Young and driven, Claire Mitchel Penton has taken on the technical communication world in Huntsville, Alabama. She is a recent graduate of the University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAH) and a current employee at Hexagon PPM. Penton has an inspiring story of personal growth that began many years ago while she was still in high school and has flourished as she has emerged as a technical communicator.

**Discovering Technical Communication**

As most younger siblings do, Penton looked up to her older sister as she attempted to find a career to fall in love with. Penton’s sister went into college with many aspirations but did not choose a path until the end of her first year of school. Determined to figure out exactly what to study before stepping foot onto the UAH campus, young Penton began researching possible careers while still in high school.

The English major is a broad subject with many possible career pathways. Penton began researching different jobs for English graduates and happened to discover the field of technical communication. As soon as she found this, she said, “Okay, sounds good,” and has never looked back. Now she has a BA in English, a minor in Technical Communication, and a Masters degree with a Technical Communication certificate. Her journey hasn’t always been easy, but throughout her time spent at UAH her doubts faded as her plans solidified into something tangible.

**Building Foundational Skills**

Penton’s time at UAH was instrumental to her career as she took many courses and built up a plethora of skills. Penton believes that, in addition to writing, being able to efficiently
communicate through different mediums, like computer programming, graphic design, video design, and multimedia presentations, is invaluable to a technical communicator. Many jobs she saw while job searching also requested XML/HTML knowledge. While mastering one program or skill can be beneficial, Penton emphasized the value of building skillsets with a variety of programs over focusing on one specific software product. Recruiters want to see that you are able to pick up and learn new skills quickly.

One way to practically demonstrate the ability to learn new skills is to build up a portfolio of different sample products. Penton’s experience at UAH and specifically Dr. Ryan Weber’s technical communication course helped her build up hard skills in a variety of mediums, such as Madcap Flare and XML. Additionally, Penton advised prospective technical communicators to find online volunteer writing opportunities and learn specifics about the culture of the location they want to work in. Here in Huntsville, the subculture of technical writing tends to be government contract work; each area has a unique writing culture.

Another way that Penton gained experience while in school was through being a graduate teaching assistant in the English Department. The skills she learned while teaching are transferring to her current job as she more fully steps into her secondary role at Hexagon serving as an Instructional Designer. Penton says that “everything is [beginning to mesh] under a broad technical writing branch” as teaching is being combined with technical writing. This is unsurprising since technical communication’s purpose is to “bridge the gap between products and their intended audience.”

**Working at Hexagon**

Penton began working at Hexagon back in June of this year. Due to the nature of reality during COVID, she has been working remotely for most of her time there. On an ideal day, she works from 7:30am to 3pm, splitting her time equally between her Writing Team and Software Development Team. However, realistically, her workload is dictated by each team’s specific needs for the day. Hexagon uses an Agile team-based development methodology in its work structure.

An Agile structure is in nature team-focused; communication is extremely important at Hexagon. As an extrovert, Penton loves this aspect of Hexagon’s community. She is always in constant communication with coworkers, team members, and her boss. The only downside to this structure is maintaining stamina without a break, which could be even more difficult for an introverted individual in her same position.

Penton’s job is flexible and allows her to design a personalized schedule around what works best for her lifestyle. Even [re-COVID, she was only going into the office twice a week. In the future, Penton sees more flexibility for technical writers. When job searching before working at Hexagon, Penton saw many companies looking for 9-5 candidates, but she believes that this will most likely shift now that more people have adjusted to working from home.

One hard thing with COVID and the Agile structure at Hexagon has been the lack of in-person interaction Penton has had with her coworkers. Just a couple weeks ago, Penton saw some of her coworkers (whom she had been working with for months) for the first time on a conference call with a new employee. Not being in the office, just one cubicle away from her boss, has been challenging, but it is a part of the new reality that is starting to take shape in society today.

**Growing in Self-Confidence**

Through Penton’s time at Hexagon, she has been able to grow in many ways. She came into her job as a User Assistance Consultant/Instructional Designer with no previous job experience outside of course work at UAH. Penton is the youngest employee in her office. This age difference has been challenging, but equally rewarding as she has been able to disprove her insecurities by becoming successful in her career.
Penton feels confident in her skills and understands what she brings to the table. She is able to genuinely help customers while having fun. Penton says that she “loves Hexagon” and that it has “a great work environment.” She likes her coworkers, boss, teams, and work community. She loves the flexibility of being able to listen to music and podcasts while working, and she truly enjoys what she does.

Offering some final advice, Penton emphasizes the importance of being confident in the skills that you have. If she were talking to her younger self, she would say that “there is a place for you and your specific skills.” It is so important that technical communicators see the need that companies have for them. Penton explains that while some of their work may seem unnecessary, like warning customers not to “put the toaster in the sink when you plug it in,” the need for technical communicators is dire as they serve as a translator that “provides a bridge that people can walk on if they so choose.”