



The lure of the 8 second commute

Once a corporate employee always a corporate employee. At least, that's what I thought. I left the organised world of the monthly salary cheque unexpectedly with every intention of climbing straight back on the publishing gravy train. At the same time, a reluctant hostage to the M4, I hankered for an office opportunity which would reduce my journey to work.

A couple of freelance, short-term commissions came in, and I realised self employment might just pay. That faltering step into the unknown took courage, but five years on, the independent life makes perfect sense. With school age kids (who are out all day, but still need help with their French verbs, spelling practice and pre-teen life's ups and downs), the rewarding variety of freelance work, the fun challenge of reporting to yourself as MD, and, of course, the 8-second commute are only a few of the 'pull' factors.

Freelancing works for me. But how can you get it to work for you? Of all the freelancers, consultants, entrepreneurs, and sole traders I've met over the last few years, there are certainly some common factors to success.

Put your customers first - always

Customers are king. Your income is nothing without you taking in and then exceeding your customers' expectations. Always make sure you understand exactly what they need: even if that means repeating it to them orally or in writing. And if giving them that little bit extra means they remember you next time, do it.

Learn to market yourself as a business

Some say there are three things that will make you a successful freelancer:

- 1 marketing
- 2 marketing
- 3 more marketing.

If you've taken the step out of an in-house editorial team, the concept of marketing may feel strange. But to be successful, you can no longer represent one function, you have to be editorial, finance, sales and marketing departments – all rolled into one. And that can take getting used to. You also have to keep marketing even when you are busy.

Marketing yourself as a business requires a new mindset. And although devising your own marketing plan sounds way too corporate, a simple but strategic approach to marketing will pay off.

Build a brand

Marketing speak, I know. But, put another way, become known – and be remembered - for something you are really good at. Do everything you can to make sure customers and potential customers think of you first. There are many freelancers out there, the trick for you is to stand out from the crowded in-tray on a busy publisher's desk.

Build a team around you

Turning freelance can put an end to Friday lunch with colleagues. Small talk by the water dispenser is a thing of the past. But creating your own social network is still a human must-have. As a business person, also think about paying for the services of an 'IT department', or for a 'Head of Finance' to draw up your annual accounts, and even a virtual PA for admin support. A sole trader doesn't need to characterize isolation.

A spotless home betrays an unsuccessful freelancer

Of course, many aspects to office life are still beneficial to the independent freelancer. Regular office hours for one. Start work at a fixed time and don't let the washing machine become a tool of procrastination. Make sure you sit at your desk for a given time and work, even if it's not paid work. Getting organised and allowing that backbone of self discipline to permeate your working style will impress your customers.

Actually getting down to work has never been a problem for me, but leaving the keyboard at the end of the day usually is. Throughout your freelance career, there

will be times when after-hours working is inevitable, because publishing is a deadline-driven business and late submissions are a no-go. But that doesn't mean you should make working late the norm. A sense of balance will help secure your success, too.

So what about you? Still waiting for the 'right' time to turn freelance?

It won't come. Not ever. Some will advise you not to give up the day job without the equivalent of six months salary in the bank. Sound advice, but how achievable is it? To be honest, nothing motivates the sole trader more than knowing you don't eat if you don't get paid.

Sound planning, researching your market, the right business approach, and a knack for building strong business relationships will ease the transition, but a comfortable financial cushion is certainly not a pre-requisite for successful freelancing.

Those who take the plunge and make up their own minds to step out of the corporate door are an inspiration to me. Those I know who do, never regret their decision.

Mary James combines her publishing expertise with a hands-on knowledge of the freelance market. With more than 20 years' experience in publishing, she has hired many freelancers, and understands how heavily publishing houses rely on their first-rate services. Now, having set up *innoved* to provide research and consultancy services to publishers, Mary recognises what is required to run a sustainable business from home and to develop strong working relationships with publishers in order to keep a full order book.