

# The worldwide landscape of freelance medical writing: Exploring challenges and opportunities

Adriana Rocha,<sup>1</sup> Eleanor Steele,<sup>2</sup>

Laura A. Kehoe<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Freelance Medical & Scientific Writer, Consultant in Medical Communications, Aveiro, Portugal

<sup>2</sup> MedComms Mentor, London, UK

<sup>3</sup> Freelance Medical Communications Specialist & Health Coach, Neuchâtel, Switzerland

doi: 10.56012/zeca2227

## Correspondence to:

Adriana Rocha

adriana@rochamedicalwriting.com

## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the pharmaceutical, biotechnology, and life sciences industries, ultimately affecting associated professionals such as freelance medical writers. Throughout this global event and its aftermath, the market has changed significantly, bringing with it new sets of challenges and opportunities.

In this article, we reflect on how the pandemic affected the industry and the current issues affecting freelance medical writers. We also explore freelancers' opinions on the subject, as provided to us through our webinar and an informal survey and provide possible strategies and approaches to tackle these challenging times.

## Global landscape: 2020 to today

Industry had to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic

The pharmaceutical, biotechnology, and life sciences industries were greatly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and needed to act fast so they could keep going. At the onset of the pandemic in March 2020,<sup>1</sup> there were two major industry priorities: (i) re-allocating resources towards COVID-19 research and development (vaccines) and product manufacturing (testing kits, protection equipment); and (ii) ensuring the workforce could still function under lockdown restrictions, meaning the workplace had to go virtual and people had to adjust to remote work.

This created a high demand in the industry for professionals who could both provide specialised medical writing support for COVID-19 projects and who had experience working remotely. Enter freelance medical writers.

## Specific challenges since 2023

By May 2023, COVID-19 was no longer considered a global health emergency.<sup>2</sup> Now that industry's needs have dwindled, so has the demand for COVID-19-related services, with most healthcare companies re-assessing their priorities and restructuring their business strategies. At first, this affected biotech companies focused almost exclusively on research and/or product development related to COVID-19, leading to mass layoffs.<sup>3</sup> Later, however, major pharmaceutical companies also announced restructuring and cost-cutting initiatives.<sup>4</sup>

Other factors contributed to a post-pandemic market downturn, such as worldwide geopolitical events and investor uncertainty in the face of instability. The original shift to COVID-19-related research delayed other clinical trials and drug approvals, setting the stage for slower industry growth in the long term.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, technology companies rushed to keep up with the demands of the new

virtual workplace and develop transformative digital technologies. The arrival of the artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot ChatGPT took the world by storm.<sup>6</sup> Since its release, the use of AI tools has been a point of contention among medical writing professionals, with some fearing these tools might replace them, while others are optimistic that they will aid and enrich their work.

## What does this mean for freelance medical writers?

Since 2023, industry changes have greatly impacted professionals, and many freelance medical writers have seen significant changes in their own businesses. To form a clearer picture, Peter Llewellyn launched the #MedComms Freelancing Barometer in January 2024 to assess 2023's freelance activities. It received 550 global responses and highlighted clear issues in freelancing work, such as less demand for freelancers in the healthcare industry.<sup>7</sup>

We aimed to expand on this to understand what freelancers are facing in the 2024 market. In July 2024, Adriana Rocha and Eleanor Steele presented *The Worldwide*

*Landscape of Freelance Medical Writing: Exploring Challenges and Opportunities*, a special webinar hosted by Peter Llewellyn<sup>8</sup> to explore the topic of this article. Later that month, we launched an informal survey to ask freelancers what challenges and opportunities they were experiencing in their current work.<sup>9</sup>

Here, we summarise the main opinions gathered from freelancers and, as always, we interpret their responses with caution.

## Challenges

### It's a mixed picture

In general, the responses received from the webinar and informal survey gave a mixed picture. Some freelancers reported no changes to their usual workload and were happy with how

“The work just doesn't seem to be there anymore in the same way it was; previously, I was always busy and had to turn down work all the time without trying.”



the year was panning out, but one responder stated that *“There is a vague sense of uncertainty, which to some extent is part and parcel of freelancing.”* However, many indicated they had faced unusual challenges since 2022, which have continued going into 2024.

