Technical Writers Thriving in 2020

Eli Jacobs
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What Should We Call Ourselves?

- Technical Writer
- Technical Communicator
- Technical Author
- Information Developer
- Information Engineer
- Documentation Specialist
- Content Developer
- Documentation Manager
- Information Designer

- Information Architect
- Technical Information Developer
- Trainer & Communications Consultant
- Senior Content Developer
- Senior Content Project Manager
- Senior Documentation Manager
- Senior Documentation Specialist
- Senior Experience Developer
- Senior Information Developer
- Senior Instructional Designer
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hmmm...
...is it really about job titles?
What Do TWs Really Want?

• To clarify – to ourselves and others - what we do
• To improve the perception of our field
• To know the direction in which we should develop our careers
How to Approach This?
How’s the Market?

• Looking at the hi-tech market can provide strategic insight into the field of tech writing
• There are more than 2,000 technical writers in Israel today - why?
• This is the result of certain market realities
• When the market shakes, tech writers shake

TWs Thriving in 2020
2015: Possible Company Structure for a Mid-Sized Tech Company

- R&D – 150
- QA – 15
- Product Management - 6
- Marketing – 12
- Technical Writers - 5
- Support – 30
- Sales & Account Management - 12
Deployment
Sales & Marketing
How the Business Consultant described it
Requirements
How the customer explained it
How the Project Leader understood it
Design & Architecture
How the Analyst designed it
How the Programmer wrote it
Implementation
What operations installed
Testing
How the customer was billed
How it was supported
Deployment
What the customer really needed
How the project was documented
2020: Possible Company Structure for a Mid-Sized Tech Company

- R&D – 150
  - Of them 6 = DC
- QA – 15
  - Of them 2 = DC
- Product Management – 6
  - Of them 6 = DC
- Marketing – 12
- Technical Writers – 0

- Documentation Manager – 1
- Support – 30
  - Of them 4 = DC
- Sales & Account Management – 12
  - Of them 4 = DC

DC = Documentation Certified
Bubble-Crash-Correction

• Speculative – generate revenue in distant future
• Fat
• Under-needed
• Over-funded
• Over-resourced
• Over-staffed
• Little accountability
Bubble-Crash-Correction

- Emergency measures
- TWs and Marketing people are sent home
- Struggle to “correct”
Market in correction
Finding the Balance

• Smaller investments
• Much more accountability
• Resource optimization
• Balance between conservative-today-focused vs. visionary-future-focused
• Companies work on products for the future but also generate revenue today
Finding the Balance – in Hiring

• Looking for the best people
• Very serious, thorough hiring process
• Demanding excellence
• Example: a medium-sized VoIP company looking for a Product Manager may hire someone who ran and sold a successful VoIP start-up
• Senior staff—more hands-on, more details oriented
• Cross-disciplinary
Who Is Valuable in a Hi-Tech Company?

• A great VP of R&D understands the implications of her decisions on the rest of the organization: Marketing, Sales, HR, etc.

• A great VP of Marketing can brainstorm a market strategy and analyze the demands on R&D, Finance, etc.

• Valuable team members:
  - Understand many things
  - Do one thing superbly
  - Sometimes do more than one thing

• We can too
Multi-Disciplinary (1)

- A great VP of R&D understands the implications of her decisions on the rest of the organization: Marketing, Sales, HR, etc.
- A great VP of Marketing can brainstorm a market strategy and analyze the demands on R&D, Finance, etc.
Multi-Disciplinary (2)

• Valuable team members:
  • Understand many things
  • Do one thing superbly
  • Sometimes do more than one thing

(1) “My job is X; don’t bother me with anything else.”
(2) “My job is A and B and C and X and Y and Z; and I do X superbly and take ultimate responsibility for X.

