


# Getting Your Foot in the Door

## Editorial

In this edition of GYFD, we are happy to present to you two great contributions. Danae Rokanas shares with us some interesting statistics and important lessons learned from the first *Live Internship Forum (IF)* in Munich. In the second piece, St Gilesmedical – one of the companies who participated in Munich – and their interns give us a peek into the educational and internship environment of a small but dynamic MedComms company. Two articles that set the mood of anticipation as we gear up towards the second *Live IF!* See you in Birmingham.

## SECTION EDITOR

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## The EMWA Internship Forum – Let us introduce you!

The EMWA Internship Forum (IF) is celebrating its 16 month anniversary this March and we (the EMWA IF team) are proud to announce its success in introducing 13 of our partnering companies with over 100 enthusiastic applicants. Our programme continues to grow and evolve at a remarkable rate.

Almost one year since the launch of the first

*Live IF* at EMWA's 42nd annual spring conference in Munich, Germany, we have compiled some key observations and lessons learned that may be useful to our supporting companies and aspiring applicants.

## Observations – for companies

### 1. Applicant characteristics.

Applicants who attended the *Live IF* were predominantly European (73%), in their mid-twenties to mid-thirties (60%), recently out of university and with no previous experience in medical writing or other industry employment (60%). Experienced applicants (40%) were in their mid-thirties to mid-fifties and had previously worked in: clinical research organisations (13%), pharmaceutical companies (13%), medical clinics (6%), animal diagnostics companies (6%), independently as freelancers (6%) or other companies (6%). Half of all experienced applicants worked in more than one company. Half of all applicants had a PhD and one third had a post-doctorate degree (Figure 1). All were eager to start a career in medical writing.

### 2. 80% of applicants who attended the first *Live IF* were hoping to gain an internship and/or job in medical writing.

Over half of all applicants were hoping to secure internships as gateways to a more permanent role with their chosen companies. Twenty six percent were looking for an internship or a job (Figure 2). Others were hoping to gain: “a way into the industry”, “advice” or “connections”.

### 3. Three out of four applicants believed it is difficult to find a job in medical writing.

Applicants were either “too young and inexperienced” or “too old and experienced” for entry-level medical writing roles according to recruiters. *How could applicants reach the golden middle?* A common problem amongst applicants was *how to get a job without experience in medical writing*. It is worth considering whether the criteria applied are perhaps too stringent and exclude a category of talented applicants that may be real assets for companies. The solution may lie in adopting a more flexible and individualised approach to recruiting; as a wise man once told me: “*We don't use a set checklist to recruit candidates. We interview them, and if we like them, the checklist writes itself*” – I am now a proud employee in his company.

## Key learnings – tips for applicants

### 1. Be positive, be yourself and write a strong application letter.

When asked about the most important criteria in distinguishing successful applicants, the majority of companies favoured a strong application letter and positive attitude (rated 3.4 on a scale of 1 [not so important] to 4 [imperative]) over higher level education and relevant work experience (Figure 3).

### 2. Become an EMWA member – get involved.

If you're reading this article, you've already won half the battle. Almost one in three companies interviewed at the *Live IF* maintained that an EMWA membership could significantly boost an applicant's credibility when looking for an entry-level role in medical writing. An additional 43% felt that a membership could add value to an application depending on the overall strength of

