In August 2004, I published an extensive research article in the Society’s academic journal, Technical Communication. That article was the result of work I had done for my thesis project while earning my master’s degree in management. There was a considerable amount of talk about that article. When I am at STC conferences today, people still ask me about my findings. Many people are concerned that technical communication, as a unique profession, might cease to exist in a few years’ time. Others wonder if technical communicators can ever “earn a seat at the table” with senior managers of other technical roles, no matter how hard we try—even if we all go out and earn MBA degrees.

The question of the future of our profession is always a pressing one for those of us who have made a living in this field. Now that five years have passed since my original study, I thought it might be worthwhile to revisit that subject. So in late 2008, I dusted off the original survey, made a few tweaks, and sent it out again. Last time, 28 participants from several countries, many of them leading names in our field, provided me with in-depth responses. This time, eight of the original participants were on board again, along with 28 others, again representing a broad cross-section of our profession—well-known leaders, everyday practitioners, educators, and managers from across the United States, Canada, Europe, and India.

The time, unfettered by the weight of my academic obligations, I felt free to take a bit more casual approach. The questions were much the same; but the results are a bit different. After all, we are living in a different world than we were five years ago. Or are we? Let’s find out as we take a look at The Future of Technical Communication—Remix 2009.

In Our Last Episode

Five years ago, we were in the midst of tough times. Many people had exited the field after the dot-com bust and 9/11. Technology spending was down. Overall, we thought it was a pretty gloomy time.

From the wealth of information I gathered in 2004, here is what I concluded that we as a profession should be doing to bolster our future prospects:

Become part of the development and innovation processes. I concluded then that we needed to make a strong move toward inserting ourselves in the development and innovation processes for the products we support. There needed to be a clear connection in the minds of our employers between our contribution and the sources of the company’s revenue. There was no more room for the shy writer working alone in a cubicle. It was time to step up and be known.

Launch a public relations campaign for our profession. It was also important to make our profession better known and understood. As 2004 survey participant Ian Wright from the United Kingdom said, “Our biggest hurdle is that people are not aware of us and the value we can add to their products and services.”

Improve our professional societies. Recently, STC has made major strides in this area, examining every aspect of its structure, programs, and organization. At the time, though, there was widespread agreement that STC, as well as other societies, were missing the mark in supporting our needs.

Become better business people and managers. Our basic persona—our tendency to be at once technical and artistic, introverted and quirky—generally did not make us great managers. I concluded that we required managers who are more professional. We needed to be able to “pitch
“If we thought times were tough five years ago, we couldn’t have imagined the state we’d be in today.”

One side effect of the use of these technologies is the never-ending day. Cogburn says, “Work on projects runs continuously, to fill every hour possible and minimize the overall project duration. A set workday and workplace have almost become obsolete, with team members connecting virtually at any time and at any location—corporate offices, home offices, on the road in cars or trains, in a quiet corner of the dining room, walking down the street. The pace is relentless.”

Cindy Frakes says she keeps in touch with her team using a variety of these collaborative tools. “We also celebrate our successes as a virtual team by having ‘virtual’ parties, where we eat a meal ‘together’ over the conference, or raise a glass together across the time zones. It’s important to celebrate as a team, even if it is virtual. It fosters team spirit and collaboration.”

Outsourcing/Offshoring

The outsourcing of technical communication work has been a reality for many years, especially in those companies where it is not seen as a core competency. In 2004, offshoring was only beginning to be a reality, with few success stories reported. Today, offshoring has grown, and a third option has been born—virtual/remote technical communication work to your own company’s facility in another country, where your organization still owns and manages the function, but your offshore employees do the work. One survey respondent from Northern California commented, “Much of the work here in the U.S. involves resources managed by the company themselves, not outsourcing. In other words—a large percentage of offshoring is actually not outsourcing.”

