Editorial

We are all riding high after meeting in Manchester at the EMWA conference in May 2013. It was wonderful to see so many colleagues coming together and enjoying the new-look events that EMWA offered us for the first time. Both the Symposium Day, and Kath’s seminar about working in and on your business, proved a great success. As these two events were free member benefits, we feel sure you’ll agree that EMWA is working hard to provide us all with a superb programme that represents excellent value.

In this issue of OOOO, Claudia keeps it light with a humorous analysis of how we freelancers spend our time compared with our employed colleagues. In the process, she dispels some myths about freelancing and flexibility, while highlighting the benefits of both employment options. Kath updates us on her experiences as a freelancer three years on from her original article and describes how life-coaching has helped her in several key areas of her life and business. In a separate article, Kath provides some tips on how to have a successful business trip. Raquel gives us the low down on a selection of time tools available to help us work around the clock in our regular Toolbox feature.

Our Freelance Foraging ‘photo-SOP’ from Anne fits perfectly with our theme of medical writing around the world, coming all the way from Brunei! When you’re out and about this summer remember to snap those funny photos and send them in.

Finally, thank you to everyone who has provided feedback on the OOOO section and given suggestions on the types of articles they’d like to see featured here – we are working on them. We are grateful to Paul Woolley for sending his insights on Mac computer systems following Sam’s article about migration from PC to Mac in December 2012. Please feel free to send us an email if you have any suggestions or feedback on our features or articles. Our aim is to keep this section as relevant for our freelance members as possible, and your valuable input is appreciated.

A reminder about the Freelance Resource Centre

We’d like to remind our readers that we have a growing archive of invaluable freelance resources available on the EMWA website. Access is via the ‘Members-only’ log in then click ‘Resources’ and ‘Freelance Resource Centre’. In addition to our well-publicised ‘Regulatory Medical Writing’ section, we have archives on ‘Starting-up and Running a Business’, ‘Legal’, ‘Technical’, ‘Personal Experience’, ‘Journalism and Translation’, ‘Conferences’, and ‘General’. Much of what may be of interest to you might already be covered in these archive materials, so do check, and be assured that efforts to fulfil our group needs have been ongoing for some years now. Happy browsing…
Non-randomised, non-controlled, retrospective analysis of the time spent working as a freelancer compared to a pharmaceutical company or a contract research organisation employee

Definitions and abbreviations

CRO  Contract Research Organisation (CRO) is a service organisation that provides support to the pharmaceutical and biotechnological industries in the form of research services outsourced on a contract basis. (Wikipedia)

Freelancer  A person who pursues an occupation without a long-term commitment to any particular employer

Introduction

The fantasies of freedom and self-determination of many employees that are dreaming of becoming freelancers are often only that: fantasies! The objective of this brief ‘nüchtern’ (no nonsense) analysis is to describe and quantify the real everyday life of a freelance medical writer compared with that of a medical writer employed by a pharmaceutical company or a CRO.

Methods

A retrospective analysis of all travel and working time between June 2007 and June 2012 (freelance working period) compared with the travel and working time between June 2001 and June 2007 (employee period) was performed. The analysis was based on the calendar used as the main time management and organisation tool during these years. The following variables were analysed in detail:

- Mean number of working hours/week during working days, distributed by month
- Mean number of working days during weekends per holiday period

Special issues

One variable that was particularly interesting but could not be systematically analysed, due to numerous missing data, was the time invested in proposals and negotiations before an order was placed. This value has been estimated roughly as being at least 25% of the real working time.

Results

The results of this retrospective analysis are shown in Figures 1 and 2.

Discussion

The results clearly show that the workload of a freelancer has greater variation over the year compared with that of an industry or CRO employee.

Though the clients might set the same tight deadlines internally or for the CROs, medical writers working within an organisation have access to other resources or colleagues that might not be available to freelancers, and are less burdened by other non-specific duties such as accounting and selling/marketing activities.

