

Technical Communications as a Profit Center

The Right Content for Your Customers and Your Company

September 2009

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Executive Summary

How strategic is product documentation or the technical communications department that produces it? Because many companies lack the insight into the contributions this department makes to enterprise profitability, the answer is frequently, 'not very.' Aberdeen's analysis of 165 participating companies demonstrates these contributions, including a 42% increase in customer satisfaction and an associated 45% increase in product revenue, are more important than many realize. Starting with this foundation, this report provides best practices and recommendations for organizations that intend to maximize technical communications' impact as a profit center.

Research Benchmark

Aberdeen's Research Benchmarks provide an in-depth and comprehensive look into process, procedure, methodologies, and technologies with best practice identification and actionable recommendations

Best-in-Class Performance

Aberdeen found that as a result of their simultaneous focus on operational efficiency and documentation quality, Best-in-Class companies were able to realize significant customer-facing value through technical communications:

- 41% decrease in volume of inbound calls to customer support
- 42% decrease in time to resolution within customer support
- 41% increase in customer satisfaction score

Competitive Maturity Assessment

Survey results show that organizations achieving Best-in-Class performance shared several common characteristics. Among these characteristics, Aberdeen found leading performers to be more likely than their competitors to:

- Leverage structured authoring editors (46% more likely)
- Measure customer use of documentation (83% more likely)
- Use Content Management Systems (CMS) to manage relationships between content components (86% more likely)
- Measure the performance of technical communications with formal metrics (100% more likely)

"Tech pubs can make a huge difference in a company, especially if they are an innovative and motivated group. To do our jobs well, we must have excellent cross-functional skills and be able to communicate with many different types of people. If we don't deliver accurate timely documentation, then the result is customer dissatisfaction and increased calls to customer support."

~ Mia Fisher

Technical Communications
Manager
Intermec

Required Actions

In addition to the specific recommendations in Chapter Three of this report, to achieve Best-in-Class performance, companies must:

- Measure the operational performance of technical communications with formal metrics
- Streamline processes with content reuse supported by structured authoring editors and content and project management solutions
- Engage customers by publishing documentation that's specific to targeted user needs or product configurations

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Chapter One: Benchmarking the Best-in-Class

The role of technical communications within an enterprise typically falls among one of two conflicting perspectives. Those within technical communications have long argued that product documentation provides significant business value in terms of a customer satisfaction as well as downstream savings in customer support and service. In the broader, enterprise perspective, however, documentation is generally viewed as a one-of-many requirement for product launch. In this second scenario, the groups that produce documentation are viewed as cost centers and are tasked with operational directives to stick to tight budgets and tight deadlines so as not to delay product launch. Without a mechanism to track the impact that technical communications provides, advocates of the department's business value often lack the quantifiable data required to demonstrate the role their department plays in the enterprise.

Through direct research involving 165 companies, Aberdeen has developed a quantified framework for the considerable impact on profitability technical communications provides when approached strategically. This chapter provides an overview of these benefits and the initiatives deployed by organizations that achieve them.

Fast Facts

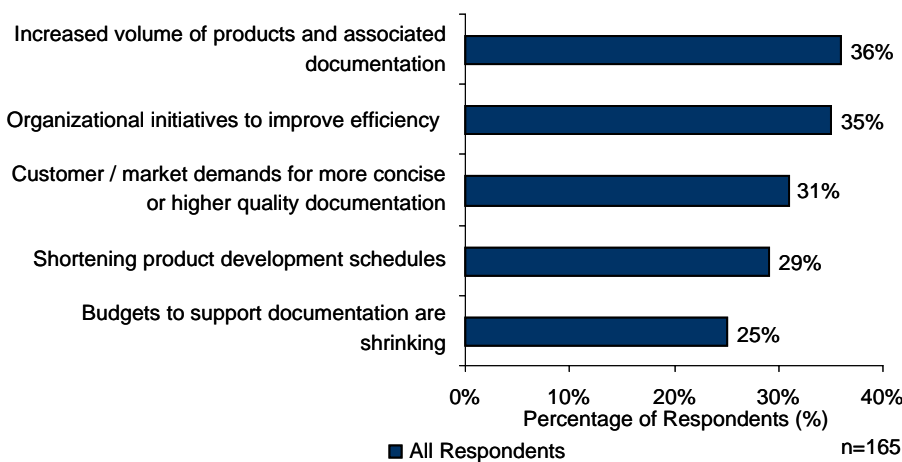
Companies at Best-in-Class levels of performance achieve:

- ✓ 41% decrease in volume of inbound calls to customer support
- ✓ 42% decrease in time to resolution for customer support
- ✓ 41% increase in customer satisfaction score
- ✓ 45% increase in product revenue

Goals and Constraints on Technical Communications

Understanding the business impact made by technical communications first requires an understanding of the factors that constrain the organization's performance and ultimately compel changes to its operations. To this end, Figure 1 identifies the top five pressures driving these changes.

Figure 1: Top Five Pressures Driving Change in Technical Communications



Source: Aberdeen Group, September 2009

It is immediately apparent in Figure 1 that no single pressure dictates the changes made to technical communications. In fact, this data makes clear the range of conflicting operational constraints facing technical communications. Increased volume of products requiring documentation, company-wide initiatives to increase efficiency, shortening product development schedule, and shrinking budgets are reported as top pressures driving changes on technical communications with nearly equal priority.

Falling at the end of the product development cycle and typically regarded as a cost center, technical communications is confronted with tight operational constraints in terms of project schedules and available budget and resources. In fact, the past year has seen headcount reductions for many technical communications organizations (sidebar), further depleting the resources available to these organizations. Adding to the challenge is the growing demand for output placed on the organization, stemming from a rising volume of products developed by many companies. Findings from Aberdeen's August 2009 [Product Design Made Easy](#) report indicate that on average, companies have increased the number of products they bring to market by 14%, largely in order to add new revenue streams.

Placed in context of these pressures, customer and market demand for more concise and higher quality falls in third place. It is in the ability to respond to this pressure that contains technical communications' potential impact on the business. This appears to be recognized within the organization: when asked to rank their objectives for technical communications, study participants indicated an increase in customer satisfaction as their top objective. Reported by 82% of respondents, increasing customer satisfaction was cited 58% more often than any operational objective.

