

Special Section: Measuring the Value Added by Professional Technical Communicators

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Special Section: Measuring the Value Added by Professional Technical Communicators

Abstract

A summary of articles in a special section of the journal *Technical Communication* reporting on value added by technical communicators; the research and resulting articles are by Janice (Ginny) Redish and Judith A. Ramey.

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Special Section: Measuring the Value Added by Professional Technical Communicators - Introduction; Adding Value as a Professional Technical Communicator; by Janice (Ginny) Redish and Judith A. Ramey, in *Technical Communication*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (February 1995), pp. 23-93. 901 North Stuart Street, Arlington, VA 22203: Society for Technical Communication.

With the advent of desktop publishing, writers and editors in many organizations seemed likely candidates for downsizing. Concerned about this, the Society for Technical Communication funded Janice Redish to lead a one-year project to measure the value added by professional technical communicators. Most extension and experiment station communicators are technical communicators, by definition, because we have degrees in communication and take information from the hard sciences and present it in a way that can easily understood and used by the general public.

Redish was asked to focus on two questions: (1) How do professional communicators and high-quality information products contribute to an organizations's success? and (2) How can the value added be measured?

Seven articles in this special section report the project findings. In the introduction and the first article Redish reviews related literature and discusses relevant issues when measuring value added. Her approach focuses on measuring return on investment. The authors of other articles include the following:

Judith A. Ramey reports on the results of a questionnaire which gives a sense of the current practice in the profession both for building value in and measuring that value. Cathy J. Spencer and Diana Kilbourn Yates of General Electric Information Services present quantitative data on the differences in support calls and costs for users who did not have their manual as compared to those who had it. The differences are dramatic. C. Al Blackwell of SABRE Travel Information Network using customer survey cards demonstrates the value that communicators added to their very first product. Denise D. Pieratti suggests specific ways to measure communicators' contribution to successful processes. Reva Daniel, a technical communications consultant working with

subject matter specialists, found that the difference was in how often people called for help.

And Martha Cover, David Cooke and Matt Hunt of Cadence Design Systems show how to estimate the cost of changes at different times in a product's life cycle.

Some organizations still produce publications without professional assistance while in most organizations communicators struggle for recognition and appropriate funding. Subject matter specialists and managers believe that "anyone can write," which puts communicators under pressure to justify their roles and activities — to show how they add value and how much.

Redish (you may remember her as head of the Washington, DC Document Design Center) says that writers/editors add value when they contribute to generating a greater return on investment than the cost of the initial investment. Her hypothesis is that even if quality work by professionals takes more resources up front, the return on the investment more than makes up for it.

She says that if communicators are having difficulty being appreciated or getting resources, they must find ways to show how they add value. If you suspect that poor documents are causing problems, then you must find out about those problems. How great are they? What do they cost? How much less havoc is there when the documents are accurate and readable?

Communicators work in a variety of fields and add value in all of them. One way is the reduction of calls. For example, one year a veterans benefits counselor handled 1,128 calls from one letter to 750 veterans, while another counselor received only 192 calls in a year for a new version of that letter to 710 veterans.

Another way communicators add value is in greater customer satisfaction and fewer errors to fix. Costs saved or costs avoided go up rapidly with more users and higher volumes.

Sometimes, communicators add value by realizing that the best solution to a communications problem is *not* to develop a document, or to develop an entirely different kind. Other times a way a communicator adds value is savings due to increasing user's productivity such as decreasing training needs, decreasing users' errors or decreasing the need for customer support.

Communicators often find that they receive no credit for helping other departments or that the accounting office doesn't track relevant information. Redish says that without hard data, managers make judgments about the value of contributions subjectively. They draw their own conclusions. It is part of our role to show the value that we add as a professional communicator.

Work on "value added" is continuing. A regular department on "value added" has been included in Technical Communications.

As accountability becomes more and more important, as computer technology makes everyone a publisher and as budgets shrink, Extension communicators should become proactive. One way is to become familiar with ways to show the value added by their work and communicate this to their administrators.

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