

## AROUND THE CAREER BLOCK

# Leveraging LinkedIn to Successfully Launch and Grow a Freelancing Career

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### ABSTRACT

When used to its full potential, LinkedIn can be a powerful networking and marketing tool for medical writers and other professionals. Bhavadharini Balaji, PhD, started her medical writing journey in late 2022 after completing 2 postdoctoral fellowships and working as a senior consultant at a global contract research organization. Today, she has a successful career as a freelance medical writer and mentor, with LinkedIn playing a substantial role in facilitating the transition.



In this article, Balaji shares her journey from academia to self-employment and discusses how LinkedIn has helped her gain knowledge, market herself and her services, and grow her business. Among many other advantages, Balaji highlights that LinkedIn can serve as a bridge, connecting medical writers with other professionals who can provide valuable insights and referrals, ultimately contributing to business growth. By crafting and curating content on LinkedIn that reflects one's expertise, passions, and unique selling points, freelancers can develop a personal brand that resonates with their target audience. As such, the social media platform has allowed her to create a compelling narrative, showcase her journey authentically, and make herself relatable through the sharing of insights and stories about her expertise, challenges, and successes. Nevertheless, having a strong social media presence is not enough to launch a career, with coaching, mentoring, and past in-house medical writing experience also playing important roles in Balaji's success.

Bhavadharini Balaji, PhD, is a former postdoctoral researcher turned freelance medical writer and mentor. With over 6,400 (as of May 10, 2024) followers on LinkedIn and a Top Academic Writing Voice badge, she is living proof that the social media platform can help accelerate your career when used right. Here, she shares her journey from

academia to self-employment and discusses how networking, coaching support, and having a solid marketing strategy helped her get to where she is today.

**Journal (Petrus):** *You started your medical writing journey fairly recently, in late 2022, having completed a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree and 2 postdoctoral fellowships before that. Tell us a little bit about your academic background and when you realized that staying in academia as a postdoctoral researcher was not for you.*

**Balaji:** I completed my PhD, focusing on the epidemiology of diabetes (working closely with the International Diabetes Federation on one of their first projects on gestational diabetes mellitus) in 2017 in India. After that, I moved to Canada to undertake postdoctoral fellowships at McMaster University and the Women's College Hospital in Toronto, focusing on nutritional epidemiology. Despite investing considerable time in academia, I recognized limited growth opportunities compared with the industry. Eventually, the need for financial stability led me to the realization that taking up another postdoc was not the most viable path.

**Journal:** *After this realization, when and how did you come across medical writing as a career, and how did you know that this was the right path for you?*

**Balaji:** Following my second postdoctoral research, I initiated efforts to transition into the industry. This involved networking, informational interviews on LinkedIn, and exploring roles held by individuals with PhDs in similar fields. Although initially hesitant about medical writing, a friend suggested it, and I decided to delve deeper. My first role as a senior consultant at a global contract research organization (CRO) was enriching, but the desire for greater diversity in my work motivated me to venture into freelancing. After a year of working full-time, I took a break to focus on setting up my freelance business. In about 3 months, I secured my first project and client.

**Journal:** *What were the initial steps to securing your first few projects and clients, and eventually growing your business?*

**Balaji:** After departing from my full-time role, I enrolled in coaching programs and engaged in extensive networking with other freelance medical writers. My first client reached out through a referral. Through the medical writing coaching program, I acquired skills in cold emailing and marketing on LinkedIn. Despite a brief dry period after my first project, perseverance in networking efforts eventually led to a thriving freelance business.

LinkedIn emerged especially as a pivotal marketing and networking tool to help me on my freelancing journey. Actively engaging with other medical writers on this platform expanded not just my knowledge base but also facilitated networking. LinkedIn served as a bridge, connecting me with professionals who provided valuable insights and referrals, ultimately contributing to the growth of my business.

In addition, I found that transitioning from academia to freelancing demanded a compelling narrative, a story that went beyond a traditional resume. LinkedIn allowed me to showcase my journey authentically and make it relatable. I found that sharing insights and stories about my expertise, challenges, and successes created a narrative that resonated with my audience, fostering a deeper, emotional connection.

