

Success as a Freelance: More than Just Landing Assignments

Success as a freelance depends on two main variables as far as I am concerned: contracts and contacts. The first is about making a living. The second is about enjoying living.

I have worked on and off as a freelance science and medical writer and editor for 20 years (with occasional timeouts for full-time jobs on magazines and journals). I think I'm finally getting the freelance gig right. Like quitting smoking, it doesn't always work on the first try. It can take a few failures, restarts, and new strategies before it finally sticks. In other words, perseverance.

1. Contracts. I have steady work, including a major contract with a busy research organization. The client is unusually innovative. A few of our projects are routine, but most keep my brain chugging and my blood streaming. I regularly land other small projects, too, on topics that grab me, like endangered species and oenology.

2. Contacts. This is the piece that wasn't so well developed in my earlier days and is probably what makes the freelance experience much more satisfying this time. I have a network of interesting people, organizations, and events that easily lure me from my home office. (For me, spending more than 24 hours in the house is not always pleasant. People who work in a busy office and see their home for only a few hours a week might feel differently. For many of us whose office and home are one, it can be confining.)

Successfully managing contacts has been a three-part operation for me: volunteer work, a monthly professional lunch meeting, and regular physical activity.

Volunteering is a reminder that there is a lot more to the world than what's on my figurative plate. It gets me involved with other people and introduces me to something new. For example, I volunteered this past summer with the Foundation Fighting Blindness after hearing a radio pitch for its annual "Sail for Sight Regatta".

Blindness interests me because I've written a lot about vision and have two cousins

who are blind. I have to admit that what appealed to me at first was the idea of sailing. Instead, I ended up in meetings and creating materials to help the group attract sailors to the race and raise money for research on retinitis pigmentosa. I finally did race, with a blind captain, but that turned out to be a secondary reward. More important, I have new friends and contacts who call on me and with whom I'll be working again on next summer's race. And I have a byline on an article in a sailing magazine, a possible new source of freelance assignments.

If you're not sure about how to find a rewarding volunteer position, try this: Name a topic that interests you—maybe literacy, hunger, ecology, education, justice, or hospice care. Identify groups in your area that provide a related service and visit their Web sites. Call and offer your services. Most groups love volunteers who can write and edit.

My monthly lunch meeting is composed of a small group of independent science and medical writers, editors, publishers, and intellectual-property consultants. We talk business and family, make referrals to each other, recommend software, and generally yuk it up. This is a very important part of the success and happiness equation. Throughout the month, we update each other by e-mail.

Finally, I exercise, daily if possible but at least four times a week and preferably not alone. I have a standing date with a friend once a week to walk. I meet another to swim. On Thursday nights I go to yoga. If you've ever spent several days in a row going no farther than from your computer to your refrigerator, you'll understand why this is so crucial.

My lunch buddies agree that success is definitely more likely when one has these two things: clients and a solid plan for getting out of the house to do something professionally and personally satisfying. If this news provides someone with insight for finding his or her way as a freelance, I'm pleased. Oh, and they wanted me to mention perseverance, again. Good luck!

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