



# Effective Medical Science Liaisons (MSLs): What Do MSL Directors look for?

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In 2007, CNN reported the top 10 jobs in high demand in the United States but with a low supply of capable candidates. Among them, the MSL role was named within this elite group. A strong compensation package coupled with the opportunity to interact with some of the best minds shaping medicine and scientific research make the MSL role highly desirable.

Over a decade has passed since the CNN report and the medical affairs landscape in the life sciences industry has grown immensely. As awareness increased among pharmacists, physicians, and PhD professionals about the career opportunities for them in the pharmaceutical industry, more and more individuals began exploring non-traditional careers such as those that exist within the pharmaceutical industry.

The MSL role in particular, has been a highly sought-after role by many. Anecdotal reports from life sciences recruiters tell us that for every MSL opening, you can expect an average of 150 applicants. Making it a very competitive field to pursue.

What are the characteristics MSL directors look for when hiring strong MSL candidates? Are they focused mostly on disease state expertise? Soft skills? Core competencies in medical affairs? The Accreditation Council for Medical Affairs (ACMA) established universal standards for the medical affairs profession in the industry, providing guidance on training and professional development, as well as the core competencies that every MSL should have.

Given the shift in the healthcare landscape, today's MSL needs to possess three core areas of strength: (1) Technical & Functional Knowledge of their role and cross functional groups (2) Strong Business Acumen and (3) an Exceptional ability to learn quickly. We will elaborate further on each of these three points

## 1) Technical & Functional Knowledge

This domain does not refer to knowledge of disease states or clinical acumen. Although these are important, this knowledge or skill should be fundamental to any MSL professional given their academic training. This knowledge domain focuses on the ability for the MSL to understand (at an intermediate level) the ability to learn various aspects of the MSL role that will be integral into what an MSL does on a day-to-day basis. For example, assessing the validity of evidence-based medicine is an important skill that transcends disease state. A strong working knowledge of health economics outcomes research (HEOR) and being able to interpret and understand budget impact models and cost effectiveness are all critical given the increased focus on drug pricing in the industry. More and more, MSLs are asked to be involved in market access presentations, which additionally links to the importance of business acumen competency. Other areas such as clinical development, clinical operations, regulatory affairs, compliance, publication planning, scientific communications, and medical strategy are all vital to a well-rounded MSL professional.

## 2) Strong Business Acumen and Communication Skills

No less important is the area of business acumen. In the literal sense of the term, business acumen refers to the ability of the MSL to understand the business/market dynamics and implications of their role at the physician, institution, and industry level. It is understanding both ends of the spectrum: the micro and macro scale as well as keeping up with the latest trends in the industry.

Soft skills such as communication and presentation skills contribute to increasing business acumen. MSLs are in the business of helping companies communicate complex information to health care providers (HCPs). Therefore, being able to articulate concepts in an efficient, clear, and relevant way is imperative given the important influence the industry has on education.

MSLs often support or drive new ideas that become business strategies. “Active listening” skills are essential for building relationships and credibility with internal and external stakeholders. They have to not only hear, but also fully comprehend what the physician they are speaking to is saying, in order to bring the complete message being communicated in-house.

### 3) Exceptional Learning Capacity and Scientific Curiosity

As well-trained and educated professionals, MSLs are high achievers. They pride themselves on their scientific acumen. Unfortunately, as the old adage goes, the only constant in industry is change. For example, in 2013 there was a significant surge in the number of mergers and acquisitions in the industry. This makes for a somewhat fluid situation in terms of what therapeutic areas an MSL will focus on. You might focus on cardiovascular today and respiratory tomorrow. Or you may have multiple disease states depending on the size and resources within the company.

Another important dimension to a successful MSL is the ability to understand and use technology to gather insights, manage their territory, and disseminate information. There have been significant developments in technology for medical affairs, which should help create more streamlined workflows and therefore make for more effective KOL interactions.

Accordingly, having an exceptional ability to learn quickly and be flexible is an absolute must. Otherwise, the MSL will find themselves with limited career options.

## Final Thoughts

It is important to emphasize that this list is by no means exhaustive and that there are a myriad of characteristics that an MSL director looks for when hiring an effective MSL. This article aims to highlight what we believe are three critical traits which may contribute to a successful MSL. What can companies do to help elevate their MSL teams? Consistency and maintaining standards of excellence is an important start. Professional development and training by certifying MSLs and other medical affairs professionals provides several benefits to the company as well as to the professional.

The benefits of training and certification in several industries are well documented. For the pharmaceutical industry, increased risk and liability as well as undue scrutiny by external stakeholders places an even greater need to ensure that the unbiased, educational arm of the pharmaceutical industry (ie., medical affairs) is operating at the highest standards of excellence and maintains consistent standards and competencies across the organization. Being comfortable with being uncomfortable comes from the base knowledge given within the certification, knowing you have a good foundation of skills enables the MSL to be flexible. This inner strength shines through as someone who is not only confident, but also credible, and credibility is what defines an effective MSL.

# ACMA in the Press

- Accreditation Council for Medical Affairs partners with the Council for Continuing Pharmaceutical Education of Canada.
- Jason Aryeh, Life Sciences Investment Fund Manager and Pharmaceutical Industry Expert, Appointed to the Board of Governors of the Accreditation Council for Medical Affairs (ACMA)
- Accreditation Council Appoints Pharma Power Players, former Otsuka CEO, Bob Oliver and Astellas Executive, S. Bob Chib to its Board of Governors.
- Accreditation Council for Medical Affairs Appoints Accera CEO, Dr. Charles Stacey to its Board of Governors
- Accreditation Council for Medical Affairs partners with the Council for Continuing Pharmaceutical Education of Canada.
- As Opioid Liability Rises, Accreditor Seeks Credential For Pharma's Educators (Forbes)
- As Specialty Drugs Gain Share, Trump Looks To Curb Prices. ACMA weighs in on the importance of certifying pharmaceutical professionals. (LinkedIn)
- ACMA Announces New Partnership with PhactMI a leading medical information provider in the pharmaceutical industry. (Yahoo Finance)
- ACMA now offers CME/CE for the First & Only Professional Board Certification Program for Medical Science Liaisons & Medical Affairs Professionals (PR Newswire)
- The ACMA announced today the appointment of Sotirios G. Stergiopoulos MD, MBEE, BCMAS as new President of the ACMA Board of Governors. (PR Newswire)
- Michael H. Davidson, MD joins the International Board of Medical Affairs Officers with the Accreditation Council for Medical Affairs (ACMA) (PR Newswire)
- The Board Certified Medical Affairs Specialist Program (BCMAS) comes to Rutgers University providing a new path forward for scientific and clinical professionals looking to work within the pharmaceutical industry (Markets Insider)

## Articles

- Four Reasons a Board Certification in Medical Affairs Will Benefit your company [January 25, 2018]
- Medical Affairs in 2018-What's coming? [January 17, 2018]
- Medical Affairs Outlook-A look back at 2017 [December 12, 2017]
- Medical Affairs Career? You're Certifiable! [August 28, 2017]
- Are you Ready to work.... Doctor? [June 19, 2017]
- 5 Smart Ways to Increase Medical Affairs Tenure Without Investing Much [March 28, 2017]