

The New Roles in Technical Communication

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This article focuses on new job roles and responsibilities emerging in the field of technical communication. Starting with exploring the “why” factor behind the emergence of the new roles, the article discusses the cultural changes that are slowly taking place in the realm of technical communication. It highlights the new areas which are yet to be discovered by technical writing community and seeks for their active contribution in areas such as business communication and knowledge management. The article also provides some insight into the future of technical communication and depicts how old values are inseparable from the “discipline” of technical communication.

Are we really changing?

Technical Communication is often referred to as an “umbrella” profession and this is reaffirmed by contemporary diverse job profiles offered under the banner of “Technical Communication”. Quoting *George F. Hayhoe’s* thought on future of technical communication – “*you can be amazed at the range of titles they hold: usability expert, content management specialist, user experience designer, information development manager, instructional designer, user assistance professional, and web master, to name only a few.*” Considering the dappled hats technical writers wear each day I sometimes try to visualize who we are and what would be the exact picture of our future? Will the “umbrella” be renamed to something like New Technical Communication or as Prof. William Hart-Davidson call’s it TechComm 2.0?

“Why” factor behind the New Role or the Change

“Increasing public involvement in science and technology suggests a new role for technical communication in which conventional skills of adapting technical content to audience needs may be replaced by skills that facilitate audiences’ own information search activities” (D. F. Treadwell). With the advent of content management system, single-sourcing, and

XML much of technical writing skills need to be “relearn” and “unlearn”.

Change is inevitable when we want to shrug off the old “Technical Writer” tag and move on for more trendy ones like *user experience designer* or *information designer* as the old tag is no longer “stylish”.

But are these the only factors?

Many organizations are now realizing the importance of information management. This fuelled the inception of various content management tools, knowledge management software, XML-based authoring environment, etc. The terminologies used for defining an end-user manual as software documentation is no longer valid. It is popularly known as “information product” amongst information developers in the industry. Also information product is no longer all about “manuals”. It spans from marketing brochure, proposal, report, white paper, web document or may be a web site and the list can go on. I would like to refer this new dimension of information product as “information solution”.

“The impacts of technological and scientific innovations combined with consumer demands for clear, usable product information have changed the core competencies that technical communicators now need. In short, the job title, technical communicator does not reject what contemporary practitioners do. Despite the debate over the various meanings and ownership of information design, the title, information designer, appears to be the best fit to describe the new profile of technical communicators” (Alison Reynolds).

Considering the emphasis on user-centered approach on software products, there are continuous demands for more usable information products. Documentation is no longer a stand-alone PDF document.

Even organizations are striving everyday to cope with the challenges from customers demanding more dynamic and interactive information products. I still remember the



question asked by one of the Subject Matter Experts (SME) in a document review meeting:

Does the customer really read these manuals? My answer was vague...

But within a few weeks we received a survey report from the customers and amazingly 80% of them responded to the survey and shared some of the noteworthy thoughts that eventually helped us in improving our documents' "delivery mode" and also the way we work.

Most of them requested for a quick user guide document on the product page of the company web site. While others requested for more interactive help systems. The most interesting request was embedding *blog* feature into online help. If I have to bring out new user assistance system, I would certainly share my entire set of help files with the user and allow them to build their own help.

1) Add, 2) update, and 3) modify job description

Change is inevitable when the culture around us is changing and is changing really fast. Our task is to quickly respond and adapt to it. But this requires a lot of adjustments -- the way we think and work. Yes, I am referring to our day to day work! We can no longer "assume" that in the entire software development life cycle (SDLC) our task is to write and edit product documents and deliver it. We have to step up and assume more "diverse" role. By this I mean engage into each and every aspect of SDLC. Here are the few steps we can all try right away:

- In the first phase of SDLC contribute as an usability expert
- Prototype-building phase contribute as a business analyst
- Design phase contribute as an user experience designer
- Development phase contribute as technical writer/information developer

- Post development phase contribute as knowledge managers, training specialists

*"Technical communicators are at the center of an organization's knowledge and can be knowledge managers" (Applen). I agree with Applen and feel quite perked up when I read this on *Technical Communication, Knowledge Management, and XML*.*

Contributing as a knowledge Manager

Technical Communicators have extreme potential to contribute as a knowledge manager. Acting as an information mediator between an organization and its product for years they have passively contributed to the role of knowledge managers for quite a while now. Now they have to label the mediator role and venture out other knowledge management avenues inside the organization. Areas like product training, customer training, creating and maintaining company web sites, employee portals, being a single point of contact for all marketing documents, etc are plausible avenues. However the avenues may vary from one organization to another. A convergence approach would be highly effective in building Technical Communication as the focal point of all organization's information source.

Contributing as a Business Communicator

There is nothing like impacting business and decision making process of an organization.



Therefore,

...taking up business communication role would not only change our “strategic” position in the organization but when performed we can directly impact the business of an organization.

According to my experience, technical communicators contribute to business communication too. But most of these roles or tasks are obscured in another job function. For example when writing a white paper or marketing brochure, a technical writer often works directly with the marketing team, media relations department, etc even though he is never a part of that team.

