

48th EMWA Conference: Vienna, Austria

Report on the Freelancer Business Forum

This year's EMWA conference was a record breaker with over 400 delegates attending the workshops, seminars and lectures, and the Freelance Business Forum (FBF) was no exception.



It was a jam-packed event which coincided with the departure of our current Chair of the Freelance Business Group, Satyen Shenoy.

Satyen has done fantastic work for the Freelancer section of EMWA over the last three years, and we are sad to see him go. He will still be working with EMWA though, and we wish him every success for the future.

Satyen opened the FBF event and thanked everyone for coming along.

After introducing the agenda for the evening, he bade us farewell and officially handed over the position of Chair to Laura Kehoe.

Laura is Section Editor for OOOO, the freelance section of EMWA's journal, *Medical Writing* – she has lots of experience within the Freelance Sub-Committee, and we are all delighted to have her at the helm.

Congratulations Laura!

There were also other changes to the Sub-Committee since the last EMWA conference. George Xinarianos stepped down, and we thank him for his contributions over the last couple of years. With the departure of Satyen and George, we now have two new members.

Mariana Rickmann and Irene Farré are incredibly proactive in the Freelancer section, and we are delighted to welcome them to the Freelance Sub-Committee, knowing that they will be great assets to the existing team.

Welcome to you both!

Invited Speaker

As always, the FBF has an invited speaker to start off the evening.



The event began with a presentation by Joanne Hilton, founder of Ecfector Ltd.

Joanne has been a medical writer for past 20 years, with last 12 years responsible for building medical writing services and leading collaborations with 15 of the Top-20 pharma clients.

She gave a short presentation on the ethics of Ecfector and her vision for the company's future – to provide sustainable solutions

in medical writing.

In her talk on what pharma clients are looking for, she focussed on three aspects important for sustainability: talent, efficiencies and reducing risk.

Medical writers are in demand, and a high workload is a factor leading to experienced medical writers choosing to go freelance. Ecfector wants to work with freelance talent to simplify resourcing challenges for their clients.

As Joanne explained, despite extensive due diligence by a client before they outsource, working with an unknown entity is a risk, and clients want dependable services. She described how resourcing models with a structure where leadership is at key positions ensures issues are escalated and resolved quickly; this enables the medical writers to focus on what they do best.

Table Discussions

After Joanne's insightful talk, we moved on to the Table Discussions, which are a strong and highly regarded segment of the FBF networking event. This year we had a fantastic line-up of topics and experts to once again guide the attendees through the maze of setting up their own business and becoming a freelance medical writer.

Topics for the EMWA Spring 2019 session are listed below followed by a Take-Home Message and summary from each table session.

1. **Additional Training Required to Run a Freelance Business**
 - Irene Farré
2. **Value in Attending EMWA Conferences and FBF Event**
 - Carola Krause
3. **Working With Clients Outside Your Country/Continent**
 - Beate Walter
4. **Price Wars: Competing with Non-European Writing Hubs**
 - Sarah van der Voorde
5. **Personal Liability Insurance: Do You Really Need It?**
 - Maria Carolina Rojido
6. **Managing Downtime Between Projects**
 - Jen Lewis
7. **Developing and Delivering Writing in Newer and More Specialised Areas**
 - Jo Whelan
8. **Getting Started in Freelance Regulatory Writing**
 - Debbie Jordan

1. Additional Training Required to Run a Freelance Business

Take-Home Message

- *Business skills training are essential to run a successful freelance business*

Summary

Irene Farré discussed the importance of networking and personal development training with the emphasis on business skills rather than medical writing skills.



She highlighted how an element of business training is essential if you are going to run a successful business.

This includes; knowing how to prepare a business plan, how to be your own bookkeeper, how to find and understand the role of an accountant, and how to get help with contracts and agreements with clients.

The consequences of IT failures were also addressed, and the group discussed what you need to consider when you work alone.

What backup plan do you have in place if your computer crashes? Do you train yourself to repair it or do you have access to an IT company who can help? This eventuality also covers

data protection of course – what do you need to put in place for cybersecurity if you don't back up your data?

Everyone at the table agreed that there are many different online resources such as TED Talks and webinars where freelancers can benefit from free business skills training. The group also indicated that training in interpersonal skills, dealing with clients, sales, and presentation skills would all be beneficial.

The idea was put forward to have a recommended list published online for EMWA Freelancers – this list could perhaps reside in the Freelance Resource Centre, and the Sub-Committee will pursue this idea.

