

Going Green

as a

Technical Communicator

BY CHERYL LANDES | *Fellow*

There's no better way to make a difference than when you can do something you love to change the world. And for us, that passion is effective, clear communication.



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ANYONE WHO HAS watched a Muppet movie starring Kermit the Frog has heard his “it’s not easy being green” lament. Maybe being green is challenging for a frog, but from an industrial perspective, green is gold. Economists now use the term *The Green Collar Era* to refer to the 21st century because of the increasing numbers of new jobs created in resource conservation, alternative energy development, pollution reduction and cleanup, and recycling.

Customers are also demanding change. They’re voting with their wallets by buying products from companies demonstrating social and environmental responsibility. At the same time, younger generations prefer working with companies who are making a difference in the world and conserving resources. This shift is creating dramatic, positive effects on how companies are doing business.

All of this is good news for job seekers. It’s even better news for technical communicators, because our skills are desperately needed.

Where are the green jobs?

Statistics vary on the number of green jobs in the United States and where the jobs actually are. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were 3.1 million jobs in 2010, the latest year with available data. Other groups that track job data report lower numbers. Opinions on the regions of the country with the most jobs also vary, although New England and the West Coast are consistent in the top rankings.

One reason for the variations is that “in the absence of standard definitions and data, strikingly little is known about its nature, size, and growth at the critical regional level,” Mark Muro, Jonathan Rothwell, and Devashree Saha wrote in “Sizing the Clean Economy: A National and Regional Green Jobs Assessment,” an article for the Brookings Institute in July 2011. Another reason, and probably the most important, is the confusion in the actual definition of *green jobs*.

CareerOneStop, a site sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor’s Employment and Training Administration, defines green jobs as “any occupation that is affected by activities such as conserving energy, developing alternative energy, reducing pollution, or recycling.” But during the past year, experts are seeing a new trend: Green permeates all industries.

Kevin Doyle, principal of the Green Economy consultancy and contractor at the New England Clean Energy Council, says that the green industry now includes any companies participating in sustainable activities, such as recycling, using recycled materials, and retrofitting older facilities to save energy. Companies that sell products to other companies practicing sustainability also fall under the green industry category.

Bill Bean, president of Green Planning and Coaching in Lee, MA, agrees with Kevin. He predicts that the term *green* “will be going away soon.”

So what does this mean for technical communicators? Opportunities are increasing everywhere!

How great is the demand for technical communicators?

Every time I attend any meeting about green careers or other topics in the green industry, I ask this question. The answer is always the same: Our skills are needed in all aspects of writing, from creating technical reports on research to publishing case studies on corporate sustainability programs.

On 6 April 2011, the University of Washington’s Professional and Continuing Education sponsored a panel discussion called “Retooling for a Green Future.” During this discussion, the moderator and all five panelists stressed that communication skills are more important than a master’s degree or certificate in green disciplines.

“We need people that can write, and people that can communicate, that can take these ideas that will make them known to everybody,” said moderator Charlie Cuniff, director of the Seattle Office of Sustainability & Environment.

Cathy Conolly, senior wetland manager at ESA Adolfsen, added, “I think there are a lot of opportunities for communications specialists who work in incorporating green information—in terms of presenting green information and bringing in the public.”

Johanna Jobin, the sustainability products manager for Millipore in Billerica, MA, echoed Conolly’s comments during another panel discussion on green careers at a The Indus Entrepreneurs Boston (TiE Boston) meeting in Waltham the next day. Jobin said the greatest demand is for skilled marketing writers who have a strong grasp of technology—in other words, technical marketing writers.

So why technical marketing writers? “A good marketing department listens to its consumers,” Susan Dobscha, associate professor of marketing at Bentley University in Waltham, MA, said at the 2011 Green Careers Conference in Marlboro, MA. “The true role of marketing is to listen to your consumer and respond.” Marketers balance the needs of the consumer with the greater good. Top-quality marketing communications play a substantial role in this balance.

Excellent communication also helps stop greenwashing before it starts. Dobscha says that greenwashing typically originates from an “uneducated manager, not the marketing department.” Then companies try to retool what they do, which can result in unintentional greenwashing. “Think about your role in your company as helping the company to steer away from greenwashing activities.”

As communicators, that role presents many opportunities.

What types of projects do green communicators do?

I started working as a green communicator long before the term *green* was fashionable. When my career started

as a technical communicator in 1991, the common terms for my work were *environmental writing* or *environmental communication*. Most of the work stemmed from growing environmental regulations, and that's how I broke into technical communication.

