

Interview with Den 2X Grad Sophie Tremblay

Carol Tice: Hey, everybody, it's Carol Tice here, the Den Mother, and I'm here with an exciting Den 2X Income Accelerator grad, Sophie Tremblay.

You may know it's called Den 2X because we're hoping to double your income in about six months to a year, but in that, in a one-year timeframe, Sophie tripled her income, and we're here to get all the details on how she made that happen.

So, Sophie, why don't you talk a little about sort of where your career was at when you came into Den 2X a year ago?

Sophie Tremblay: Sure, so when I came into Den 2X, I was doing, I guess like, medium volume but really low-paid work, so even though I was working consistently, it didn't really add up to enough. I was always covering my bills, but it was always like, you know, the last payment of the month is what you need for like the first of the month. And so, it was basically paycheck-to-paycheck living. I wasn't really saving money. I didn't have a health card just to be fine because I started writing right out of school. I wasn't coming from a career where you would've had an opportunity to save. And so, any financial emergency could have just wiped me out and in fact, that did happen to me in 2011. It's really bad. I had to live in with my parents for a year. I moved back out, but it's still, you know, I was covering things, but just not grown-up secure, you know?

Carol: And that whole thing where you're sitting there on the 30th, watching for a check to come in so you can pay a bill on the first, and like there's no, you know, room for error. That's so stressful to just feel like there's no cushion.

Sophie: And also, because I had not really diversified my income very much. If anything had happened, it would be a big chunk of my income that would be gone and it's like, what do you do, like you'll just be in big trouble financially, so.

Carol: Yeah.

Sophie: Not good, for sure.

Carol: Yeah, and we've seen this a lot in Den 2X. We call it one big client syndrome, where you get one big client that you feel kind of good about it, and you get lazy about marketing, and they're just kind of almost your only client, which is bad both in terms of risk, you know. My joke about having one big client is, if I only have one big client, then they should be paying my 401K and giving me, you know, I should be an employee. They're just getting a deal there. The whole point of freelancing is to be able to have this variety of clients and, and to spread your risk across many clients so that you're never in that disaster mode, like when you get laid off from a day job, where it's like, kaboom! Economic collapse, you know, of everything. So, talk about maybe the kind of types of writing you were doing, types of clients that you were doing.

Sophie: Sure. So, I was doing primarily website content and articles, not necessarily high-paying articles, more like in the range of like \$30 to \$50 American. I'm Canadian. So, there is like a slight boost there from the exchange rate, but not at the time our dollar was not so great. Back then, our dollar was like,

the exchange was not as good, so, it really was below what you recommend as the \$50 an hour floor. I was not making that. Just in lower quality writing, not that my work was necessarily bad, but just not a more in-demand, you know, not a lot of research, not going out and talking to people as much and not more technical topics that deserve a higher pay. And so, I've kind of transitioned to more sophisticated work by feeling like I'm good enough to go after those kinds of gigs.

Carol: Yeah, and so, the first thing we do in Den 2X is the client analysis, and what did you kind of get out of that when you, like we make everyone look at a year, your past year of clients, what did you earn from them in the whole year? What kind of work did they do? What could, would they recommend you, have you got a testimonial from them? Is there upsell opportunity in them? It's all, all the factors we're looking at to evaluate, you know, whether clients are good clients. And of course, what are you earning? What's your hourly rate? And so, what, what came out of that?

Sophie: So, one thing that I realized was just how low some of the hourly rates were, because the other thing is when you're living paycheck-to-paycheck, you don't really have time to like, think about these things. It's more like, I got the money and now I'm spending the money. And so, I just did not sit down and think like, what is this actually worth per hour? Who is actually more valuable and who is paying me lower than I expected? So, it's kind of able to pinpoint those lower-paying gigs more easily by looking at cost per hour, which is such a basic freelancer's thing, but it's hard to do when you're struggling, to just pause and say like, "Okay, let's just do this fundamental thing." It's really weird, it just does not occur, well it didn't occur to me, anyway.

