healthcare communications association

Advancing healthcare communications: HCA CPD standards

Foreword: how CPD standards will benefit our sector

The Healthcare Communications Association (HCA) has long been committed to supporting professional development, offering a range of courses and best-practice sharing sessions to help healthcare communication professionals to develop their knowledge and skills.

The knowledge and skills areas to focus on, the standard to which this should be done and the ongoing commitment needed to maintain standards, however, have not been agreed within healthcare communications. Although bodies such as the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) provide Continuing Professional Development (CPD) frameworks, these cover public relations across various industries, versus focusing on healthcare and the range of disciplines encompassed by our sector. As the leading professional association in healthcare communications, the HCA wanted to address this gap and put our profession on a par with the many others, such as legal, financial, and medical, that have CPD frameworks in place.

Beyond parity with other professions, establishing a CPD framework for healthcare communications offers numerous other potential benefits. It gives our profession greater credibility as a serious discipline and helps to build confidence. Although credibility has always been important, the COVID-19 pandemic put healthcare communications in the spotlight and starkly demonstrated the need for high-quality, trusted communicators who can inspire confidence. This credibility and confidence, together with having clear standards in place and demonstrating a commitment to professional development, should help with the ongoing challenge of attracting and retaining talent.

With the increasing focus on attracting talent from a diverse range of backgrounds, establishing standards will also help to ensure equity for individuals by clarifying expectations. Furthermore, a shared CPD framework will aid a common understanding across the different types of organisations (patient advocacy groups, pharmaceutical companies, communication agencies, etc.) and disciplines within healthcare communications. Finally, by outlining the ongoing commitment needed, we will push ourselves to be constantly refreshing our knowledge and skills, thus ensuring the latest thinking and ongoing reinvigoration of best practice – in short, it will help advance the sector.

Because the HCA is focused on the needs of its members, it was important for us to seek their input when considering the optimal approach to CPD for the healthcare communications sector. Chapter 2 of this report overviews the perspectives of HCA members, who provided their thoughts during one-to-one interviews and as part of the annual HCA 2021 benchmarking survey. To inform our thinking, we also conducted research to understand how other professions have approached CPD. While the needs of each profession vary, there are some consistent themes and best practices, which are summarised in Chapter 1. Based on these insights, the HCA recommendations outlined in Chapter 3 provide a free-to-all CPD framework that is designed to complement existing people development initiatives within organisations and provide guidance on the standards we should aim to exceed, while at the same time giving the flexibility for adaptation to the various disciplines and roles within our sector. The final chapter in this report outlines a roadmap for establishing CPD within healthcare communications, and what organisations and individuals can do to help the sector take this important step forward in terms of professional standards.

We hope that you will share in our excitement at launching this CPD framework – together, let's make 2022 the 'Year of CPD'!

Mike Dixon
HCA Chief
Executive

Chapter 1: CPD in other sectors/organisations

A review of CPD frameworks in other highly regulated sectors and organisations was conducted and this was supplemented by short telephone interviews with CPD managers – this chapter summarises the insights gathered and highlights the key implications for establishing a CPD framework in healthcare communications.

What CPD looks like in other sectors/organisations

Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR)
The CIPR CPD cycle runs from 1 March to 28 February and members need to achieve 60 points during that time from activities focused on personal development and/or the development of others. Those activities may be CIPR-led, provided by other organisations or self-study. Points are based on the duration of an activity:
- Half day = 5 points
- Full day = 10 points.

At least 5 points must be from CIPR ethics training.

Members can set goals and track progress via an online platform; this is where they also upload evidence of their activities. Once a member has achieved two cycles, they automatically achieve accredited professional status. To maintain this status, a member must continue to achieve 60 points on an annual basis.

Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA)
The PRCA CPD cycle runs from 1 October to 30 September and members need to achieve 160 points in a year from PRCA activities or those delivered by a partner organisation. As a guide:
- Short activity = 10 points
- Short event = 15 points
- Half day = 20 points
- Full day = 40 points.

To encourage a broad portfolio, a maximum of 40 points each can be logged on the following:

- Events
- Reading writing and reviewing
- Presenting
- Committee or group work
- Mentoring.

At least 10 points must be obtained through ethics events or training. Points cannot be carried over to the following year.

Individuals are encouraged to take control of their own professional development and track their goals and achievements via an online platform. Those meeting the CPD requirements receive a certificate and a logo that can be used on email signatures, etc.

Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC)

UK nurses must complete 35 hours (of which 20 hours must be participatory) of CPD every 3 years, which is when they need to reapply to the NMC to keep their nursing registration active.

