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What's Next?

Glimpsing the Opportunity Beyond the Impasse

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Overview



- Context and goals
- Some provocative questions
- Synergistech's view
- What to do?
- Profitability
- Making lemonade
- Repackage and Reposition
- In conclusion

Context and Goals



Context:

- Worked as a Technical Writer and Publications Manager from 1986 to 1994
- Began recruiting technical communicators in 1995
- Have pondered the ‘where from here?’ question a lot
- Keep track of lots of ex-Tech Writers

Context and Goals



Goals

- To catalyze (with insights, anecdotes, hope and, yes, fear) a productive discussion about responding to market's challenges.
- Show that it's irresponsible not to face facts and plan accordingly
- Find one or more paths that offer both increased income and fulfillment
- Help you begin evolving away from the dead-end that is conventional high-tech technical communications.

Discussion Questions

1. Is local demand for your technical communications services increasing? Or decreasing?
2. Are you confident about your ability to earn a decent living doing what you have done until now?
3. Do you think hiring managers' priorities are changing? If yes, how?
4. Does the prospect of evolving to meet their changing needs excite or frustrate you?
5. Would you prefer work where the goalposts don't move (so much)?

Synergistech's View

Local demand is decreasing. But why?

- Globalization, and its corollary, offshoring (to India, Eastern Europe, and soon South America and Africa)
- Shrinking economy – we're in the worst recession in 30 years
- Impatient customers who also hate to read
- Increasingly lean, “do-more-with-less” companies
- Focus on products' initial cost, not ‘total cost of ownership’ (TCO)

Sealing our own fate?



- Aloof — unable to prove our value in \$\$ terms
- Passive — taking others' word about appropriate content, delivery
- Disengaged from our audience, unwilling to reach out or insufficiently tenacious in doing so
- Invisible — poorly (or not even) represented at the executive level
- Out of touch with management's perceptions, priorities

Are we now an underclass?

- Compensation rates are trending sharply downward
- Job security is a joke
- Professional advancement is rare (and often involves keeping all your previous duties)
- Career paths are few, and mentors fewer
- Job satisfaction is the exception, not the norm

What to do?

- Option 1:
Be indispensable by generating an obvious profit for your employer or client
- Option 2:
Settle for blue-collar status, accepting instability and deteriorating rewards
- Option 3:
Exit the profession, re-package, and re-position

Option 1 - Profitability

What's involved?

- Make them money (lots of it, quickly, with minimal effort on their part), or you'll soon be gone
- No longer just saving companies money, or making their customers happy, although these matter
- Other necessary, but not sufficient, traits include:
 - Tools proficiency
 - Mastery of technical subject matter
 - Software code-reading and -writing ability
 - Versatility
 - Depth of professional experience
 - Interpersonal, project-management, and communications skills

Who generates profits?

Which tech communicators most directly generate profits?

- Trainers
- Proposal writers
- Developer community liaisons
- Technically-oriented Sales and Pre-sales (*)

(*) some argue they don't qualify; I think they do.

Who CAN generate profits?

- Project Managers
- Technical Writers of developer-oriented documentation (APIs, SDKs)
- Technical Writers of Sarbanes-Oxley (SOX) and ISO standards content
- Technically-oriented Marketing Communicators
- DITA/structured-authoring experts
- Technical Support (but seldom Help Desk)
- Translators, Localizers

Who SELDOM generates profits?

- Technical Writers of end-user and system-administration documentation
- Editors, Indexers, Electronic Publishing experts, Information Architects
- Instructional Designers, Course Developers
- Illustrators, Graphic Artists
- Online help/UA (user assistance) authors
- UX (user experience)/usability experts
- Web content authors
- Publications Managers, Publications Directors

How can we prove \$\$ value

- Ask some questions
 - Ask Product Manager what's budgeted for your role
 - Ask Tech Support what in-bound calls cost, whether you've reduced their call count
 - Ask Project Manager whether you've saved time
- Do some math
 - Figure out your cost, relative to budgeted \$\$
 - Calculate \$\$ savings or profits generated
 - Get written recommendations that cite your \$\$ impact

Option 2 – Making Lemonade

- High-tech technical communication will remain depressed due to increased globalization, price pressures, etc
- More secure industries (usually) include government, medicine, law, and finance – in part because of laws preventing export of customers' data
- Marketing and relationships matter more than professional accomplishments
- Cultivate opportunities in vertical markets and non-traditional communications roles, as well as with young companies (but not VC-funded startups)

Option 3 – Re-package, Re-position



- Goal:
Re-package your skills, find career tracks with longer-term relevance and economic viability, and ultimately regain some job satisfaction.
- Synergistech's perspective:
Most high-tech technical communicators' best option is to apply their skills to other industries.

Option 3, cont'd

To re-package and re-position:

- 1) Identify an underserved audience in a prosperous industry with good long-term prospects (eg, not snow sports or clean coal, but maybe healthcare, green tech, nanotech, medical equipment, or eco-tourism)
- 2) Develop deep subject-matter expertise and 3) a respected professional network
- 4) Cultivate a role as trusted intermediary between seller and buyer

Option 3, cont'd

5) Develop a proprietary standalone product or service, such as

Training ... Support ... Recruiting ... Advertising ...
Marketing ... Mediation ... Testing ... Documentation ...
Targeted Social Networking ... Customer Research

with which you deliver unique profit-making potential to your customer. Try to make your solution synergistic, and don't stop refining it.

Option 3, cont'd

- 6) Connect with both buyers and sellers, and dig deep for ways to make them both more financially successful.
- 7) Then market your results in ways that resonate with 'money people.'

Option 3, cont'd



Which Industry?

Your ideas...

Which Skills?

Your ideas...

Which Traits?

Passion, imagination, frugality, marketing, acting, humility...

Option 3, cont'd

- 1) **Passion** – because if you don't love what you do, you won't stick with it long enough to become great.
- 2) **Imagination** – because there's not yet a roadmap to your ultimate destination.
- 3) **Frugality** – because you'll need to accept less money as you transition.
- 4) **Marketing** – because 'deciders' need to be woo'd in unconventional ways (such as via social networks and with video, try-before-you-buy options, and seductive web sites).
- 5) **Acting** – because introverts don't interview well.
- 6) **Humility** – because you're in foreign territory

In conclusion

- There aren't too many outright success stories, but some alternative roads taken by former Tech Writers after 2001 appear at www.synergistech.com/career-paths.shtml
- Most remaining in high-tech will struggle to survive as this recession deepens, and even after the recovery comes.
- The sooner you begin devising your Plan B, the better.

For more info...

Please see Synergistech's Advice pages

www.synergistech.com/advice.shtml

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