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PRODUCT SUPPORT AND DOCUMENTATION WRITING: POTENTIAL SYNERGISM

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Beginning with the premise that product support specialists and documentation writers are both technical communicators, this paper explores the kinds of cooperation and the degree of cooperation that exist and can potentially exist between the two groups. Four kinds of cooperation are covered: (1) sharing information, (2) forging political alliances, (3) sharing duties, and (4) working together in STC. The paper concludes that while there is a moderate degree of cooperation between product support specialists and documentation writers within individual organizations, more cooperation would be highly beneficial. Furthermore, STC is a potential arena for interaction between the two groups on a national and international basis.

Almost any technologically sophisticated product must have documentation. But users often need information that is not in the documentation or that they have not been able to get from the documentation. Consequently, those who sell technologically sophisticated products (and often services as well) generally provide users with access to professionals who can respond to individual inquiries. These professionals work largely on the telephone but may also respond to inquiries with written replies.

This communication function is known by such names as "technical support" and "product support" (the name I will use here). It is performed in many technical areas--especially computers and health care. This paper, however, focuses on the computer industry.

Although product support specialists communicate with their audiences individually and, generally, on the telephone, product support is--as Judith Ramey has shown in a preceding paper--an aspect of technical communication. It would not seem surprising, then, if there were areas of actual and potential cooperation between product support specialists and documentation writers. This, at least, is the idea with which I first

began to consider carefully the relationship between the two groups, and it is the idea that underlies this paper.

In pursuing my topic, I found that little has been written about product support (1), and still less on the relationship between product support and technical communication or computer documentation. This paper, then, is based very largely on my own general familiarity with both functions and on a series of informal interviews with product support and documentation managers conducted (mostly on the telephone) in early 1986 (2). The purpose of these interviews was to gather information in an exploratory manner rather than to conduct a carefully controlled survey (3). Consequently I have generalized from these interviews only with great caution. Clearly there is much more to be learned about the product support function in general as well as its relationship to documentation, especially through more narrowly focused studies.

This study treats three ways in which product support specialists and documentation writers can and do work together within their companies. The areas of cooperation are (1) sharing information, (2) forging political alliances, and (3) sharing duties. The paper also raises the possibility of the two groups joining together in STC.

SHARING INFORMATION

Product support specialists are among the very first to learn of problems with the company's products. A "bug" in a program, an overheating problem in a piece of hardware, an error or omission or obscure section in a manual--these are the kinds of problems that immediately generate calls.

The documentation group, of course, needs to know about problems in the company's manual and often about product problems as well. They will want to improve the next version of the manual, and they might need to prepare a revision package concerning the product. Not surprisingly, then, all the individuals I interviewed told me that information is regularly conveyed from product support to the documentation writers. In some cases, there is a specific form; in others, memos are written; in others still, a copy of the manual is annotated by product support and then passed on to the documentation department; and in a single case, information is conveyed in a purely informal manner.

It appeared to me, however, that the quality of the information conveyed to the documentation writers is

often less than adequate. Two product support specialists indicated that because of the tremendous workload, their staffs are somewhat casual about recording and conveying information to the documentation department, and two documentation managers do not think that their product support departments reliably report information about deficiencies in the manuals.

Furthermore, if we look beyond what is merely "adequate" information, we can see that product support specialists potentially could provide much richer information to the documentation writers. Though it is useful to receive a memo stating "We are getting a lot of calls on how to change the system font," it is far more useful to receive such information as the following: the number of callers asking this question, the job categories of these callers, the tasks they were engaged in when they needed to change the system font, and the reason that the manual did not provide them with the information they needed--that is, were they unable to find the relevant section of the manual, were they unable to understand it, was the information inaccurate, etc.

Information of this kind could clearly lead to significantly improved documentation. Unfortunately, gathering such information requires that product support specialists spend more time with each caller. When industry leaders are estimating the cost of each product support call to be as high as \$15-\$20 (4), there will clearly be resistance to such a plan. Then again, if this information leads to far better manuals and thus to fewer calls, the long-term payoff may justify the expense. Also, much of the information being collected by the product support staff could benefit the marketing group, the product developers, and other members of the organization.

