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INTERACTIVE DISCUSSION MEDIUM



FORUM

**TECHNICAL
COMMUNICATORS'
FORUM**



IN THIS ISSUE:

Knowledge Management

**Readability / Quality /
Usability**

Education and Training

Special Aspects

TC-Forum is supported
by INTECOM



The International Council for
Technical Communication



Dear colleagues,

Next two issues in
www.tc-forum.org only!

This year, TC-FORUM celebrates its fifth year of existence. Who would have thought, five years ago, that our idea of continuing the communication process beyond Forum conferences through this medium would be such a worldwide and long lasting success!

During this period, TC-FORUM has developed into a highly regarded professional discussion medium for technical communicators worldwide and is distributed four times a year into 34 countries throughout the world completely free of charge. We thank everyone who has contributed to this great success: all the subscribers and article writers who shared their ideas and know-how with us; all the active people who prepared the articles, the printed version and the website—all for no pay; and, above all, our generous sponsors who have made this great enterprise possible.

In a world in which so many people use bad, superficial and commercial words to express

negative opinions, we - the community of technical communicators - are proud in setting a positive mark. While reflecting back these past five years, the editorial group of TC-FORUM is also looking forward into the future. Are we still going the right way, are we still using the adequate media, are we still discussing the most burning subjects? Or can we go other ways to stimulate even more discussions among our subscribers? Can we expect the editorial team to continue to work and the authors to contribute for no remuneration at all? Can we expect to find sufficient sponsors for an unforeseeable future?

In this fifth year of TC-FORUM, we encourage all of our subscribers to discuss this subject with us. Let's use the following months to find answers to these questions. Since we produce TC-FORUM for you, and for no other reason, we need your feedback. Please send the enclosed feedback form back to us, whether you have found it attached to your paper copy of TC-FORUM or in our website.

To stimulate the discussion further, the next two issues of TC-FORUM will appear **only in electronic form on our website www.tc-forum.org**. There are many pros and cons about the electronic form of publishing, and we believe the time has come to conduct an experiment: let's find out whether the electronic version is just as good or, from your point of view, whether it has serious disadvantages over the paper version.

The result of this experiment will be published, together with our evaluation of the feedback, at the end of this year. And finally, please send us your articles, comments, letters, and thoughts for the next issues of TC-FORUM - they will be published in the WWW to continue our Forum discussion.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Hans Trunger

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EDITORIAL 2

TO OUR SUBSCRIBERS AND READERS

Changing Distribution of TC-Forum - Why?
by Hans Springer 4

TOPIC: KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT (KM*)

Knowledge Management is Critical for Us! · KM 2
Interview by Wolfgang Sturz with
Alexander Schniertshauer, Germany 5

TOPIC: READABILITY / QUALITY / USABILITY (RU*)

Comments on
"Results of a Study into Establishing Guidelines... · RU 29
by Chris Curwen, South Africa 8

Response on
"Establishing Guidelines for English-Language · RU 30
by Ron Blicq, Canada 10

Ideas on cooperation suppliers / users · RU 31
by Åke Rullgård, Sweden 13

TOPIC: EDUCATION AND TRAINING (ET*)

Training of TCs in Finland · ET 7
by Tytti Suojanen, Finland 15

TOPIC: SPECIAL ASPECTS (SA*)

Impressions from German/American Projects · SA 25
by Ulrich Thiele, Germany 17

PROFESSIONAL EVENTS 20

NATIONAL CONTACT PERSONS (NCPS) 20

* Each Topic has a two-letter abbreviation,
for example

- KM for Knowledge Management
- RU for Readability / Quality / Usability
- ET for Education and Training
- SA for Special Aspects

The contributions (articles or comments)
are numbered consecutively through
the different issues of TC-Forum. When
commenting to any of the contributions,
please refer to these "codes" for ease of
understanding.

IMPRESSUM

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Changing the Distribution of TC-FORUM - Why?

By Hans Springer, Germany

As written in the Editorial of this issue, we are trying to draw conclusions from the experience of the past for the near future - and I ask you to kindly help us to find an optimum solution.

Five years ago we agreed that a paper-based publication would be fine for most subscribers. A paper magazine was simple to produce and generous sponsors paid for production and distribution.

In recent years we have implemented our Website as an addendum to widen the distribution of TC-FORUM, later we added PDF-files of the full TC-FORUM for download. Both have been highly appreciated.

Now, five years later, we have learnt that the WWW has spread its network fast and really worldwide - and the price of equipment to visit the WWW has gone down. Statistics of the TC-FORUM website show:

- In about 10 months (2 Feb. to 7 Dec 2000) about 45 000 requests for TC-FORUM pages have been counted; nearly 500 per day. Maybe 50 % of them came to TC-FORUM unintentionally - but more than 20 000 in 10 months or 200 per day indicate that there is a clientele for electronic access to our website.
- In one month (December 2000) there have been 400 downloads of PDF-Files from one server, and another 400 have been counted by another server.

