ADVICE FROM A PROFESSIONAL: The DNA of a Technical Communicator

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Schneider-Electric

Abstract

Unlike our peers in the US or UK, the technical communicators in the Danish/Scandinavian region have not had the luck of easy access to formal education within the field of technical communication. I claim that most of us technical communicators in the Danish/Scandinavian region do not have a formal technical communication degree. We have learned on the job – spiced with relevant courses (such as Information Mapping), and we have kept ourselves up to date by attending conferences, reading books and articles. For the past 10 years or so we have been blessed with the growing wealth of information on the Internet to keep us in the loop and the social media to exchange views and experiences.

This article discusses the evolution of a technical communicator profile as known in the Danish/Scandinavian region and what it takes to become a good technical communicator. What is indeed the skill set of a good technical communicator? Is there at all a future for technical communicators - and is it a promising career path?

The beginning

Looking back 20 years, our job titles had a variety of colorful names in an attempt to explain what in the world it is we spend 8 hours a day, 5 days a week working on. Most of us were probably hired under the title Technical Writer. This title still prevails and very likely still covers the job functions for most writers in our region. But now, 20 years later, we are so much more than writers. We communicate. Not just in writing, but also by designing tutorial videos, recording podcasts, etc. Hence the use of the title 'Technical Communicator' in this article.

So how did most people in Denmark or Scandinavia venture into the field of technical communication? Personally, a colleague of mine came to me in the summer of 1992 with a job ad carrying the title "Technical Writer wanted," and said that this was a perfect match for me. I had absolutely no idea what a technical writer was. I looked at the job skills required for the position: "…..working knowledge of Word (3.1!), understanding of technical issues, writing in a clear manner…" and I thought: "Hey, I can do this." The job was in the other end of the country so I would have to move

myself and my family in case I got the job. I did get the job, and it marked the start of my lifelong love relationship with technical writing/communication.

I have an academic background (linguistics) and that helped me scoping and structuring my work in the early days as a technical writer. I had absolutely no idea what a technical writer did, but during my first 18 months or so in the job, I took in most of the aspects of technical writing, including learning the trade of printed manuals. No online Help in those days. I was responsible for over 200 (printed) manuals. How I would have loved to have a single sourcing tool in back then. Sadly, Microsoft Word was the predominant tool, but I became rather proficient at using the copy/paste function.
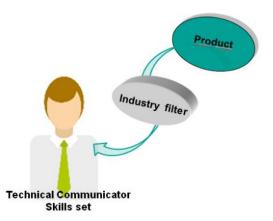
Writer's Toolbox

I have a hunch that many readers out there are nodding their heads right now saying: "Yup, this sounds very much how I started my career within writing."

It took me the better part of two years to get to know almost all facets of technical writing, or at least feel comfortable and even competent, despite my academic degree. Today, there is no time for such a long learning curve. We cannot hire new technical writers and have them spend a year or more getting to know the trade. We need them to hit the ground running. Technical communicators must have a skill set that encompasses knowledge of target audience definition; knowing how to obtain (product) information; working in a structured, single-sourced, and minimalistic manner; working knowledge of development methodologies (these days predominantly agile work environments); and being aware of the responsibility areas of a technical communicator. These are just some of the tools in the Writer's Toolbox. There is more, but for starters these skills will take you a long way. Over time, you can dive into the toolbox and see where you can improve and hone your skill set. When you have the basic skills and competencies on your palette, you will be able to hit the ground running in a new job position. This allows you to focus on the subject matter (the product) that will be the main focus for your documentation development.

I have named the collection of the skill set a "Writer's Toolbox" because deep down it is similar to mastering how to use a hammer and a nail. A Writer's Toolbox represents the skill set used in the content development process. Being new to the technical communication profession, you are probably familiar with some of the tools, and you

likely have working knowledge of said tools as well. As you mature in the profession, you will get to know the more advanced tools, when needed.

In my early days as a technical communicator, I would have given my right arm to have the overview of the concepts, processes, and tools in the Writer's Toolbox. I must admit that I was fumbling (a lot) in the dark and was overwhelmed by all the new discoveries within technical communication. The toolbox would have enabled me to focus on specific areas and come up to speed at a faster pace.

What characterizes a technical communicator? First and foremost, as a technical communicator you must be curious. Curious to get to know what you are about to document and you must have a zest for serving your audience. A technical communicator must have a natural interest in the tools that are used to develop content. Those tools are not limited to mere word processing tools, but extended to various graphical tools, video and audio recording tools. Moreover, the technical communicator is expected to have knowledge of programs for version control, recording of bugs in software and documentation (test track tools). In many companies, a technical communicator is also expected to assume responsibility in areas such as localization, editing, testing, marketing material, usability research, training material, and terminology. Just to mention a few.

