

The Business of Freelancing

One of the perks of freelance writing is the freedom to wear pajamas while you work. The additional 15 percent that goes to Uncle Sam is a fringe benefit of self-employment I could live without. Sick leave would be nice. But then, there are the flexible work schedules, frequent vacations, and a home office. As a freelance writer I experienced all of the above—the good and the bad. I made my own schedule, took appealing assignments, and turned down others, and when I needed a vacation, I didn't ask anyone. I also didn't get paid.

As in any profession, freelancing can be rewarding and uncertain. Freelance writers can meet new people, find a new job, or learn something new almost every day. I enjoyed being a freelance writer because it gave me the opportunity to learn about others' professions. While freelancing offers flexibility, it is not for the lazy, the undisciplined, or the unprofessional. Freelance writing is a business. The writer is the business owner, manager, and employee. For those brave souls who dare to risk the venture, consider the following guidelines.

Embrace Flexibility, but Enforce Discipline

When my kids were young, I frequently wrote articles poolside. What a life! I had flexibility, but I worked on a schedule. I wrote daily, met deadlines weekly, attended government meetings at night, and scheduled interviews at times most convenient to my clients. The smart writer sets aside time each day to write and remembers that the client is the boss.

Be Professional, not Trendy

Dressing down is one of the perks of working from home, but when you meet the client or attend a meeting, dress appropriately for the environment. An interview on the farm may call for jeans and sneakers; however, the boardroom requires business attire, including modest clothing and a jacket, if appropriate. Professionalism also refers to attitude and work ethic. Meet deadlines, fulfill expectations, be considerate, and treat others with deference and respect.

Have a Vision and Set Goals

Successful businesses have short-term and long-term strategic plans. Treat freelancing as a business. Set financial goals, attend workshops, read books, and learn new software. Add Web and design skills for greater marketability. Education does not stop with the diploma. Clients expect expertise.

Be a Salesperson

Marketing is important in every business venture, and freelance writers must be aggressive sales people. Don't be shy; if you are good, tout it. But don't be obnoxious. If prospective clients do not like your personality and presentation, you probably won't get the job. Your skills are a product, and any high quality product brings a fair price. Negotiate contracts, expectations, and compensation. When negotiating, I often hear two pieces of advice: start with a higher rate than you expect, and let the client speak first.

Plan for the Future

Unfortunately, paid sick leave and vacations are not part of the contract. And work can be sporadic. Plan ahead and pad your bank account. Beans only taste good the first three days. Cover hidden expenses, such as health care. Some organized groups, such as the National Writer's Union, offer health insurance to members.

Practice Business Sense

Write from your sofa while watching Oprah, but issue invoices promptly and retain copies as records of work completed and billed. Consider tax ramifications before taking a job or accepting a contract. Contract by the project (get it in writing), work by the hour, or join the payroll as a temporary part-time employee. If you plan to take a deduction, keep the original receipt.

Practicing professionalism, pursuing marketing, and following good business practices can lead to a successful career as a freelance writer. The income potential is limitless. For most that succeed, the rewards outweigh the uncertainties. Besides, in what other job could you go to work in your pajamas?

by Toni Mehling

Clients...

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person you thought had the final say. When clients know that another review comes at an extra cost, they are more willing to put time into your project.

Focus on listening to what the client needs and be careful to balance creativity with what he or she wants. Often, clients will not know what they want and you can help shape their ideas; however, first figure out their goals for the project. Then try to incorporate those goals into your designs. You may have an idea of what you would like the outcome to be and your ideas may be great, however some clients have a different vision for what they want. Always remember it is their work you are doing. On the positive side, the client will pay you anyway. In fact, you could establish more business from the client in the future.

When you complete a project with a client, make sure he or she is satisfied with the work you have done, and ask the person for a testimonial and a referral. Make sure you stay in touch with your clients and take every opportunity to let them know about other skills that you have and future work you may be able to provide. A client's positive or negative word-of-mouth referrals can often make or break your future. Always treat each client with respect, and appreciate that they are the ones paying the bill and you are doing a service for them.

by William Roy

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Bytes & Pieces

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Starting Your Own Business

"Being an entrepreneur is not for the faint of heart!" This is a refrain often stated when challenges arise during the course of conducting business at Northern Virginia Tutoring Service. The challenges associated with operating one's own business are at once exhilarating and daunting. In order to manage the daily affairs of a small business, several important legal and administrative issues and processes must be addressed. In addition, there are many skills, personal characteristics, and personal values that must be in place.