When I graduated from the University of Oregon's School of Journalism with a degree in public relations, my career options were limited. Public relations is almost impossible to break into for new college graduates in the Northwest, so I began working as a secretary for the State of Oregon. Two-and-one-half years later, I moved to Seattle and landed a secretarial job for the accounting department at Crowley Marine Services, a worldwide marine transportation company. As part of my job, I edited monthly reports for the controller and his four assistant controllers. Six months after I started there, I was promoted into the administrative assistant pool for the company's president and five vice presidents.

Shortly after my promotion, I began editing and writing reports and memos for the vice president of the Environmental, Safety, and Quality Assurance Department. The regulatory paperwork for his department had almost doubled by then, thanks to the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill in 1989. The maritime industry is heavily regulated in general, but the tanker's grounding prompted the State of Alaska, followed by the other states along the West Coast and eventually the federal government, to add and tighten regulations regarding transporting oil on tankers and barges and responding to hazardous material spills.

Because Crowley Marine Services hauled oil as one of its main market niches, we were required to comply with all of the regulations. We also helped clean up hazardous material spills. Compliance meant developing contingency response plans, emergency response plans, and training for our vessel and facility crews. The requirements for documentation varied for federal and state governments. In some cases, county and city governments wanted separate plans.

We hired consultants, our subject matter experts, to help us stay current on all of the requirements. They also wrote the plans and training materials, but there wasn't anyone to edit the documents before submission to the agencies for approval. We also needed someone who could write newsletters about our environmental and safety programs for customers and employees. So the company created a position for me as a senior publications coordinator, who handled all of these duties. Eventually some of the responsibilities for writing emergency response plans and training materials moved in house, but I still worked with internal and external subject matter experts to gather the required information.

After a major corporate restructure at Crowley Marine Services, followed by four years of full-time contracting, I landed in the airflow controls industry as a lone writer for Phoenix Controls Corporation, a subsidiary of Honeywell. For seven years, I wrote and edited the company's technical, marketing, and training materials. When I left the company

and returned to full-time contracting five years ago, I began receiving more requests for marketing materials and technical documentation in energy savings. Today, 50% of my client base is involved in the energy savings sector, and my projects include:

- ▶ case studies
- ▶ white papers
- ▶ requests for proposals (RFPs)
- ▶ user guides
- ▶ developer documentation
- ▶ training materials for technicians and salespeople

Of these, approximately 75% of my work is writing and editing marketing materials.

In all of these positions, I did not have the industrial expertise when I was hired. So why was I chosen?

How do communicators turn green?

The key to breaking into a green career is to demonstrate that your skills are transferrable. "Most employers are happier hiring someone without the knowledge but have the skills and let them immerse themselves into the industry," Doyle said. He used candidates with a liberal arts background as an example. "They know how to write, communicate, build networks with people, and are curious."

Doyle also said that an environmental studies degree or certificate is not as helpful for breaking into a green career as it was "five to seven years ago. Almost in every case, people want combination skills, even at the undergraduate level."

So, how do we demonstrate our skills are transferrable?

Before I broke into technical writing at Crowley Marine Services, I offered to proofread documents for the controllership. Soon they asked me to edit documents any time I found typos or wording that could be clearer. I knew nothing about the maritime industry when I started, but I was eager to learn and I wasn't afraid to ask questions. My proofreading and editing projects were also a great way to learn more about the company while proving my abilities.

After I was promoted into the executive administrative assistant pool, I continued offering these services, and my editorial responsibilities grew. When the executives realized they needed an in-house writer, they immediately thought of me and promoted me into a brand new position.

At Phoenix Controls, I was the company's first technical writer. Because this was a new position, the job description was not clear, so I decided to fill my portfolio with a wide range of samples in case anyone asked about my experience with different types of documents during my interview. My strategy worked, because the company wanted someone who had experience in a variety of areas. I demonstrated with my writing samples that I had the skills they needed, although I had no experience in the airflow controls industry.

If you do not have a variety of writing samples, start building your portfolio. Focus on marketing projects whenever you can. Offer to edit coworkers' documents, if possible, or join a special project team where you can write

about a green project or initiative. There are also many volunteer opportunities to gain experience, which increases your networking base. Examples of my previous green volunteer projects include editing website copy for Friends of Heybrook Ridge in Index, WA, and writing a proposal to reorganize the library at the Sitka Center for Art and Ecology in Otis, OR.

