

Jumping over and through the obstacles: Navigating the freelance landscape

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Abstract

This article explores the major challenges and strategies for succeeding as a freelance medical writer. It covers several topics, including finding enough work, managing heavy workloads, ensuring document quality, and carving out time for professional development and financial management. Here, we provide some insights and practical advice to help freelance medical writers overcome these challenges, increase their productivity, and thrive in our profession.

Introduction

Medical writers come from various backgrounds and our understanding of medical, scientific, and health terminology allow us to work in a wide variety of disciplines, documents, and materials. Roles and opportunities, whether freelance or employment, are evolving, and the demand for medical writers is constantly growing, mainly in pharmaceutical and healthcare communications industries.

Being a freelance medical writer has many positives and it can be extremely attractive due to the possibility of great work flexibility and independence. We can set our own work hours and location, often receiving a higher income compared to an employee, and we get to decide the type of clients to work for and the projects to take on.¹ But is it all “fun and games”?

Freelancing generally implies working remotely from a home office, often alone, even before the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, downsides related to potential mental health

issues due to isolation and lack of social interaction, or troubles in separating work and personal life, do not come as fresh news. Nowadays, with the rise of remote working,² companies are better equipped and used to remote collaborators, which makes virtual meetings a lot more productive and, overall, a new natural way of working. Moreover, companies are realising the potential of using freelancers to get work done, and that full-time, in-house staff isn't always a requirement.

Therefore, apart from remote working and the recent pandemic, what are in fact the challenges faced by a freelance medical writer? Besides all the pros and cons, what are the day-to-day obstacles that are different in the lives of those who work with no permanent work attachment? Here we provide some food for thought.

Uncertainty about having enough work

Whether you are an experienced or a beginner freelancer, one must make peace with the ups and downs of client work, which means a varied income. We may be lucky enough to have clients on a retainer that help ensure a regular amount of monthly income, but this may come to an end or fall short of our income needs. At some point, the amount of work we get depends on how much work we do to get it.

Securing consistent work and interesting writing opportunities requires resilience and hard work. Developing our own marketing plan, focused on our client's needs, and our thoughts on how our work can benefit them are key. Once we have identified our key competencies and established business goals, it becomes easier to market ourselves and attract the clients we want. Meanwhile, building a strong network through colleagues and professional associations like EMWA is a great way to get ourselves well known in the field and for more clients to find us through referrals.³

Having a lot more work than one can handle

On the flip side, and if we do things right, we may find ourselves in the exact opposite situation: having more work than we can handle.

One of the things that we need to learn is that sometimes we need to say “no” and take on some strategies to preserve our personal life and work balance, and consequently, keep our mental health intact.⁴

While this is a crucial aspect of freelancing, achieving it can be challenging. That's why we must consider several factors before making decisions. Distinguishing a good project opportunity from a bad one is an essential skill to acquire. In a good opportunity, the medical writer and the client should be aligned, with common expectations regarding each parties responsibilities. Generally, good opportunities pay well, but deadlines (especially the unreasonable ones) should be considered. Also, when deciding whether a project opportunity is good or bad, it is important to consider potential future referrals or projects that may arise from accepting a project, as well as the opportunity to gain experience in a specific topic.²

A strong network is again beneficial, not only for eventually getting references about a potential client (hence making the wisest decision) but also if referring or outsourcing to colleagues is the only way to help the client get the job done.

Improve/ensure document quality

Quality is paramount in the world of medical writing, especially if we want to work on the best project opportunities. A common challenge faced by freelance medical writers is the need to balance multiple projects simultaneously. This can be overwhelming at times and result in a decreased focus on each individual project. As a result, the quality of the documents produced may suffer. In addition, tight deadlines can create extra pressure to produce high-quality documents quickly, which can lead to mistakes and oversights. Despite these challenges, there are multiple strategies to improve the overall

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An effective way to improve document quality is to create a clear and detailed plan that outlines the specific requirements of each project. This can help to ensure that all necessary information is included and that the document is organised in a logical and easy-to-follow manner.

