



Mining for Career Gold:

Discovering Related Careers from Buried Skills

As a technical communicator, my most valuable career assets are flexibility, the ability to re-purpose skills, and a willingness to apply those skills in various ways. In today's economic climate, these attributes are important to maintain a career in the technical communication field. Career paths are rarely linear, and mine has certainly not followed a straight line. Layoffs, economic downturns, and industry changes have prompted me to repackage my skills to be more effective in a changing job market. Past experience in a variety of industries, plus additional duties I have taken on, have augmented my résumé and expanded my opportunities.

Where can the hard-earned skills you have acquired as a technical communi-

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cator take you? Standing the test of time as a technical communicator has added some detours to my career road map, such as stints as an editor, a requirements analyst, a business analyst, and a software tester. Each of these positions were founded in technical communication and required many of the same skills and experience.

How can a technical communicator adjust to changing market conditions and keep working when jobs are not as plentiful?

- Recycle experience and highlight skills that can enable you to apply those experiences to other fields.
- Use a fresh viewpoint to evaluate the skills you do have. Review different titles, translatable skills sets, and industries in which you may have al-

ready earned applicable experience. Remember to consider the jobs you had before you started your tech comm career, as well as volunteer positions and personal interests and hobbies.

- Think about additional duties you have had that were outside of your job description, such as software testing, writing web copy, assisting a project manager, writing policies and procedures, helping with a sales proposal, or creating a graphic for a product sales sheet. Those experiences can be a foundation for a whole new career path.

One strategy that I have found to be very useful is to create a matrix of job titles, skills, and interests. Get your pen or keyboard ready, because using this technique requires some writing. You can use the lists you create to add to a

matrix. Creating a matrix may help you discover related fields, lateral moves, and career changes that make use of what you already have but have not considered as job assets.

Titles

Make a list of job titles. Some titles I have had are shown in the following list. Notice that a few of the titles in this list contain the words “analyst,” “developer,” and “tester,” which were natural offshoots from technical communication. Pay attention to those words in your list because they are clues to possible segue positions.

- Documentation specialist, technical writer, information developer, policies and procedures writer
- Scientific editor, technical editor
- Proposal writer
- Online help developer
- Software quality assurance tester
- Requirements writer and analyst

Don’t forget positions that are slightly out of the technical communication field but use many of the same skills, such as:

- Business analyst
- Technical writing instructor (college)
- Technical instructor (corporate trainer)
- Information developer
- Web designer

Additional Duties

Many positions have had extra duties in addition to creating technical documentation. These duties are often not recorded on résumés, but they are important experiences you can use to widen your repertoire. Some extra duties that I have accumulated outside of technical communication include:

- Project coordinator (managed software project documents)
- Project manager (managed documentation projects) and project estimator
- Process analyst (analyzed and documented business processes)
- Customer software engineer (provided customer support)
- Network administrator (managed Sun network)
- Designer (designed user interface for software)
- Usability specialist (provided usability information and data to software team)

Additional Duties Matrix

If you did work that was not in your main job description, you may wonder how applicable it is to a career move. You may be surprised at how much time was actually spent on these tasks. To calculate how much work experience you need for the extras, use the example matrix and calculations (see Figure 1).

Skills

Next, list skills you have acquired as a technical communicator, including the skills you listed in the additional duties matrix, any extra volunteer work, such as creating tutorials or presentations, and new skills that other experts have taught you. For example:

- Writing (general, technical, and marketing) and editing; grammar expertise
- Researching, analyzing, and organizing information
- Creating graphics, flow charts, and presentations
- Process analysis and ability to find gaps
- Audience analysis; understanding and relating to diverse groups
- Interviewing and public speaking
- Translating technical topics into information for non-technical audiences
- Creating teaching materials and tutorials (instructional design)
- Ability to learn and use software quickly and understand the target audience’s viewpoint
- Understanding best practices and standards, and the common software schemas that users encounter

Industries

Technical communicators often gravitate to certain industries and work in them for most of their careers while others may work in many different in-

Figure 1. Calculating Additional Duties Experience

While I was a...	For this period...	I spent X% of time doing this...	Which correlates to time* * Formula: Years X % of time = accumulated experience	And applies to this skill...
Technical writer	4 years	30% testing software and writing test plans	4 years X 30% = 1.2 years	Quality assurance testing
	4 years	25% coordinating project tasks, maintaining the project schedule, and assisting the project manager	4 years X 25% = 1 year	Project coordination or assistant project management
Online Help Designer	5 years	40% designing information architectures	5 years X 40% = 2 years	Information architecture and design

* Time calculation is based on number of years multiplied by percentage of time spent on additional duty. This counts as work experience—Put it on your résumé!

dustries, but perhaps with a specialty, such as software or hardware documentation. Industry experience is important because many industries require specialized knowledge, such as the medical or pharmaceutical industries.

