

Setting up and running a medical writing company

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Abstract

I am the founder and managing director of Scinopsis, a medical writing company based in France. Scinopsis is specialised in providing regulatory documents and medical communications to the pharmaceutical, biotechnology, and medical device industries. I created the company in 2006 and today we have 15 permanent staff (including myself). I believe the keys to our success are the quality of the documents we provide to our clients and the friendly attitude of my team. This article describes why and how I created Scinopsis, how the company is organised, and the challenges I have encountered over the years.

Keywords: Medical writing company, Scinopsis, Medical writer, Small business, Freelance

Getting started

I set up my medical writing company, Scinopsis, in 2006 after having worked as a freelance medical writer for seven years. Freelancing was great when my three kids were young and it was really practical to work from home. But once the kids were all at school full-time, I felt increasingly bored and lonely at home. I am a very outgoing person and I found working alone in an empty house too quiet for my taste. So at some point I started to realise that I needed colleagues to have tea-breaks with. However, after 7 years of freedom, I wasn't willing to go back to having a boss, being obliged to arrive at work on time, asking for holidays, etc. So I started to think about the possibility of employing and training a junior medical writer to work (and have tea-breaks) with me. A few months later, one of my best clients asked me to write eight abbreviated clinical study reports in two months and I realised I could never manage the project single-handedly. So I bit the bullet and decided to advertise for staff and start a medical writing company.

I had no idea whether my business would be successful, but I knew I definitely couldn't afford to pay

for experienced medical writers. Nevertheless, I was confident of my ability to train people as long as I chose them well. So I decided to look for native-English scientists with a flair for writing. This was already tricky as, here in the South of France, the majority of native-English people in the area work in restaurants or on luxury yachts! Nevertheless, I placed an advert on the internet and I was delighted and astonished to receive a dozen suitable-looking applications. Following a friend's advice, I invented a medical writing test and emailed this to the applicants. Two participants did a surprisingly good job of the test and so I invited them for an interview. I couldn't choose between them and eventually ended up employing them both. What a great decision that was! One of them, Antonia, is still with us today and she has played a key role in our evolution and success since the beginning.

The next challenge was to rent office space and to manage the legal aspects of setting up a business. France is famous for its bureaucracy and high employment taxes, and several cautious friends tried to advise me against creating a company and employing staff in this country. However, I didn't let their fears dissuade me and I succeeded in jumping over all the legal hurdles with the help of my excellent French accountant.

When I first told my clients I had launched my company they were mostly rather reticent. They wanted me to continue to be their 'personal medical writer' and didn't want to risk having a junior writer on their projects. However, I managed to convince them that I would be overseeing and reviewing the work at every stage and that the quality of the documents would remain as high as when I was working alone. Nevertheless, training the new staff was a much bigger job than I had imagined and it took at least a year before the new writers could be left to their own devices on relatively simple projects. I soon discovered that it was necessary to invest a lot of my time in training my staff and re-reading their documents if I wanted Scinopsis to be a success. It was not as easy as I expected to explain to two scientists with

no experience in medical writing why it was important for them to use perfect spelling and grammar, align their bulleted lists, define their abbreviations, harmonise their Word styles etc. But after a certain number of drafts covered in a lot of red pen, they finally started to get the hang of it. I learnt as much as they did over the first couple of years and I was so proud to see them mature into professional medical writers and to receive positive feedback from the clients.

Growing the company

As the company continued to do well, we gradually employed more writers, which meant that we could take on more projects and increase our revenues. This was great except for the fact that the volume of administrative work continued to increase and all of that fell on my plate. When I first set up the business, I spent approximately 60% of my time doing medical writing, 20% of my time training my team, and 20% of my time doing administrative tasks. But by the time I had five staff I was spending almost 100% of my time on administration and was feeling stressed and demotivated. At this point I realised I needed an assistant and it was an enormous relief when Kristina joined us in 2010.

There is always a price to pay for success, and I experienced another hurdle three years later when I had around 10 people in my team. At this point we had so many requests for proposals that I found myself spending 100% of my time preparing cost estimates and, once again, I started to feel frustrated and stressed. Furthermore, we had so many ongoing projects that I could no longer manage to keep track of every draft of every document we were producing. I felt overwhelmed and stopped enjoying my job for a while. At this point I decided to employ a business developer/project manager and have never regretted this decision as she gave me my life back!

Today Scinopsis has 15 permanent staff including 11 medical writers, 1 quality controller, and 4 managerial staff (including myself). The more experienced writers train and manage the less experienced writers, which works extremely well. Our two project managers prepare the cost estimates and liaise with the clients regarding budgets and timelines. Our finance manager deals with the administrative aspects of the business. I oversee the overall running of the company and am involved in strategic activities such as the recent design of our new website and company film, presenting the company to potential clients and at conferences, recruiting new staff, making financial decisions, and giving general advice to the team about medical writing issues.

Keys to our success

I no longer do any medical writing myself and I hardly ever even have time to review documents any more. It is a shame as I used to really enjoy this, but it's impossible to do everything, and other members of my team are doing an excellent job of these activities. I think one of the reasons for our success has been my ability to delegate (some might call this 'bossiness'!). It is essential to choose highly competent staff and to trust and empower them to handle as much of the work as possible.

