

Remote Tech Writing – When and How

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1. My Context

- Recruit only for tech comms roles
- Software industry, mostly. Some biotech, medical device, and hardware clients.
- Typically recruit for small firms, not Fortune 500 ones
- Focus on hard-to-fill, lucrative staff and contract posts (typically the geeky kind)
 - o Work solo
 - o Most clients come by referral, are collaborative (as opposed to silent; minimal spaghetti-throwing)
 - o Most candidates are older, have lives, and want responsible (usually senior) roles paying top dollar
 - o Qualified candidates motivated by lifestyle issues (short/no commutes, efficiency, schedule flexibility, minimal external interruptions, familiar tools, predictable schedules, sentient management, etc.)

2. Market Realities

- Cost containment
 - o Hybrid roles are prevalent; most managers have never met the kind of resource they're asking for
 - o No training available
 - o Layoffs, offshoring are primary financial strategies
- Fearful, inexperienced, too-busy 'deciders'
 - o write unprioritized "kitchen sink" job descriptions
 - o stay walled off from candidate base
 - o prefer consensus-based hiring
 - o opt for contract-to-staff (when in doubt)
 - o prefer onsite
 - less communications overhead when plans change
 - want to see people working
 - equate 'working from home' with 'not working'
- Older workforce
 - o prefer primarily offsite (with rare exceptions)
 - o prefer being more explicitly trusted
 - o demand to report to vertebrates
 - o avoid open-seating workspaces
 - o motivated more by quality of life, less by upward mobility, least by chaos
- Sectors/Roles are unequal
 - o Writing for developers is most valued
 - API reference doc (often RESTful)
 - Developer tutorials (with short TTFHW, 'time to first Hello World')
 - o Writing for business end users, system admins is much less valued
 - o Writing procedures, compliance doc for in-house users is least valued
 - o Writing non-tech marketing content – content writing – is gaining in value
 - o Content strategy (cf marcom writing) gaining popularity too
 - o Writing for open source companies pays 10-15% better
 - o Mobile, Big Data/Analytics, SaaS/virtualization/cloud, Security, Open Source arenas are **hot**

- Networks, financial, manufacturing, energy, transportation, healthcare, hardware, government are **not**
- Enterprise, medical devices, biomed/pharma, green tech, semiconductors, storage are **lukewarm**
- San Francisco, peninsula, & South Bay are **hot**; North Bay, East Bay, Sacramento markets are **not**

3. What Companies Want

- Set-and-forget resources
 - o Know the technology
 - o Know the audience
 - o Know which doc deliverables to prepare
 - o Don't require formal management
- Collaborative
 - o Join our daily standups
 - o Do what we tell you (or have a really good reason)
 - o Ship when we do
 - o Don't slow us down
- Self-reliance
 - o Don't bug the SMEs unless the product fails
 - o Get things done (with the tools we provide)
 - o Don't ask for special treatment
- Onsite
 - o Easy to communicate with, call in to meetings
 - o Easy to show product features
 - o Easy to ensure productivity
 - o "One of us"
 - o Immediate gratification
- Staff (as opposed to contract)
 - o Cheaper when the hours are long
 - o Less dissention with team over pay, expectations, etc
- Contract (as opposed to staff)
 - o Easier to sever relationship if it doesn't work
 - o Cheaper if company plans to sell out rather than IPO

4. When Do Companies Consider Remote Workers

1. Refusal to prioritize requirements in job description
2. Absence of infrastructure (no procedures ramp-up)
3. Looming deadlines (so fewer choices)
4. Technical skills and experience paramount, and **rare**
5. Suitable talent is busy
6. Budget is constrained; remote talent is cheaper
7. SMEs are geographically distributed (so why not the tech writer?)
8. Hiring team already knows and trusts resource (or the recruiter/intermediary)
9. Legal is wary of IC tax law
 - a. Doesn't want to appear to control worker, so concedes on work location, schedule
 - b. Doesn't want to work through MSP (extra cost)
10. They *like* you; interpersonal skills count (if all else is equal)
11. Misc conflicted agendas (hours, venue, reporting structure, responsibilities, staff vs contract)

5. Convincing Companies to Hire You to Work Remotely

1. Work onsite until there's proven...
 - a. trust
 - b. cultural compatibility
 - c. productivity (to their standards)
2. Demonstrate you can do their work remotely
 - a. Set up a development environment to run their product
 - b. Be a committer to open-source product similar to theirs
 - c. Write content similar to theirs on spec (w/hold copyright)
 - d. Create an outline for doc they need
3. Arrange to visit periodically, as agreed
4. If really confident, charge for travel time
5. Consult on milestone basis; no approval = no pay
6. Work on retainer (fixed bid for *nn* hrs/week or month, then pre-agreed \$\$ thereafter)
7. Incorporate yourself; erases 1099 reclassification issues

6. Sustaining a Remote Working Arrangement

1. Offer to travel to their site periodically
2. Over-deliver
3. Don't whine
4. Keep all your commitments, w/o excuses (even if it means working harder than if onsite)
5. Keep yourself professionally desirable
 - a. Stay current with the technology, esp what the competition is doing
 - b. Stay abreast of their schedule, tools, priorities, politics
 - c. Stay ahead of them on implications of their choices (eg, tools, icons, UI standards, error messages, translation issues, structured content issues)
 - d. Stay cheaper than local alternatives
 - e. Make known you have other clients
 - i. Might be interested, if price and package is right
 - ii. Happy to keep dating w/o marriage
6. Anticipate glitches and politely, firmly resolve w/o help
7. If conflicts arise, offer to find and train successor
8. Don't slow the team down

7. Questions?

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