Getting Contract Work in Today’s Job Market

By Ed Thompson

The economy is improving. The job market is starting to rebound. Once again, companies are starting to inch away from the hiring-freeze routine that accompanied the sagging market.

So is it time for those unemployed to get a full-time job and settle back into the life of the working American? Maybe. But it is still too early to tell.

There are other possibilities out there for the tech writer who wants to gain employment but has not found any success looking for a permanent position with a Silicon Valley firm. That option is contract work. It may not be the only option, but sometimes in a job market that has not reached a peak, it may be one of the better options.

When positions become available in a recovering job market, as is the case right now, many firms – still feeling unsure about future earnings – may feel less inclined to hire a full-time employee. But when the work is there and needs to be done, companies will turn to contractors. This allows the company to finish the task without attaching the long-term commitment of health care benefits, 401k plans, stock options and salaries that come with it.

Local technical writer Neil Arsenault recently accepted his first contract employment offer after 13 years as a full-time employee.

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A Note From TECO’s New Department Chair

Marietta Reber introduces herself, outlines her goals and objectives for the Technical Communications Department

Now is a great time to expand your horizons and increase your professional skills by taking technical communications (TECO) classes at De Anza. We offer a variety of industry savvy courses taught by working professionals in state-of-the-art facilities.

In today’s economy many people find themselves exploring new career avenues or looking for opportunities to increase their marketability and job security. Whether you are interested in technology, project management, programming, business communications, instructional design, web development, or a host of other fields, taking classes in technical communications is a step in the right direction. In our courses, you will learn how to organize and communicate complex information in easy to use written and online documentation.

As the new Chair of the Technical Communications Department, I want to build on the successes of the department and create an even more dynamic program by:

• Partnering with industry to create curriculum that meets the demanding and changing needs of technology and 21st century corporations. Whether modifying our current curriculum or adding new courses, we want to ensure our students obtain the communication skills that industry demands.

• Reaching out to engineers, scientists, technicians, and other technical personnel in industry to help them communicate better and position themselves for raises and promotions. We have designed key TECO classes specifically for technical specialists, and credits are transferable to Cal Poly and other California colleges and universities.

(continued on page 2)
Meet the New TECO Department Chair

(continued from page 1)

- Offering neighboring corporations valuable training programs, tailored to their employees. Working with De Anza’s Business and Industry Institute, we will bring our expertise to your campus.

- Making industry more aware of our TECO certification and AA programs so that our students will be far ahead of their competition upon completion of our program.

I am pleased to be chairing this exceptional department with a proud history.

If you would like more information on the program or to speak with me about your specific situation, please call me at (408) 864-5565.

- Marrietta Reber

Look inside:

Would you like to know more about Marrietta Reber, our New TECO Department Chair? For more information, see Page 6

Higher standards: New Technical Communications Department Chair
Marrietta Reber brings real world experience to the TECO program at De Anza College.

“My aim is to put down on paper what I see and what I feel in the best and simplest way.”

Ernest Hemingway
(1899-1961)
Mathew Morrow, a systems engineer for Merck & Co., was sweating bullets. He was about to submit his first Current Good Manufacturing Practices (cGMP) document, a massive and detail-rich report that outlined all of the automation procedures he designed for the company’s latest venture, a state-of-the-art expansion to a vaccine manufacturing facility. The stakes were high for the recently hired engineer. Since he was new to the office, he wanted to impress his supervisor, but he was worried about the quality of his writing. “I was a chemical engineering major in college,” he explained. “I took one English class the whole time I was at school.” Luckily, help was available. He arranged to have a technical writer review his document before he submitted it. “That guy was great,” Morrow said. “He fixed up the organization and even the grammar.”

This situation is not unique. Engineers frequently look for help when writing technical documents such as manuals and reports. In some cases, this help is requested because they lack writing experience. In other cases, it is because they do not have enough time to write in addition to performing their engineering duties. For these reasons, technical writers are an essential asset to engineers because they can write well, and also because they relieve the engineers from having to write while under deadlines.

One factor that makes technical writers essential is the fact they are trained to write effectively. Clifford Wayne, a technical writer for Sun Microsystems, feels that some engineers need help with their writing because of their educational background. “They get their training in the development of hardware and software.” As a result, some engineers lack experience in writing.

