

**FINDING THEIR PLACES:
WOMEN TECHNICAL COMMUNICATORS ESTABLISH THEIR
VALUE IN THE WORKPLACE**

THESIS

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By

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DEDICATION

**For Steve
My Subject Matter Expert**

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CHAPTER I

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Introduction:

The seeds for this project were planted during my first job out of college in the late 1990's. With an English degree and an enthusiasm for politics, I took a job on a statewide campaign. Full of enthusiasm for my first "real" job, I went to work for a woman in hopes that I would be better trained and respected than if I went to work for a man. After five years in the work world, I swore I would never again work for another woman.

My first boss was a woman in her early sixties who had served as an elected official for decades. I believed this successful, smart, and demanding woman could teach me what it took to make it in the work world. She had lived through times when women had been openly discriminated against, and she had overcome those barriers. After a year of working 70 hours each week for very little money, I asked for a raise. Discussing the request with one of her advisors she said, "A raise? She makes good money for a girl her age."

While my salary remained unchanged, the men around me continued to receive incremental raises. I grew frustrated with the fact that my female boss was discriminating against me. From off-handed comments she made about their family situations, I assumed this was because I was not supporting a family as my male

counterparts were. Didn't she remember the frustration of being treated differently because of gender? Hadn't she felt it unfair when this had been done to her?

After leaving my first job, I went on to work at two other companies. In each case, I ran into conflicts with women yet worked well with men. My own preference for finishing my work without getting entangled in office politics or the personal lives of coworkers might have been at odds with the culture I was immersed in. Most of the women I worked with seemed to have hidden agendas and made me uncomfortable with personal stories and expectations of friendship. I felt unable to express my unease because I feared offending my coworkers and inviting retribution. In one case, my boss insisted on involving me in her personal life, enlisting my help in spying on her husband and relating intimate details of their marriage. I eventually left rather than become embroiled in a domestic squabble. At the next company, all of my superiors and coworkers were men except for one. This woman was the administrative assistant, and she repeatedly asked me to help her answer the phones – a task not included in my job description and for which she never requested the men's assistance.

My experiences in the workplace prompted me to consider the role of gender¹ relations in workplace interaction. I was interested in writing and editing, but I also wanted to consider those skills in the larger context of the modern work environment. I wondered how female technical communicators managed to produce effective documents and maintain good relationships with their coworkers. The original title of this project, "Gender, Power, and Corporate Culture: How Do Female Technical Communicators Describe Their Workplace Experience?" reflected my interest in this area.

¹ For the purposes of this project, I have chosen to use the term "gender" to refer to an individual's sex because it includes the element of social-construction as well as biological reality.

I originally set out to collect stories about the ways gender, power, and organizational culture impacted the participants' perception of self and their roles in the workplace. Based on my own personal experience, I was confident that my participants would tell stories about office conflict that arose from gender issues. I was also fairly sure that the gender conflicts would occur more between women than between women and men.

Questions about the experiences of technical writers in the workplace are particularly germane as the field continues to expand. Technical communication has developed dramatically in recent years because of the exponential growth of the U.S. technology sector. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, this trend will continue; it anticipates the demand for technical communicators to increase 25-31% by 2010 (U.S. Department of Labor). As this segment of the workforce grows, it will become increasingly important that we understand and address challenges encountered by technical communicators. In so doing, we may improve the workplace environment for technical communicators and those with whom they work.

In my search for narratives about the workplace interactions of technical communicators, I developed research questions that I believed would shed light on their perceptions of themselves and their work. In the next section, I list the original research questions, discuss the ways in which they guided the development of interview questions, and then discuss the direction participants took those interview questions with their narratives.

Whether because women have more complex communication styles than men do or because there are some essential gender differences that dictate behavior in a

competitive environment, I assumed that my difficulties with women in the workplace were common. Although a couple of my participants did tell stories in which gender played a role, I did not find that my experience was typical. In fact, my data did not bear out my assumptions.

What I found was more interesting and exciting than stories about gender conflict in the workplace. Participants shared stories with me about their personal and professional struggles to fit in at a new workplace, and they described the challenges they faced negotiating relationships with Subject Matter Experts (SMEs), individuals with specialized and specific knowledge in a subject area such as chemistry or software design. These themes not only are detailed in my data, but also are born out in existing literature on narrative, organizational culture, and workplace interaction.

Two metaphors illustrate the central themes of the project: “making a nest” and “birds of a different feather.” The first theme deals with the technical communicator’s search for place in a new work environment. The second details the relationships with SMEs reported by technical communicators. Separate chapters will describe in detail each participant’s experience with these issues and explore the broader implications for technical communicators as a group.

Research Question:

To elicit workplace narratives from technical communicators, I developed the following research questions:

What do female technical communicators have to say about their workplace interactions?

- What kinds of interactions with coworkers do female technical communicators describe?
- What common challenges do female technical communicators experience in workplace communications?
- How do female technical communicators perceive their roles in the workplace?
- Do female technical communicators perceive that their gender affects their workplace interactions?

These overarching questions became the foundation for the full list of 36 interview questions I asked each participant. The following are three examples of interview questions designed to elicit narratives that would address my research questions. A complete list of interview questions can be found in the Appendix on page ****.

- What are your theories or beliefs about differences between male and female communication styles?
- Tell me about a particularly productive experience where you and a coworker worked on a project together.
- What do you think is your most valuable asset in the workplace?

While these interview questions did elicit narratives from participants, the participants did not share stories of common experience or great interest. They also did not constitute a theme that could be directly tied to my original research question. The variation in their experiences and stories is a natural occurrence in narrative research.

Open-ended questions can be interpreted differently by participants and can be answered in many ways.

The more compelling responses came from interview questions that were not necessarily designed to address the research questions directly but were intended to provide us with a fuller picture of the participants' experiences. This likely happened because the questions struck a common nerve with participants. Some questions that prompted universal and extensive response included:

- Describe your journey to this job.
- Tell me about a project where you worked with an SME.
- How do people at your company feel about technical communicators?

Thus, while the original research questions guided the development of the study's interview questions, the participants' responses to those questions guided my revision of my original research questions. The participants interpreted and responded to my questions in ways I did not foresee and their narratives proved most compelling because of their depth and commonality with one another.

I have, to this point, discussed my initial intentions, the themes that emerged from my data, and the research and interview questions that underlie this project. In the following section, I examine the literature that informs this study of workplace interactions engaged in by technical communicators: research on narrative, organizational culture, and workplace relations. This review will help demonstrate the place in which the themes for this research are situated. The existing literature in these three areas elucidates the

context in which the data for this project exists and suggests a clear need for further research and supposition in these areas.

Review of Existing Literature:

Narrative

The study of narrative is the examination of storytelling – broadly construed. A storyteller shapes and is shaped by a complex world of language and interaction. The words we use to describe our world and our interactions tell volumes about our place, our preferences, and our perceptions. Before an event is retold in narrative, it exists merely as an interaction of the past. Once a speaker tells a story, the event takes on a life of its own, a place in a larger context, a multiplicity of meanings, and permanence. Whether a speaker recounts an involved interaction or simply comments on a situation, she creates a narrative with her consideration of scene, audience, and message. These narratives provide useful glimpses of the roles and perceptions of people and their environments.

One mode of discerning the role of a particular professional is to study the narratives she recounts about speech events in her workplace. As Dyer and Keller-Cohen argue in their 2000 article, “The recounting of narratives has been acknowledged as important not for its objective representation of a past event, but for the subjectivity of that construction and what it can reveal about the narrator as an individual, and the society by which she is shaped and within which, at the same time, she is a shaping agent” (283). In other words, we shape and are shaped by our retelling of stories. Labov and Waletzky assert, “The narrator’s self [is] constructed in relation to others in the narrative, one of the main points of the narrative of personal experience being to show

the narrator in the best possible light”(289). There is substantial value in understanding the way participants perceive themselves and express those perceptions in their narratives. While a speaker may make herself the heroine, her narratives reveal tacit information that clues us into her perceptions and realities – information to which we would otherwise not have access.

The study of institutional narratives is well represented by Zimmerman’s 1992 article “The Interactional Organization of Calls for Emergency Assistance.” Zimmerman examines the ways in which narratives are offered as accounts for emergency calls, or act as a lead into the description of the problem in the workplace. “Narratives are analyzed as part of the structure of the conversational sequence and not for what they tell us about the narrator” (Dyer 286). This perspective, however, limits us to the study of the production of narrative instead of the substance of it – a model that is interesting for Conversation Analysis but not useful for ethnographic purposes and the purposes of this project.

Nancy Blyler argues that narrative offers a broader and vibrant function in the study of discourse. She claims, “Narrative is also integral to the way we understand our existences and construct ourselves as human beings: We live the stories we tell of our lives” (2). This broader consideration of the function of narrative allows us to consider a storyteller’s perception of self and situation as a subjective but valuable illustration of an individual’s experience within various contexts and institutions. It also acknowledges the shaping effect that narrative has on others’ perceptions. By telling stories, we confirm our held beliefs and create those beliefs for others.

It is true that “competent users of language recognize when a story is being told” (Polanyi 15), but it takes a trained and concentrated ear to recognize the meta-narratives associated with specific stories and the ways they are told. In other words, we as listeners know when a speaker is relating a story rather than detailing fact. We might not, however, be aware of the larger context illustrated for us by way of that story. Sometimes the broader implications of a story are, in fact, too tacitly understood to be consciously noted. As MacKinnon contends, “the making of persuasive stories in a community requires an understanding of the community’s shared assumptions, beliefs, and values” (53). These shared beliefs are often too much a part of us to be actively considered. Narrative, therefore, is inextricably linked to organizational culture and is essential to understanding the culture and its power over its participants.