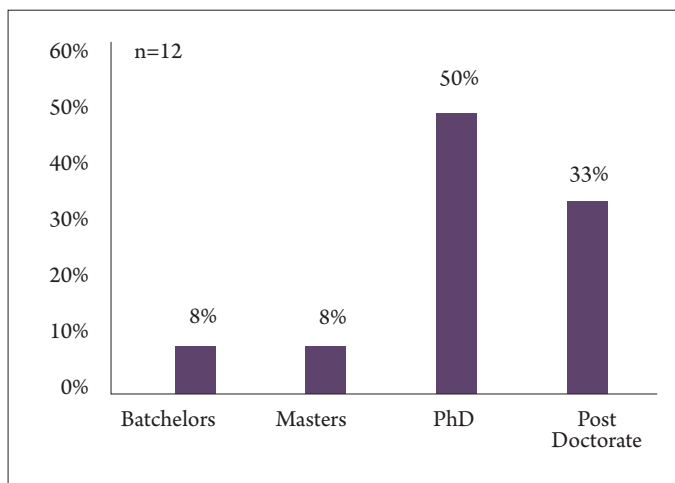


Figure 1

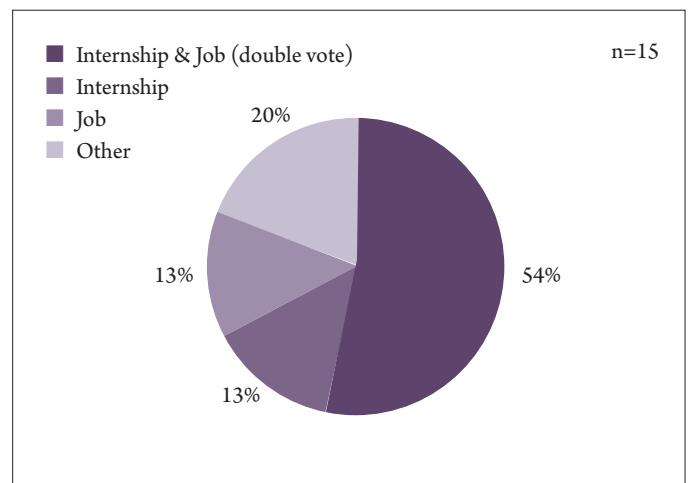


Figure 2

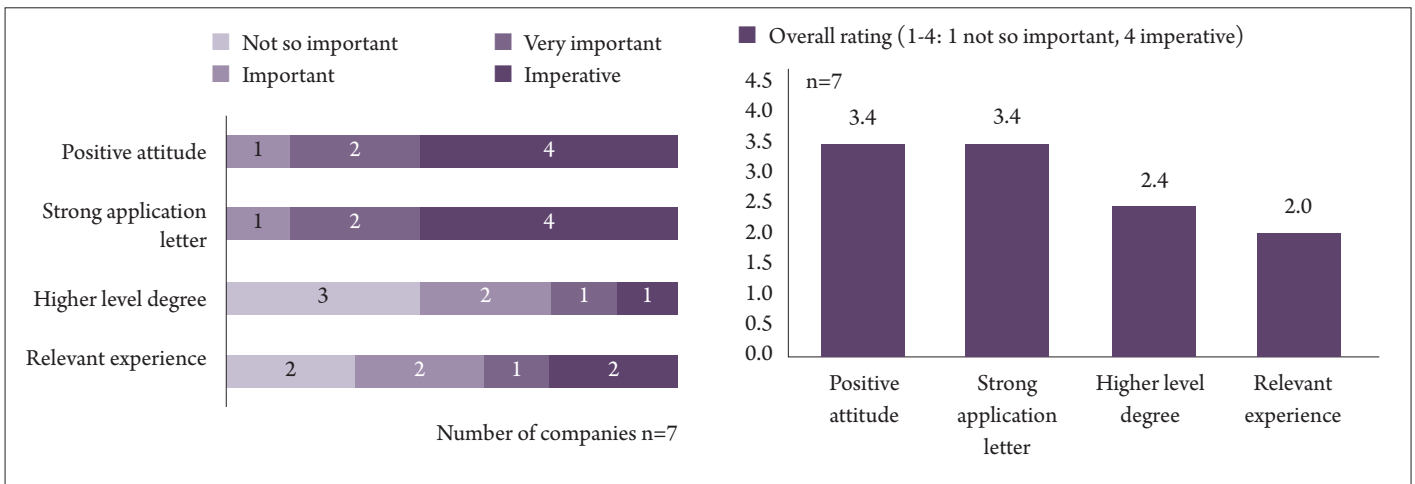


Figure 3

the application itself. From personal experience, I confidently vouch for EMWA – not just as a potent CV booster and source of medical writing training; but as an inspiring community which offers you the chance to get involved and build experience.

### 3. Give it a try – apply.

Entry-level roles in medical writing are like needles in a haystack, painful to look for but not impossible to find if you know where to look. Six out of seven companies that attended the *Live* IF have offered permanent entry-level roles to applicants with no previous experience in medical writing. Four claimed to offer entry-level roles “all the time”, while two companies admitted they only “sometimes” offered entry-level roles. One company never considered offering permanent positions to inexperienced applicants prior to the *Live* IF. One of the aims of the IF is to increase the number of companies offering entry-level roles and help you refine your search to target companies that are right for you.

### 4. Let us introduce you.

We are proud to announce that 100% of the attendees – both applicants and companies – were satisfied with their meetings at the *Live* event. Overall, the *Live* IF was rated 4 or 5 on a scale of 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent) in terms of usefulness by 82% of participants.

