

Achieving a Work-Life Balance as Medical Writers

In any industry, there is considerable evidence of the value and improved productivity for those who maintain a healthy work-life balance, and we should not forget that a near total neglect of life is not sustainable

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“We don’t live to eat and make money. We eat and make money to be able to enjoy life. That is what life means, and that is what life is for,” said George Leigh Mallory, pioneering British mountaineer who vanished near the summit of Mount Everest in 1924, almost 30 years before the first successful summit.

Every age seems to have its buzzwords, and the ‘work-life balance’ would appear to be one of the prime candidates for our current age. Unfortunately, a brief browse around the internet reveals that there are many and varied definitions of the concept and suggestions on how best to achieve an ideal state of work-life balance. One quickly realises that the perfect work-life balance is not some objective state, but rather something very subjective, and thus will differ for every person. Nevertheless, spending some six years in a molecular biology laboratory and 30 years as a medical writer (in both a small company and in Big Pharma) gives me a broad experience from which to draw in what I believe are a few general principles of what is a good work-life

balance as a medical writer and how to achieve it.

A number of recent sociology studies have indicated that the happiest and, perhaps even more importantly, most effective and productive people in a wide range of occupations are those with a good work-life balance (1). I think that even a moment’s consideration would suggest why this would be true. Certainly, my personal experience is that I can never perform my best, whether writing, managing, or presenting a workshop, when I am stressed or burnt out from the lack of a healthy work-life balance. This really ought to be obvious, one would think, as any form of activity (physical or mental) cannot be done continuously and requires occasional breaks for peak performance.

The research results in favour of a healthy work-life balance are fairly convincing in my opinion, but there is another line of evidence, which, although not normally considered strong evidence, is nevertheless most intriguing – case studies of people

nearing the end of their lives, either due to disease or advanced age (2). What is so fascinating about these individual testimonials is that everyone looks back over their lives and talks about what their lives have taught them. I have never seen even one where the person regretted not working more, but many expressed their advice for young people as some version of “taking time to stop and smell the roses”. For me, the take-home point of this is that having and maintaining a healthy work-life balance is what all these people have learned from their long lives.

Although this seems self-evident today, the importance of a healthy work-life balance is a relatively recent concept. Like many other medical writers, my education led me to a biology (molecular genetics) laboratory doing research for my PhD. These were the ‘brave new world’ days of molecular biology as gene cloning had only just become a common household word. It was common in academic laboratories in those days (sadly, many students tell me that it still is) for the laboratory



leader to stress that a career in science required a complete focus on work and a near total neglect of life. Mine was infamous for expressions such as “students should always be familiar with the current literature, but never be seen to be reading (only doing experiments)” or “What do you think this is, a country club?” Many of the students in my lab were prone to sneak out of the laboratory, leaving their coats on the coat rack so that our laboratory leader would think that they were still working. It was, in fact, the pressure to completely skew the work-life balance towards work that eventually led me to quit research and become a medical writer.

Strangely, despite the introduction of a wide range of labour-saving devices, a number of studies indicate that the

average worker has less free time and more stress, and thus a less healthy work-life balance than workers 100 years ago. Yes, the internet brings the world of knowledge and information to our fingertips, yet it also means that clients or managing supervisors can contact us at any time, including supposedly ‘down times’ like weekends. This is particularly true for medical writing, where ‘challenging’ timelines are used to insist that a medical writer be available for much longer than the traditional 40 hours a week.

Medical writing, by its very nature, poses both great challenges and great opportunities for work-life balance. Every medical writer I have ever met has noted the ‘feast or famine’ nature of medical writing, i.e., that one has

periods of intense overwork as well as periods of calm and underwork. Medical writing is clearly not an assembly line factory job where every day is the same. While the ‘peaks and troughs’ aspect is what appeals to some people, there is no doubt that others find it difficult to deal with, and it can determine whether a person continues as a medical writer or leaves to do something else. Crucial to being a successful medical writer, I believe, is the ability to achieve a practical work-life balance in a profession with such intrinsic variability. On the other hand, this aspect of medical writing also delivers regular down time, which can be critical for getting away from it all and ensuring a healthy work-life balance. It is the very unpredictability that must be anticipated and planned for so that no matter how much the

balance is upset during the peaks, it can be restored during the troughs.

