

# Getting Your Foot in the Door

SECTION EDITOR



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## Editorial

Welcome to Getting Your Foot in the Door or GYFD for short, the latest addition to MEW's regular sections.

It all started at the EMWA 2015 autumn meeting in The Hague. Derek Ho met up with the EMWA Executive Committee (EC) to talk about his idea of organising an activity aimed to connect potential interns with companies offering medical writing internships. At the same time, Danae Rokanas also contacted Phil Leventhal about her interest in a similar endeavour. The EC pledged support to this initiative and Derek and Danae, together with EMWA PR Officer Beatrix Doerr and Harald Meier got the ball rolling. Six months later, the first Live Internship Forum (IF) was held at the EMWA 2016 Spring Conference in Munich. Seven companies participated and a total of 50 intern applicants were present at the IF live event. Hats off to the IF team for pulling off this amazing feat in such a short period of time.

The event was a resounding success with very positive feedback from all parties involved. The IF was complemented by Helen Baldwin's regular not-for-credit short seminar **'Introduction to Medical Writing'** and another 'first' – Phil Leventhal's short seminar entitled **'Getting Your Foot in the Door: How to Build Experience to Get a First Medical Writing Job'**. The latter provided tips on how to get into the field without previous industry experience.

Job opportunities for new writers are scarce as Elsa Lewis laments in her article **'Where have all the UK entry level pharmaceutical regulatory medical writing jobs gone?'** on p. 50. The IF and the other EMWA offerings are witness to our organisation's commitment to help grow the medical writing field by engaging new graduates and bringing together entry level candidates and the industry. And EMWA will continue to do so through different platforms.

One such platform is this section in the MEW dedicated to this endeavour starting in September 2016, aptly adopting Phil's seminar title to be this section's name. Phil will continue to present GYFD in upcoming EMWA conferences and to complement this MedComms-focused presentation, another short seminar for newbies is planned, entitled from **'From academia to regulatory medical writing'**. However, most important of all, the IF will again be held at the 2017 Spring meeting in Birmingham, this time with a half day time slot dedicated to the forum.

In this maiden edition of GYFD, we would like to thank the Costello Medical team, Debbie Nixon and Sophie Pearson, for their insightful piece on the practical aspects of running a medical writing internship programme. In the upcoming issues, we will be covering internship from different perspectives.

Raquel

## Successful internships: a company perspective

Medical communications is a rapidly growing industry and competition for experienced recruits is often fierce. Paradoxically, however, 'getting your foot in the door' can be very difficult for those without formal medical writing experience. Thus, for applicants wishing to embark on a career in medical communications, prior experience can strengthen a candidate's CV and provide them with an invaluable insight into the day-to-day life of a medical writer.

In lieu of previous employment in the medical writing field, a well-structured internship should also enable the intern to sharpen their writing and editorial skills, whilst learning more about the healthcare industry in general, ultimately increasing their chances of finding a suitable job in medical communications. There are also notable benefits for the host company, since the additional resource provided by interns can make important contributions to proj-

ect work, easing the workloads of permanent staff, and provide opportunities to staff members looking for line management experience. Moreover, a successful period of on-the-job training and development of a core set of medical writing skills may result in the offer of a permanent position with the host company or elsewhere.

### Establishing a successful internship programme

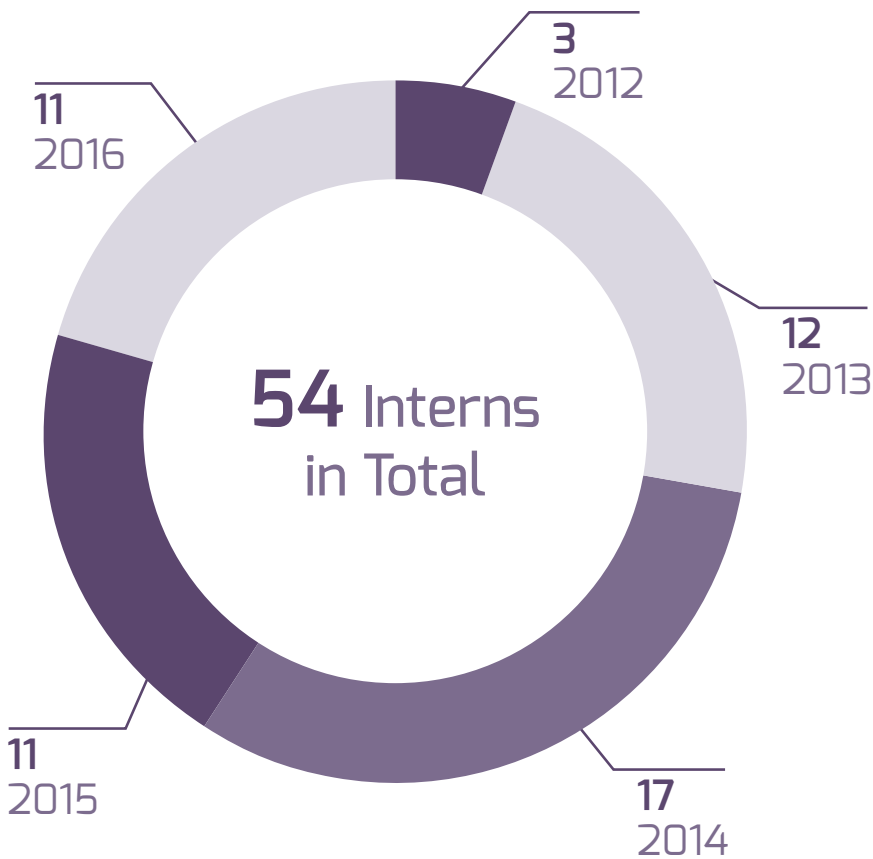
Since its launch in 2012, the **Scientific Internship Programme** at Costello Medical has offered internship positions for graduates and postgraduates from a range of disciplines to gain experience in the medical communications industry. Our primary goal had been to enable those interested in healthcare and with a passion for writing to make a more informed decision about whether the industry could provide a fulfilling and rewarding career for them.

