

## Some Reflections on the Emergence of a Profession

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### “Redefinition of our profession and our goals”

#### Abstract

*Producing Quality Technical Information played a major role in the shift from product-oriented information to user-oriented information. It brought to a large community of technical communicators an awareness of the role that technical information should play: not a description of a technical product or process but, rather, a description of what people need to do to use the product or perform the process. This shift in focus—from product to user—led to many changes in our profession and in our professional careers. No longer mere documentors of what others had done, we emerged as professionals who added value and usability to the project on which we worked.*

#### **1.7.5 Document analysis—human factors**

**Keywords:** *quality measures, quality information, task orientation, product-centered information, user-centered information, professional growth*

In the early 1980s, something unusual happened. There appeared on my desk at IBM an odd-shaped booklet with a grey cover and black and red text. On the cover was the IBM logo and the identification Santa Teresa Laboratory, System Information. The booklet was entitled *Producing Quality Technical Information*.

I remember my reaction to seeing the booklet: “An interesting looking book. Probably a rehash of things we already knew. And people in California probably had more time and money to spend on things like this than the rest of us did.” I decided to open it anyway. And like Dorothy and Toto when they landed in Oz, I realized that I was “not in Kansas anymore.”

The booklet was not an attractive way to publish what we already knew, but a very different approach to producing technical information. It had some radically different ways of looking at the job and job products that I had been working on for more than fifteen years. My initial reaction was rather skeptical, probably annoyed that people were rocking the boat. After all, we had been producing manuals—successfully, I thought—for many years. Why would people want to come up with a different way of doing business when the old way worked well?

The authors presented a new way of looking at quality—a way that tied in nicely with two catch phrases that were being heard with increasing frequency with relation to computers: “easy to use” and “user friendly.”

I looked at the book again recently in preparing to write this article. (I did wind up keeping the booklet as one of the items in my “memory box” that I took with me when I retired from IBM.) I was rather surprised. The booklet was still attractive, but not particularly different from booklets I’m used to seeing. And the content, rather than being radical, was pretty much a collection of common-sense observations about producing technical information.

What had happened in the past twenty years?

### Developing Technical Information in the 1960s and 1970s

Developing technical information, especially computer-related technical information, was very different in the 1960s and 1970s than it is today—something that is important to understand in assessing the impact of *Producing Quality Technical Information*. Because access to large, mainframe computers was expensive and limited, much of the technical information produced was developed by talk with the programmers and engineers who developed the products. There was little opportunity for hands-on work to develop and test procedures being documented. And perhaps because of legal concerns about pre-announcing new products or product capabilities, access to customers was limited.

Thus, the information that was developed and sent to customers often had the focus of product developers providing as much information as they could about the products they developed. The goal of everyone involved was generally to provide as much information as possible and to ensure, to the best of everyone’s ability, that the information was accurate and current.

And because the prime users of technical information about computers in those days were people highly skilled and technically trained in computer operations, the information was generally quite interesting to and understandable by its intended audience.

### A Shift in Focus—from Product to User

In the 1970s, somewhat before the appearance of *Producing Quality Technical Information*, an evolutionary change in computers and computer use started to become evident. Computers became smaller, less expensive, and more widely distributed

than before. The set of customers for these computers, and the audiences for the information about them changed. While many customers were still highly trained people who considered themselves to be computer experts, a growing number of them did not consider themselves computer experts (nor did they aspire to become computer experts). They were people with jobs to do, and they hoped that using computers would make those jobs easier and more efficient.

This emerging class of customers was less concerned with how computer hardware and software operated. They wanted to know what they had to do to use the computers to get their work done. They needed to know the actions necessary to perform their tasks, not the details of what the computer system did in response to their actions.

### What Did Producing *Quality Technical Information* Show Us?

And what did the authors of *Producing Quality Technical Information* tell us? They presented seven “quality categories,” with specific guidelines and advice in each category. The seven categories presented were:

1. Task-Orientation
2. Organization
3. Entry Points
4. Clarity
5. Visual Communication
6. Accuracy
7. Completeness

Within each category, guidelines, with explanation and examples, were presented. The guidelines for Task-Orientation, for example, were:

- “Present information from the reader’s point of view
- Indicate a practical reason for information
- Order the presentation to reflect the order of use
- Devise titles and headings to reveal the task”

Completeness and accuracy, the central tenets of technical communication up to this time, were, of course, included in the set of categories. But look where they are placed: at the very end! And they were presented in a changed way. A guideline for Completeness was: “Cover all the topics that readers need, and only those topics.” The implication was obvious, and to many people, heretical: Information that was known might well be left out of a manual if

there was not a compelling reason to include it. Clearly, the days of the 1000-page user manual were coming to an end.

