

47th EMWA conference: Warsaw, Poland

Report on the Freelancer Business Forum

Chair of the [Freelance Business Group](#) (FBG) sub-committee, Satyen Shenoy, welcomed everyone to the [Freelancer Business Forum](#) (FBF) and introduced the agenda for the evening. This year a raffle took place – the prize was a textbook “Essentials of Writing Biomedical Research Papers” by Mimi Zeiger, generously donated by a senior member of EMWA, Alistair Reeves.

Invited Speaker

The guest speaker for the FBF event was Julia Kosela, Managing Director of Proper Medical Writing – a company based in Warsaw – who gave an inside view of the standards and skills medical writing agencies look for in their writers. Julia provided the audience with great tips on how to get yourself onto their database, and highlighted the importance of prompt communication between writers and agencies to ensure high standards are maintained with the client.

Table Discussions

Our Table Leaders were a fantastic group of volunteers who expertly guided the attendees through the pitfalls and highlights of being a freelance medical writer. As always, FBF attendees are encouraged to flit between tables to gain the most benefit from all our excellent discussions.

Topics for the EMWA Autumn 2018 session were as follows:

- How to get into regulatory writing
 - Anne McDonough
- Client problems - renegotiating timelines, extra work, delayed payments
 - Surayya Taranum
- Managing work-life balance
 - Laura Collada-Ali
- Working for international clients, even within the EU
 - Sarah Tilly
- Writing is business but business is not only writing (issues such as liability insurance, tax matters, advertising, etc)
 - Abe Shevack
- Networking and collaborations
 - Gauri Jawdenkar-Abraham



How to get into regulatory writing

Anne McDonough's session included some great advice on gaining relevant experience for entering the regulatory field. By specialising in one or more therapeutic areas you gain the experience needed to write all the relevant regulatory documents – the protocols, the Clinical Study Reports (CSRs), the Drug Safety Update Records (DSURs) – then the client will come back to you at licensing time to write the Common Technical Document (CTD) elements. This approach was recommended rather than trying to specialise on a single aspect of regulatory writing, such as CSRs only. If you have experience in non-clinical work this was considered to be a big USP, especially in areas such as pharmacology. In non-clinical work you essentially have three areas: pharmacokinetics, toxicology, and pharmacology. There was also a discussion about clinical experience vs a hard science background and the relevance of each to different clients. It was agreed that you need to emphasise what you bring to the project and how you can help.

Client problems - renegotiating timelines, extra work, delayed payments

Surayya Taranum was Table Leader for this group which covered the problems of how to charge for projects. This was Surayya's first EMWA conference and she agreed to act as Table Leader as a means of interacting with established medical writers and developing her network. The topic covered – how to charge for projects – seemed to be dependent upon whether you have a long-term contract with your client for several pieces of work. Some felt that if a client wanted a fast turnover you need to increase your rate, especially if it means paying a sub-contractor a higher fee for working out of hours. Others who work as sole freelancers, for example on a 6-month contract for specified work, considered the same scenario to be part and parcel of being locked into a contract – therefore the same rate applies regardless of turnaround time required by the client. However, they did indicate that the contracts can always be renegotiated on renewal to account for any unexpected demands of the client. The group discussed how you should never charge less than the time you spend on a project, because that is how long you have worked for. Former EMWA

president, Alison Rapley, emphasised that if you complete the remit and deliver on time there will never be an issue with a client not accepting your invoice.

The question of how much needs to be factored in to cover insurance, tax, holiday pay, being ill, etc., to provide the same level of benefits received by a salaried employee in a similar position. The business world recommends that you should think about how much of a salary you wish to earn, and double that amount. This is essential to cover your costs as a freelancer, and to ensure you maintain the salary you 'think' you are earning. A big point to consider is how much a company would pay in pension contributions on your behalf, and how this affects your hourly rate. It was agreed that freelancers need to charge a rate which adequately reflects your expertise and the hours spent on a client's project.

Managing work-life balance

Laura Collada-Ali led this group which gave several different approaches and who came to the conclusion that there was no one single method to suit everyone. It was agreed that managing a work-life balance was extremely difficult, and one attendee found that they preferred working for a company with flexitime, rather than freelancing. One good piece of advice was to maintain office hours so that clients are aware of when you will respond to emails and when you are not at work. It was also discussed that freelancers need to remember they have the right to turn down projects and need to find a good working life that fits with, and is conducive to, good quality of life. There was a great discussion about juggling parenthood and freelancing and how it gives the flexibility to look after your child when they're ill, and allows you time to see them in a school performance because you can arrange your time around it. Also, the difficulties of having your office next to your lounge were covered – how it can be tempting to pop in and do some work when perhaps you should be on holiday.

