

## Out on our own

Many of you have already accessed the minutes of the Freelance Business Forum at the London Conference on the website, but just a reminder for those of you who have not yet managed to do so: after logging in, go to the Discussion Forum, open the Freelance Section, and one of the items contains a link to the minutes. Any comments should be made within the Discussion Forum to encourage discussion. If you want to be emailed when a new comment is posted on an item that interests you anywhere in the Discussion Forum, click on 'Subscribe' at the bottom of the item.

The Freelance Discussion Forum has now been up and running for about 3 months and offers a much requested improved option for airing views and fielding questions than its forerunner, the Email Discussion Forum. There have not been many contributions so far and we have been wondering why—it surely cannot be that there are no burning issues out there. So here is another call to visit the Discussion Forum and make your presence felt.

The costs of EMWA conferences for freelancers have been controversial in the past, so we asked three freelancers from different countries to track their expenditure on

attending the London Conference, to give freelance members an idea of what costs might be when they attend future conferences. Our three chosen colleagues felt that their outlay was a worthwhile investment. Read more in the following pages.

In this issue, Ursula Schoenberg shares some thoughts on how to say 'No' to clients and has some useful suggestions to dispel that lingering feeling that you might have taken a wrong decision when you turn down the offer of a job, especially from new clients. And Alison McIntosh tells us about two potential jobs she turned down (we suspect Ursula and many others would have done the same!). In a new feature, Raquel Billiones takes a frank look at the trials and tribulations of a week in the life of a freelance medical writer which will find resonance with more than a few working parents!

The Ljubljana Conference will soon be upon us. We look forward to seeing you there!

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## How not to ask a freelance medical writer to help you with your writing task!

I have withheld the names of people to protect their identities but these are real enquiries that have not been altered in any way (including the pseudo mobile phone texting words in the second request).

Received by email two days before Christmas: "I reside in the US. I am leaving on a 3 week vacation tomorrow and need a literature search and summary on a drug's side effects to be ready in about 3-3 1/2 weeks from now. I will give more details after contact. What are your fees?"

This I received from a student: "I am a medical student

and require a literature review to be conducted regarding a patient, the literature review should relate to my patient, I should also assess the strengths and weaknesses of the literature. I can select a patient from a variety should it make it any easier conducting the literature review, i can also provide an example. Can you please advise me if you may be able to help." Unfortunately they did not supply the name of the university department they were studying at, or I would have contacted them to make them aware of this request.

I turned these requests down. What would you have done? Have you had any similar requests from unthinking potential clients?

### Alison McIntosh

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## When to say “No”

by Ursula Schoenberg

Put any random group of freelancers together at a table, and I will place bets with you that sooner or later the perennial topic will crop up: when do you turn down a potential new client? This is a tough question triggered by the world’s worst advisor: fear. When you put the phone down after a “No, thank you”, the following cascade of doom-laden thoughts tends to assault even the most resilient of minds: A) That client was the best one in the world and I should have grabbed them at all costs; B) They will never come back again; C) I could have pushed the deadline for Company X to fit the contract in; D) That extra income would have come in handy; E) Now I’m jinxed and the phone will never ring again; F) I will end up in penury and will have to go live under a bridge.

The more experienced you are in the world of ‘precarious’ employment (this is what the Germans call it, and please note the derogative and fear-inspiring undertone), the less time you spend worrying about it. But seasoned colleagues have assured me that these thoughts never go away completely. You have to learn to live with them—like boils or a herpes virus. I turned down three potential new clients last year, and when I wake up at 3 in the morning, I start obsessing about it. This is in spite of the fact that I’m in my 6<sup>th</sup> year of freelancing and have acquired two delightful clients with considerable work volume and long-term potential instead. This is rational behaviour? No.

So in order to banish the ghosts and perhaps give other freelancers some help on this issue, I’ve gathered a few examples from my own experience that may serve to give you a feeling for when your inner ‘alarm bells’ should go off. If you encounter one or more of the following, you might do better to just say “No”.

### The incredible expanding project

We’ve probably all had experience with this phenomenon: you are in a project, and it keeps getting, if not bigger, then at least longer. When it happens with established clients, you have to roll with it (preferably in a Zen state of mind). But when it is already obvious with a potential new client, try to bow out. I got an e-mail from a new client with a short project brief and the request to call back. When we started discussing the project in more depth on the phone and I asked some searching questions, the 20-page white paper suddenly metamorphosed into 40 pages (“Oh yes, and we need the same material for patients and medical service providers, but the language should be tailored to

each target audience, can you do that?”). Of course this was all required in the same super-tight deadline frame, no extension possible. And to top it off, the client could not tell me when she would be receiving input on the project from her client. I said “Thanks, but no thanks.”

