



Freelance choices: Business development or developing a business?

by Sam Hamilton

Many freelance regulatory medical writers begin their career as salaried contract research organisation (CRO) employees. All freelancers, unlike their salaried counterparts, are in the unique position of not only making the product, but having to win writing commissions. Given that most of us are not specifically trained in business development (BD), contract acquisition and negotiation skills have to be learned on the hoof. Here, I describe some of the business challenges as they arise and evolve alongside a developing freelance regulatory medical writing business. Regardless of the approach to BD—proactive or reactive—each business decision determines the direction for the freelance enterprise. So, are we engaged in business development, or developing a business?

Some of the seemingly obvious business avenues may actually be restricted

Business awareness as a salaried employee

Company employment represents a safe harbour in which operational employees can concentrate on doing their job without worrying about the source of their next piece of work. This is the job of non-operational BD executives. To more junior members of larger companies, their BD colleagues are almost invisible, as work just seems to materialise. However, more senior employees, including senior writers and managers, are often more aware of these background activities because they are drawn into the BD process by contributing to written proposals or bids, and later on, by defending the written bid. This understanding of the BD process is essential to the wider realisation that to make the move from employment to successful freelancing, besides writing ability and good organisational skills, you need to be able to ‘get the work in’. This is a significant concern for many prospective freelancers, and may well be the first stumbling block to setting up their own enterprise. Many realise that some of the seemingly obvious business avenues may actually be restricted. Pharmaceutical companies and CROs now routinely write ‘non-compete’ clauses into their standard employment contracts that restrict the outgoing employee from soliciting business from clients with whom they have

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worked in the last six or twelve months of their employment, and this restriction may be effective for six to twelve months after leaving the company. If a recent client approaches the employee independently, however, this may not contravene the ‘non-compete’ clause, although this depends on the wording of the contract. With a range of new concerns in setting up independently, outgoing employees may elect to avoid such potentially ‘grey’ situations until their period of restriction is over. This may represent less of a loss of potential business than some may fear, as pharmaceutical clients who outsource business to CROs may do so because their current process demands it. They may not be able to outsource to freelancers even if they wanted to. It is, however, worth remembering that paradigms change as business models become obsolete in an ever-changing environment. Pharmaceutical companies that once only outsourced to CROs, frequently rewrite their standard operating procedures (SOPs) and strategic processes to allow outsourcing to different types of service providers, and this often means to freelancers.

Take a step back and think of the reasons for going freelance in the first place

First thoughts for prospective freelancers

Certain practicalities require consideration before giving up the safety of salaried employment: which sector(s) of the market will the expected workflow originate from? How will this work be found? In the event that it takes some weeks or months to generate income, are savings available to live on? These are just a few of the questions addressed by preparing a business plan (BP). This can be a focussing exercise, even for experienced writers who think they know where their work will come from. There are bound to be other points you have not previously thought of that arise from the exercise of business planning. Another positive aspect of preparing a BP is that grants or start-up loans may be available, contingent on the BP, so it is worth careful consideration.

Self-marketing for new starters

So, the budding freelancer, not discouraged by any of this, needs to find clients. There are a myriad of ways to do this, and perhaps the most obvious is to advise old friends and colleagues of what you are planning. This is, after all, a small professional community that people circulate within. It is also acceptable to contact old clients not covered

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by the time restrictions in a non-compete clause. Other start-up self-marketing activities include establishing a website; writing to potential clients; advising agencies of your forthcoming availability; joining a professional networking site, such as LinkedIn; and for the brave of heart, cold calling. This assumes that you are already a member of EMWA, of course, because the importance of networking at EMWA conferences should not be underestimated.

In the early months of establishing a freelance business, hard work is required to win contracts and some disappointments are inevitable. Once the all-important first contract is secured, others will follow, either through repeat business (by far the easiest option), or as a function of time because of word-of-mouth or self-marketing—and the longer the self-marketing activities have been up and running, the more likely they are to bear fruit.

Established business—evolving challenges

Once a freelance business is established and the flow of work is sufficient to support you (and your family), this does not mean that there will be no further business challenges. These will need very careful thought as seemingly innocuous business arrangements can be fraught with complexities. The challenges arising at this stage of a developing business may include:

- Effective resource management:
 - Support with sub-tasks. As a salaried employee, it is likely that support activities such as quality control (QC) and literature searching were either provided within the company framework or were outsourced. Effective resource management requires some thought when company infrastructure is unavailable. QC will inevitably need to be performed by an individual who did not author the document, but it is also worth considering outsourcing stand-alone pieces of work such as individual literature searches, particularly when the workload is high.
 - Additional authoring support. If a freelancer regularly has to decline work because of lack of capacity, the possibility of sub-contracting or even expanding your business to employ another writer may arise.
- Maintaining quality: as work is sub-contracted, or additional writers are employed, the quality of deliverables should not be compromised. A good way to assure quality is for the freelancer to provide training, instruction and perhaps even a style guide before writing, and following this up with personally performed QC of the deliverable before submission to the client. Quality of sub-tasks should also be tightly controlled. Established links with known colleagues are often the best way to maintain it.
- Keeping existing clients and generating repeat business: this is inevitably a result of maintaining quality over time, but is also highly dependent on initiating and nurturing good personal relationships.
- Ongoing training and professional development: as the range of documents required in regulatory submission dossiers increases, opportunities for expanding the writing portfolio should not be overlooked. The best way to keep abreast of current industry practice and requirements is to stay current and well trained.
- Networking outside the medical writing function: clients may call upon experienced freelancers to source and work with professionals outside of their own area to produce multi-component deliverables. Freelance statisticians, pharmacokineticists or pre-clinical writers may be required. These links once established can prove their worth repeatedly.

Clearly, the challenges are varied and will continue to develop with the business. At this point, it seems sensible to take a step back and think of the reasons for going freelance in the first place. For many making the move from a CRO, a love of writing, freedom to allow flexible working, and a desire no longer to have staff responsibility probably figure somewhere on the list.

This brings us back to the original question of whether, in an evolving business, we are engaged in pure business development (i.e. simply ensuring the work continues to come in) or developing a business (i.e. where the role of the freelancer and function of the business change). The question is an important one as it may well determine strategic direction. And so to the answer: to run a successful freelance enterprise, you must always be engaged in business development and in acquiring new business. Just where that takes the individual and how the business is developed involves some careful thought and active decisions.

After the first few years of freelancing, the exercise of writing a follow-up BP can be useful. Pertinent questions about strategic direction, company growth and where you see yourself in 5 years' time will undoubtedly make for interesting reading ...

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