

How can coaching or mentoring help you craft a sustainable freelance career?

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Abstract

Crafting a sustainable freelance MedComms career can be challenging. As freelancers, we need to understand our individual requirements to design and implement a freelance business that will work from a personal *and* a professional perspective. Support from a coach or mentor can help freelancers define these requirements and create a realistic plan to craft a business that will meet them.

Introduction

I went freelance in 2018 because I had a young family and wanted to work in a flexible way. After 14 years in agencies, I'd had enough of the long hours, regular travel, and the feeling that no matter how hard I worked, there was always more to do. Freelance work would let me set my own boundaries, pick and choose the projects that appealed, and I would never miss a school concert or sports day. Heaven!

In reality, this scenario doesn't happen unless you build it. Simply working for yourself isn't a magic formula to having rewarding projects and a perfect work-life balance, but creating a sustainable freelance career *is* possible. In this article, I will explore what a sustainable freelance career really is, some of the barriers that can make it hard to achieve, how coaching or mentoring could help you overcome them, and where to find appropriate support so that you can have the career that's right for you.

What is a sustainable freelance career?

A career isn't a fixed thing – we evolve over time, and what suits, motivates, and challenges us will change with experience and different life stages. In Figure 1, I have outlined key elements of how

I define a sustainable freelance career, but just like careers themselves, there is no one-size-fits-all answer. Understanding what your ideal situation is, and proactively shaping how you're working to move towards that, is part of having a sustainable career. Another factor to consider is that we must sometimes move on from things that were right for us once, but now no longer work in the way they did before.

Julia Davies, qualified coach and freelance medical editor, highlighted to me the active "unlearning" process that can be a useful part of crafting a sustainable freelance career.¹ "There is no single 'correct' way to do certain things – there's only the right way for *you*, and that can also change over time," she explained. "If you take agency life

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and apply it to your new freelance life, this can lead to burnout, and an intensification of the issues you wanted to escape. It takes time and effort to consciously decide what sort of freelance business you want to have, and to implement that. It's not just a case of continuing the role you were doing in-house – as a freelancer you now run your own business."

There are a variety of other barriers that can prevent us creating a sustainable freelance career, and I have listed some examples of these in Figure 2. These are based on my own experience, plus my work with many freelancers, both as the person booking and briefing them within several agencies, and as a friend or professional mentor to others.² Again, these are merely examples of the barriers that freelancers may experience, rather than an exhaustive list.

