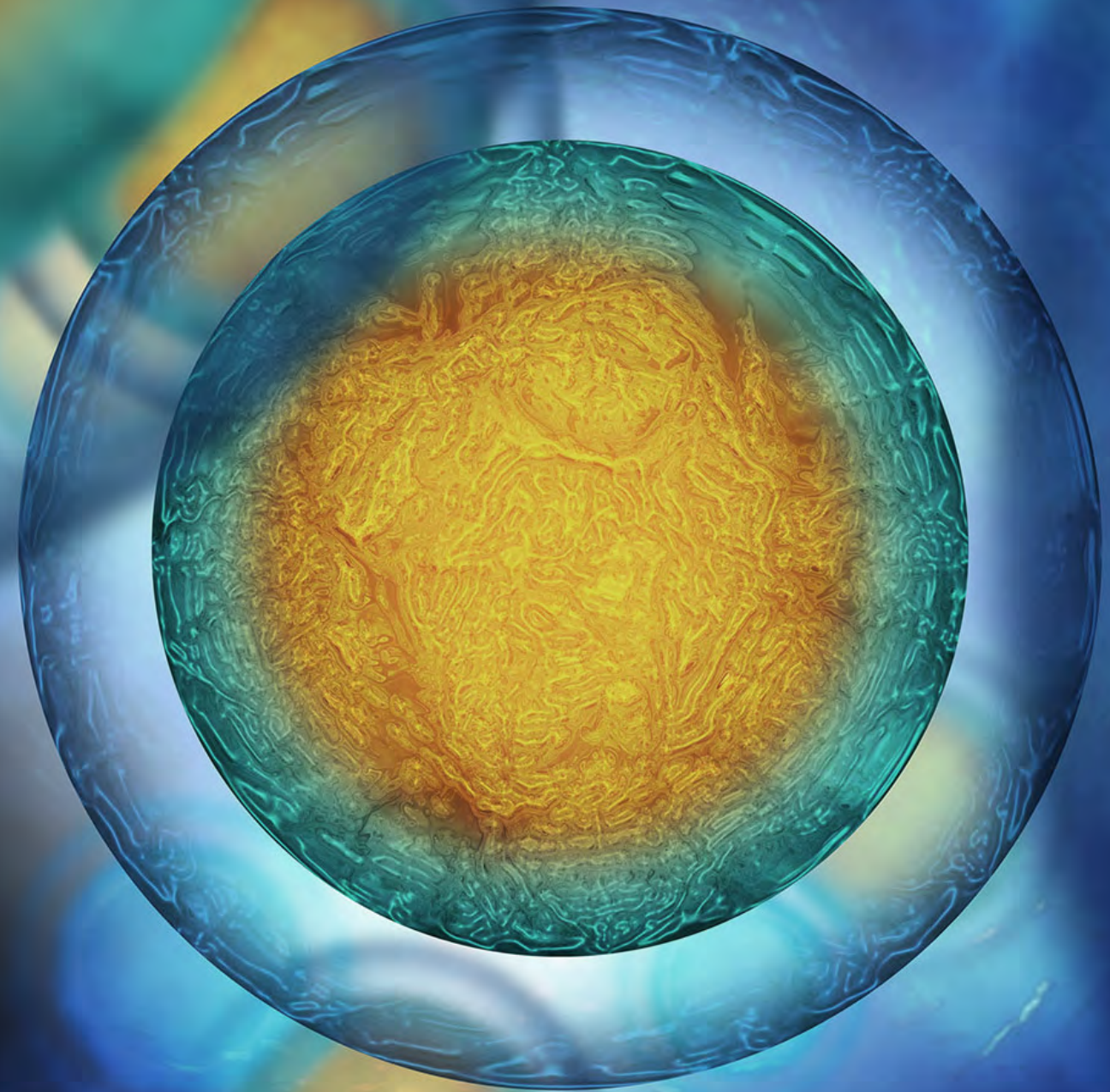# THE STATE OF TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION
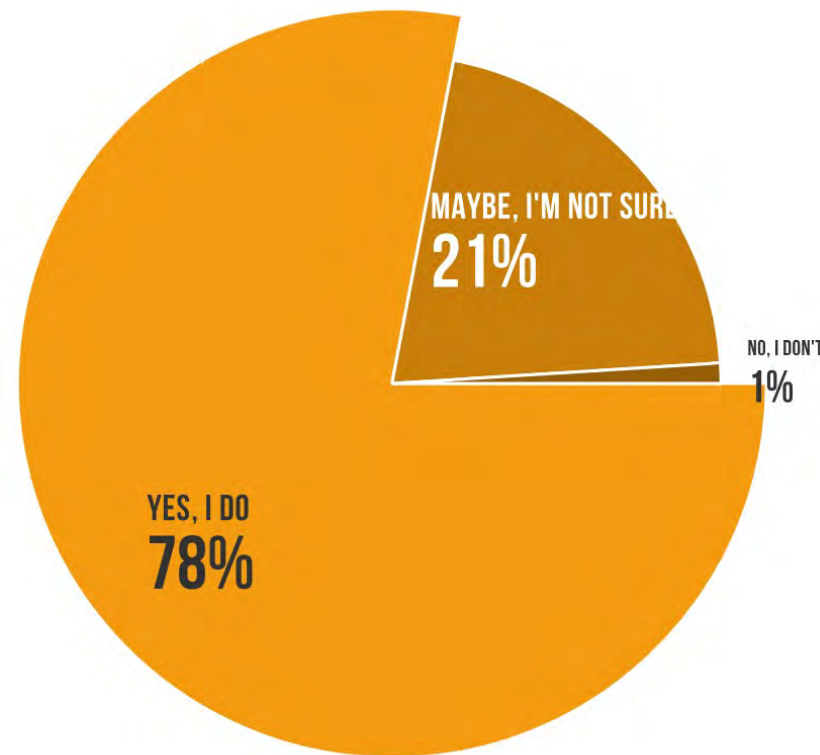
a look at the trends, challenges, methods, standards, tools, and technologies in use in modern technical communication departments

