

Technical Writing from an Engineer's Perspective



By Jay Talbott
Steyer Associates

May 2011

Steyer
ASSOCIATES INC.


*Technical
Communications
Staffing*

I'm an engineer through and through, with education and experience in mechanical, electrical, and software engineering. I've worked on everything from robotics and industrial control systems to speech recognition and machine vision systems to high availability and fault-tolerant server systems. I have spent most of my engineering career developing low-level systems software (device drivers, operating system internals, real-time embedded controls, and so on), where I was able to use my knowledge of all the various engineering disciplines. I really enjoyed the challenge of making things go, and understanding how all the software, electrical, and mechanical systems worked together.

So why the heck did I get into technical writing? In my career, I had worked with some really good tech writers and I've always thought that I had a reasonable grasp of the English language, but I had never considered doing formal technical writing myself, at least not as my primary job. I figured that's what, well, tech writers did. And I was an engineer, not a tech writer. Or so I thought.

It was August of 2003. I had been an independent software engineering consultant for a couple of years, focusing primarily on the development of device drivers and other systems software. I was busy working on a long-term software development project for a local client when I got a call from a technical recruiter inquiring if I would be interested in doing some technical writing through Steyer Associates. Of course, my first reaction was that I was an engineer, not a tech writer. And I was already busy with an engineering gig that paid better than what was being offered to do the tech writing. So why would I even consider a technical writing gig like this? Well, I didn't really consider it at the time. Fast forward several months to November of 2003, when I went to the inaugural Driver Developer Conference. While I was at the conference I met up with Marty Steyer for lunch where we further discussed the possibility of a tech writing gig. I figured it wouldn't hurt to talk about it, even though I wasn't sure that it was a direction that I wanted to go. However, my previous engineering gig had just come to an abrupt end when my client got into financial trouble, so I was much more open to whatever options were available to me at that moment.

I'll admit that the opportunity offered some really compelling benefits, as I could do all the work from anywhere, on my own schedule, which provided a great deal of life flexibility. All I needed was my laptop and an Internet connection. So I started thinking that I could do this for a couple years, make some good connections, and then go back to doing engineering work. The potential benefits of the opportunity were starting to outweigh the rate difference. But even if I did go for it, I assumed that I'd be gone as soon as I fulfilled that initial commitment. I was an engineer after all, and I still wanted to do engineering work, not tech writing. Or so I thought.



So in March of 2004, I took the plunge, and started working as a tech writer (officially, I was a “programmer/writer”) through Steyer Associates. More than seven years later, I’m still doing it. Could I have imagined seven years ago that I would be still doing tech writing today? Not a chance. But there must be some reason that I’ve stuck around.

Over the past seven years, I’ve had the opportunity to write about many new technologies months, if not years, before the rest of the general public. As I documented new device driver interfaces, I was frequently able to use my experience as a third-party device driver developer to make suggestions to the engineering teams for improvements to those DDIs. I estimate that around 95% of those suggestions were ultimately incorporated into the final released interfaces. So although my role was technically that of a tech writer, I actually provided a lot of consulting feedback to the engineering teams along the way, which made me feel like I was adding a whole lot more value than just writing documentation.

I have also had the opportunity to work on several different types of technical content, including the formal DDK (now the WDK) docs, the SDK docs, the protocol docs, numerous technical white papers, and some internal documentation. Through all these different projects, I’ve developed many connections with key people that have truly appreciated and respected my work, not only as a tech writer, but also because I bring my engineering background and experience to the table. And in recent years, I’ve had the opportunity to really take on more of a leadership role among the other tech writers with whom I work, which has provided its own level of job satisfaction as again I’m providing a whole lot more value than just tech writing.

How much longer I will keep tech writing, I have no idea. I’m still an engineer at heart. But I’ve come to realize that I’m also really good at tech writing, and my engineering background gives me a unique perspective on the things that I write about. Who knows, maybe I’ll still be doing this in another seven years.

About Steyer Associates

When you're looking for the best technical communications professionals for your next project, turn to the expert recruiters at Steyer Associates. Our clients repeatedly tell us that we're their first choice for technical communications staffing thanks to:

- **The exceptional quality of our talent**
- **The deep knowledge and experience of our recruiters**
- **The high level of customer service that we provide**

These factors help us earn almost 90 percent of our business from repeat clients and referrals. Unlike most other staffing agencies, we focus on the technical communications arena and have more than 12 years of experience helping clients meet their project goals.

Contact us today for an initial consultation, or to learn more about what makes Steyer the premier technical communications staffing agency in the Pacific Northwest.



*Technical
Communications
Staffing*

115 Hall Brothers Loop NW
Suite104
Bainbridge Island, WA 98110

206.780.3345 TEL
206.780.9083 FAX
info@steyer.net

 twitter.com/SteyerTalent

© 2011 Steyer Associates Inc. All rights reserved.