

PRACTICAL MATTERS

Managing Time: Productivity Meets Happiness

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We started our career as medical writers several years ago. The initial learning was exciting and rapid because we attended many training workshops. These were often on specific and difficult topics, and although all very interesting and things that helped us develop as medical writers, there is one simple fact from these workshops that has stuck most with us. This was from a workshop on improving document quality that we attended early in our career. This workshop left a lasting impression, particularly when the workshop participants unanimously identified time as the biggest hindrance to document quality. This understanding highlighted how mastering time management is critical for addressing the pressure of accelerated timelines and limited resources.

This article summarizes our discussions on time management and its close relationship with other aspects of project management—how we set up our projects and expectations, review practices, and communication. Effective time management is essential to achieve professional excellence in document quality while maintaining personal happiness.

WHY IS TIME MANAGEMENT IMPORTANT?

Time management improves the precision, clarity, and overall quality of documents. As simple as it sounds, having the time to understand the background and context of a document (to the degree that is required for a medical writer to efficiently follow up on review comments and run comment resolution meetings) and having the time required to actually write a document helps improve document quality. Managing time increases productivity while maintaining work-life balance (whatever that means for you). Having more time to write documents does not mean increasing the time you work over a long period of time. That is neither sustainable nor productive. When time is limited, it is important to focus on efficiency rather than sheer hours of effort.

WHAT ARE SOME THINGS THAT CREATE THE NEED FOR TIME MANAGEMENT?

On an Industry Level

According to Prophecy Market Insights research reports, the

medical writing market was estimated at around US \$4.3 billion in 2024 and is expected to reach US \$11.1 billion by 2034, with a compound annual growth rate of 10.9%.¹ This growth is attributed to increased research and development in the pharmaceutical and biotechnology sectors. There are just not enough experienced medical writers for the growing demand of medical writing services from sponsors.^{2,3} Although this is beyond the scope of an individual managing their time, it is something to keep in mind when projects seem impossible. In reality, they would run better if there were enough resources.

On a Project Level

At the project level, time management is essential due to strict regulatory and company priority deadlines, changing project scope, inefficient review cycles, and changing timelines. In some cases, deadlines can be negotiated with the regulatory agencies or senior management of pharmaceutical companies, whereas in many cases, the timelines must be met. Documents can spiral out of control due to the complexity of the content, evolving data, disorganized team, or the nature of the review comments. Inactionable, contradictory, and unclear feedback, including last-minute requests for new analyses, creates time crunches. Additionally, timelines invariably shift due to evolving priorities and data, unrealistic timelines, teams not being correctly resourced or engaged, and delaying review cycles; this is the one we have all probably dealt with. We have all our project timelines neatly staggered and carefully planned with the team's time off in mind, and then something invariably happens and unleashes chaos.

On a Company Level

Project requests are often assigned at short notice while you are at capacity, causing you to need to carve out more time. Underresourced teams are unable to handle the workload efficiently, especially under accelerated timelines. Poor communication or unclear instructions lead to delays because team members spend extra time clarifying tasks through meetings or emails. Furthermore, inadequate planning often leads to hasty, last-minute efforts to meet deadlines.

SO HOW SHOULD WE HANDLE THESE HURDLES TO TIME MANAGEMENT?

Time can be managed at the individual level (more about this in the later part of this article), but because a major part of our jobs is to work in teams, it is also very important to manage time as a team because collective efficiency directly impacts overall quality and productivity. It is critical to keep the communication on time crunches open and ongoing within the team.

