

Are technical communicators the secret asset of a healthy enterprise culture?

Alexandra ATES, Eléonore CASSAGNE, Richard DEBRABANT
Université de Paris, 2019-2020

Abstract

You spend one third of your life at work. You see your colleagues much more often than you see your friends or family, which is one of the reasons why it is important to be part of a team where you feel happy and motivated enough to carry out projects throughout your professional career. Several elements lead you to nurture —intentionally or unintentionally— these relationships within your own firm either in a positive or negative way, and greatly affect your productivity.

Technical writers are employees who communicate with customers or people in their firm. They collect as much information as possible to document projects and be aware of the modifications to be made in case of plan changes. Thus, with experience, they have learned how to behave so that professional conversations go smoothly, contacts last for a long time and they make progress in their work.

This position might suggest that they have a fairly important role in their company's activity in addition to their daily tasks... But to what extent?

Keywords: Communication, enterprise culture, management, organisational dynamics, psychological safety, team, technical writer, technical writing.

Introduction

In business, communication is one of the most important elements that any team seeks to have among its members. It is a source of motivation, productivity and trust, obligatory because it is one of the pillars of success no matter the project. But communication is also what allows us to create a good atmosphere, one of the aspects of a healthy enterprise culture.

A technical writer is an individual who mainly works in writing and communication. The user guides they write are used within one or more companies as well as by their clients. In addition, they are also led to exchange with other professionals daily to learn as much as possible about the current projects. Because of their skills, this person is absolutely necessary in large companies to gather a substantial amount of information in one place, to popularise it if necessary and to facilitate the realisation of several technical actions — whether for colleagues or buyers.

These daily tasks have a significant impact on the motivation, productivity and confidence of those affected, just like communication itself has. But could a technical writer also have a role to play in the good atmosphere and enterprise culture of their firm?

In this research article, we first explain how we proceeded to inform ourselves on technical writers' role within an enterprise culture. In a second phase, we observe the results of our questionnaires and analyse them. We finally put all of our insights together, discussing the possible definitions of a healthy enterprise culture and the modalities and stakes of a technical writer's role in this culture.

1. Methods

1. 1. Questionnaires

Our research is very much focused on the sociability and feelings of technical writers. As a result, it seemed obvious to us to create questionnaires in order to have as a source real experiences that could reflect the reality of the facts.

Thus, we created three questionnaires for different purposes and audiences:

- one for the current students of our master's degree to get their first impressions as trainees on their way to becoming technical writers,
- one for the technical writers and people working with technical writers - so the professionals we have reached through our company contacts, our teachers and LinkedIn - to know how they perceive things from their side, their usual work behaviour and the methods they have acquired over the years,
- one for some of our colleagues who kindly agreed to give us further information about their experiences as technical writers by answering more advanced questions we asked them.

Please note that our questionnaires were only available in French and that, when quoting our respondents in the 'Analysis' and 'Discussion' part of our research article, we actually quote their translated answers.

1. 2. Documentary research

To complete the answers to the questionnaires and give them a theoretical background, we have done some research on group work, management and organisational dynamics, as well as the different types of team functioning in the work environment.

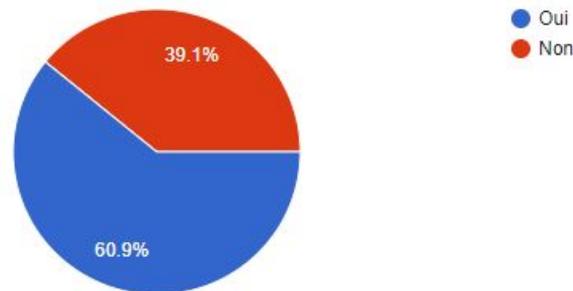
This was not an easy task to carry out as there are few articles about technical writers. We had to identify group phenomena, and ensure that they apply to the case of technical writers and their role in the workplace.

2. Results

We sent a questionnaire to a total of 51 technical writers or people who work with technical writers, and another questionnaire to 15 of the other students from our master's degree.

Avez-vous l'impression qu'en tant que rédacteur.ice technique, vous contribuez à la bonne ambiance au sein de votre service ?

