

Building Your Service Line

In the traditional corporation, there used to be something called a "career path." As your experience and skills increased, you would follow this path into management or staff positions that gave you higher degrees of challenge, responsibility, and reward. In these days of down-sizing, out-sourcing, and flattened organizations, the concept of the career path is seldom recalled, much less realized. This, of course, is one reason many people become consultants—to seek the increased challenges, responsibilities, and (most of all) rewards, that are now less available in the corporate setting.

So how can we, as technical communications consultants, gain these benefits? I think there is a concept equivalent to the career path for consultants. It's called building your service line. Increase the kinds and quality of the services you can offer, and you increase the rewards accordingly.

I've been thinking a lot this past year about ways we can build our service lines. Following are some ideas I've come up with. (If you've got others, do let the rest of us know.)

- 1) Add new skills. This may mean editing, help authoring, desktop publishing, or simply different kinds of writing. Try your hand on a marketing document. If you're technically inclined, take a programming course or two so you can write programmers' reference documentation.
- 2) Add new media. Graphics, sound, animation, video. Presentations, tutorials, kiosks, web sites. Aim to become what Bill Horton in last year's Currents keynote address called a "full-service communicator."
- 3) Become a leader. Increasingly, as corporations use more contractors, there are opportunities for consultants to be team leaders or project managers. Read some management books and polish up your people skills.
- 4) Offer a range of services. Actually, I view this as a combination of 1, 2, and 3. It's what I define in my business as "integrated communications services." Be ready and able to analyze all of the communications-product needs of a client and to provide solutions.
- 5) Compose the even-bigger picture. In the digital age, information is both a product and a tool of business. Step back and look at how information is communicated within your client organizations. Find ways you can use your skills and expertise to make it work better, to get the right information to the right people in the most understandable form and most timely manner. Can you spell "intranet?" Obviously, this one represents a brave new world for technical communicators. We're not just talking WinHelp anymore.

If you're awake and ambitious, you can find ways to build your service line while getting paid for it. The key is to look for problems that clients or potential clients have, that you can solve. Then let them know about it. Persistently, if necessary.

Reprinted from CommLink, the Newsletter of the Atlanta Chapter of the Society for Technical Communications.