Members must provide specific information for each learning activity, including a brief outline of the key points, how the activity is linked to practice, their learnings and how these will be applied. Members must also identify the part, or parts, of the Nursing Code of Practice relevant to the CPD activity:

- Prioritise people
- Practise effectively
- Preserve safety
- Promote professionalism and trust.

Law Society of Ireland

A minimum of 20 hours is required to meet annual CPD standards. The points may be gained from group study, elearning, and writing and publishing relevant material. Considerations include:

- Specific hours may be required for specialisms, such as partners practising anti-money laundering compliance
- A maximum of 7 hours can be allocated to CPD in a single day
- A maximum of 50% of time can be claimed as CPD for published work in any single cycle.

Within the sectors and organisations with whom we engaged, CPD is recognised as a valuable asset. For example, the CIPR annual members' survey consistently reveals that its CPD offering is the organisation's most valued service. The number of members who complete CPD courses increases annually; currently, this is approximately 30%. The specific benefits highlighted included:

- Cheap and easy learning for organisations
- Flexible learning
- No need to be out of the office for significant time
- Develops standards across a workforce
- Provides a competitive edge.

Some sectors/organisations find that members tend to rush their training at the end of the cycle to meet the annual deadline for achieving points. This can lead to an overstretched accreditation team, and was highlighted as a key challenge.

Best practices for developing CPD standards and ensuring their adoption

Based on insights from other sectors and organisations, we identified some best practices related to developing CPD standards:

- Most undertake a skills and competencies analysis to best understand the requirements of the sector. For example, in the PR industry, the Global Body of Knowledge project established a benchmark for competencies: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/561d0274e4b0601b7c814ca9/t/56c1fb0759827e4bccf4dc2a/1455553288468/KSABlist.pdf
- The majority of systems are points based, with some points gained from ethics training; we did encounter a few that were outputs based

- Having a knowledge panel, for example, 10 identified members representing academia, agency and in-house organisations, to help set course criteria, policy and governance can be considered, with the panel reviewed, as appropriate, e.g. every 3–5 years
- Courses should include a mix of internal (association-led) and external trainers, and links to accredited courses from other organisations should be offered
- The points award system should be based on criteria such as short reflection statements (e.g. 'What I have learned', 'What I will change'). Statements should be checked against criteria before points are awarded; this might be done as a spot check of a sample of submissions or by checking all submissions
- Points submissions must be training based and should not qualify if part of a paid piece of work.

We also identified some best practices relating to the adoption of CPD:
- Courses need to be manageable and accessible online, to allow members to easily identify the most suitable courses
- Providing an accessible, integrated and personalised platform for tracking CPD is considered beneficial to building loyalty, as well as encouraging more timely responses and completion of annual cycles
- Ensuring that every member is clear about CPD benefits is key: by integrating CPD communications into every role at an association, it allows more touch points with members to discuss the benefits as well as support with any questions or decision making
- Practical 'How to gain your CPD points' sessions, such as lunch-and-learns, have been beneficial to encouraging members to fully understand the benefits, best practice and experiences of others on a number of issues, such as how to get the most out of your training, how to plan and how to use the CPD platform
- Involving early adopters as ambassadors across communication channels helps
- Council, committee and board engagement in CPD helps to ensure adoption by others.

Chapter 2: Perspectives of HCA members

This chapter outlines the perspectives of HCA members on the topic of CPD. The perspectives are based on the findings from one-to-one interviews with senior leaders (managing directors, head of healthcare practice or equivalent) held as part of the annual HCA agency benchmarking survey. Additional conversations have also been undertaken to ratify these perspectives with communication professionals within pharmaceutical companies and patient advocacy groups.

Overall perspectives

The general feedback was that CPD would raise standards and quality within healthcare communications and help to bring greater alignment across the industry. Furthermore, CPD was considered an initiative that could help to motivate individuals, as it would provide targets to work towards and recognition when these targets have been achieved. It was noted that CPD could also help with recruitment into the industry, and retention and career progression for those already working in the sector, by providing clarity on the competencies needed.

The importance of clarifying the term CPD and the overall aim at the outset was noted, as was the need to outline its impact on HCA member organisations and the added value it would bring over what is already available.

