

5 similarities & 5 differences: internal communication vs. technical communication

I recently had my first encounter with internal communications specialists, when I attended a course run by the Institute of Internal Communication, about communicating change. The other attendees on the course were a great group, and our tutor, Dave Oliver, did a fantastic job of keeping us quiet just long enough to actually teach us some really interesting material and give us some fascinating insight from case studies.

Internal communicators are the people who work within a business to keep employees informed about whatever they need to know about – changes to IT systems, success stories, change programmes... As the day went on, I was struck by how closely the things the internal communicators in the group were thinking about and doing in their daily lives resembled the things that technical communicators do. I guess the clue was in the “communicators” part of the name ... but I suppose I just hadn’t thought it through that far. Now that I have, though, here are my thoughts on some of the notable similarities and differences between these two roles.

Similarities between technical communication and internal communication

- 1.** We think carefully about what message or information we need to convey, and design content around that
- 2.** We value carefully crafted content – tuning sentences and layout to maximise engagement and avoid ambiguity, jargon and inconsistency
- 3.** We publish to a variety of channels, often simultaneously
- 4.** We see our job as a conversation, not a one-way communication: we invite feedback from our audiences and adapt what we’re doing in response
- 5.** We often need to spend time convincing people that the work we do adds value to the organization

The differences:

- 1.** Concurrent vs. linear communication design.

Although both technical and internal communicators will often produce a set of content – not just one deliverable – when designing it, technical communicators tend to need to think about how people will access and engage with this content at one point in time – e.g. whenever the user needs help, we’ll give them access to a range of information channels. In contrast, internal communicators often need to consider this *plus* a linear aspect, of how their communication design will roll out over time. For example, in introducing a major change to an organisation, the type of communication at the start of the timeline will be very different to the type of communication at the later stages (e.g. start off with a group announcement, then move on to one-to-ones); in contrast, tech comms would generally make all their content available at once, and leave it up to the users when they access it.

- 2.** Internal communicators have a strong idea of exactly who their audience is (employees, or a subset of them); technical communicators often work with an idea of a user role or persona instead.

- 3.** Internal communicators consider emotional responses of their audience.

If you’re announcing potential redundancies or introducing a major new software package, you’re affecting people’s lives very directly, which is going to evoke a very strong emotional response. Technical communicators don’t often consider this; maybe we should?

- 4.** I run out of differences.

There must be more, but every time I come up with one, I encounter the fact that internal communicators very often communicate about IT projects or new procedures – things that are commonly handled by technical communicators instead in different organisations.

Here are some more similarities instead.

Both technical communicators and internal communicators:

- often have to write for international audiences
- often have to deliver technical information (e.g. communications about switching to a new operating system or software tool)
- produce communications to support projects that they have no influence over
- have to “extract” information from a third-party in order to produce their content

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