

Freelance Science Editing: Playing at or Working at Your Own Business?

Elizabeth A Whalen

In my first year of freelancing, I became aware that there are two very different approaches to freelance science editing. At a 1990 meeting of a local editors group, the speaker talked about how she ran her business. Most of the audience, attired in blue jeans and sweatshirts, had to admire the professional (almost slick) appearance of the speaker. She spoke a lot about marketing and very little about editing itself. When she explained that her fee for science editing was \$85 per hour, a collective gasp could be heard throughout the room. (At that point, after 10 years of working full time in staff editing positions, I was charging \$15-\$25 per hour for medical editing.) As I listened, I saw the difference between her work life and my own: She didn't have to edit nearly as many hours to get the same net income I was earning, but she did have to spend much more time and energy marketing herself to find clients willing to pay her fee.

In the 10 years since that revelation, I have talked with many other freelance science editors. A recent discussion led me to two general labels for approaches to freelance science editing: the business-indifferent freelance and the business-oriented freelance. I've defined the two categories on the basis of the first work-related priority of the freelance. (1) For the **business-indifferent** freelance editor, decisions about whether to accept work may depend on the timing of the work, the content of the work, or both. (2) For the **business-oriented** freelance, decisions about work depend on the profitability of the work (either short-term or long-term).

ELIZABETH A WHALEN is an independent consultant specializing in medical editing and writing. She teaches at the University of California and presents corporate seminars on writing and editing.

In December 1999 I asked 16 freelances to answer an e-mail interview; six replied (Michael Altus, Rebecca Bartow, Renee Cohen, Barbara Cox, Tom Lang, Peggy Robinson). I will use some of their answers (attributed) throughout this article to illuminate further the two freelance business choices.

Why are some freelances business-indifferent and others business-oriented (or downright business-emphatic)? The reasons are individual, but possible factors might be temperament, philosophy of life, values, desired lifestyle, and economic and other constraints. For example, freelances who tend to be more business-indifferent may feel as Lang does: "What I like most about being a consultant is that it is an honest living. I charge for what I do and make as much as I'm willing to work. I can choose quality over quantity." On the other hand, freelances who tend to be more business-oriented may identify with Altus: "The control that freelancing gives me about the work that I do is more important to me than the 'freedom' to work when and how much I choose. . . . I work mostly when and how my clients choose, not when and how much I choose."

Another variable that affects the business attitude of freelances is their state of financial independence. Bartow expresses why she freelances even though she doesn't need the money: "I now enjoy freelancing because of the freedom it gives me to pick and choose which projects I accept. . . . Because I am not wedded to the financial incentive, I can turn down projects that I find unappealing."

Of course, the labels "business-indifferent" and "business-oriented" are for convenience only; I am not making any judgment about which route is better, and I suspect that most freelances (like me) run their businesses in ways that combine the business-indifferent and business-oriented approaches.

In this article, by using some of the journalist's questions (*why, what, who, where, how*), I will discuss possible choices freelances make that indicate whether they are either business-indifferent or business-oriented. I think that it might help both new and experienced freelances to look at their own business style and find out whether it truly produces the income, other work-related rewards (such as being appreciated and contributing to society), and lifestyle they are aiming for.

Why Choose Freelancing?

Freelances often state one or more of the reasons below for choosing the freelance life. They are listed in order from most business-oriented to most business-indifferent.

- To make a lot of money (most business-oriented).
- To work for myself rather than for someone else.
- To have more freedom to set priorities for using my time.
- To have more time for my family and other life activities.
- To escape office politics.
- To earn a little extra income (moonlighting money).
- To work when I like.
- To work on projects I like (most business-indifferent).

Obviously there may be disagreement as to the order of the reasons, and most freelances are motivated by more than one. However, for the most business-oriented freelance profit is the bottom line, and their business will be set up accordingly. For the most business-indifferent freelances, the bottom line is being able to work when they like and on projects they like.

What Range of Freelance Work Is Accepted?

The business-indifferent freelance may choose work because it is important or interesting. Several of the freelances interviewed

Freelance Science Editing continued

said they very much valued the variety of work they receive. And one freelance talked about the pro bono work that was important to her. As a freelance, I edited two nonfiction children's books at rates much lower than my normal rate because they were just fun. However, I turned business-oriented suddenly when better-paying work started competing for my time, and (sadly) I don't edit children's books any more. The business-oriented freelance may choose lucrative work over interesting work. For example, one freelance works almost exclusively on grants and proposals because that's where the money is—even though he finds them much less interesting than research articles or other scientific writing. A mixture of these two motives was well-expressed by Renee Cohen: "It is not only important to get a good rate of pay, but also to get work that suits you and is, indeed, doable." Finding such work sometimes poses a problem.

