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ESTABLISHING TRUST IN VIRTUAL TEAMS 6

TECHNICAL WRITERS CAN BENEFIT FROM CROSS-CULTURAL TRAINING	12
RE-CONSIDERING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR GLOBAL CONTEXTS	15
BEST PRACTICES FOR ENTERPRISE GAMIFICATION	18
IT'S TIME TO GET SOCIAL	20

IN AN ARTICLE in the January 2015 issue of *Intercom*, Val Swisher exhorts technical writers to write for translation regardless of whether the content will actually be translated. Simpler, consistent writing will be more easily understood by the millions of Americans with low reading skills and for whom English is a second language. Besides, some people will just run your content through Google or Bing Translate and get better results if the original text is already optimized for translation.

I would like to take this a step further. Technical writers should always write for translation and cross-cultural training can help in these efforts. The skills that such training develops can help anyone become a better communicator, especially when communicating with those whose backgrounds differ from yours.

Learning About Yourself

In her brief list of some of the ways that writing can be optimized for translation, Swisher notes that the elimination of idioms and jargons takes practice. Many of these words and phrases are so much a part of us that they seem entirely natural. Other aspects of writing also come from a lifetime of cultural and situational experiences: our choice of vocabulary in general, the tone of voice we use, and the kinds of examples we choose. No list of rules can overcome such engrained habits.

Cross-cultural training starts by working on your own cultural awareness. Participants are exposed to facts and information about their own cultures, preconceptions, and values that they may not have thought about. Standing back and examining the sources of our own worldviews from the outside prepares us for the fact that different backgrounds can lead to different worldviews.

Learning About Others

The next step in cross-cultural training is learning about some of the major differences in how people from different cultures and experiences may see the world. Cross-cultural training will help you to see these kinds of differences as not “good” or “bad,” but rather as a fact of life that must be addressed in order to interact well with diverse groups of people.

Sociologist Geert Hofstede developed a system for comparing cultures on four key dimensions. (Later one more was added, but it is not as relevant to this article.) Although the system has been criticized, it is still widely accepted that the framework captures some of the salient aspects on which cultures differ. The dimensions are:

- ▶ **Power Distance Index:** How much the less powerful members of society accept the existing power hierarchy.
- ▶ **Individualism:** Whether society members are expected to make their own decisions and be responsible for their own success or failure as opposed to being integrated into supportive groups with their own rules, traditions, and mores that can override those of the individual (collectivism).

- ▶ **Masculinity:** The degree to which a society values assertiveness and competitiveness over nurturing and caring.
- ▶ **Uncertainty Avoidance:** Reluctance to take risks.

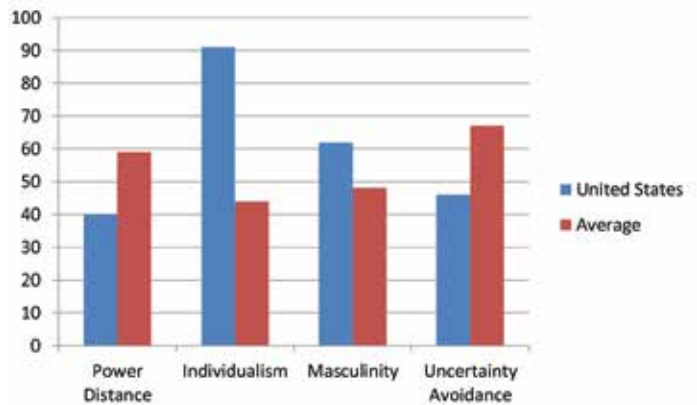


Figure 1. The United States Compared to Average Scores of 78 other countries (Source: geerthofstede.eu/dimension-data-matrix)

As compared to many other cultures, the United States has less of an accepted social hierarchy, expects people to take care of themselves, values competition and assertiveness, and has a greater tolerance for risk-taking. Much of the world acts from a different cultural context than the one that Americans often take for granted.

What Does This Have to Do with Technical Writing?

In technical writing, knowledge of these cultural differences could affect the tone you use (more stratified usually means more formal), the adjectives and adverbs you use (the value of different attributes may not be universally accepted), and the examples you choose to illustrate a concept (these may not have the same resonance in all cultures).

For example, Swisher suggests that technical writing has become more colloquial and familiar in tone, as compared to 20 years ago when it “tended to be scientific, rich in nouns, and grammatically accurate.” Aside from the problems that this new style of writing can pose for translation, it may also not set the right tone for different cultures, where a “familiar” approach from strangers may not be welcome. Furthermore, if you realize how many idioms and jargon reflect culturally shared values or experiences that might not be relevant in many places in the world, you become more sensitive to your own use of colloquial language.

Effective global communication doesn’t always require translation, but it does require being conscious of the many opportunities for misunderstanding that can arise when you are dealing with people who have a very different culture and history. Writers who have taken part in cross-cultural training will have a better capacity for assessing those aspects of their writing that

might be problematic for people from other cultures and backgrounds. Their writing should not only be simpler, but it should also be more neutral in tone and freer from a reliance on cultural assumptions to impart a message.

In some cases, we recommend a cultural assessment of materials before translation. This is because so much material is written without regard to issues of language and cultural differences. It is only during translation that these issues appear. A writer with cross-cultural skills is more likely to turn out a product that will be ready for translation and adaptation for different cultures when the need arises.

Other Lessons

Cross-cultural training can impart other skills that can be useful, not only to technical writers, but in many business settings.

- ▶ **Listening skills:** With their senses more attuned to differences in perception, those writers should also be better listeners, able to interpret and evaluate feedback

from others, and open to learning ever more about how cultural differences should impact their writing.

- ▶ **Interpersonal skills:** All writers may not work in groups, but all of them have to interact with others on some level, to get instructions, to clarify details with technicians, and to respond to editors. Cross-cultural training can also improve these interpersonal relations, both because of the writer's improved listening skills and because of their increased sensitivity to the hidden cultural factors behind people's behavior. If, as Swisher argues, writing for translation will make you a better technical writer, cross-cultural skills should improve not only your writing but also your ability to communicate at all levels, both in writing and in person. ■

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SUGGESTED READING

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RUSHANAN, VALERIE. "Editing for International Audiences." *Intercom* (December 2007): 16–19.

SIFTAR, MYRIAM. "Tips for Designing E-learning Modules with Translation in Mind." *Intercom* (September/October 2009): 11–13.

SWISHER, VAL. "Writing for Translation Even If Your Company Does Not Translate." *Intercom* (January 2015): 14–17.

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