Ted Parker: Changes from Journalism to Technical Communication

By Maximiliano Alonso

Technical communicators are often called architects of information because they create accessible paths for information to be meaningful to end users. Historians and journalists do the same with narrative but technical communicators take the path of technical language and organization rather than emplotment and prose. It is the constant changing organization of information that makes technical communicators architects of information. They continually construct the pathways of knowledge in companies and organizations so that information becomes accessible and useful.

Ted Parker is an architect of information at ADTRAN, a successful telecommunications company headquartered in Huntsville, Alabama, but he is originally from Chicago. Although Parker is now in technical communication, he obtained his early education in journalism at the Ohio State University. His specific studies were in the segments of the news editorial and broadcast journalism. Although Parker was interested in journalism, he did not find it easy to secure employment. When he graduated, the news editorial segments of journalism (newspaper) were in decline. Parker noticed that much of the world was turning to innovative technologies, so he decided to apply skills that he already had, such as writing and organization, and then go into the technical aspects of those new industries.

According to Mr. Parker and many other technical communicators, a major skill in technical communication is related to journalism. This skill is the ability to gain information from others. Parker shared that these investigative skills are just as essential for the technical communicators as they are for journalists to gather information. Communication with people is meaningful in technical communication. Although much of the work is done around software and engineering, it is important to remember that a technical communicator must be able to communicate and create a connection with the creators of that technology to gather information. According to Ted Parker, an important skill besides writing ability for technical communicators to acquire is good interpersonal communication skills. This will enable them to extract information in different cultural and political currents in a workplace. Another important skill is having the ability to understand technology.
Extracting information comes down to two things for Ted Parker: interpersonal skills and company culture. Interpersonal skills involve the exchange of ideas and information in verbal, written, and other forms. Interpersonal skills allow for information and ideas to be exchanged with less tension among technical communicators and subject matter experts. A company’s culture also affects the way technical communicators can get information. Some companies have a culture that supports technical communicators, which facilitates the process of obtaining the correct information about a product. Parker says, “one of the hardest aspects is working for a company that wants customer documentation but doesn’t have a good company culture to support it.” Parker believes ADTRAN supplies great support to its technical communicators.

Speaking on ADTRAN’s company culture, he said:

…we have “buy-in” from these organizations to provide information, to review what we produce, and to approve the final deliverables. To achieve this goal, we operate in a Safe Agile environment, in which technical publications and the engineering teams collaborate to determine the deliverables during 10-week planning and development cycles… It is a collaboration in which commitments are made and every attempt is made to meet those commitments by all stakeholders.

For Ted Parker, since ADTRAN is set up as an Agile company, being a technical communicator means being responsible for multiple projects and deadlines. For him being a technical communicator at ADTRAN and in general means, “being able to architect information in a usable format...you can’t just slap it on a piece of paper and call it a document... it needs to be usable to the consumer.” Early in his education in Technical Communication, usability was not stressed or linked to the industry as much as it is today. Now, Parker has seen the necessity for usability in Technical Communication because high tech companies must make their complex products usable. According to him, technical communicators are architects of information, but they can also be considered architects of usability.

When asked what aspects of Technical Communication he emphasizes the most, his response was that technical communicators must have proficient writing, an ability to understand different levels of technologies, project/time management, and an ability to extract information. It is the aspect of understanding technology that is evident in his earlier switch from journalism to technical communication. Parker went back to school to learn the engineering and more technical side of communication. To him, this meant learning and understanding new technologies and merging that with the writing skills he already had obtained in his journalism training.

According to Parker, understanding new technologies is a common struggle for most technical communicators. He noted that learning and understanding technologies is just as important as having proficient writing skills. He went on to say, “To write to it, you have to understand it.” I asked him what his advice was on learning a new technology. He recommended looking at what training information is available at a company. For example, at ADTRAN, he mentioned that the company has an educational department that provides classes for many technologies. Another thing he advises is to try to interact with a product from the customer’s perspective. Any question that a user may have about a product, those are the questions to ask subject matter experts. Parker circled this back to the ability of technical communicators to extract information from subject matter experts. By learning and asking genuine questions about a technology or a product, the technical communicator facilitates the exchange of information because, according to Parker, subject matter experts are more willing to provide information when someone shows genuine interest.

Change is a word that can summarize much of my interview with Ted Parker in regard to his career. Although Parker is no longer in the industry of providing information through journalism in a newspaper setting in Chicago or Ohio, he is still in the industry of extracting and providing information, that is, he is still in communication. He has successfully repositioned himself within the writing and the electronics of communication here in the South. Ted Parker
has seen a change in careers early on, and he has also seen a change in Technical Communication itself, the old-style documentation of printing and stapling has disappeared, throughout the country. Architect of information is a great way to describe a technical communicator, but, in Ted Parker's case, it also is precise to underscore an ability to adapt to constant changes of information pathways in technical communication.