Technical writers, however, receive specialized writing training. “Technical writers have a different set of skills [from engineers and technicians],” stated Mindy Beller, a technical writer and editor for Hewlett-Packard. Accredited technical writing programs always provide instruction in topics such as proofreading, process writing and developmental editing. The Technical Communications department at De Anza College, for example, covers all of these topics in the introductory course alone.

Morrow, now a veteran at writing cGMP documents, feels that technical writers make his job easier because they can write clearly and concisely. “Without technical writers, Merck would never get a single dose of vaccine to the public because the Federal Drug Administration (FDA) would never give us a license,” he explained. “The cGMP is a federally required document that has to adhere to FDA regulations for technical accuracy, standard documentation practices and traceability from the concept phase to the final stages.” Technical writers help Morrow with this complicated task by reviewing his work and writing complex sections. “It’s hard work sometimes,” he added. “I’m glad the tech writers can help me with it.”

Another benefit from technical-writing training is the ability to understand and write from the audience’s perspective. A frequent problem that affects engineers is tunnel vision, a phenomenon that occurs when engineers become so focused on their work, that they lose perspective and overestimate their audience’s abilities and needs. This phenomenon can wreak havoc on a technical document’s readability. According to Wayne, these kinds of documents are either “too technical or not technical enough. It swings both ways.” Too little information can frustrate or bewilder readers that lack the in-depth technical knowledge that engineers possess.

Inexperienced writers afflicted with tunnel vision also often forget that they are more skilled at using their products than their audience. “Engineers and technicians sometimes forget that users need to be shown every step and process along the way,” said Debra Rosenfeld, a freelance technical writer and editor. This can lead to instruction manuals that skip or omit information, making it difficult to properly use the technology.

(continued on page 11)
By David Dour

People looking for work as technical writers need to know how to use Adobe FrameMaker because, according to Mary Edmunds, a FrameMaker instructor at Foothill College, “You don’t have a choice.”

Edmunds, a former technical writer, began using FrameMaker (originally developed and marketed by Frame Technology) in 1993. She describes it as a very powerful desktop publishing program for creating technical documents that can handle an incredible amount of information. FrameMaker has become the industry standard, an indispensable tool for creating complex documentation such as user manuals.

Learning FrameMaker

Learning how to use FrameMaker is difficult. Beginners should not plan on taking it home over the weekend and learning more than the absolute basics.

“The basics probably won’t be much help to new technical writers working on their first assignment,” said Maria Solorio, a technical writer with the Franklin McKinley School District.

Many writers who have used FrameMaker find it to be complex and quirky, with a great deal of hidden functionality. “This is a really difficult program to fully learn on your own. Believe me,” stated Solorio. Initially, Solorio learned some of the basics of an earlier version of FrameMaker through the trial-and-error method, but realized that she was “running up hill with nowhere to go.” After several months, she relented and began taking courses in FrameMaker with a private tutor, so she could fully utilize all of the application’s tools.

Kathy Duggan, a former technical writer and editor with Liberate Technologies, said the application is initially intimidating to new users because they are used to creating documents with Microsoft Word software. “FrameMaker handles documents differently than Word,” she said. “Word is a word-processing program, while FrameMaker is a desktop publishing program.” Duggan said FrameMaker is more suited for “putting documents together into books.”

Resources for FrameMaker Users

Staff Reports

There are many resources for prospective technical writers to learn FrameMaker and for experienced writers to upgrade their skills to Version 7.0.

Classroom Instruction

http://www.foothill.fhda.edu/schedule/index.html
Mary Edmunds teaches a class at Foothill College for beginner- and advanced-level FrameMaker users.

Support Forums

Adobe’s Web site includes web-based forums, tutorials and a searchable knowledgebase. These features are available through the Adobe Online item in FrameMaker’s file menu.

Mailing Lists and Newsgroups

http://frameusers.com
Mailing lists are a popular alternative to web-based message boards. The Framers Mailing List is a good source of support for FrameMaker.

Tutorials

http://www.mendem.com
Mendem Concord, Inc. has produced a series of tutorials. These tutorials require a Java-capable browser.

http://www.io.com/~tcm/etwr2372/frame_index.html
Designing Print Documentation: FrameMaker Tutorials, by David A. McMurrey, offers a great selection of tutorials. Entirely Web based, it is divided into 14 sections that cover the most common tasks performed with FrameMaker. It is an excellent introduction to FrameMaker for new users.