Also attend green industry meetings and conferences. This is the best way to meet people in the field who need your services, whether you're interested in regular, full-time employment or contracting. Stan Schatt and Michele Lobl's book, *Paint Your Career Green: Get a Green Job Without Starting Over*, contains a long list of volunteer organizations and professional associations that sponsor meetings and conferences. Also check the "Other Resources" at the end of this article for more networking ideas.

Green careers have a bright future. Although many new technologies are available, more are evolving. Demand for marketing communications and documentation will also continue to grow. So for any technical communicator who's passionate about sustainability and social responsibility, going green is ideal. Jan Whittington, associate professor at the University of Washington Department of Urban Design and Planning, sums it up the

best when she said, "It's about being able to communicate well with people on issues you care about." There's no better way to make a difference than when you can do something you love to change the world. And for us, that passion is effective, clear communication.

Other Resources

Green Job Directories

Clean Techies, <http://cleantechies.jobamatic.com/a/jobs/find-jobs>

EcoEmploy, www.ecoemploy.com

Green Guru Network, <http://greengurunetwork.com/resources/jobs.html>

Green Resume Depot—A free service (released January 2013) where job candidates can submit their resumes. The resumes are stored privately, and Green Resume Depot contacts candidates when there are job matches. <http://talent.peopleplanetprofitblog.com>

Greenfish (staffing firm in Brussels), www.greenfish.eu

Information on Green Careers

The Green Jobs Blog, maintained by Green Jobs Network Founder Leonard Adler in San Francisco, is one of the most comprehensive, up-to-date resources for finding

"I GOT A PROJECT THAT TURNED INTO A \$25,000-A-YEAR GIG THANKS TO THE STC SUMMIT!"

"I spoke up in a session at a past Summit and was approached afterward by a man who was scouting for editors. He lived only about 50 miles from me, but I probably would never have met him otherwise. This encounter evolved into a \$25,000-a-year gig of interesting editing with a small firm that pays well and on time, and even holds dinners for its contractors twice a year. I always knew that I had to show up to make connections and attending the Summit proved it!"

Bette Frick

MY NAME IS BETTE FRICK AND

I'M AN STC MEMBER

<http://summit.stc.org>

jobs in the green industry. You'll find extensive lists of green job boards, career fairs and events, training and education, recruiters, industry associations, research reports, and books at www.greencollarblog.org.

O*Net, a partner of the American Job Center Network, publishes information about green sectors and occupations at www.onetcenter.org/green.html.

The U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Statistics publishes its latest statistics about the green industry at www.bls.gov/green.

Reports on Trends and News in the Green Industry

Clean Edge, Inc., a consulting firm with offices in Portland and San Francisco, publishes a variety of reports and hosts webinars about trends in the clean technology sector at www.cleantechedge.com.

Environmental Entrepreneurs, a nonprofit organization promoting "sound environmental policy that builds economic prosperity," publishes a series of clean energy reports and newsletters at www.e2.org/jsp/controller.jsp?sessionid=947614E293D31984CAF430CBA4BFB764?docName=cleanjobsarchives.

Greentechmedia is a website with the latest news in the industry, www.greentechmedia.com.

The Green Market Oracle brands itself as "the convergence of sustainable capitalism and the global environment." The site publishes news on green companies and environmental trends worldwide at www.thegreenmarketoracle.com.

LinkedIn Groups

There are many, but these I've found the most helpful:
Cleantech Open

Green Group Boston (Green Group Boston also meets monthly at the Burlington Public Library in Burlington, MA)

Green Jobs & Career Network

Green, Energy & Sustainability Careers

Greentech Media

The Green Exchange

Think Green

GreenBiz.com—Sustainability Professionals **i**

CHERYL LANDES, *STC Fellow and Certified Professional Communicator through the Association for Women in Communications Matrix Foundation, founded Tabby Cat Communications in Seattle in 1995. She has 22 years of experience as a technical communicator in several industries: computer software, HVAC/energy savings, marine transportation, manufacturing, retail, and the trade press. She specializes as a findability strategist, helping businesses to organize content so that it flows logically and to make content easier to retrieve online and in print.*

Cheryl, who currently lives in Vancouver, WA, has given many presentations and workshops about indexing, technical communication, and marketing services as a solo entrepreneur throughout the United States and Canada. She has written two handbooks on digital indexing in MadCap Flare and Adobe FrameMaker, and more than 100 articles and three books on Northwest travel and history. For more information, visit her website at www.tabbycatco.com.

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