

The work model of hybrid freelancing

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Abstract

Must we choose between a path as a self-employed, freelance medical writer, or as an in-house employee? It might come as a surprise that a medical writer can enjoy both worlds. If you dream of becoming a freelance medical writer but dread losing constant cash flow, or if you are a company employee who wants to use spare time to do what you enjoy most, you may consider combining parallel professional routes.

In this article, I address the previously unthinkable possibility of such a hybrid work model.

Five years ago, difficult circumstances led me to leave my academic career as a biology researcher. I turned to scientific writing and communication as a way to continue pursuing my love of science while also working flexibly. At first, I saw freelancing as a temporary solution for income until I found a “real job”. Unlike many freelance medical writers that I met, I have never fully devoted myself to self-employment. When I eventually landed a job, suddenly I realised I did not want to give up my business completely. Over a year later, I re-negotiated to work part-time to keep freelancing as a side activity. This feature discusses the possibility of hybrid freelancing, which allows for a balance of both employment and self-employment. Noteworthy, hybrid freelancing should not be confused with hybrid work, which refers to a combination of remote and in-office work.

Hybrid freelancing: A missing opportunity until recently

According to a 2015 survey by EMWA, 5.1% of freelance medical writers were also employees.¹ However, the 2022 salary and compensation survey by EMWA did not report figures on hybrid freelancing.² Other recent surveys of medical writers divided respondents into two distinct categories of employees and freelancers without explicitly addressing the hybrid freelancing model.^{3,4,5} It is likely that the proportion of hybrid freelancers, who combine traditional employment with freelance work, has increased in recent years due to the growing popularity of remote work. The recent 2023 Freelance Business Survey did ask respondents this question and confirms this prediction, as outlined in the associated article in this *Medical Writing* issue (p. TK); out of 194 respondents, 17% claimed to be hybrid freelancers. This general lack of recognition of hybrid freelancers is not unique to the medical writing profession. Many global online surveys of freelancers do not provide statistics on hybrid freelancers.

As an example of a survey that does, the online platform Freelancemap found that 6% of respondents in the DACH region (Germany, Austria, and Switzerland), who were mainly in the IT, finance, and industrial sectors, also considered themselves part-time or full-time employees.⁶ Official statistics on hybrid freelancers are difficult to obtain, as institutions such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) typically make clear distinctions between self-employment and traditional employment. It is hoped that the changing nature of work models will increase awareness of the complexities of employment status, including the hybrid freelancing model.

What are the “combined role” freelancers saying?

I asked current or former hybrid freelancers, all of whom are members of EMWA, why they chose this work model. These are their responses:

Laura A Kehoe: “I took on a hybrid position initially to explore more document types that I

was less exposed to as a freelancer, with the aim of then taking that knowledge back into my freelance portfolio. It also gave me the reassurance of having a fixed salary per month.”

Namrata Upadhyay: “I hadn’t initially chosen a hybrid model; however, the circumstances (mainly COVID) ended up presenting this opportunity to me. I now choose nothing but a hybrid system and negotiate it as a must-have with all employers. Two main reasons. Firstly, the mindset that I approach my work (as an employee) has shifted. Since I have the security of my own freelance business, I bring a different level of discussion to the table at work, unafraid of judgement or so-called consequences, which is a welcome relief and great for one’s mental health too. Secondly, if I face a challenge at work,

I approach it as if I’m delivering the task to my client (rather than my employer). This allows me to approach challenges, again, with a unique mindset and has allowed me to excel significantly and be appreciated at work.”

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Satyen Shenoy: “I wasn’t actively seeking hybrid. I was freelancing full-time, until a great opportunity to work with clinical oncologists at a cancer hospital came up. This allows me to be involved in my passion for cancer research.”

