TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION AND THE NEEDS OF
SMALL 501(c)(3) ORGANIZATIONS

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This exploratory study examines documentation practices and processes in ten small non-profit organizations. The objectives of this study were to answer the following two research questions: (1) What organizational needs do small non-profit organizations have that are relevant to technical communication? and (2) How are small 501(c)(3) organizations attempting to meet these needs? Which of these attempted solutions are ineffective?

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two people from each organization: the executive director and a volunteer. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed, and grounded theory was used to identify coding categories related to documentation development. Primary findings suggest that interviewees are aware that they need documentation, yet they often postpone developing such documentation until problems develop. The study findings also suggest that interviewees across different nonprofit organizations value documentation for similar reasons. Strategies are provided for technical communicators interested in working with nonprofit organizations, and additional research avenues are identified.
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INTRODUCTION & LITERATURE REVIEW

My thesis is titled *Technical Communication and the Needs of Small 501(c)(3) Organizations* because it focuses on the intersection of two fields: technical communication and nonprofit management. The study is designed to determine what needs in small 1 501(c)(3) organizations can be met by the specialized knowledge of technical communicators.

To explore this issue, I conducted a study to answer the following questions:

- What organizational needs do small 501(c)(3)s have that are relevant to technical communication?
- How are small 501(c)(3) organizations attempting to meet these needs?
- Which of these attempted solutions are ineffective?

Project Overview

The Internal Revenue Service describes 501(c)(3) organizations as “…charitable, religious, educational, scientific, literary, testing for public safety, fostering national or international amateur sports competition, and the prevention of cruelty to children or animals” (*Exemption Requirements*). Under the IRS definition, 501(c)(3) organizations vary greatly. To narrow the scope, I included only 501(c)(3) organizations with an annual budget of $5 million or less. These organizations by definition have limited financial resources and limited human resources. They are less likely to be able to hire a technical communicator as a full-time staff member and may be unaware of the technical communication field and the help it could offer.

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1 For the purposes of my project, "small" organizations have an annual budget of $5 million or less.
Several trends affecting nonprofit organizations may create needs that technical communicators could meet through their specialized skills. Nonprofit organizations are experiencing new demands or newly emphasized demands including proving their effectiveness, improving efficiency, and collaborating with other organizations—both public and private (Bryant & Lindenberg, 2001, Aviv, 2004, Maiers, Reynolds, & Haselkorn, 2005). Meeting these demands requires more documentation than most small 501(c)(3) organizations have created in the past. Technical communicators are skilled in creating effective, usable documentation and are therefore well prepared to help nonprofit organizations meet the needs for increased documentation.

Although I focused on small 501(c)(3) organizations, I included organizations representing a variety of causes because I wanted to identify patterns of needs common to many small 501(c)(3) organizations, regardless of mission. Therefore, the following are included in my study:

- Organization that supports firefighters
- Botanical organization
- Church
- Juvenile prisoner reform program
- Learning resources organization
- Home services organization for people with disabilities
- Parenting and family resources organization
- Domestic abuse shelter
- Arts organization
- Pregnancy support organization
I used grounded theory to gather information that could help me formulate a specific theory. According to Karen Locke, “Grounded theory’s distinctive features…are its commitment to research and ‘discovery’ through direct contact with the social world studied coupled with a rejection of a priori theorizing” (2001, p. 34). Using grounded theory, I achieved the following research objectives:

- Identified small 501(c)(3) organizations’ needs relevant to technical communication
- Identified patterns of needs among these organizations
- Identified trends that may have caused these needs
- Predicted how these trends may affect the organizations in the future if the needs are not met

Literature Review

Nonprofit organizations are difficult to define and poorly understood as a sector. Therefore, it is important to establish a foundation on which to build more complex ideas regarding technical communication and the roles it can fill in nonprofit organizations. Nonprofit organizations are at the center of activist research, service learning, and other popular trends within the technical communication field. These trends stem from a motivation to contribute to the community by meeting needs of the nonprofit sector. One of the primary needs that technical communicators meet is developing documentation—internal and external, print and electronic. Nonprofit organizations’ need for specific documentation is well established, but significant gaps remain in establishing patterns of
needs and in pinpointing the most effective ways for technical communicators to meet them.

Defining Nonprofit Organizations

According to Lester Salamon, an expert in the American nonprofit sector, “The nonprofit sector is perhaps the least well understood component of American society and certainly the one about which the least is known” (1999, p. 2). Therefore, before discussing the role of technical communication in supporting nonprofit organizations, I want to lay some groundwork. The IRS designates more than 19 tax-exempt organization classifications (Other Section 501(c) Organizations), but only the 501(c)(3) classification is relevant to my study. Organizations with 501(c)(3) status differ from the other nonprofit classifications in at least two ways:

- Donations to 501(c)(3) organizations are tax deductible
- 501(c)(3) organizations are organized for the following purposes:
  “…charitable, religious, educational, scientific, literary, testing for public safety, fostering national or international amateur sports competition, and the prevention of cruelty to children or animals” (Exemption Requirements)

The IRS’ list of 501(c)(3) purposes does not fully convey the variety of 501(c)(3) organizations. Consider the following examples taken from Salamon (1999): Harvard University, Montefiore Hospital, American Red Cross, American Cancer Society, Girl Scouts of America, N.Y. Philharmonic Orchestra, Planned Parenthood, Audubon Society, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and The Brookings Institute. In addition to these large, well-recognized organizations, the
501(c)(3) classification also includes places of worship and small grassroots organizations, including counseling centers, animal care organizations, local environmental groups, teen pregnancy clinics, domestic abuse shelters, soup kitchens, and countless other organizations.

With such a variety of size and purpose, it is difficult to define 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations as a sector. Some definitions focus on the tax status and the use of revenue to support the organization’s mission—not to benefit private owners or other individuals (Block, 2001). Other definitions focus on the people involved: “Nonprofits are voluntary associations of people who decide individually to work collectively to achieve ends that they decide are important …” (Ott, 2001, p. 50). One of the most comprehensive definitions is Salamon’s (1999). Nonprofit organizations are

- Organizational—they are institutionalized to some degree and are not purely ad-hoc, temporary groups
- Private—they are not government organizations
- Nonprofit distributing—they put revenue into the organization to support the mission and do not generate profit for owners
- Self-governing—they control their own activities
- Voluntary—they are non-compulsory and usually involve unpaid volunteer participation
- Publicly beneficial—they serve a public purpose and contribute to the public good (1999, pp. 10-11).

