

# **Introduction: The Changing Face of Technical Communication in the Global Outsourcing Economy**

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This collection of essays examines the effects of outsourcing on technical communication and the work of its educators, students, and practitioners. If in order to connect with the audience, I had to introduce this book in terms of a common genre of technical communication, I would describe it as a user's manual. This book looks at an issue affecting the present of technical communication as a profession and academic discipline. Outsourcing is changing the face of the field as you read these lines, and the main purpose of this book, like a manual, is to give a state-of-the-art description of this situation in order to guide the user through a specific set of tasks. In academic environments, this book should assist administrators, faculty, and students (graduate or undergraduate) in their organizational or personal process of developing strategies for coping with the outsourcing phenomenon and dealing with opportunities that might arise because of this situation. Once that guiding purpose is accomplished, the authors and editors also intend to spark new ideas for research and discussion in the audience so they can generate their own action plan.

After reading this book, academic audience members should be better prepared to create or modify program specifications, course descriptions, and research or production assignments. These readers could embrace the international expansion of the field and develop skills with the goal of obtaining a competitive advantage. Workplace audiences could be represented by managers, staff writers, and

freelancers. These readers might already be involved in outsourcing projects and could be looking for ideas that would guide them in overcoming cross-cultural problems; or they could be gathering information about technical communication in other countries as a way of planning for the future. In academic or workplace environments, readers of this book can be in any country involved or planning to be involved in technical communication projects involving offshore outsourcing.

### DEFINING OUTSOURCING

Authors in this collection write about outsourcing mainly as a synonym for offshore outsourcing or *offshoring*, a term that has been defined as “the procurement of goods or services by a business or organization from an outside foreign supplier, typically to gain the benefits of labor arbitrage” (Brown & Wilson, 2005, p. vii). It is important to point out that this book does not cover outsourcing as the general *vertical de-integration* process that takes place “when a company decides to purchase a product or service from a source outside of the company. It generally refers to products or services that were once done in-house, now purchased from a source external to the company” (Hira & Hira, 2005, p. 199). The chapters included in this book look exclusively at outsourcing cases involving international transactions and operations.

It is impossible to ignore outsourcing as a controversial topic. The outsourcing debate has generated discussion about exporting jobs and also concern for the complexity of managing the production of documents at a distance, for training offshore workers, and for the cultural differences that may result in different expectations for outcomes. The topic of outsourcing has been portrayed recently as a hot issue in news media, political campaigns, and even pop-culture representations. Some commentators say that “outsourcing and the motives behind it are simply destructive of our way of life” (Dobbs, 2004, p. 2), while others say that offshore outsourcing is a consequence of globalization and that “home-sourcing to Salt Lake City and outsourcing to Bangalore were just flip sides of the same coin sourcing” (Friedman, 2005, p. 38). Although some individual contributors might have strong ideas leaning toward any side of the debate, this book as a whole does not promote a general opinion or prescription about outsourcing. Instead, it presents a balanced gathering of perspectives that should enable the readers to come up with their own perspectives on this issue.

From a technical communicator’s perspective, outsourcing projects are international by definition, vulnerable to cultural differences, and liable in legal and political dilemmas.

Outsourcing is international by definition because it involves offshore markets where writers are being hired to develop technical documentation for audiences that could be located anywhere in the world. The generic essence of the basic genres of technical communication makes the field susceptible to this kind of outsourcing. Unlike creative writing or even journalism, technical documents can

be reduced to simple repositories of headings, subheadings, and list items. Any academic bookstore in the United States probably has a dozen technical communication textbooks that present the field based on principles of simplicity in design and composition. When fundamental deliverables in any profession can be apparently expressed in checklists and general rules, anyone with critical-thinking skills and average professional-English proficiency can become a technical writer—in any country. Non-native English speakers can write technical documents for American audiences, and technological advancements can integrate them to production teams regardless of their geographical location.

Outsourcing is vulnerable to cultural differences because those non-native English speakers might be able to write an effective set of instructions for household appliances, but they might not understand the context in which the tool will be used. Being in another country and trained in English exclusively for business or professional situations, these writers can be in *acontextual* or *bicontextual* situations, in which their native values and beliefs are not represented in the documents they produce for a living. These cultural differences are not related exclusively to nationality or language; they can also be present in organizational climate or managerial practices. The American offices of a corporation might have standards and procedures that the Indian office of the same company might not understand or follow, or vice versa.

