



**Bogo Vatovec  
Consulting**

Designing Business Interaction

## Trends in Technical Communication

Presented by / Bogo Vatovec

Change Management / Knowledge Engineering / User Experience /  
Interaction Design / Process Engineering

## A little survey

- » How many of you have been in the field for less than two years?
- » How many for more than five?
  
- » How many have changed jobs in the past two years?
- » How many of you are often bored at what you are doing?
  
- » How many are worried about their job-security in the future?
- » How many of you can tell me what is Technical Communication?

## What I will (and will not ) do today?

### I will not:

- » Give you a list of trends to take home shouting „Eureka, Eureka!“
- » Give you the latest tips and tricks on FrameMaker you should (or shouldn't) know.

### Instead, I will:

- » Show you some trends and buzzwords and let you decide which ones are right for you.
- » Try to show you a way to read and understand the trends.
- » Encourage you to have a different opinion.

# Setting up the Context



## The good and the bad news

**We are in one of the most amazing professions that exist!**

**But also in one extremely controversial.**

## Not so long ago

### First:

- » The new economy boom provided amazing possibilities for everyone.
- » A demand has been higher than supply.
- » Quantity has been often more important than quality.

### And then:

- » Companies massively laid-off people in cost-centres and were (are?) saving wherever possible.
- » Now the seed is being separated from the weed.

A Technical Communication field has been booming as well, but we focused on wrong things...

- » **Internal fight between specialists:**
  - » Tool freaks
  - » Technical writers
  - » Usability experts
- » **Contemplating buzzwords that only enlightened technical communicators understand**
  - » Single sourcing
  - » Task-orientation vs. Function descriptions
  - » Indexing
- » **Increasing attempts to (re)define the profession**
  - » Technical writers?
  - » Information designers?
  - » Communicators?
  - » Knowledge engineers?
  - » Instructional designers?
  - » Information architects?

## Meanwhile, the fun has been taken by others

- » Knowledge management is done by strategic consulting groups and software companies and programmers.
- » Usability and especially interface design is done by programmers and, when lucky, by usability specialists.
- » Content Management is done by strategic consulting groups and software companies and programmers.
- » Marketing communication and PR is done by marketing/PR departments.

## So why I paint everything black?

- » Because it is black.
- » We say that programmers are geeks. Technical writers are just as geeky as the programmers.
- » We have not managed to understand the business context of our work and properly justify our existence.
- » We have (as all geeks) stuck to our terminology and not look at where the business is going and where “the money is”.

**We didn't learn to COMMUNICATE.**

But wait, this is supposed to be a positive presentation...

- » Consolidation on the market means focus on quality and services.
- » Companies save money wherever possible, while still having to keep their business running.
- » Large consulting and outsourcing projects have been stopped.
- » The companies are looking for external specialists to help them with specific tasks.

**The market is recovering. Very quickly.  
Let's not miss the opportunity again!**

You can use this great opportunity,  
if you only...

- » Stop being a “technical writer”.
- » Learn to sell your skills to everyone – regardless of where you work – think as an independent.
- » Understand that “good enough” is the quality to deliver.
- » Understand the paradox: The companies are looking for specialists. You should be a generalist.
- » Start practicing the user-centred approach in daily life: understand your users, understand the business environment you work in, understand the trends. Focus on helping the company and not only fulfil your passion
- » Start getting involved in product design rather than documenting the results.

# Skills in Technical Communication



At the job interview:  
Skills everybody is going to ask you about

- » Knowledge of Robohelp and ForeHelp.
- » Knowledge of HTML and WinHelp.
- » Knowledge of FrameMaker.

Key message: OK, OK. So you know how to use a hammer.

At the job interview:  
Essential skills nobody is going to ask you about

- » Writing: communicating information through words and visual images.
- » Grammar and style. Knowledge of the language.
- » Editing: anticipating readers' comprehension and making sure the grammar, spelling and editorial style is followed.
- » Information design: planning a communication product.

**Key message: OK, OK. So you know your handcraft.**

At the job interview:  
Skills everybody should ask you about (but rarely do)

- » Project management: planning and implementing a project.
- » Business and industry experience, subject matter expertise
- » Usability: Designing information products for the users and evaluating their ease of use.
- » Marketing technical communication, quality metrics, etc.

