

FREELANCE FOCUS



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Jam Session for Seasoned Freelancers—Part 1

Brian Bass, with commentary from Melissa L. Bogen, Lori De Milto, Cathryn D. Evans, Gail V. Flores, and Phyllis Minick

A popular session during the annual conference was the Jam Session for Seasoned Freelancers. The session gives seasoned pros the chance to share experiences and discuss ideas, concerns, and challenges with peers who have the same or even more experience. A range of important topics were discussed at this year’s session. These include managing stress, email issues, travel and security issues, sculpting your business, friendships with colleagues, referring clients, legal battles, and one of the costs of doing business. In this issue, we will cover the first 4 topics.

MANAGING STRESS

Saying *no* is probably the seasoned freelancer’s greatest weakness. The no muscle can be strengthened by paying more attention to red flags that indicate a client may not be ideal to work with, such as being disorganized, and cutting that client loose. Giving yourself a day off every now and then, or better yet, a permanent 4-day work week, is another great way to take control of your freelance business and lower your stress level.

Another way to manage stress is to slow down. Delivering an assignment early is a great way to endear yourself to a client, but it can also set the expectation that you don’t need as much time as other freelancers to get great work done. Slowing down doesn’t mean you should start taking longer to complete assignments. Rather, you might sit on the completed project for an extra day or 2 before you deliver it—still early, but not as early.

Subcontracting is another option for managing heavy workloads. Seasoned freelancers who subcontract warn that subcontracting isn’t easy and can actually lead to more rather than less work for the freelance business owner.

Tips from Seasoned Freelancers

Doing excellent work for our clients and delivering it on

time and on budget while running a freelance business is often stressful. But with the right business practices, we can manage stress.

We need to say no to working with new clients that are likely to be bad clients and to unreasonable demands from current clients. If we are working with bad clients, we need to fire them. Although it’s scary to do this, there are lots of great clients out there who need our help. If you’re working with a client that depletes your energy and increases your stress, then you won’t have the time or energy to find or work with better clients.

Training our clients also reduces stress. We need to set boundaries about when we work and require reasonable deadlines. If we answer emails or phone calls on evenings or weekends or agree to unreasonable deadlines, clients will always expect us to do this. Let your clients know your normal business hours and review each project carefully to ensure that you can make the deadline with your normal work schedule.

Make it clear to the client that if they do not do their part (eg, sending you source materials or reviewing your work), you cannot meet the deadline. Although it’s always great to deliver a project a little early, don’t turn it in too early or the client will always expect this.

All of the usual stress management techniques help too. Simple things like deep breathing, which you can do anytime, make you feel better right away. Meditation, exercise, being in nature, and eating healthily are other ways to manage your stress. I started meditating shortly after the start of the pandemic, using the Insight Timer app. Insight Timer has 100,000 free guided meditations on 200 topics, including stress and anxiety. I mostly do short meditations (3 to 10 minutes).

—Lori De Milto

My answer: Managing stress daily is a high priority for me. By taking specific actions, I can maintain productivity and enjoyment of my work. If I am not vigilant about managing my stress levels, a sense of overwhelm can threaten to derail me.

Specific Actions to Manage Stress

- **Exercise:** A commitment of Pilates classes on Zoom twice a week keeps me accountable and somewhat active. I did a 6-week fitness challenge at a local gym, but COVID dissuaded me from continuing the challenge. Huffing and puffing into a mask at the gym while others didn't necessarily wear a mask wasn't to my liking, so I've replaced the gym with doing exercise programs on YouTube in my living room. Some programs I like are Yoga with Adriene (<https://www.youtube.com/user/yogawithadriene>), HAS Fit (<https://www.youtube.com/c/Hasfit>), and Fitness with PJ (<https://www.youtube.com/c/FitnesswithPJ>).
- **Stay hydrated:** Drinking water is important. My goal, 2 large glasses before and after lunch, forces me to take frequent trips to the bathroom. These short excursions are an ideal time to stretch and focus my eyes farther away than the monitor. I live on a lake, so there's always something pretty to see.
- **Eat at regular intervals:** I need to keep my body fueled to think and perform well throughout the day. If you're like me and don't have time to cook, consider a food delivery service, whether online like Hello Fresh (<https://www.hellofresh.com/>), Mosaic Foods (<https://www.mosaicfoods.com/>), etc, or simply local takeout. Keeping cut-up vegetables around helps me snack on something healthy.
- **Maintain regular hours:** Once I'm off the clock, I don't respond to work-related email and I tend to stay away from my computer. I need time when I am not working to relax.
- **Engage in a hobby:** Humans are not meant to just eat, sleep, and work. We need social engagement and creative outlets. Social engagements have been tricky during COVID. Participation in regular nonwork Zooms with friends from around the country and my family help me feel less isolated. But I also need to see people I know in person! I hike with local friends. Getting out in nature, even a simple walk around the block, invigorates me. I need creativity in my life—coloring in adult coloring books, dancing to music, or gardening (or looking at garden catalogs in the winter) are all restorative activities.

