Planting, Harvesting, Writing: The Literate Activity Systems of a Regional Agricultural Cooperative

David Giovagnoli and Jordan Kuhns

Professional Literacies Project: In this edition of the Professional Literacies Project, David Giovagnoli corresponds with Jordan Kuhns, who works for GROWMARK, Inc., a company in Bloomington, Illinois that provides goods and services to farms. He discusses the complex literate activity system of the professional writing he does on a day-to-day basis, which includes interacting with co-workers, communicating with colleagues in different countries, and working on systems that automate the writing of business documents.

For this installment of the Professional Literacies Project, I sat down (virtually) with Jordan Kuhns, who is the End-to-End Process Lead at GROWMARK, Inc., which is a regional agricultural cooperative based in Bloomington, Illinois.

Jordan, could you explain a little bit about your journey through college to the current point of your career?

I came to Bloomington from Iowa to go to Illinois Wesleyan in 2009 where I majored in Business Administration. During school, I got a part-time job at GROWMARK, Inc. helping them process year-end point-of-sales data and sending it to their vendors during the summer of 2011. I did that for the summers of 2011 and 2012 and then transitioned to work in their Seed Lab for a few months between the winter of 2012 and graduating in May of 2013. After graduation, I was fortunate enough to be hired into a full-time role as a customer operations associate in their Seed Division.

Could you explain what you do in your current role as an End-To-End Process Lead?

In my current role, I work on a special software implementation project that GROWMARK has branded "spark!" because all good projects need a name, right? It's our job to implement the SAP software package, or what's sometimes referred to as SAP ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning), which is essentially software used to run the company. It helps our employees do everything from purchasing product, selling product, managing inventory, billing customers, and paying vendors. Additionally, it does all of the necessary accounting involved in those processes as well.

My job on the team is to supervise a team of five End-to-End (E2E) Process Analysts and give SAP Consultants to ensure that we have adequately designed the software so our business users can use it effectively, stayed within the timeline that we've been given, and also stayed within the budget that we've been given. The E2E team is responsible for all purchasing and sales activities. So we're focused essentially on how we procure product and pay the vendors and then how we sell product and bill customers. We have another team, or pillar, on the project called Supply Chain that does all of the other tasks (like inventory, shipping, transportation, etc.).

What role does your position play in the hierarchy of the company?

I report to our Project Management Organization (or PMO), which is comprised of two project managers (Eric and Josh) that work to keep the project moving forward on time and within budget. They report directly to our Chief Information Officer (CIO), Keith, who oversees the project at a very high level. Keith reports to our Vice President of Finance, Wade, who then reports to our CEO, Jim Spradlin.

What kinds of writing do you do on a daily basis?

My day-to-day job involves identifying and tracking the things my team should be working on and then delegating those out to the Process Analysts, fielding questions and concerns that my team may have, and communicating priorities, changes, and issues both down to my team and up to my supervisor. This means that I spend most of my time reading and writing emails, tracking what my team is doing by reading their status updates or by reading what's called "Functional Specification Documents (FSDs)," and creating presentations for the project's stakeholders to keep them informed on our progress, roadblocks, decisions, etc.

Sometimes, I'm also tasked with writing FSDs myself, so I might also engage in some more "technical" writing as well. FSDs are essentially a functional description of how we want something to work in the system. We write them, send them to a team of developers who write code to meet our functional descriptions/requirements, and then we test what the developer has done. You can think of an FSD as a document that explains a super basic way something should work. So, for instance, you could write an FSD that details how to write a document in Word, save the document, and then click a "Share" button which would then open your email client, attach the aforementioned document to an email, and allow you to edit the email before sending. That would be something we might write an FSD for on our project.

How does the kind of writing you do now in your career match up with the kinds of writing you were asked to do in your college and graduate school experiences, whether specifically in business courses or more generally? Are there things you do now that you didn't anticipate having to do, or which function differently than you assumed they might?

The kinds of writing that I do professionally align slightly with the types of writing I was asked to do in college and even more so with the types of writing I was asked to do when getting my MBA. First, a good amount of my writing is persuasive in nature. Whether I'm talking to my team, my supervisor, or another manager in the company, I oftentimes have to explain a topic and then persuade the reader to understand where I'm coming from, why I'm taking a certain approach, then to agree with it all. For instance, I might be writing to convince my supervisor to extend a deadline by two weeks so we can get something done, I might also be writing to a teammate to convince them that working longer hours for the next two weeks is necessary for us to hit our goals, or I might also be writing to a manager in another division of the company trying to explain that we won't be designing the software the way that they're suggesting because it will cost too much money and take too long. In all of those cases, persuasive writing from college comes into play and is very helpful.

