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Summer 2005

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First in a new British series on technical communication

The Economics of Technical Documentation

By **A J Marlow**

Publisher: Marlow Durndell Publishing, Price: £10.00, ISBN: 1 873407 03 3

Reviewed by **Gavin Ireland MISTC** and **Linda Robins MISTC**

This is the first in a series of 48-page books on aspects of technical communication; others are due to be published during 2005 and 2006. If this book is indicative of the style, level and quality of the others, I fully expect to be buying them all. I can certainly recommend this volume as a 'must-have' for the technical communicator.

Purpose

The book sets out to provide guidance on the 'fundamental economic skills' likely to be required by a technical communicator working in a commercial environment, including:

- Costing
- Estimating
- Budget control.

From a philosophical perspective, the book also demonstrates that there are commercial consequences for all activities, processes and decisions associated with the production of technical documentation. There are chapters on cost-effectiveness and the use of outsourced or in-house services.

Content

Each chapter contains guidance, worked examples and sample layouts as appropriate. The material chosen is such that the examples are relevant to a wide range of document types, organisations and individuals.

The factual information covering principles, standard terminology and rules is well presented. The guidance is authoritative with the authentic ring of the 'voice of experience'. (The 'Estimating' chapter is particularly comprehensive and could stand alone as a guide on that topic.) The 'philosophical' perspective of the last two chapters is thought-provoking and covers ground that is rarely considered by project managers and organisations.

Linda's perspective

Most of my experience in technical communication has involved detailed

sizing, estimating and costing in order to sell documentation at a profit. I have worked on some long-term, iterative projects (in software documentation) where we have developed and refined metrics. For the most part, I have not had specific guidance. The organisation has usually imposed rules for reporting and recording, without advice on the extent of monitoring, frequency of data gathering and so on. The secret of success in a project often lies here!

As I was reading each chapter, I would just start to think, 'What about...?' (for example, sizing by task-oriented metrics from past projects) when I would find the topic covered in the right place and with appropriate detail. The only extra that I would have liked to see is a development of the 'Contingency Allowances' section in the 'Estimating' chapter to cover risk management, as many projects will formalise contingency with a risk register (giving the prospect of recouping specific contingency funds if a risk is realised). This subject is a hot favourite of mine and is also of importance to most ISTC members, whether directly in their work or to maintain awareness of the bigger picture. However, I have since discovered that it is covered in the next title in this series of books.

The book is also very readable.

Gavin's perspective

As a novice in economics (it's been a long time since I've considered myself a novice technical communicator), I've never really done much more than educated 'guesstimating'.

When I received my copy of this book, my first reaction was, 'Oh no, a useful but complex and difficult read'. So imagine my surprise when I picked it up and didn't put it down again until I'd read the first three chapters.

As a lone technical author and a one-time independent author, I've often needed to produce estimates and

costings and I've always used the tried and tested method of best-guessing. This method has served me well but rarely proves totally accurate and carries the risk of missing deadlines or having to work very long days and weeks to make up for poor guesswork.

I found the book exceptionally easy to read and understand, containing plenty of relevant examples and aimed at a UK readership rather than being another American import that doesn't quite fit. It shows that, by building up information over a few projects, I can easily and quickly improve the accuracy of my quotes and thereby increase my efficiency. In fact, since starting this review, I've already begun putting the advice into practice.

The book describes each step and uses examples that are specific to technical documentation in the UK. It also examines some wider-ranging topics consider, such as printing compared with online delivery, single sourcing, localisation and outsourcing.

I have never seen such an effective and easy-to-read book for those who are responsible for estimating documentation projects and have no financial background or training. For £10, you really can't go wrong. I, for one, am looking forward to the rest of the series. **C**

Andrew Marlow MISTC has over 25 years' business experience including 20 years in the IT industry, specialising in the field of technical communications. He holds numerous graduate and post-graduate qualifications in a wide range of subjects including science, computing, manufacturing and business administration.

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