FAQs and Other Resources

Users often turn to Frequently Asked Question (FAQ) lists for support. In the case of FrameMaker, there are several FAQ lists available.

http://www.microtype.com/
A comprehensive and current FrameMaker resource, not affiliated with the Adobe site, is "FrameMaker/Acrobat Articles & Resources, Quick Reference Guides, & FAQs." To access the page, click the Resources link on the MicroType home page.

http://theideastore.com/
The Idea Store publishes a useful list of tips and shortcuts for FrameMaker users.
The skills of a technical writer are valuable to professions in a wide variety of fields

By Chad Stanke

In the increasingly competitive job market, limiting one’s knowledge to a single field is becoming a guaranteed way to lose a job opportunity. In fact, many employers look for well-rounded applicants, who show the ability to complete multiple tasks and assume many hats when necessary.

One such skill that will help a prospective employee increase his versatility is technical writing. Writers with a technical background may be needed for jobs as simple as creating instructions on how to properly open and assemble a shipping box or as complicated as writing a yearly prospectus for a major bank. Any company with a marketing department, whether it employs 10 people or 10,000 people, needs to have skilled writers.

Nursing

Maryanne Santos, a registered nurse at Alta Bates Summit Medical Center in Berkeley, has found that she uses her technical writing skills almost everyday.

“I have to be very clear when I am writing treatment recommendations, or analyses of patients,” Santos said. “The doctors who read my notes expect to easily understand everything and they don’t have a lot of time to look things over.”

Santos said that in addition to other responsibilities, nurses must be able to write clearly. In her mind, nurses must be very clear when they communicate with doctors and other nurses, and one way this clarity is achieved is by choosing the correct words to describe any condition.

Certainly, as Santos attested, there are many documents that nurses must write. Progress reports, detailed instructions, and thorough descriptions are among the myriad technical documents that nurses create.

Retail Sales

Joanne Enriquez owns Sights and Sounds, a retail stereo store in Daly City. Enriquez, who also functions as the store’s manager, said her job is becoming increasingly demanding of her writing skills.

“I have partners to answer to. If I want to make a change in our store, they want a proposal,” Enriquez said. “I have to tell them what I want to do, how I want to do it, and what I expect to achieve. All of this has to be in writing. The better I can write about my ideas, the more likely my partners will agree with what I want.”

Enriquez has learned that writing an effective proposal is the key to getting what she wants.

Engineering

Patrick Murphy is a software quality assurance engineer at Kanisa, Inc. in Cupertino. His primary job function is testing natural language processing software. Murphy said that his job requires more technical writing skills than he had envisioned when he was first hired.

“Test plan writing is a really big part of my job. These plans are very technical documents,” Murphy said. “I’ve had to learn technical writing as I go because the kind of papers I write require it. The software I test uses artificial intelligence and is very hard to test. Every test that I run must be documented so that other people can run it also.”

Detailed test plans, according to Murphy, can be long, complex documents. One of the most critical issues is organizing the information. He said that the technical writing skills he has learned have made this process of organizing these complex documents much easier.

Marketing

Pat Kreamer, a marketing professional, understands the need for clarity in her writing. She said that taking courses in technical communication has helped her to organize and edit her material, creating focused marketing collateral.

“As a marketing professional, I create a variety of collateral. Anything I write must be clear and brief,” Kreamer said. “This is difficult after accumulating lots of terrific research about the product or service. I want to tell it all. But with too much content, the reader loses interest.”

Kreamer has enrolled in De Anza College’s Technical Communications (TECO) course and expressed her happiness with the knowledge she has acquired.

“A found the TECO Program provided an environment to successfully improve my writing and software skills. The instructors were working professionals and very supportive,” Kreamer said.

A Useful Tool

Technical writing skills are not reserved for careers in writing or documentation. The ambitious professional, whether employed as a nurse, a marketing professional, a sales manager or a software engineer, will need to acquire skills in technical writing well before he or she is called upon to use them.