There are others ways in which information can be shared between product support specialists and documentation writers. All the product support managers I interviewed reported that their staff members respond at least occasionally to customer inquiries in writing, whether in individual letters, mass-produced explanations of frequently encountered problems, computer bulletin-board replies, or items for user newsletters. At Hewlett-Packard, noted Barry Crume, the product support staff members spend 25 percent of their time writing. Clearly, the documentation writers should receive copies of this writing to consider as possible source material for the next version of the documentation. Not only may the documentation writers gain valuable information from the explanations prepared by the product support staff, but if a product support professional has found a useful analogy or other explanation strategy, the documentation writer could use that as well.

Information can, of course, be shared in both directions. Even the earliest drafts of a revised manual can be valuable to product support--and, of course, the comments of the product support people could then lead to further improvements. Furthermore, if

documentation has reason to believe that a section of a manual--prepared, let us say, under severe time constraints--will cause trouble for users, they can give product support advance warning so that product support can prepare oral and written responses and, in extreme cases, staff up for extra calls.

Product support specialists and documentation writers do indeed cooperate by sharing information: it is standard practice for product support specialists to inform writers of problems with the documentation or with the product. But more information of this kind could potentially be conveyed. The other forms of sharing information described above occur in at least some instances, but do not appear to be standard practices.

POLITICAL ALLIANCES

Are product support specialists and documentation writers natural political allies within their organizations? It might seem so in that neither group justifies its existence on the basis of revenue generated but rather by arguing that customers require not only technically advanced products but the best possible information about those products. On the other hand, there is potential competition for funding and a certain sense in which one function lessens the need for the other.

One further perspective can be considered: most product support managers reported explosive growth in their departments, and several seemed nervous and defensive about the ever-rising cost of their department to the company. It would seem possible that this feeling could translate into support for strengthening documentation departments on the assumption that better prepared manuals and more comprehensive documentation sets would reduce the number of hotline calls.

None of these political dynamics, however, nor any other was borne out consistently in my interviews. One individual, a documentation manager, expressed some hostility toward product support based on the problem of competing with that department for funding. Several other individuals--including product support manager Kerry Pace--described the two departments as allies. Pace reported that at her company, Accountants Microsystems Incorporated, the two departments worked very closely and were strong allies. But Pace also noted that this had not been true at the other companies she worked for. The other respondents described the relationship as neutral or distant or regarded the two departments as allies but only in the sense that *all* units of the organization are members of the same team.

It appears, then, that if product support and documentation are potentially close allies within their organizations, they have not in many instances made this alliance.

SHARING DUTIES

In some companies, the same individuals perform both the product support and documentation functions on a regular basis. At Xerox Corporation, Tu Lee and her colleagues answer hotline calls for two hours each day and, in addition, write documentation, conduct training sessions, and do some programming. At Hewlett-Packard answering hotline calls is the main duty of the service and applications engineers. But these individuals also work on documentation along with full-time documentation writers and, in addition, help design ease-of-servicing features into new H-P products.

In organizations in which the two functions are the responsibility of separate departments there are still instances in which duties are shared between these departments. Kerry Pace noted that on one occasion a product support person at Accountants Microsystems joined the documentation group for eight months because it was felt that this person's product knowledge would be of special value on a particular project. At Microrim, noted Terri Joyce, individuals from one department are occasionally asked to help relieve an overload situation in the other department--writers will temporarily work on the hotline and product support specialists will (can a greater service be rendered!) proof galleys in the documentation department. But these are not regular occurrences in these two companies, and I found no other instances in which duties were shared between the two departments.

There would seem to be significant benefits from the sharing of duties between documentation and product support. A writer working in product support would be talking directly to users of the company's documentation and would get a better feel for that abstraction known as "the audience." The value of this experience, notes Delores Bergstrom, is well recognized at Microsoft, and writers are invited to increase their understanding of their audience by periodically monitoring product support calls. In addition, a product support person working in documentation would certainly become a better writer and might help other product support specialists improve their writing skills.

Apart from the improvement of professional skills, the sharing of duties can result in a very desirable change of pace. As Tandy Corporation's Ed Juge and several others observed, product support specialists have a high burnout rate. This phenomenon, I believe, might diminish if they had more varied duties--such as working in documentation. Likewise, a writer or editor might well enjoy an interval of person-to-person technical communication on the phone. And, as noted above, still another benefit of sharing duties is increased flexibility in dealing with overload situations in the two departments.

One impediment to the sharing of duties between these two groups is surely organizational inflexibility. Most companies are simply not accustomed to the idea

of employees splitting the workweek between two departments or moving back and forth between them on some sort of schedule. Another impediment is the different set of skills required for each position. It is generally recognized that hotline work requires a stronger background in computers and in such areas of product use as accounting and statistics than does documentation writing. Consequently, documentation writers, who very often have humanities backgrounds, may not have the technical skills necessary to work in product support. Correspondingly, though highly skilled in oral communication, product support specialists may not have the writing ability necessary for documentation work.