For the purposes of this project, participants’ narrative expression is the method by which we glimpse the environment, itself constructed by narrative, in which they work and the way they interact with others. Their views on issues, the ways they perceive themselves and others, and the stories they chose to tell give us insight into their lives and the lives of other technical communicators.

Additionally, their stories reveal the culture of their organization even though the unspoken nature of organizational culture makes direct discussion of it difficult. Participants in this study were unable to identify prohibited and encouraged behaviors because those ideas were so much a part of their tacit knowledge. The indirectly-elicited narratives enabled me to glimpse the existing culture in which each participant worked.

Organizational Culture

Organizational culture is the conscious and unconscious set of guidelines that exist and inform workers about how they should function both independently and with others in a specific place (Fletcher, McNamara, Sentell). According to Gerald Sentell's 1998 book Creating Change—Capable Cultures, the two characteristics of successful organizational cultures are competence, or a focus on performance and accountability, and flexibility, the capacity to change in order to meet the demands of emerging challenges to the group's performance (176). Many other characteristics signal systemic problems in an organization, but they are often identifiable only to outsiders or newcomers, because organizational culture is so fundamental to the thought processes of those entrenched in the culture (Hagberg and Heifetz 2).

Workers in an organization learn about its culture through official communication and training and posted guidelines but also through organizational narratives, observations of rewarded and discouraged behaviors, and other unofficial methods referred to by Hagberg and Heifetz as “the operating system of an organization”(2). Fitting in is essential to finding success at work, and therefore a worker's apprehension and mastery of the organizational culture directly impacts her success in that environment. “If an individual is out of sync with the culture, the organization's cultural antibodies will often attack” (Hagberg and Heifetz 4). It is natural for employees to see and act against the differing opinions and values of the interloper in their culture, and this tendency can only be combated by the interloper's quick and complete acculturation. In fact, acculturation is so important that it has become the focus of much research in fields

ranging from management and communication studies to technical communication and psychology.

A 1999 study conducted by Sam Racine examines the effect of corporate lore on organizational culture and concludes, “People are included or excluded from such cultures [corporate or professional] by their knowledge and ability to manipulate professional fables and folklore, historical data, workplace experience narratives, and practical knowledge” (Racine 167). The comprehension and employment of corporate lore are part of the larger assimilation into organizational culture. Racine further contends, “Stories have become one gate keeping strategy to determine who gets in and who leaves” (Racine 181). In his research, employees who did not understand and internalize office lore were unable to comprehend the company’s tacit value system and succeed within the corporate structure.

Carter McNamara refers to organizational culture as “the personality of the organization” (1) and defines four specific types of corporate culture: *academy culture*, *baseball team culture*, *club culture*, and *fortress culture*. In *academy culture*, the workers are highly skilled and encouraged to advance personally and through the organization’s ranks. In *baseball team culture*, workers are “free-agents” with sought-after talents prized by the organization. In *club culture*, workers are encouraged to “fit in” and are generally advanced through the ranks through years of service. *Fortress culture* exists in uncertain organizations where employment is unstable and valued skills are transitory. In all four of these examples, the culture of an organization is defined by the skills of the workforce within it and the value given to those skills by management or by the stories a culture tells about workers and their contributions. Valuation may cause

power gaps where highly sought-after workers may hold more power than the management professionals themselves, and less-sought-after workers may be valued less than both the highly sought-after and the management employees. These gap can become a source of conflict, or at least a barrier to productivity.

Many studies of organizational culture discuss the negative, sometimes violent situations that can arise from workplace friction. Much of this oppositional behavior stems from feelings of powerlessness. As Martin argues in Problem Employees and Their Personalities, “Individuals who resort to mudslinging, backstabbing, and benign sabotage are frequently those who do not have expressed power or who are not in an organizationally recognized role of control” (129). In nearly any workplace, individuals who fit this description exist and require negotiation on some level.

Power is not the only prominent complicating element in organizational culture. Gender impacts individuals’ impressions about themselves and others. Some research has been conducted on the effects of an organizational culture on women who are in the minority in that culture. One study conducted by Joyce Fletcher and described in Disappearing Acts : Gender, Power and Relational Practice At Work, involves female engineers in a predominantly male engineering firm. Fletcher notes that in this workplace, a culture exists wherein individual success and the ability to work independent of help or collaboration is valued. Women in this workplace found that their natural tendencies toward teamwork and production rather than personal aggrandizement conflicted with their professional desire for recognition and advancement. Women’s ability to assimilate into the existing culture defined their success.

In all the existing literature on organizational culture, workers function in environments where unspoken rules and expectations guide behavior – where stories rather than directives convey messages about appropriateness and value. For participants of this study, learning those behaviors made a tremendous difference in their ability to function effectively in the workplace.

Workplace Relations

Separate from the study of organizational culture is the study of workplace relations. After gauging the environment and understanding the culture, an examination of specific communicative events for information about micro-level relationships and interactions can begin. Perhaps the most germane of these exchanges for the technical communicator are the ones she has with SMEs.

The interactions between a technical communicator and SME are complex and varied but all rest on an essential power struggle between people known in the workplace as knowledge holders and as knowledge documenters. In this case, I rely on Rosabeth Moss Kantor's definition of power as "the ability to mobilize resources to get things done" (66). The technical communicator must motivate the SME to provide complete and accurate information so that an effective document can be produced.

The challenges and rewards inherent in the technical communicator / SME relationship are outlined in the results of two articles that discuss surveys on the topic. Technical communicator Debbie Walkowski's "Working Successfully with Technical Experts –From Their Perspective" examines the responses of SMEs surveyed about what characteristics they most and least appreciated in technical communicators. These

qualities include a fundamental technical knowledge of the subject, superior writing skills, a clear understanding of a document's difficulties and effective solutions, positive attitude toward collaboration, and professionalism in the quality of their work and in meeting deadlines (65). Walkowski contends that understanding and addressing the preferences of SMEs builds more productive collaboration. SME's can also employ the same techniques when dealing with technical writers to facilitate collaboration.

In response to Walkowski's survey, Lee and Mehlenbacher surveyed technical communicators about their experiences with SMEs. Lee and Mehlenbacher found that most technical communicators enjoyed working with SMEs; their major complaints were the SMEs limited time and lack of respect for documentation development. In one case, a writer complained that SMEs "think I'm stupid just because I'm not a programmer" (7). The survey also elucidates technical communicators' perceptions of themselves. They "defined their role in terms of learning, being prepared, interviewing (including listening and asking questions), and acting as the link between the company and the user" (Lee 7). Additionally, Lee and Mehlenbacher made four major suggestions regarding the SMEs contribution to collaboration. "SMEs need to make time, understand the importance of the documentation process, respect the writer's organizational role, and learn to communicate more effectively" (Lee 9).

Lee and Mehlenbacher also address the impact of organizational culture and power inequity on the technical communicator/SME relationship. Because the organization values and rewards the two differently, collaborative impediments arise. The SME feels unmotivated to participate in and possibly even burdened by the task of

working with the technical communicator who in turn begins to feel like a “second-class citizen” (Lee 13).

Relationships in the workplace sometimes fail because of “poor quality of work, poor management, and oversized egos” (Rude 34). But there are strategies that technical communicators can employ to combat these obstacles. Participants both in the Lee and Mehlenbacher’s study and in this project offered many examples of successful strategies in to build and maintain relationships in the face of personality and environmental challenges.

Patrick Moore acknowledges the difficulties technical communicators face when working with SMEs. In his case study of one male technical writer’s experience, Moore argues that by thinking strategically, communicating with management, and understanding the stakes of his interactions with the SME, a technical communicator can protect himself from toxic relations with an SME that might otherwise threaten his job (9). He recommends that technical communicators consider six variables of power: the players, the goals of the players, the stakes, the resources, the values, and the obstacles in all professional interactions (3).

A technical communicator’s interaction with SMEs is crucial. A successful technical communicator negotiates her relationship with an SME regardless of the personality conflicts and variant priorities that may exist. The participants of this project employed various methods, but all realized the need to cultivate respectful and open relationships with the SMEs on whom they depended and who depended on them.

Limitations in Existing Literature

Limited research exists on discourse practices in the workplace, especially in the field of technical communication. The insular nature of today's businesses is a barrier to onsite study of written and oral communication, and the expense and time required to conduct ethnographic research in a professional environment can be prohibitive, as discussed by Hodson (1203).

Another limitation in current literature is the availability of research on workplace literacy, the skills needed by writers when entering the workforce (Staple and Ornatowski 86). The seven skill groups outlined by Carnevale, Gainer, and Meltzer as fundamental to a worker's ability to develop professional skills include organizational effectiveness, teamwork, and problem solving in addition to basic writing skills (1990). This study helps to illuminate technical communicators' personal experience and perceptions of these essential skills.

In addition to expanding our understanding of the technical communicator's workplace experience, this study attempts to extend current literature in narrative, organizational culture, and workplace relations.

Research Design and Methods

This project was conducted using qualitative research methods. Unlike quantitative methods, which are generally employed in scientific research, the aim of qualitative research is the gathering of descriptive data through subjective means. The researcher understands and admits her biases, believing that conducting interviews, observing interactions, and collecting artifacts can provide an insightful picture of a

particular context. I have chosen to use qualitative research because of its usefulness in constructing accurate descriptions of experiences.

