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Are online translation tools posing a threat to your confidential information?

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Creating information that adjusts to the device

Beyond tc

The future of technical communication

imprint

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tcworld

magazine for international information management

From the editor

There is much talk about the changing image of technical communication. Presentation slides in conferences reveal how increasing numbers of consumers check out technical documents before purchasing a product. On webinars technical communicators are labeled "marketers". Articles in industry-relevant publications illustrate ways to measure the value of technical content.

Yes, the technical communicator is no longer the invisible wordsmith who helps users explore complex functionalities; no longer the interpreter in the background for tech-savvy engineers. Technical communicators today stand in the spotlight of a new corporate effort of creating trustworthy and valuable information. This precious product information – as it has been revealed – has the potential to improve the perception of the company and product, increase customer satisfaction and, most importantly, boost sales.

The new awareness of the impact of technical communication has shifted the profession – away from "technical" and closer towards "communication". Some organizations have even formally moved their tc departments from engineering to marketing or communications.

In our focus story, Joe Gollner shares an insightful case study, which illustrates the wind of change that is blowing through the tc industry (page 11).

An important part of any content strategy is to make valuable, high-quality content available on any device and in any output format. Nicky Bleiel informs us about the advantages of responsive design (page 24).

Jang Graat explains the principles of progressive disclosure, a solution, which helps technical writers provide users with exactly the amount of information that is relevant to them (page 20).

Don De Palma advises us of the risks of feeding free machine translation confidential information (page 16).

For a great how-to-guide for writing inspiring manuals, check out the excerpt from the Dozuki Tech Writing Handbook on page 29.

Last, but not least, Leah Guren suggests six ways to improve your TC career (page 32).

We hope you enjoy this issue of our magazine!

Corinna Melville

technical communication
tcworld

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Beyond tc - the future of technical communication

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Free machine translation can leak data

Your confidential information, trade secrets and intellectual property might be at threat from Google Translate, MS Bing Translator and other free translation services.

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Making content flexible with responsive design

A new technology helps technical writers create content that automatically adjusts to the device.

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MACHINE TRANSLATION KICK-START STRATEGY PROGRAM

Machine Translation Kickstart Strategy program KantanMT, a subscription-based machine translation service, has launched its Machine Translation Kickstart Strategy program. Throughout the 30 day program, company consultants will provide technology and business guidance to participants, while focusing on a 90 day action plan for implementing a strategy throughout all necessary departments.

http://kantanmt.com

REPORT ON TRADE SHOW AND CONFERENCE STRATEGIES

Common Sense Advisory, Inc., an independent market research firm specializing in the language service industry, has published a report about events and explores how to leverage them to win more business. "Maximize the Return of Your Trade Show and Conference Strategy" presents findings from a survey of language service and technology providers intended to assess their marketing strategies.

www.commonsenseadvisory.com

NEW CAPABILITIES WITHIN SDL'S CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE CLOUD

SDL has announced new cloud-based solution capabilities across two key pillars of the SDL portfolio: SDL Social and SDL Campaigns. SDL Social, as delivered through the SDL Customer Experience Cloud, provides marketers with the insights necessary to properly allocate digital marketing resources to improve targeting, engagement and ROI for customer acquisition. SDL Campaigns, delivered through the SDL Customer Experience Cloud, enables marketers to maintain a continuous cycle of engagement and understanding along each customer's unique journey.

www.sdl.com

SUBWAY CHOOSES TRANSLATIONS.COM

Language services provider Translations.com, has signed an agreement to provide restaurant operator Subway with enterprise language services and the GlobalLink Localization Suite. By employing Translations.com's GlobalLink platform, Subway will be able to streamline, automate, and centralize their translation requirements around the world.

www.translations.com

Connected physical devices to increase 30-fold by 2020

The future explosion in the number of intelligent devices will create a network rich with information that allows supply chains to assemble and communicate in new ways. Research firm Gartner, Inc. forecasts that a 30-fold increase in Internet-connected physical devices by 2020 will significantly alter supply chain leader information access and cyber-risk exposure.

The Internet of Things (IoT) is forecast to reach 26 billion installed units by 2020, up from 0.9 billion just five years ago, and will impact the information available to supply chain leaders and how the supply chain operates, depending on industry.

"It's important to put IoT maturity into perspective, because of the fast pace at which it is emerging, so supply chain strategists need to be looking at its potential now," said Michael Burkett, managing vice president at Gartner. "Some IoT devices are more mature, such as commercial telematics now used in trucking fleets to improve logistics efficiency. Some, such as smart fabrics that use sensors within clothing and industrial fabrics to monitor human health or manufacturing processes, are just emerging."

As these capabilities become mainstream they will allow modern supply chains to deliver more differentiated service to customers more efficiently. This will happen when many more physical assets than today are communicating their state to a networked ecosystem that then formulates an intelligent response.

Digital marketing budgets are expected to continue to increase in 2014. A rapid move to digital marketing has direct implications for the supply chain, particularly for consumer product industries with rapid cycles of go-to-market and promotional activity. B2B industries adopting digital channels to reach customers will also be affected.

www.gartner.com

Image: © Renjith Krishnan/ 123rf.com

TAUS releases Translation Technology Directories

TAUS has released a new directory of translation technologies as a free and open service to the global translation industry. The directory contains listings of translation support tools, machine translation engines and language technology tools. The TAUS Directories of translation technologies are designed for use by both translation professionals and technology developers, and offer many options to refine searches to specific needs. Users can also provide feedback on listings.

The TAUS Directories already contained 200 products at the launch in April. Commercial and academic developers can easily create and edit their own listings. TAUS members can upload demonstration videos and other multimedia resources to enhance their listing.

https://directories.taus.net

CNGL develops consistent brand voice tool

Researchers from the Centre for Global Intelligent Content CNGL have developed an innovative content quality assurance tool that helps to ensure consistent communication of an organization's unique brand voice across global markets. The tool, created in collaboration with partners Cisco, Intel, Symantec and Welocalize, protects stylistic consistency and brand integrity of multilingual content.

Inconsistent brand messages confuse consumers, making them less likely to purchase a product or service. A key competitive advantage for any company, therefore, is the ability to consistently communicate its brand voice across a diverse communications architecture.

"Cisco's Brand is an integral part of who we are in the eye of our customers", states Julien Mira, Localization Operations Manager at Cisco Systems, Inc. "Being able to convey our brand consistently across different platforms of delivery and content types – web content and advertising, technical manuals or marketing brochures – is absolutely critical to deliver the One Cisco image we strive to create around the globe."

Working closely with industry partners, CNGL's experts in language technology and content analytics developed an advanced web-based quality assurance tool that instantly recognizes style inconsistencies.

The tool extracts style characteristics from reference texts, assesses whether content adheres to these characteristics, and generates a content consistency score across multiple languages.

Marketers and localization project managers can use this content consistency score to help effectively communicate global brand value at a local level.

www.cngl.ie

Can't read, won't buy

Based on a survey of more than 3,000 global consumers in ten non-Anglophone countries in Europe, Asia, and South America, 75 percent prefer to buy products in their native language. In addition, 60 percent rarely or never buy from English-only websites. These findings, and hundreds of other global online consumer buying preferences, are detailed in "Can't Read, Won't Buy: 2014," a new report by independent research firm Common Sense Advisory (CSA Research).

Image: © Joachim Wendler/ 123rf.com

The 10-nation survey, which included Brazil, China, Egypt, France, Germany, Indonesia, Japan, Russia, Spain, and Turkey, was conducted in the official language of each country. Specifically, the research assessed online language preferences and their subsequent impact on purchasing decisions. Factors including nationality, English-language proficiency, global brand recognition, and the ability to conduct transactions in local currencies were included in the study.

Common Sense Advisory Chief Strategy Officer and founder Don DePalma concludes the findings of this study have great significance to global businesses. "There is a longstanding assumption that enough people on the web feel comfortable using English, especially when buying high-tech or expensive products. Our research in 2006 proved that 72.4 percent of consumers surveyed were more likely to buy products in their native language. Our 2014, larger-scale behavioral study of consumers again validates this preference and, in fact, concludes this demand is increasing, with a full 75 percent of respondents saying they want the products in their native language."

The research also shows that nationality increases the demand for local-language content in online transactions. The percentage of those who buy only at local-language websites jumps to more than 70 percent of consumers in Japan. France and Turkey are among the countries with more than half of survey-takers favoring purchases at properties in their language.

Additional findings detailed in the report include:

- 30 percent of the 3,002 respondents never buy at English-language sites, and another 29 percent rarely do.
- Across the 10-country sample, 56 percent either spend more time on sites in their own language than they do in English, or boycott English-language URLs altogether.
- Details on the likelihood of consumers purchasing from English-language websites across 19 categories of services and products. The study found that automotive and financial services are the products that consumers are least likely to buy if the website is not in their native language.
- Exactly half would prefer that at least the navigation elements and some content appear in their language, and another 17 percent strongly share that preference. This finding contradicts the conventional industry wisdom that you should localize everything or nothing.
- Global brands can trump language, causing buyers to choose such products over those with information in their own language. Egyptians constitute the nationality that is most infatuated with global brands (83 percent agree or strongly agree with the statement). Those least won over are the Germans (56 percent).
- There is more to cross-border purchasing behaviors than language. Privacy, payment methods, delivery, and customs are major components of a localization strategy and can affect the global online experience. Egyptian and Turkish respondents were most concerned about sites asking for personal information.

