

Distinguished Canadian Members series

By Wendy Ogden

Every step Brian took brought him closer and closer to technical writing, but the path was not a straight one!

Brian O'Malley's training in technical communication began at home where he grew up in a family of volunteer leaders. That may not sound like a start in the technical communication field, but it was an indirect step; Brian is very passionate about the STC and credits his success to his membership and involvement in the organization.



Brian O'Malley

Academic path

Brian began his academic path with a BSc and MSc in Zoology from the University of Manitoba and a PhD in Biology from the University of Calgary. He did his dissertation on the evolutionary changes in bird songs (an indicator of bigger changes in our ecology). Brian was fascinated with this work, but after 12 years of university he was tired of being broke and wanted to be free of the political atmosphere of university life.

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Survey of job opportunities

By Donald Nordman

The downturn in the high tech sector in the late 1990s hurt the high tech professions and technical communicators did not escape. Just what is the Canadian job situation for those in the technical communication profession? What skills are in demand? And what are the trends in the profession? These were the questions posed to STC chapter presidents and technical communication professionals across Canada in an informal survey.

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Canadian SIGnals

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www.stcsig.org/canadian/index.htm

Letters to the Editor

We encourage you to send
comments, suggestions, and
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World of work

Brian took a job as an Employee Benefits Analyst. He discovered he enjoyed working with computers and the company discovered they needed some help in that area. Brian began working with DOS, training other employees, and finally ended up writing a command manual for his trainees.

Fun on the side

Brian took on some extra work in addition to his full-time job. A small startup software company hired him to write a user guide for Macs. At the time he didn't even have a computer at home. He had no idea why they hired him, but he loved the job. After a two-week vacation in Mexico, where he did some thinking, he quit his regular job and created his own company, Polaris Communications Ltd. After that leap of faith, the software company cancelled the project

STC rescue

Along the way Brian found the STC and with it came immediate connections and overnight success. Brian began his membership with the STC by attending the Region 7 conference in 1991. He became president in December of 1996 and laid a new foundation for the Alberta chapter. He built an executive (after a year without an executive), created new positions, put the chapter online, and changed the financial year-end. Through his leadership and the dedicated efforts of a committed team, the membership grew from 37 members to 150 members within 18 months!

With these kinds of accomplishments to his credit, his contribution to the organization is immeasurable. But Brian feels these contributions benefited him greatly; over the years he has made many friends through the STC. They are people he feels he can call on with stupid questions; people who have shared their lives with him. It's been one of his greatest privileges to know these people. Brian joined the Canadian Issues Committee in 1995 and was involved in creating a model curriculum which was presented to the Annual Conference in Toronto in 1997. He was a founding member of the Canadian Issues SIG.

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Promoting our profession

Brian believes it's important for technical communicators to promote their profession — that it's up to us to make sure we are part of the design team from the beginning and to be advocates for the user. Brian has some tips for fellow STC members:

- Work hard and study hard; have theory behind your work
- Commit to quality and listen to your client
- Don't get caught up in the tools; there will always be new tools
- Maintain good writing skills

Brian will be honoured in Baltimore at the STC conference in May 2004 as an Associate Fellow. He is overwhelmed by this honour and his goal is to maintain control during the presentation. It means a lot to Brian to be recognized in this way. For him, it's all about the relationships he's formed along the way. He treasures those relationships and that's what he gets back from volunteering. He says he gets more than he gives, but with the list of volunteer jobs he has done for the STC, it's hard to believe anyone could get that much back!

Enjoying the ride

In Brian's 15 years as a technical writer he has accomplished a lot. He has won many STC competitions. In fact, he has never made an entry that didn't win an award! He continues to work with the STC, and was the manager for the Region 7 conference in 2003. His business sponsors the Polaris Communication Ltd. Scholarship for technical communications students at Mount Royal College in Calgary. Brian loves "doing the work" and plans to continue until he retires—he is at the height of his success and enjoying the ride.

We are pleased to honour Brian as a Distinguished Canadian Member and Associate Fellow of the STC!

