Survey & Corpus Analysis:

Investigating the Hirable and Desirable Technical Communicator

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# Introduction

As the majority of society moves into an increasingly technologically dependent era, it is crucial for technical communicators evolve as well in order to stay relevant. In order to fit the new technological needs of their audience, students must be taught specific tools and techniques that will make them vital resources. In this report, I discuss key information found by analyzing a concordance of job ads (for technical communication positions) and have compared and contrasted the answers of a survey that was given to professional technical communicators. This research will benefit students who are preparing to enter the professional field of technical communication as well as instructors who are deciding what curriculum should be taught in technical communication programs.

# Methods

### Surveying Technical Communicators

I developed a survey that assessed the current awareness and use of digital literacy as well as its predicted future. The questions asked where:

1. What is your job title and what company do you work for?
2. What are your main job responsibilities?
3. What tool(s) do you use the most in your job?
4. What is your definition of digital literacy and how does it relate to your job?
5. What is the most important technical skill you possess?
6. How valuable is the ability to teach yourself new technical skills?
7. How important is it to possess correspondence skills, such as working well in a team or communicating effectively with subject matter experts, versus skills that are more specific to a technical communicator, such as being able to work with specific software as well as writing, editing and organizing content?

This survey was distributed to 3 technical communicators of varying job types. I contacted two technical communicators whose information was given to me through a family friend and received a response from one of them (Michael Chapman). My other two contacts were given to me (upon request) by my cousin who holds a Ph.D. in Organizational Communication. Although her degree does not involve technical communication in the way being researched in this report, she knew two technical communicators from having worked with them.

### Job Ad Corpus Analysis

The corpus being analyzed for this research was a collection of job ads related to technical communication/writing. These ads described what skills, experience and education were necessary as an applicant and summarized what work the job would entail. I used AntConc, a corpus analysis toolkit, to find keywords and phrases along with their context. In order to find words in various contexts, I regularly checked and unchecked the REGEX (regular expression) box when looking at concordance lists. I feel the need to include my use of that specific part of AntConc because I was unaware of what its function was in the beginning of my research, but when I discovered it’s use, I was able to find where words were being used in the corpus even if they didn’t match my search exactly.

# Corpus Analysis Results

I analyzed the corpus analysis to obtain information on what hiring companies are seeking in employees. My search was broken down into four categories; Titles, Description and Skills and Education.

### Titles

The title portion was done to indicate if there were any noteworthy job titles. Because of the topics we have discussed in class, I expected more job titles to be *modern* sounding, such as content strategist, usability experts and interface designers. There were a few of these job titles, but not near as much as the overwhelming amount of technical writers or technical writers/editors. I’m not convinced of the validity of this proportion of job titles when looking at the entire job arena as a whole rather than the results of a corpus that was compiled by student’s who were told to find job ads in technical communication. I firmly believe that if looked for properly, that the amount of more appealing job titles (UX, content strategist, etc.) would match or surpass that of the typical *technical writer/editor.*

The most frequent word that appeared in job titles was *writer* with 66 hits (69% of all titles[[1]](#footnote-1)), and was closely followed by *technical* which received 63 hits (63%). These numbers make sense because the assignment was to find jobs in technical communication, it is no surprise that the most popular title related phrase *technical writer* accounted for 41% of total phrases. The next closest phrase frequency was 7% for the title of *content strategist*. Although *technical writer* was a popular phrase, the actual job title of *technical communicator* was scarce.

### Description

Finding specific information on the descriptions of job postings was a difficult task. Most of the search results yielded information pertaining to the skills needed for the job, which reflected what kind of work would be involved in a position. For example, if a post stressed that the applicant needed a strong knowledge of JavaScript, Python and XML and is proficient in programs like MadCat Flare and RoboHelp, it could be assumed that the job would contain a significant amount of coding. Another, different example is; if extensive knowledge of Adobe Creative Suite was necessary, the job most likely contained responsibilities dealing with graphic manipulation or content organization. The primary skills, which allowed me to hypothesis about the work duties of these jobs, will be discussed in the next section.

### Skills

I researched the required tool and technology proficiencies as well as the required education. In the tools category, I divided up the specific tools mentioned in the corpus into 3 categories; Microsoft Office, Adobe and Other. (Table 1.)