#### Fluctuations in workflow

Freelancers recognise that there are usually seasonal peaks and troughs in medical writing, but some indicated that the troughs were more exaggerated this year compared to previous years. Even busy freelancers, who still have a steady flow of work, indicated that they were turning down less work than in previous years, with one stating *“The market seems unpredictable.”* Experienced freelancers who have felt comfortable with years of stable and predictable workloads are now describing periods of feast-or-famine, with one responder stating, *“The work just doesn't seem to be there anymore in the same way it was; previously, I was always busy and had to turn down work all the time without trying.”*

#### Tackling budgets and negotiating contracts

In Peter Llewellyn's January 2024 MedComms barometer survey,<sup>7</sup> the data showed that despite maintaining their rates, nearly half of the freelancers stated their revenue at the end of 2023 was less than expected or predicted due to fewer projects. This trend seems to have continued into 2024, with responders to our survey and informal

conversations with freelancers raising concerns regarding income stability. This brings up the big “B” – Budget! Budget is a recurring theme in the responses we've gathered. Several freelancers indicated that they have lost contracts because their service rates were too high despite maintaining the rates they've had for years and meeting all the client's requirements. What are the expectations of these clients who have a low budget but want an experienced freelance writer with a multitude of skills? Some responders described clients jeopardising the quality of their work by stripping back hours to meet tight budgets.

#### Usual sources drying up

Some freelancers stated that they were experiencing fewer requests from contract research organisations (CROs), agencies, and their previous clients, which spans across both MedComms and regulatory work. There also seems to be a trend in agencies requesting freelancers to work in-house, which in most situations is impractical or not feasible. In addition, some people describe being engaged with recruiters and agreeing to projects

but nothing materialising or, in the reverse scenario, the project expanding but the budget remaining the same. At the same time, some

responders feel that there are more new freelancers in the field, creating even more competition. We currently don't have any quantifiable data on the current number of freelancers today versus a few years ago, but this is an opinion shared by many freelancers, with one stating *“There is definitely more work available than ... when I started freelancing. However, there have been exponentially more freelancers since that time, and the increased competition makes it seem like there is less work available overall.”*

Networking and using professional platforms are usually effective sources for potential jobs, projects, or clients. However, many freelancers indicate that even the jobs and recruiters on LinkedIn have gone quiet, leaving freelancers at a loss as to where to search for new clients. More experienced freelancers, who for

years relied on longtime clients and ex-colleagues from in-house positions, are now finding that these contacts are not able to provide work

*“As my clients recently have tended to be research organisations and direct pharma companies, this has hugely enhanced my client interaction and project management skills compared with freelancing for MedComms agencies, where I often felt hidden from the end client.”*

opportunities anymore. This may be the result of agency mandates stating freelancers can no longer be used or their contacts no longer work at that agency due to business closures or restructuring – some freelancers have even found that their contacts had gone freelance themselves!

**Upskilling and marketing**

Upskilling oneself can be considered both a challenge and an opportunity for a freelancer. Clearly, the role of a medical writer has evolved over the years and, with further advancements in AI and online content optimisation, developing new skills can keep a freelancer ahead of competitors. But experienced freelancers, with years of stability and a constant workflow, are finding themselves in uncharted territory when it comes to developing new tech and business development skills. These freelancers have never had to market and sell themselves to clients and feel daunted, as before the client always came knocking. Some responders indicated that this is a major concern for them and that early-career freelancers skilled in these new technologies are offering lower rates and grabbing the opportunities.

A last point discussed was the shift in working patterns of freelancers, with some freelancers changing to in-house roles (employed) or hybrid roles (e.g., splitting their working time between an employed contract and freelance work). Various factors could be driving this, such as job security, income insecurity, or

exhaustion, from repeatedly trying and failing to acquire and maintain clients. What we do know is that freelancers globally seem to be feeling a sense of uncertainty. So, how do we overcome these challenges? What opportunities and positives can we take from the current situation?

**Opportunities**

**Use quiet times productively**

Rather than viewing quieter times with anxiety, freelancers can use them as valuable opportunities for professional development. After all, fluctuations in workload are part of the medical writing industry. For example, the first quarter of each year is typically the quietest time in any MedComms agency and, therefore, also quiet for the freelancers who support them. One of the most effective ways to utilise these lulls is by factoring them into your plans and investing time, and potentially some budget, in training (see Table 1).

Freelancers could attend workshops, participate in webinars, or enrol in online courses relevant to medical writing or the broader pharmaceutical industry. By doing so, they can ensure their current skills remain sharp and up-to-date while also acquiring new competencies that can set them apart in a competitive market.

**Pivot into new areas**

Medical writing is evolving as a profession, and quiet periods present an ideal opportunity for freelancers to explore new avenues and expand their professional horizons. This might involve

diversifying into different types of projects or exploring new therapy areas. Another strategic move could be to transition from working exclusively with MedComms agencies to directly engaging with biotech or pharmaceutical companies, a shift that can lead to more varied work and potentially higher rates. Indeed, one freelancer shared, “I feel that clients are increasingly interested in working directly with freelancers, bypassing agencies”, while another said, “As my clients recently have tended to be research organisations and direct pharma companies, this has hugely enhanced my client interaction and project management skills compared with freelancing for MedComms agencies, where I often felt hidden from the end client.”

