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By Roy Hu



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Beyond traditional roles: How technical communicators can add value

The skill sets and experience of technical communicators are valuable assets for global organizations. International tech company ARM has found a way to leverage these skills that goes far beyond the job description.

In many organizations, technical communication still lacks respect and visibility from colleagues and management. Often, technical writers are required to demonstrate the value they add. In addition to authoring documentation, technical communicators have several opportunities to leverage their strengths and expertise to contribute in multifold ways to their organizations, thereby enhancing their profiles. This article explores possible unconventional ways for technical communicators to add value that are based on my own experience as a senior information developer for the global high-tech developer ARM in China.

Me and/or my colleagues have used our expertise as technical communicators to get involved in developing and delivering

- Customized writing courses
- Communication guidebooks
- Customer documentation feedback reports
- English communication programs for non-native speakers
- Customer support

By contributing more than what is defined in your job role, you not only display strong commitment to your organization, you also get a better chance for career advancement.

Customized writing courses

As technical communicators, we are valued as language experts. But of course we are not the only ones communicating across various barriers. Many of my colleagues in China need to communicate in English with coworkers from other parts of the world. Thus, there is a significant need to enable more effective communication by improving their English writing skills. The concept of a customized writing program was intended to address this requirement.

Before we started this program, some engineers in the company expressed the need to improve their English writing skills. ARM had previously offered technical writing courses, but this did not fully meet the needs of my Chinese colleagues.

Here is how we created and delivered customized writing courses step by step:

1. Investigate writing needs

To get started, we hosted meetings and exchanged emails to learn in what kind of writing scenarios our colleagues need English, what challenges they face when writing, what they expect from our training, and what specific areas they need help with. We also asked them to send us some writing samples so that we could identify common problems in their writing.

2. Define the scope of training courses

After thorough investigation, we found that most of our colleagues' written communication belonged to the following three categories:

- Emails
- Slides
- Technical documents

3. Develop customized writing course modules

After we had a good understanding of people's needs, we began extensive research in relevant areas and developed corresponding writing course modules. Based on common problems identified in the writing samples, we offered writing tips providing helpful dos and don'ts. We also included games and exercises to make the training more interactive. One training module lasted 1.5 hours; three training modules formed a one-day writing course.

To further tailor our content to our audience, we also customized our material according to their age and position. For a relatively young audience, our slides revealed a lively style; for a more senior audience, we added more advanced content to the training materials and adopted a rigorous style.

4. Present the course

Here are some tips for presenting courses:

- Use as many examples and stories as possible. Too much talk about writing theories and guidelines will make your audience lose interest quickly. During our sessions, we shared many examples and challenges from our own writing experience.
- Deliver the training from the audience's perspective. For example, we used stories or examples that were relevant to the course participants' work scenario.
- Find a good speaker for the course. All knowledge and stories should be narrated by the speaker. This requires the speaker to have strong public speaking skills.

5. Collect course feedback and compile a training report

We continuously improved and optimized course materials and the way we delivered sessions based on feedback. It is impossible to use a standard set of training modules to meet all the requirements of an audience. The customization process never ends because different audiences have different needs. We do not want to offer apples when our audience expects oranges.

Up to today, we have delivered eight training sessions in Taipei, Hsinchu, Seoul, and Shanghai, and received great feedback. These training modules have been shared internally with technical communicators in the UK, India, and the USA so that our colleagues abroad could reuse and customize them according to the specific needs of their local audiences. In this way, technical communicators helped many colleagues improve their English and communication skills, and expanded the influence of the technical communications team.

In other regions, our technical communicators have conducted training courses on different topics such as "How to write a good technical specification" and "How to write a good conference abstract". Our team in China is planning to customize these training modules and deliver similar sessions in China. There is a strong demand for such training courses: What we as technical communicators need to do is pay close attention to all the writing scenarios of our colleagues and identify where we can help them.

Communication guidebooks

As ARM's business in the Asia-Pacific (APAC) region keeps growing, our company is confronted with the challenge of making cross-regional communication more effective. As technical communicators, we asked ourselves this question: How can we leverage our strength to help our company address this challenge? As a result, we proposed the production of communication handbooks to enable more effective communication with the APAC region.

We took the following steps to create and deliver these handbooks:

1. Investigate communication challenges

We collaborated with managers across the organization to get their support, asking them to nominate interviewees who have extensive communication with colleagues from overseas. Thus, we managed to interview around 20 people, asking them two questions:

- What pain points do you have when you communicate with colleagues from other sites?
- What can people from other sites do to improve communication effectiveness?

Gathering feedback wasn't all that simple. Sometimes, we needed to go into specific details and discuss particular scenarios to uncover the real issue.

