

In preparing training material for a bunch of engineers on technical writing skills, I was confronted with one seemingly familiar but highly intriguing question—what makes a good technical writer? Does knowledge of technology coupled with a flair for writing make a good technical writer? Does familiarity with many tools make a better writer? So, what are the skills you would impart to a group of engineers to make them better in technical writing--grammar, templates, style...?

*All these; but something more.*

The first and foremost is to develop an organizational perspective in them—a thinking of what is good for the organization and its customers. Secondly, helping them act as user representatives, by bringing in the vital element of user viewpoint on to the table. Finally, making them see the strategic aspects of a company's business and not just operational aspects. These points may seem lofty, but technical writers in most organizations already think and act on those lines. And so, a training program in technical writing skills would do well to inculcate these qualities in engineers as well.

This leads us to the next question—is there an accepted model for technical writing?

Hillary Hart and James Conklin in their paper titled 'Toward a Meaningful Model for Technical Communication' in the recent issue of 'Technical Communication', the journal of STC, say that the model of technical communicators being the 'bridge' between technology experts and technology users no longer holds good. They argue that this image is misleading or even degrading, as bridges are passive conduits to traffic rather than active participants and contributors to complex human processes. What then is the model for the modern technical communicator? Hart and Conklin say that technical communicators are now becoming strategic negotiators who bring disparate groups into conversations that are ultimately intended to benefit user audiences.

In effect, technical writers of today are not mere wordsworths, but people who add value to their organizations in various ways. To know that writing user manuals is not always on top of that list goes to show the growing involvement of technical communicators in various aspects of modern organizational working. Maybe the accepted definition of technical communicator as, "anyone whose work makes technical information available to those who need it", needs a rethink now.

**- Vinay Babu**