

Freelancing offers flexible opportunities

'You can't rely on someone else. You need to be proactive.'

By Denise Deveau, Postmedia News October 26, 2011

Linda Crawley never intended to embark on a full-time freelance career as a graphic designer.

"I started out as an inhouse designer, but decided the job was not working out for me," she says. "I needed something to tide me over, so I called everyone I knew was looking for some work. Within a few months I had a full-time job freelancing and I've never looked back."

The number of people engaging in freelance work has grown over the years for many reasons, from the economic to the personal. For some, it's a means to an end such as fulltime work in a chosen field.

For others, it's a way to keep challenging oneself through different project work. And for people like Crawley, it's an end in itself.

She has learned some valuable lessons about how to get started - and how to keep the momentum going. "The first thing to do if you're starting out is to contact everybody you know and let them know you're looking for work. Whether they need you or not, they might know somebody who does."

Most important, you have to be self-motivated. "You can't rely on someone else. You need to be proactive about things and not wait for other people to get things going.

"And remember that your office is never closed. It's a 24-hour-a-day job. But on the other hand, it gives you incredible flexibility. I can work at the cottage or from Florida if I want to."

Krista Hidemma, partner with e2r Solutions, an employment law and human resources consultancy in Toronto, says freelancing might hold a lot of appeal for many people, but you have to go into it for the right reasons and understand what's involved.

"You need to remember you are genuinely running a business and not just working in one area of competence," she says.

"You have to do your own marketing, sales, customer service, collections, and accounting. That's something a lot of individuals don't necessarily think about."

She notes that key areas for freelance work these days are "anything within the media sector" as well as IT. "That's where we see the highest volumes. The tight economy has also brought freelancers to market in less traditional industries such as pharmaceuticals, professional services and architecture.

Freelancers are also an important resource for contract work with government agencies and large enter-prises, says Aizaz Sheikh, marketing program manager at Procom Consultants Group Ltd., a specialist in IT job placement in Toronto.

"A lot of clients are looking for certain skill sets on a temporary basis." He reports that the highest demand is for project managers, business analysts and IT personnel.

Contract freelancers can enjoy a number of advantages, Sheikh notes. "They get paid considerably higher, because it's hourly work."

Freelancing on contract jobs is also a great way for individuals to develop their skills on a portfolio of different projects, he adds. "It's the variety that drives them."

There are some important things you can do to get on the good side of prospective clients. A good work ethic is a place to start, says Crawley.

"There are always clients out there looking for somebody to work hard.

"You don't have to be the world's greatest at what you do, but if you show that you can deliver your work on time at a good price, that's absolutely key."

Building connections is also crucial. There is a wide range of industry associations and events that provide opportunities for networking.

Social media sites can also play an important role in building awareness and connections.

LinkedIn, for example, offers a number of useful tips on how to build your freelance career online.

These include raising your profile with your contacts, providing regular status updates, following companies you are interested in, joining groups of like-minded people and showcasing your expertise to others.

As for ending a freelance career, that's optional too.

"I enjoy freelancing," Crawley says.

"It keeps me involved. I might do a bit less in a few years, but even if I make it a part-time job, that sounds good to me."

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