2. Summarize the main problems and corresponding solutions

After careful investigation and research, we categorized the challenges and provided tips in the form of handbooks. We found that sometimes cultural factors resulted in communication barriers.

As a result, we created handbooks of no more than 50 pages that included effective communication tips, appealing graphics, and helpful examples.

We got very positive feedback about these handbooks. For example, one director commented: "Amazing work! The content is relevant, comprehensive, and professionally put together."

And with regard to the Handbook for Communicating with Greater China, I think the material applies not just for internal communication but also communication with customers."

3. Collect feedback and continuously improve communication guides

Our communication handbooks were well-received. The following handbooks have been released:

- *Handbook for Communicating with People from Greater China*
- *Handbook for Communicating with Japan*
- *Teleconference Guide* (intended to help non-native English speakers by providing many teleconference tips and commonly used English sample sentences).
- *Email phrase book* (designed to help non-native English speakers by providing plenty of phrases for common business scenarios including seeking help, politely declining meeting requests, and disagreeing in a non-offensive manner).

Customer documentation feedback reports

As a global company, it is important to collect documentation feedback and information requirements from Chinese customers. As a local technical communicator, I worked with application engineers to collect customer feedback, and then created a detailed documentation feedback report to be shared internally at ARM. This feedback report was used not only by technical communicators to improve documentation, but also by engineering and marketing teams to improve their deliverables. Some feedback in the reports required cross-team collaboration.

We collected information regarding how customers use our documents. For example:

- Do they print our documents for reading?
- Do they use mobile phones or tablets to read documentation?
- Do they have Internet access when using documentation?
- Do they require translation?

The answers to these questions directly impact our content strategy. We need to use their responses to deliver timely, high-quality target information.

Here are some tips for customer interviews:

- Send a list of your questions to your customers before your visit so that your customers have time to collect feedback from team members.
- Get to know the subject you are going to talk about. If possible, have application engineers (AE) and field application engineers (FAE) accompany you when visiting customers. This has proven to be very helpful during my visits, because the engineers could directly help clarify technical issues.
- Get permission from customers to record the conversation. If you do not record the interview, chances are that you will lose a lot of valuable information. You cannot focus on the conversation when you are too busy taking notes.

- Send the documentation feedback report to colleagues who also joined the interview to ensure its accuracy.

Direct customer feedback is rare for technical communicators, but very valuable. In addition, we also interviewed the following people to get documentation feedback:

- Customer-facing colleagues, such as sales, FAEs, AEs, or marketing staff
- New hires who have previous experience using our products and documentation
- Internal documentation users such as software engineers

English communication programs for non-native speakers

As English is the official language at ARM, there is a huge demand by Chinese colleagues for improving their spoken English. We regularly hosted English-speaking sessions and invited colleagues to debate interesting, hot topics. During these sessions, attendees were requested to speak English only. We invited colleagues from the UK to remotely join our discussion through video conference. When possible, we also invited colleagues who were on business trips to Shanghai to participate in our program.

To help more people improve their spoken English, we received support from colleagues in the UK and the USA, and implemented the English Buddy program. We promoted this program internationally and received a number of volunteers who had given us information about their hobbies. Based on shared interests and hobbies, we then matched these volunteers with their Chinese colleagues who had expressed the wish to improve their English. We put the partners in touch and they proceeded with regular conversations. The format and frequency of their exchanges were completely up to them.

Through these programs, technical communicators have helped colleagues in China improve their spoken English significantly. These services are flexible and save the cost of hiring external English trainers, thus adding value to the company.

Customer support

Technical communicators with a strong technical background are great candidates for getting involved in customer support. One of our technical communicators approached application engineers and expressed a strong interest in getting involved with customer support. His involvement enabled him to answer the following questions:

- What information do customers need to use a specific product?
- What is the application scenario of this product?
- Who are the primary users of this product?
- What information do customers need and how can we deliver this information effectively to them?

The answers to these questions allowed us to improve documentation quality by providing more accurate information to meet customers' needs.

Summary

The team of dedicated technical communicators at ARM is continuously striving to add value to the company. We constantly ask ourselves: How can we enhance the influence of the technical communication team? How can we add value to the company? How can we earn respect and good will from other teams? Our answer is that we must go beyond our traditional roles and be more than just technical communicators.

We can learn the pain points of other teams and use our expertise to solve their issues or contribute to the company by helping achieve its strategic goals. In this way, we believe you will find a way to add value to your own career, your team, and your organization.

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#1 Madhu wrote at Wed, Aug 09



Great article Roy!

As TechComms we can contribute to so many other things in addition to delivering quality product documentation.