

Out on Our Own

SECTION EDITORS



Satyen Shenoy
ssheno@describescientific.de

Editorial

Greetings, readers.

In this issue of *O000*, we start off with an important question – how do I prevent the risk of working too much? An apt question as we approach the end of the year, finishing up our projects and settling in to enjoy the holiday season. This is the question Belinda Cabral, our Berlin-based EMWA colleague, asked herself after she started her freelance consultancy and found herself working all kinds of hours. Many of us, especially in our early days in freelancing, have perhaps gone through such a period where

every client was welcome and we were loath to say no to a project. While such a situation is exciting and challenging in the beginning, it can eventually spiral into a stressful situation due to the pressure of multiple deadlines and a heavy workload. In her article, Belinda shares with us certain techniques that she practices in order to strike a healthy work-life balance that allows her to enjoy her downtime just as much she enjoys her freelance business.

2017 has indeed been an eventful year for EMWA's Freelance Business Group, and quite a few initiatives have been rolled out to enhance

the benefits we offer to our freelance members. And I have taken the opportunity to share these with you in a brief recap.

Many thanks to all of you who have contributed to *O000*; your articles are indeed insightful and of immense help to your fellow freelancers. I would also like to reiterate my request to all our readers to continue submitting your articles and sharing your thoughts with us.

Season's greetings and good luck for 2018!

Satyen Shenoy

On my own to manage my work-life balance: How do I prevent the risk of working too much?

Regarding work-life balance, working on one's own has its advantages. For me, one of the most valuable advantages is being free to decide when I want to start and when I want to stop working. I can start working at 8am or 10am and finish at 4pm or 8pm; I can arrange my timetable to have my Friday afternoons free; and I don't have to ask for days off because of doctor appointments. In a nutshell, I am the boss of my timetable and I enjoy the flexibility. But is it really an advantage? I must say that sometimes I wish to go back to the time I was employed in a company, where I had defined worktime that I had to respect. At least, I always had my weekends and holidays free.

When I became a full-time freelancer, I kept working like the time when I was working with a company. But I noticed very quickly that it is easier to be distracted when one is not working in an office set-up. Also, it is easier to exaggerate and work late or during the weekends. So I had to think of some strategies to avoid this and find the right balance between my work and my free time.

I choose my work time and I stick to it.

As a freelancer, there was a time when I was always tempted to check my emails, whatever the time of the day, at weekends, and during my vacations. If this was an innocent act, like: I look

As an independent worker, it happens sometimes that the clients I work for forget that I am at the service of other clients too.

very quickly and I forget about it, it would have been great. Unfortunately, when I check my emails, I also want to answer them or to do what I am requested to do, or I want to plan what I should do for work. If I do all these, then I am working. And any time this happens, it is often equivalent to working, which according to me, is not a healthy way to spend my downtime.

When I started to work as a freelancer, I did not pay attention to this and I worked most of the time. After several months, I felt tired and even got ill. I realised that as a freelancer, the times I was not in good health, my work suffered as it accumulated and there was no one to support me. So I have learned to plan my work effectively, and I have meaningful time intervals to rest and rejuvenate myself. I defined my work time and my work days, and I planned time for real vacations, during which I wouldn't work at all. Then, I inserted all of these in Excel sheets that I printed and hung on a wall in my office. Since then, I try to stick to them, even if it's not always possible (I try to stay flexible in case of deadlines or urgent work). At least, I have much more time to rest and to enjoy!

Also, I check emails and take professional calls only during my work time. When I am on vacation, I set up an out-of-office automatic reply, which allows me to fully enjoy my vacation while keeping my clients informed of my absence with

a promise to get back to them when I resume working.

I define priorities and I say no in a diplomatic way.

As an independent worker, it happens sometimes that the clients I work for forget that I am at the service of other clients too. Some of them expect their emails to receive replies right away or their calls to be returned within an hour for regular tasks. At the beginning, I put myself under a lot of pressure and always tried to answer all emails and return all phone calls as soon as possible, until I noticed that it was not possible to do so especially when the workload grew. So I had to find a way to be there for my clients while making them understand that I can't always be immediately available to respond to their requests. Of course, some of them need to be reminded of this more often than others, but I try to do it diplomatically, and they usually understand.

But how do I prioritise my work?

First of all, I order my tasks by deadlines (which define the urgency) and then by the day I was asked to do them. Also, I deal first with tasks that are important for me.

When all my tasks are put in order of urgency and importance, I just "book" time spots on my Outlook calendar in order to perform them within my work time. That way, I know in advance if I can meet all deadlines or if I have to ask for more time to perform some tasks (instead

of working late or during the weekends). Moreover, it allows me to explain to my clients why I am not able to complete a task right away and to give them a reasonable time frame for task completion (instead of saying clearly no).

I choose a place for my office and I only work there.

In order to really enjoy my free time, I need to forget about my work. Otherwise, I keep thinking about my work during my free time which I don't want to do. As I work on my laptop, I have the freedom to choose the location: in my office, in the living room, in the bedroom, in a café, or at the park. Unfortunately, by doing this, all these places little by little become associated with work. So when I am there during my free time, I also think of the work.

The idea I had to avoid this was to get used to working only in the same place (in my office), so that I think of working only when I am in that confinement and leave the rest of the places to be associated purely with my free time. This brought me two advantages: I am more efficient when I work and I can enjoy better my free time without



having a cloud full of work thoughts hanging over my head whenever I am out of my office.

I lock my office door outside the defined work time.

