

Learn more about Microsoft Word

Start to delve into VBA and create your own macros



Communicator

The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators
Summer 2015

**What's a technical metaphor?
Find out more.**

**Create and implement
personalised learning**

**Re-think your accessibility
requirements with SVG**

**Discover how a security
technology team engaged
with customers**



President's view

I've been thinking some more lately about what technical communicators do - and, more importantly, how we explain that to others clearly and succinctly. Writing the introduction to the special supplement published with the last issue of *Communicator* brought it to the forefront of my mind again, although it's something I've wrestled with for a long time.

A few years ago, I was a regular attendee at a networking event. You know the sort of thing - a brief talk and then a lot of chat amongst the people in the room as you try to work out whose services you can use and who may be interested in buying from you. The former is always, for me anyway, easier than the latter. I've found one or two graphic designers who I now work with quite a lot, and a copywriter who is excellent at the sort of writing that's on the fringes of what I do, working more in the advertising strand of marketing.

If I was lucky enough to find myself talking to a software developer, I was usually OK. I could actually say I was a technical author and he or she usually (not always!) 'got it' immediately. Otherwise, I had to try to come up with something that would mean something to the person I was talking to, in a minute or two, as attention spans were notoriously short at some of these events.

I don't know about the rest of you, but I always feel a little embarrassed that I'm claiming to be a professional communicator when I struggle to communicate what it is that I do. It's not as if I haven't thought about it before I get into that situation - but remember I'm looking for work. It's easier when I'm in a social situation... I can usually mention some of the things that people

have encountered that will have been written by a technical communicator - everything from the washing machine instruction book to the "Let's get started" leaflet that came with their latest mobile phone. As a profession, we stopped 'just writing the manuals' quite a long time ago, so those examples don't really do us justice today, although they suffice for the casual enquirer.

The other place I have found myself explaining what technical communicators do in general terms is at careers fairs. The ISTC attends a couple on a fairly regular basis (and would like to attend more). Our profession could appeal to students from journalism, creative writing, English, foreign languages and marketing as well as to those with a



How do you describe what technical communicators do?



science, technology, manufacturing or engineering background. That's a wide range of subject areas! Again, I have to explain what technical communicators do in enough detail to encourage visitors to our stand to investigate further without being so specific that they get bored and start to think the profession is irrelevant.

Is technical communication a 'special case'?

I attended a forum all about CPD (continuous professional development) on behalf of the ISTC about 18 months ago. It was one of the most enlightening lunchtime series of conversations I've ever had in terms of understanding how other professions see themselves. We had just been hearing about the new CPD requirements for the medical profession, and what some of the impacts would be. The details are not important, but the conversations that followed were interesting.

As I made my way around the room, nearly everyone I spoke to had the same type of comment, "It's alright for <insert other profession here> - but our profession is too diverse for that to work." As that was the unvoiced comment in my own head, I kept quiet and listened. In each case, the profession I was talking to viewed their own as diverse but all others as relatively homogenous. I don't know about you, but I wouldn't fancy undergoing eye surgery performed by an orthopaedic surgeon!

Yes, we *are* a diverse group with a wide range of specialisms, but we're certainly not the only group like that. I'd argue that the differences between technical communicators working in different industries and sectors are large, but no larger than - for example - the differences between the different sectors in which engineers work.

So why is it so hard to explain?

Those professions who find it slightly easier to describe what they do are where the general sense is widely known. Take doctors, for example. We all know what a doctor does... so doctors can go straight into describing what *type* of doctor they are. The same is true for teachers, the military, the police, builders, plumbers... any profession that is well known in general terms to a lot of people.

Professions that are largely 'hidden' from the public gaze - they do important stuff but many people don't realise they exist - share our problem. One of my sons is an actuary. You may know what one of those is: I do, now. I didn't when he first told me that's what he was going to be. When people ask me what he's doing, I say he's an actuary and wait for the same blank expression you tend to see when you say you're a technical communicator. I then try to find some sort of link to something people will recognise - a bit like the washing machine manual for us, but in his case I usually pick pensions or life insurance. If this was a casual enquiry, that's where the conversation ends. If not, I almost have to continue by saying "But that's not what he does." The same is true for my own social encounters: "So, which are the mobile phone companies you've worked for?" ... "Erm, although they were written by a technical author, it's not what I do."

Have you worked it out?

If you've found a clear and succinct way to describe what we do in general terms, I'd love to hear it. I'm trying to raise our profile, but don't want to give people the wrong impression. We need something equivalent to the medical profession's 'we keep people healthy and help them when they're not'. **C**

Alison Peck FISTC

E: president@istc.org.uk



See what else we offer...

If you enjoyed this article, visit our website to see what else we do.

The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators is the largest UK body representing information development professionals, serving both our members and the wider technical communication community.

What the ISTC offers



Professional development and recognition

Resources and opportunities to develop and diversify skills, stay up to date with trends and technologies, and get recognition for achievements.

Our CPD (Continuous Professional Development) framework enables you to provide evidence of your learning in all its forms, and our Awards programme gives you the opportunity to showcase excellent work.

Communicator



Communicator professional journal

Communicator is the ISTC's award-winning quarterly professional journal, covering the breadth of technical communications, offering in-depth articles, case studies, book and product reviews.

Now you've read a sample article, would you like to see more? The journal is free to our members and is also available on subscription.



ISTC Community

The ISTC offers opportunities to network, exchange expertise, and stay in touch with the UK technical communication industry – through a range of online groups, local events, and InfoPlus+ (our monthly newsletter).

You can find us on LinkedIn, Eventbrite, YouTube and Twitter (@ISTC_org).



Technical Communication UK

The ISTC hosts Technical Communication UK, the annual conference that aims to meet the needs of technical communicators, their managers and clients, from every corner of the industry.

Open to all, visit www.technicalcommunicationuk.com for the latest news.



ISTC Resources

The ISTC offers access to a range of resources, including our own books, various templates, articles summarising key technical communication issues and discounted British Standards publications.

