



EMWA Virtual Freelance Business Forum – November 2020

Despite the virtual nature, freelancers want to network!

Usually, the Freelance Business Forum (FBF) is a social affair, with a table of alcoholic options at the back of the room, it gives some of us introverted freelancers some Dutch courage to start networking and socialising. This year was different; we were virtual! And despite my efforts to encourage people to run to their fridges to get a cool beer or wine, it wasn't needed, as from the comfort of their homes, perhaps some even in their pyjamas, the attendees embraced the networking, and interactions were in abundance.

The Freelance Business Group (FBG) tried to maintain the structure that the FBF has had over many years. An introduction presentation, a guest speaker and roundtable discussions that this time were in the form of breakout rooms. We had an impressive 74 people in the Zoom meeting.

As chair of the FBG and section editor for Out On Our Own (OOOO), I initiated the opening of the FBF by explaining who the FBG are and what we are doing. Some of our key initiatives are:

- **Freelance Directory (FD):** Past-FBG subcommittee member Allison Kirsop took the challenge on to update the FD and enable freelancers to improve their profile visibility by having a specific profile on the member platform. If you haven't updated your profile, do it now!
- **Podcasts:** in recent years, the idea of having a medical writing podcast has been suggested. The FBG, more specifically Mariana Rickmann and Diana Ribeiro, have taken on the task, and we will soon present to the EMWA executive committee (EC) our ideas. Watch this space.
- **Freelance Resource Centre:** this is a bit outdated and in need of some tender loving care, so we aim to update this in the coming year.
- **Freelance Business Survey:** the FBG has been launching the survey over several years. Unfortunately, the last one (2018) has yet to be published, so we aim to launch a new one in 2021 to amalgamate the two sets of data and look at changing trends, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly had an impact on freelancers' activities.
- **Creating a freelance emailing list:** a recent suggestion is to have a specific freelancer emailing list that will enable us to establish a network in which freelancers can help each other and offer advice and suggestions.

Since we were using an interactive platform, we thought we'd take advantage of the polling options. We asked four questions and had some interesting results (note not everyone provided an answer):

1. Are you already freelancing? – 35% were not, 53% were freelancing and 12% were partially freelancing.
2. Is this your first FBF? – 43% were FBF veterans and 57% were experiencing the FBF for the first time.
3. Are you registered on the FD? – only 18% were registered on the FD, with 81% not using the FD as a source to find clients.



4. Would you be interested in being on a separate EMWA freelance email list? – a huge 83% thought this would be a good idea, with only 17% not wishing to be on an email list.

These questions, and more importantly, the responses the attendees gave, help the FBG continue our quest to help freelancers and will give us ideas when planning new initiatives and events.

Former FBG subcommittee member and now EMWA vice president, Carola Krause briefly addressed the audience on the structure and importance of the freelance community within EMWA. She is our liaison person for the EC and will be discussing our future ideas with them to allow us to realise them as practically and successfully as possible.

We then had the pleasure to hear from Shaun W. Foley, founder of Biome Professionals, who spoke to us about tips on setting up a business while juggling freelance work and bringing in an income. His beautifully crafted presentation summarised key things like financing a business, generating and being passionate about your business idea, and networking. He will feature in the December issue of OOOO discussing the same key points. Watch out for it.

Breakout room discussions

The wonders of technology allowed us to set up seven breakout rooms, and after a few technical issues (it's never perfect!), we managed to get everyone in their desired room. The idea of the breakout room is that you can leave whenever you want, come back to the main room, and hop into another, imitating the roundtable discussion we have in person. The room moderators kept the conversations flowing and summarised at the end what points were discussed. I thank them for providing these summaries:

Room 1:

Andrea Rossi - Developing and maintaining professional networks: no medical writer is an island

At one point, there were 28 people in this breakout room. From that, it is clear that freelancers want to network and want to find out how! Here are the key points:

- The session started with the simplest networking activity: introducing each other and their competencies.
- Collaboration is crucial for freelancer activities.
- In some countries, medical writing networks have already been established, and attendees shared their experiences of these (there are local networks in the Netherlands, France, Germany, and the UK).
- Many attendees explained that networking via Facebook allows a more interactive approach, while LinkedIn is used for a more professional approach.
- Freelancing in medical writing should be an individual activity, but interactions with colleagues are crucial to share work when overbooked or when someone receives a request on a topic where their knowledge is not at a professional level.



