

How to Use Graduate Interns to Support Your Publications Department

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Abstract—Graduate interns in technical writing and editing can be a valuable source of professional support for a publications department, especially if their managers keep certain management principles in mind. Fresh from year-long internships at New Mexico State University's Physical Science Laboratory, two interns briefly describe their experience and offer publications managers eight suggestions for the effective management of technical writing and editing interns. They also include an annotated bibliography of recent literature about internships in technical writing.

WHEN your publications department has more top-priority projects than your writers and editors can manage, you may have to turn for help to your professional support staff—those writers and editors employed on a part-time or temporary basis to help during peak periods. A good professional support staff can make the difference between publication deadlines met and unmet, projects completed and uncompleted, and departmental commitments satisfied and unsatisfied. But a good support staff is hard to find. You may be lucky enough to have a list of freelance writers and editors on reserve or you may have to hire them through an agency. We want to call your attention to an important but often overlooked source of publications support staff: graduate interns in technical writing and editing.

Technical writing and editing internships result from agreements between an industrial host and a university with a technical writing program. During 1982 and 1983 we served as graduate research interns in technical writing and editing at the Physical Science Laboratory (PSL) on the campus of New Mexico State University. Our internships were the first of their kind at the laboratory.

INTERNSHIPS AT THE PHYSICAL SCIENCE LABORATORY

PSL is a large, multidisciplinary scientific and technical organization that provides government, industry, and the university with a wide variety of technical support services. These services require many types of publications: proposals, capabilities statements, technical reports, conference proceedings, manuals, brochures, and other documentation. Historically, publications were managed and produced by the laboratory's various departments; but in 1982 PSL decided to consolidate its publication efforts.

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The laboratory created a new publications department by hiring a publications manager and combining an existing word processing group with an existing printing and reproduction group. The new manager also wanted a writing and editing group but PSL had none. Although she needed the continuity afforded by a full-time publications staff, she had a minimum budget with which to hire one and, initially, not enough work to keep a full-time staff busy.

She solved the problem by following PSL's longstanding tradition of hiring student employees. She reasoned that if she hired qualified technical writing and editing students for long periods, they would provide departmental continuity, would work for student salaries, and could maintain the flexible schedules required by a fluctuating workload. In addition, she hoped they would bring with them new ideas and information about the field of technical communication.

With these ideas in mind, she contacted New Mexico State University's graduate program in Technical and Professional Communication and made arrangements to sponsor two part-time, year-long internships in technical writing and editing. We were hired to fill those internships in the summer of 1982.

In the course of the next year our jobs involved technical writing and editing, graphic design and layout, complete project management, and sometimes even word processing. In short, although we were part-time student employees, our manager gave us the same responsibilities as permanent technical writers and editors.

Our internships were successful for all concerned. We gained experience and the publications department gained a support staff. The internships proved to our host that graduate interns can provide valuable professional support for publications operations and that effective management can make that support even more valuable. Based on our experience, we offer the following suggestions for how you can best manage graduate interns in technical writing and editing.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PUBLICATIONS MANAGERS

Take an active role in your internships.

Allow yourself a little time each day to talk with your interns. Our manager stayed in close touch with us and was always aware of the progress we were making on our

various projects. Our recent research on graduate internships in technical writing and editing indicates that most internship hosts try to follow this pattern of daily interaction.

Listen to your interns' ideas.

Be open to their ideas and respond with constructive feedback. Our manager routinely met with us to discuss ideas, suggestions, problems, and solutions. These meetings gave us a sounding board for new ideas gained in our coursework and research and gave her the opportunity to exert subtle guidance. She discovered that, as Blaine McKee noted in his 1978 article "Internships Benefit Employers as well as Students" (see the bibliography), one of the major advantages of internships to employers is gaining a fresh point of view from the students.

Give your interns the same responsibility and authority as your permanent employees.

Trust your interns. Give them authority over small projects at first and let them work up to large ones. Once she gained a measure of confidence in our abilities, our manager became an active supporter of our authority over assignments. William O. Coggin, in his 1982 article "Creating Successful Internships," notes that "sponsors should recognize that interns can act as mature, dependable employees only if they are treated as such" (p. E31).

