

# What are the Stakes and Difficulties of Working with Experts?

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*A technical writer has a key role within a company. He works with people with various functions. He's asking developers for advice and feedback to build the user guide of their product. He's connected and dealing with every part of the team: developers, testers, managers, product experts, etc. to produce documentation that is as clear as possible for the user, and depending on the product, the user's life can depend on his work. Most of the time, this interaction is a very rich and fulfilling experience.*

*But how to find the right place between the different services of a company? Communicating with developers is not always easy: they often don't have time to spend with a technical writer. Receiving feedback from testers can be troublesome, sometimes you don't get information unless asking clearly for it. Many uninformed people think that being a technical writer is just writing sentences and that anyone can do it. It happens sometimes that even people in their own team don't recognize the work and the importance of the technical writer. This article explores the difficulties a technical writer can encounter when working with experts.*

**Keywords:** technical writing, technical writer, expert, communication, technical communication, collaboration, feedback

## **Introduction**

This article focuses on the relationship between technical writers and experts.

The work of a technical writer is often underrated. According to them, experts often think that anyone could do their job and do not recognize the effort of making a good document. But is that statement really true? Why do technical writers feel so underrated while experts are able to acknowledge the importance of what they do?

Technical writers cannot work without experts and experts cannot work without technical writers. It is a win-win relationship. They share the same goal: help the user understand the product and help him use it.

This relationship works if everyone understands each other. And the key to all that is communication. With better communication the work will be easier for everyone.

As technical writers apprentices, we all have encountered difficulties to obtain all the information we need to create our documentations. This is a common issue that technical writers have. Experts do not often have the time to explain everything the technical writer needs to know and expect them to conduct research on their side. Obviously the technical writer will have to do some research but to do that they need the experts to guide them by providing as much information as needed.

These are the reasons we decided to work on this subject. We find it interesting to understand why this relationship may bring some difficulties. And by having both points of view from technical writers and experts about this relationship, we can analyze it and understand what the issues are.

## **Methods**

To initiate this study, we undertook a reflection about our own experiences within our companies: what we could perceive in our workplace, what each of us have experienced. We have drawn some emerging conclusions out of this reflection.

To support these findings, we have created two surveys to assess the stakes involved in our study. One curated for technical writers and one curated for other experts that occasionally collaborate with technical writers. Using this methodology has allowed us to characterize and to get a better understanding of the different insights provided by the surveys.

Furthermore, we have carried out personal interviews to conduct further analysis of our results. We were eventually able to make statistics out of the collected data.

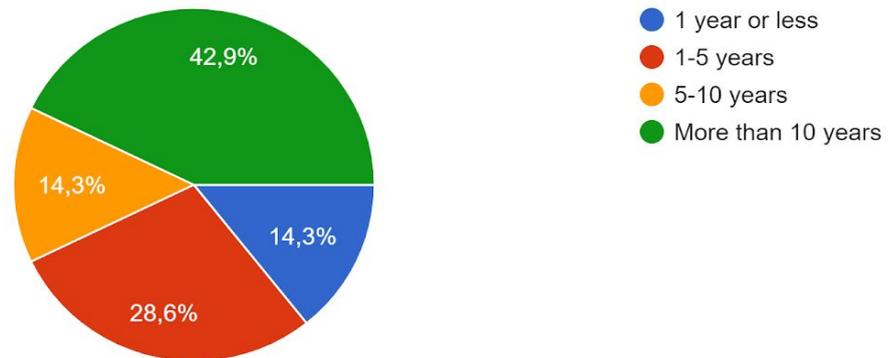
Besides this, we have also read many articles to apprehend in greater depth all dimensions of the technical writers - experts relationship.

## **Results of our surveys**

The results of our surveys are at the core of our research project. Submitting the surveys to both technical writers and experts and thus having direct feedback from them has made it possible for us to better understand the relation between them and to compare their points of view.

We first submitted a survey to technical writers from various companies. Our goal was to know more about their perception of their job in the company they work for. We asked them different questions about their role and their relation with experts. Here is what we found out:

For how long have you been a technical writer?



