

Negotiating Skills for Technical Communicators

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Negotiating with vendors, business partners, peers, or employees can turn differences to mutual gain. The following paper along with the paper entitled “Successful Contract Consulting” provides background for a panel on how to optimize your success as a consultant, contractor, or an organization. The panel [PD 11B] is called “Rules of the Game.”

Negotiating skills are so valued in today’s business climate that senior corporate executives pay \$2000 for three-day seminars sponsored by ranking MBA schools, such as Harvard University. Negotiating is no longer seen as a tug of war in which opponents either win or lose. Instead, negotiating with vendors, business partners, peers, or employers is a matter of understanding how differences can be turned into mutual gain. A print advertisement currently in several business and technical magazines illustrates this aspect of technical communication. In the ad, the president of Ericsson, a leading firm in the telecommunications industry, is shown saying: “It’s about communication between people. The rest is technology.”

As a profession in general, technical communication is hard to define. It encompasses job titles and responsibilities that range from director of information systems to data entry clerk. What we do remains a great mystery to those who are not technical communicators. Then, there are those who assume that, just because they speak and write English, they can not only do our job but do it better. Dealing with anyone who believes our profession is artless or insignificant requires many skills, including negotiating.

Technical communicators must constantly interact with, interview, and depend on source material from other types of professionals in different organizations. In doing so, the technical communicator must often

- Deal with difficult people
- Build effective coalitions

Further, since the technical communicator is rarely on the inside executive track, negotiating becomes important in determining feasible deadlines and even getting a raise.

ONE EXAMPLE

In the following scenario, a technical communicator negotiates successfully for a permanent job with the firm for which she has been working as a contractor.

You are the only technical writer in-house. Although the venture-funded firm that you work for has hired writers from time to time to work on specific projects, you are the

first who has occupied a desk 40 hours a week. You bring to the company an expertise in the industry to which the firm wants to sell its new technology. However, you have limited experience as a technical communicator. Your initial contract with the firm is almost up. The project is nowhere near finished because of delays in product development. You have been working extra hours on the weekends.

You realize that you like working for the company but you want to translate your job into a permanent position. You begin pulling the paperwork together, and you’ve already gotten the support from the head of Engineering.

You’ve heard from your front office contacts that the CEO is under recent orders from his board of directors to trim costs. Yet he pulls you off the manual you are racing to get out the door to accompany a major product release. He puts you on a business development proposal. Your only input is to wordprocess his and the executive staff’s changes. He refuses to listen to any content or format suggestions you make. What do you do?

1. Stay cool. Don’t let the CEO’s panic infect you. Finish your proposal. Also, recognize your value. Your ability and flexibility are worth something if the CEO pulls you off another important job to work on his top priority.
2. Put your experience, wisdom, and knowledge of the industry to use by demonstrating your ability to appraise the situation:
 - Assemble supporting evidence
 - summary of your qualifications
 - current resume
 - description of the current documentation project
 - description of ancillary services provided, such & working on the business development plan
 - Write a clear, concise justification of why the company should hire you as a technical writer. Include remuneration options, which becomes the basis of your negotiation.
 1. Option 1. Extend your contract to match the latest due date of the product release. Provide your hourly rate. Show your self-motivation and responsibility by, offering to submit a weekly review of activities and project status reports, But don’t go overboard. Defer milestones and progress setting to the Engineering Department.
 2. Option 2. Fund a full-time technical writer position.

Provide the pros of why you want to work for the company and why it should want you. For example, you might say something like:

The company is growing rapidly and the product base is expanding with it. To sustain growth and customer loyalty, the company's products will require documentation of the highest quality. As a full-time employee, I would provide all the services that I do already as a contractor. In addition, I would provide continuity as well as [list an expanded scope of deliverables].

I believe that my ability and attention to detail already complement the staff. I have a work ethic that is hard to find and a sense of urgency with regard to every task I undertake. I have been pleased with the level of intelligence and professionalism that I have encountered while working for this company. I would be proud to join such a fine team on a permanent basis.

Ultimately, your no-nonsense approach prevailed despite a highly politicized atmosphere. Because you appealed to the firm's budget-consciousness and you applied your knowledge of what is needed to get the product out the door, you got a permanent position at the salary you requested.

10 RULES

The following are some general rules for negotiating with your peers, vendors, or managers.

Point #1: Have Something of Value

To begin negotiating, you must have something of value to negotiate. The fact that you are employed by the company you are working for is your first bargaining chip. The firm sees value in paying someone to be a technical communicator. The value must be of value to more than yourself. But don't get cocky.

Point #2: One Person's Garbage Is Another's Gold Mine

While executive pay in regards to performance is currently receiving more scrutiny than ever by shareholder and the national press, the correlation between an executive's compensation and the company's performance is often unclear. So just because you are getting paid to be a technical communicator doesn't mean necessarily that your contributions are valued commensurably. Your colleagues may value your contributions more less than what the company is paying you. It is all relative.