### Ghost companies

Never ever work for a company whose website has impressive mission statements, extensive philosophies, trendy background music and/or fancy flash animations—but no people mentioned or pictured on the site. To work professionally and successfully, you need a certain degree of accountability. And what does it say about a company if the people you will be accountable to are obviously marginal entities?

### The risks of mega-projects

When a new client has a project with such a large volume that you would have to work on it exclusively for several weeks, turn it down. As freelancers, we all learn to juggle clients and deadlines, and sometimes you have to make decisions about birds in the hand and in the bush. You don’t know these people yet. You don’t know how they handle projects. You don’t know if they will pay you, and if so, whether they will pay in a timely fashion. And while you are working on their stuff, chances are that either current clients or other new clients will give you a call. You then have two (not very attractive) options: either you turn them down, or you end up overcommitting, working 24/7, collapsing, and needing a rest cure. If the mega-project sounds really interesting, or there is some other reason you want to take it on, at least consider asking for a down payment of 30 to 50 percent. This is a practice that seems to be more widespread in the United States than in Europe. So the new client may blanch at this request, and one of two things will happen: they will go find someone else or they will comply with your conditions, in which case you can at least pay for the rest cure after the project is over.

### Dubious practices

A new client called me once with the following request: they would like to get to know me, preferably the next day at their office. If they liked what they saw, we would have a meeting with their long-term pharmaceutical client several days later to discuss a large project with a tight deadline. At this meeting, they would introduce me as someone they had been working successfully with for several years. I got out of it. My rationale: if this is the way they treat clients, how are they liable to treat freelancers, who are considerably further down the food chain?

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## &gt;&gt;&gt; When to say “No”

**Play dead on Fridays—and in December**

I have a freelancer friend who does not answer her cell phone from 3 p.m. onwards on Fridays. Why? Because, to quote her: “Everything that comes in on Friday afternoons is garbage”. Either it is a project that has to be finished on Monday morning. Or you are talking to a new client who is so badly organised that they did not realise on Monday or Tuesday that a new project requires organisation and planning. This phenomenon can also be observed with regard to the fiscal year. Those are the phone calls at the beginning of December when someone has woken up to the fact that an allocated budget has to be spent by the end of the year—or else. Everyone is free to do what they choose. But if I have the choice, I hate to work with people who are badly organised. My advice: play dead on Fridays. And only work with your established clients in December.

**The John le Carré scenario**

Sometimes freelancing can be very diverting. I once got a phone call from a man who purported to have worked for a large pharmaceutical company and now wanted to “write a book about what really goes on behind the scenes”. These sorts of requests can be amusing, but they are not really serious projects to get involved with. Unless, of course, David Cornwall’s fact checkers come calling ...

**Pigs in a fog**

Try not to get involved with clients that don’t let themselves get pinned down. With a little experience, you can usually intuitively recognise these people during the first phone call. They are unclear about deadlines. They think there will be research that you will have to do on a topic, but the amount remains unspecified. You do not know who your main contact will be, or the contacts keep changing. If you take on clients like this, work will be frustrating. Don’t do it. Remember—life is short.

I wish there was a divining stick to simplify the process of identifying thankless clients. But since there isn’t, I can only assure you that one does get better at it with time and practice. For you beginning freelancers: make yourself a standard list of questions about a project that you keep next to the phone. When someone calls, go through the list. Stall a little bit to draw out the conversation and try to get a feeling for the person at the other end. And don’t ever be afraid of listening to your ‘gut feeling’. Because if your emotional brain is sending panicked messages to your rational brain that this is not a good idea, you might do well to listen.

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**English FAQs: Do I use the plural or singular form of the verb when using ‘percent’?**

This problem is associated with the verbs *to be* in the present and simple past and *to have* and any other verb only in the present. The reason for this is that the present (*is, are*) and simple past (*was, were*) verb forms of the third person singular and plural are different for *to be*, and in the present (*has, have*) for *to have* and all other verbs (e.g. *puts, put*). These forms in the simple past are the same for *to have* (*had, had*) and all other verbs (e.g. *took, took; showed, showed*). The difference in verb number is therefore not obvious in many cases and leads to insecurity when using *to be* in these tenses and *to have* in the present.