Now in its fifth consecutive year, with a total of 54 interns hosted to date, our internship programme has undoubtedly fulfilled its original ambition of giving individuals a hands-on experience of life in a busy medical communications agency. The programme has also supported the company's long-term growth strategy, with many of the interns transitioning into permanent positions at the end of their internship (see Figure 1 overleaf).

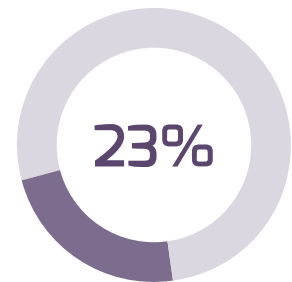
The duration of internships may vary greatly from company to company. At Costello Medical, we usually offer a three-month internship period, which allows sufficient time for an intensive two-week induction and training period, followed by approximately 10 weeks of project work where interns can contribute to a range of ongoing client deliverables. Subject to an internal review, interns may choose to extend their contracts for up to six months.

# Costello Medical's Internship Programme

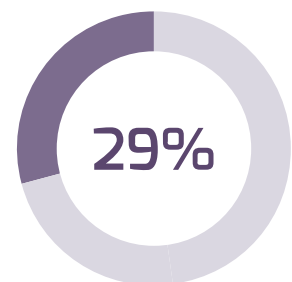
Number of Interns 2012-16



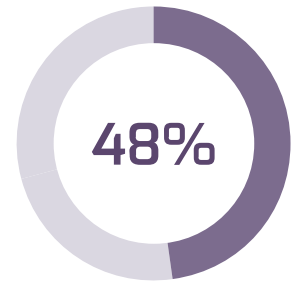
Alumni Destinations



Permanent Employee at Costello Medical



Further Study



Other Employment

## Company Considerations for an Internship Programme



Establish clear and individualised objectives to maximise the internship experience



Carefully consider the content and distribution of your advertisement to target the right candidate



Assign a manager to provide guidance and support throughout the internship



Establish a thorough induction process and provide further project-specific training



Plan a variety of projects for the intern and flexibility for additional project support



Listen to intern feedback in order to maximise benefits of the programme for future interns

This provides a greater opportunity for the intern to take on more project responsibility and potentially experience work across other divisions of Costello Medical. Participants are typically based in one division of the company with their assigned line manager but are able to gain experience across a variety of project types, including: medical writing, evidence development, medical affairs and market access.

The internship programme at Costello Medical is constantly evolving as we implement feedback from every new round of interns. We have also defined a set of core programme objectives to make the experience as rewarding as possible for the intern (see box below).

### Key objectives for a successful internship

- To experience a variety of projects reflective of a permanent position
- To see at least one project through from start to finish
- To gain an insight into project management
- To gain experience of communication with clients

Beyond these key objectives, individual intern programmes are designed to be managed flexibly and relatively informally; this enables the intern and their manager to match project work with the intern's own interests as new opportunities arise, and to facilitate the rapid delivery of client work when it is needed.

### Practicalities for intern recruitment

Developing a compelling advertisement that communicates the benefits of the internship programme is a crucial first step in the recruitment process and is worth investing time in. The advertisement should include a clear outline of the tasks and responsibilities of the internship position, and list the type of hands-on experience that successful applicants will have the opportunity to gain. If there is scope for the internship to lead to a permanent role with the host company, this should also be mentioned. Ideally, candidates should be able to review the key criteria for a successful internship and quickly determine their suitability. Practical details relating to the internship should also be included, such as internship

duration, possible start dates, hours of work, and salary.

