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Careers In Technical Communication (or—How To Get Into Technical Writing)

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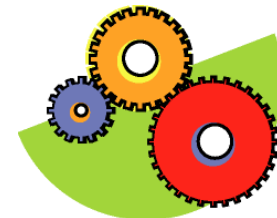
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Definition Of A Technical Writer

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

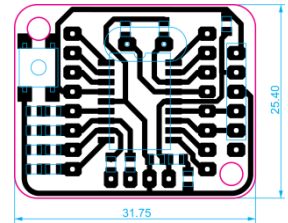
- Technical writer (as the term is commonly used) wrote user manuals and/or specifications for “hardware” products.
- Common types were: Operator’s manuals, installation manuals, troubleshooting manuals, parts manuals, etc.
- Opportunities were more limited: main frame computers, auto industry, agriculture,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



Common Titles Of Technical Communicators

- Technical Writer
- Technical Communicator
- Technical Communication Specialist
- Documentation Specialist
- Technical Editor
- Editor/Proofreader
- Hardware Writer
- Software Writer
- Proposal Writer
- Specification Writer
- Parts Catalog Writer
- Technical Marketing Writer
- Independent Consultant
- Freelance Writer
- Contract Writer
- Temporary Writer
- Staff Writer
- Lead Writer
- Senior Writer
- Writer/Manager
- Principle Writer
- On-Line Help Developer
- Information Architect
- Information Developer
- Content Coordinator
- Content Strategist
- Content and Digital Marketer
- Content Marketing Specialist
- Web Content Writer
- Creative Learning Designer
- Web Content Editor
- Course Developer
- Courseware Developer
- Instructional Designer
- E-Learning Designer
- Interactive Learning Specialist
- User Experience Designer
- On-Line Content/Social Medical Editor
- User Experience Specialist
- User Experience Strategist
- User Experience Architect
- User Experience and Usability Specialist
- Usability Analyst
- Proposal Writer/Coordinator
- Proposal Development Analyst
- Information Developer
- Information Analyst
- Labeling Specialist
- Technical Labeling Specialist
- Medical Writer
- Training and Communication Specialist
- Social Media Coordinator
- Social Media Specialist
- Social Media Strategist



...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

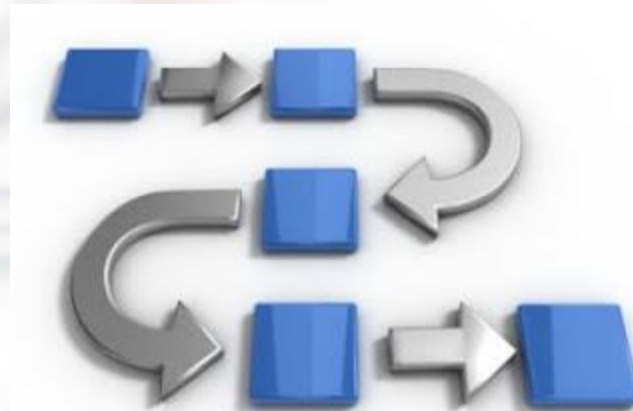
- Knowledge of software tools have become a very important skill for today's technical communicators
- Long-standing traditional tools still matter:
 - MS Office®
 - Adobe InDesign®
 - Adobe FrameMaker®
 - Adobe Acrobat®
 - Adobe PhotoShop®
 - Adobe Illustrator®
 - Adobe RoboHelp®
- Other newer tools 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.



Expanded List of Industries

- Medical device
- Biomedical sciences
- Healthcare
- High-technology (digital, emerging)
- Software development
- Web-based (cloud) technology
- Telecommunications
- Business-to-business products
- Consumer products
- Commercial/heavy equipment
- Transportation
- Banking/finance
- Insurance
- Engineering
- Safety and compliance
- Manufacturing
- Research and Development
- Government
- Defense
- Aerospace
- Chemical sciences
- Education
- Energy
- Utilities
- Agriculture
- IT services
- Architectural
- Construction
- Environmental infrastructure



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.
- Expanding use of gamification and virtual reality technologies for training, user experience, testing, and conveying procedural product information to the user.
- 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.

change ahead.



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

- Rapid pace of changing technology requires continue retraining and staying in tune with changing technology.
- 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.