

Growing a remote medical writing business: Two perspectives

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Abstract

Deciding to grow your own remote medical writing business can be daunting. In this article Lesley and Bilal, who each own and manage independent medical writing agencies, share how they founded and grew their businesses.

Lesley's story:

In a previous article in *Medical Writing*¹, I wrote about how I became a freelance medical writer. Things have rapidly evolved since then, and here I share about how I grew Alchemy Medical Writing into a small agency with 9 employees.

I went out on my own for two reasons: I knew there was space in the market, and I wanted to be the master of my own destiny. Within a year, customer demands outweighed capacity, so around 18 months after founding the business I hired my first employee. As everything was new to me and to keep the financial risks low, I employed an entry-level writer, Melissa Tombs (Mel) who was referred by Bilal. I decided Mel was a good fit as she wrote a great cover letter and displayed bags of enthusiasm. My instinct was right; Mel is a great person and has grown into a fantastic medical writer. Within another 2 months, my husband Adam Taylor (who is also a medical writer) joined me as a business partner. As Adam and I still do a lot of project work, we brought in a part-time project coordinator to help with administrative tasks and to liaise with clients. This has since grown into a full-time role we cannot do without.

From there we gradually expanded the business in line with increasing demand, employing a mixture of entry-level and experienced writers. We mainly support larger agencies but also work directly with a few pharmaceutical companies. A lot of our business comes from referrals, for example, former colleagues or clients that have moved on to new companies. Networking on LinkedIn has also been invaluable.

As Adam and I both worked as in-house medical writers before, we know how demanding the role can be, so we try to create a great company culture. We support diversity and inclusion, foster a good work-life balance, and care about people inside and outside of the company, as well as the environment. Some of the ways we do this are by accepting our teams' unique abilities and limitations, offsetting our carbon, having a no-overtime policy, having regular mental health catch-ups, rewarding staff with bonuses, perks, and fun activities, and by donating to charity. Often our charity events involve team members participating in physical activity campaigns, serving the dual purpose of also improving their wellbeing. Our plan is to remain a small close-knit team that works and plays well together going forward.

I have found that there are many upsides to expanding the business: getting to work with and learn from others, seeing the team grow in experience and confidence, receiving great feedback from clients, and increasing financial security. But everything is not smooth sailing 100% of the time. Running a business with employees is a big responsibility and a lot of work. It is also hard to fully switch off, unless the whole company closes (for example, over Christmas).

For anyone considering growing their business, here is my advice: You'll need to learn how to strike the balance between making sure there is enough work coming in – but not too much! A team is

also only as strong as its individual members, so remember to spend enough time considering the training, development, mentoring, and communication styles of individuals, in addition to their project preferences. When they thrive, the team does too.

Policies, insurance, human resource (HR) management, equipment, interviews, and contracts are the necessities of running a business and delegation is key here to ensure important details aren't missed. Our project manager handles a lot of the administrative tasks, ensuring the cogs keep turning.

How to bring the team together, structure your business, be fair to everyone's preferences, and determine what perks you will offer are all rewarding facets to work on. You must also be prepared to have difficult conversations with both clients and employees and have a plan of action as to how you will handle it when something goes wrong.

Tackling all this whilst also doing project work, liaising with clients, and doing the usual business administration can lengthen the to-do

list. To relieve some of these pressures, we outsource functions like HR, accounting, and technology support; I would recommend doing this to all new agencies. In terms of where to start, I found it helpful to reach out to owners of similar companies to ask questions. You also grow to learn that, to some extent, we are all flying by the seat of our pants!

As we are a remote company, staying in touch is also a big consideration that influences all our tasks. At Alchemy, we stay in touch over Microsoft Teams. We have an open "coffee chat" to say hello, catch up, share GIFs and Netflix recommendations. We also have a "Q&A chat" where we ask for help with understanding briefs, acronyms, technical issues,

or to offer support if we have time available. Personally, I love seeing the team collaborate over the Q&A chat. Their willingness to support each

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other lets me know that we have a great team spirit. We also have a weekly catch-up call where we share news, recognition, any woes, and what everyone is doing in the coming week. Finally, we like to get together for virtual and in-person events. This year we will be catching up in Scotland for some Escape Room action, quizzes, a castle tour, and some great food.

So, if you are thinking about expanding your freelance business, there is a lot to consider. If I could start over, would I do it again? Definitely.

Bilal's story:

My story of growing Bham Pharma Ltd is similar to Lesley's, although I took longer to get there! As I wrote in previous articles in *Medical Writing*,^{2,3} I began as a freelancer back in 2011 for several reasons: I had been made redundant twice in 9 months in 2 different countries; I moved back to the UK to be with my mother after my dad passed away, and so moving for a new job wasn't an option; commuting 3 hours each day was unpalatable; and I had always wanted to be my own boss.

