Remote Technical Communicators: Accessing Audiences and Working on Project Teams

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Abstract

Purpose: This pilot study investigates challenges experienced by technical communicators who work remotely from their audiences and project teams and identifies factors that contribute to success in these work arrangements.

Method: I surveyed and interviewed seven technical communicators who worked remotely as consultants for large U.S. corporate organizations, including two Fortune 500 financial services companies, a professional services firm, and a safety certification organization. No participant performed more than 15% of her work on-site. Each participant had a minimum of three years' experience working remotely and had previous experience working as an on-site technical communicator for other organizations. The surveys and follow-up interviews provided qualitative data, which I then coded and analyzed.

Results: Unlike local technical communicators, who may have limited contact with their end-user audience, these remote technical communicators had no direct contact with their end-user audience and instead relied on other in-house and remote team members (such as project managers) to provide audience information. The remote technical communicators reported facing challenges such as lack of social interaction; inability to stop working; and a lack of information and resources. They reported using various skills and strategies to cope with challenges, citing communication, self-discipline/motivation, and organization/structure the most frequently.

Conclusion: Given the trend of organizations choosing to outsource writing and training jobs and hire consultants to take on these roles, technical communicators should acquaint themselves with the potential challenges of working on a remote team. Study participants reported such challenges as difficulty building trusting, new relationships; missing out on small talk and sometimes even critical conversations; and feeling isolated.

Keywords: remote; technical communicators; challenges; consultants; project teams

Practitioner's Takeaway:

- Partnering with team members, especially SMEs and project managers, is essential to the remote technical communicator (TC) since team members are often those with access to the end-user audience.
- Remote TCs should expect to be creative in building and maintaining work relationships.
- When TCs work remotely, they may need to develop strategies to cope with feelings of isolation.
- When TCs do not have a physical presence in an office, they may miss out on critical conversations and should find alternate ways to stay connected to people and projects.

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Introduction

Four years after I started working as a technical communication consultant for a Big Four accounting firm, I was still having difficulty accessing the audiences for my training documents and feeling like a member of my project teams. Having previously spent more than a decade working as an on-site technical communicator (TC) for corporate offices of other Fortune 500 companies, I was puzzled at the extent of my current challenges. I was curious to learn if these problems were representative of the experience of other remote TCs, and if so, how they dealt with them. I began my inquiry by consulting recent technical communication scholarship and by conducting a pilot study of remote TCs.

Over the past decade, technical communication scholarship has taken a closer look at the challenges that technical communicators face in the workplace and the related skill sets needed to address these challenges (Barker & Poe, 2002; Brizee, 2008; Carliner, 2012; Slattery, 2007; Smart & Barnum, 2000; and others). Readers of *Technical Communication* will be familiar with such conversations as the challenges of working as independent consultants and working within cross-functional teams. What we know less about are the additional challenges unique to TCs who are physically distant (working remotely) from their audiences and work groups. To date, these areas have not been fully explored. Anecdotally, we may be aware of some of the issues with which remote TCs must contend, but there is little research to support these accounts. Empirical, qualitative data regarding remote technical communicators is lacking. Most of the scholarship remains focused on local TCs, that is, TCs who are physically located at some workplace where they have varying degrees of direct exposure to their audiences and work teams.

Only within the past several years have studies stared to examine the situation of the remote writer (Larbi & Springfield, 2004; Turetken et al., 2010), that is to say, the writer who works offsite (typically from home), has limited connection with her project team and limited to no exposure to her audience. Scholars have begun to focus on independent consultants (Barker & Poe, 2002) or freelance writers (Brady, 2011), many of whom work remotely. At the same time, the digital workplace has created a pressing exigency to look at these TCs who are physically separated from both their audiences and their project teams. In the United States, there is a growing trend among organizations to hire employees who telecommute, to outsource writing and training projects, and to subsequently hire contracted workers to perform writing and training tasks. After considering "STC's U.S. Independent Contractor/Temp Agency Survey," Barker and Poe (2002) explain, "the model of contingent employment is becoming a dominant model among employed writers within most organizations" (p. 151). In light of this trend, our field would benefit from examining these distance work arrangements and their implications for TCs.

To address the need for more empirical data on the relationship between remote TCs and their project teams and audiences, I developed a pilot study to investigate remote technical communicators (TCs) and their relationships with their audiences and project teams. This study was concerned with the primary question: *What are the work experiences of remote TCs?* I approached this question via three more concentrated research questions, which my surveys and interviews were written and structured to address. These questions were:

1. How do remote technical communicators (TCs) report obtaining information about their audiences?
2. What unique challenges do remote TCs report facing?
3. What skills do remote TCs identify as necessary for their workplace success?

