

Kathryn: Podcasting from Fairfield Connecticut, you're listening to Compass, where we talk with location independent women about finding work and getting paid. I'm your host Kathryn Hunter and you're listening to episode 14 with Monica Gokey, radio producer. Today we're talking about when hard choices aren't, choosing a good fit for you, and reach work. Monica, welcome to the show.

Monica: Thanks Kathryn.

Kathryn: So, I like to start with your early life to see where that influences you later on. What did you want to be when you were five?

Monica: I knew you were going to ask this question and the more I tried to think of an answer, I just couldn't come up with one. I am sure when I was five I wanted to be like a dog or something. I was a very animal batty type of kid. The closest, next thing I can come up with is that was a veterinarian. A love of animals was with me pretty early. And of course what I do now in my professional work is not very related to animals, but we do live on a cattle ranch and so my animal lust has come to fruition in sort of a roundabout way.

Kathryn: It's really interesting how that happens and it happens a lot.

Monica: Yeah. Yeah. No, I think you're right.

Kathryn: I'm guessing by the time you were in high school, you really weren't that interested in being a dog anymore. How about the veterinary aspect?

Monica: Yes and no. You know, in high school I would say I sort of blossomed. I loved athletics. I loved the sciences. If you'd asked me in high school what I was going to be, I would have picked something like biologist or some kind of scientist. I had an astronaut phase as well. So, I guess my sights were really set on the sciences at high school. But then again, you have the, I changed again from there it's become sort of sort of, I did go to college, I started as a science major and then switched to business. This was sort of like a not very well thought out, you know, 20 year old decision that I thought I, if I had money, that would accomplish a lot of the things I wanted.

Monica: But, I graduated from college around the same time the economy crashed and I really didn't have the kind of job prospects I wanted. But throughout college I had been really active in the outdoors community. I was a whitewater kayaker and a raft guide for many years. And so I sort of, I sort of, took to that a full time seasonal life as you will. I worked at a lot of ski resorts in the winter and in the summers, generally on the river. Still interested in science and that's really where I started getting interested in writing. That led me to graduate school for Science Journalism and that's where I picked up radio and radio has been with me ever since.

Kathryn: As far as what you studied when you were in school, do you apply any of that now? Business, science, any of it?

Monica: Yeah, big time. So my master's program was in science journalism and just being interested in science for a long time has helped me a lot. I cover science for a couple of different media outlets. And so like having a basic science literacy is important to that. I don't think I use as much of the business as I probably could, but going to business school did afford me like a very, a very solid understanding of how the world works with like for profit corporations and just these, just sort of these like know how things that it's important for journalists to know. So yeah, I would say all of it sort of has a cumulative effect of adding up to making me the person I am now.

Kathryn: And how did you first get into being location independent?

Monica: I think the same as a lot of people, Kathryn, it started by leaving my job. I was at an NPR affiliate where I was a radio producer. And you know, we had just started a family. News culture is sort of notorious for not being very family friendly. You know, it's the type of job where you might have to work to 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning on election night or if there is a big earthquake or fire, you know what you're expected to be on the clock. And moreover, you know, it's just like one of those work climates where 40 hours a week is really the minimum. And after we started our family, it didn't feel like a good fit for me. Plus we were in a city, in Anchorage, Alaska, with a very high cost of living. And when I became pregnant again, it was just clear that having two kids in daycare was gonna make my salary, a wash.

Monica: Around the same time we had an opportunity to move back to my husband's family's ranch. They'd lost a seasonal employee. And so we told his parents that we would take that job. It was summer only and that very much aligned with some of the family values I wanted. I wanted to spend time with my kids while also, you know, being able to work and this sort of fit the bill. So that's how we ended up in rural Idaho on a cattle ranch. And you know, I just started keeping up with my journalism work, but on a freelance scale and just little by little, you know, it's sort of, it's sort of added up. And I ended up, I ended up staying more in radio than in writing. Which was a surprise to me. I thought, I thought writing was going to be an easier way to pay the bills, but it turns out radio has really been my mainstay through, through that transition.