Developing new skills in visual communications and medical media content creation is another promising strategy. As healthcare communication becomes increasingly visual and interactive, writers who can combine solid scientific knowledge with multimedia skills are likely to be in high demand. The increasing focus on personalised medicine, partly driven by AI and big data, presents another opportunity. Apps that connect patients and their data to healthcare providers require medical writers to adapt complex medical information into lay language for patients. Additionally, the pandemic highlighted the need to combat medical and scientific misinformation, making medical journalism and fact-checking essential areas to explore, particularly in the context of AI-generated content.<sup>4,5</sup> By staying adaptable and open to new opportunities, freelancers can often maintain a steady stream of work and professional growth.

“I have seen a lot more opportunities for freelance work over the past month, so I hope that this trend continues. I used to be constantly busy, but the last 1.5 years have been much tougher.”

**Table 1. Opportunities for freelancers during quiet periods**

**Use quiet times productively**

- Don't panic during slow periods, especially Q1
- Ringfence time and budget for learning and development
- Keep current skills up to date and build new skills

**Pivot into new areas**

- Explore new types of projects
- Expand into broader therapy areas
- Consider working directly with biotech/pharma clients

**Find sustainable, authentic marketing strategies**

- Start by talking to people you know
- Regularly check in with previous clients/colleagues
- Mention additional services or capacity to existing clients
- Keep track of conversations and follow up regularly

**Join a professional community**

- Expand your network and connect with peers
- Access resources and support
- Discover new opportunities and clients

Abbreviation: Q1, first quarter of the fiscal or calendar year.



### Find sustainable, authentic marketing strategies

Marketing your services as a freelance medical writer doesn't have to be intimidating or flashy. Often, the most effective marketing strategies are those that feel authentic and leverage existing relationships. A good starting point is to maintain regular contact with previous clients and ex-colleagues. This can be as simple as periodic check-ins to inquire about their current needs or to share updates about your services. One freelancer shared, *"Business development at all times will help you to manage during tough times. Do your best to be the top of the mind recall so that when the opportunity arises, you are the first on the [client's] list."* When communicating with existing clients, always mention any additional services or increased capacity you might have available. New opportunities can also be found in unexpected places. Your broader social circle is likely to include people who work in related fields; you just may not realise it yet!

Keeping track of who you talk to and when you have those conversations is essential. This way, you can follow up regularly and maintain those relationships. Authentic, consistent communication can help you build a strong network and ensure a steady flow of work.

### Support and networking communities

Joining professional communities can provide invaluable support and networking opportunities for freelance medical writers. These can range from large organisations, such as the European, American, and Australasian Medical Writers Associations, to smaller local organisations. Within EMWA, there is a dedicated Freelance Business Group that provides information for freelancers.<sup>10</sup>

Communities vary by geographical location – from Asia Pacific to South America – and by area of expertise, such as the MedComms Workbook<sup>11</sup> for MedComms freelancers and the Chartered Institute of Editing and Proofreading<sup>12</sup> for editors and proofreaders. You can find a more complete list of communities in last year's article on the need for community for freelance medical writers.<sup>13</sup>

Being part of such communities can offer support, advice, and networking opportunities, helping you to navigate the challenges of freelancing and find new opportunities.

### Conclusion

Overall, there are reasons for optimism. Some freelancers agree that perhaps we are resurfacing from the dip, with one remarking, *"I have seen a lot more opportunities for freelance work over the past month, so I hope that this trend continues. I used to be constantly busy, but the last 1.5 years*

*have been much tougher."* By using quiet times productively, diversifying your work, employing sustainable marketing strategies, and engaging with professional communities, you can build a sustainable and rewarding freelance career in this dynamic field.

What's your opinion? What challenges and opportunities have you experienced as a freelance medical writer? You can continue the conversation at the dedicated EMWA Freelance Business Forum Online LinkedIn group,<sup>10</sup> come share your insights with other freelancers and let us navigate these issues together.

### Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Peter Llewellyn for inviting us to join him in hosting the webinar *The Worldwide Landscape of Freelance Medical Writing: Exploring Challenges and Opportunities* on July 3, 2024,<sup>8</sup> and the freelancers that responded to our informal survey in July 2024.<sup>9</sup>

### Disclosures and conflicts of interest

Eleanor Steele works as the MedComms Mentor, providing professional training, mentoring, and consultancy to MedComms clients. Eleanor also manages the MedComms Workbook subscription service for MedComms freelancers. Adriana Rocha and Laura Kehoe declare no conflicts of interest.