Who are these people? Subscribers to the paper issue who want to read the information earlier (because the updated website is available weeks earlier than parcels posted to Australia, Brazil or Israel)? Or are they colleagues who use a PC for most of the day, and so for them it is just a few mouse-clicks to read an article from the current issue or even from the Archive?

I know that there are other subscribers who are accustomed to reading TC-FORUM on their way to work or when waiting for a service or in a queue. They, of course, would prefer the paper issue!

Is there a way to help most subscribers? I think: Yes, there is. If we could identify large enough groups who prefer the paper or the electronic TC-FORUM we possibly could adjust the printing and distribution accordingly. We could more or less rely on the Web (especially for subscribers living in distant parts of the world, as seen from Europe). This could help speed up delivery and save costs. Perhaps others might prefer to receive TC-Forum printed, by surface mail, for an appropriate annual charge.

Summary

We want to update TC-FORUM to a format and distribution which best meets the wishes of our subscribers. Therefore we need to know your wishes and preferences. So please take a few minutes of your time to complete the attached questionnaire, add your additional proposals and comments and return it soon.

This is the only way you can present your wishes and ideas to us.

Thank You

Hans Springer
on behalf of the editorial team of TC-FORUM

Knowledge Management Is Critical for Us!

KM 2

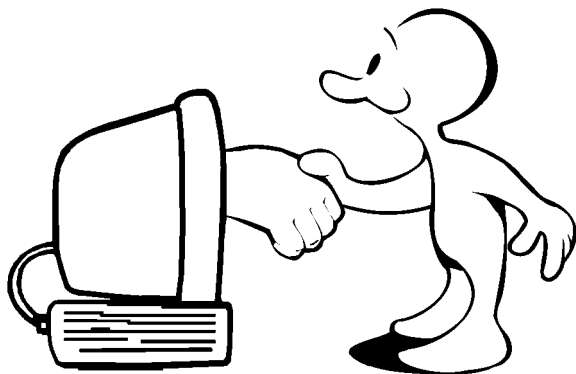
An Interview with Alexander Schniertshauer, Germany

We express our thanks to Dr. Wolfgang Sturz, publisher of "wissensmanagement" (Knowledge Management) for granting us permission to translate and print this interview in TC-FORUM.

When you bring your car into the repair shop, you expect it to be repaired there quickly and professionally. In order to do this, the shop personnel have to be able to access relevant information about the model in general as well as its specific variants.

In the case of Mercedes-Benz vehicles from DaimlerChrysler AG, a Group-wide information system for repair facilities provides both authorized service centres and dealers with the up-to-date information they need.

wissensmanagement spoke with Mr. Alexander Schniertshauer, Area Manager for Mercedes-Benz Parts Technology & Technical Information at DaimlerChrysler AG.



wm: Right now, knowledge management seems to be a buzzword, but I'm sure that the task of knowledge management, particular in your area, is already likely to be quite familiar to you. How long have you had something like knowledge management, even if it's actually been known by another name?

Schniertshauer: Well, you're right. One of the most important services in our area of Parts Technology and Technical Information is constantly updating and maintaining the Group-wide Repair Information System. We provide authorized repair facilities and dealers with all the information they need, that is, with all the knowledge required to solve a given repair problem. It's nothing less than pure knowledge management. And, of course, we haven't just been doing this since the term "knowledge management" has been floating around. We've been at it for a long time now.

However, in doing so, we have to fulfill very strict standards. The knowledge that we make available in our information system needs to meet the highest demands in many different ways. In particular, it has to be:

- **Correct:** Incorrect repair instructions can't help me solve a problem.
- **Current:** These days, when a new vehicle comes out on the market, all the relevant repair manuals have to be available right at market introduction.
- **Complete:** Each model, each variant, and each equipment combination needs to be included. This makes huge demands on how to organize the knowledge base.
- **Accessible:** The employees in the repair shop have to be able to readily locate the repair instructions by using suitable search strategies and criteria.

Just these four criteria alone lead to requirements that are often simply left out of today's discussions on knowledge management.

wm: Knowledge management could be defined as the transfer of the knowledge from one person into the brains of many others. Can such a

Knowledge Management Is Critical for Us! (cont.)

transfer be accomplished solely with the structures and processes available in electronic data management, or does the human factor still play a substantial role in this?

What role does the human factor play?

Schniertshauer: Without computers, our team would be fighting a lost cause. But the opposite is also true. I mean, if we only had the electronically stored data with no specialists working there in the background to evaluate, interpret, classify and structure it all, we'd just end up with one huge data graveyard.