Carol: It just doesn't seem to occur to most freelance writers in my experience, and it's because they're not coming at it with a business mentality. Like you say, you're just kind of paying bills, getting through the day, you know, getting through the week, getting through the month, good money, yey, you know. And they're often, it's hard to take that opportunity to reflect and kind of go, where is this career going? How am I progressing here? Is, am I progressing here, you know?

Sophie: Right.

Carol: Do I like the types of work I'm doing? Do I want to maybe steer this in a different direction and when I'm, where I'm going now? And I've never had a Den 2X student that hasn't said that. It was just completely eye-opening experience doing that. And also, looking at annual client value.

Sophie: Yes. That was perfect.

Carol: When you look at, what is this, again I work for them all year and what was that worth, you know. And how much effort was that for those, whatever maybe, \$3,000 or something small in a client or in many cases, \$500. I have a lot of clients, lot of Den 2X members where they're, they're doing a lot of tiny one-off gigs and, yeah.

Sophie: I have a lot of that as well and like also if you're targeting really small businesses which many of us target because you're not so confident to go after a bigger name. They just don't have the budget to do, to throw you like 1,000 bucks of work a month, in most cases. Like if, you know, usually for \$1,000 in a small business, they want so much from you that it's almost like a full-time job for that \$1,000, or they have a project that's like 500 and that's their marketing budget.

Carol: Right.

Sophie: And so, I have a lot of that to begin with. And so, like, the biggest difference, and I'm getting a little bit ahead of myself I guess, but with the roadmap, there is a mindset recess.

Carol: Yeah, that's where I was going next, yes. So, after we do that, you talked about getting the confidence to go after better clients. So, what, we do have this mindset reset exercise and it sounds like that, my sense from talking to you over the year is that, that's was really a big issue for you. Just not feeling ready, not feeling good enough to go after real serious big money clients.

Sophie: Yeah, definitely. I mean, I came into this with a science background, which is good for some things, but it's not good for knowing how to write in an approachable way. So, it took your Article Masterclass to help me learn how to write for non-academic people in a way that's really fun. And then also, I didn't learn these marketing things in school, and also like, because I was in genetics, it's so far removed from anything related to like, profit or marketing or anything. It's like, and so, having not had that background, I just did not – language over a larger client. And even though I had put so much effort into learning all these things, like reading about this all the time, and you know, you do pick it up as you work more, I needed them and sort of reset to kind of, show like, oh yeah, actually, I am a good writer, like most people cannot talk about this topic in a way that's really fun, like my clients would tell. Now my clients tell me that feedback and it's like, yes, this is one of my strengths, and that gives me more confidence to take on assignments that are hard. You know, maybe they're out of my niche or something that I don't necessarily know anything about, but it helps me think like okay, I do have transferable skills, and I'll just dive in and just do it, like just don't think about it, just shut up and do it.

Carol: And also, that, what you do have value, I feel like this is, this is a big holdup for a lot of writers, they're like, oh, everybody can write. No. Everybody can not write a magazine quality article, can not write a blog post that gets a lot of traffic for a big company. No. Not at all. You bring a lot of value to the table and I feel like writers really tend to discount their own worth, you know.

Sophie: Yeah. I feel like for me, I mean obviously, everybody has their own strengths and weaknesses. Mine was having the confidence to believe in my own business. And then, once you do that, you start treating it like a business, which is really what caused my income to go up so much. But, like, that was like the thing that kind of made everything else happen. The product of each tip also helped me a lot, but the main thing was that mindset reset, having the support that if there is a problem, I could just go into the chatroom and ask people or just say like, "Oh my God, this is so difficult. I can't believe it." And then, other people will say, "Oh yeah, I really struggle with that, too." It's helpful to just not be alone because it's so easy to like hang up on your own shortcomings, which we all have, like nobody is perfect and no one is amazing at every aspect of the business, but you still, you feel like you should be, but nobody is like that, so.

