



STRATEGIC INSIGHTS REPORT

ISMPP ACADEMY

BOSTON, 2025

snapsight



Table of Contents

1. Executive Summary	2
2. Key Themes and Trends	3
2.1 The Primacy of the Human Element: From Patient-Centricity to Strategic Partnerships	3
2.1.1 The Foundation: Health Literacy as a Core Mandate	3
2.1.2 The Enabler: Trust as the Currency of Collaboration	3
2.1.3 The Differentiator: Human Judgment in an AI-Driven World	4
2.1.4 Sentiment Analysis	4
2.2 The Operational Imperative: Dismantling Silos to Foster Alignment and Trust	4
2.2.1 Diagnosing the Problem: A State of Misalignment	5
2.2.2 The Pharma-Agency Dynamic: A Microcosm of the Challenge	5
2.2.3 Proposed Solutions: Frameworks for Collaboration	5
2.2.4 Sentiment Analysis	6
2.3 Navigating the AI Frontier: A Strategic Shift from Content Generation to Insight Curation	6
2.3.1 The Reality of Adoption: Experimentation Without Scale	6
2.3.2 Redefining Roles: From Writer to Strategist and Collaborator	7
2.3.3 The Imperative of Governance and Critical Thinking	7
2.3.4 Sentiment Analysis	7
3. Opportunities and Challenges	8
3.1 Key Opportunities	8
3.2 Persistent Challenges	9
4. Evolving Narratives	10
5. Strategic Recommendations	11
5.1 For Executive Leadership (Pharma & Agency)	11
5.2 For Team and Department Leaders	11
5.3 For Individual Professionals	12
6. Snapsight	13
6.1 About Snapsight	13

1. Executive Summary

The medical communications industry is at a critical crossroads, as evidenced by the ISMPP Academy 2025. This inflection point is defined by the concurrent forces of technological disruption and a renewed emphasis on human-centric value. The key takeaway from the sessions is a compelling narrative: while Artificial Intelligence (AI) offers a paradigm shift toward operational efficiency, its successful adoption depends on reinforcing, rather than replacing, the foundational human expertise of the industry—specifically, empathy, strategic thinking, and trust.

Three macro-themes dominated the discourse:

1. **The Enduring Value of the Human Connection:** The event was anchored by a foundational focus on **health literacy** and the end-user experience. Discussions consistently circled back to the idea that effective communication is rooted in empathy and a deep understanding of human context, whether it's a patient struggling with complex terminology or a client-agency relationship built on personal trust. As automation becomes more prevalent, this human-centricity is repositioned not as a soft skill, but as the core strategic differentiator.
2. **The Urgent Need for Operational Alignment:** A significant pain point emerged around widespread **cross-functional misalignment**. Panels and audience feedback repeatedly highlighted "functional silos," "poor communication," and a "lack of trust" as the primary barriers to effectiveness. The consensus is that operational excellence is no longer optional; it is a prerequisite for navigating an increasingly complex ecosystem of internal and external stakeholders. The industry is moving from siloed execution to a model of integrated, strategic collaboration.
3. **The Pragmatic Embrace of AI:** The conversation around AI has matured from abstract potential to practical application, albeit with significant caution. The prevailing sentiment is one of pragmatic optimism, viewing AI not as a replacement for professionals but as a powerful augmentation tool. The focus is shifting from routine content generation to higher-value activities like strategic planning, insight analysis, and quality assurance. However, this evolution is contingent on establishing robust governance, upskilling the workforce, and resolving critical challenges related to accuracy, confidentiality, and measuring true return on investment.

Ultimately, the key strategic takeaway from the ISMPP Academy is that the future of medical communications will be defined by a symbiotic relationship between human and machine. Organizations that successfully navigate this new landscape will be those that leverage AI to automate tasks, freeing their human talent to focus on the irreplaceable work of building trust, crafting strategy, and communicating with genuine empathy and clarity.

2. Key Themes and Trends

The ISMPP Academy 2025 highlighted three pivotal themes defining the future of medical communications: **Human-Centricity, the AI-Augmented Workflow, and Operational Resilience**. Success hinges on treating the scientific communications professional as a **strategic curator and guardian of integrity**, emphasizing human skills like trust and empathy to safeguard against automation. AI adoption must move from theory to **governed, scaled implementation**, requiring urgent upskilling in prompt engineering. Finally, achieving **Operational Resilience** demands breaking down functional silos through intense cross-functional collaboration and redesigning workflows to be faster and built on shared objectives.