The Maturity Class Framework

The position that customer demand holds among the operational constraints placed on technical communications fundamentally means that the business value contributed by technical communication must be identified within these constraints. To this end, Aberdeen set out to identify the organizations that simultaneously maintained a high degree of operational efficiency and a high standard of documentation quality. Five key metrics were used to identify these organizations:

- Percentage of projects meeting targeted authoring deadlines
- Percentage of projects meeting documentation quality targets
- Percentage of projects meeting source language authoring cost targets
- Percent decrease in time required to develop documentation
- Percent decrease in source language authoring costs

Using these metrics, Aberdeen benchmarked participants and categorized them into one of three tiers of performance: either Best-in-Class (top 20%

Headcount Reduction: Technical Communications

Aberdeen's research indicates a general reduction in headcount in technical communications organizations over the past year:

- ✓ 16% of these organizations have seen over 20% reductions in headcount
- ✓ 11% of these organizations have seen less than 20% reductions in headcount
- ✓ 57% have seen no change in headcount
- ✓ 7% have increased headcount between 1% and 20%
- ✓ 7% have increased headcount by more than 20%

Customer Demand as a Top Pressure on Technical Communications

Aberdeen has consistently found customer demand to be a top pressure on technical communications, including:

- ✓ [The Technical Communicator's Transformation](#) (Oct. 2008)
'Customer demand for precise / quality communications (50%)
Rank: 1st
- ✓ [Publishing Technical Communications in a Multi-Channel World](#) (May 2007)
Increased demand for more concise communications (53%) Rank: 1st
Increased focus on customer satisfaction (40%)
Rank: 4th
- ✓ [Next Generation Product Documentation](#) (Dec. 2006)
Demand for concise and customized documentation (55%) Rank: 1st

of performers), Industry Average (mid 50%), or Laggard (bottom 30%).
Table I displays the aggregated performance of these organizations.

Table I: Top Performers Earn Best-in-Class Status

Definition of Maturity Class	Mean Class Performance
<p>Best-in-Class: Top 20% of aggregate performance scorers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 93% of projects meet targeted authoring deadlines ▪ 91% of projects meet documentation quality targets ▪ 83% of projects meet source language authoring cost targets ▪ 26% decrease in time required to develop technical communications (man-hour required) ▪ 43% decrease in source language authoring costs
<p>Industry Average: Middle 50% of aggregate performance scorers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 89% of projects meet targeted authoring deadlines ▪ 75% of projects meet documentation quality targets ▪ 81% of projects meet source language authoring cost targets ▪ 6% decrease in time required to develop technical communications (man-hour required) ▪ 5% decrease in source language authoring costs
<p>Laggard: Bottom 30% of aggregate performance scorers</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 65% of projects meet targeted authoring deadlines ▪ 35% of projects meet documentation quality targets ▪ 18% of projects meet source language authoring cost targets ▪ 2% increase in time required to develop technical communications (man-hour required) ▪ 1% increase in source language authoring costs

Source: Aberdeen Group, September 2009

Based on these measures alone, substantial performance gaps fall between Best-in-Class and Industry Average as well as between the Industry Average and Laggard performers. In particular, the Best-in-Class demonstrate a strong capacity for balancing the disparate pressures outlined in Figure 1. Once defining Best-in-Class performance in terms of operational efficiency and maintenance of high quality documentation, Aberdeen found a correlated impact on customer satisfaction and customer support and service organizations. These findings align to the value articulated by proponents of the conception of technical communications as a profit center as well as indicate the potential business value technical communications stands to provide the enterprise.

Reductions in Service and Support Costs

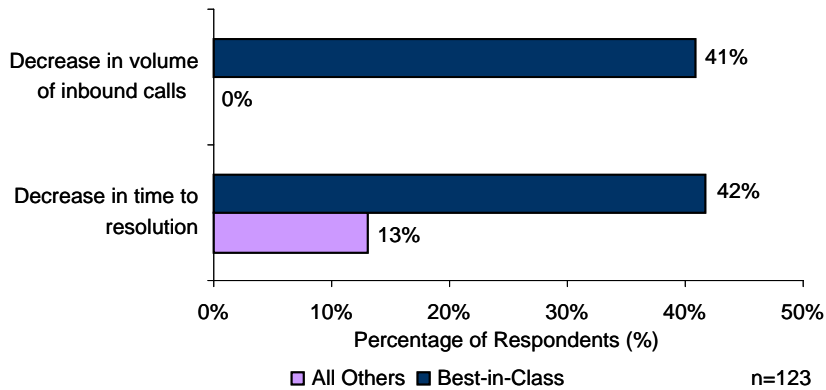
The first area where Aberdeen identified an impact made by technical communications is within the customer support and service organizations (Figure 2). By better responding to expectations on documentation, the Best-in-Class are able to better engage and educate their customers about the features and use of their products. The result of this education is a 41% reduction in inbound calls to customer support and service organizations, which can be compared to a 0% change reported by Industry Average and Laggard performers. At the same time, Aberdeen’s research indicates that this product education also drives a 42% decrease in time to resolution when product issues are escalated to customer support departments.

“If the people writing the checks don’t value the output of technical communications, then they won’t put investment. The challenge for technical communications managers is to always show their value to upper management. You need to always promote yourself and demonstrate the value you bring to upper management.”

~ Chona Shumate
Technical Publications
Industrial Equipment
Manufacturer

Industry Average and Laggard organizations do see an impact here as well, but it is less than half that of the Best-in-Class.

Figure 2: Impact on Customer Service and Support



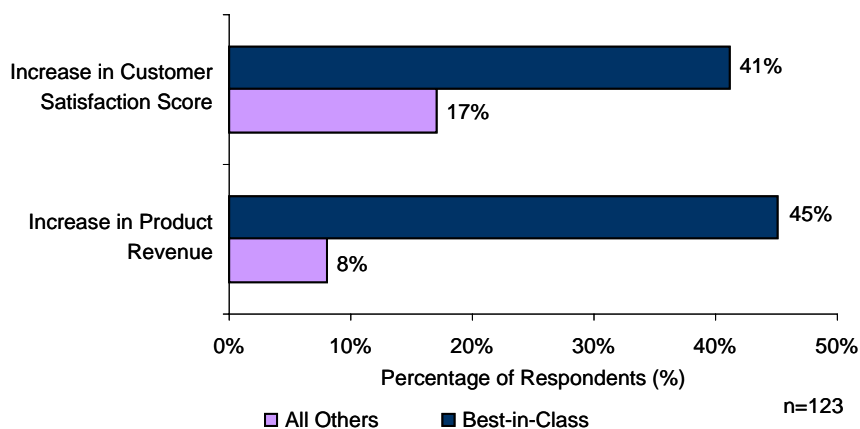
Source: Aberdeen Group, September 2009

The performance of the Best-in-Class in these two areas indicates the potential impact that technical communications has for downstream profitability by contributing to operational cost reductions for customer support and service. By contrast, the performance of the Industry Average and Laggards indicates the lost opportunity of technical communications, particularly among those struggling to address operational pressures.

Increases in Customer Satisfaction and Product Revenue

Increasing customer satisfaction was reported as the top objective for technical communications (82%). Aberdeen identified a significant impact made in this area by both the Best-in-Class and their competitors (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Impact on Customer Satisfaction and Product Revenue



Source: Aberdeen Group, September 2009

**Note about Figure 2:
Increases in Products Launched**

To place the decrease in call volume reported by respondents into the correct context, Aberdeen compared participants' answers to the reported change in products requiring customer support in the same timeframe.

Aberdeen identified an increase in products across the performance framework. Industry Average and Laggard performers each indicated a 19% increase in products, while the Best-in-Class reported a 33% increase.

For Industry Average and Laggard performers, this places the 0% decrease in call volume in context. It is not that these organizations see no impact on customer support, but that the impact made by technical communications lags behind current increases in products. At the same time, a 33% increase in products requiring customer support among the Best-in-Class places a 41% in inbound call volume in an even more dramatic light.

