

FREELANCE FOCUS

2023 Jam Session for Seasoned Freelancers Plays to a Packed House

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The Jam Session for Seasoned Freelancers held during the American Medical Writers Association's (AMWA's) 2023 Medical Writing & Communication Conference was packed with people and important discussions. Chief among those discussions was the use of artificial intelligence (AI) by freelancers and the role AI plays, does not play, should play, and should not play in medical communication.

WHAT SHOULD FREELANCERS BE DOING ABOUT AI?

Seasoned freelancers attending the session continue to be at odds with the technology. There is no doubt AI is here to stay, and all medical communicators (not just freelancers) must make peace with it. But how?

AI is being used to conduct literature searches, generate images, and draft initial content that can then be used to guide further literature research and writing. It may be most useful for developing content in the area of disease states. There was an informal consensus that freelancers, and anyone, for that matter, should not share proprietary or confidential information with AI. It should be assumed that all information given to AI will be assimilated into its knowledge base and potentially shared with others. Whether medical writers and editors are freelancers or employees, education and guidance are needed on what to do and what not to do when working with AI content generators.

There was discussion around the potential utility of AI for writing large documents for which development timelines are traditionally lengthy, such as clinical study reports. It was suggested that AI might be able to write a clinical study report much faster than humans, and that this could adversely affect what freelancers can charge. However, it was noted that AI-developed content will not exclude human involvement. Freelancers may be able to charge more when using AI to create large documents because of the additional work needed to perform the functions that AI is not currently able to do or do well, such as verifying sources, references, and making annotations. Humans are also still needed to review and rewrite AI content. In some

areas of medical communication, AI may also enable freelancers to increase revenue by enabling them to do more billable work faster.

Reminiscent of the fear that offshoring of medical writing and editing functions might cause people to lose their jobs, there was discussion that AI might eventually pose a similar risk. It was suggested that writers and editors who work for content mills are the ones who would most likely suffer because content mills are not typically concerned with the quality, accuracy, and ethical issues that arise with AI-generated content. For those who are concerned about quality, accuracy, and ethics, the use of AI in medical communication will likely always be AI-assisted writing rather than solely AI writing.

Session attendees identified a number of resources for content and image AI generators. Some are free and some are fee based. Mentioned were both the free and subscription-based versions of the well-known ChatGPT (<https://chat.openai.com>) and also OpenEvidence (<https://www.openevidence.com/>) for searching medical literature, Claude AI (<https://claude.ai>) for generating text, and DALL-E (<https://openai.com/dall-e-3>) for generating images.

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The bottom line for session attendees was that freelancers must embrace AI rather than fear it and find the best use of AI for their and their clients' needs. The value proposition for freelancers lies in the quality of the AI-human pairing.

IS FREELANCING DANGEROUS TO YOUR HEALTH?

Another important topic discussed during the Jam Session for Seasoned Freelancers was the effect of freelancing on one's physical and mental health. Freelancing is not a full-contact sport, or at least it shouldn't be. But as session attendees discussed, freelancing can still take its toll.

Fatigue from the pace and constant stress was at the top of the list for some seasoned freelancers. For others, long hours sitting at a desk and staring at a computer screen result in chronic dry eyes, stiff necks, and can exacerbate arthritis. The intensity was palpable when attendees began discussing the psychological effects of freelancing. Despite freelancers having the freedom to take off from work whenever they like, the lack of work-life balance and the ease with which freelancers can become workaholics were common threads of discussion. Even for seasoned freelancers who are busy all the time, the fear that at any moment there might not be enough work is like a carrot on a stick driving them continually to do more.

Digging deeper, session attendees grieved the loss of once-loved passions and hobbies. It was ironic that people who devote their careers to helping others are so bad at taking care of themselves. As one seasoned freelancer noted, “we are caregivers to everyone but ourselves.”

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To overcome, or at least address, some of the health-related concerns of freelancing, session attendees recommended self-help books, making health—and better yet, themselves—a priority, and investing in disability insurance if possible. One attendee noted that retiring was cathartic. Regrettably, retirement wasn’t yet an option for most people in the room.

In the end, seasoned freelancers agreed that freelancing was the best career choice they ever could have made, and they would never go back to a staff position.

WHAT WAS WITH 2023?

Last year was an odd year for many seasoned freelancers—slower than usual, but why? Although many attendees may have come to the Jam Session thinking they were the only one experiencing a bit of a slowdown last year, they soon learned they weren’t alone.

Several suggestions for what may have contributed to 2023 being a slower year were provided:

- Belt tightening by pharmaceutical companies reducing workflow to freelancers’ medical communication clients, and, thus, to them.
- Reduced pharmaceutical funding stalling current and/or planned communication initiatives.
- Rising interest rates making venture capitalists jittery and slowing investment, causing smaller pharmaceutical and biotech companies to tighten their belts.
- Overall market uncertainty.

Of course, not every freelancer experienced a business slowdown in 2023, and not everyone whose freelance business did experience a slowdown was slower all year. One area of freelance medical communication that was as busy as ever in 2023 was regulatory writing. Session attendees specializing in regulatory writing agreed there was no slowdown in their business in 2023, and there was no sign of a slowdown in sight.

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One thing is for sure—top freelancers will always have work as long as there is work to be had. Seasoned freelancers embrace change and uncertainty. They have lived and worked through many market fluctuations. Thanks to this experience, they know not to be worried. Instead, session attendees agreed that 2023 was a good year to take extra time off, enjoy some peace and quiet, and get ready for 2024. In other words, enjoy it while it lasts!

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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