

Don't Let Your Work

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In the United States, the first industry affected was manufacturing. American factories shut down and were replaced by lower-cost operations abroad. Then auto plants closed, to be replaced with new facilities in countries where labor was cheaper. This was followed by service jobs, especially those in support call centers and information technology (IT). Before we knew it, the movement of jobs became a worldwide phenomenon as software-development, legal, medical, human resources, and accounting jobs moved from countries with relatively expensive workforces to those with cheaper labor.

What was happening? These jobs were becoming *commoditized*—that is, the cost of the work became the key market differentiator.

Commoditization isn't new. After the U.S. Civil War, factory jobs flowed from the northern to the southern United States as the country's transportation infrastructure improved and local workers acquired the necessary skills. Mar-

Become a Commodity

kets were still largely national until after World War II. Now, they are international. The world has become flat, in the words of Pulitzer Prize-winning author Thomas Friedman, and today's information infrastructure allows for instantaneous, 24/7 global communication.

What does it mean when Friedman says "the world is flat"? Now jobs will flow to wherever they cost the least, anywhere on the planet. If an IT job that costs \$100 an hour can be done by another worker for \$20 an hour, the job will flow to the less expensive worker. When the job can be done for \$15 an hour, it will flow again. Because of the unprecedented level of collaboration possible through the global information infrastructure, jobs can be decomposed into tasks, each of which can flow to a less expensive worker.

Who's Affected?

According to an article by Michael T. Robinson posted on www.careerplanner.com, the jobs most likely to flow to lower-cost workers have these characteristics:

- They are highly repetitive.
- They can be broken down into small, manageable pieces.
- Tasks are predictable and well defined.
- Tasks can be easily turned into a routine.
- Proximity to the end customer is unimportant.

Commoditization has already begun to affect technical communicators. An article in the July/August 2004 issue of *Intercom* summarizing a panel discussion on offshoring noted that "the effect [of offshoring] on technical communicators has not been as significant as it

has been on programmers. Without a doubt, however, offshore technical communicators are currently being hired to support their colleagues in the programming arena.”

Since 2004, many technical publications departments have been “rebalanced” to include a specified mix of high- and low-cost workers. Note the distinction—the *location* of lower-cost workers is not the point. The point is that some jobs and tasks are becoming commodities, and commoditized jobs will flow to lower-cost workers regardless of location.

What can you do to prevent your job from becoming a commodity? Consider the tasks you do that are repetitive, predictable, and routine. These are the tasks most likely to flow to lower-cost workers.

For example, most large companies have style guides. As companies contain costs and strive to meet regulatory requirements (such as Sarbanes-Oxley), they will push for stricter adherence to those standards. And as they press for adherence, they will develop metrics for compliance by which they will be able to “objectively” measure “good.” With this level of standardization, all technical communication work can be made to fit into a workflow. In a workflow system, some components of the work can be parceled out to the most cost-efficient workers, regardless of geography. Ask yourself: will your tasks flow elsewhere? Or will you be in a position to manage the flow?

Technical manuals that follow a narrative can be made predictable and almost programmatic; it’s not hard to see how this type of work could become a commodity. On the other hand, much of what we develop in the future will conform to a task/chunk model instead of a narrative. After style-compliant, standard chunks are in place, reuse rules must be developed. Technical communicators need to develop an understanding of the nature of content, and be able to render content into a standard form. After legacy material is modified to fit this form, support for it can be commoditized, but the rendering itself will be a valued skill for a while. Engineering the

workflow will be valued as well, for now. And managing components through the workflow system will remain a well-paid responsibility for the foreseeable future. In short, a premium will be paid for content creation, content architecture, and content management.

At some point, though, anything technical could become a commodity. Remember when PCs were expensive? Remember when there were several competing operating systems? Years ago, companies needed writers to document specific implementations of TCP/IP. Now TCP/IP is table stakes. No one sells TCP/IP; people sell applications that assume it is there.

Our Response

What’s the best way for technical communicators to respond to the commoditization of technical tasks? In general, jobs unlikely to become commodities have these characteristics:

- They have a high degree of ambiguity—you do not simply follow rules; you make judgments.
- They are unpredictable, with little routine.
- An understanding of the local culture is critical.
- Time is of the essence; waiting several hours for an outcome is unacceptable.
- A high degree of collaboration is required.
- Close proximity to the end customer is required.
- Creativity and innovation drive the outcome.

There are specific steps we can take to safeguard our current jobs:

- Be the best in your field; be a lot better than the next person.
- Demonstrate the ability to be creative and innovative.
- Market your accomplishments to your management and your marketplace.
- As Robinson recommends, get out of any repetitive jobs that do not require close proximity to the customer.
- Become a lifelong learner—what you know now will become old technology, so make it second nature to learn new things.
- Get the right schooling—acquire or

renew skills that allow you to work in teams, communicate effectively, and resolve conflicts.