Source: Adobe Stock Images

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DO YOU BELIEVE THAT TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION CAN IMPACT SALES?

MAYBE, I'M NOT SURE
21%

NO, I DON'T
1%

YES, I DO
78%

78% of respondents say they recognize the role technical content plays in the conversion of prospects into customers; up from 51% in 2016.

Each year, The Content Wrangler surveys technical writers around the globe to identify the top issues impacting the creation, management, translation, and delivery of technical content.

Our *2019 Technical Communication Industry Benchmarking Report* looked at the trends, tools, standards, and technologies in use in modern technical publications departments today. The findings should prove useful to practitioners, managers, vendors, educators, students, and employers.

Technical communication impacts sales

Traditionally, information products created by technical communicators were consumed by customers after the purchase of a product or service. Deliverables like end-user documentation; assembly, disassembly, maintenance, and repair instructions; and, online help were often provided to customers only after they purchased a product or service.

More than three-quarters of technical communication teams realize that prospective buyers often seek — and value highly — technical information, making it an essential ingredient in almost every type of business transaction.

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ABOUT THE
RESPONDENTS

- **600+ technical communication pros working in 16 countries**

- **Teams of all sizes and configurations**

- **40% work in a department with 10 or fewer co-workers**

- **15% work on teams with 50 or more co-workers**

HOW LONG HAVE YOU WORKED IN THE FIELD OF TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION?

15 YEARS OR MORE **11-14 YEARS** **6-10 YEARS**
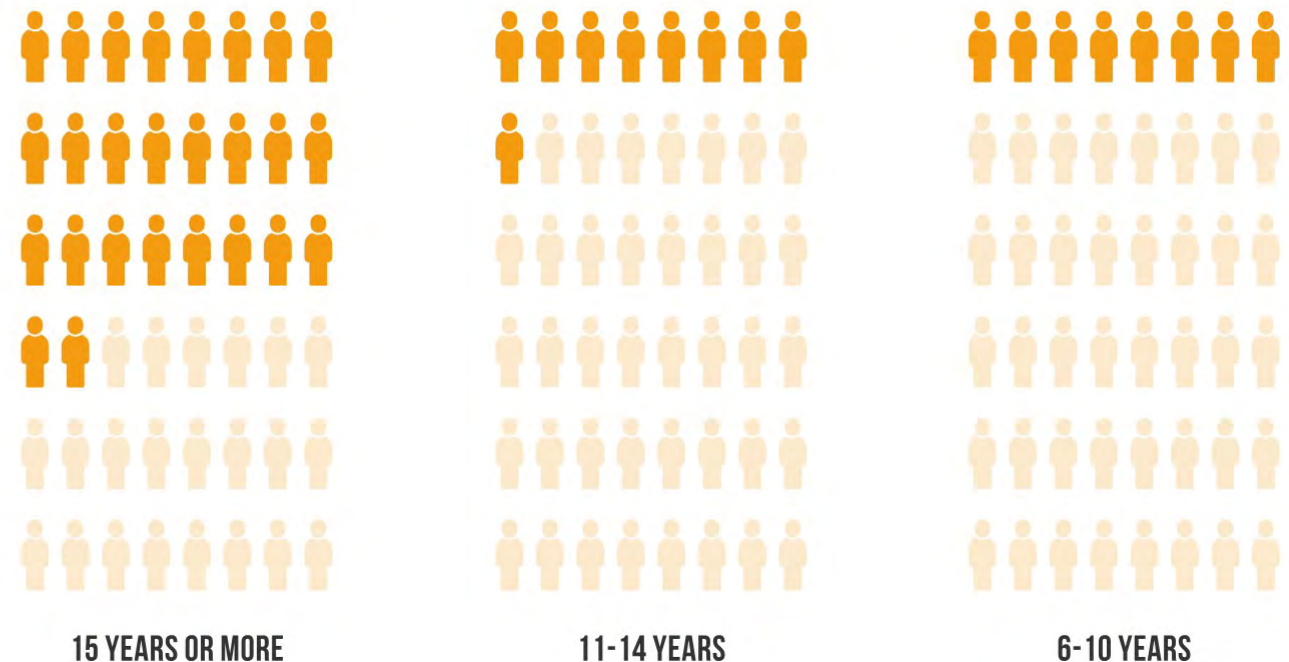
More than half (52%) of those we surveyed are veteran tech writers having worked in the field for 15 years or longer.

