

# Measuring Value Added: Rationale and Approaches

Elinor L. Knodel, Sandra M. Gallagher, Judith Leetham, Theresa Marchwinski,  
Amy E. Smith, and Emily A. Sopensky

*This panel will present case studies on the value added by technical communicators and their information products to the products and services they support. Many of us practitioners would like to do more value-adding assessments, but don't know how to adapt the measures to our real-world situations of limited budget and often limited interest among our customers. The panel will focus on practical approaches for applying some of the metrics used to calculate the value of our products and services (1,2). We will also discuss the benefits of this exercise for ourselves and our customers.*

**Moderator and Panelist: Elinor L. Knodel,**  
**DuPont Co., Wilmington, DE**

As technical communicators in DuPont, our group is learning to develop estimates for the return on investment from our information products for various DuPont businesses. I will present a case study in which I developed a technical bulletin for a promotional mailing to introduce one of DuPont's technical chemistry products. As the primary technical piece in the package, it was meant to influence the buying decision. I will discuss the results of a short survey of the sales force and selected customers on its perceived value. It is very clear that the cost of producing the piece is negligible in comparison to the anticipated net value of the product it supports.

**Panelist: Emily Sopensky,**  
**The Iris Company, Austin, TX**

Technical communicators are at a crossroads. It's how they approach the business of technical communication as business. Whether self-employed or otherwise employed, technical communicators must afford *not* to show value of the work they do.

With the current economic climate, waiting for others to determine the value of their work often means waiting in unemployment lines.

But many technical communicators are toolless and clueless about how to show value. So much of what technical communicators have to "sell" is difficult to explain or measure. I will focus on establishing measures and how they relate to estimating and project management. I will provide a few tips and strategies for those technical communicators interested in determining their contributions to their own business or to the firm they work for. No magic is involved. But, as with technical communication, consistency is at the heart of success.

**Panelist: Sandra M. Gallagher,**  
**DuPont Co., Wilmington, DE**

I will discuss how the Technical Publications group in DuPont added value by improving the production process for the *1994 DuPont Data Book*, a resource for financial analysts. By working directly with corporate finance and various business units to finalize the copy before it was sent to an external agency for layout, we avoided numerous, costly revision cycles with the agency. In the improved process both the writer and editor in Technical Publications researched the content and made revisions to internal Microsoft Word and Excel documents prior to turning them over to the agency. In this way, both groups did what they do best—Technical Publications did the research, writing, and editing, and the agency did the layout and artistic enhancements. As a result the total cost for the project was reduced by 50%. We should realize further cost savings by similarly streamlining the development and production process for the *DuPont Annual Report*.

**Panelist: Judith Leetham,  
Novell Corp., Orem, UT**

Before starting the documentation effort for our next major product release, our group performed an audience analysis with several objectives:

- Identify who is using our product and find out if the existing documentation set provides information in a useful manner.
- Understand our audience and use our knowledge to improve the intuitiveness of the product design and also our competitive edge.
- Design effective documentation, even if it differs radically from traditional product documentation, to reduce the cost of customer support.
- Eliminate documentation elements that are not useful, lowering the cost of goods.

Based on our analysis, we made significant changes to our documentation. We will have immediate feedback on the impact on cost-of-goods. The company also measures the portion of product revenue that is used for customer support. Within six months of the product release we will have financial data for the new product. Management will have a clear indicator of the success of the product interface and documentation through support cost percentages, which are typically high in a new product release.

**Panelist: Amy E. Smith,  
Fidelity Investments, Boston, MA**

The majority of documentation produced within Fidelity is for internal use only. There are no known established metrics that measure the effectiveness of documentation produced by our technical writers. Traditional methods, such as calls to help desks and customer feedback, do not apply. Consequently, more innovative ways are needed to assess the value of technical writers to the company. This

study looks at two such ways that are more qualitative than quantitative:

- Assessing the need for a full-time documentation group

Our group was formed recently to meet the end-user documentation demands of a large internal development project. Although we are starting to get other business, we still have to market ourselves actively. We measure our value to the company not only by the quality of our work, but also how our range of services is expanding to meet the needs of our customers.

