

# Freelancing – Are you ready to go solo?

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## Abstract

Freelancing offers an ideal way of making a living for many of us, providing the opportunity to work from home, and be our own boss. However, working for yourself comes with its own set of challenges and is definitely not an easy option. Success is never a certainty, nor is the level of income you will generate. This article provides some basic points to consider before making the transition and provides helpful advice for those already freelancing and want to maintain or grow their business.

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The reasons why people become freelance are many (Box 1): redundancy, or being fed-up with a long daily commute, or increased family commitments (so that working from home or having flexible working hours better suits their lifestyle). The reason I set up my own freelance business was because I wanted to work from home, to learn business skills I wouldn't learn while working for someone else, and to enjoy a greater freedom in managing my own time. My role as medical writer within a large pharmaceutical company meant the variety of documents I worked on was limited. Additionally, increased line management responsibilities made me feel I was getting further away from the actual writing I loved. My desire to develop my skills as a medical writer and widen my experience led me to become freelance in 2010. Here, I will share my thoughts and ideas on starting and growing your freelance business, based on my own experiences. I have assumed that you have a good level of medical writing experience to give you the confidence to freelance, and that you have funding in place to start your business.

## Box 1: Ten top questions to ask yourself before you take the leap into freelancing<sup>1</sup>

### Emotional:

1. Am I self-reliant, self-motivated, self-disciplined and self-confident?
2. Do I have the temperament to work on my own – to be my own manager and right-hand (wo)man?
3. Will I be able to cope with 'feast or famine' – both in terms of workload and income?

### Practical:

4. Can I cope without the resources/back-up provided by an employer such as IT help, secretarial assistance, pension and sick pay?
5. Do I have plenty of industry contacts/sources of contract work?
6. Am I comfortable negotiating my own contracts/rates and have I got a good grip on the range of rates my industry pays?
7. Do I have a clear idea on which of my skills/experience/interests I wish to focus?

### Financial:

8. Have I sought advice from a qualified accountant who knows my industry?
9. Is a fluctuating income acceptable, relative to my ongoing financial commitments (e.g. rent, mortgage repayments, school fees, etc.)?
10. Should I set up my own company or work as a sole trader? Or maybe I should work through an umbrella company or even an agency payroll?

## Before you take the leap

Freelancing is not for everyone. Becoming a business owner, or 'solopreneur', requires a mind-set shift from employee to employer. You may not employ staff, but you are responsible for your own success

and leading business decisions: ‘the buck stops with you’!

Besides having the necessary medical writing experience, you should assess if you have the personality for self-employment (Box 2). Freelancing comes with its own unique challenges. Write down the pros and cons of freelancing and be brutally honest about your personal strengths and weaknesses. Ask close friends and family, with no vested interest in your decision, to give you feedback and discuss your decision with those who are impacted, e.g. partners/spouses and other family members. Glenny gives some excellent advice on personal considerations before transitioning to self-employment.<sup>1</sup> Further personality traits and advice can be found in Reuvid.<sup>2</sup>

### *Box 2: Why go freelance? An experienced freelancer's story*

Helen Glenny became a freelancer in 1992 after taking a redundancy package on relocation of her employer's clinical research strategy and planning team. She had worked full-time for major pharmaceutical companies for about 14 years prior to going freelance. Helen opted to work on a sole trader basis as she wanted to keep things as simple as possible. As she was aware that some clients preferred to deal with a limited company, Helen decided to set up Glenny Clinical Research Ltd. in 2003. She keeps this as a dormant company through which she can operate at short notice if need be. It suited Helen to work flexibly, part-time and home office-based whilst her son was young. Twenty three years later she would be extremely reluctant to return to a full-time, office-based role as she relishes the flexibility, challenges and independence of being freelance and working from home. Helen also appreciates having the opportunity to work in a variety of roles and in a wide range of projects with different clients.

In a conversation with an experienced freelance colleague soon after I went self-employed, I explained how nervous I felt whenever I received a request for my services, because invariably, the work would be in an area I wasn't overly familiar with. My colleague informed me this was normal and that I should take on the project confidently. It's true. The more experience you gain as a freelancer, the more your comfort zone expands. Therefore, you become more confident in writing a wide variety of documents across a range of

therapy areas. So, where do you begin when creating your own freelance business?

