



Making the leap: My move from academia to medical writing

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Abstract

A complete re-evaluation of your career path can be a daunting task. By identifying your own key skills, a proactive approach can be taken. Talking to varied companies and people in the field and trying out different writing styles can help to find the best fit for those skills. This article presents a personal view of taking this approach to change profession from academic researcher to medical writer.

This article is adapted and updated from a post published on the Naturejobs blog in November 2017. The original blog post is available at <https://go.nature.com/2CiGR5p>.

Academic research just wasn't doing it for me anymore. The realisation came as a shock to me. Since my undergraduate days, I'd always assumed I would have a career in academia, with the goal of my own research group and a healthy flow of students to teach and mentor.

However, the rose-tinted glasses started to crack a little during my first post-doctoral position. I'd always known about the difficulties in making the breakthrough of getting your own funding, but the obstacles seemed to be getting higher. My PhD gave me solid but unexciting data, which was therefore difficult to publish. I found this position (surely not that unusual) was holding me back. The university offered plenty of additional activities I could perform to broaden my horizons and my CV, providing I did them in my free time. Yet the demands on that time would only get greater as I moved from one short-term contract to the next, with the prospect of hitting a pay ceiling for the foreseeable future.

Identifying strengths

On top of the uncertainty that short-term contracts provide, I also felt I had strong skills that weren't used or appreciated by my colleagues. I have always taken a meticulous approach to my work, sometimes bordering on an obsession with accuracy and precision. Away from the bench, I had sharp eyes for mistakes, inconsistencies, and dodgy conclusions, whether

they were in our own documents or the wider literature. I enjoyed interacting with students, and I started to notice that they would choose to come to me for explanations of scientific or technical concepts. However, opportunities to get involved in academic teaching were frustratingly hard

to find as a postdoc and would not be formally credited by the university.

All of these concerns sat uneasily with me, but then I secured a position in a great lab at a different university for my second postdoc. This seemed the perfect outcome – I could

continue to build my career in academia in a fresh environment with new opportunities.

A few months in, however, I was still uncomfortable. Things were done slightly differently at my new university, but I found all the same concerns niggling at the back of my mind. Now I found myself in the position of questioning whether the career I'd planned truly played to my personal strengths.

Finding a new direction in medical writing

Career advice for early career researchers at universities tends to focus almost exclusively on the academic route. However, I thought science writing could be the perfect fit for the skills I knew weren't being exploited in academia.

I started browsing job adverts and discovered not only that there were many companies looking for exactly the skills I had, but also that there were

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many more different types of science writing jobs out there than I had realised. I entered diverse science writing competitions to see what style suited me best and found I enjoyed writing for audiences across the spectrum from lay to technical. When my entry to the Naturejobs blog #scidata16 competition¹ was selected as one of the winners, it gave me a confidence boost and re-affirmed that I was on the right track. The prize for this annual competition is the chance to work with an editor of a Springer Nature journal to report on the one-day Better Science through Better Data conference,² providing an invaluable insight into the world of science writing and publishing.

Making the leap

I had identified my strengths and the industry I wanted to move into, but how could I find a company that fitted my interests and personality? There are many places to turn for advice on getting into medical writing, including websites such as FirstMedCommsJob,³ EMWA's Career Guide,⁴ contacting companies directly, and careers events. The early career researchers group at the university institute where I worked held an event focusing on careers outside academia, and I made sure I took the time to talk to every writing company that exhibited. Among a number of medical writing firms was one that caught my eye: Insight Medical Writing. They specialised in regulatory writing, which was a new field to me. My interest was piqued, and I signed up for an open day at their office near Oxford, UK. After hearing about their work in more detail, I found it resonated with my personal interests and principles. When preparing regulatory documents all of the evidence must be systematically reported and discussed, unlike in medical communications where the focus is more on key aspects of the data. This perhaps reflects differences in the respective audiences. In order to decide whether to approve a new treatment, regulators must consider every piece of data produced during its development. Clinicians, on the other hand, will not have the time for this depth of analysis and will be most interested in how they can best improve the health of their patients.

I made it clear to Insight Medical Writing that I was interested, and, at the end of the normal recruitment process, I completed my career change. I was a medical writer!

Refining existing skills and gaining new ones

Now, after 18 months in the job, how do I feel the experience compares with my previous world in academia? It was immediately obvious that I was in an environment with like-minded people where the skills I had would be put to use. The biggest adjustment for me was the need to work with clients to deliver the document they require. In regulatory writing, we work on a diverse range of documents including new drug submissions, clinical study reports, pharmacovigilance documents, and literature reviews. I've learned a great deal from working collaboratively with colleagues in order to achieve a clear overview of complex data in these different contexts.

My scientific horizons have also been broadened by working on different drugs, diseases, or devices, depending on the client. This is a refreshing change from the often narrow vision of research projects. Indeed, from reading medical literature of varying quality and from different fields, I've appreciated the importance of presenting data and arguments with clarity, regardless of who the intended audience is.⁵

My first EMWA conference in Barcelona in May 2018 was a completely different experience from the academic conferences I was used to, with a greater focus on expanding skill sets and sharing expertise.

I was pleased to see that the skills I had originally identified are clearly valued across all types of medical writing.

Lessons learned

So what have I learned from my experience? I had a definite career plan, but as the academic environment changed, my plan no longer seemed so certain. By identifying my key skills and taking a proactive approach in talking to different people and companies outside of academia, I found a career that suited me. Taking opportunities to try out different writing styles increased my confidence and reinforced that I was choosing the right path. My previous ambitions were based on old information,

and I had re-assessed them based on new data. After all, that's what any good scientist would do.

Disclaimers

The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and not necessarily shared by Insight Medical Writing, Springer Nature, or EMWA.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Matthew Edmonds, PhD, has a background in cell biology and biochemistry, particularly in the context of oncology research. His continuing interest in science communication started by conducting lab tours for people of all ages and backgrounds.