Aspects of CPD where members thought the HCA could best support

In the HCA benchmarking survey, participants were asked to rank CPD initiatives that would best support members. All of the proposed initiatives proved popular:

- Almost 90% of all survey participants stated that they would like the HCA to provide a range of CPD activities. The need to provide additional opportunities for mid- and/or senior-level individuals was specifically highlighted
- Almost three-quarters said that they would like the HCA to provide recommendations for CPD but, given the heterogenous nature of the industry and the array of disciplines, roles and levels, the need for the recommendations to achieve the right balance between individualisation/ flexibility and standardisation was highlighted. This balance was also highlighted from the point of view of HCA recommendations needing to complement, versus replace or contradict, the activities of its member organisations

- Almost two-thirds of respondents said that it would, or may, be beneficial for the HCA to provide the opportunity for individuals to become CPD accredited, providing it brought value and the process was not overly complex, costly or time-consuming
- Two-thirds of respondents also stated that it would, or may, be beneficial for the HCA to accredit activities provided by other organisations as it would provide us all with a wider range of opportunities for professional development. The need to ensure the quality of non-HCA activities and keep the process simple was highlighted
- Two-thirds of respondents also stated that it would, or may, be beneficial for the HCA to benchmark annually, providing the process was not too complex
- Over half of respondents said that providing guidance on the number of hours/CPD points would, or may, be useful – there were some concerns that this may be perceived as too prescriptive
- Of all the options, providing an online platform for tracking CPD activities and conducting spot checks of CPD activities were ranked lowest, but were still selected by 42% and 21% of participants, respectively. Some participants expressed concerns around cost and whether such a platform would be used, especially because some organisations have their own systems.

Figure 1. Prioritisation of how the HCA can best support members, from HCA Benchmarking Survey

1.	Provide a range of CPD activities
2.	Provide recommendations - broad areas of focus
3.	Offer opportunity for individuals to become accredited
4.	Benchmark annually
5.	Accredit the activities of other organisations
6.	Provide recommendations - no. hours/CPD points
7.	Host an online platform/app for recording/tracking
8.	Conduct spot audits to check standards are being upheld

These perspectives were invaluable for informing the recommendations that are outlined in Chapter 3, where you will see we have proposed a simple framework that can be flexed to the individual and will work alongside activities that organisations may already have in place, without incurring any significant additional cost.

Chapter 3: HCA recommendations on CPD

Based on the findings from other sectors/organisations and the perspectives shared by our members, this chapter outlines the recommendations of the HCA on what each healthcare communications professional – regardless of whether they are a member of the HCA – can be doing to further their own professional development and maintain standards within our industry. The recommendations are a best-practice framework, versus a mandated curriculum, and are not a replacement for any existing training plans you or your organisation may have; rather, they aim to complement these by showing how ongoing learning fits into your continuing professional development journey.

The framework outlines core competency spheres that are relevant to all healthcare communications professionals, regardless of our:
- Organisation (pharmaceutical or medical device company, agency, patient advocacy group, freelance, etc.)
- Discipline (e.g. PR, medical communications, medical affairs)
- Role (medical writer, project manager, etc.)
- Level of experience (e.g. intern or managing director).

Within competency spheres, however, the focus can be flexed by discipline and role, as appropriate. The recommendations also provide guidance on the minimum numbers of hours/CPD points that we should each be aiming to invest to ensure ongoing professional development, and suggestions for the weighting of points per competency sphere according to level of experience are outlined.

Core competency framework

The core competency framework (Figure 2) was developed following an analysis of competency frameworks used within HCA member organisations (pharmaceutical company, agency and patient advocacy group). This analysis identified six core competency spheres:

1	2	3
Foundations of healthcare communications	**Communication skills**	**Science and data**

4	5	6
Leadership, partnership and management	**Environmental, social and corporate governance**	**Innovation and trends**

Although the terminology used within HCA member organisations to describe these six spheres sometimes differed, the knowledge, skills and behaviours at the heart of each core competency area were generally the same.

No matter what your discipline, role or level of experience, each of these competency spheres is relevant to your professional development in healthcare communications. Within each sphere, however, the intention is that what you focus on and the extent of the knowledge and skills you should be aiming to build can be tailored to your discipline, role and level. Figure 2 lists example areas of focus for each competency sphere, although these are not exhaustive lists. The figure also provides some examples of how the framework can be adapted by discipline, role and level; again, these are only examples, designed to give an idea. This flexing to different levels of experience is also reflected in the recommended CPD points per sphere (Figure 2). For example, it is recommended that those just beginning their professional career in healthcare communications seek to gain more points in the 'Foundations of healthcare communications' competency sphere than an experienced individual; conversely, an experienced individual should be seeking to gain more points in the 'Leadership, partnership and management' competency sphere than somebody new to the sector.

