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Careers In Technical Communication

--How To Get Started in Technical Writing--

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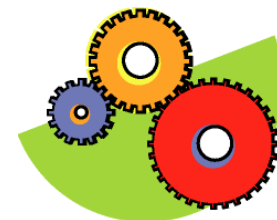
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Definition Of A Technical Writer

Looking back at the 1950s, 60s, and 70s:

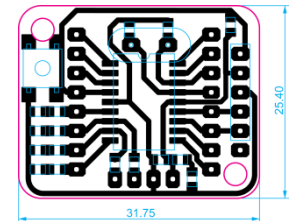
- Technical writer (as the term is commonly used) wrote user manuals and/or specifications for “hardware” products.
- Common types were: Operator’s manuals, installation manuals, troubleshooting manuals, parts manuals, etc.
- Opportunities were more limited: main frame computers, auto industry, agriculture, heavy machinery, aviation, defense, and government.





Definition Of A Technical Writer (Cont'd)...

- In the mid-1980s, technology exploded:
 - Introduction of microprocessors creates a flood of new products.
 - New technology products = New documentation needs.
 - “Technical writer” evolves as a subset of a newer term: “technical communicator”.
 - Desktop computer becomes the new writer’s tool .





New Types Of Technical Communicators Emerged

- Software technical writer.
- On-line help (user assistance) developer.
- Web content developer.
- E-learning (online training) developer
- Content management system (or single-sourcing) specialist.
- Global translation coordinator.
- Content strategist.
- User-experience specialist.
- User-interface designer.





Opportunities Have Multiplied For Technical Communicators

- Medical device and bio-tech.
- Enterprise software (IT.)
- Web-based commerce.
- Quality assurance departments.
- Manufacturing processes.
- Internal policies and procedures.
- Compliances (FDA, ISO, Sarbanes Oxley, global import standards.)
- Training (employee, sales, customer, distributor).
- Global markets (compliance, translations, training).





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Explosion Of Deliverables...

- Hardware documentation
- Software documentation
- Operator's guides
- Troubleshooting guides
- Maintenance manuals
- Installation manuals
- Paper-based
- On-line
- Web-based
- On-line help (local)
- Web-based help
- Remove-and-replace procedures
- End-user (external) documentation
- Internal documentation
- Field service notes
- Installation notes
- Test plans
- Test procedures
- Proposals
- Newsletters
- Reports
- Manufacturing procedures
- Process documentation
- White papers
- Trade journal articles
- Quick reference cards or guides
- Help desk tip sheets
- Functional specifications
- Product descriptions
- Feature/benefits marketing sheets
- Technical brochures
- Interactive technical manuals
- Equipment technical manuals
- Video scripts
- IFUs for medical devices
- Templates for formatting
- Research studies
- Style guides
- Medical device labeling
- Quality assurance documentation
- Training documentation
- Classroom training
- E-learning training
- Compliance documentation
- Sarbanes-Oxley compliance
- Motivational
- ISO
- FDA clinical trials documentation
- Intended-for-use statements
- Compliance documentation
- Procedural
- Descriptive
- Persuasive
- Standard operating procedures (SOPs)
- Step-by-step
- Policies and procedures
- Disaster recovery documentation
- Military spec.
- Parts lists
- Change management documentation
- Knowledge management documentation
- Software development/life-cycle documentation
- Business process requirements
- Software/system requirements
- Design documents
- Workflow documentation
- Presentations
- Network infrastructure doc.
- Cloud-based documentation
- Wiki authoring
- Mobile device delivery



...And More Ways To Deliver

- User manuals in a variety of forms, including portable/removable memory, and on the web.
- On-line help systems (local computer and web-based).
- Web-based training (E-learning).
- Documentation translated from English to other languages.
- The newest devices: tablets, notebooks, smart phones.





“Cross-Over” Professions For Technical Communicators

- Journalism
- Marketing communications
- Engineering
- Software development
- Computer science
- IT
- Healthcare
- Teaching, education
- Customer service
- Field service





Education, Skills, And Experience Noticed By Hiring Managers

- Technical communication majors.
- English, journalism, marketing comm. Majors.
- Engineering and computer science courses.
- Two-year technical degrees or certificates (supplemented by writing courses).
- Any writing courses; software courses/certifications.
- Technical writing & training development courses.
- Software authoring, web development courses.
- Professional certifications.
- Advanced degrees.
- Familiarity with widely accepted tools, new tools, and new methodologies.



Software Tools

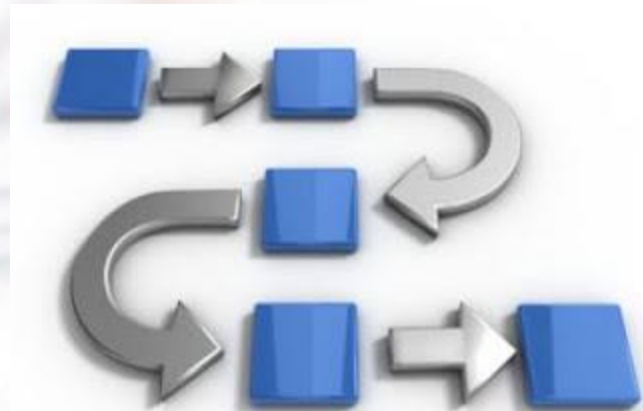
- Knowledge of software tools have become a very important skill for today's technical communicators
- Long-standing traditional tools still matter:
 - MS Office®
 - Adobe InDesign®
 - Adobe FrameMaker®
 - Adobe Acrobat®
 - Adobe PhotoShop®
 - Adobe Illustrator®
 - Adobe RoboHelp®
- Other newer tools for technical writing and training development:
 - Madcap Flare®, Adobe Presenter®, Adobe Captivate®, Camtasia Studio®, Articulate Studio®, XML (markup languages for content management), and so on.