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LANGUAGE FLUENCY AND TRANSLATION

IN HOW MANY LANGUAGES ARE YOU FLUENT?

61%

are fluent in only one language

39%

are fluent in two or more languages

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Survey respondents are a monolingual group, for the most part, with 61% reporting they are fluent in only one language.

39% of technical writers claim to be articulate in two or more languages.

Despite a lack of multilingualism, the organizations for which most survey respondents work are multinational firms (78%) that translate the content they produce into a variety of foreign languages.

Translating technical communication deliverables

- **21% of organizations translate their technical content into 1-5 languages**

- **34% translate their technical content into 6-10 languages**

- **18% translate their technical content into 11-24 languages**

- **11% translate their technical content into 25 or more languages**

LEADERSHIP
AND VALUE

51% of those surveyed said they have both a favorable view of their workplace and that they believe their leaders value the contributions they make.

DO THE LEADERS OF THE ORGANIZATION FOR WHICH YOU WORK VALUE TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION?

51%
believe their leaders value tech comm

Despite support they believe they have from leaders in the firms for which they work, only 19% of technical writers think their leaders view content as a business asset worthy of being managed efficiently and effectively, while 16% said the leaders of their firms do not value content as an asset.

MOST COMMON
FIRST NAMES
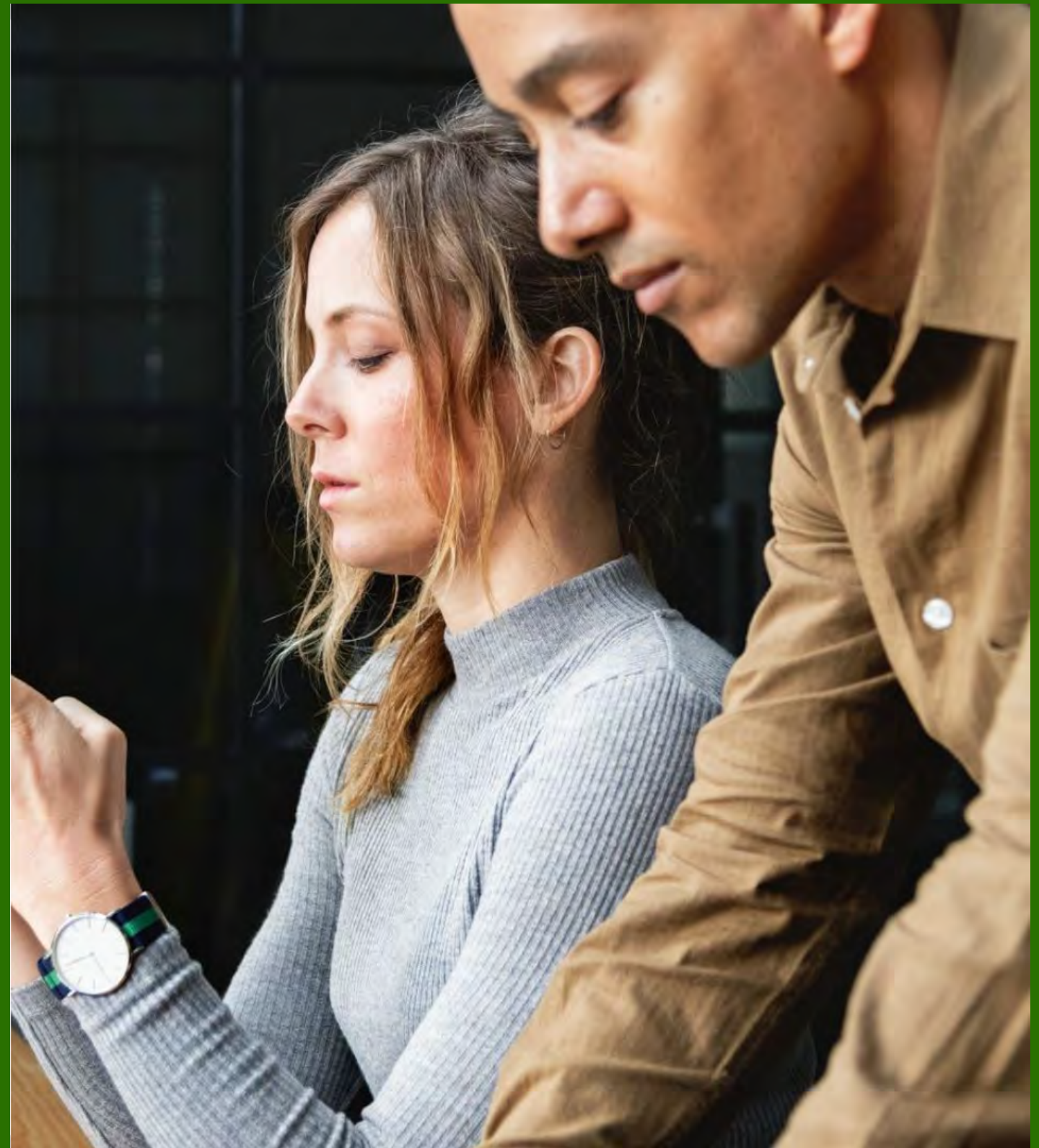
The most popular first names among technical communicators we surveyed are:

For men:

1. John
2. Mark
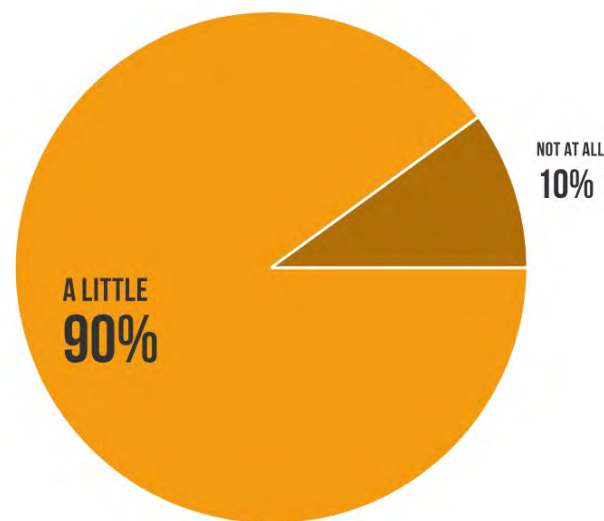3. Reed

For women:

1. Jennifer
2. Deborah
3. Susan

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ARE YOU EXCITED ABOUT TECHNOLOGY AND ITS IMPACT ON THE FIELD OF TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION?

NOT AT ALL
10%

A LITTLE
90%

They are an optimistic and well-supported bunch, the majority (90%) of which say they are "super excited" by the future impact of advanced technologies on the way they live and work.

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EXCITED ABOUT THE FUTURE OF TECH COMM

Chatbots, voice assistants, and artificial intelligence are innovations many technical communicators are most excited about

51% of those we surveyed have a favorable view of their workplace and say they believe that their leaders value the contributions technical communication teams make to the company.

All three of the technologies deemed "most exciting" by tech comm pros are related: chatbots, voice-enabled digital assistants, and artificial intelligence.

In short, there's big excitement around innovations involving machine learning.

"Augmented reality will radically transform how technical and scientific information is communicated, bringing technical documentation content directly to — and integrating it with — the point-of-use."

— director of technical information, medical device manufacturer

AUGMENTED REALITY: ANTICIPATED & FEARED

There's excitement — and a bit of trepidation — surrounding the addition of augmented reality to the tech comm tool box.

18% of tech comm teams claim they produce augmented reality-enhanced documentation deliverables today. 10% say they're planning to do so.

Tech comm shops that use augmented reality tend to exist in large global firms, often working on teams of 50 or more communicators producing content in 20 to 50 languages.

Some survey participants said that they recognized the potential of the technology to enhance and improve user experiences, but they are uncertain if they will be called on to work on augmented reality projects because they lack the knowledge and experience needed.