Carol: Yeah, we all have fantasies –

Sophie: Yes, exactly.

Carol: – of like, all the other writers are super productive and they never feel nervous and, you know, all these bizarre ideas that other people are doing great and they don't have any problems. And yeah, they're super awesome all the time and I'm, you know, a bundle of insecurity. But, yeah, and the chat, the chat, I've had Den 2X members tell me that they would pay to be in this group just for the chat thread, if there weren't live office hours or live masterminds or six-figure freelancer calls where we pick

people's brains or, you know, the one-on-one coaching, that they could cut all of that out, and if they just have the Skype chat, like that would do it for them. It's, it's a lively place in there, yeah. Lots of great support.

Sophie: Yeah, it's really great because a lot of times like, when you look at the demographics of freelance writers, so many are new or are, you know, just establishing their business, don't necessarily have a lot of experience that, if I have a problem, you know, I'm six years into this, that somebody who just started and doesn't have any experience isn't going to have the same experience to provide some insight, they've never been through it. And, it's also like, you know, if you're having a problem with who is, not a problem with the client, but just a problem with an assignment for a really good client, it just, it comes off as really complaining. Whereas if you are talking to other mid-level freelancers who've have these struggles and overcome them too, you get just a lot more and say like it is a really nice community. I really liked it.

Carol: Yeah, you don't want to be like a brag-plainer, and yeah, I totally get what you mean because I think that is a big reaction people have when they get into Den 2X, it's like, okay, everyone here is in the same struggle I'm in. We've learned how to do this for a living. We are eking out a living doing it, you know. We're not at that, 'how do I get started' phase, you know. But it's not enough yet, and I need to know how to leverage this up. And yeah, I think it's very magical, having, you know, 15, 18 people who are all right at that point to getting together. So, talk about like, so now you did this analysis, you did the mindset reset, got your head on straight, and so what were some first steps that you took that started to create change and started to grow your income?

Sophie: So, I really think, like, part of it just seemed to kind of happen organically when I just started to have a little bit more confidence in myself and run my business like a business. It automatically boosts your productivity. My spill from the beginning, that is that I was able to write quickly, and I just assumed that was even a skill, you know, like I didn't really recognize the value of that. But now, like I've turned that into being able to turn around rush work for clients and being more open to those opportunities and going after that kind of thing. And I just got a really fantastic client because the editor messaged me and their other writer had flaked out. She had turned in a draft, needed a lot of edits, she completely flaked out, and she's like, "Can you take this? How fast can you turn it around?" And I told her, "I can have it to you by noon tomorrow." And she was so, like she was thrilled, like it completely saved her with this client. So, it's kind of, once I started thinking about, okay, what are my actual strengths, that you can kind of leverage that into, okay, this is the kind of assignment that I'm good for. And, you know, if you're the sort of person that can look at like (coughs), excuse me, huge sets of data and pull out a story from there, like, you know, once you know that you can do that, then you can look at the kind of assignments or companies that have huge sets of data and they need someone to tell a story out of it. So, it's just like, for me, it's recognizing what I was already good at, and then just going after things. Like, I know that sounds so obvious, but it did not occur to me to think like that before.

Carol: And so, did you do, we have a bunch of initial steps in the Den where you think about, could you get a raise from existing clients? Do you want to drop existing clients? You know, what can you do to free up more writing time, all these sort of basic building blocks, anything in there that happened?