Technical Communicators and Audience

In their review of recent scholarship, Spilka and Blakeslee (*Audience Work*, book manuscript in progress) find that audience remains a primary concern for TC practitioners and continues to be at the core of what TCs do. They point out that TCs continue to be "audience advocates" and continue to add quality to industry in ways others cannot due to their knowledge and understanding of the audience. However, we have limited knowledge about how remote TCs function, either theoretically or practically, as audience advocates. In instances where representative audience members are not available to interview, as would presumably be the case for the remote TC, how would that TC obtain information about the audience?

Would the TC simply construct the audience? After all, constructing one's audience is a method of audience analysis that has been covered in TC scholarship since the mid-1970s. Much technical communication scholarship through the early 1980s focused on the role of the writer in manufacturing the identity of the audience, and a number of writers at this time (Long, 1980; Ong, 1975; Selzer, 1992; and others) emphasized audience as a construction of the writer.

What about the importance of contact with actual, representative audience members? Starting in the late 1980s, technical communication scholarship (Blakeslee, 2001; Faigley, 1985; Mirel, 1998; O'Dell, 1985; Spilka, 1990; and others) pointed to the importance of considering the social and contextual components of the audiences and of taking into account that context shapes an audience's needs. As O'Dell pointed out, that the process of composing "may entail a great deal of social interaction" (250). Would scholarship of these previous decades accurately explain how remote technical communicators (TCs) obtain information about their audiences?

Challenges of Technical Communicators

Aside from the challenges they face working as independent consultants or on cross-functional teams, remote TCs face an added multitude of issues both related to working alone and to being separated from their work teams. Scholars cite cooperation (Brizee, 2008); collaboration (Brizee, 2008; Fisher & Bennion, 2005; Rainey, Turner, & Dayton, 2005); communication (Robey, Khoo, & Powers, 2000; Smart & Barnum, 2000); and complexity of the work (Slattery, 2007; Smart & Barnum, 2000) as issues for the remote TC. However, the most widely recognized challenges faced by remote TCs are the lack of proximity and face-to-face time with their work team. The absence of these can result in isolation (Larbi & Springfield, 2004) and a lack of sense of community (Fisher & Bennion, 2005). Larbi and Springfield explain that we were so eager to trade in cubicles for electronic communication that we "underestimated the impact and necessity of physical reality" (p. 102).

Success Factors for Technical Communicators

Scholars have started to look at what constitutes success for the remote TC and have identified the importance of soft skills (Larbi & Springfield, 2004),

especially communication; previous experience or face-to-face time with team (Robey et al., 2000; Turetken et al., 2010); and familiarity with technology (Slattery, 2007). This familiarity is particularly important because, as Slattery tells us, the creation and management of digital documents can be quite complex, and TCs are "spending shorter amounts of time looking at more and more texts" (p. 313). Brizee (2008) adds that collaborative discourse practices "can be complicated by the technologies and physical distances so interwoven in today's project management" (p. 366). Turetken et al. (2010) note that the availability of richer communication media leads to more successful telecommuting.

Methods

From August through December 2011, I conducted a pilot study to look at some of the ways remote TCs communicated with their audiences and interacted with their project teams. This section describes my recruitment methods, participants, and research questions. It also covers the process by which I administered the surveys and interviews and the method I used to code and analyze the responses.

Recruitment and Participants

In this IRB-approved research study, I surveyed and interviewed seven remote TCs, each of whom had a minimum of three years' experience working remotely. I selected this method of data collection over a single in-depth case study because my goal was to examine multiple perspectives from multiple professionals in various industries. My participants included seven remote TC consultants who were contracted with four large corporate organizations, two of which were Fortune 500 Financial Services Companies. These instructional designers were not employees of the organizations for which they worked. They were external, independent consultants who were contracted to these four corporations during the lifecycle of at least one project. I used referral sampling to recruit participants. These participants were referred to me by a partner at the global consulting firm that placed the consultants. When I requested participants, my only requirements were that they worked remotely and that writing was one of their primary responsibilities. The length of time that the participants had been working

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remotely ranged from three to ten years. Table 1 lists the participants (by pseudonyms), the industry in which they worked while participating in the study, the number of years they worked in their field before becoming a remote TC, and the number of years they have been a remote TC.

