two days a week. This was on one drug in one therapeutic area and was the start of a more flexible approach to working within the agency world. The internet was starting to blossom and although we were still using dial-up, it was possible to to-and-fro with documents much more easily. I was in a very fortunate position; I had enough work to pay my way, a delightful

new life in the country, and a young family to play with. And this is when the freelancer’s world is just right.

Am I being left behind?

Some years later, when I was starting to do more writing again, I became increasingly aware that things within pharma and the agency world had moved on, leaving me behind. Processes had changed, regulations had tightened, and digital technology was racing ahead. I had been stuck with my head down one therapeutic-area hole, doing largely the same thing for some years and had had no exposure to the larger world around me.

As a freelancer, it is not always easy to keep abreast of changes and to understand some of the nuances of organisational reshuffles within the industry; often the demands of the current workload take all your time and putting aside for training is not the highest priority. I think it was my lack of experience with new software that became my biggest worry at this time and despite trying to do some online courses, I was conscious that my skills were diminishing.

As a result, I started to look around for opportunities for “remote” employment. Nowadays, this is much more common and working full- or part-time from home is offered by many employers. In those days, it was a leap of faith for any employer. But I was lucky and a client of mine with whom I had built up trust and reputation, agreed to take me on. I worked four days a week, from home, as a senior writer and then editorial director. I undertook to visit the offices once a month and, actually, this was a pleasure rather than a chore. It got me out and really helped build my relationship with others in the company. Remote working is fine, but

I think you really do need to meet colleagues face to face on a regular basis to build up a positive and supportive relationship.

During my employment with this company, I built up business with an important US client, travelled to congresses

and client meetings, learnt lots of new skills and felt happy and part of a team. It was a really good move for me at the time; it built up my knowledge and confidence and made me feel valued again.

The cycle begins anew ...

But the old proverb started to raise its head, and I started to feel constrained again. The more I thought about things, the more the worm of dissatisfaction wriggled. Alongside, things changed within the company and eventually, after nearly three years, I resigned and returned to the world of freelance.

I picked up with old clients, found some new ones, and started to network more. Peter Llewellyn had started up his MedComms Networking initiative and this was a great help for those of use divided by geography. It has gone from strength to strength, and I highly recommend being part of it.

Now, another eight years on, I am employed again – yes, the same old circle ... I wanted more involvement, more client facing work, less last minute ‘can you just’ work. And I found a wonderful agency that took me on. They have a seriously flexible approach to working and a great spirit. I have been with the group for nearly four years now and have no intention of leaving. I have been through a couple of bad times recently and being part of the team and having some very kind and thoughtful colleagues has been a huge help and a wonderful support.

This is the strength of being employed – perhaps on balance for me, employment is the winner.

For now, at least ...



Author information

Clare Gurton has more than 30 years of experience as a medical writer/communicator. She has worked within the pharma Industry and for many different medical communication agencies and as a freelancer.

Alistair Reeves' story

It was at the Galileo Museum after the Florence EMWA conference that we crossed a threshold with no return. We approached the counter to buy tickets, and the friendly signora there said: "I am wondering whether you qualify for the senior citizen's reduction or not". Even if others in similar situations had thought this, it was the first time someone had actually voiced the thought that we were grey and wrinkly enough to look like – don't use that word – pensioners. As it happened, we had to pay the full price because the threshold was 65 years and we were still a few years off.

I used to think I would never retire. That had something to do with being a freelance editor and trainer. You could pace your work. If you wanted, you could do nothing for a week and then do a 60-hour week or do more or less training. And I really enjoyed that flexibility for about 15 years. But I noticed one day that my patience at training events was getting rather thin. How many more times would I be asked if there is a comma before *and*? And I was a little sarcastic answering a participant on one occasion – taboo for a trainer.

I stopped training at commercial events fairly soon after that, but continued editing. Things were not quite the same. I had translated, corrected, edited and rewritten poorly put together scientific documents in English with alacrity for 40 years (a colleague once said that I was known for liking "rescue jobs"), but now it was rapidly becoming a chore and I needed a rest from giving back-to-back workshops for EMWA. I didn't spend much time analysing why, because there were loads of things we had put on hold for retirement. Now was the

time to start. So I retired early almost 2 years ago, although I still do a couple of days a month for regular customers turned friends.

Two years on, I can say that I made the mistake of trying to do too many new things at once. I started learning the clarinet, and Italian, and also intended to brush up my Hebrew, French and Spanish, in addition to all the reading and DVDs that had piled up over the years. Sitting and reading during the day was still associated with a certain amount of guilt, because I could have been doing something "useful". I also envisaged us travelling a lot, doing weekly hikes and swimming every other day, and going to all sorts of interesting exhibitions, as well as getting on with overdue jobs around the house and garden. On top of that, music is our passion, and we scrambled to attend as many concerts as possible. We could never attend events during the week when working, and now we had all the time in the world. Oh yes – and I was going to prepare well-planned meals every day, and not just at the weekend.

Things have settled down a bit now. Those jobs around the house are finished. I am still learning the clarinet and I listen to French and Spanish audiobooks. I am catching up on reading (no guilt now) and go jogging and swimming. I cook a lot more, but we do eat out about twice a week. I run short seminars for EMWA. We still frequently go to concerts but don't overdo it, nor have we done as much travel as we thought – we did so much business travel that a few small trips and a "big" holiday once per year seem right at present. And now and again, I do absolutely nothing – which I can highly recommend!

Alistair Reeves

Medical writer (1977–2016),
EMWA Conference Director (2012–2014),
and workshop leader (1997–2016)



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