Alternate Career Paths for Technical Communicators

By Jack Molisani

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Executive Director, The LavaCon Conference
About the Speaker

- Associate Fellow, STC
- President, ProSpring Technical Staffing
- Executive Director, The LavaCon Conference
Group Participation
I am not a Professional Statistician
Speaking in Hypertext
Chinese Artists
Controversy!
Career Path #1

- Other Profession
- Technical Writer
- Sr. Technical Writer
- Documentation Manager (maybe)
Career Path #2

- Other Profession
- Technical Writer
- Sr. Technical Writer / Doc. Manager
- Contractor Technical Writer
- Technical Writing Business Owner
Career Path #3

- Other Profession
- Technical Writer
- Other Profession (This time in a related field.)
Related Fields

- New field is related to technical writing
- Uses the same core competencies
- You take a specific task of technical writing and specialize in it
- Identified not as a “tech writer” but as a “__________”
Core Competencies

- Written Communication Skills
- Interview Skills
- Project Planning and Project Management
- Critical Thinking Skills
- Conflict Resolution
- User Advocacy
- Quality Control
## Related Fields

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accessibility</th>
<th>Marketing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business/Software Analysis</td>
<td>Product Management</td>
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<tr>
<td>Change Management</td>
<td>Project Management</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coding/Programming</td>
<td>Proposal Management</td>
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<tr>
<td>Compliance</td>
<td>Quality Assurance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Content Management</td>
<td>Release Management</td>
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<td>Corporate Communication</td>
<td>Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>Documentation Management</td>
<td>Usability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graphic Design/Illustration</td>
<td>User Interface Design</td>
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<tr>
<td>ID/Courseware Development</td>
<td>Website Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>Localization / Internationalization</td>
<td>Other</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
My premise: Related fields are more valued by management…
and thus receive better compensation.
Why? Because they are perceived to add value, reduce costs or generate revenue.
Or: Because they are perceived to add more value, reduce more costs or generate more revenue than technical writers do.

Exceptions: Illustrators and QA/Testers
The Survey

- I created a web-based survey that asked about transitioning from technical writing into related fields
- Presented a predefined list, but also prompted for other answers
- Also asked about compensation
- Included TWs who haven’t transitioned to get a compensation baseline
The Survey

- 351 self-selecting responses
- Compensation answers were given in both hourly rates and annual salaries, so we annualized the hourly rate by multiplying the by 2,080 hours.
- Note that this affects the true average annual compensation since not all contractors bill 2,080 hours a year...
…and some fields are more consulting oriented than others.

But since we did the same annualization across all answers, the survey should present relative differences between technical writing and other fields.

(remember that this is an informal survey with a limited self-selecting audience.)
Other Disclaimers

- I reassigned some “other” responses that were very close (or actually on) the predefined list to make tabulation easier.
- We limited respondents to choose only one field for the same reason.
- I did not include fields with fewer than three votes or answers that didn’t make sense (such as one person who gave a salary but whose field was “Unemployed.”)
- When given a range of compensation, we used the average. (Foreign currencies were converted.)
Have You Transitioned from TW?

- Yes, 79%
- No, 21%
Into What Alternate Career Field

Accessibility
Business/Software Analysis
Change Management
Compliance
Corporate Communication
Document Management
Graphic Design/Courseware Development
Instructional Design/Localization/Internationalization
Marketing
Product Management
Proposal Management
Quality Assurance
Release Management
Project Management (non-documentation)
Training
Usability
User Interface Design
Website Development
XML, Java, JavaScript, Perl, C++, etc.
<table>
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<th>Association Management</th>
<th>Patent Claims Writing</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creative Writing</td>
<td>Process Engineering</td>
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<tr>
<td>Customer Support (Help Desk)</td>
<td>Program Management</td>
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<tr>
<td>Database Creation and Design</td>
<td>Proposal Management</td>
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<tr>
<td>Editing</td>
<td>Publishing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Human Resources/Recruiting</td>
<td>Real Estate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Information Architect</td>
<td>Regulatory Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Innovation management</td>
<td>Systems Engineering</td>
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<tr>
<td>Knowledge Management</td>
<td>TW recruitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawyer</td>
<td>User Experience Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parts Sales/Service Manager</td>
<td>XML validation</td>
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</table>
Type of Employment

- Staff Employee: 59%
- Contractor/Consultant: 31%
- Business Owner: 9%
- Staff Employee and Consultant: 1%
Avg Salary by Employment Type

- Business Owner: $140,000.00
- Contractor/Consultant: $120,000.00
- Staff Employee: $80,000.00
- Staff Employee and Consultant: $100,000.00
The survey disproved my premise that professionals in related fields are more highly compensated than technical writers.

The relative compensations followed a bell curve:
- 11 fields were higher
- 2 were the same
- 9 were lower

The people who reported the highest compensations were business owners.
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