- People agreed that the EMWA networking is fundamental for medical writers and scientific communicators. The attendees who were attending the conference for the first time or at the beginning of their freelancing, were all looking forward to improve professionally and to learn from more experienced colleagues.

Room 2:

Mariana Rickmann – Financial planning (or how to survive feast or famine cycle)

Despite being an extremely important topic, there was only one other participant interested. Nevertheless, we had a very practical discussion about how to start as a freelancer.

Starting as a freelancer:

- Make sure you have enough money saved to live for 3 months without any earnings. After that, you either need a client or plan B.
- Look for financial help:
 - Apply for a start-up grant (this exists in Germany, known as the Gründungszuschuss),
 - Check if you have the rights to receive unemployment money (available in many European countries)
 - In Germany, once your business is running, as a freelance writer you can apply to the Artists' Social Security Fund (<https://www.kuenstlersozialkasse.de/>). This acts as an employer for artists and freelance writers, paying a substantial part of the Social Security obligations like health insurance.

Other financial things to consider:

- Pay yourself first
- Profit first: It's a kind of an envelope system, where you put your money in different envelopes or accounts, but the difference is that instead of taking the expenses, you take the profit first.
- Financial cushion. Putting money aside for emergencies, e.g. lockdown, illness
- You need a budget: an online tool to organise and control your expenses and income, so that you do not have any surprises: <https://www.youneedabudget.com/>

Room 3:

Diana Ribeiro – Managing down-time in between projects

Our table started with four people in total, each with a different amount of time spent as a freelancer. We discussed how frequent it is to have down-time as a freelance medical writer, and we concluded that it is not a matter of *if* but *when* those times in between projects will happen.

Given the certainty of less busy times, what do freelancers do? And what should they be doing?

Usually, the first days to a week are spent in a blissful, decompressing-after-the-deadline state. One might indulge in some light reading, walking outdoors, or simply enjoying the free time. Soon after, though, those without the certainty of a regular paycheck at the end of the month, start to get antsy



and wondering if they will ever find work again. Anxiety starts to settle, and freelancers start to look around, making some contacts and looking into job boards. Hopefully, the time spent without working is short, but every time that a freelancer finds him or herself without work, there is a feeling of unease.

Some things that can be done/are done during down-time:

- Understanding that every freelancer has down-times; it is not a reflection of anything “bad” that you did, neither is associated with being less experienced.
- Take time to do the things that make you happy: it’s not feasible to be overworked all the time. Enjoy the free time, you earned it.
- If possible, try to keep some of your marketing/networking activities even during busy times, but don’t beat yourself up over it. If you find yourself during a longer period of down-time, start networking. Coming to EMWA conferences is a great way to reconnect with old friends, meet some new ones, and “get yourself out there”. Volunteering for EMWA and writing for the journal is also recommended.
- Establish or be a part of a community or network of other freelancers that can pass work around.

Midway through the discussion, Mariana and Somsuvro joined us from room 2 and the conversation started discussing some off-topics discussion like:

- How were EMWA conferences in the ‘90s and how they are now.
- How to transition from employee to freelancer.
- Where to find clients as a freelancer.
- Benefits of establishing and being part of a freelancers’ network.

Overall, it was a very enjoyable affair, and we were surprised when the notification to join the main room appeared!

Room 4:

Barbara Grossman: Points to consider while working for clients outside of Europe

We had a nice size group with people from all over the world in attendance. We discussed various scenarios that the freelancers had faced when working with clients outside of Europe.

- Use a tax adviser – not a family member!
- Interview several accountants before selecting one; it’s important to understand their approach and ask them for advice on dealing with clients outside of Europe.
- Be aware of a client’s payment terms. Ask when they are going to pay and if you need to add a percentage to your invoice because of tax reasons at their end.
- What currency you invoice a client in. The currency of the client or of the freelancer. And make sure your bank account can accept the currency paid and if there are additional charges.

