

Getting Your Foot in the Door

Editorial

Welcome to our first issue for 2021. The first EMWA virtual conference is done and dusted, but the impressions remain. In this issue, Daniela Nakagawa, a newbie, tells us how she unknowingly did medical writing in the past but only realised this when she “zoomed” into EMWA last November. Bless her and her generation for seeing the silver

lining and embracing virtual learning and networking.

Another inspiring newbie tale is that of Emmaline Tregembo who, through persistence, was able to land an apprenticeship and find a company willing to mentor her. She then moved on from being an apprentice to a medical writer! Kudos to Bilal Bham,

SECTION EDITOR



Raquel Billiones

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managing director of Bham Pharma Ltd, and his team for investing in future generations of medical writers!

Raquel Billiones

No setback comes without a blessing

Like many things in the professional world, I got to know more about medical writing and see it as the next step in my professional life, thanks to a connection. A friend of a friend was a native Spanish speaker living in Munich, Germany, with a PhD in Biomedicine, just like me. But while I was still looking for opportunities outside academia, he was already working in a pharmaceutical company as a medical writer. He told me about EMWA and how he landed his first job as a medical writer after attending his first EMWA conference. When he described what medical writing was, I strongly felt that this was a path for me too, because the writing was what I most enjoyed during my PhD. After talking to him, I decided to become an EMWA member and attend the spring conference in Prague in 2020 with my husband and my one-year-old son. Then COVID-19 came, and life paused for all: both the spring and autumn conferences were cancelled, my son stopped going to daycare, and I put on hold all my professional plans. But an EMWA e-mail in October, announcing the first online EMWA conference, rekindled both my earlier interest in medical writing and my hopes for starting a new professional chapter the following year.

Like many things in life, no setback comes without a blessing. The in-person conferences

native Spanish speakers living in Germany or abroad, all working as medical writers in English. Moreover, some of these colleagues live in Munich, and we already have agreed to meet in person, bringing the networking out of the “cold” virtual world and back into the essential part of life that is getting together with others. Finding “my people” in an in-person conference would have been a more serendipitous event. However, it took me less than a minute in an online conference to know who they were, add them to my network on LinkedIn, and even get advice from them on how to tailor my CV for the German market.

Though this was my first EMWA conference, and thus I cannot compare it to the in-person event, I feel that I got from it the same I would have extracted from the latter:

The in-person conferences might have been cancelled, but the online version made it easier – not to say more comfortable and affordable – to attend.

I gained clarity of what medical writing entails, the types of it, its challenges, and its rewards. In the session, “Getting into Medical Writing”, I discovered that I already had experience in medical writing after having worked for a pharmaceutical start-up some years ago. Until the conference, I would label my experience as



Daniela Nakagawa

consulting, but now I can say that I was actually a medical writer. The conference, in particular the workshops, taught me to identify the skills I have and the ones I lack. This inspired me to keep investing in my education through online courses recommended during the workshops and by attending future editions of the EMWA conference, to which I look forward either online or in-person. I am convinced that both ways represent a win-win situation for EMWA members and aspiring medical writers

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Ask and you shall receive: Job searching during a worldwide pandemic

Emmaline Tregembo recently did a three-month internship as a medical writer with Bham Pharma Ltd, an internship that turned into a fulltime position as a junior writer. Here are some thoughts from Emmaline on how she got that internship, and some from Managing Director Bilal Bham on why he hired her.

Emmaline: Since my first job at 13, I have never had one that was advertised, and so it seems only fitting that I continued this pattern in my job search as a Bachelor of Science graduate. During the summer of 2020, whilst the Covid-19 pandemic was in its first wave, and after receiving rejection after rejection from job applications, I decided to take matters into my own hands. I had spent every spare hour applying for roles which, on paper, I had the qualifications for but had become increasingly frustrated that every application ended with that same dreaded email: “Thank you for taking the time to apply, but unfortunately, at this time, we cannot progress your application any further.”

I began to read between the lines and realised that I may not have the same experience level as others who were applying. At this point, I had a choice to make, either continue my education to gain a full master’s degree and potentially a PhD, or gain some relevant experience. As the former was not that enticing to me, I decided on the latter and reached out to Bilal Bham, the managing director of Bham Pharma Ltd, applying for an internship. After a short email exchange and a brief phone conversation, Bilal offered me a 3-month internship. To say I was thrilled is an understatement. I felt like I had found the Holy Grail in a profession I so wanted to be a part of. I would gain the experience and skills I needed, and now was my time to prove that I could do it.

Diamond in the rough

Bilal: When Emmaline wrote to me asking for an internship, she was not the first graduate to inquire, but her communication with me and her desire to be given an opportunity, coupled with a well-written CV, stood out. After our phone call, which was a general conversation rather than a formal

interview (I don’t do formal interviews), it became quickly apparent that she had the personality and character to fit in with my growing team.

For someone so young (23!) to have such desire and confidence to do what she wants, reminded me of my endeavours of arranging my placement year at the European Molecular Biology Laboratories in Heidelberg, Germany, my MSc project at the Paterson Institute for Cancer Research in Manchester, UK, and then applying with vigour to every medical writing job I could find after being introduced to it by a friend. I believe courage, confidence, and tenacity are key in life and business. Emmaline had those in abundance, and since we were entering into a busy period, I decided to give her a 3-month internship.