Aside from content considerations, business-indifferent freelances tend to take on projects that they know they can do. For example, one science editor has learned only WordPerfect for DOS and does not want to learn any other word-processing program. Therefore, she will accept electronic editing projects only if they arrive in WordPerfect for DOS. Even more extreme is the freelance who does not have a computer and will take on only work that is to be edited with pen or pencil. Both those editors limit the amount of work they receive, but the comfort of working with familiar media is worth more to them than the extra money they might earn otherwise.

To be fair, I should make a disclaimer here. At one point in my own freelance life, I was working on three electronic projects. Each used a different word-processing system (WordPerfect, Microsoft Word, and XyWrite). I overestimated my own flexibility in being able to learn XyWrite and edit with that program while doing other projects in other programs. The XyWrite job was a disaster for me, so perhaps the business-indifferent freelances discussed above were just more realistic in their self-expectations.

The business-oriented freelance has to be realistic too, but will look for as many markets and as many job types as possible. That's really the only way to figure out what work is the most profitable. As technology changes, a business-oriented science editor will change with it. For example, it's improbable that any business-oriented freelance would try to run a business today without having an e-mail address (voice-mail and a fax machine were requirements previously driven by technology). I suspect that, in 10 years, most business-oriented freelances will have a Web site also.

When a business-oriented freelance is offered a lucrative contract to do unfamiliar work, he or she may find someone who can do it and subcontract the work—or use contacts to learn how to do that type of work. The only limits this freelance might impose will be based on profitability (for example, he or she may not offer proof-reading if the standard hourly rate is not cost-effective).

Who Are the Clients?

For whom do science editors work? The answer ranges from graduate students trying to finish a thesis to huge pharmaceutical companies. For any specific freelance science editor, the answer depends on contacts, experience, and personal motivations.

A business-indifferent freelance science editor likes to edit but may find that sometimes clients—no matter how well they pay—may be intolerable to work with. When that is the case, the business-indifferent freelance will "fire" that client. Firing a client usually entails finishing the current project but never working on another one for that client. However, in extreme cases (such as blatant perjury or fraud), the freelance may resign in the middle of a project; in these cases the freelance must decide whether the bad will engendered by such action (that client may talk to other clients) is justified by an absolutely intolerable situation. (Of course, a business-oriented freelance sometimes "fires" clients also. As Altus says, "after all, a lousy client can be bad for business.")

The business-indifferent freelance

may even do some pro bono or low-rate work for graduate students or medical students—just because it's fun and the editor receives a lot of appreciation and the chance to make a long-term contribution (that is, by helping students become better writers). This volunteer editing may lead to lucrative contracts, but that's not why the business-indifferent freelance does it. The freelance will take on "unprofitable" clients because it provides the emotional balance that is sought in freelancing.

Like the business-oriented science editor I mentioned in the first section of this article, many business-oriented freelances will spend much of their time seeking profitable clients (such as corporations, private hospitals, and advertising-rich medical journals) and then working to keep them (for example, in lunches, dinners, and long telephone conversations). Business-oriented freelances will usually charge higher rates (although I know one somewhat business-indifferent science editor who will not do a job for less than \$50 per hour because she'd rather be with her family than work for less). They will trust others to do the editing or writing work (with their approval), but they themselves will do most of the marketing that gets the good clients in the door.

Where to Freelance?

The saying "There's no place like home" applies also to the home office. But in this context, it can apply to both the advantages and the disadvantages of a home office. There is no place like home for convenience, money and time savings, the closeness of family (and pets), the comfort of working in a sweat suit or pajamas, the instant availability of food throughout the day (also a disadvantage), and the ease of working very early or very late hours. However, there is also no place like home for the difficulty it entails in separating work life and home life, for the large number of distractions it provides for avoiding work, and for loneliness. Although it is often true that business-oriented freelances have an outside office, mostly because it may look more professional, the decision

to work at or away from home depends on a wide variety of factors, including the amount of space and privacy available at home.

Altus expressed a problem about home offices that both business-indifferent and business-oriented freelancers may face: "I work in a home office and often get cabin fever. I just have to get out of the house." However, the business-indifferent freelance is much more likely to act on that cabin fever, call a friend, and get out of the house than the business-oriented freelance, who may have to continue to work on a lucrative, tight-deadline project, fever or no.

