

Technical Communicator Profile: Robert McDonald

A DoD Writer's Perspective on the Field

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Robert McDonald

Robert McDonald is a man with a valuable perspective on the technical communication field. Less than four years out of college and into a technical writer/editor role at Raytheon, he balances insightful experience in a high-intensity working environment with an understanding, undimmed by time and distance, of what it's like to be new to the discipline. I sat down with McDonald for a Zoom interview to hear about his experience with, and thoughts on, the technical communication profession.

Dressed casually, with a backwards-facing baseball cap resting precariously on the back of his head, McDonald's demeanor was relaxed but professional. He spoke precisely, deliberately selecting phrasings and narrative examples to make his points clear. More than once, after a lengthy response to a question, he returned to restate a central thesis, careful to ensure he had made himself crystal clear. One might surmise, accurately, that McDonald's goals in

technical communication have seeped over time into his casual standards of conversation. This is a man who has made communicative clarity his priority.

About the writer

McDonald told me he's spent a little over three years working in the technical communication field. With a major in English and a minor in Technical Communication from the University of Alabama in Huntsville — the school had not yet begun to offer its Writing major and Technical and Professional Writing concentration at the time of his graduation — he secured a job offer from Raytheon one summer and graduated two weeks later. “On the contingency that I would graduate – though they never even followed up,” he chuckled. He attributed this smooth transition from classroom to career to UAH's proximity to a technical communication-related industry: “Being in Huntsville in particular, there were always jobs, especially with the Department of Defense.” In hindsight, even though his job search offered little trouble, McDonald recognized that his resume could have done better to highlight keywords, particularly XML: “You're still doing the procedural writing, but you're also responsible for going back and creating it in XML.”

A day in the technical communication life

It's no surprise, then, that much of McDonald's work is done in XML tagging. His range of writing duties stretches well beyond that, though; he also, as one of his larger functions, compiles training manuals for soldiers to use when completing tests. McDonald described his work in this way: “It's a lot of task writing, a lot of looking at engineering data, like drawings or parts lists or logistical data, and deciding how those affect tasks that we're writing — I'd say it's mostly writing a task, making sure it's in accordance with U.S. government standards, and then actually creating that task in XML.”

The “we” in “we’re writing” is important, as McDonald works alongside both other technical communicators and other types of Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) who have the information he needs. When it comes to SMEs, though, the definition of “alongside” varies widely in meaning, as they are not always readily available for contact: “There were some [SMEs] we could walk to in the building, and then there were others that were in Massachusetts, for example. You’re not always hearing back from them quickly.” McDonald noted that, even when he receives the data he needs promptly, it’s not always immediately obvious, for the technical communicator, how to use it. “I’ve even been handed things on a napkin,” he said, smiling, “or just heard something over the phone and they’re expecting you to get everything down.” Since the accessibility of SMEs can vary wildly, he stressed the importance of the technical communicator’s “many hats,” building up a buffer of knowledge to limit the necessity of always running back for more information.

That knowledge, of course, could give a technical communicator a skewed perspective on what is or is not common knowledge when writing for non-SMEs. McDonald mentioned that, at least for government-related projects, documents go through “validation and verification procedures.” Task manuals are put in front of “somebody who just has that base level of training” to determine that the document meets their needs and not only the needs of “somebody who’s been on the equipment for 20-plus years.” On a personal level, McDonald ascribed to the principle “be honest with yourself” when proofreading one’s own work: “I try to ask myself, ‘Does that make sense to me? Would I be able to look at this and figure out what it means?’”

The upsides and downsides of the field

When it comes to the positives of working in technical communication, McDonald was quick to clarify that it should never be the job itself that brings satisfaction. He said, “I don’t ever

want to look at work as where I'm getting my satisfaction. I want to work to be able to afford the things I do like doing or have the things I like having." It's a "cherry on top," as he put it, though, when aspects of his work bring him joy. One of these aspects is seeing his experience pay off as knowledge, after three years of working in the field: "There's a time when you got your feet wet, and there's a time when you feel like you can actually swim." Feeling capable, he said, is when working in technical communication pays off.

It was not all positives for McDonald, though; technical communication has its downsides. "I used to have a list of this, actually," he mentioned, though he doesn't know where that list has ended up now. A big issue in his experience is being "naturally undermined," especially when other SMEs fail to respond to contact in a timely manner: "I'll just give you an example: just yesterday, I got an answer to an email I sent [nearly two months prior]. It's been a little while, right?" McDonald didn't believe that this issue is generally so much a problem of rudeness as it is a misunderstanding of the importance of technical writers in the workplace. Some SMEs like engineers, he believed, focus only on their end of a project and see responding to technical communicators' request for information as a "backburner" issue. It's important, he felt, for department heads to clarify the importance of technical communicators to their subordinates so work like his isn't devalued and undermined in the workplace.

Looking to the future – and the past

Looking at the field from a Department of Defense perspective, McDonald believes technical communication is still a growing profession: "I wouldn't say exponentially, but I think it's going to be around for a very long time." In his view, the move of work from physical to digital doesn't hurt the profession, since "they're writing the same content either way." If automation ever comes to the field, he sees it as a long way off – even longer for the

government: “They’re really slow-moving, in all honesty, and I think it’d be a long time before they would push towards a computer writing their procedures. Even then, you’d need someone to read it all and make sure it’s right.” McDonald himself is taking advantage of the growing field, as, the week after our interview, he moved to a new position at Northrop Grumman.

At the end, McDonald considered what advice he would leave with his younger, less-experienced self. His thoughts can be summarized in this way: assert yourself, but also assert your limits. “I should have asked even more questions . . . assuming that I could figure something out, and then being afraid to double back with that person,” he recalled. He emphasized that “learning takes time”: “I had a really good boss, when I first started, who was pretty good about telling me that a lot of this you can learn in school, but a lot of it you have to learn through experience.” He wishes he had realized earlier in his career the importance of reaching out to supervisors about the prospect of advancement, “understanding that they want to see you succeed, and not being afraid to ask how you can do that.” McDonald wrapped up with this statement: “Being honest with yourself and others about what you understand — I think that gets you a long way.”