New Methodologies And Tools Continue To Emerge

- Wiki or open source content development.
- Agile or collaborative project management.
- DITA (Darwin Information Typing Architecture) for XML environment.





Do Companies Provide Training?

10+ years ago (pre-recession):

- Very common for medium to large size companies to provide software training, product training, etc.

Currently (post-recession):

- Less common for all companies due to cost-cutting and less resources; would be more inclined to do product training than software training.*

*Note: Due to increasing pressures of decreasing talent pool, there are preliminary signs that companies are trending back to pre-recession training.



Hiring Options Available

- Contract (typically, through an agency, at the client site).
- Contract-to-hire.
- Full time direct.
- Consulting—aka: freelancing, independent consultant (via an agency, or direct with the client).





Industries Offering Best Opportunity

- Medical device*
- Bio-tech
- Healthcare
- Banking and finance
- Engineering
- Software development
- High-technology
- Manufacturing
- Web-based commerce
- *Note: Minnesota is near the top of the list for number of medical device companies.





Compensation Rates



- Employee--Annual Salary:
 - U.S. Annual Mean (2016): \$73,350
- Independent Consultant:
 - Consultant compensation (hourly rates) are typically 15-20% higher than salaried positions because consultants usually do not receive any benefits.
 - Compensation well into the \$six figures is attainable for senior-level technical communication consultants—especially those with a niche skill.

* Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics



Getting Your “Foot In The Door”

- If in last year of college: Try to get an internship that involves any type of writing (technical, marketing, training).
- If you are currently in any “cross-over professions,” you may be able to get into technical writing easier if you:
 - Apply for a contract or consulting position.
 - Re-organize your resume so as to focus on “strengths” versus “chronology”.
 - Take a course in technical writing, or in specific tools areas (i.e., FrameMaker, InDesign, etc.).
 - Network: Go to meetings of organizations that promote technical communication.





Opportunities Will Be Heating Up Because...

- Demographics: Boomers will be retiring in the next 10-15 years.
- More demands for documentation in healthcare and medical device.
- Increasing demand in bio-tech.
- Increasing variety of deliverables (i.e., tablets, notebooks, smart phones, cloud storage, file sharing, etc.).
- Increasing use of new technologies and tools (i.e., translation software, content management, web-based software, etc.).
- Training development (instructional design and e-learning) will continue to be in demand.



What Are The Future Trends?

- Tools and methodologies will continue to evolve and change for content development, translation, and delivery.
- New industries will continue to emerge and expand on the waves of technology, thus creating new needs and new roles for technical communicators. (Social media, for example.)
- Web will remain strong, and get stronger.
- Paper will not go away, but will probably become less important.
- Writers will increasingly become project managers.
- Rapid pace of changing technology requires continue retraining and staying in tune with changing technology.

change
ahead.



What Are The Future Trends? (Cont'd)...

- Virtual office (working from home office) should get stronger as ways of communicating become better and more diverse, and as companies try to save on “brick and mortar.”
- Due to the increasing talent shortage and skills gap, companies will continue to adapt and find more creative ways to secure talent (i.e., part-time, remote, flexible schedules, more in-house training.)
- Although more technical writing jobs are done outside U.S (due to globalization), companies will prefer to have the writing resources on-site or close to site.

change
ahead.



The Future Looks Bright ☐

- Opportunities will continue to expand.
- Compensation will remain strong.
- Part-time, flexible, and telecommuting more common.
- Good profession, even after retirement.





Profiles That Catch The Hiring Manager's Attention

- 4-year degree in Tech Comm., English, Journalism; some requests call for an advanced degree .
- Internships, projects, or related job experience while in school are very helpful.
- Solid writing ability.
- Good verbal skills.
- Quick study (learning about client products)
- A creative problem solver (can adjust to changing landscape).
- Basic software tools familiarity.
- Works well with people, departments, and stakeholders.





Use The Tools Of Effective Job Search

- Resume (or curriculum vitae).
- Create a portfolio of samples (may also include samples on-line).
- Join LinkedIn and create a profile page.
- Watch the on-line job posting sites.
- Post resume on reputable sites.
- Person-to-person networks still important.
- Work with agencies that specialize.





Communication Is Important

- Have all vital contact information on resume.
- Check e-mail and voice mail on a regular basis.
- Return e-mail inquiries and missed phone calls promptly—sometimes a day or even hours can make the difference.
- Be proactive and check in with your agencies or contacts periodically—shows interest, energy, and professionalism.





Organizations And Memberships

- Society for Technical Communication (STC)
 - www.stc.org
- American Medical Writers Association (AMWA)
 - www.amwa.org
- LinkedIn specialty groups
- Networking groups, training, seminars, expositions, etc.