

# Who are your users?

Improving the user experience



# Communicator

The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators  
Spring 2020

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## President's view

Technical communication as a profession is constantly changing. In the short time that I have been working in the field I have seen the arrival of new software to help you create better manuals, a push to use DITA, and the rise of using virtual reality to make documentation more interactive and user friendly. I often watch webinars demonstrating the latest software, or attend talks explaining a new methodology on how best to re-use your content, and I come away quite overwhelmed. It seems that just when you come to grips with the latest trend, a new one has started. I'm sure I'm not the only one to get caught up in the awe of new software and finding myself spending ages trying to figure out how to justify the expense to my company.

In addition to all this, I've lost count of the number of different job titles that have emerged over the last few years to better describe a specific area within technical communication. In my eyes, this has really been a double-edged sword to the technical communications profession. These new job titles have been important as in most cases they better highlight what it is we actually do. I'm sure most of you will agree with me when I say we do so much more than just write manuals. Content strategy, information architecture, documentation specialism (to name just a few specialisms) have all helped in opening people's eyes to how important our profession is and raised its profile within organisations. However, I often fear the downside to this is that we have diluted what it means to be a technical communicator. As these new job titles become more embedded in the work environment, it feels like many have forgotten

that these areas all belong under the technical communication umbrella.

The one constant in all this change has been the fundamentals of what makes a good technical communicator. The ability to write clearly, to know exactly what the user needs to know to help them complete a task, and how to interact with subject matter experts (SMEs) in order to gather the information you need. These fundamentals are taught in the classroom and more importantly through hands-on experience. Learning how to be a good technical communicator takes time and patience. Instructions are not written in one sitting and sent to be published straight away. Most of us will write multiple drafts before we are happy for it to be formally reviewed.

Learning how to extract information from an SME can only be learned through experience. Some prefer you to make a meeting request with them and book a meeting room so you can talk through the problem and they can sketch out the solution on a whiteboard. Some prefer to interact only via email, and some SMEs love it when you come over to their desk asking questions. Software cannot teach you how to figure out the ways to interact with SMEs. This is a soft skill that must be learned through experience.

These fundamentals make technical communication more than just a job. Technical communication is a profession, one that we should be proud to be a part of. Having a community like the ISTC is important to our profession for a number of reasons. Most technical communicators work on their own and belonging to a community of peers who understand the pressures our profession brings, and who can give advice and recommendations when needed, is priceless. Technical communications IS a profession and belonging to a prestigious body like the ISTC gives the profession credibility.



### TCUK Metro

To keep up with the changes in our profession, it's important that the ISTC responds to the changing needs of its members and of the wider community. Which brings me to the subject of TCUK. For the past 10 years, TCUK has been running as a three day conference. The

feedback from those who attend the conference has always been positive. It's clear that TCUK is a well-liked conference. Amongst the feedback we receive, there is one question that has been asked frequently by people: would we consider having a one day conference? Some people cannot justify the price tag of a three day conference and secondly, employers can be reluctant to release their employees from the office for three consecutive days. This is something we, the ISTC Council, have kept in the back of our minds and in the last few years we have asked if this is the year to try a new format. After a lot of deliberation, and given the current economic climate, we decided 2020 is the year to finally try this format out.

TCUK Metro, is a one day conference to be held in the Hallam Conference Centre in London on 29 September 2020. The day will consist of some talks, a possible workshop as well as the ISTC AGM and the UKTC Awards presentation. We are entering uncharted waters with TCUK Metro and while we cannot guarantee it will be a success, we are very excited about trialling the format this year. I hope that it will give those that have been unable to attend TCUK in the past, a chance to experience it. For more information, including how to purchase tickets, see the TCUK website and various social media channels.



### UKTC Awards

A reminder that the UKTC Awards is now open for entries. These awards recognise the value of clear, concise and effective information products. The quality of the entries we receive increases 10-fold every year and I for one am looking forward to seeing what entries we will receive this year. For more information on how to enter, see the UKTC Awards website. The closing date is 31 July. **C**

### References

- TCUK website  
<http://technicalcommunicationuk.com>.
- UKTC Awards  
<https://uktcawards.com>.

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