



A little fish in a big pond? Emma Gledhill and Karen Tkaczyk argue that making the switch can in fact extend one's influence

Good company

Why opt for in-house, after many years of freelancing?

Emma Gledhill and Karen Tkaczyk discuss why they made this choice

Emma Gledhill (ENG) and Karen Tkaczyk (KMT) were long-time freelance translators who have taken on in-house roles over the last couple of years. Emma is part of the Language Services department at Avaloq, a global leader in digital banking solutions, and Karen is a director at language service provider (LSP) MasterWord. Early in the New Year they sat down for a chat about their experiences.

ENG: I think we're quite unusual taking the route from freelancing back into in-house. When I started out, the standard route was to get an in-house job for a year or five, then go freelance, and that was it for the rest of your career.

KMT: You've made one type of transition, from freelance translator to in-house translator, and I've made another, moving to work in providing translation and localisation rather than actually practising. So how long did you spend freelancing?

ENG: Since 1993. I worked in-house for one year early on, but otherwise all freelance. I now work in-house as a language services specialist at a leading Swiss-based company that makes software for, and provides services to, the financial services industry.

KMT: When and why did you decide to go in-house? And how long did it take you to find the job that you got?

ENG: Well, there were several factors. I'd been struggling with living in a very expensive country with crashing exchange rates – in one crash I lost 30 to 40 per cent of my income overnight. It wasn't doing my health any good spending 12 to 14 hours a day, seven days a week just translating and typing, and I started to wonder 'is that all there is?'

So I was looking to diversify both my work and my income stream. I set up a sailing business in 2013 and ran that 50/50 with freelance translation for some years. I'd been looking unsuccessfully for a couple of years for a language services contract to tide me over the winters.

And then, as the pandemic hit, I was extremely lucky to spot an ad for a maternity-cover job and land the position. It actually started on the first day of lockdown in March 2020 and subsequently became permanent. I was just in the right place at the right time, so although I'd been looking for a while, when it did happen it was really fast. How about you?

KMT: I set myself up as a specialist technical French to English freelancer in October 2005. Before that, I worked in the chemical industry. I found that as the pandemic hit, a few things happened. It's usually more than one thing that produces a change like this! First of all, my husband was furloughed without pay, and there

was no end in sight for that. While he found some consulting work, we live in the USA so the cost of medical insurance became an issue. Second, my revenue fell by a third in 2020. Third, we were approaching the kids all leaving home. They no longer need me in the way they did when they were small, so I no longer needed the flexibility that freelancing provides.

To cut tales of a long deliberation period short, I decided I would look for jobs in the language services industry, and especially in companies that were big enough to have a life sciences division. I took the decision at the end of 2020, and in March 2021 I had my first job interviews since 1999. The job I got at MasterWord came from an introduction through my network: a close friend/colleague wrote a note to the CEO. I began in May 2021.

ENG: So clearly financial security was a strong motivator for both of us.

KMT: That was certainly part of it for me but not the whole. I will say though that I'm making more now than I did before the pandemic.

ENG: I'm the sole breadwinner these days so it's a huge weight off my shoulders. In the good times, I was also doing very well as a freelancer, but nothing like this. These days, I work part-time, 70 per cent, with a lot of flexibility and the time and headspace to do other things on a voluntary basis, and to sail for several weeks a year. I get a wonderful work-life balance and earn more than many people do full-time.

KMT: Are you working from home at the moment?

ENG: Yes, I've only been into the office in Zurich 10 or 11 times in almost two years. Even when things normalise I'll probably only have to go to the office once a week, so I'm in my comfort zone.

KMT: I'm also working remotely from my home office, which I love. I travel to the offices in Houston for things like quarterly management meetings and client meetings.

ENG: And how do you find working hours, compared with freelancing?

KMT: There's less flexibility than as a freelancer as there are way more meetings on my schedule than before. I get the odd call out of hours.

But do I have balance overall, compared with freelancing? Yes, I have the balance I want.

ENG: My working hours are surprisingly flexible and there's not usually a problem if I need to change one of my regular working days. I often do long hours on my working days and I'm always building up overtime that I then have to take off in lieu, but as nobody abuses the flexibility, it's there when we need it. And I get to switch the work computer off at the end of the day, which was something I found really difficult as a freelancer – Switzerland is strict on keeping a barrier between work and private life.

KMT: And paid holidays.

ENG: Paid holidays, and in fact everything I do is paid now, whether I'm doing 'core' language work – translation, reviews, terminology – or spreading my professional wings. I'm absolutely loving the variety of our work, from writing style guides and implementing language tech, to localisation, UX writing and more. As we're in-house, we're able to talk directly to authors, designers and developers and exert influence to improve quality in a way I was never able to as an external.

I've also found that my experience of the 'vendor' side of language services has also been extremely useful to the buying side. It meant that when we started working with individual freelance translators for the first time, I knew what processes and documentation we would have to set up.