## **Creating your own business**

### *Networking*

Networking is critical (see also page 175). Assuming you are in employment beforehand, tell as many colleagues as possible of your intention to become self-employed. Ask if you can keep in touch with them regarding a possibility of contracting work in the future. Congratulations! You are already networking.

Many freelancers gain their first projects from their former employer and this is a great first step. Write down all the people you know who could be potential contacts for obtaining work like former colleagues, managers, and people you've met on training courses and at conferences. Contact everyone on your list or connect with them through LinkedIn or other social media networks. Let them know that you are freelancing and available for work. Remember, these people will know other people and may move jobs or companies – so your list expands. Attend relevant conferences, training courses, and other events where potential contacts can be made. These occasions are also paramount for your personal and professional development.

### *Your working environment*

Ensure you have an appropriate space from which to work and conduct your business – ideally, a separate room with a door you can shut. This minimises distractions and interruptions from other household members and after a day's work, you can tell yourself you are finished for the day. This way you have a definite separation between work and home life. Consider even renting an office space locally – this may also offer the chance to network with other business owners.

You need to be able to focus fully on your work when you're 'in the office'. Ensure family and friends respect your time in the office and clients also respect these boundaries. Overworking is a common problem when working from home so be strict with yourself and take breaks. Remember, good ideas often arise when your mind is quiet and you're not actively thinking about a specific issue or piece of work. Having a separate phone line or mobile phone for business calls also provides appropriate boundaries between family life and business.

Try to invest in an affordable and ergonomically designed desk and chair. You will spend a lot of time in this environment, so you need to look after your health and wellbeing. Remember to budget for buying and upgrading office equipment and

don't forget the cost of consumables such as ink, paper, and other stationery items.

### *Having an online presence*

Several articles have been written about the utility of social media and improving your online profile.<sup>3-6</sup> Nowadays, I think an online presence is vital to ensure the success of your business. You can start with having a website. It ensures you have a professional, online 'face' to your business. It shows potential clients you are serious about investing in your business and success. You can create your own web site but it might be better to hire a professional website designer because you will have enough to do. Additionally, a web designer will know how to optimise your website with regards to search engines and should be aware of any country-specific legalities. This doesn't mean you can't write your own website content – in fact I would suggest you do. After all, it's good writing practise and means your content is authentic to you – it speaks to your ideal client in your own words, which is all part of your marketing strategy. Consider buying a website domain and email address that contain your business name (e.g., <http://www.businessname.com>; [yourname@businessname.com](mailto:yourname@businessname.com)). Again, I think this gives a professional edge although there are many freelancers who are successful using more generic websites and emails, such as gmail. Keep your website content and other profiles (e.g., LinkedIn) up-to-date. I've found LinkedIn to be an invaluable way of generating interest in my business.

### *Marketing*

Love it or hate it, all freelancers are marketers! The term 'marketing' seems to sound alarm bells to many freelancers, but it doesn't have to. Useful resources include De Faoite's workshop on marketing (EMWA Workshop PTF19: An Introduction to Marketing for Medical Writers), De Milto,<sup>7</sup> and Storm Lane<sup>8</sup> on how to build your business profile. Marketing doesn't have to be a 'hard sell'. In fact, this is probably the least successful way of getting clients. Be yourself! Think about it: we buy from people who we connect with, who give us great customer service and make us feel valued. The same applies to your potential clients. Consider having a professional photograph of yourself for your LinkedIn and social media profiles and website. As freelancers, we are the face of our company. Frequently we work remotely from our clients, some of whom we may never meet in person, so it is helpful for them to 'connect' with us through a photograph. Increase exposure and

build your credibility by writing articles, blogs and newsletters or giving seminars and workshops.

### *Legalities*

Get legal advice on the kind of business you want (limited company, sole trader, etc.). Research the insurances you may need to run your business. Requirements will differ depending on whether you have set up a limited company or whether you are working as a sole trader. Some clients may insist you have certain insurance policies in place, e.g. indemnity insurance, before they contract your services. For more information see Lane<sup>9,10</sup> and the UK Association for Independent Professionals and the Self Employed (IPSE) website (Box 3). You should have an accountant to ensure compliance with tax legislation and help you manage your business finances, which can take a substantial amount of time. You can then concentrate on other aspects of your business, especially your client project work.

