

An interview with Julia Cooper:

Insights and experiences from leading a global medical writing team

Zsuzsa Csik

Freelancer, Vinhedo-SP, Brazil

doi: 10.56012/wagk7798

Correspondence to:

Zsuzsa Csik

csikzsuzsi@gmail.com

Abstract

Julia Cooper, PhD, is the Corporate Vice President and Head of Medical Writing Services at Parexel. In this interview, she shares her insights on the different aspects of leading a global medical writing team and on how she and her team at Parexel approach training, quality control, conflict management, communication, and community-building. She also discusses overcoming challenges, building a united global team, and ensuring consistent, high-quality work throughout the world. (All sections in italics below are Julia Cooper's words).

Leading a global medical writing team is an inspiring and demanding role filled with challenges and rewards. In a conversation with Julia Cooper PhD, Corporate Vice President and head of Medical Writing Services at Parexel, we gain insights into this position's intricacies and the strategies that lead to success. (See Figure 1). Julia emphasises the role of shared values in forging a team, regardless of geographical separation. Creating a safe space for learning, utilising peer development programmes, fostering open communication, resolving conflicts, and nurturing a sense of community and belonging are crucial in cultivating a thriving working environment.

"We're one team, we're all trying to achieve the same objectives, so let's treat each other in the way that we would want to be treated ourselves. We can achieve our goals working with colleagues we enjoy spending time with."

From researcher to global leader

Julia chose to give me the short version of her career path. Walking me through the full version of how she attained a leading position at one of the major CROs might have taken up all our time.

Like many in the field, Julia did not plan to become a medical writer but started in academic research after graduating from university. However, she "always tries to be open to new avenues that she hadn't considered before," as she puts it. Soon, Julia discovered medical writing via a job advertisement and made her shift into the field. Later, she moved to Parexel as a Senior Medical Writer. A series of opportunities eventually led her to manage the European medical writing team, and a couple of years later she was invited to lead the global team.

Today, she manages nearly 300 employees within her direct team, and about 800 employees are involved with medical writing within the company.

Her exciting and dynamic career path aligns well with her personal interests. As she says, *"I love to travel, experience new cultures, meet new people during my travels and, above all, to experience the local food."*

Working in four different countries – Germany, UK, China, and Ireland – and getting involved in several professional organisations – including EMWA, AMWA, and the China Medical Writing Community – has allowed Julia to gain unique and broad perspectives on the role of the medical writer globally, her team's cultural differences and similarities, and much more.

Medical writing around the world

Over time, medical writing has evolved, and so has its perception – a process that spans the globe, independent of culture or location.

"I found that the biggest difference [in the perception of the medical writer] is probably

between teams who have worked with medical writers before and those who haven't... It was less based on cultural differences, more on the experience and understanding of what a medical writer can bring to the team."

As clinical trials became more complex, the preparation of a protocol or a final study report, for example, often turned into a more challenging and intricate task. Simultaneously, timelines shortened, and the pressure grew. *"That has made the role of the medical writers increasingly multifaceted,"* says Julia.

Expertise and efficiency are sought and appreciated in regulatory document preparation, so medical writers are now valued members of most teams who need to prepare these documents. Robust medical writer training includes a significant investment in acquiring the hard and soft skills needed to deliver high-quality documents, enabling the rest of the team to focus on their own competencies and contributions.

"They [the teams] now understand what medical writers do. They view a writer as someone who is going to develop a quality clinical study report or the final deliverable per

regulatory requirements. Because medical writers regularly prepare these documents, experienced writers know how to do this most efficiently."

The skills and mindset of a medical writer who became a global leader

When I asked Julia about the skills she transferred from her role as a medical writer into her leadership career, she listed key competencies. Besides the evident writing skills, she highlighted organisation, project planning, building relationships, and communicating with people.

The principles used to manage a large regulatory document project can be extrapolated into different scenarios that leaders need to address, for example, when setting up a new



Figure 1. Five key points of Julia's insights of leading a global medical writing team

group utilising a global team or deploying a new technology.

“Being able to break goals down into smaller pieces and then map out the process, how you’re going to get there, and what the timeline looks like... being able to negotiate with people and help them to reach a consensus... It’s these organizational, communication, and listening skills that I learned as a medical writer that are equally necessary to succeed as a global leader.”

Despite the many skills medical writers already possess when entering management and leadership roles, other skills need to be developed, according to Julia. A leader’s responsibilities extend beyond the operational oversight of the project at hand. They need to look further and set the team up for future progress and success, ensuring the team evolves and adjusts to changes in the industry.

“At the individual level, it’s helping people with development plans so that they continue to develop in their careers, and the team has a bench of evolving talent to meet current and future needs. For the wider team, I need to ensure we regularly evaluate our process and models to maintain high quality and maximum efficiency. To do this effectively, I need to regularly set aside time together with my leadership team to strategise and reevaluate our approach to operational processes, talent development, and

technology. This is particularly important given the fast-paced evolution of AI and other technologies that are influencing our profession.”

Uniting a team with members from all over the map

In addition to supporting individual and team progress, a leader must strive to establish a sense of community within the team. This is easier said than done, especially if the team is spread across different time zones.