• How would you rank TWs on the multi-disciplinary scale? Are most TWs more like (1) or more like (2)?
How can we turn a TW into an F-15 Pilot?
What Else Can a TW Do?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill/Interest</th>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Deliverable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visual, sensitivity to usability</td>
<td>GUI</td>
<td>Wire Frames, FRS, MRD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social skills</td>
<td>Marketing, Support, More</td>
<td>Interact with customers and partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born teacher</td>
<td>Training</td>
<td>Training Materials; training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product Market Awareness</td>
<td>Product</td>
<td>MRD, FRS, Much More</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System Expert</td>
<td>Customer Support; Design, More</td>
<td>Customer Support; CS Tool, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programming Knowledge</td>
<td>Development, Application</td>
<td>APIs, SDKs, Component Design, Naming Conventions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analytical Thinking</td>
<td>Architecture, QA, etc</td>
<td>Sky’s the limit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domain Expertise</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>Any Marketing Material; Develop Strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentation Expert</td>
<td>DOCUMENTATION</td>
<td>Manage resources, tools, schedules, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ideally, you should be no more than 1 step away from the “critical path”

Do you ever need to stay late?
How?

• Understand many things
• Do one thing superbly
• Do more than one thing
• **Maybe you already are**
• Expand your involvement even more
• Figure out what you are good at

• Keep your ears open – where are resources missing?
• Do it with finesse
• Overlapping with your assignments
• Not at the expense of your day job
Case Study: Rachel

• Rachel wrote a 200-page Admin Guide for an existing system that had no documentation; she had to do lots of experimenting
• With each draft she also submitted details of UI and system bugs
• The client called me once a week to praise Rachel work
• The client called me 2 months later and asked if Rachel was available to do QA work for them
Case Study: Robbie

• Robbie was writing a 2nd tier support guide for a large company
• SMEs - R&D team in Israel
• Audience – Support team in Europe
• The division of responsibility was not clear
  • For example, “How often should this batch job be run?”
  • R&D said, “This is a decision for the Support Team”
  • The Support Team said, “We don’t understand the implications – should this be once every ten minutes? Once a day? Once a month?
• Robbie helped “negotiate” this issue
• Now both R&D and the Support team consult with Robbie on similar issues
• What should Robbie’s job title be?
Case Study: Rivka

- Rivka is very pedantic
- We were called into a medical device company
- On the phone they said that they needed a TW to work on change control reports required by the FDA
- Rivka started work and they were impressed with her thoroughness
- Rivka’s role was then expanded – she is now responsible for tracking the change control process for a team of 12 Change Engineers

**What should Rivka’s job title be? Is she still a technical writer?**
So What Should We Be Called?
At work:

Avi, Phil, David, Julie, Zecharia, Esther, Danielle, Doron, Leybl, David, Itzchak, Mike, Daniela, Yaakov, Avi, Sarah, Michal, Rami, Daniel, Meir, Yitzchak, Yitzchak, Jonathan, Baruch, Ari, Debbie, David, Monica, Ester, Shifra, David, Yossi, Rachel, James, Rochelle, Jo, Yechiel, Leah, Laura, Yehoshua, Amnon, Rivka, Ben, J, Dganit, Devorah, Eliezer, Menachem, Nadina, Naomi, Shlomo, Nathan, Dorit, Asher, Marina, Adina, Uri, Steven, Yehuda, Yaakov, Esther-Rena, Sara, Caroline, Maya, Annet, Lisa, Sara, Etay, Ben, Janet, Yaacov, Julian, Judy, Steve, Yisrael, Hilla, Yehuda
...and outside of work:

• When speaking to people outside the tech industry:
  • Say, “I work in hi-tech”

• For people who work in hi-tech
  • Say, “I work at [Company Name] on the [Product Team] [in QA] [in R&D] [in Customer Support]”
Summary

• Market realities seem to indicate
  • Companies are careful to maximize their resources
• It appears that
  • Although the entire product/project lifecycle involves documentation, technical writers are primarily used for end-user documents
  • Tech writers are smart and have great opportunities to learn and expand their knowledge and skills

• Thoughts
  • Tech writers can and should find ways to, organically, contribute to their organizations, beyond their narrowly defined job description
Conclusion

• By expanding your contribution beyond your strictly defined job title:
• Make *yourself* more valuable and
• Advance yourself and secure your job
• Help your company
• Strengthen the entire Tech Writing community
• Enhance the entire Israeli hi tech market
• Humanity? We’ll leave that to the IEEE