"Considering the data from our survey, there should be no question about localizing your website and product information if you want to sell more goods or services to global customers," concludes DePalma. "Localization improves customer experience and increases engagement in the brand dialogue. It should be a rigorously planned and executed business strategy for any company looking to grow internationally."

In related research, also just published, CSA Research identified best and worst practices in online customer experience (Global CX) for highly globalized websites. This study of 181 prominent websites fielding 21 or more languages also serves as the basis for ranking the global customer experience of the top 100 most globalized websites.

You can find out more in the reports "Optimizing the Global Customer Experience" and "The Top 100 Global Websites for 2014."

visit www.commonsenseadvisory.com

Beyond tc – the future of technical communication

Photo: © lisegagne/istockphoto.com

Good documentation drives product sales

Something is shaking up technical communication departments as we know them. The transformation might start with an overhaul of technologies and processes. But – as this case study will show you – the journey into the future of technical communication might take you a lot further than you expected.

By Joe Gollner

Things are changing pretty quickly these days. The source of the changes is not hard to find – everything and everyone is connected everywhere. And all this is owing to a remarkable convergence of technological innovations. For many, these changes are exciting because every day brings new services, products and capabilities. It's a great time to be a consumer.

For the producers of such innovations however, these changes come as a mixed blessing: they must constantly adapt to a changing landscape of consumer demand. It's a challenging time to be a producer.

Among the people who are right in the middle of these changes are technical communicators. Most commonly, these are the people who document how products work, how they are to be used and how they can be fixed when something goes wrong. Using a mix of media types technical communicators effectively help consumers to get the most from the products they buy. It is a vital task and its importance grows rapidly with the increasing complexity of products.

An aircraft, for example, would be easily outweighed by its documentation if all this information was printed out as hardcopy manuals. Without the work of technical communicators, these aircraft would never get off the ground, or at least they would never be allowed to. But we don't need to go too far to illustrate our point. Consider the latest array of technology components that make up a typical home entertainment system. The installation and configuration of these integrated systems are often so complex that the retailers typically include onsite installation services. And, the teams that perform these services have been trained using documentation, which they also routinely consult when problems arise.

So, technical communicators are at the center of the changes that are sweeping through the global economy as digital technology takes

A business case for technical communication – facts & figures

There is much talk about the changing image of technical communication. Organizations are starting to recognize that providing relevant and valuable content to consumers can trigger sales. Technical communication is moving away from engineering and closer towards marketing and communications. Several renowned organizations have conducted eye-opening research into this change of perception. Here are a few examples.

Good product information encourages users to recommend product

In late 2012, provider of global information management solutions SDL released the survey report called *Measuring the Importance of Product Content in Customer Experience Management*. The report uncovers findings about the importance of product content and why interactive, contextually-aware, multimedia product information is a must-have in any customer engagement strategy.
The survey, which was conducted online among 1,000 adult consumers in the United States, demonstrates the impact that high-quality product information can have on the customer experience.
The majority of respondents agreed that high-quality product content

- is essential to good customer service (82 percent),
- makes it easier to solve service problems on their own (87 percent),
- improves their impression of a product or brand (79 percent),
- makes it more likely that they would recommend a product and brand (72%),
- makes it more likely they would purchase additional products from the same manufacturer (79%).

The survey also revealed:

- **How product information is being used:** The survey found that 47% of respondents use product information to learn more about a new product before they use it, while 42% use it to troubleshoot a problem. Only 11% of respondents use these materials to discover new product functions or features.
- **Which channels consumers trust most:** 61% of respondents indicated that they trust the manufacturer's website the most for product information – while only 22% of respondents turn to printed product manuals. The third most trusted source is user forums and wikis (13%), while only 5% of respondents indicated that video websites were their most trusted source for product information.
- **How consumers feel about user-generated content:** When it comes to younger consumers (aged 18–24), content found on forums, news groups and wiki sites is a significant source of trusted product information. The survey found that 20% of users aged 18 – 24 cited forums and wiki sites as their most trusted source of product information, while a mere 5% chose this selection in the 55 – 64 age group.

You can view the full report at www.sdl.com/cxm-survey.

Technical documents can drive sales

IBM has been developing a technical communications body of knowledge with a focus on content as a business asset. The company runs a permanent survey on its website asking customers to evaluate the importance of high-quality technical information. The responses of 179 participants of this survey between 2010 and 2013 have been summarized in an article for the ***Technical Communication Magazine*** of the STC.
Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that high-quality technical information is important or very important with regard to

- the perception of the company (84.5%),
- the satisfaction with the product or solution (93.3%),
- the perception of the product quality (96.4%) and
- the initial purchase decision (88.7%).

Most people research online before buying

The trend of consumers searching for trustworthy and reliable information before making a purchase is also reflected in the ***Major Purchase Shopper Study*** conducted by the GE Capital Retail Bank, which was published in July 2013.
According to this study

- 81% of consumers go online before heading out to the store (up 20% from the previous year)
- Consumers spend an average of 79 days gathering information before making a major purchase
- 60% of consumers start their research with a search engine before heading to a specific website
- 66% of shoppers conducted their research on a PC or laptop at home and 15% conducted their research on a mobile device at home
- 79% of shoppers feel empowered by technology because it provides access to information

the wheel. We have also established that technical communicators play a key role in helping people to deal with all this new technology. They provide the documentation that people use to install, configure, use, and – if necessary – fix these technology products. But there is more to the story than this – much more. Let's start with a case study to see if we can catch a glimpse of the future of technical communication.

Accepting change

This case study takes us back a few years to a repair and overhaul service provider for large aircraft engines. The organization would receive huge turbine engines and undertake major refurbishments. One of the tasks was to completely redo the associated documentation. As part of their service, the company would provide their customer with a carefully refurbished engine along with a newly baselined documentation. It was a good business to be in. Customers obviously had a vested interest in aircraft engines that were working well. It was also a competitive business to be in because customers were becoming very cost-conscious, and more and more options were becoming available for offshore repair and overhaul services. The organization in this case study needed to modernize how it operated if it was going to stay competitive.
So this was the environment that I entered when I arrived to work with the technical communication team. My task was to modernize their tools and practices. In this case, I was playing the role of "change instigator" as I was the one responsible for introducing new technologies for the creation, management, publication, and deployment of documentation content. The starkness of the change in this case could not have been more extreme. The documentation team worked in a large open office with the team manager in the center. Each team member was an expert at producing beautiful printed manuals using a highly sophisticated desktop publishing system that was a relic from an earlier age. Into this environment I was to introduce a radically different approach to planning, authoring, illustrating and controlling documentation as reusable modules that would be delivered to users primarily in electronic form. There was a good chance that the changes would include an increase in the use of external suppliers so

soon the technical communication team would not be working in a single room.
On one occasion, one of the desktop publishers asked me a very simple question: "What is going to happen to me?" It must have been on everyone's mind as the entire office stopped to listen to what my answer would be. The question took me aback because it so completely conveyed a sense of fear, or at least uncertainty, about what these changes would mean for these technical communicators and the specific skills they had worked so hard to acquire and hone. And, I will confess that I was caught off guard and I did not have a clever answer ready.
I remember this episode particularly well because it illustrated so clearly that those of us pushing content technologies in ever more novel directions need to stop and think about what this means for the people who actually create that content. Being caught off guard my spontaneous answer was: "I don't know for sure what will happen to you".
I quickly continued with some further thoughts: "The changes we are implementing here are big changes. They cannot be avoided or postponed – not if this company is going to survive. But there are some things that we do know. The tools you have been using are obsolete and one day very soon they are going to stop working. So there is no future in using these tools, here or anywhere else. With the changes we are implementing we are aiming for standards that are used around the world and we are introducing a new web-based publishing solution that uses state-of-the-art tools and techniques. If you give these changes a chance, I can at least promise you that the additional skills you will develop will make you far more marketable in today's economy."
It was the best I could come up with at the time and I was being completely honest. Luckily, events then unfolded in a way that fell completely in line with my promise. The team did commit themselves to the changes and soon started working in a different way.

A fully digital future (and present)

This short case study illustrates some key points about the future of technical communication: For one, the future is fully digital and is geared, completely, towards providing enhanced digital information services to customers and to end users operating the products. Secondly, an inescapable part of this change is that technical communication is pushed into an even tighter integration with the product lifecycle that is itself becoming that is itself becoming more digital. The organization in our case study was now receiving source data in more useful digital formats and it was investing in its design and workshop technology so that it could use this data directly. The same applied to the documentation to be updated. The company needed to be able to receive, use, and return documentation in accordance with a number of international standards. Also, data from the parts inventory system and revised procedures from the workshop needed to come directly into the documentation set. The team had always worked closely with colleagues across the organization but never as dynamically as this or at such a detailed level.
At this point the case study has brought us up to the present. Today, technical communication is conducted using digital technologies and is an integral part of the overall product lifecycle. So far, so good. Here the case study takes an unexpected turn and allows us a glimpse into the future of technical communication.

