

Out on Our Own

SECTION EDITORS



Laura A. Kehoe

laura.a.kehoe@gmail.com

Editorial

Welcome readers,

This edition of Out on Our Own (OOOO) is all about the Freelance Business Forum (FBF). It's where I, only two congresses ago, embraced EMWA and delved into the world of the FBF. Just in the last year, I have been a table leader, written an article for OOOO, and become a freelance business group subcommittee member, and now here I am as section editor. It is with pleasure that I take over as section editor from Satyen Shenoy, who has been remarkable at developing the section but also the FBF. The EMWA FBF is unique, providing a much-needed platform for freelancers, and future freelancers, to meet. The medical writing field is relatively small, and even more so for freelance medical

writers, I feel that forming a network and connecting with others is key to a freelancer's success. This is the principle behind the EMWA FBF. This year in the majestic city of Barcelona, freelancers, and those tempted by the freelance world, got together to chat, share experiences, suggest solutions and drink a little sangria. It was truly a success, with over 70 registered attendees, and 10 roundtable discussions that followed on from an encouraging talk by Helen Baldwin. Check the FBF 2018 report for more details. In this issue of OOOO, two first-time EMWA attendees, Mariana Rickmann and Francisco López de Saro paired up to summarise their experience. First meeting in a workshop, they then navigated to the FBF. Mariana, as a new freelancer, was keen to get a good discussion flowing at her table as she had

accepted to be a table leader, and Francisco, with already 2 years of experience as a freelancer, by attending the FBF still learned new techniques for working with clients.

Beate Walter, a second-time FBF attendee, had a different perspective this time around, as between the first and second FBF she has taken that exciting and challenging step of becoming a freelancer. Here, she describes what it takes to become a freelancer in Germany, getting that first client and stepping into the freelance world, developing a business, finding accountants, etc. It's not all about writing!

Get inspired, register for the next EMWA FBF, and join us for these insightful discussions. See you in Warsaw.

Laura A. Kehoe

Here is what happens when new freelancers attend an EMWA conference for the first time

Barcelona, grey and cold at the beginning of May. One may think that in Barcelona the sun always shines. Which it does.

But they also say "Hasta el 40 de mayo, no te quites el sayo", which means until the 40th of May don't take your coat away.

That was precisely the case for the Friday afternoon when Mariana and Francisco were attending a workshop at the EMWA conference.

Who would want to be outside enjoying the beach and a lovely energetic city when there is so much going on inside the EMWA conference?

Two scientists turned writers sit next to each other to begin an exercise on establishing a robust dialogue for problem-solving during a writing project.

What do two Spanish people do? Yes, they chat (sorry Alison!). Wasn't it about dialogue, anyway?

Indeed, the Spanish communication gene is also expressed in scientists. Perhaps, at a lower level than the general population, but detectable and even with surprising results in some cases. Immediately they noticed they had something in common: love for basic science and a new career in writing.

Here, they describe their experiences of EMWA and the FBF.

This is how the freelance medical writing world got real for me at EMWA

Joining EMWA and going to the conference in Barcelona was one of the first business strategies on my list when I decided to start my new life as a freelance medical writer.

The extensive amount of resources for freelancers available on EMWA's website gave me the trust I needed to invest in becoming a member and attending the conference.

More importantly, Barcelona is the starting point for the most significant events in my life: studies, work, family and friends.

It was immediately crystal-clear for me that I should start my new professional road there as well. Plus, I had accommodation, family vacation and babysitting all in one! How could I miss it?

After finishing my PhD in Barcelona, I joined the pancreatic cancer research group in Munich: the place to be if you are in the field. Science and projects were exciting and very time-demanding.

After my second maternity leave and the end of my temporary contract, I had some time to think about my next steps.

What can I offer to society? What do I like? What do I want to do?

All these questions and their answers simmered together and guided the route to

where I want to be: to help people understand the scientific facts behind news, products or projects with my writing skills. And I am still on my way, so ask me next year!

By planning my days at the Congress in Barcelona, I was immediately overwhelmed by the number of workshops, sessions and intense rhythm.

It was challenging to keep my focus since every session was exciting for me as a newcomer. I decided to select the workshops that complemented the training on writing that I had just finished and registered for several foundational seminars.

In "managing your freelance project", I was lucky enough to sit next to Francisco. I learnt a lot from the workshop, but also by meeting people like him, who are ahead of me on the freelance path.

And being a new freelancer, it was almost an obligation to go to the Freelance Business Forum (FBF). I was curious, nervous, excited and my senses were sharper than they were, at least during the last year (remember: I come from maternity leave, with little sleep time).

