

Recession-PROOF Your Career

By JACK MOLISANI, Associate Fellow

Editor's note: Part I of this series, "Job Hunting in a Recession," appeared in the September/October 2008 issue of Intercom.

In the first installment of this article, I addressed immediate actions technical communicators can take to increase their chances of finding work during a recession. In this installment, I discuss near- and long-term career strategies for:

1. Increasing your chances of surviving a layoff.
2. Increasing your ability to find work in case you *do* get laid off.

One would think that if you do a good job at strategy 1, you won't need strategy 2, but mergers happen and companies sometimes offshore complete departments, so it's best if you do both to maximize your chances of staying employed.

Increase Your Chances of Surviving a Corporate Layoff

There are three main actions you can take to avoid being laid off:

- Add value to your company.
- Ensure that management *recognizes* that you add value.
- Repeat as needed.

Add Value to Your Company

The main strategy to staying employed is to make yourself so valuable to your company that they wouldn't even *consider* letting you go. This is not as hard to do as you might think.

Here is an excellent example: When Andrea Ames delivered the keynote presentation at LavaCon 2008 in Honolulu, she shared one of the strate-



Send Out Ships

You've probably heard the expression "when my ship comes in." Any idea where that expression comes from? In the nineteenth century, merchants in Europe would mortgage everything they owned to build and provision ships to sail to the new world. When (if) the ships finally returned loaded with furs and spices and other goods, the merchants would be rich beyond their wildest dreams. However, as Chellie Campbell says in her book *The Wealthy Spirit*, "Some people are going down to the dock, waiting for their ship to come in—but they haven't sent any out!"

You have to send out ships. Every call you make, every business card you give out, every newsletter article you write, and every presentation you give is a ship that might someday come in. It may take weeks or years for those ships to come in, but if you send enough out, they *will* come in.

So the secret to ongoing prosperity and "job security" is to keep sending out ships!

For more information, I recommend the books *The Wealthy Spirit: Daily Affirmations for Financial Stress Reduction* and *Zero to Zillionaire* by Chellie Campbell.

gies that enabled her to become the first person in the history of IBM to rise from an information-development role to her current level in the company. When people ask her what she does for a living, she replies, "I solve business

problems." Not "I'm a technical writer." Not "I create writing standards." Not "I coordinate changes to the user experience." While she may actually do those things as part of her job, they're not the way she *approaches* her job, and they are

certainly not how she identifies her corporate mission. She finds problems her company is experiencing and then finds solutions.

How does she find problems to solve? She asks for them! About every three months, she makes a point to ask the executives in her division, "What problems are you running into?" Then she looks at what her organization can do to help solve those problems. Even if the problems are not directly related to her area, there are often actions her group can take as part of a larger solution. In short, she strives to be an innovative solution provider and profit center, not a commodity-like tech pubs cost center (see sidebar).

What a great way to increase your job security! Who in the world would lay off an individual who's continually saving the company money and helping to solve management's problems?

When was the last time *you* looked for problems to solve in your company or workplace?

Ensure that Management Recognizes You Add Value

I recently started classes at a local business school and was looking forward to applying the information to my career, specifically how to better market my services. However, I soon found out that before I could take the marketing courses I wanted, I had to take a course in public relations (PR).

I was not happy about this since I thought PR was a nefarious undertaking—something done by big corporations to cover up embarrassing events or by politicians wanting to manipulate public opinion. The definition of PR I read in *Public Relations News* certainly supported my viewpoint:

Public Relations: The management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or an organization, and executes a program of action to earn public understanding and acceptance.

While that definition might apply to a public relations firm with clients like Exxon or General Motors, I didn't find it very applicable to me.

Next, I read *Effective Public Relations*



Cost Centers vs. Profit Centers

One of the core goals of most corporate executives is to increase revenue and decrease costs. For example, even if there is a need to increase customer satisfaction or employee productivity, the ultimate reason to do so is because those actions add to the company's bottom line.

To increase your corporate value, look for opportunities to increase revenue or decrease costs. Even a small savings or sales increase will be remembered (and considered) come review or layoff time.

How do you want to be viewed by management—as a cost center (a commodity to be acquired for the absolute minimum price given an acceptable level of quality), or as part of a profit center that reduces costs and generates revenue for the company?

For more information about cost centers and profit centers, and how they affect your standing in your company, see "How to Build a Business Case" in *Intercom* (July/August 2008).

by Scott Cutlip and Allen Center, who described PR as "Empathetic listening and persuasive communication." While this was closer, I knew this definition of PR applied more to defusing a heated labor dispute than advancing a technical writer's career.

It wasn't until I read a series of articles by L. Ron Hubbard that I really started to understand how I could apply PR to my career as a technical communicator. In the article "A Redefined Definition of PR," Hubbard explains that a more accurate definition of PR is "Effective cause well demonstrated." This is a definition I can apply!

