



## Report from the Freelance Business Forum—Barcelona 2008

by Alison McIntosh

The Freelance Business Forum (FBF) has now become a regular feature at all EMWA conferences, and the Barcelona FBF was well attended. Sam and Alistair had put together a packed agenda which we covered in the allotted hour.

The first agenda item concerned the new-look EMWA website. A huge amount of work has gone into the new website, and various things have changed regarding the freelance listing. Shanida Nataraja, the website manager, came along to discuss the changes and receive input from the freelancers. She was willing to work with a representative group of freelancers to address any issues we had about the listing. The option to have our own freelance-only discussion forum was discussed, and we agreed that this would be a very useful tool. She also suggested that the website could become a place to promote freelance opportunities.

The freelance listing is an important source of clients for those of us who advertise there, and it is essential that anyone who needs to find a freelancer is able to navigate through the listing easily. To facilitate this, it was felt that the introductory text and layout could be improved, and Jo Whelan volunteered to work on the text and also act as a point of contact to co-ordinate input. She will send out an email with collated points for comments which will then be discussed with Shanida. Anyone willing to help with this should contact Jo directly ([jo@textpharm.com](mailto:jo@textpharm.com)).

Questions were asked about the ordering of the listing within each country because it is no longer in alphabetical order and changes according to the number of hits each freelancer receives, with those receiving the fewest hits being cycled to the top of the listing. Shanida confirmed that the alphabetical listing is not presently possible using the new system, and will take a couple of months to address and solve. A request was made for the hit counter to be hidden.

Positive aspects mentioned included that the freelance listing fits in with the rest of the website with the same appealing new look, and the 30-word text on the front works well.

We were updated on a series of freelance initiatives introduced in the last year, including the 'Out on Our Own' section in *TWS* and the email discussion group. It was also confirmed that the FBF is to be held at every EMWA conference, although unfortunately, it is impossible to get around the tight time slot. All of these initiatives were seen as a positive contribution for freelancers and for EMWA as a whole. If you have any suggestions of what you would like to see covered on behalf of freelance members, or you

would like to contribute to the freelance section of *TWS*, please contact Alistair and Sam.

There was a good response to the latest round of email discussion questions raised in February 2008, and a summary of responses received up to the end of March was distributed before the FBF. There was debate around distribution, and most felt it was best circulated by email, with names attached to comments unless otherwise requested. It will remain a closed list open only to EMWA freelance members, and may in the future become more immediate by using the freelance section of the website.

Of note: if you are a freelance medical writer and HAVE NOT received the discussion e-mails and would like them please send an e-mail to [info@emwa.org](mailto:info@emwa.org) (copy in [sam@samhamiltonmwservices.co.uk](mailto:sam@samhamiltonmwservices.co.uk) and [areeves@ascribe.de](mailto:areeves@ascribe.de)) asking to be added to the list (freelance members are not automatically added to the list; they are added only if they specifically request it).

The value of advertising on the EMWA freelance listing was discussed and one member confirmed that about 50% of hits on her website are directed from the EMWA website. A show of hands confirmed that no-one in the room presently advertising on the website would remove their entry!

Continuous training for medical writers was discussed, including Good Clinical Practice (GCP) updates. One member from the UK confirmed that earlier this year she had taken part in two Medicines and Healthcare Regulatory Agency (MHRA) inspections (as the writer of the Clinical Study Report [CSR] for a study that the auditors were inspecting). In both cases, the inspectors questioned her about how she kept her training up to date and wanted to see documented proof of this, in particular proof of yearly GCP update training. Via the email discussion forum, members were asked to register their interest in basic GCP training tailored for medical writers with periodic updates thereafter. A total of 52/61 responses were positive, and this request is now being considered by the EMWA Professional Development Committee (EPDC).

Suggestions for specific training or information events for freelancers were discussed and topics mentioned included: overview of guidelines being developed (e.g. Paediatric Investigation Plans [PIPs]), new and revised national guidelines, changes in data protection legislation, and trial design issues. The email discussion forum was identified as a place to ask for information and also as a way of disseminating changes to guidelines/legislation.