From technical communication to information services

We set out to measure the success of this particular project. To be more precise, we tracked the improving efficiency in the documentation process as we squeezed out layer upon layer of redundancy in the content and eliminated hand-offs and wait-times. And we counted the savings to see that our original business case justifications were in fact being realized. For the first three years, the numbers tracked a gratifying curve that showed that the cost of implementation, thanks to the team's efforts, was lower than expected and that the savings realized were in fact greater than projected. There were smiles all around. But then one year the numbers came in with some unexpected changes.
The new numbers showed that there was a sudden sharp rise in documentation expenditures. Management immediately became concerned. But fortunately a closer analysis of the numbers exposed some very good news: The reason why documentation expenditures had spiked could be traced directly to new orders placed specifically for enhancements to the new web-based documentation system that had been put into place for aircraft engine maintenance information. This had not been seen in the past so the accounting systems had not been set up to handle customer orders that were directly, and exclusively, related to documentation. What they did track was the increase in expenditures that the technical communication team needed to make to fill those orders. This realization prompted management to take a fresh look at the technical communication department: Could we make more money from the work of the technical communication team? In which ways could these new information services help our business?

TC as a sales pitch

This part of the case study brings us to one of the latest trends in technical communication. Several large organizations have started to see technical communication as part of a new "customer experience" focus. In some cases technical communication has been formally moved, organizationally, from engineering or logistics over to marketing or "customer experience". These organizations are the ones that realize how high-quality digital information services can directly feed customer satisfaction and can support a new breed of technically informative marketing campaigns. For example, studies of consumer purchasing decisions have been highlighting the large, and growing, role that online research plays in the choice of products. For more complex products, further studies of Google search patterns have shown how frequently people make a point of searching for, and consulting, product documentation as part of this product research. Good documentation, it turns out, drives product sales. The common thread in all of these initiatives, in line with the questions that management was starting to ask in our case study, was the idea that technical communication could be seen as a revenue generator and not just as a cost center.

Taking the lead

But the case study does not stop here. And neither does our exploration of the future of technical communication. In the final stages, the organization began to expand the scope of innovation that had been applied to the technical information services. There were more encouraging, albeit challenging, questions. Can we apply the same approaches to creating, managing and using content that we use for aircraft engines to how we document our own business procedures from finance through to human resources? Can we provide similar digital information services to customers and partners for all our activities? Can we leverage digital communication strategies to streamline how we conduct reporting financial information, maintaining regulatory compliance, aligning our supply chain, and recruiting new talent? The answer to all of these questions is "yes".

It turned out that the technical communication team was, for a number of reasons, very well positioned to play a leadership role in answering these new questions. Members of the technical communication team were now recognized across the organization as specialists in not only communicating but also doing so using the latest in digital technology to reach customers and partners. The future demanded that the whole organization shift to a posture of digital collaboration and it was obvious that management would bring these questions to the technical communication team.

Peter Drucker, the esteemed Viennese management thinker, was among the first to recognize the character of a new global knowledge economy and what this would mean for organizations. One thing he pointed out in particular was that the business functions in our organizations will become increasingly specialized as we move into the future. This is not something that can, or should, be reversed. But it is something, he advised, that we need to deal with. And the one response that is essential is that we leverage another growing specialization, that of technical communication, to facilitate the collaboration and integration of all the other specializations working within a modern organization.

Our case study illustrates this clearly, although, at that time, we were not fully aware that we were doing this. What we were doing, it turns out, was exploring the future of technical communication and what we encountered was very encouraging.

contact

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Free machine translation can leak data

New European Union regulations will threaten companies with substantial fines if they're found guilty of a data breach. While IT departments ensure the integrity and security of their data, many ignore the outflow of proprietary information through the frequent use of free machine translation.

Image: © Jirsak/ istockphoto.com

By Donald A. DePalma

Your personal and corporate data is under siege. Hackers around the world steal identities and credit cards and breach the cyber-defenses of corporations, while government agencies systematically monitor your phone calls, e-mail, and Internet usage. Whether they are driven by the promise of ill-gotten gains or claims of national defense, these invaders have inspired the European Union and other governments to institute strong laws to protect data.

But even if these hackers and government agencies stopped looking, you would still have to worry about data security. Why? Both your employees and your suppliers are unconsciously conspiring to broadcast your confidential information, trade secrets, and intellectual property (IP) to the world. How? Through unencrypted requests to Google Translate and Microsoft Bing Translator, routine use of Wi-Fi at coffee shops and airports, and whenever they send translation jobs off to their contractors. How big a problem is this?

Last year, Google disclosed that 200 million people use its free machine translation (MT) every day. That's just one place where people go for no-cost translation. Add Babylon, Baidu Translate, Microsoft Bing Translator, SDL's FreeTranslation.com, SYSTRAN, Yandex Translate, and their mobile equivalents. There's simply no shortage of free MT options that tempt your employees.

In our most recent survey on machine translation, Common Sense Advisory asked localization managers at enterprises to estimate their corporate colleagues' use of the technology – 64 percent figure that their fellow employees use it frequently or more often than that (see Figure 1). These usage levels mean that employees send significant amounts of corporate information to these online MT providers. For example, they might translate e-mails, text messages, project proposals, legal contracts, merger and acquisition documents, and other sensitive content. We asked our respondents how concerned they are with the potential loss of intellectual property or proprietary data on these free sites:

62 percent told Common Sense Advisory that they are concerned or very concerned (see Figure 2).

Our survey did not ask whether our respondents were worried about their suppliers' use of machine translation, although other Common Sense Advisory research shows increasing experimentation and reliance on the technology among both freelancers and language service providers. Systematic or even ad hoc use of free MT through its integration to widely used translation memory tools will increase the outflow of corporate information to sites over which the content owner has no control.

How worried should enterprises be about free MT? Sensitive corporate data can leak in two ways – in transit or at the site:

- **The "wrong" people can see information in transit.** This issue isn't restricted to MT, but is a symptom of increasing reliance on web-based services and the cloud. Employees or providers make MT requests over unencrypted connections or use open Wi-Fi hotspots that anyone could monitor. Similarly, translators – either working for the company or for a language services provider (LSP) – may push client content over unsecure communications channels, thus exposing potentially sensitive information to whoever happens to be listening in.
- **MT sites can use your data in ways you did not intend.** While content ownership remains with the creator, free MT providers claim usage rights under their terms and conditions. For example, Google notes that it "does not claim any ownership in the content that you submit or in the translations of that content returned by the API." However, as you follow the policy links, you learn that "When you upload or otherwise submit content to our Services, you give Google (and those we work with) a worldwide license to use, host, store, reproduce, modify, create derivative works (such as those resulting from translations, adaptations or other changes we make so that your content works better with our Services), communicate, publish, publicly perform, publicly display and distribute such content."

This license to use the data "continues even if you stop using our Services." MT providers may offer an opt-out option: "Some Services may offer you ways to access and remove content that has been provided to that Service. Also, in some of our Services, there are terms or settings that narrow the scope of our use of the content submitted in those Services." However, once the data has leaked, it's difficult to get it back under your control.

Microsoft offers paying subscribers who commit to a minimum volume of 250 million characters per month the option of restricting their training documents to just their own MT system. It addresses the communication holes with interfaces that fully support secure sockets layer (SSL), a common protocol for managing secure message transmission on the Internet. However, users of its free MT service are subject to the problems that we just described.

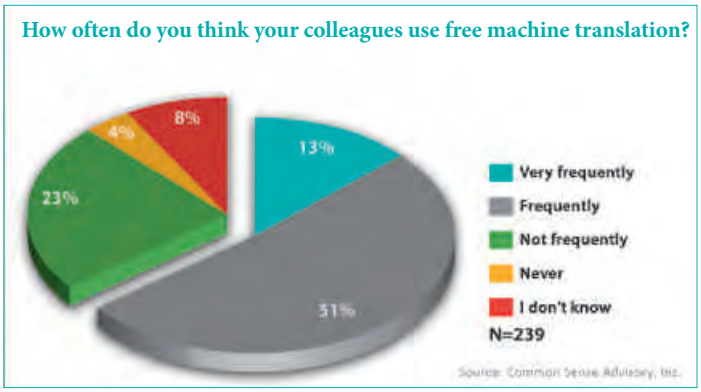

Figure 1: Many companies use free MT frequently

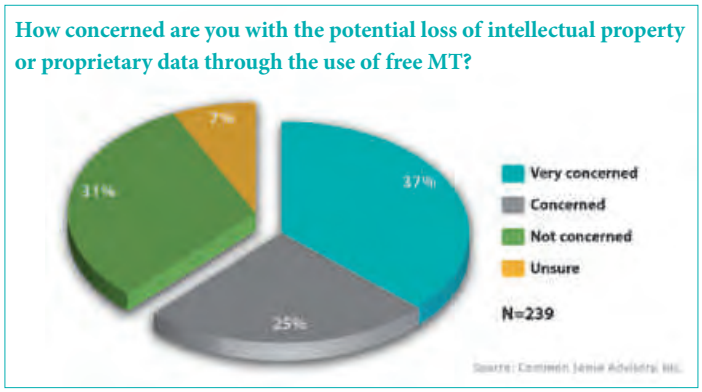

Figure 2: Concern with potential loss of intellectual property from free MT

But enterprises also need to think about suppliers working with corporate content outside the firewall. For example, translation suppliers add another headache to free MT usage. Even if all of your employees practice "safe MT" usage and avoid sending sensitive data over unencrypted communication lines to servers outside your control, you cannot expect your translation suppliers to be experts in these best practices.