2004 Canadian STC honours list

John James Conklin (Fellow)
Sheila C. Jones (Fellow)
Leanne Logan (Formerly of Southwestern Ontario chapter) (Fellow)
Deborah Ann Maskens (Associate Fellow)
Brian O'Malley

Survey of job opportunities

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The job situation for technical communication professionals is holding steady or slowly improving. Several respondents tempered their generally favourable observations with the remark that their view is relative to the recent downturn; the employment situation has a way to go before approaching the employment levels of pre-downturn times.

The demand for technical communicators

The employment situation across the country has regional variations. In Winnipeg, it is positive and steady. In Toronto, there are demands for technical communicators and many technical communicators to meet that demand. Ottawa is currently seeing growth in employment. The Montreal employment situation is stable with a steady stream of opportunities. Calgary is showing slow growth, and in Vancouver demand is up.

Salary levels

Employers seem to be especially cost-conscious these days. One trend noted by respondents is that some employers are offering technical writers lower salaries than before the slump. A related trend is a tendency for employers to maintain low wages by hiring junior writers instead of senior writers.

Survey of job opportunities

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Full-time salaries estimated by the respondents ranged from a low end of around \$25,000 a year for junior writers to a high end of around \$65,000 for senior writers. The average salary of the Canadian technical communicators who responded to the STC 2003 Technical Communicator Salary Survey was \$58,180. According to the Independent Contractor/Temp Agency Employee Survey in the March 2004 *intercom*, the mean annual income of the independent contractors who responded to the survey was \$74,760.

Industries

Despite the downturn in the high-tech sector, the software industry continues to be a large employer of technical communicators across Canada. The telecommunications industry has not recovered fully from the slump, but it is still a major employer in Ottawa. In Toronto, the financial sector employs many technical communicators, and in Calgary the energy sector is a large employer. Technical communicators are employed across a broad spectrum of sectors in Winnipeg, with no sector dominating.

Skills

Employers are looking for varying degrees of technical expertise in their industries. Some employers require a high degree of technical knowledge, while others require technical communicators only to have enough technical expertise to communicate with subject matter experts.

Communication skills are vital to a technical communicator, but, in the opinion of some, communication skills sometimes take a back seat to the more easily quantifiable skills with software tools being quite important in the eyes of employers. Skill set and flexibility seem to be keys to success in the present job market. The most frequently mentioned software tools identified by respondents were Microsoft Office, FrameMaker, and RoboHelp.

Other software mentioned included Acrobat, Photoshop, and Dreamweaver.

Trends

The trend in technical communication most often mentioned by the respondents was toward single sourcing—using one version of a document to serve across many platforms. Outsourcing tech jobs to lower wage countries was another trend noted. The employment outlook for technical communicators seems to depend on the condition of the economy, so a wide range of skills and the ability to adapt can improve the job outlook for technical communicators everywhere.

International glossary

When writing article for other countries, it's essential that the spelling is varied to match how a certain countries form of the word is spelled. Ron Blicq is the current president of STC Manitoba, and was part of an Intecom committee who wrote a glossary for different spelling of words in British, US and international forms. To see the whole glossary visit the Intecom web site at www.intecom.org.

British	US
baulk	balk
collectible	collectable
metabolise	metabolize
moult	molt
underground	subway
windscreen	windshield

Lone no more

The challenges for lone writers who join technical writing teams

By Maggie Burdick

With the Canadian economy slowly recovering from the information technology bust of the late 1990s, many technical writers are now once again being employed in full-time positions. After lengthy periods of time working freelance or alone for a small company, a writer may find the transition to becoming a member of a technical publications team presents many challenges. These challenges include learning new processes and new ways of making decisions. Once these hurdles are overcome, former lone writers may even find their special skills can add real value to the team.