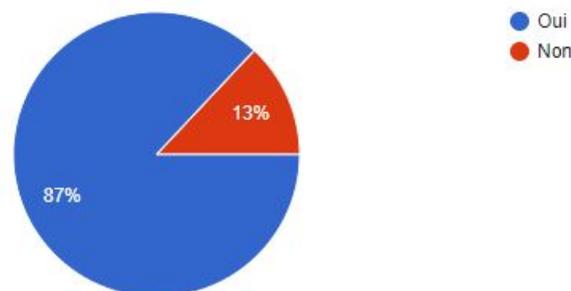
23 responses



60% of the technical writers who answered our questionnaire said that they feel they contribute to the good atmosphere in their company. They also said that they did this through communication - asking relevant questions allowing them to anticipate further potential problems. Having good social skills is a key skill for a technical writer, they somewhat need to create and maintain a good relationship with experts.

Avez-vous l'impression qu'en tant que rédacteur.ice technique, vous êtes un lien entre différents services de l'entreprise ?

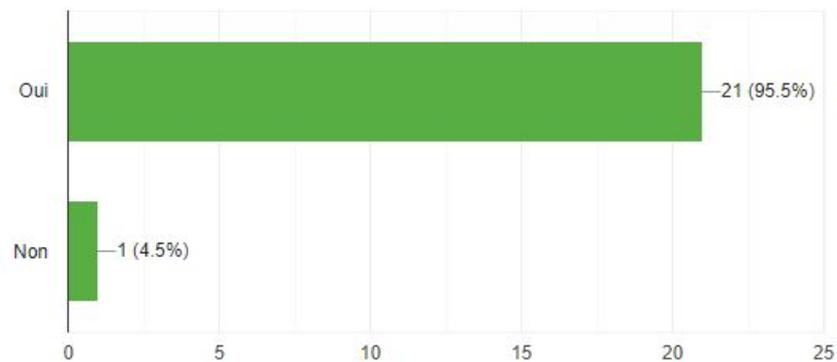
23 responses



A majority of them consider themselves as a link between the different departments of their firm — without a doubt because their job involves gathering information from different experts in the firm.

Y a-t-il une bonne ambiance dans votre entreprise ?

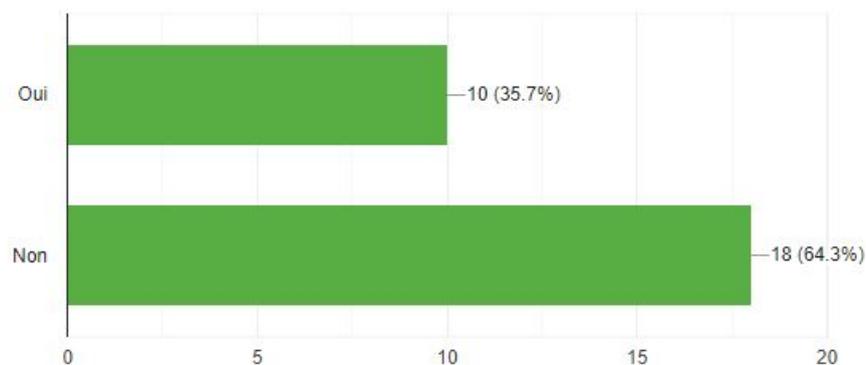
22 responses



90% of them consider that they work in a good atmosphere, and the same proportion feels comfortable with asking questions and sharing ideas with their co-workers, though half of them hesitate before doing so.

Avez-vous constaté un changement d'ambiance suite à l'arrivée d'un rédacteur.ice technique dans votre équipe ou service ?

28 responses



However 60% of non technical writers did not feel a big change of the enterprise culture with the arrival of a technical writer in their team. This is of course context-dependent, as feeling a change or not in teaming space can stem from both subjective and objective elements. These 60% also did not notice a difference either in the relationship with the other departments of the company or in the team's efficiency.

Concerning the questionnaire we addressed to our classmates, 90% of them said that they work in a good atmosphere. 70% of them have a good relationship with the other services. But 30% said that their relationship with other services cannot be equal to the relationship they have in their team as they have less interactions with them.

3. Analysis

We want to touch a bit more on the answer from one of our respondents: that didn't come from any questionnaire, seeing as they emailed us afterwards. A paragraph in particular caught our attention:

"Ever since I've been working as a technical writer, I feel like I'm better perceived as companies are becoming more aware of our ability to connect with different departments within the same company."