It is also important to make sure we are meeting our own and our client's quality standards. For instance, editing tools can help us identify grammar mistakes and save us a lot of time when proofreading documents. Most of them provide vocabulary solutions that can help clarify content and even reduce word count if needed.

Finally, a strong network of trustworthy fellow medical writers may also come in handy when it comes to proofreading and scrutinising documents. By collaborating with other

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professionals, we can leverage their expertise and ensure that the documents produced are of the highest possible quality.

Training and keeping up-to-date

In freelance medical writing, staying up to date with the latest research and trends is critical for success. All medical fields and our profession are constantly evolving, new discoveries are made every day, and it is up to us to reach out and obtain this knowledge.

To stay on top of one's game, we must be committed to ongoing professional development. This can include attending EMWA conferences, relevant workshops and webinars, and training sessions. Many other professional organisations, found online, also offer certification programs that can help us progress in training, gain expertise, and

stay up to date on best practices.

Another key aspect of staying up-to-date is reading relevant literature, guidelines, updates, and relevant standard operations procedures (SOP). We should make a habit of regularly reviewing academic journals and other publications to stay current on the latest research and trends in the field. It is crucial that we set aside dedicated time, such as 30 minutes per day or a morning each week, to fit reading into our tight schedules. Also, using technology to our advantage, such as listening to audiobooks or podcasts on relevant materials while commuting or doing other tasks, can be a smart approach.

Financial management

As freelance medical writers, we are responsible for managing our own finances, which can be a daunting task. This includes everything from setting rates and invoicing clients, to managing taxes and retirement planning.

One way to overcome this challenge is to



educate ourselves on basic financial principles as well as to seek advice from fellow freelancers and professionals in the finance field. Since all countries have different policies when it comes to setting up or being self-employed, understanding the rules in our own country is key to ensuring our freelance business runs smoothly. This can include hiring an accountant to help with taxes and budgeting. As freelance workers, we should also be diligent in tracking our expenses and income, so we can make informed decisions about pricing and invoicing.

Notably, one's experience will play an important role in finding strategies to quote for projects, and these are bound to evolve with your increased work experience. For example, lower prices and more time invested at the beginning of your career will eventually evolve to increasing or maintaining prices, but using less time to complete a project.

It is also wise to set aside funds for unexpected expenses and emergencies. This can involve establishing an emergency savings fund or subscribing to an insurance plan to protect us against unforeseen events such as illness or injury.

Lack of benefits

The lack of access to traditional employee benefits such as retirement plans, health/professional insurance, paid time off, or sick leave can make it difficult for us to manage our personal and professional lives and can have a huge impact on our overall job satisfaction.

One way to address this challenge is to seek

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out alternative benefits. For example, we can search for indemnity insurance plans provided by professional organisations, or eventually partner with other freelancers to create a shared retirement plan. Another option is to negotiate with clients for benefits such as paid time off or professional insurance. While this may not be possible in all cases, it is definitely worth exploring. Forward thinking and putting money aside so holiday time does not come as an additional stress because we are not getting paid can also be helpful, as well as asking other freelancers how they deal with this situation.

Overall, while the lack of benefits is probably the most significant challenge one can face, careful planning, by considering all the expenses when quoting projects, and diligence can help us save up more money and enjoy a successful and fulfilling career as freelance medical writers.

Given the importance of this topic, in 2021, EMWA members were asked to participate in a salary and compensation survey. The results were published in 2022,⁵ aiming to provide some guidance on this matter for medical writers, both company employees and freelancers.

Final thoughts

Freelancing can be a profitable and rewarding way of working, but it doesn't come without its challenges. Here, we list just some of the challenges we have faced during our journey as freelance medical writers and that we work tirelessly to overcome. What about you? Don't let these challenges overwhelm you, speak to other freelancers who can offer advice. We would love

to hear from you about how you have tackled your own challenges. Please share your experience with us by reaching out to the email address provided at the beginning of this article

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Disclaimers

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

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