For the purposes of this study, “technical communicator” will refer to a person whose chief job duties include the writing or editing of documents, whether printed or online, used either internally or externally by a company for instructional, clarifying, descriptive, or persuasive purposes. The participants in this study actively engage in these tasks on a daily basis.

Institutional Review Board

Institutional Review Board approval for this project would be necessary if the participants in this study were students at the university or unable to proffer legal consent, but the scope of this project renders it exempt from direct IRB oversight. It is essential, however, that all research using human subjects strictly adhere to standards of acceptability described in the U.S. Code of Federal Regulations and detailed in Paul Anderson’s “Ethics, Institutional Review Boards, and the Involvement of Human Participants in Composition Research.” The following seven criteria are covered by IRB rules and the Code of Federal Regulations:

- 1.) Risks are minimized
- 2.) Risks are reasonable in relation to benefits
- 3.) Selection of participants is equitable
- 4.) Informed consent is obtained
- 5.) Informed consent is documented
- 6.) Provisions to protect confidentiality are accurate

7.) Vulnerable participants are protected (Anderson 271).

This study rigorously adheres to these standards and considers the admonitions and advice of researchers and academics in qualitative research.

Data Collection

This project is based on case study research, defined by MacNealy as “a carefully designed project to systematically collect information about an event, situation, or small group of persons or objects for the purpose of exploring, describing, and/or explaining aspects not previously known or considered” (197). This method of inquiry will allow insight into particular instances that may be indicative of larger trends. In the case of this project, case study research will help us identify factors affecting female technical communicators in the workplace, their conceptions of self, and their perceived place in the corporate structure.

Kim Sydow Cambell identifies four methods of data collection for qualitative researchers working in technical communication: literature search, observation, artifact search, and interview (536). The scope of this project, the available access to work sites, and time constraints dictate that I will employ literature search and interview, but will not do on-site observation or artifact search and review. A larger study of the experiences of technical communicators in the workplace would necessarily employ these other two methods as a means of balancing perspective in the data, but this project focuses only on the experiences of the technical communicators as they perceive them and the resulting ways in which those women see themselves because of their experiences.

Five women employed as technical communicators were interviewed about their interactions at work. Questions about their work history, their experiences with collaboration, and their interactions with coworkers were fundamental to the study. The participants were fully informed about the general purpose and focus of the study; written consent was collected from each for their interviews to be tape-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. Copies of these signed consent forms can be found in Appendix on page ##. The subjects were interviewed in person, away from their workstations, and with no other coworkers in attendance. The interviews were tape-recorded and I also took limited handwritten notes.

Informed Consent

It is important that participants in qualitative research studies understand the risks and benefits associated with their participation. Johnstone discusses the ethical implications of informed consent, arguing that in order for a researcher to record an individual or group's speech without jeopardizing her legal and ethical positions, she must obtain consent, preferably in the form of a signed document (42).

The informed consent document used in this study is based both on Johnstone's Qualitative Methods in Sociolinguistics and on Lindlof's Qualitative Communication Research Methods. Lindlof suggests:

Anyone who participates in a study should (a) do so voluntarily, (b) be able to understand what the study demands of him or her, (c) be able to understand participation's risks and benefits, and (d) have the legal capacity to give consent (99).

The consent form for this study (see Appendix) outlines the general scope of the project, the supervising professor and institution for which it is being conducted, the fact that the interview will be recorded and last approximately one hour, the potential risks and benefits of participation, and the right of the participant to withdraw at any time with no penalty.

I anticipate that the educational level of the participants of this study will protect me from the ethical questions that can arise when participants are unaware of the legal ramifications implied by the informed consent form (Fine 113). All participants orally and in writing expressed their understanding of the consent form's contents.

Interview Methods

Norman Fairclough views discourse “as a complex of three elements: social practice, discursal practice (text production, distribution, and consumption), and text, and the analysis of a specific discourse call for an analysis in each of these three dimensions and their interrelations” (74). For the purposes of this initial study of workplace interactions, an exhaustive exploration of all three of these elements of discourse is impossible. I chose interviewing techniques to probe the social practices and contexts associated with the subjects' workplaces and to examine emerging consistencies in the subjects' experiences and perceptions.

Given that the participants in this study were aware that they were being recorded and that their responses would be part of an academic report, it is possible that this knowledge may have affected their choices of words, topics, and presentation of self.

This possible distortion of results is not enough to prompt a surreptitious taping, which Barbara Johnstone admonishes researchers to use only when a participant's knowledge of the recorder will drastically alter her responses (Qualitative Methods in Sociolinguistics 106). However, my awareness of Johnstone's work will partially dictate the order and type of questions asked during the interviews.

To allow the participant time to relax and adjust to being recorded, the initial questions were fact-based and easy to answer, as recommended by MacNealy. Interviewing techniques employed to facilitate comfort and productivity included: establishing personal rapport, asking for specific details of the location and event being recounted by the participant, and asking follow-up questions to elicit elaboration of answers to open-ended questions (MacNealy 204).

Seidman's work on interview technique was essential to the development of questions and the way I conducted the interviews. He suggests that the researcher listen intently, ask follow-up questions for clarification, and use open-ended questions that encourage the participant to explore and explain in her narrative (63). These suggestions are echoed both by MacNealy and Rossman and Rallis. An example of the effectiveness of this technique in my own study was especially apparent in the interview with Christina. She frequently used open-ended questions as a springboard to narratives I would have otherwise not uncovered.

Transcription

After the interview process was complete, I transcribed the approximately six hours of recordings. This task was daunting both in the amount of time it necessitated

and the ideological choices that preceded it. The transcriber chooses whether she will transcribe verbatim; note breaths, pauses, and other signposts of co-production; and whether she will “repair” mispronunciations and colloquial speech. Each of these elements has an impact on the way a reader perceives the interviewee. As Johnstone notes, there is no formal or standard way of transcribing, but it is rather up to the researcher to present her data in the most effective way possible for her purpose (Discourse Analysis 21). The completed transcriptions form the basis for data review and analysis, and the way the documents are transcribed can dramatically affect the perception of the reader. The way words and utterances are represented on the page may make the speaker appear unintelligible, hesitant, or colloquial even though the tape itself might give a different impression.

Because I was interested in the content and the words themselves and not necessarily the production of narrative, I transcribed all the words on the tapes as I heard them. I did not elect to transcribe using traditional conversational analysis methods, including notations for co-production, breathing, or pronunciation because these elements were not fundamental to my study of narrative. I believe this choice also preserved the interviews’ position as narratives of personal and professional self rather than a co-produced speech event.

After concluding the interview phase of the project, I transcribed each interview in its entirety. Johnstone suggests that it is during this process of transcription that the researcher begins to notice categories in the data (2000 91). She calls the transcript a “partial representation of talk” in which the researcher’s choices about how to represent speech and interaction during the interview impact the data (2000 117). These

considerations led me to transcribe my interview tapes entirely and document them as accurately as possible in the transcriptions.

After completing the transcriptions, I searched for common themes and issues for further research and noted issues in the current literature that my data either reinforced or contradicted. Member-checking (wherein participants review the data to confirm or challenge their words and/or the researcher's interpretations and conclusions) was not employed because many of the conclusions may conflict with the participant's perspective and might even lead to some level of disillusionment with the study or their workplace experiences. For example, if a participant had not consciously realized that she was in a position of disadvantage, reading the transcript and analysis of her interview might cause her to second-guess herself personally or professionally. The end goal in this exercise was to find some common phenomena experienced in the subjects' workplace discourse that may signal broader trends in the narratives of female technical communicators.

Participants

My own limited network in technical communication meant that I had to depend on acquaintances for contacts. Additionally, several potential interviewees declined to participate in this study for various personal reasons. These limitations dictated my choice of participants. Three of the participants are former classmates of mine, and the other two I met through mutual friends. Our existing relationships led to a greater willingness to share personal, honest stories. My assurances of anonymity, my lack of access to people with whom they currently work, and our common desire to see an

increase in scholarship in the field of technical communication all contributed to the comfort level of the participants.

The five women I selected for this study range in age from 24 to 55, have at least a B.A. in English or Communications, and all concentrate on writing, editing, or spoken interaction in their daily work. Some limitations I encountered when assembling interviewees included reluctance on the part of some of the women I approached to participate in an interview because of their time constraints, my limited network of technical communicators, and the exclusion of male technical communicators. The interviewees finally chosen for this project were eager to participate and represented a range of personalities and job descriptions found in technical communication. Each chose a pseudonym for herself². Below I detail the general duties and education of each of the participants.

Jennifer Jackson is a technical writer at a government-contracting firm in San Antonio. She has worked as a technical communicator for five years. In her current position, she spends the bulk of her time working on web-based material and editing marketing/ communication documents. Jennifer is 26 years old, has a B.A. in English Studies, and is currently working on an M.A. in Literature at a university in San Antonio.

Katrina Williams is an editor at a large publishing company in San Antonio, her first job as a technical communicator. She has held this position for one year. Katrina recently completed an M.A. in Technical Communication and also holds a B.A. in Communications. She is 24.

² One reader noted that the pseudonyms were confusing because three sounded similar. This similarity was based on the reader's perception that the names were from "a certain age bracket." Interestingly enough, the reader was able to determine the participants' ages based on their names.

Christina Salinas is a 30-year-old technical writer in San Antonio. She earned a B.A. in English Communications, went on to work at a large software company, and subsequently moved to a smaller company that deals with government contracts. She is now employed at a small IT company that does government contracting. Her job currently focuses on the design and maintenance of the company website, although she prefers editing contract deliverables. Christina chose to go into technical communication because there were more jobs available in that field than in her first choice profession, journalism. She now enjoys technical writing so much that she plans to stay in the field.

