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Never say never! Returning to full-time employment after freelancing

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Abstract

Alison McIntosh successfully operated as a freelance medical writer for 14 years and gave up the 'flexible lifestyle' of a self-employed freelance medical writer to become a full time employee. She has joined a growing band of 'decentralised' office workers and has become an employee of ICON Clinical Research, a full service, world-wide clinical research organisation (CRO). She has stepped from one end of the medical writing spectrum to the other in terms of working arrangement and organisational structure. The skills needed to work for a large CRO align well with those of a freelance medical writer. Whilst major benefits of joining a large organisation have included colleagues to share the workload, and well defined department structures, new company jargon together with the number of standard operating procedures have been a more challenging experience.

I have been a medical writer for the pharmaceutical industry for 20 years. My



medical writing career began when, after working as a postdoc, I became a full time employee with Wellcome (now Glaxo-SmithKline). After 5 years as an employee, I made the momentous decision to become a freelance medical writer and found gainful employment in this capacity for 14 years.

Most of my freelance years were during what I like to refer to as the ‘pre-blog era.’ As such, I documented my medical writing journey in articles published in the EMWA journal. My first ever EMWA article was entitled “Medical Writing at Home” and covered my significant change in direction, relaying important first steps along the road of a freelance medical writing career.¹ Alongside this, I documented my first attendance at an EMWA conference,² my experience of developing an EMWA workshop,³ and how my years as a freelance medical writer progressed and my medical writing experience developed.^{4, 5}

Setting off on a New Medical Writing Journey

A new episode in my medical writing journey began in June 2014 when I gave up the “flexible lifestyle” of the self-employed, freelance medical writer to become a full

time employee again. My employer is ICON Clinical Research, a full service, world-wide clinical research organisation (CRO). This change in status allowed me to truly step from one end of the medical writing spectrum to the other in terms of my employment arrangement and organisational structure.

At first glance, joining a large CRO may have seemed like a strange move for someone who had worked as a sole trader for such a long time, but for some time previous to making the move, I had felt that I needed new challenges. When I considered what I wanted to achieve, working for a CRO seemed to me like a natural progression as I thought the freelance skills that I had built up were ideally suited to this environment.

During my 14 years as a freelance medical writer I had essentially operated as a CRO in miniature (Table 1 overleaf). I had a broad client base, and I had learned how to provide a service to these clients that met their requirements and needs. I was adept at meeting tight deadlines and being flexible in terms of working arrangements. Through the years I had gained the ability to transform client requirements into well written

documents of a high standard. Since I had also been exposed to a variety of different document types, for me it was also important that I maintained an exposure to regulatory writing whilst also continuing to have the opportunity to write medical communications documents.

I have now joined a growing band of ‘decentralised’ office workers working from home on a permanent basis. When I first became a freelance medical writer the opportunity to pursue this type of working arrangement was limited, not least because of the lack of reliable home internet facilities. In 2000 these were primitive to say the least. Who among us remembers the long cables that were originally needed to connect a computer to the phone line for dial up internet services using AOL as a service provider? These limited internet connections made downloading a document bigger than 1 or 2 pages an impossibility – and sometimes even 1 or 2 pages took hours! This limitation is definitely a thing of the past. Working from home nowadays means you have access to everything you would have in the office, including all the servers and back-up systems you expect from working for a large

Individual Skill	Large CRO	Freelance MW (mini CRO)
Broad client base	X	X
Interaction with many different clients	X	X
Understand the individual needs of clients	X	X
Developing new clients	X	X
Understand what is required to meet agreed deadlines	X	X
Project management skills	X	X
Awareness of budgets	X	X
Awareness of time required to completed writing tasks	X	X
Different types of medical writing ^{a, b}	X	X
Regulatory	X	X
Medical Communications	X	X

^a This skill is based on the medical writer’s personal experience and the different documents they have written or audiences they have written for.

^b Not all clinical research organisation offer the ability to write both regulatory and medical communications documents.

Table 1 Matched Skill Set of Freelance Medical Writer and Clinical Research Organisation

company. Everything is completed online with only an occasional visit to the office required.

Has the Change been Positive?

Of course, there are pros and cons associated with making what many might consider a ‘giant leap’. Major positives are friendly colleagues with whom I can discuss challenges and share the workload. The problem of conducting independent quality control of documents has also disappeared as there is a distinct process in place to achieve and verify these important stages of document development. There are well defined department structures and for the first time in around 15 years I found myself looking at an organogram with my name on it. Joining a large organisation also exposes you to company jargon and many, many standard operating procedures (SOPs). The sheer number of SOPs was one of the most challenging features of joining a large CRO, but after more than 1 year in the job this aspect has become routine in nature.

Continuous professional development (CPD) is something that we all have to be aware of and pursue. As a freelance medical writer you are responsible for organising and paying for your own CPD, and committing to regularly attending EMWA conferences over the years has allowed me to keep abreast of new developments in the pharmaceutical industry. I now have an employer that ensures there are on line

learning facilities available to me in the workplace together with other CPD opportunities. There is just not enough time in the working day to avail myself of all the possibilities on offer.

Advice to Others?

My main advice to all medical writers, and not just those who are working in a freelance capacity, is to always keep your options open, and do your utmost to grow professionally. As a freelance medical writer, regularly attending EMWA conferences to keep up to date with advances and changes in the industry was of enormous importance to me. Playing an active part in EMWA, the organisation, can pay huge dividends not only when looking for opportunities as a freelancer, but also if you decide to change direction at a later stage in your career.

Overall, my change in career direction has provided me with new challenges as a medical writer and increased my professional experiences. I understand that it is not a direction that all freelance medical writers will choose to follow and is heavily dependent on factors that are specific to the person concerned. However, for me it has been the right move at the right time. Although I have fewer holidays, and may have a little less flexibility in the work I undertake, I had my first paid holiday in over 14 years and I think it was all the more relaxing because of this.

Conflicts of Interest and Disclaimers

Alison McIntosh is an employee of ICON Clinical Research UK. She is also a workshop leader for EMWA, a section editor of *Medical Writing* and has served on the EMWA Professional Development Committee.

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Alison McIntosh has been a medical writer for 20 years. She was initially employed by Wellcome (formerly GlaxoWellcome, now GlaxoSmithKline) for 5 years, before becoming a freelance medical writer and trading as AAG Medical Writing for 14 years. Her broad medical writing experience covers both regulatory writing and medical communications.