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The Tech Comm Job Market

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Our Agenda

1. Demand
2. Preferences
3. Pace
4. Trends
5. Predictions

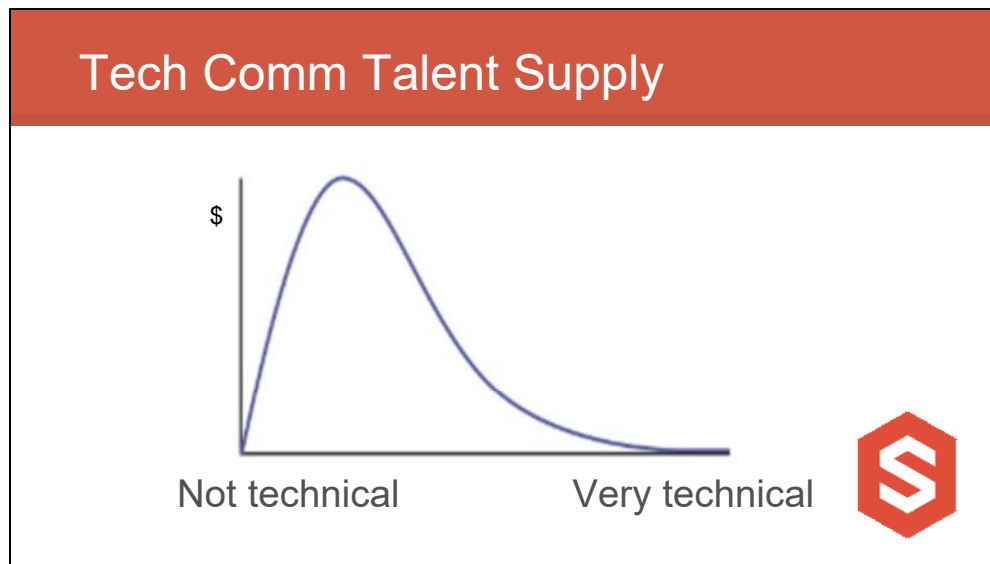


I run a one-person recruiting agency exclusively for technical communicators in the San Francisco Bay Area. I want to share my observations and working hypotheses about our local job market, and throw in some battle-tested advice to help you win at this game.

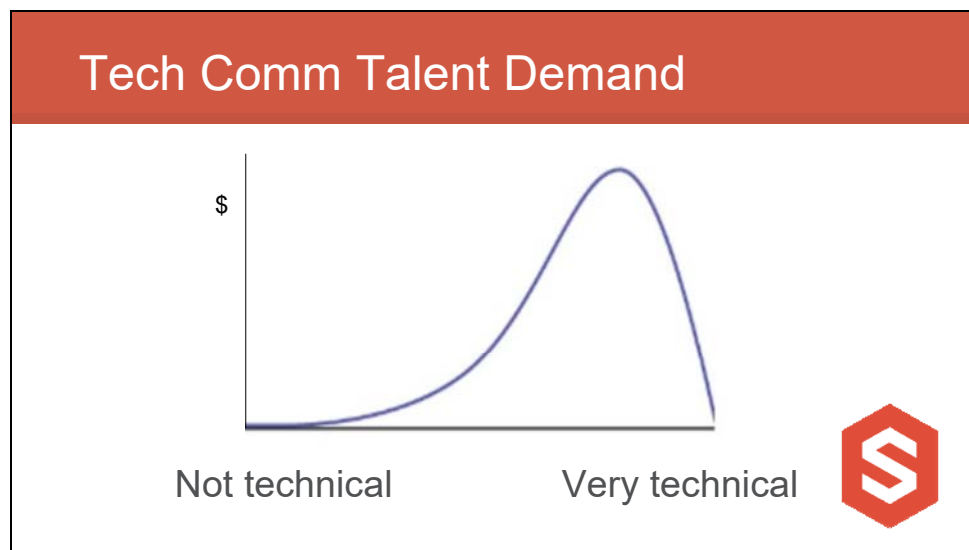
I expect to provoke you, and you might find some of what I share depressing. But if you ignore it, you'll likely become a casualty of the next tech market pivot.

So don't take notes, but do write down your questions, and let's have a lively Q&A session at the end. (And if you're viewing/listening/reading after April 10, 2019, and want to discuss or debate, get in touch using the contact info on the final slide.)