A lone writer has the sole responsibility for all documentation for a company or a given project. Lone writers often make all the decisions connected with style and content as well as the writing processes, methods of obtaining and updating information, and liaising with subject matter experts (SMEs). In a team environment, a style guide and project management processes usually already exist. They both involve a learning curve for the new addition to the team. A newly hired writer used to working alone may often be fearful of participating in a project and not know how to proceed. The best way to overcome this fear is to jump in with both feet. Mistakes are unavoidable and they can even be beneficial to both the writer and the team. Often teams get set in their ways — and it takes a newcomer to point out a more efficient alternative!

A lone writer joining a team also needs to adapt to new ways of making decisions. Lone writers who are used to making most of the documentation decisions on their own. When they join a team, they lose that power. The structure of the team has a lot to do with how the decisions and change processes occur. In many teams, the manager or team leader has the sole power to make style, format, and process decisions.

In an ideal situation, all team members have the power to suggest changes that are then reviewed by the others. Often, however, managers are the only ones who can and should make decisions about changes to how the team works.

In both cases, making a suggestion that is not adopted by the team can be frustrating, especially if the decision is a proverbial “no-brainer” to the writer. In this situation, each suggestion will need to be “sold” to the team or the manager and lone writers are usually experienced with this. For example, a lone writer may need to persuade the Chief Technology Officer that buying an upgrade to editing software will save time and effort in the long run. In a team environment, the same argument needs to be made, but it needs to be delivered to the team.

In addition to overcoming the above challenges, lone writers can also leverage their skills in diplomacy in the team environment. Often technical writing teams can become disjointed from development teams, perpetuating an “us versus them” mentality. In a lone writer environment, contact with SMEs is crucial and the lone writer needs to establish good working relationships to ensure the success of future projects. These skills are extremely valuable to large technical writing teams where often communication with SMEs may be stilted and formal.

Transitioning to a team environment has definite benefits as well as challenges for a writer. The team can provide an environment to grow, share and learn new skills, and it can be a safe method of seeking feedback and testing out ideas. Being a member of a team also provides the writer with some clout in dealing with other teams in the company. Though it may be difficult to switch from working as a lone writer to a team mentality, it is an experience well worth the effort. It makes for a well-rounded writer who is able to work well in any environment.

Canadian presentations at STC conference

The STC's 51st annual conference is being held May 9 to 12, 2004 in Baltimore, Maryland. The three-day conference arranges the education sessions into six categories ranging from management, writing, editing, technical tools, usability finding, and information design.

Some Canadian presenters are:

Rahel Bailie:

- How to run a successful regional conference
- Metrics and ROI.

Leanne Logan:

- Bring brand alive for software and websites

Alexa Campbell

- Writing clear, concise instruction

Ann Rockley

- Is teleworking for you?
- Low-cost content management
- Challenges in information modeling
- Comprehensive single sourcing: XML's time is here
- Developing reusable life sciences content

SIG Business Meeting

On Sunday May 9 the SIG is holding a meeting at 3:30 p.m. in room 320.

SIG Networking Lunch

On Tuesday May 11, there will be a networking lunch at 12:15 p.m.

Look for the Canadian Issues SIG table.

Technical writing programs

Technical Communication Diploma program at Red River College

The Technical Communication Diploma program is a two-year diploma program, with a term in co-op placement. The courses that are offered teach students how to write technical documents for companies, both on paper and online. The program gives students the ability to lay out documents so they are effective and visually pleasing to a reader. The courses offered allow students to gain insight on what it takes to be a technical communicator, through preparing documentation such as manuals and newsletters, for actual clients.

Entrance requirements are listed in the Red River College calendar of courses; applicants are required to have a minimum of grade 12.

Contact information

Alexa Campbell at acampbell@rrc.mb.ca

Red River College at www.rrc.mb.ca

Communications Certificate program at York University, through Glendon College (bilingual school)

The communications program at York University offers an excellent program, with insight on why we communicate. The program keeps the traditional aspects of communications such as the word craft, rhetoric and professionalism, which the world values highly.

More information about requirements and general information can be located at the York University's website.

<http://www.yorku.com/yorkweb/index.htm>