Figure 2. HCA core competency framework

Foundations of healthcare communications

Understanding the healthcare industry and drug development

Understanding healthcare systems

Understanding the role of communications

PR/Medical Communications basics

Patient-centricity/empowerment/advocacy

HEOR and market access

Foundational: 8
Mid: 6
Senior: 2

At the beginning of your professional development journey, this is likely to be a big area of focus, with your attention on understanding the industry, the process for drug development and the basics of PR and/or Medical Communications. For somebody more experienced, this area remains relevant, although it may be a relatively smaller focus, with attention on aspects such as understanding different healthcare systems and access challenges around the globe

Communication skills

Writing excellence

Visual communication

Listening skills

Storytelling

Presentation skills/verbal communications

Workshop facilitation/moderation

Negotiation skills

Knowledge and understanding of communication channels

Foundational: 8
Mid: 6
Senior: 6

For a medical writer, the focus of this area is likely to be different to that for project manager, for example. While both roles require a good knowledge of communication channels and good listening and presenting skills, writing skills will vary, with both needing to be skilled in written client communications and the writer also needing skills in writing materials for medical education programmes, publications, etc.

Science and data

Understanding the role of science and data

Understanding different data types and evidence levels

Robust collection of data

Critical analysis

Understanding and communicating benefit–risk

Fair and accurate presentation of data

Understanding how science and data are shared

Effective communication of science and data

Measurement and evaluation

Future directions in science and data

Foundational: 8
Mid: 6
Senior: 2

Regardless of role or level, a basic understanding of science and data, its fair and accurate presentation, how it is shared and measurement/evaluation is fundamental. Some roles will need to build their knowledge of specific aspects of science and data as they progress in their professional development journey. For example, those working in insights/analytics teams will need to build and hone their skills in data collection and critical analysis

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- Example areas of focus by competency sphere
- Guidance on annual CPD points per competency sphere by level of experience
- Examples of adapting competency spheres for different roles and levels

Leadership, partnership and management	Environmental, social and corporate governance	Innovation and trends
Client service/working with agencies Stakeholder engagement Strategic planning Project management People management and mentoring Influencing in a matrix environment Business leadership	Principles of diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) Unconscious bias Mental health awareness Industry codes of practice/ ethics Health literacy Behaviour change	Creativity in healthcare communications Patient activation Emerging trends, e.g. virtual/hybrid meetings and teams
Foundational: 2 Mid: 5 Senior: 8	Foundational: 4 Mid: 5 Senior: 6	Foundational: 2 Mid: 4 Senior: 8
Whether your role is within a pharmaceutical or medical device company or a communications agency, strategic planning and stakeholder engagement is likely to be key. However, partnership for somebody in a pharmaceutical/ device company will also encompass working effectively alongside agencies, while for somebody within an agency it will encompass client service. Those at the more experienced level are likely to need skills in business leadership	We should each refresh our knowledge of codes of practice/ ethics and our understanding of DE&I on an annual basis. As we progress on our professional development journey, we are likely to want to build our understanding of aspects such as health literacy and behaviour change	We should all be 'keeping our finger on the pulse'. However, monitoring emerging trends and driving innovation in the industry are likely to be a larger focus for individuals at a more experienced level

Foundational equates to somebody in their first 3 years in healthcare communications, mid-level to 4–8 years' experience and senior-level to 9 years or more of experience in the industry. CPD, continuing professional development; HEOR, health economic and outcomes research.

CPD points and recommended targets

In our industry, we are very aware of the importance of measurement, the philosophy that, 'If you're not keeping score then you're not really playing'. With this in mind, we wanted to provide guidance on how much time each of us ought to be investing in our own professional development and suggestions on what this time should be focused on depending on discipline, role and level of experience. This is a minimum guide only and does not replace any more ambitious goals that you or your organisation may have.

Given that the time we spend on professional development opportunities is an investment to help us progress along our chosen career path and uphold standards within our industry, it does not seem unreasonable for us each to spend 1 day per quarter on such an important activity. If we consider that 1 hour of learning equates to 1 CPD point and that a day equals 8 hours, then 1 day equates to 8 CPD points and this gives us an annual target of at least 32 CPD points. These points should be gained in a 12-month cycle; the dates that the cycle begins/ends can be set by the individual, to fit with the review cycle specified within their organisation.

annual target of at least 32 CPD points

To ensure we are each developing in a holistic manner, the recommendation is that these points are gained through activities that span the six core competency spheres, with all of us gaining at least 3 points from professional development opportunities that are focused on ethics and/ or codes of practice in the competency area 'Environmental, social and corporate governance'. That said, the weighting of CPD points per competency sphere may vary depending on our level of experience; Figure 2 provides guidance on this. As job titles vary between HCA member organisations, levels of experience have been categorised as: foundational (≤3 years' experience); mid (4–8 years' experience); and senior (9+ years' experience) level.

at least 3 points from professional development opportunities that are focused on ethics and/or codes of practice

> **6 CPD points should be gained through structured learning**

Many professional services that have CPD programmes in place also provide guidance on the type of activity from which points should be gained. The recommendation of the HCA is that a minimum of 6 CPD points should be gained through structured learning, where possible supporting the opportunity for the exchange of ideas; remaining points can be gained from a mix of activities – see Box 1 for suggestions. These activities may be HCA-led (CPD courses/activities, shared experience or conference sessions), delivered by other organisations/individuals or self-guided.