The concept of the public good can be nebulous, but the most appropriate definitions consider the variety of views represented by the nonprofit sector. The public
good cannot be universally defined because of the variety of nonprofit organizations. However, each organization and the individuals comprising the organization piece together their own concepts of the public good based on the organization, its mission, and individual and collective values (Ott, 2001, p. 50).

Because the nonprofit sector is varied and reflects diverse—sometimes conflicting—concepts of the public good, some people question the societal impact of these organizations. Scholars, organizational leaders, and politicians have identified significant impacts (Smith, 2001, Filer, 1975, Ott, 2001). According to the Filer Commission Report, which summarized contributions of the nonprofit sector in 1975, nonprofit organizations in the U.S.

- Initiate new ideas that government and business groups will not risk supporting
- Develop public policy leadership
- Reduce the alienation and powerlessness caused by large, impersonal government and business institutions

David Horton Smith developed one of the most comprehensive summaries of nonprofit organizations’ impacts on society, including

- Enabling self-actualization for volunteers and members
- Preserving old traditions and values
- Experimenting to develop new traditions and values
- Serving as a social critic
- Promoting social integration of alienated groups (2001)
The impact of nonprofit organizations is as varied as the organizations, although they often share the general goal of directly or indirectly improving lives. “The most fundamental reason why the nonprofit sector exists is to encourage and enable the benevolent donation of money, property, and time and effort to eliminate or prevent the causes of social problems and injustices and to otherwise improve the quality of life around us” (Ott, 2001, p. 49).

In addition to being varied and influential on society, nonprofit organizations are widespread, involving the vast majority of Americans as donors and almost half of Americans as volunteers:

- 89% of households financially contribute to nonprofit organizations
- 44% of adults (83.9 million people) volunteer with nonprofit organizations
- The volunteer sector represents the equivalent of more than 9 million full-time employees, which is a value of $239 billion (Independent Sector)
- “…[a]lmost as many Americans volunteer for nonprofit organizations as take part in our national elections” (Salamon, 1999, p. 7)

The widespread involvement of Americans with nonprofit organizations suggests that nonprofit organizations are important community resources. My findings can help to determine how technical communicators can more effectively meet the needs of nonprofit organizations, support the organizations’ missions, and promote the public good—however they may define it.
Technical Communicators’ Obligation to Contribute

Many argue that because of their specialized knowledge, technical communicators have an obligation to contribute to their communities and promote the public good (Bowdon, 2004, Grabill, 2000, Grabill & Simmons 1998, Clark, 2004, Rude, 2004). This obligation stems from the power that comes with knowledge. Technical communicators have specialized knowledge in written language, document design, and rhetoric. But beyond this knowledge, technical communicators also understand the power of the written word, primarily in institutions and organizations (Grabill, 2000, Rude, 2004, emphasis added). Technical communicators understand this power because it is wielded in their jobs. Technical communicators empower people who are not technically savvy by bridging the technical and non-technical worlds. Technical communicators shape corporate policies by employing nuance in business communications. Technical communicators can use this expertise in the public and nonprofit sectors as well, partnering with public policy makers and those affected by policies to guide policy-making (Grabill, 2000).

Similarly, technical communicators are well suited for collaborative leadership roles because a grasp of rhetoric enables them to reason about civic issues and persuade audiences to adopt or support positions on these issues (Rude, 2004). Technical communicators have the power to shape and interpret complex information, bridging that information and the people affected by it (Bowdon, 2004). With this power comes the responsibility to conduct research that promotes emancipation, empowerment, and social change (Grabill, 2000). According to activist researcher Melody Bowdon, “Technical communicators are poised to create change in our local
communities and beyond. …Technical communicators don’t have simply the opportunity
to engage in textual activism; in many cases they have no alternative” (2004, p. 326).
My study fulfills the obligation to activism described by Bowdon because as I identify
and analyze the needs of nonprofit organizations, I will be enabling them to identify a
new resource for fulfilling those needs: technical communicators.

Activist researchers advocate for the civic and altruistic use of technical
communication skills (Clark, 2004, Ornatowski & Bekins, 2004). “…[T]echnical
communication scholars have searched for ways to connect the research, teaching, and
practice of technical communication to broader democratic and human concerns in
order to open up the field to civic advocacy and action…. In a word, the goal is to ‘civil-
ize’ technical communication…” (Ornatowski & Bekins, 2004, Rabelais, Gargantua and
Pantagruel ¶2). My study will support activist research goals by identifying common
needs of nonprofit organizations to enable technical communicators to effectively meet
them. By helping nonprofit organizations meet their needs, technical communicators are
engaging in civic advocacy that benefits their local communities and supporting causes
that they believe are important.

One of the primary tenets of activist research stems from the postmodern view
that researchers, their studies, and their documents are never neutral (Grabill, 2000,
2004). Even seemingly neutral documents such as maps, emergency plans, and
legislative acts support a rhetorical stance that privileges those in power (Barton B.F. &
Barton M.S., 2004, Grabill, 2000, Grabill & Simmons, 1998). For example, some maps
display distorted proportions in which powerful countries appear proportionally larger than other countries (Barton B.F. & Barton M.S., 2004).

Based on this view, neutrality is impossible, and activist researchers embrace purposely rhetorical goals such as “…emancipation, empowerment, social change” (Grabill, 2000, Activist Research in Professional Writing, ¶4). In accordance with this view, my study not only empowers the small 501(c)(3) organizations to more competently pursue their missions but technical communicators are also released from the narrow confines of traditional industries, such as software documentation, to seek jobs and conduct research in a new arena: nonprofit organizations.