If you are looking for an opportunity to work in medical writing, please feel free to contact us at [internship@emwa.org](mailto:internship@emwa.org) or visit our website ([www.emwa.org/internship](http://www.emwa.org/internship)) for more information. We are happy to help!

### Key learnings – for EMWA and the IF team

Despite our recent success, we are constantly looking for ways to further develop the IF to better suit the needs of the applicants and companies involved. In the words of the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus: “there is nothing permanent except change” (4th century BC). At the EMWA IF we plan to make positive change permanent by realising some key goals.

### 1. Maximise the potential of the EMWA website and members’ emails.

When asked how they had heard of the IF, the majority of applicants voted for the EMWA website (50%) and the members’ emails (33%). Company representatives were largely (71%) informed of the IF by their colleagues or acquaintances who had been personally invited by the EMWA IF team. Underwhelmingly, the EMWA flyer and social media such as LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter had little-to-no impact on publicising the IF to applicants and companies (Figure 4).

At first glance, it seems as though the pilot *Live* IF mainly attracted applicants from within the EMWA community (i.e., existing EMWA members). Moving forward, we should place emphasis on pursuing interested applicants outside of EMWA to grow and diversify our applicant pool.

Ultimately, when it comes to the dissemination of key information regarding the IF, our approach should be two-fold. First, we must maximise the potential of the EMWA website and email distribution list to maintain the interest

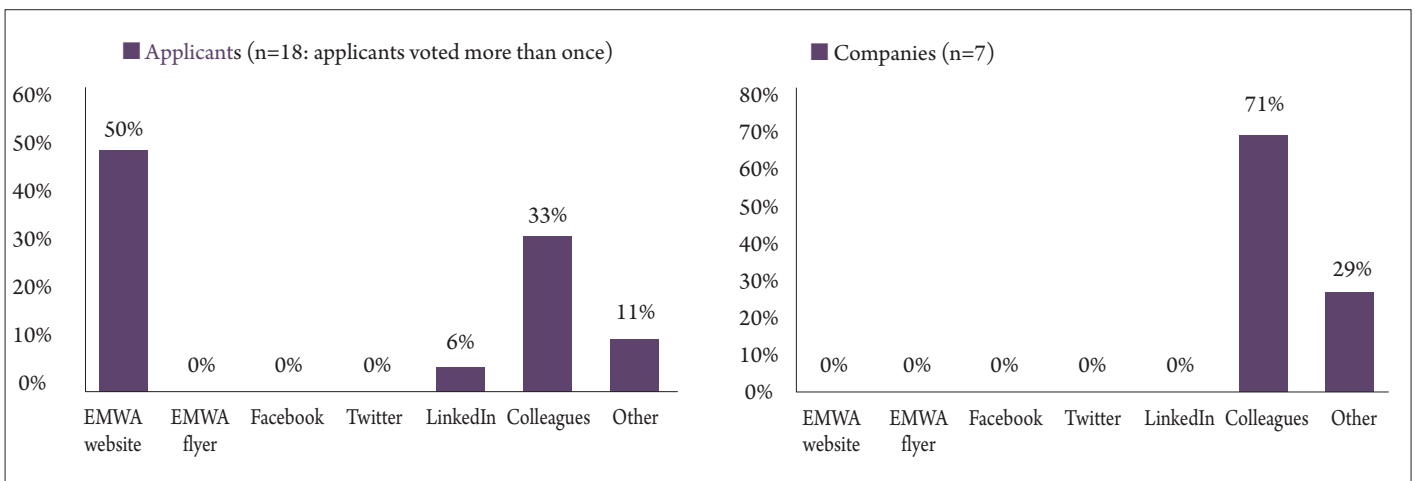


Figure 4

of existing members. Second, we must make an impact via social media to draw attention to the EMWA website and attract new members to the EMWA community.

## 2. Make an impact via social media.

It's true, we won't become Kendall Jenner overnight, but it might be worth reassessing our strategy when advertising the IF on social media. *Are we producing regular posts on EMWA's Facebook and Twitter accounts? Are posts openly accessed by the public? Are we drawing enough attention to the IF website? Are we appealing to our target audience? Are we bringing value to applicants and companies?* In a world dominated by Facebook, Twitter, and the Kardashians, it is important that we find a way to engage our target audience and make a lasting impact via social media.