To help ensure quality, the HCA has developed a resource that you can use to capture what was learnt and record your points. The HCA will also be developing an online platform for members to use in planning and tracking their CPD journey. Those recording 32 (or more!) CPD points in an annual cycle will be eligible to display a HCA 'certified to CPD standards' logo on their email signature, CV, etc. Points cannot be carried over to the following year.

hca Certified to CPD Standards

Suggested activities for CPD
- Structured learning
  - Courses
  - 1-to-1 training or coaching
  - Online learning
- Events
- Researching, reading, writing and reviewing
- Presenting
- Committee or group work
- Training, coaching or mentoring others
- Volunteer/pro bono work in a related area

Chapter 4: An HCA CPD roadmap for the future

In the foreword, we highlighted that the knowledge and skills areas to focus on, the standard to which this should be done and the ongoing commitment needed to maintain standards were not yet defined across healthcare communications. This report addresses these gaps. In this final chapter of the report, we outline the role that each of us can play in implementing and championing the recommendations outlined in this report; we all need to adopt the CPD framework if we are to truly drive further improvements in standards across healthcare communications.

2022: the 'Year of CPD'

We recognise that it will take time to fully embed a CPD framework; the other organisations that we spoke to highlighted this. However, to help us achieve a strong start, we invite you to support us in making 2022 the 'Year of CPD' for the healthcare communications community.

Leaders within organisations

To help establish CPD in 2022 and beyond, we invite leaders within healthcare communications organisations to:
- Build CPD into your annual business plans and budgets; we do not anticipate significant financial implications, rather ensuring that existing training budgets are focused on activities that will enable teams to meet the CPD recommendations
- Ensure HR and/or managers within your organisation are aware of the initiative and are building it into the personal development plans of the people they manage
- Ensure your wider teams are aware of the initiative, what it means for their personal development and encourage them to participate – the HCA has developed a short presentation that you can share with your teams, which you can find on our website
- Encourage your teams to contribute individually to making 2022 the 'Year of CPD' and lead the way by doing so yourself
- Help us spread the word by liking and sharing the HCA social media posts on CPD.

If your organisation is not a member of the HCA, you can still sign up to these standards, although we would, of course, recommend that you join and support this and the many other initiatives we do.

Individuals

Our research has shown that the most successful CPD programmes are those that grow from the bottom up. CPD provides an amazing and exciting opportunity for all healthcare communication professionals to take ownership of their professional development journey and support the people they manage to do likewise. Individual healthcare communications professionals can support CPD in 2022 and beyond by:

- Familiarising themselves with the HCA CPD recommendations, discussing them with their line manager and/or team leads, and building steps into their personal development plan that will enable them to achieve accreditation in 2022 and subsequent years
- Discussing CPD with the people they line manage and help them to embed it into their personal development plans
- Helping us spread the word by liking and sharing the HCA social media posts on CPD.

Beyond 2022

While our current focus is on making 2022 the 'Year of CPD' and establishing the framework within healthcare communications, we are already considering how we could build on these foundations in years to come. Some aspects that we are considering:

- How can we ensure as wide a range of CPD-accredited activities as possible, to support people in their professional development journeys? The HCA will continue to provide CPD-accredited activities and we are aiming to expand the range that we offer, in terms of topic areas, types of activities and target audiences. We will use the input from the HCA benchmarking survey and ongoing discussions with members to guide us here. However, we are also exploring the possibility of accrediting non-HCA courses
- This naturally leads to another aspect that we are considering: how do we ensure the standard and quality of CPD-accredited activities?
- We will monitor the roll-out of the CPD framework and continue to engage with our members, as there may be aspects that we wish to revisit in the future, if they would be beneficial.

Summary

We hope that the recommendations outlined in this report will provide a useful guide for all individuals within healthcare communications as they continue their professional development journey. By applying these recommendations for ourselves and encouraging others to do likewise, we can all contribute to driving standards in our industry to a new high.

Acknowledgements

Contact us:
For further information and support with the HCA CPD framework, or to provide feedback and suggestions, please contact: **cpdstandards@the-hca.org**

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