Surveys and Interviews

Each participant completed two surveys over the four-month period. These surveys were intended to capture the participants' impressions on how they conceived of and interacted with their audience members and teams. The second survey was administered approximately four months after the first, and some of the questions from the first survey were repeated on the second. Approximately two weeks after I received each completed survey, I interviewed that participant by phone for roughly 30 minutes. Each of these semi-structured interviews responded to the preceding survey and enabled me to collect more in-depth responses to the initial survey responses. These interview questions were based on how participants responded on the first survey and were intended to obtain clarification and further detail about their interactions with their remote teams and audiences. See the Appendices for copies of these surveys.

Coding the Responses

I coded the responses to the surveys and interviews to group them into common themes using the Hughes and Hayhoe (2008) method of defining codes at the word or phrase levels. The nature of the open-ended questions allowed participants to give more than one answer to each question. In cases where participants gave extended answers, I extracted as many themes

as the response contained and coded accordingly. For this reason, the number of responses to a particular question often exceeds the total number of participants. However, if one participant's response contained two or more references to the same theme, I counted the multiple references as a single instance. Table 2 gives an example of this coding. The left column contains the question; the middle contains responses from participants; and the right column shows the code(s) I assigned to the responses.

Results

Participants were asked to respond to several open-ended questions over the course of two surveys and two follow-up interviews. After providing a brief overview of the major findings, this section addresses the results of these questions, as I have coded and organized them into various themes. I have included several participant comments to illustrate more fully the responses I received. Specifically, five of the seven participants reported that they *never* interacted with members of their target audience. Six of the seven participants noted that a major challenge to working remotely is making and maintaining connections with others. And three or more participants listed major success factors to working remotely as communication, self-discipline/ motivation, and/or organization/structure.

Overall, remote TCs had little to no direct contact with their end-user audience and instead relied on other remote team members (such as project managers) to provide any audience information that was available. Challenges remote TCs faced included lack of social interaction, inability to stop working, and a lack of information and resources. The skills and

Table 1. Demographics of Study Participants

Pseudonym	Current industry/firm	Years prior to going remote	Length of time as remote worker
Delores	Financial services	16	10
Rose	Financial services	14	10
Laura	Professional services	8	10
Sue	Safety certification	8	7
Jenny	Financial services	5	7
Linda	Financial services	12	4
Debbie	Management consulting	3	3

Table 2. Sample Coding

Question	Responses	Code/themes
Survey 1, #5: What are the challenges of being a remote worker?	In an office environment people tend to know what is going on in the lives of their co-workers. This builds camaraderie and trust. This can happen with remote relationships, but it takes more time. It's difficult to make new friends.	Connection
	Staying connected to others with whom you work, staying informed. Casual conversations happen in the office that you're not privy to … You become very tethered to your desk.	Connection Consideration Delineation
	Separation of work/home. Esttablishing a boundary between work-time/off-time is difficult. This includes a physical separation (home office, personal space). The flexibility makes you feel like you should or could ALWAYS be working.	Delineation

strategies used to cope with challenges were varied, but the most frequently discussed strategies included communication, self-discipline/motivation, and organization/structure.

Lack of Audience Contact

Despite our field's understanding that involving representative audience members is an important part of the writing process, the participants in this study rarely obtained any information directly from their audiences. On the first survey, I asked the participants: "*How often (if ever) and in what capacity do you interact with members of your target audience or end users? Your target audience or end users are those who will take the courses you design, develop, or manage.*"

With only two exceptions, the comments of these TCs indicated that they *never* interacted with members of their target audience. Representative comments included the following:

Debbie: "I am never involved in the needs assessment."

Ann: "...the heads of the learning department tell me what we are going to teach them."

To determine if my participants found this lack of interaction detrimental to their work, I asked follow-up questions (regarding audience interaction) during my phone interviews. Just two of the participants noted that their lack of interaction with the end-users was problematic:

Delores: "I find it very motivating if I can [interact with] some audience members. It makes it more real for me. I don't know that it impacts the quality of my work, but it impacts my motivation."

Jenny: "I have strong feelings about [not interacting with the end-user]. It's not the best way to work; I don't see the whole picture. The result is that I might be designing based on incorrect information."

Clearly, these two TCs considered interactions with representative audience members beneficial and noted that the lack of such interaction was detrimental in the quality of their work. However, the five remaining participants indicated that non-contact with representative audience members was simply the way their clients did business ("*these decisions are based on time and budget*") or that the clients performed the needs assessment themselves or that needs assessments were not, in their opinion, necessary for their particular projects. Additionally, when I asked about challenges of being a remote writer, no participants mentioned lack of contact with audience as a challenge to accomplishing their work.

