

# The soft skills gap for remote workers: Different perspectives

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the way we work, with many companies opting for fully remote or hybrid roles on a permanent basis. While remote working has many advantages, there are some soft skills that may deteriorate when working from home long-term. This article focuses on which soft skills are essential for medical writers and offers advice on how these soft skills can be improved. Four professionals from the medical writing industry contributed their insights on this topic: a freelance medical copywriter, a principal medical writer, and two mentors for medical writers.

**S**oft skills (also known as transferable skills, meta-skills, or generic skills) have always been an essential part of the work landscape. These are personal attributes that can make a job candidate stand out between two equally qualified candidates.<sup>1</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally shifted the way we work in a relatively short time, with many workers opting for full-time remote or hybrid roles.<sup>2</sup> But the advantages of remote work (no commute time, increased productivity, flexible working hours) have a downside: neglected soft skills, such as verbal and non-verbal communication, active listening, authenticity, and collaboration, among many others.

The phenomenon, often termed “the soft skills gap” or “soft skill decay,” is already the focus of social sciences departments and business schools around the world.<sup>3,4</sup> The problems that

come from building and sustaining relationships in a dispersed workplace are leading to the surprising conclusion that soft skills may be even more important than hard skills.<sup>1</sup> As an example, a recent analysis of 12 million online job advertisements in Australia highlighted that advertisements for remote roles are more likely to mention interpersonal skills.<sup>5</sup> The key findings of a report on educating the post-pandemic workforce stated that the top four soft skills that are currently in-demand are: problem-solving, time management, the ability to adapt to change, and leadership ability.<sup>2</sup> Some of these are similar or identical to key soft skills chosen by expert contributors to this article (*Figure 1*). Perfecting these skills in the home office may be challenging.

This article focuses on what soft skills mean to a freelance medical writer, a principal medical writer, and two mentors for medical writers, and how improving soft skills can make a difference in our work lives.

We all know there are many ways to communicate these days – email, video calls, WhatsApp, messaging apps – and each one demands a different blend of clarity and professionalism.



**Figure 1. The key soft skills mentioned by this article's contributors**



Freelance Medical Copywriter


**Martyna Piotrowska**

I think soft skill development is just as important as technical know-how. Sometimes soft skills may even be more so, especially when writing patient-facing materials. For example, there are certain tips on how to use inclusive language for patients, but in the end, we write for patients drawing from our own experience and instincts. In my view, the soft skills necessary to progress in your medical writing career are listening to others, being open to new ideas, and being flexible to change. If we want to work with others, we must rely on each other's experience and trust one another. Also, as we are facing the age of artificial intelligence (AI), adapting and learning new skills quickly will be crucial. Those of us with boundless curiosity will be the real winners.

In remote work, I have noticed it has become more difficult for me to speak to people over the phone or in person; I become irritated and just want to get back to my projects. On the other hand, working remotely means working online, and I honestly think I've progressed in skills such as time management and productivity (although I'm still working on it!).

As a freelancer, I think the hardest skill I've had to learn is managing my finances. This is a critical skill that causes a lot of stress, and unfortunately it is also a taboo topic, which makes it difficult to talk to someone who has more experience.

The soft skill I appreciate the most is the ability to focus completely on my work. I would find it really bothersome to be always available to colleagues while I'm working. I think it makes you lose focus and reduces productivity. When working on my own, I can decide my own priorities and devote myself to the task as long as I like, until I need a break.




Head of Medical Writing  
**Anonymous**

Soft skills, such as communication, effective time management, teamwork, and flexibility, are essential for a medical writer. Authoring or maintaining various clinical, regulatory, and submission documents, e.g., clinical study protocols, clinical study reports, investigators’ brochures, and risk management plans, requires input from cross-functional teams (non-clinical, clinical, biostatistics, regulatory affairs, data management, etc.). It’s incredibly important to be able to communicate clearly and to formulate the right questions in order to receive the necessary input from other functional teams. Developing good working relationships with colleagues and wise time management are also essential.