2. Value in Attending EMWA Conferences and FBF Event

Take-Home Message

- *Freelancers find great benefit in the FBF event and work is underway to implement new initiatives and improve the Freelance section of the EMWA website*

Summary

Carola Krause, one of the Freelance Sub-Committee, was Table Leader for this session.



Carola was looking for direct feedback on whether members thought they benefitted from the FBF event, and also if they used the resources provided for freelancers on the website.

The good news is that members apparently benefit from the FBF and thoroughly enjoy the event.

However, it was noted that there is room for improvement on the website – especially within the Freelance Directory.

Allison Kirsop, Freelance Sub-Committee member and a volunteer with the EMWA Web Team, is now restructuring the freelancer section of the EMWA site, so this is in hand and will be an ongoing project.

A poll was taken which revealed that most of the attendees were aware of the Freelance Directory, but much fewer people appeared to be actually registered – registration enables freelancers to highlight their services to potential clients and the group discussed how the fee associated with registration is an issue. Examples of people listed and benefiting from the Freelance Directory are published in the [March issue](#) of the OOOO section of *Medical Writing*.

The Sub-Committee members are hoping to address this.

Members were also in favour of renaming the OOOO section of *Medical Writing*, and a tentative suggestion was made for the name, O⁴. The delegates at this session felt that if future topics for potential articles were made available, e.g. listed on the EMWA website and announced at FBF events, this might encourage freelancers to become involved in writing for OOOO.

The content within the Freelance Resource Centre was more of an issue and acknowledged that it needs to be updated. Members suggested that small video clips, e.g. testimonials, would be beneficial – as this is currently being investigated for the Ambassador program, we hope to have more information by the next EMWA Spring conference.

The volunteer web team has recently been expanded to accommodate the scope of work needed to update the Freelancer section and the Sub-Committee is working to rectify this issue. With our two new members on board, things should start to improve in this area, and it is a priority for the Sub-Committee to complete this task.

Regarding user experience, the Freelancer section needs more transparent navigation and better links between pages.

The option of an online forum for freelancers was discussed which could be used for members to contact and ask relevant questions of their peers, e.g. how to price a particular job. The attendees at this session were unsure of the value of this but thought that the Sub-Committee's idea of podcasts was more interesting, especially if linked with an OOOO article. Therefore, this is something that the Sub-Committee will take on board and try to implement, if at all possible.

Carola concluded the session with an emphasis on how the Sub-Committee exists for all freelance members, and should anyone have any issues they should let any member of the Sub-Committee know – we will work with the Executive Committee on your behalf to resolve issues and implement new ideas and initiatives.

3. Working for Clients Outside Your Country/Continent

Take-Home Message

- *Globally, insurance requirements pertaining to different countries will likely differ, and it is the responsibility of the freelancer to check and understand where and when these requirements might apply.*

Summary

Beate Walter's session covered the requirements of different legislation that can apply when working with clients across different countries and continents.



It is good advice for freelancers to check whether your insurance covers a country which is out of the EU, and your client may be able to advise on this.

Alternatively, speak to another freelancer who has experience of working in that particular country.

This will be dependent upon the type of work that you do; regulatory work will likely have specific requirements

that may not exist within other areas of work, for example, medical communications or medical education.

In the end, it is the freelancer's responsibility to ensure that they are covered for any possible eventuality, especially when dealing with the pharma industry and other regulatory companies.

Working with a client in a different country than your own also exposes you to varying rates of pay and expectations, and some countries pay a little less than others.

The table attendees all agreed that clients need to be assured of the value that you add as a European medical writer and that EMWA has published rates for guidance. An EU writer should be paid EU rates as this equates to high standards.

This initiated a discussion about how to invoice other countries and the importance of thinking about how taxes differ – in the EU there is the reverse charge tax process in place, and this should be taken into consideration when you invoice your client. International bank charges are another thing to bear in mind, and you may need to discuss with your client whether they will assume this cost.

The group also talked about how to get new clients in a different country than your own, and the key point came down to effective networking – try to network with freelancers who are already working in the particular country you would like to get into. If you have the language skills, this will likely make it easier for you.

If you can connect with a freelancer from another country, you could perhaps work together on a project which helps to get your name known.

A great piece of advice from Beate was to attend trade fairs where companies attend from different countries and continents - tell them that you are a medical writer and explain what a medical writer could do for them. You could issue business cards at these events, and possibly one in 20 or one in 100 might yield a new contract/client in the future.

Also, join societies associated with your own specialist area/research area, attend their Congress meetings, and become the go-to-person who writes for them. Finally, the table discussed how joining AMWA could also yield benefits. There, you can contact American medical writers who can advise EU medical writers how to get US clients.