In formal writing, percent values are almost always followed by *of*\*. The choice of the number of the verb depends on the number of the object of the preposition *of*. Hence: *More than 90% of arginine vasopressin in the circulation **is** bound to platelets, resulting in underestimation of the actual amounts released.* In this sentence, we are talking about ‘part of a whole’: of all arginine vasopressin (the object of the preposition *of*), more than 90% is bound to platelets. A further example: *More than 50% of the tissue **was** unsuitable for analysis.*

But: *60% of the serum samples **are/were** unusable because of haemolysis.* In this sentence, the object of the preposition *of* is the *serum samples* which is in the plural and means ‘some of many’; the verb is therefore in the plural. A further example: *More than 90% of the patients **were** obese.*

The following examples illustrate the use of *to have*:

- *50% of the cartilage **has** evidence of urate deposits/50% of the samples **have** incorrect labels* (has and have are appropriate because cartilage is singular and samples is plural, and the difference is evident from the number of the verb).
- *50% of the cartilage **had** evidence of urate deposits/50% of the samples **had** incorrect labels* (number of the verb looks the same, but the first verb is actually singular and the second is plural).

Like the example with *had* above, the following illustrate how you cannot distinguish between the number of the verb in the simple past with the verb *develop* representative of all other verbs: *50.0% of the herd **developed** (singular) acute diarrhoea within 4 hours of dosing/65.4% of the dogs **developed** (plural) twitching of the hind legs after 3 days.*

\* In less formal writing and when speaking you may skip the prepositional modifier of the percent (20 horses were enrolled; 25% were mares.), but this does not affect the number of the verb.

**Alistair Reeves**

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## Cost of attending London Conference

by Alistair Reeves

I didn't actually hear any grumbles in London, but at previous conferences over many years, freelance colleagues have complained on and off that EMWA events are (too) expensive for freelancers. So we asked three freelancers from different countries to track the cost of attending the 27<sup>th</sup> Conference in London, from leaving home to getting back (not taking 'lost' earnings into account), and we'll be doing the same for three colleagues from different countries who attend the Ljubljana conference in May 2009. When I see what commercial training events cost, I always think EMWA offers excellent value for money. I also assume that in most countries, as in Germany, expenditure on professional training is tax-deductible for freelancers, which means that depending on your income and country, you can probably knock off between 20 and 40% of the costs of attendance from the actual sum spent. That coupled with all the learning and networking opportunities means that EMWA really does offer a unique service. At least I think so.

We approached Moira Cockell from Switzerland, Anne Murray from Spain, and Iain Colquhoun from Scotland to track costs, and also asked them to tell us whether they thought EMWA events offered good value for money. So let's see what they thought. Their expenditure is summarised in Table 1.

### Moira Cockell



As a part-time freelancer with a second occupation, I aim to budget time and finances to accommodate one EMWA conference a year. Living up to my Scottish origins, value for money is always an important factor in my calculations; so at the three previous meetings I've attended since joining EMWA in early 2006, I lodged in small, modestly priced establishments close to the conference venues. I've never felt that staying offsite interfered with networking opportunities. It also gives me a flavour of the local atmosphere that isn't easy to find in mega-hotels with conference facilities for several hundred participants. This year, exceptionally, I managed to attend both the spring and autumn conferences by combining the second with a family visit. My husband agreed to take a couple of days off work and I booked two tickets to London.

I didn't actually hear any grumbles in London, but at previous conferences over many years, freelance colleagues have complained on and off that EMWA events are (too) expensive for freelancers. So we asked three freelancers from different countries to track the cost of attending the 27<sup>th</sup> Conference in London, from leaving home to getting back (not taking 'lost' earnings into account), and we'll be doing the same for three colleagues from different countries who attend the Ljubljana conference in May 2009. When I see what commercial training events cost, I always think EMWA offers excellent value for money. I also assume that in most countries, as in Germany, expenditure on professional training is tax-deductible for freelancers, which means that depending on your income and country, you can probably knock off between 20 and 40% of the costs of attendance from the actual sum spent. That coupled with all the learning and networking opportunities means that EMWA really does offer a unique service. At least I think so.