My study also highlights some of the unique knowledge that technical communicators can bring to 501(c)(3) organizations. As public intellectuals, technical communicators are well positioned to contribute to nonprofit organizations by applying language to affect both individuals and institutions (Bowdon, 2004). This specialized knowledge focuses on written communication, rhetoric, and print and electronic document design. These areas of knowledge enable technical communicators to evaluate raw data, process information from that data, and craft messages that bridge technical and public audiences. However, for technical communicators to effectively fill their civic responsibilities, they must identify specific needs that they can fulfill.

Current research establishes that nonprofit organizations need documentation for a variety of purposes. However, this research does not identify the specific needs of nonprofit organizations:

- Common types of documentation
- Common documentation developers
• Types of documentation organizations need
• Reasons organizations lack documentation
• Value that documentation provides organizations

To fill this gap, we need more research about writing in and for nonprofit organizations and about nonprofit organizations’ needs that are relevant to our field (Rude, 2004, McEachern, 2001, Clark, 2004, Henson & Sutliff, 1998). For example, Rude discusses the role of rhetoric in long-term strategizing to change public policy (2004). Although technical communication students and professionals are prepared to serve as editors and grant writers, those roles do not exhaust the skills that technical communicators offer. To take full advantage of their knowledge and abilities, technical communicators need more information about how their documents can effect social change as part of a long-term rhetorical strategy (Rude, 2004). Clark also calls for additional research (2004). His experience with action research that partners a university program with local nonprofit agencies encountered several problems, one of which was analyzing the nonprofits’ needs in a way that was valuable to both the researchers and the nonprofit agency (2004). More research on nonprofit needs could identify how to pinpoint needs through effective research that is useful to both parties. In addition, Henson and Sutliff observe in their article on service learning that “Major research projects on writing in the workplace have not addressed nonprofits… Such research is needed to investigate the full range of rhetorical elements in the kinds of documents used in various nonprofits” (1998, p. 202). My study begins to fill this gap and extend the research of Grabill, Bowdon, and other activist and service learning researchers.
Need for Documentation

Nonprofit organizations need documentation and written materials for a variety of purposes, from fundraising to planning to collaboration. Existing literature details the need for internal documentation as simple as procedural lists and as complex as information and communication systems. These documentation tools can help organizations meet increasing demands for accountability and proof of program effectiveness. While the literature establishes needs for documentation, gaps remain, particularly in defining and addressing the specific needs of nonprofit organizations.

Internal documentation supports communication within nonprofit organizations and reduces costs by streamlining processes and saving time (Connolly, 2004, Weinstein, 2002, Bryant & Lindenberg, 2001). For example, organizations may develop “desk procedures” that describe the tasks performed by particular employees. When developing these desk procedures, employees may examine their work practices and increase procedural efficiency. Written desk procedures also enable employees and volunteers to consistently perform duties after employee turnover or while an employee is out of the office. Nonprofit fundraising expert Stanley Weinstein recommends that organizations develop internal documentation not only to enable smooth personnel transitions but also to encourage employees and volunteers to examine their routines and increase efficiency: “The aim is to maximize the benefit while minimizing the cost. After eliminating unnecessary steps and reports, policies and procedures can be documented. Thoughtful documentation is tangible evidence that on-going activities have been reduced to simple-to-administer routines” (2002, p. 28). One of the primary forms of internal documentation is manuals; organizations may have three versions:
employee, volunteer, and board. These manuals address day-to-day concerns, establishing rules regarding stakeholders’ behavior and responsibilities. For example, organizations with security concerns, such as domestic abuse shelters, may develop very specific policies regarding onsite access: who has access, how limited the access is in terms of time of day and areas of the property, who has the authority to grant access. These policies would be recorded in manuals.

In addition to addressing day-to-day activities, internal documentation such as strategic plans and business plans provide both short-term and long-term guidance. One of the primary ways an organization establishes and communicates its vision for the future is through a strategic plan. Strategic plans often include a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis, objectives and goals, and periodic follow-up measures (Wolf, 1999, Weinstein, 2002). Although the primary focus of any nonprofit organization should be fulfilling its mission, secondary aspects—such as documentation, management, and planning—support this primary focus (Weinstein, 2002, Connolly, 2004). Thus, a strong business plan is vital to strengthening organizational capacity, which is the ability of an organization to fulfill its mission (Connolly, 2004). Just like for-profit businesses, nonprofit organizations should develop a business plan describing needs for their services, competition in providing these services, and the organization’s core competencies that will support its efforts (Connolly, 2004).

Internal documentation is not limited to paper form but also includes electronic tools that record, manage, and disseminate information to people within an organization. For example, donor databases are vital documentation tools that record
information such as the donor’s name, the date of donation, the amount of donation, the donor’s contact information, and even the donor’s preferences such as “no phone calls” or “emergency response programs only.” Because this information drives marketing tools and appeal mail, Weinstein calls the donor database an organization’s “main communication tool” (2002, p. 83).

Another electronic tool is the information and communication system (ICS). The ICS supports transportation and logistics, as well as basic organizational communication (Maiers, Reynolds, & Haselkorn, 2005). This tool is particularly vital for international organizations because it enables the organizations to quickly and appropriately respond during crisis. The ICS also supports organization-wide collaboration and recordkeeping, ideally enabling an organization’s headquarters to accurately track spending and program effectiveness at field offices around the world. These accurate records support the organization’s accountability demands. “The state of the internal information and communication systems within an NGO is an integral component of how successfully the organization is able to respond to complex humanitarian emergencies” (2005, p. 3). Maiers et al. conducted two studies—one involving the headquarters of large, international humanitarian relief organizations and the other involving the organizations’ field offices. They found that stakeholders—particularly at the field offices—do not prioritize documentation and communication tools for several reasons, including that

- They focus on directly serving people and defer documenting their program activities.
• They do not consult information technology and logistics departments when developing project proposals

• They view developing documentation and communication as overhead rather than program-related expenses (2005, pp. 5-6)

Unfortunately, when organizations fail to document their expenses, activities, and operating conditions, they cannot meet accountability demands. Nonprofit organizations are accountable to a variety of stakeholders, including board members, employees, individual donors, grant makers, government regulators, and “the public” (Bryant & Lindenberg, 2001, Hopkins, 2001, Aviv, 2004). Many of these stakeholders are demanding that organizations prove the effectiveness of their programs. “Private donors want to know whether their dollars really improve people’s lives. Public donors…want to know if their resources were used effectively. NGO staff members have a strong sense of mission and want to know more than ever before about whether their programs matter” (Bryant & Lindenberg, 2001, p. 21). To prove their effectiveness and account for how they spend donations, organizations must be transparent, that is, they must make information available and understandable (Aviv, 2004). One of the ways organizations increase their transparency is by providing easy access to their government-required documentation such as the 990 information return for the Internal Revenue Service. Many organizations make the 990 available directly from their website. Organizations can also increase their transparency by registering with organizations such as GuideStar and the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability, which provide publicly accessible databases of information on nonprofit organizations. Organizations
can also provide financial updates and budget summaries in donor communications such as the organization’s newsletter or email blasts.

