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Communicator

The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators
Spring 2014

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President's view

Feel good factor?

So, are you feeling as though the economy has turned a corner? We've certainly been told that we are on a steady road to recovery, even though the public sector as a whole is still taking a massive hit, and private sector wages have been pretty stagnant. 3di (my day job) is still experiencing strong growth and people in all of the other service organisations in our profession I speak to tell me they are growing too. But what does the economy feel like to you and your family? Some of you will almost certainly have been seriously directly affected by the wettest UK winter in 250 years, and I imagine dealing with that would have a rather sobering effect on your ability to feel good about anything at all.

Pockets of strong growth

There is genuine cause for optimism for our profession though, with many sectors of the UK economy that make use of technical communicators growing strongly, and being well positioned to continue growing. Amongst them are:

- Telecommunications
- Civil and energy infrastructure
- Media technologies
- Scientific instrumentation
- Web-delivered services
- Aerospace services
- Software development
- High-tech manufacturing
- Security systems and technologies

Over 60% of the new technical communication enquiries we had into 3di in the second half of 2013 were from organisations that could be described as engineering or high tech manufacturing. Twenty percent were from software development

organisations, and 20% from organisations needing their processes and procedures documenting better.

This has been our experience, but what about yours? What sector do you work in and is your job, work, or team being positively or negatively affected by growth or decline?

Growth is good isn't it?

Growth is good of course, isn't it? Well actually it can be very painful, particularly for technical communicators who are often working in small teams at the sharp end of a business's commitment to customers. More customers, with increasingly bespoke requirements, puts pressure on development and implementation teams, and on the technical authors and illustrators along the way. Increased volumes through the customer support desks typically lead to requests for more technical and troubleshooting information to support the post sales customer contact.

But it's nice to be wanted, to be needed; to be relied upon. Not nice being a bottleneck though is it? Ask anyone who has to work with me about what a bottleneck looks like. [Editor's note: see picture top left]. I digress. How can you turn growth that's happening around you into growth that you feel you are on top of, able to keep pace with, able even to influence and encourage?

A tool for every job

Our specialist profession exists because somebody realised a while ago that one person can't do everything. In fact of course it's the basis of the world economy. The principle of do what you do best, and do it better than the next guy, is a generally reliable basis for economic well-being. And our profession is of course a sign of quite an advanced state of economic evolution. Periods of growth are the perfect time to hone your evolutionary survival abilities. Break down your generic job into sub-jobs that the business REALLY needs to support efficient growth, and decide what specific tools are needed to do those sub jobs best. Which tools are you best positioned to wield? And which could be better wielded by others?

Be specific about the value

Now you have the outline of a business case for recruiting a colleague, or

upgrading your technology, or changing a process. I get the impression though that this is still a period of cautious growth in the UK. Purchasing and investment decisions are still in the hands of the money men, and there is intense pressure on the need to demonstrate value.

A good technique I have found that works well is to associate any type of spend with specific customer requirements. After so many lean years, there is such a keen awareness of the competitive marketplace, that organisations are working very hard to meet the specific needs that existing and potential customers have. What can you or your team do (that isn't what you would normally do) that would make a difference to winning, or increasing profit from, a key customer?

Profession capacity could stifle or diffuse our growth

Although individually, we can turn growth to our advantage, I do have genuine concerns that we do not have the capacity within the existing technical communication profession as a whole to take the opportunities that growth presents. There is virtually no spare capacity and not enough people are becoming new technical communicators, either as post-graduates, or as a second-career.

The ISTC is working hard to ensure potential new entrants can find good and engaging information about the opportunities in technical communication. The ISTC could almost certainly do more, but so could the training organisations, the specialist recruitment and services providers and the organisations that already have a team and want to grow it. Get creative about working together to encourage new people to come in rather than relying on existing technical communicators to take the risks of moving.

Demand for our talents and skills is growing but we can't do everything ourselves. Unless we can focus on our strengths, and attract and develop new technical communicators to work with us, other people in businesses will end up meeting that demand, or redefining the 'job' and 'tool' so they can do it. **C**

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