

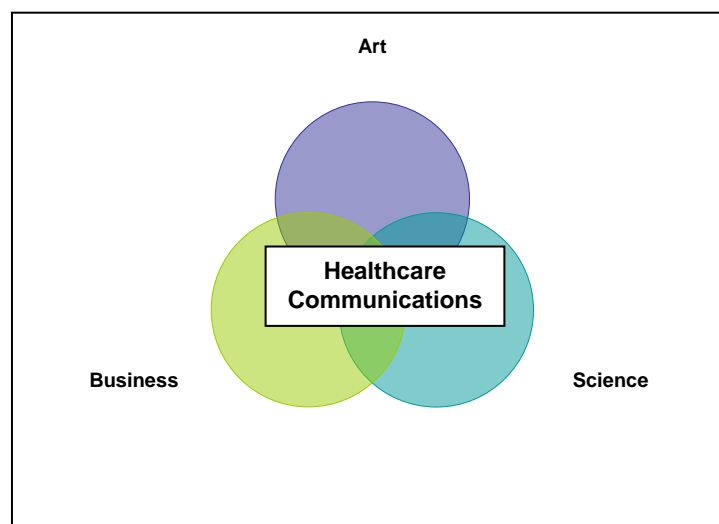
Careers in Healthcare Communications An HCA Guide

Healthcare communications is a diverse, dynamic and challenging career. In essence, communications is about enabling the communication of messages from one party to another but there is much more to it of course! Those who work in healthcare communications come from all walks of life but there are a number of core attributes that employers may look for in a candidate.

The information provided here is intended to give you a flavour of what it might mean to work in healthcare communications and assist you in making your next career decision, whether you are fresh from university and looking for your first step on the ladder or you are thinking about a change in career direction.

What is healthcare communications?

Even people who have worked in healthcare communications sometimes have difficulty in explaining what it means in practice, but that is because there is so much going on that it is difficult to know where to start! Perhaps the easiest way to describe it is a marriage of three areas:-



It is the blend of these three disciplines that often appeals to people working in healthcare communications. You get to exercise your creativity, your flair for the written word, your love of working with people, your strategic prowess, your head for complex data and passion for doing something worthwhile – sometimes all in one day! If variety is something that motivates you in the work environment then you won't be disappointed as no two days are ever the same.

The fact that PR makes use of knowledge and skills drawn from these three disciplines also means that candidates are welcomed from a wide variety of academic and vocational backgrounds, although a first degree is normally a baseline requirement. If you did not choose to embark on a career in healthcare communications straight after finishing your education, there is still the opportunity to make the move if you can demonstrate that your skills and knowledge are transferable. Some examples of jobs where individuals have come from prior to a role in healthcare communications include:

- Nursing
- Physiotherapist
- NHS press officer
- Charity fundraiser
- Health promotion/ education
- Medical journalist
- Sales representative for a pharmaceutical company
- Brand manager for a pharmaceutical company

Who would I work for?

A job in healthcare communications could mean working for a whole range of organisations, but the HCA members are mostly made up of pharmaceutical companies and PR/ communications consultancies who will conduct PR campaigns and projects on behalf of their pharmaceutical company clients.

Your choice of whether to work for a consultancy or directly for a pharmaceutical company will depend on a number of factors personal to you. Most employers will take on graduates but some would advise that it may be more beneficial when you are learning the ropes to work amongst a larger team to get the benefit of learning from a range of different people, different products, and different projects, and there may be more opportunities for this type of working in a consultancy environment. Likewise, if you are keen to concentrate exclusively on one area or product group and prefer working in smaller teams then an in-house role may be more suitable for you.

Consultancies can also vary enormously in their size and set-up so think about what is most important to you. Some consultancies are large multi-sector and multinational organisations, with offices in many different countries. In these organisations, the healthcare practice may sit alongside other divisions such as corporate, financial, consumer, business to business, internal communications and you may benefit from working alongside these specialists in order to gain perspectives from outside of the healthcare environment. On the other hand, you could work for a consultancy which specialises in healthcare – working solely alongside like-minded people who share your interest in the field. The best advice is to see a range of consultancies when you are job hunting, ask lots of questions to those interviewing you and see which feels right to you.

What are people who work in healthcare communications like?

Those who do well in healthcare communications are proactive, positive, professional and work well within a team.

Quite often communications professionals are seen as a creative force in the pharmaceutical environment however it is important to conform to the business codes of practice of the industry. This is perhaps most evident in dress codes! Whereas communications practitioners in industries such as fashion and beauty will need to demonstrate their commitment to cutting edge trends, healthcare communicators will need to reflect a more traditional business environment when conducting business (though many multi-disciplinary consultancies may have much more relaxed dress codes on a day-to-day basis).

In addition, the pharmaceutical industry is regulated by the law and industry codes of practice in every country across the world and healthcare communicators also need to abide by these regulations – whether working in-house or in a consultancy on behalf of pharmaceutical clients. Healthcare communications practitioners take great pride in delivering effective healthcare campaigns that make a real difference to people's lives and wellbeing, and relish the challenge of working in a field that dominates the public agenda every single day.

People working in healthcare communications often report that they feel they receive recognition from their managers for the work they do and feel that they're making a difference to the team/ company that they're working for. Many companies also allow more flexible working hours than in other industries, making it a very 'people friendly' environment to work in.

What type of work does it involve?

Healthcare communications provides you with opportunities to collaborate with leading experts in a variety of fields; brilliant doctors, thought-provoking academics, inspiring patient groups and important policy makers.