Lang succinctly summarized both sides of the home-office dilemma: "I like being self-directed, independent, and, most of all, sharing my home office with my dog. The hard part is juggling EVERYTHING: work, clerical tasks, travel arrangements, professional activities, AND taking the dog out to play in the middle of it all."

One business-indifferent freelance started taking freelance work after working on the staff of a medical journal for 10 years. She is able to get work without much formal marketing because of her specialized editing knowledge. The work comes mostly from out of state, so she certainly could work at home. Her decision to rent an office arose from her own preferences and self-knowledge: (1) she wanted home to be home and to be totally separated from work, and (2) she knew that she would find it hard to motivate herself to work in a home office (close to the beach and other distractions).

On the other hand, one business-oriented freelance decided to set up a home office because it allowed him to work more hours and to maximize the profits. When he is meeting with a client whom he wants to impress, he uses a conference room at a hotel or university nearby.

How Is the Business Set Up and Run?

The format of the subsections below reflects an attempt to address the complex, multidimensional question of how freelancers set up and run their business.

The quotations after the general labels are not direct quotations but are the types of answers I would expect from business-indifferent or business-oriented freelancers. The other quotations (always preceded by a freelance's name) are from my interviews; I am not categorizing any of these freelancers as purely business-indifferent or business-oriented, but I'm suggesting that each fits that category for this particular aspect of the question.

Starting Up

Business-Indifferent Freelance: "It was sort of an accident. I was between full-time jobs, and the work just started coming in—I was freelancing for a year before I even had a business card! I have lots of clients."

Lang: "Life circumstances made [freelancing] necessary, the lifestyle is a bonus, and the money is adequate, as long as I stay married."

Business-Oriented Freelance: "I started planning 1 year before launching my business. While working full-time (and then part-time), I researched market demand and created my business plan; consulted with the Small Business Administration; designed and purchased business cards, a brochure, and other marketing items; and put aside as much money as I would need to live on for 1 year in case the business didn't take off right away."

Accessibility

Business-Indifferent Freelance: "I walk away from my home office as soon as the kids come home. I check for messages every morning and take care of them at that time."

Business-Oriented Freelance: "With the help of a business loan, I purchased all the equipment I needed to get new clients and retain the ones I already had: a state-of-the-art computer with Internet access and e-mail, a fax machine, a pager, and a cell phone. Clients know that they can contact me at any time!"

Legal Aspects

Business-Indifferent Freelance: "I guess

I'm a sole proprietor; I mean I fill out Schedule C and all, but I don't have any employees or a special company name or any plans to expand."

Bartow: "I am the sole owner because it is such a small operation."

Business-Oriented Freelance: "As part of my business plan, I looked into the advantages and disadvantages of sole proprietorship, partnership, and incorporation. I decided to incorporate because it seemed to give me more options to expand in the future, it legally protected some property I had inherited (in case I was ever sued), and I could lease a car just for the business and write it off."

Altus: "I started as a sole proprietor because it was 'simple': You say you are in business, and you're in business. In 1998 I decided to incorporate [because] I believed that being incorporated shows a seriousness about being in business. However, given the vast increase in paperwork that comes with being incorporated, I sometimes yearn for the simple life of a sole proprietor."

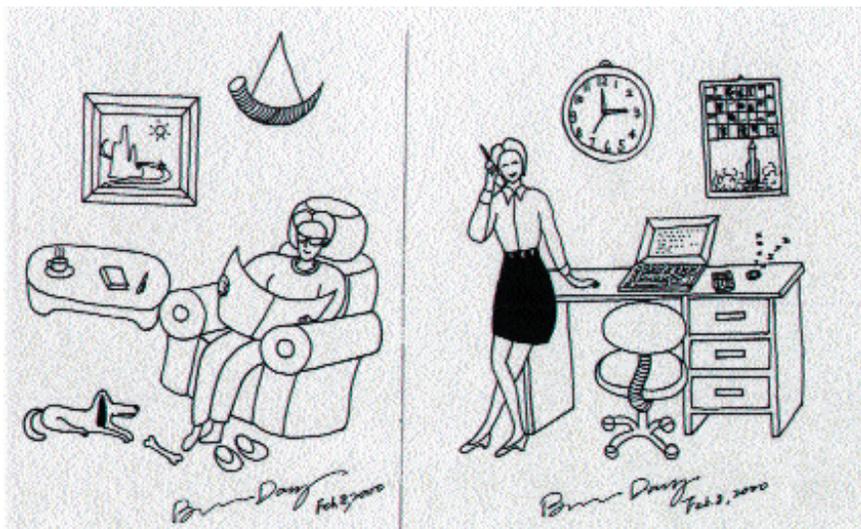
Taxes

Business-Indifferent Freelance: "For the first 2 years I did my own taxes—I had to file amended returns both years; in both years I had paid too little in estimated taxes and had to pay heavy interest and fines. So I was pretty frustrated, and I found a reasonably priced accountant who does my taxes for me now every February. I pay my estimated taxes every year according to the income of the year before. Sure, my income fluctuates, but this way I know that I'll never be penalized again for paying too little in estimated taxes."