"Customers think of documentation as part of the product. That should also be the way we look at it. Documentation isn't a necessary evil. It's a part of the product. You use it to help improve the product for the customer. The more customers know about the product, the more they value it. You lose a lot of opportunity with poor documentation."

~ Chona Shumate
Technical Publications
Industrial Equipment
Manufacturer

Again, Aberdeen identified a significant difference in the impact made by the Best-in-Class, whose reported 41% increase in customer satisfaction score is more than twice the 17% increase reported by Industry Average and Laggard performers. This impact follows again from the ability of an organization to respond to expectations to better engage and educate a customer about a product. What senior managers and executives may find more compelling is the associated 45% increase Best-in-Class performers indicate in product revenue as customer satisfaction yields to retention.

On one hand, it is overenthusiastic to suggest that technical publications alone contribute to a 45% increase in product revenue. It is not reaching too far to suggest that the Best-in-Class performers that nurture a customer-centric technical communications organization are doing other things outside of the scope of this study to achieve this kind of impact. Not the least of these is the 33% increase in products identified earlier.

"Documentation is always included on our customer satisfaction survey. Documentation is generally consistent with a customer's satisfaction with the product overall. A product that gets good ratings also has documentation that gets good ratings. If a product gets poor ratings, documentation also gets poor ratings."

~ Associate Vice President
Healthcare Software Provider

The Best-in-Class PACE Model

By simultaneously maintaining a high level of operational efficiency and a high standard of documentation quality, the Best-in-Class are able to contribute significantly to customer satisfaction and downstream profitability. Creating and maintaining this balance is easier said than done. It requires a combination of strategic actions, organizational capabilities, and enabling technologies that can be summarized as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: The Best-in-Class PACE Framework

Pressures	Actions	Capabilities	Enablers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Increased volume of products ▪ Customer demand 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Increase reuse of content across technical communications ▪ Create more engaging customer experience with technical communications ▪ Provide licensed access to specialized / premium documentation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Content layouts are standardized based on use case ▪ Documentation is customizable based on customer need ▪ Dedicated role assigned to developing and managing documentation format / presentation ▪ Authors specialize in knowledge areas that apply across product lines ▪ Documentation access by customers is tracked and measured ▪ Documents are dynamically linked to information within product's system of record ▪ Performance of technical communications organization is measured using formal metrics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Structured authoring editors ▪ Graphics / Image editors ▪ Rich media / eLearning editors ▪ Content Management System (CMS) ▪ Process / project management

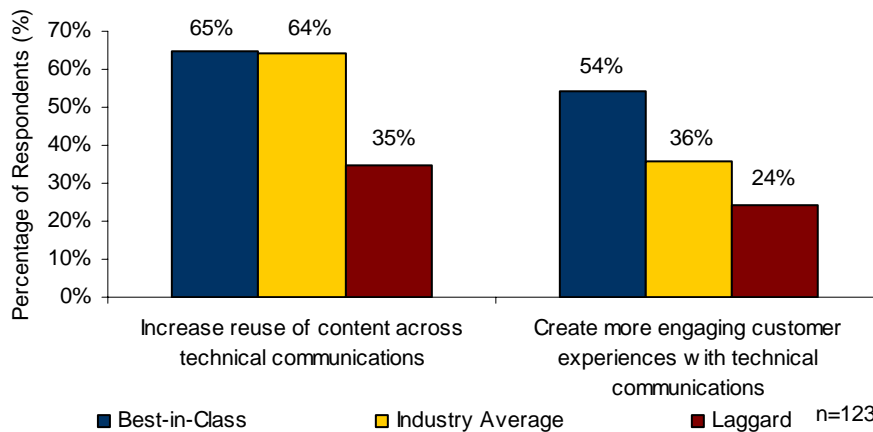
Source: Aberdeen Group, September 2009

Best-in-Class Strategies

Aberdeen's data clearly indicates that Best-in-Class performers have found the means to leverage technical communications to influence customers'

experiences with a marked impact on business profitability. The Best-in-Class have not accomplished this by foregoing the tight operational pressures on technical communications. Rather, it is the Best-in-Class that leverage a combination of strategies the Best-in-Class use to do so (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Strategic Actions of the Best-in-Class



Source: Aberdeen Group, September 2009

The value of the first of these strategies (increasing the reuse of content) is no secret within technical communications. When developing new documentation, there are often a number of sections that either match exactly or are similar to sections that have been used in the past. In these cases, reusing existing content, rather than wasting effort rewriting it, consumes less time, enabling writers to focus their efforts on developing new sections. Given the popularity of content reuse initiatives, it is not surprising to see that Industry Average performers report roughly equal adoption to the Best-in-Class. However, the Best-in-Class take a significantly different approach to its execution, which will be seen in Chapter Two.

If the first strategy is responsible for the operational success of the Best-in-Class, the second strategy indicated in Figure 4 (create more engaging customer experiences with technical communications) is responsible for the customer-facing benefits enjoyed by these companies. In effect, these leaders reinvest the efficiency they gain through content reuse into uncovering new means to engage and educate customers. The difference that these efforts make is significant, and can be seen clearly in the 42% increase in customer satisfaction score and 45% increase in product revenue reported by the Best-in-Class.

"Reuse and repurpose,' are big words that many people don't understand and may not know how to apply in practice. To truly leverage reusing and repurposing, you can't just start with existing content as is. You have to ask yourself: 'What do people do when they use a help system?' You have to go to all the parties that use documentation: trainers, sales engineers, users, support personnel and ask them: 'How does the content match what you want to do with the product or solution?'

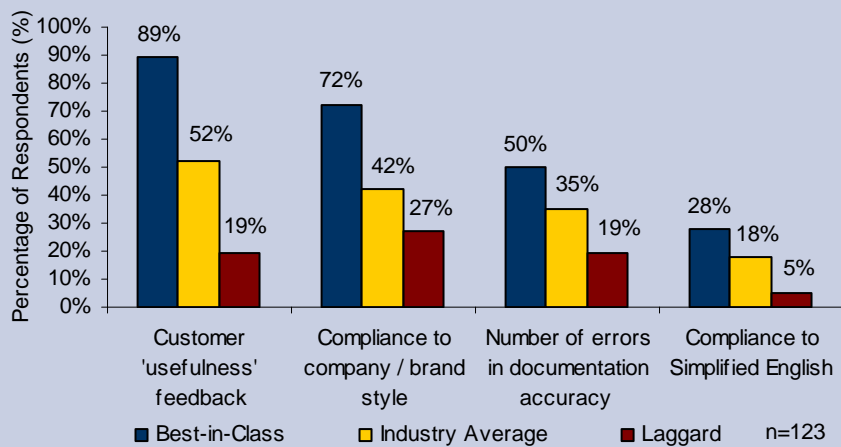
You can't just think about chunks of content that 'auto-magically' come together in a complete help system. Just because you have those chunks in your help system (or documentation) doesn't mean that you can provide the solution that people need right then when they have a printer jam or an issue with your product."

~ Jean-Luc Mazet
Localization Program Manager,
Information Developer
HP

Aberdeen Insights — Strategy

The impact that the Best-in-Class make in terms of customer support and customer satisfaction both hinge on the quality of documentation. To this end, Aberdeen found that the Best-in-Class are more likely than their competitors to assess the quality of their publications according to a greater range of requirements (Figure 5). By contrast, Aberdeen found that 57% of Laggard organizations do not measure the quality of documentation.