Guessing that their ability to interact directly with their audience would be limited, I asked a second question of the participants: "*Do you ever envision a particular or composite trainee or type of learner when you are writing? If so, please explain.*" Supporting what Blakeslee (2010) found in an earlier study, two participants in my study indicated that they visualized a particular "persona," as they wrote. The personas, however, were general, rather than specific in nature. These participants responded as follows:

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Debbie: "I picture a new hire as young and wanting to have fun."

Delores: "I picture them…as very bright."

Interestingly, there was no additional indication that the participants invoked their audience except that two of them said they envisioned the readers as themselves. These responses were:

Rose: "I put [myself] in their shoes – would I want to do this or sit through this [?]"

Laura: "[You] put yourself in their shoes."

I found these particular responses somewhat problematic. Based on our discussion it seemed like "putting yourself in someone else's shoes" was actually putting them (the audience) in theirs (the TCs), which brings to mind a point Russell Long (1980) made 30 years ago, when he noted that it is easy for TCs who are not considering their audiences to slip into the habit of writing for one's self. Ede and Lunsford (2009) state that changes in technology have "opened avenues for audience to take on agency and to become participants and creators/shapers of discourse in more profound ways than ever before" (p. 60). In some ways, though, the very technology that makes the work of the remote TC possible is also the technology that remote TCs must work around to come into contact with their audiences. This further emphasizes Blakeslee's (2010) call to "reexamine the notion of audience to determine if anything is changing or needs to change in response to the field's shift to digital communication" (p. 200).

Challenges of Working with Remote Project Teams

This study was also concerned with the particular challenges remote writers faced compared to their on-site counterparts. My study confirmed some of the findings of previous research, specifically, that remote TCs are challenged by lack of cooperation (Brizee, 2008); collaboration (Brizee, 2008; Fisher & Bennion, 2005; Rainey, Turner, & Dayton, 2005); and communication (Robey, Khoo, & Powers, 2000; Smart & Barnum, 2000). In the surveys or interviews, I did not provide pre-established categories or codes to my participants; instead; I asked the following open-ended question: *What are the challenges to being a remote worker?*

Using inductive coding that I developed by directly examining the data, I categorized comments pertaining to these challenges under the themes of connection or consideration. Examples of how the responses were categorized will be explained later in this section.

Unlike participants in previous studies, my participants did not cite the complexity of the work or technology as a particular challenge. However, my study did find two additional challenges: access to information and resources and being able to delineate work time from free time.

I grouped and coded the challenges articulated by the participants into the following categories:

- Connection
- Consideration
- Access
- Delineation

The number of participants who cited each type of challenge is shown in Figure 1. Communication and collaboration were not specifically reported as challenges in my study. However, several responses in the connection category, such as lack of connectedness with team and inability to create social networks, could be classified as communication issues. In addition, although collaboration was not specifically mentioned, consideration (such as not being invited to ad-hoc meetings) suggests collaborative behaviors.

Connection was the top concern of the participants of this study. Eight comments mentioned that working remotely results in a lack of social interaction, engagement, and networking. From the first survey and the follow-up phone calls, I received the following relevant comments:
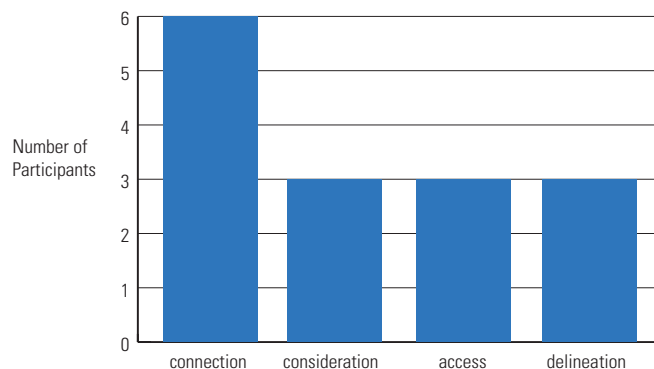

Figure 1. Challenges Facing Remote Technical Communicators

- "It can get lonely."
- "I don't hear jokes anymore."
- "[It's difficult] staying connected to others with whom you work."
- "Networking falls to the wayside."
- "[I feel] less engaged working virtually."
- "It's not human interaction; it's virtual interaction."