Enough about what you could refer to as the hardware department. The Writer's Toolbox is not just a list of physical tools or content areas that you must be familiar with. The Toolbox also encompasses knowledge of processes and procedures with regards to the content development phase, the ability to define your target audience (personas), knowing the ins and outs of working with Subject Matter Experts (SMEs), knowing how to properly structure your content, knowing how to single source and write in a minimalistic manner, knowing the review processes, and how to get ready to ship to market.

In theory, the Writer's Toolbox should not have any reference to "the product." The product is the center of attention for your documentation process. The product can be anything and many things, whereas the skill set of a technical communicator constitutes the constant in this equation. No matter the nature of the product, the technical communicator can rely on the skill set to complete the task of developing contents for the "product."

However, in reality, it is hard not to include a brief mentioning of the "product" as it is associated with much confusion. Some writers tend to add too much content related to

knowledge that is considered required domain knowledge for the user of the documentation. Others tend to assess the user's knowledge level incorrectly and thus risk losing the reader's attention right away. Any reference to what is termed domain knowledge must be done with due consideration for the level of the target audience.

For the more seasoned communicators all of the above is more or less second nature, but to a new communicator such elements can be rather overwhelming and even intimidating. Hopefully, this article can shed some light on this area and help new communicators.

Technical communicator - skill set

Technical communicators are found within many industries and businesses. Let me mention a few to display the variety of potential work areas for technical communicators: telecommunication, government, life science industry, manufacturing, military, pharmaceuticals, aviation, automation, and more.

This variety makes it even more important to be properly equipped from the very beginning to hit the ground running in a new job as a technical communicator. When you have the proper skill set you can instead focus on honing your product knowledge and get to know the specific company speak and product terminology (referred to as the industry filter in the above illustration).

Other than naturally knowing the product you document really well, you must define your target audience, get to know the people you work with on a daily basis, and focus on writing in a structured and consistent manner. Let us take a look at those skills and what they entail.

Target audience

You would think that it goes without saying that of course you must know who you write *for*. Right? But ask around and you will discover that many writers do not have a clear picture of the user(s) whose attention they are trying to catch. Without a clear notion of the target audience you risk aiming your content in the wrong direction, for example using language and terminology that is out of sync with the user's expectations. The result is that the user probably never consults the documentation anymore and rather prefers to ask a colleague or contact the support center. This does not resonate well with the tight budgets that most companies juggle with these years. We, as technical communicators, should do our best to contribute to lowering costs.

There are several ways in which you can get to know your audience. If you have the possibility to visit your users and ask them about work behavior, expectations, etc., this ranks among the top of the list of excellent options. If you for example work for a

software company you can talk to the developers or product/program managers. They should be able to give you a better picture of the users.

Down the road, you can also start working on a list of *personas*. A persona represents a group of users with similar work routines, behavior, and other similar characteristic features. Take for example the receptionist at a hotel. When we travel we feel that we know this person, we are familiar with the tasks that this person performs, what to expect from this person. It would not be too difficult for us to describe such a persona on the fly. With a bit of investigation on the subject of personas, you can start this exercise in your company.

The following example is one of the fictitious persons in my company's suite of personas. We have 10 personas in our suite. To develop personas is no small task and you must be well prepared and also expect to spend time getting very much under the hood of your users. There is excellent knowledge on this subject to be found on the internet. In my company we were a group of 4 developers, 1 tester, 1 product manager, and 1 technical communicator, who brainstormed on the knowledge of our users, mixed and matched the information and, as is normally the practice for presenting personas, we came up with names and found fictitious pictures for each persona. Each persona was then added a profile description to present the characteristics of this particular user.

Markus
Supporter
"Right now I am dealing with THIS problem..."

Markus works in the support organization. To Markus the details are much more important than the big picture. He deals with multiple and often complex customer problems each day. His job requires that he has a profound knowledge of the product. The added benefit is that he has quick access to the development department and if the situation requires it, he can ask for a quick fix to the customer.
From time to time, Markus also works in the field, that is he goes on-site with customers to help them install, create, and configure the model.

Collaboration

For you to gather the information you need to develop product documentation, there are a number of sources you should focus on. One is to have access to any design or functional requirement documents for the product or product feature you are about to document. You may not always be so lucky to find such documents. Instead, you should look to another important source of information - the stakeholders. Stakeholders are the Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) and whether a SME is the developer of the product, a knowledgeable supporter, a product manager or the like, you must establish a good work relationship with this person. Other than having the SME give an introduction to the product, you can also ask for assistance on the review of your documentation.

One of the ways you can make sure to get your arms around the product and the areas that need particular attention is to learn a set of interview techniques. You must never be afraid to ask questions, how simple they may seem to you. Chances are the SME never thought about this specific issue. And remember, you are the user's advocate. This is
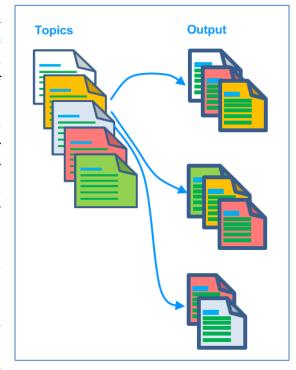
your chance to ask for specific information, and in many cases you also have a chance to influence the functionality if you for example can suggest a more suitable and intuitive way of completing a task.

