



If your users don't read, who is responsible?

The technical communication profession is highly skilled. We emerged from the 1980s with tools, standards, and methodologies that we gradually tuned and extended through the 1990s.

The information user became our focus and our challenge was clear: we wanted users to find the information that enabled them to be productive and competent performers. We crafted information that supported and empowered the task performer, and we designed information spaces that users could navigate successfully.

But does our responsibility end with publishing? How much does OUR success depend on our users engaging with our product? And how often do we actually ask ourselves "If they don't engage, whose responsibility is that?"

I know that John Carroll gave explicit warnings about user resistance to information and tutorials. Here is just one of endless examples from *The Nurnberg Funnel*:

"The problem is not that people cannot follow simple steps; it is that they do not.... People are situated in a world that is much more real to them than a series of steps, a world that provides rich context and convention for everything they do." (John M. Carroll, 1990. *The Nurnberg Funnel*. Massachusetts: MIT Press, p. 74.)

And yet, many who read the Nurnberg Funnel became so preoccupied with assessing the validity of Carroll's suggested solution, Minimalism, that they totally ignored the message: "it's not that people cannot..., it's that they do not."

As information technology spread, most of us accept that online users started learning through trial and error. They leveraged previous experiences, asked colleagues, rang Help desks, and explored every possible low cognitive effort option before resorting to information or self-study.

Some of you will be thinking "Surely it is up to information users whether they engage or not." People must be free to refuse as well as take up. And people ARE free to decide whether to engage, but everyone, employee and employer, customer, and supplier, has a stake in competent performance and successful outcomes.

I recently worked on an online documentation project with a number of human resources professionals in a large Australian organization. The project sponsor was a senior manager who wanted a solution that made USEFUL information accessible to employees and managers.

The sponsor recognised that achieving project objectives meant improving the presentation and accessibility of information, but her vision went beyond new documentation templates and a new navigation architecture. For her, USEFUL implied IS USED. Information cannot be USEFUL if it is ignored!

During one collaborative analysis and design session, the HR specialist I was working with stopped explaining the policy and system components of his information domain and complained that people were ignoring most of his information.

Did that matter? Did lack of knowledge affect employee performance?

In fact, yes. The policy area related to employing new staff. Before a new staff member could be employed, the new staff position had to be defined. The definition of the new position impacted salary and resourcing across the business area, as well as employee benefits and performance assessment.

Managers defined the new position by completing a very complex form. It certainly looked like a challenging task to me so I asked whether managers phoned for help when completing the form.

Yes, they did. The form represented performance pain. Managers sought help from colleagues or the HR team, or they cloned other job definitions.



We suddenly realised that here was an entry point into the information domain. Information that was bound to the form, that could prevent rework or mistakes, and that could speed up outcomes would unlikely be ignored.

We would create a checklist to enable managers to perform their task. Nothing radical about that. Technical communicators have been designing fit-for-purpose information aids since time began.

The checklist was our opportunity. In addition to briefly explaining what was required, we used what I call *unsettlers* to prompt the manager to review further information.

For example, each new employee position needed a title but a title could not simply be invented since it implied the seniority of the position. There were guidelines for determining the appropriate title for a position.

In the checklist, the help for specifying the title included an *unsettler*: "Will the title you specify comply with HR guidelines?" The phrase, *HR guidelines* linked to the short online topic that set out rules for position titles.

We were able to pursue the *unsettler* approach throughout the checklist.

What had happened? We had had information users who did not USE information. The business was disadvantaged by their degraded performance but ultimately so were the potential information users.

We found a critical task where USEFUL information would be welcomed and we designed the USEFUL information to *tip* people into other USEFUL parts of the information domain. We identified *unsettlers* by analysing the performer's context which included their task goals and their awareness of the organization's expectations.

Ironically, this had been a design approach that I'd been using for more than a year in Website design. The approach was based on exploiting key user entry points.

1. Review the most likely online information and transaction tasks that users will perform.
2. Identify information entry points for each task.
3. Analyze the agenda/context around the task.
4. Develop triggers (*unsettlers*) that can be used to pull people through to other parts of the Website or intranet.

And now, after many readings of Malcolm Gladwell's book, *The Tipping Point*, I recognise that *unsettlers* actually manipulate the performer's context in the same way as a broken window tipped passers-by in a Palo Alto street into trashing a car.

So who's responsible for users USING information? Should we, as information designers, do more than organize and write the information users need to know?

In this article, I've suggested that we should. We need to seize opportunities to influence user engagement with what we write.

Users may not have read the principles behind an HR policy or they may be unaware that practical support exists, but at performance points where they are desperate for a quick information solution, we should have strategies that pull them through to information that will inform their decisions and actions.