Technical Communication or Information Design?

A New Zealand Perspective

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Abstract

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This research aims to investigate and analyse current trends in New Zealand technical communication. Specifically, it considers how these trends compare to those evident in the United States of America, where the research shows a contemporary paradigm shift occurring from technical communication to information design.

The findings of this research show that New Zealand technical communicators do have the core competencies of information designers and that technical communication in New Zealand is, indeed, undergoing a similar change to that happening internationally, especially in the United States of America.

The research methodology of this study uses data from two sources:
- Current literature on trends in technical communication and information design
- A qualitative survey of New Zealand technical communication practitioners.

Current literature in the field describes trends that suggest a shift in the core competencies of contemporary technical communicators. This literature largely emerges from an American context. These trends include:
- A need for technical communicators to be part of the iterative design process of products and to be user advocates
- A change from paper-based documents to online information
- The advent of the Internet
- The advent of single sourcing and knowledge management computer tools.

This study concludes that technical communicators need a broad range of competencies to adapt to the trends described, and that it is no longer adequate for a professional technical communicator to simply be a good

writer and document designer. However, this study also shows that New Zealand practitioners currently do demonstrate the key competencies of information designers, including highly developed skills in problem solving, planning and managing the process of product development, information management, usability testing, while continuing to carry out the more obvious tasks of technical communication, such as writing, audience analysis and document design.

The main difference between the American and New Zealand technical communication trends analysed here is that technical communication in New Zealand is just becoming recognised as a profession, whereas in the States it has existed since World War Two (WW2). Because of this historical difference, it seems that New Zealand practitioners are not bound by traditional job titles as their American counterparts are, and also tend to have position designations that are more readily recognised by clients and users, such as "documentation specialist", or "document developer".

To date, no formal research on technical communication or information design has been completed in New Zealand. Further research is recommended then, in order to gain a more detailed profile of practitioners and practices. This research could be used to address areas such as training needs and, more widely, could continue to raise awareness of the profession in New Zealand. Further research should focus on gathering information on the geographical distribution of practitioners, profiling tasks, tools and jobs, analysing salaries, and examining potential academic programme profiles that could meet the needs of potential information designers.

Introduction

Overview of technical communication trends

Introduction

Technical communication is just gaining recognition in New Zealand as a profession. This is reflected in the recent establishment of professional associations such as the New Zealand Chapter of the international Society of Technical Communication (STC) in 1995 and the New Zealand Technical Writers' Association in 1997. However, no research has been completed in New Zealand to see if there are any commonalities between the trends occurring here and those happening internationally.

Technical communication in America

Technical communication as a profession originated in America, and its professional body, the Society of Technical Communication is an American-based group with over 250,000 members, mostly residing there. The profession has been recognised in America since WW2 and, unlike New Zealand, has a history of technical communication programmes at university level dating back as far as the 1950s. When those graduates describe themselves as technical communicators or technical writers, most people would understand what this means. However, these titles do not have the same recognition in New Zealand.

In America, trends and developments in technical communication are well researched and documented. Historically, the profession developed in response to the rise in technology and the increase in scientific endeavours during and after WW2. Technical writers wrote complex documentation, such as instructional manuals and procedures, and were generally male engineers or other professionals attached to the military in some way. This documentation was done at the end of the product development cycle and was designed to be used mainly by highly technical staff, rather than by members of a wider public.

Generally these early technical writers wrote paper-based documentation by hand and then had it typed up by assistants. However, during the later

years of the twentieth century, as technology became more accessible to the public, consumers increasingly began to demand products with adequate supporting documentation. And in response, organisations saw the marketing benefits of providing supporting documents designed with the user in mind.

This rise in consumer demand for usable product information, as well as the invention of the personal computer, led to the first major paradigm shift in technical communication in America. In this way, technical writers became technical communicators, finding themselves increasingly responsible for ensuring that documentation was aimed at users' needs rather than being just a "tack-on" at the end of a product's development. So, technical communicators' roles changed and began to include competencies like being able to carry out an audience analysis, designing documents, and being able to use computing tools to produce a variety of information packages to meet users' needs.

