

Out on Our Own

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Editorial

With spring comes a renewed sense of optimism. A good time, perhaps, to review where we are in our businesses and consider how we can improve. Michelle Storm Lane of the Association of Independent

Professionals and the Self Employed (IPSE) provides five helpful hints on how we can become more effective freelancers. CV development expert, Matt Craven, tells us how to write an impactful professional profile that 'speaks' to our intended audience and improves our chances of attracting clients.

As has already been announced at previous conferences, EMWA is keen to ensure our more experienced members receive education and development opportunities beyond our foundation and advanced

workshops already offered. Several initiatives are being put in place to do just that, and Debbie Jordan describes these in more detail, with particular emphasis on those relevant to our fellow freelancers. As we look forward to the next conference in Dublin this May, Uwe Kollenkirchen reflects on his first conference in Florence last November. We love to hear from our freelance members, so please get in touch if you wish to write about your conference experiences, or any other aspect of freelancing life you wish to share with us on these pages. We look forward to seeing you in Dublin, Ireland in what is now only a few weeks time.

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Life beyond EMWA's educational programme

Many people come to EMWA meetings for the excellent training offered through the EMWA Professional Development Programme (EPDP) and to gain their foundation and advanced certificates in medical writing. But experienced medical writers often ask what EMWA has to offer them once they have completed these programmes, or what it has to offer people who don't want to join them. This applies particularly to freelancers who have to fund EMWA membership themselves, and where attendance at conferences comes at considerable cost from conference and workshop fees, flights, and accommodation, as well as time away from the office when paid work is not being done.

One clear benefit of being a member of EMWA is that it is the only professional body for medical writers in Europe. By being a member of EMWA you are showing your commitment to your profession and recognising the importance of being a member of a professional organisation centred on your work. An excellent journal keeps you up to date with developments in the medical writing field and by attending conferences and workshops

you can find out what is changing in the way that we work. It is always good to attend workshops to increase your all-round knowledge – after all, we can always learn new things and it never hurts to hear someone else's view on a familiar topic. Also if you are an expert in a particular area then becoming a workshop leader is a good way to get involved in the organisation. Developing a workshop is also an excellent way of challenging your own knowledge and practices. EMWA conference are also a fantastic place for networking with colleagues to find out what others are doing in their day-to-day jobs and what is changing. There are also opportunities to get involved in running EMWA by joining a committee, or helping in the training aspects of the conferences by joining the EPDP committee, or helping out with EMWA's journal *Medical Writing*, either as a regular contributor, section editor, or assistant editor.

Experienced medical writers can also get involved in special initiatives such as the Budapest Working Group (BWG), which was set up by Sam Hamilton to review the clinical study report (CSR)

International Conference on Harmonisation (ICH) E3 guidelines. The BWG is also developing a similar set of guidelines for the development of protocols (which are currently only briefly covered in the ICH E6 guidelines). Another working group is the Good Writing Practice (GWP) Group that looks at creating standards for medical writing that cannot be found in style guides through a series of articles in the EMWA journal. Ultimately, a handbook on GWP will be produced that writers can use as a reference document.

EMWA has a unique pool of expertise and needs experienced people to share their experience and knowledge with a wider audience. How often do we moan about how badly some official documents are written or the fact that they don't reflect what it is really like to work as a medical writer? Getting involved in initiatives like the BWG and the GWP is a great way of initiating change. We are facing all sorts of challenges in the future as medical writing continues to develop. For example, regulatory agencies have now agreed to publish CSRs so that these are open to public scrutiny. We will also need to write a lay summary of CSRs when EU

directive 536/2014 is implemented in May 2016. EMWA needs to play an active role in these initiatives and needs its members to step up and get involved.

On a personal level, I have completed both my EMWA foundation and advanced certificates, I served on the EMWA Executive Committee for 2 years, I run three workshops at EMWA conferences, I contribute regular articles to *Medical Writing*, and I am involved in the BWG and GWP groups mentioned above. I find getting involved with EMWA on all of these levels to be stimulating and interesting. It stretches me to think 'outside the box' and to be at the forefront of where EMWA and medical writing are going in the future. It is also good to give something back to an organisation that has helped me to develop into the professional medical writer that I am today.

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EMWA Conference Florence 2014 – Insights of a newcomer

After attending nearly 80 scientific and medical conferences throughout my earlier career in the pharmaceutical industry and recently starting my own company in scientific writing, I was excited to attend a conference in my new field after being away from science and drug development for almost three years.

