

From Portugal to the world: Leveraging remote medical writing for global impact

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Abstract

With the advent of the pandemic, global businesses in medical writing accelerated efforts to hire remote professionals across different countries. Portugal is a fruitful source of talent, yet it remains underrepresented in the medical writing industry. As a medical writer in Portugal, I highlight the practical advantages that make the country an attractive market for hiring remote medical writers and describe how adding Portuguese writers to international teams can offer a blend of talent, cost efficiency, and strategic advantages. While fully recognising that many countries are underrepresented in the medical writing world, I speak here of the benefits of my native country where I have settled my career.

The concept of working from home (WFH) has been around for decades, but it was the COVID-19 pandemic that expanded this practice to many industries. WFH was a necessity during the pandemic years and the multiple confinement periods became a driving force towards a more robust digitalisation and wider adoption of innovative tools for virtual collaboration. The sudden change in circumstances triggered a natural selection process that would, in many ways, test the adaptability of both companies and employees. Only those with the ability to quickly reorganise an office-based structure to a remote and online workforce would thrive. In the medical writing industry, many businesses

decided to extend WFH, once an option for only a few, typically more experienced writers, to the entire workforce, regardless of their experience level. Several companies realised that they could not only effectively manage an online workforce but could also successfully hire new talent regardless of geographic location. And thus, the pandemic brought into play another concept that gained increased momentum during lockdown years: employees working remotely from a country different to the parent company location.

Remote medical writing fosters global businesses

Fast forward a few years, and the discussion around the appropriateness of remote work to each business is very much alive. Some executives argue that, in the absence of pandemic restrictions, it is time to return to the office,¹

whereas others believe that remote work is here to stay.² For the medical writing industry, perhaps the simplest, most influential argument in favour of remote working is that employees like it.^{3,4} Greater flexibility, improved work-life balance, and access to global market networks and career growth opportunities are among the many reasons why working remotely has been embraced by so many writers.³ Furthermore, working with people located in different countries has always been the norm for medical writers: meetings with international clients and project team stakeholders, mentoring less experienced writers or line management of writers working in offices in different countries, etc., are among the many daily activities that have been successfully managed online for a long time. Why not expand this to perform all medical writing activities remotely from a home office in a country of our choice?

Employers of medical writers across the globe are increasingly aware of the impactful advantages of remote work, not only in achieving

and maintaining high employee satisfaction, but also in attracting and retaining new talent. Indeed, in post-pandemic years, remote work has become a driver for business health for multiple reasons. In an increasingly challenging workplace

environment, the more adaptable the teams, the healthier the business. Diverse, cross-cultural teams, with members around the world, provide access to a range of skills and expertise, plus varied perspectives and ideas. Teams with different backgrounds are able to share multiple viewpoints, increasing the likelihood of finding innovative and effective solutions whilst adapting efficiently and better to changing market demands. It is now more common to see medical writing teams, both in contract research organisations (CROs) and pharmaceutical companies, distributed across different countries and

regions – a much-needed mark of survival, progression, and growth after the hardship and constraints of the pandemic.

Think globally, act locally

As mentioned above, remote medical writing teams now support global businesses, and many writers take advantage of remote work to improve their personal and professional lives. More and more, medical writing teams have people located across the globe, and many writers are working remotely from an increasing number of European countries. I choose to work from my home country, Portugal, for several reasons.

Portugal has a safe environment, pleasant weather, amazing food, vibrant cities, serene countryside, and beautiful coastal areas. I would think this country would have a more prominent presence in the medical writing industry, since there are good reasons why Portugal should be an emerging hub for medical writers. However, when it comes to global medical writing, Portugal, like other countries, is still enormously

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underrepresented. As a Portuguese writer, I have frequently pondered why.

I would say this might be mostly due to two significant reasons: Portuguese graduates may large be unaware of scientific careers outside of

academic research, including medical writing; and, being a small country, Portugal often slips under the radar of hiring managers looking for scientific graduates with a talent for writing. As a result, I've made it a mission of mine to connect

potential Portuguese medical writing candidates with those looking to hire new talent for this industry, through increased education and awareness of opportunities within the medical writing industry. This article is a step toward that mission.

Portugal as a hub for medical writers

As we know, English proficiency is a crucial factor in medical writing, not only because most documents are written in English, but also because most teams use it in their routine/daily interactions and communication. According to the worldwide ranking of countries and regions by English skills prepared by the EF English Proficiency Index in 2023, Portugal is ranked in the top 10 global countries with very high proficiency in English. Considering the European countries in the top 10, Portugal is supplanted only by Scandinavian countries (Figure 1).⁵

This makes sense. English has long been taught in Portuguese schools as the preferred foreign language; a growing number of children are now learning English from early preschool years. Furthermore, for historical and political reasons that I will not explore here, books, music and visual entertainment in their original English



Figure 1. Portugal ranks very highly in the Education First English Proficiency Index.⁵

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forms, free of dubbing or translation, have always been available in Portugal. This permanent exposure to the English language is the reason why so many professionals present such a high proficiency level. However, English is not the only language the Portuguese are exposed to throughout their lives. Spanish, French, and Italian share a Latin core with Portuguese, which makes them easy to learn for a Portuguese. Indeed, many professionals invest in their multilingual skills, which can be of tremendous value to establish rapport with international stakeholders and work in projects for global companies. In addition, the cultural compatibility between Portugal and other European and Western countries can lead to smoother integration and collaboration within international teams.

Portugal produces a well-educated workforce. In the last decade, the number of doctorates in Portugal increased by 73%, a number that represents more than 43,000 PhD holders across different fields.⁶ With such an abundant flow of talent, I'm confident that many graduates with PhDs in life sciences and similar fields would have the potential to become medical writers for the pharmaceutical and biotech industry CROs, and other entities.

Another advantage of hiring remotely from Portugal is its geographic location. Expat Empire, a consultancy business focused on helping people move abroad, says about Portugal:

Portugal's position on the western edge of Europe has several advantages when it comes to time. The Portuguese mainland and the island group of Madeira use the same time zone as the United Kingdom throughout the year, which is known as UTC+00:00 (Coordinated Universal Time). Meanwhile, the island group of the Azores is one hour behind at UTC-01:00. This means that a business in Portugal shares business hours with places as far east as Jakarta and Bangkok and as far west as Denver and Calgary, as well as the majority of the world's population in between.⁷

This is extremely convenient when it comes to collaborating with American, European, and even Asian teams. Medical writers based in Portugal are thus very well placed for real-time communication, and can therefore facilitate overlapping working hours, which contributes to "around-the-clock" productivity (working in different time zones allows a continuous

information workflow among writers and stakeholders) and project delivery. The country's strategic location within Europe also provides short travel distances to other key business hubs for occasional in-person meetings, if needed.

Hiring medical writers in Portugal can also be cost efficient. The cost of living in Portugal is relatively lower compared to other European countries. Companies can achieve significant cost savings without compromising on talent and expertise, while maintaining competitive salaries for high-quality work.

Conclusion

Hiring remotely in Portugal offers several compelling advantages for global companies, particularly in industries such as medical writing. However, there is still a long way to go to increase the awareness of medical writing as an exciting and challenging career for Portuguese graduates, while also bringing the attention of hiring managers to a country that promises a vast pool of highly educated and talented candidates. Once this gap is bridged, I see Portugal quickly becoming an emerging hub for remote medical writers in Europe.

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The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and not necessarily shared by Johnson & Johnson Innovative Medicine or EMWA.

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