What it all really comes down to is an intelligent interaction between humans and their electronic assistants. And that, by the way, is a statement that fundamentally applies to knowledge management. To bring about knowledge management solutions, what I need as a manager is a qualified team. The team, in turn, needs to have efficient, productive computer support. That's the only way it will work.

wm: What qualifications do you need in your team to be able to tackle such problems?

Schniertshauer: "Team" is the right term here, because we need a great variety of skills. One of the most fundamental skills has to do with the area of repair description and definition. That's where highly qualified specialists specify repair sequences in detail. After that, we need technical editors who really know what they're doing.

"It all really comes down to an intelligent interaction between humans and their electronic assistants".

When doing this, we maintain a very deliberate, dedicated separation of skills. It's important for us that each member of the team can bring their competencies to bear in the project without interfering with the work of others or even limiting its effectiveness. Maintaining repair information is only possible as a team effort. Knowledge management is teamwork.

wm: Knowledge management could also be defined as knowledge exchange. In this sense, knowledge should not just simply flow out from the home office down to the shops and dealerships, but there should also be information flowing in the opposite direction back up to the home office. Is there such a bottom-up knowledge transfer in your case?

Schniertshauer: Knowledge management can never ever be just a one-way street. Sure, our job is to provide our authorized shops and dealers with information. At the same time, we're also dependent on their responses. So, we've also implemented feedback systems. That means we have hotlines that allow us to quickly tell if the knowledge we've provided is somehow incorrect or incomplete. In addition, the knowledge end-users can provide us with written or electronic feedback about the quality of our information and, of course, about any possible quality problems in particular.

We show our appreciation for all this invaluable feedback by holding a raffle four times a year in which we offer really attractive prizes and awards. At any rate, I can assure you that knowledge exchange works for us in both directions. The opportunities provided by electronic communication have, of course, stimulated this exchange and made it all a lot easier.

wm: Knowledge management could also be defined as motivating employees to share their knowledge. In a recent conversation with our magazine, Mr. Müller from DaimlerChrysler University mentioned that performance evaluations of your managers are often influenced by their willingness to share knowledge. What types of motivation do specialists have to share their knowledge?

Schniertshauer: Well, knowledge management as such is not an explicit topic in performance evaluations. Nevertheless, employees can only bring out the performance expected of them in all its facets when they are capable of working beyond their own immediate sphere of work and are willing to engage in

teamwork and communication. It's all about overall performance, and this can only happen when it's clear to every employee that information without any mutual exchange is really just useless information.

wm: Knowledge management could also be defined as a dialogue among Development, Production, Sales and the After-sales areas. These are areas that, at least primarily, are pursuing very different goals and frequently speak very different languages. How do you ensure that the communication among these areas occurs without any information loss despite their different horizons?

Schniertshauer: Knowledge management is a dialogue. It's a dialogue taking place within a network. A dialogue among employees who define repairs and those who then describe them. A dialogue between those who develop and those who produce. A dialogue that takes place through many levels and via many point-to-point paths.

"Nevertheless, employees can only bring out the performance expected of them when they are capable of working beyond their own immediate sphere of work and are willing to engage in teamwork and communication".

The team spirit has to be in place first, and if this attitude works well, then information exchange and knowledge management occur by themselves. In this context, communication with our customers is particularly important to us. We're looking for a dialogue here, too. Our customers get information from us through a customer information system, hotlines and many other channels. In turn, we use various channels to acquire information on the wishes and expectations of our customers. That's an important exchange of information and, as such, another significant component of knowledge management.

wm: So now, what's your final comment, Mr. Schniertshauer, on the topic of knowledge management?

Schniertshauer: Knowledge management is, without a doubt, a very significant topic. But it can't operate in a vacuum. Knowledge management just for knowledge management's sake creates no added value. Knowledge management increases the focus on the generation, management, and conveying of information – and it's information that is the raw material in our time. We've never actually given our work the label "knowledge management." But that's exactly what we do, and have been doing for a long time now.

wm: Thank you very much for talking with us, Mr. Schniertshauer.

The discussion was led by Dr. Wolfgang Sturz.

Knowledge Management can't operate in a vacuum.



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Comments on "Results of a Study into Establishing Technical Documentation". RU 29

By Chris Curwen, South Africa

Having been teaching Technical Writers and Authors for more than twenty years, I was particularly interested to read the results of Ron Blicq's research into the creation of standards for English-language documentation. I congratulate him on his work. However, I do not believe that it would be in anyone's interest for INTECOM to establish guidelines, or try to set standards, based on that research. It seems to me that far too much emphasis is placed on one very small, but important, part of the writer's job – spelling – a subject that cannot be dealt with in isolation. The choice of whether to use American English, or British English, spelling must not be made on personal preferences, but on the usage of the words. Unfortunately, most organizations rely on personal preferences for setting standards for spelling, without considering the usage of the words.