When I was asked to write a conference evaluation by sharing my 'newcomer' impressions in a short article, I felt a little nervous and flattered at the same time by the request. Being a newcomer in the medical writing business with little specific experience, my evaluation could potentially be far off target! But then again, I was asked for my newcomer impressions, so I thought: 'Why not give it a try?'

Registration for the conference

After deciding to attend, online registration for the conference and booking a hotel was easy, but it took me some time to understand the structure of the conference. It mainly consists of parallel sessions in the format of training workshops which need to be booked and paid for in advance. When I tried to sign up for the workshops that interested me, I learned that some were already fully booked. Too

bad! So I looked for 'second choices' and registered for a total of three. Next step was to check on the social programme – important for networking! Unfortunately, most events were already sold out, however, seats at the networking reception on the first evening were still available and at no additional cost. Very good!

Once in Florence, the on-site registration was quickly done. No lining up as at big conferences. I experienced friendly and relaxed service at the registration desk and enjoyed a quick lunch that was already included in the registration fee. A good start!

Reception

Though the workshops started in the afternoon immediately after the registration, the official opening took place in the evening with the usual welcome words by the President, Julia Donnelly, and former president, Andrea Rossi, who welcomed us to his home town. An entertaining lecture on 'What Scientific Societies Need from Medical Writers in the Mediterranean Region' by Ferdinando Fusco then led to the networking reception which provided a common ground for interaction and was supported by excellent local food

and wines. The conference programme promised 'A game where you will experience unique sensations that will inspire your medical writing ...'. I am still waiting for the writing inspiration, but it definitely stimulated vivid exchanges between participants. It also helped me to meet with several colleagues and learn about their business experience, e.g. regulations for setting up your own business in France, or the thoughts that drive a young scientist to make the move from academic research into medical writing. The reception was interesting and diverting, but when it ended, I realised that I had not met anybody who would be a potential client for freelance medical writing services. The majority of attendees seemed to be like me, looking out for contacts in the industry. Admittedly, a look at the list of participants shows that my perception cannot be totally true, but deliberate inclusion of industry representatives might be worth considering for future conferences.

Workshops

Before discussing the workshops I attended, let me share my thoughts on the conference format.

I like small, workshop-based conferences because they encourage discussion on selected topics and interaction between the participants. This was achieved at the EMWA conference. However, the downside of having a series of parallel workshops divides the audience. Getting a close interaction, lots of discussion, and comprehensive coverage of topics in each of the workshops was great, but participants needed to decide on the topics they prefer most, thereby excluding five or six other concurrent sessions. So, over a two-day meeting, one could only participate in a maximum of four out of the offered 28 sessions and had to disregard the other 24. I am sure the EMWA Executive Committee has discussed this issue already several times before, but there might be still ways to improve on this. (Editor's note: this was the reason for starting the symposium and expert seminar series at EMWA Spring Conferences. However, EMWA membership is diverse and this wide choice is something which has always been welcomed in delegate surveys.).

Once in Florence, I started preparing for the workshops and realised I had overlooked the requirement to complete pre-workshop assignments. Thus, I had to spend time in my hotel room preparing for the courses. Interestingly, Tania Kotsokechagia had described similar experience in her article 'The new girl's EMWA conference'.¹

However, this albeit brief preparation still helped me to follow the workshops in detail. All three turned out to be very interesting and worth

attending and I would rate all as very good to excellent:

- Walther Seiler gave an expert presentation on all aspects of clinical trial protocols in 'The Clinical Study Protocol: Content and Structure' workshop. The importance of the ICH guidelines E6(R1) and E3 was explained and the CDISC Protocol Representation Model (PRM v1.0) was emphasised as a key organisational model for the structure of clinical study protocols.² The content of a clinical study protocol was comprehensively covered and the discussion was lively and interactive.
- Understanding the principles of good clinical practice (GCP) and its application to writing and reviewing clinical trial documents was the objective of the 'GCP Training for Medical Writers' workshop. Gillian Pritchard presented a well-structured overview of ICH guidelines E3 and E6. With a mixture of presentations and group exercises, she successfully converted this potentially dry subject into an interesting learning event. Importantly, useful supplemental information for writing clinical study protocols and reports was discussed, e.g. the SPIRIT and the EQUATOR network.^{3,4}
- The 'Writing Guidelines for Manuscripts' workshop by Andrea Rossi focused on manuscripts published in scientific journals. He facilitated the understanding of this large body of information buried in numerous guidelines in a well-prepared presentation supported by practical exercises. Getting articles published in scientific journals has become a very competitive field for authors and the correct application of publication guidelines is key. There are guidelines specific to almost every scientific area. A good overview on publication guidelines is provided by the EQUATOR network.⁴

Freelance Business Forum

This session was open to everyone and aimed to provide freelancers (approximately 30% of EMWA members) a platform for exchanging experiences.