At a Team Level

Planning and Communicating

Setting realistic expectations and keeping communication open throughout a project helps to avoid time crunches and resolve them easily when they do occur. It is important to understand the actual urgency of each of your projects. Is it a top-priority submission required to be submitted to the health authority on a particular date? Is there any flexibility in the timelines? Are there any factors in the future that will determine the flexibility of the timelines? Is it something the team is doing as a “nice to have”? Once you have an idea of this for each of your projects, when timelines invariably shift and create conflicts with other projects, you will know which projects to deprioritize at that moment. It is important to discuss your reasoning for reprioritizing your work to the team. Most often, teams will be reasonable if a clear justification is provided. The questions should be revisited as information on the project evolves. For example, when late data become available in an already tight submission and the team is scurrying to add it all in, check with the team to see if it is really possible to make the submission by the deadline in a way that it will be accepted by the regulatory authority. Set realistic expectations with timelines and create granular timelines so that time for even the smallest of steps is accounted for. Therefore, while designing accelerated timelines, we should keep in mind our collective years of experience to plan. For example, one review cycle is never going to be enough for a complex document. If we do not plan more than one review, there will be ad hoc reviews that will create time crunches. Proper planning and timely coordination ensures that tasks are completed on time, avoiding unnecessary delays.

Efficient Feedback Management

Communicate the need for actionable and consolidated feedback clearly and often, especially when timelines are tight. Point out instances in which it is not occurring. In spite of this, we will often receive unclear and contradictory feedback. Although emails are a good way to resolve minor comments when there is time, set up small team meetings to get comments clarified when time is critical.

Use of Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools can enhance medical writing by improving efficiency and accuracy of documents.⁴ Additionally, these tools help detect errors and optimize content for readability. With the use of AI becoming more common, timelines are going to get even more accelerated. Although the use of AI will definitely accelerate some of the more mundane medical writing tasks, reviewers are still going to be human experts in their fields and will have comments.

At an Individual Level

Break down large overwhelming tasks into smaller, manageable tasks. This makes the task less daunting and allows for more accurate time estimation. Prioritize your work often to identify tasks that require immediate attention and those that can be postponed for a while.

- Allocate specific time blocks for focused writing sessions. Treat these blocks as appointments and avoid interruptions. Avoid multitasking to stay productive. If needed, communicate your unavailability to your colleagues during this time.
- Group similar tasks together to minimize switching and having to revisit the context (eg, annotate your documents for quality control as you write them).
- Where helpful, use technology to streamline workflows and automate repetitive tasks. It might require some time and effort to learn a new technology, but it should save time in the long run.
- Delegate tasks when possible.
- Learn to say “no.” Accepting more work than you can handle only reduces the quality of both the work you have at hand and the new work assigned.
- Avoid perfectionism by getting the work done rather than obsessing over every detail.
- While performing an important writing task, set boundaries and avoid interruptions by using tools like “Do Not Disturb.”

The above suggestions are by no means new or an exhaustive list of suggestions. You will need to try a few things and see what works best for you. Here are a few things that you might want to figure out for yourself: some people might like to complete the hardest task of the day first. However, some people might find themselves procrastinating on the hardest task. For them, it might be helpful to complete several small mundane tasks that can be checked off to get into a productive frame of mind. The hard task might then seem much easier to handle. When it comes to time and productivity, it is helpful to know at which time of the day you are at your most productive. With many medical writers working

remotely and in global teams, our jobs allow some amount of flexibility. And so, you can plan to do tasks when you are able to get them done best. And when you hit a block, take a break. We are sure many of us have been in the situation of when trying to get a task done at the end of the day seems almost impossible, but when you come back to it with a clear head the next morning, it gets done easily. Find ways to organize tasks that work for you. Although organization tools might be helpful for some, some find this time consuming and have an ability to keep mental lists and/or paper lists.

Ultimately, how an individual manages their time depends on what work-life balance means to them. Some people might be at a stage of their careers in which work is all they want to do, and it keeps them highly motivated. Others might like to complete their work in a set time and pursue other activities that keep them motivated and refresh them for the next day's work. Both are dedicated ways of working, and we must recognize that when working in teams. We believe that the aim of time management is to find a perfect balance in which you can be productive and fulfilled at work while also finding and pursuing the things that make you happy in life.

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