The need to Standardize on American or British English

Although there are nearly as many versions of the English language as there are different languages, the reality is that there are only two recognized international versions – American and British. All the others fall into a category we refer to as colloquialisms.

For example, here in South Africa, somebody might write this:

"The accident was caused by failure of the robot control system".

Although there is nothing peculiar about the spelling, neither to an American or a British reader, or to anyone else, there is a problem with the word usage. What did the writer actually mean? To most people in the world, a "robot" is an automated machine. And so most people would think that the writer was referring to a failure of the control system of that machine.



Most people think that this is a robot...



... but in South Africa, many people use the word "robot" to refer to this.

However, in South Africa, many people use the word "robot" to refer to traffic lights – a colloquialism. But, how many people would know that? So, if we allow people to use colloquial terminology, we are faced with a massive problem. And the first piece of advice I give to writers is to avoid colloquialisms and standardize on either American or British English.

I am often asked which one of these I recommend. And, even though my personal preference is for British English, I have stated on many occasions that both are acceptable. However, in Africa, and in Southern Africa in particular, it makes more sense to standardize on British English as we have had much closer relationships with Britain than we have ever had with America.

How do I choose which version of English to use?

As Ron says in his article, the most common reply to this question is simply:

"If the product is being sold in America, use American English; if it is being sold in Britain, use British English."

Guidelines for English Language International

But that advice is worse than useless. As the world has become smaller, so the markets for our products have grown wider. And it is unlikely that any one product will be sold in only one place. If that is the situation you are in, it makes sense to choose the version of the language you are most comfortable working in, so long as it is one of the two internationally recognized versions, and as long as you use your chosen version consistently. The last thing you need is for some other person or organization to dictate that choice to you.

Consistency in spelling and word usage is essential

Having made the decision to standardize on either British or American English, it is essential to standardize on word usage, as well as spelling. If the writers choose to standardize on American spelling, they must also standardize on American word usage. If they choose British spelling, they must also standardize on British word usage. What is important is consistency.

To demonstrate this, let us examine a sentence taken from a technical report produced by an engineer in a car manufacturing company. The sentence reads:

"A modification is required to the hood release mechanism."

At first glance, this sentence might seem perfectly clear. But, if you examine it carefully, you will see that it could create confusion. The word "hood" has two different meanings. And the actual meaning depends on whether the writer is using American English or British English. This is shown clearly in the following two diagrams.



Diagram showing American English usage of the word "Hood"



Diagram showing British English usage of the word "Hood"

Although the spelling of the word "Hood" is the same in both American and British English, the usage is completely different. And the only way that a reader would know what was actually meant by the word would be by the spelling and usage of the words in the remainder of the report.

So, if the writer had used words like "optimize, recognize, color, gray, and tire", in the remainder of the report, the reader would assume not only American spelling, but also American usage of words, and would attach the American meaning to the word. But, if the writer had used words like "optimise, recognise, colour, grey, and tyre", in the remainder of the report, the reader would assume British English spelling and word usage, and would attach the British meaning to the word.

This example should be sufficient to highlight the importance of writers being consistent in both word usage and spelling – not just spelling. It should also highlight the importance of using illustrations, as well as providing indexes and definitions, in technical documents to overcome geographical and cultural differences in language usage.



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Response on “Establishing Guidelines for Eng

Response to Chris Curwen’s Suggestions

**By Ron Blicq, Canada
President, INTECOM**

Chris Curwen is absolutely correct: the language study that INTECOM has embarked on must not limit itself to the differences in spelling between British English and American English. Its focus must be very much broader.

First study in 1999/2000.

This became apparent almost immediately after the results of the original study were published. (See TC-FORUM for September 2000 [1]. The results are also available on the Web, at www.intecom.org. The study started in September 1999 and continued until June 2000, during which I surveyed technical communicators at meetings held in Norway, Germany, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and the USA. A questionnaire was also published in TC-Forum for December 1999 [2], and distributed at the Idea Market held at Forum 2000 in London. The responses showed considerable diversity of opinion regarding preferred usage, yet marked unanimity in two areas:

- 1) Technical communicators, particularly in countries other than the US and the UK, are seeking advice.
- 2) Those same technical communicators resist the suggestion that INTECOM should establish standards; they would much prefer that INTECOM offer guidelines.