**Journal:** *What are your tips for new medical writers who are looking for clients or an employer but who may not have experience working on certain types of projects?*

**Balaji:** If you are new to medical writing and lack a portfolio, consider opportunities to gain experience, perhaps through internships at agencies or CROs. By starting in an in-house internship position, you can acquire critical skills on the job and gradually transition to freelancing with confidence. For instance, if you have not written scientific manuscripts or regulatory documents, gaining experience at a company first will provide the necessary skills before making the leap to freelancing.

**Journal:** *For freelance medical writers, how important is it to expand their networks and market themselves to potential clients? You have a sizeable following on LinkedIn; how has this helped you land clients or expand your business in other ways?*

**Balaji:** Having a solid marketing strategy is crucial for a freelancer's success. At the start of my journey, I spent months actively posting content on LinkedIn, focusing

## Recommended Readings

Liber B. 15 ways to leverage LinkedIn for your professional networking strategy. LinkedIn. Published May 13, 2019. Accessed January 18, 2024. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/15-ways-leverage-linkedin-your-professional-networking-briony-liber/>

Complete guide to LinkedIn: the ultimate guide to networking on LinkedIn. Learn how to use LinkedIn for business and the best practices to increase your LinkedIn presence in 2023. Premier Connect. Published August 14, 2023. Accessed January 18, 2024. <https://premierconnect.io/complete-guide-to-linkedin/>

Dublino J. How to network on LinkedIn like a pro. Business.com. Updated February 2, 2024. Accessed April 5, 2024. <https://www.business.com/articles/linkedin-networking-tips/>

Clayton R. 10 steps to building a powerful freelancer brand on LinkedIn. Payoneer. Published May 22, 2022. Accessed January 18, 2024. <https://blog.payoneer.com/e-sellers/industry-tips-sellers/build-powerful-freelancer-brand-on-linkedin/>

on medical writing topics and sharing industry insights. Although engagement and numbers were not my primary focus, I noticed that clients often mentioned being referred to me by someone in their company whom I had never interacted with. This underlines the importance of being visible and engaged on the platform, marking your attendance, and fostering a sense of community.

Many individuals mistakenly believe that simply having an account and listing your past roles and education will attract job opportunities or interviews. However, this overlooks the platform's essence as a social networking space with a distinct professional focus. In order to leverage LinkedIn effectively as a freelancer, maintaining an active and engaging presence is paramount. Unlike other job-seeking platforms, LinkedIn thrives on continuous content. In this digital age in which visibility is key, especially for freelancers, the ability to craft compelling content and the ability to build and develop a distinctive personal brand becomes essential. By crafting and curating content that reflects one's expertise, passions, and unique selling points, freelancers can develop a personal brand that resonates with their target audience. The process of personal branding goes beyond self-promotion; it is about building trust, establishing authority, and creating a recognizable identity in the professional sphere.

When potential clients peruse profiles, engaging content and a well-crafted personal brand can instill confidence, making the freelancer not just a service provider but a trusted partner. The continuous process of building an audience and developing a personal brand on LinkedIn serves as an ongoing investment in the freelancer's professional growth and success.

**Journal:** *In addition to your medical writing business, you are also offering one-on-one mentoring to other new writers. How important was having a mentor or coach for you personally, and in what ways are you supporting your mentees?*

**Balaji:** Having received invaluable mentorship during my initial foray into freelancing, I recognize its significance. Offering one-on-one mentoring evolved organically as I started sharing insights and advice on LinkedIn about medical writing. New writers and grad students began reaching

out, seeking guidance on freelancing, finding their niche, and securing clients. It seemed only fair to share the knowledge I had gained, create a supportive community, and give back to others, just as I had received mentorship and advice when I needed it most.

**Journal:** *Any final words of wisdom?*

**Balaji:** I'll reiterate what I mentioned earlier: the power of LinkedIn visibility cannot be understated. LinkedIn's potential for visibility transcends the mere creation of an account—it's an active engagement tool that can significantly impact a freelancer's journey, just like it has impacted mine.

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

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