- Think creatively (as Andrea Coombes suggests in her article “How to Stay Competitive in a Global Job Market”), interact with others, brainstorm, persuade, and be flexible.
- Show leadership skills—geographically dispersed teams require good communicators to lead them to work effectively and efficiently.

In the long run, we need to completely revamp our job descriptions. One way to do this is counterintuitive. Rather than authoring printed manuals and online help panels, we should be involved in or leading projects that make them unnecessary. Why? Because consumers increasingly demand intuitive interfaces to the products they use. Users and administrators of more complex products expect interfaces that guide them through decisions rather than require them to read details.

Examples of intuitive interfaces to technology abound on the Internet. Who isn’t familiar with Amazon.com? The site will create “your store” and update the information it displays on the basis of your previous searches and purchases. After you buy something, Amazon easily lets you track your purchase as the product makes its way to you. You don’t need documentation to use the site effectively.

But Amazon still hires technical writers. Here’s a recent job description on its careers site:

Amazon.com is looking for an exceptional technical writer to join our Voices team, a group dedicated to drive platform improvements based on community feedback and involvement. We help to ensure that the experience of Amazon’s partners is smooth and problem free.... As a technical writer on this team, you will lead initiatives to develop documentation and training that (users) will depend on to help them quickly and efficiently launch and manage their stores on Amazon’s website. You will also design and write documentation

(for those who) interact with our clients on a daily basis, to help them through all phases of the client lifecycle: from sales, through the development and data integration process, and on into operational maintenance of the Web site solutions we provide them.

Look at the emphasis here: *drive platform improvements, ensure the experience ... is smooth and problem free, lead initiatives, (help users) quickly and efficiently launch and manage their stores.* Not your traditional job description, is it?

And here's a qualification for that same job that you don't see every day:

You should have a demonstrated affinity for technology and software and a genuine desire to consolidate and streamline workflow.

Not long ago, only managers desired to consolidate and streamline workflow. How rapidly our industry is changing!

Now consider *www.Pandora.com*. Created by the Music Genome Project, Pandora asks you questions and customizes an Internet radio station based on your responses. First, Pandora asks you to name a group or a song. When you respond, Pandora plays your request, and asks you to evaluate the song by giving it a "thumbs up" or a "thumbs down." Then Pandora plays a song by another group. You evaluate that song, and the next one, and so on.

The engineers at Pandora analyze hundreds of thousands of songs and tag them with attributes, which they store in a database. Each time you respond to a song, Pandora refers to its database and offers you a choice with similar attributes, refining the mix each time. As described in the *New York Times*, the site provides "a stream of music with similar 'DNA,' ... microtailored to each user's tastes" (Jeff Leeds, "The New Tastemakers").

You don't need documentation to use Pandora—you interact with the Web site and get results. Similar technology and analysis could yield a Web site providing a stream of microtailored information for users attempting to install a server or use a software application. You are probably familiar with compa-

nies that are rolling out something similar (none, however, as sophisticated as Pandora)—software that provides some form of "user-personalized documents." It's not uncommon to visit a company Web site, choose among several system characteristics, and receive a customized document based on those choices. Such a document comprises XML chunks stored in a database and rendered into PDF format.

As mentioned earlier, writers should be involved with chunking material and writing the rules for combining chunks. Still, the trend is that users read documentation only when stuck or when attempting to do something complex. Otherwise, why bother? The interface itself should help the user through the process.

It's not that the need for printed documents and help panels will vanish. Rather, these products will become a commodity, and at some point their production will flow to lower-cost workers. Unless we're willing to produce commodities and accept commensurate wages, we must find something more valuable to do.

Our Value

Writing and communicating will always be of value. For some of us, valued work will mean guiding teams of commodity producers or managing the collaboration of geographically dispersed teams. For others, it will mean designing interactive scripts or shaping the repositories of information tapped when using sites such as Amazon and Pandora, or user-personalized documents. It will mean more *developing content reuse and single-sourcing strategies* and less *employing various authoring and desktop publishing tools to produce printed or electronic publications and integrated online help systems*, which is a phrase you probably find in many current job descriptions.

Web 2.0, a term that refers to the Web as a communal, highly interactive development platform, also affords new and exciting opportunities to the technical communicator. Because of the stability of Web standards and availability of standards-compliant browsing software, users can now:

- Produce and share content
- Organize content
- Access site content and functions well beyond the borders of site pages
- Pursue social goals, not just work goals (as William Hart-Davidson explains in the September/October 2007 issue of *Intercom*)

This model grants users an unprecedented role in designing and coordinating content, which is a premium that high-cost technical communicators provide. Who better to facilitate and guide collaboration than skilled technical communicators?

Staying on top of these trends requires embracing change and reinvention—that is, viewing the worldwide changes in our industry as an exciting challenge rather than a depressing threat. Learning new things should be second nature to anyone whose career is in technology. It is at the core of communication, and effective communication is never routine. ❶

SUGGESTED READINGS

Coombes, Andrea. "How to Stay Competitive in a Global Job Market." *enarta.msn.com/encnet/Departments/Adult Learning/?article=HowStayCompetitive*.

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