



Always manage your time: The point of view of the medical writer in the pharmaceutical industry

by *Andrea Rossi*

Working in the medical writing function of a medium-sized affiliate of a large pharmaceutical company gives me the opportunity to experience many aspects of medical writing and its management. Italy has one of the lowest rates of investment in research among developed countries. In 2004, it accounted for only 1.1% of the gross net product, compared with 1.9% for Europe as a whole and 2.8% in the USA [1]. 'Italian creativity' together with a strong push from universities mean that despite this, much research is still published in high-quality journals: for instance, the ratio of oncological papers to all medical literature from 2000 to 2006 from Italy was second only to the USA, and corresponded to the highest ratio between number of publications and gross domestic product [2]. So, why does the Italian affiliate of a pharmaceutical company need medical writers? This question often occupied me when I started medical writing more than 5 years ago, and now I think I have some good answers!

My activities are mainly related to the preparation of publications, but I am also responsible for publication planning and tracking, business planning, training, people and vendor selection, and general management. The planning and management tasks take up most of my time, and you can't imagine how grateful I am for these. At Eli Lilly Italia, we also have to prepare and periodically update a vast amount of procedures in line with documentation prepared at the company headquarters. This is not particularly stimulating work, but it needs (always unplanned) time that has to be properly managed—and someone who cares about it.

When a new task lands on my desk, my first question is: will it be time I lose, time I have to spend, or time I have to manage?

Planning activities

Every year, for every marketed product or product under development, our company has to prepare a disclosure plan which forms part of the global business plan. The plan from each country has to be relevant to local scientific communication needs and must be integrated with the worldwide publication programme. The use of Scholar Datavision is a great help in the management of scientific data disclosure planning. Coordination with physicians and the knowledge of the scientific environment is crucial to preparing a good publication plan. Time spent to prepare a good publication plan is always 'good' time spent—and sharing the plan with other groups affected (physicians, Clinical Operations, Medical Information, Marketing) is

even 'better' time spent. Planning the best way to disclose the right message to the right customer at the right time and make your colleagues aware of this is the best added value for customers and patients, and therefore also for me and the company. The medical writer has a crucial role in this activity and must drive the process, always with a keen awareness of the main goals to be reached and communication priorities.

Time management is one of the most important aspects of medical writing: colleagues may support you when a new publication has to be prepared or published, but almost all of them have no time for any aspects of planning. They may all have great academic curricula, but Italian universities teach nothing about planning and management: learning is focused purely on the research itself. Medical writers have to be able to manage the actual publishing of the findings, using all their psychological and technical expertise, and conflict-solving abilities. If they are good at this, most of their job is already done (well, almost ...). From the managerial point of view, the crucial part is not that a publication is written in-house. It can always be outsourced. But this also has to be managed, and if your planning is not good, your company will not have resources for writing up crucial topics when they are needed.

Meetings: Malediction or benediction?

Do I have to provide updates? What information are we wanting to share? Who is taking part in the meeting? What is the expected outcome? We all ask ourselves these questions when we have to attend a meeting ... or we should. Any meeting we are requested to attend might be useful, but we need to be able to evaluate whether the meeting will actually be of benefit. Even if writers are invited as consultants to a meeting, they have to find a way of deriving benefit for their work from the meeting. So every meeting has to be carefully evaluated and prepared for by asking yourself some questions. Would I need the same time to obtain the same information if I didn't attend the meeting? How much time do I need to prepare for the meeting? And is there crucial information I will miss if I do not attend?

We all receive invitations to meetings that will bring us no benefit for our work but which we are expected to attend. But how do you avoid attending? The best way is to be honest with the person convening the meeting and arrange to attend for only part of the meeting so you still have time to discuss important points, or not attend at all, explaining that if you attend, you will lose time for other priorities. If

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the meeting convener is your boss, and he or she is insistent, you should still defend your priorities. The result should be either more respect from your boss for wanting to maintain your timelines, or revision of those timelines with your boss's agreement to ensure that you attend the meeting (the one you are desperately trying to avoid!)

Outsourcing

If your day is absolutely full and the only time you have is time when you should be sleeping, you have a big problem! When you plan your activities at the beginning of each year, the evaluation of headcount takes priority over financial planning. If you find that you have time for anything but writing, it is more than possible that you need to revise your plan. When time is short, the first thing that comes to mind (especially your boss's) is: we need to outsource.

Outsourcing without planning is not the right approach. Freelancers and medical writing agencies have their own plans, and you generally have to plan in advance together with them. A good manager needs to know what activities are planned and what the department can manage with the staff available. It is crucial to have a good relationship with vendors. They have to be carefully selected, have a good working relationship with the outsourcing department in your company and, even more importantly, you need a good contact person in the vendor company. Establishing this all takes time and involves meetings with the vendor and with the colleagues who will work with the vendor. This is 'good' time spent, especially because you can also learn new ways of doing things from vendor companies. A good medical writing manager will manage 'writer time', also considering the vendor and the particular areas of expertise that each vendor can offer. Only in this way can you ensure that each of your projects will be completed in line with your expectations.