Here are some roles intrinsic to business communication that technical communicators can dive into:

- Branding of a product
- Marketing
- Advertising
- Customer relations
- Public relations
- Media relations
- Project Communication
- Listening To Your Customers
- Cultural Intelligence
- Cross-cultural Communication

“Impact decision making by being part of the business communication.” (Effective Business Communication)

A list of *Real Jobs*

Let's look at some of the “actual” roles that have emerged due to the explosion of XML,

content management system, and Darwin Information Typing Architecture (DITA).

In order to grab a list of “new” skills required for the new role, I browsed through quite a few job sites and career portals of renowned companies.

Here are the new skills and responsibilities that can aid in developing the next generation technical communication or “TechComm2.0”.



TABLE 1 JOB DESCRIPTION (COPIED EXACTLY FROM THE WEB SITE)

Job Title	Skills	Job Description
SDK Technical Writer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • C++ or other object-oriented programming • Proficient in Doxygen and HTML 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Portfolio that includes sample code in Java, JavaScript, PHP, Python, Perl, or other languages
XML Document Engineer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scripting (DOS, BASH, and/or Python) • Experience with FrameScript 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge of AJAX, REST, SOAP, XSLT, or other web-based technologies
Data Standards Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience with content management and project tracking software • Experience in software development setting • Experience working with Qt and/or MFC • Experience with Computational Fluid Dynamics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write additional text as needed, such as blog entries, FAQs, journalistic articles
Business Analyst (from my personal experience)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience with visualization software • SQR, SQL, PeopleTools 8.48 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience with coding or scripting in any language
Process Manager Programming Writer		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ability to read and write VB.Net and/or C# code required • Write Conversions, debug, build, or enhance PeopleSoft on-line objects

Following roles also get prominence in the DITA environment.

TABLE 2 ROLES IN DITA ENVIRONMENT

Roles	Responsibilities
Type architect	Analyzes topic types needed to accommodate content being produced, and defines new topic types if needed.
Topic writer	Writes and edits topics, according to the topic-type standards established for the project by the XML architect.
Information architect	Analyzes the overall structure of the content, groups it into topic collections, and defines maps that describe the relationship of topics to each other.
Build developer	Processes the DITA source topics into various formats, as needed for product deliverables.
Information designer	Establishes the "look and feel" of the output presentation

Among all the new roles discussed above information architect is much talked about in the recent times since it is rapidly making its presence felt under the broad “umbrella” of technical communication.

“Acknowledging the importance of adapting successfully to a new, information-based

economy, we also expand the responsibilities of technical communication professionals to include those of information architects to better describe and delineate the opportunities and tasks associated with our new roles” (Richard K. Mott and Julie Ford).



What is the “Future”?

“Apprehension related to concerns about the direction and impact of science and technology and its increasing sophistication calls for a higher level of expertise from technical communicators in order to meet today's exciting opportunities and challenges. As an intermediary, the technical communicator has responsibilities to both sides of the exchange”. (Gail Gilliland)

Increasingly, technology is affirming its position in technical communication. The direction we are moving in is still unknown. Considering the above job roles taken from the job portals, it is inevitable that

...technical communication is a perfect discourse of writing and technology.

Focus is more on all-round awareness on technology rather than writing for the technology. So would technical communication or the “umbrella profession” be renamed? Are we going to share our traits with science or technology in future? With which discipline would we associate ourselves in the academia? Are we going to be a branch of information technology?

Well, I am still looking for the perfect answer. But here are my assumptions on what we need to do to keep up with the trend and dynamism in our field:

- Know technology
- Look beyond our writing and editing skills. The idea is to build newer skills (related to information technology) on top of the existing ones
- Comprehend a bigger picture by assuming a new role and contributing to each and every aspect of the organization's “information solution” drive. If the drive is not started yet, be the pioneer of the information solution movement
- Stay tuned with the changing trends in information technology domain by

learning skills specific to information technology

- Ask bunch of “why” questions to ourselves, to the community we live in, to the organization we work for. *“Why aren't technical communicators themselves seen to be the pivotal players in the design of systems that support single-source authoring?” (William Hart-Davidson)*

“Single sourcing, XML, and other forms of multimedia have changed technical communicators' work processes and on-the-job duties. Beyond the requirements for traditional skills in writing, editing, and designing, technical communicators must now play enhanced roles within professional environments including organizing, creating, and managing information” (Richard K. Mott and Julie Dyke Ford).

What about my “old hats”?

The changing roles and responsibilities sometimes entail building new skills and unlearning the existing ones.

However our “traditional skills” of writing, editing would always be the core skills and our success story would always be written on those skills. It is on these core competencies that the model of “information solution” stands.

Conclusion

I agree with Prof. William Hart-Davidson on *“writing is the core technology that all IT systems attempt to leverage to make these systems more valuable”*. In pursuit of new skills and “trendy” job roles, we cannot disregard our “core competency” – **writing**. This is the base on which the very foundation of technical communication rests. So while we are appreciating the true value



of “core competencies” I would also like to highlight the value of *fundamental knowledge* which we acquired during our days in the academia. I am referring to the theory (rhetoric, legacy of technical communication, understanding roots) here. In order to strike a perfect balance and “refine the practices of technical communication”, theory should be given an equal importance with the emerging trends in the technical communication.

Therefore according to me, the factor which remains static in the field of technical communication is – our core competencies. The roles which are steadily gaining priority today would soon fade away or replaced by newer roles. Or who knows in future technical communication may leave the ambit of information technology and allied with some “newer” domain that is yet to be discovered.

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