What can techcommers do with techcomm?

Identifying linked skills for taking your career into new areas, and what to do to fill the gap for your next career move. Digital communications recruiter CJ Walker of Firehead.net provides a roadmap to a potential new career.

Now you've been in techcomm for a while. Where can you go from here?

As a recruiter, I'm used to getting a lot of questions about how to get *into* techcomm. Assuming you already are in techcomm, where can you go next? What career move could you make that uses the skills you've already worked so hard to develop? And how do you build a plan for how to get there?

Techcomm is becoming more and more strategic as we automate more of the rote tasks like writing steps, and are moving from monologue procedures to conversation design for the machines. A strong technical communicator has to make sense of what's important and what's not, and how to put the important stuff in context of how people do their jobs.

Fortunately for techcommers, there are many career transition possibilities because of the array of transferable skills – so many possibilities, it would take a book, and ironically detailed instructions – but by showing you how to analyse the skills you already have in your arsenal, I hope to provide you with six solid examples of potential career development.

Techcommers are polymaths

A polymath is someone whose expertise lies in not only one, but many subjects. This is the basis of techcomm – you have to have tools and writing skills, but you also need the ability to understand and write about many different technical topics. Contract technical writers jump around regularly among different industries and subject matter. While we're as different as the topics we write about, we all have techcomm in common.

Diana Ost, (former) techcommer, wrote an article titled "Mining for Career Gold: Discovering Related Careers from Buried Skills" in the May 2009 issue of Intercom in which she offered a valuable perspective on how wide techcommers' talents are spread. "Technical communicators are, in general, people who have multiple interests, are well-read, and have a deep sense of curiosity about how things work. We are usually quick learners who enjoy both technology and people, and we can be a bridge between the two."

At the ISTC's conference in 2018 under the theme "Pursuits of a Polymath", there were talks on (a wide variety!) of topics, including: "The Value of the Polymath Communicator" by Alisa Bonsignore and "Polymathing 365" by Eran (Yuri) Kolber. I think it was an eye-opener for many techcommers to see so many of their skills acknowledged at once. And so publicly.

Focus on the skills, not the job title

Did I mention that in such a field you are spoilt for choice? I personally don't think you should look at a move as either being lateral or a promotion, but rather focus on the change in skill set. A change made for job satisfaction or growth can be a reward in itself. While the goal is, of course, for your pay to grow as you do; it isn't always higher when you move into another field where you don't have as much seniority.

It also depends on how the employer values the skills you bring to their table. In a technology company, writing skills are outside their core competence and this can have an impact on the salary offering, positively or negatively.

For example, I recently recruited for a company that was looking for a content manager and a technical author. They were willing to pay a higher salary for the technical writer because, they consider, a technical author has to have much more knowledge to start from a blank page and design the information from scratch. The content manager, to a tech company, was just another tech role.

Skills in content structuring, analysis, and management are hot on the market in the information age, in spite of this one company's idea about content managers' salaries.

Classifying, organising and structuring content are under-appreciated skills – I know! I'm a linguist – that are now finding a demand in the market for several reasons. The most important, in my opinion, is the trend in artificial intelligence (AI) and automation, meaning that we will be developing content differently for human-machine interfaces. Structuring information so that AI automation works will be paramount.

Six jobs with transferable techcomm skills

I want to focus in on six jobs that align well with techcomm skills sets. This list is by no means exhaustive. And many, many new roles are developing as AI technology moves forward. I'll give some of the shareable crossover skills for the positions, so you can start to define where your skills gaps are in your own situation.

1. Content strategy/ ContentOps

The core function of this role is to use content strategy towards creating an operational model that makes sense for effective and efficient content production.

This role has exploded in interest, self-description, and (in fewer cases) job moves for techcommers. It's the most popular new destination for most technical authors I speak to about career moves. There are plenty of crossover core skills for a move from techcomm to content strategy: user research, structured writing and editing, critical thinking, business analysis, and stakeholder management. But there are still many skills gaps, most of which involve business, technical, and possibly marketing skills, that are firmly required as well.

Chris Hester, owner of content agency Red Desk Studio, insists it is important to create a collaborative working relationship with design and development teams as well. Content

strategy is a more unified approach to solving information/content delivery problems by working together across the organization.

For a content strategy to work, it is important to emphasize the strategy part over your own content development skills. Chris Hester advises: "First, assess your business skills and knowledge. I've met new (and experienced) technical communicators who have been so focused on their tech comm skills that they have very little business knowledge." The strategy element is not for someone who doesn't have business skills.

