

Stress Management for the Technical Communicator

By Warren Singer

Part 1 – What do Technical Writers Find Stressful?

Whether you are considering technical communications as a career or are new to the profession, you probably want to know if this is a high stress occupation. Technical communicators sometimes complain of stress and someone entering this profession for the first time needs to be able to identify and cope with job stress.

Part 1 describes some of the stressors that technical communicators are typically exposed to in the work environment. Part 2 discusses strategies for dealing with work-related stress.

What is Stress?

Stress occurs when you perceive outside demands as being greater than your resources. Stress is the physical and psychological reactions you have to these "unbalanced" situations, which may last for 10 minutes or for years (source: <http://www.intelihealth.com>).

People experiencing stress may feel tension, anger, fear and frustration. Adrenaline levels increase, blood pressure rises and the heart rate increases. Prolonged stress, over a long period, causes health and immune system breakdown.

Stress is a natural part of life. A certain amount of stress can be considered as normal and even beneficial for healthy functioning. Facing mild to moderate stress makes you excited and can provide energy and other potentially positive benefits. However, when stress rises beyond a level where you feel you can cope, you may experience *distress*.

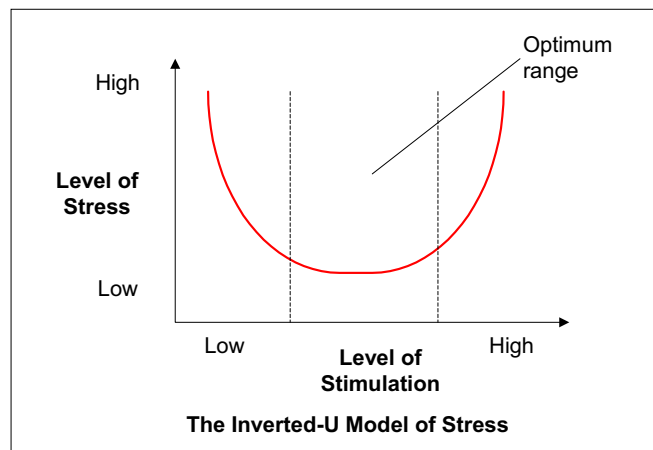


Figure 1. The Stress Curve

Figure 1 illustrates that a certain amount of stimulation is beneficial to healthy functioning. Too little stimulation can result in boredom, while too much stimulation can cause anxiety and panic.

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How do technical communicators rate their level of work stress?

Within the profession, there is a wide variation in the reported levels of stress. Some technical communicators consider their profession to have a low stress level, while others indicate a high level.

Techwr-I conducted a poll (August 2001) where technical communicators were asked to rate how stressful they found their jobs. 14.7% indicated their jobs were very stressful, 39.7% indicated moderately stressful and 21.6% indicated only slightly stressful. The results of this survey are available at: <http://www.raycomm.com/techwhirl/>

How do Technical Communicators Compare to Other Professions?

Other resources provide job comparisons of various professions. The [Jobs Rated Almanac](#) 2001, published annually by Les Krantz, ranks 250 professions based on a range of job demands that are considered to evoke stress. Technical communicators were rated as having a relatively moderate to medium level of stress, when compared to other professions.

The stress ranking provided for technical communicators is based on the large workloads, tight deadlines, stringent demands for quality and the exposure to criticism characteristic of many technical and marketing writer jobs.

What do Technical Communicators find Stressful?

Online forums, such as the Techwr-I digest provide an indication of the variety of concerns communicated by technical communicators. In an informal survey I conducted in August, I asked technical communicators from two online forums¹ to list the five largest stressors in their work and the strategies that they used to cope. This section examines some of the job factors that are *perceived* by technical communicators as stressful.

Technical Communicators Most Common Stressors
Work overload and time pressures
Last-minute changes
Difficulty with subject matter experts
Problems with managers
Limited knowledge of technology or access to a product
Poorly defined and managed projects
Computer problems
Desktop equipment
Job security
Lack of control over the work environment

¹ Thanks and acknowledgements to the members of TECHWR-L and techshoret for their participation in this survey.