Figure 5: Measured Standards of Documentation Quality



Source: Aberdeen Group, September 2009

It is notable how the Best-in-Class focus on responding to their customers takes first priority among these measures. It is also significantly absent among their competitors. For the Best-in-Class, quality is synonymous with how useful customers find product documentation. This is consistent with the strategic focus these organizations provide to customer engagement as well as the benefits they receive as a result. It is key to remember, however, that this focus on quality comes along side a similar focus on remaining within operational constraints.

In the next chapter, we will see what the top performers are doing to achieve these gains.

Chapter Two: Benchmarking Requirements for Success

Effectively exploiting technical communications as a business asset requires a change in the perspective that is often brought to bear on this organization. A technical communications organization that strategically delivers customer value and enterprise profitability takes a different shape from one that is overlooked as a cost center. This chapter will review those capabilities that distinguish the shape taken by the technical communications departments of the Best-in-Class.

Case Study: The Impact of Effective Utilization of Technical Communications Resources and Customer Responsiveness

A large North American business software provider recently reassessed how its technical communications groups were organized and distributed. Previously, the development of documentation had been a distributed function associated with each product line. The company revised its approach to include shared resources for specialized functions for graphic arts, editorial, and publishing, as well as a centralized architecture for structured authoring and related tools and technology support. The hybrid organization combines content developers distributed in each product group with shared services supporting all of their products. Making this change has enabled better utilization of resources across the company. The director of this centralized technical publications group explains, "By putting specialized resources in a central organization, the costs become much more reasonable as they're spread out across the business. We've made an investment that not one of our product groups could have made individually."

The company made this investment in order to create documentation that better supports its customers. However, even with their shared resources, the company recognized that a strategic change was necessary in order to meet its needs. The technical publications director explains, "We needed to publish specific manuals that addressed each customer's need. The permutations were in the thousands. The only way to do that was to separate the content from the delivery and then automate it. You couldn't do it otherwise; the scale is just too great."

The company adopted a topic-based authoring process, breaking content out into reusable components in a content management system, which is part of an infrastructure that includes centralized publishing and localization functions. This structured authoring approach helped reduce the time to create, localize, and publish content, allowing technical communicators to focus more on improving information quality.

continued

Fast Facts

Top differentiators of the Best-in-Class, compared to their competitors:

- √ 46% more likely to leverage structured authoring editors
- √ 86% more likely to use CMS to manage relationships between content components
- √ 100% more likely to measure the performance of technical communications with formal metrics
- √ 83% more likely to track and measure customer use of documentation

Case Study: The Impact of Effective Utilization of Technical Communications Resources and Customer Responsiveness

Using this approach, the company has separated content development from delivery. To automate the publication of content, the company stores its content components in a common CMS and leverages a publishing engine that renders content into the kind of highly specific documentation its customers need.

By transforming how it develops content and by reorganizing technical communications into a cross-enterprise collaboration, this company more effectively utilizes its resources and delivers highly personalized documentation to its customers. The difference that these changes have made can be seen most clearly in the example of a low-cost product that the company recently launched. As a low-cost offering, the product needed to stay within tight margins in order to be profitable. The company's director of technical publications explains, "We knew the product needed to be easily installed and we had to keep customer support calls as low as possible. The charge came to technical publications to make it happen. Part of it comes down to the design, so we can't say it was all us, but support has stayed within a reasonable level. I'm claiming success."

Competitive Assessment

Aberdeen Group analyzed the aggregated metrics of surveyed companies to determine whether their performance ranked as Best-in-Class, Industry Average, or Laggard. In addition to having common performance levels, each class also shared characteristics in five key categories:

1. **Process** - the approaches they take to execute daily operations
2. **Organization** - corporate focus and collaboration among stakeholders
3. **Knowledge management** - contextualizing data and exposing it to key stakeholders
4. **Technology** - the selection of the appropriate tools and the effective deployment of those tools
5. **Performance management** - the ability of the organization to measure its results to improve its business

The capabilities and enablers identified in Table 3 serve as a guideline for best practices, and correlate directly with Best-in-Class performance across the key metrics. These characteristics demonstrate how the Best-in-Class simultaneously secure the efficiency of the authoring environment and improve how they communicate product information to their customers. The remainder of this chapter will discuss these capabilities and enablers as they align to four themes describing how the Best-in-Class:

- Create visibility into customer expectations

- Increase authoring productivity and develop a greater variety of content
- Centrally manage and control content and processes
- Deliver content according to their customers' needs

Table 3: The Competitive Framework

	Best-in-Class	Average	Laggards
Process	Content layouts are standardized based on use case		
	76%	49%	45%
	Documentation is customizable based on customer need		
	40%	28%	23%
Organization	Authors specialize in knowledge areas that apply across product lines		
	56%	49%	41%
Knowledge Management	Documentation access by customers is tracked and measured		
	44%	29%	25%
	Documents are dynamically linked to information within product's system of record		
	38%	21%	13%
Performance Measurement	Performance of technical communications organization is measured using formal metrics		
	40%	19%	18%
Technology Enablers	Technology currently in use:		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 63% Structured authoring editor ▪ 100% Graphic / image editors ▪ 43% Rich media / eLearning editors ▪ 46% Content Management System ▪ 50% process / project management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 45% Structured authoring editor ▪ 85% Graphic / image editors ▪ 17% Rich media / eLearning editors ▪ 41% Content Management System ▪ 48% process / project management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 39% Structured authoring editor ▪ 78% Graphic / image editors ▪ 20% Rich media / eLearning editors ▪ 36% Content Management System ▪ 38% process / project management

“We have a few levels for capturing customer feedback: email comments come in from support or marketing escalation lists; customer-found defects or test-found defects with our product; and the embedded feedback tool of our website. As comments come in, tech pub leads sort through them and assign issues to be resolved if the comments are clear enough to warrant it.

When you have a larger team and your product team is supporting multiple releases, it's a must to resolve these comments in order to maintain the docs. Addressing the comments helps to ensure all improvements keep getting rolled into the latest documentation.”