This particular answer was unexpected: we had not considered technical writers could be better perceived than other jobs, especially since it is still a little known field, especially to the general public.

More generally, most of our results suggest that there is indeed a link between communication and a healthy corporate culture on the one hand, communication and technical writers on the other. We develop this link and what comes out of it in the following 'Discussion' section.

However, there are some caveats to note:

We based our research almost entirely on the questionnaire intended for professionals: the questionnaire intended for our classmates helped us to know their impressions of technical writing as work/study training program students in this field, but didn't do much except from supporting some of our existing theories. This therefore gave more weight to our hypotheses, but no real new lines of thought.

Also, the vast majority of our questionnaire for professionals was completed by employees of our respective companies: by observing the email address of the respondents, 45% of the responses collected come from only two different firms.

4. Discussion

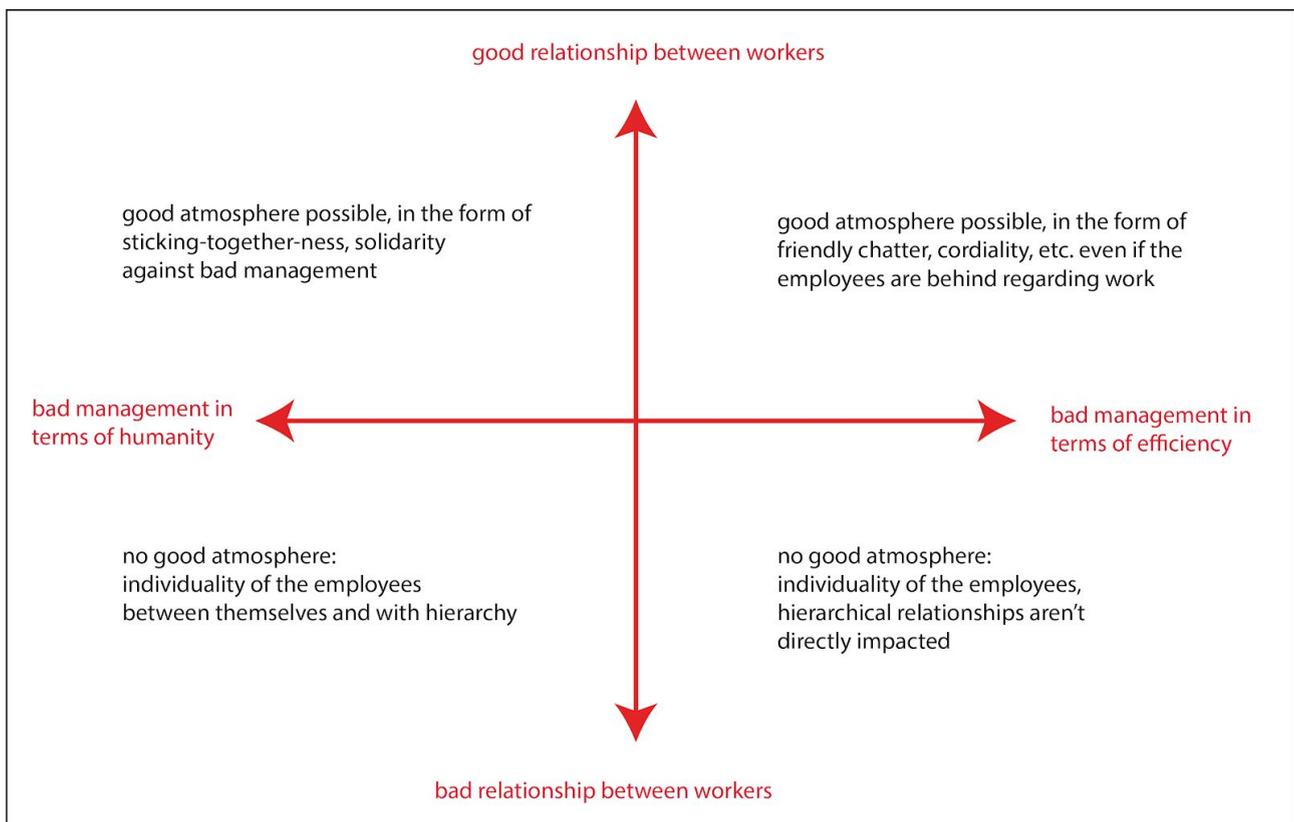
4. 1. Defining a healthy enterprise culture

Before diving head-first into the discussion part, we have to make clear what we mean when talking about 'healthy enterprise culture'. Analysing what makes or breaks this enterprise culture, we define in the following lines this term, its stakes, and how to contribute to it.

