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Out on Our Own

Welcome readers,

It is a pleasure for me to share an article in this issue from our previous Out on Our Own (OOOO) section editor, Satyen Shenoy. For those that don't know him, where have you been? Satyen, as he will describe, has been on the EMWA scene for many years. In Vienna, Satyen hung up his Freelance Business Group chairperson hat and placed it on my head. He went into a period of contemplation and asked to contribute to this OOOO issue. Over the years, one question kept cropping up and continues to, how to volunteer for EMWA? He summarises the volunteering opportunities throughout the EMWA organisation, this of

course is not limited to freelancers, but as he points out, many volunteers within the organisation are indeed freelancers. He offers a great overview of the structure of EMWA and how it is run and where volunteers are needed. Get involved!

Also in Vienna, I spoke to two enthusiastic attendees of the Freelance Business Forum, Diana Ribeiro and Matías Rey-Carrizo, who were experiencing it for the first time. When I approached them after the congress their enthusiasm was still high, and they both agreed to write articles on their personal journeys into freelancing. As I mention to many people, medical writing is not a degree that one can

complete and then step into the career path. We all have varied backgrounds and are from different countries, and often have fallen into medical writing. I love hearing the paths that other freelancers have taken and always along the way we have gained experiences that can be vital to share with others who are contemplating the freelance direction. Diana and Matías both offer us their journey and how they ended up in the Freelance Business Forum. Many thanks to all our authors for sharing their views and advice.

Happy reading!

Laura A. Kehoe

Growing as a freelancer through volunteering

In my three-and-a-half years as a volunteer for EMWA's Freelance Business Group (FBG), I have had the opportunity at our biannual conferences to meet and network with many EMWA members, most of them freelancers. What has encouraged me particularly has been the increasing number of new faces I see attending the Freelance Business Forum (FBF); this indicates that freelancing is fast becoming an attractive option for medical writers. One of the questions that I have received from freelancers over and over again, in person and by email is – "how can I volunteer for EMWA?" Now, since I pretty much serendipitously got involved with EMWA after being invited to help the FBG as a freelance advocate, I have often crafted an impromptu and patchy reply, not entirely to my satisfaction. So, in this article I would like to answer this question comprehensively and list different volunteering opportunities as a guide for those freelancers who are interested in volunteering for our organisation.

Executive Committee, subcommittees, and special interest groups

EMWA activities are exclusively managed by volunteers, of course, with an efficient administrative support from our office staff in Macclesfield, UK. Whether it be members

servicing on the Executive Committee (EC) or as table leaders at the FBF, we are all volunteers. Freelancers get involved by being EMWA Presidents (as with the current president, Barbara Grossman) and EC members, and also serve on various subcommittees and special interest groups (SIGs). The five volunteers on the FBG subcommittee are all freelancers. The point I

want to make is that freelancers are actively involved in the running of EMWA.

In recent years, numerous programmes such as the symposium and expert seminar series at the summer conferences have been initiated and these require assistance and inputs. In addition, various SIGs – medical communications, veterinary, medical devices, etc., have been launched, all of which requires active volunteers. So, how does one go about finding these opportunities to volunteer? Well, you could read about them on the EMWA website or in the monthly Newsblast in your email inbox or by checking EMWA's social media portals. You could also drop a line to our head office (info@emwa.org) and they will connect you with subcommittee/SIG chairs.

Workshop leaders

One of EMWA's most sought-after programmes is the EMWA Professional Development Programme (EPDP), which organises workshops at EMWA conferences. With over 120 different workshops that cover a range of subjects, the EPDP provides quality training to medical writers and helps them develop new skills. The EPDP is also a perfect opportunity for freelancers with a passion for teaching, such as myself, to volunteer as workshop leaders. The process is well-regulated, in that potential workshop leaders



Satyen Shenoy handing over the chairpersonship to Laura A. Kehoe at the Vienna EMWA congress.

need to send in a proposal to the EPD Committee (EPDC) for a workshop, which is then evaluated for suitability and other factors. Once approved and refined, the workshop is then offered at future conferences. It was a fabulous experience when an EMWA colleague and I underwent the process and developed a useful workshop which was first offered at the autumn conference last year in Warsaw. And from a personal viewpoint, it felt good to be able to share with the workshop attendees the knowledge I have gained in my career as a scientist and a medical writer. So, if you wish to design and present a workshop at EMWA conferences, do get in touch with the Chair of the EPDC, Marion Hodges.