Outsourcing is liable in legal and political dilemmas because we are writing the story on technical communication offshoring with every new project. There is not much written when it comes to rules and regulations for teams exchanging technical information overseas. Furthermore, every country has its own set of rules, and in most cases they are not 100% compatible with American regulations. In this area, technical communication projects involving offshore writers can take place in an environment of uncertainty and doubt. Likewise, the political climate of an organization can be very different in the American headquarters and its international branches, and these discrepancies have the potential to generate conflict among collaborators or between writers and managers.

This international nature of offshore outsourcing, characterized by differences in culture and management styles, and subject to misinterpretations and problems with legal and political repercussions, gives structure to the chapters in this book.

## ORGANIZATION

*Outsourcing Technical Communications* is organized in three main sections: Outsourcing Practices by Region; Management and Cross-Cultural Communication Issues; and Legal, Ethical, and Political Implications. Each of these sections includes chapters addressing theoretical and practical implications of outsourcing in international environments.

Part I, Outsourcing Practices by Region, includes voices from different countries where technical writing is becoming a profession mainly because of

outsourced projects. It also includes chapters analyzing problems caused by sending American documentation tasks to specific countries. The opening chapter, “Technical Communication and IT Outsourcing in India—Past, Present, and Future,” justifies India’s prominent role in today’s international technical communication. Prashant Natarajan and Makarand Pandit, experienced technical writers and trainers in this field, explore the historical roots of technical writing in India, connecting it to religious texts written between 1500 BC and 1200 BC. The authors present a detailed account of the profession’s development in India and also analyze the bilingual skills of technical writers in India, where millions of professionals speak English as their main language in business and technical environments. The core of this chapter is a survey that was applied to members of India’s chapter of the Society for Technical Communication (STC) in order to determine their linguistic preferences and skills, and their experience in outsourcing projects.

Whereas Natarajan and Pandit portray the Indian perspective on the outsourcing debate, Carlos Evia brings in the American tradition looking for a contrasting effect. In “Defining Technical Communication in the United States and India: A Contrastive Analysis of Established Curricula and Desired Abilities,” Evia compares what it means to be a technical communicator in the United States to what the Indian market expects from professionals in this field. Evia’s chapter focuses on training and education options available for aspiring technical communicators in both countries. Upon analyzing course offerings and interviewing trainers and educators, Evia argues that the evolution of technical communication as a profession in India might lead to an interesting expansion of the field in the global economy. He also documents forces dividing the field in both countries, emphasizing the divide between academia and industry that affects technical communication in the United States.

In “Africa Goes for Outsourcing,” Michael Bokor faces the difficult challenge of making a whole continent of over 800 million inhabitants look attractive for outsourcing projects involving technical communication. Bokor acknowledges the political, geographical, linguistic, and social problems that affect Africa’s current potential for accepting outsourcing projects. However, he also presents success stories from call centers in Kenya, Ghana, and South Africa. His chapter includes a call for action that enables many African countries as potential outsource destinations in the same league as India and China for these types of projects. He also introduces the French component: many African countries have French-speaking professionals, who make the continent attractive for outsourcing projects aimed at French-speaking audiences.

If Bokor makes the audience look briefly at outsourcing from a non-English, non-American perspective, Petra Drewer and Charlotte Kaempf use that resource as the main element of their chapter. In “Outsourcing of Technical Communication Tasks from German-Speaking Contexts,” these authors look at outsourcing from the sending end, but their senders are not American companies. As it turns

out, German documentation projects are also susceptible to being sent to cheaper foreign markets from Austria, Germany, and Switzerland. Drewer and Kaempf compare definitions for terms related to outsourcing and technical communication in the United States and Germany, and then give data on the status of technical communication as a profession in German-speaking contexts, focusing on education programs and job opportunities.

