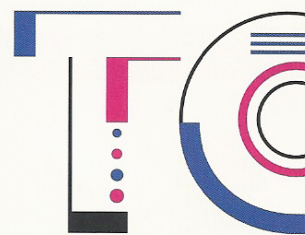


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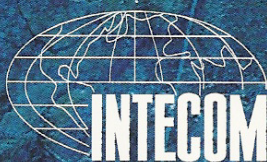
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On My Little Planet... · SA 21

by Jean-Paul Bardez, France

Recently, I sent an email that started with a reference to one of the first books I enjoyed reading, *Le Petit Prince*. It was a way of setting the general tone of my message as playful, so that the receiver would not take the serious part of my reply personally. But I was being serious. The message that triggered this reaction dealt with a technical communication issue: the use of uppercase letters. I have subscribed to two technical communication lists and am amazed at the amount of traffic that deals with typography or terminology. Very few messages address what to my mind are the real issues: usability, project management and the measuring of quality.

The Starting Point: What We Really Do

Let me start with a somewhat provocative statement: nobody reads user manuals for pleasure. And yet we all make our living from them, and hope that what we produce is at least useful, if not actually enjoyable.

However, my job as a technical communicator does not consist solely in producing paper or electronic documents - this is just the visible part of the iceberg - but in taking part in project management meetings, interviewing people, testing products, analysing customer feedback, suggesting ways for making the product more user-friendly, trying to make designers communicate better, etc. The element that is common to all these invisible activities seems to me to be the key question in our job.

I am now working on web project management, and writing is an even smaller part of my job, but I still use the set of skills I learned when I had to write. Of course, I also have to use specific tools (*DreamWeaver*, *FireWorks*, etc.), but there are training courses to learn them. And sometimes I'm not sure of the spelling of a word, but this is no big deal with present day tools. What I'm always on the lookout for is more information on "the direction I should be digging in," i.e. what information system is required in the context in which I'm working. This is where I'm getting serious...

How to Know What is Required

To answer this central question, after a period where things always seem to lead nowhere, I usually find some kind of a tool to measure the current level of customer satisfaction. Either by visiting real users or, in my present job, by analysing the webmaster's e-mails and the visitors logs. Occasionally, though, I have been in a situation where it was forbidden to contact customers...

How to know what we are doing is right

Before implementing a new "information system" (meant as an information tool and not as a technological solution), I test it. Products are tested (or they are said to have been tested) before being marketed. Documents must be tested as well. For example, I recently had a homepage project tested and received a lot of useful usability suggestions.

How to Keep in Line with the Target

I found project management easier when I worked as a consultant. There was no hierarchical background noise, and I could justify my action by the fact that I got paid to produce the documentation within a certain timeframe. Project management tools don't need to be complicated. What is required are regular meetings where you maintain a list of to do's, work done, and issues to be resolved. It's interesting that this is where I experienced the most resistance.

Working without hierarchical background noise is more efficient.



On My Little Planet... (cont.)

Last: How to Ensure We will be Allowed to Proceed

This is certainly the most difficult part of the job. Whereas it is easy to convince an administrator or client at the start of a project, using presentation tools and nice graphics, things get complicated as time goes by. We need to develop rhetoric to convince the project team and management that the ongoing implementation of project management processes leads to success.

On My Little Planet...

...tools and techniques are not the big issue. But the message itself is still a challenge. Information remains political and my colleagues are split into two groups: decision makers and technical experts, both of whom I must convince with different words, both of whom do not always give priority to awareness of customer requirements, and both of whom are not even necessarily convinced by figures or rhetoric...

*How can we
put our
theoretical
know-how
into practice?*

We all know what is required to effectively manage an information project but... sometimes fail to set it into practice. This has happened to me on many occasions, and I am not particularly happy about it. Maybe sharing thoughts on why projects did not turn out well could help members of the technical communicators' community to improve their approach. This is what I'm trying to say in this article. That

maybe we should admit we can fail, even if it is painful, and not always pretend each project was a success story. This was also the philosophy that led to the creation of the French association "Conseil des Rédacteurs Techniques, CRT", and I believe it is still a value worth building on.

Final Remark

If anyone is interested in sharing experiences like "how I convinced my boss the team should meet an hour every week" or "how I convinced the engineers to give us their product to test," please share with us your winning rhetoric to leverage our efficiency. These are situations where peer support is invaluable.



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