~ Technical Communications
Manager
Telecommunications
Equipment Manufacturer

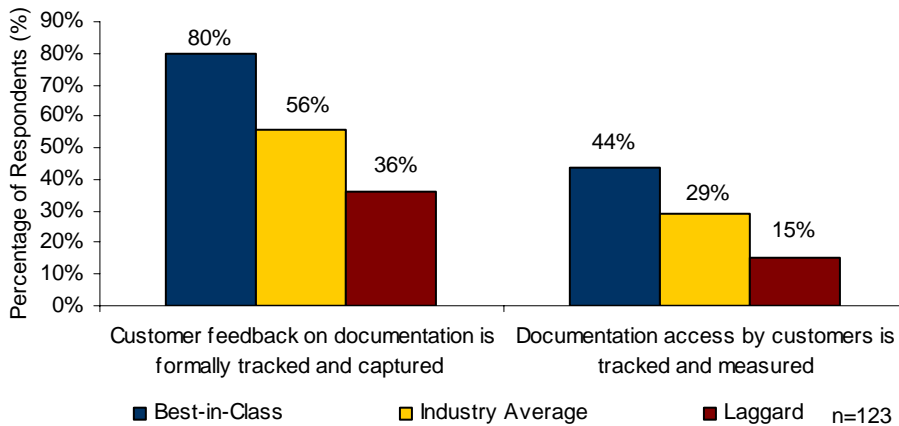
Source: Aberdeen Group, September 2009

Understanding How to Communicate With Customers

Of the two strategic initiatives, engaging customers represents the more difficult to achieve. Aberdeen's research indicates that the Best-in-Class

resolve this challenge by making a concerted effort to gain visibility into what their customers value (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Tracking Customer Feedback



Source: Aberdeen, September 2009

At the end of Chapter One, we saw that the Best-in-Class leverage customer feedback on what was and was not useful as a key indicator of the quality of technical communications. The Best-in-Class correspondingly are more likely than their competitors to deploy formal mechanisms to track that usefulness feedback. They do this not only through direct customer feedback on documentation, but also by tracking how customers access it. Both create insight into how their customers use and benefit from documentation. In the first case, it is through direct reported feedback. In the second, it is by monitoring what aspects of documentation are being read more often and which are being avoided. This latter capability, it should be noted, requires that documentation be delivered electronically.

The application of the resulting insight into how to engage customers has created significant differences between the leaders and their competitors. The impact of this insight can be seen most significantly in a 41% increase in customer satisfaction score, more than twice that realized by their competitors.

Authoring Efficiency, Diverse Content Development

To determine those companies that qualified as Best-in-Class, Aberdeen investigated first and foremost, the ability of these companies to generate a high degree of operational efficiency within technical communications. Strategically, we saw that this takes the shape of a focus on increasing content reuse. Most technical communications groups arrive at a formal process for content reuse through an approach called topic-based authoring. In this approach, content is authored not by book or chapter, but by individual topics or content components. This approach means that similar topics are only created once, and then reused and reapplied as

"I like for our writers to learn about our customers' business and how our product lines meet their business needs. Technical communicators who understand our customers' business are more likely to know what the audience needs from the publications. These are writers who can engage the customer. This, in turn, helps us to create value-added publications for the customer. These value-added publications are aligned with our business strategy and revenue opportunities."

~ Denise Lee
Manager
Technical Communications
Management Group
LexisNexis Risk Solutions

required by different documentation needs. While this has applications in how the Best-in-Class communicate with customers, the foremost benefits come in terms of the efficiency of the authoring process.

The Best-in-Class support and develop on this concept in a number of ways. The first comes in terms of transitioning how authors are given projects from a focus on specific product lines to knowledge areas that have applications for any product that a company develops. The leap from a document-based authoring process to a topic-based process brings significant flexibility in terms of how content can be used. This is mirrored in the shift that takes place when authors shift their focus to areas that apply across topic areas. These authors become able to develop content as needed for a wider range of needs, which ultimately means for better utilization and application of resources.

Further, the Best-in-Class deploy structured authoring solutions to provide their writers with environments that are better suited to a topic-based methodology. Specifically, the Best-in-Class are 1.4-times as likely as the Industry Average and 1.6-times as likely as Laggards to use these solutions. Traditional authoring tools enable authors to create content with an eye on how that content will appear on a page. Structured authoring tools enable authors to create content out of context as well as organize that how it is managed and later applied. These 'out-of-context' content components can be reused for future documentation in a way that unstructured content cannot, leading to significant productivity gains. It should also be noted that this time saving enables technical communications to devote more effort to developing higher quality documentation.

The impact of these efforts can be seen in the consistency with which the Best-in-Class simultaneously meet authoring deadlines, source language cost targets, and documentation quality targets, meeting 93%, 83%, and 91% of these targets respectively.

Communicating Graphically

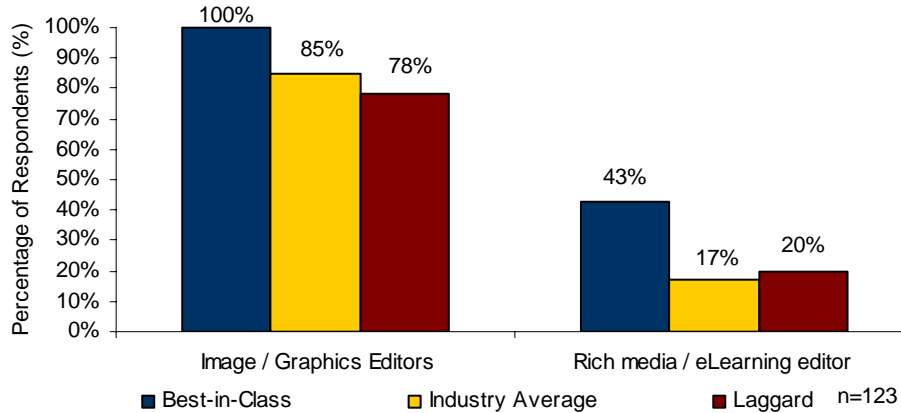
Of course, it is not just the efficiency of the authoring process that allows the Best-in-Class to achieve the results identified in Chapter One. These organizations also demonstrate a strong commitment to finding ways to more effectively engage their customers. In practice, this often takes the form of taking full advantage of graphic forms of communication.

Illustrations of products and parts are nothing new to technical communications. However, recent years have seen technological leaps that impact not only how an organization develops this content, but also expands the boundaries of what technical content can look like. The Best-in-Class are more likely than their competitors to leverage these developments to change the way they communicate with their customers (Figure 7).

"Structured authoring forces us to be more consistent. We recognize some benefit in the ease of creation. If I don't have to rewrite the topic, it's done. If I don't have to rewrite the topic, it's done. It doesn't have to be re-reviewed, usually doesn't have to be re-translated, and the cost of documentation becomes much lower. Even as well as we write, structured authoring brings it a step higher. It gets us away from 'literature writing' to the type of technical writing that's needed."

~ Larry W. Arnold
Manager, Consumer Technical
Publications
Garmin

Figure 7: Use of Graphic and Rich Media Editors



Source: Aberdeen, September 2009

Just as most organizations include visual content in their documentation, most also deploy some form of a graphics editor. However, the adoption of these tools is nonetheless differentiated across the performance framework. To this end, the Best-in-Class are 18% more likely than the Industry Average and 28% more likely than Laggards to use these solutions. These tools enable users to create illustrations that direct customers in ways that text cannot. A further benefit is that the graphic content created with these tools does not need to be translated, enabling the Best-in-Class to better engage customers in global markets while keeping localization costs low.

Further, the Best-in-Class stand out as over twice as likely as their competitors to leverage rich media editors to create animations and interactive environments that are incorporated in technical communications. The use of these tools is limited to electronic publication channels, but the impact can be significant. As with static graphic images, rich media delivers information in a way that is often easier for customers to consume. However, if static graphics can create familiarity with the product, rich media can guide users through how exactly how they are to interact with that product. For discrete manufacturers, this can be particularly beneficial when developing content for assembly and maintenance functions. For other manufacturers and software companies, this kind of content can take the form of highly specific demonstrations.