First, we can see that nearly half of the participants are very experienced technical writers. Indeed, 42,9% of them have worked more than 10 years as technical writers. This suggests they have been through a lot of experiences and situations during their career, thus allowing them to gain some hindsight and to better apprehend the stakes of communication. This is worthwhile for our study, because we can assume that the results of the following questions will be thoughtful and objective. We also noticed that another 42,9% have worked between 1 and 10 years as technical writers. This wide field of answers ensures us to have different perspectives from various experiences.

When we asked the participants what their favorite aspect of the job was, they reported to us a lot of positive points. Some like the simple pleasure of writing, learning and teaching. Some like the variety of projects they are working on, as switching from a different field to another ensures you that you will never get bored. But the thing we primarily noticed, is the *“Contact with others, getting to learn new things on very diverse subjects”*.

This answer interested us a lot, because this is precisely one of the main points of the relation with the experts. “Learning new things on very diverse subjects” necessarily involves an exchange with qualified people (experts) that teach you information on subjects we don’t know anything about.

This answer allows us to focus on an important point of the relation between technical writers and experts. Before talking about difficulties, we can see a very positive point: it is pleasant for writers to learn new things from experts. This curiosity and this will to learn is consistent with what previous scientific studies stated and what we experienced in our early professional life.

Concerning the variety of domains, we asked them if they worked with experts from various fields of work. 85% said yes, which means technical writers have the opportunity to explore a lot of different fields and learn a lot of things.

This is one of the main stakes of a technical writer: learning to provide better explanations. To be able to explain clearly to the user what this is, and what to do, he has first to understand perfectly all of the technicalities of the product he is working on. We tend to focus on this point. As learning new things and new processes is mandatory to write documentation, the relation between the expert and the technical writer is a key point.

We tried to find out more about all this collaborative process, to determine where the potential issues are. If the interaction is difficult, the capacity of the technical writer to learn is reduced. And if the technical writer does not have maximum knowledge and resources on a subject, he will not be able to help the final user to understand the product perfectly.

We believe that a good relation between experts and writers is essential because that benefits everyone, and especially the reader. This is one of the main stakes and we tried to understand what can prevent it from going well.

When asking more details about which experts they are confronted to, we learned that all of them are working with developers. This is the most common exchange a technical writer has in a company. When working on a computer product or software, only the developers know what a function is about, why it works or what goes wrong. It seems pretty essential to us that a technical writer has to interact very frequently with developers.

Other answers were product managers, specification writers, customer service agents.

We can point out the collaboration with product managers, which is also a very predominant exchange for technical writers. Product managers can be a great help. They don't necessarily know how the program works under the hood, or how its functions have been implemented, but they know why it is there. They know what the customer wants, needs, and expects. They can tell the technical writer what should be explained to the user, and what should not.

Another interesting point we were able to distinguish through the survey, is the frequency of interaction with experts. We asked our participants how often they were interacting with experts. Three quarters of the answers are between 4 and 7 (on a scale of ten), while the remaining quarter chose 9 and 10. As such, these answers do not bring a lot of information: the frequency of interaction with experts can mainly depend on the role of each in a company. Some people in user assistance or documentation teams have to gather information from experts for their team, while some never really encounter experts.

But it becomes interesting if we compare it to the following question: "How often do experts give you time to discuss your questions?". The answers are really diversified: we had nearly zero participants that picked the same option. The wide range of answers goes from 1 to 9 (on a scale of 10). We can deduce that there may be a link between the time experts give to discuss some questions and the determination of technical writers to ask questions. If writers feel that the experts don't really mind taking time to answer their questions, they may be less motivated to try to interact with them often. This raises a key question: are experts really bothered to answer questions, or is it only the perception of the writers?

To figure this out, we have to take a look at the point of view from the two sides.