Working for international clients, or within the EU

Sarah Tilly was the Table Leader for this discussion. Delegates were interested to know about contracts and how these are sometimes worded differently when the client is based outside the country in which you are based, particularly in France. It seems that contracts may have to have specific clauses included according to the country where the medical writer is being hired. There is some uncertainty as to which country's laws are enforceable should the contract be broken – should it be the laws pertaining to the client's country or that of the medical writer?

It was proposed that a standard template for freelance writers would be welcome – this would have adaptations for different countries and their particular requirements – as individual freelance writers appear to use contracts of variable content. It was emphasised that freelance writers should negotiate the content of a contract and not feel pressurised to sign immediately. There was some discussion on how to charge for VAT for clients in and outside of the writer's country and that the topic requires expert advice.

Writing is business but business is not only writing

(liability insurance, tax, advertising, etc.)

Former EMWA president Abe Shevack, and former Freelance Advocate Alistair Reeves kicked off this group discussion with some guidance on the benefits of using an accountant. Several areas of potential tax deduction allowances were highlighted which may not be apparent to someone working as a sole trader and completing their own tax return. The difference between working in the UK and Germany was briefly compared, and [insert name] gave great advice for the implications on VAT reporting as it is very different from country to country.

The difference between being a sole trader and a limited company was also discussed and how this is also different in the UK from Germany with the latter having a large cost involved for registration. Insurance liability was discussed with the view between participants that it was not necessary and that it was highly unlikely that a medical writer would be sued for incompetence. This was agreed by all participating at the table from a UK, US, and European point of view – that just because insurance is available, it doesn't mean it's required.

The importance of discussing with your client what can be used as samples of work for your website was also covered.

Networking and collaborations

Gauri Jawdekar-Abraham led this session which looked at the different methods freelancers used to network successfully and the benefits of having local networking groups was something attendees were very keen to see develop. For sourcing new clients, and also where clients might look for freelancers, the [EMWA Freelance Directory](#) (FD) was highlighted as a major source of income for some of the attendees – this also seems to be the first port of call for many medical communication companies looking for writers and editors. The [EMWA FD](#) appears to be well-known within medical communication agencies and other companies, and perhaps it could be promoted by the FBC on LinkedIn to keep it current. It was recommended to ensure that your profile and keywords in the [EMWA FD](#) are focused and specific to ensure a potential client has the best opportunity of finding you for their project.

Another option discussed was the UpWork freelancer site, and although this seemed popular, some attendees had a negative experience with the site. It seems that they only allow a finite number of people to upload profiles within a particular skillset, and there are already many medical writers in the database. However, if you have something specific to promote as your USP it is certainly worth looking into, to market your brand and services.

Moving on to collaboration, the group was interested to find out how other freelancers worked together on large projects, and how the QC element of work was incorporated into a project. Attendees who were largely from a regulatory background were used to having someone else QC their work and wondered how this was performed when you are the sole writer. Experienced freelancers explained how QC protocols are built into the project brief and agreed by the client before the work begins, and how the client also acts as a QC check

of the final work. Other options would be to work closely with a colleague with whom you could act as each other's QC auditors.



Close of events

The FBF event was brought to a close by Laura Kehoe, who thanked everyone for attending and for the TLs for providing their expertise and knowledge to what was an extremely successful event for all. As editor of the freelance section of EMWA's journal *Medical Writing*, she added that contributions are very welcome, and if anyone wishes to write an article for the OOOO section they can get in touch with her at: laura.a.kehoe@gmail.com.

To close, Satyen expressed gratitude towards EMWA's Executive Committee and our staff at Macclesfield for all their help and support to the FBG. Thanking the sub-committee members for their work he added how important it is for freelance members to provide their input so that new initiatives can be planned and executed, and to keep an eye on the website and social media for information.

Lastly, he thanked everyone for attending and added that the EMWA 6th Freelance Business Survey is to be launched soon. EMWA members will be emailed directly and non-members are encouraged to participate as they are most welcome to complete the survey too. This can be done by sharing the FBC social media promotions on LinkedIn and Twitter scheduled for the end of December. If you see it – like it and share it!

Come and join the FBF at the 48th EMWA conference in Vienna, Austria in May 2019!

If you would like any information about the Freelance Business Group or would like to contribute to OOOO, or take on the role of Table Leader at the next FBF, please contact any of the sub-committee members for information.

Dr. Allison Kirsop
on behalf of the FBG sub-committee