



In the Bookstores . . . Communication for Techies

by Karen Shashok

Nancy L. Hoft. International technical communication. How to export information about high technology. New York, Chichester, Brisbane, Toronto, Singapore: John Wiley & Sons, 1995. ISBN 0 471 03743 5

How many of you have been struck by the lack of communication between scientific-technical-medical translators and editors, professionals in applied linguistics and English for Special Purposes (ESP), and technical writers? Each of these three groups seems to have its own societies, training programs and conferences, and each seems to be working in ignorance of the theoretical and practical achievements of the other two collectives. We share the goal of optimizing communication, regardless of whether it is to take place between scientific peers or between vendors and clients. Information technologists and documentation managers, who are a bit further along on the chain of information transfer, need input from, and interaction with, those of us involved in content selection and development. Hoft's book explains how this interaction can be organized to the best advantage of any type of agency or corporation that uses language services. The author is a freelance provider of technical communications services in the USA.

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What makes the book interesting for members of EMWA is its emphasis on matters that have a direct bearing on the relationship between language service providers and their clients. The main purposes of the book are to show

1) how to identify material that can be re-used without change across products, cultures and documents (and therefore need be translated, edited or localized only once), and 2) how information and documentation managers can liaise with language service providers (whether in-house or freelance) to improve consistency and shorten turn-around time. Members who are in a position to advise clients on middle- and long-term strategies for product documentation management will find the book especially rewarding.

In addition to these three topics, the book covers a very wide range of related issues in international scientific and technical communication. As a translator and editorial consultant who works mainly with authors, I found the material on cross-cultural sensitivity in the use of language and graphics gratifying. Colleagues interested in information management will appreciate the suggestions on how to make product documentation "world-ready" and possibly save their company or client money on

translation, editing and localization. The overall theme is that quality in communication has long-term benefits for the profession *and* for the client. (More favorable perception of the product — if its documentation is accurate, easy to follow, and suitably localized — will hopefully lead to increased sales.)

Although most of the examples are drawn from the software industry, many of the recommendations can be applied to the medical and pharmaceutical industries. So, probably, can some of the major problems identified in relation with translation, editing, localization and documentation. For example, in the chapter on management issues (p. 34), Hoft notes with disappointment that at an informal poll at a conference, most participants indicated that they would willingly sacrifice quality if the extra time needed would mean missing a product launch deadline.

My only complaint about the book is that many of the end-of-chapter references are to unpublished materials such as handouts distributed at conferences. The addresses of the authors cited are not given, so presumably one would have to request a copy of the material (or the author's address) from Hoft herself. This no doubt reflects Hoft's intention to include the most recent material available.

Colleagues who have trained in the USA as technical writers are probably already familiar with this book. However, for those of us who entered the profession with a background in medicine or pharmaceuticals, translating, linguistics or ESP, Hoft provides a rigorous and fascinating view of clients' needs and goals, and balances them nicely against the writer's, translator's, editor's and localizer's motivation to provide the best quality possible.

Note: Since the book was published, the author has moved. She can now be reached at nhoft@world-ready.com Further information, including a list of publications and some of her recent conference handouts, are available at www.world-ready.com

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