First of all, let's define two key terms together: **good atmosphere** and **healthy enterprise culture**.

A **good atmosphere** is not to be confused with a healthy enterprise culture: both are linked but different. A good atmosphere is present if there is a healthy enterprise culture but it can be present without such a culture. A good atmosphere refers to the relationship that co-workers have. It does not necessarily mean that they are good at what they do, but they still are welcoming, ready to help, nice to each other. More generally, a good atmosphere is a symptom of a healthy enterprise culture, but can also stem from a solidarity feeling against bad management.

We submit this diagram as an overview:



On the other hand, a **healthy enterprise culture** depends on several criteria. It touches on both Amy Edmondson's research in *Teaming: How Organizations Learn,*

Innovate, and Compete in the Knowledge Economy and Ralph Stacey's in *Strategic Management & Organisational Dynamics*, both of which we'll talk more about after. What is to be remembered is the following criterion: a healthy enterprise culture must benefit everyone, employer and employees alike.

We suggest the following definition:

A **healthy enterprise culture** is an enterprise culture that ensures employee productivity and company growth. However, in doing so, it also guarantees good social relations between all the members of the equation: cordial understanding and respect, not only between employees but also towards and from the managers and hierarchy.

As a counter-example to a healthy enterprise culture, we suggest Amazon's example: the firm is the world's largest retailer, with its employees productive and obviously very good at what they do. Yet in more cases than one, Amazon has been criticised for the poor working conditions of their employees. According to The Business Insider, *in 2015, employees referred to Amazon's work culture as "bruising."* Bob Olson, a former Amazon Books Marketing employee, said then that *"nearly every person I worked with, I saw cry at their desk"*.¹ Whether the relationships between employees are good or not, one cannot tell: it differs too much from one department to the next. But the work ethic, that's carried by higher-ups, isn't good anyway. Thus, we see that a healthy enterprise culture can not be supported only by a 'good atmosphere'.

Now that the basics are clear, we may touch on the modalities and stakes of such a definition.

4. 2. Ralph Stacey's studies

Another very useful concept when talking about technical writers' role in enterprise culture is Ralph Stacey's organisational dynamics.

Ralph Stacey studied firms he considered "successful" (IBM, Microsoft or Disney, amongst other firms). With time, he was able to come up with eight **key attributes** that can be found in any of those firms. The attributes are as follow: *"Stick to the knitting"*, *"Close to the customers"*, *"Productive through people"*, *"Hands on, value driven"*, *"Autonomy and entrepreneurship"*, *"Bias for action"*, *"Simple form, lean staff"* and *"Simultaneous loose-tight properties"*. We recommend reading his work if any of these pique your curiosity.

We noticed our own definition of a healthy enterprise culture links to and echoes strongly two of Ralph Stacey's key attributes: **"Productive through people"** and **"Autonomy and entrepreneurship"**.

¹ <https://www.businessinsider.fr/us/what-its-like-to-work-at-amazon-2018-2>

Productive through people: the managers value their employees, making them feel like they belong to a big family.

Autonomy and entrepreneurship: they encourage local initiatives and risk-taking in practice. This gets employees to make decisions and gives them power. But if something goes wrong they are not penalized.

Interestingly, Ralph Stacey's dynamics are to be expected of managers and higher-ups. Yet, one can remark these two dynamics are closely related to what is expected from technical writers: attentiveness, understanding of others, trial-and-error processes, constant communication, making the experts feel that their knowledge is important and consequently has purpose².

Therefore, in the very definition of the term "healthy enterprise culture", we find the characteristics and stakes of the role of technical writer.

4. 3. The technical writer's role in a healthy enterprise culture

In this new part, we first analyse the direct role of the technical writer on a healthy enterprise culture, before touching on their indirect role. We are using the results of our questionnaires for this.

We first focus on the **direct part** the technical writer plays in a healthy enterprise culture.

Of all our respondents, technical writers and people who work(ed) with them alike, a vast majority of people feel communication is the key factor to have a good atmosphere.