Short presentations covered the outcome of the recent EMWA survey on type and source of registration documents prepared by freelancers, the survey on fee setting for medical writing services planned for 2015, the benefits for freelance members of EMWA, and the freelance resource centre on the EMWA website.

The main part of the forum consisted of parallel networking table discussions where experienced

freelancers moderated discussions on topics raised spontaneously by attendees, e.g. the setting up of contracts, starting out as a freelancer, organising work in the home office, dealing with agencies who act as brokers between large companies and freelancers, and the billing and payment of freelance services. The participants were allowed to move from one table to the other, thus being able to engage in several discussions. A brief summary was given by the table moderators at the end to the forum.

Overall, the table discussions were very inspiring because of the open format, the possibility to casually interact with the other freelancers and get feedback from experienced medical writers on self-selected topics. I would have welcomed the inclusion of representatives from pharma or contract research organisations in this session because interaction between industry and freelancers in this forum would help in understanding each other's needs and expectations.

Conclusions

Was it worth attending the 39th EMWA conference?

Yes. Because it was two days of well-organised and professionally conducted sessions and workshops with many opportunities to learn and to interact with other participants. The excellent venue significantly contributed to the pleasant and stimulating atmosphere. Just remember to register early if you want to attend the next conference and get your first choice workshops!

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How to write a high-impact professional profile or summary

Overview

Whether you are writing a CV, Executive Biography, LinkedIn profile, or Web Profile, aligning your message with the mindset of your audience is critical. Web-based channels are often restrictive but where you can, change your message for different audiences.

For example, if you are targeting yourself at medical writer roles and also considering opportunities within marketing communications, you would, in an ideal world, have two profiles. If I am looking for a dedicated market-access medical writer, I'll probably hire the person who is telling me that they are 'a PhD-educated medical writer specialising in the production of scientifically accurate and commercially compelling market-access collateral'. I probably won't hire the person who is telling me that they are 'an experienced medical writer with experience across a broad range of medical writing areas'.

This principal can be extrapolated across any discipline and ties in with the basic psychology of buying any product or service. Think about good Pay Per Click (Google Adwords) marketing; if I searched on the term 'Designer Sunglasses', am I more likely to buy from the advert that reads 'Designer Sunglasses' or the one that says

'Sunglasses from Designer Brands'? It is, of course, the former, because the advert is using the same phrase that I had in mind when typing my search term into Google. The same applies to recruiting – the client needs to know that you are a relevant individual for the role that they are hiring for and are going to derive this, initially, from line 1 of your CV.

If you ever wondered about the phrase 'you have 5 seconds to get the reader's attention', then this is exactly what we are talking about here; getting their attention isn't about yellow paper or fancy graphics, it's about presenting yourself as an appropriate candidate for the job!

Target marketing

Once you have defined your direction, creating a profile needs to be viewed as a marketing exercise. By this I mean thinking about your target audience and what messages and areas of expertise they are going to respond to. Too many people write their profiles thinking introspectively rather than truly aligning their message with the needs of their potential clients. I recommend thinking about the key challenges that they might be facing within your specialist area and the skills they might require to assist them. These areas should be the focus of your profile.

Go to market description

Start with a description of what you are, which should always relate to some form of functional job title that your clients and employers can identify with. For example, *'PhD-educated medical writer specialising in the production of scientifically accurate and commercially compelling Market-Access collateral'*. Cryptic descriptions get you nowhere – they may make sense to you, but not your audience. As basic as it sounds, job titles are universally recognised, so regardless of your freelance status, I would recommend this approach.

Value proposition

Once you have defined a description of yourself, think about your value proposition. What I mean by this is: where do you add value to your customers? This leaves your audience under no illusion as to where you might fit in and how you can add value.

Put this together with the previous example, and you end up with a powerful statement as follows:

A PhD-educated medical writer specialising in the production of scientifically accurate and commercially compelling market-access collateral that

drives superior traction for new products in the medical sector.

Areas of expertise and your blueprint for success

After you have provided this high-level 'helicopter-view-description' of what you are and what your value proposition is, I recommend describing what your blueprint for success is. Of course, this should be aligned with your client's needs and should tie in to your value proposition. For example: 'performing detailed research and analysis to ensure that literature is scientifically sound'; 'combining first class technical knowledge with commercial acumen to create literature that appeals to both clinical and non-clinical stakeholders'; or 'collaborating with other disciplines and using strong project management skills to ensure that projects are delivered on time, to budget and to specification'.