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In the SF Bay Area, technical communicators DON'T get hired for their

- Years of tech comes experience
- Writing skills
- Tools knowledge

...nearly as often as they get hired for their:

- Understanding of the company's products and technology
- Familiarity with the needs of the product's audience
- Ability to install & use the product (solo), figure things out (solo), and create original content w/o help

Demand, by Category

In descending order:

1. Technical Writers creating original developer reference content & code samples
2. Technical Writers & Content Writers on staff & onsite
3. Remote workers, contract and staff
4. Contractors seeking a competitive wage



I'm seeing strong demand – especially from small and mid-size tech companies – for both Technical Writers and Content Writers.

On one hand, these companies understand that it's a **candidate's market**. They're certainly working hard to get in your face.


On the other, companies are still seriously **oblivious**. 1) Employers resist engaging 'remote' tech writing resources even when all the developers work from home or a foreign country. 2) And they let their own managed services providers (MSPs) steer recruiting exclusively to low-bidder talent sourcing services, who in turn bid down the cost of labor. That's why you all get calls from the subcontinent to write API doc for \$28/hr. 3) And yet hiring managers have yet to push back on the overly aggressive beancounters, making it hard not to fry their existing talent.

Who wins? Only those who own equity, at least for now.

Demand, by Skill

In descending order:

1. Marketing deliverables
2. Reference materials for software developers
3. UX
4. Content Strategy
5. Management




Judging by the number of posted opportunities, the market wants these skills (in descending order)

- 1) creating marketing deliverables (blog posts, social media updates, white papers, FAQs, presentations, infographics, proposals, videos)
- 2) writing reference materials for software developers (mostly REST API doc, tutorials, getting started, SDK content)
- 3) UX (mainly optimizing interface design and product functionality for usability)
- 4) Content Strategy (optimizing information deliverables and delivery, marketing messaging, SEO, analytics)
- 5) Management (dedicated people managers who don't also carry an individual contributor's workload)

Note that category #1 pays about half as much as category #2. Are they trying to tempt us to the dark side?

Preferences

- Management wants:
 - Staff employees
 - Onsite work
 - Self-propelled productivity



Essentially, management wants ‘set and forget’ resources that will create and manage the company’s content without taking SMEs’ time and energy. They’re not interested in training the new hire, nor in providing that person a professional growth path. These are usually reactive, last-minute hires fueled by the desire to reduce pressure on SMEs.

Most hiring teams see only risk in hiring someone “not like them” so they frown on non-technical, work-from-home, inexperienced (with their products/tools/audience) candidates.

At smaller companies, there’s an increase in demand for ‘merged’ tech comm roles (eg, tech writer, toolsmith, marketing writer, videographer, writing tutor). I call these “armies of one” and they always involve tradeoffs. (But they pay really well.)

At mid-size and large companies, there’s an increase in pre-interview screening hurdles such as writing tests, presumably to filter out “non-team players” and those with ‘aspirational’ resumes (especially when transitioning from engineering roles).

Preferences

- Technical Communicators prioritize:
 - Income
 - Schedule flexibility
 - Remote work




Demand for experienced contractors, especially remote ones, slowed dramatically in the Fall of 2018, and hasn't picked back up. That's especially true if you count only the contract opportunities that pay competitive rates.

Getting employers and clients to agree to remote work "upfront" – before you accept the job -- is exceptionally challenging. In my experience, many managers will acquiesce after you prove yourself compatible, productive, and reliable. It's rare for a client or employer to demand that a proven performer work onsite indefinitely, but achieving that balance is scary (for both parties).

BTW, every manager I speak with about candidates' categorical commute aversion tells me they sympathize, but none unilaterally capitulates. The result? Their tech writing jobs stay open for months, intensifying pressure on the current team and making it almost impossible for the new hire to catch up with the tech debt. Call me biased, but I don't think it's an accident that the people agreeing to work onsite are often the desperate ones.

Pace

- Hiring teams often move slowly:
 - Highly selective
 - Fearful
 - Higher hurdles

An illustration of a person in silhouette climbing a rope that curves from the top left towards the bottom right. At the end of the rope is a red hexagonal logo containing a white letter 'S'. The entire slide content is enclosed in a black rectangular border.

