

Focus on social media

Exploring the subject from different angles



Communicator

The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators
Spring 2012

Thinking of breaking into
technical communication?

An analogy from the
motor industry

Exploring the latest
release of MadCap Flare

Explaining how a local
authority uses scrum



President's view

Once an optimist

The mixed signals from individual businesses and the wider economy have been playing havoc with my sense of what the immediate future holds for technical communicators. During January and February I had a series of meetings with old and current customers, and with freelance authors working on projects with my colleagues, in which I heard tales of mass redundancies, offshoring, new big teams setting up and organisations recruiting. I can scarcely recall a more turbulent time in our profession.

Those of you who know me, or who have read my previous articles as ISTC President, will know that I am, fundamentally, an optimist. I am someone who believes in the value of our collective expertise and in our ability to get customers to believe in, and invest, in that expertise. However, the optimist in me has taken a severe knock.

Tales of inevitable decline

Here's one example: in Swindon, there was once a proud and innovative team of more than 20 technical communicators working alongside their mobile telecoms engineering colleagues. As of March, the final four members of that team will have been made redundant. Virtually all of the hundreds of engineers have also gone. Global supply chain pressures had started forcing the manufacturing and the associated technical authoring offshore to China and India about six years ago, and subsequently, even the engineering product design and documentation leadership, architecture and English

quality assurance was superseded by teams from competing European, and finally, Asian companies. I know the last remaining authors well, and I know they have tried hard over the years, to keep ahead of the cheaper competition, with a focus on innovation and quality. One could argue that without those efforts, the team would have been long-gone many years ago.

A more complex tale

In every case that I have seen in recent months, the decline in UK authoring capability has followed the path of the engineers, either at the same time or after a lag of months or years. The more the product is made offshore the more likely it is that the documentation for it will follow. The companies that are still designing or building here, or delivering services here, are keeping and growing their authoring teams here.

It seems to be the less innovative products whose manufacture and documentation will sooner or later be moved from the UK to a low-cost centre. However, I believe the UK economy is embarking on a renaissance in high-tech innovation and export-led growth. Alongside the tales of teams disbanding, my colleagues and I are seeing a significant rise in smaller technology or software companies recruiting technical communicators or buying in technical communications expertise for the first time.

My extensive (though admittedly anecdotal) experience is that relatively few of those technical communicators who have been made redundant from large teams in the last year are still out of work now. Months and years of trying to compete with the growing threat from low-cost centres, even if you 'inevitably' lose, forces you to innovate as best you can, and that process gives you skills and perspectives that are valuable to other potential employers.

Always an optimist

So, there you go! Despite the gloomy news, and the defeatist predictions, I know that opportunities are still here in the UK for technical communicators, and I have seen clear evidence of the appetite and capacity in individuals to innovate and adapt to meet the demands that will continue to emerge. **C**

Paul Ballard FISTC

E: president@istc.org.uk

Member news

New Members

Member

Richard Bowen	South Glamorgan
Jenny Burton	Liverpool
Andrew Bush	Bristol
Alastair Chamberlain	Sussex
Stephen Handley	Gloucestershire
Georgina Harris	Bristol
Alan Hewitt	Bristol
Herman Jordaan	London
Lauren Olson	Nottingham
Stephen Pantony	UAE
Susan Smith	Somerset
Claire Wright	Derbyshire

Associate

Seun Okewole	London
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Junior Members

Shaun Allen	Germany
Michael Parkes	Staffordshire
Helen Shaw	Cambridge
Ryan ST John	Hampshire

Student

Katarina Bovin	Sweden
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Transfers

Fellow

Stephen Helms	London
Katherine Judge	Surrey
Stuart Miller	Devon
Richard Pineger	Manchester
Tim Sadler	London
David Woodward	Derbyshire

Retired Fellow

William Beale	Australia
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Member

Marjorie Jones	Southampton
Deirdre Laffan	Ireland
Roger Morton	Birmingham
Michael Valentine	Bedford

Junior

Liam Cragg	Suffolk
Diego Schiavon	The Netherlands
Joseph Sellman	Canada

Rejoiners

Fellow

Alexander Diack	Qatar
Robin Smith	Fife

Business Affiliates

Gold

Morson Projects	Cumbria
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Bronze

ITS	Yorkshire
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