

The Evolution of Online Help

Part II: The Changing Role of Technical Communicators

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Introduction

With origins in ancient times, technical communication is a profession that has proven its adaptive qualities repeatedly through the ages. The need to share help documentation with end users is representative of human beings' innate desire to understand how things work—ensuring that documentation will always be an important function in product and service delivery. However, over the last fifteen years, the rise of the internet has forced an evolutionary change in the role of technical communicators. A profession that was once dominated by the quintessential English major and process expert is now open to technically trained candidates and those with other non-traditional backgrounds. Furthermore, technical communication teams, once kept in silos, now work in tandem with product development teams—taking a greater part in the original content development and delivery process. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, technical communicators are beginning to find themselves on the front lines of end user communication—moderating help content discussions made possible by the social DNA of web-based help.

Origins of the Technical Communication Profession

Although examples of help documentation have been discovered in ancient Egyptian and Greek cultures, modern technical communication did not begin to emerge as a profession until World War I (1914-1918) and World War II (1939-1945) when defense forces required extensive documentation for the use of weaponry, aeronautics and other defense-related products. However, it was not until 1949 that the first example of computer-related documentation appeared when Joseph D. Chapline penned the

user manual for the BINAC computer.¹ In 1950, Chapline authored an eight-page pamphlet called Technical Writing. In 1953, the Society of Technical Writers (STW) in Boston, Massachusetts and the Association of Technical Writers and Editors (ATWE) in New York formed to advance the theory and practice of technical communication. The two organizations merged in 1957 to form the Society for Technical Communication² (STC), thus solidifying an industry.

The Traditional Technical Communicator

The traditional technical communicator is said to have an English or Journalism degree and, perhaps, a background in publishing. Many believe they do not require domain expertise, but rather process mastery. They are experts in the Writing Process and in the art of presenting detailed technical information in a more digestible fashion. But as bits as bytes and their accompanying digital formats began to outstrip the demand for printed reference materials, subtle shifts began taking place and new skills became desirable for technical communicators. Newly desirable technical communication candidates include those with increased domain or product knowledge, those with technical backgrounds, and even those with interest in community management or product evangelism. This change can be attributed to the transformation of working dynamics between those in technical communication and other product focused teams within the organization, and the rise of end-user generated documentation.

Role in the Organization

The role of the technical communicator within the organization has seen an enormous shift over the last forty years, with its most dramatic movements in the past fifteen years. They are no longer hovering over typewriters for months on end in an office basement, but rather joining agile teams on wikis and releasing documentation several times per week. Technical communicators with an aptitude for change have seen a well-deserved elevation in status. At many organizations, technical developers are now required to get involved with product development from day one, making it necessary to work as peers with members of the engineering team or other subject matter experts (SME). Developing documentation in compressed cycles requires professionals that can author, publish and share their deliverables in (sometimes) twenty-four hours or less. The writing, although critical, is often times just as imperative as the ability to rapidly deliver documentation to other departments in order to meet deadlines and rapidly deliver help to the screens of end users. In this new era, as the developer of technical documentation, the author is by default a textbook expert and is expected to leverage his or her knowledge to the benefit of the team and organization. They are expected to update documentation when code is augmented, inform development of bugs discovered while producing documentation and, most importantly, respond to end users' feedback.

Role in the End User Community

As the Internet emerged as the dominant form of business communication, technical communicators were forced to recognize the trends of users in the publishing

¹Source: http://www.proedit.com/technical_writing_history.asp

²Source: <http://www.stc.org/about-stc/history/our-story>

process. Printed help documentation quickly evolved to online help and browser-based platforms. But the respective rise of social media and internet-capable devices has presented companies and technical communicators with an even bigger challenge. The Internet is no longer a desktop collection of databases and brochure pages. It is a fast moving cloud of human interaction that floats seamlessly between desktop, laptop, smart phone or tablet. Regardless of where end users are accessing content, they are demanding the right to share their opinion and form a dialogue with the content author and others with whom they wish to share their insight. Technical communicators will increasingly be tasked with the role of community moderator.

Social platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Disqus allow end users to 1) share content 2) leave comments 3) follow topics of interest 4) express approval for content. Previously, technical communicators had no mechanism by which instant feedback on a mass scale could be attained. Today's technical communicators, however, have the opportunity to regularly communicate with end users and bring valuable feedback to the documentation and product development process. Moreover, as companies deploy knowledge base platforms and other user-generated help strategies, technical communicators will be increasingly called to moderate the content for accuracy and seeding. As a frontline communicator, delivering fast and knowledgeable responses to user questions and maintaining rapid feedback loops is an essential tactic in the fight for customer retention and an explicit value to organizations.

Conclusion

Technical communication as a profession has seen enormous change over the past forty years. There is no longer a semi-predictable course to a career in technical communication. A strong basis in the writing process and technical writing skill is still essential, but the ability to adapt to the many new technologies and methodologies disrupting the business and communication space has become equally important. Today's technical communicator is also seeing a change in the organizational chart, often times finding him or herself in greater alignment with product development and engineering teams. In addition, today's technical communicator is witnessing the shift from author to author/moderator, one who has the ability to regularly communicate with end users via social media tools—making him or her a vital part of the feedback loop with the engineering team and ultimately the organization as a whole. Technical communicators are an essential part of product development and customer retention. It is a profession that has adapted remarkably throughout the ages, and one that will continue to do so as the Internet, mobile devices, social media and even the next big thing introduces its next revolution.