

Mike Unwalla



Sheffield-based TechScribe helps software companies to provide clear user documentation for their products. Dr Mike Unwalla, the 47-year-old principal, has been a technical writer in the software industry since 1994. Prior to his doctoral research, he taught English for five years. He is a Fellow of the Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators (ISTC), the principal professional body for technical communicators in the UK. Here he shares his experiences of working as a freelance consultant.

and we face a constant barrage of rapidly changing regulations and ill-defined rules. I'm glad that PCG is there to lobby on our behalf, represent us and promote our value to the economy.

Notwithstanding the downsides, I really enjoy freelancing. It gives me the freedom to pursue a variety of interesting projects; I've done so much more than I ever would have as an employee. Escaping office politics is a bonus, and it's nice to have the option of working when I want, theoretically. In reality, I usually work over 50 hours a week and take little time off – although late this last summer I did adopt the habit of stopping work around mid-afternoon each day and strolling to the café in the botanic gardens—that was wonderful!

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I had been a technical writer in the software industry for about five years when I decided to work for myself, back in 1999. I had been planning to become a freelance when my then employer tried to force through some unacceptable changes that made my position untenable, precipitating the plan by about three months.

So what does TechScribe do? Well, we take technical information and re-present it so that non-experts can understand.

You may have the greatest software on the planet, but if your on-screen help and user guides are not clear, then your customers will struggle with the software. They'll call your helpdesk and they'll complain. There is a great need for good technical documentation. Much so-called 'documentation' is just garbage—'technobabble', buzzwords and unhelpful information.

I had been travelling over two hours each way between Sheffield and the far side of Leeds twice a week, and the idea of no commuting appealed to me. I also held the naïve belief that it would be easy to find work, and soon discovered the importance of publicity, promotion and marketing. If people don't know about TechScribe, they can't purchase its services. Getting into larger companies is another challenge; if you find the right person to talk to, it's fine, but getting past the gatekeepers can be a nightmare.

Technical writing is a third career for me. Many years ago, I taught English as a foreign language. Following that, my doctoral research was on file partitioning in multi-processor database machines. That combination of teaching and training skills, English language skills and technical ability is very rare. It means that technical people can talk to me in their language; I re-present the information in a manner that is suitable to the readers of the documentation.

Government and EU bureaucracy and red tape don't make freelancing an easy choice. The business environment for us is characterised by a lack of consistency and clarity

Photograph courtesy of Russell Skidmore
www.russell-skidmore-photography.co.uk

Clients range from sole traders through to large corporate organisations such as BG Technology (now Advantica Technologies), Cedar Group plc (now Cedar Software), Lombard, Mapeley, Save the Children Fund, and the University of Sheffield. Much of TechScribe's documentation is for software and ICT systems. Some of this documentation is aimed at end-users and some is for technical specialists.

Good documentation can reduce support desk costs and increase sales, as exemplified by a project that TechScribe undertook for SDL, a medium-sized software house. One of its products is the SDLX translation memory system, for which there was much documentation available — a user guide for each module, frequently asked question (FAQ) sheets, online help, self-paced training guides, "how to" guides, and various other items of help. SDL realised, however, that its documentation was not presenting the right image, and that users couldn't find the information they needed easily. It was fragmented, it made the product difficult to use, and it did not really help new users of the software.

TechScribe won the contract to re-design the documentation. After an initial briefing session, we investigated the user requirements in some detail, and based on our findings, designed a single 'Getting Started' guide which explained the essential tasks that users performed. This was less than half the size of the original manuals. We also produced online help containing a mix of task-based material and reference material, including FAQs, trouble-shooting information and so on. Instead of having to search through many documents, users now had only two places — 'Getting Started' or online help — to find answers to their questions.

SDLX Software Support Manager, Denise Baldwin, said, "One noticeable effect of the new documentation from TechScribe was to significantly reduce the number of telephone calls and email requests to our support desk." Steve Westover, Product Technology Program Manager, was also pleased that the new documentation proved

instrumental in generating new sales. "This customer says his decision to buy is not just because of the great product," he said, "but also because of the clear and concise instructions in the 'Getting Started' manual making it easy to get to grips with SDLX."

Many of our competitors are jobbing technical authors, most of whom work through agencies, typically at a client's site. TechScribe differs by offering a documentation service, which includes analysis of the overall business goals. A few other technical authors do this too, and we have a portal of Quality Independent Authors through which potential clients can source a truly independent author.

I would advise anyone thinking about freelancing to go for it, but be aware that it is very hard work. You have to publicise and market yourself actively; this is not necessarily expensive, but it will take time and effort.

Will Kintish, a professional business coach, says, "The strategy for survival is visibility" and I agree with him wholeheartedly. You have to network, but choose your networks carefully and learn some techniques for doing it right. Get involved with your business community. Write professional articles for journals. Write press releases; if you've got a good story, the local press will snap it up. Get a decent website; in terms of return on investment, my website beats all other forms of publicity.

It's also important to have interests outside work. I like to indulge in poetry, walking and going to the gym, and until recently was with an adventure group called Spice, through which I got involved in a few tame activities like fire eating, wing walking, ballooning and flying a jet plane.

PCG believes that freelancers have a valuable role to play in the UK's economy, generating wealth and employment and offering some of the brightest and best talent around - consultants, advisers, contractors, engineers, specialists, professionals. This profile was originally published in PCG's Freelancing Matters, Issue No 5. Copyright © PCG 2005

BSI appoints new documentation expert

The British Standards Institution (BSI) appointed Dr Mike Unwalla as Principal UK Expert for software documentation in November this year.

"Good user documentation can save industry millions of pounds," said President of the Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators, Gavin Ireland. "We nominated Mike for this important role because of his proven commitment to the Technical Communication profession."

The System Software Documentation working group (WG2) works under the auspices of the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO). It defines best-practice standards in the field of technical communication for software products. Technical writers around the world then use the standards to help them produce clear user documentation. This results in user-friendly manuals and online help systems, which benefit both the customer and the end-user.

Outgoing expert and now convenor of the ISO working group, Richard Hodgkinson, who recently retired from User Technologies at IBM, said, "Mike was a core member of the editing team for many years. I'm really pleased to welcome him as the new UK expert."

Commenting on his appointment, Mike Unwalla said, "I'm thrilled; it's a great privilege to represent the UK."

"I would advise anyone thinking about freelancing to go for it, but be aware that it is very hard work. You have to publicise and market yourself actively; this is not necessarily expensive, but it will take time and effort."

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