

International teams:

How to survive a long-distance work relationship among medical writers

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doi: 10.56012/YAKI7804

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Abstract

How does a team of medical writers working in different countries navigate different time zones and cultures to get their work done remotely? In this interview, a team of six medical writers and one editor working at P95, a private research organisation focused on epidemiology and pharmacovigilance, share their insights about the main benefits and challenges of remote work, how it affects their everyday medical writing tasks, and how to make a long-distance colleague relationship work.



What are the main benefits of being a remote medical writer working with other remote teams?

- **Wendy Hartig-Merkel (WHM. Based in Germany):** The possibility to have this type of work despite residing in a small town far away from everything. With this remote work, I can live in a town and still have the same work opportunities as people working in big cities do. Also, I can move if I want to or work from anywhere as long as I have good internet. I don't spend money or time commuting. I can work full time and still have a family and take care of (almost) everything.
- **Elvira Carrió (EC. Based in Spain):** It's enriching to have colleagues from other

countries, at the personal and professional level, as I get their insights and perspectives. It keeps my mind open! I get involved in interesting international projects while working from my preferred location.

- **Marc Baay (MB. Based in The Netherlands):** The most obvious professional benefit is the opportunity to focus. I used to be in an office of five people, walking in and out, talking among themselves. In my home office, no one distracts me. If I really need to focus, I switch off Outlook and Teams to get more work done. And although I love seeing my colleagues face-to-face occasionally, after a few days, I long for the solitude of my home office.
- **Ana Goios (AG. Based in Portugal):** The main benefit of being a remote medical

writer is working with medical writers and other professionals from around the world, in a team of highly qualified and skilled individuals, with major players (public and private) in human health worldwide and at a higher level than if I stayed in my home country.

What are the main challenges you face? (Are there times when you wish you could just meet your coworkers in person?)

- **Michelle Rubbrecht (MR. Based in Belgium):** Signing off mentally is a big challenge for me. In previous jobs, at the end of the day, that was it. I left work at work. With remote work, the lines between work and private time have become blurred. Also, working remotely and

being a medical writer are both new to me, so sometimes I struggle with something work-related, and I think it's just me feeling this way. If I was in the same physical space as my co-workers, I could talk to them and see if someone else was in the same boat, so



it would make it easier to support each other.

- **Neha Agarwal (NA. Based in Germany):** Yes, some issues are easier to discuss and show in person. Though, the screen-sharing option in most communication apps (e.g., Teams) allows us to navigate these problems to some extent. Also, it's nice to have a coffee break with a colleague and share thoughts about projects.
- **EC:** The downside of work flexibility is that we end up being more connected to work, and we might extend the working hours to adapt to other regions. I often end up checking the work mail and chat outside working hours, while if I was working in an office, I might not do so. Also, personal relations are harder to build online, as we don't share lunch and coffee breaks.

Spontaneity is also harder with online communications.

- **MB:** Indeed, sometimes a complex issue can be solved with a quick meeting, but this meeting can be held online. As a rule, we never just call; we always ask first if it would be convenient to call and I truly appreciate that. Time differences are a bigger challenge than physical distance.
- **AG:** Remote working can be lonely, and I miss those coffee table conversations that help you know what is going on "behind the scenes" and exchange experiences with coworkers. We barely have the opportunity for these conversations remotely. On the other hand, this leaves less space for gossip (which is both good and bad).

How did you adapt to this position knowing that you wouldn't step foot in an office?

- **Alejandra Gonzalez Diaz (AGD. Based in Colombia):** I was used to remote work due to the pandemic, but starting a new job with people I've never met and who are on the other side of the world was a challenge. I've had to be patient and adapt to work flexibility, changing my schedule, and turning on cameras, which is something we never did at my previous job.
- **AG:** I prioritised getting a proper office space where I feel comfortable and have my ideal setting. While this space is inside the house, it helps that it is in a separate area that I can leave behind at the end of the day and on weekends. I also found ways to leave the house every day: for exercise, to drop off/pick up children, for errands, etc.
- **EC:** I got myself a coworking space, so I could better differentiate work and personal life. We set up regular meetings where we turn on the camera to improve the team spirit. Those team meetings are not necessarily productive in terms of work but keep us connected. Besides the work chat, we use informal channels to communicate with colleagues, so we can also keep a personal relationship.

While working remotely, a medical writer can focus better and be more productive. On the other hand, in the absence of an appropriate workplace (at home), there can be more distractions.

- **MR:** The pandemic came along just as I left face-to-face work and was looking into a career change. I was already in a foreign country, and the added isolation perhaps made it easier to adapt. This job requires extended concentration, and I can't think clearly with many distractions, so solitude helps me focus. Being an introvert by nature also helped; this isn't the best job for highly social people who thrive on the energy of others.
- **NA:** I established social contacts outside work to fulfil the need for human social contact, stuck to a routine, and allowed space for flexibility whenever needed. Quick walks after work have also helped.

