

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 15 with Sonia Jaeger, psychotherapist. Today we're talking about starting slowly, outsourcing, and diversifying your income streams. Sonia, welcome to the show.

Sonia: Thanks for having me.

Kathryn: 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?

Sonia: I really don't remember. I'm not sure if I ever had something very specific that I wanted to be or maybe I went through a lot of different things, but I really don't have a specific memory of something I wanted to be at that age.

Kathryn: Okay. And when you were getting ready to leave high school?

Sonia: For very long time, I only knew what I didn't want to be in. That's basically what my parents were doing. So I've got a lawyer and a teacher as parents. So I knew those I definitely don't want to do. And I kind of came to psychology by accident because a lot of people were telling me, Oh, if I were to study again, I would study psychology or you know, it's really interesting. It opens up so many doors. You can do so many different things. And I was thinking about medicine and I remember that for awhile, but I didn't really want to study it and thought something with people, something like that. And so I settled on psychology and started with that and ended up doing that.

Kathryn: So you did your initial college studies in psychology?

Sonia: Yes. So I studied in Germany and in Germany it's a bit different from the US, so I did study psychology for five years. Basically.

Kathryn: How did you get started with being location independent?

Sonia: I went on a sabbatical, if you want to call it that. I just finished my PhD. So after studying psychology, I did, I worked for a few years and I did a psychotherapy training for another five years and I did a PhD. And once I finished that, I really needed a break and my plan was to go travel the world for 10 months and then come back to Germany and to open a private practice in Germany. And then about six months or so into my travels, someone told me, "Well, I Skype with my therapist. I keep talking to her while I'm traveling". And I had never really heard about that, but it got me curious and I started researching and looking into it and decided to give it to go. So I did go back after the 10 months but only for three weeks to defend my thesis and then I went back traveling and started my location independent business and life.

Kathryn: That's really interesting, so you, you started from scratch location independent?

Sonia: Yes. Yeah. I had a very nice settled life in Germany and I was really happy about it. I liked my work. I liked the, the future I saw for myself. The only thing is that if you open a private practice, it's a bit difficult to take more than, you know, two or three weeks at the time of holidays because you have your patients and it's a bit difficult to leave them for too long. And the idea of doing the same thing in the same location for the next 40 years seemed a little bit daunting. So I decided to see if I can keep doing this traveler thing that I really enjoyed while also doing the work that I really like.

Kathryn: When you're describing your job to people who are just, you know, kind of being polite. What do you say?

Sonia: Mostly just online counseling, basically that I'm a therapist and that I work online with people from all over the world in German, French, and sometimes English.

Kathryn: And when you're talking to someone who really wants to know more details?

Sonia: Usually go a bit more into detail, of like my background, the cultural issues. And then so what I say, what I would probably say is that I'm a psychologist and psychotherapist and I've got a PhD in psychology. And what I do is almost the same as what I would be doing offline, talking to people face to face almost, because we use video calls mostly and I have clients who most of them, they're expats and have worked with a lot of expats from all around the world, want a therapist in their native language. So I work in German and French, my both my, my two native languages and sometimes also with digital nomads, so other internationals in English who want a therapist who understands their lifestyle of who for some reason thought I might be the right fit.

Kathryn: How did you find your first clients since you weren't, you know, just transferring from original clients?

Sonia: The very first one I got through a private referral. You know, I had like set up my website, my, started my social media and was just like started to tell people that I'm going to do this now. And a friend of a friend basically recommended someone and then the first next clients that I got that one not through like private connections from Google ads and then from organic search. I now get most of my clients through an organic Google search.

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

Sonia: I don't think I've really had one major struggle in this journey. It's been a slow but relatively steady process. Yeah, no, they are things like when there's no wifi or a storm that cuts the electricity. Or, like all of those small struggles. And my business, let's say obviously getting the first clients, getting a good Google ranking, like all of those steps that you have to do in the beginning, were not super easy, but it was never like a really big struggle. I think maybe what was more complicated is to get people to understand what I'm doing, especially those who, my former colleagues who stayed and who have a private practice and a very traditional work setting, to make them understand what it's

like to work with clients in a very similar way but at the same time in a very different way.

Kathryn: And on the flip side of that, would you say that you had a major success?

Sonia: I think I've had a lot of successes and like I really like celebrating all of the different steps and successes. So you know, the first client, the first month that I made a thousand euro or you know, the first time that I had an amount of clients where I've been like "Oh this is actually working, like this is sustainable, this is going to work longer term", or hiring an amazing VA who's now helping me and delegating as much as I can. I feel like there are so many successes along the way and I should really try to celebrate them as much as I can.

Kathryn: How long did it take to get sustainable?

