

The need for community:

The importance of networking as a freelance medical writer

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Abstract

Community and networking activity can really help when you are a freelancer.

Who do you turn to when it all gets too much? Can someone, anyone, who understands your challenges, offer a sympathetic ear and help to work out a solution?

Where do clients magically appear from? Are they all lovely to work with, let alone grateful? Do you understand the contracts they ask you to sign? Have you Professional Indemnity and other insurances (do you need them anyway)? What about taxes? Do you need an accountant? Who deals with invoices (in and out) and chases money when needed? Who helps when the laptop stops working, the software needs updating, or the client imposes their own IT systems on you? Remember that training your previous employer provided – how do you stay current now? So many practical questions. Read on for inspiration and support from across the global community of freelance medical writers.

Here's a short story...

Long, long ago, working life was much simpler, freelance medical writers were scarcer than they are today, and work assignments could have been agreed to during a quick phone call. Here in Oxfordshire, several local freelance writers and editors would meet occasionally for coffee, cake, and gossip. I doubt

they talked much about work. They were friends who had worked together and now simply stayed in touch. One day, however, someone mentioned how they were fed up chasing overdue payments from a particular client. It turned out, they all had the same problem with the same client. The next day, the company in question heard from all of them and promptly paid up, rather than risk losing their services forthwith!

I've often quoted that story to make a simple point. A freelance medical writer is running a business. To run a business successfully, you need to act like one. Invest in your business, in yourself.

As a freelancer, you will confidently wear many hats, but you will need help, at least sometimes. It helps to have someone on your side.

The benefits of networking ...

I asked my new intern to imagine they are a freelance medical writer and to describe to other medical writers the benefits of networking. Here's what they wrote:

"As a freelance medical writer, networking can be a crucial aspect of your success in the field. There are several benefits to building and maintaining a strong network of contacts within the medical writing community:

1. **Opportunities for collaboration:** Networking can help you find potential collaborators and co-authors for future projects. Working with other writers can help you gain new perspectives and ideas, and can also help you build your portfolio and reputation.
2. **Industry insights:** By connecting with other medical writers, you can gain access to insider knowledge and information about the industry. You can learn about new trends and technologies and stay up-to-date with the latest standards and regulations.
3. **Client acquisition:** Building a strong network can also help you find new clients and

opportunities for work. Your network can help you get your name out there and make new connections that can lead to new projects and income.

4. **Professional development:** Networking can also help you grow as a professional. By connecting with others in the field, you can learn new skills, gain new knowledge, and stay motivated and inspired.
5. **Support system:** Finally, having a network of contacts within the medical writing community can provide you with a supportive community. You can turn to

others for advice, feedback, and encouragement, and can build relationships that can last a lifetime.

In conclusion, networking can be an invaluable tool for freelance medical writers. By taking the time to build and maintain a strong network, you can take your career to the next level and enjoy all the benefits that come with being part of a supportive and dynamic community."

I couldn't write it better myself. So, full marks to ChatGPT!

It turns out the world is full of freelance medical writers. Many are happy to meet occasionally for coffee, cake, and gossip, maybe locally in-person or maybe online across time zones. And many happily support each other in an ever-more complicated business world.

If I search for "freelance medical writer" on LinkedIn – always a great place to start looking for people – I find more than 100,000 names, obviously too many to make friends with all at once, but a useful reminder that there are plenty out there.

A sensible place to start, then, is by looking for the communities of most interest.

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The more formal...

To state the obvious, the publisher of this journal, the European Medical Writers Association (EMWA), which currently boasts more than 1,000 members from 39 different countries (including 12 countries outside Europe), already provides a host of opportunities to build a relevant professional network. You can attend annual conferences and educational workshops and participate in a wealth of online activity. EMWA's Freelance Forum, chaired by **Laura Kehoe**, provides a perfect meeting point for anyone who freelances in and around medical writing.

Looking around, it's easy to find other large, international professional membership organisations, such as The American Medical Writers Association (AMWA), The Australasian Medical Writers Association (AMWA), The Chartered Institute of Editing and Proofreading (CIEP), and The International Society for Medical Publication Professionals (ISMPP) to name but a few. All welcome new members from anywhere and all offer a range of valuable opportunities to

learn, to meet, and to share experiences with other like-minded freelancers. To state another obvious point, though, they each have a different focus, whether that is their primary geographical scope or their specialist discipline, and will suit some individuals but not others.