Structured writing

Gone are the days of writing from cover to cover in huge monolithic books. This is the old-school approach and has no place in our dynamic and flexible world with frequent updates, changes, and new development coming up all the time. The new-school approach of developing content is to think task-based and use topic-based authoring. Task-based means that you must consider the top 10 or top 5 ways a particular product can/will apply and be used. Once you have identified the many tasks, you can specify how to present the content. To structure the content you apply specific content types and use topic based authoring. A content type (document type) is similar to a template and each content type represents a particular purpose and has a uniform and consistent structure. The consistent structure allows the users to scan a particular topic and easily find the information they are looking for. Other than assisting the user and make it a better user experience to retrieve information, the predefined structure of a particular content type makes it easier for the technical communicator to write the topic and present the information in a structured way. Thinking in terms of tasks and writing topic-based content moreover makes it easier for you as the content developer to detect the areas where you can apply reusable chunks of information. This is what we refer to as single-sourcing. You write the content only once but can reuse it in multiple places.

In the early days of single sourcing, the concept was mostly to have focus on a stringent and consistent structure of the documentation. However, these days we also have tools to support our effort of writing truly single-sourced documentation. It not only reduces the effort of maintenance and lowers the volume of mixed or confusing information, but if your documentation is localized into several languages you can also keep the cost under control and lower it considerably.

When you develop your documentation with focus on a topic-based architecture, you can slice and dice your table of contents (TOC) anyway you want. You can easily substitute or update a topic when needed. You also stand a better chance of knowing where to add new information or delete obsolete information when you have a flexible structure that is based on tasks and written topic by topic.

Current educational situation in the Danish/ Scandinavian region

For years, the Danish/Scandinavian region has not been blessed with easy access to training that would allow us to educate new technical communicators or maintain an educational level equal to our colleagues in the US or the UK. Denmark has many skilled technical communicators with thorough knowledge of the trade. What a joy to talk shop with those people. However, that said, as a hiring manager, I have often found it difficult to find qualified candidates among the submitted applications. Meetings with trade organizations years ago to make them interested in the area of technical communication to benefit their members did not yield any results. All the more reason to welcome the initiatives from a couple of the Danish universities; University of Southern Denmark and Aarhus University. They have put technical communication on the agenda and work hard and seriously to broaden the knowledge and increase the quality of technical communication in Denmark.

Future of a technical communicator

Technical communicators normally don't make a lot of fuss about themselves or their profession, and some managers ask themselves if hiring a technical communicator indeed will give them bang for their bucks.

The quality in documentation lies in the subtle details such as well-structured topics that make it easy for the user to detect the important areas of information, well-written topics that include all pertinent information and do not leave the users in the dark.

Good technical communicators can contribute to the corporate economy in a subtle way. Good and efficient documentation can lower the pressure on support. If localization is an issue, then well-structured and single-sourced documentation can reduce the cost of translation considerably and keep costs under control. Good and seasoned technical communicators can improve the usability of the product. They are used to looking at the product from the user's perspective and often from a more unorthodox angle than the product was intended.

To stay in the loop, you must keep extending your technical communicator profile and meet the IT generation at their level. Nowadays many users are adept at a higher technological level and we must match that in our work. Admittedly, there are still products that either for legislation purposes or mere traditional behavior require documentation as we know it now, such as online Help or a PDF file. However, there is no doubt that we need to meet the new users at their level and look to new ways of communicating product information. Think of the power of the social media and blogging, not to mention the creation of tutorial videos.

With 20 years under my belt as a technical communicator, I am not afraid to say that we have a future and that we should put a price tag on ourselves. However, we need to constantly keep an ear to the ground and make sure that we serve our users in the best possible way.

Author

Mette Nyberg

Scheider-Electric

Mette Nyberg has a Masters degree (cand.ling.merc.) in Advanced Languages (major in English, bachelor in Spanish). Mette has been a technical communicator for over 20 years, writing as well as managing teams. She has been the manager of teams of up to 20 writers with large software companies like Baan and Microsoft. She started her career writing hardcopy manuals for printer solutions, but has since then mostly written online documentation for ERP solutions, mash-up software, and lately for software to district heating and water management solutions.

Mette is a 3-time award winner within the Society of Technical Communication (STC). She has won an award within online Help, tutorials, and editing a book. She has also served as judge within STC in international competitions and has a good feeling for what's moving within technical communication.

Currently, Mette Nyberg works for Schneider-Electric. Last year, her company, 7-Technologies, was acquired by French owned Schneider-Electric. In her spare time she is partner in Write2Users, where she designs and holds courses for technical communicators. Write2Users is founded and owned by Per Frederiksen, and before that he and Mette worked together at 7-Technologies. Together, Per and Mette have over 40 years' of experience within this profession and they share the passion for technical communication and feel strongly about raising the bar for technical communicators.