These types of challenges often led to a difficulty in building new relationships. One participant said it best:

In an office environment, people tend to know what is going on in the lives of their co-workers. This builds camaraderie and trust. This can happen with remote relationships, but it takes much more time. (Delores)

Delores was a consultant who had worked for over 15 years as an on-site TC before becoming a remote TC, and her last on-site position was director in a large consulting firm. While she was a participant in the study, Delores reported working 95% of the time out her home office, 1% in public spaces (like coffee shops), and 4% at the client site. Since Delores did not share an office, her face-to-face time with colleagues was limited to less than 5% of her work time, quite a departure from working in an office environment.

Participants in my study mentioned that a challenge to working remotely was not being in a position to have spontaneous meetings or brainstorming sessions that arise when colleagues work together on-site. Because they were not physically present, consideration was not given to any input they might have had. Following are the three responses I received regarding this lack of consideration.

- "[I'm] not privy to casual conversation."
- "Without a physical presence, [I] might not be invited to a spur of the moment meeting or receive follow up e-mail."
- "[Being remote] precludes impromptu brainstorming or consultation."

Access to information or resources was limited for some participants in this study. They cited such difficulties as being overlooked on distribution lists and having a hard time obtaining the "collective knowledge" that arises from groups. Only one reference was made to lack of resources, and no further explanation was given.

A final challenge for remote TCs as uncovered by this study is that of leaving the work and achieving work-life balance. Participants specifically mentioned the inability to delineate "work" time from "personal" time. These respondents noted the following:

- "The work is always there. There is no getting away from it."
- "Maintaining balance [is difficult]."
- "The flexibility makes you feel like you should or could always be working."
- "You become very tethered to your desk."

These findings support and give voice to Larbi and Springfield's (2004) assertion that remote TCs face challenges of working outside the office. In their words, "In the haste to abandon the geography of office walls, many assumed that electronic relationships would be as meaningful as—or even richer than—the ones physically next door" (p. 102). What this study shows is such electronic relationships require specific skill sets for the remote TC to be successful.

Skills for the Successful Remote TC

My participants named several skills necessary for the success of the remote writer. The majority of the comments fell into one of the following categories:

- Communication
- Self-discipline/motivation
- Organized/structure

The number of comments falling into each category is displayed in Figure 2. My findings supported previous research findings that communication such as face-to-face time, soft skills, and previous communication with a particular group is a key success factor for the remote TC. Technology was not found to be a major success factor in my study. In addition to the previously identified success factors, my study found that being motivated, taking initiative, being organized, and being structured are also key to the success of the remote TC.

In addition to the most frequently noted categories, various study participants mentioned each of the following factors one time as a skill that would help the remote instructional designer to be successful:
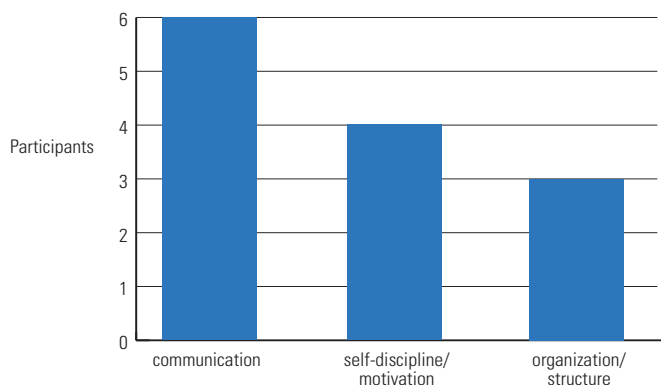
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Figure 2. Success Factors of Remote Technical Communicators

- Solving problems
- Identifying stakeholders
- Meeting deadlines
- Following-up
- Having the appropriate skill level

However, I did not chart these responses because each was mentioned only once and all could also be attributed to the local (non-remote) TC. While this list is by no means exhaustive, it provides us with a good preliminary idea of what a small group of TCs see as important skills. Future studies could look to expand this list and gain more detail around these topics categories.

Barker and Poe (2002) describe how today's business model requires a different type of workforce – one where TCs must be self-managing, self-educating, and flexible. My study responses validated these findings. The predominance of statements made about communication confirms the importance of communication written in earlier literature. What is new is how my participants conceived of and defined communication skills. They articulated these skills on a more granular level than I have previously seen. According to these participants, communication included such activities as speaking, listening, and interpreting information. As one participant wrote:

> Because communication is greatly impaired by the lack of body language and facial expression, the ability to communicate in spite of these constraints is extremely important. That means not only being careful in speaking and writing but [in] interpreting information as well. (Delores)

A sub-theme that emerged from the category of communication was the importance of building a relationship with one's team members. Effectively, the remote TCs needed to find ways to build credibility and trust with people they may have never met and had only interacted with electronically. My study participants employed the following tactics to build credibility: first, they would make opportunities to discuss their experience. For instance, they might state that their background includes years of developing storyboards in Lectora.

