

Re-thinking what you do

Case study: stepping outside your comfort zone



Communicator

The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators
Spring 2013

My first year as a technical
communicator

Recruit a technical
communicator

Volunteer in a
mechanical role

Read about MadCap
Flare 9

People of the .doc

Technical communication is often misunderstood by the world at large. **Andrew Peck** breaks down the rhetoric.

Those of you who read my article in the last issue may have noticed that I'm now spanning three columns as this column may become a regular column. And, I feel this is quite a privileged position to be in as I'm still in the honeymoon period as a technical communicator.

I find that technical communicators are a mystery to the world at large. Engineers and developers have some idea what we do, but otherwise for those not fortunate enough to grow up in a technical communications household (see Alison's article on page 10), popular misconceptions may be putting people off this exciting career.

One of the tasks often assigned to a junior technical communicator is the crafting of the organisation's blog. Whilst linking to a recent blog post of mine, the Guardian technology team described us for the uninitiated as "*the hapless folk who have to write the manual that you never read but which explains how it actually works*".

Let's consider the accuracy of this definition and see if we can suggest an appropriate and approved alternative.

The myth

Having recently endured a myriad of Christmas movies featuring animated and/or over-acted depictions of Santa Claus, when I read the description of the 'hapless folk', I was put in mind of the elf who's a little bit 'different', the one who is given some kind of make-work task because he can't be trusted with anything that might do lasting harm if inserted up a nostril. I'm a little disappointed that the popular view of writing is that it is something that happens under duress, for ungrateful disinterested end users. There is also the implication that our writing is somehow pointless, as if the only thing this profession produces is badly translated hand-outs to go with cheap electronics.

The reality

Technical communication can sometimes be outwardly very dull, but it's that way for a reason. I feel that as a general rule the more exciting, world

changing and expensive the product, the more structured and precise any accompanying documentation becomes (imagine the precision – and lack of emoticons – found in the documentation for anti-tank munitions). The reason for this of course is that the more fantastical the product, the greater the cost and damage done if something goes wrong, and that is essentially where we come in. If 'tech-support' is the cure, we are the prevention that is so much sweeter.

It is frustrating to have to use the same lexical chunks within a piece of writing, but we are shoeing the technological horse, and florid patterns aren't really of much use to users or localisation teams. (We can save these for *Communicator*: in this article alone you'll find Latin and an oblique reference to Islamic theology – neither of which would be considered good practice in software documentation.)

That's not to say that we're linguistically less skilled than our counterparts who write in different ways for different purposes. The degree of linguistic awareness needed to be precise and communicate without ambiguity or confusion requires a great deal of mental discipline. Then there are our secondary skills; the novelist or journalist may get away with 'typing', but we are master-users of desktop publishing, word processing and other 'communicating' software. I haven't used the buttons in the ribbon for 'bold' and 'italic' in a decade, and even the keyboard shortcuts find their outings cut short due to the catalogue of carefully constructed and balanced styles that have documents parading past a client's eyes like an old-school soviet military parade.

Based on the above, the definition that I'd like to see in the public domain would be something along the lines of 'the professional specialists in communication who make complex products and procedures clear and accessible to the rest of us'.

This need for accessible documentation also serves to set us apart in some ways. Users should be able to find what they need to

know, when they need to know it. Documentation is not narrative, with a beginning, middle and end. Instead it is a reference that users may dip into and return to in the distant future. If people choose not to interact with the documentation, and as a result shut down a stock exchange, shoot themselves in the foot or put their furniture together upside down, then provided the documentation existed in a clear and accessible format, they have only themselves to blame.

The dream

The above definition is quite accurate, and I'd encourage anyone who's picked up a copy of *Communicator* wondering 'is this a career for me' to think very carefully about the unique set of skills and traits they'd need to develop; both mastery of the software of communication and a precision with language that leads to everyone understanding exactly what to do and when. As a reward, I can promise that no one is going to wrap fish and chips in what you write.

If there is a *Deus ex machina* (from the study of literature meaning "God from the machine") we technical communicators are the prophets, scribes and high priests of the 'People of the .doc'.

References

Guardian Technology Blog www.guardian.co.uk/technology/blog/2013/jan/07/technology-links-newsbucket (accessed February 2013)

Peck, A (2012) 'Getting on the wagon' *Communicator*, Winter 2012: 20



Andrew Peck is a new technical communicator working for Clearly Stated. His background is as a Higher Education lecturer and military language trainer.
E: Andrew@clearly-stated.co.uk
W: www.clearly-stated.co.uk
B: blog.clearly-stated.co.uk
Tw: @clearlyandrew