

The Independent Contract Technical Writer: High Quality Documentation at a Reasonable Cost

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During an economic downturn, the task of writing manuals to explain how to use or maintain a product, or to explain the marketing features of a product, is often relegated to the engineers and IT people in an organization. It is felt they can do the work in their “spare” time. They know the product best -- they designed it. They can certainly communicate to others how the product is to be used and maintained, according to this philosophy.

The reality is, however, that *most engineers don't want to write manuals and often do not have good communication skills*. Their responsibility is engineering the product, not writing manuals. Too often the result is an adequate manual that does not provide a good company image or add significant value to the product.

While many recognize the value of a good technical writer, the company for which these engineers work may not need, or be able to afford, the services of a full-time technical writer. The company often turns to a large technical communications firm to write manuals or technical marketing communications for only the time needed. While such a firm will likely get the job done on time and at a lower cost than if the firm hired a full-time technical writer, there is a *less expensive* alternative available – the *experienced, independent contract technical writer*.

An experienced independent contract technical writer maintains a low overhead, considerably lower than a large technical communications firm or a full-time employee. Contract technical writers often don't have to pay for an office as they work out of their home or temporarily on-site. Rates can be kept lower because there are no owners, no supervisors and no janitorial services to be paid.

Another alternative that companies often use is a *temporary agency*. But, once again, this alternative comes at a premium over the independent contract technical writer. First, the quality of agency temps varies widely, so there is no assurance that the tech writer assigned to your company will work out. Second, an agency must charge enough to pay for their recruiter and other employees, as well as additional expenses, such as office expenses, 401K contributions and insurance for each employee.

The independent contract technical writer, on the other hand, has a reputation to maintain, so the work must maintain a high quality. The contract technical writer also keeps a portfolio of previous work that demonstrates competence. The independent tech writer has no recruiter, no other employees to pay, no office expenses and no additional employee expenses. There is only one person involved.

The independent is an experienced technical writer who has successfully completed a number of writing jobs in the past, a person that has most likely worked in the past as a

full-time employee in a large business environment, and who has demonstrated the professional ability to get documentation done on-time, at reasonable cost, and to the customer's satisfaction. The independent contract technical writer is also committed to the profession and realizes that future jobs depend on the quality of the current job.

In short, ***the independent technical writer is not only the lowest cost alternative to meet a company's technical communications needs, but also is the most likely to produce a very high quality product***, whether a manual, online help, eLearning script or other form of communication.