

Take Control of Your Career!

By JACK MOLISANI, Associate Fellow

Editor's note: Part 1 of this series on career development, "Job Hunting in a Recession," appeared in the September/October 2008 issue of Intercom. Part 2 of this series, "Recession-proof Your Career," appeared in the March 2009 issue of Intercom.

Technical writers are a commodity—providing a service to be acquired at the lowest possible price given an acceptable level of quality.

OK, maybe we're not a commodity. But we're often *perceived* as a commodity, which is just as bad.

In part 2 of this series on taking control of your career, I mentioned that one strategy for staying employed is to make yourself so valuable to your company that they wouldn't even *consider* letting you go. This article expands on that concept, giving examples of what I and other STC members have done, and I hope it will inspire you to find your own unique ways of adding value to your company.

It's the Economy, Stupid!

In 1992, Bill Clinton ran for president with the slogan, "It's the Economy, Stupid!" which meant that no matter what else is going on in the country or in the world, people first need to believe they will have a job in order to put roofs over their heads and food on their tables.

I can think of no other phrase that better summarizes the challenges we face in keeping our jobs during this time of economic uncertainty. Instead of "the economy," we can substitute "the company's bottom line," because no matter what else you do in your company, if you are not directly adding to the company's bottom line and are perceived by management to do so, you are prime fodder for the next round of corporate downsizing.

Focus on What Matters

Let's face it, management doesn't care if the manuals you create are filled with misplaced modifiers, split infinitives, or two spaces after a period. What management does care about is the user experience. Is the customer happy with the product? Can they use it? Will they continue to buy from the company and generate ongoing revenue, or will they return your product and buy one from a competitor?

In a white paper entitled, "What Do Your Manuals Say About Your Company?" (www.manuallabour.com), STC Associate Fellow Bonni Graham writes:

According to the Consumer Electronics Association, product returns represent a \$10 billion-dollar-a-year problem for the consumer electronics industry. Technical support costs are spiraling (even with the migration to off-shore providers) while consumer satisfaction with this support is plummeting. New technology and expanded offerings to a stabilized market are increasing competition. What can manufacturers do to help combat these problems? Better consumer manuals are a start.

Here are two experiences that illustrate this concept: a few years ago, a friend received a breadmaker as a Christmas present. She was looking forward to having her family wake up to

the smell of fresh-baked bread, but it never happened. The manual that came with the breadmaker was so poorly written and the user interface so cryptic that she took it back to the store for a refund. When she arrived, there were several other returned breadmakers (the same model) on the shelf behind the desk. The company skimped on the technical writing budget—what did that cost them in lost revenue?

Soon after my friend's experience with bad documentation, I had my own. I owned a Hughes digital video recorder, which I absolutely loved, from DirecTV, but I had to switch to a new brand when I upgraded to high-definition TV. The user interface on the new DVR was not intuitive, the manual was badly written, and the index was practically worthless. As a result, I had to call tech support *three times* to ask how to do the most basic actions—actions that were clearly documented in my previous DVR's user manual. (I actually *read* the user manual and *tried* to find what I was looking for before giving up and calling the support number. How many people called without even looking in the manual, or just gave up and returned the product? *These problems cost companies money.*)

Were these experiences caused by bad writing or bad budgeting (not paying for a professional technical writer)? Probably both. Regardless, the writers who wrote the manuals could have used whatever time and resources they did have to make the user experience better, and they could have avoided unnecessary returns and expensive tech support calls.

I've just described two negative experiences with user documentation that cost companies money. Let's turn now to two positive experiences, where writers *saved* their companies money or, better yet, generated more revenue.

Back in the days when there were only two main help authoring tools online (Doc-To-Help and RoboHELP), a writer asked me if I could recommend a good class to learn RoboHELP. I replied, "No need to start with a class. Just download a free trial of the tool and do the online tutorial—it's quite good." In fact, I gave that advice to several people. Because there were only two dominant authoring tools at the time, chances were pret-

ty good that the writers who tried the RoboHELP online tutorial bought the product after seeing how easy it was to learn. I don't know how much revenue the technical writer who wrote those tutorials generated, but I bet it was significant! (Note: This is the exact type of information you should be capturing and presenting in your résumé, your annual review, etc. Are you helping to generate revenue for your company? If so, find out how much!)

Another example involves a leading manufacturer of color printers for the home consumer with a multi-feature unit that included a printer, scanner, and fax machine. Unfortunately, the product was hard to assemble and configure, and the existing user manual was little help. I forget the exact metric they quoted when they brought us in to help, but it was something like this: for other printers in their product line, they were receiving 1 support call for every 100 units sold. For this product, they were receiving 106 support calls for every 100 units sold! The company did what they could to simplify the installation process and hired my company to totally rewrite the quick-start guide, replacing the old multi-page quick-start guide with a simple illustrated box-top.