4. Price Wars: Competing with Non-European Writing Hubs

Take-Home Message

- *Difficulties with project-based vs hourly-based pricing often comes down to experience and taking a considered approach to your final quote*

Summary

This session from Sara Van de Voorde covered issues with the price wars with non-EU countries and big CROs.



Non-European countries such as India should be seen as an advantage rather than a threat.

The quality of work from India has increased in recent years, and they could be valued collaborators instead of viewed as competitors.

Sarah acknowledged how there is a lot of work in medical writing and that it is good for writers to join different agencies, although it may be challenging to agree a good contract with the larger pharmaceutical companies.

This group also discussed pricing for hourly or project rates and attendees thought that freelancers should be able to submit real-time invoicing at an agreed hourly rate. However, most companies do prefer a project rate, but often it's difficult to estimate your time in advance.

In this case, sometimes you win, and sometimes you lose, but it all comes down to experience and learning how to work with different clients. You need to consider there will be different rates for projects and no two clients will have a fixed price for the same work. Of course, there will also be differences in rates between countries; higher rates in the US and lower rates in the south of Europe.

When you are approached about your availability for a project, try to gain as much information as you can before you give your price, which you should never give out at the beginning of a call. You need to establish what the project will entail both in terms of expected content and a projected timeline before you can work out how much you need to charge.

Once you have all the information on the project, it may be beneficial to take a day to think it through carefully before providing your rate for the job.

5. Personal Liability Insurance: Do You Really Need It?

Take-Home Message

- *Personal liability insurance is expensive and not a legal requirement for medical writers, and for insistent clients, the cost can be budgeted for within your final quote*

Summary

Maria Carolina Rojido talked about how these products are expensive, and before you go looking for a personal quote it might be an idea to use the AMWA-EMWA-ISMPP Joint Position Statement on the role of professional medical writers.



If you don't have any insurance and you feel it is unnecessary or not relevant for the project try to negotiate with the company/client to exclude it from the contract.

Some companies will agree to that, as many contracts are quite generic and not specifically designed to cover the single project that you are working on.

If the client is insistent, you could always include the cost of the

insurance premiums in the budget for the project and in your final quote.

In general, it is not essential, and usually, any liability is likely to lie with the owners of the documents prepared.

6. Managing Downtime Between Projects

Take-Home Message

- *Downtime can be used effectively according to the time you can spare, catching up with admin, colleagues, or even writing an article for OOOO*

Summary

Jen Lewis led this table discussion and noted that the difficulty is knowing how long your downtime will last for, and what you can actually do with it.



If it's just a few hours, you might want to get up-to-date with your accounts, whereas with more extended periods you might want to catch up with colleagues by phone or email.

Other suggestions included things like training events/links and webinars, etc., that you can go to when you have time.

The table also discussed the opposite problem of having too much work and that it's okay to say no without jeopardising your future relationship with that client.

Another option for anyone with spare time would be to consider writing an article for the OOOO section of *Medical Writing*, or perhaps volunteer for EMWA.

7. Developing and Delivering Writing in Newer and More Specialised Areas

Take-Home Message

- *For anyone looking to break into medical writing, you might want to consider the EMWA Internship Program*

Summary

Jo Whelan covered a wide range of topics in her session.



Attendees discussed options such as how to get into illustration work, presentations, market research, and the old catch 22 of how to gain experience and get a foot in the door.

The [EMWA Internship Program](#) was highlighted as a successful pathway into the industry for some people.

8. Getting Started in Freelance Regulatory Writing

Take-Home Message

- *Making yourself indispensable to your client is key in maintaining a good working relationship*

Summary

Debbie Jordan talked about lots of different topics in this session.



The main emphasis was placed on making yourself indispensable to clients, getting your foot in the door with what they are prepared to offer you, and then offering additional services on top of that.

She provided excellent advice in being competitive with your freelance rates and building your reputation with the client so that you become indispensable to them.

Close of Events

Laura Kehoe, the new Chair of the Freelance Business Group Sub-Committee thanked the Executive Committee for supporting the FBF. She also extended her warm thanks and appreciation to all the support staff at EMWA, and especially to our Table Leaders for their contributions to a highly successful event.

As always, she welcomed any contributions to the OOOO section of Medical Writing and anyone wishing to write an article should contact her at laura.a.kehoe@gmail.com.

Closing the event, she thanked everyone for attending and encouraged freelancers to contact the Sub-Committee members with any ideas for new initiatives or improvements.

Come and join the FBF at the 49th EMWA conference in Malmö, Sweden in November 2019!

If you would like 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 more information.

Dr Allison Kirsop
on behalf of the FBG Sub-Committee