

The Big Interview



Continuing *Communico's* look at differences between the private and public sectors, Eileen Hair talks to our consultant journalist, Julia Deakin, about Plain English, working from home and motivation.

For those of you who do not know, Julia Deakin adds her journalistic expertise to *Communico*. So Julia, could you tell us how you became involved in journalism?

My first degree was in English and Education and, at university in the mid-70s, I did publicity for their drama society. After a 10-year detour (see below) I became a copywriter and then a freelance writer. I did this the hard way, paying for training and cold-calling editors. This got me into the *Observer* and the *Times Educational Supplement*, while an interest in social and domestic history brought regular work for journals in the clothing industry. I've also written for writers' magazines and for *Mslxia* - Newcastle's nationally-acclaimed magazine for women who write.

When you were at school, did you think you would be a journalist?

Yes - so it was with some frustration that I initially became a teacher! I see myself more as an editor than a journalist, though, as I have ethical concerns about exposing traumas and tragedies. I prefer to work with information that people volunteer.

Have you always been in journalism? If not, what other jobs have you had?

I have done a number of things, mostly in public or private sector communications. As well as copywriting for advertising agencies in the 80s, I have taught in 11-18 comprehensives, in continuing and higher education, and been Marketing Officer for a local education authority. Back in the dark ages I was also an au pair, an insurance clerk, and worked at a well-known cake manufacturer's as a 'chocolate tickler'. Don't ask.

What would you like to see change in the communications industry?

I'd like to see less emphasis on celebrities and more on what ordinary people achieve.

Which other organisations do you work for, as well as the Inland Revenue?

This is sounding like a tax return! I lecture part-time in twentieth century literature at Bradford University, and as a freelance writer and copy editor work for various agencies, design studios and production houses. You name it, I've written about it.

In IR we have a Clarity of Writing Team, who check letters sent to our customers against Plain English guidelines. Do you follow these guidelines?

I am familiar with these excellent guidelines and with variants for copywriters, teachers and creative writers. But in practice I use experience and common sense. I think the key to clear writing is simplicity and good punctuation. This is not there for decoration, but to replace the intonation we use in speech to make ourselves clear.

Do you have any tips for people within IR/NICO who work from home, on how to get the maximum out of the day without wanting to switch the TV on?

I'd say set clear boundaries to your working environment and to others' encroachment on it. And in return, don't spread your work all round the house. Daytime TV? You must be joking!

How do you keep yourself motivated?

It's not an issue - I love what I do. However I do a variety of things - I also mark essays, for instance, write poems and read literary theory to keep on top of my lectures.

In NICO everyone is responsible for their own development. How do you identify your training and development needs?

I enjoy being on the receiving end of learning, so go on whatever courses I can. It's not hard to identify needs: it's finding the time and money that's the problem. When you're employer-backed, you can forget how expensive training is.

In IR we are very keen on getting the right balance between work and life. How do you balance work/life, especially with working from home?

I enjoy ice-skating, sewing, walking and DIY. My idea of a break is to go and put up some shelves!

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NICO have
18 mentees on the
mentoring scheme