

Medical writing at the management level – a rewarding career, but not for the faint-hearted

Tania Dickson

ProScribe – Envision Pharma Group, Sydney, Australia

Correspondence to:

Tania Dickson
ProScribe – Envision Pharma Group
Talavera Business Park,
Suite 1.01, Level 1, 6–10 Talavera Road,
Macquarie Park NSW 2113
Australia
+61 (02) 8058 4350
tania.dickson@envisionpharmagroup.com

Abstract

Discussion with writers from all walks of life and from across the globe has revealed that we have all come to our chosen career through different pathways. Furthermore, writer jobs are highly variable; two medical writers may have completely different roles and careers. Through a mixture of luck, both good and bad, I have taken the path of a medical writing manager. I have had the opportunity to work in pharmaceutical and device companies, one of the largest publishers in the world, several medical communications or medical education companies, as well as being a freelance writer. At every step along the way I have learnt so much, and can honestly say that each of these experiences has made me the manager that I am today. Herein, I describe parts of my journey, what I learnt, and what I believe are the attributes of a manager of medical writers.

My journey into medical writing

Starting out as a writer

Like most of us in our profession, I did not set out to become a medical writer. A year into my postdoctoral fellowship I came to the realisation that I could not stomach another 10 to 20 years of “paying my dues”. So, I began to wonder, what do I do now? More importantly, after 9 years of university education, and almost 4 years as a postdoc, what was I qualified to do? Fortunately, I stumbled upon a website that would change my life and a medical writer was born ...

My first suggestion to anyone out there considering a job as a medical writer – or any kind of job – is to never forget your network. In today’s day and age, it’s not *what* you know, but *who* you know. I landed my first job at one of the “Big Pharma” as a publications writer because my mother-in-law knew someone who happened to know a hiring manager. Do not assume your



network should be professional only – family, friends, or the butcher might know someone who could help get your foot into the right door.

Remember your network when searching for a job.

Pharma – a crash course in writing and an introduction to management

I loved my job in Big Pharma and I learnt so much from everyone around me. As a publications writer I worked directly with internal stakeholders such as statisticians, clinical monitors/directors, regulatory, legal, and marketing teams; and, external stakeholders such as steering committees and authors. I learnt about designing clinical trials, assessing the merits of investigator-initiated studies, and developing a publications strategy to meet regulatory and commercial needs. But perhaps most importantly, I learnt some of the skills needed to be a manager – both good and bad, and some that are better avoided.

I had a manager, but I also worked closely with other senior managers, giving me the opportunity to observe, learn, and experience. All the managers were smart, driven, and on top of their field, but each had a different style of managing their team. Some of the managers had a “directorial” style, which was like parents telling children what to do and admonishing them when they failed to live up to their expectations. In contrast, there were other managers who would set out the task, giving the employees a free hand to chart out their route. They would regularly meet with the employees to check on the progress and discuss the challenges and next steps. They would listen to the employees and ask them how they thought a given situation be handled and suggest a way for consideration by the employees. I learnt through these observations that it is important that managers connect with their employees, understand what may be challenging to the employees and help them meet the challenges by providing helpful advice and training if required. Managers should be facilitators for the employees to carry out their tasks and should not make the employees feel isolated or worst of all, below the mark.

Agency life – the grass might be greener on the other side?

My first job at an agency

A good manager will make you feel supported, empowered, and a valued member of the team.

was the hardest year of my life. It was a small start-up and I gained my first taste of working for a cash-poor organisation. Like my role in pharma, I learnt a huge amount about medical writing. I also learnt about continuing medical education (CME), preparing commercial materials such as sales aids, booth materials, and product monographs, as well as, working in an agency setting. As exciting as this was, the workload was unbelievable, and my learning was “trial by fire”.

Like all of us in the medical writing department, my manager was drowning in work. The managers were stretched so thin that they could not provide training or support, and most importantly were not able to provide a buffer between the “them” (clients and the account teams) and “us” (medical writers). Through this very stressful period, I learnt that a manager is responsible for the training of their staff, setting and reassessing their workload, and “protecting” them from clients and account teams. A manager may have to “stand-up” to the client or account team to ensure their team have the room to complete their work well. Lastly, I learnt that managers cannot be effective if they are carrying a full writing workload. Managing requires time and effort and needs to be recognised as a valuable task that delivers financial gains to the company.

Leaping into the unknown – managing a medical writing department and ultimately a medical education company

I joined the largest publisher of health science journals, another huge organisation with multiple divisions and levels of hierarchy. I started as a principal medical writer in a small “start-up” division and it soon became apparent that there was more work than a single writer could complete. There weren’t resources to hire more staff, so we outsourced the work to freelancers. My role evolved to spending more time briefing freelance writers, reviewing their work, and reviewing their estimates against project revenues. As we moved solely into CME, an entirely grant-driven process, I learnt even more about pricing, estimating workload and resourcing, and identifying and

delivering training to freelance writers.

