



# Freelancer Envy

By Tony Beckwith

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**In the** late 1960s I worked at an advertising agency in Madrid. It was a multinational shop and I was the account executive for the international accounts. It was a great job and a good fit for me. I was the daily liaison for my clients, which was rather like being a project manager. I had to keep up with any movement on the account, shepherd projects through the agency, interpret the client's brief to the creative department, and, of course, take my clients to lunch.

I was twenty-something, and by my standards at the time, life was pretty sweet. And yet I was consumed with a most unseemly envy. In the agency world at that time the account directors and account executives wore suits, or at the very least a smart blue blazer, preferably double-breasted, and sharply pressed charcoal-grey flannel trousers. This set us apart from

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I was truly living a life of quiet desperation.

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the creative department—the writers, illustrators, storyboard artists, and assorted trend-setters, most of whom wore cool (occasionally outlandish) outfits and loafers with no socks. I had not yet learned that, with a bit of luck, we can be anything we want to be if we are prepared to work for it, and I longed to be someone who could come to work dressed as I pleased. I also longed to be someone who wrote things for a living, even if it was jingles for laundry detergent. I was truly living a life of quiet desperation, though perhaps not quite as Thoreau meant it.

And then one day it got worse. One of my clients, a French car manufacturer, commissioned a campaign to introduce a new model, and the ads were to feature gorgeous full-color photographs of the car in a variety of

exotic settings. The art director called in a well-known photographer to join our account team, and we all spent a few delightful days in those exotic locations. Just as in movies about actors on location, even our very modest version of that scenario involved long, often intense, hours of work, followed by late nights talking about Hemingway and Pamplona over cigars and brandy. (“Leave the bottle, *por favor*.”)

As the two foreigners on the trip, the photographer and I bonded, and gradually told each other the story of our lives. My new friend was an American freelancer who had come to Spain on assignment for a magazine many years before and never went home. He and his American wife lived in a spacious apartment in a very nice part of town. He took only the assignments that inter-

ested him and charged huge fees for his work, which was highly sought after by all the top agencies in the country. His time was his own, it appeared to me, and he never wore a suit. That was when I realized that what I most wanted to be was a freelancer.

About 25 years later, after a varied career in various parts of the world, I was living in Austin, Texas, working at a job that was not a good fit and doing some translation on the side. Employed and self-employed, I had one foot on either side of the line and felt ready to make my move. I asked veteran translator Harvie Jordan what one needed most to become a successful freelancer and he said, “A wife with a real job.” I luckily met that qualification, and one day I let go of the safety net that was the ill-fitting employment and struck out on my own as a newly minted freelance translator. That was 20 years ago, and I have never regretted the decision.

It was like going back to school, and led to a crash course in survival skills that showed me more vividly than ever that—like it or not—I was master of my own domain. I never want to stop being a freelancer, but the experience has not been exactly as I had imagined. How could it be? It was the journey into the unknown that

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every freelancer has taken, a journey of exploration and resourcefulness, of nerve-wracking highs and lows. (Harvie was right!) It was a journey into a new reality.

I thought back to the photographer in Spain. He was always relaxed and made freelancing look easy. He never seemed concerned with chasing a paycheck, but he too had his nerve-wracking highs and lows. What freelancer does not? Late one night, in a bar on the outskirts of Granada, he confided that, for him, the thrill of the freelancer’s ride was the unpredictability, the lack of guarantees, the sudden appearance of projects that materialized out of the blue. He wagged his finger and said, “You must never panic—remember that making money is like catching a cold; you just have to stand in the draft.”

During the years that I coveted the freelance life I entertained a naïve yet insistent fantasy that it entitled one to work as much or as little as one wanted, whenever one wanted. As every established freelancer knows,

that amusing fiction is entirely dependent on things like a mortgage and putting food on the table. Fishermen know that you put out your nets when the fish are running, and you keep working the nets until you have caught all the fish and it is time to go home. And when you are not fishing, you are mending nets and painting the boat.

As a freelance translator, I mend my own nets and paint my own boat, which has gradually turned into a full-time job that sometimes keeps me busy seven days a week. It is a solitary occupation, involving long hours in front of a computer. But, much as I like people, I enjoy the solitude and appreciate all of the time and energy that I do not spend interacting with others in a workplace of almost any kind. This is a precious gift, for I think the greatest lesson I have learned from freelancing is that time really is of the essence.