It's a one-hour journey by car to Geneva airport from our almost-mountain village of Savigny in the canton of Vaud, Switzerland. In theory, neighbouring Lausanne's brand new, fully automated metro has reduced the total time it takes us to get to the airport by public transport, to just one hour and a half. However, a month after opening, the metro was still having sporadic teething troubles. With a weekend forecast of snow at low altitude, we were concerned about getting stuck downtown after the return flight on Sunday evening. The cost of airport parking fees for four days is similar to the cost of public transport for two adults, so we eventually decided to drive to Geneva.

The trip to London cost much less than I'd normally expect to spend on attending an EMWA conference. I usually run up quite a bill for mobile phone and Internet access when travelling. This time I didn't need to pay for virtual contact, as the only manuscript I had brought to work on was one of my own. Other than travelling expenses and conference fees, I had practically no costs to pay. We stayed with my parents-in-law who live in central London. The conference venue was a twenty-minute tube ride from their home. That was not only fortunate for my purse, but also for my poor feet, which suffered all weekend from the singularly inappropriate footwear I had brought along. Note to self: for the next conference trip, pack comfortable flat shoes.

For future reference, here are a couple of other tips from a supposedly seasoned London traveller: I only just discovered that London's rail services have special offers not available from the automatic distributors. On arrival at the train terminal of Gatwick Airport, it is worth the extra few minutes of queuing to buy a ticket at the manned kiosk. For instance, our tickets to central London and back were £4 cheaper per head because the return leg was on a Sunday; the standard train line is also considerably cheaper than the Gatwick Express and gets to central London in much the same time.

I didn't attend the London conference dinner because of family commitments. However, the other social breaks in between sessions were a useful opportunity to seek advice about which workshops to choose in forthcoming conferences. I completed the requisite number of credits for a foundation level EPDP certificate in spring of 2008 and hadn't yet given serious thought to enrolling for the advanced certificate programme. EMWA's advanced workshops cover lots of topics that I'd like to learn more about, but I did wonder if I was too far from the profile of a "real" medical writer to benefit from them. Having stepped into

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freelance writing and editing directly from a background in basic life sciences research, I don't expect to get much on-the-job experience in regulatory affairs or clinical trials reporting. In the end, I opted to sign up for two of the workshops offered in London—one at foundation level and one at advanced. Both turned out to be great choices, well worth attending for their inherent value outside of collecting credits for the certificate programmes. I'm looking forward to attending other foundation and advanced workshops and will probably re-enrol for credits before my next conference. It is always a huge pleasure to be in an interactive environment where people are not only motivated to learn but willing to reciprocate by sharing their own knowledge and experience, so to me, the EMWA conferences really have great value as a learning opportunity. Certainly, the efforts that both workshop leaders and participants put into the pre- and post-assessment exercises have a lot to do with the success of the format. It ensures there is a high level of commitment all round. In my experience, one doesn't need to be employed by the pharmaceutical industry to profit from the many insights shared in the workshops, discussion forums and lectures. The London conference's opening lecture by Professor Ian Needleman was a particularly inspiring reminder that the quality of research and the quality of research reporting are interdependent entities. No matter who pays our salary, we all share a responsibility to aim for the highest of standards.

This extremely-good-value-for-money, conference-cum-weekend-break almost cost more than I had bargained for. A shutdown of all train services from London to Gatwick on the afternoon of our departure threatened to leave us (and hundreds of others) stranded at Clapham Junction. We took a snap decision and caught the only mini-cab still available in the area, sharing the cost of the trip with another thwarted traveller. Although we arrived in time for our scheduled flight back to Geneva and avoided paying for a new one, we were very lucky to do so. The broken railway line caused serious distress for many would-be passengers who arrived too late to fly. The experience prompted me to reflect that the small amount of travel I do these days is just about right for my tastes. I'll be continuing to attend EMWA conferences annually for some time to come.

### Anne Murray



My journey started by car from a village in Tarragona to Barcelona where I left my car at the airport. Even though I live just over an hour from Barcelona, I would have had to catch a train at 07.30 in the morning to catch a flight leaving at 4 in the afternoon so I opted to drive and leave my car at the airport, at a cost of €16 a day.

I flew to Luton and returned via Stansted as these were the cheapest options I could find. I chose a hotel that was close

enough to walk to the conference venue and had broadband access, and it actually worked out a lot cheaper than I am used to for London thanks to the favourable exchange rate at the time.