Other Opinions

Chris Curwen is not the only person to have commented on this study. In a letter to the editor of the IEEE/PCS Newsletter (January/February 2001 [3]), Michael Brady of Asker, Norway, states that "...setting standards, or even guidelines, does not contribute to progress in or increased comprehension of a language". He goes on to say:

"Opinion on spelling varies far more than Blicq's compilations suggest. For instance, the current 10th edition of the Oxford Concise English Dictionary lists "recognize" (with a z) as first choice, and "-ise" as second. But leading UK publications, including The Economist and The Times, ignore that choice and use "-ise" only. An "s" instead of a "z", or the other way around, does not dilute comprehension and arguably slows reading only slightly."

To which I can add that "connection" offers a similar problem: Chambers 21st Century Dictionary [4] lists "connection" first and then immediately adds "or connexion". Yet many leading British newspapers consistently use the "x" spelling.

Robert Brown, who has lived and worked in the UK, the Netherlands, and (currently) the US, is very much aware of the differences that occur. In the Autumn 2000 issue of the ISTC Communicator [5] he describes many of the factors affecting the use of the English language and their affect on technical writers:

"Then there are different words for tools, such as spanner/wrench; adjustable spanner/monkey wrench; Allen wrench/hexagonal wrench. In electrical circuits, you need to either earth or ground a terminal or plug; you also use a socket or outlet. When writing financial documents you learn that using a direct debit is the same as arranging for drafting from your account, and that a current account is a checking account."

He includes a list to show some specific differences, including

British	US
appendices	appendixes
brackets	parentheses
dialogue	dialog
full stop	period
sulphur	sulfur
tyre	tire

lish-Language - The Next Step · RU 30

He ends by saying: "This article...aims to highlight some things you need to know as a working technical communicator, when you have to switch between these two versions of the same tongue."

The Need for Guidelines

While I was conducting the original study it became apparent that technical writers who are native-born English speakers – regardless of whether they were schooled in American or British usage – can rationalize when one style should be used in preference to the other. But technical writers for whom English is a second or sometimes third language experience much more difficulty in deciding which style to use. They are not looking for standards, but they would like some guidelines so they can make informed decisions.

Consequently I am setting up a committee to carry the study a step further (and I'm also looking for volunteers to become part of the committee).

Focus for the New Committee

The committee's first objective will be to identify areas where there are differences. This will encompass identifying

- spelling variants (not just between the UK and the US, but also in other English-speaking countries),
- words that have different meanings in different countries (for example, "presently"),
- colloquialisms, and what universally understood words or expressions can be used in their place,
- punctuation variants, and
- any other differences that come to light.

The committee's second objective - and probably the more difficult to achieve - will be to agree on guidelines and prepare a report or style manual identifying their recommendations.

Publishing the Guidelines

Ideally, the guidelines will describe the variants and then suggest which should be used when writing documentation for international use. The entries might be like this:

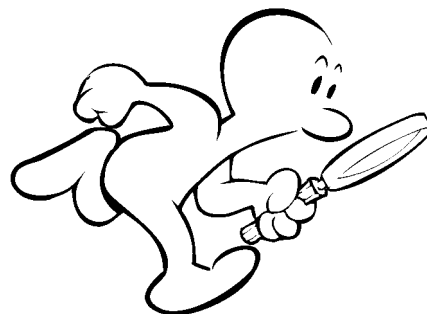
litre; liter

litre is preferred in Europe and most other countries, and is the spelling established for S.I. documentation; liter is preferred in the US; we suggest litre.

end punctuation following quotation marks in the UK and much of Europe, end punctuation follows the quotation mark: "We plan to buy a replacement computer". In the US, however, end punctuation precedes the quotation mark: "We plan to buy a replacement computer." We recommend the UK method.

presently avoid using this word: in the US, presently is understood to mean "soon" or "shortly"; in the UK, it means "after a while" or "later"; use soon or later, depending on the desired meaning.

(In none of these cases am I trying to make a personal recommendation! The examples are intended only to show how the entries might be presented.)



The Next Step (cont.)

Forming the Study Committee

Several people have already volunteered to serve on the committee (the research will be done by email), but I need to identify more technical communicators who would enjoy the research and discussions that inevitably will follow. I particularly want to find people from a wide range of countries, so that the committee will hear broadly based opinions on which to base its findings.

Most likely we will divide into several sub-committees, each focusing on a different element. And, as Chris Curwen has so cogently pointed out, the committee will need to extend its research to investigate not only the differences between the language in the UK and the US, but also special variants in other English-speaking countries such as Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Canada.

To join the group, send me an email at rgi_ron@compuserve.com. I would love to hear from you.

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1. Ron Blicq, "Results of a Study Into Establishing Guidelines for English Language International Technical Documentation", in *TC-FORUM*, 03/00, September 2000, p 10.
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Ideas on Cooperation Between Suppliers and Users Regarding Documentation · RU 31

by Åke Rullgård, Sweden

Documentation, operators' manuals, maintenance instructions, etc, can never be perfect and satisfy all users. The organization of the documentation, particularly for large systems, will never suit all users and there will always be some errors present. This means the supplier and the user need to cooperate in various ways to avoid the fatal consequences of errors and misinterpretations, and for the improvement of documentation over time.