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VIDEO DOCS

66% of those surveyed said their technical communication teams are responsible for creating video documentation, but only for some of their products.
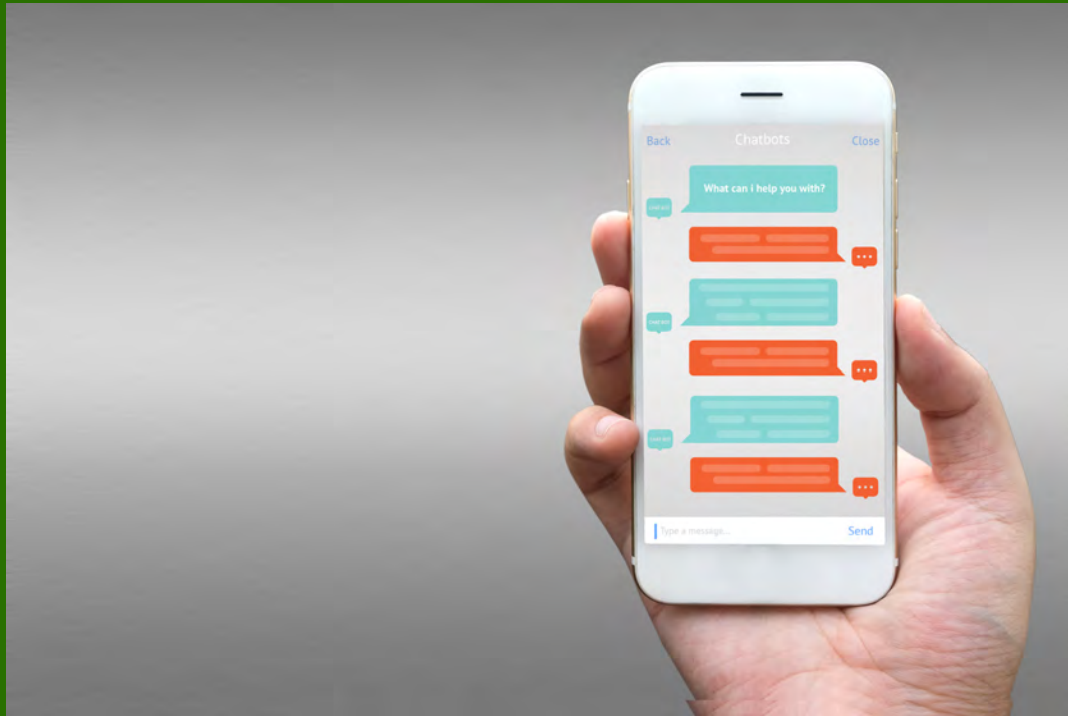

Source: Adobe Stock Images

Production of video has increased dramatically since 2007, when only 11% of those we surveyed said they created video tech docs.

Today, 66% of technical communication teams make video documentation, but only for *some* of their products; 19% of those surveyed say they craft video instructions for *all* of their products.