EMWA Ambassador Programme

The EMWA Ambassador Programme is another recent initiative launched to raise general awareness of medical writing as a profession; as well as to introduce EMWA to those finishing their education, and looking for career options. Towards this, volunteers in the Ambassador Programme visit university career events, medical conferences, medical communication events, etc., and make presentations on medical writing on how a EMWA membership helps one develop as a medical writer. Since one of my goals as a freelance medical writer is to help develop the medical writing profession in Germany, I signed up as a volunteer at the last EMWA conference in Vienna. Besides joining the programme to canvas EMWA's outreach, there's another way of volunteering to help the programme. And that is through gathering information in your area on career events, job fairs, and passing on the information to the Chair of the Ambassador Programme, Abe Shevack. In addition, if you have contacts at universities and research institutes, it would be worthwhile exploring the possibility for the nearest volunteer with the programme to make a presentation to the post-graduate students at these places.

Future issues:

We are always looking for people to contribute to the future issues of the OOOO. Here, are a few themes that we'd like to address, so if you have something to say and want to contribute please get in touch.

1. From freelancer to business entrepreneur
2. Which path to take, MedComms or regulatory? How? And what's the difference?
3. "Experienced" vs "non-experienced" freelancers: stepping into freelancing too early?

If you have any additional topics that you'd like to see in our section, then we are always happy to hear.

Webinars programme

For the past couple of years EMWA's Webinar Programme has been hosting monthly webinars on a variety of topics relevant to the medical writing profession – from latest regulatory changes to improving writing skills. Besides being a good source of information and tips for EMWA members, this programme also allows presenters to share their particular expertise with their fellow medical writers. So, if you wish to present a webinar on a topic that you are proficient in then you could contact the volunteers, Laura Collada Ali or Carolina Rojido, who oversee the programme and discuss it with them.

Local networking

While EMWA conferences are a fantastic opportunity to expand one's networks and get to know other freelancers, it is not always practical for freelancers to attend all of these. To address this, freelancers around Europe have taken to local networking and organising informal get-togethers. While this is rather well-established in the UK, at present local networking is gaining ground in the Netherlands, France, and Germany. The advantages for participating in these are numerous. From getting a sense of camaraderie, to shooting the breeze with fellow professionals, to catching up on and discussing latest developments in our field; freelancers tend to benefit from such interactions. Such events are also useful for introducing non-members to EMWA and its activities. So how could you volunteer? Look for other medical writers in your area, get connected, and start forming a network. And yes, do talk about EMWA to non-members.

Writing for Medical Writing or the website

EMWA's journal, *Medical Writing*, has developed in leaps and bounds in the past few years with contemporary and relevant themes, feature articles that are open access, an extended content, and getting listed in indices such as Scopus, EBSCO, and Google Scholar. Besides this, it still continues to have the Out On Our Own

(OOOO) section which is dedicated to freelancing issues. Recently, a new online feature called "Web Editorial", which publishes opinion pieces on relevant topics, has also been added to the EMWA website. During my tenure as the editor of OOOO, I have had the privilege to bring to print a number of articles from freelancers offering tips and tricks, their opinions and perspectives on business management, etc. To give you an idea on how valuable these articles are, I would like to share an anecdote. When I decided to launch my freelance consultancy in Germany, I had no idea where to start. One of the senior EMWA members, whom I had met at a conference, advised me to look into the OOOO archives in the Freelance Resource Centre on the EMWA website. I did so and found two articles by another freelancer based in Germany who had gone through the hoops a few years earlier and I found these to be immensely informative. Since then, I have been actively requesting freelancers to volunteer to write articles for the OOOO. Your stories and experiences, your observations and pointers; these could be helpful to your fellow freelancers. And if you wish to share these with us then do contact the Editor-in-Chief of Medical Writing, Phil Leventhal, the Editor of OOOO, Laura A. Kehoe, or our Website Manager, Diarmuid De Faoite.