Give your interns professional encouragement.

Urge them to join professional organizations and to assume a professional role. Our manager supported our development by urging us to become active members of professional organizations, encouraging us to write articles for publication, and giving us research topics. We became more active professionally and the publications department gained some public recognition as a result.

Assign your interns a variety of tasks.

Assign them to any job that needs to be done. To be effective, technical writers and editors must learn many aspects of the publication process and the experience your interns gain will benefit both you and them. But keep in mind your interns' areas of interest. Within the constraints of the department's work load, our manager made assignments according to our expressed needs and requests, often allowing us to train on projects for which we had no direct background.

Structure your internships to alleviate publication demands during peak periods.

Offer internships for periods when you expect heavy workloads. As interns, we worked half-time during the academic year but full-time during the summer when many of PSL's

proposal efforts and contract requirements fell due. The laboratory got the help it needed when it needed it. Robert DiGiovanni and Judith A. Steeh report in their 1978 article "Technical Communication Internships from a Company Point of View" that their company regularly hires summer interns to work on special in-house projects that are routinely scheduled for June, July, and August. And Blaine McKee (1978) notes that employers can also take advantage of interns' summer availability to fill in for regular employees who are on vacation.

Plan your internships for periods long enough to maintain departmental continuity.

Keep your interns for three to six months, and longer if possible. During our internship year, we became part of the PSL community and were considered a part of the staff by the full-time employees. They did not hesitate to come to us with long-term projects because they knew we would be at the laboratory long enough to complete the tasks. Our research has shown that most graduate-internship hosts concur. They generally hire students for a minimum of one academic semester, about 15 weeks.

Pay your interns for their work.

Pay them well. Many companies attempt to arrange unpaid internships in which students gain experience and earn college credit. Obviously, this approach has advantages. Among other things, unpaid internships can provide valuable labor in tight economic times. However, we agree with Blaine McKee (1978, p. 321) that there are

... more advantages to the type [of internship] in which the students are paid for their work. Not only does the pay motivate the students but it also causes the employer to expect more When our interns report for work they are expected to produce. And they do.

SUMMARY

Graduate technical writing and editing interns are generally flexible, able to work hard, eager for experience, willing to try new things, and interested in exploring all aspects of the publication process in an attempt to find their place in the field. Properly managed, they can be the dependable and productive professional support staff you need.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Brockmann, R. John. **Internship Programs: Current Practices and Future Changes.** In *Proceedings 1980 of the Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication*. Virginia A. Book, Ed. February 1980; Orlando, FL. Troy, NY: Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute; 1980.

Based on a detailed, ten-school survey of technical communication internships, this paper discusses the rationale behind internships, noting benefits to the student, the industrial host, and the technical communication program. The paper compares the distinctive features of internships to traditional cooperative programs. The paper also details internship problems, offers solutions, and makes recommendations for improving the management of technical communication internships. Survey data are included.

Coggin, William O. **Creating Successful Internships.** In *Proceedings of the 29th International Technical Communication Conference*. May 1982; Boston, MA. Washington, DC: Society for Technical Communication; 1982 [pp. E30-E31].

This paper explains the importance of an internship to a technical communication program and gives suggestions for making internships successful to students, employers, and directors of academic programs.

DiGiovanni, Robert B.; Steeh, Judith A. **Technical Communication Internships from a Company Point of View.** In *Proceedings of the 25th International Technical Communication Conference*. May 1978; Dallas, TX. Washington, DC: Society for Technical Communication; 1978 [pp. 327-331].

In the summer of 1976, the Environmental Research Institute of Michigan sponsored three technical writing interns to work on an in-house project. During the summer the Institute conducted four "brown bag" lunch discussions to teach the interns about manuscript preparation, levels of edit, media available to technical communicators, and the role of communication in technical communications.

DiGiovanni, Robert B. **The JUNGLE OUT THERE Has What the IVORY TOWER Needs and Vice Versa: Sharing Skills and Knowledge for the Successful Teaching of Technical Communication.** In *Proceedings of the 28th International Technical Communication Conference*. May 1981; Pittsburgh, PA. Washington, DC: Society for Technical Communication; 1981 [pp. E18-E19].

