

THEME ARTICLE

Medical Writing and Editing Internships: Preparing the Next Generation of Medical Communication Professionals

Speakers
Barbara Gastel, MD, MPH, ELS(H)

Professor, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX

Joan Affleck, MA, MBA

Associate Vice President, Head of Medical Writing, Merck & Co., Inc., Rahway, NJ

Moderator
Erica Goodoff, ELS(D)

Senior Scientific Editor, The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center, Houston, TX

By Sidonie Jones, MA, MPhil, PhD

This was a panel discussion with speakers Barbara Gastel and Joan Affleck and moderator Erica Goodoff. The panel discussed the importance of internships for training the next generation of medical writers, and there was a robust Q&A portion. The panel discussed internships targeted toward mostly graduate students (but open to students at various levels who show an interest in writing), but they also mentioned that internships for early career entry or mid-career change are important and do exist as well. The discussion came from three perspectives. Goodoff is part of a small team of medical editors, and she hires up to one intern per year; contact with and training for the intern is mostly her responsibility. The interns work remotely. Affleck heads a 200+ medical writing team at Merck, where they hire many interns in the medical writing department. This internship requires onsite presence. Gastel directs a professional science communication graduate program, in which she teaches and advises potential medical communicators and coordinates internship placements. She has also hosted interns, including international trainees.

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERNSHIPS

Goodoff spoke about the benefits of internship programs. Training possible future team members, teaching both hard and soft skills to the interns, and mentoring and leadership experience for their team members are all benefits for the team. Affleck stated that an internship gives students an opportunity to learn about the industry and have exposure to experienced medical writers and editors and other departments, and this builds a large potential talent pool for not only the writing team but other departments as well. They all stated that the interns benefit from having the opportunity to build their resume, gain contacts and rec-

ommendations, and learn where and if they fit as a medical communicator. An internship can also lead to opportunities for future roles in the host institution or company. Although their programs differ in size and structure, the goals are the same: successfully training new medical communicators. Some of the key points from the Q&A session are detailed in the following portion.

Interns Should Be Compensated for Their Role

The work of medical communication is highly skilled, specialized, and important and should be compensated as such. This is beneficial to both the institution or company and to the intern to have them fully engaged. A fair base salary should be explicit for interns. Benefits can include such things as locating low-cost housing and transportation assistance for in-person internships. Internship programs foster relationships with colleges and universities to find the best interns, but these programs also can recruit through job boards, fairs, and other similar venues, if allowed by the host institution or company.

Onboarding Procedures Are Important

Interns should be introduced and integrated into the team through well-defined orientation and training materials. Expectations should be set with new interns as with any new employee. Learning the interns' interests and strengths and what they hope to gain can guide interns' assignments (eg, an intern with an interest in neuroscience may be given as many neuroscience-related assignments as possible).

Keep the Intern Engaged and Part of the Team

Interns should be included in team meetings, trainings, and activities and given regular assignments. This helps the

intern become acclimated to the team and institution or company. Regular meetings with the intern are essential, especially in a remote situation. Affleck's program requires that the interns keep a daily journal and send it to the mentor once a week. Her interns also build a portfolio and give a presentation as part of offboarding. Goodoff's program uses a similar procedure.

Bad Hiring Decisions

Goodoff spoke to making the best of a bad situation by having frank conversations about the intern's challenges, possibly assigning them different tasks, and trying to guide the intern toward alternate career goals and possible better career paths if they find that the job is not a good fit. Fortunately, this is not a frequent occurrence. Affleck spoke to preventing this through clear and specific job postings and stringent interviewing and hiring practices.

Overcoming Other Potential Challenges

Budget concerns and bureaucracy can be obstacles to an internship program. Recruiting early and being willing to negotiate the salary and hours for your intern can overcome these challenges.

Internships are one of the best ways to train a new generation of medical communicators. Hopefully, we can look forward to future development of these programs by different institutions and companies with the possible involvement of AMWA.

Sidonie Jones is an aspiring medical writer.

Author declaration and disclosures: *The author notes no commercial associations that may pose a conflict of interest in relation to this article.*

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