Looking now at the technical writers who responded alone, more than half of them feel that they are contributing one way or another to a good atmosphere in their firms.

When asked about the how, one of our respondents answered simply:

"By communicating with my team."

As a whole, the technical writer must have a good relationship with the colleagues that make up their department. This quality, which is necessary for the success of their work, their healthy adaptability and their communication skills make them a valuable asset in the federation of team members around a common goal of producing quality documentation. In the long run, what has to do with work in the first place can find itself bleeding into informal interactions, thus creating a more honest, better atmosphere between colleagues.

² One of our respondents told us: "Those around us are generally of the opinion that we ask interesting and relevant questions."

What's more, when asked why they think there is a good atmosphere in their firm, 5 people out of 21 do not mention their firm *per se*, but their team. One of our respondents very clearly wrote:

"There is a good atmosphere in my team but I wouldn't say that the atmosphere in the firm at large is particularly good."

This is quite normal, considering that humanities and social research have proven humans to be unable to sustain an unlimited number of meaningful social interactions. (If the reader is unfamiliar with such studies, we advise to see the notion of "Dunbar's number" for further details.) Being able to keep up with a very large number of social interactions in your workplace is impossible, especially when more than 60% of our respondents state they work in a large or very large firm. Hence why sociability, and therefore good atmosphere, can only be created in smaller groups, teams or departments.

This is especially important when confronted with opinions of the technical writers alone:

- More than half of the technical writer respondents feel that they are contributing one way or another to a good atmosphere in their *firms*, not just their team.
- A vast majority think of themselves as a link between teams or departments.

One can therefore hypothesize that technical writers are not only responsible for the good atmosphere inside their own team, but for the good atmosphere of a larger chunk of their firm. They link together the atmosphere of isolated groups as a larger-ranged, general good atmosphere through all the departments they work with.

We now focus on the **indirect part** the technical writer plays in a healthy enterprise culture.

As was said before, the technical writer's job goes with asking a lot of questions. And there is something primordial happening when asking questions: it is not just about communicating, it is about making mistakes.

In a *Feedzai* article titled "Why do you need a Technical Writer?", one can read:

*"Someone coming from a linguistics background is the right choice."*³

It is expected of technical writers to come from a linguistics background and be hired mostly to write well, rather than understanding everything right away: after all, the engineers or other experts are the ones in charge of that. In that regard, technical writers are allowed and even encouraged to ask questions, make mistakes and be corrected by fellow experts colleagues.

³ <https://medium.com/feedzaitech/why-do-you-need-a-technical-writer-2cd5b870a767>

An interesting concept to stumble upon regarding this matter of questions and mistakes is one Amy Edmondson develops in *Teaming*, which is psychological safety:

“The term psychological safety describes a climate in which people feel free to express relevant thoughts and feelings. Although it sounds simple, the ability to seek help and tolerate mistakes while colleagues watch can be unexpectedly difficult. Yet, frank conversations and public missteps must occur if teaming is to realize the promise of collaboration across differences.”

One can remark it can be linked back to Stacey's key attribute: “**Autonomy and entrepreneurship**”. And it is to be noted that while 90% of our respondents consider that they work in a healthy enterprise culture, the same proportion feels comfortable with asking questions and sharing ideas with their co-workers. A correlation can be drawn from the likeness of these results.

But what does the technical writer have to do with it? It may be possible that the technical writer acts, unbeknownst to themselves and their colleagues, as a beacon when it comes to making questions socially acceptable — which, in turn, makes the whole of social interactions more relaxed and safe. By virtue of their role, they are a conveyor of psychological safety in the workplace.

However, it is worth noting that, when introducing his concept of key attributes, especially ‘Autonomy and Entrepreneurship’ (which we have already held to be similar to Edmondson’s psychological safety), Stacey writes the following:

“The prescription is to install them in other organisations. These too should then be successful through the process of imitation.”

He does not develop further on the process of imitation itself, but one can hypothesise that imitation is not only a purposeful change in the other organisations: we think it can also be mirrored without thinking, by mimicry. One of our respondents writes:

“I don’t work with many departments, but I work a lot with the after-sale department which works with everyone else!”

The technical writer having thus installed psychological safety in his team, this psychological safety would happen to ‘ricochet’ even to teams or departments with which the technical writer never works.