—Melissa L. Bogen

My best response to addressing this issue is a quote: In speaking of the New Year, Richard Branson, although not an acknowledged sage but unquestionably a remarkable success, wrote that "every success is a tale of constant adaptation, revision, and change." So, my interpretation of that response is this: may none of us focus on fear. If something new or stressful is happening in your life, take courage. If you face anxiety, turn to the excitement of possibilities, because it takes only one step to begin breaking any barrier. Use the power of your ability for communication to change a system, a status quo, or even the heart of people to make a difference in this world. I am thankful for the spirit of learning and wisdom that AMWA fosters to help others, to share friendship, and to anticipate new beginnings.

—Phyllis Minick

ADDRESSING THE EMAIL ADDRESS ISSUE

Most seasoned freelancers have a hard enough time keeping up with their own email addresses. For them it would be onerous to have to constantly check other email addresses as well. They solve the problem by having their client addresses forwarded to their regular email address. Some seasoned freelancers prefer to keep their own email addresses separate from their client email addresses. One way to do this and keep your sanity is to manage each email address on a different browser.

Tips from Seasoned Freelancers

I hope others will describe how to maintain client-specific emails when they are forwarded to one email account.

In the past, I have been given up to 2 client email accounts. I preferred to not have those emails forwarded to my personal email address. For me, it was easier to maintain each email account separately by webmail.

Each morning I launch my personal email (on Mozilla Thunderbird). I also launch 2 tabs in my browser for the 2 separate client email accounts. I check email in my personal email account with immediate notifications. I keep my speakers off so the notifications are silent. These notifications appear as a small red number on my email icon in the taskbar (the icons at the bottom of my monitor). I can easily ignore or check my personal email as I see fit.

I keep track of each client's emails by switching through the accounts throughout the day. Typically, I check the client email accounts about 4 times per day: first thing in the morning, before and after lunch, and at the end of the day. I give my clients my cell phone so that if they have an urgent

need, they can always contact me immediately during my regular office hours. However, clients rarely text me. One client likes to use Slack (<https://slack.com/>), software that allows private chat rooms/groups and direct messaging. Slack's immediate notification means I never miss a timely communication.

—Melissa L. Bogen

In recent years, about half of my clients have required me to use an email account housed in their organization. I've set them all up in my Outlook along with my medical writing business email account, so I can scan my emails from all of my current clients at the same time. I've found it very helpful for organizing emails by project and client in my Outlook, and it allows me to filter out my other clients when I need to focus on correspondence related to active projects. The only email account I don't access through Outlook is my personal email account. I only check my personal email account through an Internet browser, so that I don't get distracted by personal emails during the workday.

—Gail V. Flores

In a recent email, purportedly from Costco, I was asked to answer 3 questions about customer satisfaction—a feature that Amazon and others use frequently (and I respond to those occasionally to express appreciation of good service). This time, I was offered a wristwatch with a “fall accident” feature. The only cost was postage. “OK,” I wrote to accept. My son said, “Mom, you’ve been scammed. Cancel your credit card.” I called Costco Visa and was told that the charge was \$8.95 but that there was no need to cancel the card; Visa would protect me. Also, I was given the charge company's phone number. The agent who answered said, “your watch will be delivered tomorrow, and your earpods will soon follow for \$35.” I cancelled the earpods, charges, and (supposed) account. Incidentally, that call was my second scam email of that 1 day.