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One member asked a question about another person or company using your chosen domain name, and if there is anything that can be done about it. The overwhelming feeling was that nothing could be done about it. If you do register the name, it is usually only within your own country. Laura Russell volunteered to investigate protecting your logo and domain name and will write an article for *TWS*.

Another question concerned the offer of extremely low-cost editing and writing from some countries, and whether there was anything we could do to counter this. In essence, it seems nothing can be done about it. The standard of work returned is very low, and often the client has to have the work upgraded by more proficient writers and editors. However, it was felt we should not be complacent and should continue to monitor the situation.

Another topic covered was offering an editorial service similar to that offered by a centrally organised group of editors drawn from PhD life science graduates and students at the ‘top ten’ universities in the USA. After some discussion it was agreed that this might be a business opportunity for someone, but probably too complex to undertake as a band of freelancers under the aegis of EMWA.

To maintain the theme of the Barcelona conference: Translation, Gabi Berghammer agreed to write an article around the issue of medical translations for a future edition of *TWS*.

Freelance writers are encouraged to contribute articles, either for the ‘Out on Our Own’ section, or for elsewhere in *TWS*. Also, the series of articles on starting up in business as a freelancer will continue with a country other than the UK and Germany after the present series by Stefan Lang on setting up in Germany. So, please email Alistair with any suggestions for our own section of *TWS*. The September 2008 issue of *TWS* will be guest-edited by Alistair (theme: Can you manage your time?), and Sam is guest-editing the March 2009 issue (theme: Lesser known regulatory issues). Start thinking now about what you might contribute to these editions. And don’t forget: it doesn’t have to be an article; there is always plenty of room for smaller comments and tips in ‘boxes’.

And finally, a huge thank you is due to both Alistair and Sam for undertaking these freelance initiatives. They are welcomed by the substantial EMWA freelance membership (about 15% of members) and we appreciate the time and commitment it takes to make these initiatives a reality.

The next FBF will be held at the 27<sup>th</sup> EMWA Conference in London, UK, 20–22 November 2008.

### **Alison McIntosh**

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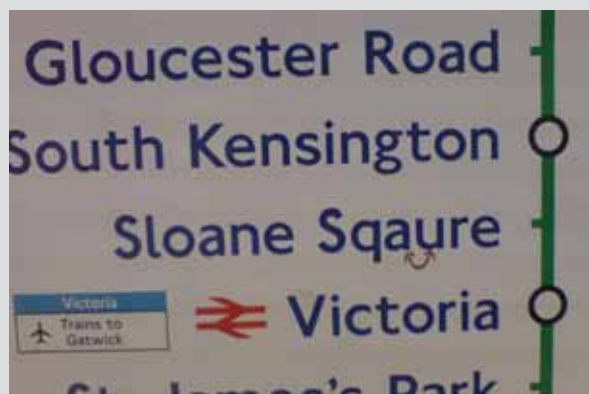
### **Groping for words: A warning**

I work on website texts and give clients links to the websites if they want to see examples of my work. I recently did this and thought I would take a look at the breast cancer website concerned, because I hadn’t checked it for a while (and it mentions my name, albeit on a very deep-down level). On the first page, in the middle of the screen, in bright red, I was faced with this:

*“I have groped a small knot in my breast. Is this serious?”*

It certainly is serious (but tell me you didn’t smile!); and if discovered by someone else while ‘groping’, probably even more serious. But it is also a serious and unforgivable error (many more had also been introduced by updates), and I requested correction. Maybe I should just stick to paper references or my own Word documents in the future!

**Alistair Reeves**  
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### **Why a mobile phone is always handy<sup>1</sup>**

If you don’t proofread your signs in time there’s no alternative but to add edits to the final product. Andrea Palluch photographed this official sign at Hammersmith underground station in London on her way to work: She sent it to *TWS* with a comment that it’s a good thing we have camera phones these days.

<sup>1</sup> Apologies to German-speaking readers.