In addition to increasing demands from private sources, organizations face stricter government regulations (Sargeant, 2001, Weinstein, 2002, Hopkins, 2001). While most nonprofit organizations are not required to file a tax return, many organizations must file an information return, which is often more complex (Hopkins, 2001). Similarly, charitable organizations are accountable for following not only federal fundraising regulations, but also state regulations, of which there are 46 versions, each with different rules, paperwork, and documentation requirements (Hopkins, 2001).

Meeting public and private demands for increased accountability requires tracking and documentation, but the current literature does not suggest how to produce this documentation, where to find this expertise, or how to meet these demands with limited human and capital resources. Leaders of nonprofit organizations may understand that they need writers—“...every development office needs a strong writer” (Weinstein, 2002, p. 302)—but they may not be aware of the expertise offered by technical communicators. Technical communicators have much to offer nonprofit organizations, including documentation development, needs analysis, and communication and rhetorical strategizing (Rude, 2004, Scott, 2004, Clark, 2004).

Improving Service Learning for Students and Nonprofit Organizations

One of the major trends connecting technical communication with nonprofit organizations is service learning. According to the National and Community Service Trust Act, service learning is experiential education that enables students to learn and
develop skills and understanding through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that is conducted in communities and meets community needs (1993). Service learning is a popular academic approach to ensuring that students gain experience writing for clients before students move into the professional world. This experience is valuable because it better prepares students for the rhetorical complexities of communicating with, for, and to real people (McEachern, 2001, Munger, 1998). As opposed to traditional internships or projects in which students produce work for for-profit companies, service learning typically partners students with nonprofit organizations. This partnership provides students with work experience, while introducing students to the concept of contributing to their community as an engaged citizen (Clark, 2004, Munger, 1998, Rude, 2004).

However, service learning involves numerous challenges: “poor communication among students, teachers, and agency representatives; poor quality of finished work; and lack of support from the parties involved” (McEachern, 2001, ¶3). Other problems include an overly pragmatic focus on producing end products at the expense of examining the rhetorical context and message (Rude, 2004, Scott, 2004). Many of the organizations with which students partner in service learning projects have long term goals that will not be met solely by the end products that students produce (Rude, 2004). Therefore, students must learn to put end products into the long-term, rhetorical context to identify the optimal rhetorical approach and gauge the product’s potential impact within a long-term strategy (Rude, 2004). Similarly, when students and teachers are focused on the end products of service learning, often they are not critically
reasoning about issues such as power distribution, roles, and potential outcomes (Scott, 2004).

To address these issues, teachers should advocate the activist research tactic of engaging participants (i.e., nonprofit organizations) in identifying outcome goals for service learning projects (Scott, 2004). However, both academia and nonprofit organizations should support the goal-setting process. Some efforts to engage nonprofit organizations in goal setting have failed because the process takes too much time. Students and instructors in service learning programs may want to spend hours gathering data at a nonprofit organization to develop an assessment of documentation needs, but the staff and volunteers at these organizations often have neither the time nor interest, “…which makes writing the 40+ page reports a time-eating exercise in relative futility” (Clark, 2004, Conflicting Agendas ¶2). The pattern of common needs identified in my study can assist technical communication instructors in designing service learning projects targeted to nonprofits’ needs without requiring hours of participation in data gathering from the organizations’ staff and volunteers. Compiling a list of nonprofit organizations’ needs is vital because this list can provide a practical way to engage nonprofit organizations to collaboratively set goals for service learning projects. Using these common needs as a starting place, students, instructors, and organizations can collaboratively select end products most appropriate for the situation.

My study will focus on the needs of nonprofit organizations as identified by nonprofit leaders and volunteers. Even Robert McEachern’s article about nonprofit organizational characteristics and service learning does not produce information specific to needs that are relevant to our field (2001). The purpose of his article is to summarize
general nonprofit characteristics from two books and suggest how these characteristics may contribute to service learning problems. This information may help instructors to foresee potential problems with service learning projects, but it does not help them to identify the specific projects that would be useful to nonprofit organizations and relevant to students.

In addition to enabling instructors to design more effective service learning, my study can help nonprofit organizations identify their own needs. Technical communication studies are often designed to have practical applications. A major focus of technical communication research is producing information that is relevant outside of academia and is helpful to professionals in the workplace. My findings are useful to professionals in a specific type of workplace: nonprofit organizations. Rachel Spilka (2000) notes that in designing studies, researchers should aim higher than merely meeting the needs of workplaces; they should produce research that can improve work practices. Researchers should ensure that the outcomes have practical applications to help organizations become more effective. Designing research to improve organizational effectiveness is challenging for many reasons, including the complexities and variety of nonprofit organizations, but academic researchers in technical communication continue to pursue the goal of improving work practices (Spilka, 2000, Clark, 2004).

In summary, technical communication traditionally focused on for-profit organizations, but some researchers have shifted focus from for-profit industry to the nonprofit industry (Clark, 2004, Grabill, 2000, McEachern, 2001, Rude, 2004, Henson and Sutliff, 1998). Specific topics include
• Shaping public policy
• Improving service learning
• Analyzing communication across large, international nonprofit organizations

Literature in these areas highlights the need for documentation, but one area of relatively little technical communication research is small nonprofit organizations. My study fills this gap by identifying a pattern of needs relevant to technical communication in small 501(c)(3) organizations. Technical communicators must understand nonprofit organizations’ needs to most effectively use our specialized knowledge to benefit the organizations and the people they serve.