Sonia: It's a bit hard to answer because I started very slow just because I was also traveling. I had friends who would meet me, you know, it's not like, I did not invest all of my time in building the business from the, from the start. So, from the idea to like the website and the first client, it probably took me about a year of more or less working on it, maybe part time or less than part time. And then, another year maybe to have the feeling, okay this is actually going to work. And really sustainable and yeah, I would say about that, maybe two years from the idea to feeling like this is really working.

Kathryn: If you could start fresh today, would you do it all the same or would you change some things?

Sonia: I would maybe consider outsourcing some of the things a bit early on, but at the same time I really enjoyed that I did it all myself. Like, I built my own website and I had never done anything like that before and I'm sure someone else could have done the same thing in so much less time and energy and with a better result. But it was also a really interesting process of learning how to do that. So, really what I like when I look back is that I did give myself that kind of time to have a slow start to the business. You know, it's not that slow. If you look at many other businesses, that just takes a few years before it's really sustainable. But when I talk to a lot of people, they expect their business to make money within the first three months or something like that.

Sonia: What I really enjoy about the fact that it took me a bit longer and that I took the time for that. I never had the expectation to be successful in a few months. I was more like, well, let's give it six months to see, this could be something or not. If not, I will just go back home and open my private practice. And after six months I felt like, oh well this could maybe work. You know, I've had a few clients maybe who knows, let's give it another six months. And then I slowly understood, no, this is actually working. So, that's my main thing that I would do the same. The thing that I would maybe change, yeah, outsource more. Not, maybe not everything, but definitely I could have done it a bit earlier than I did. It's really nice, especially to have someone handling my social media and all of the small admin tasks that I don't enjoy doing.

Sonia: And which means that the last year that I've had a VA, I've been able to focus more again on the work with the clients, itself, and the professional development and those kinds of things in my area of expertise. Instead of learning something about social media or blogging or websites, or wordpress, I've been learning more about therapy content and that's been really nice.

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

Sonia: I do. I have actually quite a few typical days. I would say, oh, I have two types of typical days. I try to schedule most of my client calls on two to three days a week so that I try to group them. And then obviously it depends on time zones, my own and my clients'. But I would try to have as much as four to five calls in a day. More would be too much for me. But, um, so I usually have them, at the moment I have them in the afternoon because a lot of my clients, because I'm in, I'm in Vietnam and a lot of my clients are in European time zones or in Latin America where we have a 12 hour difference. So, I get to either work early in the morning or in the afternoon and the other days I really love going to cafes to write blog posts or to answer my emails or to um, you know, work on new projects.

Sonia: I also started a side business where I'm helping German colleagues who also want to start their online counseling practice. So, working on those kinds of things. I love doing that in cafes and I tried to do that on the days where I don't have calls. A random day would be at the moment, get up not too early, because I'm in Asia and I work late and then go to a cafe, do my emails and stuff for an hour or two while drinking a nice Vietnamese coffee, walking around town, having some nice food, listening to an audio book or reading during my lunch break, then go back to my AirBnB and have my client sessions in the afternoon and early evening.

Kathryn: Is there anything you have to do to maintain your licensing?

Sonia: Yes. As a psychotherapist in Germany we need 250 hours of professional training every five years. So about 50 a year. Um, and one it's an 45 minute hour that counts as a point. So I can do some of my professional training online, which is what I'm doing whenever I can, attending online conferences, so online trainings, professional trainings, but then every time I go back home to Germany I try to attend offline trainings and workshops and conferences and such.

Kathryn: That's a lot of hours of professional development, so that's really good to hear. Do you do any kind of informal...

Sonia: I suppose. Um, so yeah, I can, it's quite easy to get the international things also accepted in Germany. So I can, you know, I'm going to attend an Australian online summit on suicide prevention next month. I'm going to speak at a conference myself in April in Bangkok and all of those things will count towards my, my hours. But I also, I'm part of a mastermind group, a peer supervision group with colleagues. We are about to start another one soon. Work will be more client related talk. I also started a book club for

online therapists last year, together with a colleague and we meet once a month, month and discuss a book that we all read that is usually a book that is helpful for us in our work or book that we would recommend to clients, or that, you know, clients have recommended to us as it's been this amazing book that really helped them. So we want to read it to see if we can also recommend it to other clients.

Kathryn: So now it's time to get into the numbers. How long have you been doing the work and what would you say your salary range is?

Sonia: Well, it depends on when you start counting, but I had the idea about four years ago. I had my first client about three years ago and at the moment I talk to 10 to 15 clients per week at my current rate is 100 euro per hour. Some older clients are still paying and somewhat lower fee. And then I have group calls and calls for colleagues. I also do email counseling, so I have a few different streams of income but my main work is with clients. So I actually don't know what the yearly salary range would be for this at the moment. Um, it's been quite changing, in fact still definitely improving and growing as I've been adding new parts of the business. Like this year I've added paid mastermind group for colleagues and added some other things that I'm doing on top of the one on one client work. But I would guess the range is somewhere around 4,000 or 5,000 euro a month.