4. 4. Exploring a blind spot

Nevertheless, a large proportion of those surveyed say that they are not necessarily responsible for the good atmosphere in their firm or team.

This can be explained by various factors:

- *A management problem.* Indeed, the psychological safety implemented by the technical writer can only really be extended if the management was, in the first place, neutral or favourable to a trial-and-error process. Things may not change because the fear of failure was too entrenched in the mindset, but management had no objection. However, if management is against employee expression, a technical writer will not be able to do anything about the problem in isolation.
- *A problem of previous antagonisms.* One can think that psychological safety, and the cordial relations that result from it, cannot be freely established if for one reason or another and in a particular context, strong antagonisms within a team pre-existed the technical writer's efforts.
- *A problem of subjectivity on the part of the technical writer.* We will discuss this possibility in more detail below.

We think that some of the respondents do not realise the impact they have on their team. Our idea here isn't to contradict the respondents saying they do not contribute to the good atmosphere, but merely exploring a blind spot: the subjectivity of the respondents themselves.

First of all, one can think of the sheer personality of the technical writer. They must know one of the foundations of the job is talks and communication. If someone chooses to work in such a field, they might have a knack about it in the first place: the way of being and the professionalism of the technical writer are then closely intertwined.

However, if some technical writers are naturally gifted with social skills, chances are that they won't consider it when asked about their impact on their team. It does not go in their missions, they don't do it on purpose: it's not about the job. Hence a possibility that a few of our respondents overlooked this aspect of the question.

Second, not only does personality bleed into professionalism, but professionalism bleeds into social skills as well. As technical writers, we try to make the documents we write useful and entertaining enough; it's possible that, having caught the habit, we subtly do the same when speaking to people, so that they listen to us and a real exchange ensues. Thus, the technical writer's impact on communication is even stronger, and happens unbeknownst to everyone.

Conclusion

In this research article, we endeavoured to know if technical writers could be a 'secret asset' to a healthy enterprise culture — an enterprise culture that benefits everyone and that has specific needs to be carried out.

It is clear, after our studies, that the technical writers hold a choice position regarding this concept of healthy enterprise culture. Indeed, they:

- act as a link between different teams or departments,
- encourage psychological safety and risk-taking, two things very useful both for employers and employees,
- are a catalyst to social interactions as a whole,
- and sometimes do that without even noticing it.

Yet, about a third of the respondents think the healthy enterprise culture they are in stems from a deliberate will from their firms; and a majority of them are not afraid to ask questions, make mistakes and be wrong, which has to come from management some way or another as we further explained above. Obviously, a healthy enterprise culture cannot come from just one person, be they a one-man army or not.

In conclusion: are technical writers the secret asset of a healthy enterprise culture? Yes... and no. Yes, for all signs point to it. No, for as said when defining terms, a good atmosphere isn't enough to make an enterprise culture 'healthy'. A technical writer is still human, and an employee: without the agreement of and active help from the higher-ups, they can make things better but cannot do miracles.

A technical writer can't be a secret asset: they can be a great asset, if we let them be. But for that, management has to know their value and enhance it.

Bibliography

- Agase, K. - "[Ways your business can benefit from technical writing services](#)", in *Bizcatalyst* 360
- Brown, S. - "[Seven things to know about technical writing at Uber](#)" (2018)
- Burkus, D. - "[Work Friends Make Us More Productive \(Except When They Stress Us Out\)](#)" in the *Harvard Business Review* (2017)
- Cain, A. - "[Amazon will raise its minimum wage to \\$15 an hour —here's what it's really like to work there. according to employees](#)", in *The Business Insider* (2018)
- Duarte, S. - "[Why do you need a technical writer?](#)" (2019)
- Edmondson, A. - *Teaming: How Organizations Learn, Innovate, and Compete in the Knowledge Economy* (2012)
- Morel, C. - *Les décisions absurdes : comment les éviter* (2002)
- Stacey, R.D. - *Strategic Management & Organisational Dynamics* (2007)
- Not specified - "[Co-op experience with Ericsson](#)", on the Simon Fraser University website
- Not specified - "[Global strategy on occupational health for all: The way to health at work](#)", on the World Health Organization website
- Not specified - "[Technical Writing and Organizational Culture](#)", in *Technical Writing For Computer Science Software Engineering*