Conclusions and warnings

Though these results would indicate that working as a freelancer is stressful and should not be considered an alternative by individuals that are seeking a stable workload and more freedom in their everyday life, freelancing still has interesting positive aspects such as less commuting time (no Tube, no rush hour), home office (relaxed working environment), a greater day-schedule flexibility (walking the dog during quiet periods and power-napping

Figure 1: Mean number of working hours/week during working days distributed by month.
as desired). These advantages can be (and often are)
eclipsed by huge fluctuations in workload during
the year, busy periods coinciding with the local holi-
days and the fact that home workers are often per-
ceived as ‘Mum’ or ‘Dad’, the house keeper, the
cook, and the gardener!

Working as an employee has its benefits but
becoming a freelancer is tempting. Ultimately, it is
a non-informed decision: you can’t really know
how it is until you experience it.

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Freelancing and life-coaching – an update three years on

In 2011, I described how life-coaching helped me to
make the transition from employed medical writer
to self-employed freelancer.1 Three years after
making the leap, I am thoroughly enjoying life as
a freelance medical writer. I have continued my
investment in coaching which has enabled me to
further develop my business and maintain a work-
life balance. It is good to feel that you’re not alone, to
have someone to bounce ideas off and to challenge
your way of thinking in order to try something new.

Here is an update on how I’m getting on, with
some thoughts and advice based on what I’ve
learned along the way through coaching and on-
the-job experience.

Cash-flow

One of the biggest concerns I had during the early
months of being freelance was cash-flow. Going
from a guaranteed monthly income to being paid on
a relatively ad hoc basis was a scary concept to grasp.
Firstly, I set myself a target for my yearly turnover,
wrote it down in my business plan, thereby ‘announc-
ing it to the Universe’. Some people may question my
reference to the Universe and possibly my sanity, but I
strongly believe that you make your own fortune in
life and often get what you wish for! Coaching, and
reading a book called ‘Money and the Law of
Attraction’ has helped me to change my overall
approach to money.2 Simply by changing my
language from repeatedly saying, ‘I can’t afford it’ to
‘I can afford it’ and understanding that by spending
money I’m investing in my future and the life I want
has been a leap of faith, but that change in attitude
has paid dividends.

Flexibility

One of the main attractions for me to become free-
lance was to have more flexibility with respect to
my time, and the work I took on. However, in the
early months I panicked if I had a quiet period. I
have learned that workload flows in peaks and
troughs, and this is normal! Coaching has taught
me how to utilise my time more effectively. If I
have a quiet period then I concentrate on business
development, exploring potential marketing and
networking opportunities, updating my website,
writing blogs, and investing in my own professional
development. I also adapt my working day, when
possible, to schedule time for interests outside of
medical writing, such as riding my horse, or

Figure 2: Mean number of working days during weekends per holiday period.
meeting friends for coffee. I know that I have the freedom to work weekends or evenings, in order to meet my clients’ deadlines.

**Valuing your time**

Let’s face it; no-one else will make this a priority other than you. There is a general myth that the more hours you work the more successful you’ll be. How many of us remember the raised eyebrows, and pointed glances at watches when we walked out of the office on time? In the beginning, this mindset spilled over into my freelance life too – if I wasn’t working 8-hour days then my business would surely fail. Now, I understand it’s smart working that’s the key to success. In Timothy Ferriss’ book ‘The 4-Hour Work Week’, he states: ‘Being a freelancer is about learning to balance work and play.’

Whereas I used to feel as if I had to be at my desk all day (again, a spill-over from being employed), but life is about learning to balance work and play.

**Free-time**

Do not underestimate the power of relaxation. Ideas often pop into your head when you’re in the bath or taking a walk in the countryside! Having some free-time, away from the desk and client demands, gives us the opportunity to re-charge our batteries and consider new ideas, keeping ourselves and our business fresh. The 90-minute rule suggests that we can’t focus for longer than this period of time without renewal; so frequent breaks will result in enhanced focus for longer than this period of time without work done without having employees.

**Delegation**

I struggled with this initially until my business coach turned it around and said that by contracting someone to perform tasks for me; I was investing in their skills and business. This resonated with me and I now delegate non-business tasks to free up more time for me to work on my business. Employing a cleaner or a gardener can free up hours of your time and reduce stress. Part of the appeal of freelancing was being able to do the job I love, without the stress of people management. So, by hiring help – such as a cleaner, gardener, accountant, book-keeper, etc. – you are getting the work done without having employees.