- **Service providers may not tell clients that they use MT.** Half of the interviewees for our "Translation Production Models" report on how LSPs produce translations were either already using or testing machine translation in their workflow. We found no consensus on whether they disclose that fact to the buyer.
- **Most buyers haven't caught up yet with data leakage.** Most procurement departments do not yet specify protections that suppliers should adopt while using machine translation. Even when they are in place, enforcement will always be an issue. For example, project managers may not have studied the sales agreement that the owner of the LSP or sales rep signed. If they have read it, many will not have a process to make it known throughout the production process.
- **Subcontractors might not follow the agreed-upon rules.** Most LSPs farm out work to third-party linguists, either other LSPs or freelancers. These other agencies or individuals may not follow the same rules. Vendor managers do not necessarily ask their subcontractors about their MT practices, although that should become a routine question.
- **No matter what anyone says, linguists can and will use MT.** Competition and price pressure being what they are, there is nothing you can do to prevent linguists from using free MT as an efficiency tool. As our report on "Trends in Translation Pricing" found, market forces require suppliers to use everything they can to be competitive.

The big question is, "what can enterprises do to limit the exposure of free MT usage?"

Short of disconnecting your company from the Web or establishing and enforcing usage restrictions across an entire enterprise and at all your suppliers, what can you do? First off, you should determine whether the free MT terms and conditions comply with your data security and usage policies. If they do not, then you should begin by educating your staff about the potential dangers. Train them to follow safe network and Wi-Fi procedures such as using secure HTTP and encrypted connections wherever they happen to be. While such education will not eliminate the problem, it could limit it.

You should also work with suppliers to limit your data exposure. In your master service agreements, include confidentiality statements that outline acceptable MT use, and audit the processes how they enforce such usage. Identify the content types for which you would prefer that they avoid using MT.

For the employees and providers that work with your source content and translations, you can:

- **Lock down content workflows.** If you or your LSP use a translation management system (TMS), you may be able to limit the network exposure of your content. In this case, all participants – requestor, translator, reviewer, and project manager – work within a secure, hosted environment that blocks access to free online MT. If the secure workflow extends further back to the content management system and out to the deployment system, that's even better. Many TMS suppliers should be able to provide a closed environment.
- **Find MT providers that respect your data.** Some LSPs and translation portals that offer post-editing and other MT services advertise how securely they deal with your content. Look for a supplier that limits the exposure of data during file transfers through encrypted connections, authenticates valid users through certificates and passwords, and keeps your content separate from other companies' through the use of multi-tenant servers. Don't be shy about asking your providers tough questions about how they manage your data throughout their entire process.

For the vast majority of employees, you have less control over their possible use of machine translation in their everyday work. For them, you should:

- **Anonymize outgoing MT requests.** Software can automatically hide information in your content that might identify your company. When such software is installed, what's sent to Google or Yandex for translation is text with security tokens replacing proper names such as individuals, cities, countries, and companies. Lingosec is a new software company that provides such anonymity, while CipherCloud provides more generalized protection to applications in the cloud.
- **Send free MT requests to software that you control.** Work with your network administrators to redirect any browser calls to an MT site to instead be processed by your own machine translation software. Most MT vendors offer behind-the-firewall or cloud-based solutions that will meet your requirements for data security and integrity. As with any MT solution you choose, look for encrypted connections, authentication, and multi-tenant servers. Most commercial MT solution providers support these and other security-enabling capabilities. Of course, bringing MT inside your firewall raises other issues about training and maintenance, but that is a topic for another debate.

Powerful technology brings new challenges. Free online MT is no exception. While it represents just one of the many corporate holes through which data can leak, it is a growing threat that many organizations have yet to acknowledge, much less address. Both translation buyers and suppliers have their own data security requirements based on business-specific factors, so they have to calibrate their response to potential data leakage.

The bottom line: Data leakage via free online MT and supply chain flaws is a clear and present danger to enterprises and their translation suppliers. Software to plug these gaps is just now entering the market.

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Progressive disclosure: Minimalism to the max

How can technical writers provide the right amount of information to users with a vast variety of experience and product knowledge? Progressive disclosure offers a solution, which lets the user decide how much information is enough.

Image: © Geber86/ istockphoto.com

By Jang F.M. Graat

Only tell the users what they need to know

As psychologist and computer scientist John M. Carroll explained in his groundbreaking book "The Nurnberg Funnel" (The MIT Press 1990), the idea that pouring lots of information into people's heads will make them competent in their work is fundamentally wrong. People only really learn when they have a goal. Reading information that bears no relationship to real and realistic goals is as good as keeping a manual under your pillow while you sleep.

In his book, Carroll formulates the principles for minimalism in technical documentation. It all really comes down to one simple observation: the goal of a user of technical information is never reading the manual or learning cool facts about the product. The goal is achieving the task at hand by using the product. This is why customers hardly ever complain about the missing manual for a front door lock (even though it might be really interesting to know exactly how the lock mechanism works). As long as I can figure out how my key unlocks my door, I never feel the urge to pick up a manual and read about all the intricate details on the art of lock making.

The main principle of minimalism in technical information is to not waste the users' time by giving them information they do not need. When users consult the technical information, they usually have a problem they need to solve quickly. Before picking up the manual or opening the online help, they have often tried hard to figure it out themselves. This has taken too much valuable time already, and there is no incentive to read more than is absolutely necessary to move on.

Although this principle is self-evident, its implementation is another matter. For what is the minimal amount of information any user needs? Dividing the information into concept, task and reference topics is one step in the right direction. Clearly, tasks are more action-oriented than most concepts and reference topics cover lots of details that may be useful when an exceptional situation is encountered.

But even when this clear distinction between topic types is enforced and each individual topic only answers one specific question a user may have, giving the users only the information they need is not a trivial thing to do. How much information users need to achieve their goals depends to a large extent on how much the users already know. And, with the variety of end users your product may reach, this may turn out to be an impossible question to answer. Each user may have different information requirements, even if they need to perform the same task.

Getting to know the users

Over the years, companies have adopted various ways of improving the match between their technical documentation and their customers. Task and user analysis became part of the technical author's or information architect's job. And from user analysis came the insight that users often belong to a number of categories, each with their own backgrounds, levels of education and years of experience with similar products and technologies. Where targeted information products were developed for those different categories of users (such as system administrators, service engineers and end users or operators), the definition of personas intended to help the authors. These personas would enable the author to "get to know" the user and adapt their writing style, so that they could offer the right type and amount of information to every specific audience. Although this may work for some products and companies, most cannot afford the extra effort and cost involved. And even for those who can, the result is still not optimal for most users. The fact that a user is a service engineer does not tell you how much experience this particular user may have, i.e. what extra information is required to solve the problem at hand. It might even be dependent on the specific domain for which the user tries to find help. Users who are experienced in one part of the product may be novice users of functions they have not used before. And even first-time users of your product may already know the concepts well, because they have used a similar product before.

Increasing the number of personas does not solve the problem, as this only makes it harder for each user to choose which documentation to consult. Are you an experienced user or not? What if you decide on the documentation for advanced users and you do not find

Figure 1: Who are the users of your product?

Image: © Rawpixel/ istockphoto.com

what you are looking for, because the author assumed a persona who is an expert in everything. How does the user decide which part of the technical documentation is the right one?

Putting the user in control

The solution to this seemingly unsolvable problem is to let each individual user decide how much information is enough to perform the task. With printed media this is not an option, but nowadays most help systems are offered on media that allow interaction with the user. Depending on the chosen output format, various options become available to put the users in control: let them decide how much information is enough.

To some extent, most web-based help is already doing this by providing related links or cross-references to "more info" sections elsewhere in the technical documentation. For the users, this is not an optimal solution, as it takes them away from the section they were consulting. Depending on the number of cross-references and related links and the design of the navigation in your technical documentation, users may get completely lost on a wild goose chase for a solution to their problem. This is especially true for the not-so-exceptional cases where it is unclear to the user which part of the required detailed knowledge is missing. Troubleshooting can be quite a task if the documentation was not designed for it.