Sue Green is a technical writer in San Antonio for a pharmaceutical manufacturing firm. She had previously been employed by a number of high-tech firms. She has worked as a technical communicator for the past five years after realizing that working with scientists and creating documentation was more appealing to her than creating marketing documents. Her new position affords her the opportunity to work on procedural documents, manuals, and guides that help SMEs adhere to FDA regulations. At 49, Sue is in her second year of an M.A. in Technical Communication. She earned her B.A. in Linguistics in the 1970's.

Marie Bryant is an organizational communication consultant. She earned her M.A. in Organizational Communication and works with clients in government, high-tech, medicine, communications, accounting, and other fields. Marie explains that she “backed into” this field. She spends the bulk of her time offering workshops on effective communication and creating documents that will help corporations address sexual harassment and diversity issues. At age 55, she has worked as a technical communicator

for 20 years, writing, collaborating, and teaching effective communication skills to companies and organizations across the country.

Having now discussed the foundations on which this study rests, I turn in the following chapter to an overview of my findings. I will discuss common themes in the data as well as some topics that could be explored in further research.

CHAPTER II

OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the themes that emerged in the participants' narratives. Several themes emerged, including the struggle to “fit in” in a new workplace, the experience of working with SMEs, the existence of gender-based conflict in the workplace, and the need for continued learning on the job. Only the first two of these themes were expressed by a majority of participants. The other themes, while not common to a majority, were compelling and might be considered as topics for additional research. The table below lists each of the themes as they correlate to the participants who discussed them.

THEME	Christina	Jennifer	Katrina	Marie	Sue
Fitting In At Work	√	√	√		
Working With SMEs	√	√	√	√	√
Gender—Based Conflicts		√		√	
Learning On The Job	√				√

“Fitting in at Work,” the first theme, is discussed at length in the following chapter. Narratives about “Working With SMEs” were the most common, and they make up another chapter. “Gender-based Conflicts” and “Learning On the Job” emerged in

two participants' interviews but were not consistent or compelling enough to discuss in individual chapters.

Gender-based Conflicts

"Gender-based conflicts" in the workplace were discussed by two participants. Marie told about an incident with a man she had hired to assist on a contract project. Jennifer told about her level of unease with the "young girls" in her office. In both of these cases, gender was an undeniable issue in the personal and professional conflict the participants discussed.

Marie's story documents the struggle female bosses may experience when working with male subordinates. In her case, Marie perceived that the man's unspoken and possibly unconscious resentment of her gender sabotaged her effectiveness in a client meeting. After relating a story about how a male subordinate undermined her authority in front of a client, Marie considered how his gender played a part in the situation. She explained, "I mean it was subtle, it was subtle, it wasn't overt that he didn't like women, but that was the only thing I could think. I think it was unconscious."

Marie suggests through her story that while it might not be overt or conscious, her gender affected her subordinate's perception of her and of his place in their work relationship. Whether gender differences motivated him or not, Marie's perception that this problem existed makes the gender aspect a consideration.

When men work for women, this story may be common. It is possible that men in subordinate positions express their frustrations in similar ways. No other narratives with this theme emerged in other participant responses. A possible research question that

Marie's narrative might prompt is "How do women in positions of authority perceive the behavior of their male subordinates? Do they sense any underlying hostility or sexism that that are different from the attitudes of female subordinates?" In technical communication situations at companies where men constitute the majority of the workforce, there are particularly compelling applications for this research.

Rather than discussing problems with men or subordinates as Marie did, the gender-based conflict expressed by Jennifer revolved around other women in her workplace. She told a story about an off-site event at which she was enjoying herself until some female coworkers arrived. She said, "This whole group [of young girls] came and immediately I felt uncomfortable because I know that there is something that they don't like about me."

Although Jennifer did not elaborate about why she felt disliked by the young girls in her office, elsewhere in our interview she discussed both her perception that others were jealous of her and the fact that she felt different from them. Regardless of the cause, she felt hurt at the way she was excluded from their group.

Other stories of conflict with women also emerged in Jennifer's interview. A possible research question following up on this theme might be "Is there a difference between female conflict and male/female conflict in the workplace? If so, what characteristics do the female conflicts exhibit? How are these conflicts resolved?"

Before I discuss the two themes that emerged during my interviews, I want to explore the theme that did not emerge as universally as I expected – gender-based conflict in the workplace. My initial assumption that this project would rest on gender-based conflict was based on an extensive study of existing literature (Bucholz, Chodrow,

Fletcher, Lay, Tannen) who, in various ways, argue that social and biological differences between men and women exist to varying degrees and that we must contend with these differences in the workplace. My own workplace experiences detailed in the introduction of this paper also bear this bias. But as Stokoe reminds us, “The assumption that gender differences will be found – the analyst’s agenda – has biased the analyses and findings in many studies and reinforced the popular and prevailing belief in distinct gendered speech styles” (“Talking About Gender”, 218).

The fact that participants told few stories of gender conflict may mean that they either were not an issue or were at least not a priority at the time of the interview. We must assume the stories actually recounted hold some priority for the speaker. It would be meaningless to postulate about the underlying gendered themes of the stories when the tellers themselves seemed uninterested in the topic. “Gender only becomes an issue when the participants themselves make it one and we can point to different things about that” (Stokoe, “Making Gender Relevant” 222).

When asked directly about the role gender plays in the communication styles of coworkers, the majority of participants contended that it was personality that played the most central part in determining a person’s communication style. According to several of the participants, gender is a subset of personality, one factor of many that defines a person and her mode of interacting with others. This belief is confirmed by Mary Lay’s research on collaborative writing. Lay argues that our societal move towards a “psychological androgyny” allows both men and women to leave behind stereotypically gendered behavior and enter spheres of discourse in which they were formally discouraged from participating (“Interpersonal Conflict”11).

The participants' lack of focus on gender issues may signal a more advanced personal perception of the role of gender both in personality and in the workplace and society at-large than existed in previous times. This mind-set may better allow them to work with others than traditional feminist ideas would. Lay's studies suggest, "Androgynous collaborators are more effective than gender-limited collaborators" and also that we might cease viewing gender as a cause of communication style and consider it as more of an effect ("Interpersonal Conflict" 12). So the minimization of gender as an issue at work may serve technical communicators well in their quest to collaborate across departments and coworker types. Even if subconsciously, the participants may have adopted Lay's androgynous model as part of their acculturation in the workplace.

Certainly, it could be denial, lack of interest, or wishful thinking that led the technical communicators I interviewed to ignore gender issues. Given the stories they did tell about trying to fit in and get along at work, it makes sense that this attitude is part of that larger desire to become an essential and useful part of the corporate culture and structure.

Learning on the Job

"Learning on the Job" was discussed by two of the participants. Both Christina and Sue talked about the importance of constantly improving their knowledge and skills in order to stay competitive in the workplace. Because of the ever-changing nature of technology, a technical communicator is well served by her desire to expand her knowledge.

Christina, after discussing her frustration with the limits of her job duties, talked about the importance of learning new skills. She believes that her knowledge and skills directly impact her marketability. She explained:

I just feel like I am losing my skills because if you don't practice, you lose them. So I have taught myself Access and am building my little web applications . . . I taught myself Photoshop and Dreamweaver and Flash. Lots of the time there are slow periods where you don't get anything. So I have just found ways to, like when I taught myself web design. Now the rage is the Internet, and so I just kinda taught myself. So now I sit in my office and figure out what else I can learn.

Christina's focus on improving her technical skills not only helps her current situation but also readies her for the next professional challenge she might face. Her expectation of and preparedness for change are valuable traits in a technical communicator. Sue expressed this same kind of openness to change and growth, even if her advice about learning on the job was more philosophical than technical. She commented that a technical communicator should "keep an attitude of learning. You can figure out a lot of things, but there's always a better way to do things."

"Learning on the Job" could be explored in many ways. An important question to ask might be what kinds of continuing education technical communicators participate in and what kind of support they receive from their employers for these endeavors.

Two themes emerged more consistently in the data: the participants' desire to fit in to a new workplace, to make their own nest, and their need to negotiate relationships with SMEs in order to create documents effectively. The following chapters reveal the

ways the participants expressed their experiences with these issues, the ways their jobs were impacted by these challenges, and the ways these themes replicate and extend the experiences documented in previous studies.

CHAPTER III

MAKING A NEST

In the previous chapter, “An Overview of Findings,” I offered a brief overview of the themes that emerged from my interviews with technical communicators. Two consistent themes included the participants’ need to “make a nest” in the workplace and negotiate relationships with “birds of a different feather.” In this chapter, I explore the ways technical writers find their place, both professionally and socially, in the workplace.

Several participants talked about their internal conflicts as they searched for places in new jobs. They told stories about their struggle to find a place in an work environment that may or may not value technical communicators. In learning about their job duties and the social conventions and expectations of the company, the participants described a search for place within the organization with which they received no advice or guidance from coworkers or supervisors.

I have chosen to call this process of finding a place “making a nest.” It is through this search for available territory that the individual determines the scope of her job, makes personal rules about her space, and announces the permanence of her position. She must discover what has been done by her predecessors, distinguish what successes and failures are recounted in office lore, and determine her own level of involvement in the social interactions of the workplace. During this process of nest building, a technical writer establishes her place at work and begins to become comfortable with her role.