> I was new on the project and got the feeling that some group members thought that meant I was a "new" designer. I'm sure my [youthful sounding] voice didn't help. I immediately started using buzz words and casually dropped that I had been developing in Lectora for three years and before that I had used PowerPoint to create storyboards. (Debbie)

Another way they built credibility was to mention similar projects on which they have worked. For example, if they had been hired to conduct a needs assessment, they might find the opportunity to mention that they had conducted large-scale needs assessments that are similar to the project at hand. And one of the primary ways these instructional designers compensated for lack of informal type of conversation that occurs in break rooms or hallways was to create opportunities for informal discussion. For instance, they would dial into a conference call two-three minutes early so that they were one of the first ones on the call. They would then make small talk with others who dialed in early and before the official call began. This small talk allowed the remote TCs to build a type of camaraderie with their other team members. It didn't necessarily matter *what* they talked about as much as it mattered that they did talk.

Another aspect of communication uncovered in my research dealt with the various media TCs used to work with team members and to conduct meetings. As anticipated, face-to-face meetings were the exception rather than the rule with the remote instructional designers in this study. As one participant explained, *"Currently, the vast majority of my work is accomplished without meeting my project manager [in person] or Subject Matter Experts…"* Instead of meeting in person, they communicated with their project teams using the following technology:

- Telephone
- E-mail
- Instant messaging
- NetMeeting and LiveMeeting types of software

A couple participants mentioned specific situations where they use one medium over another, but in general, conversations with entire project teams were less frequent and occurred via conference calls or software such as LiveMeeting or NetMeeting, and conversations between two group members were more frequently handled by instant messaging or direct phone calls. While it was not the primary intent of this study, the interviews and questionnaires led to some best practices for when and how often to use which medium. Refer to Table 3 for these best practices.

This study found that while project work can be done independently and offsite, there are specific times when a face-to-face meeting trumps a conference call or use of other distance medium. Larbi and Springfield (2004) noted in their research that their remote project was successful because they had an initial face-to-face meeting to set up ground rules (p. 104). My study confirmed this finding. One participant in my study articulated this as follows:

> [Projects take] longer because you have shorter amounts of time with the content specialists. Ideally, you would have a half day in person to kick off project and nail down the major design and then

have people flush out the details of their individual sections; In-person kick-off meetings are preferred - when these types of meetings are done over the phone, things are dragged out. You piece-meal it together incrementally. (Linda)

Self-discipline and motivation was another frequently cited category of success factors for remote TCs. It seems that lack of social interaction led to other types of challenges, sometimes even involving the devolution of personal hygiene. One participant summed it up when she wrote the following:

> It takes practice to be successful at working remotely. You have to identify the necessary habits and what works best for you. It is not as easy as it looks and everyone who does it is not good at it. Now that I work at home I have met several people who worked remotely previously and [went] back to working at their traditional jobs in a company... I heard several examples of people not maintaining structure, not showering, or getting out of sweats for days etc. (Jenny)

The final category of frequently cited success factors for remote TCs was organization and structure. Organization was cited several times, but no further explanation was given (perhaps none was needed). In addition to the structure mentioned in the previous quote, one participant defined it as the "ability to maintain a self-imposed schedule."

Table 3. Communication Media

Medium	Best used for …
Conference calls	Collaborating with team Updating more than two team members
***NetMeeting/LiveMeeting* (software application)**	Sharing and/or communally updating documents Demonstrating procedures
Instant messages	Engaging in frequent, brief conversations Having informal conversations Checking if someone is available for a phone call
Face-to-face	Conducting project kick-off meetings On-boarding large teams Conducting design meetings (particularly "lock-down" meetings where the subject-matter experts are scheduled to work for one or more days with the TC) Meeting near the project implementation date
All	More interaction is necessary as team approaches the project deadline

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Discussion

While on-site TCs may also be afforded little to no direct contact with their audiences, the barriers presented to remote TCs are more pronounced. This is sometimes attributed to the remote TC having multiple (sometimes unknown) intermediaries or gatekeepers between them and their audiences. It can also be the result of remote TCs having fewer opportunities to circumvent organizational processes that discount the importance of TC contact with audience members. As Blakeslee (2010) notes, it is a misconception that digital audiences are somehow less important or more generic or simpler to address. They are complex and deserve "analysis and accommodation that embrace and take full account of this complexity" (p. 223). As it turned out, none of the information my participants obtained about their audience members came directly from representatives of that audience. Rather this information was relayed via another project team member. My participants were reliant on their team members to get information about the audience or end-user. As Blakeslee explained, when interacting with readers is not possible, TCs should seek to obtain as much information as they can from whatever sources they have available to them. In the case of my participants, it was the project teams that were available. Regular communication between the TC and her project team took place virtually. If there was any contact with representative end users, it was done by one of the internal members of the staff, often the SME. This implies that the information the remote TCs have on the audience may be less reliable since it was not obtained first-hand.