While creating video documentation is seen as increasingly important by most teams we surveyed, less than half of tech comm shops that currently create video documentation localize it. Among those that do, 47% localize *some* of their video documentation, while 23% adapt *all* of their video docs. 9% say they plan to do so in the future.
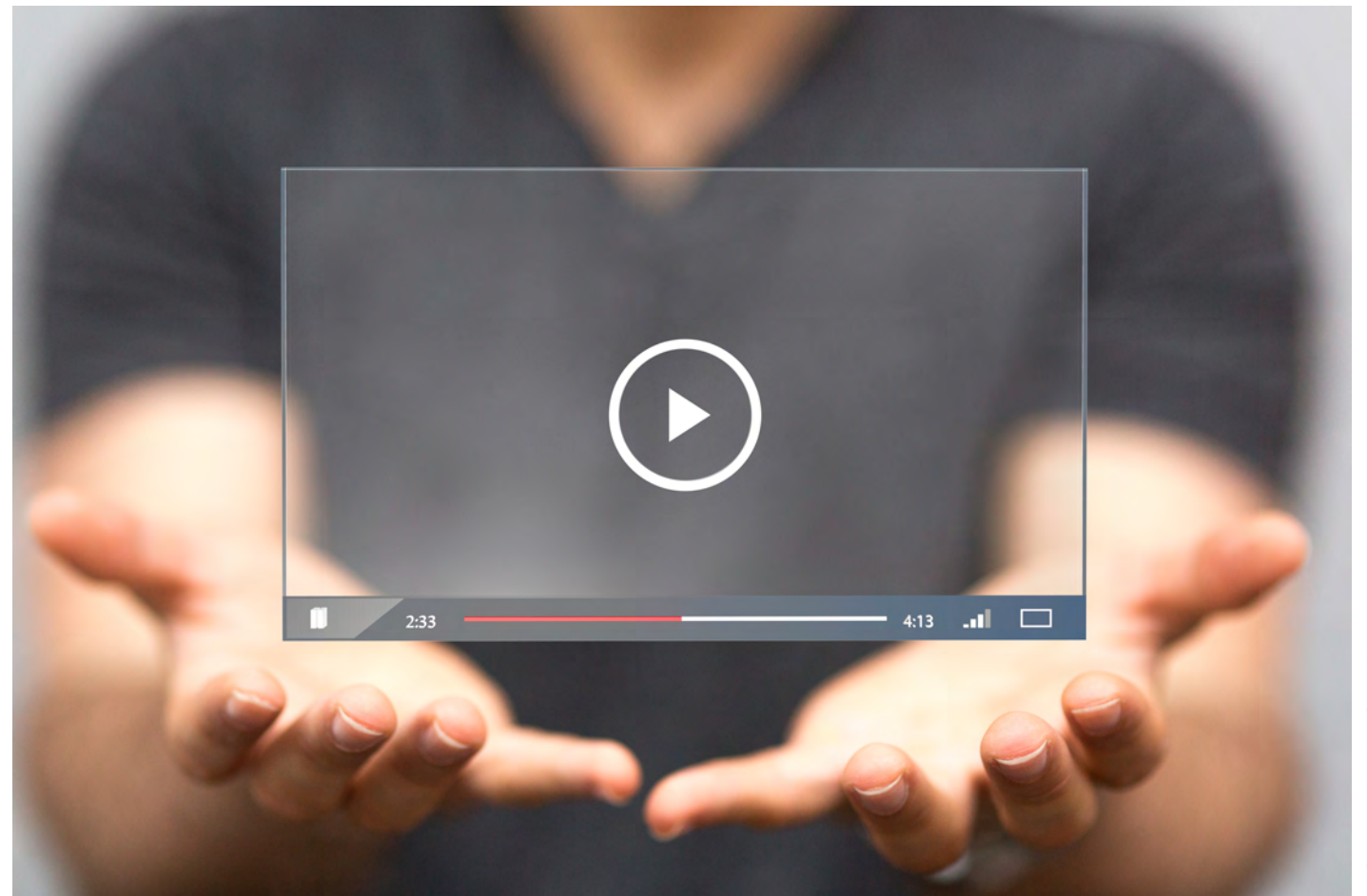
Source: Adobe Stock Images

10% of tech docs shops today deliver some of their technical content by chatbot.

50% of tech comm teams expect to launch a bot by 2020.

CHATBOTS: DELIVERING CONTENT, GUIDING USRES

62% of technical communicators say they believe **adding a chatbot to their technical support website** *might* **help them improve the customer experience**.

Chatbots are increasingly being employed to deliver customer-facing technical content and to guide a website visitor through their knowledge-seeking journey.

Despite their potential for enhancing content discovery and improving customer experiences, one-in-four tech writers say they **believe chatbots aren't useful**; opinions developed after having previous **negative personal experiences with a chatbot (23%)**, or because their **team lacks the knowledge and expertise to craft a useful chatbot content** delivery channel (43%).

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EDUCATION

Opportunities to educate technical communicators are often in short supply — or of questionable quality — some respondents suggest.

70% of tech comm team managers cite the need for continuing education as a critical factor in their future success.

Tech comm managers say their staffers need additional — often specialized — continuing education to tackle the most common challenges they face.

- **documenting APIs (40%)**

- **creating video (45%)**

- **designing augmented reality solutions (53%)**

- **crafting conversational content for chatbots and voice interfaces (42%)**

- **creating content accessible to voice-enabled devices (42%)**

- **developing and refining content strategies (47%)**

- **developing and refining taxonomies (80%)**

The lack of a formal strategy opens the door for content errors and inconsistencies across distribution channels, makes governance impractical, and unnecessarily increases content production expenses.