Sophie: Yeah, for sure, I, there's the productivity tips, and so, I did kind of take a stock of how much time I was wasting, which is a lot. And I was able to carve out a lot more writing time doing that. And so, I mean, right away, it's just like organizing your day and being really productive. It's just, you can see you

can do so much more so you can earn a lot more money. I was shifting my focus to the clients that were paying me the most. I didn't necessarily like, oh right, drop clients, but I did ask for a raise or only take on the higher paying work for most clients, so that would steadily raise my hourly rate. And then, it was just looking at, like okay, here are the better clients. These are my favorite ones. Who else can I look at and start identifying those. And I've gotten like, going back to the mindset reset, aim higher in the revenue bracket because I can tell you it seems so scary to work a massive brand, but the people are usually really experienced. They unders-, they have that framework created for you before you start a project. They don't expect you to like save their company for \$1,000, and like they're willing to pay professional rates. They know your value and they know how to set you up for success. So, I had some really, really great experiences working with large companies, and you'd think it'd be so scary, but I find it actually much easier. And –

Carol: Same here.

Sophie: Yeah.

Carol: And yeah, we had a skip out there. How did you connect with bigger brands that you know, what were the marketing methods that ended up paying off for you?

Sophie: Right. So, number one was in-person marketing. I started going out meeting people, which, some super obvious, but when writers, especially employer, self-employed writers, it's so easy to just like, stay cozy at home. But I went out and met people, just went to different groups. Sure, I did volunteering for things. You know, even you know, you go to a community writers something, it's fine to just meet other people, like you're just making friends, right? So, I did a lot of in-person marketing. I also did some letters of introduction to introduce myself and build relationships that way. And then also, I kept in touch with editors that I had worked with in the past, where at previous assignment they may not have been able to offer higher paying work. But if you keep in contact, you know, you like the editor, keep, keep in touch as they move around, and I just got two assignments that way. It's like, so, I mean –

Carol: Yeah. You never know where they'll turn up. I have two different editors that I think I've written for in three different places each.

Sophie: Yeah.

Carol: Yeah, I just –

Sophie: Yeah.

Carol: – if you like someone, just, you just follow him around.

Sophie: Yeah, exactly.

Carol: Yeah.

Sophie: It is nice, the thing about being a freelancer is that it can be kind of lonely, but it's nice to have those network of editors, like, it makes me feel so motivated and happy to see other people succeed. Like I just find that so motivating, and so, just keeping in touch and networking to like, be genuinely happy for other people's successes.

Carol: Yeah.

Sophie: And that positivity comes back to you, like I don't know how non-obvious this is, but if you're an introvert like me, I'm not shy but I'm just like a, I'm an only child and I'm used to, like I like working at home on my own. And so, you know, making the effort to branch out and network, make new friends in the industry and just see what other people are interested in and what they're doing, it really, not only makes the career more rewarding, like it's really fun to watch someone else do well, but it really does help your career as well. And so, that, and it's marketing, you know. I don't necessarily think of it as like getting you a gig, which is also like another thing. I think people can tell when you're only reaching out to them, when it's like, what can you do for me? And so, I think it's so important, like I get networking requests like that, and I never want to help those people, because it's obvious they're just takers.

Carol: I call that, hey total stranger, would you do a favor for me?

Sophie: Yeah.

Carol: It's like, that doesn't work.

Sophie: Yeah, so it's like, if you just create a positive mindset around your career and you start to reach out to people, be happy for people, and just share in other people's successes, it will come back to you and it will boost you and make you happier, too. I guess –

Carol: I feel like, it's partly giving out of the desperation mode, you know.

Sophie: Yeah.

Carol: When you're starting to think longer term of like I'm trying to sow seeds that will bear fruit in the future rather than when you're coming at people like, oh my God, I need a writing job right now, you know.

Sophie: Yeah.

Carol: Yeah, I think that the desperation thing is a real turn-off for a lot of people, so, yeah. Coming at it, I'm like you. I want go and like, "Hey, appetizers. I get to talk to people. It's interesting," you know. And yeah, I think if you go with the whole I'm just meeting people and then I retweet their stuff and get to know them and chat with them, and –

Sophie: Yeah.

Carol: Yeah, it's low-key and it's kind of fun and you feel less isolated. I feel like there's a real psychological thing to that.

