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Career makeover: Self-employed composer seeks steadier gig

By Allison Ellis / Special to NWjobs

Consider a day in the life of a freelance music composer: composing soundtracks for well-known video games, speaking at industry conferences and teaching students advanced MIDI (musical instrument digital interface) principles.

"I've been living the dream," says Lance Hayes, a Seattle-based freelance composer, producer and sound designer. That is, until the gigs became sporadic.

Cue the pursuit of a more stable career here, one with a steadier rhythm.

With more than 30 years of experience in music composition and 10 years in game audio, Hayes has been self-employed since 2002, working for clients such as Microsoft, Warner Brothers, MTV and various radio stations. He also teaches at the Pacific Northwest Film Scoring Program and blogs frequently for *Anderton's Music UK* and *Keyboard Magazine*.

"I've spent a lot of time investing in and managing my own business," says Hayes.

Prior to going out on his own, Hayes held positions as a producer and project manager.

So what's next? "I'd like to leverage my existing skills, pivot 30 degrees and stay in the industry," he says. A career in project management seems like the best fit.

To get some clarity on the next steps to take to achieve that goal, Hayes submitted a form to be considered for a NWjobs career makeover and was selected to receive one-on-one input from three local experts: Seia Milin, a human resources professional; [Lisa Quast of Career Woman, Inc.](#); and [Kathryn Crawford Saxer](#), an executive coach.

One of the things that struck Milin right away about Hayes was that he already had most of the building blocks needed to launch a solid career in project management.

"His credibility in completing projects with large organizations is established, and his energy level, drive and people skills fit well into the profession," she says.

Milin suggested project management (PMP) certification, because this would give Hayes the credentials that employers are seeking. Hayes embraced the certification idea and is now preparing for the PMP test.

Milin then worked on Hayes' résumé to focus more on his project-management skills and experience versus the current list of projects he's worked on throughout his career.

"His projects are impressive, and his résumé now demonstrates the constraints he had to work with to successfully manage and release projects to customers," she says.

Since meeting with Milin, Hayes has also updated his LinkedIn profile to reflect his revised skill set.

A change of tempo

Since it's been a long time since Hayes has had a telephone interview, Quast offered a refresher during her time spent with him.

"Lance is high-energy, fast-paced, creative and expressive," she says, so she felt he needed to flex his style so he wouldn't overwhelm managers when talking on the telephone.

"Slow down your talking speed, let the person on the other end lead the conversation, focus on concise answers to questions, and check in periodically, by asking, 'Did that answer your question, or were you looking for another example of how I've done that in the past?'"

Quast also told Hayes not to be afraid of "dead air" time over the telephone.

"Answer each question and then stop, so the other person can process what you've said and either ask a piggyback question to find out more information, or, can move on to their next question," Quast suggest.



Seattle-based freelance composer, producer and sound designer Lance Hayes would like to leave self-employment for the stability of a full-time project-management job. (Michelle Archer / NWjobs)

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Hayes appreciated these tips for better managing the tempo of interviews. "People have told me my entire life to slow down," says Hayes. "I certainly don't want to come across as overbearing."

Leverage existing contacts

After being self-employed for so long, Hayes felt he may have had the networking thing down pat; still, it was helpful to get tips from Saxer.

"I told him to go on a fishing trip," Saxer says. "Talk to a lot of people. Get a lot of lines in the water."

According to Saxer's math, job seekers should have 20 leads — 20 email conversations or scheduled coffees or interviews or introductions — going at any one time. You never know who might introduce you to someone who might land you your next job, Saxer says.

Since meeting with the three experts, Hayes has been actively leveraging his existing contacts, including HR professionals he already knows, and has sat down with them to review his updated résumé.

So far, it's a strategy that's paying off. Within a week of updating his LinkedIn profile, Hayes was already getting calls from recruiters about project management jobs in the tech industry, and as of press time, has at least one interview lined up.

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