To write effectively, a writer must have at least a cursory understanding of the elements of a technical document. Knowledge of elements such as the audience, the purpose, and the tone will ensure that a document is written well.
Meet Marrietta Reber, the newly appointed Chair of the Technical Communications Department (TECO) at De Anza College. Her selection to lead TECO continues De Anza’s commitment to provide dynamic instructors who are accomplished professionals as well.

Reber combines a diverse history in the field with a devotion to the classroom. Her first love is teaching – “but until securing this position, corporate paid the bills and taught me many valuable skills.”

**Multitasking at a Rigorous Pace**

Reber worked throughout her college days which, “helped me learn the skills of multitasking, to organize my time and not procrastinate.” Her first job after completing her bachelor’s degree in English was as a technical writer at Ameritech Library Services, designing manuals for library software and developing employee training materials for clients.

She learned UNIX and Windows while maintaining and producing manuals for library procedures – “from cataloguing to check-in and check-out.” Although Reber said she did not know much about technology or technical writing when she joined the firm, she and a coworker wrote and designed a system administrator user’s manual that received the Society of Technical Communication (STC) Excellence in User’s Guides Award.

“I was hired because – I think smart companies do this – I demonstrated an aptitude for learning and an ability to communicate,” she said. “If you can write, they can teach you the other stuff.”

Ameritech taught her technical writing and, at the same time, put her on a team developing stand-up training materials for workshops and writing manuals for users of a software product. “We worked hard and fast, juggling multiple projects at once,” she said.

Adept multitasking at a professional pace is inherent to technical writing in the corporate workplace; she is an in-your-face example for students transitioning into industry.

**Widening the Scope of Technical Writing**

Reber’s career development demonstrates that the scope of technical writing extends beyond writing about software and technical products. Her experience includes a stint working for Franklin Covey, developing personal and professional effectiveness seminars, such as one on time management using the principles from Stephen R. Covey’s *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*.

She created manuals and modules for trainers, as well as materials for seminar participants. While this job did not have a technology base, it used all the skills of a technical writer including “the ability to think, to organize information, to teach through writing and to develop documents that worked from an instructional and design viewpoint.”

Reber next worked for a professional-development group that created computer training materials, bringing together the training and technology aspects of her experience. Her team delivered customized training packages of software applications, such as PeopleSoft, specially fitted to the individual client’s needs and specifications.

“For Prudential or Princeton University, the cookie-cutter version of the application would not do,” she said.

The software, and therefore the training that accompanied it, had to be highly customized. Tailored components included stand-up training manuals, self-paced workbooks and computer-based training.

She then made a significant departure from her traditional background to accept a position at Digitas, a marketing and advertising company in Boston. There she did account work, strategic planning and marketing analysis for clients including AT&T, American Express, and General Motors.

“I sold myself on my technical writing background,” she said. In her interview for this position as a marketing specialist she was asked: “Why are you applying for this job and why should we hire you?”

“I know how to write; I know my audience,” she said.

Reber knew that she had skills and experience to bring to her new position at Digitas. Corporate marketing departments everywhere – not just in technology firms – depend on writing skills. Inherent to technical writing is the ability to conduct an in-depth probe for knowledge of the product and the customer, and then integrate the pertinent information into an optimal marketing program.

“In marketing, you must know who you are selling to, how to communicate with that market and how to give them what they need. It is the same in writing,” she said.

Reber’s eclectic experience had prepared her for this job – her resume included project management, different kinds of writing, teaching and training. She also had first-hand knowledge of how corporations worked.

**Applying Organizational Skills**

In the classroom, Reber and her fellow TECO instructors teach the organizational skills of multitasking and emphasize the responsibility of meeting deadlines.

While the pressure and pace of TECO courses may be high, on-the-job reliability for project completion or product delivery has a higher accountability.
If you drop the ball on a project, you are going to hear about it," she said. "You may even lose your job; you may have affected dozens of other people's ability to do their jobs.

"Students who are conscientious in their studies and know how to manage their time make an easier transition to the corporate environment," Reber added. "The amount of time that we have to do what we have to do is never sufficient."

Technical writers learn to work with a ranked series of priorities limiting the time allowed for a task. In fact, the first question Reber asked this interviewer was: "What is your deadline?"

Reber has sought to make her courses "as true to real-world experience as possible." She first taught technical writing at Utah Valley State College. Her students' major assignment was to develop user manuals using each other as content experts.

