



Medical Writing at Home

by Alison McIntosh

As with most people who work for a pharmaceutical company in these days of mergers and acquisitions, I was used to hearing management extol enthusiastically "Embrace change!" More often than not the usual retort was "We can embrace change but we don't have to give it a big kiss!" Well, just over a year ago, I had to embrace change and give it more than one big kiss, and a few hugs too. The change in this case came in the shape of Sarah and weighed in at 7lb 3oz.

Prior to Sarah's arrival, I had every intention of returning to work full-time and continuing my life as it was, with the baby just slotting in. How wrong could I be? My maternity leave ended in May 2000 and at that point I had to make a choice. I wanted to balance family and work commitments more evenly and chose not to return to the safe environment of a full-time medical writing position in a blue-chip company. I found this a hard decision to make, principally because I had spent years in academia jumping from one temporary contract to another and finally left to join the pharmaceutical industry as the permanent and safe option.

I knew I wanted to continue my medical writing and decided to begin life as a freelancer. This, I reasoned, would allow me to have flexible working arrangements, whilst still maintaining my own professional development at an adaptable pace. Freelance medical writing also meets a major requirement of the modern workplace - a portable skill. In theory, if you have the right technology, writing can take place in almost any locale. Hence, future changes in location should not matter to clients.

Next problem, how do I become a freelance medical writer? I needed information not required as a full-time employee. Should I be self-employed or a Limited Company? Self-employed status, how does the tax-man know? Talking of tax-man, how do you pay tax and national insurance contributions?

Accounts, do I need an accountant? How do I decide when I am self-employed, do I have to have earned money first? So where can you turn to for help in the UK?

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I turned to Business Link, a UK national organisation with local centres dedicated to helping people set up a business and providing them with ongoing support. My local office in Leicester was a treasure trove of help and guidance, proving to be an inexpensive and useful way of finding important information very quickly. Within the first week of contacting them, I had a one-to-one session with an experienced small business consultant and my list of questions kept him very busy indeed. They ran a two-day start-up course covering all the basic information needed to begin your business, and by attending, I received two years' free banking. I also enrolled on their one-day accounting course which I found invaluable. I am currently waiting to attend a one-day course aimed at improving business websites.

The Write Stuff

After completing my first year, do I think freelancing is an easy option? I don't think so. As a freelancer working from home, you have to be disciplined and also not be afraid of working alone. When you feel like a chat to break up a particularly long piece of work, there are no colleagues to wander along to and pass the time of day with. You have sole responsibility for attracting business to your company, therefore you can't take it too personally when you send out your CV to a potential client and receive the umpteenth response that they have no work at the moment but will keep your details on file. As a freelancer, you have to believe that they mean it. You have to maintain your own enthusiasm and drive, deriving pleasure from completing a piece of work to a high standard and on time. With no one else to rely on, you must be willing to tackle new skills. I personally got a lot of fulfilment out of designing and building AAG Medical Writing's website and publishing it on the internet.

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On several occasions during this last year, I have discovered that medical writing is not widely recognised as a profession. Business Link runs a mentoring scheme designed to put a new business in touch with experienced people in similar occupations. No medical writer had previously been enrolled, hence no mentor existed for my new business venture. I registered as unemployed until I obtained my first commission and discovered in the process that I did not exist as an employment category. After asking whether I was a journalist/secretary/scientist, the pull-down menu was left blank! Is this something EMWA should take note of? Perhaps even offering mentoring services from within the association through a freelance network?

Overall, how has the first year been? Very different from previous employment years. In addition to being the Medical Writer for AAG Medical Writing I have had to learn to be the Business Development Officer, the Accountant, the Budget Manager, the IT and Website Developer, Uncle Tom Cobley and all. I have successfully obtained several medical writing commissions and in July of this year my accountant said he was impressed by my accounts - praise indeed! I'd be happy to hear from any readers on any of the issues or topics raised in this article.

Useful Addresses:

England: 08456 045678	www.businessadviceonline.org
Wales: 08457 969798	www.businessconnect.org.uk
Scotland: 0845 6096611	www.sbgateway.com
No. Ireland: 028 90 491031	www.ledu-ni.gov.uk

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