Kathryn: When people are being polite and they ask you what you do, how do you describe your job?

Monica: I tell people I'm a journalist because, since we're in a small area, a lot of people will have heard me on the radio. I still freelance for the NPR affiliate in our closest big city, which is Boise. But I just sort of explain that I'm a freelance radio producer, mostly, mostly radio, and that my husband and I also help out his family business, which is the cattle ranch. And, and were very typical of a lot of rural people in the sense that we cobble together income from a handful of different sources. He also has an off ranch job, too. So, yeah, in short, I guess I describe myself as the journalist or a freelance radio producer. And most people tend to nod if they're truly interested, they'll ask more.

Kathryn: And when they do ask more, what do you tell them?

Monica: You know, I, I try to be honest, you know, there are perks and drawbacks to working for yourself and I suffer from a lot of those, you know, like a lot of freelance creatives. I only get paid for actual productive work I do. You know, I don't get paid to do background research or update Facebook or you know, all these things that are sort of a part of the job of being a freelancer. And that can be hard, you know, only getting paid for the actual work you produce. But it also comes with a lot of freedoms. And to me that's been worth it. And, and you know, I've become more successful the better I get at really maximizing what work time I have. That's time away from my kids. Time in front of the computer, just working It's amazing, you know, now that I have so much freelance going on, I would say I'm like the most efficient version of myself that I've ever been and, and that's, that's served me well.

Kathryn: You know, when you have something you need to get done, give it to a busy person.

Monica: Yeah, that's a very good thing, Kathryn. I hadn't heard that, but that makes a lot of sense to me.

Kathryn: So when you first went remote, how did you find your clients?

Monica: So in, in what I do, usually I pitch to different media outlets. So that's me saying, Hey, I have this story, you know, would you be interested? And it's a little more formulaic than that, but that's the big idea. And then, you know, early on I was looking for editors that I could have a longer relationship with. And so one example of an assignment that sounds like so boring to some people, I worked for a couple of agriculture magazines and you don't, no one's ever come to me and said, wow I loved your story on, you know, the heritability of fly resistance in cows, that sort of the science side of what I do.

Monica: But these editors have been really stable. They have long lead times. And so a lot of these people I've enjoyed keeping working with, even though a lot of this work income-wise, it's not as fruitful as what I'm making elsewhere, but, but starting these long relationships was really important in the beginning because I knew I could get more work from these people just by being sort of a regular blip on their radar. Um, and just, you know, little by little sort of building up, adding more editors that I enjoyed working with. And then also, you know, sometimes I would pitch stories to certain places, radio or otherwise and it wouldn't be such a good fit. And so just keeping in mind, you know, what's a good fit for me? I tend to be very busy with all I have going on with kids and the ranch. And so just finding, you know, the people we like to work with that seemed, that seemed to me like it was crucial at the start.

Kathryn: And now that you've build up a stable of people that you work with, do you still reach out for new clients or is it more of a word of mouth?

Monica: I do, I do. I try to choose my work wisely. Periodically I do what I call a priority gut check. You know, I often have a very lucid version of the type of journalist and radio producer I want to be in the future. And anytime I take on a new assignment I try to ask myself if, if this assignment is going to help me get to that goal I have of the person I want to be the

producer and the journalist. So every time I evaluate something new, I'm always sort of trying to evaluate whether it's in line with my longterm goals and that, that helps a lot.

Kathryn: What would you say was your first major struggle?

Monica: You know, I, when I first went freelance, I would say it was a very low time. You know, I just had these visions of like when I left my job at the NPR affiliate, I was going to cover the same things but do it for national media. I was going to be uber productive with all my time. But that really wasn't the case. You know, I didn't know how to work well on my own. And it was really only after having, Gosh, my second and then my third kid that like I really started to see my career go down the crapper, and I like that just didn't sit well with me and you know, it was just like you said, the busier I got with non-work things, the more I really clawed on to what remaining shreds I had in my career.