At Parexel, leaders invest time and effort to create a community despite geographical dispersion of the team.

“Being united in the purpose of what we’re doing and regularly communicating with the team on the value that medical writing brings, and how that helps to bring medicines to patients faster – that unites us as a community. Getting that message out – that what we’re doing is really important and... to bring our team together regularly to talk about our goals, review our processes and learn from successes while recognizing when a team or a person has done something really well – is also an important way to unite the team and create community.”

In a team, no one is alone

Julia underlines the importance of a team of people with different skills, from entry-level to

experts. Everyone has an important part to play and some of the senior staff act as Julia’s delegate when she is unavailable, or they help to share the leadership workload and perhaps learn a new skill. Whether a leader or an employee, accepting that you can’t do everything by yourself is essential. This philosophy applies at all levels in the Parexel medical writing team.

“We try to make sure that people get to work with colleagues across regions and with various levels of expertise. While we have some teams dedicated to a particular client or a program, where possible, we make sure that people collaborate with their global colleagues. We encourage people to reach out... to ask for help, and it’s almost unknown for those requests... to go unanswered. Somebody within the global team will pitch in... We have regular global and regional meetings, which are all done on Microsoft Teams. Where it’s possible, we also encourage people to come into an office from time to time, but our locations are quite spread out these days, so that’s not always feasible. To foster a sense of belonging, some of our managers will hold informal coffee chats on Microsoft Teams, where people can just dial in and talk about personal topics that we would have shared in the kitchen during the days when we were office-based.”

Training and quality control globally

In addition to maintaining a positive team atmosphere, comprehensive training is also critical for a globally dispersed team. It keeps service quality and regulatory compliance consistently high across the whole team, no matter where the staff is based.

“In our team, everyone follows the same training and development programme, whether document-specific and other technical competencies or soft skills training. It’s also important to apply the training in practical situations with the right level of support from a mentor or line manager. We also take advantage of shadowing opportunities – where an experienced writer will have a less experienced writer working under their guidance on the same program – and this tends to work quite well in medical writing.”

Line managers are closely involved in individual training and supporting progress. They work with their team members to implement development plans that take into account the needs of the business and also map out a route to achieve personal career goals and aspirations.

As performance and quality must achieve the same high standards among team members in different regions, assessment of these aspects is harmonised across the team.

“We’re trying to make sure that everybody has been given the same chances and that their performance is evaluated in the same way as closely as possible. A senior medical writer in Germany is evaluated on the same principles as a senior medical

writer in India or the US, etc... we created skill standards by role to achieve this, which align with job descriptions. They include medical writer competencies tailored to the job title and experience level. Similar skill standards have also been established for supportive roles, e.g., document quality reviewers and document specialists. These are available to everyone in the team so that expectations are clear.”

Managing conflicts in a global team

Despite promoting equality and a sense of belonging, issues and conflict occasionally arise in any team. However, Julia says that potential problems tend to be similar across teams, independent of location and background. As a leader, you need to listen, negotiate, communicate clearly, and put yourself in the others’ shoes to understand where they are coming from. Establishing a safe environment at an early stage, to learn from mistakes and avoid blame, promotes transparency and learning across the team.

Should ethical issues arise, they are addressed with a similar approach: encouraging employees to speak up about their concerns and ensuring that they will be

taken seriously. Surfacing a potential problem early on prevents a more serious one later.

“I haven’t seen so many variations [of ethical issues and other problems] across cultures. The most important thing here is to have an environment where anyone can speak up without retribution if they’re not sure about something ... working in a

global company which has ethical standards and processes around ethics, it’s clear what employees need to do if they are in any doubt about the situation. There are very clear processes and ways to communicate with company experts in these areas.”

A common goal outweighs difficulties

Ultimately, cultural differences and geographical locations influence teamwork and consistent quality only in a limited way.

“Most employees want a job that provides them with career perspectives, and a sense of meaningful work. They want to feel like they’ve done something that added value at the end of the day but also allows them to balance the job with their outside life, whatever that is, be it family, personal interests, or other commitments.”

Our medical writing group understand that patients directly benefit from our work, and this unites the team across the globe. As Julia, an experienced cross-cultural leader of international teams, puts it:

“I think that is really what it’s about: understanding that there’s much more that brings us together than differentiates us and trying to make sure that everyone has comparable opportunities and are treated fairly.”

Disclaimers

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

Disclosures and conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

I think that is really what it’s about: understanding that there’s much more that brings us together than differentiates us.

Author information

Zsuzsa Csik, MD, is a freelance medical writer and an EMWA member since 2022. She is also a physician with years of clinical experience in anaesthesiology and critical care. She is focused on delivering evidence-based medical writing that benefits both healthcare professionals and patients.



Interviewee information

Julia Cooper, PhD, is Corporate Vice President, Head of Global Medical Writing Services at Parexel, and leads a global team of around 270 staff. From 2013–2016, Julia was based in Parexel’s Shanghai office, where she helped set up the China Medical Writers Community. She has held various roles on the EMWA Executive Committee, and currently chairs the AMWA Executives Advisory Council, and is joint interim Treasurer of EMWA. Julia is also a Nick Thompson Fellow.

