

## ■ A week in the life of ...



# Elaine O'Prey

by Elaine O'Prey

I'm not sure that as a freelancer I have a typical week. They all vary so much and this is one of the main advantages of being freelance for me. I love variety!

Generally I tend to juggle writing and editing with childcare, running a home and of course running my own business. I have to admit that the 'running a business' part tends to get squashed into whatever free time I manage to grab every now and then as client deadlines take priority. I also have to fit my work around looking after my two children and all the usual domestic chores that need to fit into each day (and this list tends to be endless).

Every now and then I get to escape for a few days and either attend a conference, advisory board or go to a client meeting. I really enjoy this as for one week I get to travel a bit, meet new people and escape the routine of school run, freelance work, lunch, more freelance work, picking the children up from school, after school activities and domestic chores.

### Saturday and Sunday

I go through my check list of things that I will need for the coming week, make sure that I've got ticks in all the right boxes and pack my suitcase with suitable business clothes—things that look smart, won't crease and are easy to wear from early morning until late at night. As the UK is not part of the Eurozone, I also have to pick up some euro (or is it euros?) so that I have some cash for the coming week.

I'm due to go to a conference on Monday to work as part of the team that produces a daily newspaper covering the meeting. Some of the articles have already been written, but we will need to interview some key opinion leaders during the week, attend some seminars and symposia, and write all these up for publication the next day. This is the second year that I've been to this meeting and I've been promised that things will run much smoother this year and it won't be quite as stressful. Hopefully this is true, but I'm assuming that once again I'm probably going to have to work very long days, have to deal with considerable stress, eat at irregular hours and generally survive on very little sleep for the next week. I am now wondering why I said that I'd do it again—ah yes, that's it .... I really enjoyed myself last year! It was stressful, I had to work very long hours, and didn't get very much sleep, but I did discover that I can write up an interview surprisingly quickly when I have to. I also get to see my articles printed and it is great fun working as part of a team with a really tight deadline. The copy needs to be approved and ready for 7 PM so that the newsletter can be artworked, reviewed, approved and printed overnight and on the conference stands for early the next morning.

The final task for Sunday night is to ensure my husband knows when and where he needs to collect the children

from during the coming week and what various activities they need to go to, and on what day. The easiest option we've found is for me to send him some Outlook appointments (which go directly to his phone) and a cover email that breaks down things day-by-day.

### Monday

It's a very early start and I'm once again grateful that I live less than 15 minutes drive from Stansted airport. The taxi picks me up at 5.45 AM and I meet the rest of the team at the airport at 6 AM. Once we've checked in and gone through security, we find somewhere to have breakfast. I don't think any of us feel like eating this early, but as we aren't sure when we will get the next opportunity to eat, it seems a sensible plan.

No delays are announced and we leave the UK on schedule. We arrive on schedule and get a taxi to the hotel. No problems here either and all seem to be going well. After a quick change and freshen up, it is time for us to get a taxi to the conference centre to meet the client, and see where we will be working for the next week.

The office looks fine. It is next to the VIP lounge and so it should be very easy to catch the speakers that we will need to interview during the conference. The computers also look OK and this year we've got UK software and keyboards. This seems like a simple thing, but it can make a big difference when you're typing on a French keyboard and trying desperately to remember where you find the various commands as everything is in a foreign language. It can also really add to your stress levels if you've only got 30 minutes to write an article and get it approved by the speaker before they fly off somewhere for another meeting.

Like my colleagues, I go through the conference booklet and work out whom I need to interview and where I need to be on each day. I also check that I'm not expected to be in more than two places at any one time. A few of the sessions I'm down to cover could be interesting from a logistics point of view—they don't finish until 6.30 PM and all copy needs to be written and approved by the speaker for 7 PM! As this is an impossible deadline I will need to interview the speaker before the session, find out what they are going to talk about and then write it up so that the article is ready for their sign-off at the end of their presentation.

I make a list of articles that need to be written (using lots of colour coding and stickies for Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday). These are either reviews of what was presented yesterday or are introductions to talks that are on later that day. I now have my plan for the week and feel happier even though the conference booklet now looks like something out of a children's craft show ('Blue Peter'

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perhaps?) The final task is to see what presentations have already been uploaded to the conference website by the speakers so that I can begin to plan the articles. As expected, none of my speakers have uploaded their articles yet—not surprising really as the meeting isn't due to start until tomorrow. It is now nearly 8 PM and none of us have had lunch. I'm now extremely grateful for the English breakfast I had at 7 AM this morning. Fortunately we are now all done for the day, so it is a quick catch up with the client, with an agreement to meet up at 7.00 AM next morning for the press conference and a taxi back to the hotel to drop off laptops etc. There's no time to change for dinner as we're all so hungry and so it's a brisk walk to the nearest restaurant to find some food—and wine!