Monica: And somehow, even though I'm busier than ever, in my home life, I'm also more productive than ever in my work life. So I would say my first major low was kind of watching it all slip away. And I do want, one thing I love about your podcast, Kathryn, is that people are so honest about money. And I want to say, you know, when I first started out, I did not make a lot of money my first year away. You know, I had a baby and I had you know, a lot going on here. But I think I made about 1500 bucks, which is low. Of course I wasn't working, you know, full time by any means. But that was, to me, it's, it's indicative of starting out on your own. And some people might even call it a side hustle. It's not that for me anymore. It's definitely bigger than that. But in the beginning it probably would have been fair to characterize what I do as a side hustle. So that was a low point, you know, going from full time, top of your career to being very lowly and not getting a lot done.

Kathryn: Yeah, that can, that can be a hard hit when you have these, these high expectations, you know, you can do it, but you're just not there yet.

Monica: Yeah, exactly. Yeah.

Kathryn: What was your first major success?

Monica: You know, I don't know that I have a single major success to point to but like I said, you know, each year I, I'm always trying to set aside time for what I call my reach work. I would guess it's about 5% of my time as a creative. My reach work, what I call my reach work, it's not necessarily income generating. I do make money from it, but I often like sink so much time into it that it's really not very profitable for me. But this is the kind of work that helps me sort of advance and pursue publications and podcasts with wider distribution and sort of the more I define those reach goals and work toward them, the more I achieve them. And so for me it's more like a perennial success. Each year, I'm always trying to go a little bigger, even if it's just with one piece in the year and just defining what I want often helps me achieve it more than I ever could have foreseen before.

Kathryn: So if you could start fresh today, would you do it differently?

Monica: I don't think so. I think for a lot of people who end up being location independent, many are creatives in some way. I think we often underestimate how, what we do is actually the product of like a cumulative, you know, amount of life experiences, often in many different directions. I think that's part of why, some of us have like a vision that's very different from the norm, which might be, you know, the 40 day, 40 hour work a day world. So I don't think I'd do anything different. Of course, you know, if I could tell my younger self what to do, I'd say, you know, you like writing, you should be writing more, take a class in that. And I did always do those things, but I just never really felt like I had the time or aptitude for it until I guess, until it, you know, my life circumstances really made it seem like that stuff was never going to happen for me unless I made it happen. Yeah. I don't know. I think I'm like everyone, I wish I would tell myself I wish I'd started earlier, but, but by and large, I'm happy with where I've been and the experiences that led me here.

Kathryn: Yeah, that is, that is one theme across pretty much everyone I've talked to, they wish they'd started sooner.

Monica: I know. And that's hard Kathryn, right. Because we have, you know, all these, many of us have such diverse life experiences. My early twenties were very different than even my mid twenties or my late twenties or my early thirties. And you know, I've come to just trust that all those things I did that maybe didn't contribute to my creative career were meaningful somehow and that I would be a different person without having had those.

Kathryn: Odds are, there's no such thing as a typical day for you. Do you want to give us a random day?

Monica: Sure, yeah. My work is very seasonal because we run the ranch in the summer. I do work a lot on the ranch. But one thing I try to keep steady throughout the year is a work time frame from about 8:30 to 9:00 in the morning to 10:30-11:00. That two hour block. That's sort of when I'm at my sharpest mentally, it's when I can get a lot of like bang for my buck in terms of writing time. I'll just take the summer for example. You know, a lot of people think living on a ranch is like 99% cool cowgirl stuff, but it's really not. It's like the opposite. We do a lot of irrigating, we'll have to do that, you know, eight to 10 times a day. But through it all, my husband's been really good at helping me keep that morning work block. And that's really helpful. So I do try, I do structure my year purposefully so that I take on less work in the summer and I really do the bulk of my radio work in the winter and in the winter I'll still have that morning time block. Maybe it'll be more like three to four hours and then I'll work most evenings after our kids are in bed.

Monica: So for me, no typical day, you're absolutely right. But it varies a lot by season and I find that if I can save like those hours of my day, when I'm at my sharpest for work, I can get so much more done than if I try to, I mean, we've all had that experience right, of sitting in front of a blank screen and you're wondering like, why can't I just work now that I have the time to work? So that habit of doing it at the same time every day has, has helped me be more productive in that time period.

