

CONFERENCE

Session Report

The New Normal in the Medical Publications Sector

Speakers

Tim Day (Moderator)

Principal/Owner, Innovative Strategic Communications, LLC, Milford, PA

Michael Platt, MS, CMPP

EVP, Managing Director, Virgo Health

Glenn S. Tillotson, PhD, FIDSA, FCCP, FISC

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By Kathleen Scogna

As we enter the fourth year of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of us have begun to look back and reflect on how much our personal and professional lives have changed since “before COVID.” Like all professions, the scientific publishing world has had to adapt to a new set of expectations and priorities imposed by the global pandemic. In this talk, 3 publishing professionals give their perspectives about how this “new normal” has affected all aspects of scientific publishing, whether these changes are here to stay, and the likely impact they may have on the medical writer.

“THE GREAT RESIGNATION”

Michael Platt, MS, CMPP, executive vice president and managing director of Virgo Health, a medical education company located in New York City, focused on what has been called “the Great Resignation,” when millions of workers—many of them in the healthcare and science fields—took stock of their work lives, disliked what they saw, and left their jobs for other industries. Some dropped out of the workforce altogether.

The aftermath of the Great Resignation may be positive for the medical writer who’s prepared to jump through a few hoops. The demand for talent is high: 71% of life science companies plan to increase their workforce in 2022. But employers now are taking steps to check whether a candidate is committed to staying and that they can handle curveballs. Mr Platt lists 5 interview questions that candidates should be prepared to answer when applying to an agency:

1. “What is your ideal work environment?”
2. “Why did you leave your last job?”
3. “Why do you want to work for this company?”
4. “Describe a stressful situation and how you handled it.”
5. “What are your immediate career goals?”

Candidates should also expect to be asked to take tests, give presentations, or write sample articles during the interview process to demonstrate their writing abilities. The savvy candidate should not only ensure that their skills are up to snuff but also develop 4 key competencies Mr Platt believes are crucial to succeeding in the current environment:

1. “Being Human”
2. Transparency
3. Accountability
4. Urgency

Although the good news is that medical writers are beginning to sense their worth and are asking for (and often getting) higher salaries and freelance rates, it’s not enough to be a good writer. To flourish in this landscape, Mr Platt contends that the best candidates are lifelong learners committed to communicating data and knowledge to make a difference in the world and in patients’ lives.

THE RISE OF THE PREPRINT

In the publishing space, ethics took a huge hit during the pandemic, with inevitable consequences.

Glenn S. Tillotson, PhD, a healthcare scientist in global infectious disease drug development and now editor-in-chief of *Expert Review of Anti-infective Therapy*, described the state of scientific publication in 2020 as a “tsunami” (Figure 1). As clinical trials into COVID therapeutics took off, publishers scrambled to keep up with the rising tide of publications. One solution to quickly disseminate this information was by using preprints, or posting papers on a journal’s server or website “as is,” without editing, peer review, or the usual checks performed by the publisher before publication. Although preprints aren’t new, the number of preprinted articles increased dramatically during the pandemic. And, not surprisingly, the number of retractions increased as well.

Dr Tillotson also described a rise in plagiarized content in the manuscripts his journal receives, although it has been difficult to know whether these are deliberate instances of copying or the result of overly enthusiastic cutting and pasting. Whatever the cause, it’s not difficult to conclude that the pressure to publish cutting-edge COVID research, lack of staff to oversee the publishing process,

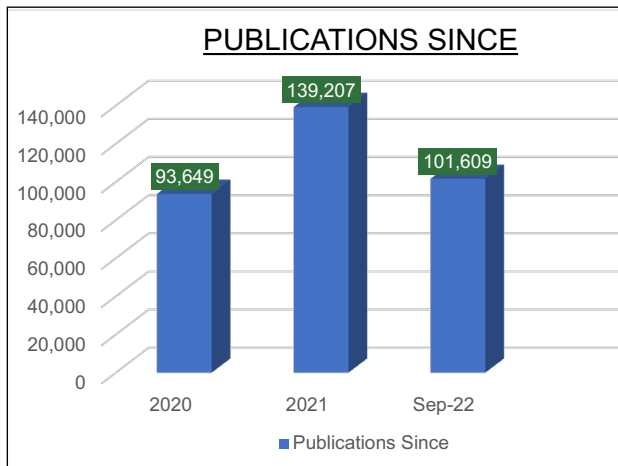


Figure 1. Number of scientific publications in 2020, 2021, and 2022.

and lowering of publication standards have created an ethical dilemma that the scientific publishing world must address in the coming years.