- Assessing the phenomenon of self-promoting documentation

Our internal manuals are designed for use by very specific audiences. Often, user demand outside of the target audience increases significantly over time, sometimes even before the manuals are published. This presentation looks at some representative documents and examines the audiences for which they were originally intended, how those audiences have changed, in both number and user type (business, systems, infrastructure group), and speculates as to why this happens.

**Panelist: Theresa Marchwinski,  
Attachmate Corp., Cincinnati, OH**

I am investigating the perceived value added by technical communicators at Attachmate (Unisys Division) in the following areas:

- Cost savings (e.g., time and money)
- Overall product improvement (e.g., usability)
- Internal customer support (e.g., all people within the company who rely on the online help and/or hard copy documentation provided by technical communicators)
- External customer support (e.g., the people who bought the product)

The investigation involves a survey of the technical communication department, as well as all other departments in the Attachmate Unisys Division.

Other data include customer survey results from our division's marketing department. In addition to the data analysis, I will also provide suggestions on how other technical communicators can investigate the same information at their companies and how they can use this information as a starting point for continually measuring the value they add.

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43

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**Redefining Technical Communication**  
*Lisa A. Moretto* . . . . . 49

**Faculty Internship Panel**  
*Deborah J. Rosenquist* . . . . . 50

**Creating an Academic Program  
for Technical Marketing Communication**  
*Janice M. King and Judith A. Ramey* . . . . . 51

## **Management**

**Management Stem Overview**  
*Tara C. Scanlon* . . . . . 55

**Playing to Win: Building a Strategic Plan**  
*Leila Merritt and Emanuel Katzin* . . . . . 56

**Estimating Scope and Schedule for Help Projects**  
*Mary M. Deaton* . . . . . 57

**Trends Panel**  
*JoAnn T. Hackos* . . . . . 58

**How to Write Your Own Contract**  
*Louis C. Costanzo, Richard H. Weiss,  
and Joanne Smestad Claussen* . . . . . 59

**When the Customer Isn't Right:  
A Workshop in Handling Conflicts  
When Clients Behave Unethically**  
*Lori A. Allen and Dean Graves* . . . . . 60

**Managing a Distributed Documentation Group**  
*Ken Jackson* . . . . . 61

**Taming a Telecommuting Team**  
*Jean H. Weber* . . . . . 63

**Separate But Equal: Developing Success  
Profiles for Technical Communicators**  
*Debra Ricks and Patricia M. Madigan* . . . . . 65

**Hiring for Success**  
*Pamela K. Tatge, Sheryl A. Moore,  
and Nancy S. Robinson* . . . . . 67

**Thriving in Ambiguity**  
*Emily A. Sopensky, Sally J. Derrick, Patricia Gabella,  
Robert G. Hurst, and Krysti Ray* . . . . . 70

**Using PERT to Plan and Schedule Your  
Documentation Projects**  
*Shish Aikat* . . . . . 71

**Writing Win/Win Proposals**  
*Duncan A. Kent* . . . . . 75

**The Effects of Online Systems  
on Documentation Management**  
*Annette D. Reilly* . . . . . 76

**Translation Management**  
*Roger A. Tunsley* . . . . . 78

**Delivering Customer Satisfaction:  
Our Experiences with Responding  
to Customer Feedback**  
*Margaret Howell Betz* . . . . . 81

**Outsourcing and Virtual Corporations:  
Implications for Technical Communication  
Professionals and Their Employers**  
*E. Berry Davis III and David M. Orchard* . . . . . 82

**Management Activities for Achieving  
Organizational Change and Improvement**  
*Cynthia C. Currie and Thomas J. Vallone* . . . . . 86