The class included numerous aviation students who knew how to fly airplanes. She paired them with others who knew nothing about flying.

The students who knew nothing about flying were instructed to write a manual on some aspect of aviation, using the pilot as their reference.

"Because that is how it works in the real world; the person writing the manual is usually not an expert in the subject," she said.

"I'm a writer, not an engineer. I'm not a software developer. When someone creates a new product, I have to create the user's manual using the talented brain of the engineer as my only reference," Reber said. "Skills basic to writing are also basic to project management and organizing an organization."

She explained that technical writing requires an analytical mind that knows how to attack something big and break it into pieces, processes and timelines and then groups all these things together in a document that reflects that organization.

"I have also had other jobs that would not seem technologically based, yet made incredible use of all the skills I have as a technical writer," Reber said. "That is one of the beauties of this field. Whether you are taking TECO courses to try out a new career as a technical writer or to enhance your performance in another area, you are going to come out a winner."

While the TECO program opens up the possibility of becoming a technical writer, Reber has experienced that it also opens doors to promotions and new jobs in other fields that might not have been open before.

"If you can master the skills of technical writing, then you are gold. Surprisingly few people can organize and communicate effectively. Corporate America will pay you handsomely if you can," Reber said.

Her record evidences the career growth and change made possible with the skills of technical writing. As she has affirmed, the ever-changing technology landscape of Silicon Valley still has jobs for those who are attuned to its needs.
“Of course, I would rather not have to work on a contract basis, Arsenault said. “But sometimes you have to take what is out there.”

Arsenault, who has spent most of his 13 years as a writer in the semiconductor field, said that he has seen the job market rise and fall a number of times and that full-time employment is not always a guarantee.

“I have come to learn that the term job security is an illusion,” he said. “I have survived my fair share of layoffs. I know that every four or five years, I came to expect layoffs in the semiconductor industry.”

Contract work has many advantages. It gives the contract employee the chance to find a fit with a company without a long-term commitment; it allows the employee the flexibility to work many different fields, thereby preventing burnout; and it allows the employee the freedom to take short or extended breaks between contracts.

Arsenault said he has seen many different types of people who take contract jobs, and says the benefits for them far outweigh the negatives.

“There are people out there who just want change. They thrive on it,” he said. “They are not happy to be in the same place year after year and are always looking for new challenges.”

Contract work generally pays higher wages than full-time employment, but also has consequences for those wages. Contract employees are almost never given health benefits from the company, are not given the options to buy stocks or the security of being able to place funds in a company-sponsored 401k program.

Arsenault, who is covered by benefits through his wife’s employer, says that the matching funds many companies pay into 401k plans can add up.

One way to start in the contracting field is to send resumes to a contracting company. Or, to improve visibility, send the resume to as many contract agencies as possible.

Many employers will turn to a technical employment agency first in an attempt to find the best contractors. These agencies usually provide the most consistent employees and employers generally know which agencies they want to use. The best of the technical agencies will see repeat requests from employers who use contractors regularly.

“I have come to learn that the term job security is an illusion.”

Neil Arsenault

Jane

Chow, who has been a hiring manager in documentation at Sun Microsystems, Applied Materials and Acuson, says dependable agencies are a key to finding the best employees.

“Some (agencies) are able to find better contractors than others,” Chow said. “It’s just a fact. I found one or two companies and stuck with them.”

Although on opposite sides of the hiring wall, Chow and Arsenault both agree that there are certain factors that every contract employee should possess before starting out in the field – writing ability, technical knowledge and diversity.

“It’s important to emphasize knowing the tools of technical writing,” Arsenault said. “But it is also important to be as diverse as possible. Employers will always hire someone who is technically knowledgeable and apt as possible.”

Chow echoed those sentiments.

“I try to get a feel for the person,” Chow said. “If I am trying to hire for a company that has a focus on hardware, I try to figure out if the employee will be able to pick up the [terminology] quickly.”

One thing Chow said is that she looks for knowledge that expands beyond the scope of the hire but may apply in general. Chow said that a well-rounded person who has knowledge beyond basic technical writing usually will be able to better relate to the different technological terms and definitions that many times are so hard to explain to the general public.