KMT: You're adding value – that's very satisfying, isn't it?

ENG: Absolutely. I feel seen. And the type of variety has changed. As a freelancer it came through the different types of text; in-house, it comes through the different types of activity, I think.

KMT: And you're learning all the time. For me, in addition to those other issues I've mentioned, I was ready for change and for new challenges. I immediately loved the fact that as an employee I'm getting a much broader exposure to the whole range of translation and interpreting. And people are actually paying to train me and invest in me, which is a breath of fresh air. I was initially brought in to grow my company's accounts in life sciences and manage existing chemical business, but I'm also applying my experience to other areas: for instance, revamping translator onboarding and becoming an internal auditor for our quality management system.

I love the multiple teams that I work with as a result. I'm working closely with people. I didn't realise quite how much I would love being in teams all day, every day. They bring me energy and joy and make my working day more pleasant. It was fabulous to join a group of account management peers where we all bring different experiences; between us we have an amazing skill set.

ENG: Yes. Like yours, my colleagues within the department all bring different things and get on really well; we form a ready-made consulting and revision network for one another.

KMT: It also turns out that I have leadership skills. Ha! That may come across oddly in writing – but I am an effective decision maker, and it quickly became clear that my ability to make decisions and advise people was valuable – not only in strategic matters but also in simple things like how I organise my time and get things done. I became a model to younger colleagues. I wasn't expecting that to be as valuable as it obviously was.

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Contact: PDO@j-net.org.uk




ENG: So would you change anything?

KMT: Do I have any regrets? No. Do I miss freelancing? Yes, of course. Did I actively want to stop it? No. But this is fabulous, and I'm *so* enjoying myself. It's showing me that sometimes change is just marvellous and exactly what you need. I've grown so much already and I've seen areas in which I can excel. My boss is a mentor and someone I can learn from, and that is something to be grateful for. Not everyone would like having a boss and a corporate structure or doing account management. But for me it's been a pleasure to move into different parts of our language services industry.

ENG: That's fantastic. To be honest I'm not missing freelancing, and I like not being directly responsible for the company's revenue myself. What we do is increasingly contributing to the revenue side: we're not just a cost centre; but it's not up to me to sell, or win clients, and that suits my personality better. While I occasionally have to do a job I'd rather not do, it doesn't often happen; and the financial pressure of freelancing in recent years didn't in practice provide me with the theoretical freedom.

Going in-house has actually revived my enjoyment of translation; I get to do so much else as well that it's become the jam instead of the bread. I like using my skills and experience to add value and learn and diversify. In many ways, the variety has made me a better translator. I may be a cog in a corporate machine, but I feel more influential now as a 'little fish in a big

pond' than when I was a 'big fish in a little pond' as a freelancer. I've found a job I adore, in a company with a very good culture, with two superb bosses and that pays well, while working on the cutting edge.

KMT: So it seems we've both found changing our career path to be much more rewarding, satisfying and even energising than we expected. Good companies make for good company. 



Karen Tkaczyk FITI studied in the UK (MChem in Chemistry with French, University of Manchester; PhD in Chemistry, University of Cambridge) and her early career was as a development chemist in the pharmaceutical industry in Ireland. After moving to the USA, she established and ran McMillan Translation Inc., where she was a practitioner from 2005 to 2021. Karen now leads MasterWord's activity for pharmaceutical, energy and chemical clients from her home office in Colorado. .

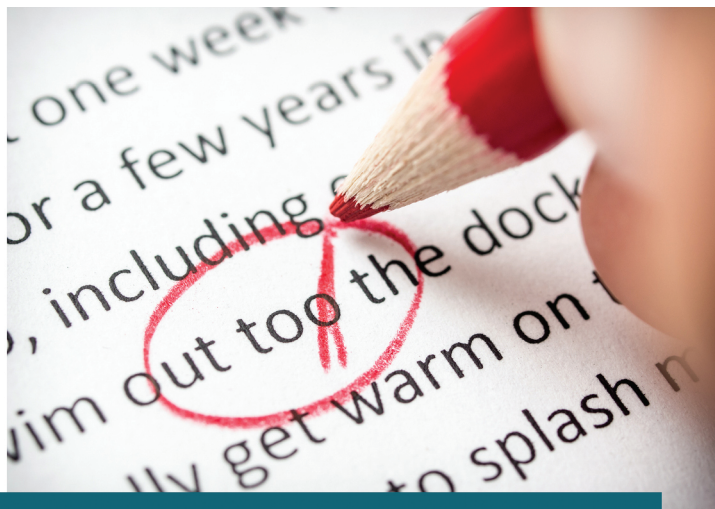


Emma Gledhill FITI has been a professional translator since 1993, working from German, Dutch and French to English. She was a freelancer for 25 years before joining the Language Services department at Avaloq in March 2020 and lives in the Swiss Alps.

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