

Soft skills needed for freelance medical writers

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Abstract

Every professional needs to develop a set of hard skills and soft skills to grow and prosper in a designated field, and freelance medical writers are no exception. However, freelancing requires a unique combination of skills, given the independence and self-motivation required for continued success not just as a writer but as an entrepreneur. These skills include client communication, networking, leadership, ingenuity, problem solving, time management, and finally, optimism and resilience. Freelancers must continually strive to perfect these soft skills if they want to remain at the top of their game, achieve their goals, and maintain personal growth and professional freedom. This article will discuss these soft skills and how to optimise them for your freelance career.

Introduction

Successful freelance medical writers aren't simply a sum of their writing abilities, research techniques, and in-depth knowledge of science and medicine. These hard skills may help them break into the field, get a little work here and there, and survive just enough to keep their fledgling career afloat. However, it's not until they start to sharpen their entrepreneurial soft skills that their medical writing business begins to grow and flourish, attracting high-paying clients that continually send them the work they love doing.

Unlike hard skills that require technical training and certificates, soft skills are more like personality traits you develop from experiences throughout your life. Not everyone is blessed with skills to create and manage a thriving business; most freelancers need to work hard to

attain and perfect those skills.

Think of how many medical writers you know who tried the freelancing gig and decided it wasn't right for them. They headed back to full-time jobs, still as medical writers, but where their responsibility was writing, not running a business. They preferred working on their collaboration and teamwork skills as employees rather than working on all the skills it takes to keep a business running smoothly as entrepreneurs. Apart from teamwork and collaboration skills, entrepreneurial medical writers may also need many other soft skills, to grow and nurture a thriving business that continually brings them multiple referrals and glowing testimonials. In this article, I will give you my insights into the soft skills I believe are key to growing your business as a freelance medical writer.

Stellar client communication

It seems as though good communication would be an obvious skill for freelance writers to possess, since writing is communicating. While that's true, writing could be considered a hard skill, while strong communication with clients is a soft skill. This skill could be optimised in the following ways:

- Asking the right and precise questions and actively listening during the first meeting will give you information about what is expected, what is the timeline for deliverables, when they want updates, what are the quality standards, hard deadlines, etc.
- Defining everything upfront will help you create a professional, killer proposal, give you a clear direction on what to do and when to do it, and ultimately give your client the product they envisioned.
- Providing your clients with clarity and transparency throughout the project will keep them happy and ensure you're first on the list when the next project comes up.

Networking

Veteran freelancers will be the first to voice their opinion that developing networking skills is imperative when growing a business. This might make all you introverts cringe, but without a strong network and meaningful connections with

other freelancers, you may find it difficult to grow your fledgling business.

Newer writers often think building connections with others in the medical writing business, particularly in their niche, is counter-intuitive: Those other writers are competing for the same business, right? When you start freelancing, you'll soon discover there is enough business to go around, and the others in your network are happy to recommend you to the clients they are too busy to take on.

Building connections with other writers and potential clients takes practice and effort, but it becomes more manageable as your network grows. There are some proven strategies new freelance medical writers can implement to produce a strong and viable network. Here are a couple of strategies to get started:



- Informational interviews are a good way for new freelancers to meet those more seasoned in the medical writing business. Many people find it daunting to reach out to someone they don't know and ask for a video call, but the more calls you make, the easier it gets. You will discover that many other freelancers were in your position at one time and are happy to lend the same advice that helped them launch their businesses and find success in the profession they love.
- Another way to make essential connections and grow your networking skills is to join organisations like EMWA and the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA). Besides a long list of membership benefits, they also have local chapters and national networking events where you can make irreplaceable contacts; Peter Llewellyn presents an overview of such networking groups in his article in this issue on p. 36. Attending in-person events can be intimidating, but once

you get comfortable, you'll start looking forward to them rather than dreading them.

Leadership

Not everyone is a born leader, but it's a skill you can learn and develop as a freelancer.

A great leader possesses multiple hard and soft skills that take time and experience to perfect. Leadership skills include decisiveness and taking responsibility for the decisions you make. It also includes great communication and team-building skills. Clients will want to work with you when they know you can take command of a project from start to finish, and they won't have to worry about the quality of work or whether you will meet the deadline.

