

Out on our own: From freelancers for freelancers

In this issue, in line with its theme, Stefan Lang concludes his series on setting up as a freelance medical writer in Germany with some thoughts on time management for new freelancers. His message is: keep it simple. Although he does wonder whether it will stay simple, with more and more enquiries and jobs flowing in. John Carpenter, who has been a freelancer in the medical communications sector for many years, answers our ten questions. In the next issue, we can look forward to hearing about setting up in Sweden as a freelance writer from Ingrid Edsman, a physician, who recently took this momentous step.

Sam and I look forward to seeing you at the Freelance Business Forum at the 27th EMWA Conference, 20–22 November 2008, London, England, on Friday 21 November from 17:30–18:30. This session is not restricted to freelance members—anyone interested is welcome to attend.

Alistair Reeves

a.reeves@acribe.de
www.ascribe.de

and

Sam Hamilton

sam@samhamiltonmwservices.co.uk
www.samhamiltonmwservices.co.uk



Time management for a freelancer novice

by *Stefan Lang*

When Alistair asked me if I would like to write another article about freelancing in Germany, I wondered if I could provide any further information about setting up business that I had not already mentioned in my last two articles. General terms and conditions, insurance, tax matters—what else could I write about? But when I heard that the topic of the next issue was going to be ‘Who manages your time?’ I contemplated how important time management might be for freelancer—especially for newcomers.

Once you move from a salaried position to freelance work, there is no boss anymore telling you what you have to do and when and where you have to be. No-one is looking over your shoulder if you take a long lunch. Learning how to manage your time is a challenge and is certainly as important as finding new clients or network partners. So before you switch to self-employment, you need to ask yourself: Am I organised enough to survive as a freelancer?

Usually, I consider myself as a well-organised person. As long as I have a reasonable amount of work, I am pretty self-motivated. I start working at 08:00, earlier if required, and finish at a reasonable time, usually about 18:00. I keep a calendar and appointment book and prepare a daily, prioritised and realistic ‘To-Be-Done’ (TBD) list. It therefore seems as if I have created a perfect time management system for myself: but why are there so many days when I fall behind?

During my first assignment—I worked on the web pages of an orthopaedic clinic—I had a two-hour meeting with the

client in a cafe. Not only could the conversation have easily taken place on the phone, I soon realised that the whole meeting could have been over in a few minutes if the client had been a little better prepared. Moreover, because I somehow felt obliged to drink as many coffees as my client did, I almost suffered a heart attack. Over time, I realised how much precious time is lavished on unnecessary meetings and extra-long-lasting phone calls, and, additionally, how easy it is to waste a few minutes here and there browsing the Internet or checking e-mail accounts.

Certainly, these time-wasting exercises could have been avoided if I had stuck closer to my schedule. Why is it so difficult to do this? I believe it has something to do with the transition from a salaried job to self-employment. As a freelance novice I needed to learn that, regardless of what I do, time is worth money. So I tried to establish in my mind how much every minute of my time is worth. It is obviously not appropriate to always evaluate the financial outcome of every single activity but others will not perceive my time as valuable unless I do. If your rate is, let us say, € 60 per hour, spending an unnecessary half-hour on the phone costs you € 30. Spending two hours hand-collating and assembling copies for your presentation actually costs you € 120, but the people at the copy shop would charge € 15 euros to do exactly the same thing. Considering the value of time certainly helps you both to prioritise your tasks and keep closer to your schedule.

Considering the value of time will certainly help.

However, the dark side is that this might mislead you to neglecting the non-billable—but also important—tasks such as billing and marketing. Moreover, you might be tempted to bite off more than you can chew. Taking more assignments than you can handle and scheduling more than you can ever accomplish in a day is not fair to your clients, your family or yourself. Therefore, while always bearing the value of time in mind, do not overload your list, but prioritise, set specific times for handling the non-billable work, and, also important, do not forget to have a break now and then.

Preparing a detailed TBD list has an additional advantage: you cannot only check the items on your list at the end of the day, but you can also use it as a time sheet. Keeping track of your time allows you to monitor how effectively you are spending your time, even, and especially so in this case, if you are not billing clients on an hourly basis. When you start your business, the question of pricing is a touchy one—and, obviously, pricing is closely connected with the time required for a job. You can easily find out the hourly rates of other freelance writers, but how do you know how long you need for a certain task if you do not have that much experience? I had generally underestimated the time I need to familiarise myself with a new topic, to search the

literature, or to prepare a first outline draft. I have therefore started to record the time I spend on these tasks. Although I do not keep my time sheet conscientiously, it has helped me to transform some ‘vague’ impressions I had about the time I needed into more robust estimates.

In my opinion, using advanced tools to create elaborate systems for time management often requires too much time to manage and takes time away from more important things that need to get done. Some people invest in card and book systems, or project management software that actually waste more time and money than they save. For me, however, experience is the key and, this is why I have kept things simple to start with. Luckily, I have neither regularly found myself at the edge of a deadline, nor have I—yet—needed to negotiate extensions. But then I only started about one year ago. Now that more and more queries and jobs are coming in, I am curious if my simple daily TBD list will be sufficient to manage my time in the future.

Stefan Lang

Osdorf, Germany

contact@scientific-medical-writing.de

www.scientific-medical-writing.de

Euro errors

1. The correct way in English to write two hundred and twelve euros and twelve eurocents when using digits and the euro symbol is € 212.12, and not 212.12 €, because one of the many quirks of English is that currency symbols precede sums of money when written as digits, even if when spoken, it is the other way around. The same applies to the abbreviation ‘EUR’. This is certainly different from German, where the symbol is written after the amount. I am not so sure about other languages. Maybe others would like to comment on this.
2. Note that I have not capitalised euro in the above sentence. Currencies are not capitalised in English unless they include a proper name (e.g. Canadian dollars). Rare exceptions to this may be the colon (currency unit in Costa Rica named after the Spanish surname of Christopher Columbus) or any other unit named after a person, but as far as I am concerned, these have also reached lower-case status.
3. Note also that I did not write euroes or euro’s to form the plural. The version with the apostrophe is clearly wrong, but seems irresistible to some writers for unfathomable reasons. It is also tempting to add an ‘e’ because of ‘tomatoes’ and ‘potatoes’, but those who do not wish to complicate their lives will opt for the plural without an ‘e’.

Alistair Reeves

a.reeves@ascribe.de

Competition destroys the spirit of science

Competition among scientists for funding, positions and prestige, among other things, is often seen as a salutary driving force in US science. Its effects on scientists, their work and their relationships are seldom considered. Focus-group discussions with 51 mid- and early-career scientists formed the base of a study that reveals a dark side of competition in science [1]. According to these scientists, competition contributes to strategic game-playing in science, a decline in free and open sharing of information and methods, sabotage of others' ability to use one's work, interference with peer-review processes, deformation of relationships, and careless or questionable research conduct. When competition is pervasive, such effects may jeopardise the progress, efficiency and integrity of science.

Françoise Salager-Meyer

francoise.sm@gmail.com

Reference:

1. Anderson MS, Ronning EA, De Vries R, Martinson BC. The Perverse Effects of Competition on Scientists' Work and Relationships. *Science and Engineering Ethics* 2007;13(4):437-461