In the following sections, I describe the methodology of my study, the study results, and conclusions. The methodology details the participating organizations, study instrumentation, and analysis tools. The results section summarizes my findings and highlights patterns of information among the participating organizations. The conclusion section discusses the ramifications of my findings and identifies areas for further research.
METHODOLOGY

The methodology included recruiting executive directors and volunteers from ten 501(c)(3) organizations located in two states and collecting information using questionnaires and interviews. The following sections describe the participating organizations, instrumentation, and analysis procedures.

Participating Organizations

The population consisted of ten 501(c)(3) organizations with an annual budget of $5 million or less, each with a unique mission:

- Firefighter support organization
- Botanical organization
- Church
- Juvenile prisoner reform program
- Learning resources organization
- Home services organization for people with disabilities
- Parenting and family resources organization
- Domestic abuse shelter
- Arts organization
- Pregnancy support organization

I purposely sought organizations that varied in mission, age, and type of stakeholders to ensure the potential for a wide range of responses. Figure 1 illustrates some of the organizational characteristics of study participants, including age of the organization and numbers of employees, volunteers, and people served.
The organizations vary widely in age, with the oldest founded in 1970 and the youngest in 2001, with a mean age of 18 years. Three organizations are less than 10 years old; six are less than 20 years old, and the remaining four organizations are 23-35 years old. This variety in the age of the organizations suggests that nonprofit organizations with relatively small annual budgets are not necessarily fledgling organizations but may well be mature, with decades of experience.

With their relatively small annual budgets, most of these organizations do not have many full-time employees. Seven of the 10 organizations have 0-5 full-time employees, while three organizations have more than 20. Every organization has significantly more volunteers than employees. Six of the organizations have 11-50

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**Figure 1.** Age of participating organizations in years.

**Figure 2.** Numbers of volunteers and employees of participating organizations.
volunteers; three organizations have more than 100, and one organization has between 1-10 volunteers. The three oldest organizations have significantly more volunteers, which suggests that older organizations may need more volunteer-centered documentation to enable the small staff to effectively guide the large volunteer base.

Although the ten organizations have limited human and capital resources, they reach significant numbers of people. Eight organizations annually serve more than 1,000 people, while one serves approximately 90, and one has served 25 people since inception. The number of people served is clearly tied to the type of services. The organization serving 90 people provides homes and home services for people with disabilities. The organization that has served 25 people in the last 6 years has no paid employees and provides large (usually $10,000) one-time grants to families of fallen firefighters.

Participants: My sample included the executive director and a volunteer from each of these organizations. I selected executive directors and volunteers because they can provide unique views into the needs of the nonprofit organizations they serve. Executive directors are top-level administrative leaders, second only to the policy-making board of directors. Board members are not usually involved with the nonprofit organization on a day-to-day basis, but executive directors are full-time employees whose job is guiding the organization in fulfilling the mission that the board defines. Therefore, executive directors are well positioned to provide a visionary, organization-wide view of the nonprofit and an assessment of its needs. Volunteers are closely involved with nonprofit organizations on a different level than executive directors. The volunteer participants in this study included both hands-on volunteers and board
members. Hands-on volunteers can often provide a narrower view, focused on the conditions, problems, and needs of the specific area in which the volunteer is involved. Board members are responsible for establishing the mission and vision of the organization and working on a macro level to ensure that the organization’s programs and budget support the mission and work to fulfill the vision. Together, these participants can paint a clear picture of the organization’s needs.

Instrumentation

The University of North Texas Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved all the instrumentation used in this study—including a consent form, recruiting script, background questionnaire, and interview questions—to ensure that the instrumentation meets the criteria for studies involving human subjects. The consent form (see Appendix C) described the rights of study participants, the purpose and benefits of my study, and the ways I would protect participants’ confidentiality. All participants signed and returned this document before completing the background questionnaire and participating in the interview.

Background Questionnaire

The background questionnaire (see Appendix B) is a one-page document that focuses on organizational characteristics such as age of the organization; number of paid staff, volunteers, donors, and people served; and turnover rate. It also asked participants whether the organization had certain types of written guidelines or policies and whether those documents were helpful.
Interview Questions

The interview questions focus on the presence of and uses for written documentation within the organization, with the first two interview questions requesting more detail about respondents’ questionnaire responses. For example, if an executive director indicated on the background questionnaire that the organization did not have written fund development policies, I would ask why not, whether the organization had informal or unwritten fund development policies, and whether they believe that written policies would be useful. If the organization did have written fund development policies, I would ask who developed the policies, who uses them, and whether the written policies are useful. The remaining interview questions focused on the participant’s own experiences with documentation at their nonprofit organizations. The following questions were included in the interviews:

- What are some of the problems you’ve had at (name of organization) that could be related to documentation?
- How long have you been involved with nonprofit organizations? During that time, have you seen any changes in the need for documentation?
- Do you think donors require more information? Have you had more demands for proving the effectiveness of your programs?
- Is there anything else you want to tell me about documentation or communicating information at (name of organization)?

These questions were designed to indicate the following information:

- Interviewees’ attitude toward documentation
- Reasons why organizations lack documentation
- Developers and users of existing documentation
- Whether interviewees have noticed an increased need for documentation
- Problems caused by documentation or a lack thereof

Procedures

Below are the procedures used to conduct the study and to analyze the interview responses. The study procedures include both recruiting and information gathering, while analysis procedures focus on coding transcripts to identify patterns of information.

Study Design

Selection & Recruitment: I used purposive sampling to select organizations based on age, budget, and mission. As Berg noted, purposive sampling is an appropriate strategy to ensure that the study includes participants with specific attributes or that meet certain criteria (1989, p. 110). I recruited participants over a 4-week period from late August through late September 2005. The study participants were recruited primarily through referrals from people who work or volunteer with the organizations and from people who work with organizations that collaborate with the referred organizations. I called the organizations and described the study to volunteers, receptionists, secretaries, or other employees. When recruiting executive directors, I used a phone script (see Appendix A) to ensure that I would fully describe the study and participant involvement.
As suggested by the University of North Texas IRB, I recruited volunteers based solely on referrals from executive directors. Some volunteers were board members, and some were hands-on volunteers. I recruited approximately half through email and half through phone calls, using a shorter version of the phone script.

