



We talk to Mike Unwalla, a member of the Independent Authors Special Interest Group who has recently upgraded to become a Fellow of the ISTC.

How long have you worked in technical communication?

I've been a professional technical writer for just over nine years. As a freelance, I tend to call myself a technical writer or technical author; it's the term that my potential clients understand.

What do you do?

I help software companies to reduce their customer support costs. How? By writing clear instructions for their software. The result is that customers don't call the help desk as often as they used to. There's a case study on www.techscribe.co.uk/techw/cssdl.htm.

How did you start as an author?

It's a third career for me. I left school at 16, and started my working life as an industrial paint chemist. I later went to university, decided not to return to chemistry and taught English as a foreign language instead, which took me to Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

Eventually, my interest in computing took me back into full-time education, studying an MSc in Software Systems Technology at Sheffield University. By chance, I then had the opportunity to pursue a PhD in theoretical computer science; my thesis on file partitioning in multi-processor database machines is at www.techscribe.co.uk/thesis/thesis.html.

I fancied staying in academia, and was involved with an English-Japanese language translation project while trying to get more papers published, but funding ran out and I spent three months on the dole. It was not a nice place to be. On the strength of my academic work, I convinced the MD

of a software house that I was just the person he was looking for. The combination of English language skills, teaching ability and technical competence is powerful, and it puts TechScribe in a strong position.

What is the most rewarding aspect of your work?

When customers and their clients praise my work, I get a real buzz. It's nice to know that the documentation I produce helps people get on with their work. The other thing that gives me great pleasure is when I finally understand the system, and see how all the bits fit together. It's like completing a jigsaw puzzle or crossword. And, of course, seeing a finished artefact, be it a printed manual or a piece of online help, is very rewarding.

What is the hardest aspect?

Gaining new clients — it takes a tremendous amount of time and effort.

What have been the biggest changes in the last five years?

Remote working is the biggest change as far as I'm concerned. Much of my work is for a fixed price, so there's no issue about hours worked (which you may have if you are a freelance who works through an agency). That means clients are generally quite happy for me to work away from their site.

I think another big change is the move from paper to online materials.

What do you see as the biggest changes in the next five years?

There's growing pressure to get products to market in ever shorter timescales. That will affect the kind of documentation that can be produced and it may also have a detrimental effect on its quality. On the other hand, the documentation that is produced might be qualitatively better. It's the old 80:20 rule: we focus on the small bit that most people use (and do it well), and leave the rest undocumented, for the help desk to pick up.

What do you like most?

It's like playing with Lego® all day, and then getting paid. Great!

What do you like least?

People perceive us as nerds. I think that's a harsh judgement. We must combat this by being business aware, learning how to demonstrate the value of our work in terms of cost savings and enhanced customer satisfaction.

How do you find operating as a small business in Britain?

I think there is too much confused and conflicting regulation, and the Government could be more supportive and consistent. For example, Gordon Brown suggested two years ago that sole traders should incorporate to reduce their tax bill but now he is changing the system so that small incorporated businesses 'pay the right amount of tax' (which is, of course, more). It looks like a stitch-up to me; read more at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/3535749.stm>.

Another example is unsolicited commercial email (UCE), which has been the subject of EU regulation. Now we have guidelines under which we can legally send UCE to businesses. However, I haven't been able to find a single ISP that allows me to send UCE under the terms of the contract. So, what is the point of the bureaucrats spending my tax money to define rules when contract law prevents me from sending UCE?

How would you like to see the ISTC develop?

I think the Institute needs a greater focus on business issues, faster response times and less reliance on volunteers. It must grow and reach out to more technical communicators.

Why did you upgrade to Fellow?

In a competitive market, you need an edge. It's great that I can tell potential clients I'm a Fellow — it shows that I'm serious about being the best I can be.

What might you rather do?

In my fantasy world, I would be a boat-builder (wooden craft). I really like wood — the feel, the smell. Putting it together to make a big toy would be good fun. **C**