Especially important for me was to participate as a moderator (table leader) of the table discussion session. Guess what topic I moderated? How to find the balance between life

and work. I hope at least one person could benefit from the vivid discussion I had with another new freelance mom. Check the FBF 2018 report!

I arrived at the EMWA Congress in Barcelona thinking that the workshops will push my writing skills forward and that the FBF will open the door to some new business relationships.

Yes, I did learn a lot from the workshops. Yes, I did get some business ideas from the forum.

But, what impacted me the most, what I benefited the most from, was the interpersonal relations, the quick chats during coffee breaks, lunch, the networking event, the group works during the workshops, the freelance discussion tables and the after-congress activities.

Being myself an introverted scientist, I did not quite envisage the length of solitude that I would have to experience as a freelancer.

I instantly connected with so many friendly and helpful professionals and got the invigorating energy of human interaction.

Incredibly talented scientists like Francisco



and so many others gave me the motivation and encouragement to put all my effort into this new career step I am taking now.

The imaginary freelance medical writer world that grew in my mind since I started working on it, suddenly got real. And it was great.

Mariana Rickmann
Freelance Medical Writer
Munich, Germany
mariana@marianarickmann.com

Transferring a life of scientific experience into writing services

Although I had immensely enjoyed my life as a basic research scientist for 25 years, it got to a point in which the efforts of surviving in academic life became less and less appealing, for many reasons.

With short-term contracts and ever-shrinking budgets, sustaining a small biochemistry and molecular biology lab could be very frustrating.

But also, I felt that most of what I had published, on DNA replication and repair, was only remotely connected to real-life health problems: just satisfying my own curiosity about things was not a good-enough reason to spend taxpayers money.

Working from home with total freedom was for me extremely appealing, so the decision to become a freelance medical writer 2 years ago was easy.

It also helped that my daughter had just been born, and the intensity of scientific life would make logistics too complicated. My wife, who works in the pharmaceutical industry, provided me with a first few contacts, and soon I developed a good client base, which has been expanding ever since.

At first, I could hardly believe that I could be paid substantial amounts of money for writing papers and grants, the very same kind

of work that I used to do for pleasure. Discovering that I could make a living from my experience in writing and publishing papers was a revelation.

But not everything is perfect in medical writing: I do miss the discussions with colleagues on current scientific topics and giving talks on my own research.

Now, I spend endless hours typing in quiet solitude, so last winter I was looking for any good reason to spend a few days away from my home-office.

Attending the EMWA conference was the perfect occasion to combine travel and professional interests, and I was eager to meet other people with the same professional pathway as mine.

Being a newbie at these meetings, I did not know exactly what to expect. I was overwhelmed by the number of seminars, courses, lectures that were going on at the EMWA conference, and I found it hard choosing the topics or events that I wanted to attend. However, all the activities that I joined were insightful for me.

Personally, I had rarely met other medical writers (MWs are a rare breed in Spain), and I was curious about the kind of people I would find doing the same as I. I was fortunate to meet Mariana and other scientists now successfully

working throughout Europe as MWs, and these social interactions were by far the most rewarding aspects of the conference.

At the FBF I enjoyed the cheerful talk by Helen Baldwin and the discussion tables. I joined one on project budgeting and pricing, which seemed to be very popular with other attendees. I learned quite a few things, such as that other medical writers sign formal contracts on every project they do.

I still find budgeting one of the most troublesome aspects of being a freelancer and I wish there were some general rules or guidelines to follow.

I returned to my desk in Madrid energised and with some fresh ideas on how to grow as a freelancer but, most importantly, with new friends on whom to rely for professional advice and companionship on this adventure.

Francisco López de Saro
Medical Writer & Health
Technologies Consultant
Madrid, Spain
lopezdesaro@gmail.com

I was
eager to
meet other
people with
the same
professional
pathway as
mine.

My way into freelancing and the first 6 months in business

Looking back about a year, I would have never guessed that I'd start my own business and go freelance within the next couple of months. I was in a permanent position as a medical writer (MW) in a small CRO in Germany, doing regulatory and scientific writing. I did that for about 3 years.

And then, the medical writing department shut down, and I was being 'let go'. It came totally out of the blue. But, when I started to look for a new job (what else), a former client of mine contacted me on LinkedIn (one reason I would always recommend being on LinkedIn). He wanted to keep working with me and, a long story short, he gave me the idea of becoming a freelancer. Due to my "lucky" timing, I could register just in time for the EMWA Freelance Business Forum (FBF) in Cascais in November 2017 to sneak a peek of what other freelancers thought and get answers to some of my questions.

My first FBF was overwhelmingly welcoming and interesting. Everybody was so encouraging when I talked about my idea and my experiences. I've only worked in medical writing for about 3 years, wasn't that too early to go freelance?

