

Communicator

International Association of Business Communicators – Toronto Chapter



The Independent Practitioner

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Freelancers Thrive on the Independent Life

By Sue Horner, Alliance of Independent Practitioners (AIP) member and freelancer

Flexibility, work/life balance and a short commute are just some of the benefits enjoyed by IABC/Toronto's independent communicators. Add in variety, good money and the lack of office politics, and you've got good reason to go solo.

Sure, you have to be disciplined to work alone, meet deadlines and ride out the ups and downs of a freelance career, but for many members of IABC/Toronto's Alliance of Independent Practitioners (AIP), the "indie" life is the only way to go.

Communications consultant Lorraine Willson (Headline: Communications Inc.) enjoys the variation in both work projects and industry focus. "As a generalist, I might provide PR expertise to a high-tech client one day, and the next, write an article for a food manufacturer's employee newsletter," she says. "Dealing with different clients and learning about a wide range of industries are exciting aspects of being an independent."

Consultant Robert Brukner likewise appreciates working with diverse clients and contracts of his own choosing. "I also like setting my own hours, being responsible for my success and failure and getting to travel for clients within North America and Europe," he says.

Rawle Borel, Jr. (Sugarfoote Communications) likes "the flexibility in scheduling, the variety of clients and work opportunities, and the sense of accomplishment."

Writer and communications consultant Frances Roberts (Your Words at Work) enjoys working with others, saying, "The opportunity to form a team based on the skills and experience tailored for each assignment is very rewarding. I also prefer to live a balanced life, and working independently lets me take time out to enjoy life or relieve stress with daytime classes."

With two small children, Cyrus Mavalwala of boutique PR firm Advantis Communications agrees. "Walking to work eliminates the long commute, which means more family time," he says. "Eating breakfast with my kids and still being able to get to the office for an early-morning conference call is priceless—a reward that makes me feel like I've won the lottery every day."

The drawbacks, and how to overcome them

Of course, independent communicators do face challenges. Roberts points out, "Working alone can be isolating. Fortunately, I have a good relationship with a fellow independent and I use his office two days a week. That gives us both an opportunity to bounce ideas around, problem solve on our client issues, come up with some creative ideas, and look for ways to generate more business."

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Freelancers Thrive on the Independent Life

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Nandy Heule (Heule Communications) cites the biggie: "The 'feast or famine' work cycle of the consultant seems to be an almost inevitable drawback of being an independent. But I try to enjoy the slower times when possible and make sure to pay myself a fixed monthly salary so the household budget doesn't fluctuate when the business income does."

Willson advises, "When work assignments slow down, that's the best time to step up marketing efforts and renew ties with former clients and colleagues."

Brukner fills dry spells with volunteer work contributions to charities, which he admits is also good for networking and drumming up new business. "Marrying well to a salaried woman also helps," he jokes.

Despite the challenges of the solo life, few independents we talked to were interested in returning to a full-time corporate job. "After five years of driving my own career and having the opportunity to employ others, it's way too much fun to give up," says Mavalwala. "I've always had an entrepreneurial bent and besides, what other job offers fabulous colleagues and clients?"

Others could quit the independent life, if given an opportunity to work on projects that "made a difference" (Borel) or "changed the world" (Roberts). Brukner could be lured by "a senior management position with considerable latitude to run my own shop," while Willson wants "a stimulating and rewarding career, work that is diverse and challenging, and a flexible work environment, including the ability to work from home from time to time."

Hmm, sounds remarkably like what our independents already have!

AIP a key benefit for IABC/Toronto independents

Close to 100 independent communicators in IABC/Toronto are enjoying the benefits of networking, learning and building their businesses with a special interest group called the Alliance of Independent Practitioners (AIP).

AIP was created in 1998 to provide professional development and networking opportunities specific to members running their own businesses. Monthly meetings from September to June feature speakers on such topics as marketing, project management, pricing, and tech support. A monthly e-newsletter shares professional development tips, resources and advice, and keeps members connected with each other.

"AIP does a good job of getting us together once a month and offering workshops that support and nurture the choices and challenges faced by Independents," says writer and communications consultant Frances Roberts. "The top benefits are the community of practitioners, the ability to network and the shared experiences of operating a sole-practitioner business."

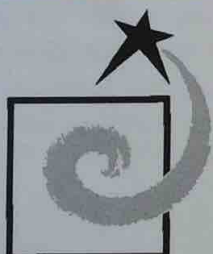
Video producer Sean Karow (Prime Corporate Communications) appreciates the opportunity to hear about the challenges that others are facing in the industry. "It's refreshing to know that others are experiencing the same ups and downs that I am and that I'm doing things right," he says.

PR specialist Lorraine Willson particularly enjoys the ability to network and stay current on communication trends, strategies and the latest technologies that AIP provides. "AIP allows independents to feel connected and part of a larger community," she adds.

Rawle Borel, Jr. says, "IABC and AIP provide an incredible network and pool of resources that have helped me in both my corporate career and in the launch of my own business."

If you're interested in joining AIP, contact executive@aiptoronto.com. Meetings are generally held the first Thursday of each month at Metro Hall in Toronto. There is no extra charge to belong to AIP, and only a small \$10 charge for attending each AIP meeting. Guests are welcome. Watch for details on IABC/Toronto's monthly e-Lerts.

Sue Horner is a member of AIP and a freelance writer who truly loves the independent life, which she has enjoyed since 1991. Find any of the independents mentioned here (and more!) on the IABC/Toronto web site at <http://toronto.iabc.com/members/aip/>.



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