Breadcrumbs do not help when you are dragged from one part of the help system to another: they show how the body of documentation is organized, not how the user passed from one end to the other using related links or cross-references. And having to press the "back" button in the browser window over and over again is not exactly the most user-friendly option, provided that it works at all (which it does not when the help page is shown in a frame, as in most tri-pane help windows).

With all of these problems, it seems like truly minimalist documentation remains a dream that cannot be achieved in real life. But fortunately, there is another option, if the output media supports a tiny bit of javascript and a fairly basic level of CSS. All modern browsers do offer this support, so with web-based help this should be an easy requirement to fulfill. This option is called progressive disclosure and really puts each individual user in the driver seat of his/her own help system. While all information is included in the output, some of it remains hidden until the user clicks on a link (or hovers over it) to make it appear. The sections of initially hidden information can be nested, hence the qualifier "progressive" and the metaphor of the Matryoshka dolls. The big difference with cross-references or related links is that the context does not change: the user stays on the same page, as more information is shown either directly on that page (in expanding or drop-down sections) or in a layer that is shown on top of it. Clicking the same link again (or moving the mouse off the trigger) hides the info and returns the page to the previous state. No "back" button required, no wild goose chase, no context change.

Note: Of course it is fine to leave the topic page when jumping to information that clearly belongs to another topic. This article should not make you think that topic-based writing is bad for users.

Making it work in real life

But progressive disclosure has one disadvantage: creating the links (whether they are text or images does not make a difference) and marking sections to be shown or hidden by them can be quite a job and requires precision in defining unique identifiers and matching javascript function call parameters. Some authoring tools provide the option of drop-down or expanding text segments and hide the technical details, but they still require the author to do this work separately for each section of disclosable information. Progressive disclosure is only feasible when the tedious and time-consuming part of the work can be automated. The crucial question is, how to tell the automated process which sections should be available on demand. Without clear, unambiguous rules, any trial of automating the process will fail. Such rules have to be based on the structure of a topic, not on its contents. And, what better candidate to do this with than a DITA task? After all, this is exactly the type of topic that action-oriented users will consult first when they get stuck. A topic must be minimized to not waste any of the users' time, but give sufficient information to all users so that they can solve their problem and get on with their work.

The DITA task has a clearly defined structure and a number of recognizable elements that would be good candidates for progressive disclosure. Using XSLT, a so-called transformation engine works its way through your DITA task and applies transformation rules to any elements it recognizes in the file. The set of rules could look like shown in the figure below (the element names appear in angular brackets):

Image: © Robyn Mackenzie/ 123rf.com

Figure 2: Just like each of the famous Matryoshka dolls reveals another one within, progressive disclosure allows information to be revealed layer after layer.

```
1) If a <context> is available, make it hidden and show an "Info" symbol at the top
   right of the page, which allows showing and hiding all information contained in
   the <context>.
2) In each <step>, show only the <cmd>, plus symbols that allow opening or closing
   extra information appearing within the same <step>:
   a) Info icon for the <info> element.
   b) Plus icon for the <substeps> element.
   c) Sad face icon for <stepresult> element (which usually contains error recovery
      information).
  Only show the applicable symbols if the elements do appear within the <step>.
```

Figure 3: A set of XSLT rules (in human-readable form) to transform a DITA task and turn it into a help page with progressive disclosure.

That's it. Now let the transformation engine run and work its magic. When the resulting task page is opened in the browser, only the minimal amount of information (the task title and the main steps of the procedure) is shown, with several icons that allow the user to open and close sections as required. In each individual step, each respective user can decide to disclose more specific information (info, substeps, error recovery) when required.

Of course, this is just one possible way of automatically implementing progressive disclosure. Which rules apply to each particular topic type depends on the type of information that is provided to the user. For a <concept> topic, the minimal content to show could be everything up to the first <section>, followed by a list of section titles, which allow opening and closing their contents at will.

Reducing cost on both ends

The only good reason to use progressive disclosure techniques is to reduce the users' effort in finding the information they need to perform their work. Keeping all users on the same topic page while still allowing for individual differences in previous knowledge simply makes your information product better and more cost-effective to use. Providing your users with a choice of dedicated topics for novice, intermediate and expert users is not optimal, as it does not cater for all user levels and will never fit the exact requirements of each individual user. The cost of a few extra clicks is easily outweighed by keeping all users on the same page (i.e. no ambiguity about which topic to choose) and having all the additional information available within the same page context (not jumping around in the help system).

The only feasible method of putting progressive disclosure to work in real help systems is to automate the process as much as possible. This reduces the cost on the part of the author who has to identify sections to be initially hidden. Instead of doing this for each disclosable section, creating well-structured information (which should be a goal for any technical documentation in the first place) is enough to make automated transformation to full progressive disclosure output an option. Creating the XLSs that work their magic on your structured content is a one-time investment, which is guaranteed to offer huge returns in the quality of your help documentation.

Using a standard structure like DITA allows you to reduce the cost even more: I will make the above-mentioned XSLs for DITA tasks available as a free plug-in to the DITA Open Toolkit. This means you only need to adapt the CSS and graphic icons to your house style. But even if you do have a proprietary structure and need to create your own XSLs, there are plenty of resources available.

The bottomline is that with well-structured content, modern interactive media and XSLT, companies have no excuses for not putting progressive disclosure into practice and let their users decide how much information is enough. The only truly minimalist help system is one that uses progressive disclosure.

contact

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Making content flexible with responsive design

Technical communicators strive to provide high-quality content to users when and where they need it. With responsive design it is now possible to create content that automatically adjusts to the device.

Image: © hakane/ 123rf.com

By Nicky Bleiel

Responsive web design is a transformative technology for technical communicators. With responsive design content adapts to the device – be it a desktop, mobile phone, tablet, or other. It gives technical writers the means to create content once and deliver it anywhere, to thousands of devices: new ones, older ones – even ones that don't exist yet. Responsive design makes content flexible, so technical writers can focus on what they do best: developing high quality content.

Before I go any further, a quick explanation of what I mean by "responsive". Responsive web design is a technique for designing web pages that automatically adjust to the device accessing them. No content is lost in responsive design; the content and the page layout simply adjust by stacking or collapsing. There is no horizontal scroll bar. Interactions – such as touch – are also components of responsive design.

We will take a look at the advantages of responsive design, the philosophy of progressive

enhancement, why the time is right for responsive, how it works, and best practices. But first, let's look at a few examples.

Responsive examples

Microsoft's website (www.microsoft.com) is a great example of a responsive website, and this blog post (http://moz.com/blog/seo-of-responsive-web-design) explains how it stacks and collapses to work on any device.

The following are a few examples of responsive software documentation.

- CouchDB: http://docs.couchdb.org/en/latest/intro/why.html
- Bootstrap: http://getbootstrap.com/2.3.2/getting-started.html#download-bootstrap
- NetHelp Widget Explorer: http://showme.doctohelp.com/WidgetExplorer/

Explore these on your desktop, and resize the browser window to see how they respond to the change. Try them out on your tablet or smartphone too.

You can check out the responsiveness of any website by opening the "Am I Responsive" website (http://ami.responsivedesign.is/) and entering the URL of the site you want to examine.

Responsive is about context and content

Responsive design is part of a web development philosophy called Progressive Enhancement. Web designers who have embraced Progressive Enhancement believe that users should not miss out on a great experience – or on great content – because they don't have the "right" device or browser. As Aaron Gustafson noted in ***Adaptive Web Design: Crafting Rich Experiences with Progressive Enhancement***: "Progressive enhancement is a philosophy aimed at crafting experiences that serve your users by giving them access to content without technological restrictions."

Responsive design is all about accommodating the user's context – their environment, device, and more. Technical communicators have always considered context when doing project planning. It is one component of our mantra "know your audience."

Responsive removes the technological restrictions of content, but clear writing still plays an important role. Aaron Gustafson also considers content the core component that responsive design builds on:

"The baseline experience is always in the form of text. No specific technology shapes this layer, instead its success or failure relies entirely on the skills of the copywriter. ***Clear, well-written copy has universal device support and does wonders to improve the accessibility of the content to users."***

Why the time is right for responsive design

Ethan Marcotte introduced the term "Responsive Web Design" in 2010. Since then it has been gaining momentum, with a number of recent events pushing it further to the forefront.

The news platform *Mashable* declared 2013 "The Year of Responsive Design" because it was the first year that tablet sales were predicted to overtake desktop PC sales. Other milestone statistics include a large increase in web traffic on mobile devices between the first quarter of 2012 and 2013, and the number of page views on mobile devices worldwide increased significantly in a similar timeframe.

Responsive design also empowers search engine optimization (SEO). Last year, Google announced that their algorithm favored responsive designs that delivered the same content to both desktops and mobile devices. Bing also prefers responsive content, referring to it as a "one URL per content item" strategy. So delivering responsive content can improve the search ranking of your content.

