Introduction

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Twenty years ago, IBM provided many opportunities for its information developers across the country and around the world to get together to share experiences. IBM's internal education program rivaled many universities, and all information developers were required to take a minimum of 40 hours of classes each year. If a class happened to be offered in Boca Raton, Austin, Poughkeepsie, or Toronto, getting authorization to travel there was seldom a problem. In addition to the numerous classes that one could take or teach, Technical Interchange Groups (TIGs) and Interdivisional Technical Liaisons (ITLs) offered additional opportunities for site representatives to meet two or three times each year. The atmosphere was open and relaxed because IBM was successful and had little competition.

This comfortable, self-assured, can-do environment was the world into which a small (53 pages) book entitled *Producing Quality Technical Information (PQTI)* first appeared (IBM 1983). The book was written by information developers at IBM's Santa Teresa Laboratory (since renamed Silicon Valley Laboratory) in San Jose, California. Santa Teresa was one of IBM's smaller, newer sites. Its primary mission was software development for database products (IMS and DB2) and programming languages (PL/I, COBOL, FORTRAN, and APL) for large systems (System/390). Other IBM sites may have deserved their buttoned-down reputation, but Santa Teresa introduced a fresh California style, as exemplified by *PQTI*. For example, Roger Grice, who worked for IBM in Kingston, New York when he first encountered *PQTI*, mentions his "annoyed" reaction to the "odd-shaped" booklet with the unconventional gray cover and red text.

The real innovation of *PQTI*, however, is not its format but its quasiscientific, analytical approach to information development. By identifying nine quality requirements and providing a checklist for reviewers to record whether these requirements are met, *PQTI* introduces tools and seemingly objective metrics for effective documentation. This approach implies that information development can be engineered to produce measurable, repeatable results. Making information development "more of a science than of an art," notes Theo Mandel, who also worked for IBM in the 1980s, is "a major accomplishment." Grice observes an additional benefit of this new cloak of scientific respectability: it enables information developers to "move from a support position to one of professional parity with others in their organizations."

The two commentators who have not worked for IBM regard *PQTI* as a good start but not a complete solution. Karl Smart points out that *PQTI* recognizes the

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multidimensional nature, but not the fluid nature, of quality and that it ignores the "contextual framing of documents." Therefore, he calls for additional research into the underlying principles of quality and additional data from the application of those principles to specific problems. Edmond Weiss also raises questions about the validity of *PQTI* as a quality system. He cites the "unchallengeable expertise of its anonymous authors," the "self-evident" implication that the After examples are an improvement over the Before examples, the lack of evidence that the *PQTI* quality requirements produce better results than some other requirements do, and the lack of data "to demonstrate that the 'better' versions are anything more than the preferences of the authors." As a quality standard, Weiss concludes, *PQTI* is built on "a noble lie...a belief based more on faith than on research."

If not a quality standard, then what are the *PQTI* quality requirements? Grice says that they are just "a collection of common-sense observations." Mandel agrees; recommending that a writer focus on the user's point of view, he says, is "no more than common sense." Morris Dean, the primary author of *PQTI*, even entitles his response to the commentaries "The common sense of producing quality technical information."

By 1983, Dean was quickly making a name for himself at IBM by teaching classes, presenting papers, and publishing articles. The young, enthusiastic, creative co-authors of PQTI include Fred Bethke, Bill Calhoun, Linda Stout, John Hurd, and Lori Newmann. They identify the intended audience for PQTI only as "the writer" ("the person who develops our publications") and "the reviewer" ("a reviewer of our publications and online documentation") (page ii). Initially, they probably assumed that their audience was their co-workers at Santa Teresa.

However, because the information development department at each IBM development lab basically follows the same style guidelines and because there has always been some friendly competition among the sites, the authors probably soon realized that they could easily win more recognition by broadening the scope of their audience to include the whole corporation. As evidence that the book's audience is even more universal, Prentice Hall recently published a much-expanded revision (311 pages) of the book, with the slightly modified title *Developing Quality Technical Information* (Hargis et al., 1998).

Why should a book whose message is 20-year-old common sense have such a lasting universal appeal? Perhaps the answer lies in the magic number three and its graphical equivalent, the triangle. Dean writes, "I wanted to create a physical object that would capture the essence of ease of use, and I saw that a little triangular pyramid would fit the bill admirably, particularly because the triangle was a prominent architectural motif at IBM's Santa Teresa Laboratory." Whether in the spiritual symbolism of the Egyptian Pyramids and the Christian Trinity, the patriotic pull of the tricolor American flag and the three branches of American government, the folklore pattern of a genie's three wishes, or the information developer's vision of the three aspects of quality (easy to find, easy to understand, and task sufficient), the number three expresses a relationship of unity and multiplicity that resonates in the psyche. Dean's expression of the ease-of-use pyramid as a recursive "set of three triples" is inspired and captures some truth that can't be logically accounted for. As Dean explains, "Three triples is an extremely strong gestalt, especially when it can be symbolized by a physical unity like a pyramid. It is so well established that the brain is a pattern-finding organism that the appeal of the core concept of PQTI must be all but irresistible" (Dean, 2002).

References

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