I am a freelance medical translator and author's editor and in 'our world', EMWA is expensive! I have been an active member of the Mediterranean Editors and Translators (MET) Association since 2005 and am used to paying about €120 for a 2-day conference with a 3-hour training workshop included in the price and additional workshops available at about €30-€60 each. MET has a strong focus on research articles and author's editing and meets my continuous professional development (CPD) needs well. Motivated by my experience with MET, I decided to look for further CPD opportunities and found that EMWA's workshop programme was highly relevant to my work, so I decided to give it a go and am happy to have done so. The sessions are well organized, motivating, and of high quality. In answer to the question as to whether I find EMWA events good value for money, I would say that the conferences per se are not, as they seem to simply provide a framework for the workshops, which one pays for apart. If one chooses not to do the workshops, then €175, in my opinion, is expensive for an opening lecture and networking opportunities which—in my case—are of limited value, perhaps because I am not a medical writer. The workshop programme, however, is good value for money in that it provides content packages and insights that aren't so conveniently available elsewhere in Europe. Time will tell whether the investment will pay off financially, but it has definitely been worthwhile so far in terms of what I have learned and the added value for my work. It has also given me sufficient confidence to be able to transmit the knowledge I have gained to my clients, many of whom have had little or no formal training in authorship or familiarity with journal practices.

### Iain Colquhoun



I live in Scotland, about 3 miles distant from the small villages of Braco and Muthill, and about 7 miles from Gleneagles Hotel, which gained wide exposure at the time of the G7 summit in 2005. Gleneagles actually has its own train 'station', but few trains stop there these days, so I joined the train at Dunblane.

Well ... I would have done, had I been travelling on my own as I usually do, but on this occasion I travelled not only with my daughter-in-law (who also attended the conference), but also with her 6-month-old baby ... and her mother! I do have the total costs filed away somewhere, but looking at them is definitely not good for my health, so I've decided just to present the costs I would have incurred had I actually travelled in my normal fashion.

## Cost of attending London Conference

Having trained as an ecologist in a past life, I try to minimise my carbon footprint where possible, so usually take the train. The station is not far away, and I do not bother putting small mileages through my accounts—life is too short—but I have included what the figure would be if I did. On this occasion, we did undertake the last part of the journey by train, but on disembarking at Kings Cross, thoughts of keeping that carbon footprint down rapidly vanished when I contemplated the task of getting me, Nicola, the bairn<sup>1</sup> and the ‘outlaw’<sup>2</sup>—plus luggage—from the station to the conference hotel, so a taxi fare is included in the table below. I ended up thinking it was good value: 3 adults, suitcases, bags, a bairn, and a mountain buggy.....!

In the circumstances, we did stay in the conference hotel—definitely the easier option for all of us, but had I been on my own I would normally have done so in any case. I did not attend the conference dinner as it did not particularly appeal to me, nor did I spend anything on an Internet connection as I decided that I was going to have a break from all that—in addition to writing, I also provide IT support on a limited daily basis, and I felt that if I went online I would be just too accessible! Had I needed to, I do have a mobile

3G USB modem or ‘dongle’ which, at €11/month, is very good value and very much cheaper than hotels.

On the way back, we managed to load the taxi in half the time, and all in all had a very enjoyable and productive time. When you add in all the ancillary benefits of attending an EMWA conference, particularly the opportunities to meet friends and colleagues, I feel the conferences are good value. But I’ll be travelling lighter next time...!

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It is no surprise that the effects of staying in the conference hotel or with relatives are evident in the overall cost of attending the conference. Had Moira stayed at the conference hotel, she would have spent € 1157 instead of €771, and had Iain stayed in Anne’s hotel, he would have spent €997 instead of €1203.

Any members who would like to track the costs of attending the Ljubljana Conference this year should contact Sam or me before the conference.

**Alistair Reeves**

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**Table 1** Cost of attending 27<sup>th</sup> EMWA Conference, London, England, November 2008

Cost item	€					
	Moira		Anne		Iain	
	Switzerland		Spain		Scotland	
Travel	Car to and from airport, parking, flight, train, tube, taxi share to Gatwick	212	Car to and from airport, parking, flight, train, tube	274	Car to and from station, train and taxi to and from conference hotel	153
Accommodation	With relatives	0	Not in conference hotel, 2 nights	180	Conference hotel, 2 nights	386
Conference and workshops <sup>a</sup>	Registration, 1 foundation, 1 advanced workshop	520	Registration, 3 foundations workshops	580	Registration, 2 advanced workshops	595
Meals and refreshments <sup>b</sup>	Excluding conference banquet	39	Excluding conference banquet	55	Excluding conference banquet	69
<b>Total</b>		<b>771</b>		<b>1089</b>		<b>1203</b>

<sup>a</sup> Including registration (€175) but not enrolment on EPDP (€100)

<sup>b</sup> This does not include the conference banquet (€50) because none of the participants went to it.