Sophie: Yeah.

Carol: First of all, going out and saying, "I'm a freelance writer. I'm a freelancer writer," to people over and over does something good for your brain, where you start to believe it, and start to act like it in the rest of your life. And well, so talk about, so, in-person networking paid off, letters of introduction paid off, talk about the types of gigs you do now. You don't have to name brands, exact brands if you, but if you could describe types of clients you have now, types of work you do, and talk about where your hourly rate was and what kind of hourly rate you look at mostly now.

Sophie: Right, so my hourly rate before, I guess was maybe an average of maybe about \$50 an hour. So, you know, it wasn't terrible. I'm like, when I first started, I was like, okay well, it's not a \$10 an hour

minimum wage job it's replacing that, so I just also needed to shift my mindset to thinking about what pro rates are.

Carol: Right.

Sophie: Now, my hourly rate is usually \$100 an hour or up. It really depends on the client, but it can be significantly up there especially for larger projects where you can spread the research over, you know like, 20 web pages, that you can really get a fantastic hourly rate out of that. And so, right now I work primarily with like food and health companies. I do recipe development, website content. I also work with a veterinarian and pharmaco, pharmaceutical companies. And I do like website content, infographics, just kind of like fun consumer-oriented content for that. I do focus on B2C content, but I have done a little bit of B2B. But, I, it's because I basically started with like, B2C writing, and some of my portfolio is just stronger there and so it just keeps on going, but I really enjoy it, so.

Carol: And don't you have one big client in financial services also?

Sophie: Yes, I just started writing articles and, they just asked me to do an infographic for them, so I'm really excited. It was my first assignment in personal finance. I was so nervous, but like, when I started talking to my sources, it was fantastic and again, I was just like, just shut up and write, just shut up and interview, you know how to do this, and just go through, and the client loved it. I'm so happy.

Carol: Yeah, and they asked you to do more. That's what you're telling me right before the call.

Sophie: Yeah. Yeah.

Carol: Yeah. So, talk about what's happened to your lifestyle. You were in a world of I have no savings, I am just living one day at a time. And so, what's your life been like in the past few months?

Sophie: Sure. So, one thing that's nice is that I do not ever have to worry about being able to pay my bills. I was able to build up an emergency fund. That was the first thing that I focused on with having about six months. I know like, for me, because I don't have kids, six months is probably enough. I do maintain a pretty low cost of living. I just stay in my studio apartment. I like it here. But I was able to max out my government retirement savings, which is really cool.

Carol: Nice.

Sophie: And really rewarding to like be able to save like a grown-up, basically.

Carol: Yeah.

Sophie: I have my emergency fund so I don't have to worry. And then I've also travelled a lot. I got to go to New York for 2 ½ weeks in the spring and a month over the summer. And on Tuesday, I'm heading back for another two weeks. And like, next spring, I'm going to head out to Portugal for a few weeks at least.

Carol: Wow.

Sophie: Yeah, so, I mean, that's why I've stayed in the apartment that I have. It's like, have the low cost of living and now I can afford to travel, so.

Carol: Yeah.

Sophie: That's one of the things like, especially if you don't have children, where you've to be there for their school and stuff.

Carol: Right.

Sophie: That's one of the best things about being a freelance writer in my situation, is that we have the freedom to move anywhere and if you have the right clients that can financially support that lifestyle, then you can kind of like, have a work life that other people like dream about, and able to go travel and go see the world. And, you know I mean, that's like the freelance dream, you know, that sort of talks about like quitting your job and work, making a living as you travel the world. And so, like making enough money from lucrative clients, I was able to do that and without, you know, going into massive debt for it, which is also really nice. So, it's been great.

Carol: Right on, yeah.

Sophie: For some, you know.

Carol: Yeah, actually putting the freedom in freelance writing.

Sophie: Yeah, exactly.