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Work overload and time pressures

Technical communicators work in an environment characterized by high workloads and tight schedules. Documentation projects need to be completed in time for delivery dates and insufficient time may have been budgeted for this. As companies tighten their belts and cut back on staff, writers are expected to handle more tasks and work longer hours. The combination of too many tasks, tight deadlines and long working hours can add to stress levels and result in fatigue and burnout.

Jane Carnall expresses it succinctly when she states: *“Too much work to do in too little time. This can mean something like six months to do a 12 month project, or one person working on a project that has work for three.”*

Sella Rush lists *“Last minute deadlines”* as a major stressor, and goes on to explain: *“I’m talking hours, sometimes; for major projects, less than a week; or what’s worse, the ASAP, which means someone’s constantly breathing down your neck.”*

For contract writers, the need to bring in additional projects may result in commitment to more tasks than they can handle. Contract writers must also balance family and work commitments, which can add additional stress, as Paula Stern, an independent contract writer, notes: *“As a working mother, I’m expected to keep the kids, the house, the husband, etc. etc. and yet deliver the manual when they need it.”*

Last-minute changes

In addition to tight deadlines, technical communicators are also expected to handle constant changes to features, often at the last minute before a product needs to be shipped. This may be because the writer is often involved only at the last stages of development or because reviewers respond late to their deadlines for reviewing the documentation.

One result of this is documentation that may contain errors or be of inferior quality.

Jane Carnall lists as her major job stressor: *“Last minute changes to the software entailing last minute detailed changes to the documentation, which usually means the documentation going out hastily proofread, which sometimes means humiliating small errors creep through”.*

Difficulty with Subject Matter Experts

Problems with Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) is a commonly cited source of stress for technical communicators. Technical communicators must often compete for the scarce time available to subject matter experts, some of whom may not be willing to invest the time in explaining concepts and reviewing documents – especially with a new writer.

Difficulty extracting information from an SME can place stress on already tight workloads and cause backlogs.

Geoff Hart indicates some of the problems with SMEs: *“SMEs making undocumented changes in the interface or underlying algorithms, SMEs forgetting an agreement to keep me posted about such changes, lazy and careless documentation reviews.”*

The SME may also not have the skills to explain a concept to the writer in a clear and coherent manner. Rebecca Downey lists this problem as: *“Bad teachers (people who think that an explanation means repeating the same definitions over and over again) ”*

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Part of the problem with SMEs may lie in the perception of the contribution and status of technical communicators, especially if you are a new writer. Mary Shubow notes that: *“tech writers are sort of second class citizens in high-tech companies, not really techies and usually foreigners [contract writers], outsiders on two counts.”*

Limited knowledge of technology or access to a product

Technical communicators are usually not experts in a technology or product. They are nevertheless expected to understand a technology within a short period. Sella Rush describes this: *“No matter how much I learn, I never catch up to everyone in my office. I know I'm not supposed to be at expert level for all subjects, but the result is that every conversation I have puts me at a disadvantage.”*

Writers may also have limited access to the product. When access to the product that is being documented is limited, the writer may have to rely more on the SME for accurate information. Tracey Houston describes the problem of: *“Not being allowed access to/having limited access to “play” with the software/machine/product you are writing about.”*

Problems with Managers

Micro-management refers to the type of manager who controls every aspect of your duties and limits your independence. This is often cited as a source of stress. While as a new writer, you may benefit from having the constant guidance and feedback of an experienced writer, this can create friction if your supervisor expects you to always “do things their way”, without any scope for ingenuity and initiative. At the other end of the spectrum are supervisors who provide no support or guidance.

Jane Carnall notes: *“Lack of support from management: lack of respect: lack of acknowledgement of the hard work you put in.”*

Glenn Maxy describes this as: *“Arbitrarily being prevented from doing what needs to be done by pointy-haired bosses.”*

If expectations have not been clarified, and your co-workers or supervisor has a different expectation of your role or of your contribution to a specific project, this can lead to friction.

Says Yaacov Gerber: *“I have found the two most stressful parts of the job are office politics and failure to take advantage of all my talents.”*

Poorly defined and managed projects

In-house writers and more commonly contract writers sometimes encounter poorly defined projects, where ownership is not clear and features and deadlines are constantly changing. This may be more characteristic of beta version products, still undergoing development or companies where work processes have not been clearly defined. Such projects seem to hang in limbo and demand constant energy and time. This can be a problem for contract writers, who need to balance projects from several clients and who bill per project.