Nevertheless, it seems likely that in any organization there will be some individuals equipped to perform both jobs. Furthermore, it takes only one or two of these individuals to help balance out an overload situation, to serve as a conduit for information and professional skills, and, in general, to promote further interaction between the two groups.

It appears that in organizations with distinct documentation and product support departments, there is relatively little sharing of duties taking place. But to quote Colleen Byrum, product support manager for the Aldus Corporation, it is "at least a good experiment."

INTERACTION THROUGH STC

Product support specialists see themselves as technical people rather than professional communicators, and their professional affiliations lie in the disciplines of computer science and electronics or else in professional fields such as accounting and statistics. Consequently, they have yet to establish either a publication or a professional organization.

At the same time product support specialists readily acknowledge that the heart of their job is communication. It seems feasible and appropriate, therefore, for STC to recognize product support as an aspect of technical communication, to welcome product support specialists into the organization.

With this possibility in mind, I asked the product support managers I interviewed to estimate the degree of interest on the part of their staffs in a professional communication organization. The responses were mixed: several stated that there is no interest or very little interest, while several others stated that there is a significant amount of interest. The most optimistic response was that of Hewlett-Packard's Barry Crume, who estimated that about a third of his staff would be interested in joining a communication-oriented group. Crume, however, added the proviso that the organization would have to reflect the full range of interests of these individuals.

I have ventured a few thoughts on the kinds of topics product support specialists would want treated in STC publications, chapter meetings, and ITCC

presentations. Clearly many topics pertaining to audience analysis, the structuring of information, and explanation strategies apply as much to oral communication as to written or visual communication. Likewise, product support specialists would find relevance in our presentations and publications dealing with management, professional ethics, and professional development. We share a common interest in numerous technologies and innovations, especially data communication and the computer bulletin-board, information retrieval via databases, and the potential for the electronic transmission of graphics. Product support professionals would, of course, have a special interest in oral communication and in equipment for controlling and logging incoming telephone calls. They would have some interest in writing but relatively little in typesetting or printing. All told, product support specialists would probably desire their own ITCC stem and professional interest committee, but would be interested in a broad range of STC topics and activities.

My interviews suggest that there are considerably more product support specialists than documentation writers, so participation from even a small percentage of these individuals would have an impact on STC. The impact, I think, would be very positive. STC would be larger and more diverse and would more fully represent the field of technical communication. Also, interaction between these two groups in STC would lead to greater interaction and more productive cooperation in their companies. Finally, STC would be providing a national forum and professional identity for product support specialists who recognize this need now and probably others who will later.

CONCLUSION

There is a moderate degree of cooperation between product support specialists and documentation writers. But there is the potential for much more. This cooperation could potentially enable both groups to do better work, gain more influence in their organizations, and derive increased job satisfaction. STC can play an important role in promoting this cooperation. But as much or more needs to be accomplished on an individual basis. Individual STC members, I believe, should investigate the potential for working more closely with the product support professionals in their organizations.

REFERENCES

- (1) Most of the literature dealing with product support has appeared in computer magazines. Much of it deals with the quality of the support provided by different companies. A significant portion deals with the issue of whether customers should pay for support.
- (2) My thanks to these product support managers: Barry Crume, Hewlett-Packard; Terri Joyce, Microrim; Kerry Pace, Accountants Microsystems

Incorporated; Tu Lee, Xerox Corporation; Ed Juge, Tandy Corporation; Colleen Byrum, Aldus Corporation; and Delores Bergstrom, Microsoft. I also wish to thank these documentation managers: Brenda Barkey-Braund, Care Computer Systems; Anne Hacker, Ebasco Services; Jeanne Prickitt-Kelly, Sperry Computer Systems; Karen Kidwell, Mannesmann-Tally Corporation; and Peter Michaelsen, Phamis Incorporated.

- (3) The organizations whose communication professionals I interviewed represent a fairly broad spectrum of the industry. These companies are large, medium, and small in size; produce hardware and software products; and sell to both highly technical and relatively non-technical users. These organizations, however, are only a convenience sample, and the sample size is small.
- (4) Interview with Mitchell Kapor, Chairman of Lotus Development, in *Personal Computing*, 10:6, February 1986, p. 128.