Shifting from what search engines want to what users want – mobile users want everything that desktop owners have. They want one web. Responsive web design expert Brad Frost calls this "content parity". He notes that it is a myth that mobile users don't want the same information as desktop users, and we should give people what they want: one web. The W3C Mobile Best Practices specification describes "One Web" as "making, as far as is reasonable, the same information and services available to users irrespective of the device they are using. However, it does not mean that exactly the same information is available in exactly the same representation across all devices. The context of mobile use, device capability variations, bandwidth issues and mobile network capabilities all affect the representation." In other words, Frost notes, it is fine to optimize the presentation of content as long as the content remains accessible in some way, shape or form.

"Content parity" is validated by a research report by Google (***The New Multi-screen World: Understanding Cross-platform User Behavior***). The report found that multi-screening is common – 90 percent of people begin a task on one device, then switch to another (dubbed sequential usage), while 66 percent of users use smartphone and laptop/PC simultaneously. This means that users will notice when content is not available on the device that they are using.

Lastly, studies have found that user task completion improves when sites are responsive and designed to give users what they need in their context. This increases the findability of content and improves the user experience, which boosts task completion.

A short responsive primer

As mentioned earlier, responsive designs adjust on-the-fly to the device that is accessing them. The content adjusts its size and shape, as well as rearranges itself based on the width of the browser screen. No content is omitted; it is only the presentation that changes.

In responsive designs, the HTML doesn't change, it is the CSS that changes based on the device/browser. A variety of technologies are used, the core ones being media queries, fluid layouts, and flexible images.

The HTML media attribute is used to specify what CSS should be called based on the width of the screen. Therefore one responsive site will use multiple style sheets to transform the presentation of the content. For example, when the width of the screen matches the parameter in a specified media query (in this case, a common smartphone width of 320px), the CSS named mobile.css is called.

```
<link rel="stylesheet" media= "(min-width:320px)" href="css/mobile.css" />
```

If the media query was media= "(min-width:1025px)", a css developed for the desktop would be used instead.

Fluid layouts (also called fluid grids) are grids that contain a specific number of elements that are based on percentages, not pixels. As the device or screen size changes, the grid adjusts its elements

proportionally, either by "stacking" on devices with smaller widths or spreading out on larger screens. The microsoft.com website and the blog post that explains it are a great demonstration of a fluid layout.

Images on the web have traditionally been specified using pixels, which meant they were hard coded and inflexible. Images become flexible (or fluid) when relative units are used instead of pixels. The most common solution is to set the max-width of images to 100 percent and the height to "auto" so that images expand or contract to fill the available space.

Understanding the power of responsive design and how it works is important, but it may not be necessary for us as technical communicators to code responsive outputs ourselves. We should consider using help authoring tools that give us the option to customize and build responsive outputs. If we do that, instead of coding, we can concentrate our efforts on optimizing our content.

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Best practices for technical communicators

Luke Wroblewski has famously advocated that web designers should focus on mobile first. This best practice also works for us because content designed to work well on mobile devices scales well to larger devices and desktops; starting with the desktop and scaling down to smaller devices does not work.

Here are a few "mobile first" best practices for technical communicators:

Keep image files small. Large files increase load time; 74 percent of mobile users will abandon a site that takes more than five seconds to load. (See *Four Common Responsive Web Design Pitfalls* at www.sitepoint.com/4-common-responsive-web-design-pitfalls/)

Write concisely. Mobile users are less likely to wade through content (this also has the added benefit of reducing translation costs). Quite a bit has been written on the subject of minimalism and concise writing. Another interesting article on brevity is "Keep It Short" by Danny Heitman of the New York Times: http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/03/24/keep-it-short/

Use progressive information disclosure. Show users a little and let them choose what they want to learn more about. We can use collapsible text, inline text, and other dynamic features to make this happen. Technical Communicators have been advocating this for many years, and in *The Psychologist's View of UX Design*, (http://uxmag.com/articles/the-psychologists-view-of-ux-design) Susan Weinscheck confirms it.

Improve navigation so users don't use the device's 'back' button and navigate away from your content.

Make links easier to use. Avoid including multiple links within the same paragraph, because this will make them harder to select on smaller devices. Turn important links into buttons.

Streamline your table of contents and numbered/bulleted lists. Users can't see the relationships between levels on smaller devices. Stick to no more than two levels, and keep in mind that indenting bulleted and numbered lists uses valuable screen real estate.

Clean up device-specific terminology. "Click" and "Tap" only apply in specific environments. Make sure that you use more generic terms, such as "Select".

Tables need to be easy-to-navigate on smaller devices. To have the information in tables display effectively in responsive designs, you should consider adding the option to either stack column information (reflow it), or display columns individually (toggle the columns on and off). Reducing the amount of text in each cell will also improve readability.

In conclusion

Technical communicators strive to provide high-quality content to users when and where they need it. With responsive design and mobile devices, we can truly make information available everywhere.

contact

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Writing manuals that inspire (Part 2)

In our last issue we talked about the importance of getting to know the product you are writing about as well as concise and clear writing. Today's excerpt from the Dozuki Tech Writing Handbook is all about writing styles and your audience.

Image: wynnter/ istockphoto.com

By Kyle Wiens and Julia Bluff

Communicating with style

Manuals aren't pulp fiction page turners. But that doesn't mean they have to be a snooze-fest. Instructions are important. People need them. As writers, it's our job to make reading manuals not feel like a chore. Write with style.

It's okay to write informally – but that degree of informality should vary depending on subject matter. If you're writing maintenance procedures for a nuclear power plant, it's probably best to stick to a formal, business-like tone. If you're writing instructions on how to build a backyard barbecue, feel free to write in a style that is friendly and informal.

Style doesn't necessarily equate to poetic language and intense imagery. Every writer, no matter how technical the material, has a style. Style is how you, as an author, choose to communicate with your audience. It includes things like tone, humor, and the degree of formality in your writing. Good style is about making decisions – about knowing what to include and what to omit, when to follow the rules and when to break them.

You can break all the rules, but you should do so for a clear reason. For example, in the previous edition of tcworld magazine we told you to be direct and avoid tangents, but sometimes the best way to explain a feature is to include an anecdote. In that specific moment, it's fine to break that rule. The benefit of storytelling outweighs the perks of being concise. Just don't go around breaking rules without good reasons for doing so.

Mackie's user guides are an inspiration. Mackie's style is instantly recognizable. They know their audience – professional sound engineers – and how to reach them. They address their readers like friends, while still passing on detailed instructions and expert-level knowledge.

Here are some style highlights of Mackie's style:

Humorous instructions:

Pack yourself a big lunch and go for a nice walk outside. Have a picnic and lie back and dream. Things are going to be so good now.

Realism:

This icon

will lead you to some explanations of features and practical tips. Go ahead and skip these if you need to leave the room in a hurry.

Anecdotes:

The dual-purpose mute/alt 3-4 switch is a Mackie signature. When Greg was designing our first product, he had to include a mute switch for each channel. Mute switches do just what they sound like they do. They turn off the signal by "routing" it into oblivion. "Gee, what a waste," he reasoned. "Why not have the mute button route the signal somewhere useful, like a separate stereo bus?"

So mute/alt 3-4 really serves two functions – muting (often used during mixdown or live shows), and signal routing (for multitrack and live work) where it acts as an extra stereo bus.

Developing your own distinctive style

Here are a few considerations that will help you find your own personal style:

Humor: Everyone likes humor. Apply with extreme care, however. Humor and wit are almost impossible to capture in translation, so only use them if you're writing for a local audience. After all, what's funny in the U.S. might not be funny in Iceland, or Turkmenistan, or Japan. Plus, humor is hard to get right. It takes writing, rewriting, whittling, and gumption. And sometimes, it's not appropriate – don't use humor in precautions, or in anything that may have legal ramifications. Also, sarcasm may sound funny in your head, but it usually just comes off as mean.

Despite the drawbacks, humor is sometimes the most memorable way to make a point. You can talk about capacitors until you're blue in the face, but make people laugh and they'll remember it.

Some tips on writing funny:

- Only write it down if it makes you laugh.
- Erase the funny part and write it better.
- Stop trying to be funny. Funny works best when it's spontaneous.
- Don't be mean to real people. The only actual person you're allowed to make fun of is yourself.
- Read something hilarious before you write. We recommend Dave Barry, funnyman journalist extraordinaire.
- Humorist Sherman Alexie suggests, "Write naked—that will make you laugh." Don't ever try this in the office. It's still hilarious, but you'll probably get fired.

Set the tone: Your writing can be serious, authoritative, journalistic, friendly, humorous, or anything else you'd like. As a writer, you dictate the tone. But don't change halfway through your document. Find one you like and stick with it.

Addressing the audience: The classic writing conundrum: Can a writer say "you" when referring to the audience? Sometimes people avoid the second-person pronoun to achieve a sense of distance and impartiality – especially on scientific topics. But if you are telling readers what to do, "you" and "your" is perfectly acceptable. In fact, when used purposefully, the informal "you" sounds more natural and encouraging.

Some examples:

"How to upload images onto your computer" vs. "Uploading images to a computer."
"Be careful when you pull the wire from its connector" vs. "The wire should be pulled from the connector carefully."
Ultimately, the choice is yours.