Due to the variety of disease areas, clients and products, healthcare communications provides the opportunity to develop a range of skills that is much wider than media relations – the traditional role of communications professionals. Most job roles will reflect a range of the following responsibilities:

- Strategic planning
- Issues and crisis management
- Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)
- Key opinion leader (KOL) development
- Disease awareness
- Product launches
- Professional relations
- Medical education

Some examples of typical projects undertaken by healthcare communicators:

- Development of a website for a new disease area
- Holding a training day for healthcare professionals about a new product
- Devising a campaign to recruit individuals for clinical trials
- Attending an international congress to hear about the latest clinical developments and co-ordinating presentations for your products
- Running a press office – taking daily calls from journalists who have questions about your product / company
- Running a media training day to make sure you / your spokespeople are well versed in the messages you want to deliver
- Handling a crisis situation in which media involvement and reporting is crucial
- Writing a press release to grab the attention of the media
- Meeting a journalist for lunch to brief them in more detail on your story

- Doing research in a disease area that you haven't worked in before because your company is developing a new product/ your consultancy has been asked to pitch for a new client

Evaluation of communications activity is a key part of any activity and enables practitioners to track the impact and success of each project or campaign, for client/ senior management information. Seeing the results of hard work such as a piece of media coverage or attendance at a meeting can be exhilarating.

What is the career path like?

Healthcare communications encourages an entrepreneurial spirit and most companies invest heavily in training and development so that people can see a career pathway for themselves. Healthcare communications can also be competitively paid compared to other areas of PR, due to the specialised nature of the discipline.

There are plenty of career opportunities to consider and each organisation will offer something different. Whilst consultancies may offer more structure and hierarchy for promotion, in-house opportunities will also come with good promotion prospects and can often offer placements in different parts of the organisation. Both consultancies and pharmaceutical companies offer excellent opportunities for travel and working abroad if this is of interest to the individual.

One of the differentiating factors in most healthcare communications roles is that, compared to sister industries such as advertising and some medical education specialist organisations, the position on offer will very often be a mixture of account handling responsibilities (new business development, strategic planning and financial management) as well as the implementation of the programmes, providing the opportunity to develop business skills as well as retaining the creative element of the role.

Finally, whilst communications has not traditionally been taken as seriously as sales and marketing roles when it comes to the most senior board level positions, this is changing rapidly and there are more and more board director level positions being created for communications professionals within blue-chip companies. This is resulting in many exceptionally talented individuals staying true to their roots and delivering results for the business via communications methodology at the very top of their game – which can only bode well for the future of the communications industry.

Getting a job in healthcare communications – top tips

- Research your target agencies. The HCA (Healthcare Communications Association) website carries information on all members (under the 'Membership' link on the website: www.hca-uk.org) and the industry directory Communiqué (available online via www.pmlive.com) has entries from most healthcare communications agencies
- Most companies have their own websites with careers information and welcome on-line applications. This will ensure that they filter through to the correct contact and are likely to be logged for attention and a response
- Look for graduate recruitment schemes. A number of companies offer these schemes as a way to find new recruits
- Contact companies for potential holiday or work experience. Larger companies in particular may run work experience schemes or regular holiday work during busy periods. This will give you valuable experience and look good on your CV
- PR Week is the trade publication for the industry but to be more healthcare specific, read journals such as Pharmaceutical Marketing, PharmaTimes and Pharmafocus to find out more about the pharmaceutical industry
- Make sure that your CV is up to date in clear concise English and does not contain typos. Remember, you are applying for a job where the ability to write concise, punchy and accurate copy is essential, so make sure your CV reflects these skills
- A CV should make the reader want to know about you – it should not be used to chronicle your life's history. Make it interesting to read and wherever possible tailor your application so that it's 100% relevant to the role you are applying for. Try to anticipate where the holes are in your experience and address them
- Contact employers directly, usually via the human resources department or via the Managing Director

- Be different (for the right reasons!)... remember that you are selling yourself in a very competitive marketplace – so position yourself in your future employer's mind correctly
- Become an avid media reader – read, watch and listen to as many current affairs and consumer / healthcare related programmes and publications as you can, looking out for PR-led stories, journalists' interests and growing trends – it will always help in an interview and throughout your career in healthcare communications
- When you get an interview, dress smartly. Although this is a creative industry, you must be business-like when client facing
- Try to draw on your experiences either at university or in previous roles to demonstrate how you have the basic skills to be good at healthcare communications. Even if your experience is not directly comparable to the job on offer, it is much more important that you can demonstrate how you think you could grow into the role and apply the skills you have picked up elsewhere
- Above all – be yourself!

Still not sure if healthcare communications is for you?

If you are still considering whether healthcare communications is the right career for you after reading this overview, it may help to talk it over with someone who can tell you how it really is. The HCA recruitment sub-committee are a group of individuals from different consultancies and pharmaceutical companies who have come together to ensure that, as an industry, we are continuing to recruit and retain the best talent around. They have volunteered themselves to provide a telephone information service for people considering a job in healthcare communications. If you would like to speak to someone working in the industry, then please send an e-mail to the following address giving your contact details and an overview of your circumstances and specific requests: career@hca-uk.org

Try a career quiz

You can also try one of the many quick quizzes on the internet which can be helpful in identifying the type of career that you are suited to. These tests assess your motivators, your skill set and your experience and can be quite informative – and of course, fun!

Note: some tests will be free of charge but others will require payment.

www.jobsite.co.uk/cgi-bin/myjobsite_questionnaire.cgi

www.totaljobs.com/PaidForServices/CareerHealthCheck.aspx

www.bbc.co.uk/science/humanbody/mind/surveys/careers/

www.prospects.ac.uk/cms/ShowPage/Home_page/Applications_and_interviews/Interviews/Test_yourself/plLidF