**Strategic Thinking and Planning for Information  
Development Organizations**  
*Charles L. Breuninger, JoAnn T. Hackos,  
Heather J. Fox, and Angela W. McAlister* . . . . . 90

**What DOES a Manager Do Anyway?**  
*Mary K. Coffee, Jean M. Jahnke,  
and Sarah C. Yeo* . . . . . 92

**Getting the Most from  
the Quality Improvement Process**  
*Audrey M. McDonald* . . . . . 93

**Demystifying ISO and QS 9000**  
*Gerard Paradis* . . . . . 96

**Entrepreneurship ... Yes? No?**  
*James G. Hamlett* . . . . . 100

**Tips and Tricks for  
Successful Project Management**  
*Meryl Natchez* . . . . . 103

# Theory and Research

Theory and Research Stem Overview  
*Lynnette R. Porter* . . . . . 183

Goal-Oriented Paper Versus Online Documentation Search Strategies  
*Patricia H. Anson and Robert Anson* . . . . . 184

Modeling the Empowered User  
*Thomas Barker and Patricia Goubil-Gambrell* . . . . . 185

Performance Test Report: Comparative Research of Understanding-Oriented and Operation-Oriented Manuals  
*Shiro Kawaguchi* . . . . . 190

What Makes a Communication Research Proposal a Grant Winner  
*Christopher F. Velotta, Lottie B. Applewhite, and Carel J.M. Jansen* . . . . . 191

Useful Differences in Information Design Between Technical Communication and the Arts  
*Robert Krull* . . . . . 194

The Dynamics of Collaborative Design  
*Lorraine C. Sherry and Karen Madsen Myers* . . . . . 199

Interactive Media to Communicate Environmental Research Findings  
*Mark H. Hodges and William Evans* . . . . . 205

Modeling a New Rhetorical Architecture  
*William O. Coggin* . . . . . 209

Digital Architectures: SGML, HTML, Multimedia and the Structure of Electronic Documents  
*Gary M. Heba* . . . . . 213

What Research Should STC Sponsor?  
*Stephanie L. Rosenbaum* . . . . . 217

What Really Goes on at a Usability Test  
*Francine N. Hyman and Barton A. Evans* . . . . . 218

Finding Out Who Likes What:  
 Research Tool Kit for Technical Communicators  
*Lynda J. Ausburn and Floyd B. Ausburn* . . . . . 219

Usability Testing of Medical Instrument Instruction Manuals  
*Christopher P. Beckmann, Nancy L. Bayer, and Robert Krull* . . . . . 220

Rendering Technical Communication: Toward a First Philosophy of First Principles  
*Ronald L. Stone* . . . . . 221

Multimedia and Interactive Marketing in the Digital Age  
*Bruce R. Gibbs* . . . . . 222

Developing Products and Their Rhetoric from a Single Hierarchical Model  
*Basil J. White* . . . . . 223

Applying the Sensation-Perception Continuum to User Documentation  
*Marlana A. Coe* . . . . . 225

The Graphic Design of Text: A Review of Research  
*David W. Matis* . . . . . 230

Researching Requirements for Field Service Documentation  
*Elise Andrews, Michelle M. Merritt, and Arline Zalenski* . . . . . 236

Human Factors Jeopardy!  
*Marlana A. Coe* . . . . . 237

Researching and Planning for SGML: The Communicator's Role  
*Sharlyn A. Dimick* . . . . . 238

Researching and Planning an SGML Implementation  
*Lori A. Stertzbach* . . . . . 239

How to Be a Consumer of Research  
*Susan D. Kleimann and Kenneth D. Keiser* . . . . . 241

Strategies for Research in Technical Communication  
*Kenneth T. Rainey, Lottie B. Applewhite, Sherry G. Southard, Christopher F. Velotta, and Thomas R. Williams* . . . . . 242

Meas  
 Rati  
*Elinor  
 Leeth  
 and E*

The S  
 Impac  
*Micha*

Nomir  
*Jan H.*

**Too**

Tools  
*Roger*

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Writin  
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