

Offshoring of Technical Writing

Roundtable Meeting Abridged Notes – July 24th 2003

A roundtable discussion was attended by forty Technical Publication Managers and representative/s from the various trade associations: Society for Technical Communications (STC), the Bay Area Publication Managers Forum (BAPMF), the National Writers Union (NWU), a leading Silicon Valley Career Coach, another staffing firm and the Director of San Jose State's – Technical Writer Certification Dept.

The roundtable was organized by:

*Andreas Ramos, Co-Chair of the Technical Writers Division of the NWU
Walter Keefe, President of Synergy Personnel Services, Inc.*

The Purpose of Meeting:

Begin to discuss with key Silicon Valley Publication Managers and opinion leaders the global trend to export documentation and its effect upon future career opportunities within technical communications. Do this in a manner that allows us to better understand the issues so that together we can agree upon some Next Steps.

Presenters:

Publication Manager whose previous employer because of financial difficulties offshored 1000 jobs to Bangalore, including the entire Technical writing team, while maintaining 100 jobs in the Bay Area to manage the documentation process.

Executive VP of a company that utilizes its own staff to handle offshore operations in five countries throughout the world.

Dir. of Engineering Operations who manages all of the vendors involved in software development, Q/A, tech support and documentation with components both offshore and onshore.

Comments of Presenters and from Roundtable discussion:

Many companies are attracted to offshore because of compelling cost-savings especially during this recessionary period. (labor cost that is 16% of U.S. level and approx. 33–25% after quality and service are factored into the calculation.)

The offshore decision is made at the CEO or CFO level. Beyond the cost-cutting survival mentality that prevails, there should be a strategic reason for offshoring that would endure even if / when labor costs increase.

A significant employee morale problem is created especially when an individual is asked to mentor his / her replacement only to be laid off.

Offshoring of technical writing is a trend and not a law of nature. Companies may need to look inward to

determine how to differentiate their product / service to become more profitablefocus upon revenue enhancements not only expense reductions. Nor should the Executive expect quick cost saving because of a significant learning curve in offshoring.

Don't fight the global trend but reposition your job to become part of the process. This means more project and process management, more documentation management and need for editing skills.

Unless the company has good documentation processes already in place (style guides, and templates) think hard before offshoring.

Unlike Engineering and Q/A there is a more limited supply of qualified Tech Writers in India. (there are 70 members in the STC – Indian Chapter)

There is a quality and service difference between the most commonly utilized countries of India, Russia, and Ireland. Other countries like China, Malaysia, and Indonesia are preparing to become players as well.

Publication Managers will be challenged and given more responsibility for the managing and control of information....an Information Architect. (see separately job description) Need to be prepared to handle problems regarding urgency, deadlines, follow-up. enforcement and quality review.

Expect multiple rewrites and a long learning curve even with good documentation process in place because of using writers with (a) less technical subject matter expertise (b) a more elementary understanding of tech writing with the perception that tech writing is only a massaging of engineering notes (c) junior level tech writing skills (d) communication / cultural differences. (e) scheduling difficulties due to time differences.

Conundrum: The more organized your tech pubs department becomes with solid processes in place, the easier it will be to relocate offshore.

Possible Next Steps / Actionable Ideas:

- 1. Establish cooperation between the STC and / or BAPMF. This could include the preparation of a "value proposition" targeted to the CEO or CFO that makes the case for keeping the doc process domestic (see separately)*
- 2. Have the STC / BAPMF play a leadership role in driving global docs. Silicon Valley is the best place in the world for venture capital, entrepreneurship and skilled workers.*
- 3. To remain world-class it is imperative that UC, Stanford, San Jose and San Francisco State along with the community colleges and other educational facilities attract the students and develop the curriculum of skills required for the futuresoftware, hardware, nanotech, biotech etc.*
- 4. Have the NWU play a role in reviewing & proposing legislative action to make sure the playing field is level and loopholes aren't being exploited. This includes the issues surrounding homeland security.*
- 5. The STC / BAPMF should participate and possibly manage the preparation of a white paper that examines the impact of offshoring upon the Bay Area. Corporate sponsors should be solicited. The network*

*should be extended to include the myriad of trade associations and educational facilities effected.
E.g. the SDForum, and the NAACB.*

Without reinventing the studies already done the white paper should address the economic and non-economic (social, cultural, political) trade-offs and consider the impact of the global economy upon all the major Bay Area job categories.