THE INTERNATIONAL ONLINE WORKPLACE:

A PERSPECTIVE FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATORS

By

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While online use remains somewhat restricted to the United States and Canada, international access to cyberspace is rapidly increasing. Nations such as India and China have already undertaken public and private sector plans to increase Internet use in those nations. Western Europe is similarly experiencing growth in online access and use with one report claiming that one in three European households will have Internet access by 2003. Thus, ***international online interactions*** (IOIs) are poised to grow at an almost exponential rate in the near future. This heightened access will have important effects on the workplace and on technical communication practices.

International Online Production Models

An interesting aspect of increased international online access is how it is shaping business practices. Increased international online access, for example, brings with it the potential to create offices and production facilities that never close. In such a model, workers in a part of the world where the workday is ending would use online media to "forward" their work to international colleagues located in regions where the day was just beginning. Those co-workers could continue work on that project and use similar online technologies to forward their work to other co-workers in different regions. In such a model, production would not need to stop just because the workday was ending in one part of the world.

Interestingly, certain companies are experimenting with such international production models. IBM, for example, uses such a production model with its Java Around the Clock programming process. In this system, programming work is forwarded from one nation/region to another so that the overall software creation process does not have to stop. This production model, moreover, is but one of the ways companies could capitalize on the ability of the Internet to make the world a smaller place. In some cases, products such as software or digital video and music recordings could be "transmitted" from a production

facility in one nation to a distribution center in another. In other cases, IOIs could lead to the outsourcing of technical work to developing nations with skilled technical workers who can provide the same quality of specialized services at a fraction of the cost. In such models, the workers do not migrate from different countries to a common workplace; rather work migrates from a common source to individuals who are located in different nations.

International Online Technical Communication

International online production models (IOPMs) could affect technical communicators in one of three ways. The first scenario has to do with the Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) who provide the basic information about procedures, generate much of the requisite technical specifications, and answer technology-specific questions. The key to creating effective documents, thus, is to have access to these SMEs. IOPMs, however, often mean that the SMEs working on a project might be located in different nations. As a result, the data gathering process inherently involves intercultural interactions. Moreover, international time differences could mean that some SMEs will be leaving work when the technical communicator is starting work. The asynchronous nature of online media could therefore make it a more practical and cheaper method for interacting with international SMEs than international phone calls might be.

In the second scenario, technical communicators might find themselves in an IOPM related to the actual writing of documents. That is, the field of technical communication is not unique to just one country or region. The STC, for example, has active chapters in the US, Canada, Europe, India, Israel, and Japan. Several of these chapters have technical communicators who are accustomed to producing documents in English. As a result, document files could be forwarded to writers in different countries just as easily as software programming code could. Thus, technical documents could be produced by international teams in which writers in one country forward work to international colleagues who continue with the writing process. Alternatively, writers located in different countries could work on different parts of the same manual.

While such an international process could require editing to create a consistent style or tone, one needs to consider the purpose for which this document is being created. That is, if a company's goal is to get a new product to a new international market quickly, then delays in generating product documentation could counter the company's intentions. As a result, IOPMs might be the best method for quickly generating documents for an early international product release.

One added benefit of such an international writing process could be access to SMEs. In this case, overseas technical communicators involved in a project might be located in the same area as the SMEs working on that project. In such cases, technical communicators could interact directly with the SMEs involved in a particular IOPM. This ability to interact directly with SMEs could reduce the time needed to get information vs. the time delays associated with using email to try to receive timely and detailed answers to multiple questions.

In the third scenario, technical communicators might find themselves participating in both of the afore-mentioned IOPM situations. In this case, the speed with which one's company wishes to get a product to market could result in both product development and document creation being done by international teams. As a result, the technical communicator could find him- or herself interacting with both overseas SMEs and overseas writing colleagues. The point at which these relationships overlap could depend upon deadlines associated with production and on the contributions different overseas SMEs would be making to the overall process.

International online access will only continue to grow. As a result, new forms of international online production will arise. For this reason, technical communicators need to rethink the document creation process in terms of IOPMs.