In regards to the technological skills needed, my data showed that 19%[[2]](#footnote-2) of ads required knowledge of XML or HTML (49 hits each). The ability to work with content management systems and knowledge of CSS both each accounted for 7% and JavaScript accounted for 8%. There are two pie charts located below that illustrate the amount of hits for a specific tool within Microsoft and Adobe. Tools that accounted for less than 5% were not included

The skills needed for a job is some of the most important information in the corpus. It clear that Microsoft Word and Excel are vital, especially considering that these two programs are included in the 31 hits for Microsoft Office as a whole. In Adobe, Acrobat, FrameMaker, PhotoShop and Illustrator have the highest hit amounts. General tools (e.g. Word, Excel and Acrobat) that can be used for a variety of everyday office tasks are essential to learn before entering the workforce. Fortunately, by the time someone graduates college, they will almost definitely be familiar with these programs because they are so heavily used. The rest of the skills needed for a job are dependent on the job itself. A student who wants to teach high school technical writing shouldn’t waste their time becoming proficient in RoboHelp or MadCat Flare. However, knowledge of these programs can be a deal breaker if a student is looking for a job that is more computer focused.

There were no real surprises in the results my search for required skills in the corpus. One interesting thing I noticed however, was that for skills relating to HTML or XML, the majority of ads only called for an understanding of these technologies. I think this is noteworthy because it shows that some workplaces just need you to be familiar with a technology, which is beneficial to students who might not be interested in extensively learning the technology.

### Education

All of the jobs required a degree of some sort. The majority of ads requested a minimum of a bachelor’s degree, usually in the English, liberal arts, or some computer science related field. (Table 2.) There were other degrees that were acceptable, but the degree varied depending on the job type. Jobs that require a lot of writing and editing may call for an English or technical communication, where marketing and journalism based jobs call for degrees in their specific field.



Table 1. Tool Requirements

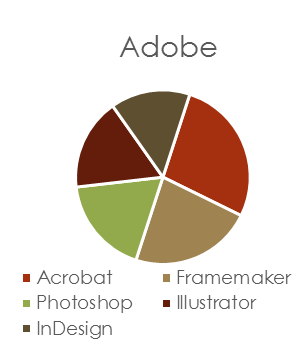


Table 2: Education Requirements



# Survey Results

The results of my survey were relevant to my findings in the corpus[[3]](#footnote-3). Although each of the people I surveyed came from very distinct realms of the technical communication field, there were mainly similarities between the three of them. Some of these similarities include:

* The importance of being able to learn new technical skills (very important)
* The use of email and word processing software
* The definition of Digital Literacy

The similarities end however when the participants were asked what their most important skill was (question 6). Since each person had a distinctly different job with different duties, their most valued skills were very different. This made sense because different tasks take different abilities to perform them, but I still found this interesting. Laura Gunn, the department chair of a digital writing department, stated writing was her most valuable skill and even joked that she might be biased because she is former technical communications student. Laura Palmer, a marketing director, said Search Engine Optimization (SEO) skills were the most important in her job, which made sense given that she works with online systems to make advertisements and sales. Michael Chapman, a maintenance publications manager, said that his most valuable skill is understanding XML based software.

The responses to question 6 supports my theory that, the specific skills that should be learned really just depend on the job you want. It would be difficult and possibly wasteful to learn all three of these skills if you only use one. Since most students want jobs at varying types of jobs, maybe they should focus on the skills needed for the job they want, rather than learning a little bit of everything.

# Conclusions

I believe that no matter what information is found on technical communication jobs as a whole, the most informative information for an individual is the information they seek out specifically. Research on a corpus like the one in this experiment is limited by what other people choose to contribute as jobs that they might be interested in. In order for a student to know what they should learn before entering the workforce, they should only focus on jobs that they would be interested in. This doesn’t mean that, for example, someone wants to work in user experience (UX), that they should only learn UX related technologies and tools because then they are limited to their job choices if they decide to change fields.

It is important for all technical communicators to learn technologies such as word processing, content management and coding as a sort of middle ground between the tools and technologies geared toward a specific job. Though the proficiency required in said technologies can vary depending on the job. I have thought in depth about how professors could prepare students best for their entry into the workforce and have not had an epiphany yet. I think that in order to accommodate for the most amount of students, technical programs should teach core competencies that cannot have their merits disputed and then allow for students to select a learning path that is best suited to teach them the important skills needed for their job of choice. Like regular college programs require basics and then core classes for a major, maybe technical programs can be broken down in a way that allows for basic competencies to be taught first, and then allow the students to choose what they want to focus on for the remainder of their degree. I have no experience in making curriculum and degree plans so I’m not sure if that is even a feasible suggestion, but in theory it sounds really beneficial.

1. This sample size was 95 total titles. This amount was calculated by manually inspecting the corpus to find the individual job titles. I chose this method because many job titles were repeated in the same ad, which would skew the results. This sample size does not accurately represent the total amount of job titles because not all listings included a specific title. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Based on a sample size of 160 total job ads. Since each student was required to submit 15 ads and there are 10 total students, accounting for the people who contributed multiple ads led me to estimate a total size of about 160 job listings. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The participants responses can be located in the document titled, contact\_information.docx [↑](#footnote-ref-3)