Other much smaller groups also offer interesting paid-for networking opportunities for subscribers. My own MedComms Workbook for freelancers comes into that category.

Another is The Anthill, run by **Abigale Miller** in Canada. Abigale writes, "The core Anthill community is a paid membership format that includes access to our online community platform and regular events like work sprints, weekly planning calls, book clubs, study sessions, and more. Being in The Anthill provides some of the benefits of being in an office, especially having colleagues to chat with, learn from, and troubleshoot with. It's possible to make deep, trusting relationships with fellow writers who understand how medical writing works. We cater mostly to freelancers, but around 25% of our members are full-time employees who are either

thinking of moving to freelance or who want some more connection beyond their company."

The less formal...

What about simply sticking with the idea of informal coffee, cake, and gossip with like-minded folks?

Kathryn White has been a freelance medical writer for many years in the UK and early on saw the value in meeting with other freelancers. Kathryn began organising small, informal local meetings, sometimes inviting additional speakers to join them. Starting with known friends and over time attracting other participants as word spread, the group remained active during pandemic lockdowns and beyond. She writes, "My lovely group of fellow writers has helped me keep my sanity – knowing I'm not alone in the issues I face as a business owner and medical writer is a comfort. The feedback I often receive during or after our meet-ups or Zoom calls is: "Phew, it's good to know it's not just me!"

Over the years I've encouraged many freelancers to start their own local activities. Some

kept going, many didn't! It takes perseverance and some luck along the way, but the rewards are there for everyone. Can you find a group that suits you? If not, how about starting something yourself?

For this article I sought – and found – inspiration from across the international community of freelance medical writers.

Corinne Swainger organises an informal group in Northwest (NW) London. In practice, several members of the group travel into London to meet. That's maybe something to do with the fact that evening meetings are arranged every 3 to 4 months at different local/regional pubs and restaurants. They are convivial affairs. Corinne writes, "We all agree that we're more likely to mix personally and professionally as part of a small, 'in-person' group, versus a large in-person group, or an online group. At the NW London meetings, we usually have a good laugh and enjoy the chance to discuss issues that may concern some members."

In Yorkshire, **Vicki Evans** counts freelancers and employees amongst their group. Vicki writes, "The group is more than just work, not only have we developed friendships over the years, we also support each other with work, juggling family time, passing work between us and recommendations and basically, just being there for each other."

Of course, technology now means there are no borders. As an early adopter of Zoom, which proved transformative for my activities, I started

arranging online video meetings of the New Zealand Medical Writers. I was in Oxford, late at night with a whiskey in hand, chatting to participants from across New Zealand and beyond, while they enjoyed morning coffees. Clearly, though, it was best organised locally. **Amanda Xiaoqing Mao** from Australia helped pick up the baton from me after a couple of years and the activity expanded within the region. She writes, "There is a gap in the MedComms community in the Asia Pacific region – on the one hand, to stay up to date with the latest trends, best practices, and global developments in the field; and on the other hand, to build relationships, exchange ideas, and learn from one another. Asia Pacific (APAC) MedComms Network was established to fill the gap."

Across the community, approaches vary widely...

From the USA, **Carla Eisenstein** created The Coffee Chat Group as a social space for medical writers to connect with each other. She writes, "I make sure and meet everyone before they join. I want the group to be a good mix of beginners, midcareer writers, and veteran writers. Freelancers and employees are welcome in the group."

After a conversation at an EMWA event in

2016, **Carola Krause** and **Paul Wafula** decided to expand informal networking activities among medical writers and communicators in the Berlin area in Germany. They write, "Initially, the objective of the Medical Writers' informal gathering, Berlin and Brandenburg Group was simple but effective; to create an opportunity to help and support each other in solving daily challenges affecting freelancers in their businesses, or even simply to just interact and get to know colleagues in our local areas."

The Scientific and Medical Writers Network (SMWN) organises face-to-face and online networking and skill-sharing events for science

and medical writers in Benelux. Online events are also open to those outside Benelux. Co-founder **Jackie Johnson** writes, "The value of our network is in the members. We are a very close-knit group (considering we have over 100 members), and it's common to share jobs, best practices, tools, and tips within the group. The face-to-face events are a great way to engage with our local community, keep in touch, and supplement the bi-annual

EMWA events at a much lower cost."

The Swiss Medical Writers & Communicators group is a private LinkedIn group co-founded by **Laura Kehoe** and **Raquel Billiones** to bring together the many medical writers and

These local and international networks and groups provide an essential platform for medical writers to talk, share knowledge, and gossip.