What does 'prioritise' actually mean?

Prioritisation is a continuous, ever-changing process that needs the right answers to the right questions.

What is the most important thing in your life? Why are you a medical writer? Do your objectives comply with those of your job? Do you support your company strategy? These may not be so crucial for other functions, but medical writers have to communicate to the entire world not only the results of research but also the philosophy of their company. When your boss assigns you a new activity, the first question should be: where does this come on the priority ladder? Your manager's answer is often: THIS is our top priority! You have to be able to overcome your emotional response to this and arm yourself with the tools to obtain a clear answer. Always maintain a task list of short-term and long-term activities, prioritised in agreement with your boss and assume that you have to be the proactive element in this process. Clear prioritisation is the only way to ensure added value, and time spent prioritising is always 'good' time spent. If you can, ensure that priorities are not

constantly changing and are in line with plans made at the beginning of the year. There are, of course, exceptional situations, but these must be rare ... otherwise they are not exceptions!

My time is more important than yours!

Unlike many activities, medical writing is a cross-functional activity with a multitude of borderline activities with many different colleagues in different departments. This is the main reason why everybody feels free to ask the writer to do something that is 'absolutely urgent' and that the writer is just there to do this. In other words: "Dear colleague, because I am unable to manage my time, please rescue me from this desperate situation". Requesters will never admit that they cannot manage their time, but you nevertheless feel obliged to help them ... but sometimes rage wins over reason and you cannot resist saying: "Is your time more important than mine?" or "I can only help you because I am an efficient planner and I have built in enough time to help you" or "I came to you with a similar question last year, and you didn't have time to help ME!" Raise your hand if you have never reacted like this in similar situations. But beware: is this sort of reaction justified? Unplanned things happen every day. How do we plan for the unplanned? It is obviously impossible, and the only way to handle it is to manage the situation by redefining priorities. Much time is lost in useless thoughts, leaving less time for setting priorities, which must always come first.

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Parkinson's Law

Cyril Northcote Parkinson was a professor of history at the university of Malaya. He inspired a number of 'laws'. One first published in the *Economist* in 1955 is 'Work expands so as to fill the time for its completion'. This applies at the individual as well as at the institutional level. He wrote "Thus an elderly lady of leisure can spend the entire day in writing and dispatching a postcard to her niece at Bognor Regis. An hour will be spent in finding the postcard, another in hunting spectacles, half an hour in search of the address, an hour and a quarter in composition, and 20 minutes in deciding whether or not to take an umbrella when going to the mailbox".

Parkinson's Law of Medical Research was published in *The New Scientist* (25 January 1962). 'Successful research attracts the bigger grant which makes further research impossible'. Parkinson wrote "In accordance with this law, we mostly end up as administrators. We should have ended administering, in any event, remember, had we never done any research".

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We have to attend a congress: HELP!

I try to plan as much as possible, prioritise urgent matters, solve interpersonal conflicts, and deal with many other matters, but when a deadline for abstract submission to a congress is coming up, however I try to plan things, I seem to be damned never to succeed. I have tried all sorts of different approaches to this. I have familiarized myself with the topics under discussion at the congress, spoken to all those involved, made sure that they know that I am aware of their needs, that I regard their abstracts as a priority, and that I wish to relieve them of the stress of preparing them. After all, it is my job. But somehow time always runs away from my colleagues in this situation. They are subject to many other stresses when preparing for congresses, and what should actually be a fairly straightforward procedure—preparing an abstract—turns into an utterly stressful experience because of the imminent deadline. My approach now is to inform all those concerned very early of the deadline and work out a common strategy to reach this deadline. Early discussion and analysis of new research findings to be communicated is paramount, based

on a comprehensive action plan, including roles and responsibilities. But it all takes time!

People think medical writers sit at the computer screen all day writing. But medical writers know different. Any writer working in such a complex structure as a pharmaceutical company or a CRO soon realizes that they are the most appropriate person to coordinate and manage document preparation activities as the central point of reference. This means that they not only have to be able to write, but they also need good managerial skills, which can only be achieved with high-quality training and with the support and mentoring of experienced colleagues.

Andrea Rossi

*Eli Lilly Italia S.p.A.
Florence, Italy
rossi_andrea_a@lilly.com*

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International Medical Communications Association Congress

**24-27 January 2010
Tokyo, Japan**

The first meeting of the International Medical Communications Association will be an opportunity for those involved in the wide range of medical communications to come together, express their views and establish strategies for developments in the future of this vast and essential field of endeavour.

We would like to invite anybody interested in giving a presentation on any of the following listed topics to contact Patrick Barron at jpb@imcc-tmu.jp no later than 31 October 2008:

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