1 Wiktionary definition: Etymology: Old Norse *barn* and Old English (Anglian dialect) *bearn*. Compare West Frisian *bern*. Noun, bairn (*plural* bairns) (*Northumbrian, Scotland, and parts of Northern England*) A child or baby.

2 Jocularly used in British English to mean ‘in-law’.



## A week in the life of ... Raquel Billiones

by Raquel Billiones

When Sam Hamilton and Alistair Reeves asked me to write about my typical week as a freelance medical writer, I was reluctant. After all, I am not your typical (and successful!) medical writer, certainly not one whose weekly travails will inspire or entertain other colleagues. Here are the reasons why:

- I only work 3 days a week, the other 2 weekdays dedicated to being a mother to twin boys and wife to a busy banker.
- Despite my small capacity, I haven't yet reached the point where I have to turn jobs away as many of my colleagues do.
- It goes without saying that I don't earn enough to support my family but it is nice to be able to pay for my own shoes and my trips to the EMWA meetings.

But then I thought, why not? I am always in search of that ever elusive life-work balance and maybe upon reading this weekly diary, some enlightened soul out there can give me some pointers towards that goal.

So what is my typical week? There's no typical week for me, only a good and a not-so-good one. So here it is ... a good and a bad week in the life of a not-so-successful medical writer.

### A perfect week...

**Monday.** I start the week by taking Monday off from medical writing. Seriously. The kids are at home so I would do most of the household chores on Monday. Actual medical writing work starts on Monday night when I check and reply to my emails and prepare a work plan for the days ahead.

**Tuesday.** I may start the day by taking the kids to preschool but then I may not, depending on my husband's schedule. Preschool, by the way, is a 45-minute commute each way. And if you are wondering whether there is no smarter alternative to this apparent waste of time, I refer you to UNICEF's Innocenti Report Card 8 on "early childhood education and care in economically advanced countries" [1]. With Switzerland's rather abysmal performance, you will understand why this is the only way. My sons only go to the preschool 3 days a week and my husband and I split the preschool drop off/pick up responsibility 50-50, so it's not too bad.

On a typical week, I would work on several projects in parallel. Regulatory work would require 2 full days of the 3 I have. A perfect Tuesday would be 8 hours of work inter-

rupted by phone calls, a jogging run and a light lunch. The working day ends at 5 pm when I have to head for preschool pick up.

**Wednesday.** This is another day off from medical writing for me and is basically reserved for playdates, swimming lessons, football practice, and other extracurricular activities. A couple of hours on Wednesday evening in front of the computer are used for administration work such as filing and book-keeping.

**Thursday.** A perfect Thursday would be 8 hours of uninterrupted regulatory work. The project is right on track and the clients are happy. With music in the background and a thermos flask of tea, I sit at my desk and do the work I love. I might get a phone call or email from a headhunter, to which I would politely refuse by saying "Sorry, I am a happy freelancer". But it sure is nice to know that one is needed. Thursday evening is movie night with friends—a great way to wind down.

**Friday.** Friday is the day for small but nonetheless enjoyable web projects I do regularly. Writing short articles for the web media is a nice break from clinical documents. They are mostly review articles on "cutting edge" issues, from melamine to medical marijuana. Another jogging run in perfect weather conditions would be the perfect ending to a perfect medical writing/mothering week. I'm ready for a relaxing weekend. And I get almost perfect marks for time management!

Now, this is not a perfect world, and a week can turn bad ...

### A worst-case scenario week...

**Monday.** A bad Monday can start with a sniffling and rather crabby preschooler. This may be topped up by a husband going off to New York for a one-week business trip.

**Tuesday.** A week of single parenthood means 6 roundtrips to preschool. That is 6 x 2 x 45 minutes. This Tuesday would then be a short working day for me and I can already feel the stomach acid building up. If I am lucky, the sniffling preschooler would be better today and I wouldn't get any phone calls from preschool teachers requesting early pick-up. To add insult to injury, this might turn out to be a week of difficult clients. Difficult clients for me are those who demand output but do not deliver inputs. They are those who ask for 3 review cycles and expect 6. They are the ones who put the deadline two weeks ahead of schedule and tell me only two weeks later.



