

CONFERENCE

Session Report

Strategies to Prevent Medical Writer Burnout

Speaker

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In the dynamic field of medical writing, burnout has been an ongoing concern, prevailing even before the recent surge labeled as the “great resignation.” The World Health Organization (WHO) acknowledges burnout as an “occupational phenomenon,” attributing its origin to persistent workplace stress: a challenge notably experienced by medical writers.

Nidhi Johal has over 11 years’ experience in the medical writing industry, having worked on a variety of clinical and regulatory documents across multiple therapeutic areas. She is passionate about creating positive workplace cultures that value employees’ wellbeing and presented on the topic at the AMWA Annual Conference in October 2023.

Nidhi established the following learning objectives for her presentation, entitled “Strategies to Prevent Medical Writer Burnout”:

- Build awareness of the various factors that affect the document authoring process.
- Manage team and stakeholder expectations and set clear boundaries.
- Identify tools and methods to manage the document authoring, review, and editing processes more effectively.

Understanding the nuances of burnout and recognizing its early signs are crucial. Nidhi encourages medical writers to pay attention to signs of burnout, such as increased sick days, reduced work quality, behavioral changes, and disengagement. Furthermore, withdrawal, lack of focus on professional development, and noticeable stress are additional red flags that demand one’s attention.

Nidhi believes that adopting proactive measures is essential when it comes to counteracting burnout effectively. This involves a holistic approach encompassing self-awareness in addition to catering to one’s physical and emotional needs. Prioritizing workloads, seeking additional resources, establishing clear boundaries, and requesting

help when necessary were some of the key strategies put forward. Nidhi stresses that the gradual implementation of changes in work patterns is pivotal in mitigating the risks associated with burnout.

Effective collaboration within medical writing teams is fundamental in burnout prevention. To achieve this objective, Nidhi suggests building trust through facilitating team member introductions, understanding each team member’s roles and responsibilities fully, and fostering open communication to create a cohesive work environment that minimizes burnout risks.

Nidhi encourages all medical writers to thoroughly prepare before they dive into any new project. Essential preparatory steps include things like understanding project specifics, aligning with client expectations, and scrutinizing project timelines. For example, facilitated kickoff meetings allow team members to gather crucial information pertaining to a project as well as to discuss document authoring processes and collectively establish timelines.

“Educating teams on effective review practices before a document is reviewed is pivotal for improving overall efficiency.”

– Nidhi Johal, Medical Writing Director,
Trilogy Writing & Consulting

Throughout her medical writing career, Nidhi has also found comment resolution meetings (CRMs) to be extremely helpful in getting team members aligned such that documents can continually progress more easily. Nidhi suggests having CRMs after each reviewed draft of a working document to keep everyone on the same page. It’s generally easier to schedule CRMs well in advance to ensure that team members are available to participate.

“Lean authoring” is an approach to medical writing that encourages the delivery of essential information in an easily accessible format, as opposed to bulky documents that are hard to decipher. Nidhi is a huge proponent of organizations adopting a lean authoring attitude as she’s seen it shorten

review times considerably, freeing up writers' time to complete other tasks.

To ensure every meeting is purposeful and productive, Nidhi encourages medical writers to carry out meticulous planning beforehand, keep meetings concise wherever possible, and make sure someone takes responsibility for keeping to the agenda and wrapping up on time. She also advises professionals to be mindful of team members in different time zones or with upcoming vacation time or "out of office" dates. All in all, the more considerations are made ahead of time, the more smoothly meetings are likely to go, minimizing friction, stress, and fatigue among employees.

"Your job as a manager is to get better outcomes from a group of people working together."

- Julie Zhuo

Outside of the workplace, Nidhi recommends developing and strengthening complementary skills, such as self-discipline, nurturing a positive mindset, implementing self-care routines, and setting healthy boundaries. Other helpful skill sets for preventing burnout include getting more comfortable asking for help, breaking problems down into more manageable chunks, taking regular breaks, and talking things through with trusted advisors, colleagues, or friends.

Nidhi considers supportive managers to be indispensable in helping to prevent medical writer burnout. If you manage a team, try to foster an empathetic work environment in which you check in regularly with team members to offer constructive advice and support. Keeping an eye

on each person's workload to make sure it is manageable is paramount, and celebrating team achievements will help boost morale and productivity.

Before wrapping up, Nidhi shared a concept from the book *Multipliers: How the Best Leaders Make Everyone Smarter* by Liz Wiseman and Greg McKeown. "There are two types of leader: Multipliers and Diminishers," she explained. "Multipliers bring out the best in people, whereas Diminishers do not." In the book, Multipliers are described as leaders who create a safe space for employees to share struggles with them, such as feelings of burnout. Conversely, Diminishers are leaders who micromanage team members, acting like tyrants and know-it-alls, making workers feel small and unappreciated. Nidhi encourages managers to engage in open dialogue with their team wherever possible, taking a "Multiplier's" approach to leadership to create a healthier work atmosphere.

In conclusion, adopting a multifaceted approach that integrates individual well-being, effective team communication, skill development, and robust managerial support is imperative to prevent medical writer burnout. Implementing these strategies comprehensively can significantly contribute to creating a mutually beneficial and more productive work environment in the medical writing profession.

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Author declaration and disclosures: *Sophie is the founder of Prospology, a company that provides business coaching services for freelance medical writers recovering from burnout.*

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