Legal, Administrative, and Financial Issues
Starting your own business is not nearly as glamorous as the ads on television or in magazines make it seem. There are a multitude of legal, administrative, and financial issues that an entrepreneur must face at the onset.

The first step is to make a determination regarding the proper legal status of your business. Should the business be a sole proprietorship, an S-Corp., or a limited liability company? Each of these legal models offer advantages and disadvantages that are too numerous to detail here. Seeking legal advice from a qualified attorney whose sole interest is business law is critical to choosing the correct business type. This decision has significant tax implications, as well as corporate liability implications.

The issue of effective administration becomes critical at this juncture. Decisions regarding office space, supplies, equipment, furnishings, and technology must be made. This is often made in a vacuum by well-intentioned people who regret their mistakes at a later date. It is worth seeking the services of a manage-

ment consultant to assist in these decisions.

Financial issues are some of the most intimidating things facing any small business owner. The small business owner must address and answer questions such as

- Do I have sufficient capital on hand to start the process? If not, from where should I seek start-up capital?
- Does my enterprise require that I seek commercial office/retail space immediately?
- Does the nature of my business venture permit me to begin operations from home?
- How do I market my product or service?
- What are my capital equipment needs?
- Where and how do I advertise?

These and other financial issues and decisions are important, because failure to address these issues or making the wrong decision may result in early business failure.

Skills

The skills necessary to operate a business efficiently and effectively are numerous, some tangible, some intangible. Some skills will never be learned in a classroom, but come from life experience, trial and error, as well as success and failure.

Interpersonal and public speaking skills are of significant importance. Without the ability to interact effectively with

people, success is short-lived. The ability to articulate one's thoughts, purpose, and goals are also critical skills. This skill often manifests itself in situations such as participation in Chambers of Commerce, professional associations, client groups, civic groups, and simple telephone conversations. Failure to develop effective interpersonal skills can be the death knell of a small business.

Organizational skills and attention to the details of operating a small business, which require the watchful eye of an effective manager, are other important skills. This is not to say that the owner of a small business should involve him or herself in the minute details of business operations. Rather, it implies that any successful small business owner must keep a keen, watchful eye on the daily operations.

This logically leads to the next critical skill, the ability to delegate effectively. Small business owners must position

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STC's mission is to create and support a forum for communities of practice in the profession of technical communication.

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Kristen Soller
JMU STC President

President's Message

The meetings this semester focused on the role of technical communicators in the workplace. Our chapter hosted speakers who provided insight into the various employment options for professionals in our field. Shri Henkel spoke to the chapter about working as a freelance writer and editor. Her presentation on entrepreneurship and the TSC class offered, this semester on managerial and entrepreneurial communication were the inspirations for this newsletter's theme.

Many of the tasks conducted by technical communicators apply outside a traditional office setting, which makes freelancing an attractive option for employment. Technical communicators are in high demand in many companies around the country; however, for those individuals who want to work in a place where there are fewer employment opportunities, or for those people who like the idea of building a company from the ground up, starting a business may be more appealing.

Whatever your career aspirations may be, this issue of *Bytes and Pieces* aims to give you a better understanding of the diverse ways in which technical communicators work. For those of you considering freelancing or starting your own business after graduation, I hope that this issue will give you an idea of the challenges and rewards of the many career paths in technical communication.

Managing Clients: First-Hand Experience

One of the most difficult challenges a beginning entrepreneur faces is learning how to handle client relations. The process starts with finding a client and then agreeing to complete a project. Each project involves a price, a project timeline, deliverables, a payment schedule, and more. Your client management is not complete when you get the agreement signed. It can be a lengthy process even before you start work on the project; however, with proper care you can help establish future work for your business.

With each step there are many challenges. When first finding a client you have to market yourself and showcase your abilities. You must have confidence in your abilities to complete the project. Try to set up a meeting with clients to begin to develop a relationship with them. Once you have agreed to complete a project, make sure to have a written and signed agreement in place that clearly defines timelines, deliverables, and other expectations from you and the client.

