



Ten questions for ...

Alison McIntosh

By Alison McIntosh

In 100 words, what is your background and how did you become a freelancer?

I was a postdoctoral molecular virologist wanting a change. I replied to an advert in *New Scientist* looking for a medical information scientist. Two weeks after starting my “dream job” Glaxo took over Wellcome (GW) and following reorganisation I began a regulatory writing career which lasted about five years. After several back-to-back submissions and a stint in the USA, I went on maternity leave, moved to the East Midlands (UK) and didn’t go back to GW. I knew I wanted to continue medical writing and so began my freelance journey which is now entering its eighth year.

What is your most important piece of advice for people setting up a new business?

Know that the first year is probably going to be the hardest. Everything about your normal work-life changes: you do not have a regular salary or other work colleagues, you have to make up your own work pattern and also attract your own business. You might be lucky and have work lined up but most of us have to begin from scratch and it is very hard to maintain your own momentum through that first year. I joined EMWA when I began as a freelance and through that built up a new and lasting network of colleagues.

What do you like about being a freelancer?

I like being responsible for making my own decisions about my medical writing career development and feel I have been able to develop it in a way that would not necessarily be encouraged by an employer. I like having the freedom to decide which pieces of work I take on and I also greatly appreciate not having a yearly appraisal (although this could be said to come in the form of a bill from the taxman!)

What do you dislike about being a freelancer?

In my experience it is a myth that freelance medical writers can work exactly the number of hours they want when they want. Life is more flexible, but you still have to juggle timelines and complete the work in the agreed time. This can become more and more difficult as multiple client timelines slip and as luck usually has it, all at the same time—and typically just in the lead up to Christmas!

What are your main sources of work?

Main sources of work are pharmaceutical and communications companies. I also work for CROs and some independent publishers. Most is from the UK, but some is from mainland Europe.

What are the most rewarding projects to work on?

I prefer to work directly with the client rather than through a third person. I also prefer to be included in discussions surrounding the editing and review process.

What are the least rewarding projects to work on?

Those that do not include the elements listed in the above question. This can mean you end up working in isolation from the rest of the project. However, the upside is you do not get involved in the ongoing company politics which often surround particular projects.

Do you have a preferred type of client? If yes, why?

A well-organized client who sets a good brief, and supplies the correct accompanying documents to write from. They have accurate timelines and costings, and ensure payment arrives on time. They will also tell you what a good job you are doing, or have done for them. You notice one of these exceptional creatures when you work for them, and when you do, you should always take a moment in your busy schedule to appreciate them.

What is the best way to say ‘No’ to clients?

If their timeline is not flexible I am honest about how busy I am and I recommend other freelance writers that I know personally. If they have come through another route I also direct whoever the enquirer is to the EMWA freelance list.

Would you ever consider working for a company (again) as a fulltime employee? If yes, why?

“Never say never.” Some days the answer is yes, others no. Depends on which piece of work I’m working on and for whom. The one very good thing about being a freelance is you can have a great variety of tasks which I’m not sure I would get from an employer. However, the thought of a regular salary can also be very attractive sometimes...

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