For people who have just started their journey in medical writing and want to gain their first professional experience, working in the office is clearly beneficial, simply for better onboarding, mentoring, integration into the team, and learning about team dynamics.

The pandemic forced us to switch to home-based, remote working. This model has become very popular nowadays, with many medical writers currently preferring this option. Remote working provides more flexibility. Medical writers often emphasise that they can work more effectively from home, but they should try to keep a proper work-life balance. Indeed, remote working requires adaptation to technology-mediated communication, but does not negatively impact soft skills.

Before the pandemic, we were in the office every day. After over two years of remote working, we introduced a hybrid model, whereby the entire team comes into the office once a week. I think everybody benefits from this model. Although the team works remotely for the rest of the week, we have developed effective communication within the team, to keep a proper team dynamic – we have short briefing calls every morning, align on resources, etc. By using communication technology, we can interact successfully with each other, as well as with clients.



Medical Writing Mentor  
**Sarah Nelson**  
Green Pen Solutions

I believe soft skills are essential to succeed as a medical writer. This is why I included agency skills (which include soft skills) as one of my core 5 Pillars of Medical Writing (Figure 2).

Writers must become adept at managing the constant push/pull between producing high quality content and staying within budgeted hours; we are always working under time constraints. It is therefore essential to have good time management skills and techniques to ensure productivity. In this respect, working remotely can be advantageous, because writers can allocate “focus time” without the distractions of being in an office.

Another key soft skill is communication. Writers are good communicators, not only through our writing, but also in other forms of communications with team members and clients. We all know there are many ways to communicate these days – email, video calls, WhatsApp, messaging apps – and each one demands a different blend of clarity and professionalism.

I do not personally believe that remote working has robbed writers of soft skills. However, I am coming from the perspective of having worked in an agency for many years – I understand what’s going on in agency and client worlds, even though I am not physically there. It could be more challenging for junior writers who perhaps have only ever worked remotely and don’t understand the culture. As an example, I once mentored a junior agency writer who was in this situation and worked remotely. They did not understand the best way to work from home and would sit at their home desk for 8 hours a day, with no real breaks. There’s no way to remain productive for that long, and I am certain the senior management would not have expected this anyway. My mentoring helped the writer to adopt a better remote working approach and to set more realistic expectations.

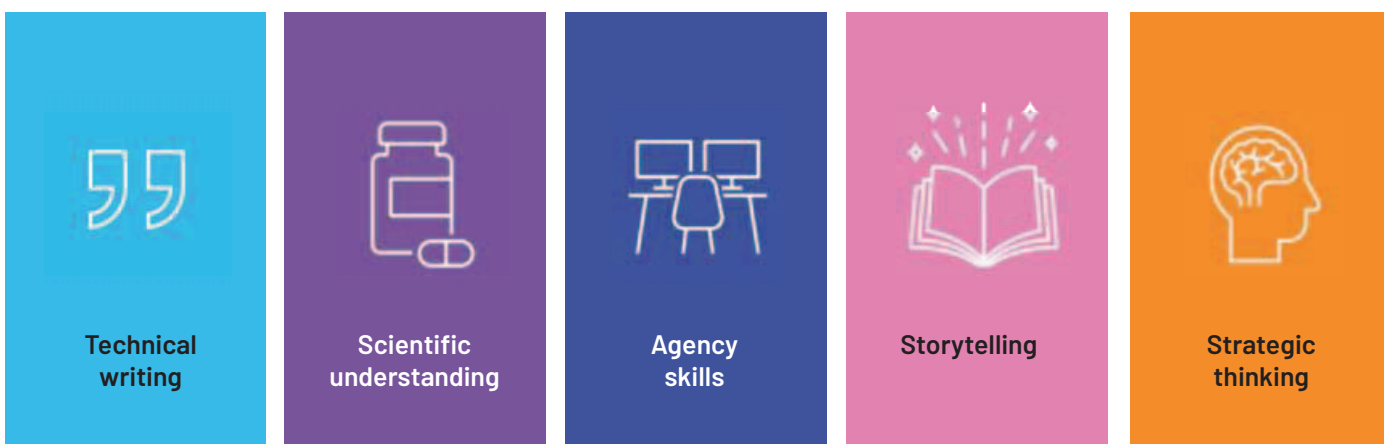


Figure 2. The 5 pillars of medical writing

Courtesy of Sarah Nelson, PhD. © Green Pen Solutions, 2024.