## 3. Provide all participants with a complete IF guide.

We found that many companies had questions

about their roles within the IF, the processes involved to arrange meetings with applicants at the *Live IF*, and their responsibilities when offering internships to successful applicants. A common question was *"once the internship is finished, what happens next?"* Our aim is to produce a complete IF guide, individually tailored to applicants and companies, to help address these questions and provide clarity on how the IF works.

## 4. Address wider audiences, not just 'MedComms'.

Despite often using the term 'MedComms' on the IF website, it is important to clarify that in addition to MedComms we welcome the participation of any company – be it CRO, pharmaceutical company or other – which could offer medical writing positions to prospective applicants. To paraphrase the words of Gus Portokalos *"We're all different, but in the end, we're all medical writers"*.

## 5. Establish a place for the *Live IF* at EMWA's annual spring conferences.

When we launched our first *Live IF* at EMWA's 42nd annual spring conference in Munich, the event only lasted 1.5 hours and took place at the conference centre's lunch area with a couple of standing tables and borrowed microphones. Today, I am happy to report that due to popular demand, the *Live IF* has been extended to half a day and will be taking place on Thursday, 4th May 2017 at the next spring conference in Birmingham – in a conference room and with all the necessary equipment. Slowly but surely, the EMWA IF is establishing its place in the EMWA community... and this is only just the beginning.

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## Internship joys and challenges: experience within a small agency

**"Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn."** – Chinese Confucian philosopher Xunzi (312-230 BC) in *The Teachings of the Ru*, popularised in the West in the 1960s and often attributed wrongly to Benjamin Franklin.

We describe our experiences of supporting medical writing interns from the perspective of a small agency. Simultaneously, we seek the views of some of the talented trainees we have had the privilege to be associated with.

### The Directors' view

Education is central to our role at St Gilesmedical. This was especially the case with a new business and the need to develop a writing team in a short space of time. We were fortunate in having access to experienced associates we had known for some time, but it was necessary to provide balance in our workforce by also developing an in-house team. In previous ventures we had enjoyed very successful results from internships and this was coupled with a desire to offer opportunities to people who for any reason might need support to gain a foothold in the industry.

As we became more established, approaches from prospective medical writers for work experience proliferated. In many cases, though well qualified, they were not able to secure a placement without experience and to gain experience one needed a placement.

Around the same time, we were invited to take part in the first Internship Forum at the EMWA Conference in Munich. The level of interest in our small organisation was surprising: in response to our posting of a potential apprenticeship-based internship, 38 talented individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds and nationalities requested to meet with us. Since there were limited scheduled slots within the programme, we offered to meet with the majority throughout the conference, usually at our exhibition stand. Among those we spoke to some were seeking paid full-time employment in our London or Berlin locations, others were looking for periodic unpaid distance learning opportunities to fit in with family and employment commitments, with a spectrum of requests in between. In the end we took on one intern who had cleverly engaged our interest ahead of the Forum and offered a number of others the opportunity to work on a few training pieces from home, for which we would give feedback and support. Though time consuming, we have continued to help a few individuals in this way since then.

We are supporting our current in-house intern to build on his work experience at St Gilesmedical in applying for a full-time position as a medical writer.

One exciting initiative has been our support for the Manchester Metropolitan University

Master in Science Communication Course, which contains a Medical Writing Module. St Gilesmedical has been involved with course development and delivery. Recently we hosted one of the course students as a short-term intern at our London office. Similarly, another helped us organise a major scientific conference at Imperial College London ([www.euhic.com](http://www.euhic.com)) and then deliver an eBook covering all presenter content and slides.

Our interns have spanned a wide demographic, from bioscience undergraduates thinking about career options to established scientists (and a medic) looking for a change in direction. They have ranged in age and gender and have included diverse ethnicities and heritage. Important learning is that being a non-native English speaker brings challenges for both the intern and the employer, particularly given the fundamental need for highly developed communication skills in this field.

Early on we made the mistake of thinking we could rely on fairly simple documents such as a short meeting reports being completed quickly and in a near finished format. This proved not always to be the case. By comparison, other pieces of work such as complex fact checking or the creation of original work have always been carried out diligently. We have learned not to make assumptions, to remember that interns are there to learn from us as well as to help with our

tasks and that they should be regarded as supernumerary. As supervisors we need to be clear in what we are asking, keep a check on progress and monitor all client documents carefully. It is advisable to seek HR advice concerning terms and conditions at the outset and to find time for regular review meetings.

The fresh perspective and energy that interns bring is of great value to a small agency like ours and more than repays the effort needed to support them. We continue to learn and grow.