An important aspect of this peak and trough nature of medical writing is learning to keep the peaks from spinning out of control. Medical writing projects in the regulatory environment involve long chains of activities, and delays in any of them can cause an accumulation of delays at the end – at the point of finalising the document. Clinical research is an exploratory science, and unanticipated problems and issues often occur, causing delays and requiring changes in plan. All of this can cause large amounts of stress for a clinical team and many react by ‘suggesting’ that the medical writer try to perform miracles and complete writing assignments in impossibly short timeframes. Part of being a good medical writer with a healthy work-life balance is to correctly train your teams. While top writers will often work to very tight deadlines and may spend considerable time and effort outside of the traditional worktime, sanity dictates that some requests will need to be declined, and it must be explained to the team that some things are simply not possible, with reasons for why and with explanations of what is possible. I was once asked by a client to write a clinical overview and have it reviewed and finalised by the clinical team in two weeks. I had to inform them that this would not be physically possible.

Additionally, the very qualities that contribute to making a good medical writer, attention to detail and conscientiousness, are the same ones that can also contribute to a pathological sense of perfection and a loss of work-life balance. A recent article in *The New Scientist* describes how psychologists are increasingly seeing perfectionism as a mental health disorder that can lead to depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and in extreme cases, suicide (3). In medical writing, the final product, a clinical document, can always be worked over and improved, so a sense of perfectionism can easily lead people to obsess over

a document: checking it again and again, taking huge amounts of time, ruining the project budget, and destroying any sense of work-life balance. I consider one of the best predictors of the future success of young writers is their ability to accept and let go of a document within a reasonable time. Learning to delegate and striving to make documents ‘fit for purpose’ (which is a positive attribute) rather than perfect is an important part of being a medical writer.

So, how does one go about achieving a healthy work-life balance? Like many problems, the first and most difficult step is to acknowledge that there may be a problem. Achieving a healthy work-life balance requires an active decision to do so and constant vigilance. A successful work-life balance will require balance, and not an emphasis on only one or the other. Western culture tends to value work above any other activity (despite the US Declaration of Independence stating that the pursuit of happiness is an inalienable right given to all people by their creator), and rarely do medical writers need to make an active decision to work more. It is the life part that is harder to give enough attention to for balance, so we need to make an active decision to make time and effort for our life side, otherwise known as the ‘pursuit of happiness’. This can be difficult because people find that doing things to restore the work-life balance can, due to many years of indoctrination, feel like they are doing nothing, and this makes many people feel deeply uncomfortable.

Based on my life experience, I would say that to find balance one needs to find an activity that brings joy, and the most lasting kind of joy is coupled with a sense of achievement. Many people first discover a work-life balance with the arrival of children, and this is certainly something that can bring joy as well as achievement to your life. However, as anyone with children can attest, parenthood can also feel like a chore sometimes as there are many things one ‘has’ to do as a parent.

Thus, I think that it is also important to find a sport, hobby, or activity that can also bring joy and achievement to truly reach a healthy work-life balance. It is important to remember, however, that the goal here is balance and peace of mind. Whether it is canyoneering, travel, model trains, hill walking, or postage stamp collecting (all of which I have known medical writers to do), find something that brings you joy, relaxes and distracts you from your problems, and most importantly, gets your mind off of your work and restores work-life balance for a longer and happier, and probably even more productive, life.

References

1. Visit: hbr.org/2015/08/the-research-is-clear-long-hours-backfire-for-people-and-for-companies
2. Visit: www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2012/feb/01/top-five-regrets-of-the-dying
3. Visit: www.newscientist.com/article/mg24332433-200-our-obsession-with-perfection-is-damaging-individuals-and-society/#ixzz62KWEQ9QA



Barry Drees received his PhD in Molecular Genetics at the University of California, US. Following his postdoctoral work as a fellow of the National Institute of Health, he worked as a medical writer at Hoechst/Aventis for 12 years, setting up a Phase I writing group and leading several regulatory submission teams. Barry is a frequent speaker on medical writing, statistics, and other scientific communication topics for a number of associations and companies in the pharmaceutical industry. He is a past president of the European Medical Writers Association (EMWA) and is a former Editor-in-Chief of the EMWA Journal. Barry is currently a Co-Founder and Senior Partner of **Trilogy Writing & Consulting**, continuing to personally lead submission teams, as well as providing training for the industry around the world.