Room 5:

Sara Ferrao – What are your freelancing dilemmas?



We all agreed that freelance medical writers have a lot of dilemmas, even the more experienced ones. It was great because, although we were only four participants, we all had different types of experience as freelancers, and we all agreed on some key everyday dilemmas:

- How to find clients - we talked about the importance of networking, and that having a website or using social media as a marketing strategy could be helpful for some freelancers.
- Rates - we talked a lot about this topic, and the more experienced freelancers talked about their experience and that it is hard, when you're starting out, to establish a knowledgeable rate. Some writers chose to leave the rates up to the client at first.
- Strategies to manage non-paying clients, like having a contract before the beginning of the project and upfront payments. We agreed that some clients do not pay and that sometimes the cheapest thing to do is never work with them again.
- Specialised areas - we agreed that, when you start as a freelance medical writer, you normally take on projects of a broad range of areas and that, eventually, with experience, you start working in specific ones and get more specialised.
- Health literacy - we ended the conversation by speaking about the need to turn scientific information accessible to the lay audience, especially in this COVID-19 era.

Room 6 :

Shaun W. Foley – Freelancing, business and BREXIT – how is it going to affect us? Does anyone know?

Shaun approached this topic declaring that he was not an expert on BREXIT but soon the conversation gathered momentum and some key points were raised. Here's his summary:

- The time to UK transition is running out. There are 57 days to go (from date of FBF)! 1st January 2021. Public discussion has been put on the back burner because of COVID-19/US Elections.
- Impact on UK science: Agreed that BREXIT would have a negative effect on science, and the effect is already being seen, e.g., the EMA has left the UK and gone to the Netherlands. One attendee stated that it's a slow process, a big worry is that pharmaceutical regulations will be different, and could be difficult to have European medical trials in the UK.
- Relocation: Some colleagues are already moving back to the EU. Trickier for other EU candidates moving to the UK. If there is a choice between two candidates for a job position, one person from the EU and one for the UK, possibly the UK candidate will win every time (as lower risk, no funding needed). If you are from the EU and move to the UK by the end of the year, you can apply for pre-settled status. Next year, more change of people moving to the UK. Might be beneficial for freelancers as we can work anywhere.
- Travel: Additive effect of COVID-19 and BREXIT restricting travel? Eventually, people will get used to the virtual Zoom, maybe we will have hybrid conferences comprising of in-person and virtual attendees.
- Could there be implications on VAT? Unsure for UK freelancers working with EU customers.
- Language: will the language of science eventually evolve to something other than English?



Summary: Things will change! UNCERTAINTY! So, even if it seems that the post-BREXIT era will be less kind for self-employed and freelancers, this will gradually become normalised, as the new status quo matures, learns and evolves.

Room 7:

Irene Farré – Conflicts in freelancing: bad briefs, lack of support, unpaid or delayed services

We discussed various problems and concerns that all freelancers face:

- How to invoice clients and if to make a partial payment or split payment process so that you receive a percentage of the work that you've completed while you wait for comments or reviews of the work. For example, if it is an article for a publication, waiting on reviewers comments can take months, try to set up a split payment with the client.
- The juggle between charging a client per hour or per project came up. The per hour option covers your back as you will charge for all the hours you work, but some clients may want to have a fixed payment, so they know exactly what they will pay for the project. The difficulty is that if you come across unforeseen changes or delays to the project in a fixed rate project, the freelancer could lose out.
- There is an app known as "Toggle" which helps you track the time and hours you've worked on a project.

Summary

Overall, many described the first virtual FBF as a "big success". We reached a broad audience and covered various issues that freelancers have. The only problem is we ran out of time, we want to chat and network for longer. Many thanks to all those who attended, the moderators, the FBG, Shaun Foley for presenting, Carola, and the EMWA team behind all the organising; amazing job!

Hopefully, we will see you in person for the next FBF, until then, stay safe.

Written by Laura A Kehoe

On behalf of the Freelance Business Group – Mariana Rickmann, Irene Farré, Sonia Costa and Diana Ribeiro. Summaries provided by each room moderator.

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