Questionnaires: When individuals agreed to participate, I scheduled an interview and sent the research consent form and background questionnaire. Participants returned the signed and completed documents before any interviews took place.

Interviews: In mid- to late September, I conducted seven in-person interviews and thirteen phone interviews. I recorded every interview with a digital voice recorder, using a speakerphone to enable the recording of phone interviews. Because two of the in-person interviews recorded poorly, I re-interviewed the participants by phone three weeks after their original interviews, making 22 total interviews, 20 of which were analyzed.

Analysis of the Qualitative Interview Data

Transcribing the interviews enabled me to analyze participants’ responses in-depth and compare data to identify patterns of information. The single-spaced transcripts of the 20 interviews total 143 pages: 85 pages of executive director interviews and 58 pages of volunteer interviews. The difference in transcript length confirms my expectations in selecting two representatives from each organization. As expected, executive directors had an organization-wide, day-to-day knowledge. This extensive knowledge consistently resulted in 30-minute interviews. Volunteers had
narrower, more focused views, which typically resulted in shorter interviews of approximately 15 minutes.

Unit of Analysis: In coding the transcripts, I used themes as my unit of analysis, as opposed to sentences or paragraphs. A theme can be defined as “…chunks of varying size—words, phrases, sentences, or whole paragraphs, connected or unconnected to a specific setting” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 56). As Miles and Huberman suggest, the meaning of words relies heavily on context (1994, p. 56), and the goal of coding these transcripts is to identify patterns of meaning. This meaning may be expressed in as small a unit as a word or as long as two or more sentences. Therefore, I coded the transcripts by marking thematic units with meanings described in my codes and subcodes.

Theoretical Framework: I analyzed the transcripts using a grounded theory approach. Grounded theory involves categorizing empirically collected data to build a general theory to fit the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Because grounded theory is an inductive approach based on specific cases, this approach assumes that each case has variables that interact in complex ways. To identify these variables and define their complex relationships, I coded the variables through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. In open coding, I marked the transcripts to identify patterns of information. In axial coding, I compared the patterns, frequency, and trends among codes to identify relationships, and in selective coding, I identified the single theme from which all codes emanate.

Coding Categories and Definitions: I open coded the transcripts by identifying types of information that appeared repeatedly. I then named, defined, and categorized
this information to produce a list of five major codes, each with three to six subcodes.

The five major codes that emerged from the data are listed below:

- Developer—who within the organization developed existing documentation
- Motivation—why the organization developed documentation
- Lack—why the organization lacks documentation
- Amount—the amount of documentation currently required by the organization compared to the amount of documentation required in the past
- Value—the value or utility of documentation to the organization

I specified three to six subcodes for each major code to provide further detail and to enable a clearer information pattern:

Developer: This code identifies who developed existing documentation or is developing future documentation for these organizations. In addition, the Developer code sheds light on related topics such as

- Whether users are represented when documentation is developed
- The attitudes of developers toward this task
- Whether there is a relationship between the usefulness (or existence) of documentation and its developer

This code has five sub-codes:

- D-collaborative—a team or committee developed documentation
- D-single—a single staff member, board member, or volunteer developed documentation
- D-director—the executive director developed documentation
• D-external—an external source (such as a government organization) developed documentation

• D-expert—an expert, such as a lawyer or marketing professional, developed documentation

Motivation: This code identifies why organizations develop documentation and may indicate whether certain motivations result in more effective documentation. This code has three sub-codes:

• M-external—requests/requirements from external sources (such as funders) motivate organizations to create documentation

• M-proactive—desires to prevent future conflicts, confusion, or inconsistency motivate organizations to create documentation

• M-reaction—existing needs motivate organizations to create documentation

Lack: This code indicates why organizations lack documentation. The Lack code identifies barriers to developing documentation and indicates when documentation is unnecessary. Identifying whether certain documentation is necessary can help technical communicators offer help where it is needed, and identifying barriers can empower technical communicators to help organizations overcome these barriers. This code has six sub-codes:

• L-no need—the organization lacks documentation because the particular documentation is not appropriate for the organization or situation

• L-culture—the organization lacks documentation because the culture of organization is hostile or apathetic to written documentation
• L-focus— the organization lacks documentation because the stakeholders have prioritized other matters and lack the time or resources to develop documentation
• L-gatekeeper— the organization lacks documentation because gatekeepers within the organization hold the information in their heads and communicate it verbally
• L-inconsistency—the organization lacks documentation because it changes so often
• L-need more—participants believe the organization should have more documentation either now or in the future

Amount: This code compares the current level or amount of documentation with that of the past. The Amount code gauges the need of nonprofit organizations for documentation and identifies trends. This code has three sub-codes:

• A-more—more documentation is necessary or requested now than in the past
• A-less—less documentation is necessary or requested now than in the past
• A-same—no change in the amount of documentation that is necessary or requested than in the past

Value: This code indicates the value of documentation to nonprofit organizations. The Value code designates how organizations use documentation and why directors and volunteers believe they need it. It also indicates the role of documentation in these organizations and the relative importance of documentation as compared to other priorities. This code has four sub-codes:
- **V-proof**—documentation addresses liability, proves or documents outcomes or expenditures, assesses or asserts effectiveness
- **V-mission**—documentation affects the organization in achieving its mission; e.g., the mission of the organization is more valuable or important than creating or maintaining documentation; the mission is supported by good documentation; the mission is threatened by a strong focus on documentation
- **V-commonality**—documentation promotes a common understanding of the organization’s mission, rules, procedures, guidelines, resources, roles, or responsibilities; documentation serves as a reference to preserve common understanding
- **V-tool**—documentation serves as a tool to help stakeholders support the organization

**Intercoder Reliability:** To increase data analysis accuracy, a secondary coder also marked the transcripts. I trained a technical communication colleague to perform this coding, providing a document that explained the codes and sub-codes in detail, including key words, concepts, and definitions. We discussed the document and reviewed the coded transcript of my interview with one executive director. I explained each coded unit and described how uncoded words often provide the context necessary to identify the appropriate code. Then she coded the transcripts from my interviews with two other executive directors. I had underlined all thematic units within these transcripts, and the secondary coder assigned codes to this text while I was available to provide input and answer questions. After this training, the secondary coder coded the remaining 17 transcripts by assigning a code to the thematic units I had underlined. I
analyzed our coding by determining the percentage of codes that match as compared to the total number of codes. Using this calculation, we achieved an 89% match, establishing a highly reliable coding scheme.