The US Department of Labor’s list of industry categories provides a high number of jobs for technical communicators. The following are the common industry categories, ranked from highest to lowest numbers of jobs for 2007:

- Computer systems design and related services
- Architectural, engineering, and related services
- Management, scientific, and technical consulting services
- Newspaper, periodical, book, and directory publishers
- Software publishers

The Department of Labor Statistics also provided the following list of the top paying industries in 2007 for technical communicators:

- Financial investment activities
- Computer and peripheral equipment manufacturing
- Grant making and giving services
- Business schools and computer and management training
- Wireless telecommunications carriers (except satellite)

Industry experience can also be related to personal pastimes. For example,

geology is a lifelong interest of mine, and I have been a “rock hound” from childhood. In college, it seemed natural to take geology for my science requirement. That interest, backed by college study, opened the door for a scientific editor position in the oil and gas industry. By factoring in strong interests and hobbies, such as solar power, space travel, popular culture, the outdoors, teaching, or even charities, those interests can be a passport into a related career.

Next, create a list of industries you have worked in, and don’t forget positions that may not have been in technical communication. For example, I spent several years working in a hospital as an event planner which later allowed me to do some grant writing, as well as other tasks like managing the daily hospital census and writing reports for all the major departments. That experience was very useful later when I was hired to document medical software for hospitals.

The following is a list of industries I’ve been involved in during my career. When you list the common industries of your career, group them by common themes, as shown below:

- Consulting
- Charitable foundations and community service
- Financial and mortgage
- Government (state and federal)

- Medical, hospital, and pharmaceutical
- Oil and gas research (scientific)
- Software
- Telecommunications

Interests

Finally, record interests, hobbies, or additional skills that may not be evident or used in your work life:

- Charitable and community volunteerism
- Environmental activities
- Earth sciences
- Popular culture on the web (such as Facebook, Twitter, blogging)
- Languages
- Arts and crafts, music
- Physics, astronomy, science
- Outdoors activities
- Teaching

Creating a Jobs and Skills Matrix

After recording your job titles, skills, interests, and industries, adding the list to a matrix can yield some great ideas for expanding possible positions.

Map your job titles, skills, and interests. Look for positions that make use of the listed skills and interests. If you need ideas, search job boards for the skill (not the title), check the US Department of Labor Statistics site (www.bls.gov), or check with your local and state labor or employment agencies on the web.

Figure 2. Skills, Interests, and Related Positions Matrix for Technical Writers

These skills...	Plus these interests...	Could translate to this position...
Technical, medical, or scientific background	Popular culture	White paper (analysis reports) editor
Grammar and writing expertise	Fiction and nonfiction	Non-fiction book editor
Ability to relate to diverse groups of people	Reading	Science or medical editor
	Business	Thesis or dissertation editor (freelance)
	Education	Technical website editor
	Computers and technology	Magazine editor
	Inventions, engineering, research	Research and development editor
	Sales	Web copy editor
		Textbook editor
		General editor
		Book editor
		English instructor
		Technical writing instructor
		Proposal editor
		Global culture and usability consultant

Figure 3. Skills, Interests, and Related Positions Matrix for Technical Editors

These skills...	Added to these interests...	Could translate to this position...
Writing (general, technical, and marketing)	Research Sociology and buying behavior Money and finance Charitable organizations Languages Outdoors Military Science and medicine Graphic design	State agency writer for social programs Grant writer Financial writer US Forestry Service writer Aeronautical technical writer Military systems technical writer Science applications writer Medical applications writer Marketing communications Product writer Web financial copy writer Proposal writer Advertising copy writer
Research	Sociology and buying behavior Psychology Law, rules, and regulations Computer science Popular press Popular culture	Proposal coordinator and writer Financial researcher and writer Corporate publications Policies and procedures writer Technical journal researcher Research analyst or research writer
Graphic design	Art and design Computer science	Corporate publications writer and designer Advertising copy writer and designer Graphic designer Web copy writer Usability specialist User interface designer
Creating flow charts and presentations; Understanding and designing logical processes; Audience analysis and presentation	Art and design Sales and purchasing Public relations Software development Process design	Corporate publications staff member Graphic designer Public relations specialist Communications department writer and designer Software requirements analyst or writer Process re-engineering consultant
Writing for global audiences Organizational and process improvement	Learning and speaking different languages Global culture Management (teams or individuals) Project management	Translation specialist Translation coordinator Global documentation usability consultant Proposal writer Project coordinator Writing project manager

The example matrix contains some example skills, interests, and possible job matches. Note that these are not one-to-one matches. Several skills are needed for many positions, so there is some overlap. Some positions may require additional education to move into. The matrix is by no means an exhaustive list of possible jobs. There are many more that may be applicable for your experience and interests.

Technical communicators are, in general, people who have multiple interests,

are well-read, and have a deep sense of curiosity about how things work. We are usually quick learners who enjoy both technology and people, and we can be a bridge between the two. Maintaining longevity in a technical communication career can take us down many paths that use and enhance our talents and capabilities, if we know how to look for the experience and talent we already have, and apply it to our next job. It is my hope that the tips here will help you to do just that, so you can get on

with your next adventure in technical communication. **1**

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