Do you think remote working makes a difference in the way a medical writer works with clients/other teams?

- **EC:** Sometimes, it's more efficient to work remotely, as we can just share our screen, which facilitates communication. Online meetings can be shorter and more efficient than in-person ones, and it's easier to get back to my tasks after. Being a virtual rapporteur is easier than taking hand notes in a face-to-face meeting.
- **MB:** Within the company, I don't think it makes a difference. As a rule, we turn on the cameras during meetings unless the internet connection is bad. With clients, I have seen the change from using Teams as an online phone call to using cameras. I think that it improves the interaction, it is easier to bond, and provides feedback from non-verbal communication. As a team lead in a remote setting, it all comes down to trust. I have to trust my team to get their work done. And I have to build a relationship with the team, so they have the confidence and trust to come to me to discuss any issues.

- **MR:** Not really. Many writers do best in solitude but working with clients or other teams is another issue. I think it takes longer to establish a good working relationship or cultivate trust online than it would face-to-face.

- **AG:** In my experience, we are more productive. While it may be more difficult for us to meet with other people in person because we are all in different countries, it also means that we are more used to reaching out to people all around the continent/world, so in a way, we are more reachable. On the other hand, we can't exchange experiences as often, so we mostly learn from doing, not from witnessing others do it.
- **NA:** Yes, there are both pros and cons. While working remotely, a medical writer can focus better and be more productive. On the other side, in the absence of an appropriate workplace, there can be more distractions.

What would you recommend to remote medical writers working in large companies to improve their work/ communication with other teams?

- **WHM:** Be active, call people/have online meetings, reply quickly, and be reliable. All this shows that you are a living person and not just an email address. Also, be nice. Make sure to meet in person regularly; perhaps just one or two times a year might be enough to keep the spirits up. It is extremely fun to meet with your online colleagues in real life (at least if you have a nice workplace and cool colleagues).
- **MR:** If possible, attend company gatherings or conferences together. It makes it less

awkward to interact on screen after meeting in person. You can't express yourself or read body language or facial expressions as easily online. In-person time can lead to serendipitous discoveries about one another and bonding. Sharing during remote meetings requires more effort.

- **AG:** Be available to speak/help others during office hours, ask all the questions from the beginning or whenever in doubt. Accumulating doubts while working remotely can lead to accumulating errors and, if this goes on, it might be difficult to correct in the end. So to prevent this, maintain open communication, and reach out regularly. Also, regular team/project calls help to get a notion of the whole and realise that we are not alone.
- **NA:** Have regular online coffee meetings where you can talk about work-related and non-work-related issues. Also, share your work schedule/out-of-office calendar with colleagues, follow the work ethic, and have professional conversations.

How is the daily remote interaction with people from other countries/cultures?

- **MB:** It is very enriching to be in a company with people from so many countries and cultures. Of course, it's important to be sensitive to cultural differences, such as different holidays, different schedules for



lunch and dinner (both of which may impact availability for meetings), and more complex differences, such as religions. But most of the time, these differences do not affect the work/interaction at all.

- **AGD:** It's a learning process. I've learned to pay attention to other people's paces, work habits, and demeanours. It's interesting because many of those things are related to cultural reasons and personalities, so I try to learn and be respectful. When it comes to deliverables, being seven hours behind plays in my favour because I can work on



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documents while others are sleeping, which gives us more time for each project.

- **MR:** It varies. There are days when I don't interact with anyone at all or one or two at most. Project team meetings are time-restricted, so apart from the brief pleasantries, it's all business. I do love being part of a multi-

national team/company, but informal interactions are curbed under the circumstances.

- **WHM:** The time differences are challenging and lead to online meetings that are too late for my taste, but if I schedule online meetings too early, my colleagues on the other side of the globe might not be able to join. Personal

and cultural differences are in themselves a challenge, but that also happens with face-to-face work, on-site.

Same topic, different points of view. When it comes to remote work, there is not a one-size-fits-all manual. Just like a physical office, remote working poses benefits and downsides: besides the obvious commute time saving, it allows a team to gather highly skilled talent worldwide and work with international clients. Even if for some colleagues, this work setting is better for focusing, occasional opportunities for socialising are key; in-person gatherings now and then and virtual coffee breaks can help to bring people together. At the end of the day, finding the right balance between virtual and in-person settings, and solitude and company, might represent some trial and error, but it is vital for the success of any remote-working team.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge Margarita Riera and Henk Hoornaert for reviewing this interview.

Disclosures and conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Disclaimers

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



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