The last region explored in this section is the United States-Mexico border. In “Approaching Outsourcing in Rhetoric and Professional Communication: Lessons from U.S.-Owned Maquilas in Mexico,” Barry Thatcher and Victoriano Garza-Almanza study the history of rhetoric, outsourcing, and technology in projects involving collaboration between the United States and Mexico. Conducting case studies in American-owned *maquiladoras* or *maquilas* (subcontracting production plants) in northern Mexico, Thatcher and Garza-Almanza show how Mexican engineers “translated” technical information to lineworkers in a mainly oral approach. Then they present the well-documented profiles of some workers who, without being aware of it, were doing outsourced technical communication work in a country where, at least on paper, such a field does not exist.

Part II, Management and Cross-Cultural Communication Issues, ponders the repercussions of outsourcing on the production cycle and management of information products. Moving from organizational culture to international issues, this section also examines what kinds of cross-cultural competencies and technologies are needed to work effectively in the outsourcing environment. JoAnn and Bill Hackos, in “The Information Developer’s Dilemma,” denounce what they consider to be a disruptive innovation coming from low-cost economies obtaining outsourced documentation jobs originated in the United States and Western Europe. They blame this shift in the professional market on high-speed, inexpensive worldwide communications. These authors claim that because of new communications technology, technical writers do not need to be physically in touch with subject-matter experts or end-users; therefore, technical writing jobs can be sent to offshore markets. They propose a plan that urges technical communicators to take an aggressive position and understand market forces with business objectives. By learning how to save money in their projects, they add, information developers might be able to compete with cheap labor from foreign workers.

Continuing the skills-building recommendations for competitive advantage introduced by Hackos and Hackos, Jim Melton invites American technical communicators to get involved in international training programs. In “Language, Culture, and Collaboration in Offshore Outsourcing: A Case Study of International Training Team Roles and Communication Competencies,” Melton wants to find out what competencies would assist technical communicators involved in international training projects. In order to answer his research questions, Melton conducted a case study inside a training program aimed at Japanese salespeople working for an American company in Hawaii. His findings

and recommendations cover a wide range of skills related to translation, rhetoric, collaboration, linguistics, and social and cultural differences.

In “The Implications of Outsourcing for Technical Editing,” Clint Lanier also urges American technical writers to gain specialized skills as a competitive advantage in the global economy. In this particular case, he introduces technical editors as mediators between outsourced writers and their client organizations in the United States. Lanier’s research included a virtual focus group with technical editors, in which they expressed their opinions and experiences dealing with cultural and rhetorical differences in outsourcing projects.

Part III, Legal, Ethical, and Political Issues, stems from the question of what kinds of legal and ethical issues are associated with outsourcing and international collaboration in technical communication projects. In “The Privacy Problems Related to International Outsourcing: A Perspective for Technical Communicators,” Kirk St. Amant uses a recent case of information blackmail to hypothesize on problems that could happen because of the exporting of personal medical or financial data to other nations. St. Amant talks about gray-market informatics: the process of an outsourced technical communicator stealing confidential information. He concludes the chapter by introducing a series of strategies that technical communicators can use to counter privacy threats in outsourcing.

St. Amant argues that gray-market informatics is possible because there is no actual regulation on privacy and confidentiality in outsourcing projects. In “Outsourcing Technical Communication: The Policy Behind the Practice,” Keith Gibson investigates this apparent lack of legislation and looks at the way in which the future of outsourcing is presented in political speeches. Particularly, he looks at the 2004 presidential campaign in the United States and studies how each candidate addressed the outsource debate.

Continuing Gibson’s analysis of outsourcing’s legal implications, the last chapter of this collection, “Obligations and Opportunities: Legal Issues in Offshore Outsourcing Technical Communication,” reviews policies and rules governing offshoring. Charlsye Smith Diaz writes in this chapter that most outsourcing projects rely on “soft law”—individual agreements between corporations, due to the lack of actual rules. She interviews legal specialists and suggests that technical communicators can work as facilitators who convene offshore outsourcing relationships.

The authors of this collection look at the controversial issue of offshore outsourcing from different perspectives based on nationality and personal bias, and grounded on professional specialization and interests. I hope their ideas can generate conversation and prompt readers to take action and get involved with technical communication in the global economy. The chapters should affect teaching and training programs in technical communication in countries interested in outsourcing for different reasons, and

should also bring new knowledge to decision making in projects from academia and industry.

### REFERENCES

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