



Gateway to heaven: Analysis of the job postings on the EMWA website in 2007 and 2008

by Thomas M. Schindler

The idea of analysing the job market for medical communicators first occurred to me during the EMWA meeting in Lyon (2006) and then again in Vienna (2007). I wondered whether the increase in the number of attendees at the annual conferences reflects a rising demand for medical writers in Europe. Certainly, efforts of my own company to recruit medical writers have demonstrated a scarcity of good candidates. At the meetings of our American sister organisation (AMWA) the same message was spread: year after year and from conference to conference, the number of attendees increased. Are we at the beginning of a golden age for medical writing?

The search for some 'hard' numbers about job opportunities for the medical writing profession proved difficult, particularly on a European scale. Initially, I investigated internet job portals such as "monster" or "jobpilot" as a possible source of information. However, their functionality does not allow searches of all of Europe but only of individual countries or combinations thereof. Which countries should be included? Only the EU members (27 countries), this would however exclude Switzerland and Norway? Should I use the geographic definition of Europe including Belarus and Albania, but then what about Russia? Thus this route of investigation proved to be too cumbersome to deliver reliable numbers, and I turned instead to the obvious solution: the EMWA website. Surely, any company that was looking for a medical writer in Europe would want to use the internet and it seemed reasonable to assume that an analysis of job postings on the EMWA website would be a true reflection of the job market for medical writers. Any serious company ought to consider using this very affordable service provided by EMWA to recruit their medical communicators. With this in mind, I approached EMWA head office with a view to obtaining the source information I needed to perform a survey of job adverts posted on the EMWA website.

Methods

The EMWA web team (Shanida Nataraja and Crispin Hodges) provided me with PDF copies of the job adverts posted in 2007 and 2008 (one PDF file for each year). In addition, they supplied Excel lists with the names of the companies posting the adverts. The file of the adverts for the year 2008 contained 1 advert that had been placed in 2007; in the analysis, this advert was analysed for the year 2007.

An initial assessment revealed that the adverts varied widely with regard to amount and type of information provided. Therefore the analysis was limited to the following categories of information: date of appearance, name of company, type of company, qualification sought, salary mentioned, type of work advertised, editing mentioned, location, temporary or permanent. All adverts were analysed and categorised, and the data was entered into an Excel file which was then used to derive the summary data.

In the process of categorising the adverts, a number of problems were encountered due to ambiguities. When the number of open positions in an advert could not be determined, e.g. because 'several positions' were offered, it was assumed for the purposes of the analysis that there were at least 2 open positions. When 2 or more different positions were advertised in one posting, i.e. a medical writer and an editor were sought; all positions were entered separately. When the advert was placed by a recruitment agency and the name of the originating company was provided, this name was used for the analysis; if the originating company was not evident, the name of the placement company was used instead (2007: 5 recruitment companies offering 8 positions in undisclosed companies; 2008: 3 recruitment companies offering 8 positions in undisclosed companies). However, all adverts of recruitment agencies provided the type of company (i.e. biotech, pharma, medcom, etc) for which they recruited. The categorisation of the type of company was based mainly on self-reporting, i.e. if a company advertised itself as a 'medical communication agency', this was used. However, the big international pharmaceutical companies were categorised as 'pharma', even if sometimes their self-presentation used the term 'biotechnology company'. A company was considered a CRO if it also offered clinical research services other than writing. 'Editing' as a job function was only entered into the database when the word was actually mentioned in the text of the advert. 'Temporary' employment was only entered if this was explicitly stated in the advert. Data analysis, quality control, and writing of this article were performed exclusively by the author.

Results

The job postings in 2007 and 2008

In 2007, 39 companies placed 57 adverts offering at least 67 positions; in 2008, 50 companies made 68 postings with at least 88 open positions (the exact number of open positions was not provided in 3 adverts in 2007 and 5 adverts

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in 2008). This represents an increase of 28% in the number of companies placing adverts. In both years, most companies placed only 1 advert in the course of a year (2007: 74%, 2008: 78%). Nevertheless, a substantial proportion of companies placed 2 or more adverts in the course of a year (2007: 26%, 2008: 22%). One company in 2007 and another company in 2008 placed 5 adverts on the EMWA website. January was the month with the highest number of postings in both years. Late spring (April and May) and autumn (August to October) were also periods with high activity. June and December marked the troughs in terms of postings (see Figure 1).