Conference participation

Since we freelancers are primarily business owners, network development is the key to our success. EMWA conferences are a great venue to engage in networking with other freelancers and non-freelancers, some of whom will also be volunteers. From these, you will get to hear about new initiatives and opportunities to help out, and you could volunteer your thoughts and ideas. It is a classic feed forward process where, with each conference you attend, your network grows and you will have more opportunities to share your opinions and perhaps even be invited to join a committee or propose a new workshop.

While I may have serendipitously been offered an opportunity to be an EMWA volunteer, it is an experience that does give me immense satisfaction. Like most wannabe volunteers, I too felt unsure at the start, wondering if I would ever be able to make time or contribute my best efforts for the FBG and EMWA as a whole. But with some fantastic support and encouragement, I did give my time and my best. At present, as a workshop leader and a volunteer on the ESS committee and the Ambassador Programme, I do feel like I have given something to an organisation that has given me so much, most important of which is an

identity as a professional medical writer.

In Vienna, I resigned from the FBG subcommittee to make way for another eager volunteer to join and have the opportunity to contribute. In Vienna, I also handed over the chairpersonship of the FBG to Laura A. Kehoe, a fellow EMWA member and a dear colleague

who I first met when she gamely volunteered to be a table leader at the FBF at the autumn conference in Cascais in 2017. I must add that it was her first FBF. And that is the best part about EMWA – new volunteers always step up to the plate, bringing with them fresh ideas and a desire to help our organisation grow. And grow we shall.

Happy volunteering!

Satyen Shenoy

Describe Scientific Writing & Communications

Getting into medical writing through the Freelance Business Forum

There is nothing like looking, if you want to find something. You certainly usually find something, if you look, but it is not always quite the something you were after.

J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*

Not having the usual academia or industry background made me question if I could throw myself into the freelance medical writing world and be successful. Attending the Freelance Business Forum (FBF) in Vienna gave me confidence and a clearer vision for what I want my journey to be.

From over-the-counter to writing

My journey to become a medical writer is a recent one. For over 10 years I worked in healthcare, first as a pharmacy technician and later as a pharmacist. In both roles I kept longing for some other aspect of communication than the simple-yet-complicated interaction with patients at the pharmacy counter. Besides talking to people, I enjoyed writing information handouts and drug interaction reports for patients. I was also known for being always busy researching something and studying new (and old) medications. Over time, I realised that I would like to do more work in writing and communication, and less in retail pharmacy.

In early 2018, I connected with Maria João Almeida on LinkedIn. She is a Portuguese medical writer and a member of EMWA's Executive Committee. After answering my

questions (namely: what is a medical writer?), she directed me to the EMWA website. I looked around the website, searching for some kind of information that allowed me to feel comfortable in saying that I had the 'right' profile to be a medical writer.

I never found that magical piece of confirmation, but I did find a webinar open to non-members. There, Satyen Shenoy explained the benefits of EMWA for freelancers. That swayed me into becoming an EMWA member and gave me confidence to acknowledge that with enough planning and hard work I could build a new career as a freelance medical writer.

Next stop: Vienna, Freelance Business Forum

One thing that came up again and again in the OOOO articles of *Medical Writing* journal was the benefits of attending the FBF. Everyone wrote about how great it was to get to know fellow freelancers – it was like having a tribe inside the medical writing community. So, when I signed up to the Vienna conference, it was a no-brainer to sign up to the FBF too.

I was looking forward to attending the roundtable discussions, going from table to table like a bee in a meadow, hearing what everyone had to say.

In Vienna, after an opening speech by Satyen and a short presentation from a fellow experienced freelancer, the tables were set up. The table leaders moderated the discussion of their assigned table, giving prompts and keeping the conversation going. It was a happy affair, with

drinks and snacks, and I learned useful tips about medical writing and freelancing. I also discovered that medical writers are very resourceful: they can host a round table discussion without a table of any kind! There were not enough tables, and Carolina Rojido was left tableless for her discussion, but she did not let that get in her way. It's all about people, ideas, and having a great conversation, after all.