I just imagine that when I go to my office in the morning, it is equivalent to going to work, except that I don't have to leave my apartment. As a room in my apartment serves as my office, every time I walk by it and the door is open, I see my

desk and my work stuff. So I think of the work I have to do. Since I decided to lock my office at the end of the work day, it seems like it doesn't exist at home outside my work time. In my mind, the door of my office is like a wall, so that it gives me the feeling that what is behind there is not part of my apartment (where I should enjoy my free time). I have even kept the door as simple as possible so that there is nothing particular on it that makes me think that this door belongs to my office. It is white, without pictures or signs, so that it blends well with the walls and it can be easily forgotten outside of the work time.

Of course, this works uniquely for me and I cannot assure you that it will work for others. Each person can find a way that is adapted to their life style and personality. At the end, what counts is to find the right work-life balance adapted to one's particular situation.

Belinda Cabral
Freelance medical writer
Berlin, Germany
belinda.cabral@belitral.fr

Save the date

**The 47th EMWA Conference in
Warsaw, Poland
November 8-10, 2018**

For more information: http://www.emwa.org/EMWA/Conferences/Future_Conferences/EMWA/Conferences/EMWA_Future_Conferences.aspx

2017 in a nutshell for the Freelance Business Group

It has indeed been a busy year for EMWA's Freelance Business Group (FBG).

We started with yet another collaboration, this time with the Verband der Gründer und Selbständiger Deutschland e.V. (VGSD; www.vgsd.de), one of Germany's largest freelance advocacy groups. We have had a similar association with the Association of Independent Professionals and Self-Employed (IPSE; www.ipse.co.uk/) in the UK for a number of years. The main intention behind fostering such alliances is to offer the benefits of membership of such organisations to our freelancers at a discounted rate. Of course, these benefits are mostly relevant to freelancers based in the UK (for IPSE) or Germany (for VGSD). Such association memberships were a part of the Freelance Benefits Package until the latter was made redundant earlier this year. What does this mean? It means that now any interested EMWA member, whether a freelancer or not, can take advantage of these association memberships at discounted rates. This could especially be useful to those EMWA members who are considering a switch from being an employee to freelancing. Details on these membership offers and links to the organisations are provided on EMWA's website. Of course, the FBG is always interested in partnering with such organisations in other countries and request you to get in touch with us if you have a recommendation to make.

Yet another initiative implemented this year was changing the way the FBG will be managed hereon. Historically, the activities of the FBG were run by one or two or at times even three freelance advocates. However, with an increase in the scope of and programmes conducted on behalf of the FBG, EMWA's Executive Committee (EC) decided to constitute a subcommittee comprising five volunteers to look after the FBG. A call for volunteers was sent out in April this year and it was indeed encouraging to receive such a tremendous response. Subsequently, the newly formed FBG subcommittee was introduced at the spring conference in Birmingham. The FBG subcommittee members are Allison Kirsop (UK), Petra Pachovska (Czech Republic),

Paul Wafula (Germany), George Xinarianos (UK), and me (Germany). Your new FBG subcommittee has a healthy mix of experienced and relatively new freelancers, with a varied background and experience but proactive as a team and we look forward to serving the FBG to the best of our abilities. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of you who wrote to me expressing an interest in volunteering for the subcommittee. We shall certainly be in touch should we need your help.

As the FBG continues to look after activities such as organising the Freelance Business Forum at EMWA conferences and putting together the Out on Our Own section of *Medical Writing*, I would like to share a couple of new initiatives that are in the cards.

The Freelance Directory (FD) provided on EMWA's website is a useful tool for our freelancers to advertise their business. This is by no means a novel concept. EMWA's American and Australasian counterparts have similar facilities for their members. While FD has a positive feedback overall, some of you informed us that it was somewhat tedious and clunky and needed to be revamped. Taking these suggestions into consideration, the FBG subcommittee (especially Allison and Petra), together with Alison Rapley, our former president, are involved in redoing the FD to make it more dynamic, upfront, and "search-friendly". Our goal is to create a FD that provides improved visibility and a much easier

interface between our members who subscribe to the FD and their potential clients.

The FBG conducts the Freelance Business Survey (FBS) every 3 years to gauge the practices among our freelancers, and the next survey will be conducted in early 2018. Over the years, the FBS has taken a more holistic approach and now collects responses to a number of diverse issues that are relevant to the freelancing business. The results of the FBS are of significant importance to not only the FBG and EMWA's EC but also to current and future freelancers. For example, if a newbie freelancer wonders what the current hourly rates are for drafting a manuscript, one of the easier ways they can get this information is by looking at the survey results and...et voilà! Of course, to achieve a real-life representation, we need participation from as many members as possible. To consider the example I just gave, if the results on hourly rates were based on the output of a few freelancers whose rates are either at the high end or at the low end, the rate we arrive at is unrepresentative of current practices. And this can potentially affect our business.

My intention behind sharing the progress made by the FBG in 2017 is straightforward: I want to present a snapshot of all the activities we carried out for the benefit of our freelancers in 2017. And we have you to thank for it because these ideas, sometimes even in a rudimentary form, have come from you, during a casual conversation while at the EMWA conferences,

during an informal local gathering of freelance medical writers, via email messages, or on social media. It is your participation in the process that allowed us to take on these initiatives and implement them. Which is exactly why I have also taken the opportunity to apprise you of what is coming in the near future, and to request that you continue to participate in our initiatives and make them successful. If perchance you have other ideas that you think would be beneficial to our freelance membership then please share them with us.

I wish you all a successful 2018.

Satyen Shenoy
Member FBG Subcommittee
sshenoy@describescientific.de