“I may find out that the person knows or has worked in IT or on helpdesk,” Chow said. “I find out – are they technical?”

Another aspect of contracting that is very important is networking. Arsenault, who has worked at Novellus Systems, KLA Tencor, and Lam Research Corporation, said that aspect of the job will not only help on that job, but may also reap benefits for future employment as well.

“The more people you know, the better opportunity you have to make it,” Arsenault said. “You need to develop a good reputation. Once you do that, you may have more credibility in the industry.”

For a contract employee, credibility can be a key.
When Tech Writing is More Than a Job

By David Dour

Some write because it is a required skill for the job. Others write because using a keyboard is easier or less intimidating than speaking in a public forum.

But there are also those who find that writing is both exciting and enjoyable. For that segment of the population, any job with the word “writer” in the title is a job worth having.

Finding writers who have the ability to write technical documents narrows that field to an even smaller group. But for those, technical writing may be the perfect career.

The Right Career Choice?

"If your goal is to write a novel, this probably is not the job for you," says Michele Frumm, the Technical Publications Director at Aspect Communications in San Jose. "Although the finished product is something you wrote, there’s a lot of collaboration required to get to that point. You’re interviewing people. You’re coordinating with other departments."

Frumm also said that, in some cases, writers may spend a good deal of time on page-layout and graphics, (depending on the job requirements) in addition to the writing.

Many people assume that working as a technical writer involves time sitting alone at a PC writing and revising documentation. This may be partly true, but the job requires plenty of contact with technical professionals (from programmers and project managers to marketing people) to write and design documentation for software, hardware, and internal company operations.

Technical writing is a highly collaborative effort requiring interaction and dialogue: Whether it’s face-to-face with an engineer in a production facility, or an e-mail correspondence with a product manager, successful technical writers do not work alone for long.

Gerald Badding is an English major, current product manager at Sony, and former tech writer. He admits when he first started working as a technical writer at Calera Recognition Systems in 1991 he “basically just wanted to be left alone so I could write.”

Without much technical background, however, he soon found that he “had to become the social butterfly of our company in order to learn the products and clearly describe them to our customers.” In his experience, Badding says, the professionals actually building and developing the products “usually love to talk about what they’re doing, but you better be a good interviewer.”

Badding believes that the ability to work well with a diverse group of technical professionals, as well as the technical knowledge he has learned, have made him a much better writer and well rounded person: “I’m also a much more attractive job candidate, period.”

Another assumption is that technical writers only work in technical fields. The ability to write clear and concise documents, manuals, and reports is the key to career success as a technical writer.

Mary Edmunds, currently a software application instructor at Foothill College in Los Altos, pointed out that besides working as a writer for high-tech companies, she has also worked at Nordstrom and Charles Schwab, one of the country’s largest investment firms.

When considering work as a technical writer, one way to learn about the field and what it requires is to read and review computer manuals and online help systems, like those for home or business operating systems and assorted applications. Frumm suggests reading through documentation produced by local companies that are hiring technical writers and asking “Is this what I want to be writing for a living?”

Writers may also spend time revising existing documentation and designing for on-line and internal publications. When writing for a young company, creating new documentation or department procedures will only be part of the job. Producing official memos, legal documents, and editing content on a company’s internal websites are some examples of work that technical writers may perform.

Much of a company’s technical documentation is intended for internal purposes and no one outside the company will ever see it. For a good explanation of various levels of technical writing and typical job functions go to:


What Background is needed?

Technical writers have varied backgrounds. According to a 2002 membership study of the Society for Technical Communication (STC), the five academic backgrounds most common among technical writers are English, technical communication, science or engineering, computer science and journalism.

Anyone with a technical background will have an easier time breaking into the industry in Silicon Valley, as that shows a facility with technical topics and the ability to work with industry professionals.

However, Edmunds pointed out that her undergraduate degree was in Psychology and that prospective tech writers need to “realize that the industry is bigger than hardware and software.” The technical writing classes she took, Edmunds says, “equipped me to be a tech writer.”

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In Silicon Valley where Information Technology (IT) is king, the STC recommends taking courses in technical writing, web design, and programming topics to build a foundation for a career in technical communications.

But remember the key factor to employment as a technical writer, no matter the industry or location, is and always will be the ability to clearly identify the purpose and convey the topic accurately to a specific audience.

