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Thriving in Ambiguity

Emily A. Sopensky, Sally J. Derrick, Patricia Gabella, Robert G. Hurst, and Krysti Ray

A panel of experts will discuss how to work in an authority vacuum. Whether working within or consulting to an organization, multi-talented, multi-tasked professionals are finding themselves working in an authority vacuum. Often, these jobs are nestled in the management ranks. Often, too, the position and the job are so new that the rules have not yet been written.

Not everyone can function in such ambiguity. Yet major economic changes are forcing many of us to face more uncertainty than ever imagined. Not only can the panelists help define a new type of evolving management structure but they can also help in giving us concrete ways of dealing with daily uncertainties.

ONE EXAMPLE

As the professional on the hot seat, you know there are underlying assumptions and innuendoes about what and how the job is to be performed. You just aren't exactly sure what those unwritten rules are. You try to consult with those in authority, but it's hard to find someone who will take that responsibility. The person who hired you is either long gone or has other priorities (read: crisis). Given your fuzzy charter, you know you will always have more than enough work to do. But there are too few resources at your fingertips to accomplish it all. Your mission is so distinctly different from that of your peers' that no one but you can decide the priorities of the job. So you draw the line and prioritize, putting on hold some things you know have to be done soon. You're still getting paid, and, generally, you're doing the things you want to. Yet, you wonder. When does the rug get pulled from underneath you? How do you keep your balance? How do you watch yourself in the mirror when there is no mirror?

QUESTIONS

Here are a few questions that the panelists will be prepared to answer:

- How do you get feedback appropriate to your job?
- How do you prioritize?
- How do you measure your value? How do you communicate your value to those who sign your pay check/invoice?
- What tool or technique do you consider the most valuable for staying afloat and thriving?
- How would you structure the job to expand it to other areas of your company?

THE PANELISTS

The three of the four panelists are all in unique positions within their companies. One works for a startup and the other two for Fortune 500 firms. One is a technical writer, one an engineer, and a third began her career with her company as a graphic artist. The fourth panelist, with many years of consulting experience in technical communication, has also been a manager for a Fortune 500 firm. The four proposed panelists are experienced technical communicators who will make a strong, interesting panel.

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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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