Second, the other type of writing I do a lot of in my job is analytical writing. So much of what my team and I do every day is interpreting a process and then writing it down so we can explain it to others, at the most basic level. We spend a lot of our time listening to "users" in the company talk us through their processes. A process can be anything from "this is how I sell grass seed to our customers" or "this is how I publish prices so customers know how much to pay for our products" or "this specific vendor requires that we submit a down payment before they ship our product and we need a way to do that in SAP." Once we listen to those processes in depth, we must then write them down so that we can explain them to our developers who are oftentimes offshore in India.

Because those two types or writing are a large part of my job, I would have to say that the most important parts of my education were classes and assignments that required analysis of written material, persuasion of the audience, and even recaps of other materials. Those three types of writing were pretty common in both my undergraduate classes and my Master's classes. During my undergraduate, I got experience in these types of writing in a wide array of subjects. Philosophy, business law, English and literature, and history all instill these types of writing in their courses to a certain degree.

The one thing that I wasn't adequately prepared for, which is a surprise in the global world of today, was how to write to someone who may not speak your language very well, or someone who may not understand the subject that you're writing about very well. A lot of the writing we do at work involves putting together documents that will be read by developers in India. They speak English as a second (or third) language and also have no idea what GROWMARK is or what we do. Writing to that type of person takes a lot of patience and practice, and you learn very quickly that some of the things we put in our writing don't necessarily translate to someone who isn't a native English speaker and doesn't understand the inner workings of a regional agriculture cooperative.

How did you learn to navigate these new writing situations in your career? Was there a lot of training, or did you have to learn how to write on the fly?

There were very few formal learning opportunities that taught me how to craft a formal or semi-formal email in the workplace. A lot of that learning was done on-site during my first few months on the job. My very first supervisor would sometimes critique my writing, showing and telling me ways that I could have rephrased my email, things I could have said instead, etc. But the majority of my writing skills, when it comes to email, have come from experience and assessing the audience to which I'm writing. So I guess that means that a am taking a few more cues from my academic training in writing than I probably think. The majority of the time, however, I've learned how to write or how to improve my writing simply based on experience, trial, and error. For instance, the first time you send an FSD off to India to be developed and the developer needs to schedule a 2-hour conference call to clarify what you've written, you realize some of the things you could have done differently. When the project began, there weren't any formal opportunities to learn how to write these FSDs in an efficient manner, so we all had to learn as we went. Flexibility was key.

What kind of tools do you use to communicate at work, in terms of platforms, technology, and things like that?

To communicate at work we use Microsoft Outlook for email, Skype for Business and Slack for instant messaging, Office 365 for collaboration on word documents, spreadsheets, etc. which I believe is a form of communication, our intranet for company-wide or team-wide announcements, an application called HP Application Lifecycle Management where we log defects and bugs related to our SAP software, and also quite a few conference call/webinar applications so we can communicate with our offshore team more effectively.

Who are you writing for, most of the time? Do you deal a lot with external audiences or are you mainly talking to people who work for GROWMARK? How does communicating with different people affect the way you write?

I would say that I spend about half of my time talking with internal employees and the other half of my time dealing with external contractors, like consultants, developers, etc. I don't deal with vendors or customers anymore, though I used to.

The communications between internal and external people do very. I can get away with less formal emails with my teammates and peers, but if I'm talking to consultants or developers, I need to be slightly more formal. Additionally, when communicating with internal employees, I need to vary my style to be more formal if I'm talking to a superior as well. An email that I would send to our CIO asking for an extension, for instance, would not be the same type of email that I would send to my team explaining that I was going to ask our CIO for an extension. When talking with our CIO, I need to be fairly formal and detailed, yet brief. He's busy, but informed. So I need to include enough detail to satisfy his questions, but not so much detail that he feels like he's being dragged through the nitty gritty details. Furthermore, I will oftentimes include answers to questions I anticipate he'll ask in those types of emails as well, because that saves us both time. When communication to my team, however, it might only be a few sentences long, I may not use a greeting, and I can say things like, "If you need more information, just come find me." The two styles of communication are very different and for good reason. My team doesn't need me to communicate to them like our CIO expects me to communicate with him. That'd be overkill. Furthermore, if I talked to our CIO like I talked to my teammates, he wouldn't have the necessary information he needs to make decisions, and he might think I'm unprofessional or incompetent at explaining complex ideas in writing.

Who has power over the way you write? Are standards about writing set by the company, or does it more depend on who you're working for specifically? Are there legal regulations about the writing you do?

It all depends on who we're working with. The company as a whole has set standards as to what our email signatures should look like and the information they should contain, but there aren't any hard-and-fast rules or standards to follow outside of that and common sense. Writing to your audience, as mentioned above, is very important, though. So I would say that to a degree, office politics, rank and title, and the topic of your writing all hold some intangible power of what we write and how we write it, if that makes sense. Furthermore, some of the things we write in the FSDs become written proof of what we were asking for. So if we write an incomplete FSD without fully explaining the requirements, we'll oftentimes get an incomplete development back that's filled with defects and bugs. If we were to challenge the developer on that, they could pull out our FSD and say "you next asked me to do that." So again, there's some power over what we write and how we write it in that regard as well.

