



Freelance or employee: Which is better?

by Phillip S. Leventhal

Have you dreamed of being a freelance medical writer? When you are an employee, the independence of a freelance life can sound liberating and adventurous, but is it a siren song? On the other hand, employee life has real benefits, such as regular hours, steady work and vacation, but does it imply living with a lot of limitations and aggravations? Many writers have struggled with these questions and tried to find an answer to the question “Which is better: freelance or employee?” Answering this question was the goal of two lunch table discussions at the recent 28th EMWA Conference in Ljubljana.

Life as a freelancer

To begin with, freelancing offers the possibility of great independence—the romance of being your own boss, captain of your own ship. Key benefits include setting your own hours and choosing where and how you work. Also, freelancers spend more time writing, more often get the credit for the work, frequently get more interesting projects, and more often are asked to give scientific input. One very pleasing aspect of freelancing is a lack of meetings (which we all know can be a big time-waster) and a lack of administrative issues. Also, unlike employees, freelancers have the freedom to reject projects or clients they don’t like.

Most of these benefits could be considered emotional rather than practical. A practical benefit is lack of a cap on earnings. However, on average, this argument is less important and probably should not be a key factor in deciding which path to take. A 2007 salary survey by the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) found that the mean salary was \$82,232 for employees and that the mean net income was \$93,306 for freelancers, even though both worked roughly the same number of hours per week [1]. (Ed. – the EMWA Freelance Earnings Survey is due to be repeated in 2010; for details of the 2007 survey, see reference [2].) Of course, the slightly higher income of freelancers could reflect a higher level of experience, and the salary for employees did not include benefits such as retirement, sick leave, insurance, and other perks.

Just as there is no cap to freelance earnings, there is no *bottom*; being able to get work is not guaranteed and can be difficult, especially for a less experienced writer. Even if you get work, it can often be difficult to collect payment for work already completed. In fact, one freelancer made

the surprising claim that “there are always billing problems.” Although this is less of a problem when freelancing for pharmaceutical companies, it can be a serious problem when working for small-to-medium sized companies or academic institutions.

Also, although attractive, being your own boss can have disadvantages. Freelancers generally work alone from a home office, and the result can be a lack of colleagues to consult with and very real social isolation. In addition, it can be difficult to separate your work and personal life, especially with a work flow that has the potential to vary between extremes of too much and too little. The down-times can also lead to anxiety about future earnings, an important concern for less experienced writers with fewer contacts. Another potential problem is getting pigeonholed into a single type of work—for example manuscript writing—and it is usually difficult to find clients willing to take the risk of letting a freelance writer learn on the job.

Life as an employee

What about life as an employee? Being an employee may lack the romance of freelancing, but it has very attractive and substantial benefits. One key point is stability. This includes having a fixed monthly income and a steady stream of work. Another important benefit of being an employee is working on a variety of different documents and in new scientific domains. Furthermore, many employees consider life as an employee to be less stressful than freelancing: employees enjoy regular hours, a separation between work and home, and having support staff to deal with billing, business development, and miscellaneous administrative tasks. A further important advantage of being an employee is the possibility of receiving professional training in new areas, something generally unavailable to or often too expensive for freelancers. Also, freelancers have no colleagues for backup or quality control. Finally, there are a variety of other pleasant benefits of being an employee, including paid vacation and sick leave, health insurance, retirement, and various perks only available in a company setting. As for the disadvantages, those who have been employees know them well: bad management, the aggravation of managing others, mind-numbing meetings and administrative tasks, office and company politics, the feeling of being on a treadmill, and a general lack of independence.

Three stories

Three stories may help those thinking about starting a freelance career. One medical writer described his life bouncing back and forth between freelance and employee: he had worked in pharma, then as a freelancer, is soon taking a full-time job in pharma, and eventually plans to go back to being a freelancer. He said that he is specifically going back to work in pharma because he wants additional experience that he can't get as a freelancer. He concluded that the benefits of the additional in-depth experience outweigh the negatives of temporarily giving up his independence.