'Content strategist' is a fluid job title in today's job market. If you look on any job site, you'll see a wide scope for what content strategists are supposed to do. Or even who is calling themselves a content strategist. This ever-debated job title has made things vague for those of us researching jobs.

I would like to cut through the evolving definitions and job titles in this new field and give an analogy of how the content roles work in concrete terms. Rahel Bailie, Director of Content at Babylon Health, gives a clear example:

"Imagine that content operations is like running a bakery. Before you can run a bakery, you have to hire an architect to design and a construction company to build a bakery to suit the needs of whatever products you plan to produce.

- Content strategists are like the architects who design the bakery
- Content operations professionals are like the construction crew who come in to build and maintain the bakery
- Content developers are like the bakers who now have a fit-for-purpose bakery so they can churn out the baked goods every day"

Whatever the job title, some standard skills are required for the practice of content strategy or content operations practitioners:

- Understand business and user requirements
- Carry out gap analyses and developing strategies
- Business process mapping
- Encode editorial conventions and standards
- Understand content management principles
- Manage expectations at various stakeholder levels
- Change management

2. Content marketing

The content marketing role is to create content that markets an organisation to attract prospects and retain customers. This content can include such things as ebooks, white papers, webinars, web copy, nurture emails, blog posts, infographics, solution briefs, imagery and videos.

Although marketing is a different kind of communication than techcomm, the connection with it can be a bridge though content strategy. Many different kinds of content are important to an organisation's products and brand, and the basics of how to communicate still apply.

Alyssa Fox, Senior Director, Partner Marketing at cybersecurity firm Alert Logic in Houston, Texas, came up through techcomm. She says: "My technical ability has served me tremendously in marketing – marketing is now an art and a science, and understanding analytics and various software tools to help you in marketing is essential.

"I recommend marketing because you get to have a visible impact on how the business is doing every day."

Standard content marketing skills with potential techcomm crossover:

- Understanding target audience
- Copywriting
- Storytelling
- Messaging
- Understanding and providing context
- Strategy
- Prioritisation
- Measurement and analytics
- Social media, video

3. Instructional designer

Instructional design (or instructional systems design, or ISD) is a systematic approach designing, developing and delivering learning materials. It's both a science and an art – a science because it's based on learning theories, and an art because there is so much creativity involved in the design process. IDs often work synergistically with techcommers, using their original content, gathered from SMEs and technical specs, to develop learning materials. They can also work with designers, UX and marketing.

Tom Johnson wrote about this relationship in his blog 'I'd Rather be Writing' on 16 September 2010 in a post titled 'Instructional Design Versus Technical Communication'. He summarises the synergy between the two fields: "The instructional designer needs access to the content that users need to learn. The technical communicator needs to present the content in a way that users can learn it."

ISD skills with potential techcomm crossover:

- E-learning
- Computer-based learning (CBL), web-based learning (WBL), and blended learning
- Cognitive theory
- Project management
- Topic-based writing
- Facilitation
- Industry knowledge
- Research
- Learning methodologies

- Learning assessment
- Creativity
- Visual content creation

4. Chatbot conversation designer

Conversational AI applications enable long-running interactions with customers via text or voice using the most intuitive interface available: natural language.

Often considered a UX role, it has long been a subject of research in linguistics. It will take on more and more significance as we develop our content for machines, and companies seek new ways to trigger and sustain more meaningful engagement. Technical communicators are some of the best-prepared people to segue into this new role. Techcommers understand the content life cycle. It overlaps nicely with UX writing and taxonomy, as well.

This role is also appearing as Conversational UI, Chatbot Writer, AI Writer, and AI Interaction Designer.

Chatbot skills with potential techcomm crossover:

- NLP
- Strategy
- Analytics
- Personality design
- Copywriting
- Script design
- Syntax
- UX
- Conversation flows
- Categorisation and metadata
- Data parsing

5. UX writer

UX writing has evolved to describe a type of writing where the writer's output is part of the product, where the writing is part of the interface, part of the design and part of the user experience. It differs from copywriting in that it is task based. It aims to guide the user through the interface or product in an intuitive manner using microcopy. The Help isn't a separate manual, it's right there in the User Interface.

As apps and websites become increasingly complex, the need for clear guidance within them also grows. These digital products have become an integral part of daily life, and users prefer the ones that give the most natural and fluid experience. These changes in the way we interact with technology have led to the creation of UX writing as a discipline in its own right.

This is a fast-growing role, often discussed by the content community in forums and blogs, and many clients are asking for this job title. It could be that UX writers are being hired internally as content developers move and connect with different projects and goals in their companies. I do think this is a space to watch. Content strategy and UX writing have many overlapping responsibilities. The role also has elements of both copywriting and techcomm in it.