This process is crucial to the future each individual faces at a particular workplace. Sam Racine, in discussing corporate lore, argues “People are included or excluded from such cultures [corporate or professional] by their knowledge and ability to manipulate professional fables and folklore, historical data, workplace experience narratives, and practical knowledge” (167). This lore is transmitted to new employees in the form of workplace stories from established workers. A new employee’s ability to access, process, and apply the lessons of corporate lore directly impacts her ability to fit in to the work environment. “Stories have become one gate keeping strategy to determine who gets in and who leaves” (Racine 181). We can examine the participants’ stories against the backdrop of this existing corporate lore to see how they perceives their progress in the process of acculturation

Christina, Jennifer, and Katrina discussed the adjustments they made when they began work at their current jobs. Each one described her desire to find an appropriate nesting place, a niche where she could prove her value, do work that needed to be done, and maintain effective relationships with others.

Christina provides insight into several aspects of nest-making, including the need for a proactive approach to establishing place. She tells about her expectations upon beginning this new job, her struggle to realize her own goals and potential, and her need to evaluate and fit into the existing structure of her new company.

Christina’s story

At her previous job, Christina had begun as the sole technical writer and eventually created an entire technical writing department and company-wide system for producing and reviewing documents. Her success in this endeavor caught the attention of

a competitor who believed that Christina could do the same at his small, specialized software company. Excited by the possibility of replicating her success, Christina accepted this new job. Based on the promises made to her by the company president, Christina came to her current job with the expectation that she would be creating a technical writing department, as she had at her former workplace.

When she began work at the new job, she had only a broad understanding of her long-term goal – setting up a system for document creation and review – and of her immediate priority, editing contract deliverables for the government documents generated by the software engineers. Yet the president who had hired her and established the expectation that she would be developing a technical writing department assigned her to a supervisor without communicating those expectations to him. Under this new boss, Christina did not receive any direction about where she should begin or what her priorities should be. She explained:

Right when I started, I went to I kept trying to figure out where I fit in, what am I supposed to do? And it's good that they do this, they kind of give you a general area. They say, "OK, we need to clean up this." OK. But they don't tell you what they want or anything. It's like work on something and we'll tell you whether we like it or not.

Christina knew which raw materials were available to build a nest with at this workplace. She would work with engineers, and she would edit contract deliverables. But was she to be involved in document creation from the inception of a project? Would she have final approval before deliverables were sent out? Where was her place in the

organization? What kind of power and managerial support did she enjoy? Christina needed to understand the layout of the tree and placement of the other nests before she could make her own.

Christina attended meetings and queried her coworkers and supervisor about their document development process. She described the successes she had experienced at her previous company and discussed how the same concepts might be applied in a new system at this company. Despite her attempts to explain the value of technical communication to her coworkers and persuade them to participate in creating a document creation system, Christina did not find support for her suggestions among the engineers or her supervisor.

Because no technical communicator had been employed at the company before, no documentation or narrative existed on a predecessor's successes and failures. Christina's primary responsibility became figuring out what her place and the place of all future technical communicators would be at the company. She had to stake out a position that proved her value. By listening to the stories and exchanges of established employees, she learned about the culture of the company and the existing attitudes about the value of technical communicators. Christina said that her coworkers were so interested in their own self-expression and self-importance that they would not willingly submit to new rules and systems.

Christina's experience adjusting to a new workplace was fraught with challenge, uncertainty, and frustration. Her struggle was an extended study of the corporate culture, existing beliefs about technical communicators, and the need to prove her own value in the workplace. Katrina expressed similar sentiments about her frustration with her

company when she recounted the process of fitting in at her first job. Her challenges were to her existence at the company, however, rather than challenges to the value of her expertise. She had to seek out work in addition to a role and place in the company.

Katrina's story

Katrina had, after an extended job search, been hired as an editorial assistant on a project at a large publishing company. Although she had been hired to do a particular job, no specific tasks awaited her when she came to work. The day she began, she was asked to do paperwork and was then left with no direction. Within a few days, she learned that the job she had interviewed and been hired for had evaporated, and Katrina was left scrambling to create work for herself lest she be deemed expendable and fired. She explained:

I thought that I was going to be assisting the editor for the manuals for tests being administered. . . . so I was kind of left by myself with nothing to do for the first day or two. Which was kind of I guess an introduction to the way the next six weeks would be. Because the next day I found out the girl I was going to assist was moving to New Mexico. So I was kind of confused about what my place was going to be. And supposedly I was going to help her via e-mail. Well, then it turned out – she lost the job. They gave the manuals to some people in Virginia. And I was really just kind of floating around for about six weeks. Without really a job title and very upset that I might be let go after I just moved to San Antonio. I don't know . . . And I was trying to dig up work to do and I probably, and I see it in everybody who starts there. They try really, really hard for the first month or

so and they are so conscientious and then it kind of fades away. I mean, we joke about it.

As Katrina emphasizes here, she had been hired as a temporary employee and her search for place was charged with the additional pressure that she might be terminated with no notice at any time. With little job experience and no assistance from established employees, Katrina was confused and frustrated by her situation. Where should she begin? Who was she to be working for or with? How could she find a place when she had so little direction? Katrina was left wondering whether there was any room in the tree for her nest.

Katrina talked to established employees and asked if she could be of help. She found small jobs to occupy her time and tried not to be a nuisance in her search for tasks. Although no coworkers talked to her about their experiences trying to make a nest or suggested ways in which she could establish her position and find assigned tasks, they did give her enough work to keep her busy, and she was able to prove her industriousness and independence. In time, she was given an official position and projects.

Able to build her nest at the company by “digging up work,” Katrina eventually discovers that the struggle to fit in and find a place at this particular company is a nearly universal experience. It is one that she and her coworkers now joke about. Whether this experience is a rite of passage fundamental to this particular corporate culture or an isolated experience, it is impossible to know without further study. We can say, however, that an individual’s capacity for finding her place and making a nest is valued as an indicator that she will be an independent thinker and worker. By forcing Katrina to find

her own work, the culture demands that she make a nest without a blueprint, the corporate culture reinforces its valuing of independence and creativity.

Both Katrina and Christina are strategic in their use of stories and feedback from existing employees to guide the construction of their nests. While Katrina uses coworkers to prove her determination and work ethic, Christina tries to educate, listen, and build consensus about her value and the value of her work. Faced with unclear daily expectations and tasks, the two women both used the organizational culture of the workplace to find a place. But organizational culture can be a barrier to nest-building in itself, as seen in Jennifer's story.

Jennifer's struggle to make a nest was less dictated by her need to outline her job description and more by her need to understand and assimilate into the corporate culture of her new workplace. At the time of our interview, she had been employed at this new company for only six months, and she was still dealing with the challenge of understanding the environment and fitting in.

Jennifer's story

Jennifer had been working as the sole technical writer at a small government documents firm, enjoying a great deal of autonomy. Her new role as a technical writer/web designer at a large government documents firm afforded her the opportunity to develop new skills and varied activities, but she was still negotiating her place in the rigid hierarchy and highly competitive environment of the new company. Not only did she have to adjust to a different system of managing and distributing information, but she also met social challenges that affected her ability to fit in. The birds in this new tree

were different and so was their nesting system. She had to determine which materials were most valued, which places were prohibited, and which birds were prized.

Jennifer describes her relationship with the other young women at her company as “uncomfortable” and told several stories about these conflicts. She contended that her access to confidential information and better computer equipment created a position of privilege which other women in her age bracket envied. Unaware of the corporate conventions of this new workplace, Jennifer initially attempted to befriend the women, but she met with several barriers. She explained:

At first I was really confused because most of their titles are program manager. And at my last job program managers were managers. But that’s not what they do. Their program manager is basically. . . they make sure all the people on a contract get paid and get their time sheets in.

Jennifer’s misunderstanding of her coworkers’ job titles led to her misconception of their place in the company’s hierarchy and the miscommunications and conflicts resulting from this fundamental miscalculation. In her journey to fit in, Jennifer learned she was not welcome in every circle of the company, every branch of the tree, and she realized that she would have to negotiate the culture at this company to do her job effectively. She explained:

I socialize with my coworkers only because I have to. I feel like I have to be phony. I have to work with these people, laugh at their jokes, their corporate speak, corporate jokes that I find so unimaginative. But I am learning and getting better at it. I am trying to find the amusement in it.

As Jennifer continues to build her nest, she has a better understanding of restricted areas in the tree as well as the pecking order of the birds around her. She understands the inflexibility of the corporate hierarchy and is acutely aware of the departmental and title distinctions at the company. To avoid further conflict, Jennifer has chosen to participate in the “corporate speak,” even though she finds it distasteful. MacKinnon explains that new employees are more likely to adapt themselves in a large, established company like Jennifer’s current place of employment than at a small company like the one she used to work for (43). This process of acculturation is experienced by newcomers to any discourse community. Jennifer must learn the language of the discourse community so that she will be capable of participating in its conversation. It is essential to Jennifer’s success that she not only understand her professional duties, but that she also fit in socially within the rigid hierarchy of the company. Her ability to distinguish the nuances of this corporate hierarchy directly affects her success and promotion (Racine 181).

Christina, Katrina, and Jennifer had different experiences when they began new jobs, but each of them experienced difficulties finding their places. In each case, the new employee made her nest after learning about her environment and her job. Although the challenges were different, the tasks they faced were the same: finding a place for the nest, collecting appropriate building materials, and orienting herself to the position of the birds around them. These activities were fundamental to adjusting to the new job.

One of the factors that each of the participants had to consider when making her nest was the spoken and unspoken perceptions of technical communication held by others in her company tree. The value of the technical communicator in a workplace is dictated

in large part by the culture's perception of technical communicators. These female technical communicators tell us that the connection between finding a place and understanding existing attitudes about technical communication is a strong one. A direct relationship exists between what the participants of this study were told both explicitly and implicitly about their place in the tree and the challenges they met trying to fit in with existing employees.