This article proposes some procedures and methods for such cooperation. The ideas suggested below apply, with obvious adjustments, to documentation on paper as well as documentation stored electronically. The proposed procedures should be applied at each level of the production process of documentation, i.e. also between the main supplier and possible sub-suppliers of, for instance, measuring equipment and other sub-systems. This article also aims at opening a discussion in TC- Forum on methods for improving documentation. Readers, suppliers and user are therefore welcome to submit comments on the ideas presented below.

1. The supplier shall always, as an integral part of the documentation, submit a list of all papers, i.e. drawings, manuals etc, forming the **complete documentation** for the product or system. The list shall specify each paper in complete detail, such as full bibliographical data, document id-number, issue, origin etc. This will facilitate establishing safe and efficient specifications for each paper.

The list shall further clearly state the product or system for which the documentation is valid. Prior to delivery, the supplier shall inspect the documentation regarding readability to ensure the information has not been mutilated in some way. For documentation on CD, the document shall be checked carefully so that the corresponding digitized version can be unambiguously read on the screen. For full clarity, the responsibility for correctness of facts always remains with the manufacturer of the documented product.

2. If the complete documentation is contained in a single, bound manual it is practical to include a remark such as: "This manual contains the complete documentation for product X". In such cases the list described as item 1 is not needed.
3. Upon receiving the documentation, the user shall immediately check that all papers listed according to item 1 have been received and that the bibliographical data found on the papers agrees with the data in the list. Any discrepancy between the list and the papers shall be reported immediately to the supplier, who shall return corrections to the user.

It is also important that unlisted papers are reported. Consequently, the formal check constitutes a good base for determining the coming use of the documentation. It also forces the user to become thoroughly acquainted with the documentation. (This effort is comparable to a procedure applied in delivery control, in which the received goods are checked against a packing list, a procedure applied in all delivery control systems.)

4. After completion of item 3, with possible corrections from the supplier, the user shall inspect the documentation to determine its readability and, where readability is weak, report possible difficulties to the supplier for corrective actions.
5. The user shall identify any errors and ambiguities found when applying the documentation, and shall report them to the supplier. **The supplier shall respond immediately** with corrections and/or clarifications.

Formal check required to determine usability of documentation.



Ideas on cooperation (cont.)

*User
documentation
must be
restructured.*

6. Documentation for large systems, e.g. documentation for a plant, should contain the supplier's description of the principles behind the organization of the documentation, plus advice on how to use the documentation to find special items such as components and maintenance procedures. For documentation on CD, this section corresponds to software for navigation among the various papers, which can of course be highly automated.
7. It is essential that the supplier establishes an efficient and reliable system for communicating corrections and updates to the documentation. This system shall be designed so that it facilitates user implementation. Similarly, **it is also essential that the user immediately inserts the corrections and cancels obsolete documents.**
8. Users are urged to report experiences, positive as well as negative, from use of documentation in magazines such as TC-FORUM, preferably in a neutral way, i.e. without mentioning the supplier's name.

By close cooperation between the manufacturer and the user, changes to documentation will be implemented and understood in the shortest possible time. Further, the communication between the involved parties will encourage improvements in documentation accuracy. Hopefully, this will ensure that situations will be eliminated where errors appear in edition after edition, and were piled up in someone's office, so that the plant operates with obsolete documentation, be it a lawnmower or a steel plant.



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Technical Communications Program at the University of Tampere · ET 7

by Tytti Suojanen, Finland

The demand for technical communicators in Finland has been increasing at a steady pace in the past two decades. Increasing attention is thus being paid to technical communication training. Professionals have traditionally learned their trade through practice, for university-level education only emerged in the 1990's. In addition to two university programs leading to an M.A., continuing education courses for practicing professionals are available throughout the country.

Much of the technical communication training offered around the world is characterized by a strong tradition of cooperation between university and industry. This is also the case in the Finnish context, where some forms of cooperation between university and industry have been tested with good results. I will briefly outline one example, the Technical Communications Program at the University of Tampere.

Industry Cooperation

The Department of Translation Studies at the University of Tampere launched the Technical Communications Program in the autumn of 1997. The program is intended for translation and language students in the final stages of their studies. The driving force behind this one-year program is industry cooperation: 20-30 Finnish companies have been involved in organizing the courses since the program began. There are four forms of cooperation:

- Visiting lecturers. Companies employing technical communicators are very experienced in technical communication, and their representatives give lectures at the university on different aspects of technical communication.
- Traineeships. An important part of the program is a three-month summer traineeship where students work as technical communicators, and get to test the knowledge and skills they have learned during the program.
- M.A. theses. Students write their M.A. thesis in cooperation with a company. They thus learn to combine theory and practice through writing their thesis, and the companies receive the benefits of the latest research, which they can adapt to suit their own objectives.
- Student visits. Students visit companies to familiarize themselves with the work of the technical communicator, or companies visit the university.