Centrally Controlling Content and Processes

The Best-in-Class make judicious use of Content Management Solutions (CMS) and project and process management solutions in order to secure control over their content and the processes by which it is developed.

Managing Content

For the most part, CMS evolved out of document management solutions. The most significant difference between the two is that while document

Sector Insight: Discrete Manufacturers

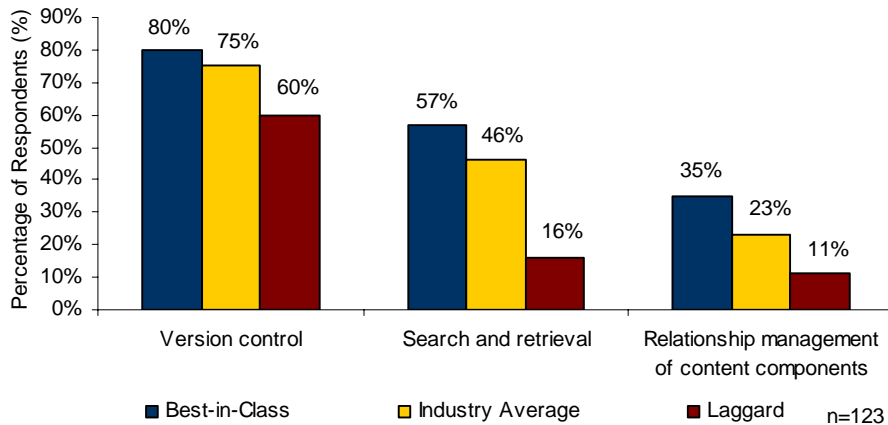
In businesses where it is an option, the Best-in-Class are also twice as likely as their competitors to link images of products directly to the Computer Aided Design (CAD) files used in the product development organization to design the product. While limited to those industries that design their products using CAD, this capability speeds up the development of illustrations, creates more exact representations of the product, and can be automatically updated as the product changes.

"We have templates set up to keep us tight. About anything that is done in template is under control, everyone is going to come out with the same thing. When we send out documentation for a product, I know it fits the style guide and handbook that tells us what the internal rules are. That makes it consistent to customers. Whatever the product, it will look the same. That's not intended to make anything less friendly. It is intended to make everything of equal quality."

~ Larry W. Arnold
Manager, Consumer Technical
Publications
Garmin

management manages and controls documents in their entirety, CMS manages and controls individual content components. The Best-in-Class are more likely than their competitors to leverage these solutions, but the most significant differences come in the capabilities of these solutions used by the Best-in-Class (Figure 8).

Figure 8: CMS Capabilities Used by the Best-in-Class



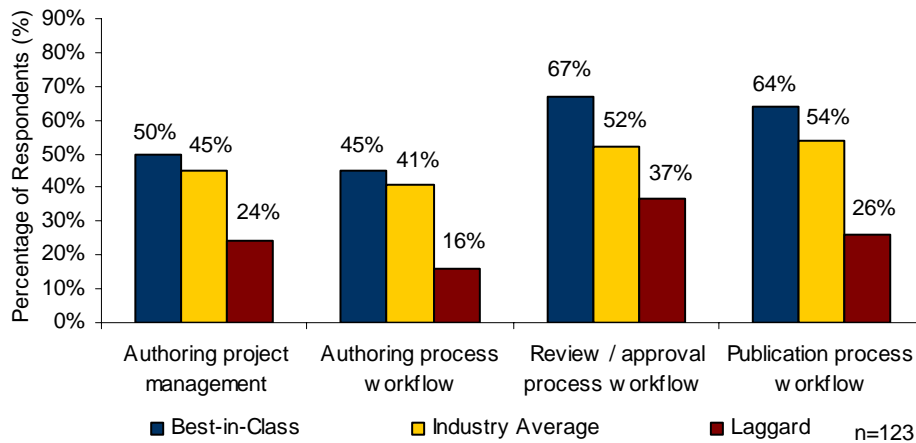
Source: Aberdeen Group, September 2009

Of these areas, the most commonly used is version control, which refers to the check-in / check-out protocol used by these solutions to ensure continuity in content components and avoid the 'version confusion' that typically ensues when multiple stakeholders are involved in the development of content that is stored on a folder system. The next two capabilities make it easier to reuse content. To this end, search and retrieval functions enable the Best-in-Class to quickly find content when it can be reused. By also managing of the relationships between content components, the Best-in-Class maintain the contextual links between these components. Again, this leads to greater reuse and coherence between components. This also helps when updates need to be made to documentation. When a new release goes out, much of the old documentation can be reused, but some portions become obsolete due to new features. Understanding the relationships help the Best-in-Class identify which areas would be affected by the updates to reduce documentation errors.

Managing Projects and Projects

The Best-in-Class don't secure central control of just their content, but of their processes as well. To this end, they are more likely than their competitors to use project and process management solutions. Here again, the critical difference between the Best-in-Class and their competitors doesn't come in just the use of the solution, but how it is used (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Processes Managed with Project Management



Source: Aberdeen Group, September 2009

The Best-in-Class leverage project management solutions to control the variety of processes required to develop documentation. This begins with the management of authoring project assignment and the management of the process workflow for each of these projects, an area where Laggards fall behind their competitors significantly. The two areas that see the greatest differentiation across the competitive framework, however, are in the use of these solutions to manage the workflow of content review and publication. Taken altogether, these capabilities demonstrate a greater likelihood among the Best-in-Class to create tight management and control over their operations. To help secure this kind of control, the Best-in-Class are also over twice as likely as their competitors to use formal metrics to measure the performance of technical communications. This in turn, enables these companies to drive continuous improvement.

The end result of this control and all the steps reviewed thus far is a far greater degree of authoring efficiency. Specifically, the Best-in-Class report reductions in authoring time of 26% (compared to 6% reported by the Industry Average) and in source language authoring costs of 43% (compared to a 5% reduction reported by the Industry Average). The difference between the Best-in-Class and what is achieved by the majority of organizations can be seen most dramatically in comparison to the Laggards, which meet only 18% of their source language authoring cost targets and 35% of their documentation quality targets.

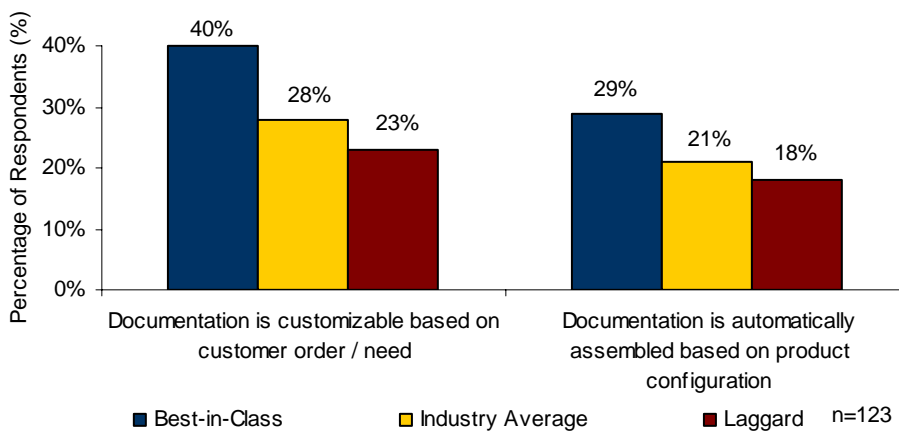
Delivering Publications According to Customer Need

The need to better engage customers doesn't just drive how the Best-in-Class communicate product information, but how they deliver that information as well. In this regard, the approach taken by the Best-in-Class can be directly contrasted with the concept of a single manual developed for a given product line. This manual contains information relevant to all versions and configurations of a product line, so that customers who

purchase any one model receive a large amount of information that does not apply to their case.