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CONCERNS
BIGGEST CHALLENGES
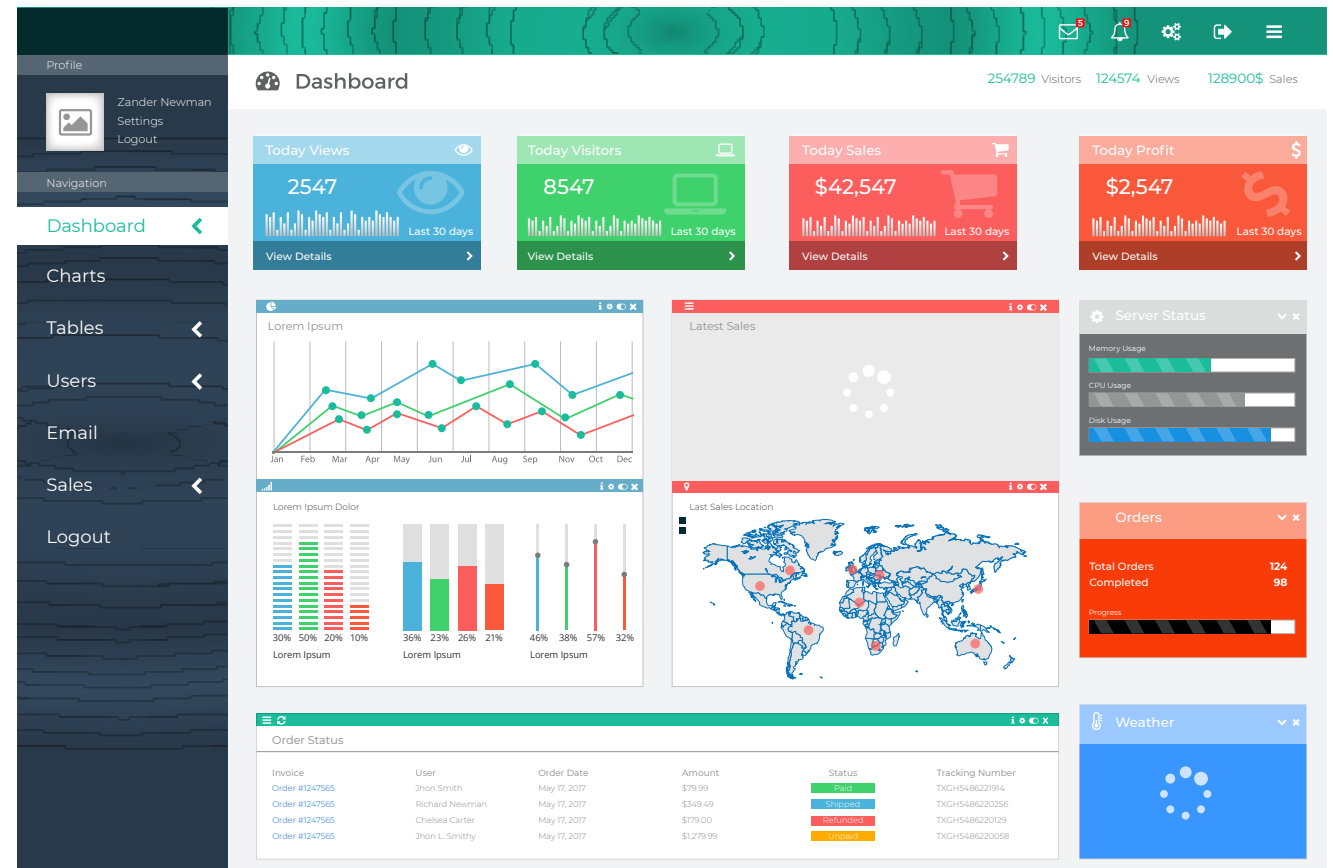
Top challenges facing tech comm teams:

- **developing effective collaborative authoring processes (65%)**

- **overcoming issues relating to change management (75%)**

- **measuring content performance (80%)**

While these challenges ranked highest, it's clear from the data that there are a host of additional, related problems impacting the ability of modern tech comm shops to produce content efficiently and effectively, including:

- **lack of a formal content strategy (68%)**

- **lack of terminology management control (58%)**

TOOLS
SOFTWARE

Software vendors are too-often focused on **adding more features on top of stale, outdated products,** **instead of working to reimagine how technical communicators work.**

Some of the biggest challenges facing tech comm teams today are related to the software they use. 78% complain that tech comm software products are poorly designed and painful to use. Tools created for use in a separate discipline (software not optimized for the work technical writers perform) are increasingly put to work in tech comm departments, leading to inefficiencies and the need for staff to devise clever workarounds, some tech comm pros complain.

"Just because I can learn and live with poorly-conceived, poorly-executed authoring interfaces, doesn't mean I should have to."

