Learn, network and share

Read about this year's TCUK conference

Communicator

The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators

Winter 2015

Localise content through web design

The world of analytical engineering

Learn more about networks

Are technical communicators grumpy?

Brian Lanigan describes his day...

Every few weeks, I resolve to start work earlier, finish earlier, and have more free time in the evenings. Despite this, and despite my short commute (I work from home), I usually fail to reach my desk any earlier than 8.45 or 9am. So much for the benefits of flexi-time!

My employer is Technically Write IT (TWi), a documentation outsourcing provider based in Cork, Ireland. I, however, live in Dublin, so I don't quite make it to the office every day (or even every week). Working remotely doesn't bother me; I find that I'm quite productive without the distraction of a busy office. I don't feel isolated because I talk regularly with my colleagues over IM (instant messaging) and phone throughout the day. Besides, many of our clients are in other countries so remote working is just part of the job.

My first task of the morning is to make a plan. I've yet to find a to-do app that works as well as pen and paper, so I scribble down my tasks and figure out which comes first. One of my favourite things about working for TWi is the variety. I could be working full time on a big project, splitting my day between a couple of smaller clients, or working on internal projects. My team lead does a great job of managing the broader project timelines so I can focus on my own deliverables. Today, I'll spend most of my time on a client project and a small bit of time on internal stuff. The internal projects aren't high priority so I start with the client work.

At the moment, I'm working on some API documentation. To be precise, I'm writing tutorials that illustrate how to use the API. These tutorials will be the user's first experience with this API, so we want them to be really clear and useful.

My last project was written using an XML authoring tool, with multiple outputs and a big CMS in the background. For this project, I'm using Markdown[1]. It's a nice change, since Markdown is much simpler and the tool is a simple lightweight text editor. It makes for quick writing, but deciding what to write is less simple. I spend some time reading sample code to figure out what's happening in the tutorials, then begin to restructure the material, add detail, and clarify the rough steps provided by the client. As I progress through the tutorials, I spot a couple of gaps that might trip up inexperienced users. I can fill in some of the missing information myself, but other parts are a mystery.

Around noon, I'm writing an email to the developer with some questions when Outlook nudges me about a meeting on a different subject. Nice timing. The call is quick and informal: one of my colleagues is writing a couple of posts for the TWi blog, and I agreed to proofread her drafts. We chat about some feedback I sent yesterday—not that many changes were needed—and I plan some time tomorrow to check the updated draft.

Lunch is approaching, so instead of getting back into real thinking work, I start browsing Twitter. One of the many advantages of my job is that I get to call this work. (Along with some of my colleagues, I keep an eye on the TWi social media accounts. Naturally, that means I need to stay up to date with what everyone else is doing.) I also check my bookmarked blogs to see if anyone's written any interesting posts. There are a few long articles that I add to Pocket[2] to read later, and some short posts that I skim quickly. One of the articles seems relevant to a project that one of my colleagues is working on, so I fire the link to him over IM. By the time I've read a few posts, replied to tweets, and checked a few LinkedIn groups, I've eaten into lunchtime.

After lunch (and a quick walk to the shop to replenish the teabags), I get back to proper work. While I was away, the developer on the client team replied to my email. He wants to have a call tomorrow morning to discuss the questions. I always worry that a developer might not care about the quality of documentation, but I really have no grounds for it. I've not had a bad client yet, and this one is no exception. The developers are enthusiastic about their product and they are eager to make time to perfect the documentation.

Since a couple of the tutorials are in limbo for now, I skip ahead and make good progress on later ones. Time flies, and around 4.30 I call it quits on the client project for today. I commit the relevant files and check that everything displays correctly on the test server.

A quick glance at my inbox reveals a few new emails. It's all internal stuff, nothing urgent, so I run downstairs to make a cuppa before dealing with them. I'm on the home stretch now: the last big thing on my to-do list is a call with my team lead.

On the call, we go over the project timeline to make sure everything's on track. We've had no hiccups in the last week, so we don't need to adjust any delivery dates. All's going smoothly and the client has been happy with the work so far. My team lead also tells me about an upcoming project to which I might be assigned when this one is finished, depending on timing and availability. It sounds like interesting work and I hope the logistics work out.

The rest of the evening passes with some bits and pieces of admin work, and I log out about 5.45.

Since I live and work in the same four walls, it's important to get out of the house for the sake of my health (both physical and mental). I usually go for a run along the local canal or head to a nearby rock-climbing gym for a couple of hours. Tonight, it's cold and wet and windy so I opt for the climbing. This is Ireland, and it's October. Better off indoors. **C**

---

[1] Markdown - a lightweight mark-up language. http://daringfireball.net/projects/markdown/syntax

[2] Pocket - a short-term bookmarking app that syncs across all of your devices. https://getpocket.com

---

Brian Lanigan is a senior technical writer with Technically Write IT (TWi), a leading provider of outsourced technical writing, editing, and documentation solutions based in Cork, Ireland.
E: brian.lanigan@technicallywriteit.com
W: www.technicallywriteit.com