'Many companies fail because the boss continues to try to keep control of every single aspect of the company as it grows: these control-freaks usually end up having a nervous breakdown (and the business collapses) or being so fed up with their job that they decide to close down the business. I haven't fallen into this trap and I still enjoy my job thanks to my fantastic team'.

The wonderful thing about having a team is that we are continually increasing our knowledge and expertise. When I first started out as a freelance medical writer, I only felt confident in a limited number of therapeutic areas and document types. But now I have employed a team of experts coming from a wide range of scientific fields and, as a team, we have written many different types of regulatory documents and medical communications in a large number of indications. These days, when a new client calls me to ask if we have the experience and capabilities necessary for their project, my answer is almost always a very confident 'yes'.

Having a larger team also enhances our flexibility. Clients' timelines often change and we always manage to keep smiling even when deadlines are tight. Excellent in-house communication ensures harmonisation across our team and means that clients never have to give us the same information more than once.

As the company has grown we have, of course, had to improve our quality procedures. This didn't seem necessary at first when there were only three of us, but with 15 staff, it is important to ensure that everyone is working in the same way. In 2014, we developed a new quality system with 24 standard operating procedures and numerous templates and listings. It was an enormous, and somewhat painful, undertaking to write and approve all of these documents. However, it was well worth the effort, and we are very proud of our new system. Additionally, at various stages in our development, we have had to make significant investments to improve our

computer server and backup procedures: these are now fully compliant with our clients' requirements.

With all the extra staff, we also found that we needed new office space last year. We really didn't want to move as we all love our offices, which are located in a traditional Provençale house in Fréjus. I was delighted when the house next door became available and so I decided to buy it for Scinopsis. This enabled us to triple our office space whilst remaining in the same location. The sea view from my office is stunning – I feel so lucky to work here.

Choosing staff and keeping them motivated

The recruitment process that we have gone through for each new team member has been absolutely essential to our success. We put a great deal of effort into this selection process because we know how important it is not to make a mistake at this stage. All our staff members are highly qualified scientists, most with PhDs and several years of post-doctoral research experience, and they all have excellent writing skills. The medical writers are either native-English speakers or have lived and worked in an English-speaking country for 5–15 years. They are also all really lovely people.

'When building a small company it is essential to choose people who will fit into the existing team. I always involve my team in the recruitment process and we have often rejected applicants with excellent CVs and medical writing tests just because we felt their personalities wouldn't suit Scinopsis'.

It is essential not to compromise on this aspect and we have sometimes not selected a single applicant out of 50–100 received because we didn't find anyone who would be a perfect fit.

Once you've chosen good people, it's important to keep them happy in their jobs. It's important to train them well and to give them the appropriate amount of responsibility. Our system of mentoring of more junior staff by more senior staff works really well. The junior writers know they can ask as many questions as they need, and the senior writers feel valued and useful in their managerial role. Projects are allocated based on the writers' availability and experience, with the most complex or demanding projects allocated to the most senior writers. This is motivating for the experienced staff and gives the junior staff something to aim for.

At Scinopsis we put a lot of emphasis on the company atmosphere and we have always done a lot to ensure we maintain this. I never forget that I was bored and lonely working from home and that the main reason I created the company was to have friends and colleagues. We are lucky enough to be based in the South of France and to have a sunny roof terrace where we all eat lunch together every day (we each take it in turns to cook for the others). This creates a really nice family atmosphere and is a great opportunity to chat and get to know each other better.

'I always try to find ways to keep each staff member happy and to be as flexible as possible. In return, everyone in the team is very hard-working, positive, and willing to make extra effort on a project when needed'.



A photo of my team in September 2012. It's not all work and no play at Scinopsis!

Highs and lows

Of course it hasn't all been plain sailing. We have had some very profitable years and some less profitable ones. There doesn't seem to be much logic to the medical writing market, and we sometimes suddenly find that we have too much work for our team to cope with or, alternatively, that we don't have enough work to keep all our staff busy. When we have too much work we can always use freelancers, but when we don't have enough work the sense of responsibility weighs heavily on my shoulders. However, I am grateful to say that, until now, we have always managed to continue to ride the highs and lows and to remain steadily standing on our surfboard even during stormy weather.

It's all been worth it

So, would I do it all over again if I had the chance? Yes definitely! The last 9 years of my life have been fantastic since I created Scinopsis. I am so proud of

the quality of the documents that we provide and of the excellent reputation that we have managed to earn in the industry. I care about every member of my team and I am so happy to have been able to help them progress in their careers and to give them the opportunity to live in such a beautiful part of the world. I am confident that we will continue to grow and to be successful for many more years to come.

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Author information

Helen Baldwin is a PhD pharmacologist and the founder and managing director of Scinopsis. She has been a medical writer for 16 years and is experienced in a wide range of regulatory documents and medical communications. Helen is a past-president of EMWA and a regular presenter at EMWA conferences.