"Trends in Technical Communication - my personal experiences"

by Kathleen Aughey, Manager, Digital Publication & Product Services, Eastman Kodak, Rochester

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Introduction:
STC Region 1 Director-Sponsor Kathleen Aughey, Manager, Digital Publication & Product Services, GCSS at Eastman Kodak, was featured speaker at our November '99 meeting. She discussed "Trends in Technical Communication - my personal experiences" - and if anyone in Central New York lives and breathes Technical Communication, it's Kathleen! A Kodak Technical Writer, Supervisor and Manager for 14 years, she began her Kodak career by winning the Kepner student writing award which included a 10-week internship at Kodak. After graduation, she was quickly hired as a Senior Technical Editor (contract), writing copy product hardware and software user documentation. By 1988 Kathleen went "full time" as a Senior Technical Writer, and in 1990 she became Supervisor, Technical Publications, SISD/DSC and grew her department from 3 to 9 writers plus two print technologists. In 1995 she was named Manager of Digital Publications and Product Services, handling the newly-combined writing, printing and product groups in support of all KODAK business lines, with a staff of 40. Kathleen's department has since become a KODAK Center of Excellence for technical user publications, print-on-demand, and software product creation.

Kathleen is a Senior STC member, an STC Associate Fellow, serves on the STC Board of Directors as Director-Sponsor of Region 1, has served the Rochester Chapter in various positions from Membership Chairman to two-term President; serves as Judge for student and technical communication competitions, and served at the STC international level as Manager of The Chapter Handbook for five years.
Kathleen has witnessed firsthand the tremendous technological changes that have so transformed our profession in the last decade and a half.
"We have witnessed changes in our tools (from yellow ruled paper to SGML/XML online). We've seen Technical Communicators gain respect in the corporate environment, advancing from "scribes" to "professionals." The Internet has become our standard delivery method, no longer to be feared. HELP, multimedia, and video authoring have become part of our toolkits. The WEB is now part of our turf, and programming is no longer exclusively for engineers: as information designers, we need to understand and utilize programming skills. These are exciting times - and I'm proud to be part of this new future!"

Transcript:
I joined Kodak when Electronic publishing was just beginning, around '84-85.

Kodak had just joined with Canon to create an electronic publishing system called KEEPS. We were writing front end software basically to an interleaf package. I was the Kodak Interleaf software "expert" at that time. Kodak offered me a full time position, and my career began.

We were writing about printers, so we decided to print all our work on Kodak printers. That led to another group formation. The manufacturing people were coming to us for their alphas and betas and coming to us for their publications. We master, press and write all the CDs. We write, print, press, do CDs, order parts, etc. and send them to the manufacturer.

We call ourselves "Publishing and Printing Services".

In America it may appear that film is dying and electronic imaging is the new wave of the future. But this is not so true elsewhere in the world. Our silver halide market is growing outside of the USA, which drives a great need at Kodak for documentation to be served in 18 languages. This need drives everything we do in technical publications today at Kodak.

People are trying to save trees and paper. Writers won't go away, but we are moving forward to having things on intra- and inter-nets while reducing paper documentation to a small setup card and troubleshooting piece. Our manuals are now offered as PDFs on intranet, and on CDs with product software.

Some consumer products, however, like digital cameras, still require hard copy manuals. If Aunt Minnie takes a picture of her grand-baby and wants to get it up on her screen. she'll want to be able to read, page by page, how to make those red eyes disappear. However, most other people don't want books, they want to go online.

In 1984 we were still using word processing and having type set outside. It's amazing how far we've come in 15 years! From word processing we got into publishing…Pagemaker, Framemaker, Interleaf on a Unix box…suddently we were in new control of our destiny and our creations.

Soon, however, our profession took a temporary nose-dive from people assuming that desktop publishing and writing went together automatically. Lots of non-technical writing people thought they were now publishers and writers, because they had these desktop tools. Remember those documents? They were like ransom notes. They had 14 fonts per page; festooned with clipart!

For a time, corporate America erroneously assumed that all people who could move around and format type were tech writers. This did some damage, but after a while we turned this around; it became obvious after a few years that there's more to technical writing than moving words around on a wysiwyg screen. Once all the would-be publishers realized they were not getting very far as desktop publishers, they came back to us looking for true technical writing expertise.

The next great buzz that came along was hypertext. We all got excited about auto-generated indexes and tables of contents and hyperlinks. It has been very exciting; every 3 years something new has come along. It has been difficult to absorb all the new developments.

We have a sophisticated Kodak product, 'picturemaker' - that lets you take any photo and make prints, framed, in a few seconds. It has scanning software, a camera, etc.

Our writers needed to decide who needed what kinds of documentation. First, we needed documentation for the systems people who have to maintain and run it. But also, we needed instructions for the 17-year-old kid at Wal-Mart who would be trying to run it. We needed a very graphic user manual for the end users.