Carol: Like it's supposed to be. I think, you know, it's a different, it's a, it's, this is the Den 2X mindset. It's not subsisting and you get a lot of freelance writers who are like, "Well obviously, I won't be able to make as much as my day job at this, I'll just kind of scrape by but I love writing so I want to do that." Going from that to, "I'm earning three times as much money as I did before." Money in the bank, money for travel, retirement money, you know.

Sophie: Yeah.

Carol: This is like, oh, this is a real career, like, like having a job, except you're in control of it, but financially, that it has that ability to really give you a great lifestyle and love.

Sophie: Exactly.

Carol: This is why I do Den 2X, is that this is my vision for how freelance writers should live.

Sophie: Yeah, and then, it is amazing to know like, right now the job market, there is no such thing as job security, like maybe you will have some severance, but oftentimes, it's not very much. But now, I know, you know, like I lost a client earlier this year, which kind of stuck up my cashflow a little bit, but I was able to replace it and it's not like my whole income was gone. So, like, even if, you know, you haven't, even if you haven't grown your income enough that you're able to save a lot, you don't have your emergency fund fully built up, it's still, if you're paying attention to the type of clients you got and really guiding your career, then it can be like, losing one client isn't going to sink you, which is a huge thing.

Carol: Right so, yeah.

Sophie: Like it's all about like creating that security for yourself with the saving, thinking about it as a job that's like a real thing that people do as a professional to bring value to other companies, you know. All these things are just kind of building the foundation so that you can go and do fun things like travel or whatever it is you want to do. For me, I, like, obviously, I'm a freelance writer, but I think of myself as an entrepreneur because it's the business that comes first and it's not just the writing. Like, if you're just

writing, then you're just writing. But, like, being a real writer is thinking about a marketing goal and, you know, both for yourself and for your client, and you know, just kind of making it more than about the words, that you're a business owner helping other business owners. And that really did help. It just changes the way that you look at assignments, at least it did for me. And that really helped, you know, if you don't have a lot of that marketing expertise, which I did not, it helps you pick that up when you start thinking about that and you're able to work with, like you're able to do content marketing as opposed to just writing, you know.

Carol: It's a different way of relating to your clients. I feel like most freelance writers are like, here's the client, and here's little old me down here. Oh, I'm just this tiny person. And when you think of I'm in business, you're in business, you're having a relationship like this.

Sophie: Yes, exactly.

Carol: And it's totally different.

Sophie: Yes.

Carol: And yeah, you feel more empowered to upsell and to say, "Hey, I think this would be good for your business," you know. You're kind of on an, on an even ground together instead of feeling like, you know, some little serf.

Sophie: Exactly, yes.

Carol: Serving some master of the herd, you know.

Sophie: Exactly. You know, it's so much more rewarding for me that it's like I feel like I am a member of this marketing team, and we both want this project to succeed so much.

Carol: Yeah.

Sophie: When you invest like that, it really comes across in your work, too. I know that Linda Formichelli has talked about like the brain sale versus the heart sale, and that you really need to care about what you're doing and your client's success. And not that I didn't care before, but when you have the confidence to think of yourself as an equal coming in as a valuable member of a team, then you're able to make that heart sale and really put that into your work. And, like I know my clients, like, I mean, they like the work, they keep coming back to me, so.

Carol: And I, I think that positioning also allows you to come back to people when they're doing something you think is a mistake.

Sophie: Yeah.

Carol: And say, "You know, I think this isn't going to be good." Well, I love it, this is fantastic. I just fully appreciate you taking a few minutes to talk about what all it took in terms of mindset, in terms of marketing, in terms of re-envisioning your, what you do as a writer. And I'm happy that Den 2X provided like the, the pathway and sort of the format to facilitate this 3X, maybe we'll rename it. Den 3X. Anyway, thanks so much Sophie, I really appreciate it.

Sophie: Well, thank you. I love being in front of the community. It's just a great resource. I'd recommend it to anyone for sure.