I recently had the opportunity to sit down with Russ Joens, 53, of Huntsville, AL, to discuss his experience as a Senior Technical Manager at Hexagon. We discussed his role and duties and spoke at length about the future and how he prepares for it. Plus, he gave insights on hiring practices for prospective technical communicators.

Joens knows a lot about changing technology and keeping up with the amorphous future. “The skills I brought to this job over 30 years ago are not relevant at all. . . I was working on a Unix mainframe and we were literally pasting with scotch tape pictures on the page” he said. Now he uses modern authoring tools such as Author-It. According to Joens, Author-It is a “collaboration product that is database-driven. What’s great about Author-It is that we can write stuff one time and share it across multiple topics.” Joens compared the topic-based, granular
approach to “documenting legos, in that we break stuff down into their small, contiguous part that we can reuse.” This allows a flexibility not available in linear-style writing such as a novel or newspaper article.

Joens develops his skillset with trends he sees in the industry. Three years ago, Joens and his team were still publishing to CHM, a compressed HTML file used for documentation that shipped with software, and they realized “that was really old-fashioned.” Now, the team creates documentation that goes online: “We’ve pretty much have gone online, and I see that’s the way of the future for everybody that’s not having to work on classified information.”

Transitioning to newer technologies offers many benefits. Joens explained that documentation will be faster for the user to find what they are looking for: “They are not having to go through an index or search through a 1,000-page PDF. They can do a quick search and get that nugget of information and move on with their job.” Joens meets user’s documentation needs from where those users are. Joens said, “One of the exciting things I see coming forward — we are going to start doing interactive training or tutorials. So, we’ve been doing videos and animated GIFS… But what can we do to get to that next step. To help people find out that information. And something that’s quick and easy to learn and covers their different learning styles.”

Transitioning impacts more than end users. Moving online supplies a valuable resource for technical communicators — analytics. Joens said, “We average 80,000 hits a month. We didn’t realize we had that big an audience. . . For years, I worked in a vacuum because I didn’t know if anybody was reading it. [I didn’t know] what they were reading.” He then posed a hypothetical scenario: “The software that I write has 60 documents, and we can see which one of those documents is the most popular. And then we can break it down and see where people are
looking.” This provides valuable feedback to the documentation team. They can focus their attention on those specific topics. It tells them “1) that area of the documentation has to be really well written with lots of examples and 2) we need to go back to development and say, ‘you might want to go back and look at the UX and look at the software because people are struggling here.’” Having quantifiable metrics empowers technical communicators to tailor their documentation and also become an advocate for their users across disciplines.

Tailoring documentation poses unique challenges that are further complicated when working with fragmented teams. Joens, as a Senior Technical Manager, splits his managerial attention between three continents and several time zones. “I log on around 5:45am,” he said. Because of time differences, he starts his day by meeting one of the writers every day of the week. He supervises several writers — three in Israel, two in India, several in Houston and Philadelphia, and a few scattered in Huntsville. He explained, “It’s really important for distributed teams to have communication. You cannot go days without talking to one another. It just doesn’t work.” Having those open lines of communication makes collaboration easier: “We have really fostered that collaboration. If you don’t know something, ask someone. You really have to have that team spirit. . . Otherwise as a group, it’s hard to write cohesively on a product.” Joens spoke to playing up the strengths of each writer to create a unified product. Knowing each writer and building that rapport is paramount to success.

Joens, when looking to the future for aspiring technical communicators, reiterated keeping your technical skills up to date. Hexagon is partnered with Udemy, which provides thousands of classes that Joens takes advantage of. “I’ve taken a PowerShell course,” he said, a skill he used when publishing documentation from Author-it to Fluid Topics. He emphasized, “Work on your technical skills. . . You know the word ‘technical’ comes first. I cannot stress
how important it is to keep your technical skills up to date and to have that technical drive.”

Emphasis on the technical motivates his hiring decisions: “When I’m hiring writers for my department, if I have a writer with good technical skills, but their writing needs a little bit of polish and I have another writer whose grammar is perfect and flawless and they are technologically timid. . . I will always take the person with technical aptitude.” Being inquisitive and the desire to figure out the puzzle is a necessary trait for technical communicators.

Joens wants technical communicators and the teams that build products to keep in mind the user’s workflow and what is working well. “I would like to see better UX design,” he said, “They are so bent on new, new, new; they break stuff that was working well.”

The future is one requiring increasing technical skills and a continual renewal of knowledge. He laughed, looking back at over thirty years of experience: “The skills I brought when I started this job are not relevant. At all. . . Just because you graduated from college doesn’t mean you are going to stop learning. You are always going to be learning.”