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Communicator

The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators
Winter 2016



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A few comments on recognition

Horace Hockley Award 2016 honoree **Peter Anghelides** says “thanks for the feedback.”



How splendid to receive not only this year’s Horace Hockley Award but also Honorary Fellowship of the ISTC. Major Hockley established standards for the technical communication profession, and was himself recognised with an OBE in the 1968 New Year Honours list.

We should welcome feedback about our work that’s timely, evidence-based, constructive. It’s a culture shift in our industry: to seek professional feedback instead of mere evaluation.

That’s important to us at IBM, where our mission is to deliver the right content, to the right person, in the right place, at the right time.

The feedback fire hose

Feedback can be overwhelming. It may be from our peers, our editors, our engineers, our clients. And the explosion of feedback is a consequence of how we’ve slashed hardcopy entitlement, increased softcopy, integrated online information, and incorporated documentation in development environments and platforms such as Eclipse or IBM Bluemix.

We get comments from IBM support, in the IBM Knowledge Center, in forums and collaborative environments like Stack Overflow, or repositories like GitHub, not to mention the freeform fire hose of Twitter and YouTube.

More than half of the visitors to ibm.com go there for technical information, and a third of them use IBM Knowledge Center (millions of unique visitors, every week). IDC research revealed that vendor information is the second biggest pre-sales influence for technology buyers.

Delighted clients are advocates for our company. And our technical content reveals our company to our clients. That’s why we welcome feedback. We crave it.

Take a page out of my book

But when I first joined IBM in 1988, feedback came via the Reader’s Comment Form (RCF). This was back in the days when you might get your IBM machine delivered on one pallet and your documentation on the next two. Each of those big hardcopy manuals

might have hundreds of pages, with one RCF at the back of it. We invited our clients to fill these in, with a request for assessment on Clarity, Accuracy, Completeness, Organisation, Retrieval, and Readability.

What optimism! Our hope was our reader would tear this page from the back of the manual, complete it in detail, fold it neatly, and return it by pre-paid post to IBM in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania where our product documentation was printed. IBM Mechanicsburg would then bundle up the RCFs and re-post them to the appropriate development lab – in my case, IBM Warwick Lab.

For years in Warwick, one client kept sending us RCFs that were completely blank. Nothing on Clarity. No insights into Accuracy or Organisation. We knew they came from one person, because each had the same postmark.

Was our mystery correspondent shy? Using invisible ink? Or a really furious client trying to bankrupt a multi-billion dollar corporation one pre-paid envelope at a time?

Then the blank RCFs stopped. For months, we wondered what had happened, until they suddenly began arriving once more.

“What a relief,” said my manager, Roger Amis, “I was beginning to worry that something had happened to him.”

Roles and responsibilities

Roger is the man who hired me into IBM. Over the following three decades, I’ve been a technical author, project lead, talent manager, globalisation expert, and accessibility advisor. I’ve line-managed information developers, human factors engineers and designers.

I completed two worldwide assignments for the three IBM Corporate Directors of Documentation, Globalisation, and Design. Those were wonderful opportunities to support strategy, process, and tooling for the biggest tech comms population in the world, through times of great transformation in IBM’s core businesses, and, therefore, great change in how we delivered product documentation in dozens of languages.

I’ve helped my company change from IBM-specific tools and technology, such as BookMaster, to establishing and sharing open standards, such as DITA. I’ve seen a company-wide renaissance in design thinking that puts user outcomes at the heart of what we do.

Technical communication is now an institutional competency within IBM. As an upline manager, the latest transformation I led was to integrate information development into the engineering squads, instead of being a separate organisation.

Multi-disciplinary teams mean that design and technical writing are no longer “add-ons,” but integrated with engineering from the outset: essential ingredients in a mix of skills for successful software development.

Staying the course

There have been many colleagues, managers, and mentors in the UK and around the world. But I reflect it was the IBM manager who hired me in the first place who made this all possible.

You sometimes hear it said that “people join companies, but leave managers.” Well, Roger Amis is a big reason why I stayed the course.

By happy coincidence, he also introduced me to my wife.

I’d like to recognise Roger as a role model for what it means to be a technical communicator, a manager, a collaborative colleague, and a mentor. He made it possible for me to set off on this path.

And I thank the ISTC for this much-appreciated recognition of my subsequent journey over the years. **C**

Reference

IDC Technology Marketing Blog, October 19, 2012

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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.

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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).

Find us on LinkedIn, Eventbrite and YouTube.



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