The documents I produce consistently win awards. I volunteer with my STC chapter. I organize community service days. I'm a professional in my field, and the products I create are excellent dem-

onstrations of my ability. But how many people are aware of my good works (other than my mother and fellow tech writers, of course)? Not many.

No one else would take the time to advertise my accomplishments, so I sat down and wrote a PR plan for myself (see sidebar). Suddenly my visibility increased and I started landing new clients. PR works!

Day in and day out, you are constantly demonstrating that you are a professional in your field. Do people know? Get the word out!

Increase Your Ability to Find Work

Now that we have looked at ways to increase (and promote) the value you bring to your current employer, let's look at some actions you can take in the future to ensure continued employment when the next recession comes along.

There are three main strategies to increase your long-term marketability:

- Expand the industries you serve.
- Expand the services you offer.
- Start your own business.

Expand the Industries You Serve

While you and I know a good technical communicator can learn and document anything given sufficient ramp-up time, most companies these days want technical writers who already have experience in their industry: biotech companies want writers with experience in biotech, construction companies want writers with experience in construction, etc. So what can you do if you have been working in, say, accounting companies your entire career and want to move into a new field?

One option is to take classes in different fields—but which fields? What classes will make you most marketable? That varies depending on the country and region in which you live, so I suggest doing some research. First, look at what investment advisors are saying are the hot growth industries two, five, ten years out. If those industries are growing, there will be a need for technical writers!

Another option is to monitor the types of jobs being posted on job boards like DICE.com, Monster.com, etc. By

monitoring such sites, you can see the types of companies that are hiring in your area, and you can take classes to prepare yourself for those jobs.

Yet another option would be to find someone who already services those industries, preferably an independent contractor or outsource writing company with projects that can be done off-site. Ask to help with their projects by writing a section of the manual, indexing the book, generating the online version—*anything* that will enable you to list the project (and industry) on your résumé. By gaining experience with just one such project, you can leverage it to get another and another until finally you are well-established in the industries in which you want to expand.

And keep in mind, the more industries in which you can be established, the greater your chances of finding work if any one of them slows down. (For example, you could have concentrated on your other clients if your banking clients put all their projects on hold after the mortgage crisis hit.)

Expand the Services You Offer

As technical communicators, we are blessed with almost limitless career options (see sidebar). An accountant's career options are pretty much limited to, well, accounting. But a technical communicator can leverage his or her core competencies to move into fields other than technical writing. We can do instructional design, stand-up training, and user-interface design. We can advise companies on accessibility and usability issues, become full-time project managers, and more. And we can do these things in the biotech industry, the manufacturing industry, the software industry, etc.—the choices and combinations are endless!

Will it benefit you to go back to school for an additional certificate or degree? Yes. Will that take a few months or a few years? Probably. But remember, we are talking about how to prepare for the next recession after the economy recovers from its current slump. (And considering it might take a while to get out of *this* slump, you've got plenty of time to prepare for the next one!)



Creating a PR Campaign

There are four basic steps to applying public relations to an area:

- **Research:** Don't make the mistake of assuming you know what your audience thinks and feels—find out for sure. Even informal surveys can reveal some surprising results!
- **Planning:** Does your company publish a newsletter? Do they post success stories on their intranet? Do they grant awards for accomplishments? Once you have researched ways you can publish your accomplishments, make a plan for what you will do and create a timeline.
- **Communication:** If you are a contractor, communicate your accomplishments to prospective clients. If you are an employee, communicate your accomplishments to your current or prospective employers. Make sure people in your company know the value you bring to the organization.
- **Evaluation:** As with other endeavors, evaluate your performance at the end of the project. Whether you measure the effectiveness of your PR campaign with a new opinion survey or by an increase in your paycheck, strengthen what worked in your plan and change what didn't. (Then, of course, write and execute your PR plan for the next year and get to work!)

For more information, see Suggested Readings at the end of the article.

Start Your Own Business

One option for taking control of your income and increasing your chances of staying employed is to become an independent contractor, consultant, or business owner. Here is an anecdote from my own career that illustrates this concept:

When I made the leap from employee to independent contractor (and subsequently business owner), my mother would wring her hands at the

feast-or-famine nature of contracting and plead with me to get a “good job” with “vacation” and “benefits,” under a misguided notion that a salaried job equals “security.”

Later, when half of California was laid off in the recession of the 1990s, my mother proudly stated, “Thank God you own your own company!”

Many of my clients cut back on outsourcing at that time, but having multiple clients and multiple streams of income enabled me to at least survive the economic downturn, in contrast to staff employees who lost their *complete* incomes when they were laid off.

I'm not being negative so much as realistic when I say *there is no such thing as job security*. Even the members of the United Auto Workers union are finally realizing a company can't keep workers on payroll if there is no money to pay them, collective bargaining agreement or not.