Being a leader also means you enjoy sharing your leadership experience to create other great freelancing leaders. The longer you are freelancing in the medical writing business with success, the more other writers will look to you for guidance. You could share this guidance by

participating in mentoring programs, creating courses for new writers, presenting educational webinars, or speaking at networking events.

Ingenuity and problem-solving

Ingenuity is an extraordinary skill that requires you to be creative, imaginative, and innovative; it will help you find effective solutions to problems in your business, with your clients, and with your writing.

When you work in an office, there are co-workers to bounce ideas off and daily meetings to go over the expectations and details of projects. As a freelancer, you have to figure out a lot of the aspects of a project on your own. Yes, you want to keep the communication lines open with your client to ensure you're on the right track, but you can't call them every day with endless questions because you're not sure what you're doing. The reason they hired a freelancer was to simplify their job and not to have to give daily direction.



You will inevitably receive an offer to do a project that pays well that you've never done before. Rather than turning it down, get your problem-solving skills in gear and use ingenuity to figure out how to get it done. You know you can learn a new skill quickly, and if you have a great network to lean on, you can ask other freelancers for tips on how to do it. Great freelancers don't give up; they figure it out.

Time management

Of all the soft skills you possess and continue to work on, time management probably has the greatest impact on your income. After all, time is money.

You should be able to estimate how much time it will take to complete a project, to provide an accurate proposal to the client. You need to stay on schedule and meet deadlines. If you take longer than expected, you'll lose money. Taking too much time with one project will also take you away from others, which could force you past deadlines. Either way, you risk losing income and future business.

Creating and following daily or weekly schedules can help solve some of your time management problems. Having a schedule can help you track how long certain projects take. You can also flag deadlines. That way, you don't overlook a project due in two days, knowing you have four days' worth of work left to do on it.

Creating schedules also means you're able to set boundaries with clients. Remember, you became a freelancer so that you would be the boss. If your client starts demanding more of your time, you have to be able to say no, particularly when it cuts time short for your other projects and clients.

You also want to include time for yourself and your family in your daily and weekly schedules. Your business is essential but so is your personal and mental health. Time management is a skill that takes some practice, but once you have mastered it, your freelancing business will be much more enjoyable for you and your family. Also, your clients will find you a joy to work with.

Optimism and resilience

I thought it would be best to pair optimism with

resilience because you'll have difficulty building resilience without optimism when times get tough. When you're a freelance writer, you will inevitably face adversity or lulls in your business. Undoubtedly, it takes practice and freelancers need optimism to deal with adversity and resilience to remain optimistic when things aren't going well.

When you are an optimist, it means you can send 60 cold email pitches in three days and feel triumphant when only one of them replies with a Zoom invitation from the director of communications. Believing that one reply is better than none is genuine optimism.

Resilience comes into play when you get on the Zoom call with the Director of Communications only to hear your writing isn't what they're looking for right now. When you click

"End Call" and close your laptop, the familiar feelings of failure will undoubtedly fill your head. Then comes the imposter syndrome to remind you that you don't have the skills to make a living as a writer, that you certainly aren't cut out to run your own business. Imposter syndrome likes to strike at your lowest and loneliest times, making resilience one of the most challenging soft skills to master. You can't become resilient without experiencing failure and you can't fight

imposter syndrome until you know what it is. As the old saying goes, "Keep your friends close and your enemies closer". Imposter syndrome is the enemy and when you know it well you can fight back hard. Instead of letting it fill your head after hearing your writing isn't quite what the

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company is looking for right now, you can click "End Call," close your laptop, drink a cup of tea, take a break, and start pitching again. Your resilience will kick the syndrome's butt, leaving *it* feeling like a failure and *you* the champion.

Freelancers must learn to develop optimism and resilience on their own. It's not like working as a writer in a large agency where you have co-workers to pick you up after a failure, dust you off, and tell you, "You got this. We know you'll get it right next time!" When you're a freelancer, you must pick yourself up, try again, and not give up. When you learn that the best part of failure is how much you will enjoy success when you find it, you've learned the irreplaceable skills of optimism and resilience.

Conclusion: Success with soft skills

Good writing, grammar, SEO practices, marketing, and accounting are important hard skills for freelance writers to master. However, refining your soft skills will take your business to the next level by helping you gain and retain clients, create a network of meaningful connections, achieve personal growth, and ultimately enjoy the freedom you deserve as a successful entrepreneur.

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