“What Technical Communication Graduates Require to Survive in the Industry”; Rao, S.

# Introduction

Technical Communication is a field that is evolving every day and has a number of facets associated with it which makes it the diverse field that it is. As graduate students, the skills we learn at University need to be relevant when we start looking for jobs, so these skills need to be specific enough, but not too specific since technology is constantly evolving, and so are its tools. The many talents that are required of a technical communicator means that they have to be the jack of all trades, and a master of some. Since technology evolves, the common belief is that students shouldn’t waste time learning tools, but learn how to use these tools to their benefit. This paper focuses on the skills required by a technical communicator in the industry and what a manager hiring for the job would look at. To accomplish this, an analysis of job ads from various online sources has been done using the corpus method and various technical communicators have been interviewed to research the veracity of these ads.

# Method

## Interview

The method for the interviews was to contact various technical communicators through Quora ([www.quora.com](http://www.quora.com)) and Twitter ([www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com)) and ask them a list of pre-decided questions which were designed with a focus on the objective of this research paper. These questions were sent through an email so that the professionals had time to think about their responses and reply accordingly. The responses were noted and their relevance to the corpus looked at manually. The answers were looked at as objective replies considering how the people had no stake in the paper. This was the list of questions:

* What are your most used tools?
* What is your definition of digital literacy and how does it relate to your job?
* What is the most important technical skill you possess?
* How valuable is being able to teach yourself new technical skills?
* What field do you work in/have you worked in?
* What are some of the projects you have worked on as a technical writer? (If you can give details, that would be phenomenal)
* What are your educational qualifications?
* What do you think employers look for when they want to hire technical writers?
* What, do you think, is the future of technical communication?
* Do you think learning new technology is relevant in the field now?

## Corpus Analysis

This consisted of an analysis of a corpus of multiple job advertisements on websites like [www.monster.com](http://www.monster.com) and others. The text for these ads was then copied off the sites and pasted in a text file and this text file was run through a software called AntConc (which is a corpus analysis software). The findings from the analysis were documented and compared to the interview findings to note any similarities.

The comparison between the two procedures was manual and was used to check for any similarities between the findings from the two methods.

The following were the key findings from the two methods:

# Key Findings from the Interview

There were several key findings from the interview. These were:

* All of the technical communicators used different tools but PHPStorm and Microsoft Word were some common points, since two of them were also programmers.
* Each of the interviewees said digital literacy was the ability to use technology to their own benefit, whether it was the internet or any other technology.
* The most important technical skill differed from person to person since their job descriptions were very different.
* The ability to teach yourself new technical skills was one of the most essential things in the industry, according to all of them.
* Most of these are industry veterans who have worked in various fields and have a variety of educational backgrounds.
* The ability to write in clear and precise English, being good at communicating in fluent English and an understanding of the audience were what managers hiring technical writers were looking for.
* One of the responders said that reproducible research was the future of technical communication since the users didn’t want to be hassled for using a different platform than what the product was made for. Another said that the future did not belong to the media companies but to blogs and other independent technical writers.
* The most important thing in the industry is the ability to keep learning since stagnation is the worst thing that can happen to a professional.

# Key Findings from the Corpus Analysis

The key findings from the corpus analysis have been annotated and are as follows:

* Microsoft Office Suite was the most important skill required of all technical communication job ads.
* Of this, Microsoft Word was considered the most essential. Excel, Visio and PowerPoint were the other important ones.
* The Adobe Creative Suite was also a desired tool requirement for applications.
* XML and HTML was high amongst the technology requirements for job candidates.
* Knowledge of JavaScript and content management systems were also desired.
* “Bachelor’s Degree” and “journalism” were the most used keywords in the job ads amongst required degrees.
* There were a variety of job titles in the corpus of job advertisements. The list of key words discovered in the corpus analysis were:

1. Writer
2. Technical
3. Content
4. Editor
5. Specialist
6. Strategist
7. User
8. Designer
9. Manuals
10. Visual

* These are the findings from the analysis of keywords in the corpus and the further parts of this paper will discuss its relevance.

