

Technical communication in Ukraine

by Kirk St.Amant

In the summer of 2001, I had the opportunity to work as an instructor of professional and technical communication in Ukraine, a relatively new Eastern European country that was once a part of the Soviet Union. I quickly learned that certain cultural factors greatly affect the burgeoning practice of professional communication in this country. These factors, in turn, could affect how successful technical communicators are at interacting with Ukrainian colleagues.

One of the more interesting cultural factors is an effect of the Soviet style "command" economy: a "command" style of communication in which supervisors give orders, and subordinates follow these orders without question. As a result, the idea of writing for a specific audience appears to be underdeveloped. The prevailing writing style could best be described as "haphazard." For example, paragraphs may contain four different, unrelated subjects with no attempt to connect them.

In some cases, writers seem to be highly concerned with maintaining formal status and power relationships, factors that also affect writing style. For example, some authors or speakers use long, formal sentences in which the subject and the action are difficult to identify. Sometimes the desire not to offend a "powerful" reader causes authors to begin sentences with the expression "as you well know." The purpose of this expression, I later learned, is to avoid challenging the knowledge of a reader by suggesting that he or she might not already know the topic.

Many of Ukraine's business and management educators have backgrounds in science and engineering, and they teach business from a technology and engineering perspective. Students generally demonstrate well-developed computer skills. Thus, in time, and with development of a national communication infrastructure, Ukraine has the potential to become a source of well-trained knowledge workers, as are India and China today. For this reason, technical communicators may find themselves increasingly interacting with colleagues from Ukraine.

There is relatively little research available on the cultural expectations and communication in this region. Efforts to understand these factors can lead to successful business relationships that help all involved nations succeed in the new global economy.

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