Kathryn: I really like that. I used to, I used to power lift and one of our coaches would say, you know, if you're going to compete in the mornings, start training in the mornings, you want your body, to know what's going on. And I think that translates to pretty much everything you do. Like if I get up super early, I talk to people in a lot of different time zones. And if I get up super early to do an interview, you know, I have to, I have to give myself time to kind of recalibrate.

Monica: Yeah, that's, that's really good advice from your powerlifting coach. You know, it's funny you say that because I've heard that in other, in sort of like performance pursuits. One is, I don't know if you've heard of the Suzuki music method, but they teach kids music from as early as like age zero, which when I first heard this, I just couldn't understand, but part of it is like at practice every day at the same time of day. So you build in kids ingrained behavior of doing music every day, at a certain time and, and that carries on, you know, a zero year old, an infant can't do music, but if they do something similar at the same time every day, the Suzuki method, they sort of believe that that helps contribute to musical literacy over a lifetime. I think you're onto something there. You and your powerlifting coach. Yeah.

Kathryn: So do you keep up with any kinds of continuing education?

Monica: There really is none for my job. There are, you know, courses like masterclasses you can do. There's none that are required of me. I find I often go into I'll just call them like, slumps where my work feels like work. It doesn't feel like a dream job. I think that's very normal for anyone, regardless of whether or not you work for yourself. And one thing that always helps pull money out of that is to just stay invigorated on my craft. For me it might be like reading a new radio book, reading a memoir on someone's writing career, just sort of tapping into those things that leave us really fired up about what we do, can even be like different podcast episodes. Every now and then I try to go to events, you know, maybe hearing another writer talk, those kinds of things. I think those helped me stay invigorated. And they're also a way of continuing education too, right? Because you're learning about how other people have done it and that's always helped me.

Kathryn: So now we're going to get into some numbers. How long have you been doing this work, and what would you say the salary range is now?

Monica: I've been a freelancer for three years. It's very much what you put into it is what you get out of it. So there were, there's one component of my job where it's content generation, right? I get paid by the story or by the podcast. And on that salary scale I would guess I'm making 20 to \$25 an hour. I know some people will cringe hearing that, but as best as I can judge that very normal for a lot of freelance journalism, radio production work. But for a lot of people like me, we end up adding different parts to our income streams that tend to be more lucrative. I teach a radio storytelling workshop at a nearby university satellite campus that sort of adds to my income. And then I'm also a managing producer for a public lands podcast. And so that's a stable income. You know, I'm paid quarterly and I think people who are at this a while, they often have some kind of editorial or contributing editor, managing editor, those kinds of jobs really add income stability over time.

Monica: So just for perspective, when I first started out that first year and granted I was busy with a baby and a couple other things here on the ranch, I still do. I think my first year's income was about 1500 bucks. Very low, very cringe worthy. But it, it was fine for me because it was about right given the time I had to put into this work. Three years later adding, you know, a managing producer job and some editing to my income stream, I'm in the \$20,000 to \$25,000 range is about my average yearly income for journalism, radio, and print work. And I'm very comfortable with that because you know, I seldom work a 40 hour week. I would say I'm very part time in a lot of what I do. My, my lowest input weeks, will probably be about 10 hours. My highest input weeks we'll probably be about 40 hours. It just sort of varies with what I have going on. And I find this is very true to people who work for themselves. It's, your time use can be very characterize this feast or famine, where you have some weeks where you don't have a lot going on. And then some weeks where you're like tearing your hair out, shaking a fist at the sky screaming, why did I do this? So I have both ends of the spectrum, but I like that variation and it works for me.

Kathryn: We talked a little bit about what you could expect at the beginning. Where do you say the salary range would top out?