Using contractions: To use contractions or not to use contractions? That's the question. We have the answer: 'Tis nobler to use them. Contractions shorten your sentences and improve the overall flow. If you doubt us on this point, try reading a paragraph without contractions aloud. It sounds unnatural. Swap in contractions and the paragraph sounds human again.
Something to consider: If you plan to translate your manual into another language, using a lot of contractions can make the job more difficult.

Short paragraphs are key: The rule of a well-formed, five-sentence paragraph is suspended in tech writing. You don't need theses or topic sentences for manuals, and you don't need long paragraphs to defend your assertions.
You can start a new paragraph whenever you start a new thought. (See what we did there?) Readers like short paragraphs. Short is easier to skim. We're fans of using short, declarative bullets to break up content into little readable chunks.

Internationalization: If you plan on publishing for an international audience, your manual will need to be translated, which is an expensive process. The right style will make the translation process much easier. Some general style tips are the same: It's even more important to limit your vocabulary to simple/common words. But when writing for translation, avoid jokes and idioms (they don't translate well), use contractions in moderation, and be consistent with your phrasing. This tutorial, for example, would be very hard to translate into another language. We've used a lot of colloquialisms and idioms, quite a bit of creative language, and we didn't bother to limit our vocabulary. That's a decision we made to keep this (long) tutorial both informational and engaging. These are the kinds of tradeoffs you'll have to make as a writer.
There's enough nuance to internationalization to fill a book, so check out The Content Wrangler.

Audience

Writing never takes place in a vacuum (unless you're literally in a vacuum, which would be incredibly uncomfortable). When you're writing a manual, you're always writing to someone. Figure out who that is. The more you know about them, the better your writing will be.
Optimize your manual to match the target audience's expertise. The *Books for Dummies* series, for example, has successfully targeted one narrow audience: the clueless newbie. *For Dummies* publishers have a book on everything from writing résumés to coaching children. Each one features diagrams, illustrations, extended explanations, context, and basic tips.
Auto Repair for Dummies has a whole chapter dedicated to changing your car's oil. It covers what oil does in the car, the pros and cons of synthetic oil, and instructions – 15 pages of 'em. If the book was entitled Auto Repair for Experts, however, that whole chapter could be boiled down to a single sentence: "Change the oil." Unless they're changing the oil on a supercar, no car expert will need 15 pages of instruction for an oil change.
Knowing your audience means knowing what to include and what not to include. It means you know how many steps it'll take to explain something to them. It means you know how long your manual is going to be and what sort of language you can get away with using.
Here are a few things to keep in mind:

Reading level = writing level

You shouldn't write over your audience's head. You also shouldn't write drastically under it, although in our experience this is rare.
Flesch-Kincaid Readability Tests are the most common way to ascertain a text's readability. Flesch-Kincaid scores ease of reading on a scale of 0-100, with 100 being the easiest to read. Another Flesch-Kincaid test estimates reading level (K-12). The average American adult reads at about a ninth-grade level.
To show you just how wide manuals can miss the mark, we decided to test a manufacturer manual for a popular product – Apple's MacBook Pro – on the Flesch-Kincaid scale. The Apple user manual scored an abysmal –2.2 and required a reading grade level of 24. (In case you were wondering: no, grades don't go that high.) To put this in context, Shakespeare's Macbeth is at an 11th grade reading level.
Here's a safe rule of thumb: A user manual shouldn't be more difficult to read than Shakespeare.
iFixit's repair manual for the same device scored at a fourth grade reading level. The lower the reading level, the more likely your readers will be able to understand what you're saying.
Not sure how to gauge the reading level of your writing? You can use sites like The Readability Test Tool at read-able.com to measure readability on existing web sites. Word and Excel already have readability tools built into them – they just need enabling.

Existing knowledge

What can you assume your audience already knows? Technical writers often forget what their audience knows and, especially, what they don't. Mechanical engineers sometimes write manuals that sound like they are written for other mechanical engineers – but if the target audience isn't super tech savvy, then rambling on about shear load, helical gearing, and kinematic chains without an explanation is a problem.
Military organizations are amazingly bad at this. They have so many acronyms that you have to spend months learning them all before you can communicate with anyone. Here's an example from an Army Shipboard Operations manual:

a. Emergency Training. Emergency requirements or training necessary for imminent deployment usually will come from DA through a MACOM such as FORSCOM. Army aviation units will receive the higher command's assistance in scheduling ships and other resources.

The standard practice in technical writing is to spell out an acronym on its first usage, putting the acronym in parentheses. This ensures clarity for all readers.

Six ways to improve your tc career

Feeling as if you've reached a deadlock in your career? Don't leave your future to its fate – it is all in your hands! Here are some tips that will give your career a boost and a surge of new energy.

Image: © Dmitriy Shironosov/ 123rf.com

By Leah Guren

It's time to take responsibility

Do you ever feel as though you are drowning in a deluge of self-help tips? Everything from weight loss to the latest management fad seems to find its way into my inbox. And while it is quite tempting to simply delete all of these emails and get back to my emergency du jour, I risk deleting useful tips that directly relate to career planning.

Let's face it: ***no one else is going to take responsibility for your career***. Each of us needs to learn how to roll up our sleeves and do the hard work of analysis, planning, and implementing, if we want to make wise career choices. Without this hard work, we end up passively riding the waves of fortune (both good and bad).

Many people avoid this self-imposed career planning because it seems like a lot of work (it is) and it may reveal things that they prefer to ignore (it does). Who wants to discover an embarrassing inefficiency at some critical task? Who wants to admit to being hopelessly out of touch with current best practices? But there is good news that makes the effort worthwhile:

- **Career planning is empowering.** People who make and implement plans tend to be happier and more satisfied in their careers than people who don't. In fact, one of the biggest causes of depression is the feeling of helplessness; so by taking action and gaining some control, most people feel a surge of hope and empowerment. The optimism created by taking action is more than just New Age speculation; multiple independent studies have shown that optimists are more likely to be hired, promoted, and given interesting projects.
- **These are scalable "tweaks" to what you are already doing.** You don't have to rethink your entire career or lifestyle to implement the following simple tips. In fact, you may already be applying some of these.

So here are the six ways that you can improve your career.

1. Capture metrics

You can't control what you can't quantify. If you have ever struggled with estimating the time for a project because of unknown factors, you know how utterly frustrating this can be!

Time is the single most important metric for anyone working as contractor or consultant. Even for full-time in-house employees, being able to budget your time is crucial for meeting internal deadlines and the expectations of your boss. However, you can't budget time if you don't know how long it takes to do a specific task or what the typical turn-around is when you hand things over to a client or for internal review.

When you don't know how long things take, it makes it very difficult to produce an accurate bid (both time and money). Further, you always sound more professional when you don't guestimate.

Start to treat time as a valuable resource. Use a time tracker application. There are several free options (SlimTimer is my favorite) that allow you to define any number of activities and arrange them in whichever way makes sense to you (for example, by client or by project). When you sit down to work, click the activity in a small, unobtrusive window. Every time you change an activity, you click the new one (you don't have to deselect the previous activity). The application automatically keeps track of how much time you've spent on each activity, and can generate useful reports to help you analyze where your time has gone.

To make this more useful, make sure to define time-waster tasks, such as playing games, using social media, or even human distractions such as that chatty co-worker who wants to stand in your cubicle doorway and tell you about a new restaurant. Don't forget legitimate tasks that are potential time-wasters, such as looking for documents, tweaking graphics, or redoing something that you thought you had already done.

We also need some metrics about resource use. Resources can be things such as software applications, references (web sites, books, people), or physical tools or gadgets.

After this initial period of gathering data, you can start to see where your time goes and what resources are valuable (and therefore cost-effective to update). For example, in a recent analysis, I discovered a pay-for-service application that I rarely used, plus several hidden time-wasters that I hadn't been aware of.

Now armed with the metrics, you should have a better sense of how long it takes you to edit a page, write a Help topic, apply reviewer comments, etc. For time-waster activities, develop strategies:

- **Use games as a reward.** Use five minutes of a favorite game (for example, online crossword puzzle or Sudoku) as a reward for a set amount of work on a difficult task.
- **Stop people interruptions graciously but firmly.** "I want to hear all about that restaurant, Charley, but I'm right in the middle of something now. Want to meet in the coffee room at 10:45?"
- **Rethink your data infrastructure.** If you are spending time looking for things, or redoing something that you thought you had already done, maybe the problem is your content management (or lack thereof). If the pain (wasted time and effort) becomes big enough, it is worth the effort to get properly organized and professional with your content.

Finally, remember that it takes a month to establish a new habit, so do your best to apply the new strategies consistently until they become second nature.

2. Master tools

Poor tool usage accounts for more wasted time and energy. Sadly, even though we expect our peers to be experts, many technical communicators are only doing very basic things with the most important applications. As professionals, we are expected to go past the basics in the applications we use every day (DTPs, HATs, graphics applications, etc.).