About 4 years into my career at this organisation, I was asked to head-up the Office of CME. I jumped at the opportunity and spent the next 12 months leading a team of accomplished individuals to reorganise three separate divisions into a single business unit. What a learning experience! Who knew that there were so many financial and Human Resources hoops to jump through? I learnt about tax and capital expenditure and human resources implications. Most importantly I learnt how to diplomatically navigate a convoluted and hierarchical organisation. Additionally, I had the arduous task (along with my team) of educating and enforcing compliance with mandated guidelines across all divisions in a very large company with a global footprint. Sadly, the hardest managerial lesson I learnt was having to let staff go. Learning how to have a “tough” conversation is not easy for anyone, but it is an important skill that you unfortunately need to learn. Large organisations generally have a Human Resources manager who can (and should) be your key resource for learning these skills; while smaller organisations may want to consider Human Resources consultants for this role.

Do not underestimate the value of a good manager.

Change of pace

In 2010, I came to the realisation that although I loved my job and my career as a manager, it had come at a huge cost to my health and my family.

I also missed my home and decided it was time to return to Australia. I freelanced for a bit before deciding to re-join agency life, at what was then, the premier medical communications company in, not only Australia, but also the Asia-Pacific region. I joined with some trepidation as this was a small, albeit well-established company and my previous experience with a small company had been less than pleasant. A few weeks after I joined, they merged with a large, global communications company, and the best of all worlds coalesced into one amazing organisation.

Tough conversations are part of being a good manager, but should not deter you from becoming a manager.

Although I originally joined as a medical writer and specifically informed the hiring manager that I did not want to be a line manager, 6 months after I joined, I was promoted to a manager. Unlike any other organisation that I had worked for, the first thing that happened was that I was sent on a 2-day leadership training course. How refreshing, the company wanted to ensure that I had the skills necessary to be a good manager (even though I had been a manager for some time). I have now been with this organisation for 5 years and I can say without a doubt that it is the best I have ever worked for. Although my job is no different from anywhere else I have worked, I feel very positive about my job and my career. It all comes down to my manager, their manager, and the senior management team. There is a culture of support and encouragement that permeates from the top down, and it is this culture that leads to an exceptionally high employee retention rate. Recent alignment across the company has ensured that all managers have received the same training and should all be managing in the same way. This organisation has recognised the value of good managers and has chosen to embrace this as company culture.

What does it take to become a good manager?

Like any skill, management can be learnt. As medical writers are adept at reading and assimilating information so that we can write about it. If one takes this approach to learning management skills, one can become a successful manager.

Throughout my career a lot of my management education came from watching and learning from others – both what to do and what not to do. For the most part that has worked; however, I have also attended no fewer than five different leadership training programmes. Some were useful, while others were not. The most recent training I received was one of the best. It made me realise that a manager's behaviour and style should be tailored to each individual staff member. I had to critically assess my personality as well the personalities of my staff in order provide them with the right type of management, relevant to that moment in their life. I am not going to get

If you want to be a manager, start with identifying the training you need. If your organisation does not offer training, look to external organisations or companies.

What does a manager do and what skills do they need?

You may be asking yourself, how do I know if I am manager material? There's no single list outlining the skills or attributes of a good manager; however, I believe that there are skills that overlap or are transferable across individual writer types (Figure 1).

All writers and managers must have good project management and communication skills. The nature of our work also requires flexibility and an ability to quickly change direction, and we need to demonstrate leadership