The result? *Tech support calls decreased by 96 percent in the first six weeks after they released the new product.* We had a direct result on the company's bottom line, and you better believe I quote that statistic every time I meet a potential new client! (By the way, the company is *still* using our box-top design years later—who knows how much money we saved the company?)

Have you done anything to help reduce tech support calls in your company? Have you found ways to save on development time or production costs? If so, get the word out! If not, start looking for ways to do so!

Increase Your Sphere of Influence

The previous anecdotes are examples of what you can do as part of your day-to-day job to increase your corporate value—proactive, causative steps you can take to increase revenue or decrease costs. Now let's look at examples of actions you can take outside of your day-

to-day job responsibilities to increase your sphere of influence.

A few years ago, Invitrogen Corporation needed to redesign its website to lead potential customers through a very complex decision tree to identify the exact product they needed. Rather than hire a business analyst or a website production company to do the work, Invitrogen Documentation Manager Kris Oden and Manual Labour's Bonni Graham rolled up their sleeves to tackle the problem. By approaching the problem from the customer's viewpoint, they were able to walk through the decision-making process and design a decision tree-based user interface that made the selection process faster and easier for the customer, which resulted in greater sales after it went live.

Bonni explained, "I teach a class on Critical Thinking Skills for Technical Communicators as part of a certificate program at the University of California, San Diego and this project was an excellent example of what I cover in the course. By analyzing the audience, their needs, the process, the logic, we were able to design a user interface that made it easy for customers to find what they needed. Was this a typical job for a technical communicator? No—but someday it will be!"

I asked members of the STC Management SIG how they added value to their companies. Here are just a few of the many responses I received:

"At one company where I worked we had a large number of employees for whom English was a second language. All employees had to write self-evaluations as part of the annual review process, so our tech pubs department offered to help people write them. We said, 'We can't tell you what to say, but we can help you say it.' The goodwill we generated was far greater than the amount of time it took."
Philip Sharman

"I created a corporate communications position with my previous employers. I continuously sought out opportunities to show that I had a skill that could fill a void within the company. In my time there, I took over as project manager for the cor-

porate newsletter and annual report on research, I edited all web content, edited and wrote marketing and technical materials, created a corporate style guide, developed training sessions for all levels of employees, and met with new hires to discuss the importance of intelligent communication." *Danica Rhoades, Write Rhetoric*

"At Pearson, in our proposal group, we were worried about the lower number of RFPs coming in and the downtime looming, so we marketed ourselves to other Pearson companies to develop proposals, oral presentations, white papers, marketing materials, etc. It has worked well. We started working for one company (at the time called Pearson Educational Measurement), and now we do work for six companies (with another in negotiations right now). Consequently, we have grown our reputation and our staff. And it has been a wonderful opportunity." *Diane Borgwardt*

"In 2004 my team volunteered to help with the voluminous documentation required for our first Sarbanes-Oxley filing. We made standard templates in Word and Visio that provided consistent formats for auditors to review. Several people on my team had good Visio skills and assisted subject matter experts who couldn't produce their own Visio diagrams. This work kept three of my team members fully employed during a period when others in our department were being laid off.

We also broadened our scope by taking on training for proprietary or purchased software used by the company. In many cases we'd been engaged to write the user manual or quick reference, so we had to learn the software ourselves and consider how the employees would use it to do their jobs. So it was a short hop to delivering training. Not all tech writers are comfortable training, but I was lucky to have several who wanted to expand their careers in that direction. So it was win-win.

These kinds of opportunities exist, if you just take the time to look for them. It requires informal network-

ing within the company, not being afraid to toot your own horn, and maybe working late once in a while to demonstrate your commitment. I enjoy it because it keeps my job from getting stale." *Holly Harkness, Mirant Corporation*

Jean Femia at Opto 22 offered this great summary:

"My company is unusually open, and we have greater opportunities due to our flat reporting structure. But the point is, if you offer to do things—with the motive of contributing, not supplanting—and you do them well, you can definitely increase your value in the company."

Moving Forward

What do all of these stories have in common? Each person saw or searched out a need, proactively informed the parties involved that they could fill that need, and then proceeded to do so, which significantly raised their sphere of influence (thus raising both their corporate value and their *recognition* that they added value).

In part 2 of this series, I showed that there are nearly limitless directions in which you can take your career over the long-term. The examples in this article show that no matter how specifically or broadly defined your job duties may be, there are nearly limitless actions you can take right now to increase your sphere of influence and your job security.

How big a sphere of influence do you want? 

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