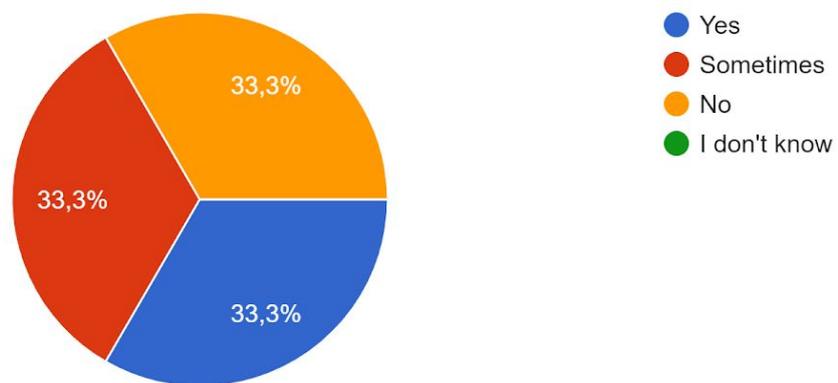
Giving feedback to developers is essential to ensure the good functioning of a team, but it may be difficult sometimes. Nobody wants to question the capacity and knowledge of a developer architect or a product manager. As the technical writers are often the bridge between the customer expectations and the developers work, they have a good overview of the problems the developers may not see.

Unfortunately, technical writers tend to be too much reserved about feedback:

When we asked how much do you think experts take your work and feedback into consideration on a scale of ten, the majority of the answers were between 1 and 6. That would explain why some writers declared to not interact that much with experts: they feel like it's useless and a loss of time for both parts.

Even worse: two thirds of the participants answered “Yes” or “Sometimes” when we asked them if they feel like they bother experts with their questions.

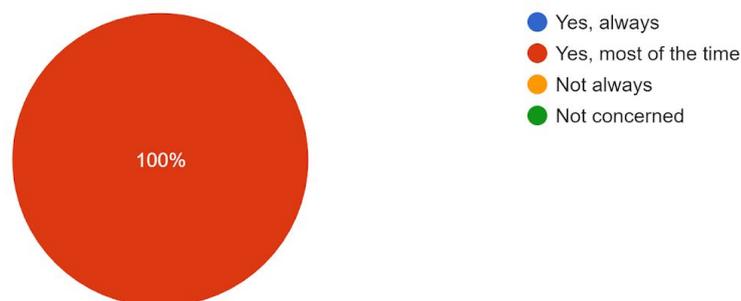
Do you sometimes feel you are bothering experts with your questions?



There seems to be a problem of communication between the two parts. Most of the writers are sure to be “annoying” “uninteresting” to experts, while from the other side it is completely different:

We asked the experts if they took writer’s feedback into consideration. None of them said no. Even better: 100% of them answered positively.

Do you take technical writer’s feedback into consideration?



This allows us to take some look back at the first answers we had from writers. Their point of view may not be not objective, they seem to lack confidence.

Experts embellished their answers with some details:

*“Yes, it is important. They are the people that can explain with clarity the most complex things. Everyone can learn from what they write, and reuse this content to make product development smoother.”*

*“I think it is valuable. It makes it possible to realize a better document for the client.”*

When we asked if they would consider giving up some of their time to answer questions from a technical writer, all of the answers were above 7 (on a scale of ten).

This contrasts greatly with the answers of the writers. After looking in detail at the results we had, we were able to make a correlation. It seems like young technical writers (that worked for 1 year or less) commonly expressed that they actually feel well considered by the experts. On the opposite, writers doing this job for more than 10 years agreed that experts do not have time or compassion for them.

The perception of the writer seems tightly related to their personal experiences in their companies. Experts of a team might kindly welcome a newcomer, and take time to get acquainted, in addition to working on redaction. When we just join a new team or a new project, we often do not see all the negative points and problems. We can be a bit naive and too optimistic. After some years with the same team, doing the same work, we become much more realistic on the situation (and maybe also weary).

This might be the case of senior technical writers. They are more demanding than new writers and will less easily accept being ignored.

The size of the company might play a role in the time given by the experts to the technical writer. Indeed, by looking at the results we were able to make a correlation between the size of the company and the quality of communication between the teams. It happens that the bigger the company is the less time experts will have to give information and feedback, probably due to the amount of people they may have.

We also think that this difference of perception might come from the proximity of colleagues inside a team. Often, software developers are set apart from user assistance developers. They do not totally work in a coordinated manner. Developers work on the software on their side, and when they are done, it is time for the user assistance developers to write about what they worked on. The impression of “bothering” the experts might come from this: the writer feels like he is annoying experts that just finished to work and that want to move on. But this is rarely the case, and as it is proven by the results above, experts are apt to take time to give explanation to the writer.

