

# The hard truth about soft skills in medical writing

**Corinne Swainger**

Freelance Medical Copywriter  
MediQuill Ltd, London, UK

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## Correspondence to:

**Corinne Swainger**

corinne@mediquill.com

## Abstract

Historically, hard skills – such as technical, digital, or life sciences qualifications – have been seen as more valuable than soft skills in successful medical writing. However, hiring managers now recognise soft skills as one of the top educational needs in medical communications. Although the use of artificial intelligence (AI) is also emerging as a key medical communications tool, there are some things AI simply cannot do. That's where soft skills, like teamwork, adaptability, and leadership, come in. This article reviews the essential soft skills you now need as a professional medical writer, and how you can optimise them for your career.

## Rebranding soft skills

**I**nterpersonal, communicative, and “soft skills” are being rebranded as “power skills”, “durable skills”, and “essential skills” which are becoming increasingly valuable in the global and local medical communications industry.<sup>1</sup> In fact, a recent American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) survey reveals that soft skills are now among the top educational needs identified by hiring managers in medical communications.<sup>2</sup> Such soft skills include time management, critical thinking, working with a team, problem solving, adaptability, and leadership, as well as several other abilities.<sup>2</sup>

Since more medical companies have shifted to hybrid or remote work models, soft skills have become just as valuable as technical knowledge. For example, effectively communicating and collaborating with colleagues, KOLs, and clients

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online, has become a top priority to succeed in a virtual world.

Unlike professional hard skills, soft skills, are not usually taught in medical communications. Soft skills tend to be human-centred traits that you develop from your own lifetime experiences. However, you can still learn and develop these capabilities to complement your hard skills. So, what key soft skills do you need to stand out as a medical writer in today's changing medical communications industry?

### Human soft skills

According to a recent Forbes report, artificial intelligence (AI) is poised to “reinvent the entire communications industry”, and “pave the way for

better, more accessible human expression by eliminating monotonous tasks and expanding creative potential.” For example, these tools can help medical writers, researchers, editors, and content creators develop better ideas, formulate text and improve consistency, accuracy, and style.

Although the use of AI tools like ChatGPT-3 and Jasper AI are emerging as key tools for medical communication, you'll still need to branch out offline to update your essential soft skills.<sup>3</sup> That's because there are some things AI simply cannot do (Table 1). In an increasingly AI and automation-driven workforce, durable soft skills remain a uniquely human strength, and hold significant value.

### Time management

When you started your career as a medical writer, you probably didn't expect most of your time would be spent on management tasks that don't include any writing at all. However, it's estimated that medical writers spend 60% of their time on writing and 40% on project management.<sup>4</sup>

Also, according to a recent AMWA survey, time tracking is the biggest challenge for most medical writers.<sup>2</sup> Efficient time management is important for producing your high-quality documents on time. In addition, by optimising your time management skills, your clients and

**Table 1. Essential soft skills for medical writers**

1. Time management
2. Communication
3. Leadership
4. Adaptability
5. Problem solving/critical thinking
6. Innovation/creativity
7. Emotional intelligence
8. Collaboration/teamwork
9. Networking

colleagues are more likely to see you as an efficient, reliable resource. Here are a few tips to optimise your time management skills.

- **Set realistic timelines:** Have a practical idea of how long you'll need to complete each project. This should include your working time for research, planning, writing, and editing, post-review, client consultation and project administration. You can then confirm this time to your clients and set up your project schedule.
- **Set up and stick to a project schedule:** This allows you to prioritise your projects and set boundaries with your clients. For example, if you're working on various projects for one client, and an account manager starts demanding more of your time, then you should flag this up to your client's main account director, to determine which project takes precedence.
- **Be prepared to say "No":** Amazingly, some clients and colleagues expect medical writers to be "miracle workers" by producing an unrealistic amount of content in one day. If you experience this pressure, let your team members know as soon as possible what you can actually deliver, within certain timelines, based on your own professional and personal schedules.
- **Include personal time in your schedule:** As a fulltime or freelance medical writer, it's vital to set aside personal time for yourself, in your daily and weekly schedules, to maintain your physical and mental health.<sup>5</sup> Building in this personal time will also help you to think creatively, manage your deadlines better, and edit your content with a fresh pair of eyes.

#### Communication

As a freelance or fulltime medical writer, providing clear, detailed communications is a critical soft skill for keeping your projects running smoothly. You can optimise this skill in the following ways:

- **Get a clear, written project brief** before you begin any work. Don't just rely on a verbal brief. Ask your client to provide answers to all your questions up front, regarding the project objectives, deliverables, timelines, deadlines, style, and content quality, to confirm your next steps.