Of course, a well-crafted internship advertisement will only yield results if it reaches the desired audience, so deciding where to post the role requires careful consideration. Most universities have a dedicated careers service, and many will advertise vacancies free of charge. For a broader reach, and to advertise to those already working in industry/academia or the medical profession, advertising on high-visibility recruitment sites can be a fruitful avenue to consider. Participation at organised recruitment events such as the EMWA Internship Forum, MedComms Networking events, university careers events, or in-house company open days can also provide good exposure for internship opportunities within your company, alongside opportunities for other permanent positions.

There is likely to be some overlap between established recruitment processes at the host company and those taken to recruit interns. However, given the short-term nature of the internship, these processes are unlikely to necessitate multiple assessment rounds or interview stages. Consider the most efficient and effective way of assessing how far the candidate meets the requirements for the internship – for example, completing a short writing test or attending an assessment day, as well as a formal interview. When interviewing intern candidates, take account of the fact that they are likely to have less industry experience than those applying for full-time roles, so their responses to questions about client management and commercial awareness in general may be less developed.

As we see greater globalisation of the pharmaceutical industry and the world of work overall, an increasing number of intern applications are likely to be received from overseas candidates. Therefore, on a practical level, it is important to verify the candidate's right to work in a particular country prior to making an offer, and also to be transparent during the recruitment process about the assistance available for obtaining visas or work permits.

### Management and planning for internships

Establishing an effective system for intern management and resource planning can support long-term planning on a company-wide level, and also helps to ensure that the internship is mutually beneficial to both the intern and the host company. Below we summarise the approach taken at Costello Medical, although the most appropriate methods for management and planning may vary depending upon company size and structure.

**Management and mentorship** – Each intern is assigned a senior staff member (typically a Senior Medical Writer or Senior Analyst) to act as both line manager and mentor. The manager meets with the intern on their first day in the office and schedules weekly meetings to discuss ongoing projects, and address any questions or concerns the intern may have. Periodically, the intern and their manager also meet with an internship programme co-director to discuss how their individual programme is going and to identify any new objectives that may help the intern reach their full potential.



**Intern training** – Upon arrival at the company, each intern completes a two-week induction period. This training period provides an opportunity for the intern to gain an understanding of the company ethos and approach to work, as well as the breadth of projects that the company delivers. This also facilitates interaction with other company employees, across all divisions, and enables the intern to spend time with other new recruits. The intern will also receive more detailed guidance and training for any specific projects they are assigned to.

**Planning intern resource** – Prior to arrival, the intern will be assigned a variety of projects, with the aim to develop a varied and enjoyable workload throughout the internship. However, individual intern programmes are designed to be fairly flexible and planning typically allows for interns to provide support for additional projects. The ultimate goal is to design a tailored programme for the intern that takes into account the intern's own interests and skills, whilst factoring in the demands of current project work.

**Project management** – The intern is likely to be working within multiple project teams, led by different project managers. To ensure that the intern is not overwhelmed, a suitable amount of time is allocated on a weekly basis to work on each project. The intern manager plays a vital role in ensuring that all project managers are updated if there is a change in priority for any specific project.

## The importance of intern feedback

Communication plays a vital role in generating a successful internship and project managers are encouraged to provide regular feedback on intern performance and attitude to work. Not only does this provide an opportunity to recognise high quality work and important contributions to a team project, it also helps to establish personal goals for the intern to work towards in order to maximise the success of their internship and to make the experience as rewarding as possible.

A formal review meeting around four to six weeks into the internship programme provides an opportunity for the intern manager to provide feedback on what the intern is doing well and where there is room



for improvement. Another review meeting held at the end of the internship is incredibly valuable as this enables the intern, their manager and the programme co-director to discuss what went well and any aspects of the internship programme that could be improved. Suggestions for improvements to the programme are actively encouraged as part of the wrap-up process and are implemented where possible, playing a vital part in maximising the value of the programme for future interns. The intern is asked to prepare a short report in advance of the wrap-up meeting, summarising their internship experience. This report forms a great starting point for discussions and can also prove to be a useful document for the intern to refer to in any future job applications.

## Post-internship support

As the internship comes to completion, the host company may offer the intern advice on alternative opportunities within medical communications or the wider pharmaceutical industry. The HR team and intern managers can also provide employment references and application advice.

For those who have enjoyed their internship experience, applying for a permanent role within the host company may be an attractive option. Promising interns who have demonstrated skills and commitment throughout their internship are offered support in applying for a permanent position with the company. If a successful intern does decide to apply for a permanent role, the host company benefits from a new staff member who has already undergone the induction and training

process and who is familiar with the company's culture and ways of working, allowing them to make an immediate and positive impact upon their transition to permanent role.

## Acknowledgements

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## Call for Companies

The 2nd Medical Writing Internship Forum will be held at our May 2017 Conference in Birmingham, UK.

Please contact [internship@emwa.org](mailto:internship@emwa.org) for more information.