In school you learn how to develop projects to a teacher's specifications by learning what the teacher expects and then developing your project accordingly. Generally, a class project has a timeline, and you stick to that timeline. If you miss your deadline, you turn in an incomplete project. Completing projects for a client can



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be a much greater challenge. You are not only relying on your ability to complete tasks in time but also you are relying on your client's willingness to make your project a priority and get you necessary resources. Unfortunately, clients often have many other responsibilities and it can be a challenge to get their time.

Select a fair number of reviews and, ideally, have the client sign off at each stage of completion. I usually have two or three reviews, with the last review covering minor revisions only. Having clients sign off helps reduce discrepancies later about where you are in the project timeline. Sign offs also protect you if there are multiple decision makers, and the client wants changes later that were previously agreed upon by the

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Business...

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themselves to be free to market their enterprise from outside the office. This process begins with effective advertising to attract high quality employees, screening applicants, interviewing prospective applicants, and hiring qualified personnel. With highly skilled personnel, a small business owner positions him or herself to engage in effective marketing of the business. Without these elements in place, delegation of tasks becomes difficult, if not impossible. The result is a small business owner who is held hostage by the minutia of management, rather than free to sell his or her product in the community.

Strange as it may sound, strong accounting and financial management skills are not a prerequisite for the effective operation of a small business. A broad knowledge of this process and the ability to identify problems is critical. However, involvement in the daily accounting process is unnecessary and counterproductive. Here again, the need to hire qualified personnel and to delegate this task is crucial. One factor sometimes overlooked by small business owners is the need to hire people who possess a strong sense of professional ethics. In other words, hire someone who can be trusted to manage money. With this in place, once again the small business owner is free to do what is most critical to operational efficiency and effectiveness marketing.

Writing skills are another important element of managing a business. In today's world of instant messaging, email, and text messaging, the need to communicate effectively in writing has become ever more critical. It is easy to pass this skill off as old-fashioned and out of touch with our cyber age. However, society continues to place a very high premium on the written word. A small business owner must be able to prepare a clear and accurate memorandum, email message, or letter to a prospective client.

Students and Entrepreneurship

Resources to help YOU!

365 Foolish Mistakes Smart Managers Commit Everyday: How and Why to Avoid Them

Shri Henkel
www.nikkileigh.com/biz-mistakes.htm

Get Clients Now!: A 28 Day Marketing Program for Professionals, Consultants, and Coaches

C.J. Hayden
www.amazon.com Search: *Get Client Now...*

Guru.com

Largest Online Marketplace for Freelance and Talent
www.guru.com

Personal Characteristics and Values

Personal characteristics that are important to the successful operation of a small business are somewhat more amorphous and less easily recognizable. Of course, many of these traits are learned through life experience.

Honesty and trustworthiness are essential parts of business ownership. No one wants to conduct business with a dishonest or deceitful individual. This not only applies to the transaction of money but also applies to the reliability of one's word in the world of business. A businessperson who develops a reputation for reneging on his or her word will soon find his or her peers very reluctant to work with him/her. Professional isolation becomes the cross that this person will bear.

Hard work, drive, and perseverance are several additional characteristics and core values that can determine the success or failure of a small business. The ability to take the time to ensure that all aspects of a small business are operating well is critical. A business owner who walks away from this responsibility on a regular basis will soon find that the business he or she has worked to build will collapse in short order.

A sense of community is an often-neglected factor that can make or break a small business. Participation in civic affairs, or "giving back to the community," and a sense of commitment to those who are less fortunate are the hallmark of a successful business. This, of course, provides benefits to those in need (e.g., children, students, the elderly, the poor, and the homeless). The spin-off often provides unintended benefits to the business owner. Community recognition for non-profit service reaps intangible rewards.

The task of starting one's own business is both challenging and tenuous if an entrepreneur does not go into the venture with his or her eyes wide open. A touch of common sense, coupled with some basic skills and a sense of determination, is the recipe for success.

by Dr. Ralph G. Perrino

The Well-Fed Writer: Self Sufficiency as a Writer in Six Months or Less

Peter Bowerman
www.writingcareer.com/mf_well_fed_writer.php

The Complete Idiot's Guide to Starting Your Own Business 4th Edition

Edward Paulson
www.amazon.com Search: *The Complete Idiot's...*

U.S. Small Business Administration

www.sba.gov