

Introduction

Jane Doe* “wear[s] a lot of hats” as the Business Development Lead (BDL) at a defense contractor which employs less than 40 people. She writes proposals, searches for new opportunities, and networks with other businesses to expand the company. In the seven years she has worked with this contractor, she has also served as the Program Manager, the Quality Assurance Lead, and a Senior Systems Engineer. The size of her current employer affords her the opportunity to fill a variety of roles; but this has not been her experience with the other companies she has worked with. Previously she worked at International Business Machines (IBM), a very large company. After IBM she worked with the Logistics Management Institute (LMI), a company of about 800 employees. This profile will address Jane’s education, her experiences with technical writing in her various positions, her account of her current position, and her future goals. The interview with Jane revealed a prevalent theme in her career, which is that she typically “fell into [leadership roles by] follow[ing] [her] interests.” Her ability to follow her inherent strengths has made for a very interesting career.

Jane’s Education and Challenges She has Faced

Jane attended Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and received both a Bachelor’s of Science and a Master’s of Science in Electrical Engineering. When asked whether she imagined when she started school that she wanted to be involved with engineering, she said no, that she let her interests and skills lead her to this degree track. “I liked math,” which helped her choose to attend a polytechnic institute. “First I wanted to be a doctor, then a biomedical engineer,” but when Jane realized that she would be required to work on animals for these degrees, she rejected them in favor of electrical engineering. Along with skills in math and science, she found out early on in her academic career that she had a knack for organization and leadership, and “fell into” those roles at school.

The ease with which she seemed to gravitate toward engineering should not be confused with a career without significant challenges. At the time she started working as a systems engineer for IBM, she found her sex to be an obstacle. There were certain rules that had been established before women joined the workforce which still limited her. As a systems engineer for IBM, she worked on technology for submarines. Civilian women were not allowed onto submarines for some time, which restricted the tasks she was allowed to perform. However, when those rules

changed, she was one of the first civilian women to enter a submarine, an impressive accomplishment. She said that again, she did not plan to be a boundary-breaker, but came to it by following her natural talents.

Jane's Experience with Technical Writing

Coming from an engineering background, Jane's experience with technical writing education was not as humanities-based, as some others tend to be. When she was pursuing her B.S. and M.S. no independent writing or English courses of any kind were required. She dealt with a lot of different documentation as a systems engineer: specifications, test planning and reporting, configuration management guides, as well as purchase orders and contracts when she worked as a subcontract manager for IBM. She learned a lot about technical writing by doing it on the job. She learned even more through a series of classes she took with the National Defense University; and later her knowledge continued to grow at LMI through working with the editing department.

At the National Defense University, Jane took a series of eight classes in three months, paid for by LMI. As a full time student for these three months, she had to turn in writing assignments for each class. This motivated her to intensely focus on her writing style, though as mentioned previously, she already had a natural skill for document organization, including document organization. "Consistency [more so than grammar] has always been something I look for [when editing a document]." She credits NDU with developing her writing technique.

While working for LMI as a research fellow and later a Program Director, she wrote many reports and analyses, and frequently interacted with the company's editing department. This interaction gave her an entirely new perspective on technical writing. She found that editors would often ask technical writers questions regarding the meaning of certain technical information-- information that engineers could easily understand but the audience for these documents may not comprehend without a similar background. Jane, however, found that she had a knack for "translating" engineering language into audience-friendly language. So what she really learned from the LMI editing department was to hone this "translation" skill she already had, and where to find document style information. Through her interactions with these editors, she learned about the Chicago Manual of Style rules and the U.S. Government Printing Office's Style Manual for citations and

bibliographies. With this information, her writing improved even more. She still keeps a cheat sheet with rules from both of these style guides on her desk and uses it consistently when reviewing her own work and others’.

Jane’s Writing and Technological Advances

Today Jane uses Microsoft Word to write proposals and other documents. At the beginning of her career, Jane would hand-write all of her documents and turn them into the company Typing Pool. A typist would usually finish her document in about a week’s time and give it back to Jane to proofread. After she made her proofreading “redline” marks on the draft, she would send it back to the Typing Pool for a typist to correct the previous errors. Jane recognizes the benefits of Microsoft Word and other technologies used today, but she misses the simplicity of the way things worked in the past. “In the old days, we worked at a slower pace...there was less multitasking,” which afforded for better communication between co-workers, in her opinion.

Jane specifically cites SharePoint as a technology that “doesn’t necessarily improve communication.” SharePoint is a project sharing software that many companies use to share files for editing purposes. Jane has often experienced the confusion that can result from using SharePoint instead of directly communicating with her co-workers.

Jane’s Current Position and Her Future Goals

As was previously mentioned, Jane currently fills a lot of different roles. Part of this is due to the history of the company. Since its founding the contractor she currently works for has gone through cycles of expansion and reduction in size. Most recently the company reduced from a 60-65 person company to a 20-25 person company. Due to this history of flux, an experienced engineer and leader like Jane needs to be competent in a variety of areas. She has spent most of her time at this contractor as the Program Manager (PM), leading a team of engineers and writing and editing a lot of technical documentation. As a PM, she wrote the majority of the Contract Data Requirements Lists (CDRLs) for projects, along with monthly status reports, engineering reports, and the daily email communications. that never cease for most professionals today.

Comparing her work as a PM to her current role as the BDL, it is apparent that the working mindsets of these two positions are very different: “Being a PM, [I] had a team to assign duties to, to schedule deadlines for, [and I would] meet with customers to brief them; [I] basically knew after the kick-off meeting what [my] goal was...With BD, I am constantly looking for new opportunities, which involves a lot of small projects that can change at any time. When working as PM there would be things that might suddenly pop up, but [the team] would still know the plan.” With BD, there is no overall plan, other than to acquire new opportunities for the company.

As BDL, Jane works with different documentation. She writes solicitations for Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) grants as well as larger proposals, and she reviews CDRLs written by other colleagues checking for non-technical audience comprehension. A typical day for Jane as the BDL involves checking her email as soon as she gets in. Her inbox currently has between 400-500 unread emails, and she will most likely never get to read everything in her inbox. She looks for action items and emails about tasks with a deadline and prioritizes accordingly. After this, she checks in for a status report with her Business Development team, which usually includes the Senior Vice President. The rest of her day involves writing proposals, reviewing potentially interesting SBIRs, speaking to her contacts in other companies about collaborating as subcontractors for a project, and reviewing documents written by others, such as CDRLs or engineering reports.

When asked what she would like to be doing in five years, Jane jokes that she would ideally like to be retired; but because her daughter will be a freshman in college in five years, she doubts that will pan out. What she actually has in mind is a firm idea of what she *does not* want to be doing. Her experience has ranged from working as a Senior Systems Engineer and Program Director at big companies like IBM and LMI, to being a part of the contractor’s Senior Management team in many different capacities. For the foreseeable future, she knows she does not want to return to a big company like IBM or LMI where she will be in charge of a large division. She prioritized her family over that type of work years ago and wants to keep working in a small business because it allows her the time she wants to spend with her daughter. Jane is proud of what she has accomplished by simply following her talents, and hopes that she is able to be an inspiration to someone in the future.

*All personal information such as the interviewee's name and the name of her current employer have been substituted or omitted.