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Winter 2015

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The *technical* in technical communications

Warren Singer and Wael Elazab discuss the relevance of technical knowledge to our roles as technical communicators.

Introduction

As technical communicators, how comfortable should we be talking about technical concepts? After all, the word *technical* precedes *communicator* that is linked to our role. We are technical communicators.

The Society of Technical Communicators (STC) defines two aspects of technical knowledge that are key to our roles:

- Communicating about technical or specialised topics, such as computer applications, medical procedures or environmental regulations.
- Communicating by using technology, such as web pages, help files or social media sites.

The ISTC defines a third aspect of the role of technical communicator:

- Providing instructions about how to do something, *regardless of how technical the task is or even if technology is used* to create or distribute that communication.

The first aspect requires domain-specific knowledge in a technical field. The second requires knowledge of technology used in technical communication. The third aspect implies that domain-specific knowledge may not be required.

Let's explore each of these briefly:

Domain-specific knowledge

Communicating *about a technology* requires a basic understanding of the technology and how it works. In specialised fields such as medicine, chemistry and engineering, detailed subject matter expertise may be required to communicate effectively. For example, writing a developer's guide may require the ability to read and understand code in a particular coding language.

Knowledge of communication technology

Communicating *using technology* requires an in-depth knowledge of how to use technology to communicate effectively, for example, knowing how to use procedures and applications for content management, using Desktop Publishing and website creation applications, and an understanding of publishing from a single source to multiple output formats (multi-channel publication). Technical communicators should be experts in these areas.

Task-based knowledge

Providing *task-based instructions* may not require a detailed technical background, unless the technical communicator is working in a

field and communicating at a level that requires technical understanding. For example, providing instructions in a user guide for a graphical user interface (GUI) application may not need domain-specific knowledge. However, providing instructions on how to assemble aircraft components would require domain-specific technical knowledge.

How technical should we be?

What level of technical understanding do we need? Each industry or field has its own discourse, its own set of concepts and terminology, which we would not be expected to understand unless we were a specialist in that field. However, if we are communicating within a field, we would be expected to use the terminology and reference the concepts that are familiar to practitioners in that field.



We should feel comfortable learning and communicating about a range of technologies and industries.



On the other hand, being too familiar with a subject can sometimes hamper the ability to communicate clearly. For example, an engineer may be so familiar with their domain area that they fail to realise they are using concepts that will not be clear to a user who is not an expert in this field; they may have overlooked key steps or background information that new users will not be familiar with.

One thing is clear. If we cannot talk about a technical subject in a way that makes sense to users within that field, then that limits our ability to ensure that the messages we deliver are clear and precise.

What type of technical training do we need?

So, how much and what type of technical training or background would be relevant to a technical communicator?

A significant number of technical communicators are generalists, perhaps with a background in the arts, literature, education or philosophy, but without the detailed technical training of an engineer, computer scientist, software developer, systems architect, accountant, financial trader, chemist, biologist

Should we have a basic understanding of the technology that surrounds us and influences our lives and jobs?

or physician. Nevertheless, we are often asked to document or communicate a technology used or developed by technical audiences, at a level that will be intelligible and relevant to a technical audience.

Many of us gain industry knowledge on the job, learning about key concepts, terminology and processes within a field. However, as technical communicators, we often rely on the support of others in the business to ensure appropriate language, accurate statements and that the content is 'right' without necessarily needing to delve too deeply into the subject itself.

It would be helpful if we were able, as a profession, to insist that all technical communicators have a solid foundation in core subjects such as the sciences, ICT (Information Communications Technology), English and mathematics, which would provide a foundation for learning new technical concepts. The question of what is considered a solid foundation is open to debate. As a minimum, should GCSEs in core subjects or their equivalents in other countries, be mandatory for all technical communicators? Core foundation knowledge should be combined with some higher education specialisation that demonstrates the ability to research and understand complex material. Technical communicators should also be expected to demonstrate learned or acquired knowledge in the technical areas in which they are required to work.

In the absence of an agreed standard of technical training for technical communicators, more important is that as technical communicators we feel comfortable learning and communicating about a range of technologies and industries. Regardless of the subject at hand, we should not be flummoxed by the content: we should be comfortable learning new technical concepts and ideas.

If you agree or do not agree with these views, please tell us your opinion on this online survey: www.surveymonkey.com/r/NTVYMY3

Introducing the regular technology column

Communicator plays a role in bringing to the attention of our colleagues information about some of the technology that is affecting our lives and our roles as technical communicators. Many articles have been written about how to communicate *using technology*. For example, in various 2014 and 2015 issues of *Communicator*, Matt Pierce and Ellis Pratt have written about video, there's a piece by Rachel Johnston on mobile and Noz Urbina wrote a piece about the pace of change in technical communication.

There is also a place in *Communicator* for talking *about technology* in general, and not just technology used directly by technical communicators. In the Autumn 2015 issue

of *Communicator* we introduced the first Technology Column, intended to describe some of the exciting technological developments of our generation and present them in a way that is relevant to us as technical communicators. Our first article described the field of robotics and its relevance to technical communicators. Robotics has recently received increasing attention in the media as it surreptitiously permeates our lives. For our next topic, on page 34 in this Winter 2015 edition, we introduce networks, and describes how the internet works behind the scenes.

There are many scientific and technical advances that have and will continue to change our lives, and the Technology column provides an opportunity to explain these to our ISTC colleagues.

We welcome feedback on the Technology column and encourage others to contribute to this new inclusion. 

References

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