Rather than require their customers to wade through pages of documentation to find the nuggets that may be useful to them, the Best-in-Class are 96% more likely than the Industry Average to customize their publications based on specific customer orders, needs, or other factors that make sense to their business (Figure 10). In other words, the Best-in-Class are only sharing the information that is valuable to each specific customer.

Figure 10: Delivering Personalized Documentation



Source: Aberdeen, September 2009

Publishing personalized or even a highly targeted document stands to put a great deal of extra strain on the technical communications organization. The Best-in-Class avoid this strain largely as a result of the changes they've made to how content is developed and managed.

The concept again is about reusing, rather than recreating information. Following the development of structured content components and their management within CMS, the Best-in-Class free themselves from conceiving of technical communications as a 'document.' These individual components can be assembled as needed to form a publication that meets a variety of needs. Additionally, by publishing engines that automatically assemble this content, the Best-in-Class take the responsibility off of their staff resources. While it represents another emerging capability: the Best-in-Class are 61% more likely than their Laggard competitors to automate the assembly of content based on product configuration.

The advantage of delivering more specific content, as with developing rich media and other graphic content, is not realized in terms of the operational performance of technical communications. Instead, it is realized as a result of the impact it makes on how a customer is educated about a product as well as the customer's ultimate satisfaction with the product. The difference made by the capabilities deployed by the Best-in-Class can be seen in all of the customer-facing benefits realized by these leaders:

“Over the next couple of years, our goal is to move all products to a common look and feel. This will enable us to take a source and bend it to meet needs of each product. It will also allow us to distribute a help system that is identical on the platform-independent product, standalone media (CD/DVD or USB flash key), or our support site. All of this, along with the transition to topic-based writing, is important to support truly integrated solutions.”

~ Andy Roth
Director
Engineering Services /
Global Product Solutions
Tekelec

- 41% decrease in call volume to customer support
- 38% decrease in time to resolution for customer issues
- 42% increase in customer satisfaction scores
- 45% increase in product revenue

Aberdeen Insights — Technology

Companies rarely prioritize technology investments to support technical communications. However, it should be clear by now that the Best-in-Class stand in stark contrast to this tendency. Having recognized the value that technical communications provides as a business asset; the Best-in-Class demonstrate a considerable willingness to invest in technology solutions that enable these organizations to yield greater value. This takes the shape of solutions that help streamline content reuse and operational efficiency as well as those that help them engage with, and respond to, their customers' expectations.

It is the adoption and effective implementation of both of these kinds of solutions that support the kinds of benefits enjoyed by the Best-in-Class. The technologies that help companies improve the efficiency of the technical communications process (CMS and structured authoring) are not enough to drive the kind of customer-facing value realized by the Best-in-Class. These performers add graphics and rich media editors to communicate with customers that better engage customers as well as publication engines that enable them to deliver more specific publications without additionally taxing their staff. Best-in-Class performance can also be achieved through a dedicated focus on content quality that can be achieved as a result of the operational efficiency that comes with the control provided by project and process management solutions.

In short: companies looking to leverage technical communications as customer-facing business assets will need to be prepared to make the appropriate investments in the organization.

Chapter Three: Required Actions

Whether a company is trying to move its performance from Laggard to Industry Average, or Industry Average to Best-in-Class, the following actions will help spur the necessary performance improvements:

Laggard Steps to Success

- **Commit to reusing content.** Before anything else, Laggard organizations need to make a strategic commitment to transforming how they are developing documentation. Only 35% of these companies have made content reuse a strategic priority, nearly half that of the Best-in-Class and Industry Average. Reusing content will reduce authoring time to contribute the productivity improvements necessary to consistently meet operational performance targets. It will also enable technical communicators to focus on the quality of new sections. Deploying a topic-based approach and a structured authoring solution will help companies execute this strategy.
- **Measure the operational performance of technical communications.** Without insight into current performance, organizations will be challenged to find ways to improve it. The Best-in-Class are 123% more likely than Laggards to use formal metrics to capture the performance of technical communications. The insight they've gained by doing so has helped these companies gain the performance they currently indicate and will help them drive continuing gains.
- **Capture customer feedback.** Just as the use of formal measures is required to improve the operational performance of the technical communications organization, insight into how customers use documentation is the first step to understanding how to better meet their needs. The Best-in-Class are 122% more likely than Laggards to capture customer feedback. The ways they apply this information enable these performers to generate a 41% increase in customer satisfaction.

Industry Average Steps to Success

- **Take broader advantage of CMS.** Industry Average organizations have made some improvement to their operational performance, reducing authoring time by 6% and authoring costs by 5%. However, they lack the dramatic impact realized by the Best-in-Class. While these performers are nearly as likely as the Best-in-Class to use CMS, they are failing to take advantage of many of its capabilities. Specifically, the Best-in-Class are 24% more likely to use search / retrieval function and 53% more likely to use CMS to manage the relationships between content components. Taking advantage of these functions will help these organizations reuse

Fast Facts

Organizations planning to transition their technical communications organizations into a 'profit center' must:

- ✓ Measure the operational performance of the technical communications organization with formal metrics
- ✓ Streamline authoring processes through content reuse supported by structured authoring editors and effective use of CMS and project management solutions
- ✓ Publish documentation specific to targeted user needs or product configurations
- ✓ Understand how to engage and educate customers by capturing feedback on documentation

