

# Using a Technical Writer to Add Value to Your Company

By Heather Robson

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Having worked as a technical writer in a corporate environment, I was often surprised how often good technical writing is dismissed as an extra. Even more, corporations almost invariably overlook the contribution a technical writer can make even from the earliest stages of product development.

It didn't used to be an issue. In the days when all user guides and help guides were print editions, a technical writer could wait patiently until a concept was firmly developed and then begin the writing process once alpha phase testing began. Now, help systems are often integrated into product software, with the end result that often programmers design software and then a technical writer tries to work in a help system around what's been done. Or worse, the programmer ends up writing the help files.

In either case, the help system is usually reactive and not very well integrated. By letting the technical writer become part of the design team, a more streamlined help system can be developed. The technical writer can provide insight into when a help system should offer advice and when it should remain quietly in the background. Ideally, with a technical writer working on the development team, the entire product design becomes more user-friendly. This is especially true of software programs. What would once be buried in the help index becomes fully integrated into the software presentation (with the option for advanced users to turn off any extra information they might not need), making the product much easier to use.

To help a technical writer bring further value to the company, it is also useful to provide her with periodic customer service and customer support reports. By helping the technical writer to see what problems reoccur among customers, both the user documentation and the product design can be refined.

Making good use of a technical writer is an intelligent thing for businesses to do. Once a product is purchased, the technical writer becomes the company spokesman. To the customer, the quality of the user guide speaks to how much the company values his patronage—how much investment were they willing to put in to make his new product easy to use, saving him time and frustration. Good user documentation can turn a one-time buyer into a repeat customer.

Because of this, companies should consider what they can do to make their user documentation as good as they can get it. Instead of viewing technical writing as a single step along the production line, companies could profit from viewing the technical writer as an invaluable player from a product's inception to its release.

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