# Results

A lot of the key findings from the interviews differ from the findings from the corpus analysis with respect to the key skills required, but the positive is that some of them do match up.

The most essential one is the importance of the knowledge of the Microsoft Office Suite, which includes Word, Excel and PowerPoint and which had focus in the Corpus Analysis as well as the Interviews. It was virtually agreed upon by all the interviewees that Word was the most used tool for their writing and editing work. It might also be so because it is the most easily available tool in the market too, as well as the most user-friendly.

The Corpus Analysis mentioned the Adobe Creative Suite which consists of InDesign, FrameMaker, Photoshop, but none of the interviews discussed that. None of the professionals even talked about anything Adobe-related, which means that either these particular writers don’t use it, or the focus on these tools is much less that believed.

The interviewees spoke about a good knowledge of programming, which includes HTML and XML as some basic technologies and these are talked about in the Corpus Analysis too. JavaScript is a keyword found frequently in the corpus too, and this is a part of programming too. Two of the four people interviewed had engineering backgrounds and even the third did a lot of programming, hence the bias towards programming languages.

The interviewees had a variety of job descriptions, but all of them agreed they were technical writers. So, that reflects on the Corpus Analysis too, with ‘technical writer’ being two of the most used words in the search of job keywords. One of them was a technical photographer, the other was the head technical writer at a firm, and the other two wrote technical manuals for various firms.

The fact that a bachelor’s degree was more important than a master’s degree and a focus on degrees which are writing-related rather than anything specific to the field the candidates might be writing for. This flies in the face of two people who were interviewed who focused on programming knowledge as more useful in their job, even though Mr. Skvorc had a Masters in Computer Science as well as English Literature.

# Discussion

This analysis helps us understand how job ads are not an exact appropriation of the current situation in the industry. You might get some on-the-job training from the company who employs you. However, this sample of people who were interviewed was too small to get data that is good enough for such a conclusion. Maybe the analysis can be conducted again with a diversity of people from many sectors of the industry and a more accurate result derived.

But at the moment, the focus on tools by prospective hirers should be restricted to Microsoft Word because that seems to be the only tool absolutely required of all technical communicators in the industry today. The others might be learned just to get an idea of how technology works, so as to remain with the times. Tools like XML, HTML and CSS seem important because technical writing is slowly shifting to online content, where a knowledge of these will turn out to be crucial.

The most important skill required of technical communicators seems to be the skill to write efficiently, to get the point across accurately and to make sure the user understands the writing. That is why, a degree in English or similar majors is what seems to be required of technical communicators. One of the respondents, Michael Graham, even mentioned that he would prefer to hire native English speakers.

A lot of hiring for technical communication also seems to be based on how well the new candidate can learn new technology and consequently, master tools related to their particular industry. The candidates also need to be enthusiastic about technology in order to understand the product before writing about it. A dislike for technology is not something that managers looking to hire, desire. This is because most technical writing is associated with and uses technology now, as many of the respondents replied.

Technology is changing, and the new hires need to adapt to the changing times. A lot of the interviewees stressed on the ability to change with how the industry flowed. A lot of them suggested that internet content is now the call of the day, and learning programming would be essential for future technical communicators to survive.

# References:

The technical communicators I contacted for this survey, I contacted on Quora and Twitter. Their contact information is as follows:

1. Frank Dauenhauer – [frankd14612@gmail.com](mailto:frankd14612@gmail.com)
2. Bruno Skvorc – [bruno.skvorc@sitepoint.com](mailto:bruno.skvorc@sitepoint.com)
3. Erika Heidi – [erika@digitalocean.com](mailto:erika@digitalocean.com)
4. Michael Graham – [mechengineermike@gmail.com](mailto:mechengineermike@gmail.com)

I contacted a number of other people who gave me their email addresses but didn’t respond to my emails. I exchanged two emails with each of these people and got the information I needed.

I used AntConc for the Corpus Analysis.