This article discusses the unsatisfactory nature of courses in technical communication. The problem stems from the fact that neither the business nor the academic world is capable of providing a total teaching and learning situation. The article recommends solutions for the problem.

Gloe, Esther M. **Setting Up Internships in Technical Writing.** *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*. 1983; 13(1):7-27.

The fields of journalism and cooperative education provide most of the information about writing internships. This very thorough article contains a review of the literature as well as advice on how to establish, administer, and evaluate internship programs in technical communication.

Hull, Leon C. **Internships in Technical Writing: A Sponsor's View.** *Technical Communication*. First Quarter 1977; 24(1):7-9.

Summer internships in technical communication at the Naval Underwater Systems Center are the subject of this article. It presents student complaints about the internship program as well as sponsor complaints about the interns. Finally, the article presents an evaluation of the overall program.

Loeb, Helen M. **Answering Industry's Needs: An Internship Program for Technical Writers.** In *Proceedings of the 29th International Technical Communication Conference*. May 1982; Boston, MA. Washington, DC: Society for Technical Communication; 1982 [pp. E70-E73].

Northeastern University's one-year non-degree internship program to train technical writers for the computer industry is the subject of this article, which discusses three conditions that make an internship successful. The conditions are carefully selected applicants, university liaisons to industry, and a firm commitment to the program.

McKee, Blaine K. **Student Internships Benefit Employers As Well As Students.** In *Proceedings of the 25th International Technical Com-*

munication Conference. May 1978; Dallas, TX. Washington, DC: Society for Technical Communication; 1978 [pp. 320-322].

This article describes the undergraduate technical journalism internship sponsored by Colorado State University. It compares paid and unpaid internships and discusses the advantages of each. The article also notes the importance of intern selection, the role of the faculty supervisor, and the advantages to students and their employers.

Pearsall, Thomas E.; Sullivan, Frances J.; McDowell, Earl A. **Academic Programs in Technical Communication.** Washington, DC: Society for Technical Communication; 1981.

This report describes the range of academic programs offered in technical communication in the United States, lists schools that offer undergraduate and graduate programs, and provides brief descriptions of each program. The report also presents the results of two surveys of degree programs in technical communication.

Rarey, Kathleen N. **Internships From the Student Point of View: Can I Make It As a Technical Writer in the Real World?** In *Proceedings of the 29th International Technical Communication Conference*. May 1982; Boston, MA. Washington, DC: Society for Technical Communications; 1982 [pp. E94-E95].

This article presents technical writing internships from a student's point of view. It includes a list of the student's goals for the internship, a discussion of the student's concept of the internship, and a description of what the student gained from the internship.

Steele, James B. **The Inexperienced But College-Trained Technical Editor.** In *Proceedings of the 23rd International Technical Communication Conference*. May 1976; Washington, D.C. Washington, DC: Society for Technical Communication; 1976 [pp. 48-50].

This article discusses what managers can expect of recent college graduates hired for editorial jobs. Among the subjects addressed are the education of technical writers and the need for professional experience through internships.

Stohrer, Freda F.; Pinelli, Thomas E. **A Joint University-Government Technical Editing Program.** In *Proceedings of the 25th International Technical Communication Conference*. May 1978; Dallas, TX. Washington, DC: Society for Technical Communication; 1978 [pp. 323-326].

The article fully describes a cooperative agreement between Old Dominion University and the NASA Langley Research Center in which one English department faculty member and two graduate students (one in English and one in engineering) work with a senior editor at the Research Center to prepare technical reports for publication.

Wymer, Thomas L. **Technical Writing and the Marketplace.** In *Technical Communication: Perspectives for the Eighties*. Proceedings of the 32nd Conference on College Composition and Communication. March 1981; Dallas, TX. Houston, TX: National Aeronautics and Space Administration; 1981 [pp. 193-196].

This article discusses the growing market for professional communicators and the need for education of the business and industrial communities to the ways technical writers can serve them. It briefly discusses sufficient training for technical writers. Finally, the article notes the ways, including internships, in which the market can be convinced of the value of technical communicators.