"We are seeing some 5-10% hard reuse right off the bat. We are also reducing cycle times since the writers no longer worry about formatting, but only content. We expect the value to go up considerably as our staff gets more comfortable with the tools and we have newer projects that have higher reuse."

~~~ Andy Roth  
Director  
Engineering Services /  
Global Product Solutions  
Tekelec

content more often as well as find content when they need it more quickly with an ultimate impact on productivity.

- **Measure the customer's use of documentation.** Capturing customer feedback enables companies to understand how satisfied customers are with documentation as well as how to better respond to their needs. However, this feedback cannot provide insight into the kinds of factors that impact usefulness that customers often do not recognize. In some cases, that which is making the most impact is invisible to the user. To this end, the Best-in-Class are 52% more likely to track how customers access publications.
- **Increase the personalization of documentation.** The Best-in-Class are 43% more likely than the Industry Average to customize their documentation to customer orders and needs. While most organizations will not need to provide documentation that is tailored to each specific customer, those that fail to develop more targeted documentation put the usefulness of documentation to their customers at risk. Often this results in customers who do not use documentation experiencing detrimental effects for customer satisfaction.

## Best-in-Class Steps to Success

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- **Automate publication.** The use of publication engines enable companies to automate the publication of content to a wide variety of formats and channels as well as assemble it to the distinct needs of a variety of audiences. The Best-in-Class are 38% and 61% more likely than Industry Average and Laggard performers respectively to automatically assemble content based on product configuration. However, only 29% of these companies have adopted this capability. Its adoption will help these leaders to better deliver precise publications without additionally taxing their technical communications resources.
- **Engage and educate customers with rich media.** When it can be used, the use of rich media enables companies to directly demonstrate how products should be used, assembled, or repaired. As such, the information provided through rich media provides little ambiguity, ensuring that customers are best directed on how to use a product. It has the added benefit of being easier to consume than text for many customers, adding to willingness to use it. While twice as likely as their competitors to leverage rich media editors to develop this content, only 40% of these performers currently do so. Best-in-Class performers that do not currently use these tools will find that they enable them to continue to enhance how they engage their customers.

### Aberdeen Insights — Summary

Make no mistake, the performance of the Best-in-Class indicated in Figure 2 and Figure 3 of Chapter One indicate that technical communications does stand to make a considerable positive impact on a company's business. However, the performance of the Industry Average and Laggards on those same measures indicates that for the majority, technical communications falls considerably short of its potential.

This means that many companies possess the opportunity to generate significant value to their business by transitioning technical publications into a customer- and profit-centric organization. The recommendations detailed in this chapter are designed to help organizations realize the next steps they can take to both improve operational efficiency and strategically engage and educate their customers.

For many organizations, this transition will require making the investments necessary to develop the productivity of technical communications to the point where it no longer must struggle to meet and exceed operational demands. For many technical communicators, this will yield the freedom needed to focus on responding to customer needs. The downstream value realized in customer support, satisfaction, and enterprise profitability will begin to fall out naturally from this.

## Appendix A: Research Methodology

Between July and September 2009, Aberdeen examined the use, the experiences, and the intentions of the technical communications departments of more than 165 enterprises.

Aberdeen supplemented this online survey effort with interviews with select survey respondents, gathering additional information on strategies deployed by companies to gain more value from technical communications, their experiences, and finally, their results.

Responding enterprises included the following:

- *Job title:* The research sample included respondents with the following job titles: CEO, other senior management (10%); vice president, senior vice president (8%); director (25%); technical communications manager (23%); and technical communications staff (21%).
- *Department / function:* The research sample included respondents from the following departments or functions: technical communications (49%); business operations / management (22%); engineering / research and development (12%); marketing (8%); business development (6%); and other (3%).
- *Industry:* The research sample included respondents from a full range of industry sectors. Sectors receiving the greatest representation included: telecommunications (7%); computer hardware and equipment (9%); industrial equipment (9%); other discrete manufacturing (11%); and software (33%).
- *Geography:* The majority of respondents (73%) were from North America. Remaining respondents were from the Asia-Pacific region (12%); Europe (11%); and other (4%).
- *Company size:* Twenty-six percent (26%) of respondents were from large enterprises (annual revenues above US \$1 billion); 31% were from midsize enterprises (annual revenues between \$50 million and \$1 billion); and 43% of respondents were from small businesses (annual revenues of \$50 million or less).
- *Headcount:* Thirty-six percent (36%) of respondents were from large enterprises (headcount greater than 1,000 employees); 32% were from midsize enterprises (headcount between 100 and 999 employees); and 32% of respondents were from small businesses (headcount between 1 and 99 employees).

### Study Focus

Study participants completed an online survey that included questions designed to determine the following:

- √ The degree to which technical communications generates measurable business value
- √ The structure and effectiveness of existing technical communications organizations
- √ Current and planned strategies and capabilities to support the performance and impact of technical communications
- √ The technology solutions organizations leverage to support their strategies and capabilities.

The study aimed to identify the quantifiable business value provided by technical communications as well as the best practices top performing organizations leverage to more effectively capitalize on technical communication. The resulting findings are intended as a framework by which readers can assess their own organizations and capabilities.

**Table 4: The PACE Framework Key**

| Overview                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Aberdeen applies a methodology to benchmark research that evaluates the business pressures, actions, capabilities, and enablers (PACE) that indicate corporate behavior in specific business processes. These terms are defined as follows:</p> <p><b>Pressures</b> — external forces that impact an organization’s market position, competitiveness, or business operations (e.g., economic, political and regulatory, technology, changing customer preferences, competitive)</p> <p><b>Actions</b> — the strategic approaches that an organization takes in response to industry pressures (e.g., align the corporate business model to leverage industry opportunities, such as product / service strategy, target markets, financial strategy, go-to-market, and sales strategy)</p> <p><b>Capabilities</b> — the business process competencies required to execute corporate strategy (e.g., skilled people, brand, market positioning, viable products / services, ecosystem partners, financing)</p> <p><b>Enablers</b> — the key functionality of technology solutions required to support the organization’s enabling business practices (e.g., development platform, applications, network connectivity, user interface, training and support, partner interfaces, data cleansing, and management)</p> |

Source: Aberdeen Group, September 2009

**Table 5: The Competitive Framework Key**

| Overview                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>The Aberdeen Competitive Framework defines enterprises as falling into one of the following three levels of practices and performance:</p> <p><b>Best-in-Class (20%)</b> — Practices that are the best currently being employed and are significantly superior to the Industry Average, and result in the top industry performance.</p> <p><b>Industry Average (50%)</b> — Practices that represent the average or norm, and result in average industry performance.</p> <p><b>Laggards (30%)</b> — Practices that are significantly behind the average of the industry, and result in below average performance.</p> | <p>In the following categories:</p> <p><b>Process</b> — What is the scope of process standardization? What is the efficiency and effectiveness of this process?</p> <p><b>Organization</b> — How is your company currently organized to manage and optimize this particular process?</p> <p><b>Knowledge</b> — What visibility do you have into key data and intelligence required to manage this process?</p> <p><b>Technology</b> — What level of automation have you used to support this process? How is this automation integrated and aligned?</p> <p><b>Performance</b> — What do you measure? How frequently? What’s your actual performance?</p> |

Source: Aberdeen Group, September 2009

**Table 6: The Relationship Between PACE and the Competitive Framework**

| PACE and the Competitive Framework – How They Interact                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Aberdeen research indicates that companies that identify the most influential pressures and take the most transformational and effective actions are most likely to achieve superior performance. The level of competitive performance that a company achieves is strongly determined by the PACE choices that they make and how well they execute those decisions.</p> |

Source: Aberdeen Group, September 2009

## Appendix B: Related Aberdeen Research

Related Aberdeen research that forms a companion or reference to this report includes:

- [\*The Technical Communicator's Transformation: Publishing On-Time and On-Quality\*](#), October 2009
- [\*Documentation Goes Global\*](#), April 2008
- [\*Dynamic Publishing, Smart Documents Streamline Technical Documentation\*](#), December 2007
- [\*Publishing Technical Communications in a Multi-Channel World\*](#), May 2007
- [\*Next Generation Product Documentation\*](#), December 2006

Information on these and any other Aberdeen publications can be found at [www.aberdeen.com](http://www.aberdeen.com).

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