During her first days in her new job, Christina tried to discover the attitude coworkers had about technical communicators. After struggling with the definition of her position and authority at her new company, Christina asked her supervisor directly what role she was to have in the document creation process. She related the following exchange:

I went to this supervisor and say, "OK, what does this mean? What do you want me to do? Do you want me to have people give me everything before it goes out, do you want me to be in charge of delivery because I am the last person?" He goes, "Oh, I don't think we need that here. I don't think we need a technical writer." I think I just went, "Okay." So that tells you how they feel about technical writers there.

Christina had been prepared to create a system for document creation and asked what amount of control and authority she would be allowed within that system. Once her supervisor told her that he considered her position unnecessary, Christina realized that she would have no real power over contract deliverables nor would she be creating a technical writing department and company-wide system for document production and

review as she had initially been promised. She instead was forced to find another place for a nest. Her boss's attitude was a barrier to making a place in the document creation process of the company. Had he been involved in the hiring process or been apprised of the president's reasons for bringing Christina on board, this miscommunication might have been averted. As it was, her boss was not convinced that she brought significant value to the company.

After Christina began to understand the existing biases against technical communicators and the places that she was not going to be allowed to nest, she immediately began searching for an empty spot – an unfulfilled need that she might address. The company website was rudimentary and could substantially aid the growth of the small business if remade into a professional-looking site. Using her web design skills, Christina took over the design and maintenance of the site, thereby making a place for herself even after her original spot had been dismissed as unnecessary. Even though the website had not been a priority before for the company's management, Christina was able to make the website impressive enough that her superiors took notice and asked her to focus all her attentions there. In this way, not only did Christina find a function for herself at work, but also she expanded her coworkers' limited conception of a technical communicator's role.

In Christina's case, existing beliefs about technical communicators dramatically impacted her position and her ability to nest. The other birds did not understand her contribution to the overall health and productivity of the tree. Christina disagreed with the values and priorities of her coworkers, and wanted to spend time writing, editing, and polishing deliverables. Rather than fighting the notion that these activities were

pointless, she found another place that was more valued by those in positions of authority.

In Jennifer's case, working within the original job description was her only choice, and she was left to negotiate the beliefs and attitudes of others in superior and lateral positions. Unlike Christina, who needed to find tasks that would prove her value to doubting coworkers, Jennifer's coworkers depended on her expertise as an integral part of their work. This dependence has its implications as well.

Jennifer was a member of the marketing/communication team at her company. Others in her group edited documents, but she was the only dedicated web and document design and production staff member. She described an instance in which she was the only one with expertise, and yet her work was reviewed by a number of coworkers that she believed were unqualified:

The people in other departments think that they should have a say in what our department does. And it's actually kind of encouraged by management. We had an awful, awful website for years, and when I got there I redesigned it. Before we took it into production, I had to send it to like 50 people for them to review – People that don't have anything to do with the website and people that don't have any expertise in that. So. We would kind of get that a lot.

Jennifer experienced this attitude from other departments as well, and she pointed out that although many employees feel at liberty to offer input or advice about technical communication documents, the reverse is not true. She is not invited to and does not offer suggestions outside her own realm of expertise. Other nests are off-limits to her.

The company encourages the belief that marketing/ communication employees are not privileged to the extent that they deserve autonomy. Other employees have a stake in these documents and are encouraged to provide feedback. This system makes technical communicators into editors rather than creators of information, and relegates them to a support role for any department who might interact with them.

Understandably, Jennifer is dismayed by the open way in which others offer suggestions and review her work. As a professional who prizes her skills, Jennifer wants the respect and trust of her coworkers, but she must negotiate the relationships with others and listen to their input because the corporate culture demands it of her. To make her nest in this tree, she must understand the position of the other birds and allow them appropriate access to her place.

Making a nest in a new workplace is the first challenge participants described. As social creatures, we need to establish ourselves, learn our boundaries, and become part of the culture. From determining job duties to assessing existing social and organizational structures, the professional and personal struggle to make a nest establishes a technical communicator's position at a workplace. In MacKinnon's study of writers entering a workplace, she found "increased knowledge of the social and organizational context had significant effects on their writing" (46). Only once the nest is built and the layout of the tree becomes clear can the technical communicator begin to interact with others and produce work. The technical communicator must have a contextual foundation from which to operate in the workplace.

Many factors impact the way a technical communicator goes about making a nest in the workplace. There may be gender, power, social, or other issues that flavor her

experience. These factors are all aspects of organizational culture, the conscious and unconscious set of guidelines that exist and inform workers about how they should function both independently and with others in a specific place (Fletcher, McNamara, Sentell).

Studies of organizational culture are complex because the understanding of corporate values is often tacit. In some of the existing literature, explorations of an organization's culture have helped explain frustrations some employees face.

In Fletcher's study of female engineers, for example, their own personal values and socialized belief in teamwork kept them from speaking up, taking credit for ideas, and refusing to help coworkers who were taking advantage of them. Because the "female" value of the whole over the individual did not fit into the corporate culture, the women had a difficult time finding their place and feeling comfortable with their peers and their work. Both in Fletcher's study and in many other work contexts, women struggle to balance their ideas of appropriate work behavior and desire for recognition and success in the workplace.

Stephen Riggins discusses the way members of a group "other" or separate and label those individuals outside the culture in order to reinforce the culture's values and beliefs. He argues that groups use discursive practices to venerate their way of doing and thinking and denigrate the ways of those outside the group (6). Sam Racine also noted this group-building technique in his study of corporate lore in the workplace.

Technical communicators in this study tell us organizational culture is central to the process of establishing a place. As the participants built nests in their new workplaces, their understanding of corporate culture guided their acculturation. Although

they expressed frustration at the challenge, they were actually performing essential research that formed the basis of all their future workplace interactions. This process of “making a nest” is an expression of cultural competence as well as an attempt to “fit in.”

In the next chapter, I will discuss what happens after the nest is built. Established and comfortable with her position, a technical communicator must begin to collaborate with others in order to do her job. Document creation is dependent on interaction with SMEs, people who often have very different priorities and personalities. How do technical communicators describe their negotiation of these relationships? What are some successful strategies for working with SMEs?

CHAPTER IV

BIRDS OF A DIFFERENT FEATHER

The previous chapter describes participants' experiences making a nest in a new workplace where existing perceptions about technical communication impacted their quests to fit in. Their stories tell us that not only must a technical communicator find an appropriate personal and professional role in her new company, but she must also contend with her coworkers' existing attitudes toward the role and value of technical communication. In this chapter, I will further explore the interactions between technical communicators and their coworkers, now focusing on the ways a technical communicator negotiates her relationships with SMEs (Subject Matter Experts). The line of communication between technical communicator and SME is essential to her ability to glean appropriate information in a timely manner and create the documents she is required to produce. To succeed, she must navigate this relationship carefully. The SMEs on which the technical communicator depends for information are often scientists, engineers, or technicians who have highly specialized knowledge, very different thought processes, and other priorities and job duties whose time constraints affect interaction with the technical communicator. These SMEs are "birds of a different feather" precisely because they function and are rewarded differently in the workplace

than the technical communicator. One participant noted that she could never be “one of them” when working in a group of software engineers:

You are still, in a way, supporting their work. They are still the ones making the money because they are creating. You just make it nice, make it pretty.

In this case, the technical communicator not only describes the difference between herself and the engineers, but she also denigrates her own role in the collaborative process. It is not only the difference in personality and role of the technical communicator and SME that complicates the relationship, but also the perception the technical communicator has of her own role in relation to the other’s role. In this instance, the technical communicator expresses her own valuing of technical knowledge over communication skills.

This valuing of technical or scientific knowledge above writing skills is pervasive in the workplace and society at-large. Unless a technical communicator can demonstrate to an SME both the ways in which she adds value to his work and her own professional skill and work ethic, she may be unable to facilitate a mutually beneficial collaboration.

The relationship between technical communicators and SMEs is a crucial but tenuous one. Lee and Mehlenbacher’s 2000 article in *Technical Communication Online* outlines the frustration felt by both SMEs and technical communicators regarding the interactions they have as they create documents. They describe the need for mutual respect of time and talent in workplaces that often have different expectations and reward systems for technical communicators and technical experts.

The fact that different priorities, communication styles, and personalities may contribute to tension in the relationship between technical communicators and SMEs is a proven one, and the need for collaboration between the two exists regardless of the challenges. The technical communicator depends on knowledge “owned” by the SME, which necessitates her negotiation of the relationship so that she might access that knowledge a full and timely fashion.

The participants in this study had very specific strategies for working effectively with SMEs. The one participant who was unable to negotiate her relationship with SMEs eventually took another job where she was no longer dependent on them for information. The other four discussed their attitudes toward SMEs and their strategies for building and maintaining good relationships with them – an endeavor considered essential by each. These strategies included building strong personal relationships, maintaining professional and respectful relationships, and remaining aware of the “higher purpose” of the relationship with the SME.

Sue, Katrina, Marie, and Christina all had productive relationships with the SMEs they worked with, due in part because they carefully crafted relationships. They learned to create a balance of professional and personal communication with which both they and their SMEs were comfortable. They reported respecting the importance of the relationship and the value these “birds of a different feather” contributed to the company and to individual projects. In return, they got respect, cooperation, and the information they were seeking.

Two of the participants talked about the relative ease they experienced working with SMEs, and two reported that they depended on particular strategies and their need to

exert extra effort to make SME collaboration successful. Sue and Katrina fall into the first category; Marie and Christina fall into the second.