Groups to join

- **The American Medical Writers Association (AMWA):** <https://www.amwa.org/>
- **The Anthill:** <https://the-anthill.mn.co/>
- **Asociación Española de Redactores de Textos Médicos (AERTeM):** <https://redactoresmedicos.es/>
- **Associação Portuguesa de Medical Writers (APMW):** <http://apmw.pt/> or <https://www.linkedin.com/company/apmw/>
- **The Australasian Medical Writers Association (AMWA):** <https://www.medicalwriters.org/>
- **Chartered Institute of Editing and Proofreading (CIEP):** <https://www.ciep.uk/>
- **The Coffee Chat Group:** <https://www.linkedin.com/groups/13912874/>
- **EMWA's Freelance Forum:** <https://www.emwa.org/freelance/>
- **Freelance medical writers based in UK & Ireland:** <https://www.linkedin.com/groups/12729342/>
- **Grupo Sudamericano de Medical Writing (GSMW):** <https://www.linkedin.com/groups/9176993/>
- **International Society for Medical Publication Professionals (ISMPP):** <https://www.ismpp.org/>
- **Medical Writer's Hub France:** <https://www.linkedin.com/groups/5173211/>
- **Medical Writers' informal gathering, Berlin and Brandenburg Group:** <https://www.linkedin.com/groups/8553972/>
- **Medical writing for beginners and beyond (free resources):** <https://www.linkedin.com/groups/9110350/>
- **Science and Medical Writers (SMWN):** <https://www.linkedin.com/groups/12126629/>
- **South African Medcomms Professionals Network:** <https://www.linkedin.com/groups/12703690/>
- **Swiss Medical Writers & Communicators:** <https://www.linkedin.com/groups/9071340/>



communicators in Switzerland. They write, “The group currently has 73 members, [is] free to join, [and] members are either invited or request to join. Once a member, people are free to post questions or interesting items to others, and after two successful face-to-face meetings, we’re trying to arrange more throughout Switzerland.”

In South Africa, **Rebecca Tadokera** has been reaching out to other writers. “As a freelancer working in a place where medcomms is still very new, I had to rely heavily on my network. Most of what I know now I have learnt through my networks. The majority of my clients have been referrals through my networks, both national and international. I have seen first-hand the value of networking, that is why I am trying to build a community of freelancer medcomms professionals in South Africa.”

A need for national activity...

Language is often a driving force for the development of national initiatives, but also the desire to champion local policies.

Amy Whereat writes that she “started the French medical writers’ group as an informal social networking group among a group of

English-speaking medical writers in France, who would meet regularly in Paris. The group soon gained attention from French-speaking writers and became the Medical Writer’s Hub France. The hub united a heterogeneous group of freelance and pharma medical writers, medcomms writers, translators, and medical communication activists.”

Interestingly, Amy goes on to explain, with **Trevor Stanbury** and **Marie-Odile Faure**, “we made the decision to develop a more formal Association, known as The French League of Writers (FLOW), in order to help make the medical writing profession become more visible, solve national problems as a group, and to support a growing list of local projects the group wants to achieve.”

In Portugal, **Maria Almeida** has been involved in establishing the Associação Portuguesa de Medical Writers (APMW). It started as an informal meeting, but it was soon decided that something more formal would be useful. Face-to-face and online events are conducted in Portuguese. Maria writes, “this group is a way to help people come into the profession, for medical writers in Portugal to

meet each other, and for everyone to learn more.”

Evguenia Alechine started an informal Spanish-speaking medical writing group mainly for people in South/Latin America. Grupo Sudamericano de Medical Writing (GSMW) runs as a LinkedIn group. Evguenia writes, “The South/Latin American medical writing scene is completely different from those currently existing in North America or Europe. There is still not that much awareness about medical writing as a career opportunity in our countries, so our primary focus is to increase that awareness and offer both networking and training opportunities to group members.”