Vici Koster-Lenhardt from Coca-Cola in Vienna, Austria, says that in the past five years, outsourcing entered the discussion as an option but wasn’t outsourced—at her recommendation. “As it related to the business, I did not see the need for the documentation department. When I realized that, from the company’s perspective, technical communication was not perceived as a core competency for the company’s business, I proposed to outsourcing. I have had a team of nearly 20 years of staffing full-time technical communicators, the company now uses only outsourced resources.”

The marketplace for offshore writers is growing, especially in India, where the talent pool has greatly increased in the past five years. Tara Materi is the head of documentation for Cybage, a service provider in India. She says, “Six years ago, we were a handful of writers in our company, working in isolation on different projects. Now, we are a team of more than 50 writers, with the company offering documentation as a service. With increasing demand for documentation, the significance and awareness has definitely been on a steep rise.”

Survey respondents this year indicated that they were partnering with companies in India, Pakistan, the Philippines, Hungary, Germany, China, and Canada, as well as using lower-cost marketplaces within the United States to achieve cost savings.

Conclusions Remixed

In many respects, I think my conclusions from five years ago still hold up today—with a little remixing to account for the changing times. Let’s take a look at how we stand today in those same areas:

We are becoming more a part of the development and innovation process.

Despite hard times and corporate cost cutting, some pretty cool innovations were taking shape today in our field. Figure 1 highlights just some of the innovations that are taking place in the organizations of those who participated in this survey. But are we more integrated with development and innovation overall?

Frances Gambino, executive director of Documentation Services at Information Builders in New York, says that her team’s role has changed dramatically in the past five years: “Content management has become a critical part of our company’s success. My team has recent-

ly (in the past two years) developed an internal search tool to help users navigate our internal content repositories. We are now marketing the platform for our customers. From technical writer to system technical developer in five years! My team was heavily involved in digital archiving and creating controlled vocabularies to manage content searching and retrieval. These efforts are broadening the scope of the technical writer’s traditional role within our organization.”

I asked survey participants if we are gaining clout in our organizations. Cindy Frakes says: “In most cases, the contribution of the technical communicator directly corresponds to the level of advocacy technical communication has as a whole in the company.”

Chona Shumate believes we are gaining headway and cited an example. “As our service revenue has increased considerably, so has the attention to the field service engineers. Their needs are now very critical and tied to company balance sheets. We now have an internal customer with a strong voice in decisions and funding. They have actually become our strongest advocates.”

We still need to launch a public relations campaign for our profession.

While our profession is probably not better known or understood by the public than it was five years ago, our PR campaign today should be turned inward to our employers. The survey responses emphasized it over and over again—value, value, value—to ensure our unique role continues into the future.

Jack Molisni, president of ProSpring Staffing and executive director of the LavaCon Conference on Professional Development, had virtually the same thing to say today as he did five years ago: “What we need to be doing to ensure that our role exists going forward is the same thing we should have been doing all along: find a business need and try to fill it. To quote Andrea Ames (for- merly of Sybase Inc.)—‘We aren’t just technical writers and more a solutions provider.’ Ask your boss and your boss’s
bosc what problems they are having and try to solve them day by day. Get yourself into teams that are considered a profit center (not a cost center), and make yourself such a valuable contributing member to the company that they wouldn’t even think of laying you off. Leverage your core competencies and let it be known that you’re not just a technical writer, but a corporate communication specialist, a project manager, a—whatever your company needs and perceives as valuable to the organization.

We are improving our professional societies. As you know if you have been con- suming your STC membership for the past few years, STC has been in the process of extensively remaking itself in response to member feedback. As a result of much hard work, we have a new executive director, a new structure for our board, new resources for leader- ers, new budgeting and financial mea- sures, a new mission statement, more educational opportunities, new mem- bership packages and benefits, and a redesigned and improved annual Sum- mit. STC has been involved in the construction of a Body of Knowledge that defines the technical communica- tion profession. All of these changes have made STC more viable, current, and relevant to us.