One of the endearing virtues of youth is the assumption that one knows everything. Emmaline came in without that. However, she is fearless, has a healthy appetite for learning, and the ability to take critical feedback on the chin professionally. Red lines are a staple of our industry – even senior and principal medical writers receive them – and one must develop a thick skin to cope with the ups and downs of our profession.

My first ever project as a trainee medical writer was a Phase III clinical study report, and I do believe that a combination of treading softly and a baptism by fire are needed with newbies to assess if they have the character and raw talent to handle what the professional world will throw at them. Therefore, I decided to throw Emmaline into the deep end. For someone



**Emmaline
Tregembo**

with no medical writing experience, she surpassed expectations, impressing our whole team. I have worked with many medical writers, and she was delivering at a level one or two years above her experience, which meant that we could feel confident letting her work on live projects with a senior writer shadowing her work.

A 3-month whirlwind of lessons

Emmaline: It was not that daunting for me to begin working for Bham Pharma Ltd, a fully work-from-home company, even before working from home was cool and became the new norm. I had successfully adapted to working from home during my final semester of university, and I found that it suited my working style nicely. In fact, it was not the first time I had to be self-motivated to study, as my parents took me out of school for a year at age 13 to travel. This built my confidence and independence and meant that the lack of a physical office at Bham Pharma Ltd did not faze me.

Within my first month, I learned more about the industry than I expected to learn in the entire 3 months, and I realised why I was unsuccessful

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in so many interviews. It was not just my glaring lack of experience; it was also the fact that I did not know what the job entailed. Selling yourself for a job that you know nothing about is actually really hard, and so I embraced the opportunity I had been given and learned as much as I could about the industry.

Those 3 months were a steep learning curve. Quickly, I learned that medical writing is not just about having the ability to write. It is also about having an impeccable eye for detail and the ability to jump between projects seamlessly. Although I always felt that I had a natural ability for writing (I only took English language as an A-level because I knew I wouldn't need to study for it), I suddenly became aware of how challenging I found the whole writing process. I found myself in awe of my colleagues, who seemed able to produce a document effortlessly.

Rapidly, I learned the importance of managing time effectively and the skill it took to assess a brief to give an accurate estimation of the time required. On my first estimate, I thought carefully and decided on a time frame I felt was generous, only to be a day-and-a-half off in the wrong direction and found myself asking for an extension. Although I thought I had erred on the side of caution, it reminded me that I was still a newbie, and I obviously would take longer finishing tasks compared to more experienced writers.

Managing these personal expectations has been important, and by not putting too much pressure on myself to be perfect the first time, I have been able to fully embrace the feedback I was given. I was lucky that I stumbled across Bham Pharma Ltd because they are an exceptionally supportive team that continues to provide me with constructive feedback, and helps me to improve and progress. Had I begun in a larger writing team, I could easily have felt like a fish out of water, not knowing what to do or who to turn to for advice. But by being part of this small but supportive team, I have the confidence to ask questions, no matter how trivial they seem.

Although criticism and corrections are all part and parcel of the profession, at times, it does require a thick skin. I remember some of my early pieces of work being returned and feeling as if not a single sentence was useful, having received what felt like a never-ending list of comments and tracked changes. But those early mistakes were

how I learned, and I appreciated the time it must have taken my team to go through my work with a fine-toothed comb and following up with calls to discuss the reasoning behind the changes. If it were not for my team investing time into my learning and development, I would not have progressed so rapidly. Having a structured mentoring, training, working, and feedback approach has really helped me.

My advice to anyone considering a career in medical writing would be to reach out to companies for an internship as I did and gain an insight into what the industry really involves. You may just be surprised which avenues you enjoy. I was convinced from my research that medical communications would be where my interests lay. However, although I enjoyed the communication

projects I have worked on so far, and especially loved the variety they bring, I was surprised to find that I also thoroughly enjoyed working on regulatory documents. It just highlights that you only truly understand what a job involves once you begin.

Normally, it takes approximately 3 years to become a proficient medical writer, so I know that I still have a long way to go. But every day, I am learning something new, which brings me one step closer to that goal. I am excited about what the future will bring. I would highly recommend to anyone considering entering the medical writing profession to jump in headfirst and see where it takes them.

Make your CV flawless

Bilal: I would echo that advice. If you are a new graduate looking for an opportunity in medical writing, follow Emmaline's example of reaching out to businesses for an internship to gain some actual industry experience. Personally, I do not believe a PhD makes for a better writer; I got up to an MSc and quit my PhD a couple of months in because I realised it wasn't for me, and after over

14 years in the industry, I haven't done badly! My first boss at what was then Accovion, now Clinipace, in Eschborn, Frankfurt am Main, Germany, took a chance on me as a brash 24-year-old, so it was natural that I would do the same for someone of a similar age, raw talent, and character.

Emmaline's CV was excellently written compared to those of senior medical writers that I was hiring for, and it's what sparked my interest in giving her an opportunity. I reject CVs regularly because they are poorly written, too long, and error-strewn. If you are applying to any positions, ensure your CV is 2 pages long (excluding the references page), consistent with punctuation, looks neat and tidy, reads well, is brief but informative, and highlights your character as well as your experience. You never know, you might just jump ahead of more experienced writers, as Emmaline did, and get the job full time! Good luck, and may the odds of medical writing be ever in your favour!

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