## A week in the life of ... Raquel Billiones

**Wednesday.** On a week like this, I tend to improvise. An afternoon at an indoor playground can give me a few hours on my laptop to catch up on the backlog from Tuesday. Never mind that other moms would stare at me disapprovingly while my boys practice anarchy.

**Thursday.** The sickly preschooler might have to stay at home today but we still have to drop off his twin brother anyhow. Yes, I know. I can take the easy way and keep both at home. Unfortunately, this is against the family's GPP—good parental practice guidelines. We should treat each twin as an individual. Another item in the guidance is a maximum of 20 minutes TV time each day. Debbie Jordan suggests allocating a couple of hours every few days for emergencies like this [2]. But what about a week of almost non-stop emergency? I turn off the phone so that the client doesn't catch me in the middle of a tantrum session. Forget about jogging runs and movie nights. This is going to be one long Thursday night.

**Friday.** On Friday, the preschooler might be well enough to go to school but then he might not. I ask for a deadline extensions. The backlog is up to my neck, the stress levels all time high. I order the babysitter for the afternoon, wincing at the thought that her hourly rate is a fourth of mine but she doesn't pay taxes on hers. I look forward to having my co-parent back that evening.

**Weekend.** As expected, the working week has to be extended to Saturday and Sunday just to catch up on the "lost" hours of the week. Luckily, my husband is a capable, hands-on father once he's around. I feel a little bit "off" myself. And it is at times like this when I wish I could call in sick. But there is nobody to call. I am my own boss. Now, where are those job offers again? Usually by Sunday, things will have settled down and I will be ready for the (hopefully good) week ahead.

Now, you may ask—what is the bad week to good week ratio? I would say it's currently 1:5. And it gets better as the kids get older. Maybe one day I might even increase my working capacity to 4 or 5 days and earn more. But then maybe, I might not. Maybe I would follow Wendy Kingdom's advice and take time to "look at the real world rather than a computer image of it" instead [3]. And maybe, just maybe, I will achieve that life-work balance after all.

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2. Jordan, D. Get more time out of your day. *The Write Stuff* 2008 17:121-123.
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**The Coffice**

With the trend to more and more people working at home, new terms are constantly being coined to make what we call our 'home office' less of a drag. Many of us are familiar with SoHo (small office, home office), WAHM, WAHD, and WAHP (work-at-home-mom, dad, or parent). But this is the first time I've come across this one—the 'coffice'. It simply means working in a coffee shop. According to the Boston Globe [1], coffices have become a phenomenon in the US where more and more people work in coffee shops, though not from behind the counters. This probably has something to do with the availability of free wireless LAN offered by most coffee chains as a marketing ploy. What they haven't taken into account was the need for a large number of power sockets, which probably wasn't in the original plan and design of already existing coffee shops.

The lack of power sockets and the fight for a favourite table seem to cause 'turf wars' and 'coffice tensions' according to the Globe among coffice mates (coffee drinkers) or with the office managers (the baristas). Sounds like your usual office politics, eh?

I must admit I do go and work in a coffice once in a while, for a number of reasons, namely:

- when my Internet service provider acts up
- when I have an urgent need for some human contact and a chat, if only to order a cup of latte macchiato
- when I have a few minutes to kill between client meetings and preschool pick up time.

Of course I make sure that I only do nonconfidential work at the coffice. You never know who is looking over your shoulders.

However, compared with the US, coffices in Switzerland aren't yet up to scratch and it's not just the power socket that is the problem. Free Internet access at most Starbucks in Zurich is only 30 minutes per cup of coffee. Most shopping centres have only Hot Spots for paid Internet access. Coffice workers have to share the space with many mommies with their babies and toddlers on a rainy day. (Mind you, I can be a coffice worker, a mommy, or both). And finally unlike in many parts of the developed world, Zurich coffices are not smoke-free (at least at the time of writing) but the Swiss are working on it.

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**Editor's note:**

This delightful piece by Raquel reminded me of when on a recent holiday I enquired as to the whereabouts of an Internet café. I was told where to find one with the gratuitous comment, "It's the café where you can't buy a cup of coffee".