Sue and Katrina's stories describe a "divide and conquer" approach to collaboration. Rather than interacting with SMEs to hammer out an effective document, both Sue and Katrina take the work of SMEs and manipulate it into an appropriate format. They are not collaborating in a traditional sense, but they depend on their SMEs for the information that must appear in their documents. Therefore, strategies they employ must motivate the SME to release complete information in a timely manner, but are not designed to establish a free-flowing or respectful dialogue with SMEs.

Sue's story

Sue grew up in a family of scientists, a factor that she believes directly impacts her work with SMEs. She understands the logic and communication style of those "more left-brained individuals." She is extremely aware of her manner when she interacts with the SMEs at her workplace. She does not interrupt to ask questions, listens intently, is respectful of their time, and gets information from other documents or writers whenever possible so as to disturb her SMEs as infrequently as possible. She explained her success with SMEs in the following way:

I work well with other people. And having been in the sales and marketing department, I learned a lot about the inter-departmental workings of the company and that part's really good. Being a quick learner is very helpful. There are certain personalities that are argumentative about learning, and I am not. I listen before I start challenging things because I have found out with this type of job that if you listen you'll have so many more questions answered than if you start

popping off with “How come we don’t do it this way? How come we don’t do it that way?”

Because of her good relationship with SMEs, Sue has been able to earn a reputation for creating effective, complete documents quickly. She has little trouble getting information from SMEs quickly, and she is copied on all emails that her SMEs think might impact her work. A mutual respect exists between Sue and her SMEs in great part because she values their expertise and time and treats them deferentially.

However, in some instances SMEs overstep their bounds. Sue described that aspect of her relationship with some of the SMEs, emphasizing her role maintaining professional decorum in the relationship:

There is a degree of one-up-manship. And I will say this, I see it more among guys than among the women. Especially the ones who have been in the military. It is really interesting. But when you challenge them, they’ll look at you like they catch themselves.

Reserving her challenges for issues that infringe on personal dignity, Sue is able to halt any unpleasant interactions quickly. Her relationships with the SMEs are not highly personal, and she is therefore able to avoid complication, leaving only space for professional communication and exchange.

The hallmarks of Sue’s story include her immense respect for the time and value of SMEs and the professional rather than personal relationships she has formed with these coworkers. Her focus on productivity and her respect for the other birds’ time and

value facilitate collaboration. The same behaviors and relationship features can be found in Katrina's narrative about SMEs.

Katrina's story

The SMEs Katrina works with are not scientists, but are content-area specialists with specific expertise in academic subjects. Most of these SMEs are former teachers. Katrina describes many of them as having inter-personal problems and a lack of perspective. She expressed her relief that her SME did not exhibit these characteristics.

Katrina reports that her dedicated SME, Eva, and she have an ideal working relationship. Katrina admits that they know very little about each other personally and both are comfortable with that arrangement. When asked about a specific time she collaborated with Eva, Katrina explained:

Well, I think most of the time I work well with Eva. I can't really think of a specific instance because there haven't been any crises. I mean she could probably do it without me. She is just really orderly, she doesn't ever seem to get in, she doesn't ever seem to get in these problems like other people do. She just has everything very organized. She gives me what she needs me to do, I give it back, and that's it. Clear-cut.

There are many office horror stories about SMEs and editors being unable to work together, and Katrina acknowledges how fortunate she is to be teamed with someone who has similar priorities and temperament. She and Eva are mutually respectful of each other, appreciate each other's personal space and privacy, and value each other as collaborative partners. Devoid of rigid hierarchical constraints, their

relationship facilitates the co-production of documents; the work they produce together runs smoothly through a predetermined process and to a quick and painless completion.

Katrina not only understands that Eva is a different kind of bird who needs to be respected for her talents, but she also appreciates that Eva is superior to some of the other birds in the tree by virtue of her intelligence, organization, and work ethic. In order to earn and maintain Eva's respect, Katrina mimics her behavior, thus closing the gap in the differences between the two birds. This is most evident in her prioritizing of the work that needs to be sent to Eva over what might need to be forwarded to her boss or another department.

Where Sue and Katrina employed "divide and conquer" collaboration techniques, Marie and Christina's efforts called for closer collaboration with SMEs. They needed to co-develop documents and therefore had to develop ways of offering criticism and input without offending the "birds of a different feather." Both Marie and Christina were very much aware of their role as facilitator and the position of the workers with whom they collaborated.

Marie's story

Marie works as an organizational communication consultant and depends both on other communication specialists and on specialists inside various companies to act as SMEs. These knowledge holders include individuals as varied as marketing executives and Nobel Prize winning scientists. Much like Sue, Marie has learned to minimize the personal side of her relationships with SMEs and focus on her ability to listen and respect the input of others.

When discussing her collaborative work with one particular group of experts, Marie explained, “Each of us in some respects all had a strength.” That acknowledgement of place and purpose, along with the strictly professional relationships that were adhered to, made the experience a great success.

Adding to Marie’s positive experience is the fact that she has been working in the field for so many years. After twenty years, she has established a position in which she need only take on those projects she feels comfortable with:

I don’t work with people I don’t like because I have a choice. In the life I am leading I get to pick, who I bring on board, who I propose. So I totally have control. It’s not like I am in a company where I am told, “You’re going to be red-teaming this proposal and you’re going to be working with Alexis, and Mary, and also Charlie over there.” And I get stuck with these people and usually get stuck doing the work because they don’t work. Because you can say I don’t want this project, I want these people involved, and I don’t like that kind of work, so we’re not going to bid on it. You know. There are not that many teamwork issues.

Marie’s narrative may focus on the ease of her current situation, but her awareness of potential teamwork challenges points to a work history full of negotiations and collaboration. Although she may now choose her coworkers and her projects, she still draws on her understanding of the importance of maintaining these relationships. She knows the types of birds that populate various trees and can avoid being paired with those who might be trouble. This understanding of the complexity of birds of a different

feather is echoed in Christina's story as well. She discusses the development of her approach to collaborating with SMEs and her successes and failures with various tactics.

Christina's story

Christina relates that at her first job fellow technical communicators met with resistance when they attempted to wrestle information from the engineers or strong-arm them into meeting deadlines. These SMEs did not like being forced into answering questions for technical communicators, and they frequently withheld information or were slow to deliver it. Their own personalities along with their lack of respect for the value of technical communicators exacerbated the situation. A recent college graduate with little experience, Christina explains that she initially, "asked for a lot of help, and 'you're so smart' and that sort of thing. That actually helped a lot." Her playing the role of the lost and needy girl may have worked at first, but she eventually developed a different strategy.

Christina decided that she would build personal relationships with even the most difficult people so that she could have established and open lines of communication with anyone she might depend on for information. She explained:

I knew everybody. Not kind of fake, I was really sincere about it. Since I knew everybody, whenever I needed anything I just walked right over and, "Hey, can you get me this?" "Could you explain this?" "Is this really what they mean?" Even if they hadn't written the document but were somehow involved I could go and ask them about that. That way, I found really good. I think the actual documents are a lot better when you talk to each other rather than writing email.

But I always made the point – even with the most difficult people. Figure out what their interests were and have a conversation to get to know them because it is such, it makes such a big difference with other technical writers who try to beat people over the head. You shouldn't have to, but it helps.

When Christina went to SMEs for information, they were helpful and positive, perhaps because they saw her as a friend rather than another hassle and barrier to finishing their own projects. They happily complied with her requests in most cases. With plenty of information and clear understanding, Christina was able to produce excellent documentation with significantly less personal struggle than some of her more aggressive counterparts faced. Her investment in building personal relationships with SMEs showed them respect, and they repaid her with information.

Christina was savvy in dealing with SMEs, but she did also discuss the imbalance she perceived in her relationships with these kinds of experts.

You are support for them. Always. I've never known anybody who doesn't see a tech writer as that. They treat you differently, some of them are very nice and they are helpful and they see your work as important because they don't have to do it, so they are very helpful. But you are never at the same level as they are.

While Christina perceived that she was viewed as unequal by the SMEs she worked with, that did not prevent her from building and maintaining effective relationships with them. It does, however, underscore the reality that the job of

collaboration remains paramount, regardless of the bird of a different feather's unpleasantness.

In all four of the narratives discussed above, the participants developed successful relationships with their SMEs even if the methods and ends of those relationships were different. Jennifer, the one participant who could not make that relationship work, finally was frustrated into changing jobs.

Jennifer's story

Jennifer had less success working with SMEs than the other participants did. As the sole technical communicator at her former job, she worked on contract deliverables that depended heavily on SME input. Her two major complaints about the SMEs were their attitude that "their position affords them the right to dick me around," and "their communication skills are really lacking." These criticisms center on the differences in communication strategies employed by birds of a different feather. In fact, the SMEs and technical communicator were speaking completely different languages.

Depending on SMEs for information, Jennifer frequently asked them to clarify technical questions and "they would launch into an answer that made absolutely no sense." Jennifer was frustrated by her inability to communicate effectively and the resulting difficulty she had producing documentation. While the SMEs might not have intended to insult her, their lack of awareness of appropriate tone and approach created a barrier to collaboration – one made immovable by Jennifer's reaction to it.

Even when technical miscommunication was not an issue, other barriers remained. She felt that the SMEs did not respect her input or expertise. She explained:

The worst thing that I ever encountered in my career is someone who refuses to work with you on something. In my old job it happened all the time. They would say “this is exactly what we need to say” and I would tell them, “this is wrong grammatically or the audience won’t understand it” and they would say “it doesn’t matter. Leave it.” And it was so frustrating.