One thing I have always appreciated about MWs in general, but now in freelance MWs especially, is the support you get and the lack of competitiveness. Instead of other freelancers thinking "oh no, here comes another one" they share strategies and give hints on what needs to be done, when and how.

So, coming back from Cascais the theory became more real. I wanted to become a freelancer. In Germany, that means a bit of paperwork (or actually a lot): Looking for an accountant to take care of my taxes, my tax ID, and register me as a self-employed MW; an insurance consultant that would check out my existing insurances for necessary adaptations or whatever insurance(s) I would require; health insurance had to be arranged; and because I was still in the status of "unemployed" the whole business of applying for a founding grant (*Gründungszuschuss*). Again my "lucky" timing. When you're unemployed in Germany and want to start your own business (with a few requirements you have to fulfil) there are means to apply for grants that get you over the first hump (the first months when work isn't chasing you down yet). In order to apply for this money, you have to write a business proposal, a business plan for the first 3 years including calculations of income and expenses. Basically, get your crystal ball out and predict your future. What a blast. Or not. I thought making my own website (a whole

other story) was hard, figuring out my business name, getting the necessary hard- and software, etc., but no, the income you have to predict for 3 years to come, this led me to complete meltdown status. How should I know? How do I do that? Do I lie and fib a little? Help!

My experience in the CRO and the projects I had completed helped me to accomplish this in the end. My "client No. 1" wanted to do two projects with me to start off: observational studies with medical devices, between 50 to 100 patients, they wanted the database, the analyses, the reporting and possibly a manuscript (I did the exact same thing for him before, so I knew what would come and how much time it would probably need). This was my foundation, everything else was just made up, what I was expecting (or better hoping for); manuscripts and projects that resembled the ones I described.

One more thing, that only works for freelancers in Germany, is the Künstlersozialkasse. It has been described in the OOOO section before, so I applied there too. Because, funnily enough, a "scientific author" counts as an artist. Until now, (July 2018) I am still waiting on a reply. I had to send in proof of my work as a "scientific author" more than once, so I'm unsure whether or not I have much chance. But, if you mainly write manuscripts or other scientific content and not so much the regulatory documents, it is a good option. They pay half of the health and pension insurance (and in turn your clients have to give a deductible to the Künstlersozialkasse).

January 2018, and the time had come. Officially, I was in business. I had my own business website, or at least, the domain. I bought a new laptop and gear to arrange my new office at home. January and parts of February flew by with getting my website filled with information and hooking it up with Google in order to be found there, contacting my network and letting people know that I was "back" in business and eager to work. And then, the waiting game started. Why didn't they call? Or send a message? Oh well, I did a few webinars (EMWA and others, like software and basics in business development) and read a lot, tried to fill my time with "productive" tasks. I was constantly antsy. I didn't want to leave my "office" for too long in case someone would call or write. And then, they called and wrote. New clients that found my

Instead of other freelancers thinking "oh no, here comes another one" they share strategies and give hints on what needs to be done, when and how.

profile on LinkedIn or my website, and also old clients that knew me and appreciated my work. Boy, it felt great. I was in business, for real, or for at least another month or two. My nervous state of mind got a bit better with time. Whenever I didn't or

don't have completely filled days, I do things I could never do while employed. Like, going to the gym mid-morning (so much more relaxing and less claustrophobic) or read or paint or garden or knit or whatever my heart desires. Even flying to family visits without feeling the tension of holiday constraints, I just packed my laptop and work phone and worked as it was necessary between playdates with my nieces and coffee with my friends and family.

Learning to relax and taking the days and work as they came was a big issue for me, but my biggest issue yet after my first 6 months, is to balance the need for business development. I haven't mastered the art of always being busy. We discussed this in the last FBF in Barcelona, and I still have a few things I haven't tried out so far. But isn't there always? There are busy times followed by free time. Recently, I started working with a recruiter that only works with freelancers. Yet another way to expand my opportunities. So, fingers crossed, I will find new clients and keep my current ones, keep learning and growing my business and network, because basically, networking is, besides the actual medical writing content, the most important thing for freelancers. Isn't it?

One more thing I heard a lot from people who have either worked with me or even from those who declined to work with me so far, is, that my attitude, my personality were nice to either work with or get to know, because I love what I do and that transfers. Plus being professional and sticking to timelines is one of my strengths. Nevertheless, the "lack" of experience got in my way a few times. But, I feel this will get better with every project and contract I will do. A bad attitude is a lot harder to fix. Becoming a freelancer took a lot of guts, there are uncertainties you don't have when you're employed, but the positive outweighs the risks for me, and it was the best decision I could have made by far.

Beate Walter
Freelance Medical and Scientific Writer
Muenster, Germany
beate@bmwalter-medical-writing.de