In summary, my methodology involved recruiting ten nonprofit organizations, gathering information using background questionnaires and interviews, and analyzing the data according to grounded theory. The following section further discusses this data by comparing the frequency and patterns of codes in the interviews.
FINDINGS & IMPLICATIONS

The Findings and Implications chapter describes the frequency and distribution of interviewees’ responses recorded in the 20 interview transcripts. This chapter is divided into five parts based on patterns that emerged in interviewees’ responses:

- Documentation Development—Who developed the organization’s existing documentation?
- Motivation—Why did the organization develop the documentation?
- Lack of Documentation—Why does the organization lack documentation?
- Amount—Has the amount of required documentation changed?
- Value—What is the value or utility of documentation to the organization?

Documentation Development

Table 1 shows the frequency and distribution of interviewee comments that identify developers of the organizations’ documentation. The developers are divided into five groups: (1) collaborative developers, (2) a single stakeholder other than the executive director (such as a staff member or volunteer), (3) the executive director, (4) technical experts in documentation (such as external event planners or marketing experts), and (5) people in entities outside of the nonprofit organization (such as government agencies or funding organizations).
Table 1

*Distribution of the Developer Comments*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Documentation Developer</th>
<th>Number &amp; Percentage of Occurrences</th>
<th>Number of Interviewees (16/20 total)*</th>
<th>Number of Executive Directors (9/10 total)*</th>
<th>Number of Volunteers (7/10 total)*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative development</td>
<td>30 (39.4%)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development by one internal person (other than the executive director)</td>
<td>15 (19.7%)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development by the executive director</td>
<td>13 (17.1%)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development by an external expert in the documentation type</td>
<td>11 (14.4%)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development by an entity outside the nonprofit organization</td>
<td>7 (9.2%)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Number of interviewees who made comments in this area.

Interview Questions

Participants identified documentation developers in response to interview questions following up on the background questionnaire. Participants indicated on the questionnaire whether the organization had developed or intended to develop particular types of documentation. In the interview, they were asked who did or would develop it. Thus, the responses shown in Table 1 indicate who has, is, or will be developing participating organizations’ documentation.

According to their background questionnaires, eight of the ten volunteers did not know whether the organization had some of the listed documentation. Therefore, they could not provide information about who had developed that documentation or if it
existed. Not surprisingly, therefore, more executive directors than volunteers were able to identify documentation developers. The sole exception was when documentation was developed by a single stakeholder other than the executive director. These developers were often volunteers themselves or staff members who work closely with volunteers.

Collaborative Development

Ten of the twenty participants (seven executive directors and three volunteers) indicated that their organization’s documentation was collaboratively developed. Together, the ten participants offered 30 comments describing collaborative approaches. Typical of the responses was this comment: “Our executive director, program director and development director worked together on guidelines for… the volunteers and for the orientation program.” Responses also indicated that a wide range of stakeholders had input into the employee handbook: “All of us [staff members] have input; then we work with one committee on the board, and the executive of the board then approves it, and then we sign it.”

The prevalence of collaborative development supports the usefulness of research on collaborative writing in technical communication literature (e.g., Clark, 2004, Grabill, 2000, Bowdon, 2004, McEachern, 2001, Spilka, 2000). Researchers recommend that technical communicators and other stakeholders collaborate to conduct research or develop documentation. Because collaborative development is already being implemented in some 501(c)(3) organizations, it should be easier for technical communicators to collaborate with these organizations.
Other Types of Developers

Some organizations attempt to meet their need for documentation through other approaches. Seven of the twenty interviewees indicated that their documentation was developed by a single stakeholder other than the executive director (fifteen total comments). Five indicated that their executive directors had developed documentation (thirteen total comments), and four identified experts with ties to the organization who provided expertise beyond that of staff members (eleven total comments). Most of the experts offered their help for free, which can be a great benefit to small organizations on a limited budget. For example, one executive director said that a marketing expert is donating his time to develop promotion materials for her organization: “…we have a retiree… who makes mega bucks for doing marketing for a very large company, and if we had to pay him, it would cost us $500 an hour for his time. That’s what he gets as a consultant.” The least common type of developer is external to the organization and lacks pre-established ties. Three interviewees indicated that documentation had been developed by an organization outside of their nonprofit. For example, one executive director noted that her organization works with several local nonprofit groups on an awareness campaign, and one of the other organizations had provided all of the planning documents.

This finding indicates that few organizations have documentation developed by outsiders. Therefore, technical communicators interested in meeting 501(c)(3) organizations’ needs should consider how they present themselves. Small 501(c)(3) organizations may accept help more readily if technical communicators present
themselves as new volunteers or experts willing to provide a free service. One way that technical communicators might apply this finding is through service learning relationships. Technical communication students seeking service learning opportunities could seek out organizations with missions they personally support and offer to volunteer their time as experts in documentation development or other technical communication areas. As stakeholders in the organization—not outsiders—students may be more likely to be offered opportunities. Similarly, activist researchers could establish relationships with organizations through service learning projects and identify themselves as organizational stakeholders before proposing research projects. As an insider, the researcher may be more likely to enlist support and build a collaborative effort (although they must be mindful of potential biases that could arise due to their “insider” status). Under the right conditions, however, both parties—the researcher and the organization—could benefit from the project.

Motivation

Table 2 shows the frequency and distribution of participants’ comments identifying why organizations develop documentation. The comments suggest that there are three major motivators: (1) external, (2) reactive, and (3) proactive. External motivation occurs when external sources request or require documentation. With reactive motivation, an existing problem or need prompts the documentation development. Proactive motivations reflect the desire to prevent a problem or meet an anticipated need.
Table 2

*Frequency of the Motivation Comments*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation for Developing Documentation</th>
<th>Number &amp; Percentage of Occurrences</th>
<th>Number of Interviewees (14/20 total)*</th>
<th>Number of Executive Directors (9/10 total)*</th>
<th>Number of Volunteers (5/10 total)*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>External</td>
<td>18 (40.0%)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reactive</td>
<td>18 (40.0%)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proactive</td>
<td>9 (20.0%)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Number of interviewees who made comments in this area.