Note how these are written in a 'features and benefits style' or 'skill leading to xxx benefit'. I recommend four of these, strategically aligned with your marketplace and target audience. Note how they are focused on hard skills rather than vague or clichéd behavioural competencies.

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The ultra-effective freelancer

An IPSE member recently told me how he had launched himself into freelancing with huge enthusiasm, but quickly discovered that being his own boss was 'no bed of roses'.

Freelancing can be an extremely satisfying and rewarding way of working, but it can also be an emotional rollercoaster. Medical writers often experience a constant cycle of feast and famine – the stress of too much work followed by the worry of not enough. The most effective freelancers are the ones who develop the resilience to deal with the natural dynamics of their business so that they can enjoy their working lives to the full.

Here are five enduring wisdoms used by many in our freelance community to make a bumpy ride a little bit smoother.

1. Know your 'rocks'

Stephen Covey is best known as the author of one of the great 'bibles' of productivity, 'The seven habits of highly effective people'.¹

The third habit is to 'put first things first'. To illustrate the power of this principle, Stephen used rocks as a metaphor for the tasks that we face in our daily lives. Large rocks represent the things that are truly important to us, such as family, health, clients, or career ambitions. Small rocks are all those little tasks that tend to fill our lives without actually leading us to where we want to go.

A video of one of Stephen's popular talks shows the metaphor in action.² Stephen asks a volunteer to fill a bucket with a mix of large rocks and pea-sized pebbles. When the small pebbles are placed in the bucket first, the volunteer finds that there is no space left in the bucket to fit the large rocks. Then Stephen asks the volunteer to try it the other way around – placing the large rocks (the things that really matter) into the bucket first. The volunteer is then able to pour the pebbles over the large rocks and finds that they fall naturally into the spaces between the rocks. By putting the large rocks first, all the rocks and pebbles fit into the bucket.

This striking analogy shows how, if you prioritise the things that really matter, everything else tends to fall into place.

So what is the best way to work out what really matters?

Doug Belshaw offers a fairly radical solution: write your own obituary!

In his fantastic ebook, *'#uppingyourgame'*,³ he recalls:

'I'll never forget the look on the faces of my form class when, as a teacher, I asked them to write their obituary. They thought it was morbid, creepy, and that I was a little bit crazy. Once they got into it, however, they realised, as I had done, how eye-opening it can be'.

He explains that the exercise is a great way to focus the mind on your deeper purpose, the things that you want to be remembered for. You are likely to feel more motivated to achieve something when you know why you want to achieve it. Doug describes this effect as a 'well of productivity'.

2. Remove distraction

Phil Dobson, the founder of BrainWorkshops®, runs training courses based on the science of peak performance. He feels that one of the biggest enemies of effectiveness for freelancers is the overwhelming number of distractions all around us.

'When we're plugged into email all the time and we're accessible by so many people, our direction can be led by others', he says. 'We become very reactionary and responsive with this constant stream of requests, and if we're not careful, our direction towards our goal can be compromised'.

Phil warns us to be aware of the addictive power of the alerts that bombard us from every piece of technology we own: 'We feel good when we get a Facebook 'like'. We get a little shot of dopamine and the reward centre in our brain goes 'yes, more of that please', but the cost is that our productivity is destroyed'.

He recommends disabling alerts on smartphones and computers to allow the brain to focus on one task at a time.

'Your brain evolved to notice things that it's not expecting, to keep you alive', he explains. 'So a beep from your phone, just as much as a visual alert on your screen, shifts your brain from what it was doing. It goes from task A to task B, and some studies have shown that the time it takes to shift back to task A can be as much as half an hour. In fact, multitasking has been shown to reduce our effective IQ by up to 10 points'.

The more we encourage ourselves to concentrate on one thing, the better we become at it, thanks to

the brain's plasticity. Conversely, if we constantly multitask, our neurones reorganise themselves to make us more prone to dividing our attention across several tasks, thus decreasing our effectiveness. To put this into perspective, multitasking has been estimated to cost the global economy \$450 billion annually.⁴

Lisa Carter, an independent Chartered Clinical Psychologist, recommends the technique of 'mindfulness' as a useful way of practicing the art of focusing: 'Originally mindfulness was a form of meditation but now it is being used in everyday life by many people. It involves focusing your attention on just one thing 'in the moment'. It's also very healthy to have short-, medium-, and long-term goals, because if you achieve the short-term goals, it gives you that boost in confidence to lead you to the medium-term goals, and so on. So as you achieve the first step, you feel better able to take the next.

