

Melanie Francis



Melanie Francis has been freelancing for seven years. Her company, Melf Computing, specialises in developing Microsoft Office templates and reporting solutions, and has completed projects for Sainsbury's, Merrill Lynch and a diverse range of creative, consulting, research and manufacturing businesses. She has been a PCG member since June 1999. Here she describes her experience of running her own business and offers advice to those considering freelancing.

The idea of freelancing had always appealed to me, because I wanted to work for myself and be in control of my career. Being made redundant from my permanent job, seven years' ago, presented me with the ideal opportunity to take the plunge and set up my own company.

Freelancing suits me very well. I have the freedom of being able to work when I want to, and thoroughly enjoy the variety of work that I'm commissioned to handle. It allows me to escape the grind of office politics and being asked to undertake mundane tasks such as filing and testing. I can now focus on work that I enjoy doing, and knowing that it's for the benefit of my own business is a very motivating factor.

It concerns me however that the Government does so little to encourage the development of small businesses in the UK, and that we are continually being presented with more bureaucracy and new obstacles to overcome. All businesses are faced with the increased costs of complying with government legislation, but the effects on small business owners are disproportionately higher.

The other challenge involves having to compete with cheap labour in other countries. We cannot compete on price. We have to offer added value, better quality or lower risk, and we have to educate our clients not to view price as the most important criterion in their supplier selection process.

Being in business on one's own account is a key factor in not being deemed as a "disguised employee". With this in mind, I developed my own website, and this is proving more and more successful in bringing me new business opportunities. I have also moved towards taking on fixed price contracts, rather than charging by the day or hour. There are risks associated with that approach, but I enjoy the challenge of completing the work within the budgeted time, and to a certain extent it gives me more freedom about when and where I work. It also makes it easier to service other clients at the same time.

In the early days, I obtained most of my assignments through agencies, but nowadays all my work is won directly, either through my web site, or through direct marketing campaigns. I am fortunate to have had a variety of projects and my client base includes a range of very different companies.

At the larger end of the scale, I have undertaken projects for Sainsbury's and Merrill Lynch, but then I undertook work for a small PR company specialising in the horse-racing industry and a company selling acupuncture patches.

My portfolio includes work for construction consultants, marketing and design agencies, research organisations and manufacturing companies. I also enjoyed handling projects for Granada Media and ITV, both of which involved dealing with television schedules and advertising.

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If anyone asked my advice about moving into freelancing, I would say that you have got to like working by yourself and be prepared to take sole responsibility for your work and for your decisions. You have to be extremely self-motivated to get on with the work as there will be nobody managing you, encouraging you or nagging you. You also have to accept the need to spend time on non-billable work such as producing quotations, bookkeeping, VAT returns, researching and keeping up to date with your skills, and building relationships with your clients.

Successful freelancing has to be viewed from a long-term perspective. It takes time to build relationships with clients, win repeat business, and get to the point where your reputation helps to benefit from referrals.

I think that contracting as it used to be – working through agencies, being paid by the hour, and having very low overheads – has all but gone. People should not go into freelancing for the money. By the time you have taken into account the absence of holiday pay, sick pay and other employee benefits, combined with all the costs of being in business, you may not be any better off financially. If however you like the idea of being in charge of your own destiny and want freedom and variety, then freelancing is wonderful.

And finally, your work/life balance is no less important when you are freelancing. In my spare time, I love watching football – and have a season ticket at Arsenal – as well as swimming and skiing.

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**Melanie Francis, Managing Director
Melf Computing Limited**

10 useful Excel and Word tips

from Melanie Francis

1. Enter fractions in Excel by typing 0 followed by a space and then the fraction (for example, 0 3/8). The cell will show 3/8 but the value of the cell will be the decimal (0.375) thereby allowing you to use the cell in formulas.
2. Use Paste Special options when copying the contents of a cell to add, multiply, subtract or divide the copied values to the destination cell.
3. To create a chart quickly, select the data range and press F11. This will create a chart of your data using Excel's default chart options.
4. Custom Lists can be very useful for quick data entry. If you regularly enter lists of data such as sales areas, products or departments, add the list to the Custom Lists tab from the Tools, Options menu. Then when you type in one of the list members, you can drag the Fill Handle to copy out the rest of the list. You can also use the custom list as a sort key when sorting data. (From the Data, Sort menu press the Options button and select your list.)
5. To quickly see a calculation of a range of cells, without entering a formula, select the cells you want to calculate, then look at the status bar in the bottom right-hand side of the screen. It will show you the sum of the selected cells. You can change the calculation method to Count, Average, Min, Max and Count Nums by hovering the cursor over the result in the status bar and using the right mouse button to display the options.
6. Return to the place where you last were in your document by clicking Shift + F5. Word remembers your last three locations so you can keep pressing it to go back to previous locations.
7. Use the Document Browser to move around the document. The Document Browser is found at the bottom of the vertical scroll bar; it is the button with a ball on between a button with a double up arrow and a button with a double down arrow. The default setting is browse by page so when you press the double down arrows you are taken to the next page in your document, but you can elect to browse the document by tables, fields, headings, footnotes, endnotes, graphics, sections and edits.
8. To remove all the manually applied formatting from a section of text, select the text and press Ctrl + Spacebar. The formatting will revert to the formatting set in the paragraph's style.
9. Go immediately to the halfway point in your document by using the Go To box. Click F5, select Page in the Go To What box then type 50% in the Enter Page Number box. You can use other percentages to go to other points in the document here too.
10. If you have trouble with section breaks, when you first create a document, add a dummy section break at the end of the document. The settings for a section - headers, footers, page orientation - are stored in the section break, therefore your original document settings will be stored in the final dummy section break. When you delete a section break, the newly merged section takes on the settings of the section break at the end.

PCG believes that freelancers have a valuable role to play in the UK's economy, generating wealth and employment and offering some of the brightest and best talent around - consultants, advisers, contractors, engineers, specialists, professionals. This profile was originally published in PCG's Freelancing Matters, Issue No 2. Copyright © PCG 2003

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