- **Clarify any requested changes:** Ask your client to explain any unclear editorial changes they may request, so you can highlight any problems that these changes might cause. For example, some requested revisions may contradict the project brief and the style sheet or delay the content delivery.
- **Provide regular updates:** Keep your clients and colleagues regularly updated about your own progress, at each stage of the project. Ensure that you highlight any editorial issues that you or they need to deal with.

#### Leadership

As a vital soft skill, leadership in medical communications is not just for managers.<sup>2</sup> Revealing your leadership abilities shows clients that you can manage yourself and your workload. While your title may not be "Senior", "Lead" or "Principal" medical writer, you may still be given responsibility to manage the production of a new healthcare document – from start to finish. For example, these leadership skills include time management, problem solving, quality control, client/internal communications, and the mentoring of other writers. Although you may not consider yourself to be a born leader in medical communications, you can learn and develop these strengths over time.

#### Adaptability

In today's unpredictable biopharmaceutical healthcare communications landscape, adaptability is an essential soft skill that can allow you to stay ahead of the curve.<sup>6</sup> This can be a valuable asset for you as a medical writer, if you're asked to meet the ever-changing demands of various projects, priorities, and clients – and still deliver quality output.<sup>6</sup>

Adaptability involves proactively leaving your comfort zone to learn new technologies, rather than waiting for them to be forced upon you. So as a medical writer, you could arrange to learn the basics of AI apps, like ChatGPT, and actively test this as part of your standard research and writing methods to see how it could expand your current abilities.

#### Problem solving

Recent results from a 2022 AMWA survey revealed that medical communicators need critical thinking as part of problem solving and

decision making – two other crucial soft skills.<sup>2</sup> Problem solving is a key way to identify and address complex challenges and opportunities in medical communications, where it is strongly tied to data analysis, creativity, and critical thinking.

For example, as a strategic medical writer, you'll need a critical eye to analyse challenging project briefs and to develop a plan to clearly present your content to specific industry audiences.

#### Emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence – also known as emotional quotient (EQ) – is now recognised for its association to success in work and personal life, and overall well-being.<sup>7</sup> As a human soft skill, EQ is your ability to understand and manage your own feelings, and empathise with others. Furthermore, professionals who control their emotions are able to take a step back, assess a situation and develop an effective plan of action. For example, in medical writing, EQ means taking criticism from reviewers on your latest draft, and calmly using this feedback to improve your next draft.

#### Innovation and creativity

In medical communications, creativity is typically linked with fields like art or design, but it is a broad term that involves several sub-skills, ranging from questioning to experimenting.

For medical writing, creativity also prompts you to focus on your other soft skills, such as critical thinking and problem solving. This helps you to develop unique, targeted solutions for new communications challenges you're faced with, as an independent consultant. Creativity also encourages you to collaborate with your colleagues to generate strategic ideas, concepts, and campaigns.

#### Collaboration and teamwork

Your ability to work well with a team is a vital soft skill, at all stages of your medical writing career. You'll need to work closely with various stakeholders, including account teams, creatives, clinical experts, and regulatory authorities. Having strong teamwork skills allows you to provide effective internal and external communications and deliver high-quality content to your team members.

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## Networking

By nature, you may be an introvert rather than extrovert, and are not keen on networking. However, as an important soft skill, networking is not just about meeting new people. It's also a chance to connect with colleagues, peers, and mentors that you know of, but haven't had the chance to personally interact with.

Expanding your medical communications network is critical at all your career stages. Although building connections with other professionals takes practice and effort, it becomes more manageable as your network grows. The following key actions can help you improve your networking skills:

- **Expand your connections:** Optimise your networking through the use of social media, virtual online meetings, and face-to-face conferences. Each of these sources can provide you with unique networking opportunities, and informal learning opportunities.
- **Join professional medical communications groups:** Another way to grow your networking skills is to join established medical communications organisations, such as the European Medical Writers Association (EMWA), the AMWA, and the global MedComms Networking community. In addition to membership benefits, these groups also offer you local chapters and national events where you can build valuable relationships, in person.

## Conclusion: Refine your soft medical writing skills

Artificial intelligence is quickly emerging as a key "hard tool" in the healthcare communications industry, for efficient data research, analysis, and computation. However, durable, soft skills remain a uniquely human strength and hold significant value for medical writers and clients.

Formal training for medical writing rarely covers the development of soft skills. These soft skills tend to be personality traits that you develop from your own lifetime experiences. However, you can still learn and develop these capabilities to complement your hard skills. Refining your soft skills will help you build your medical writing career, create a network of meaningful connections, and achieve your personal growth.



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## Disclosures and conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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## Author information

**Corinne Swainger** is an established, freelance Senior Medical Copywriter and Content Consultant at MediQuill Ltd, based in the UK. She specialises in developing targeted content for pharmaceutical-healthcare advertising, PR, medical affairs, and medical education, on a local and global level.