Monica: If I were to go back to working 40 hour weeks, making this a full time job for myself, I don't think it's unreasonable to aim for like \$45,000 to \$60,000 a year. And some of that might be my location too. You know, if I, if I lived closer to a major city, I think there's way more opportunities, especially in terms of teaching and just the diversity of media outlets. Where I am now, I'm in rural Idaho, there's not a lot, media-wise around me. But because you know, I'm location independent, I do a lot of my work remotely and I still managed to reach national and western audiences with my work. So it just depends what you put into it and what you're going for, I think.

Kathryn: How do you decide what you charge?

Monica: Well, you know, this is a tough one. In my work, it's often set by the industry. So I'll give an example. For a lot of people starting out in writing an 800 word web essay or what, or reported web story is a very normal assignment, maybe 800 to a thousand words. The going rate for something like that is usually around 200 bucks. But that's about the same for the New York Times is it is my ag magazine. And then there are places on either side of that too. So if I have a \$200 assignment, I aim to produce it in six to 10 hours. Of course, you know, I get lucky and I have some assignments where it takes me far less. You know, maybe it's just like a synergy of the universe where I'm able to sit down and pound it out even quicker.

Monica: Or sometimes where I've bitten off more than I can chew and I ended up making far less than that. So if I strive for six to 10 hours for a \$200 assignment, I'm about in the 20 to \$25 per hour range, which to me is fair for what I do. But I do regret sometimes that I'm not able to decide more on what I make, but I am able to do that sort of in my managing producer job and in my teaching jobs and I do have a much higher hourly rate for those jobs. But for a lot of the content production, it's sort of set by the going rate.

Kathryn: And as far as working that out, or you're managing producer work, how does that work?

Monica: You know, it's just like any job really, for that one. I negotiated a quarterly fee and so I have some jobs, they're like perennial jobs, you know, posting to social media, making sure our podcast season comes out on time. And so it was just like any, any negotiation, you know, where they threw out a number, I threw out a number, we settled on something in the middle. And that's, that's, I think that's one thing that's so hard about when you end up working for yourself because you end up, you end up really being your only advocate, right. But one thing I try to remember is that, you know, I like to think of myself as a good worker and I know that other people feel that way too. And oftentimes with some of the jobs I have, people are coming to me with more work than I can comfortably take on. And that always gives me a good idea of what my work is valued at. And I just try to remember that, that, you know, it's not, it's not an aggressive to be asking for money for more money, it's just business. And we really do need to do that for ourselves, sometimes.

Kathryn: When you've got more work than you've got time, do you recalibrate your rates?

Monica: It depends. It's so right now I'm sort of undergoing a shift where I'd like to do more, more pieces for more national publications. Those are going to take more time from me, so I probably end up making less money. But this goes back to like my long term goals. I feel like if I can start doing this now, it's going to get me into a better place like three years from now, five years from now. A lot of the work I do right now, I'm very comfortable doing it. You know, it gets easier, quicker, faster for me, but I'm not sure it really contributes to like my progression as an author and a radio producer.

Monica: So I'm always trying to circle back to that is like, where do I want to be? And the answer is yes, eventually I would like to make more money. But for me that's really, that's really venturing into like more long form works books, feature articles, that sort of thing. So I do have an eye on making more later. But I think one of the hard things is, there's no formula for how to do it, right. We rely on our intuition and our knowledge of our industries. And for me, just a really putting my efforts into that reach work, what I call my reach work, reaching beyond what I'm doing now. To me that's what's going to get me there to that version of my future self.

Kathryn: So it's as much strategy as it is income.

Monica: I certainly think so. Yeah. And, and like I think, you know, as a creative, you know, you can keep doing what you're doing and if it's working, you're probably going to keep making money, right. But I, you know, five years out from now, I'm not really sure I want to be working for the same agriculture magazines. Maybe I do, but, but you know, I want to be reaching wider audiences and I think, yeah, just keeping, keeping your eyes on the long term strategy, it's always important, right? We can all drown in what we're doing in the present. So keeping an eye forward is definitely something that has helped me a lot to get where I'm going.

Kathryn: What's your number one tip for women looking to get started as a radio producer?

