

Free yourself to do as you please

THE last set of unemployment figures showed a drop, but even by the government's reckoning there are still more than 2m people out of work, and there is no sign of a return to the days of job security. When redundancy comes, most people probably consider the freelance life. Each year, the number of self-employed people in Britain increases. It is expected to reach 3.7m by 2001.

For some, the going is tough, a struggle to learn the rules of the game while making enough to pay the bills. For others it brings the opportunity to do work they really enjoy, earn good money and take control of their lives.

This happy situation is not so difficult to achieve, according to Roy Sheppard, a freelance for 12 years, who gives seminars on the techniques of successful freelancing. Sheppard, a former BBC television presenter, has derived his material not only from his own experience, but also from that of rich and famous entrepreneurs who told him the secrets of their success.

"The best lesson was from Mickie Most, the record producer, who advised me to concentrate my efforts in the area that would return the biggest investment on my time, using my existing skills," he says. "My income rocketed. Many freelances focus solely on an individual sector that pays badly, so have little or no chance of ever earning higher fees."

The seminars are intended to show people how to earn more, keep more and work with better clients. Sheppard's underlying message is about the need to alter perceptions, but he also gives a lot of practical advice on work practices.

"The most common mistake among freelances is the desire to work five days a week. This is part of an em-

With careful planning, freelance workers can be independent and valued assistants rather than just put-upon hired help, writes Margaret Coles

ployee mindset and should be avoided at all costs," he says.

"You can fill your life with any number of things, and become reliant on other people telling you what you can do as a freelance. A successful freelance decides, making room for the things that matter, including loved ones and personal development."

The secret of successful freelancing is taking control, says Sheppard, by developing a work "portfolio", as described by Charles Handy, the leading thinker on management issues. "The portfolio should contain some things that are high-return and high-risk, some low-return and low-risk," says Sheppard.

"People take things they don't want because they are afraid to turn work down, and then something better comes along. Having a portfolio changes the way you think about work and stops you relying exclusively on one area. When you know your portfolio will generate different types of work over different time periods, you increase your self-confidence, and that allows you to gain more clients and fundamentally change the importance of each one."

Sheppard's portfolio includes conference work, presenting corporate

videos, and TV voice-overs — booked, respectively, a year, a few weeks and sometimes hours ahead.

Sheppard has identified many mistakes commonly made by freelances. "People de-select themselves for jobs, thinking they are not good enough. How often have you wondered 'how the hell did that person get that job?' The answer is, he applied, and the odds were stacked in his favour because there were fewer people in competition than there would have been for a more mediocre post."

Another common failing is the inability to say no. "Saying no doesn't feel comfortable, but it doesn't need to. Inevitably, people will offer a deal that is beneath you, and you can easily inflict pressure on yourself by accepting and maybe lowering your fee. That puts you into a vicious spiral of having to accept more and more work to make the money you believe you should earn."

Successful freelancing requires good marketing, says Sheppard. This is laborious and time-consuming, "but you cannot afford not to do it". He suggests creating lists of every possible contact who might be able to give you work or put you in touch with someone who might, plus a "wish list" of those people for whom you would most like to work. Then it is a matter of working systematically through your lists, identifying people who might want what you have to offer, and writing each a letter, asking detailed questions about what they want from freelances.

"If you can tap into people's worries when they employ a freelance it will be very useful," he says. "Find out what people need and offer it."

He adds: "Asking for work is a big mistake. I strongly suggest you never do it. Rather, create a series of offers



Free agent: Roy Sheppard has made a success of doing work he enjoys

so powerful the prospective employer will want to contact you. Usually, an employer has a number of problems and needs people to solve them. You should concentrate on what you can offer rather than on what you would like. It is your job to tell them all the benefits you can give them."

Among his other tips are: obtain testimonials and referrals, learn to network effectively, use direct mail professionally, and learn how to calculate your daily rate.

"Freelances should also prepare for the future," he says, "and this in-

volves moving away from selling your time towards selling your skills. More organisations are looking for knowledge workers, people with a specialism rather than those who perform a function. Retraining yourself has got to be a serious priority. Successful people spend time planning ahead."