What the authors of *Producing Quality Technical Information* proposed was a fundamental change in the way that technical communicators (or information developers) worked. They proposed that technical communicators do more than gather information and present it as proper prose that was kept up to date and consistent throughout a document. They defined a way in which technical communicators could move from a support position to one of professional parity with others in their organizations. The analysis, restructuring, and reorientation of information made them a group who added value to a product. And their added value required knowledge, skills, and organizational structure that let them emerge from the status of a support group to professional partners in a development organization.

### What Was the Real “Emergence”?

One of the more common themes in presentations about how the role of technical communicators was changing at the time was to say that “information development was an emerging profession.” This statement was often accompanied by a visual image of a newly hatched chick emerging from an egg.

When we talked of our “emergence,” we usually talked about our position in an organization: of job-code parity, of the parallel labeling of information development with hardware development and software development, and of progress in achieving salary parity with those with whom we worked. Certainly this was progress, and it worked for the good of those who developed information and those who developed products as a whole.

But was advancement and status within an organization the real success? From the perspective of twenty years after the fact, I don’t think so. I believe that the true emergence was our redefinition of our profession and our goals for professionalism and professional success.

Focusing on proactive work we could do to improve the quality of technical information helped to move technical communicators (or information developers) from clerical support roles to roles of active participants in the product-development process. It enabled us to take leadership roles that often

stretched beyond the narrowly defined bounds of information development. This new focus enabled us to codify and clarify what our added value to a product was and helped us to measure our successes and innovations. By providing a framework in which to measure—and speak about—our successes, we were able to truly raise our professional status.

### Producing Quality Technical Information--User-Centered Design Teams

Many who develop and produce technical information today work as members of user-centered design teams. The distinction between development roles has blurred somewhat, and product developers work as collaborators, not friendly adversaries, to get the job done. Contributions range beyond what had been traditionally thought of as information development; they include user-interface design, interaction design, information layout and design, and other aspects of a product that contribute to quality and success in the marketplace.

And what of the *Producing Quality Technical Information* booklet? After several iterations within IBM, it emerged in 1998 as a Prentice-Hall book, *Developing Quality Technical Information: A Handbook for Writers and Editors*. The seven original “quality categories” have grown to nine, grouped under three major headings:

- Easy to Use
  - Task Orientation
  - Accuracy
  - Completeness
- Easy to Understand
  - Clarity
  - Correctness
  - Style
- Easy to Find
  - Organization
  - Retrievability
  - Visual Effectiveness

Appendixes in the book describe how to apply the quality characteristics to guidance information, reference information, and combinations of guidance and reference information. The authors provide procedures for reviewing and evaluating technical information and checklists that should prove very useful.

I found it interesting that, in the new organization, accuracy and completeness had made it back to near

the top of the list. This move seems to be an instance of innovation coming of age, of increasing its stability. The need to appear different and new is diminished, and there is greater acceptance of using strong points from the past.

### Reflecting on the Impact of the Booklet

What started out as a small booklet intended to inspire technical communicators to take more pride in their work continued to inspire progress many years later.

Technical information today appears in a wide variety of forms. *Producing Quality Technical Information* addressed printed information only. But today, we have printed information, online displays of information, hypertext, animation, and sound. The

rapid growth and widespread use of the World-Wide Web as a primary medium for conveying technical information has transformed the field of technical communication for all those involved—those who use the information and those who produce it. Have the lessons from *Producing Quality Technical Information* been learned and applied? I believe they have, that they have become part of the general understanding of what it means to produce information today. Despite the many examples of bad information—poorly designed, developed, and presented—that we might find, most of the information that we find today, especially on the World-Wide Web, is designed to appeal to users, to attract their attention, and engage their interest and thought.

I believe that this is the legacy of *Producing Quality Technical Information*.