◆ *Freelancing in the Computer Age: The More Things Change . . .*

Panelists:
Seth Beckerman
Business and Technical
Communications
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Laurie Lewis
Freelance Writer-Editor
New York, New York

Ann Conti Morcos
MorcosMedia
New Orleans, Louisiana

Reporter:
Renée J Robillard
Medical Writing & Research
Lake Oswego, Oregon

Seth Beckerman, self-employed since 1988; Laurie Lewis, a freelance for 16 years and author of *What To Charge: Pricing Strategies for Freelancers and Consultants*; and Ann Conti Morcos, who described herself as "the new kid on the block" in freelancing, discussed the relation between technology and freelance science writing and editing.

Beckerman provided "a personal history" of his use of technology and lessons learned since 1967, when he began to use an early IBM system to produce camera-ready copy. He offered several pointers for exploiting technology: Upgrade software when your clients do, invest in computer "horsepower" so that you have the "computer equivalent of the ultimate multitasking machine—a teenaged girl", make use of time-zone differences when possible, use PDFs when possible for sending proofs to clients, and search for clients anywhere, now that location has become largely irrelevant. Beckerman also stressed the importance of recognizing when you need technical help and when to partner on a project.

Using wonderful cartoons, Beckerman addressed several general issues in freelancing. To lessen isolation, he periodically lunches with a group of self-employed friends who are writers and artists. To prevent clients from seeing him primarily as a technology "tool user", he makes an effort to alert clients to the value-added aspects of his work. He advised freelances to be prepared to deal with a possibly hostile reception from employees of companies for which they work. And he recommended investing in additional technology training, especially 1-day "basics" courses.

Lewis said that her aim was to provide a somewhat "negative" view to contrast with the assumption that technology always achieves positive results. She illustrated how the sense of urgency that accompanies e-mail can mean "haste makes waste" by describing a client who felt so rushed to send Lewis background material for a project that she got Lewis's e-mail address wrong—several times. The problem was eventually solved, but Lewis lost a week of the time available for the project. Lewis also talked about a potential client who was so inept at sending articles by e-mail that she ultimately decided not to work with the client.

After noting that many people think that "everything you do with a computer is more efficient", Lewis listed several activities in which computer use might be time-consuming or unsatisfactory: transferring files across platforms, Web searching that doesn't turn up the information sought (especially contact information for people on institutional sites), and interviewing. Lewis said that e-mail interviews are inferior to telephone interviews, in which something an interviewee says in passing (and would probably not have said in e-mail) often provides the interviewer with the most interesting angle of a story. Lewis concluded by urging judicious use of technology.

Morcos recounted her struggle to become a full-time freelance, which included two failures to achieve her goal but recently resulted in a successful business, partly because of technology. Morcos emphasized the increasing importance of the Web in finding new clients. She has landed jobs by advertising on the CSE, American Medical Writers Association, and Board of Editors in the Life Sciences (BELS) Web sites and by answering job postings on those sites and others (write to her for a list). She now has her own Web site to attract clients.

Morcos also provided several tips for new freelances: Get additional training, join and become active in professional organizations, get a BELS certification, meet deadlines, work hard, be professional, give clients more than they ask for, have enough money to live on for several months, be persistent, and use job interviews as networking opportunities.

Topics of discussion after the presentations included using Web sites to provide potential clients with samples, making business cards on a laser printer, and working for less money than usual to get publicity. A participant who hires freelances concluded the session well by commenting that she hires freelances who make a job easier, she hires those who add value, and she refers good freelances to other employers. ◉