## Data availability statement

For inquiries about data and other supplemental information, please contact the corresponding author.

## References

1. World Health Organization. WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 - 11 March 2020 [cited 2024 Aug 11]. Available from: <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19-11-march-2020>
2. WHO. Statement on the fifteenth meeting of the IHR (2005) Emergency Committee on the COVID-19 pandemic. 2023 [cited 2024 Aug 11]. Available from: [https://www.who.int/news/item/05-05-2023-statement-on-the-fifteenth-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-\(2005\)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-coronavirus-disease-\(covid-19\)-pandemic](https://www.who.int/news/item/05-05-2023-statement-on-the-fifteenth-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-(2005)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-coronavirus-disease-(covid-19)-pandemic)
3. Fidler B. 'The music stopped': Biotech rout leaves drug startups grounded as demand slumps for IPOs. BioPharma Dive. 2022 [cited 2024 Aug 13]. Available from: <https://www.biopharmadive.com/news/biotech-ipo-venture-startup-investors-market-downturn/618205/>
4. Bilodeau K. Behind Big Pharma's layoffs — is there an end in sight? PharmaVoice. 2024 [cited 2024 Aug 13]. Available from: <https://www.pharmavoices.com/news/big-pharma-layoffs-patent-cliffs-bms-takeda/718333/>
5. Levy V. 2024 Global life Sciences Sector Outlook. Deloitte Global. 2024 [cited 2024 Aug 11]. Available from: <https://www.deloitte.com/global/en/Industries/life-sciences-health-care/analysis/global-life-sciences-sector-outlook.html>
6. Open AI. Introducing ChatGPT. 2022 [cited 2024 Aug 13]. Available from: <https://openai.com/index/chatgpt/>
7. MedComms Workbook. MedComms Freelancing Barometer 2024. 2024 [cited 2024 Aug 13]. Available from: [https://medcommsnetworking.com/docs/barometer2024\\_all\\_data.pdf](https://medcommsnetworking.com/docs/barometer2024_all_data.pdf)
8. Steele E, Rocha A, Llewellyn P. The Worldwide Landscape of Freelance Medical Writing: Exploring Challenges and Opportunities. NetworkPharma.tv. [Webinar] 2024 [cited 2024 Aug 13]. Available from: <https://networkpharma.tv/2024/07/03/the-worldwide-landscape-of-freelance-medical-writing-exploring-challenges-and-opportunities/>
9. Kehoe L, Rocha A, Steele E. Survey on The worldwide landscape of freelance medical writing: Exploring challenges and opportunities. 2024 [cited 2024 Aug 13]. Available from: <https://forms.gle/tF1TzbfSQBc3kmca7>
10. EMWA Freelance Business Forum Online LinkedIn group. 2024. [cited 2024 Aug 13]. Available from: <https://www.linkedin.com/groups/12769131/>
11. MedComms Workbook website. 2024. [cited 2024 Aug 13]. Available from: <https://medcommsworkbook.com/>
12. Chartered Institute of Editing and Proofreading. CIEP website. 2024 [cited 2024 Aug 13]. Available from: <https://www.ciep.uk/>
13. Llewellyn P. The need for community: The importance of networking as a freelance medical writer. Med Writ. 2023;32(2):36–40 [cited 2024 Aug 13]. Available from: <https://journal.emwa.org/freelancing/the-need-for-community-the-importance-of-networking-as-a-freelance-medical-writer/>



## Author information

**Adriana Rocha** is a freelance medical and scientific writer and consultant in Medical Communications. With a PhD in Medical Neurosciences, she transitioned from research to medical writing in 2019, currently assisting academia and industry in enhancing their communication strategies and presenting key findings to specialised audiences. Since 2024, she has been the Chair of EMWA's Freelance Business Group and section editor of the Freelancing section in the journal *Medical Writing*.



**Eleanor Steele** has worked in MedComms since 2004, first as a medical writer, then leading scientific teams in several different agencies. She is now a freelance consultant working as the MedComms Mentor to provide specialist training and mentoring to medical writers and consultancy to agencies around building, nurturing, and developing their medical writing teams. Since April 2024, she has also managed the MedComms Workbook subscription service for MedComms freelancers.



**Laura A. Kehoe** has been a freelance medical communications specialist for over 7 years and, prior to that, spent several years as an in-house journal editor. She has extensive experience in neuroscience, hepatology, psychiatry, mental health and, more recently, women's health and lifestyle medicine approaches for non-communicable diseases. She is also a lifestyle medicine health and fitness advisor and currently training as an integral coach.