The key to hiring good technical communicators is their ability to analyze their pending audience. This capability has helped us greatly over the years to do more for Kodak. Ten years ago, tech writers were not even allowed to talk to potential customers. Marketing had decided that only

Marketing would be doing this. We were pushed aside from client interaction. But now we use demographics from Marketing to determine our audience. It's so important to understand who's going to use your documentation. In a robust kind of application package you have conditional text, writing the book once for several audiences, and masking various portions of the text to enable it for different audiences.

In companies today there's a shortage of software engineers and product development engineers. As we repaired our credibility, some of their chores fell downhill upon us. Now we not only write all the materials, we compile them. We determine the text programming for packages. We have to know programming and scripting languages and now with multimedia we are beginning to use Java. We have become even more technical and professional.

As mentioned earlier, the trend everywhere today is to cut the use of paper. And, at Kodak, we are heavily into "localization" which means all materials go into 18 local languages. The average fee for translation is 25 cents a word , so cutting text saves costs.

We also cut down on text because when translating, it's easy to commit cultural gaffes with a misused word or color…whereas if you just use pictures you can avoid this and reduce costs including costs of word translation and printing costs.

We no longer embed text callouts in graphics due to the translation problems it can cause. We manage callout titles and graphics as separate elements. Time-to-market is shorter now. In digital cameras we make our money in the first 12 weeks. We can't afford to miss an opportunity; we can lose millions in slow time-to-market, in a matter of weeks.

So now we write once and output several times. Conditional text helps in some ways but when I finish a user guide, the first thing I have to do before product launch is populate the intranet for any last minute changes so the call centers have the info at their fingertips. Then I have to populate the internet because people don't want to read anymore; they want to pick up information anywhere. Then I have to get it into PDF format and get it on the CD, then send our large files for localization.

Those are our standard output modalities for every single piece of text. Our next venture will be to look at structured language, or SGML. SGML involves structured writing and meta-tagging to give text 'write once, use many places" capability.

Because now all our data is tagged, I recently watched one colleague put together a special version of a manual in 7 minutes flat! She created a workable "version 2" that fast, just by point-and-click assembly.

This was intimidating to my writers! Were they just going to become robots?

I told them that we have to stop writing books; they're not going to be writing endless pages of rhetoric for six different output modalities anymore. They're going to become 'information wranglers'.

We are now developing a software program to tell our engineers where we need a guided tool, where we need a wizard, where we need help. Our engineers are designing software with "holes" which we fill in for them, using Robohelp and other tools. We are designing the information taps -

the wizards, the help systems, etc. The job of tech writer is definitely changing, but you are still needed today just as much as ever.

How will we avoid turning into choppy writers as we abandon 'rhetoric-writing'? All our writers go back to RIT to take courses to relearn the basics of writing in today's environment. They go in grumbling, but they come out excited and challenged. Our highest-paid people at Kodak all have Masters degrees in language skills.

The care and feeding of a tech writer today involves appreciating them while you are changing the way they work. We have one senior writer who, a year ago, was all rhetoric with a few graphics. He recently surprised me by telling me he was going to just place a quicktime movie 'right here' in a job. He has actually started using the new media! This is progress! Today, you have to become not just a writer, but more of a project manager.

Abbreviated writing is very key today. Abbreviated writing means taking a minimalistic approach to writing, using more graphics where possible. It doesn't mean just short sentences.

Our writers use digital cameras and process their own photos in Photoshop. They are not just writers anymore. Our writers are handling more graphics because end users expect and need more graphics.

Now we also ask our writers to write in different genres. We used to be analytical technical writers; now you are asked to get it onto the web, and it can be marketing writing, too. It's not just writing tech manuals anymore. But we're learning new skill sets. It's simply not enough anymore to write one thing, one way only.

Using a structured approach puts a great new emphasis on version control and archives. Where is all the data? We now need to understand document management structure, a new concept where you embrace the idea of 'check in-check out' data, version control, etc.

When you are putting out wheelbarrow-loads of documentation in assorted modalities you simply must get into document management. This embraces all kinds of input, but is most efficient with structured documentation such as metatagging. Once you've got that, you have the control you need to manage all versions of documentation.

This has all been very new and different for us to learn. But now we have built a structure and a data repository system. This allows us to do collaborative authoring, something we couldn't do before. We now can have people working on different book sections on our system. Formerly, collaborative authoring was frightening because some wrote in passive voice, some in active voice, and others had their own unique ways of writing which didn't merge well. Now through structured documentation and document management we have eliminated these pitfalls.

Advice for aspiring tech writers: Get Basic Technical Certification followed by Advanced Technical Certification. Learn SGML and Framemaker. XML, used in web commerce site building, is a subset of SGML. We are all learning SGML because XML is not yet robust enough but in a couple of years it will be the mode of choice for going direct to the web with your information, and by knowing SGML now, the transition, when it occurs, will be easier.

Getting a Masters Certification in Multimedia is a big plus, now, too.

Young people fresh from college now use the web for everything. They don't use the phone or write letters. New hires, therefore, don't mind that everything needs to be written for the internet and intranet as well as print. They're coming out of college already adapted to the new media. Older, experienced writers are the ones needing to re-learn new ways of doing things!