A Stepping Stone

"It's a great way to get into an organization and then move into a different job," says Frumm. Technical communicators often move into jobs as programmers, systems analysts, information architects and project leaders. Others move into sales or management roles.

Badding noted that the wealth of product and technical knowledge he picked up working as a technical writer for several companies helped him land his current job as a product marketing manager at Sony.

The opposite is equally true. Many technical professionals become enamored with the creative, personal growth and career advancement opportunities that technical communications training can provide.

A case in point is Doug Klingerman. A mechanical engineer, Doug joined a database company right out of college and did not have an opportunity to use his training. When layoffs became a fact of life a year ago, Doug entered the TECO certificate program at De Anza as a way to enhance his skills and increase his chances of obtaining a job utilizing his mechanical engineering training. However, as he took more classes, he realized, "that I liked to write, and I became more interested in pursuing a technical writing position than one in engineering."

A premium is paid for people who have superior communication skills and can explain their company's products, services, or goals to a specific audience.

Career Outlook

As long as new technologies are being developed and new services offered, there will be a demand for people to explain them in writing.

"It didn't take long to show my value as a writer to the district superintendent," says Maria Solorio, a former tech writer with Hewlett-Packard, who was laid off in 2001. "I was devastated at first, but I think I saw it coming," she said. Solorio took a "survival job" as an office assistant at the Franklin-McKinley School District.

"But it didn't take long to show my value as a writer to the district superintendent, and I soon found myself writing new employee training materials and grants," Solorio said. "I love writing grants."

What had been a survival job turned out to be a career she believes has promise. Solorio says she realized the value of the technical writing courses she took in preparing her to move to a new industry, "whether by choice or necessity."

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"A Stepping Stone"

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A premium is paid for people who have superior communication skills and can explain their company's products, services, or goals to a specific audience.

From the Silicon Valley chapter of the Society for Technical Communication. The chapter produces a newsletter, hosts a monthly dinner meeting with guest speakers and a web site to keep its members informed of industry trends.

The STC Silicon Valley's website offers a variety of job hunting resources for the technical writing novice or professional. It includes the STC Job List; an Employment Services Directory featuring technical agencies that offer temporary, contract, or permanent placement; and a selection of web sites for online job searches.

Clearly, this is the site to bookmark when looking for a technical writing position.
Here to Help
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Since technical writers do not actually create the product that needs to be documented, they provide an outsider’s perspective to writing technical documents.

Jake Throgmorton, an applications architect for Niku, appreciates the importance of this quality. “The main thing about tech writers is that they make tech work understandable. They’re a filter that help people understand the functionality of a product,” he said. “They don’t know everything about a product, but they can write about it so that a layman can understand it.”

Another factor that makes technical writers essential is the fact that they can significantly reduce engineers’ workloads, especially when deadlines approach. Given the rapid pace of technology development, engineers often do not have enough time to adequately document every product feature and operating procedure.

William Chen, a hardware design engineer for Oak Technologies, experiences this whenever a technical writer is not available to help him with documentation. “Having technical writers frees up time from having to write documentation,” he stated. “Taking the time to write documents is hard during crunch time. When a deadline approaches, we sometimes have to jot things down on pieces of scrap paper.” In this kind of situation, technical writers provide engineers a valuable service. By assuming documentation duties, they allow engineers to perform their primary job—conducting research and creating technology.

Ultimately, technical writers are essential because they are skilled writers that can save engineers both time and trouble. Technical writers are communications specialists trained to bridge the gap between engineers and their audiences. They can help engineers reach their audiences more efficiently and with better results.

FrameMaker
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Duggan feels that new users also have difficulty getting used to FrameMaker’s terminology and use of frames.

“FrameMaker has all the same functions as Microsoft Word such as cut and paste, but they call it something different,” she said.

“All also, people aren’t used to working with frames,” she said, referring to the program’s method for containing and organizing information. “They will try to use it and discover that [a table they set up] is in the middle of the page.”

The program’s learning curve may be steep, but technical writers such as Solorio, Duggan and Edmunds believe it is worth spending the time to learn because of all the powerful features it offers.