2.1 The Primacy of the Human Element: From Patient-Centricity to Strategic Partnerships

Discussions throughout the event underscored that technology and process are in service of people, not the other way around. From the opening keynote on health literacy to panels on building effective partnerships, the irreplaceable value of empathy, trust, and clear human communication was a constant, unifying thread.

2.1.1 The Foundation: Health Literacy as a Core Mandate

The keynote by **Helen Osborne** (President, Health Literacy Consulting) powerfully framed health literacy not as an add-on, but as a fundamental responsibility. She argued that factors like age, disability, language, culture, and emotion create significant barriers to understanding, affecting everyone at some point. The core message was a call for empathy and simplicity.

“This is bad and hard and tough enough. So please speak like a human, make it better, not worse.”

— **Helen Osborne MEd OTRL**, President, Health Literacy Consulting

Osborne highlighted the danger of jargon and cultural misinterpretation, citing examples from indigenous languages where the word for cancer translates to "the disease for which there is no cure," creating unintended fear and hopelessness. This established a critical baseline for the event: the ultimate goal is to serve the patient, and this requires a deep, human-centered approach to communication.

2.1.2 The Enabler: Trust as the Currency of Collaboration

This human-centric focus extended directly into professional relationships. In the "Pharma-Agency Partnerships" session, panelists agreed that the most successful collaborations transcend a simple vendor-client dynamic and are built on a foundation of mutual trust and respect. As **Melanie Watson** (Portfolio Director & Team Lead, Envision Pharma Group) noted, recognizing the humanity of colleagues is paramount.

"We are all people, we are all spending the vast majority of our lives doing this. So let's just interact as people... This client is actually a person. You don't have to be their best friend. But if you view them as a person... you're going to be interacting in a way that's much more conducive to actually getting things done."

— **Melanie Watson**, Portfolio Director & Team Lead - Scientific, Envision Pharma Group

This sentiment was echoed in discussions about fostering a feedback culture, celebrating successes together, and the importance of in-person check-ins to build rapport beyond project deliverables.

2.1.3 The Differentiator: Human Judgment in an AI-Driven World

The final session on AI brought this theme full circle. As AI automates content creation, the unique value of human professionals is being redefined. The consensus was that while AI can generate text, it cannot generate trust, interpret nuanced context, or demonstrate true empathy.

"AI can generate text, but it can't generate trust. We have to do that as people."

— **Monica Mody**, VP, Scientific Communications, Madrigal Pharma

The evolving role of the scientific communications professional is therefore less about being a writer and more about being a "curator of evidence," a strategic thinker, and a guardian of integrity and meaning—all fundamentally human endeavors.

2.1.4 Sentiment Analysis

The sentiment around this theme was overwhelmingly positive and resolute. There is a strong, shared belief across the industry in the importance of human-centric principles. Speakers were passionate and discussions were rooted in a sense of mission-driven purpose, particularly concerning patient outcomes and professional integrity.

2.2 The Operational Imperative: Dismantling Silos to Foster Alignment and Trust

A persistent and palpable challenge articulated across multiple sessions was the struggle with internal and external misalignment. Functional silos were identified as a primary impediment to efficiency, consistency, and impact.

2.2.1 Diagnosing the Problem: A State of Misalignment

The "Connecting the Dots" panel began with a poll that set the stage for this theme. When asked to describe the current level of cross-functional alignment in their organizations, the dominant response from the audience was **"moderately aligned."** According to **Doreen Valentine** (Director, Strategic Initiatives and Programs, ISMPP), this was the expected outcome, indicating a widespread, shared challenge.

The greatest challenges identified by the audience in a word cloud exercise were **Time**, **Data Owners**, and **Prioritization**, all symptoms of poor cross-functional integration. **Wesley Portegies** (Chief Strategy Officer & Founder, MedComms Experts) noted the consequence of this fragmentation:

"You can often see that because we have, I guess, some silos in that area, we're duplicating certain efforts, maybe not fully aligning on the message and there is so much that we can do about it."