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Session proposals are now being accepted for the California Federation of Interpreters’ 10th Annual Continuing Education Conference, October 5-7, 2012, at the Millennium Biltmore in Los Angeles, California. The theme will be “Building on a Decade of Professional Development.”

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## American Translators Association

225 Reinekers Lane  
Suite 590  
Alexandria, VA 22314 USA  
Tel: +1-703-683-6100  
Fax: +1-703-683-6122  
E-mail: [Chronicle@atanet.org](mailto:Chronicle@atanet.org)  
Website: [www.atanet.org](http://www.atanet.org)

### Editor

Jeff Sanfacon  
[Jeff@atanet.org](mailto:Jeff@atanet.org)

### Proofreader

Sandra Burns Thomson

### Art Directors

Ellen Banker  
Amy Peloff

### Advertising

Caron Mason, CAE  
[advertising@atanet.org](mailto:advertising@atanet.org)  
+1-703-683-6100, ext. 3003  
Fax: +1-703-683-6122

### Executive Director

Walter Bacak, CAE  
[Walter@atanet.org](mailto:Walter@atanet.org)

### Membership and General Information

Kwana Ingram  
[kwana@atanet.org](mailto:kwana@atanet.org)  
website: [www.atanet.org](http://www.atanet.org)

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**Tony Beckwith** was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, spent his formative years in Montevideo, Uruguay, then set off to see the world. He came to Texas in 1980 and now lives in Austin, where he works as a writer, translator, poet, and cartoonist. Contact: [tony@tonybeckwith.com](mailto:tony@tonybeckwith.com).

**Stephanie Tramdock Cash** heads ATA's Business Practices Education Committee. She is a freelance French→English financial and maritime translator. A Chartered Financial Analyst, she has an undergraduate degree in English from Bryn Mawr College, an MBA in finance from the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, a certificate in translation studies from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and a Diplôme Français des Affaires 1 from the Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie de Paris. She has worked as a securities analyst, a portfolio manager, and an institutional portfolio strategist with firms in Philadelphia, New York, and Montreal. She lives in Cape May Court House, New Jersey. Contact: [cashrs@comcast.net](mailto:cashrs@comcast.net).

**Paula Gordon** translates Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian into English and edits and proofreads English articles for publication. She has a paralegal certificate from an American Bar Association-accredited program. She is an experienced medical translator (patient records, journal articles, clinical trial documentation) and a published literary translator (artist monographs and catalogue essays, film subtitles, and a full-length play). She edited the *Serbian and Croatian into English Medical Dictionary* by S.P. Djordjevi. Her areas of interest include medicine, law, and technology and the intersection of these disciplines—end-of-life and disability issues, bioethics, biotechnology, constitutional law, and intellectual property. Contact: [paula@dbaPlanB.com](mailto:paula@dbaPlanB.com).



**Grant Hamilton**, a certified translator, owns and manages Anglocom, an agency based in Quebec City that specializes in the English↔French translation. He also teaches advertising adaptation as part of the translation certificate program at New York University. A regular presenter at events throughout Canada and at ATA conferences, he is a past assistant administrator of ATA's Translation Company Division. He is a board member of Quebec's Ordre des traducteurs, terminologues et interprètes agréés, and is president of the Quebec wing of the Duke of Edinburgh's Awards. His Twitter feed, @anglais, provides twice-daily tips on English translation, and he is the author of *Les trucs d'anglais qu'on a oublié de vous enseigner*, published in 2011 by L'instant même. He is a graduate of Laval University. Contact: [ghamilton@anglocom.com](mailto:ghamilton@anglocom.com).

**Fabio M. Said** translates from German and English into Brazilian Portuguese, specializing mostly in legal, business, and financial translations. In the past 19 years, he has worked in several industry segments, including localization and sworn translation. He has had a number of book translations published in Brazil. He is the editor of [fidusinterpres.com](http://fidusinterpres.com), a translation blog where he shares his views and tips with the translation industry, and is the author of *Fidus Interpres: A Prática da Tradução Profissional*, a book originated from his blog. Contact: [fabio.said@fidusinterpres.com](mailto:fabio.said@fidusinterpres.com).

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