

Profile

An interview with Laura Carolina Collada Ali: On the peculiarities of working for independent research organisations

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Laura C Collada Ali wears different hats: she is a medical writer plus a medical translator, and has extensive experience delivering multilingual authoring and translation services across a wide range of independent research organisations. She is a translator by education, yet has worked for many years in the fields of independent clinical research, regulatory affairs, and logistics. Based on her background, she has a large portfolio of services to offer: scientific writing and translation, proofreading, regulatory writing, medical communications writing, project management, and training. Additionally, she served as Public Relations (PR) officer for EMWA from May 2013 to May 2015. In this profile, we turn to Laura to better understand the peculiarities of working for independent research organisations.

(Note from the MEW Editorial Board: For MEW readers, Laura is also well-known for her profile interview series. She recently took over the translation section of MEW of which she is now the new section editor. She handed over the interview series to Beatrix Doerr who is the current EMWA PR officer. It is only fitting to feature Laura as our profile interviewee in this issue, with Beatrix as interviewer. Thank you, Laura and welcome, Beatrix).

MEW: About your professional career: You have 15 years experience in clinical research and regulatory affairs based on what we call 'independent research or not-for profit research'. In how far do you think this experience helps you in your current role?

Laura C Collada Ali (LCCA): Indeed, I have worked at the European Organisation for Research and Treatment of Cancer (EORTC) in Brussels for two years where I was responsible of coordinating the scientific review of new protocols. Integrating evaluations from subject matter world experts and opinion leaders can be a challenge sometimes! I have also worked for many years for the Italian Group for Adult Haematological Malignancies (GIMEMA) Data Centre in Rome. I was in charge of logistics and regulatory affairs, coordinating a team of five colleagues and dealt with the logistics and start-up procedures of more than 30 clinical trials.

This broad hands-on experience in the independent clinical research field is particularly useful for

small organisations looking to gain international audiences for medical and scientific subject matters. I really think this helps me a lot because I fully understand what their particular needs are and I am able to render them in target documents that fulfil their expectations. On the other hand, when I decided to go freelance, I already had quite a big portfolio of potential clients. Today, indeed, I often work with different independent organisations, both as writer and as translator.

MEW: Do you think it is essential for newcomers to gain first experience in the field of clinical research and regulatory affairs or will it taking training courses in this field be sufficient? How did you gain the necessary medical knowledge?

LCCA: Well, all roads lead to Rome, but some may be harder to travel... Probably, a combination of the two is the right answer. Yet, in my opinion, experience in the field cannot be equalled by theoretical training, unless a given training course comprises a final 'hands-on' stage that is sufficiently effective.

Experience gives you a broader view and the possibility to fully understand the intricacies of what you are doing. It enables you to put in practice what you've learned by training, and having actually 'practiced' or done something leads you to a better understanding of the given topic.

When you fully know your subject matter, you are able to be proactive and to propose solutions when identifying a potential problem. Such an approach is highly appreciated by clients, of course.

That said, professionals who have long experience in medical writing or translation and did not start hands-on on clinical research may also be able to have such an approach.

MEW: You offer quite a big portfolio of services. What advice would you give somebody who is new to freelancing—specialise or diversify?

LCCA: Personally, I would say both.

In my experience, the best option is to be able to give a broad range of services within a highly specialised domain. Indeed, I am somewhat diversified because I do not focus only on translation, but also do lots of writing, editing, and even training,

and thanks to my experience as project manager, I am also able to manage projects that involve different languages and specialisation domains, collaborating with expert colleagues in different languages and domains.

On the other hand, I am also somewhat specialised because most of what I do is based, first on medicine, and secondly, on the fields of oncology and haematology.

This strategy may have several advantages: your learning curve in the subject matter is less steep, as you focus on one single area. All your projects are likely to be similar and you may apply what you've learned in one project to the next one. You target a single segment, which is far easier from a marketing point of view than targeting several ones.

On the other hand, you need to bear in mind that by specialising you may be economically tied to one specific segment, which means that you may have decreased opportunities for sales, it may be harder to increase your customer base, and you may get tired of focusing on the same topic project after project.

MEW: Of all the different services you offer, which one would you deem the most challenging and why?

LCCA: To be honest, in my experience, I would not be able to say that writing is more challenging than translating, or the other way round. What I do sometimes find 'challenging' is interacting with the author of a given text that needs to be either edited or translated. And you may wonder why? It is not always easy to explain to a physician that what he/she has written is:

- ambiguous and needs clarification,
- grammatically incorrect,
- semantically incorrect,
- not coherent with other parts of the text,
- does not respect typographical rules of the given language,
- etc.

Very often, authors consider their texts as their own creation and do not happily accept criticism, even the constructive ones. You need to find an

appropriate way of communicating and, of course, you always need to have references at hand to support your thesis. This may sometimes be tiresome, yet with experience you learn to approach such situations in the best way possible.

MEW: Writing for non-profit organisations is no different than writing for the industry, right?

Well, yes and no. Although some may argue that the difference is not in what not-for-profit research does, but in why it is done – increasing shareholder value versus addressing patients' needs, often conducting research for neglected diseases and orphan drugs. In many European countries, there is a particular regulation that applies only to independent research by lowering the amount of bureaucracy needed to run a clinical trial. This means that documentation requirements for not-for-profit studies may be less complex and stringent compared to those of a pharma company trial. And, of course, independent trials usually being not aimed at registering a given drug, will not lead to any regulatory registration-driven documentation.

Conclusion

Laura shared with us the great wealth of opportunities in medical writing and communications—from translation to writing, including project management and training. I hope this interview will particularly be useful for newcomers, showing how to build on previous experience to further career paths and business ventures. For freelancers, Laura gave some food for thought on specialising versus non-specialising. We also thank her for her candid views about potential difficulties with authors. It is certainly reassuring for newcomers that even experienced people like Laura face resistance and her tips can help to master such situations.

In conclusion, medical writing is a wide field and with enthusiasm and commitment, everything is possible. So start exploring new horizons. As Laura says, 'all roads lead to Rome' and since she lives in Italy, she must know it!

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