Monica: Oh Gosh, this is such a tough one. Well, let me say, so right now in the podcast world, first I'll just say podcasting. Podcasting's the way to start. Having a podcast now is about what having a blog was 10 years ago. When you look at the different podcasts that are out there, you really see two kinds. You see the sort of produced programs like This American Life, Radiolab, where it's a very, it's a very often intense story that's told through sound. That's the sort of radio work I do. But by volume, the larger quantity of podcasts is podcasts like this one where it's a host and a guest or maybe two hosts, and there's a very conversational nature to it. The perk of podcasts like this is production costs are low, it's relatively easy, and many people find it very fulfilling. If podcasting is like a side hustle, it contributes to whatever they're doing for income generation. It can be kind of hard to make money off a podcast from the get go. But it's definitely, definitely possible. So for people looking to get into radio, I would suggest thinking about which kind of radio you want to get into. If you want to get into a, you know, a podcast, that's relatively low on production costs, just dive right in there.

Monica: There's so much online to help you get this kind of thing started. If you do find yourself being the person who wants to tell very rich stories told through sound, there's a number of resources out there. You don't need to go to school for radio. In fact, there like mini-schools just for people who want to produce this kind of radio. Two that come to mind are the Salt Institute for Documentary Studies it's somewhere in the northeast. And then, Transom Radio Workshops. They have traveling workshops around the country. They vary in length from three to 10 days. But these really, these little like radio bootcamps really give you the technical and equipment, know how you need to be able to produce a podcast over the long term. And one more, one more quick note on equipment. I would say the, the cost to entry for doing that sound rich work is probably about 300 bucks for a recorder or maybe \$150 for a nice microphone if you're going to record just through your computer. And then for editing software, Hindenburg is the one that a lot of journalists and podcasters use. It's got a lot of bells and whistles and it's only 99 bucks. And then for people like me who need sound editing of a slightly higher caliber, Adobe Audition is sort of the industry go to. That was a long answer, Kathryn.

Kathryn: It was a long answer, but it was a great answer.

Monica: Thank you.

Kathryn: And what are your next steps?

Monica: My next steps are to pursue a book. Several times in my life I've tried to stop what I'm doing workwise and write a book and I just never managed to get there. And I really think this is where it certainly can't be every day, but at least one day a week I want to donate or dedicate that morning time block to working on some kind of long form book work. That's really where I see like the kind of income stability that I want into the future is sort of in longform work. But also, you know, one part of being a successfully published author of a book length works is being an interesting person in your day job. So for me, you know, continuing to build like the, what I'll call platform or like name notoriety as a radio producer and journalist and then also be pursuing like a, a book length work for it. That's sort of my next step I think is to try for something long form that way.

Kathryn: Where can listeners find you?

Monica: You know, I don't have an e-portfolio or a website yet. I've constantly been evaluating whether that, that's something I should do. But I can be found on Twitter at @magokey. It's a short for Monica Ashley. And then also I'm on Instagram. You can just look me up there. Monica Gokey.

Kathryn: That'll all be in the show notes to make it super simple for everybody.

Monica: Yeah, and actually, Kathryn, let me add one more thing. So even though, even though I have a like a master's degree in journalism, no one ever asks me where I went to school or whatnot. If there was one thing I could tell other creatives, it's that people will judge you entirely by what shows up when they Google your name and what you do. So, like Monica Gokey, radio; Monica Gokey, journalists; those things probably comprise my biggest web presence then than anything I could direct you to. And I'm still not sure whether that's a good strategy or not. It's been on my list to think about whether I want to make an e-portfolio at some point.

Kathryn: Monica, thank you so much for joining us. This has been great.

Monica: Thanks for having me. Kathryn. This is really fun, I love what you do. I really enjoyed listening to a couple episodes before we spoke. It's a great podcast.

Kathryn: Thank you.

Kathryn: Thank you for listening to Compass. You'll find today's show notes at [compasspod.com/014](http://compasspod.com/014). If you enjoyed this show, please share it with a friend, by visiting [compasspod.com/014](http://compasspod.com/014) and clicking the share buttons at the top of the page. Next week we'll be talking to Sonia Jaeger, psychotherapist.