

Writer, Editor, Web Guy

Writer and editor Derek Miller didn't even have a job title in his first year at Navarik, the software company where he currently works. The company initially sought him out so he could just "do the stuff he usually does." Now Derek is officially the communications manager at Navarik, a title he admits was chosen by the company simply because it looks impressive on his business card – "I'd be just as happy being called Web Guy or Wordsmith."

Derek has always been a compulsive writer, but twenty years ago, as a seventeen-year-old high school graduate, he didn't have a compelling vision of what he wanted to do. Thinking he might be a marine biologist one day, Derek got his Bachelor of Science degree at U.B.C. In his spare time he took up drumming and wrote for several newspapers that he helped start. The internet was not widely used yet, so the young Derek could never have predicted a future in web writing. After graduation he realized that he was qualified "to wash other people's glassware in somebody's lab," a prospect that didn't appeal to him. It was then he had an epiphany: "I looked back and realized that I had been doing writing and editing work in my spare time for free for all these years so maybe I should try do something with that." So in 1992, Derek returned to U.B.C. and got a diploma in applied creative non-fiction writing. He volunteered as a fact checker at *Western Living* magazine and started writing for the student society at his university. It seemed he was well on his way to becoming a professional writer.

Then the rock and roll took over.

He decided to hit the road and become a professional drummer instead. For the next four years he drove around in a van with his band, *The Flu*, released a cassette nobody heard and played to drunken crowds across Canada. In late 1995 he got married and quit the band.

Derek needed a job. He opened up the newspaper and found an ad for a job as a writer in a gardening magazine. Despite knowing nothing about gardening, he got the job: “This is the interesting thing: not knowing really anything about gardening but being able to cobble information together from other people and write an article that looked like I knew what I was talking about.” Unfortunately, the publisher was “not a great person,” so Derek opened up the newspaper once again. These were the halcyon days of the dot com boom. Derek got a job as an administrative assistant at a software company called Maximizer and soon found his niche in the high-tech world. For the next five years he naturally gravitated towards writing and editing work at the company. He also melded his writing skills with technology: “Eventually when the web guy left I had taught myself how to write web pages so I ended up taking over the website, creating most of the online writing there.” Then came the dot com crash. The high tech bubble burst, and Derek lost his job along with everyone else.

Determined to keep writing and editing, Derek decided to be a freelancer and a stay-at-home dad. He sent out an e-mail to all the techie people he knew and said

“I just lost my job. Anybody got anything?” A couple of days later, somebody he’d known at work told him he had a brother who was working for Sierra Wireless. Within a couple of weeks Derek had a three-month contract there. He never even collected E.I.

Incredibly, clients began to fall into Derek’s lap. Not once did he make a cold call: “Obviously when you work in a high-tech company and a bunch of people get laid off, they all land up in other companies and they remember you.” Derek also attributes a large part of his success to his website, penmachine.com, and the blog he has been writing since 2000. His dominant online presence attracted clients from around the world.

Three years ago Derek accepted a full-time position at Navarik, a company started by some of the people he used to do editing work for at U.B.C. He’d grown tired of working freelance and it was an offer he couldn’t refuse. Derek loves being part of a team that respects and values his skills. At Navarik he gets to run the website, write the company blog, edit proposals, and do the stuff he usually does.

Derek readily admits that the technical subject matter he writes and edits at work isn’t exactly riveting material. But that’s not where he gets his kicks: “I can proofread anything, and I enjoy that. Some people think that’s perverse. But now I can get paid for it and other people don’t, so there you go.” Derek also gets enjoyment out of the writing process: “The satisfaction comes out of being able to

take almost any subject matter, no matter how dull it may be, and try to make it clear and interesting.” Indeed, for Derek, restraint is a skill: “There’s a risk in showing how clever you are, saying ‘look what kind of tricks I can do with words;’ that’s fine if you’re a poet.” Derek believes that good writing is like a direct telepathic link from one mind to another. For him, the real skill is in making writing inconspicuous: “When people notice the writing is when they get frustrated, and unless you’re James Joyce it’s hard to get away with that...and even then people don’t read James Joyce.”

Derek doesn’t know what the future holds. He might still be working for Navarik. His website may evolve into something he could never have imagined. He could even get a new job title. Ultimately it doesn’t matter: “It’s not something that I try to predict too much because I know I’ll still be writing.”

By Antoine Giraud