Technical Communication Industry Survey

Preliminary Report

April 2007

Summary
This report summarizes the results of an online survey conducted over 2 months at the start of 2007. Detailed results will be available soon on the TechWriter website www.techwriter.com.au . We recommend that you read this in conjunction with our Salary Survey (also on the web) which will give you an idea of current market rates.

This survey asks employers and those involved in the technical communication industry for information about technical communication in their organizations and what they look for when hiring technical communicators. This is the second year of the survey.

The key findings are unchanged from last year:
- The majority of respondents use Word as their authoring tool
- The main documents produced are user manuals and training materials
- The key competencies necessary for success are writing ability, skills in dealing with people and using relevant technology
- When hiring, employers place most emphasis on performance at an interview and consideration of past experience.

However, writing skills have risen in importance compared with collaboration skills. Although not the top competencies, there has been a significant increase in the importance of content management and a drop in interest in usability testing.

Respondent Profile
The population profile is the same for the two years. Most respondents are from NSW (51%) and Victoria (34%). Respondents were managers (29%), team leaders (15%) and technical communicators (21%). Main industries involved were IT (36%) and Financial Services (16%). The majority (40%) of respondents were from large organizations with greater than 500 employees. The majority (67%) had a dedicated in-house documentation team.

Hiring Practice
Most (71%) had hired a technical communicator in the last 2 years, 66% of these had hired more than one person. The methods of successfully finding candidates were 65% using an agency and 42% via word of mouth.

According to those respondents who had hired a technical communicator during the last 24 months, the main means of assessing a person's suitability was consideration of a person's past experience (83%), the interview (83%) and a review of work

samples (61%). Performance at an interview was rated as critical by 55% of respondents.

Competencies
Respondents were asked to rate the top competencies required to be successful in their organizations. These are largely unchanged from last year although there has been an increase in the importance of writing skills compared to collaboration skills.

Competency (% rating)	Critical	Very Important	Important	Ranking (prior yr)
Write clearly for specific audiences	65	29	5	1 (2)
Write, edit and test documents	61	31	6	2 (3)
Collaboration with subject matter experts and coworkers	45	40	12	3 (1)
Using relevant technology	19	57	21	4 (5)
Evaluate one's own work and the work of others	19	55	25	5 (4)
Research, analysis and reporting	17	45	23	6 (9)
Content Management	12	35	33	7= (11)
Assess and learn to use technologies	12	48	32	7= (6)
Presentation skills	16	42	30	9 (8)
Instructional design	12	35	36	10 (10)
Project Management	10	34	39	11 (12)
Usability testing	8	32	40	12 (7)
Single sourcing	8	22	42	13 (13)

Table 1: Relative importance of competencies compared to last survey

Qualifications
The information related to employee qualifications continues to be mixed. Many respondents (60%) indicated that team members had an undergraduate degree or better. However, when asked ideally what qualifications team members needed, many respondents indicated that experience and good writing ability were most sought after. Possession of an undergraduate degree was seen as an advantage rather than necessary for most roles. Despite this, 55% of respondents indicated that they would recommend employees obtain formal qualifications in technical communication. Part of the reason for this seeming contradiction may be that the survey showed there was low awareness of the technical communication courses on offer with only 29% of respondents able to name a specific course.

Tools
As in 2006, the main tool used by documentation teams is MS Word which is used by 80% of those surveyed, with 24% of them using only this tool. The next most frequently used tools were Framemaker (26%), Dreamweaver (24%) and Robohelp (26%).

Products

The top 3 work items produced are user manuals (77%), training materials (64%), online help (52%) and maintenance/operations manuals (47%). The work produced varied according to the industry with the percentages as in Table 2.

Industry	User manuals	Training materials	Online help	Policies and Procedures	Web content	Maintenance Operations manual
Overall	**77%**	65%	52%	45%	45%	47%
IT	**94%**	70%	79%	33%	36%	42%
Government	71%	43%	43%	57%	**86%**	57%
Financial Services	**67%**	**67%**	47%	40%	53%	33%
Defence	80%	40%	0	40%	0%	**100%**

Table 2: Types of work produced. Respondents grouped by industry

Conclusion

Most employers have realized that the best technical communicators combine strong writing and editing ability with interpersonal skills. They are looking for people who can work as part of a team as well as independently. The main method of assessment is an interview and consideration of past experience but it can be difficult to assess the key competencies by this means. This is supported by the importance of word of mouth or personal references in the process. Using a reliable agency that has experience with a contractor over a period of time can also be of value.

There is quite a lot of recruitment activity in the industry with the majority of respondents having hired more than one person. In a time of skills shortage, it is important to focus on what is really crucial to the role. Often having the exact match of experience and tools may not be as important as attitude and interpersonal skills. Most competent technical writers can learn new tools very quickly; changing their behaviour is much harder.