That said, I've done editing jobs by email in 6 countries for years. The only change I've added to my system is a separate email address for clients. I never use that email address to buy anything! Consequently, I never receive ads or unsolicited responses on that site. I also have a separate bank account to receive online payments for completed jobs. Immediately after payment arrives, I transfer the money to another business account.

—Phyllis Minick

TRAVEL SECURITY AND SANITY

Tapping into airport or hotel Wi-Fi can expose you to a host of security issues. When traveling, seasoned freelancers rely on their security software for protection. Norton, Trend Micro, and Malware Bytes come to mind. Some seasoned freelancers go so far as to have their own virtual private network (VPN) for travel security. And for both security and sanity, never check email on your phone when you travel, especially when you're on vacation. Set your out-of-office message and walk away from the inbox.

Tips from Seasoned Freelancers

For the last 2 years I have not stayed in a hotel and have traveled only by car. In the past, I took up to 15 trips per year: I have never worried about “security” vis à vis email or Wi-Fi while traveling—and I check my email by iPhone and iPad regularly. Even when traveling by air, I always sign on to the airport Wi-Fi and have never had a problem with hackers. Some of my clients like to send text messages regularly and of course I review these while traveling—sometimes I prefer text messaging, even if the messages are very long, because it is so much simpler while traveling.

—Cathryn D. Evans

BUSINESS SCULPTING

Freelance medical writers often get their start in one area of the business, like scientific publications, and over the years find their interests wander. Freelancing gives us the flexibility and the opportunity to explore other areas and sculpt our businesses accordingly. Rather than resist the urge to branch out, seasoned freelancers should embrace their passions and pursue other interests that can allow their freelance businesses grow.

Tips from Seasoned Freelancers

As a freelance business grows, it's common for seasoned freelancers to get so busy that we don't take time to think about the type of work we're doing. Then one day we realize that we'd like to add other types of medical writing or transition out of the work we're currently doing to other types of medical writing.

One of the joys of freelancing is that we do get to choose our clients and our projects. If you're not doing what you want to be doing, set aside a few hours when you can think strategically about your business and develop a plan. Consider other types of work you want to do and how you can make the

transition to those types of work. Can current clients give you new types of work? Who in your network does what you want to do and might help you? Continue doing the work you're known for as you add or transition into new types of work.

Every 6 months or so do another strategic planning session. Review your progress and the type of work you most want to do.

—Lori De Milto

This is truly an important question for all of us. I started out targeting “pharmaceutical industry” clients because I had worked for several years as a full-time medical writer for a drug company. Note, however, that during all those years, my experience included not only scientific publications and regulatory affairs but also marketing communication, sales-training projects, continuing medical education and patient education materials, writing and designing educational and scientific exhibits, writing press releases, and covering medical meetings. So my “focus” on pharma/biotech clients was by no means limited to clinical regulatory affairs.

I point this out here because I feel those who have worked in the industry may have a better advantage than they realize. An underpinning to *all* of these topic areas is understanding deeply the *process of the development of new drugs/biologicals as well as strong familiarity (experience)*

with Food and Drug Administration regulations. No matter what you do in the pharma/biotech industry, regulations will be a ghost in the background—so learn the regulations as well as the product development process.

Over the years as a freelancer, I have also worked for hospital systems, creating or modifying website copy, writing practitioner profiles, or creating brochures, and for managed care companies, writing provider manuals, standard operating procedures, responses to patients, and educational material. The background in pharma/biotech enabled me to branch out this way quite easily.

Incidentally, I became a certified yoga instructor as well as a certified Acupressure/Shiatsu practitioner while freelancing. Thousands of hours devoted to classes for these certifications because I love both practices and did them part-time while freelancing as a medical writer.

Think about your present expertise and how/where you might branch out. Take classes in the new area, if you can. Do your homework and then move. But please . . . never, ever tell a client you have experience doing something when you do not! Study, learn, practice first—then do it for a client.

—Cathryn D. Evans

There's more to come from the 2021 Jam Session in next month's issue of the *AMWA Journal*.



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