

Occupational hazards when freelancing

Freelancing should come with one of those black-border labels that read “Freelancing can be dangerous for your physical and mental health.” This goes double for those freelancers (many, if not most of us, I assume) who work from home, and in triplicate for what the Americans, with their love of acronyms, have dubbed WAHMs (read: work-at-home-moms). Much has been said and written about the classic pitfalls awaiting this segment of the working population: isolation, administration and procrastination, to name but a few. Some aspects have gone largely unmentioned, however, and I would like to supply several real-life examples from my own freelance existence for readers’ enlightenment.

Phone amnesia

The advent of those wonderful gadgets, cell phones, has given rise to a new threat to efficiency. I call it ‘phone amnesia’, and it goes hand-in-hand with that urban myth called multi-tasking. Brrring-brring! When my office phone goes and I answer it (after checking the number identification to make sure it’s not that telephone marketer again), I invariably end up getting out of my chair and pacing around. This is, of course, highly recommended by health gurus who are always encouraging us to replace our desk chair with an exercise ball chair and spend as little time as possible sitting around on our backsides.

So I could pace with a clear conscience if I didn’t simultaneously have the habit of picking things up while talking, and then moving from room to room with them. And then - you guessed it - I mislay them. For anyone who is interested in the cumulative effects of this behaviour, I will cheerfully send you my husband’s phone number at work. Just call him, say the words ‘concert tickets’ and then be sure to hold the phone 10 cm away from your ear. All will be revealed. The term ‘phone amnesia’ can also be used to describe the reverse phenomenon—that of not knowing where you have put your cell or home phone. In a pinch, however, you can solve that problem by calling the number and hoping that the cell is switched on and/or the battery of the hand-held home phone isn’t dead yet.

Multi-tasking + ‘flow’ = chaos

As the above example illustrates and recent research has confirmed, the original concept of multi-tasking, defined as the brain’s capability of mastering several activities in parallel, is deeply flawed. Instead, it seems that the right and the left lobe of the brain concentrate on different tasks, making it difficult to successfully tackle more than two tasks at the same time [1]. Thus, I was concentrating on the essential tasks of talking and walking, not on those tickets.

Even more toxic is the effect of mixing one’s perceived multi-tasking capability with the unexpected onset of ‘flow’, that pleasurable state of mind in which you are so engrossed in your subject that you forget time and space around you [2]. I have taken to buying only the most basic kind of kitchen hardware after several unpleasant and malodorous experiences when I had the hubris to think I could combine cooking dinner with writing. I suppose it can be considered a credit to my powers of

concentration and dedication to my work that I forget the kitchen when I leave it, but I can reliably report that it takes weeks for the smell of burnt carrots to dissipate from a home. Of course, creative re-framing can take you far in this case, too—put the pot outside and, when they come home from school, show your offspring that vegetables are carbon-based life forms.

Incomprehension and envy

When I started out as a freelancer, I found it rather challenging to deal with the attitudes of some people vis-à-vis my career choice. Even if you yourself are blithely confident that things will work out and you will be able to make a living out of this ‘revolutionary’ way of working, be assured that some of your nearest and dearest will not. (People seem to forget or have never internalised the fact that contractual employment, unions and pension plans are all very recent inventions, seen historically. My grandmother, born in 1884, never knew where her next 6-month teaching contract was coming from, either [3].)

To this day I sense my mother-in-law’s unasked question behind the query: “And how is your work doing?” which is most certainly “And are you earning enough not to plunge you all into penury?” This wouldn’t make me quite so annoyed if people in ‘steady’ jobs were living in a kind of professional paradise. But they aren’t, and whether any job (other than a civil servant’s) is steady, is a moot point in my opinion. On the other hand, you can spend quite some time disabusing people of unrealistic notions of freelancing. I can’t count the times I’ve heard variations on “Gosh, it must be great to be your own boss.” Yes, of course. And no, of course not. Just like everything else in life.

Virtual reality

Both of these reactions, incomprehension and envy, subtly seem to imply that freelancing isn’t ‘real’ work, somehow. Real work is something you do in a real office. This is, of course, one of the great barriers to successful teleworking models for people with those ‘steady’ jobs, with managers finding it hard to relinquish control and trust their employees to put all their energy into their tasks. I must admit, though, after a day at the computer keyboard and with few face-to-face interactions, I sometimes get the impression of not being ‘all there’ or, conversely, to have melded with the machine somehow. So be careful what you believe: Maybe a hyper-sophisticated bot [4] is writing this, and you’ll never know it!

Ursula Schoenberg

*Creative Communications
Frankfurt/M, Germany
u.schoenberg@t-online.de
<http://uschoenberg.wordpress.com>*

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