**Key message: Aha, so you can actually do for me what I need!**

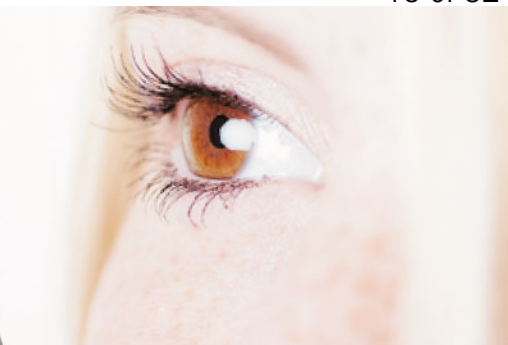
# Tools in Technical Communication



## Tools?

- » When hiring, many TC managers pay more attention in the proficiency with tools rather than actual information design.
- » Many TCs judge their abilities themselves by their knowledge of tools.
- » Yet the majority of tools can be learned very quickly. And change very often.
- » Over focus on tools is dangerous:
  - » Well-produced manuals with bad content.
  - » Focus on tools scares away really good candidates.
  - » Once the tools are mastered, their use is a little more than a clerical skill.
  - » By focusing on the tools, you directly ignore focus on the business – and this is where the company's value is and what the upper management understands.

# Buzzwords, trends, issues



## What are the Trends? Which ones are in/out?

- ↑ Knowledge management
- ↑ Change Management
- ↑ Usability and User interface design
- Embedded help, Context sensitive help
- Content Management
- Marketing communication
- XML and all kinds of MLs
- ↓ Single sourcing
- ↓ Task-oriented or modular documentation
- ↓ FrameMaker, RoboHelp, MS Word

## Issues in Technical Communication (1)

- » Job skills and knowledge
- » Audience analysis and understanding
- » Designing new documentation processes
- » Designing for visualization
- » Information dissemination tools
- » Collaboration and team-based, cross-functional projects
- » Hardcopy and online evaluation and quality metrics

## Issues in Technical Communication (2)

- » Research Models for Technical Communication – how to bridge the gap between researcher and practitioners
- » Certification among technical communicators.
- » Certifications of technical or industry skills.
- » The name of the profession – technical communication.
- » Status of the profession.

## Some References and Info on Trends mentioned



## Whom to listen to?

- » JoAnn Hackos
- » Ginny Redish
- » Paula Berger
- » Saul Carliner
- » Bill Gribbons
- » Edmund Weiss

# The Must-Read Publications

## » **Scholarly journals**

- » Technical Communication (published by the STC)
- » IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication (published by the IEEE PCS)
- » Technical Communication Quarterly (published by ATTW)
- » The Journal of Technical Writing and Editing (published by Baywood Publishing)
- » The Journal of Business and Technical Communication (published by Sage Publications).

## » **Professional magazine**

- » Harvard Business Review
- » Intercom (published by STC),
- » Editorial Eye (published by Editorial Experts, Inc.)
- » Writer's Digest and The Writer (two general magazines for all types of writers)
- » Wired

## Knowledge management

- » The single most important topic for technical communicators in the next years.
- » Although KM is currently not a major buzzword anymore, it is a mandatory discipline inside almost every company.
- » Chunking information, organizing it and designing ways of accessing it has always been a field of TC.

## Usability and user interface design

- » A topic every TC gets involved in at the very beginning.
- » A common transition field for TCs that want to change and do something else.
- » Usability, in particular usability testing and interface design offer a great possibility to get tightly involved with product development and add more value to the company.

## Information plenum

- » A concept developed by Edmund Weiss, triggered by the Internet. The opposite of vacuum. The space is full of information.
- » For the users, search becomes more important than creation. Companies publish everything online.

## Single sourcing

- » A topic that can be effectively linked with Knowledge Management and Content Management for added business value.
- » After years, the tools are finally ready. The problem is, we are not.
- » Organizing of content in proper independent blocks has proven to be an information design challenge not many are coping with successfully.

## Embedded help

- » The latest help concept yet to be fully exploited.
- » The help is not separated from the interface, but rather fully integrated.
- » Since it is new, the tools are not really supporting it, thus requiring higher development effort.

## Content Management

- » Another lost opportunity for TCs taken by the strategy consultants and programmers.
- » Related to Single Sourcing and Knowledge Management.
- » Has a strong business and aspect related to it.

## XML and other MLs

- » Many technical communicators think that they must know XML and other related buzzwords to be successful in the industry. This is wrong.
- » Understand the first two chapter of the book on XML.
- » Understand object-oriented concepts and meta language concepts.
- » Understand the complexity and importance of taxonomy and human search patterns.
- » Leave the XMLing to programmers or those who want to become programmers.
  
- » In one sentence : understand the concepts of good information design



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Thanks!

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