Type of employer placing the adverts

In both years, most of the adverts came from pharmaceutical companies and medical communication agencies. Together they accounted for 77% of adverts posted in 2007 and 70% posted in 2008 (see Table 1). In 2007, the group of advertisers was almost exclusively pharma, medical communication, and CROs. In 2008, some biotechnology companies, scientific publishers, and regulatory agencies also used the EMWA website to recruit new personnel.

Qualifications required, types of work advertised, salary sums mentioned

In both years, about two thirds of the adverts specified that their future employee should have a background in the life sciences. About one third of the adverts did not specify a required qualification but mentioned that the applicant needed to have 'relevant experience' (which could be as short as 6 months). The largest proportion of the postings were for positions in medical communication (2007: 49%; 2008: 38%), followed by positions in regulatory writing (2007: 30%; 2008: 28%). Proficiency in both areas was required in 16% of adverts in 2007 and 18% of adverts in 2008. In about one third of all job descriptions, editing was explicitly mentioned as one of the tasks (2007: 33%, 2008: 41%). No advert in 2007 but 3 adverts in 2008 mentioned editing as the major task of the position.

The adverts posted were almost exclusively for permanent positions (2007: 96%, 2008: 80%). Only 4% of positions in 2007 and 10% of positions in 2008 were advertised as temporary positions (in 2008, some 11% of adverts were unclear with regard to intended duration of employment). Proposed salaries were advertised only in rare cases in the job postings (3 adverts each year). The sums mentioned in 2007 were in the range of GBP 25000 to 50000; the 2008 postings offered GBP 23000 to 32000.

Location

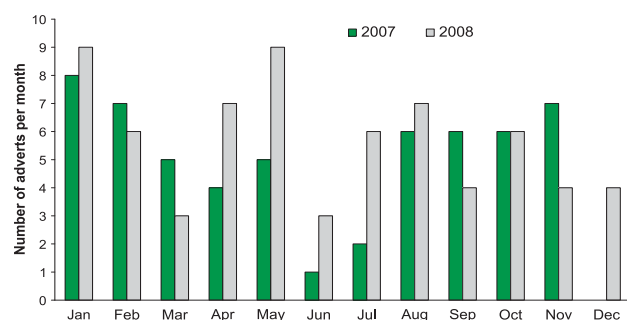
Eight different countries were offered as work locations in 2007 and 10 different countries in 2008. Most positions were located in the United Kingdom, followed by Switzerland, Germany and France. Some job postings either offered several locations or the location of the work place could not be identified from the advert. Only very few postings mentioned home-based work.

Table 1 Analysis of the job postings on the EMWA website in 2007 and 2008*

	2007	2008
Type of company		
MedCom	33%	46%
Pharma	44%	24%
CRO	12%	10%
Academic	4%	1%
Publisher	0	4%
Biotech	2%	8%
Regulatory agency	2%	3%
Other / unclear	4%	5%
Qualification required		
Life sciences	65%	70%
Unspecified	33%	29%
Language / translation	2%	1%
Types of work		
Communication	49%	38%
Regulatory	30%	28%
Mixed	16%	18%
Editorial	0	4%
Safety writing	0	2%
Technical writing	0	2%
Unclear / other	5%	8%
Locations**		
United Kingdom	55%	52%
Switzerland	9%	18%
Germany	9%	13%
France	13%	3%
Austria	0	4%
Ireland	0	4%
India	5%	0
Unclear / several	5%	1%
Other (<2 or home-based)	4%	6%

* All percentages were calculated using the total number of job postings in each year as denominator (2007: 57 postings, 2008: 68 postings).