UX writing skills with potential crossover from techcomm:

- UX
- Designer's mindset
- User research
- Copywriting
- Micro-copywriting
- User journey mapping
- User analysis
- Listening
- Problem-solving
- User advocacy
- Empathy

6. Senior technical communicator

Many communicators may choose to advance their career path by remaining in pure techcomm and going into leadership/management roles.

Alyssa Fox, a Senior Director of Partner Marketing says, "I started my career as a technical writer and worked my way up through management. My final techcomm job title was Director of Information Development, which was a global leadership position." After this, as mentioned, she moved into content marketing as way to advance her career, considering that the new challenges would come from learning new skills and applying her knowledge to a new field.

Most lead or senior techcomm roles are in larger companies and are usually a track choice as opposed to going into management. In my experience as a recruiter, they tend to pay roughly the same salaries. It's a good option for people who enjoy the core techcomm skills and remain practitioners and don't want to essentially change careers by going to strictly management of others.

Karen Mardahl, is a lead technical author at SimCorp in Copenhagen, Denmark. She has a degree in English and her techcomm training has all been on the job. Now, after so many years in the trenches, she gives seminars to colleagues in development, education, or customer support on user experience, personas, productivity skills, and even writing.

Her main task in her senior role is documenting her teams' work for each agile sprint – but it's the organization and management around this that takes up most of her time. Karen says: "After several days of working on projects in ad hoc groups and making plans in a leadership group, I really savour digging in to some good old-fashioned writing. Crafting some nice topic-based documentation can be quite satisfying."

She adds: "For me, the benefits of being in this [senior] role lie in the opportunities to solve problems at so many levels – what content to deliver, how to deliver it, how to make content delivery possible, how to help design functionality that will help our content authors or features for our site visitors."

Skills needed for the step-up to senior technical communicator:
- Leadership
- Management
- Listening and synthesis
- Teamwork
- Product testing
- Research
- Project planning
- Educating
- Curiosity
- Networking

Next steps: research, plan, network

Once you start to see the overlap (or gap) between your current skills and new career paths, you can start to research the new field and make your career development plan.

To do this, networking is vital. It's a fact that about 70-80% of jobs come through referral from your network. Your colleagues know your field and your work. Networking becomes even more vital when you want to change fields. But how do you get people to recognize you in a field you haven't even worked in yet?

Get involved. It can come in the most creative or unexpected ways. Give a presentation on a topic you already know well to an audience who works in your new area of interest. Emphasise the bridge. For example, Ellis Pratt, founder of Cherryleaf technical writing services, says: "Having our own podcast is a good way to ask questions, and to talk to people who might have the answers."

The important thing is to get out there and start working with it. Build your name while you're working on your gap skills. I have a few suggestions to get started:

1. Listen to podcasts
2. Take part in user forums
3. Go to conferences
4. Attend online courses
5. Get on LinkedIn and network
6. Volunteer for your professional organization or in your community
7. Promote the work of companies on your 'interview bucket list'
8. Build a list of online resources to follow
9. Give a presentation, seminar, or course
10. Identify and follow the thought leaders in the field

Summary

Techcomm skills provide a basis for many departures into other content and analytical fields. I know from my own career how versatile a skill set in techcomm can be. I started my techcomm career in the '90s. I had a chance to work in international areas where I got to use my language and linguistics skills to structure content for translation. I worked in localisation. I got to learn instructional design. Then, I moved to Europe and worked as an editor. I changed my career path when I went into recruitment, but it was my niche expertise in techcomm that helped my success. Then content strategy came along. Now, things are coming together with structured content, categorisation and procedural approach to content to bring us forward into the AI era writing for the machines.

The world of content is heating up and you, as a seasoned techcomm professional, have a strong skill set to take your career to new levels if you're looking for new horizons.

CJ Walker is the founder of Firehead.net, a market-leading, Europe-based recruiting and training consultancy specialising in digital communications.

20 Tech Comm Career Moves

This list is a sample of possibilities for applying techcomm skills (beyond just technical documents) as a base to move into new areas. This comes from my 15+ years of experience as a recruiter in techcomm and watching techcommers' evolutions into other areas:

1. Editor: non-fiction, textbook, science, and medical publishing
2. Content strategist
3. Content management
4. Business analyst
5. Technical writing instructor (corporate or university)
6. Community manager (marketing and social media)
7. Corporate trainer
8. Web designer
9. Academic editor: thesis and dissertation
10. Web writer and editor
11. Research and development
12. Language instructor
13. UX writer
14. Proposal writer
15. Documentation manager
16. Information architect
17. Knowledge manager
18. Localization manager
19. Content marketer
20. Chatbot conversation designer