Today's complex tools are not always easy to learn on your own. Consider taking courses (either from the tool vendor or from a reputable third party). Try the tutorials if they are provided with that application. Join user groups for the application. And most important of all, build training into your schedule. If you don't budget and plan the time for training, it won't happen!

3. Invest in your domain

You have to be very knowledgeable about the domain in which your product sits. Think about what industry you are in. How comfortable are you with the terms, technology, and business practices? Technical communicators who don't understand their domain never gain the respect of their subject matter experts (SMEs)!

Whether you are just getting started or trying to stay current, start with the industry's trade journals. Consider taking courses and attending conferences or tradeshows for the industry. Again, build this study time into your schedule, even if it is only 30 minutes per week of reading time.

4. Cultivate contacts

It always comes down to people. You may not get a job or a promotion because of who you know, but you get exposed to *more opportunities* because of who you know.

- **Do you know what the people around you do?** In some companies, people become very isolated in their departments. Talk to people from different departments. Learn their names. Ask them what they do. People think that you are a fascinating conversationalist when you get them to talk about themselves!
- **Annotate your contact list.** It isn't enough to have a person's name and phone number; add notes that indicate how you know this person, what context, what they were good at, etc.
- **Find ways to do live networking.** These days, everyone thinks first of social media. But few connections are as powerful as those we make face-to-face. If there is a professional group in your area, attend the meetings. Go to conferences.
- **Learn to use social media properly.** You may already be a master of social media, but many people make critical mistakes about what they post on Facebook and what they post on LinkedIn. For example, Facebook is the right place for friends and family, but be aware that there is no such thing as true privacy settings. Never post anything that you would not want a client or potential client to read! LinkedIn, on the other hand, should be your main focus for professional, business-related posts. Don't clutter it with anything not directly related to your professional goals. Similarly, don't fall into the trap of connecting to anyone whom you don't really know. If you haven't worked with someone, how can you possibly provide the assumed endorsement that comes with a connection?

5. Diversify mentally

Don't fall into the trap of living in a niche. Mastery is good, but high skills lead to complacency. Consider:

- **Volunteer to do something new.** Volunteering is a great opportunity to get out of a rut and experiment. You don't have to offer to help only with those things you already know how to do.
- **Find a hobby that has nothing to do with your job.** Do you sit all day at a computer? Try something physically demanding. Writing very technical content? Try something creative and right-brain, such as an art class. Never learned to play an instrument? It's not too late.
- **Push yourself out of your comfort zone**. There is ample evidence that challenging ourselves mentally keeps us creative and mentally young. Don't let fear of failure hold you back from doing something completely different.

6. Strengthen the alternate value

Money is great, but we need more than an income to be truly happy in our careers. A good way to find a non-monetary value is to identify what you do that helps people (directly or indirectly). Find ways that help people around you at work; for example, are you the resident expert in Word? Can you help SMEs prepare a research paper for publication? Position yourself as an advocate for the user. Take action by proposing ways to make your company's documentation deliverables more useful. Become an advocate for the profession. Take the time to educate people about technical communication and about the value that we bring to companies and users. Advocacy is a very powerful way to start feeling great about what you do.

Conclusion

Whether you are just beginning your career or have been a practitioner for several decades, you can always find ways to improve. By collecting data to help you identify your time usage (and eliminate some time-wasters), and by improving your mastery of tools and domain knowledge, you can improve your efficiency and credibility. By paying attention to the people around you and actively cultivating contacts, you will expose yourself to many more choices and opportunities. And by pushing yourself out of your comfort zone and finding the human value in what you do, you can stay creative and mentally positive.

I wish all of you a long, prosperous, and personally rewarding career.

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contact

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tekom Europe Roadshow 2014 unites tc professionals in eight cities

Following the success of last year's Roadshow, tekom Europe will hit the road in 2014 to bring together tc professionals from across Europe. The mobile one-day conference that will be hosted in eight European cities in September encourages a fruitful dialogue between industry experts, decision-makers and managers in the field of technical communication.

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By Anke Mecklenbrauck and Kiriaki Kampouridou

Which media channels are relevant in tc and how can technical writers utilize them? How can authors create adaptive content, which adjusts to different output formats and devices? What's state-of-the-art regarding the production of multilingual content? Numerous presentations, workshops, and panel discussions are seeking to answer these and many other questions at the tekom Europe Roadshow this year.

The program

The conference offers participants a unique opportunity to expand their knowledge and exchange ideas regarding various topics around the main theme of this year's conference:
The conference offers participants a unique opportunity to expand their knowledge and exchange ideas regarding technical communication standards, processes and intelligent publishing.
The roadshow seeks to spread information and knowledge on the latest industry trends. All presentations are strictly product-neutral and clearly related to the main conference theme.
In each of the eight conference cities the program will emphasize a different industry including software, medical engineering and technology, automobile engineering, machinery and manufacturing.
In addition to the varying industry focus, each city will witness different presentations on topics such as
Standards (understanding and applying standards in the techcomm workflow; influence of standards on media production; latest developments, etc.),
Conceptual Design (creating a media concept, style guide, content strategy, workflow planning, etc.),
Publishing (cross-media publishing, mobile documentation, single-source publishing, DITA, etc.) and
Customer Feedback (social media, user feedback, user-generated content, etc.).

Enabling a fruitful exchange of knowledge and ideas between technical communicators from across Europe is the roadshow's principal goal. The conference will offer participants many opportunities for networking with their peers. Interactive sessions and panel discussions are designed specifically to enable a lively dialogue between the speakers and the audience.

The participants

The roadshow is targeted at decision-makers and professionals in the field of technical communication who are eager to learn and share their knowledge about the latest industry trends. The organizers expect attendees from a large spectrum of professional backgrounds ranging from technical writers, information designers, technical documentation/communication managers to marketing executives, heads of technical documentation departments, and many more.

Information and contact

The tekom Europe Roadshow is organized by tcworld GmbH, the service provider of tekom Europe, Europe's largest professional association for technical communication. Currently the tekom Europe Roadshow team is preparing the conference program. A large number of sponsors have already confirmed their generous support (see the list of sponsors on the left page). In addition, the Roadshow thrives on the support of many country organizations of tekom Europe (see the list of country organizations on the left page).
Registration for the tekom Europe Roadshow will open on May 15, 2014 via an online-registration tool.
For more information visit
http://roadshow.tekom.eu
or contact the project team at
roadshow@tekom.eu.
Don't miss this opportunity to expand your network and to gain new ideas and insights regarding the latest trends in technical communication. We look forward to seeing you at the tekom Europe Roadshow 2014!

tcworld calendar 2014

when	what	where
May 19 – 20	**SDL Innovate Amsterdam** www.sdl.com/innovate ①	Amsterdam, The Netherlands
May 22	**TAUS Roundtable** www.taus.net/taus-translation-automation-roundtable-in-moscow	Moscow, Russia
June 2 – 3	**TAUS Industry Leader Forum** www.taus.net/taus-industry-leaders-forum-2014	Dublin, Ireland
June 3 – 6	**Localization World Dublin** www.localizationworld.com	Dublin, Ireland
June 10 – 12	**SDL Innovate San Francisco** www.sdl.com/innovate ①	San Francisco, CA, USA
June 19 – 20	**Congility 2014** www.congility.com ②	London Gatwick, United Kingdom
Sep 8 – 26	**tekom Europe Roadshow** http://conferences.tekom.de/tekom-europe-roadshow/ See page 36 for details	Paris, Ghent, Eindhoven, Copenhagen, Warsaw, Istanbul, Bucharest, Vienna
Sep 10	**SDL Innovate Sydney** www.sdl.com/innovate ①	Sydney, Australia
Sep 12	**SDL Innovate Tokyo** www.sdl.com/innovate ①	Tokyo, Japan
Oct 1 – 2	**Brand2Global 2014** www.brand2global.com	London, United Kingdom
Oct 29 – 31	**Localization World Vancouver** www.localizationworld.com	Vancouver, Canada
Nov 5 – 7	**Languages & The Media** www.languages-media.com	Berlin, Germany
Nov 11 – 13	**tcworld conference 2014** http://conferences.tekom.de/tcworld-conference-2014/	Stuttgart, Germany

①

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Since 2006 the **Congility** team has been looking at overcoming format boundaries, enabling multi-device delivery, structure and semantics, and user-lead information design for increased ROI. Back then, this appraoch was bleeding edge. Now the entire industry is buzzing about how multichannel and even omnichannel strategies impact how we work and how we create, manage and deliver our content. Each year marketing experts and technical communicators, business managers, content directors and user experience professionals meet near London and learn from real case studies and globally recognized thought leaders. They come to learn from the best and return to their companies with solutions to overcome project barriers.

If we are really going to escape the silo trap, we have to engage across disciplines and communities. Congility sessions examine the latest methods and strategies in presentations and workshop format, as well as casual and business conversations.

"Content Agility" is all about how organizations can make their content agile, increase quality and lower costs for improved ROI, and make content a business asset. Each year Congility brings together a solid and growing community and from ever more diverse backgrounds.