** Including only countries with at least 2 positions in any year

Figure 1 Monthly distribution of job postings on the EMWA website in 2007 and 2008

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Summary and Interpretation

A certain amount of caution is needed when interpreting the results of this analysis. The main question that should be addressed is the representativeness of the EMWA website with regard to the European job market for medical writers. It might be that the postings on the EMWA website represent predominantly those jobs which have in some aspect an international scope. It appears unlikely that for example a Lithuanian company that is looking for a medical writer to write Lithuanian regulatory documents would post the position on the EMWA website. Thus, positions with a national focus which require excellent knowledge of a language that is not English are unlikely to appear on the EMWA website. Thus, companies from mainland Europe are likely to post their international positions at EMWA, while for British companies this is an inexpensive way to recruit within their homeland. This could be a confounding factor in respect to the representativeness of the EMWA web adverts for the European market. The apparent dominance of UK-based positions might be a simple reflection of different recruitment behaviours, the British companies might also post their vacancies with a national focus while the companies from mainland Europe restricted their postings to positions with an international scope.

In summary, the job market for medical communicators is almost certainly bigger than reflected by the postings on the EMWA website. Bearing this in mind, it is however quite likely that the postings on the EMWA website provide a good indicator for the international positions in Europe (including Britain) within the field of medical communications.

The EMWA website appears to have become more popular for the recruitment of medical communicators or more employers who knew about it have chosen to actually use it. The diversity of companies recruiting increased from 2007 to 2008 and now includes regulatory agencies and small and medium-sized biotechnology companies besides the 'classical' medical communication and pharma companies. This might indicate that medical writing has become more recognised in the biopharmaceutical sector. However, given the comparison over just 2 years, this really is very speculative. The good news is for science graduates because almost two thirds of all postings required a life science background 'preferably at PhD level' to secure a position. However, there is hope for other qualifications: once you have accumulated a certain amount of experience, your chances are getting better. In some adverts, relevant experience required was as short as 6 months. However the proportion of medical writing jobs not requiring a life science degree has dropped slightly from 2007 to 2008.

The quality of the adverts posted on the EMWA website varied substantially. For some adverts, it is very apparent that actually the human resources department is in need of a writer. It is quite common that the employers post long lists of qualifications needed but fail to provide any information on their company or the department concerned. The use of the words 'self-starter', 'enthusiastic', 'hard-working',

'detail-oriented', 'excellent writing skills' is epidemic. However, some companies do not even mention the tasks of their newly recruited writer. Since small companies try hard to be attractive, they sometimes highlight remarkable features. One company located in Switzerland mentioned '6 weeks of vacation' as the main bait, another company in Ireland claimed that 'concern for our employees' quality of life affects all our business decisions'. The company claimed that even their location has been chosen because of this (and not because of the tax relief offered in this country, as some more sinister minds might suspect).

This analysis of the EMWA website postings is a first attempt to obtain reliable figures about the job market for medical communicators in Europe. Although limited to 2 years, it gives an impression of the job market for medical writers in Europe. To gain a more complete picture, further sources need to be incorporated into the analysis, e.g. the number of freelance medical writers in Europe and an analysis of the job adverts in journals such as *New Scientist* or *BMJ*. For many aspects of an organisation such as EMWA it is of great importance to monitor the developments in the job market, not only will this impact on the development of membership but also on the educational and developmental needs of the medical writers in Europe.

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An entertaining spelling game

James Harding, *The Times* editor, in his introduction to the spelling bee website¹ set up by his newspaper says "English is the country's gift to the world and its home-grown headache." But the games on the website are certainly a good cure for the spelling headache. *The Times* created the site to help young people learn to spell, but the tests are open to all comers. Shortly after arriving at the website an animated bee whooshes on screen to moderate your game. If kept waiting the bee produces a copy of *The Times* which he proceeds to read. But the bee's full attention returns as soon as you start a game. In the main game the bee pronounces a word that you should type into a box as quickly as possible. The quicker you spell the more points you will score. Each test consists of 15 words. There is also a multiple choice test where 3 words are presented, one of which is a misspelling. In another test a definition is given and you have to guess the word.

Happy spelling!

Thanks to **Ursula Schoenberg** u.schoenberg@t-online.de for alerting *TWS* to this URL.

¹ <http://www.timesspellingbee.co.uk/>