— **Wesley Portegies**, Chief Strategy Officer & Founder, MedComms Experts

2.2.2 The Pharma-Agency Dynamic: A Microcosm of the Challenge

The same issues of misalignment were explored in the context of client-agency relationships. An audience poll in the "Pharma-Agency Partnerships" session identified the most common barrier to a strong partnership as **"Poor communication and direction,"** followed by **"Reactive and not proactive support."**

The panel emphasized that overcoming this requires intentional effort from both sides. This includes establishing shared objectives from the outset, clearly defining roles and expectations, and creating formal and informal channels for open communication. **Sandra Farley** (Senior Director, Business Operations, Merck) stressed the importance of proactive onboarding and relationship-building.

"Let's take the time to do that. At the beginning of each team forming, let's take the time to figure out who each person is and how they work and think of the future."

— **Sandra Farley**, Senior Director, Business Operations, Merck

2.2.3 Proposed Solutions: Frameworks for Collaboration

Speakers across sessions offered tangible solutions to combat these operational challenges:

- **Shared Spaces and Resources:** Utilizing collaborative platforms like SharePoint or Miro boards to create a single source of truth and ensure transparency.
- **Structured Communication:** Implementing pre-read materials for meetings to focus valuable synchronous time on decision-making, as suggested by **Amanda Borrow** (Director, Communication & Publication, Daiichi Sankyo).
- **Clear Accountability:** Developing process maps and clarifying decision-making authority to reduce ambiguity.
- **Proactive Feedback Loops:** Establishing regular, consistent check-ins (quarterly or even project-based) and fostering a culture where candid feedback is encouraged and acted upon.

2.2.4 Sentiment Analysis

The sentiment regarding operational alignment was one of shared frustration but also proactive determination. While the challenges of silos and miscommunication are deeply ingrained, there is a strong appetite for practical solutions and a clear recognition that solving these issues is critical for future success. The tone was less about complaining and more about collaborative problem-solving.

2.3 Navigating the AI Frontier: A Strategic Shift from Content Generation to Insight Curation

Artificial Intelligence was the most forward-looking and disruptive theme of the conference. The discourse has evolved from theoretical potential to a grounded discussion of practical implementation, new skill requirements, and the urgent need for responsible governance.

2.3.1 The Reality of Adoption: Experimentation Without Scale

While investment in AI is increasing, scaling remains a hurdle. A workshop introduction by **Monica Mody** (VP, Scientific Communications, Madrigal Pharma) highlighted that while companies are forecasting significant spending increases on AI (e.g., more than \$10 million), major barriers remain. One poll indicated that **37% of employees don't see the value of AI solutions**.

Jenny Ghith (Senior Director, Channel Integration and Analytics Lead, GSK) reinforced this during her workshop, noting that while nearly everyone is executing on AI use cases, very few feel they are successfully scaling that work. The industry is firmly in a "test and learn" phase.

"We are seeing a lot of use case work, not a lot of scale yet even whether you're at a large or a small company. And so everyone's trying to figure out what the secret sauce is in order to be able to drive that and get beyond the use cases."

— **Jenny Ghith**, Senior Director, Channel Integration and Analytics Lead, GSK

2.3.2 Redefining Roles: From Writer to Strategist and Collaborator

The central debate revolved around whether AI will replace or augment the scientific communications professional. The overwhelming consensus leaned toward augmentation, with a powerful caveat: roles must evolve. The value proposition is shifting away from the mechanics of content creation and toward strategic, uniquely human skills. A closing poll from the AI debate asked what an agency's most valuable team member will be in 2030, with "Best Strategist" and "Best AI Collaborator" far outweighing "Best Writer."

The session concluded with a powerful and widely-accepted maxim:

"AI won't replace you, but someone using AI might. Let's make ourselves irreplaceable by mastering science and strategy and AI."

— **Valerie Moss**, Chief Scientific Officer, Prime

2.3.3 The Imperative of Governance and Critical Thinking

With the power of AI comes significant risk. Speakers repeatedly emphasized the dangers of "hallucinations," data confidentiality breaches, and the erosion of public trust through difficult-to-detect misinformation (e.g., the "Pope in the puffy jacket" example).

To mitigate these risks, a framework for responsible AI is seen as essential. **Monica Mody** proposed the formation of an **"AI Governance council"** within organizations to oversee ethical adoption, create guidelines, and conduct risk assessments. This council would include cross-functional representation from legal, R&D, medical, and tech departments. At the same time, individual professionals must sharpen their critical thinking skills, treating AI outputs not as truth, but as a first draft to be rigorously verified.

