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The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators

Summer 2015

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Ant Davey describes a typically untypical day . . .

My alarm goes off just after 5am. I feed the dog, get dressed and am out of the door at 5:50am to walk to the train station. If I'm being good I'm wearing cycling kit and carrying pannier bags. I have to get one of the early trains as they are the only ones that stop at Clapham Junction, where I keep my bike. Cycling the last 7.5 miles to the office takes about 30 minutes; the same as staying on the train to Waterloo and then catching a bus.

I'm one of the first into the office around 7:30am. I have a quick shower and then get down to work. I review and respond to the latest emails in my inbox, check the calendar for the day's meetings, then the Research Management System for my to-do list of research reports that need preparing for publication. This is where my day starts getting ugly.

I've been using unstructured Frame for some years to output our research project reports as it has more stable numbering systems. But our Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) and our external contractors write in Word. I've had standard templates for Word-based content that will import easily into FrameMaker for years. How well they are used, and if at all, has a lot to do with how productive my day is going to be… And how many people I'd like to beat with a big carrot (a variant on the stick and carrot method of motivation).

I'm now part of a recently enlarged communications team, and currently have the rest of our Publications team (a subgroup of the communications team) reporting to me. Somehow I've become the lead guardian of our recently reviewed company image and identity, so I get a lot of questions about how things should look; which words we should be using; where we should place things on a page. The image review is recent and lots of templates and publications are creeping out of the woodwork that the Communications team previously knew very little about. Fortunately we now have a graphic designer to help with some of those questions and build some consistent and quality thinking into those decisions.

Our image and identity review has, for the first time, looked at our company's tone of voice, and this afternoon most of the Communications team is going into a workshop to explore what it means and how we convey that to our 170+ SMEs (mostly engineers) who produce the majority of the content that we publish to support the rail industry. This morning included a short meeting about progress on an industry-wide strategy document that I'd spent a lot of the previous three weeks preparing presentations for, and for which I was due to be lead author.

> " *I'm trying to convince 170 SMEs to write effectively in Word using styles.* "

A comment from our CEO was recounted, suggesting that the importance of this strategy document was such that he wanted an author on this full-time. It's now late April; first draft is due for review in early July; and publication late in September. Right now I'm the only trained technical writer in the company, and I wasn't about to drop everything for five months. As the only person familiar with the processes involved in publishing a lot of our outputs, that wasn't an option. So I left the meeting with one less big task, and two hours to draft a job description for another me, with experience of writing strategy documents in an engineering and operations environment.

I start on the job description, and then get interrupted to write a roles and responsibilities paper for the project, for a director to take into a meeting with the CEO in 90 minutes. I take the opportunity to agree that we should make a case for a second permanent technical writing position, and that's included in the paper. A colleague arrives at my desk and thankfully persuades me out of the office. We go for our regular Friday lunchtime treat from one of the stalls on the local market, an amazing half-pound burger, today with cheese, red onion marmalade and mayonnaise.

Fifteen minutes later I'm back at my desk, finishing off the meeting paper which has suddenly been pulled forward 30 minutes. Another 20 minutes on the new job description and then it's into the tone of voice workshop with colleagues from the Communications team. It's 2pm on Friday afternoon, so the job description will have to wait until Monday when I can show it to my line managers and the CEO for consideration.

Into the workshop for the next two and a half hours, where we hear from the consultants who developed the reasoning behind the tone of voice and how it should support our new image and identity. It's a productive session; which is just as well, as I'm going to be lead evangelist as we take this out to the rest of the company. To those SMEs who are used to writing academic research reports and engineering standards papers; some for the last 30 years. I'm also trying to convince those 170+ SMEs to write effectively in Word, using styles.

As I said, it's Friday afternoon, so almost as soon as the workshop has finished, I'm out of the door, as I'm going to the theatre tonight to see an amateur dramatics production of Blackadder II. Often the weekend involves something to do with sailing, where I can divert all my attention away from work. It's a great distraction before I get back on Monday, when I'll be back to considering the many ways in which we can make our work more effective – and get everybody writing content using XML. Hey, I can dream… **C**

Ant Davey MISTC is the Technical Publications Manager at the Rail Safety and Standards Board. Unwittingly a technical writer of one sort or another almost since graduation, he officially took on the role in 1999. An expert translator of gobbledegook into understandable language, he is a passionate advocate for the cause of information users.
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