One of these features—conditional text—used by Edmunds on an earlier version of Frame Maker, proved useful to technical writers at Nordstrom. Edmunds conducted a one-day class on the application for Nordstrom’s technical writers. “Conditional text,” explains Edmunds, “allows the writer to keep a range of data in one document and create tags that tell FrameMaker not to print material for a certain audience.” This was a useful feature for the writers producing Nordstrom’s catalogues since in-store merchandise varied from store-to-store and state-to-state.

Duggan appreciates the program’s automated features. “In FrameMaker, you can automatically cross reference figures and table numbers,” she said. “It automatically [cross references] across all documents. You can have 20 chapters, and it will run through everything.”

Duggan suggests that new users should “hang in there” and not become discouraged. “Don’t go into it saying ‘this is difficult,’” she said. “Use the ‘help’ feature when you need it, and get used to the terminology.”

FrameMaker, a powerful tool for assembling large technical documents, can be difficult for some new users. But once the users learn the tricks that have made FrameMaker the industry standard, the end result will almost always be better, more accurate and easier-to-read documentation.

“Most writers regard truth as their most valuable possession, and therefore are most economical in its use.”

Mark Twain
TECO Team Effort

By Alex Ling

One of the Technical Communications (TECO) program’s best features is the spirit of camaraderie that builds between the students. This camaraderie encourages the students to share valuable information and skills gained from their respective professional backgrounds.

A recent visit to the Language Arts Computer Laboratory in the Advanced Technology Center revealed several groups of students working together in the TECO Publication Area (Tech Pubs). Tech Pubs features an impressive array of powerful computers, scanners and software that supplement the Laboratory’s 30 plus Apples and PCs. The computers in Tech Pubs are loaded with high-end professional software including Adobe Design Collection with Photoshop 7.0, Illustrator 11.0, InDesign, Acrobat; FrameMaker 7.0 and Dreamweaver MX. This area provides TECO students with industry-standard tools enabling them to apply their knowledge and produce professional-quality technical documents and websites.

Students, working on individual or group projects, share their expertise with software and hardware, serve as subject matter experts, and critique and edit their classmates writing projects. What makes many of the projects more challenging is that they require students learn new software to produce the final deliverable.

Working on websites for two De Anza clients, the Cross Cultural Partner Program and the Office of Diversity, team members had to plan and design the layout of the site, write the text, and then learn a variety of software programs to build the site.

“[Working on the Office of Diversity website] has been a truly collaborative effort where all of us have been involved in all aspects of the construction of the website,” Nishita Kumar remarked. “We faced a few technical challenges together, and as a consequence have learned a lot about the Dreamweaver program and website creation.”

Cindy Reguerin added: “Nishita is really good with computers and had some experience with Dreamweaver. When we first started working together, we were at ‘point zero’ and did not know how to get the work done. We’ve learned a lot by working together.”

Reguerin added that there were personal challenges to overcome as well. “The biggest challenge I faced working on the Diversity website was having access to a computer with Dreamweaver during the hours I have free.”

Vera Kostiouk, working on the Cross Cultural Partner (CCP) Program website said one of the largest challenges for her group was “filtering through tons of information and making decisions on the purpose and audience of the project.” Another challenge was “working with multiple bosses and trying to balance the requirements of the TECO class with the requirements of the CCP client.” And don’t even get her started on the technical challenges; however, the bottom line is that working as a group, the team met the challenges and produced a portfolio quality product.

Kelly Lang decided that in addition to the challenge of writing a user’s manual for class, she would also produce it in FrameMaker. She relates, “I was having problems learning and using FrameMaker. Specifically, I couldn’t figure out how to change chapter numbers. One of my classmates, whom I consider a subject matter expert on FrameMaker, was able to sit down with me and show me how to do it.”

Pat Kreamer, working on a quick start guide for new users of Photoshop, gained perspective on her project when it was peer reviewed by her classmate, a professional proofreader and copyeditor. “Information overload brought my individual project to a standstill. I couldn’t look at it objectively," she said. "So when [my classmate] made very insightful suggestions about how I could improve the organization of the content, it improved the manual and gave me a fresh start."

The camaraderie and collaboration doesn’t stop when the class ends. Kumar may have said it best when she remarked, “I have also made a new set of friends.”

Group Effort: TECO students Kelly Lang, Cindy Reguerin and Nishita Kumar work together to complete a group project.