**Variety of work**

I love the fact that I have the opportunity to work on a wide range of projects with a variety of clients. Over time I’ve become more aware of the kind of projects I really enjoy doing. As my self-confidence has grown I’ve taken on projects that I may have turned down initially due to a perceived lack of knowledge on my part. I will always remember a freelance colleague telling me, ‘The first rule of contracting is never turn down work because you don’t think you’re good enough to do it – smile sweetly to yourself, agree with the client that you’ll do it, put down the phone, and then scream!’. If I’m too busy to take on a project then I may consider sub-contracting work to fellow freelance colleagues. This way I don’t lose clients, and I think it’s a great learning opportunity to work with fellow freelancers and peers.

**Identify your ideal client**

If you know the work you love to do, and therefore you’re able to identify your ideal client then this will help you to go out and find more of it. I’ve learned not to be afraid of turning down work if it doesn’t fit in with my business goals or work ethic. So far, other work has always filled the void. Through business-coaching I’ve been able to build a fantastic client-base, and increase the number of projects that really play to my strengths. Recently, I was thrilled when one of my clients, who knew I was an equestrian journalist, asked me to write articles for a company newsletter. This allowed me to combine my journalism skills with my knowledge of the pharmaceutical industry. I loved it and even got more articles to write as a consequence as my passion fuelled my success.

**Conclusions**

I cannot deny that there are some days when I wake up feeling worried or stressed about the day ahead. Most of my worries are about the running of my business rather than the work itself, and largely due to my tendencies to be a perfectionist. But that’s a whole article in itself! Being a freelancer demands a lot of courage but the rewards can be fantastic, and with regular coaching, I have reached goals I never knew were possible.

**Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank business- and life-coaches Elaine Bailey (http://www.elainebaileyinternational.com) and Kevin Watson (www.myown-coach.co.uk) for their continued guidance and inspiration.
Travelling on business? Tips for more efficient and enjoyable business travel

I am fortunate, as a freelance medical writer, to have the opportunity to travel around the UK and abroad, attending meetings and conferences with and on behalf of clients. Additionally, I sometimes travel to meetings with established and new clients as well as attending training courses away from home. I have summarised some tips and guidance, based on my own experiences, which may help you to travel more efficiently.

Pre-travel preparations

Firstly, make sure that you know where you’re going! This may sound obvious, but if a client makes the arrangements on your behalf and they are accompanying you on your travels, you can be lulled into a false sense of security that someone else will guide you to your destination. I have been in the situation where a client had to pull out of attending a meeting at the last minute due to unforeseen circumstances. Fortunately, I had all the details I needed to know where I was going. I now always ensure I have contact details for the client, the people I will be working with at the venue, directions for the meeting venue, and hotel if I’m staying overnight plus copies of any travel documentation. If you’re travelling by car – don’t forget your navigational aids, ensure you have sufficient fuel, and have change available for car parking.

If you’re travelling abroad, take enough currency to cover taxi/public transport transfers and any refreshments – again, don’t assume this is all taken care of – prepare for the unexpected! Notify your business credit card provider and bank too, although, from bitter experience, this doesn’t always go to plan. I had the embarrassment of having my credit card declined when I tried to exchange currency and pay for a hotel while away on business. At least I had notified my bank of my impending travel so because it had been an error on their part, I was given some compensation. With this in mind, it is also worth taking your personal credit card as back-up. A spare envelope or folder is useful for storing receipts and expenses details so they are kept safe until your return.

While travelling

If possible, wear comfortable clothes for travelling and, ladies, consider wearing flat shoes and taking smarter shoes in a bag if you have to walk or stand around. You may also want to pack comfortable clothes for you to change into and relax in if you have any free-time during your time away, e.g. in the evenings in the hotel. Taking a book, MP3/ipod (or equivalent) or ipad/DVDs to play on your laptop can help you to make the most of your free-time and help you to wind down after a day of meetings.

IT and mobile phone considerations

Internet access is important if you want to stay in touch with your business while you’re out of the office. Take a web stick or enquire about Wi-Fi at the hotel/meeting venue or use your mobile phone ensuring you have coverage/service if going abroad.