Four forms of cooperation with industry.

In addition, the program works in close cooperation with the Finnish Technical Communications Society.

Diverse Aims

Since the Technical Communications Program was launched, we have had two primary aims:

- To increase cooperation between the business sector and the university and to bring theory and practice closer together. Traditionally the Humanities have not had very close contacts with industry in Finland, and translation students, for example, often find combining theory and practice difficult.



Technical Communications Program ... (cont.)

- To offer students an opportunity to specialize in technical communication and to improve their employment opportunities after graduation. The program is an important forum for networking, and most of the students who have completed the program are now permanently employed as technical communicators.

*More
research is
badly
needed.*

In addition to these aims, we try to fill in the educational gap in the field and to offer the business sector an educated workforce. Academic research in the field of technical communication is still in its infancy in Finland, and the program also acts as a way of generating more research concerning the specific characteristics of Finnish technical communication.

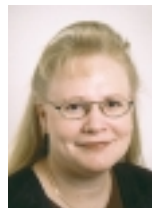
Course Design

The program focuses on imparting core skills necessary in the work of the technical communicator: these skills include information gathering, audience analysis, visualizing information, and strategies for writing to different audiences and purposes both in Finnish and English. Most Finnish technical communicators write in English, and therefore language issues form one of the essential modules. In addition, the students become familiar with different publication media and some of the tools of the trade. Usability and the skills involved in project management are also emphasized in the program.

Challenges for Educators

Although the Technical Communications Program has been very successful, it has also raised a problem inherent in organizing technical communication training in Finland. It is difficult to find educators who have the necessary knowledge, skills and understanding of technical communication and the technical communicator's work so that they could offer adequate training, both from the practical and from the academic perspective. A cycle has not yet emerged in which professionals with experience return to universities to carry out research, to train future generations of technical communicators and also to offer further training to professionals. It is a real challenge for educators to design courses and training programs in which the interests of all parties are taken into consideration.

Tytti Suojanen (Ph.L.) coordinates the Technical Communications Programme and carries out research on the professional development of technical communication in Finland.



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Impressions from German/American Projects

SA 25

By Ulrich Thiele, Germany

In this forum most of the articles have dealt with rather technically oriented problems concerning translations of technical contents in writing only. Differences in culture between the different people add more problems, as we learned during several months of work with four mixed German/American project teams.

How it All Started

During the past couple of months I - as a German - have worked on a project in which North-American colleagues were involved. At the same time, three of my German partners were involved independently also in German/American projects. When we - by chance - exchanged our experiences on those individual projects, we found we had experienced quite a lot of very basic problems, that could not be connected only to the language barrier. We agreed that the problems mostly emerged from different cultures with different educational and political backgrounds, rather than from pure communication. In this article I will summarize what we have found to be important to know about our North-American partners, beyond the translation-related points of view.

I have to point out that these experiences are not based on any systematic research, and are not at all of any statistical relevance! They are just impressions, picked from a couple of months of cooperation between Germans and Americans. I should also mention that one of my partners is a native American, living and working now for more than a decade in Germany.

When preparing this article we tried to exclude any statements that are based on emotions or on the personal characters of the colleagues we had been working with. Needless to say, we are looking only from this side of the Atlantic, not from the other direction, from the American point of view. (It would be very interesting for us to hear the problems that an American engineer has experienced with Germans when working on a mutual project like this.)

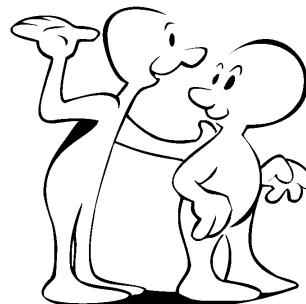
The Language Barrier

A major part of our problems may be deduced from the different languages and the different ways of interpreting what is said or written. Only a small amount of the German and American languages seem to match, whereas large portions of the languages are not compatible with each other.

How to Communicate

Yes, we had underestimated the language problem, when we met for the first German-American conference, the kick-off meeting for this mutual project. It turned out, that not all of our German experts were sufficiently proficient in English to discuss the project-related issues in detail. On the other side, our American colleagues never tried to talk or even understand any German words, which for pure psychological reasons had a bad influence on the atmosphere during the meetings. (Personally, I have learned that just saying "hello" in the language of your partners gives you advantages for the rest of your cooperation, even if it is hard to learn how to say it in Indonesian, Russian or Chinese.)