Ami Isserof describes the stress resulting from: *“Contradictory requirements and instructions and vague and ambiguous information.”*

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Computer problems

Technical communicators use a variety of desktop publishing and graphic software tools, which need to be properly installed and configured. Installing new applications can result in time spent discovering and solving software glitches. Other problems may relate to converting documents to other formats, printing documents in online or paper format, or to the operating system. As a new writer, you may also not be familiar with a product or tool, and may require time to learn its features and limitations.

An additional problem for technical communicators may be budget restrictions for purchasing the necessary tools needed to do their jobs. Laura MacLemle writes: *“Tool limitations can affect the quality of your output. Sometimes a TW has no choice but to use the available tools, whether or not they are the best tools for the job. Limitations may be based on budgetary restrictions or company-wide access to documentation.”*

Desktop equipment

Technical communicators rely on their desktop equipment to complete their tasks. Your monitor, mouse and keyboard and chair can all play an important part in body stress, leading to eye strain, back problems and carpal tunnel syndrome symptoms. A monitor that is not IVR protected can cause stress and damage to the eyes. Incorrect use of the keyboard and mouse can lead to repetitive stress on wrist and fingers. An uncomfortable chair, with a soft back can result in back strain.

Sandy Noymer indicates one such physical stressor: *“Typing for many hours, often at a desk and computer that are poorly designed. Frequently, this leads to RSI/CTD (repetitive stress injury/cumulative trauma disorder), which can be painful, disabling, and very, very stressful.”*

Job security

The current economic situation has many technical communicators worried about their positions. New or junior writers may be the first to be let go when a company downsizes. For contract writers, companies can cancel their contracts at a moments notice or decide not to continue working with a contractor. Adjusting to a new job or contract, or to layoffs and restructuring within your company, can be stressful.

Mary Shubow states: *“the instability of the current [economic] situation is stressful for all high-tech employees at all levels. It's hard to see your friends fired, and you always wonder when your turn may come.”*

Says Carol Chung: *“I worry if my deliverables are not considered essential, how much job security do I have...”*

Technical communicators also need to keep up with the changes in their profession, as Mark Levinson explains: *“While you're mastering one technology, another technology is becoming fashionable and making your skills obsolete.”*

Lack of control over the work environment

New technical communicators and even experienced writers often have little control over their office environment or tasks. The inability to influence the environment can be reflected in specific areas, or this may be a general problem. Usually, technical communicators cannot dictate what projects they are handling, the people they work with or their deadlines. Lack of control could also be reflected in a combination of the other

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stressors discussed in this article. This can contribute to feelings of helplessness in the work environment.

Jane Carnall describes this as: *“Feeling of futility: nothing you accomplish is worthwhile or getting anywhere.”*

Stress - When you perceive outside demands as being greater than your resources

It usually takes the combination of several stressors to trigger *distress*.

Says Bill Swallow: *“Stress is relative. Some people sweat bullets at night dreading the above. Some consider them a welcome challenge that comes with the job. Sometimes these things bug me, sometimes they don't. Usually several need to be happening at a time to get my tension level up.”*

While this article has concentrated on some of the more stressful aspects of being a technical communicator, many technical communicators indicate low levels of job stress. Daren Barefoot considers technical communications as one of the least stressful professions, since *“Typically, you work in a safe, danger-free environment. Your work is not on the critical path of a product release. Relative to other parts of the company your work has only a small impact on your company's health and for the most part, if you get something wrong, it's not going to result in catastrophe.”*

Conclusion

Stress is an integral part of our lives, and technical communicators are exposed to stressful events, just as in any profession. Learning about some of these stressors in advance may help you decide whether technical communications is the career for you. This article may also help to prepare you for stressors that you could encounter on your first job. However, it is important to remember that stressors may not necessarily have a negative impact. Many of these stressors can actually be a challenge and a motivating factor in your performance, enabling you to achieve the maximum out of yourself.

Part 2 of this article describes strategies that can be used to cope with the stressors that were described in this section.