Denise Christa, who works as a Risk and Quality Manager at NMR Consulting in Huntsville, had plenty of advice and wisdom to share about the different ways – some winding trails and others straight paths – to becoming a technical communicator. Despite not intending to work in technical communication initially, she found that her education and professional experience meshed together to provide the set of skills and methods that a technical communicator needs.

At the start of our interview, Christa wondered how helpful her insights about the field could be as she explained, “My career is more of a meander than a trajectory.” However, her perspective from a broad range of academic and professional experience provided an excellent example of the importance of life-long learning and showed just how diverse technical communicators can and should be.

**Learning the Skills**

Since she hadn’t intended to become a technical communicator, Christa followed an unconventional path. She worked as a highly successful real estate agent until the 2008 housing crisis stalled out business in Huntsville. Christa decided to take a break from real estate and instead pursue a graduate education at The University of Alabama. She earned a Master’s degree in Library and Information Science, which she summarizes as “the organization and preservation of digital information,” and obtained the foundational skills she needed to later begin writing and curating digital technical documentation.

Afterward, Christa re-entered her career as a real estate agent but found that she no longer enjoyed the work as much. “I didn’t really know what I wanted, but I knew what I didn’t
want to do anymore,” she explained. So, she began a second Master’s program, this time focused on the business applications of information systems, and she began to pivot away from real estate.

While at UAH, Christa worked in a variety of positions using the range of research and writing skills she had gathered already – “I went from job to job just because of certain skills that I had, not because I wanted those particular jobs,” she explained. Eventually, though, Christa began working at a consulting company that used Lean Six Sigma, a method for managing professional and collaborative operations. When she was trained on using Lean and Six Sigma, everything began to fall into place. After beginning to understand why the principles of technical communication are important – “why do you want to document this information, why do you want to pass it on, what’s the purpose of it,” as she put it – the use of her skill set within technical communication became much clearer. “That’s what got me into it,” she explained about her experiences using Six Sigma. “Mapping out processes, documenting the processes, sharing the information – it all just sprang from there.”

Working as a Technical Communicator

In her current position with NMR Consulting, Christa jokingly called her job “sticking [her] nose in everybody’s business.” She manages many responsibilities as Risk and Quality Manager for the Research and Development Enterprise Collaboration Services (RECS) program, which is a contracted project with the Missile Defense Agency (MDA) to provide a range of collaboration services. Though her current position has an unusual title for a technical communicator, Christa employs the communication skills she has gathered – like using Lean Six Sigma and managing digital documents – every day at NMR.

On the Quality side of her title, Christa writes and curates thorough documentation, including textual Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and visual workflows that detail how project members and teams are fulfilling their tasks within the RECS contract and within the government’s requirements. Writing and curating documentation for the project leans heavily on Christa’s technical communication skills, as she must communicate federal and contract procedures to other project members, then document their workflows within the provided guidelines. In these workflow documents, Christa explains, “We say ‘This is how we do it and meet within the federal government guidelines.’” After the documented work is completed, Christa will check again “to see that the project managers are following the process, doing what they’re supposed to do, and documenting it.”

Additionally, as the Risk Manager, Christa meets with project managers to discuss potential risks to their projects. Within these meetings, she uses a copy of the RECS contract with the MDA and checks, “Are we meeting what we say we were going to do?”

Throughout her processes as Risk and Quality Manager, Christa frequently works with RECS project members – the subject matter experts for her technical communication – to document their tasks. On NMR’s RECS team, she has had generally good experiences with her SMEs, who are more than willing to provide the information she needs to complete the required documents. “If you’re a software developer, you want to be writing the code – you don’t want to be writing a ten-page paper telling how something works,” she explained.
On top of these responsibilities, Christa also organizes the central document control system in Microsoft SharePoint, where all of the documentation she produces with the RECS project teams is stored. From these SharePoint files, Christa can provide instructions, workflow diagrams, and other documents to anyone with questions about project tasks. While summarizing how she approaches document curation and sharing, she explained, “You make sure that the information is correct, that people have access to it, and that it’s in a digestible format… no one wants to read 20-page SOPs.”

Since NMR began requiring telework over a year ago, Christa’s normal work day has shifted. She begins early in the morning, around 6:30 AM, and starts her day with a list of what to do and write. “It’s easier for me to log on at 6:30 in the morning to work,” she confessed. “There’s not a lot of people around, so I can write in peace.” Then, from around 10 AM to 1 PM, she spends her time in meetings with project managers, RECS team members, and her supervisor. Finally, she spends the afternoon completing her tasks and writing for the day before logging off. When considering how teleworking has changed her day-to-day experience, Christa said, “I’m much closer to some employees now than I would’ve been, like the folks out in Colorado.” Working remotely has made her colleagues in Huntsville and across the country almost equally accessible, she explained.

**A Professional’s Views and Advice**

Throughout her path from real estate, graduate education, and a wandering professional track, Christa gathered an understanding of the skills a technical communicator needs to succeed. She cites three central skills – communication, interpersonal, and technical skills – as the most important for a technical communicator. As a technical communicator, she says, “you need to be able to take that information and communicate it with the outside world.” However, getting the information you need from SMEs and other individuals requires interpersonal skill, or “being able to work with their personalities,” as Christa phrases it. Lastly, communicators need to be able to use and navigate the necessary tools, such as Microsoft Word or other specialized tools – and be able to find help for these tools whenever it’s needed. “I have to realize when I don’t know how to do something, and go to somebody that does,” she explained.

For any aspiring or new technical communicators, Christa highly recommends learning the tools and methods that will help when thinking through risks and producing documentation. Her early experience with Lean Six Sigma colored her approach to technical communication and process documentation. “A lot of it is asking, ‘What do you do next?’” she reflected. Being able to identify skipped steps, finding the missing information, and using logic to organize your documented processes are incredibly helpful tools with which to start.

Christa’s career followed a more meandering path, but her insight provides excellent guidance for budding technical communicators at any stage in their careers. Learning and practicing with the skills and tools that can help you think like a technical communicator are vital – no matter whether you’re learning in a college course or in an entirely different field.