If you use a desktop computer at home, having a travel laptop is something I would consider essential. If you use a laptop at home, then consider having a spare one for travel. It’s good to have a back-up computer anyway, but if you have a laptop designated for travel, you can buy a lighter model and you only need to upload the essential documents required for the trip. This is more secure than travelling with your entire business stored on the laptop you take with you.

Always place your laptop and any confidential documents in your hand luggage if travelling by plane – again, sounds obvious, but I have heard of people putting these in the hold which poses risk of damage and theft. Take a USB stick containing your back-up meeting material and you can also use it to upload any materials provided to you during your meeting. Don’t forget your power cable, and a travel adaptor if necessary. You should regularly back up your computer anyway, but I always make a point of backing up my files before going away.

Travel light and take electronic copies of documents where possible rather than heavy paper and have them backed up on USB just in case your laptop doesn’t work when you arrive.
During the meeting
If I’m writing meeting minutes, I always take a dictaphone and spare batteries with me. Some meetings I have attended are recorded or videoed by the client but it’s always useful to have your own means of recording the meeting (providing this doesn’t breech confidentiality) so that you have immediate access to what was discussed. It’s amazing how much you miss as you’re scribbling down notes!

Take a camera with you if you’re going to a conference or meeting where you are able to take photos of posters and presentations for reference when writing up your report. Again check this doesn’t contravene confidentiality.

Finally, always take a handful of business cards with you for potential networking opportunities, but do respect your client’s wishes if you plan to hand out your cards. For example, if you’re working on behalf of an agency for a third party client, then this may be frowned upon so always double-check first. However, you just never know who you may meet on your travels - networking opportunities arise when you least expect them to - so always have your business details to hand.

Table 1: Summary of the main points to consider when embarking on business travel

| Contact details and directions | – Know where you’re going and have contact details for client, hotel, travel advisors and meeting venue. |
| IT and phone considerations | – Take a laptop with power cable (and travel adaptor if needed), web stick, and USB stick to ensure you can keep in touch with your business and have a back-up of your meeting documents. |
| – Take your computer backup before you go. |
| – A USB stick is useful for downloading any material you’re given during the meeting. |
| – Ensure you have mobile phone coverage if travelling abroad. |
| Comfort and relaxation | – Comfortable clothes are recommended for travelling in and for any free-time you may have. |
| Finances | – Take a book, MP3 player or equivalent, or DVDs to play on your laptop to help you unwind and relax. |
| – Take sufficient currency to cover expenses, such as taxi transfers, even if this has been arranged by the client. |
| – Have an envelope or folder to store receipts and expenses details. |
| – Notify your credit card company if travelling abroad. |
| Recording devices | – When writing meeting reports or attending conferences take photographs of presentations and posters to refer later. |
| – A dictaphone will enable you to record meetings and ensure you don’t miss any essential detail. |

Reader feedback
OOOO is always delighted to hear your feedback on articles. Paul Woolley of Berlin wrote in response to Sam Hamilton’s article ‘Successful migration from the personal computing (PC) to Apple (Mac) computing environment for regulatory medical writers’ (MEW 2012, 21(4):325–330):

- ‘Viruses: There are indeed Mac viruses out there, and just now and again, (very rarely) I get visited by one. I would definitely not try to save the cost of an anti-virus programme; it could turn out to be a false economy (low risk, high stakes). Furthermore, I would not like to be the inadvertent passer-on of a Windows virus from one client to another or even to have a Windows virus dormant on my machine at all!
- Time machine: I am informed by local experts that it is far from perfect. I would suggest that you consider taking independent back-ups as well.
- Finally, I have encountered an interesting Mac problem, apparently an incompatibility with Windows: I frequently find that diagrams embedded in Word documents – often but not always imported from PDFs – do not show up on my screen. This is a nuisance; it can be circumvented by various tricks, but I have never found a direct remedy for it, or indeed an explanation, and neither have others to whom I have spoken about it’.

Author response
Sophos anti-virus for Mac is available for free although other anti-virus programmes are out there too. I also find the blank embedded diagrams/images problem a nuisance; often a right click on the blank image and ‘wrapping the text tight’, resolves the problem. This doesn’t always work, however, as it seems to depend on the source of the embedded diagram/image. I have raised this with Apple and they are currently investigating.