Actually, I can further clarify my earlier statement: there is no such thing as job security *when you work for someone else*. I have job security because I know I will do what it takes to find enough work to keep me (and my employees) working. Sometimes it takes long hours and a great deal of persistence and follow-through, but believe me, it pays off in the long run.

After I started my technical writing business, I used to call the documentation manager at a local consumer electronics company every three months asking if she had any work to outsource. For a year and a half the answer was “No,” but I always replied, “OK, I'll call you again next quarter!” I never gave up and sure enough, one time I called and the answer was finally, “Yes!”

Not only did my persistence land us a major client, but we did such a good job producing that manual that it won an STC publications competition award. And when the product we documented was reviewed in *PC Magazine*, the author specifically mentioned the user documentation, saying, “The concise manual made setup easy.”

You better believe I made a color copy of that review and have shown it to every potential client I have met since,

which in turn landed me more work. Yet we would have never landed that project had I not called the manager every quarter for *years*.

This is one ship that finally came in—several times over! (See sidebar.)

At one point in my career, I expanded the services I offered from “just” technical writing to technical writing *and* recruiting tech writers. That alone increased my job security because it doubled the services I offered: I could call companies and tell them that whether they wanted to outsource a project, bring in a temp contractor, or find a full-time staff employee, I could help!

That worked well, until the dot-com bubble burst and the number of jobs I had to fill shrunk from 120 to 3 in less than a day (ouch). What did I do then? I told one of my junior recruiters, “You are now a full-time lead generator. Go find jobs for us to fill!” The jobs were out there—you just had to find them. How many phone calls and letters and networking events did it take to find them? Plenty! But we *did* find them, and we came out of the dot-com crash stronger than when we went into it.

Cash reserves (to get you through the lean times) and flexibility (to respond to market changes) are important aspects of the consultant/business owner route. But if you send out ships and plan for lean times, this route can be very rewarding indeed.

Take Control of Your Career

I heard a saying once that went something like “you don't get to vote on the way things are—you already did.” To me this means that the choices you made in the past led you to where you are today, and the choices you make today will determine the opportunities you will have in the future. I like to take this notion a step further: you not only choose the path you walk, you *create* the path you walk!

Not happy with your current job and/or economic condition? Well, fine—acknowledge the choices you made that led you here, chalk them up to one of life's lessons, and start creating your tomorrow.

If you look for opportunities (I mean



Core Competencies and Alternate Career Paths

In January 2008, I conducted an informal survey to find if there were any technical writers who had used their core competencies to move into other fields, and if so, which fields.

I was surprised at the number of responses and how long the respondents had been working in other fields. The fields/specialization they expanded into included:

- Accessibility
- Business/Software Analysis
- Change Management
- Coding/Programming
- Compliance
- Content Management
- Corporate Communication
- Documentation Management
- Graphic Design/Illustration
- Instructional Design/Courseware Development
- Localization/Internationalization
- Project Management
- Release Management
- Training

For detailed information on the survey (including the relative compensations for each specialization compared to technical writing), see the presentation “Alternate Career Paths for Technical Communicators” on the Resources page of the Pro Spring Staffing website, www.ProspringStaffing.com.

really *look*—don't wait for opportunities to come to you) and develop multiple income streams in multiple industries, you have a better chance of staying employed should one industry “recess” more than the other. For example, the biotech and healthcare industries didn't suffer the same crash that the high-tech and dot-com industries did. The smart thing would be to have clients in multiple industries in order to minimize the

risk of any one of them crashing. But how many of us did that? (I do now!)

If you expand the services you offer, if you build a support team, if you build and maintain your professional networks, you can use each and every one of those channels should you need employment options in the future.

You *create* the career path on which you walk.

Have you decided where you want to go?

Start walking! 🚶

SUGGESTED READINGS

For more information about applying PR to your technical communication career, see “Advancing Your Career Using Public Relations” in *Intercom* (July/August 1999).

For information about how to become more valuable to your company, see “Expanding Your Sphere of Influence,” *Intercom* (June 2005).

For information about the basics of public relations, read *Speaking from Experience* based on the works of L. Ron Hubbard, published by Concept Technologies, Inc.

For more information on how to create a public relations campaign, read *Effective Public Relations* by Scott Cutlip and Allen Center, published by Prentice Hall, Inc.

Jack Molisani (jack@lavacon.org) is an educator, award-winning technical writer, STC Associate Fellow, and the president of ProSpring Technical Staffing (www.ProspringStaffing.com), an employment agency specializing in staff and contract engineers, project managers, and technical writers. Jack has a degree in Computer Engineering from Tulane University, is known internationally as a dynamic and entertaining speaker, and reports on employment trends at the trends session of the STC Technical Communication Summit. He also produces the LavaCon Conference on Professional Development (www.lavacon.org). The sixth annual LavaCon Conference will be held 26–28 October 2009 in New Orleans.