The Inexorable Rise of the Technical Communicator

The value a technical communicator brings to an enterprise has never been higher

THE NUMBER OF TECHNICAL WRITERS IS ON the decline. So says the United States Department of Labor, the government agency that tracks such things. In its place rises the technical communicator.

It only makes sense. Certainly the need for simple, clear technical information has never been greater. The complexity of this information is ever increasing. To satisfy these evolving needs, the skill set of a technical writer falls short. Today's world demands the skills of a professional technical communicator.

The evolution of the technical communicator. The Department of Labor maintains hundreds of descriptions in their Standard Occupational Classification system. This is how they describe a technical writer:

> Write technical materials, such as equipment manuals, appendices, or operating and maintenance instructions. May assist in layout work.

This description is more than 70 years old. Perhaps it accurately described the work of technical writers then — but certainly not now. The work of the technical writer has evolved over the past 30 years.

The task of the technical writer gained in complexity with the advent of the desktop computer and access to software by the masses. This complexity broke open about 10 years ago with the World Wide Web and exploded like the Big Bang in this new millennium as the Web became the indispensable source for information.

A new occupational title was needed: *Technical Communicator*.

A new description. The Society for Technical Communication (STC), an international organization that is "dedicated to advancing the arts and sciences of technical communication", submitted this occupational description for a technical communicator:

> Develop and design instructional and informational tools needed to assure safe, appropriate, and effective use of science and technology, intellectual property, and manufactured products and services. Combine multi-media knowledge and strong communication skills with technical expertise to educate across the entire spectrum of users' abilities, technical experience, and visual and auditory capabilities.

Technical communicators are expert in many areas of communication. They ensure that their work meets the needs of their users and of their company; that their work is intricately connected with their company's overall corporate goals. Technical communicators embrace a wide array of often disparate information, and apply their expertise and knowledge of effective communication methods. Ultimately, they add a tremendous amount of value to a project. In a word, they work strategically.

A wide and varied array of skills. Technical communicators bring a depth, breadth, and encompassing set of competencies to effectively communicate technical information. They:
- Analyze information at a high-level.
- Understand the range of technical information.
- Possess strong research skills.
- Understand and apply tools and technology.
- Apply standards and facilitate processes.
- Design user interfaces for ease of use.
- Create testing scenarios for products, services, and documentation.
- Design the deliverable format of any communication.
- Thoroughly know the industry.
- Deliver technical communication in various media, including paper, video and film, audio, and the Internet.
- Ensure that products and services are usable by the intended audience.
- Pave a path through the labyrinth of technical intricacies to attain comprehension.
- Identify the needs of their audience, and ensure their audience can act quickly and appropriately.
- Write superbly, using appropriate language, diction, and style.
- Inform, instruct, and persuade through a wide array of communication vehicles including (but certainly not limited to) user guides, online help, functional specifications, policies and procedures, Web sites, scripts, training materials, white papers, marketing and sales materials, reports, proposals, statements of work, wikis, and blogs.

An all-encompassing grasp. Technical communicators know and work with all functional areas in an enterprise. They interact with technical development to understand how a product works, and then interpret this information to explain how to use the product. They interact with marketing to translate arcane technical information into clear language to explain features and benefits that can be used to sell a product.

Technical communicators are often the only people in an organization who know how something works, how to use it, and what benefits it provides: an all-encompassing grasp. They ensure products and services are usable and meet expectations. In the end, technical communicators secure customer satisfaction.

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POSITION PAPER