The pros and cons of hybrid freelancing

Self-marketing and income insecurity can be intimidating for an independent professional. Thus, maintaining a few loyal clients alongside the job can provide a sense of security and predictability in terms of income. As a freelancer, you have the freedom to choose your favourite projects, but as an employee, you are bound to your employer’s demands and delegated duties. In addition, self-employed individuals are responsible for handling their own accounting, which is usually spared from employees. There have been many discussions about the pros and cons of being a freelancer versus an employee. I created a comparative table that compares employment to freelancing with another column on hybrid freelancing (Table 1). Freelancing generally offers more flexibility than traditional

Table 1. The pros and cons of hybrid freelancing

Feature	An employee	A freelancer	A hybrid freelancer
Independence	No (unless you lead the company)	Definitely	A combination
Social interactions	Working with colleagues, team spirit	Although clients may sometimes be viewed as colleagues, working alone can be isolating.	Solves the issue of loneliness associated with freelancing
Variety	Depends on your role and expertise area. Mostly limited to the company's product/service line.	A diverse range of work that you choose	A diverse range of work with the job component more predictable
Professional development	Depends on your role, employer, and development opportunities	Self-dependent. No one else covers training and qualification costs.	Skills acquired through employment can enhance performance as a freelancer and vice versa.
Self-marketing and networking	Unnecessary	A must	To a lesser degree. This work model may be suitable for a small, loyal clientele.
Income level	Depends on your role, employer, and expertise area	Depends on your skills, clientele, and workload	It matters not when income from full-time employment is similar to that of freelancing
Income patterns	Fixed monthly income	Fluctuations in income	A steady salary could provide a cushion against fluctuations in freelancing income
Flexibility in working hours	Typically regular hours	Mostly flexible hours	Flexible when freelancing. It can be difficult to navigate between working hours as a freelancer and those devoted to the job.
Benefits	Pension scheme, vacation/sick days, eligibility for unemployment money, etc.	Lack of benefits	Benefits only apply to the job
Workload	Depends on the employer's demands, delegated duties, and your working habits.	Irregular work. Busy times and downtimes. It is sometimes hard to say no to a client.	Workload is a combination of both. When the job becomes stressful, you may reduce your freelancing workload.
Work/life balance	Officially determined by contract. In reality, depends on your role and the employer.	A wide range – it is up to you to decide	A combination. When the job becomes stressful, you may reduce your freelancing workload to allow yourself more free time.
Commute	Commuting, to some extent, is required, unless the job is fully remote.	Typically no commute, except for meeting clients	Less commute
Accounting and insurances	No responsibility	Full responsibility. If desired, services can be outsourced	It can become more complicated when it comes to filing taxes
Privacy	No, when attending office	Yes	No, when attending office
Immigrants in Europe	Having a job contract can be beneficial in demonstrating integration and in the process of applying for a working permit or residence	Freelancing, especially when income is not high, can deter authorities. More difficult to get a permit.	Solves this disadvantage associated with full-time freelancing



Photo: Freepik

employment contracts. Hence, balancing part-time or full-time employment with freelancing is not easy. As a hybrid freelancer, it is helpful to maintain good relationships with both clients and colleagues and prioritise tasks based on their importance and urgency. Time management is key – you may choose to dedicate certain days or parts of the day to your freelance business and others to your job. Regardless of who assigns the task, it is essential to manage your time and responsibilities effectively.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed working habits considerably, as discussed in the September 2022 issue of *Medical Writing* entitled *A Virtual Workforce*. As remote work continues to gain acceptance, employees can allocate time to projects beyond their employment contracts. It is a unique opportunity for freelance medical writers who can opt for these hybrid positions and enjoy the best of both worlds. Yet, managing multiple clients and working with colleagues in parallel can be challenging; therefore, hybrid freelancing may not be a feasible option for everyone. It will be fascinating to observe how shifting work habits impact the development of hybrid working models in various professions in the coming years.

Disclaimers

The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and not necessarily shared by his employers, Porous GmbH and Charité Universitätsmedizin Berlin, or EMWA.

Disclosures and conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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