We also asked the writers if they thought their role was important in their company, compared to other jobs.

Two-thirds of them answered 8-9 on a scale of 10. This confirms us that technical writers believe their job is important for the good-being of a team, a product or a company.

Now, it is interesting to compare this data with this question:

When we asked them what their colleagues thought of their jobs, answers were unanimous:

*“The technical documentation is rarely a priority for colleagues”*

*“They don’t really value it as an essential work”*

*“Easy, not important”*

*“The way we are working/creating content is quite "blurry" for them. They don't know that we need to follow specific guidelines (style, formatting, etc).”*

The first thing we can deduce is that technical writers do not feel well considered by their colleagues. This is interesting because this is a feeling we often hear when asking technical writers about their teams. Answers are that their teams feel like what they do is a “secondary” work, that is not really essential. According to them, writing documentation is not a big deal and quite easy: “They don’t know that we need to follow specific guidelines”. It looks like some experts do not even know what this job is about, which would explain why they do not consider it as important as it is. Looking at these answers, we can deduce experts do not really care about technical writers and their job.

We asked a personal question to the technical writers: “Do you feel fully acknowledged for your work”? The answers to this question are important for us because when we compared with the answers of the experts on this subject we saw a gap in their perception.

Most of them do not feel acknowledged:

*“Not enough!”*

*“Not always.”*

*“Not at all - what I do in this company is seen as mechanical and obvious.”*

We also had some “Yes” but they were a minority.

So if we sum up what we learned from the technical writers through all these questions: experts do not have enough time to answer their questions because they think writers are not essential and doing a secondary and easy job.

But is that true?

This answer seemed too much contrasted to us. Could this only be the perception of the writers and an interpretation of what they believe? These answers did not feel really objective to us.

So we asked the reversed question to the experts: “According to you, how important is the role of a technical writer within a company?”

And we were surprised with the answers: all of them chose 8 and 9 (on a scale of 10).

This brings contrast to the answers we already had. In fact, experts and writers are alright on the subject: writing documentation is important. They all agree on this, and no expert told us documentation is “secondary” or “easy” as the writers thought.

Seen from the point of view of an expert, writing documentation is to “Make complex, technical things easy to understand for everyone”. This is pretty encouraging and demonstrates that it is the technical writers that have a negative perception of their role.

We asked ourselves where this difference could come from. Writers sometimes have a negative perception of their job in their company. Maybe it is because they have to ask a lot

of questions, on subjects that may seem very basic. As the experts know the product very well, and writers know nothing about it at the beginning, it is logical that they have to ask a lot of questions that may not seem very interesting. For the experts, the answers may be obvious, but the writer needs as much information as possible in order to write good documentation for the user.

When looking at the results of the personal interviews that we carried out, we can also suggest that the company's field of work might affect the way technical writers are seen: indeed, in technology companies, developers and product managers take the lead and are at the core of the business strategy. The writing process is sometimes underappreciated, and technical writers considered as unskilled workforce. Several technical writers reported that they are sometimes informed of important projects that will affect their work at the very last minute and that they do not take part of the strategy process.

It is possible that technical writers have had bad experiences with some experts. Like in any domain and any job, some experts may have been rude, or uninterested, and so the technical writers may generalize and think that all of them will be rude and will be annoyed by their questions, which, according to the survey's answers, is not the case. Experts care more about technical writers than they might think.

Nevertheless, it is valuable to note that there can be a bias, as the experts involved were already willing to answer the survey. This would probably not be the case of experts usually bothered by technical writers questions. The results of the experts point of view should therefore be tempered by this assumed statement.

## **Conclusion**

After analyzing the relationship between technical writers and the experts with whom they collaborate, we have shown that there is a gap between their respective perceptions. While both agree on the importance of the technical writers role, the latter seem to devalue themselves and to suffer from an inferiority complex in front of some very skilled colleagues.

There must be a difference of perception depending on the field of the company and the personal experience of the technical writer, but both writers and experts know that a good communication is key and will eventually benefit for end-users and therefore for the company's image.

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