Despite our field's understanding that involving representative audience members is an important part of the writing process, the participants in this study did not obtain any information directly from their audiences. Did this ultimately hurt the quality of the documentation? Future studies might look to somehow measure and compare the quality, effectiveness, reception, or use of documentation created by remote TCs with direct input of users against documentation created without this input. If the input is found to influence the quality, effectiveness, reception, or use of the documentation, as I suspect it will, we should explore creative ways to include the audience in this process or to have some influence over the questions the other team members take to the audience regarding their needs and preferences.

Our field would benefit from continuing this research and by examining particular problems that can emerge with remote TCs working with teams that are physically separated and writing for remote audiences, when these TCs often have at their disposal only virtual/ digital types of communication. Communication was a major theme that arose when examining the data both on the challenges and the success factors of the remote TCs. The responses offered by these participants suggest there were inventive but specific ways of understanding and acting within a group. The participants identified the importance of communicating their credibility by sharing their experience, expertise and skill set using whatever distance media at their disposal, particularly phone conversations. While their discourse seemed to be, in many ways, creative and innovative, it still used approved channels. For example, sending formal letters of introduction or copies of resumes were not accepted genres or channels by which to communicate one's background and experience. Ad-hoc telephone conversations were the typical genre these discourse communities used. Smart and Barnum (2000) state "Many teams fail--and that failure is often due to poor or inadequate communication" (19). Communication is a complex topic that would benefit from being broken down and examined from several angles. Future studies of remote writers might attempt to unpack the subtleties that comprise communication and examine this topic in a more granular way.

Several of the challenges cited by my participants are not unique to TCs. For instance, topics such as the isolation and lack of structure experienced by remote workers have been identified in articles on virtual team management. Practitioners and scholars in the field of business management (Alexander, 2012; Evans, 2010; Grosse, 2002; Maher, 2014; Pauleen, 2003; Pauleen and Yoong, 2001; and others) have offered advice for managers dealing with challenges and building positive relationships on remote teams. The primary difference between the challenges faced by remote workers in general and those faced by remote TCs has to do with the already ambiguous nature of the role of the TC and the fact that industry does not always recognize and promote the full range of skills TCs bring to the workplace. Brady and Schreiber (2013) suggest that TCs are challenged because to succeed in corporate

environments, they must continuously explain their value to co-workers and bosses and must also begin to represent themselves and their work as dynamic. Subsequently, remote TCs have to build not only their personal ethos, but also have to also promote the value of their role.

As this was an exploratory pilot study, the number of participants (n=7) interviewed was limited. Having a larger group of participants would potentially uncover additional challenges related to the challenges of remote TCs accessing audiences and working on project teams. Future research could further test the results and conclusions of this study using a larger group of participants. In addition, this study focused solely on the challenges of being a remote TC. To advance a more comprehensive understanding of the remote TC experience, future studies should also examine and analyze the advantages that accompany being a remote TC.

Implications for Technical Communication Practice

Context plays an important role in technical communication. This study provides a contemporary illustration of what the earlier scholars have said about the importance of attention to the social and contextual components of the audiences. Today, we need to also consider the social and contextual position of the TC, as we cannot take for granted that they will always be part of an onsite, established corporate environment. What they *will* be part of are virtual communities of practice, and in this role, as one study (Robey et al., 2000) showed, their learning will be based on actual work practices rather than on knowledge acquired outside the context of actual work.

In today's digital and dispersed workplace, TCs will also have to work to acquaint themselves with potential challenges of working on a remote team and to create a toolbox of skills with which to meet those challenges. These skills are of extreme importance when it comes to the success of TCs to effectively define, understand, and write for industry audiences, as well as successfully overcome challenges using strategies often particular to *digital project groups* and *distance collaboration*.