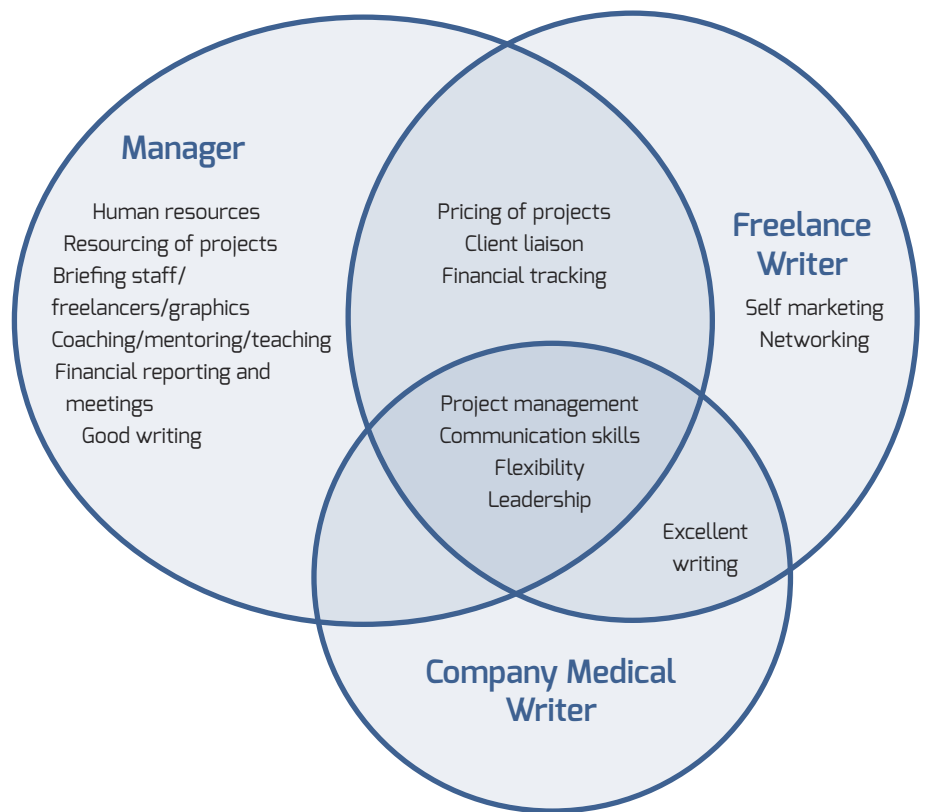


Figure 1. Shared and transferable tasks and skill of managers, freelance writers, and company writers

skills. I would also posit that freelance and company writers, if this is their chosen career, will be excellent writers, because anything less may lead to reduced business. But to be a manager, you do not have to be an excellent writer, you have to be able to recognise excellent writing.

Sometimes companies make the mistake of promoting their “excellent” writers into managerial roles, whereas other writers may be better suited or more interested in a managerial role. Management should not be viewed as a reward for good work, but instead an alternate career path. Freelancers and managers share the skills of pricing projects, client liaison, and financial tracking. That’s not to say that company writers do not have these skills, but

Leaders are people who create a vision of the future and who motivate and inspire others to engage with that vision in order to effectively deliver that vision.



depending on the size of the organisation, their exposure to these activities may be more limited. Lastly, there are many tasks and skills that fall to a manager. Some of these will have been learnt along the way as a writer, while others will require specific training. None of these are inherent qualities within a person and one should not assume that you cannot be a good manager just because you hate financial spreadsheets. You can learn to read them and understand what they mean. Managers are made, not born!

Conclusions

Management can be a very rewarding career for a medical writer. All it takes is a passion for seeing others succeed and grow into incredible people. Some days are hard and giving someone bad news about their performance is never easy, but if you are doing your job well, then the bad days are few and far between.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank all the managers, mentors, and Human Resources managers who have taught me what I know about leadership and management. You have made me a better manager.



Disclaimers

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

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Author information

Tania Dickson, PhD, CMPP, has been a medical writer since 2001 and a manager of medical writing teams since 2005. Her medical writing focus is on developing scientific publications that assist healthcare providers in improving their patients' lives. Her passion; however, is creating efficient, healthy, and happy medical writers.

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John Carpenter's story

Mark Twain once said that giving up smoking was easy – he'd done it dozens of times! I'm a bit like that as I've retired several times. The first time was in 1992, when I took early retirement from the University of Manchester. As a new pensioner, I went straight into a full-time job as a medical writer with a medical communications agency near Manchester. I stayed there happily until I was 'head-hunted' in 1999 and joined another medical communications agency just outside London. When this company reorganised in 2000, a number of us were made redundant – my second retirement. However, after a short pause, I was snapped up by an agency in central London. This odd post involved them paying me but not letting me do much. They too reorganised in 2001 and I was again in retirement. Then calls and e-mails started coming in from pharmaceutical companies and agencies asking me to give advice and help write documents. So I was now "unretired" – a freelance writer and medical communications consultant (grand title) with business cards and everything. I gradually began to switch my focus towards providing training, rather than doing the heavy lifting at the

coal face of writing. As a founding member of EMWA, I had been running workshops at just about every conference forever. So I told everyone I intended to retire as an EMWA workshop leader when I turned 70 in 2013. But like Mark Twain's smoking, attending EMWA conferences and running workshops is a bit addictive, so I unretired again in 2013 and I'm still running EMWA workshops. And still doing training courses (mainly on medical/scientific writing) for groups outside EMWA. These help pay for my favourite toy (a sailplane) and holidays. I may well give it up again sometime. Who knows? But retire? I don't think I could.

John Carpenter
EMWA founder and EMWA workshop leader past, present, and future

Life after
Medical Writing

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