Companies are being picky and slow to decide. It's not uncommon to see listings open for 4+ months.

Writing tests – usually real projects where the employer stands to benefit from your input -- are increasingly common, even for experienced candidates.

Judging by the number of recruiters and hiring teams going dark, even after in-person interviews, it's entirely possible that some companies don't actually have funded headcount and are thus harvesting resumes and building lists for when they do.

Trends

1. Age
2. Skills
3. Pay
4. Independent Contractors
5. Worker Priorities
6. Layoffs



Trends | Age

- Tech Comm is seldom a first career
- Average age = late 50s
- Your successors exist...
- ...but most aren't local



Few pick tech writing as their first career. It's famous for being the bastion of liberal arts majors who couldn't use their communications skills and EQ more profitably. So we're older than our engineering counterparts.

Tech is famous for its ageism, but (Spoiler Alert) **no one wants your job!** Technical Communicators who survived the 'Internet Bust' and Great Recession AND own homes locally AND stay current with in-demand technology are AT LESS RISK of losing their jobs to younger workers.

Most Millennials and even Gen-X'ers prefer Content Writing and UX work to software industry tech writing. They enter tech writing mostly for the money.

Other factors keeping ESTABLISHED tech writers safe include:

- Local tech writing degree programs have almost vanished (and those that haven't aren't taught by *working* tech comms professionals)
- Few companies have internships or apprenticeship programs
- Tech writers in their 20s and 30s probably got hired on-campus and are 'marking time' until they can transition to more lucrative, respected roles (eg, engineers)

Most would-be new tech writers are:

- Transitioning from engineering roles (from which they've been laid off)
- Returning to the workforce from caregiving roles
- Only interested in remote and/or contract work

Trends | Skills

- Software tech doc values:
 - REST API reference doc
 - Python, JavaScript, Ruby, Perl literacy
 - Docs-as-code authoring
 - SaaS, CI/CD, analytics, security, AI/ML expertise




In the software development documentation market, the most marketable skills include”

- writing REST API references
- reading Python or JavaScript (or Ruby or Perl or Go or Swift or Java or C++/C#)
- using non-GUI tools (on Linux command lines)
- authoring "docs-as-code" content (often using Markdown or reStructured Text, GitHub, and a static site generator)
- documenting cloud infrastructure, CI/CD, analytics, security, artificial intelligence/machine learning solutions
- DevOps and hands-on software development experience

Trends | Skills


- Content Writing roles require:
 - Social media
 - Blog writing
 - Video, white papers, infographics, analytics (A/B testing), presentations
 - Sales/marketing focus



Trends | Pay

Compared to past Silicon Valley tech bubbles:

- Staff employee salaries are peaking
 - \$100k is minimum wage
 - (Just don't watch the clock)
- Contract rates are uneven, gigs are brief, predatory agencies abound



There's substantial upward pressure on compensation for in-demand staff employees. \$120k two years ago is \$135k now. \$100k is minimum wage. Inexperienced individual contributor API tech writers working onsite start at \$120k and can expect \$130k with a year's experience. That niche tops out at \$150-160k at small and medium-sized companies and \$170+k at places like Salesforce and Google.

Contract rates are uneven, due mostly to armies of clueless recruiters trying to underbid each other and impress their clients. (FYI, Synergistech's current contract candidates earn \$70-95/hr.)

Trends | Pay

- Raises are rare
- Matching 401(k) plans are rarer
- Bonuses and options often aren't bankable
- Promotions are usually "cashless"
- Training is unusual, typically OTJ



Most tech firms no longer give raises and attach many strings to bonuses. I know only a half-dozen that match their employees' 401k contributions. And there's a good reason stock options and RSUs are called "lottery tickets."

When technical communicators are promoted, they usually can't expect a raise until the next performance review cycle.

And paid training, even in the form of conference attendance, is often not fully underwritten by employers. They'd prefer that you stay in the office, work late, and teach yourself what you need to know on-the-job.

In this job market -- if income is your main motivator -- most say that the best way to better pay is to quit. (Sorry if that sounds cynical.) And yes, you'll first need to have signed a more lucrative offer letter.

