

Knowledge Labs Times



Technical writer's survival guide

A hearsay that we, as technical writers, are aware of is that they mostly do a cut-and-paste job. This feeling is not just limited to hush-hush discussion, but is now reflecting into visible actions. Being at the lowest end of the salary revision band, no consideration for awards and recognition and a feeling of being left out are some of the indicators we all are experiencing in our jobs. In some cases, highly technology-intensive documentation work has gone back to their origin because the technical writers at the outsourced locations did not show much willingness to match the skills and competency of the original writers.

Let us, therefore, understand a few simple techniques to be significant team players in our respective teams.

Acquiring domain knowledge: This comprises knowledge about technology and operations. For example, if a technical writer is working on a network-related product, then the person must possess knowledge about the pertinent hardware, software, protocols and how all of these work in tandem.

Good domain knowledge enables writer to decide level of abstraction that is suitable for certain audience type. In our example of network-related product, the writer will write about IP address and subnet mask in the simplest possible form for common users. On the other hand, the writer will delve at length about what specific condition the subnet mask

must meet while configuring the product.

Possessing hands-on expertise: User assistance content that is borne out of writer's own experience stands tall in comparison with similar content prepared using design document. The former is rich with conceptual information, tips, cautions, and known issues. The latter is a plain list of to-do steps.

Learning: For many who land up documenting applications that are generally not part of any curriculum, there is no shortcut to learning. Happily, initial few days of projects are generally not demanding on performance, and therefore, writers must make good use of this time.

Doing homework: It is commonly believed in the technical writing fraternity that SMEs either do not cooperate or are not available to consult. While there may be some truth in this belief, it is also true that writers go unprepared for meetings without their homework done. The results of such meetings are sloppy discussions that annoy SMEs and serve no real purpose to writers.

Managing time effectively: Just like developers must deliver working code within allotted time, writers must deliver usable information within time allotted to them. If writers face challenges in producing usability-tested information, they need to raise flag early on and avoid adding to project manager's woes.