3. Take breaks

Do you struggle motivating yourself to work?

Often, the opposite is true – freelancers can be particularly bad at dragging themselves *away* from their desks.

But if you fall into the trap of working all night, every weekend, and never taking any holidays, your effectiveness as a professional will suffer.

The dangers of overwork have been well documented for a very long time. An article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 1977 observed: 'Overwork, i.e. working beyond one's endurance and recuperative capacities, may be a hazard in certain personality types engaged in open-ended occupations. Some persons appear to lack an inner 'governor' and for various reasons ignore the commonplace signs that inform one of the need for rest or recreation. If they are engaged in occupations that do not have a finite workday, they may at times exceed their bodies' ability to recover. Clusters of symptoms may then develop, some of which may mimic serious physical ailments'.⁵

In the absence of a corporate structure, the only way for a freelance medical writer to have a 'finite workday', is to create boundaries.

For example, Phil Dobson has set a number of rules for his freelance business. He always has a lunch break away from his desk and uses deadlines to make sure that he finishes work at a reasonable hour.

He also highlights the 'Pomodoro technique'⁶ as a way to improve focus and keep the brain fresh throughout the day. This involves working in 25-

minute chunks with a five-minute break between them. Using a timer can provide that extra motivation to focus during the 25-minute session.

Another freelancer, Alison Coward, gives herself an annual holiday allowance of 25 days to ensure that she takes enough time off.

Sean d'Souza goes one step further and schedules three months off every year. In order to fit his heavy workload into the remaining nine months, he hones his skills continually to be able to work more effectively. For example, he has managed to reduce the time it takes him to write an article from two days to 45 minutes. He has also trained himself to rise at 4 am every day, to take advantage of the quiet time, free of distractions, before everyone else wakes up.⁷

4. Pay attention to your body

'Stress is helpful in small doses. It helps us to rise to challenges and motivates us to do our best', says Lisa Carter. But as a self-employed psychologist, she is only too aware of the need to manage stress in order to avoid it becoming a threat to effectiveness.

'Some people thrive on high-level stress and excitement in their life, but others tend to fall apart when faced with smaller obstacles, so it really differs between people as to when stress becomes a problem', notes Lisa. 'But there are certain early warning signs that we might notice. It might include feeling tired all the time, changes in your concentration, minor changes in your health, such as a rash or headaches. Even going to the toilet more often can be an indication of stress'.

Lisa says the problem is that we often don't notice until it has gone too far: 'Particularly as freelancers we tend to soldier on, so we don't notice the little niggles of our body trying to tell us that something's wrong. Added to that, we can't really afford the time off if we're ill. But eventually it could lead to a loss of productivity, because if your concentration and motivation suffer as a result of high levels of stress then you can't do the best that you can in your work. If you're not performing at your best you may damage your reputation and it could have a devastating effect on your business'.

Lisa advocates looking after your body as one of the best ways to prevent stress: 'Make sure you have a healthy diet and really be sure to make time for exercise because the endorphins released through exercise are the best anti-stress, anti-anxiety and anti-depressant drugs out there. Be

aware about putting that into your plan – it's about being clear about what you want to do when'.

5. Don't be too hard on yourself

Freelancers are expected to be high-energy, solutions-focused, and positive all the time, which can be exhausting.

'When we think about being employed versus being a freelancer, clients are much harder taskmasters than bosses and we really do have to be our best', agrees Lisa. 'We can get caught up in expecting too much of ourselves and that can, again, contribute to stress. So we need to be realistic about what we can achieve'.

Lisa believes that freelancers should be brave enough to manage client expectations and negotiate deadlines around what is realistic: 'Clients respect that. It's a case of being realistic about what is 'good' and not being too perfectionistic in your work. A great contributor of stress is having this belief that you need to be perfect'.

'Awareness and willingness are very important', she concludes. 'Be aware that stress can affect anyone, even you. And when you recognise that you might have the symptoms of stress, be willing to manage that stress'.

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Freelance foraging

...and they say we speak the same language as our friends 'down under'! This sign advertising flip-flops in Darwin reminds us to make that extra language check for every document!



Answers to Medical Writing Jumble #11:
INPUT, URINE, INFORM, MANAGE.
The CEO of the opioids manufacturing company
was fond of saying, "No pain, no gain".