Unlike the other participants, Jennifer expressed her awareness of her own expertise and her desire for mutual respect and appreciation in the technical communicator / SME relationship. Unable to ignore the inequities in the relationships and smoothly negotiate relationships with SMEs, Jennifer began looking for another job in technical communication that relied less on collaborating with technical experts. It is unclear if other strategies employed successfully by other participants and discussed in this study might have helped Jennifer work with SMEs, but it is true that she left her job because of her difficulties in this area.

In every case described above, the relationships participants developed with SMEs directly impacted their ability to do her job successfully. These relationships also affected the overall satisfaction each participant had with her job. It was essential in each situation that the technical communicator negotiate a relationship with her SME to get information with which she could produce documentation. Sue and Katrina relied on respect and organization; Christina and Marie relied on personal rapport; they all knew that it was their responsibility to make the relationship work with these “birds of a different feather.” Failure working with SMEs meant failure creating a successful document.

The fundamental challenge a technical communicator faces in her interactions with SMEs is that they are “birds of a different feather.” Their personal biases and professional expectations are different. Dutch engineering professors Gert Brinkman and Thea van der Geest have suggested that engineers be trained to review documents and provide feedback “formulated and delivered in a way that will stimulate the writer/presenter to benefit from the feedback” (69), but they acknowledge that this skill is one not well cultivated during university education. Engineers in their study tended to rely on writers for their skills but did not take a particular interest in creating good documents. This may in part stem from the fact that writing is valued differently by technical professors and writing professors at the college level. Summer Smith determined that technical students may begin to “discount technical writing” as at odds with the values of their own department (7).

Wojahn et al.’s study of collaboration between engineers and technical communicators in the classroom lends insight into the disconnect between engineers and technical communicators. While professors noted that the engineers “did not understand what other disciplines could or should bring to the table and did not know how to effectively utilize these skills”(133), they also found that technical communicators had a difficult time understanding their own value and expressing it to their team members. This study provides insight into the frustrations of collaboration in the workplace between these two professional groups. We can also help to educate both technical experts and technical communicators about the value of their own role and the value of their counterparts.

The professional expectations of an organization also reinforce the divide between technical communicators and SMEs. Lee and Mehlenbacher note that one of the barriers to effective communication between these two groups is management's "rewarding the value of their work in significantly different ways" (13). The participants' awareness both that the SME was less motivated to collaborate and less skilled at communication underscore this overarching reality. The scientists and engineers who are SMEs do not depend on documentation to complete their outlined duties, but the technical communicator does depend on the scientist or engineer to perform most of her assigned duties.

Even after educating both parties about collaboration and mutual respect, we need to acknowledge that the maintenance and manipulation of this critical relationship falls to the technical communicator, and we should offer as many examples of successful relationship management as possible. A larger participant pool of both technical communicators and SMEs questioned about failures and success in this area would make up an invaluable body of research for technical communication students and professionals.

In the previous two chapters, I have discussed themes that emerged from my interviews with technical communicators. These two commonalities – making a nest in the workplace and working with birds of a different feather – were expressed by a majority of participants and are supported by and extend existing literature in a number of fields. In the following chapter, I will discuss the implications of this study and topics for further research suggested by my data.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In this project, I employed primary researched techniques to collect data about the workplace interactions of technical communicators. Five female technical communicators were asked about their personal and professional experiences at work, and they each told a variety of stories about their perceptions of work, coworkers, and their own roles on the job. This information helps us to understand the everyday experience of the technical communicator and to prepare students and professionals entering the field of technical communication for challenges they might face.

Existing literature in narrative research, organizational culture, and workplace relations between technical communicators and SMEs is vital to a complete and accurate analysis of narratives about workplace interaction told by technical communicators. It is impossible to discuss the experience of professional technical communicators without considering the challenges they express in narratives about their workplace. By understanding and anticipating potential obstacles, we can train technical communicators to negotiate them.

Implications for Teaching and Practice

This study is useful in its potential application both in the classroom and the workplace. In the classroom, future technical communicators can be taught about the realities that will affect their work experience outside of their skills and knowledge. The negotiation of organizational culture and relationships with coworkers will be crucial to their success. Understanding existing attitudes about technical communicators will help them anticipate and address challenges others might make to the value of technical communication. In general, students will be better prepared for the highly social context in which they will perform their technical duties.

Workplace applications of this study are equally compelling. Technical communicators may find common experiences, use suggestions from participants' experiences, and educate coworkers about the value of technical communication after reading the narratives of this study. A concerted effort to champion the value of technical communication and remind us of our own perceptions and biases is called for in these stories of negotiation and establishment of place.

Implications for Future Research

The two themes that emerged from this research were the technical communicator's need to "make a nest" in a new workplace and her negotiation of relationships with SMEs. These social interactions defined the participant's place at work and dictated much of their effectiveness and satisfaction with their jobs.

To better understand the technical communicator's need to "make a nest" in her new workplace, research could be conducted with more participants. Using a broad age

range of individuals will help insure that the phenomenon is not limited to the young or inexperienced. This process of nesting is likely observable in other fields as well, but it is especially important in technical communication. The technical communicator's deep dependence on coworkers for information, her integral role in the production and delivery of essential documents, and the newness of the field itself all impact her struggle to find an appropriate professional and personal space at work.

There will likely be no end to the study of the technical communicator's relationship with SMEs. As long as technical communicators depend on SMEs for technical information that needs to be accessibly documented, the two will have to find ways to communicate with one another. It is likely that the elements that made the participants of this study successful in that relationship will be universally helpful to technical communicators working with technical experts. As the field of technical communication continues to grow and develop, more study of these themes will become necessary. A follow-up examination of the social interactions of technical communicators in the workplace should include a larger participant pool and should track the acculturation of technical communicators in their organization's culture over time.

Briefly discussed in Chapter II, two additional themes were present in a few of the participants' narratives, but were not universal enough to suggest conclusions. These themes include gender-based conflict and the need for continued learning on the job. The ongoing interest in academia in gender studies makes the first theme a potential topic for additional study. The constant development of new software and documentation techniques makes learning on the job an essential function of the technical communicator and could prove an important topic of further research. With a larger and more diverse

participant pool than was used in this study, more narratives containing these themes might emerge.

Some potential research questions discussed in Chapter II might be posed to further consider these important issues. Some of these questions include:

How do women in positions of authority perceive the behavior of their male subordinates? Do they sense any underlying hostility or sexism that is different from the attitudes of female subordinates?

What kinds of continuing education do technical communicators participate in?

What kind of support they receive from their employees for these endeavors?

Regardless of the questions posed, primary research in technical communication is a dynamic and necessary tool to developing better work environments and understanding of the definition and value of technical communication.

APPENDIX 1

Consent Form

Alexis Carroll Cline is conducting interviews with female technical communicators regarding their workplace interactions. This research will be used to develop her MA thesis, which is being conducted under the supervision of associate professor Rebecca Jackson, PhD of Southwest Texas State University – San Marcos.

Participants may find that they gain insight into their workplace dynamics and communication through the reflection called for during the interview. There will be no monetary compensation made for interviewees.

The interview and all reports pertaining to it will be used for educational purposes. Participation in this interview is completely voluntary and interviewees may choose to opt out or end the interview at any time with no penalty. The identity of the interviewee will be confidential. Pseudonyms will be used and the audiotape will be under the care of either Ms. Cline or Dr. Jackson at all times, but absolute anonymity cannot be ensured.

NAME _____

DATE _____

APPENDIX 2

Interview Questions

1. What are your pseudonym, age, and level of education? How many siblings do you have and of what gender? Are your parents married or divorced?
2. How do you describe yourself?
3. Tell me the type, size, and focus of your company.
4. What is your job title and job description?
5. How long have you been employed here?
6. Describe your journey to this job.
7. How did you learn that the job you now have was available?
8. Can you tell me why you took this job?
9. What kinds of expectations about the daily routine of the job did you come into it with? How do these measure against the reality?
10. What analogies would you use to compare previous work environments to your current one?
11. What are your theories or beliefs about differences between male and female communication styles?
12. With whom do you communicate during a typical workday?
13. Do you socialize with your coworkers either in or outside the workplace?
14. What kinds of people do you generally work best with?
15. What characteristics do you find it most difficult to contend with in a coworker?
16. Do you collaborate with coworkers on writing projects?

17. Tell me about a particularly productive experience where you and a coworker worked on a project together.
18. Do you collaborate on projects often?
19. Have you worked with this person before?
20. How do you feel about group projects in general?
21. What is your relationship with this coworker outside of a business context?
22. What kinds of communication do you and your supervisor engage in? As in do you talk in person, on the phone, via email? What predominates?
23. Describe your supervisor.
24. How far (in approximate distance) are your workspaces and what characteristics distinguish the two?
25. Tell me about an instance where you went to your supervisor for help or guidance.
26. How did you learn to write/ cycle documents at this job?
27. What processes do you go through when creating a document?
28. Describe the corporate culture at your workplace. Is it comfortable?
29. What kinds of behaviors are valued at your company?
30. What kinds of behaviors are discouraged at your workplace?
31. How are these expectations enforced?
32. Do you work with SME's?
33. Tell me about a project where you worked with a SME.
34. How do people at your company feel about technical communicators?
35. What do you think is your most valuable asset in the workplace?

- 36. Do you perceive that your writing skills are valued?
- 37. What is your favorite part of your job?
- 38. What is the greatest source of conflict for you at work?
- 39. If you could change something about your work situation, what would it be?

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