Sharing, learning, and having fun

Time flew during these discussions, and I am only sorry that I did not take part in more of them. I would also like the tables to have been a bit bigger. With so many of us attending the forum, there was a kind of a bullseye forming around each table, making the ones in the outer circles having to strain to hear the discussion and making it harder to participate in it.

The air was thrumming with energy. I talked with many like-minded people, all in great spirits, keen to support each other in their freelance journeys.

I even got to talk with Satyen, but before I could thank him for putting up the webinar that ultimately brought me to EMWA, pride got in the way. You know, I am from Cascais, where a previous EMWA conference was held and praised by Satyen in his opening speech. And this made my proud inner geek deliver a crash course on pronunciation ... Satyen was graceful enough to pronounce "kesh-kay-shh" to my satisfaction, but I am fully expecting some kind of revenge on an forthcoming event.

In the end, I left the FBF thankful for all the networking and learning. I would like it to be longer. I would like it to have more information. More discussion, more sharing.

In a nutshell, I want more FBF.

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Networking: The important part of the Freelance Business Forum

I would like to share with you my thoughts and impressions on the Freelance Business Forum (FBF), in case it may be of any interest to other freelance rookies. But first, please allow me to introduce a smidgen on myself. Like many medical writers, I did not know this profession even existed until shortly before falling head over heels into it. A former PhD colleague told me about medical writing, and although she was not very specific about what the job entailed – to describe it is even hard for some of us to this day – it still caught my attention.

After my post-doc, when the moment came to choose a new career path and after digging up some information on the field, I was completely resolved to become a medical/scientific writer. As some of you may know, a long academic background is not always the preferred choice for recruiters, but to make matters worse, my degree is in chemistry, far from the medicine, pharmacy, or biology usually required in many job advertisements. This meant I got the door slammed in my face on several occasions. However, after earning AMWA's Essential Skills Certificate, attending EMWA's internship forum in Barcelona, and getting tips and advice from well-seasoned medical writers, I was finally contacted by someone eager enough to place her trust in me for a job.

Fast forward one year and there I was, an

accomplished medical/scientific writer at my second EMWA Conference in Vienna on May 2019. I signed up for the FBF without knowing too much what to expect from it. I had read the experiences of Laura, Allison, and Sally (cf. OOOO Vol. 28 Num. 1) with the freelance directory, so my only expectation was to get more opinions on it from my colleagues.

The first thing that struck me at the FBF was the wine; after a whole day of workshops running on water, some fermented grape juice was most welcome! The most introvert among us, including me, were really grateful to have a socialisation enhancer. The event started with a nice talk by Joanne Hilton followed by an emotional farewell from the Freelance Business Group by Satyen Shenoy and a short speech by his successor Laura A. Kehoe. She then introduced the table leaders and their topics, and we were left to discuss and debate for quite some time.

I was particularly attracted to three topics: should we get training on day-to-day activities (e.g. accounting, IT); where and how to find new clients; and how to get your foot in the door with regulatory writing. The discussions were vivid, and everyone got his or her say in the matter. Once the time ran out, the table leaders summed up the collective conclusions and we all got some good picture of the addressed topic. In the end,

I went back home with some nice tips and a broader vision of subjects affecting medical writing I could not have thought of myself.

Notably, I managed to get some impressions from the attendees on the freelance directory, which eventually set my mind on signing up after the summer holidays. That is what to me was most important at the FBF; networking. Before joining EMWA I was not convinced by the power of connections, but how wrong was I! Although it is not immediate, I have seen word of mouth at work countless times, so given enough time it can really make wonders. Back to the FBF, I got in contact with some people with whom I am sure we will be able to establish lasting relations with, be it professional or not.

I would never have thought medical writers would give off that much advice to newcomers (who are potential competitors), but we stand where we are because Homo Sapiens is a gregarious species. Freelancers tend to work alone most of the time, so in the end, my personal view on the FBF – which could also be extended to EMWA – is that we are not alone but instead part of a vast family that believes in mutual aid to strive.

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