

Predicting trends in techcomm

Learn how documentation could look and feel in the future.



Communicator

The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators
Summer 2018

Understand the advantages of
working with Open Standards

Better documentation?
Work / life balance improved



Discover tips for
researching effectively

Information 4.0: content
contextualisation and output



President's view

Over the last few months, I have started a massive de-cluttering and organisation activity in my house. In the midst of all this, I came across a few boxes that we still hadn't unpacked from when we moved in a year ago. In one of the boxes, I found a stash of old Communicators. Most of them were dog-eared and had lots of coloured post-it markers sticking out of them. As I put them in the bookcase, along with the more recent Communicators, this year's Spring issue fell on the floor. I picked it up, started thumbing through it, and found myself re-reading an article by Robert Scott-Norton.

Robert does a great job of summarising the discussions on the ISTC members-only discussion forum. In this particular article, he mentioned a recent discussion on the forum about how to get into technical writing. I won't go into the actual discussion here (you can read that on the forum yourself, if you are a member of course), but what really caught my eye was the sentence "As someone on the forum puts it, good technical authors are like gold dust."

I've heard technical authors called many things, but I have never heard them referred to as gold dust. It was a phrase that made me sit back and think wow that's so true. Good technical authors are scarce, and therefore in high demand. That inevitably led to the question we all ask ourselves from time to time "Am I a good technical author?"

My initial answer to that was, well I've been at the same company for the past X amount of years so I must be good or I wouldn't still be here. I

then started to think, just because I am very lucky to have long-term employment does not necessarily mean I'm a good technical author. It means I'm good at my job. I know the ropes, I follow the processes that have been set in place for years (long before I arrived on the scene), and I know how to communicate with the software developers because I have known them for so long. But if I were to move to a new company, with a new environment where I didn't know the ropes or the processes, would I still be seen as a good technical author? That set me thinking about peer reviews and self-checking systems. Are these the best way to check your profession's competences against your peers and yourself?

At the end of my working week, I compile a report of everything I have done that week. The content of this report varies, some weeks I have to go into more depth (especially around the time of a release, where it's extremely important that my colleagues know exactly where I am in documenting their projects). There are weeks, where I find that I have spent a significant portion of time solving a documentation-related problem. This could be figuring out a better way to use a feature in Adobe FrameMaker, or updating process templates in a way that results in less work for me going forward, or reading something interesting on a discussion forum that might improve how we deliver our documentation. These are the various ways that I keep my skills up-to-date and myself in touch with new developments in the profession. No matter how valuable this is to me as a technical author, to those reading my report it can often appear to be just another mundane task I do.

I don't want to lose all of this valuable information so I have implemented a new self-checking process for myself. From now on, when I start to compile my weekly report and I come across technical communication-related tasks that I have completed that week, I write a more in-depth summary of it in a separate file. This includes where I found the information, and how I implemented it. This is my personal self-checking system and my way of keeping track of what I am doing to improve myself in my profession. My aim is to look over it once a month

and see what I have (or haven't) accomplished in that period.

The ISTC does encourage its members to keep up-to-date with the latest trends in the profession. All ISTC members have a responsibility to maintain their professional competence and they are encouraged to undertake continuous professional development (CPD) activities and to maintain a reflective record of their CPD. For Fellows, this reflective record is mandatory. I am well aware this can often be seen as a chore, not because people don't want to maintain these records, but more because after a long day or week at work it can sometimes be too much of an effort to maintain this reflective record. However, once you start to think of your career and profession as being like gold dust, and how rare, valuable, and in demand good technical authors are, it becomes clear just how important these records are in helping to document your abilities as a technical author, providing visibility of these activities both to yourself and to others.

In ISTC news, TCUK is set for the 25th-27th of September this year at the De Vere Hotel at the Staverton Estate in Daventry, Northamptonshire. With this year's theme of "The Pursuits of a Polymath", it's shaping up to be a very interesting conference. If you are on Twitter, make sure to follow @TCUK_conf for all the latest news on the conference, including information on the keynote speakers, and on the sponsors attending the conference, plus the 2018 award winners. **C**

References

CPD (Continuing Professional Development) www.istc.org.uk/professional-development-and-recognition/continuing-professional-development

ISTC member discussion forums www.istc.org.uk/our-community/discussion-forums

Scott-Norton R (2018) 'Online groups' *Communicator*, Spring 2018: 8-9

TCUK

<http://technicalcommunicationuk.com>

UK Technical Communication Awards <https://uktcawards.com>

Carol Leahy MISTC

E: president@istc.org.uk