2.3.4 Sentiment Analysis

The sentiment surrounding AI was a mix of excitement and anxiety, a state of "pragmatic optimism." Professionals are eager to harness AI for efficiency to free up time for more strategic work. However, this enthusiasm is tempered by very real concerns about job security, the ethics of implementation, data privacy, and the current limitations of the technology. The tone is cautious but forward-looking, recognizing that ignoring AI is not a viable strategy.

3. Opportunities and Challenges

The discussions at ISMPP Academy 2025 illuminated a clear set of strategic opportunities for the medical communications industry to seize, as well as persistent challenges that must be addressed to unlock future growth and impact.

3.1 Key Opportunities

- **Elevating the Strategic Value of Communications:** By leveraging AI to automate routine tasks (e.g., generating summaries, first drafts, meeting minutes), professionals have a significant opportunity to reclaim time and redirect their focus toward higher-value strategic activities. This includes deeper insight mining, more robust publication planning, and serving as true strategic partners to both internal stakeholders and external clients.
- **Enhancing Patient Outcomes Through Health Literacy:** There is a clear and growing mandate to integrate health literacy principles systematically into all forms of medical communication. This presents an opportunity for the industry to lead in creating more accessible, empathetic, and effective content (e.g., plain language summaries, patient-centric visuals), directly improving patient understanding and health outcomes.
- **Strengthening Partnerships with Proactive Collaboration:** The widespread desire to move from reactive to proactive support creates an opening for both agencies and pharma clients to redefine their partnerships. By co-creating shared objectives, establishing clear KPIs for communication and collaboration, and fostering a culture of open feedback, teams can build more resilient, efficient, and innovative working relationships.
- **Demonstrating Impact Beyond Traditional Metrics:** As articulated by **Wesley Portegies**, the industry is transitioning from an "output environment to an outcomes environment." This shift provides an opportunity to develop and champion new models for measuring impact that go beyond publication counts to include metrics related to audience engagement, behavioral change, and alignment with overarching medical strategy.

3.2 Persistent Challenges

- **Overcoming Deep-Rooted Functional Silos:** The most frequently cited challenge is the pervasive nature of organizational silos. These barriers impede communication, create inefficiencies, and foster a lack of trust between departments and with external partners. Dismantling them requires sustained effort, leadership buy-in, and a fundamental change in organizational culture.
- **Managing the Risks and Costs of AI Adoption:** While the promise of AI is great, the practical challenges are significant. These include ensuring data confidentiality (especially with public models), verifying the accuracy of AI-generated content to avoid "hallucinations," navigating a complex vendor landscape, and justifying the substantial financial investment in the face of unclear ROI.
- **Addressing the Workforce Skills Gap:** The rapid evolution driven by AI is creating a skills gap. There is an urgent need to upskill the current workforce in areas like AI literacy, prompt engineering, data interpretation, and strategic thinking. Concurrently, a challenge exists in training junior professionals in foundational writing skills if their initial work is heavily augmented by AI.
- **The Constraint of Time and Resources:** Across all discussions, "time" emerged as the most precious and limited resource. Professionals are stretched thin, leaving little capacity for strategic thinking, proactive planning, or experimenting with new tools and processes. Overcoming this requires ruthless prioritization and a clear demonstration of efficiency gains from new ways of working.

4. Evolving Narratives

The narrative of the ISMPP Academy 2025 progressed logically from a foundational **"why"** to a practical **"how,"** culminating in a transformative **"what's next."**

The conference began with **Helen Osborne's** deeply human-centric keynote on **health literacy**. This set the stage by grounding the entire purpose of the industry in the end-user: **the patient**. The initial dialogue was focused on **empathy, ethics, and the responsibility to communicate clearly**. This established a **moral and strategic anchor** for all subsequent discussions.

The narrative then shifted inward, moving from the "why" of patient communication to the **"how" of professional operations**. The **"Connecting the Dots"** and **"Pharma-Agency Partnerships"** panels tackled the internal mechanics of the industry. The conversation became **pragmatic and problem-oriented**, focusing on tangible challenges like **functional silos, poor communication, and resource constraints**. The tone here was one of **shared struggle but also collaborative solution-seeking**, as professionals grappled with improving the complex machinery of medical communications.

