



# Technical Communication Industry Survey 2008

## Preliminary Report

May 2008

### Summary

This report summarizes the results of an online survey conducted over 3 months at the start of 2008. Detailed results will be available soon on the TechWriter website [www.techwriter.com.au](http://www.techwriter.com.au). We recommend that you read this in conjunction with our Salary Survey (also on the web) which will give you an idea of current market rates.

This survey asks employers and those involved in the technical communication industry for information about technical communication in their organizations and what they look for when hiring technical communicators. This is the third year of the survey.

Most of the key findings are unchanged:

- The majority of respondents still use Word as an authoring tool
- The main documents produced are user manuals and training materials
- When hiring, employers place most emphasis on performance at an interview and consideration of past experience.
- However, the ranking of items related to technology has declined while the criticality of the top 3 items (writing for specific audiences, collaboration with colleagues and write, edit and test documents) has increased significantly.

### Respondent Profile

The population profile is similar to prior years. Most respondents are from NSW (38%) and Victoria (48.5%). Respondents were managers (38%), team leaders (15%) and technical communicators (35%). Main industries involved were IT (37%) and Financial Services (12%). The majority (53%) of respondents were from large organizations with greater than 500 employees. The majority (69%) had a dedicated in-house documentation team.

### Hiring Practice

Most (68%) had hired a technical communicator in the last 2 years, 56% of these had hired more than one person. The methods of successfully finding candidates were 64% using an agency and 27% via word of mouth (down from 42% last year). 54% had to work through their HR department

According to those respondents who had hired a technical communicator during the last 24 months, the main means of assessing a person's suitability was the interview (95%), consideration of a person's past experience (86%), and a review of work samples and/or referees(66%). Performance at an interview was rated as critical by 58% of respondents.

## Competencies

Respondents were asked to rate the top competencies required to be successful in their organizations. These are largely unchanged from last year with the top 6 items remaining the same.

Competency (% rating)	Critical	Very Important	Important	Ranking (2007 2006)
Write clearly for specific audiences	73	27	0	1 (1 2)
Collaboration with subject matter experts and coworkers	72 <sup>1</sup>	24	4	2 (3 1)
Write, edit and test documents	73	21	4	3 (2 3)
Self starter able to work unsupervised	49	38	11	4 (? 4)
Evaluate one's own work and the work of others	31 <sup>2</sup>	51	14	5 (5 4)
Research, analysis and reporting	17	65	17	6 (6 9)
Using relevant technology	20	46	30	7= (4 5)
Assess and learn to use technologies	26	34	36	7= (7= 6)
Content Management	20	33	41	9 (7= 11)
Project Management	13	30	44	10 (11 12)
Presentation skills	10	35	37	11= (9 8)
Instructional design	10	37	33	11= (10 10)
Usability testing	10	29	43	13 (12 7)
Single sourcing	13	20	37	14 (13 13)

**Table 1: Relative importance of competencies compared to last survey**

## Qualifications

Many respondents (63%) indicated that team members had an undergraduate degree or better. However, when asked ideally what qualifications team members needed, many respondents indicated that experience and good writing ability were most sought after. There were a number of employers who indicated that relevant qualifications were necessary where the person did not have any technical communication experience. Possession of an undergraduate degree (especially in a subject matter area such as IT, science or engineering) was seen as an advantage. Only 45.6% of respondents indicated that they would recommend employees obtain formal qualifications in technical communication.

## Tools

As in previous years, the main tool used by documentation teams is MS Word which is used by 77% of those surveyed, with 19% of them using only this tool. The next most frequently used tools were Framemaker (25%), Dreamweaver (19%) and Robohelp and Indesign (17%). The survey indicates a broadening of the range of tools being used with the percentages using the main tools declining or staying the same over the three years and tools such as Indesign increasing in use.

<sup>1</sup> Significant increase on last year's 45%

<sup>2</sup> Up from 19% last year

	2006	2007	2008
MS Word (% only tool)	82	80 (24%)	77 (19%)
Framemaker	27	24	25
Dreamweaver	26	24	19
Robohelp + Flare	32	30	24
Indesign	6	15	17

**Table 2: Percentage of respondents indicating that they use a particular tool**

### Products

The top 4 work items produced are user manuals (76%), training materials (56%), online help (54%) and maintenance/operations manuals and policies and procedures (53%). The work produced varied according to the industry with the percentages as in Table 3.

Industry	User manuals	Training materials	Online help	Policies and Procedures	Web content	Maintenance Operations manual
Overall	<b>76%</b>	56%	54%	53%	48%	53%
IT	<b>83%</b>	56%	72%	36%	58%	39%
Government	50%	17%	17%	67%	<b>100%</b>	33%
Financial Services	<b>75%</b>	58%	50%	42%	33%	25%
Defence	50%	50%	17%	33%	0%	<b>83%</b>
Health/Medical	<b>75%</b>	38%	50%	25%	25%	63%

**Table 3: Types of work produced. Respondents grouped by industry**

### Conclusion

Most employers have realized that the best technical communicators combine strong writing and editing ability with interpersonal skills. They are looking for people who can work as part of a team as well as independently. Experience is clearly preferred over formal qualifications in technical communication. However an increasing number of employers are indicating that qualifications are important for those without experience.

There is quite a lot of recruitment activity in the industry with the majority of respondents having hired more than one person. In a time of skills shortage, it is important to plan ahead, act quickly and be open to alternative ways of working. Providing opportunities for part-time work or work from home provides access to a broader market.

The main method of assessment of suitability for a position is an interview and consideration of past experience but many feel that it is difficult to accurately assess actual performance by these means. As a result, word of mouth or personal references are given high value. However an increasing number of employers are turning to recruitment agencies to supplement their own sources. Using a reliable agency that has experience with a contractor over a period of time can also provide reassurance about performance.