Staying anywhere too long -- which I define as 18 months without a substantial increase in responsibility -- is always detrimental to your future employability. If you feel like wallpaper where you work, worry.

Trends | Independent Contractors



Trends | Independent Contractors

- Independent Contractor classification rules changed a year ago. Pay attention!
- If your work product is “essential to your client” you’re now someone’s W2 employee.
- Incorporate, or find ‘below the radar’ clients, but that’s no guarantee.



The April 2018 independent contractor classification law changes make 1099-based independent contractor (IC) work really rare and risky.

Instead of the 20 Questions, common-law factors, and control-related criteria for determining who is and isn't an independent contractor, the new rules boil it down to:

“If your work product is essential to the company’s product or service, you're automatically a W2 employee (of your agency or client).”

For tech writers, your output disqualifies you from working as a 1099-based contractor. Content writers have a lot more latitude.

To stay independent, most 1099ers have had to incorporate and/or stick with small, below-the-radar clients. Neither tactic guarantees they won't be caught (by IRS, EDD, or FTB) and reclassified -- a painful, expensive experience.

Essentially, if you contract 30+ hours/week at a mid-size or larger company and aren't incorporated, you'd better be on W2. And if you found the work on your own, call Solo Workforce and have them run your personal payroll and provide your employment benefits; tell them I sent you.

Trends | Worker Priorities

My candidates tell me they prioritize:

1. Income
2. Fully or mostly offsite work
3. Flexible schedules (aka 'work-life balance')

They work to live, not the other way around.



Most technical communicators tell me their priorities are 1) income, 2) fully- or mostly offsite work, and 3) work-life balance. Few have a "do whatever it takes" or "gotta get ahead" mindset, but instead a work-to-live one.

Lifestyle factors – mostly stress-reducing ones – dominate employment decisions. Candidates routinely laugh if I propose a commute of more than 10 miles. "Andrew, that's an hour each way in Bay Area traffic, so NO." Then they tell me "I'd happily bail on my current job for one that let me work from home; it wouldn't even have to pay as much."

Call it maturity, cynicism, or fatigue, but these days that 'fire in the belly' is probably an ulcer.

In case you're curious what became of those driven, bleeding-edge, "life in the oncoming lane" types, the ones that survived got older and wiser. Few of them feel they're evolving professionally. Most admit they've plateau'd, and their main worry is staying employable without burning out.

Among candidates who reach out to me, the main work stresses they identify are **unrealistic deadlines, distrustful/unresponsive management, and reinvention of the content authoring toolchain**. Oh, and few of them consider **open-seating workspace** a sign of progress.

Trends | Layoffs

Although not publicized:

- Offshoring
- Acquisitions
- Mergers
- Bankruptcies



Offshoring continues, driven by cost-control

Acquisitions (especially by private equity companies) consolidate teams, lead to RIFs

Mergers benefit lower-cost workers

Bankruptcies

Lots of larger companies are laying off workers they can replace with offshore talent. FYI, a Senior Tech Writer of programmer content costs US \$22k in India, \$70K in Toronto, \$90k in RTP and Austin, \$60k in the UK, and \$35k in the Czech Republic. These layoffs don't get publicized.

Merger activity often results in cutting more expensive talent, despite the quality they deliver (deemed unimportant). Mergers and bankruptcies will mushroom during a recession, causing many well-paid tech writers (and many more not-so-well-paid content writers) to be RIF'd. Expect a lot of forced retirements (and home sales) and a jump in contract openings for reactive, "we just remembered we need doc" situations.

Trends | Layoffs

When the recession hits:

- Contractors will be back in demand
- Many senior pros will quit, sell, and leave
- Offsite work might gain popularity
 - Cheaper for employers and clients
 - Compatible with 'sandwich generation'



When the next recession starts, expect a lot of forced retirements (and home sales) and a jump in contract openings for reactive, "we just remembered we need doc" situations.

When seasoned workers move away, they often try to find remote roles through their professional network. The fact that they're trusted, productive, culturally compatible, and pre-trained might lead to more roles for those workers. Then again, the "must be onsite" doctrine might prevail.

Newcomers currently have a hard time breaking into our business. I expect they will have an even harder time breaking in when the economy slows because they'll compete with unemployed layoff casualties with recent relevant experience. This will make for a tighter talent pipeline when the recovery starts. On the flipside, Bay Area traffic might ease a bit.