Saul Carliner, associate professor of Educational Leadership from the Univer- sity of Montreal and former STC president, says that we can use what we learn from the Body of Knowledge project to “promote our unique skills and knowledge and explain how they benefit the or- ganizations that hire us.... For the first time, we are saying who we are and what we do.” As an industry, we are “becoming more politically ac- tive in the organization. Learn to make a business case. Get out of the cubicle and start talking to people other than the developers.”

What can we do to raise our status? Holly Harkness replies, “We must be- come engaged with the business and offer solutions to business problems.” That requires an understanding of what drives a business in the first place— numbers and business concepts that of- ten aren’t of specific interest to those of us who “just like to write.” In response to that, Stan Bicks, associate professor and director of the MS in technical communica- tion at North Carolina State, says, “In our management course, we teach students that one of their biggest chal- lenges is negotiating the political waters in organizations where they are often atypical of the other employees.”

We still need to repackage ourselves for the future.

There is room in every organization for someone with our unique combination of skills to make a contribution. “In fact,” says Vici Koster-Lenhardt, “some people who are excellent technical com- municators do not even know the term (technical communicator).”

So how can you repackage yourself to find that niche that adds value and satisfies you professionally? “The techni- cal communicator will see his/her role in the organization become more cru- cial over the coming years. We need to find out what we are passionate about and consider specializing,” says Bernard Aschvanden, president of Publishing Challenges Ltd., Toronto. “Technical commu- nication needs people who are able to provide specific skills in areas like user documentation, tutorials, administrator guides, training videos, command line information, and more. No one person will be able to do all of these, and to do them well. Therefore, our best hope is to ensure that we grow ourselves to meet the unique roles that organizations will have for technical communicators, regardless of the formal title that is as- signed to a particular job.”

Through the Looking Glass

I will survey respondents “what is the next big thing on the horizon for technical communication?” They men- tioned such things as “content conver- gence” from several genres and owns- ers into a single information source; movement away from “books,” with more focus on content and less on a single format; use of social networking environ- ments to deliver documentation; more community-authored information; and more focus on feedback and error information in “greener” ways.

I also asked where people thought they would be as a profession in five to ten years. Certainly, we have made some progress in the past five years, as shown in Figure 2, which highlights the trends influencing us five years ago versus to- day. What else might be happening?

“I think a big trend will be a demand for good technical communication skills in English in the Chinese and Indian markets,” says Vici Koster-Lenhardt. “In the next 15 years, there is expected to be a huge shift in the world GDP from the West to the East. So, one prediction is that is more technical communicators will be working for companies that are producing documentation for the BRIC markets (Brazil, Russia, India, China), because these will be the countries that will be growing.”

We will also complete the paradigm shift to support what I call “informa- tion gratification.” The thrill of having Google answer every question in sec- onds has become an addiction—one that everyone will soon expect to have fed by all information sources in their lives, not just Internet searches. Chona Shumate says, “Online users are chang- ing, and we will have to adapt to their style of how they access information.”

We also can expect a new wave of reg- ularly-updated, multilingual, platforms, and manufacturing markets to generate opportunities for technical communicators. Saul Carliner believes “there will be a trend away from product-focused industries like hard- ware, software, and military equipment, and more toward consumer-focussed activities, associated with a product release, to ongoing deadlines associated with web- based publication.”

“ Heck, in ten years,” says Shumate, “we’ll probably have holograms of talk- ing text, with images of someone per- forming a procedure. Or, mental tele- pathy, where written information is no longer needed—just kidding—I think!”

Final Words

Based on the 2009 survey results, here is what I think we should be considering for the next five years:

• Advocacy: Is someone in manage- ment an advocate for the work you do and the contribution you make to the company’s bottom line? Are you known to the strategic decision mak- ers two levels above you? Are you con- sidered to be a beloved right arm that no one could think of living without? If you can answer “yes” to these kinds of questions, then you have probably al- ready begun to remix yourself for the fu- ture. If not, it may be time to start look- ing ahead, because before you know it, the next five years will have come and gone.

In the meantime, I think I’ll update my Facebook status. “Barbara is a tech- nical communicator providing highly valuable information in new and differ- ent ways.” What are you doing?

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