

# Elevate your medical writing team to success:

## Managing professional growth from internship to management

Julia Cooper,<sup>1</sup> James Newman,<sup>2</sup>  
Garima Pallavi,<sup>3</sup> and Linda Yih<sup>4</sup>

Medical Writing Services,  
PAREXEL International Ltd

1. Dublin, Ireland
2. Uxbridge, UK
3. Bengaluru, India
4. Lyme, CT, USA

### Correspondence to:

Julia Cooper  
PAREXEL International Ltd  
One Kilmainham Square  
Inchicore Road  
Dublin 8, Ireland  
julia.cooper@parexel.com

### Abstract

The opportunity for continual learning and development is one of the reasons many of us are attracted to, and remain in, the medical writing profession. A culture of learning is critical to instill ongoing development in any profession. For medical writers, it helps to maintain a broad perspective and adapt to the change that is a part of our industry. In this article, we describe our experiences in hiring, training, and developing medical writers at all levels, from internships through to mid-level career and into management.

A culture of learning is critical to a successful career in medical writing, and many medical writers cite the continual opportunities to expand their skills as one of the reasons they stay in the profession. The defined path for a learning culture (Figure 1) instills ongoing development and helps employees maintain a broad perspective and adapt to change. Line managers have the largest and most immediate influence and can leverage this by demonstrating a

commitment to growth and encourage a safe environment for employees to ask questions and share ideas. Empowering employees and appointing stretch assignments expands their skillset and confidence. Support to achieve these goals creates trust within the organisation. In this article, we share our experience in hiring and onboarding, internship programmes, development of mid-level writers, and making the transition into medical writing management.

### Laying the foundations: Recruitment and onboarding

To establish a culture that encourages employee growth, line managers need to make learning an expectation, not an option. This begins at the hiring stage, when candidates are evaluated not only for their knowledge, but for their initiative toward professional development. To handle the pressures of ever decreasing timelines and other project challenges, medical writers need to

Figure 1. Path of a learning culture



demonstrate resilience. Ideal candidates often describe their greatest challenges as their best learning experiences and have persevered and succeeded in times of change. Interviewers emphasise expectations for professional development, in addition to programmes and tools for support.

Capturing a new-hire's enthusiasm and engagement are key at the onboarding stage, so development tools and opportunities are introduced within the first weeks in the company. A new-hire mentor welcomes and assists employees in navigating department systems and processes. Writer skill standards, which were created to evaluate skill sets consistently within a job role and across levels (e.g., junior, senior, and principal writers), are introduced at this early stage. The DIA Medical Writing Competency Model (Clemow et al.,<sup>1,2</sup>) was used to develop these standards that also align to job descriptions, and designate expected competencies per level: writing, functional (project management), leadership (team management, process), and other (technical, editing and language). Previous professional experience is included as part of the evaluation. Skill standards are likewise used to determine and justify promotion readiness.

## Internship programmes

The demand for medical writers continues to increase, and a well-run intern programme can ensure organisations have the means to develop a talent pipeline. Experiential learning, such as internship programmes, provides entry-level job aspirants with practical experience, priming them to efficiently and effectively enter the workforce. In combination with other training and support, the programme fulfils the “3Es of learning” – Experience, Exposure, and Education – as guidance to develop professional goals (Figure 2).

Carefully designed internship programmes benefit organisations in the following ways:

### Efficient and cost-effective recruitment strategy:

- Performance of interns can be evaluated before offering permanent positions.
- Considerably less time to hire compared to experienced staff.

### Faster growth and employee retention:

- With a defined learning programme, interns develop faster, with learning curves shorter than external entry-level hires who are immediately immersed in project work.
- Tailor-made programmes and incentives for interns lead to increased motivation and engagement, resulting in long-term retention.

### Succession planning:

- With a faster learning curve, interns quickly take on straightforward writing tasks, which open capacity at higher levels, allowing senior writers to focus on advanced and complex work.
- Line managers and senior staff advance their career development with mentoring/coaching responsibility for interns.

### Setting up an entry-level internship programme

A successful internship programme requires commitment from the employer to ensure interns attain a meaningful experience, benefitting all parties. A crucial first step is to clearly define the programme objectives, how the programme will benefit the organisation, and details on how to meet the desired outcomes.

The hiring process should be as rigorous as those employed for permanent hires, including interviews, administration of competency tests, behavioural interview techniques, and other recruitment strategies that will allow the organisation to target the right talent and “fit” within the department and company. A job description explicitly defining the desired academic qualifications as well as job roles, responsibilities, and expectations should be developed.

The curriculum should be targeted to connect people from different backgrounds and build a cohesive group. Interns hired out of universities will be unfamiliar with working in a corporate environment and with the basic principles of clinical research and medical writing; therefore, standardised structured training on these topics,

including orientation to the organisational culture, should be provided. Practice exercises, job shadowing, and periodic assessments will measure progress. Trainers, coaches, mentors, and managers play important roles in orienting interns to the organisational culture, customising learning objectives, assigning job-shadowing exercises, and giving constructive performance feedback as well as eliciting feedback from interns.