What are some of the impacts of your writing? In other words, what does success look like in your writing tasks?

The writing that I do, and my team does, ensures that we get our software designed in the most useful way possible. We are in charge of explaining to developers how we need the software to work, so clarity, accuracy, and depth are all critical to our success as writers. Furthermore, the writing that I do ensures that those in leadership roles above me are well-informed as to what my team and I are working on, the progress that we're making, and the issues that we're facing. If I can't accurately and effectively communicate that to my superiors, they may not understand my situation and thus make ill-informed decisions.

How do mechanics, style, grammar, spelling, and that sort of thing factor into the success of your writing? Do you think about them much?

Those sorts of things are very important to my writing. So much of what I do is through electronic communication. I have to be able to clearly explain my thoughts and ideas in writing and, at the same time, I must be able to use correct grammar, style, spelling, etc. while writing or else those I'm talking to won't take me seriously. That's especially true when communicating with those outside of the organization or my superiors, and slightly less true when communicating more casually with my peers.

If you were new, again, at this job, what are some kinds of writing that you might wish were taught specifically?

I wish I had learned more about communicating with those who may have certain barriers up between my writing and their understanding. As mentioned above, that may mean that they speak English as their second or third language, or it might even mean that my writing is more technical than their understanding or vice versa—my writing isn't technical enough compared to their understanding. If I'd been more prepared for those types of communications, with strategies and structure around how best to communicate in those scenarios, I would have been more successful during the first 6–12 months in my job.

You mentioned once that you had an automated system that constructed invoices for customers, based on a computer database. Could you describe how that worked?

Sure—Our SAP system is used in part for placing customer orders, shipping product to the customers, and then invoicing them for that product. Part of my job three years ago was to design the invoice template that would be used when the system generates the PDF that we send to our customers via email at the time of billing. The customers then use that as their invoice, and it tells them what we sold them, when we sold it, how much it cost, what they owe us, and when they need to pay us, among several other things. So the process of creating that invoice works like this: First, we create the billing document in our software system. That's the document that is used to record all of the information mentioned above. We do this in batch in the middle of the night, because it can take several hours when creating 3,000–4,000 invoices. Then, after we create all of the billing documents, we run a second program that generates the individual PDF invoices for all of the billing documents that were previously created. That program compiles the data in our database and formats it in a way that is consistent and readable (so our customers know where to look for the information they need to know), accurate, informative, and complete (so our customers have all of the information they need to pay the bill at their fingertips).

You mentioned that the sales team wanted the invoice to be able to display a different unit of measure abbreviation, but that making that minor change to the writing was very difficult from a programming standpoint. What was involved in making that change?

When designing an invoice like this, you have to consider all possible scenarios for which that invoice will be used. In our case, we needed to consider all different kinds of products being sold using this invoice, like gasoline, diesel, fertilizers, etc. and also all different kinds of prices, taxes, discounts, and surcharges appearing on the invoice for those products. Furthermore, for certain products, you're legally required to include certain pieces of information that aren't necessary for other types of products. In the situation you mentioned, the Sales Team wanted to change the invoice so that instead of displaying "TO" as a unit of measure corresponding to Metric Tonne, we displayed "MT" which would make more sense to the customer. From their standpoint, that was a very simple change, but what it meant for me and my team was that we needed to have a developer, in India, write custom programming logic that essentially evaluated an "if this then that" logical statement for not only the "TO" unit of measure, but also all other units of measure that may be used. And by implementing custom code at that place in the form, we would need to retest the whole thing, ensuring that after our change, all possible scenarios where the invoice would be used still generate an invoice with the correct information. This would be about 100 different scenarios and would include placing orders in our test system, shipping those test orders, and running them all through billing as well. We'd then need to review all of the invoices, check all the data, and ensure its accuracy.

In terms of material impact, it seems that this system which generates those forms saves a lot of time that humans would otherwise spend doing them. Who do you see as ultimately responsible for the actual writing of these texts, in the sense of who takes responsibility for any errors/inaccuracies that they may contain?

Our team is responsible for "writing" these things. We were tasked with designing the invoice form and the program that generates it for us, and thus we support it if and when there are issues. The customers usually see the issues first, report them to our customer service department who verifies that there truly is an issue, and then they'd report the issue to us so we can take a look, find the bug, and implement a fix. That's essentially the purpose, at a granular level, of our team as a whole. We're tasked with implementing the software that's supposed to make the lives of our employees easier (so they can focus on more high-impact tasks), and then we're tasked with supporting that software into perpetuity ensuring that it continues running smoothly and any changes requested by the business users are analyzed, developed, tested, and implemented successfully.

Thank you so much for sharing your experiences about writing with us!

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