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Communicator

The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators
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A day in the life of a technical communicator

Nissa Dann: it isn't all Dilbert!

My day starts at 06:50 with my partner leaving for work. I debate getting up and doing some yoga, but then remember that I am a sloth and hit the snooze button for fifteen more minutes of sleep. I get ready quickly, play with the cat before travelling thirty minutes to work at Hoare Lea in Central London. On the journey, I organise what I need to do for social committee events (leading art classes, looking for events in London or drafting questions for the book club), arriving at the office around 08:20. Many of the engineers, designers and consultants don't get in to the office until 09:30-10:00 so I have an hour of quiet with the breakfast club (about fifteen of us with the same idea!).

I firstly check the tasks that I had lined up, with my first caffeinated drink of the day. I confirm that the tasks are high on the priority list and that there are no urgent queries that have been sent in overnight. Next, I respond to quick queries from my colleagues, if there are any. Sometimes this is a case of passing on a query to a colleague, other times it is sourcing information, or trying to fix corrupted Word documents.

By 09:00 I am working on a document. This could be creating or updating a standard specification, guidance note, calculation, or schedule (all with as many pre-populated

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options/ guidance notes as possible to save the engineers, designers and consultants time and reduce risk), or even producing a podcast, newsletter or e-learning module. Additionally, I help to develop the team's communications strategy with the firm. This includes researching the end-user's needs, looking into available technology, working with our learning and development or marketing teams, and researching strategies used elsewhere.


The documentation tasks usually require research in the form of talking to the SMEs (often a Skype call more than face-to-face, because if they are Hoare Lea employees they can be anywhere in London or our Middle East offices. If they are external, it is usually a phone call), gathering and reading relevant regulations, standards and industry guidance suited to the subject I am writing about.

I try not to allow myself to be interrupted by emails constantly and have a check roughly once an hour. Our Technical Control team (six people) responds to numerous queries arising on active projects. Many are quick-wins, where the answers sought are already within our published material and we direct the person to the relevant document, but others require greater thought and in-depth replies.

I take lunch around 12:00 and either go for a walk along the canal from King's Cross towards Camden, go to a class at the local gym, or socialise with some of my colleagues. Either way, I get away from my desk, and take the full hour. It is something I never did in my younger days but I have now found it increases productivity in the long run, as well as improving my general well-being.

Before resuming the current task or moving onto something new, I'll check any emails, or posts on our internal discussion forum. I am interrupted throughout the day by colleagues coming over for a chat or to ask a question, but I always make time for this as it is essential to maintain open and friendly communications with the SMEs.

Our team relies on feedback from the engineers, designers and consultants who apply our material to their active projects. I believe that it is important to embody the behaviour we want to encourage, promoting a two-way communications stream. I can inform and advise best practice to my colleagues, who can pass it on themselves.

By five-to-five my day is done, cheerily saying goodnight to the office and heading back to the underground. The route home is used to carry out research for ideas to bring to the next Hoare Lea Corporate Social Responsibility steering group (these happen every couple of months). I'm home by 17:30, to be greeted by my fiancé and the cat and I then spend my evening cooking, reading and planning my wedding. In the words of Riva Starr and Fatboy Slim, "Eat, Sleep, Rave, Repeat". 

Further reading

Adams S (1996) Dilbert and Tina the Technical Writer <https://dilbert.com/strip/1996-12-11> Accessed January 2019).

Key G (2014) 'Stress: the final frontier' *Communicator*, Spring 2014: 50-51

Wright C (2016) 'Is your job affecting your health?' *Communicator*, Summer 2016: 33-35

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