What may not seem valuable to you may be quite valuable to someone else. The fact that you know how to

nurse the copier along when no one else can get it to work may be of little value to you personally but whomever you're negotiating with may consider this a key factor because your initiative and skill eliminates one more item from his or her agenda. This may seem minor but little things can sometimes sway authorities inordinately.

The corollary is that you don't want to waste your bargaining chips on the wrong person.

Point #3: Know Your Worth

Documenting one's work is inherently important to negotiating. Knowing what you're worth to the company and in the general marketplace gives you a foothold in your negotiations. You simply cannot negotiate if you have no data. What is your output per day? How long does it take you to produce a new page of documentation, to track down an errant co-author, to interview a beleaguered overworked manager, to get the important information? Do you have to go back? How many iterations must you make. How much coordination do you have to do?

What are your peers making in other companies locally? Nationally? How is your pay/compensation compare to these averages? If you are salaried, know what your hourly wage equivalent is — what is your salary plus benefits worth per hour to the company. Know what it would cost to replace you. The hunt for someone else costs money. Are there others in your community that have your set of skills? What makes you different'?

Be productivity-oriented. What is the bottom-line on what you do? Are customers/clients happy with the output? Could they do without it? What is your value-added. Often this is hard to quantify for the technical communicator because the documentation process frequently is not part of the product development critical path. If you can, get the documentation process on the critical path.

Listen to the business vernacular. If the current company mantra is TQM (total quality management), use the terms of TQM to describe your contributions. If the management vogue is KAIZEN or JIT, use that terminology. Use management's vocabulary but also know what you are saying—don't just mimic the words like a parrot. For example, if just-in-time (JIT) inventory management is popular in your firm, show how you've developed the documentation process to reflect this management style.

Point #4: Take Calculated Risks

Negotiating means taking risk. It is risky to stand out and be counted, yet ultimately the adage "nothing ventured, nothing gained" still applies. Meeting your "buyer" halfway is part of getting what you want. On the other

hand, you cannot and should not assume responsibility for that which is totally out of your control, such as Engineering's deadlines.

What are you negotiating for? A higher salary? Different work hours? A deadline? Use of annual time? If you know your request is not likely to be granted, use the stepping stone approach. Ask for what you want and accept something less. But be sure you name the "something less." There's nothing worse than taking the initiative and then having to accept someone else's definition of what you want.

Point #5: Keep Your Antennae Up

Be alert and receptive to opportunities. Make yourself indispensable—or at least valuable. Volunteer for inglorious tasks that must be done but that no one wants to do. For example, writing an article about the importance of safety for the employee newsletter is probably a boring task to most but necessary.

Point #6: Never Assume

Never assume, for example, that you are owed a merit increase or a promotion. Making assumptions like these already weakens your negotiating position. A corollary to this point is that once you take a stand be willing to back it up all the way. Waffling is not attractive, and it is confusing. That also means do your homework. Never give up unless you know what it will cost you and the "buyer." In short, never give up anything unless it is beneficial to you and your buyer.

Point #7: Be Aware of Labels

Buyers and sellers react differently to how things are labeled. "Valuable" to a seller may mean "expensive" to the buyer. Be careful how you term your request for a raise or new piece of equipment. Know what is of value to your buyer, then play to it.

Point #8: Build a Coalition

Network, develop support and trust, volunteer, and carry through. Knowing whom to go to when you have a question, having good relations with those who supply support services, and helping someone out when not required, are all means of providing you valuable assets that will help you in your negotiations. These are indirect assets that are not used as bargaining chips, but having the genuine support of your peers is rarely something that goes unnoticed by those with whom you would be negotiating.

Point #9: Show How It Can Be Done

Or at least demonstrate your analytical capabilities by laying out your plan. Of course, you don't want to lay the whole plan out all at once. After all, decision makers can deal with only one piece of new information at a time. On the other hand, you don't want to appear to be holding anything back. That's a display of distrust. Distrust begets distrust. Trying to be crafty may work in the movies, but not with technical communicators; it'll boomerang on you.

Point #10: Understand with Whom You Are Negotiating

Know who your "buyer" is. The corollary to this is don't negotiate with anyone who doesn't have the power to give you what you want. Don't negotiate with the vice president for sales and marketing when it's the CEO (his archenemy) who has final say on new positions. (See the corollary of Point #2.)

Don't try to leap to the other side of the river when the stepping stones are right in front of you. In other words, acknowledge the links in the chain of command. Don't go over your manager's head without his or her knowledge.

Conclusion

Because technical communicators are in the business of conveying information, being able to negotiate is a natural skill to develop. Just like learning how to write is an ever-evolving process, so is learning how to negotiate. If negotiating is approached as if it were another writing task with certain "rules of the game," the technical communicator can excel at negotiating.

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