Grants – Independent Contracting from Members of the new Minnesota North Star Chapter of the Grant Professionals Association

Joan Oswald of the Miller-Dwan Foundation sat down with Jo Miller, Certified Grant Professional of JM Grants, for a lively conversation about the independent grants profession. Here’s what they had to say.

**Joan:** Technology is moving so fast. To keep up, what changes have you made, and what are the tools you can’t live without?

**Jo:** As an independent contractor, mobility, connectivity, collaboration, and anywhere-anytime-access is crucial to my business. My clients come from all backgrounds. From the small nonprofit down the street to the large national healthcare system, I need to be able to instantly connect and function whenever and wherever I’m needed.

I really enjoy using Google Docs to collaboratively draft a narrative with multiple team members. I can give individual team members access to all or some of the grant documents. Project collaborators with approved access can work on a document at the same time, without running over one another. Plus, we can access the documents from a variety of devices and Google Docs automatically saves all previous versions. My clients and I can see who is reviewing, editing or working on the document – all in real time. Google Docs also serves as a backup for our work, and it serves as a safety net. For instance, if something were to happen to me, my clients continue to have full access to all of our work. Once we have an agreed-upon framework, documents can be moved from Google Docs into a Word document where everyone can track changes for our final edits and format the document according to the grantors requirements.

I require a great laptop. I am using multiple programs and graphics simultaneously on one machine, and this requires a higher level computer processor in my laptop than I might be able to get away with if I were an employee accessing tools through a shared network. A wireless mouse and wireless keyboard, too, give me the flexibility to stand, sit and move around. At home, a 2nd monitor is critical, allowing me to see two, three or four pages at once. In fact, I carry an HDMI cord with me when I am away from my home office so that I can use an available HDTV as a second monitor. We know that one of the top reasons a grant proposal is rejected is because the narrative doesn’t accurately describe the budget. A 2nd monitor will allow you to review the latest version of both documents side-by-side, assuring that the Project Coordinator you dedicated as a full-time employee in the narrative is represented accordingly in the budget.

Essential software components include Microsoft Office with Excel (I use Microsoft Office 2010) and Adobe Acrobat X Pro. For email, I use Gmail, and I use Google Calendar. I also use Dropbox for business documents, contracts, research and client documents, all of which I can easily sync with my Smartphone and access on any device with internet access. Speaking of Smartphones, I can use my phone as a hotspot which gives me access to the internet and all of these tools almost anywhere at any time. When you’re independent, you need to be connected.
**Joan:** Whether you’re in front of your computer or on the beach, you need to be sure you’re receiving the information you need to serve your clients well. And you don’t have an assistant, so time management is all your own.

**Jo:** My time is my own, but grant work ebbs and flows. It’s important to take advantage of the busy times, but it’s also beneficial to find a niche and diversify. I tell people to make sure they’re recognizing their strengths and accomplishments, and then build on them. I, for example, enjoy mentoring people in their grants process, and I’m good at it. So in addition to writing proposals, I provide mentorship and training services.

I have been a grant writer for more than 15 years, and I have been an independent consultant for nearly a decade. It is incredibly satisfying to work with a nonprofit and government agency staff to build their grant skills, to see my clients apply these new skills and, as a result, for the client to get grant awards that make their visions a reality. I also work with Grant Professionals who are considering and independent career. I understand the challenges and requirements of owning your own business and working with clients as an independent contractor. As an independent contractor, it is essential to have people around you who understand your business and can help you navigate business set-up, social media, client relationships, and much more.

**Joan:** Speaking of having people around who understand, how do you go about networking?

**Jo:** Finding your niche is the key. Once you’ve done that, you can follow related conferences. You can also network with those organizations in your arena that have been funded. People are happy to share their success stories. Funded organizations can provide you and your clients with feedback for successful program design and grant development. LinkedIn, too, offers an opportunity to connect with grant professionals and nonprofit organizations. Of course, I appreciate the tremendous opportunities to network through our local North Star GPA chapter, online with other GPA members on the GPA site, Facebook page and LinkedIn pages, and at the GPA National Conference.

It’s vital to have people around you who see and understand your work — people who can review and make valuable suggestions.

**Joan:** Good advice. My niche is mental health. In addition to attending local social service conferences and building relationships with local non-profits, I recently attended the large National Conference on Behavioral Health. I met people from organizations throughout the nation and familiarized myself with state and federal mental health priorities. This has helped direct my grant writing efforts to those projects with the most potential. Any final advice?

**Jo:** My final bit of advice, especially for new grant writers, is to learn by doing and, when possible, have an experienced Grant Professional review your work before you submit the grant application. If you don’t get a grant, ask the grant maker for feedback on your application’s strengths and weaknesses. I’m not seeing many grant courses beyond Grants 101. However, Grant Professionals, like JM Grants, offer grant mentoring and can customize workshops and seminars for a variety of topics and levels. In addition, organizations like GPA and the Foundation Center are beginning to offer more advanced grant professional training. An
excellent free resource is to watch webinars and videos for Federal and State grants postings, even if the latest webinar posted for the topic you’re interested in is for an opportunity from the previous year. Use GrantSpace.com, a service of the Foundation Center, and sign on for a Grant Professionals Associate (GPA) membership. The local and national GPA conferences are great places to connect with people who do what you do and to ask questions like the ones asked here.

You can find Jo Miller at [www.JMGrants.com](http://www.JMGrants.com)
Joan Oswald is the Grants Professional for the Miller-Dwan Foundation in Duluth, Minnesota and can be reached at joswald@mdfoundation.org