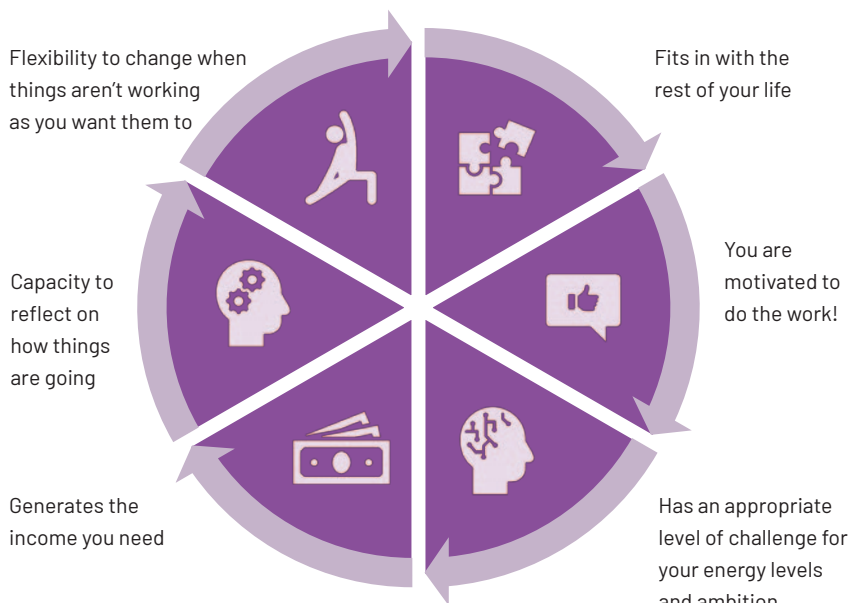


Figure 1. Potential elements of a sustainable freelance career

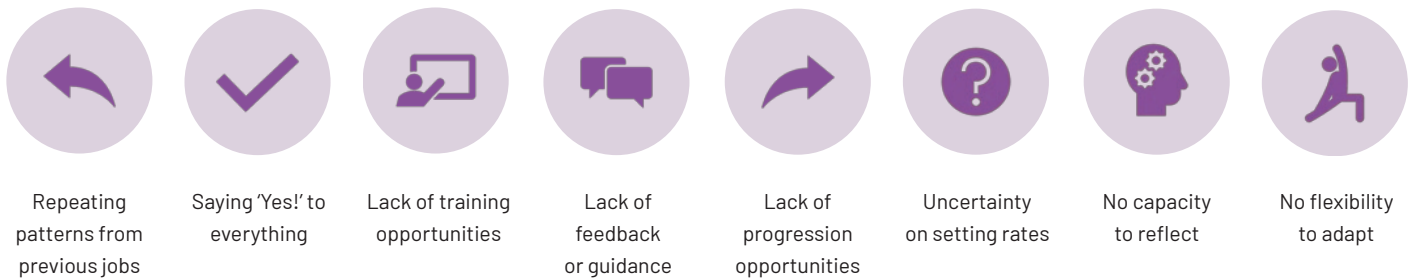


Figure 2. Potential barriers to a sustainable freelance career

Key questions for designing a sustainable freelance business

Taking the time to design the freelance business that suits you and your experience, skills, values, and requirements is daunting when you're caught in the hamster wheel of deadlines. However, it can be broken down into smaller questions, each of which could be considered separately, allowing you to gradually build up a picture of your current and ideal situations. Below, I suggest some questions you could use as a starting point for designing your sustainable freelance business.

If these questions bring up more questions or uncover deeper uncertainty that you are struggling to resolve, the book *You Coach You* by Helen Tupper and Sarah Ellis is full of insights and practical ideas to help you find your way.³ Helen and Sarah are co-founders of Amazing If, a company with a mission to make careers better for everyone, and presenters of the Squiggly

Careers podcast.⁴ They champion the career "squiggles" that are part of modern working lives and, besides their books, their website offers a plethora of free resources.⁵

What can we do as individuals to create a sustainable freelance career?

Ask for feedback

As freelancers, we often don't get the same level of feedback as in-house team members. Providing detailed feedback to freelancers is often regarded as a poor use of time by agencies. But that doesn't mean that as freelancers we should stop hoping for feedback! Instead, we can make it easier for our clients to give quick and simple feedback.

In the Squiggly Careers podcast episode on "How to give and get fast and frequent

feedback",⁶ Helen Tupper and Sarah Ellis provide multiple recommendations, including asking about one thing that was useful and one thing that was missing or asking how a similar project could be "even better if..." – two feedback frameworks that would enable clients to respond very quickly. Including simple questions like these when submitting work, or in a follow-up a few days later, won't guarantee you receive feedback, but would make it more likely that some clients will respond. Taking on board the insights you receive will help you focus time on aspects of your work where you may need to improve or find new processes, plus reinforce things that are working well.

Reflect on your work regularly

While clients may not always give us feedback, there are usually some lessons we can learn from any piece of work. Noting down things that went

Key questions to consider when designing a sustainable freelance business

Outside work, what other responsibilities or ambitions do you have?

- Do these currently get adequate time and focus in your life?
- How are these likely to change or develop over the next few years?

How much do you need to earn per month?

- Do you have a plan for ensuring you have this amount of work booked in each month, and a financial buffer for quiet months?
- If you have this amount booked, do you also have time for working on your business (e.g. finances, training, planning, networking, etc)?