The Asociación Española de Redactores de Textos Médicos (AERTeM) is a not-for-profit organisation initiated in 2005, and currently has a membership of 143 medical writers from Spanish-speaking countries, mainly Spain. Although the association is open to anyone, 70% of members are freelancers. **Matias Rey** writes, “Our association’s *raison d’être* is to offer support to Spanish-speaking medical writers by actively working to stimulate the correct usage of Spanish in scientific publications, and to defend the dignity of this professional activity by

People to meet

- **Evguenia Alechine**: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/evgueniaalechine/>
- **Maria Almeida**: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/maryjohn75/>
- **Raquel Billiones**: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/raquelbilliones/>
- **Laura C. Collada Ali**: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/laura-c-collada-ali-6a9a4625/>
- **Virginia Chachati**: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/virginiachachati/>
- **Johanna Chester**: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/johanna-chester-34a55b4a/>
- **Carla Eisenstein**: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/carla-eisenstein/>
- **Vicki Evans**: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/vickievansfreelancer/>
- **Marie-Odile Faure**: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/marie-odile-faure-7b51336a/>
- **Rachel Hassan**: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/rachelhassan/>
- **Jackie Johnson**: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/johnsonjackie/>
- **Laura Kehoe**: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/laura-a-kehoe-phd-93893982/>
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- **Amanda Xiaoqing Mao**: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/amandamao/>
- **Abigale Miller**: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/abigalemiller/>
- **Matias Rey**: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/matias-rey-carrizo/>
- **Andrea Rossi**: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/andrea-rossi-ab95577/>
- **Trevor Stanbury**: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/trevor-stanbury-b95388100/>
- **Corinne Swainger**: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/corinneswainger/>
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- **Paul Wafula**: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/paul-wafula-phd-b301a15/>
- **Amy Whereat**: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/amy-whereat-3b7550a/>
- **Kathryn White**: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/kathrynewhite/>





abolishing ghostwriting and fostering the public acknowledgement of medical writing professionals. The main strength of the AERTeM lies in the Executive Committee's (past and present) efforts to offer to our members an array of tools for them to become the medical writers they want to be."

Andrea Rossi, Laura C. Collada Ali, and Johanna Chester are creating a national network of medical writing professionals in Italy to reach out to aspiring and current medical writers, scientific communicators, university researchers, clinicians, and scientific journalists living and working in Italy or beyond. Various aspects of the medical writing profession, both from international and national perspectives, will be openly debated in Italian. They write, "A hardy and active network offers strength in numbers, and for common objectives, such as promoting the medical writing profession and ever improving the level of national recognition of medical writers' contribution to science, national initiatives in the local language, can and should be exploited."

EMWA is helping to start the Italian network activity and is interested in supporting more such national initiatives. Enquiries to Head Office are welcomed.

Something for everyone...

Despite all this activity, nothing ever quite suits everyone. Here are two more, very different, examples of newer groups.

After meeting at an in-person MedComms Networking event last year, **Rachel Hassan** and **Mina Varsani** set up a new dedicated LinkedIn group for freelance medical writers based in the

UK and Ireland. Rachel writes, "I think shared knowledge and community are so important in an industry like ours. I couldn't find any groups that were private and with only freelance medical writers. I decided to set one up." Mina agreed it would be useful to have a group more specifically tailored to their needs, and writes, "It's been so helpful having a group of friendly freelancers to ask questions or to share experiences with. It really

helps to break the isolation of freelancing."

Virginia Chachati also started a LinkedIn group, little more than a year ago, and it has already grown to more than 2,000 members, Medical writing for beginners and beyond (free resources). She writes, "I wanted to really celebrate the journey we take to become medical writers, and also work together to network, make valuable personal and human connections, improve how much we charge for medical writing services, discuss the best way to produce medical writing content, and answer practical questions. I wanted to create a supportive and "safe" space for people to discuss their concerns without fear of being judged out in the open. And people could use the space to connect with others, find job opportunities, try out different paths in medical writing, and then pursue whatever suits them most – by making an informed decision!"

Conclusion...

My aim in this article was to highlight the benefits and opportunities out there for freelance medical writers to network. The medical writing community is expanding globally, as the profession is getting more and more established. These local and international networks and groups provide an essential platform for medical writers to talk, share knowledge, and gossip. There does seem to be something for everyone. But, if you're still not finding quite what you're looking for, then set something up yourself. Let me know and I'll happily help spread the word! Reach out on LinkedIn and let's help each other. It's good to talk.

Acknowledgements

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this topic. Kudos to the freelancers who have been quoted in the final text here, and my best wishes to them in their efforts to encourage networking amongst freelancers across our community. Why not reach out to them? They'd be happy to hear from you.

There does seem to be something for everyone. But, if you're still not finding quite what you're looking for, then set something up yourself.

Disclaimers

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

Disclosures and conflicts of interest

One of the MedComms Networking services run by the author is the MedComms Workbook, a paid-for subscription service for specialist MedComms freelancers, such as medical writers.



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