### An effective training strategy will entail:

- **Clarity of purpose** – Rationale for the course, target group, aims and objectives, desired learning outcomes, process plan, responsibilities, piloting and testing, and evaluation.
- **Defined lesson plans** – To assess knowledge gaps and define the training goals.
- **Adaptive and/or customised training** – Assign suitable trainers with different skillsets and expertise, relevant training materials (presentations and lesson plans), and carefully planned training logistics.
- **Consistency of approach** – All trainers follow the same principles, periodic status checks ensure progress stays on track, and full commitment is expected from all stakeholders.
- **Continuous feedback loop** – All (positive/negative) feedback from new hires is incorporated in real time to improve the curriculum and training methodology.

### Structured, responsive, and flexible teaching

To expedite intern development, classroom training plays a role, alongside practical learning. Ensure each lesson has its own path with room for flexibility, and share with other trainers, mentors, or coaches to gain feedback. Use a lesson plan template or create your own. Putting the plan in writing allows you to spot flaws or omissions compared to the overall training strategy. Sharing these plans with others reveals how they can reinforce your lessons. Lesson plans may need to be altered when taking varied trainee development needs into account. Remain flexible in the event that a lesson deviates from a planned route; in fact, such instances are a form of feedback and signal a need for a plan to be updated. It also indicates that trainees are engaged.

Watch and listen to your trainees to identify

## Path of a learning culture

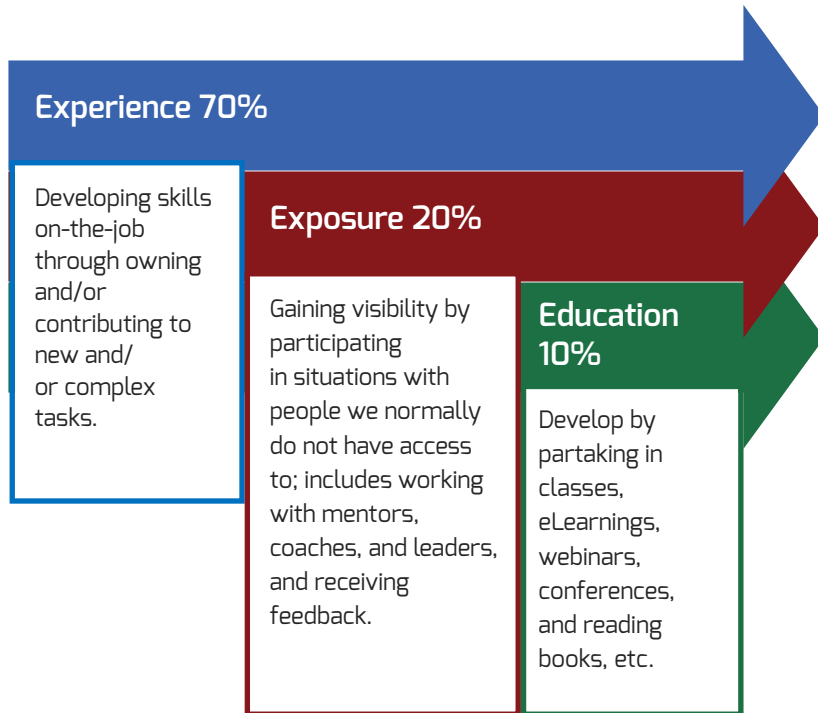


Figure 2. The 3Es of learning: experience, exposure, and education

what works for them. To start, ensure that each lesson is planned around the principle ‘tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, then tell them what you have told them.’ When lessons have periods of interactivity mixed in with more traditional didactic blocks, a trainer can make the same point in different ways to reinforce the core objective, plus keep it fun and well-paced at the same time. In fact, fun can be a useful tool, not only to engage the trainees but also to keep them learning and foster team spirit. Consider starting each lesson with an activity or game that relates to a previous lesson: group trainees into teams and make such starting activities or games loosely competitive by keeping score. A prize for the winners at the end of the course is motivating.

### Onboarding/offboarding interns

The decision to hire or release an individual at the end of the internship should be made following in-depth performance assessments; 360-degree feedback is particularly useful. Onboarding checklists ensure a consistent, targeted approach to integration and adaptation into the organisation. Interns transitioning into an entry-level writer position may be assessed for

production-readiness before being allocated live project work. To keep them engaged with a steady and manageable workload, assign live work in an incremental manner and set clear expectations around the regular job duties.

Offboarding should be done in a carefully considered and sensitive manner. Give the interns open and direct feedback on their development and ask for their feedback on the programme; exit interviews should be conducted whenever possible. Interns should leave the organisation with a positive impression.

### From entry-level to experienced writer

As described above, plenty of attention is devoted to employees at the beginning of their careers. However, it is important to pay attention to the majority of employees who are in mid-career; this is when job satisfaction often diminishes and engagement wanes. Feeling overlooked or forgotten can be the final push for individuals who feel they have given their best efforts to a company and now desire a change in roles or locations or need a new challenge to jumpstart motivation. Development plans, line

manager support, and information sharing amongst the writing group maintain employee progression and momentum.