In an ideal world, how would you structure your working days, weeks, and months?

- How do your current working patterns compare with this ideal?
- Are you able to proactively plan your time and stick to it, with a work-life balance you are happy with?

What kinds of project and/or therapy areas do you want to specialise in?

- If you're offered work in other project types or areas, how do you respond?
- Do you have a website or other method for sharing your specialities or preferences with prospective clients?

How do you want your business to develop over time?

- Do you have a business development strategy, including training to develop your skills, and contacts to cultivate into potential new clients?

well in a project, or what we particularly enjoyed, will help us use this knowledge in future work. Considering things that were more challenging makes it easier to come up with solutions or alternative processes to try next time. If we leave it until we are doing a similar project again, we may have forgotten the insights that seem obvious immediately after finishing a piece of work. Thinking back over a project will also help us focus on the kind of work we want to do more of or the clients we want to collaborate with again.

If clients do give us feedback, we should obviously consider its implications for future work and potentially develop strategies to incorporate any learnings into our processes. We can also record particularly good feedback into a Smile File – compliments and appreciative comments can be so motivating on the days when everything seems to be going wrong.

It's also worth giving ourselves a pat on the back for a job well done when we've finished working on something, rather than instantly switching to the next item on the to-do list. Having a break, if only for a moment, helps us internalise the achievement. I've recently started a new notebook for recording what I've achieved in my business. Each month, I jot down key projects I've completed, hurdles I've overcome, and new clients I've started working with. If we don't memorialise these things, they can blur into one. Without the regular reflection of line manager one-to-ones or appraisals, we can feel like we're working all the time without *really* achieving anything!

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Become part of a peer community

As a freelancer, one can feel very isolated. The confidentiality of pharma projects means we are trained from Day 1 that we shouldn't talk about our work outside of our teams and, as freelancers, we no longer have that team to help us let off steam. Cultivating a network of peers in the industry, both freelance and in-house, can open up opportunities for peer mentoring and support. This could be as simple as keeping in touch with ex-colleagues, signing up for freelancer meet-ups (virtual or in-person), or contributing to LinkedIn groups. Peter Llewellyn explores this topic in more detail in another article in this edition on p. 36.

If we talk about projects in a general way, redacting any client-related content, we could hear about new trends or interesting opportunities, while also creating scope for acting as reciprocal peer mentors within our networks. An additional benefit of this is that it will almost certainly help you develop your skills and approaches too – explaining something to someone else is invaluable for making sure we really understand a concept.

How can coaching or mentoring help support a sustainable freelance career?

Often when we're struggling with something, there are two things that we really need:

1. The time to focus on the issue and find potential solutions
2. A sounding-board to talk through our ideas with

This is where coaching or mentoring can be valuable. Paying for support means dedicating time to it, forcing us to take this commitment to ourselves and our business more seriously than if we were trying to fix things alone. It's the same rationale as paying a personal trainer even when we know we *could* create our own training plan. The ring-fenced time, and the professional we are working with, ensure we actually show up and do the work. And once we're there, other commitments and issues can fade into the background, making it much more likely that we will make progress on the specific challenges we need to overcome.

Furthermore, talking things through with someone who has experienced similar challenges or supported people in similar situations means we can learn from pooled experience rather than having to find our own way through every potential set-back.

Do you need a mentor or a coach?

While there is a lot of overlap, a mentor will usually have specific experience for you to draw upon, while a coach has more general training to help you reflect on your challenges and find your own way through. The lines between the two can be rather blurred, with mentors using elements of coaching in their practice, and vice versa.

Coaching

If you're struggling to define exactly what your challenge is, but you know *something* isn't working, it might be helpful to work with a coach. Charlotte Rooney, Burnout and Mindset Coach at A Half Managed Mind,⁷ explained to me that, "A coach is there to help you understand yourself better, working with you to define what you want, and how you can move towards getting it".