— technical writer, hospitality company
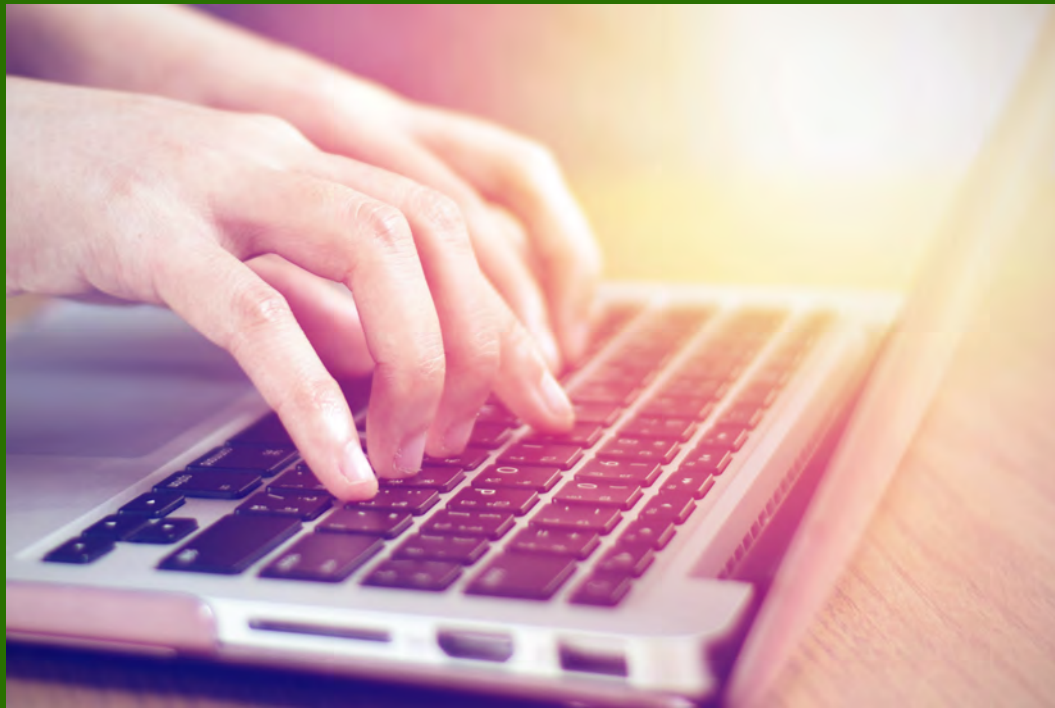
20% of all technical communication teams we surveyed say they create documentation using the Adobe Technical Communication Suite.

The Content Wrangler

AUTHORING SOFTWARE

While 47% of tech docs shops use Microsoft Word as their primary authoring tool, tech writers are increasingly using a variety of software to craft content.

29% of tech comm teams use **Adobe FrameMaker** — most often to create multi-channel, multi-language content for highly configurable products or services.

90% of those teams also *sometimes* utilize sister Adobe products — **Adobe Illustrator** and **Adobe InDesign** — to help them craft deliverables.

COMMONLY USED AUTHORING TOOLS

- **Microsoft Word (47%)**
- **Adobe FrameMaker (29%)**
- **Author-it (17%)**
- **Oxygen XML Editor (16%)**
- **Oxygen XML Author (14%)**
- **Arbortext (9%)**
- **Madcap Flare (5%)**
- **Oxygen XML Web Author (4%)**

POPULAR ADD-ONS AND PLUG-INS

grammarly

- **Grammarly (67%)**

Most often in use as a grammar and punctuation checker extension for Chrome, Safari, Firefox, and Edge web browsers and as an add-in to Microsoft Office. The tool can is also employed on Apple Macintosh and iOS platforms. The software provides the ability to check content for plagiarism.

SOFTWARE

COMPONENT CONTENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

A component content management system is a content repository designed to manage relationships between content components at a granular level, helping technical communicators assemble publications and other content deliverables from a single source of content.

The most commonly used component content management system in tech comm departments is **SDL Live Content**, a system that is currently in use in 16% of all technical communication departments that create structured XML content.

easyDITA, finds itself in second place with 9% of tech comm shops leveraging the platform to technical content deliverables.

Astoria CCMS commands 7% of the market, followed by **Ixiasoft DITA CCMS** (6%), and **Vasont** (3%).

MOST COMMONLY USED COMPONENT CONTENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

- **SDL Live Content (16%)**
- **easyDITA (9%)**
- **Astoria CCMS (7%)**
- **IXIASOFT DITA CCMS (6%)**
- **Vasont (3%)**

OTHER COMPONENT CONTENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS IN USE TODAY

Each of the CCMSes listed below are in use in 2% of tech comm teams that produce structured XML content

- **Dakota Content Platform**
- **Schema ST4**
- **Ingeniux**