**Tuesday**

The alarm goes off. I've only had 5 hours sleep and as I'm not a morning person I'm not feeling completely awake yet. I can't even have breakfast as we need to leave the hotel before they start serving food and so instead I'm forced to investigate the mini-bar. Diet Coke and a packet of nuts will have to do!

I meet my colleagues in the hotel reception and we get a taxi to the conference centre for the press conference. Result! They have coffee and croissants at the back of the room. I'm now happy and feeling much better after my morning dose of caffeine. The press conference was interesting and useful as it sets the scene for the day. I make a few notes and once it is over, head back to the office. I'm not down to attend any sessions until after lunch so I spend the morning trying to contact the speakers I need to interview and set up some meetings for later that day and for the rest of the week. I meet the speaker whom I need to interview, write up an article and then go along to their session at 5 PM. I check through my article as they are speaking and make a few changes to the hard copy as things have changed slightly from the presentation I saw earlier. I then hover at the end of the session and catch the speaker at the end just before they disappear. "Please can they review my article?" The speaker makes a few changes, but seems quite happy. I'm in the editorial office by 6.45 PM, have updated the text and got it ready for artwork for 7 PM! After a quick chat with my colleagues, we end up swapping a few sessions as this will make things easier all round for the next day. Time to go back to the hotel and find somewhere for dinner!

**Wednesday**

This is similar to Monday except that the sessions I need to go to are at different times. The conference newspaper is available from 8 AM and so I pick up a few copies to see what my articles look like. It is always good to have something to show to future clients!

Everything is running smoothly until the power suddenly goes off in the editorial office—it seems we have blown the fuse. The electricity is back on 30 minutes later, but we're all feeling a little nervous. .... Is it better to use my own laptop with its small keyboard or use the computer provided and risk the power going down again? Decisions! Decisions! I decide as my typing is faster on a standard keyboard to use the computer provided and just set the auto-save to every 2 minutes. There are no more problems with the elec-

tricity and all articles are ready for artwork by 7 PM and the client's sign-off. Only one more day to go...

**Thursday**

I have to be up for 7 AM to be in a session for 8.30 AM, and once again I miss breakfast! I'm starting to enjoy the Diet Coke and packet of nuts from the mini-bar, and so make a mental note to eat healthily and do loads of exercise when I get back to the UK to compensate for my poor diet!

I arrange to meet one of the speakers at the stands and so I have a quick look to see what the various companies have on show as I quickly rush past.

Everything seems to be going well. I really enjoy the office environment and team work on projects like this. It is something I miss when I work freelance from home, but on a more positive note, I also get to miss the office politics, which can't be bad!

Once again we get all the articles written and approved for the 7 PM deadline, which is great! There's just some house-keeping to do before we leave—tidying up the electronic files, making sure we've got hardcopies and approval sheets for all the articles, and removing the files from the borrowed computers. The office will be dismantled tomorrow after the conference ends mid-afternoon, and so we need to get things sorted tonight.

**Friday**

There are no sessions that I need to go to today as it is the last day of the meeting and there's nothing to be written up for tomorrow. Instead, I get up a little later (7.30 AM) and we all meet for breakfast for the first time. The hotel breakfast is good. It is a shame that I've missed it all week! After breakfast it's up to my room to pack. Our flight doesn't leave until mid-afternoon so I decide to go across to the conference centre for the morning and have a wander among the stands—something I haven't really had chance to do all week. The hunt is also on! Are any of the companies present giving away freebies? Can we find chocolate anywhere in the conference hall? I spend a couple of hours looking around and collect a few copies of the conference newspaper so that I have something to show for yesterday's efforts before catching a taxi to the airport for the flight home.

Everything is running on time and there are no delays at the airport. The taxi drops me off home just as my husband is leaving to take the kids to their swimming lesson. No rest yet as I drop my suitcase in the hall and rush out to the car to join them so we can be at the swimming pool on time. If only I'd been a few minutes later I could have sat in the garden with a cup of tea ...

**Saturday and Sunday**

It's the weekend, but no rest yet! I spend Saturday morning catching up on emails and making a list of things that I need to do on Monday when life returns to 'normal' and it's back to writing training manuals, PowerPoint presentations or chasing for author comments on a clinical safety review.

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