

Your professional association: A great way to expand your skills and advance your career

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Abstract

Many medical writers and translators are not members of professional associations. While online networking is clearly accepted as a key element for success in business, the benefits of joining associations are still not obvious to all, even though effective networking and having a public profile are viewed as key tools in today's business world. This article highlights the reasons for joining professional associations and the career advantages of membership.

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Surprisingly, many professionals still don't fully appreciate how professional associations can help them. They view associations as training grounds in a given field, and once they obtain their longed-for certification, they believe the association has no more to offer. Why professional associations give this impression is not discussed here, although this is a potential topic for further discussion.

Professional associations exist to benefit their members in various ways: by promoting recognition of the value of the profession, both in society and in business; by facilitating communication and networking among members; by establishing standards of competence and ethics; and by educating and informing members.

Professional associations raise the profiles of the professionals they represent

Many professions, such as doctors, teachers, and politicians, are highly visible. Everyone is aware of them and has at least some understanding of their work and their role within society. With this visibility comes respect for the skills involved. The public interacts directly with these professionals and therefore appreciates their value and the likelihood that they will be needed well into the future. Members

of such professions enjoy widespread promotion of their roles. Their interests are protected by high-profile associations, who also monitor standards and seek to protect their members and the public.¹

Likewise, a low profile may result in a lack of respect for work done and skills required. If people (especially colleagues from different professions) are unaware of what certain professionals do, or how they do it, they may have unrealistic expectations. For example, fellow professionals may not appreciate how long it takes for a medical writer to write a full protocol and may expect it to be done in a couple of days. A lack of visibility also leads to under-appreciation and therefore poor remuneration, which, combined with lack of respect, can lead to poor morale among the members of a profession. A lack of status in society may also discourage future generations from entering the profession. Without the support of high-profile associations, individual practitioners will find it hard to promote their profession and to avoid poor standards due to a lack of professional education. Lack of a high-profile association also reduces the reputation of individual practitioners, their ability to find work, and the recognition they receive for their skills.

One of the major aims of professional medical writing associations is to defend and promote medical communications professions and thus improve working conditions. Associations may join forces, and pool resources and energy, to ensure that their professions are recognised, respected and valued, and to make sure that they gain the public dimension and visibility they deserve.

Professional associations provide a forum for networking and communication

Socialising with colleagues within the profession and getting known as a professional by them is also important. Such visibility equates to having a

good reputation and a defined role within a given field, whereas a lack of visibility within a profession means isolation, under-appreciation, and lack of recognition.

Professional associations make networking easier. Reaching out to strangers and introducing oneself can be intimidating and strange. Professional associations catalyse this process by hosting events where networking is actively encouraged. Such networking events are an excellent opportunity to establish long-lasting friendships and collaborations.² Many associations also offer formal mentoring programs, LinkedIn groups, Facebook® pages, Twitter® accounts, and job boards to facilitate member networking.

Collegiality refers to the cooperative relationship between fellow members of a profession united in a common purpose and respecting each other's abilities to work towards that purpose. Professional associations can help foster collegiality, as fellow association members are usually happy to help colleagues, whether they are well-established professionals dealing with a highly technical problem or new or young members who need advice on basic issues such as pay scales. Also, professional associations have directories of professional members, LinkedIn groups where members can post new discussions and even Twitter® accounts, where members can find fellow members ready to help.

The Brazilian educator and philosopher Freire, known for developing popular education, advocated dialogue – an exchange of ideas and opinions – as a type of pedagogy. He believed that dialogue allowed individuals to learn from one another in an environment of respect and equality. For him, dialogue was not just about deepening understanding but also about making positive changes in the world.³ Professional associations are an excellent place for discussions and debates on matters of common interest. Such discussions help eliminate the isolation often experienced by freelance writers and translators. Taking an active role in a professional organisation allows members to meet new people, put forward ideas, learn to respect the opinions of others, feel useful, and participate in a group project.⁴

Professional associations raise professional standards

Associations raise standards in medical writing or translation by developing and publishing professional and ethical standards, as well as sound and fair business practices. These standards may deal with topics such as confidentiality,

independence and objectivity, misconduct, legal issues, handling clients, and conflict of interest. Association members are encouraged to act in accordance with these standards to maintain the reputation of the profession. Professional organisations also promote standardisation initiatives, for example, by developing technical guidelines or holding targeted workshops. Maintaining standards can, for example, help safeguard wages and working conditions.

Professional associations provide professional education and information

Learning is essential for professional development. Many would agree that lifelong learning is, in itself, a good aim. Although some professionals do a reasonable job without developing substantially, others seek actively to challenge and stretch themselves, often in their own time. Many want to develop professionally, and while mindful of the need for a healthy work-life balance, are prepared to find the time to learn, develop, and improve their working practices.⁴

Continuing education may include certificate and non-certificate accredited courses, online and in-person training, self-paced and one-on-one training (perhaps using Skype, email, or another mutually agreed platform), and webinars (online presentations in real time in a virtual platform).

Professional associations can be a great help in all this. They often schedule training but may also ensure that the training is of a high standard. EMWA is an excellent example of this with its numerous high-quality workshops held at annual conferences in spring and autumn. These workshops cover all areas of medical writing and related topics such as marketing, statistics, and English.⁵ Organisations may also offer online courses and webinars, which are an excellent opportunity to learn without leaving the office. EMWA is currently exploring this as an adjunct to in-person workshops.

Professionals are frequently recommended to learn as much as possible about the industries and companies that need their services. Whether working in-house or freelance, knowledge of the market is extremely important because it provides a competitive advantage and assists in professional growth. Keeping abreast of current trends and the latest industry news is also vital. Industry education and research therefore should be a daily activity and should not be postponed in lieu of more pressing matters. Professional associations can help with

this by providing access to exclusive industry publications, databases of company information, news about legislative issues affecting the field, and salary studies that help establish standards of pay and benefits. Subscribing to all of an association's news alerts and online and offline publications is important for remaining fully informed about the profession. Following fellow association members' business accounts on LinkedIn and Twitter® may also be a useful source of information.

Joining a professional association increases prestige

Adding a professional association to a c.v. professionalises it as it shows an understanding of the importance of professional networking, of being up to date with what's happening within the field, of continuing education, and of other important professional issues. It also suggests an investment in the chosen career area. In other words, listing membership of an association on your c.v., particularly an association that is a leader in the field, creates a good impression.

Conclusions

Professional associations are open and representative organisations of in-house and freelance professionals. They are active in all career areas and work for the benefit of individual professionals and of the profession as a whole. Membership in an association is a 'must' for professional advancement.

In a professional environment like medical writing – which is constantly challenging and is not immune to the current economic downturn – professional associations are often overlooked as a resource. They provide support and training within a particular field. Because they vary in size, level of activity, and breadth of membership, identifying the most suitable association is not always easy. Regardless, joining the association(s) that best meet(s) your needs and becoming active is professionally and personally rewarding.

Whatever your field, there is an association for you. Get involved, learn, meet new friends, and reap the benefits.

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