## The intern perspectives

### Farzad Heidari

Before I knew much about the field, I thought medical writing in a medical communication agency would be a dry job where you sit at a desk in isolation and write all day. But my misperception soon stood corrected as I discovered the unique and inspiring field of medical writing in St Gilesmedical.



Yvonne and Steven, directors of St Gilesmedical, explained that medical writers integrate myriad scientific knowledge into comprehensive communications for diverse audiences, ranging from the general public, to physicians, and to regulatory agencies including the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

The more I learned about medical writing, the more it sounded like something I could be passionate about, perfectly complementing my academic training. I was used to managing multiple research projects from start to finish and comfortable with communicating findings through a variety of outlets: in peer-reviewed manuscripts, internal grant submissions, international conferences, and regulatory submissions.

Working in St Gilesmedical, however, has extended and diversified my range of skills and abilities such as in:

- Presenting research findings at seminars, and conferences
- Hosting and managing a CPD-accredited medical conference
- Completing projects within stringent timelines: clinical trial reports, and conference abstracts
- Strategic planning and managing high-level research projects.

Learning about a variety of medical innovations and exciting new products, as well as knowing that our work makes a difference,

definitely keeps me interested and motivated in St Gilesmedical.

### Valeria Clausi

I had the pleasure to meet Steven, one of St Gilesmedical's directors, during the EMWA 2016 Spring Conference in Munich. Since our first informal chat, I was impressed by his enthusiasm about the wonder of science communication. It was so contagious that I did not hesitate further about my enrolment at the Manchester Metropolitan University as MSc student in Science Communication: a choice I do not regret, but treasure every day. In short our meeting was inspiring, fruitful, and enjoyable. It was an excellent opportunity not only to share knowledge and experience but also to seize the opportunity to take part as a volunteer at the first EuHIC Conference in London.



EuHIC 2016 was my first foot in the door of medical symposium organisation in the UK. It was not a classical medical conference: the audience comprised future leaders in healthcare and science, people with energy and ideas who wished to learn, collaborate, and make things happen. Science took the stage throughout the day and I truly enjoyed and benefited from the day. I was delighted to meet Steven again and for the first time the other members of St Gilesmedical's team: different personalities and nationalities but all as one in front of a glass of wine during the pre-conference meeting and all committed to making the conference a success. Indeed, the event was a resounding success with very positive feedback from all parties involved. From my personal viewpoint, it was a superb opportunity to interact with amazing people and update myself with scientific breakthroughs in a wide range of fields and therapeutic areas. The icing on the cake was my involvement in writing the conference eBook.

Nothing is more direct than gaining hands-on experience and St Gilesmedical is the right place. This small medical communications agency has a good balance in terms of workload and the types of tasks you are given. It is a place where you play a role in helping the company run smoothly whilst the company, in turn, teaches you the ropes.

### Rob Davies

Finding the office was not as tough a challenge as first anticipated, armed with



Google maps, it was only a short walk from Tottenham Court Road tube station. I met Steven again (who had coordinated two seminars earlier in the year at MMU) and was introduced to the in-house team. The office itself was very different from any I had experienced before, and most likely different to most people's expectations of a typical office space. It had a much quirkier and comfortable atmosphere with the smaller space and the 18th century build.

In terms of the work I was given, I helped with contributions toward editing the St Gilesmedical company slides, and began work on a publication based around a medical student survey on compulsory reflective practice as part of their curriculum. Sophia showed me a very useful yet simple technique of collecting large numbers of references and abstracts into a spreadsheet so they can be systematically reviewed and a decision can be made whether they are appropriate.

I attended two very interesting meetings during my time at St Gilesmedical. My first was at the Marie Curie Hospice at Hampstead, where a range of medical staff ranging from GPs to social workers discussed real-life issues concerning a difficult to manage inpatient at the hospice. This I found particularly interesting in view of the differing opinions regarding management offered by the experienced medical and nursing audience. The second meeting I attended was at Islington Council, where Yvonne was discussing and planning a workshop the following week based around the points of entry of young offenders into the youth justice system and how these can be integrated within healthcare pathways.

Overall, I loved my time at St Gilesmedical. The team were all very friendly and welcoming, with Farzad helping me improve my bland LinkedIn profile, and Allon showing me the nicest Thai food in London. I feel as though I received a good insight into what it is like to be a medical writer, and learnt some new and useful techniques to take back with me to Manchester. Thank you, St Gilesmedical!

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