There are some key lessons we can learn from the participants in this study on remote TCs, and organizations will benefit from considering the following when working with new TCs, whether they are internal or external to the organization:

- Instill the importance of partnering with team members, especially SMEs and project managers, as they are often those with direct access to the end user audience.
- Explain that each corporate culture and work team will have its own (usually unstated) rubric that determines which communication technology to use and in which situations. Encourage TCs to discern this rubric early on by asking team members which type of communication medium they prefer the TC to use and when (and how often).
- Advise TCs that building new, trusting, relationships and maintaining contacts may not be easy, and they should expect to be creative in building and maintaining these relationships. One method is to call into a conference call early to take advantage of small talk. Another is to form relationships via professional social networking sites such as Linked In, where the TC can learn more about team members and communicate congratulations on promotions and work anniversaries.
- Warn TCs that when they work remotely, they may experience feelings of loneliness or isolation, and they will need to develop strategies to cope with these feelings. These strategies may include becoming involved in local, professional organizations and maintaining schedules that include regular meetings with friends or former colleagues.
- Explain to remote TCs that not having a physical presence in an office will make it difficult for them to engage in small talk or even to participate in critical conversations. Encourage them to find alternate ways to stay connected to the people and projects in their organization. Again, this could include connecting to others on professional social networking sites such as Linked In, and if geography is not prohibitive, arranging for informal monthly or quarterly lunches or other opportunities for face-to-face socializing.

Today's TCs will be entering a workforce where they will be writing in multiple new formats including websites, blogs, and social networking media, and in many cases, they may also be working remotely and/or as part of a global team. Instructors and employers of these TCs might continue to search for or create models that will help TCs not only grapple with the concept of remote writing, but will also help them identify and address challenges inherent in their remote work.

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About the Author

Tammy Rice-Bailey recently earned her PhD in English (Professional and Technical Writing) from the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. She brings 20 years' practitioner experience as a technical writer, instructional design manager, training project manager, and business owner to her interests in writing pedagogy and rhetorical strategies of technical communicators (TCs). Her research examines such topics as remote TCs, the relationship between TCs and Subject Matter Experts (SMEs), and inter- and cross-disciplinary writing partnerships. Contact: ricebai2@uwm.edu.

Remote Technical Communicators

Appendix 1: Remote Instructional Designers - Survey 1 Questions

Name:
E-mail:
Date:

Instructions: Please complete this survey and return it to Tammy Rice-Bailey at ricebai2@uwm.edu. Thank you for your participation.

1. What is your current role? Select all that apply.
    Instructional Designer
    Project Manager
    Coach
    Other:_____

2. If you selected more than one role in the previous question, please indicate approximately what percentage of your time is spent in each role.
    Instructional Designer   %
    Project Manager   %
    Coach   %
    Other: %

3. Select all the places from which you perform your work and the approximate percentage of time you work from each
    Home office   %
    Public location (ex. coffee shop)   %
    Client Site   %
    Other: %

4. Approximately how long have you been a remote worker?

5. What are the challenges to being a remote worker?

6. With how many different project teams are you currently working?
    1
    2
    3-4
    More than 4

7. If you are an instructional designer, from whom do you typically take direction on a project?

8. How often (if ever) do you interact with members of your target audience or end user and in what capacity?

9. If you are an instructional designer, what resources do you use when you have questions about or problems on a particular project?

10. Have you ever worked with a group remotely and then, after some time, actually met members of that group in person?
    Yes
    No

11. If you answered yes to the previous question, in what ways were various team members different than how you envisioned them?

12. If you answered yes to the previous question, in what ways were various team members the same as you envisioned them?

13. What skills make a successful remote instructional designer?

Thank you for sharing your time and experience.
I look forward to chatting with you soon!

Appendix 2: Remote Instructional Designers - Survey 2 Questions

Name:
E-mail:
Date:

Instructions: Please complete this survey and return it to Tammy Rice-Bailey by Monday, November 7th at ricebai2@uwm.edu. Thank you for your participation!

1. With whom do you share general questions, concerns, or ideas about instructional design or project management work? No need to mention specific names.

2. To whom do you "vent" (complain or commiserate) about instructional design or project management issues? No need to mention specific names.

3. Are there ways to compensate for informal ("water-cooler") conversation? If so, what are they? If not, why?

4. Comparing the professional network you had when you were working as an on-site employee to your professional network as a remote writer, which of the following is true for you?
    My professional network has decreased
    My professional network has remained about the same
    My professional network has increased

5. What are your thoughts about social networking (Facebook, Twitter, Linked-In, etc.)?
    It's nice for others, but it doesn't interest me
    I use it occasionally
    It's crucial to me

6. Do you ever envision a particular or composite trainee or type of learner when you are writing? If so, please explain.

Thank you for your time and participation!