#### *Box 3: Useful resources for freelancers*

- The Association of Independent Professionals and Self Employed have also published a guide to freelancing which can be downloaded as a pdf from <http://www.ipse.co.uk>.
- The website of business coach, Christine Kane, president and founder of Uplevel You™, is another great resource for those who wish to improve their business management skills. For more information and to sign up to her weekly eZine, please go to <http://www.christinekane.com>.

## **Maintaining and growing your business**

If you are now an established freelancer, you cannot relax entirely. You need to stay focussed to keep your business running smoothly and efficiently for long-term success. Most small businesses fold within the first five years.<sup>11</sup> Why? Burnout! As freelancers we wear many different hats (Figure 1). As you become more established, managing work flow on top of managing your business becomes a greater challenge, and efficiency is critical to avoid exhaustion. You need to manage your time effectively to take care of your business and client responsibilities.<sup>12</sup> Experienced EMWA colleagues have provided some helpful hints on how to ensure longevity as a freelancer.<sup>13</sup> Here are some more useful tips to help you maintain that work-life balance.



Figure 1: Freelancers have to juggle a lot of different roles.

### *Boundaries*

If you want clients to respect your time, then you have to respect your time too. Managing work flow is a key challenge for freelancers working with several clients and different projects. Also, projects rarely run within the agreed timelines. When clients try to change timelines, let them know what you *can* do, rather than what you can't do. Negotiate in a positive way. Learn how to centre or ground yourself before entering these conversations to give yourself the best chance of getting the outcome you require. Being a solopreneur requires strong self-leadership.

### *Systems and processes*

Try to avoid 'you' becoming the bottleneck in your own business. Look for ways in which you can semi-automate tasks you always have to do. For example, create templates for frequently sent emails such as those accompanying invoices. Adopt good habits to keep on top of essential business-related tasks, such as setting time aside each week for book keeping and marketing. Consider delegation. Virtual assistants are becoming popular for outsourcing administrative tasks. Think outside the 'business box' – consider employing a gardener or cleaner to create more time. Not only are you investing in a local business, it frees up your time to do your 'high value' work, which generates the most income. If workload continues to increase, you can subcontract some work to fellow freelancers, who you know have good working standards, so you keep your clients happy without overstretching yourself.

### *Personal and professional development*

It's easy to neglect your own personal and professional development when you become freelance. But it's important to set time for this to ensure

longevity of your business. Keep up to date with developments in your specific working areas and continue to cultivate your medical writing skills by attending seminars, workshops, etc. Consider hiring a business coach. Mine has not only opened my mind to opportunities I wouldn't have otherwise known about or considered, it has also extended by network of business and potential client contacts and expanded that comfort zone.

Loneliness can be an issue if you work alone from home. However, joining a local business owners' forum or meeting up with other freelancers can be a great way of combating the feeling of isolation. And, if there isn't a freelancers' group close by, create one!

## **So, are you ready to freelance?**

Freelancing presents its own unique challenges and worries. The degree of flexibility of working hours and work load will depend on how well you set your boundaries, and how much financial value you place on your services. However, it can be rewarding in so many ways. For example, you can get to know other freelancers to share ideas, experiences and challenges with. You can also gain skills on managing a business, which I believe are also transferable if you later decide to go back into employment.

Often, people refrain from going freelance because of worries of not having enough work. This is an important consideration so you have to discuss your decision to go freelance with those affected by it. However, medical writing seems to be an area in which freelancers thrive. I firmly believe that a positive attitude makes you come across to clients differently. It changes your personal energy or confidence which means you're more likely to attract clients. In fact, once you've

managed to overcome this ‘mental hurdle’, you may find that the new issue holding you back is the fear of coping with success.

Self-employment is not for the faint-hearted and mistakes are inevitable as we push the boundaries and expand our comfort zone. But, ‘what the rest of the world calls failure, marketers and business owners call “R&D”’.<sup>14</sup> If you want to expand your medical writing skills and gain business management experience, while enjoying the freedom to work from home and autonomy of self-leadership, freelancing may just be for you.

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## Conflicts of interest and disclaimers

The views given in this article are those of the authors and do not guarantee business success.

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**Kathryn White** worked as a medical writer in the pharmaceutical industry before embarking on a freelance career. Since then, she has worked alongside business coaches in the UK and US to improve her business management skills. She has presented seminars and published articles about working more effectively as a freelancer.