Typical challenges I support freelancers with as the MedComms Mentor

Skills gaps

- How to approach a particular type of project
- How to handle working with multiple freelance clients

Confidence gaps

- Approaching potential clients who are not current contacts
- Handling conversations around contracts or finances with clients

Career crossroads

- Designing and implementing a sustainable freelance business strategy that will fit their values and requirements
- Finding a permanent job that would actually suit them better than freelancing



A coach could also help you with challenges that aren't MedComms-specific, including burn-out, issues around motivation, productivity, or work-life balance, and more general mindset or business challenges.

Mentoring

A mentor will usually have direct experience that's relevant to the challenges you are facing. They will use this experience to help you develop your skills, understand potential directions you could take, and highlight tools you could use to overcome those challenges. In the chart on p. 70, I have outlined typical challenges that I support freelance clients with when working as the MedComms Mentor.

I work with clients to elucidate the possibilities open to them and use my experience to help them explore what will be the best fit for them. We then work together to build practical steps mapped out against a realistic timeframe to turn the possibilities into a solid reality.

Finding the right support

It is important to find a coach or mentor who you can open up to and explore potentially uncomfortable topics in a supported and respectful way. While coaching and mentoring is not a

regulated industry, most professionals will outline their credentials, ethos, and approach on their websites. Many will offer a free consultation to let you get to know them and their methodology before making a decision. Use these resources to find someone you "click" with before you sign up for paid sessions.

Whether we are sole traders or operating as directors of our own little company, we are running a freelance business.

But you don't necessarily need to pay someone! Mentors can be people you know, who are happy to have a coffee and chat to discuss how they've approached a challenge similar to something you're facing. If you're setting up an informal mentoring relationship, resources from the Academy of Medical Sciences could be useful.⁸ They have a series of tools covering mentoring topics such as types of mentoring relationships, helpful questions for mentors and mentees, and approaches for virtual versus in-person mentoring conversations.

Mentors can also be at a distance – people who you're not in regular contact with. When I was first promoted into a team leadership position, I would regularly ask myself, "What would Gary do?", when faced with tricky situations. He had been my line manager at a previous company and taught me so much that, even when we weren't working together

anymore, I could imagine how he would respond. This approach helped me sense-check my instincts before making decisions, giving me the confidence to do what was needed. Maybe you have someone from your past or among your current connections who you could think of as your "unofficial mentor", even if you aren't actually working with them on the things you're finding challenging.

Conclusion

Becoming a freelance writer or editor seems like a simple transition for someone with agency experience. It feels like a continuation of using the same skills but with greater control over how and when the work is done, and often a higher earning capacity. But that higher rate comes with strings attached that may appear innocuous until we find ourselves caught in them. No longer being an employee means we are responsible for everything – we must find our own work, manage our own projects, set our own rates, pay our own taxes, and send our own invoices. These considerations are new to many freelancers coming from an employment background and can seem like "additional" tasks that need to be slotted around the projects that "should" comprise our working time. In addition, training and professional development opportunities and benefits, like pensions and paid sick leave or holidays, disappear when we are forging our own business.



That is the crux of it – whether we are sole traders or operating as directors of our own little company, we are running a freelance *business*. But that’s not how we usually describe ourselves or how we see our work. Without that entrepreneurial mindset, though, we will often find ourselves struggling to find time for the non-MedComms elements, unintentionally replicating the working practices we intended to leave behind and wondering why it all feels so challenging.

However, with the right support – whether that’s from a professional coach or mentor, peers within the industry, or role models we don’t know personally – we can overcome our individual challenges and have the confidence to create a sustainable freelance business that will become a long-term, fulfilling career.

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Disclaimers

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

Disclosures and conflicts of interest

Eleanor Steele works as the MedComms Mentor, providing professional training, mentoring and consultancy to MedComms clients.

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