An individual development plan that outlines short- (1 year), mid- (2-4 years), and long-term (5+ years) development goals allows for transparent career path conversations with line managers. Using templates and a guide for self-assessment, preparation, and evaluation, the plan maintains a structured and consistent approach, while the development path itself can be flexible. The plan is owned and updated by the employee, who can make changes as needs and aspirations evolve, and new opportunities arise. The individual development plan can be reviewed regularly (i.e., quarterly, with an employee’s line manager, who can identify opportunities for development goals).

For writers who want to remain in their current roles but acquire new skills, a writer mentoring programme can be useful as it focuses on targeted development (i.e., honing document development or project management skills). A mentor from another department or region may be identified to help a writer acquire skills that go beyond the writing role. As project management and leadership skills play a larger role for senior-level writers, soft skills training (i.e., managing challenging circumstances or teams, negotiating, influencing without formal authority, cross-cultural training) is offered and is available as needed. A forum for the global writing team to share expertise and discuss the lessons learned not only expands group knowledge but gives writers the opportunity to develop presentation skills and gain recognition as a subject matter expert. These activities instil confidence in writers to lead project teams, provide meaningful contributions to the writing team, cultivate autonomy and, importantly, maintain engagement.

### Transition to management

Writer development plans address the transition of senior writers into operational leadership or management roles. Those who do not wish to become a manager may pursue a technical expert track, such as principal medical writer. For those who are willing to take the leap into management, the move from writer to manager can be a smooth transition with the right tools and support. Expectations may include a mixed bag of positives (new challenges, opportunities to make a meaningful difference, increased exposure)

and anxieties, centred around new people-management responsibilities, the perceived need to “know it all” to lead others, and managing former peers, to name a few.

Development tools similar to those for writers can be created for managers to facilitate the transition. Management aspirations are often identified at individual development plan discussions. An employee can evaluate his or her skill set against the job description and manager skill standards to identify competency gaps. Skills that make one a good medical writer are not necessarily the skills required at the managerial level; coaching skills, building a team culture, providing feedback, managing conflicts, and influencing others are key management competencies that may not have been essential in the past. The writer and line manager may discuss an action plan to close such gaps and determine a realistic timeline for the transition. A manager mentoring programme supports new or established managers on topics including delegation, giving feedback, managing across regions/cultures, and other leadership skills. Company-sponsored managerial effectiveness training educates novice managers on topics such as developing and managing a high-performing team, proactive problem solving, behavioural-based interviewing, and change management.

While these tools present management expectations, once in the role, new managers will undoubtedly experience a change from being experienced individual contributors having considerable control over their work, to delegating and managing others' work for which they have ultimate responsibility. Trust and relationship-building skills are essential for success. If managing former peers, an individual may soon find that not everyone is necessarily on his or her side. This shift in mindset may come as a surprise, and this is where a mentor or trusted adviser can help. An environment of open communication, where employees are encouraged to contact each other with questions or share lessons learned, further instils a learning culture. Managers can do the same, by sharing people management ideas or concerns (while maintaining employee confidentiality) and openly discussing leadership styles and techniques.

## Concluding remarks

Targeted hiring, internship programmes, mid-career development plans, and tools to support

**Targeted hiring, internship programmes, mid-career development plans, and tools to support the transition to management all foster the culture of continual learning that is essential to success in medical writing.**

the transition to management all foster the culture of continual learning that is essential to success in medical writing. Furthermore, the human element must reinforce the development philosophy. A reliable, supportive network within the department and company with transparency and open dialogue are essential. Line managers who develop trust and a strong working relationship with their writers are able to openly discuss the necessary skills and experience to progress to the next level and effectively plan for career progression. Development programmes should also incorporate the flexibility to allow individuals to explore new opportunities in a “forgiving” environment where mistakes can be made to broaden their knowledge base. In this type of environment, employees are encouraged to thrive and develop beyond their expectations.

## Disclaimers

The opinions expressed in this article are the authors' own and not necessarily shared by their employer or EMWA.

## Conflicts of interest

The authors are employed by PAREXEL International Ltd.

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## Author information

**Julia Cooper, PhD**, is Vice President, Head of Global Medical Writing Services at PAREXEL, and her responsibilities include hiring and training of medical writers across the Americas, Europe, and Asia. She currently works out of PAREXEL's Dublin office.

**Garima Pallavi, MSc**, is an Associate Director at PAREXEL, and her responsibilities include recruiting, onboarding, mentoring, and developing high-calibre medical writers. She has led a successful medical writing internship programme. She is based out of Bengaluru, India.

**Linda Yih, BSc**, is a Senior Director in Medical Writing Services at PAREXEL. As the global lead for the People Development initiative, she focuses on onboarding, professional development, and retention of writers as well as managers. Linda is decentralised in Connecticut, USA.

**James Newman, PhD**, is a Senior Manager at PAREXEL and his responsibilities include recruiting and developing medical writers in Europe, and leading quality initiatives. He has co-developed and co-led a medical writing intern programme. He is based out of PAREXEL's Uxbridge office in the UK.