FYI, safer tech sectors include **medical devices**, **fintech**, **pharma/life sciences** and **insurance**.

Predictions

- Bull market will survive 2019 but not 2020
- Talent is tired, not tempted
- Hiring will get harder, pricier
- Companies will lose this game of chicken, but so will local tech writers



The bull market will survive 2019, but not 2020.

Tech unicorns and wanna-be's will intensify their hunt for talent that is tired and, frankly, just not tempted.

Hiring teams will eventually yield and permit remote work just to attract experience. BUT when they do, they'll likely opt for much cheaper talent. Remember, "remote" doesn't necessarily also mean based in the US or even the First World.

Be careful what you wish for. And always consider what you offer that can't also be offered -- on more favorable terms -- by your global competitors. Be prepared for your depth of experience, and your high cost of living, to be weaponized.

Who won?



Predictions

- Tech comm's winners won't:
 - rely on corporate loyalty (training, raises, promotions, retention schemes)
 - neglect self-study to get/stay technical
 - ignore networking
 - depend on offsite opportunities



The issue of 'employee disposability' will persist. Companies will keep avoiding investing in new recruits through training and offering purely performance-based raises. Companies won't make long-term plans, so contractors will only find short-term gigs. Staff employees with commodity skills (who now think they're safe) will be replaced by hungrier, better educated, cheaper foreign talent when the recession hits ... or sooner, as their "successful" employers sell out (leaving mid- and low-level employees' stock options worthless). Question: what's in your employment agreement?

The solution to staying employable will remain being and staying technical. Most will be hired not for how well they write but for how much they already know about their employer's technology and that technology's audience. Telling an interviewer you'll learn on the job is fatal, even if it's true.

Remote workers (contract and staff) will have to compete with local unemployed talent and offshore workers by lowering their price.

Local unemployed tech writers will pursue pivoting to **UX** and **content writing** work (and **project management** and **UI/usability**) if they can afford to, or will move away.

How can I help?

- Advice about resumes, salaries, interviewing, portfolios, negotiating
- Introductions via LinkedIn, etc.
- Jobs to Explore – <http://j.mp/sfba-tc>
- Helping you hire (contract or staff, local or remote)

Why can I opine on the SF Bay Area technical communications job market? Besides having recruited exclusively in this space since 1995 and speaking often and at length with hiring teams and candidates about their experiences, needs, and preferences?

Because I have data ☺. For the past 3+ years I've curated a Google Docs file called "Jobs to Explore." I track who's hiring in the SF Bay Area, how long listings stay open, and whether these companies want my help. (Spoiler alert: the ones that should usually don't.) This file only includes direct -- ie, non-agency intermediated -- contract and staff posts for content writing, UX, and tech comms with SF Bay Area product companies. It lists the employer name, job title, and location (and, when the work can be done offsite, it includes the word "remote").

I offer this list as a service to technical communicators I can't help directly -- that is, by introducing them to my clients for staff and contract opportunities -- because I don't want them to go to my competitors. Those of you who've dealt with recruiters know first-hand that most don't understand tech writing, don't share your goals, and are really good at going dark. This list pulls data from a dozen job boards, most of which aren't aggregated, and will let you see who's hiring and how long they've been looking. It'll let you apply directly. And it'll let you see the last time a given company tried to hire for a similar role, and avoid wasting time if things look fishy. The file's over 300 pages long, but the inactive listings are clearly marked.

So even if my clients haven't yet realized they want to hire you, do yourself (and me) a favor and check out this resource:

<http://j.mp/sfba-tc>

One last thing: 95% of my clients were referred to me by a working tech writer. And yes, I pay referral fees (of up to 4 figures).

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Tech Comm Talent Scout

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Questions?

From you?

From me:

- 1) Which non-monetary employment benefit do you most appreciate about where you work?
- 2) Do you have a say in what you work on and when it's due?
- 3) Is there a formal growth path available to you at your current job?
- 4) Did your company ever train you on how to do your job (technology, tools, etc)?
- 5) Do you get sufficient access to SMEs to do your job well?
- 6) Do you get to interact with your products' users?
- 7) Does your management support your efforts to improve your performance, goad you, or just not care?