Kathryn: And what would you say the beginning range is?

Sonia: Well, it depends a lot on how you set your fees, because what I do is really a session to session, so I don't set any packages. I don't have any courses or anything like that. So it's really a timemoney thing. Um, so I started at a lower rate than what I'm charging now, but I know what my colleagues charge also varies a lot. So you can find an online therapist for like maybe 50, 60 euros an hour up to 150, probably more in some countries, especially in the US, therapists can be really expensive. But overall I would say it's around a hundred euro or \$100 depending on the country for an hour of, um, of online therapy, online counseling.

Sonia: So then it depends on how many clients you see. And I don't want to see more than 15 a week. Just because I don't want to work that much. So that limits, you know, the money I could make or that someone in a similar situation can make. But obviously there are people out there who would be willing to work much more than this.

Kathryn: And what would you say is the top end of the range?

Sonia: If you stay with the one on one work and if that's your main source of income or at least for that part of the business, there is not that much more you can do, you cannot charge for counseling. You can't really charge, a huge amount of money. I mean it's already expensive. Most people stay with me for 10, 15, 20, 30 hours. So it's quite a lot of money that they're investing. So it's not like the kind of coaching package, you know when you get that few hours put a set amount of money. So if you do that one on one, one on one work, which is really what I'm trained for and what I love doing. And I guess if you're outsourcing a lot so that you have more time to really do the client work, you

could maybe see 30 people a week at, if you have like if you had the high end of the fees then maybe 450 euro each or something like that, but you're not going to get really rich by doing this kind of work.

Kathryn: What goes into deciding what you charge?

Sonia: I think it can be either what the market rate typically is depending on your country, your language, and your background. And that was definitely something that has been a struggle for me because I'm French and German. And in Germany the typical rate for an hour of therapy is roughly a hundred euro. And in France it's more like 60. So then if you count that in or, if you look at where do my clients live, depending on, am I working with expats who have a good salary because they're sent there by a European company, or am I talking to someone who married a local and now is living in a foreign country and just making a local salary. So it gets quite complicated. Um, I think in the end, the best way to do it, is just, just look at a mix of what would a fair, you know, payment for what you're doing and how much money do you need? How do you want to live and how much do you want to work?

Sonia: And that's what I did. I just calculated my, this is my goal. This is how I want to live, this, what I want to be able to afford. And I also want people to be able to afford counseling as much as possible. So what I do and what most therapists do is that we also have a few spots open on a sliding scale, on a reduced rate for people who can't afford a hundred euro. Because if you pay a hundred euro a week, that's quite a bit of money.

Kathryn: What's your number one tip for women looking to get into psychology?

Sonia: Just go for it. I don't know, like getting into psychology is such a big topic, like it's going to take time, like if you really want to do what I'm doing, I mean basically took me 15 years of professional training to get where I am today. So it's hard to tell someone you should do that. You definitely don't need a PhD to do what I'm doing. You should study psychology. You should have some kind of training in psychotherapy and counseling depending on where you're from and your background. Yeah, otherwise just become a coach and then it's a very different kind of business. If you're interested in doing a similar work but with very different kinds of people and um, problems that they have.

Kathryn: What are your next steps?

Sonia: I went, so I just started this year, I started a new project, where I'm helping German colleagues who also want to open a private practice guiding, guiding them and helping them with the process because it's quite complicated. The laws and regulations in Germany are quite complicated. Um, a lot of what I'm doing is not yet regulated in Germany, which is a huge advantage compared to some countries like the US but it also means that a lot of things are quite unknown or hard to research because there's just no information out there.

Sonia: So I'm helping people set that up and you know, follow the path that I'm, I've been on. The other thing is, one of my goals for this year is to take more time off. One of the big

things I did last year that I took the whole month of December off. It was the first time that I really took a full month of work and off social media. And it's been amazing and my clients survived without me and I survived without social media amazingly well and without work. And um, so I'm looking into doing that again, or more of that this year, taking the two, two weeks off twice this year and then another month, probably also in December or maybe in August, which are usually the slowest months in counseling. And then I have lots of ideas of things that I could do, you know, start a podcast about online counseling and digital nomadism or something like that. Um, write a book. My VA keeps telling me that I need to write a book. I have lots of ideas, but I don't have any specific projects yet because I'm trying to take it one step at a time and not start too many things at once because I just don't ever want to work as much as I used to work again.

Kathryn: Where can listeners find you?

Sonia: They can find me on my website, just my name. They can find me on Instagram and on Facebook at Dr Sonia Jaeger. If they speak French, they can also find my French Facebook page that I started, still quite small compared to the English/German one. But that is Sonia Jaeger Psy en Ligne

Kathryn: Okay. And we will get all of that in the show notes to keep it super simple. Sonia, thank you so much for joining us. This has been great.

Sonia: Thank you for having me.

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