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Columnist Answers Questions From Journalists

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Columnist answers questions from journalists

From time to time, this column will feature your questions about professional development. I will strive to answer your questions fully before publication in this space. Thanks to all who have offered questions and, to others, keep them coming.

Before tackling the questions posed to me, ethics is the theme for this issue, and I didn't want to miss an opportunity to discuss ethics and highlight the excellent staff at Poynter Institute.

I recall hearing Bob Steele, Poynter's ethics group leader, advise journalists to include other newsroom colleagues in ongoing discussions of ethical dilemmas. Communicating standards of ethical conduct can only help our newsrooms, especially when one considers the perception many have of journalists and how we work.

The Poynter Web site has numerous tip sheets, case studies and articles related to the various ethical situations journalists encounter. Plus, Poynter invites professional journalists to call faculty on a special toll-free number, (877) 639-7817, with questions about ethics. Poynter is simply indispensable in this discussion of ethics. If you're ever in doubt, give Poynter a shout.

Now, on to the questions.

Q: I am an environmental journalist and would like to find additional freelance opportunities. Is there a Web site I can go to that will direct me to publishers looking for freelancers relating to specific themes or topics? Thank you. AB, Hawaii

A: Thanks for the question. Before you launch a freelance career, please investigate the guidelines of your employer. You don't want to cross any ethical barriers by freelancing stories that your employer might want or that your employer discourages. With any ethical restrictions considered, I then would encourage you to research a

few possibilities. First, look to the magazines and publications you already read. Find out if they use freelance articles.

Second, you should visit two Web sites, sej.org and nasw.org, which have specific

sections for freelancers. Both Web sites might have some ideas for you. If you're not a member of Society of Environmental Journalists, I would encourage you to join that organization for your own personal development. Thirdly, a gold mine of freelance opportunities can be found in the book *The Writer's Market*, which lists publications, what type of submissions they accept as well as guidelines, and some pay ranges for pieces you write.

The key to freelancing is to study the publication closely — what types of stories are published, and, based on that information, give them something they want and need. Finally, another resource for you is the American Society of Journalists and Authors' annual writers' conference, taking place April 16-17 in New York City. That might be too far for you to travel this time, but perhaps organizers will repeat their workshop "Better Bylines, Bigger Bucks: Secrets to Successful Freelance Writing" at a future conference. Good luck! The Society of Professional Journalists also recently started a freelance forum on its Web site, spj.org.

Q: I accepted a position with (a major news organization in the Washington, D.C., area) about a year ago, shortly after completing an MBA degree. It has been a year of learning and developing, and I have enjoyed it. My eventual goal is to use the business degree within the journalism industry, either as a business reporter or by working my way into management. What are your thoughts regarding the future of news organizations? Do you think there will be more workers with journalism/business backgrounds? And are you aware of MBAs showing more interest in media

companies? MH, D.C.

A: I think you'll have opportunities to use your expertise/MBA as a business writer in newspapers. Your MBA taught you how numbers are used. In a numbers-shy field, your degree will help distinguish you among the crowd of applicants. Presumably, your numbers knowledge is a fantastic asset in a world where numbers and money often tell the story. The key to landing a reporting job, however, will be your clips. To catch the eye of a hiring editor, you will want to show thorough reporting and crisp, clean writing. That said, I would encourage you to begin exploring opportunities in newspapers. In the meantime, seek business reporting and writing experience where you are. Let your boss know of your interest in this field and ask for more exposure to that area. While waiting for those opportunities, study the craft of business writing showcased in the business sections of newspapers and magazines. If your current employer does not provide the opportunity to write business stories, then look for other ways to get the experience. Freelancing may be an option if your employer allows this. Also, consider joining SABEW (Society of American Business Editors and Writers), which would allow you to network with those who are doing what you want to do and give you the chance to discover what opportunities would be available to someone with your background.

If you have aspirations of becoming a manager, you'll want to succeed as a reporter first and cultivate the softer skills — communicating clearly, giving effective feedback, coaching, motivating — that separate the great supervisors and leaders from the substandard ones.

Carla Kimbrough-Robinson has spent nearly 20 years in newsrooms and is a trained life coach with Inspire Higher International, LLC, a Denver-based personal development company. Send her questions at coaching@inspirehigher.net



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