After the last meeting we were told that working in the Netherlands, for instance, is much more efficient for Americans because of the much more American-minded attitude of the Netherlands engineers. My unspoken comment on this was: as we had agreed on cooperating for a two-year German project, surely one of our American colleagues could have tried to learn a little German in preparation for that.



Impressions from... (cont.)

Reading Between the Lines

In communicating from person to person problems arise in quite a different way, compared to written translation.

I remember a telephone conversation between the American and German teams during which, on the German side, some members of the American team also were present. Parts of the scope of work had been discussed in English, and finally the American partners in New York agreed to take over additional work.

Later we discussed the conversation with our American colleagues who had attended the telephone conference with us, and were very surprised to hear that they were convinced that nobody on the American side had ever agreed to take over the additional work! The reason for this misunderstanding, apparently, was that Germans tend to stay exactly with the spoken word, whereas with the American language one has to learn to read "between the lines". Thus an American "Yes" might mean "absolutely no way", depending on the context and the situation.

Translation Problems

All of the contributions made by our American partners were delivered in English. However, since the final project documentation had to be in German, a translation before the project meetings was necessary. No big deal, you would think? It turned out to be a major problem.

In our different projects, my friends and I are used to working with translated documents, done by translation experts. This, however, was different, because we had immediate feedback during the project meetings, when the German partners with the translated documents and the Americans with their originals discussed the documents with each other.

International teams require new ways of cooperation.

We found the translation quality of different translation companies in some cases to be inadequate (not necessarily wrong, but differing in important details because of different meanings in the two languages). For example: the term "initial installation", which on first sight seems to be simple to translate, but when we completely understood the whole software concept behind this English term, we found there is no comparable German expression. Instead we had to explain the initial installation in several sentences to make it unmistakable to the German team members.

Interestingly, usually it is the other way around: you find abundant redundancy in English technical writing because of the lack of technical terms and the multiple meanings of English words (such as "appropriate"). In English this means inserting several explanatory sentences, just to describe a single issue. In these cases sentence-by-sentence translations expand the text unnecessarily and make it hard for Germans to read. It created additional work for us, to reduce the translations down to the essentials.

Ways of Communication

We noticed differences in how each party communicated using technical means. Americans seem to be far ahead of the German "handy communication" generation. They have already learned it is impolite to interrupt their colleagues during working hours or disturb their meetings by phone or cellphone. So we found our American colleagues always in search of plugs to hook up their laptops instead. Most communications were made via e-mail. If it was absolutely necessary to call, this was announced by e-mail well in advance. That explains why, during our project, we seldom saw an American colleague using a cellphone.

The American Way of Working

During our different American projects we learned quite a bit about how our American colleagues work. Their organizing methods and procedures are based on different structures and hierarchies than Germans are accustomed to.

- Before discussing any project related contents, it was very important for our American colleagues to know who was taking part in the project and what was his exact position and responsibility. It could happen in case of disagreements on technical issues, that instead of arguing on a technical basis we had to answer questions like "What's your role in this project anyway?"
- A person's educational background sometimes seems to be much more important than a person's professional competence. It happened more than once that at a first meeting, one of the first questions on the American side was: "What is your background?" This is something which for Germans seems rather intruding when meeting a person for the first time.
- As a proof for activities our American colleagues sent us numerous updates on documents, each one incomplete and of preliminary status. If the documents had to be translated, this especially proved to be an inefficient back and forth procedure. Even after deadlines had expired, more updates kept coming in and endangered the project schedule. Those updates were sent to everybody's attention, also via mailing lists to people who were only remotely involved, which for us proved to be a time consuming way of working. (We seemed to accumulate piles of papers in different projects!)
- Open issues that probably cannot be resolved right away, were simply ignored. Only if project management insisted repeatedly on an answer, was a solution presented, and then only reluctantly.

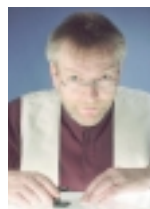
To the Germans involved with the different German/American projects the American way of working seemed in some respect to be rather inefficient. However, we also experienced that our American colleagues compensated this by extra work that often far exceeded German office hours. This flexibility helped us finish the different projects on time.

Conclusion

At first sight there seem to be a lot of differences in culture and educational background between the two nations, which disturb efficient and smooth cooperation within a team. However knowing these differences (at best both sides should read a "How-to" guide before) it is quite easy to come to terms. We think that people should agree upon certain rules of "behaviour" before starting a mutual project.

As already mentioned it would be very helpful to get a feedback on how Americans experience the German working culture. The same goes for European colleagues. They may have quite different points of view regarding their German counterparts.

Finally we have to say, that for everybody it was an adventure none of us would have liked to miss, and we are prepared and looking forward to the next mixed-culture projects.



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