MedComms Mentor  
**Eleanor Steele**

Medical writers need a combination of soft skills beyond writing and scientific knowledge. Firstly, writers need to adopt a learning mindset; writing is a skill that must be honed over time, but medical writers also need to be open to new approaches for writing different types of content. This can be harder for remote workers who are less likely to be exposed to work by colleagues in other teams or work for other clients, than people who are in an office. This can lead to tunnel vision and makes it harder to spark connections or new ideas.

Also, as medical writers, it's important to develop a resilience to criticism. We often get feedback from a very broad range of stakeholders, and it isn't always polite! We have to detach ourselves from the way a comment is given to find the advice or learning point within it. I think this is harder for remote workers as feedback is more likely to be written, which can make it seem more blunt.

When working on our own, it is difficult to know when our work is good enough, and we can fall into the trap of striving for

perfection, which is rarely what the client is paying for. Sometimes we need a sounding-board to check whether our work is good enough, and it's harder to schedule a two-minute check in from home than when you're sitting next to someone you can ask.

My advice for remote workers:

- Think about all work and interactions as learning opportunities, not just tasks to tick off. Make notes at the end of a project about what worked well but also things you would do differently next time. Reflect on feedback and think about how it might apply to other projects or your writing in a broader sense.
- Make sure work doesn't take over your life! It can be harder to have boundaries between work and life if you work at home. Finding a way to separate your sense of worth from your work will help you take in feedback no matter how blunt it is. It also helps to have a work best friend who understands and who you can have a moan to when really annoying comments come along.
- Think about projects in terms of "must have" elements and "nice to have" elements. Do the "nice to have" elements if you have time and capacity but stick with "must have" if time is tight.

### Upskilling soft skills for growth

Despite coming from different work backgrounds, all four contributors agree on the value of soft skills for remote medical writers. Unsurprisingly, communication – both verbal and non-verbal – is listed as a key soft skill, regardless of whether someone works in an office or remotely (Figure 1). A lack of communication skills, whether among team members or with clients, will inevitably lead to potentially serious setbacks. In remote work settings, when working via email or messenger apps, it is even preferable to *overcommunicate*, to ensure that communication is clear throughout the project.<sup>6</sup>

Time management and productivity were also indicated as essential in the medical writer's skillset by all of the contributors. Fortunately,

these are skills that can be perfected in the home office more easily than communication, especially with the consideration of setting work-life boundaries.

Interestingly, there is a shared view that junior medical writers benefit from working in an office by learning from more experienced team members, particularly if they have only started working during the pandemic and have never experienced an office-based role.

Not everyone wants to or can work in the office every day. For some, it is simply a matter of preference but, for others, with caregiver responsibilities or a disability, it is not, which

**In remote work settings, when working via email or messenger apps, it is even preferable to *overcommunicate*.**



makes remote medical writing all the more attractive. But great writing skills and medical knowledge are no longer enough to make employment a certainty (especially with AI getting better at these skills too). This is why it is increasingly important to note which soft skills

we may be deficient in and focus on how we can improve them, in the same way as we would approach long-neglected IT skills or a need to revise the principles of good clinical practice. An illustration of the enhanced status of soft skills is their renaming as "power skills" by the education technology company Udemy in 2022.<sup>7</sup> Taking the time to perfect

these skills is sound advice for future-proofing a career in medical writing.



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### Disclosures and conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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