In terms of how I run my business, it is pretty much identical to Lesley's, so I won't repeat all of that, but I will share some key lessons. Echoing Lesley's journey, I had more projects coming in

than I could handle alone, so I began hiring. (I now have 15 team members.) I also started strategising and building the foundations of my business to support both the regulatory and medical communications pillars with experienced team members. Initially, we were top heavy, with more experienced team members, and then in came an intern, Emmaline Tregembo, with whom I wrote a blog;⁴ thus began the mixing of experience and inexperience. My goal has always been to build a robust business where we can take experienced writers and newbies and train them into not only world-class medical writers but leaders. We focus not only on medical writing training but also personal growth and development, helping to fast-track the success of my team if they are up for it.

I have read, watched, listened to, and been mentored by highly successful business owners, and I have tried to incorporate their help and advice when and where appropriate.⁵ I have delegated as much as I can, empowering my leaders to run teams as per their vision, with me being there to help and oversee things as necessary, and being the key decision maker when needed. I have tried to spend more time working on my business than in it, but workload pulls me back into projects, in which case I work

under my medcomms and regulatory writing managers. However, I am still the only salesperson, and I oversee marketing and social media activities, which are run by my team.

I have tried to take a relaxed but professional approach within my team, and in general, it seems to be working. Nothing is perfect, and we have our ups and downs, but I have tried to foster an atmosphere of high quality, team ethic, openness, honesty, and above all, fun and enjoyment. Microsoft Teams has been vital to us creating that close-knit team spirit, and we have great camaraderie amongst us. Currently, I am the only man in a company of women, and that has been because the best candidates were women, and because of our focus on women's health. I have always wanted to run a thriving, successful, inclusive, international, rewarding, interesting, and fun organisation. Work is important, but so is the relaxation aspect. Unless absolutely necessary, I ensure no one is on Teams after 6 pm, and recently, we switched to a 4.5-day working week, so we are finished for the week by 1pm on Fridays. I endeavour to always listen to my team, especially my leaders, and make changes as swiftly as possible. Switching to a 4.5-day week (we still work 37.5 hours) came about from a conversation at 10 am, and by 1pm, we had

spoken to the team and our HR company, and started a trial period, which was successful.

I want my team to love what they do, and having a healthy work-life balance is crucial for achieving this. Ensuring my team take all 25 days of their annual leave plus public holidays is important – to refresh, reenergise, and prevent burnout. I check in with everyone at least once a week to see if they are happy and content and help where I can if there are any issues, even personal ones. I want my team to know that I am always there for them. Our HR company also has monthly check-ins with every team member where they can discuss anything openly. Providing that unwavering support is key for me. As a leader, I have always endeavoured to be the boss and mentor I never had. Of course, I learned from my previous bosses, but I had my own ideas on running teams and organisations, which I am building upon now.

As we work remotely, I also want to get my entire team together, all expenses paid, at least twice a year. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, we did this regularly, and then in April 2022, I took all of us on an all-expenses paid trip to a spa weekend in the Lake District, which was wonderful. We relaxed, enjoyed good food and drink, got to know each other better, and made and strengthened bonds, which helped our team get a better understanding of each other. I don't believe in corporate teambuilding activities, but I do believe in relaxing in each other's company and getting to know each other. The only rule I put in place for that weekend was: No talking projects!

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I echo Lesley's advice to new business owners and add the following points:

- Treat business as what it is – a business. We all win work (sales), we all do the work (delivery), and we all get paid for it (invoice). And then come the financial and legal aspects of having good accountants and HR companies in place.
- Focus on growing yourself. Personal growth and development are absolutely necessary; just being a great medical writer is not enough. Stresses and challenges come to you via conveyor belt on a daily basis, so you must be strong enough to handle them.



- Be flexible, firm, but fair. You know your business and you know what you want, but this isn't a dictatorship, so be prepared to change and adapt, and respond to business needs swiftly and efficiently. It could save you a lot of time and make you a lot of money.

Moving from freelancer to business owner and employer is a big step, but nothing ventured, nothing gained!

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The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and not necessarily shared by EMWA.

Disclosures and conflicts of interest

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Author information

Lesley Taylor has been a medical writer for over 10 years. She worked as an in-house regulatory writer at GW Pharmaceuticals Ltd for 7 years, mostly recently as a clinical pharmacology medical writing lead. Lesley founded Alchemy Medical Writing Ltd, a medical communications agency, in 2018.



Bilal Bham has been a medical writer for 16 years. He worked as a regulatory medical writer in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, at what was Accovion, (now Clinipace), moved to Sanofi, (also in Frankfurt am Main), then moved back to the UK for a role at a biotech company, Renovo, in Manchester. Bilal founded Bham Pharma Ltd in 2011, initially freelance, before moving to a medical writing consultancy model from 2018 onwards.