Bartow: "I do my own [taxes]."

Business-Oriented Freelance: "I have an accountant on retainer. She works with me all year to make sure I pay the right amount of estimated taxes according to the current year's income and expenses. That way, I know I'm not paying too much or too little in estimated taxes. She also advises me about the best times to make major purchases, such as a new computer or a copier-fax-printer-phone system."

Altus: "I have an accountant because

Freelance Science Editing *continued*

businesses have accountants, and I'm a business. [I also have a lawyer] because businesses have lawyers, and I'm a business."

Marketing

Business-Indifferent Freelance: "I belong to a couple of professional organizations. I like the people contact, and I do occasionally get referrals from that. If someone is interested in hiring me, I have a résumé and work samples that I send to them."

Robinson: "I have a business card, a complete résumé, a list of publications on which I have worked, and a list of current and recent clients. . . . So far, business has been good, but I don't relish the prospect of having to do a lot of marketing to drum up business."

Cox: "[I use] business cards and a résumé. . . . I hate marketing. Fortunately, I rarely have to do it any more."

Business-Oriented Freelance: "I am active in several professional organizations. Because I have held offices and given talks for national organizations, my network is very wide and strong. I update my marketing materials (brochure, business card, book marks, and so on) each time they are printed. And, of course, I update my Web site continually."

Cohen: "I use business cards, coffee mugs, résumé, and a 'postcard'-type piece. What else I use is a secret! . . . I love marketing, and sometimes I develop marketing plans for others."

Altus: "I use a business card, cover letter, résumé, promotional flyer, copies of work

samples, and references if requested. I've registered a Web address and am arranging to have a Web page designed."

Times of Feast (as in "Feast or Famine")

Business-Indifferent Freelance: "If I'm too busy, I just tell the clients that and encourage them to call me the next time they have editing work. Sometimes I will refer a client to another freelance—if I'm sure that the freelance is adequately skilled and won't 'steal' my client away from me. However, I don't like the idea of being judged on someone else's work, so I would not want to subcontract or hire anyone to do the work for which I am responsible."

Business-Oriented Freelance: "There is no such thing as too much work in my business. The same network that provides jobs for my company also brings to my attention good people to whom I can subcontract jobs. Often I find people who are more skilled than I am in one area or another (such as designing, production editing, or word processing), and I try to subcontract to them as often as possible. That's the kind of income that really keeps my business going: I get paid for work that I pass on to other skilled people! As my business expands, I won't be afraid to hire full-time employees."

About the Famine Times (as in "Feast or Famine")

Business-Indifferent Freelance: "When I don't have much work to do, I use that

time to catch up on family and friends, to fulfill other obligations, to enjoy non-work-related hobbies, or to relax and enjoy life. I know that eventually someone will call and ask me to do some editing. I don't get paid for sick leave, vacation, or holidays—why not enjoy leisure while I have it?"

Business-Oriented Freelance: "I work 7 days a week. There is no such thing as a day when I have nothing to do. If I don't have any pay work coming in, I spend my workday making contacts—cold calling if necessary—and improving and sending out my marketing materials. My research shows that there is plenty of work out there, so it's my job to find it if it isn't finding me."

The Bottom Line

We are lucky to be living in a time when so many work options are available to us. As a skilled science editor, you can choose to work as a full-time staff member or to work for yourself. If you work for yourself, as you can see from this article, you can decide whether to focus on making money or to focus on finding the work you like to do when you want to do it. As I said before, most of us choose a little of both. But I think it's important to choose consciously and to know into which category we fall—always the business-oriented freelance, always the business-indifferent freelance, or sometimes one and sometimes the other. I hope this article has helped you focus on that distinction and has helped you understand other freelances—because, no matter what your choice on any particular day, freelance science editors can help each other. There's room for the super businesspersons who generate high-paying work, and there's room for the science editors who work only when the timing and the content of the project are right.

Acknowledgment

Thanks to the six freelances who filled out the survey so honestly. Thanks also to Barbara Gastel and Michael Altus for helpful comments that have improved this piece. 🍷