MENTAL HEALTH IN THE WORKPLACE

Tim Day, owner of Innovative Strategic Communications with an extensive background in pharma, spoke about the pandemic's unforeseen impact on workers' mental health. Recent surveys^{1,2} found that over three-quarters of US workers experienced at least one symptom of a mental health condition in 2021, more than 80% identified their place of work as a contributor to at least one mental health challenge, and most workers are looking for workplaces that support mental health in the future.

Given these findings, moving forward in the post-pandemic era requires businesses to normalize discussions about mental health and commit to fostering the well-being of their workforce. A report published by The US Surgeon General report cited 5 essentials for achieving these goals (Figure 2).

As we approach yet another transition in the pandemic—the return of at-home workers to brick-and-mortar offices—employees and freelancers need to take stock of lessons learned over the past 3 years and apply them to the new normal in scientific

publishing. Mr Day encourages staff writers to consider whether their positions are suitable for at-home work and to discuss this possibility with employers. And all employees, whether staff or freelance, should strive to develop strategies to balance work, family, and mental health. If the pandemic has taught us anything, it's that mental health in the workplace is no longer optional but essential for both the well-being of individual employees and the industry as a whole.

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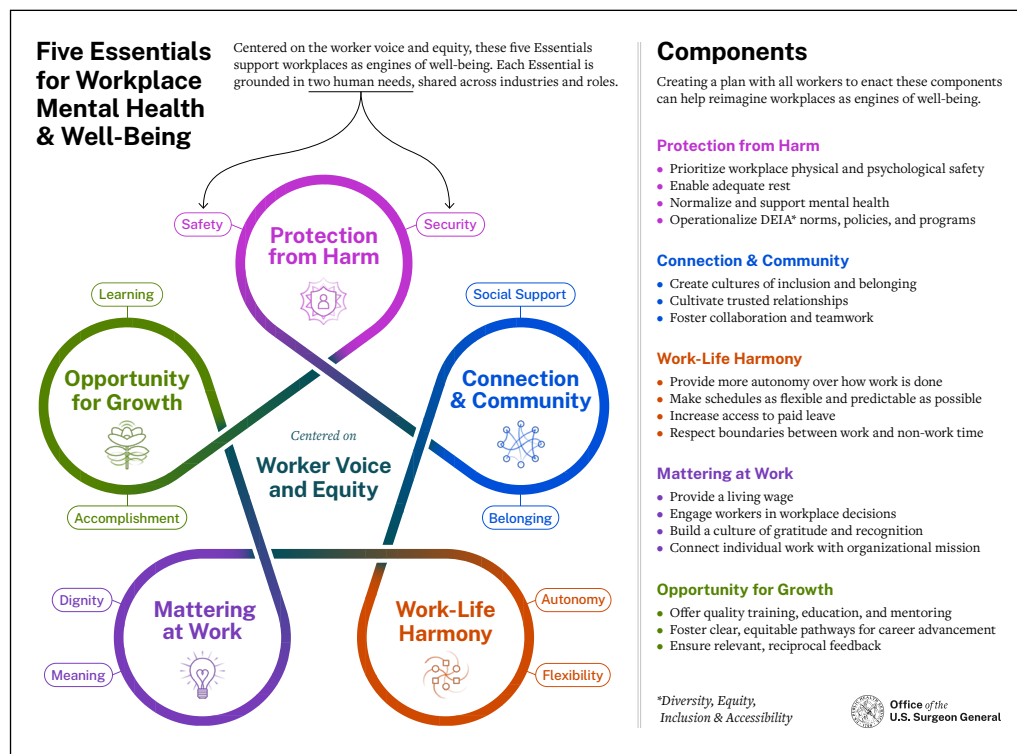


Figure 2. Five essentials for workplace mental health and well-being. From the US Department of Health and Human Services.³