In a similar way, the current technological revolution sparked by the rise of the Internet is responsible for another shift in the way technical communicators operate. Web-based technologies, for example, are changing the skills technical communicators need to be able to work successfully. Today, organisations like banks and insurance companies can be more widely known for their information products, such as EFT-POS, online banking or interactive Web sites, than for their buildings. As a result, technical communicators now design information that is presented in a range of forms, including online formats, paper-based formats, CD-ROMs, videotapes and other multimedia products.

Consequently, contemporary technical communication practitioners need a broad range of skills that are largely focused on bringing a problem solving approach to communication, rather than being focused on producing discrete product outputs. Overall, the urgent need for understandable

information continues to increase in demand, and consumers expect more performability and usability from product information and the Internet. This is the paradigm shift that has led to a move in America to redefine the profession of technical communication to that of information design.

Technical communication in New Zealand

Before 1996, research into the field of technical communication in New Zealand was limited. There is scant information available on whether or not the paradigm shifts that have occurred in America are mirrored here, or whether practitioners are moving towards an information design skills' profile in response to the advent of Web-based of information.

We do know, however, that the profession of technical communication in New Zealand has become more visible and recognised since about 1999, and that two professional associations for technical communicators have been established. We also know that the demand for training has increased in response to the increasing need for documentation specialists to replace incumbent untrained staff.

One indicator of this recent change can be measured by the development and growth in the Graduate Diploma of Technical Communication (GDTC) online programme, offered by the Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology (CPIT). Set up in 1996, this programme was initially presented in response to the demand for qualified writing practitioners to work at two of Christchurch's larger technology companies, Tait Electronics and Aoraki Corporation. Up until this time, these companies were actually importing qualified practitioners from America and England to write their product documentation, create their design specifications, and produce their training materials. This proved to be a costly exercise.

Today GDTC graduates are in high demand, and at present this demand in Christchurch alone outstrips supply. Similarly, the demand for places in the

programme has more than doubled in the past two years and entry has become competitive. Enrolments now come from Australia, Canada, America, Japan, Singapore, India and Europe, as well as from New Zealand.

Furthermore, the demand for freelance or contract technical communicators continues to increase around New Zealand, to the extent that often these practitioners have to turn away work or expand their businesses to cope with volume demands.

The purpose of this study

Introduction

This research aims to determine current trends in technical communication in New Zealand, and to compare these to trends occurring in America, as identified through the literature. The following research problems and related questions and answers form the basis of this study, along with information gathered from published literature sources.

Research problem one: What do New Zealand technical communicators do?

The results for this research problem were derived from data collected from the following questions:

- How do technical communicators in New Zealand define their job titles?
- What tasks do they complete?
- How do they spend their day?

Research problem two: What are core competencies do technical communicators have, and which do they believe are essential for their roles?

The results for this research problem were derived from data collected from the following questions:

- What training have they had?
- What training would they like to have?

- What do they believe are the essential skills needed to be a successful practitioner?

Research problem three: How have technical communicators' jobs change, and what future changes do they predict?

The results for this research problem were derived from data collected from the following questions:

- How have technical communicators' roles and tasks changed since they first started in the profession?
- What predictions do they have about the future of technical communication?

Research problem four: What is the role of computing tools in practitioners' jobs?

The results for this research problem were derived from data collected from the following questions:

- What computing tools do technical communicators currently use to complete their work?
- How did they learn these tools?
- What changes in computing tools do practitioners predict?

Research problem five: Are New Zealand practitioners following the American trend of redefining their roles as information designers?

The results for this research problem were derived from data collected from the following questions:

- Do the competencies, roles, tasks, and future predictions of practitioners mirror a paradigm shift to information design?

Research Outcomes

The results of this research will be used in the following ways:

- To promote awareness of the profession in New Zealand through publications and presentations nationally and internationally

- To give existing practitioners an overview of what their colleagues are doing in New Zealand, as well as fostering more networking and membership of professional associations by giving feedback of the results to members
- To ensure the existing Graduate Diploma of Technical Communication at CPIT is meeting the training needs of future practitioners
- To determine the potential for a degree in Information Design.