Thank you! Sam Hamilton
Freelance Foraging

We medical writers love standard operating procedures (SOPs): These six signs on the correct use of toilets in Brunei, sent in by Professor Anne Cunningham (plenary speaker at the EMWA Lisbon conference in 2010), may make you think twice before you go!

The tool box

Medical writing round the clock

The world is flat*, even in medical writing. But time zones are still barriers we need to tackle when working on global projects. I once attended a workshop on project management and laughed at the ludicrous idea of a medical writing team strategically based in different geographic regions so they could work round the clock. However, now that I’m working for a global CRO, this rather (then) far-fetched scenario has (now) become almost reality as each day finds me interacting on and working with colleagues in different time zones.

I am no stranger to bridging longitudes and latitudes. As an Asian-born, naturalised European living in Zurich, my family is scattered in Europe, the Philippines and New Zealand. But scheduling the occasional birthday and Christmas Skype sessions is nothing compared with constantly dealing with transatlantic teleconferences (TCs) in the workplace. Thus, I need to have the right tools in order to fully operate in this brave new world of virtual meetings.

Time zone abbreviations

First things first: know what the time zone abbreviation you are dealing with stands for and which geographic area it covers. GMT and UTC are common enough acronyms but have you heard of GALT, IRKST, or YEKST? And do you know that there are two different ESTs – Eastern Standard Time US Canada and Eastern Standard Time Australia? For an extensive list of time zone abbreviations and what they stand for, check out http://www.timeanddate.com/library/abbreviations/timezones/.

Time zone converter

Ok, so I need to call a colleague in Boulder, Colorado today. Is now a good time? Furthermore, I am not one of those numerically gifted souls who can do quick

*The metaphor ‘the world is flat’ comes from Thomas Friedman’s bestseller where he expounds on the factors that levelled the global competitive playing field. This ‘flattening’ is evident not only in business and technology but also in education, medicine, yes, (I believe) in medical writing.
maths in my head. This is where a time zone converter comes in handy; one that converts times in the present, past, or future dates, and takes into account daylight saving time (DST). The converter at http://www.timeanddate.com/worldclock/converter.html meets all these requirements.

World clocks on your desktop

If you are dealing with the same time zones all the time, you might want to have these times ready on your desktop. If you are using Windows Vista, Windows 7.0 or Windows 8.0, you have the world clock gadget at your fingertips. Just right click on your desktop to get access to ready-to-use gadgets. Figure 1 shows what my desktop looks like. The top three clocks are for private purposes. The lower clocks show the US time zones of colleagues working on a project with me.

Meeting planner

At the end of a meeting, you’re asked, ‘What about a TC next week or next month at the same time?’ Unfortunately, because of DST, ‘next time’ may not be ‘the same time’ for all parties involved since time differences between time zones are not constant the whole year round. For example, the US changed to DST on 10 March 2013. In Europe, the switch occurred 3 weeks later on 31 March 2013. In NZ, however, DST ended on 7 April 2013. Thus, the period from March to April is usually full of timing pitfalls. The same problems can happen come autumn at the end or start of DST, depending on which hemisphere you are located.

The meeting planner can sort out meeting times without the DST glitches. It helps you plan TCs ahead and be confident of your times and availability come meeting day. Figure 2 shows a screenshot of a meeting I planned on 12 March 2013 across five different time zones. With smart colour-coding, the tool shows when the attendees
are working, awake but not working, and sleeping. Thus, for a 30-minute TC, I have a 2-hour time window between 16:00 and 18:00 my time (ringed in red) to invite my colleagues to a TC without disrupting their sleep.

For good measure, I also have the meeting planner as an App for my smart phone (see Figure 3).

Caveat

There are many time tools available on the web, but glitches can happen. Even Apple cannot seem to permanently fix the notorious iPhone DST bug which recurs year after year1. No wonder many of these tools come with disclaimers. I don’t think we should throw away those analogue clocks just yet.

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Figure 3: Meeting planner App for smart phones. Screenshot used with permission of www.timeanddate.com.