A second participant was a medical writer now freelancing after many years of working in academia and pharma. He said that his extensive experience, combined with his personal network and knowledge of the marketplace gained when he was an employee made it possible for him to find clients and generate a steady work flow. He emphasized the importance of working first as an employee for several years before launching a freelance career. He pointed out that one of the worst things a freelancer can do is to take on unfamiliar work and not do a good job; the result is that you will lose the client and will gain a bad reputation. Making a good name for yourself is essential, and it generally requires in-depth experience gained over several years of working as a medical writer.

The third story is my own. Until 2003, I was a research scientist in biotech. However, like other medical writers, I always felt most comfortable in the communication of science, and I was looking for a way out of the laboratory. Getting a job as a writer directly from the laboratory was challenging, and I had become averse to working in an office. I did what a lot of scientists think of but are rarely crazy enough to try: I jumped directly from the laboratory to freelance writing. I got my first break by answering an ad on the AMWA jobs website for a manuscript editor. The pay was low, but it was a start, and the work greatly improved my writing skills. I also placed ads on the AMWA and EMWA freelance pages, which eventually generated a small trickle of editing and writing work. Over time, through networking, I managed to get a steady flow of work; however, I did succumb to the danger of losing clients because of taking on work I was unfamiliar with. Also, not knowing the marketplace, how companies work with freelancers, or how to protect myself with a good contract created a lot of stress. In the end, I was working very hard, and although independent, I felt isolated, mistreated, and typecast as a manuscript writer.

The result was that I started considering life as an employee, but I was concerned about the prospect of giving up my independence. With this in mind, I started looking around very carefully for a creative solution. One year ago, I managed to find it. I took a full-time job with 4Clinics, a CRO with a total of about a dozen writers and a branch office in Paris. So far, working for 4Clinics has been an optimal middle path and a positive experience: I have many of the freedoms of a freelancer combined with the stability and all

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of the benefits of a full-time job. For example, I have been able to help develop new clients and expand the company into new areas of writing, such as medical communications. I also have had the chance to learn new areas of writing and medicine that I would not have been exposed to as a freelancer. Perhaps my job is unusual, but it seems that this kind of small communications company is a good fit for someone who does not want to deal with the downside of freelancing but also wants to avoid the headaches of a big company.

Conclusion

So, which is better: freelance or employee? Freelancing is a great career path for those with experience and the ability to work alone. Surprisingly, for those already working as medical writers, life as an employee is favoured over life as a freelancer. Although the independence of freelancing is seductive, the concrete and emotional benefits of life as an employee are just as attractive, especially for less experienced writers, and they should be considered carefully.

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2. Reeves A, Hamilton S. EMWA Freelance Business Survey 2007. *TWS* 2007, 16;3:138-140.

Battles over opinions as to superiority of products should take place in journal pages not in court

So said the Indiana federal judges in a defamation case brought by a product manufacturer against the American Society of Health Systems Pharmacists (ASHP) and the authors of an article published in the *American Journal of Health-System Pharmacy*¹. The device manufactured by the claimant had compared unfavourably in the article which compared five devices. The manufacturer failed in their action because they were unable to prove malice, knowledge of falsity or recklessness as to the truth or falsity of statements in the article. During the court case the journal had to produce the peer reviewers' comments but were not forced to reveal the names of the peer reviewers. This was a critical case because if the manufacturers had won the case scientists would not have been able to state opinions about products without fear of legal action. The journal had also feared that the reviewers would be drawn into the case as defendants which would have had a detrimental effect on the time-honoured peer review system.

¹ Talley CR. Victory for science and peer-review publishing. *American Journal of Health-System Pharmacy* 2009;66:e1. Available at: <http://www.ashp.org/DocLibrary/News/VictoryforPeerReviewPublishing.aspx>.