Finally, the dialogue pivoted to the future with the sessions on **Artificial Intelligence**. This marked a significant shift in focus from current operational pains to **future technological transformation**. The AI debate introduced a sense of urgency and even existential questioning about the future of professional roles. However, the narrative did not end on a note of technological determinism. Instead, it circled back to the conference's opening theme. The central question of the AI session became: **"What unique value do we still bring?"** The answer, consistently, was the **human element—strategy, critical thinking, empathy, and trust**.

This created a powerful, **circular narrative**: the event began by defining the **core human value** of the profession (empathy for the patient), explored the operational challenges in delivering that value, and concluded by asserting that this **same human value is the key to navigating the industry's technological future**. The conversation evolved from "how do we communicate better to people?" to "how can we work better with each other?" and finally to **"how do we partner with technology while retaining our essential humanity?"**

5. Strategic Recommendations

Based on the insights and sentiments from the event, the following strategic recommendations are proposed for key stakeholder groups.

5.1 For Executive Leadership (Pharma & Agency)

- **Champion and Fund Cross-Functional Alignment:** Acknowledge that "moderately aligned" is insufficient. Charter and fund initiatives aimed at breaking down silos. This could include investing in unified technology platforms, establishing joint task forces, and creating incentive structures that reward cross-departmental collaboration rather than functional goal achievement alone.
- **Establish Enterprise-Wide AI Governance:** Mandate the creation of a cross-functional AI Governance Council to develop clear policies on data security, ethical use, and vendor selection. This proactive step will mitigate risk, build internal trust, and provide a clear framework for teams to innovate responsibly.
- **Reframe AI ROI to Include Human Capital:** Shift the evaluation of AI investments beyond simple cost reduction. Frame the primary ROI as augmenting human capability—freeing up highly skilled professionals from low-value tasks to focus on strategy, innovation, and client relationships, which are harder to measure but drive long-term value.

5.2 For Team and Department Leaders

- **Formalize Partnership and Communication Protocols:** Do not leave collaboration to chance. At the start of any new project or partnership, formally define roles, establish communication cadence and channels, agree on shared KPIs (including metrics for communication quality), and map out feedback and escalation processes.
- **Cultivate a "Fail Fast, Learn Fast" Culture for AI:** Create "safe sandboxes" for your teams to experiment with AI tools on non-confidential projects. Encourage sharing of both successes and failures to accelerate collective learning. As one attendee noted, "there's also a fine line between failing fast and then not using the technology right," so pair experimentation with structured training.

- **Prioritize Proactive Onboarding and Knowledge Management:** Address the challenge of team turnover by investing in robust internal documentation (e.g., up-to-date scientific platforms, lexicons, process guides). As **Alyssa DiLeo** (Manager, Scientific Communications, Seaport Therapeutics) noted, this ensures continuity and significantly speeds up the onboarding of new team members, whether internal or agency-side.

5.3 For Individual Professionals

- **Proactively Pursue AI and Strategic Upskilling:** Take ownership of your professional development. Seek out training on AI tools, practice prompt engineering, and actively look for opportunities to shift your focus from tactical execution to strategic contribution. Frame yourself as an "AI-augmented communicator" who can curate insights, not just generate content.
- **Become a Health Literacy Advocate:** Internalize the principles from **Helen Osborne's** keynote. In every piece of content you create, challenge jargon, question complexity, and advocate for the end-user. Position yourself as an expert in plain language and clear communication, a skill of increasing value.
- **Build Your Human Network:** In an era of automation, your professional relationships are a key asset. Invest time in building trust with colleagues, clients, and cross-functional partners. Practice active listening, provide constructive feedback, and be the person who connects the dots and bridges the gaps between teams.



6. Snapsight and ISMPP

6.1 About Snapsight

At the 2025 ISMPP Academy, Snapsight powered real-time transcription and summarization for all plenary and general sessions. This AI-driven platform delivered instant, high-quality transcripts and synthesized key takeaways, ensuring that participants could quickly access and review session highlights. Importantly, all AI-generated content was reviewed by human experts to maintain accuracy and relevance. By streamlining content capture and distribution, Snapsight enhanced the accessibility and impact of the event's communications.

Learn more at snapsight.com.

6.1 About ISMPP

The International Society for Medical Publication Professionals (ISMPP) is a global organization dedicated to advancing the ethical and effective communication of medical and scientific information. It provides education, resources, and a collaborative community for professionals involved in medical publications and communications. *For questions about ISMPP or to learn more, visit ismpp.org or email ismpp@ismpp.org.*