

## Changes in the Freelance Environment

### Panelists:

**Susan Metzger**

Allen Press

Lawrence, Kansas

**Sue Silver**

*Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*

Silver Spring, Maryland

**Cindy Brown**

Blackwell Publishing

Malden, Massachusetts

### Moderator:

**Seth Beckerman**

Business & Technical Communications

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

### Reporter:

**Laura Altobelli**

American College of Physicians  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

This session's panelists presented an overview of their strategies for enlisting—and retaining—quality freelancers.

### Recruiting

Scientific publisher Allen Press increased its freelance pool from 17 to 50 during the last 18 months to accommodate a 400-publication workload, according to Susan Metzger, director of customer and composition editorial services. Although the publisher occasionally recruits on Web sites, such as *copyeditor.com*, most freelancers arrive via other routes. "Of course we get random inquiries", Metzger said, "and several former full-time copyeditors have come back on a freelance basis." Customers also provide referrals.

Unsolicited inquiries have also proved fruitful for the *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment* (published by the Ecological Society of America). When recruiting on the National Association of Science Writers Web site produced too many responses, edi-

tor-in-chief Sue Silver decided to wait for writers to come to her. "I received an e-mail from a schoolteacher who wanted to know what he needed to do to become a freelance writer." Silver instructed him to send her a sample article. He is now a regular contributor.

Recruitment also crosses international waters. Blackwell Publishing, a worldwide publisher, outsources freelance work to the Philippines, Malaysia, and India—often at reduced cost. Instead of establishing a traditional pool of freelancers, Blackwell hires international freelancers on a contractual basis in an effort to maintain standards and achieve consistency. According to production manager Cindy Brown, however, it remains to be seen whether the international experiment is successful: "We're still waiting to determine whether the quality is there."

### Training

With freelance editors usually working off-site, training remains informal. Frequently, freelancers get little more training than that found on a customer style sheet, and feedback is project-specific, limited to highlighting mistakes caught by a proofreader.

Increased workloads and decreased turnaround times may, however, spell the end for these casual approaches. Some publishers are now formalizing training to achieve consistent quality from the entire freelance pool. Blackwell went so far as to create a freelance management team to standardize guidelines. Detailed feedback forms were created to rate performance on all elements of work—down to how well a freelance codes tables and edits captions. The publisher then built a database of its entire pool, coded by demonstrated expertise, speed, and workload capabilities.

Allen Press also tightened its standards, requiring new freelance editors to train on "dead" samples—pieces that have edited versions on file for comparison. Random evaluations have also been instituted to track such qualities as a freelance's flexibility and ability to deliver on deadline.

Freelance writing is not conducive to such rigid publisher-specific training. "Rules for writers" remain the norm, governing such points as word counts, themes, and graphic elements. In the case of ESA's *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*, pitches from obvious sources, such as *Nature* and *Science*, are not allowed, live quotes are required, two interviews are preferred, and authors must send manuscripts to interviewees for approval before submission.

### New Demands

Technologic advances, even godsend that increase publishing capabilities, present training and support challenges to freelancers and publishers alike. Beyond those challenges, the new tools have gone far to reduce tedium. Blackwell, for example, uses automation to "clean" files before editing. Although macros and plug-ins of this sort are no match for the complexities of the English language, they *are* useful for correcting such problems as font inconsistencies, faulty sequencing of figures and tables, and hyphenation-rule violations.

Such technology upgrades enable freelancers to be more than copyeditors: most also insert style tags for the compositor as they edit. With added responsibility comes the expectation of additional compensation—as though rates weren't difficult enough to determine. Being in Kansas, Allen Press struggles to maintain parity while holding on to good freelancers based in California and northeastern markets. "The difference between rates in the Midwest and those on the East and West Coasts makes things difficult", Metzger said. Brown faces the same problem at Blackwell, complicated by another variable: international exchange rates. To stay competitive, the publisher conducts an annual pricing review to maintain fair rates regardless of currency.

Rates aside, Brown believes that one of the best ways to retain quality freelancers is to keep workflow well regulated. "Freelancers often can't keep up because publications don't give them enough notice." 🕒