Interview Questions

In the interviews, participants were asked why they had developed or were planning to develop particular forms of documentation. Many volunteers did not know whether their organization had certain types of documentation. Therefore, they could not comment on why the organization had developed it. Volunteers' widespread lack of documentation knowledge is reflected in the last two columns of Table 2, which show that more executive directors than volunteers indicated why their organization developed documentation. Thus, the motivations for developing documentation are primarily supplied by executive directors. The two most common motivators—external requests and reaction to an existing need—were each mentioned eighteen times (the first by eight interviewees and the second by nine).

External Requests

One executive director said that government regulations prompted her organization to develop documentation: "A lot of it [documentation] is driven by… one of our major government contractors who deal exclusively with family violence shelters,
and so there are some things in there [the personnel policy handbook] that are specific and unique to our business. Other policies and procedures that are in there are… the result of government regulations…” Organizations also develop documentation in response to external requests from private donors. For example, to meet accountability requests from private donors, one organization has begun printing budget summaries in its newsletter. The fact that external requests prompt documentation development was not an unexpected finding, since government regulations for nonprofit organizations are growing increasingly complex (Bryant and Lindenberg, 2001, Hopkins, 2001, Wolf, 1999). Further, the demands for accountability and transparency from donors—public and private, individual and corporate—are prompting organizations to develop documentation (Aviv, 2004, Sargeant, 2001, Weinstein, 2002).

Existing and Anticipated Needs

The last two motivators—existing needs and anticipated needs—are of more significant interest since they suggest that organizations often develop documentation after they need it. This finding identifies an important need that technical communicators can meet: proactive documentation development. Of the seven interviewees who identified future needs as a motivation for developing documentation, six of them only mentioned it once. In fact, only one interviewee said that her organization’s policy is to proactively develop documentation. As executive director, she seeks advisors in larger nonprofit organizations to share their experience and documentation, which she modifies for her organization as appropriate: “We have us a real good friend who works in human resources at YMCA, and she gave us lots of good policies that for the YMCA
were an inch thick but for us could be one page because we’re a little guy, but that would still protect us from those liabilities and make sure that our programs are strong.” However, only half as many comments (9) indicated that organizations proactively develop documentation, while twice as many comments (18) show that organizations develop documentation in reaction to problems or needs. Further, while only one organization intentionally researches potential problems and develops documentation before needs arise, other organizations consistently develop documentation after they needed it. For example, one executive director said, “Anytime we have a problem, we add [to the employee handbook]. Like this year, someone’s sister died, so we added a bereavement section.” Another executive director summarized, “I guess if it becomes an issue; that’s usually how our policies get written.” A third participant said, “Usually, what happens is you think you’ve got it all covered, and then something comes up and then you go, ‘Oh, gee, we don’t have anything written down about that. We should do that.’”

As these responses indicate, many organizations typically—not rarely—develop documentation in reaction to problems that have already occurred. For example, an organization that lacks written board member guidelines may elect a new board member who is unaware of the organization’s expectations and unwilling or unable to perform the expected duties. Unfortunately, the misunderstanding would come to light only after the new member consistently fails to perform the expected duties. Similarly, if an organization lacks a written organizational chart, staff members and the executive director may experience conflicts and power struggles before developing written policies to ensure a common understanding. Technical communicators can prevent
misunderstandings like these by developing documentation that clearly describes expectations, policies, and guidelines before a miscommunication occurs.

Further, the lack of important documentation can impede effective planning and strategic thinking. According to leadership expert Jeffrey Luke, strategic thinking is a vital but rare component in organizations that promote the public good (1998, pg. 152). Organizations that lack documentation do not have objective facts on which to base their strategic thinking and therefore rely on personal opinions, “gut feelings,” and anecdotal input from stakeholders. In addition, the failure to document an organization’s policies and objectives prevents board members from fulfilling one of their legal responsibilities: evaluating the organization’s performance (Wolf, 1999, pg. 152). Board members cannot engage in strategic planning without documentation because they must build their vision for the future on an accurate foundation—the organization’s current status. Documentation defines this status.

Reactive documentation development can impede organizations from effective planning and mission fulfillment. Unfortunately, many organizations develop documentation reactively—thus indicating significant needs that technical communicators can fill. Technical communicators can help organizations identify potential problems and proactively develop documentation before problems arise. Technical communicators are experienced at researching, evaluating, and organizing information to develop documentation that is appropriate for users. Therefore, they are well positioned to provide this help.
Lack

Table 3 shows the frequency and distribution of interviewee comments that explain why organizations lack documentation. These comments include five reasons: (1) preference for verbal communication over written communication, (2) no need for documentation, (3) a focus on priorities other than developing documentation, (4) a documentation-resistant culture, and (5) frequent changes that make documentation impractical.

Table 3

*Frequency of the Lack Comments*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lack of Documentation</th>
<th>Number &amp; Percentage of Occurrences</th>
<th>Number of Interviewees (16/20 total)*</th>
<th>Number of Executive Directors (10/10 total)*</th>
<th>Number of Volunteers (6/10 total)*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information is communicated verbally and is not written down</td>
<td>36 (31.8%)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is no need for documentation</td>
<td>28 (24.7%)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholders are focused on priorities other than developing documentation</td>
<td>21 (18.5%)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture is resistant to developing documentation</td>
<td>17 (15.0%)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules/procedures change too often to justify documenting them</td>
<td>11 (9.7%)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Number of interviewees who made comments in this area.
Interview Questions

The comments in Table 3 are derived from interview questions that follow-up on the background questionnaire. For example, participants were asked, “According to your background questionnaire, (name of organization) does not have (type of documentation). Why not?” Fewer volunteers than executive directors knew enough about the organization’s documentation to comment.

Verbal Versus Written Communication

Ten interviewees indicated in 36 comments that although their organization has policies or guidelines, they are not written down. These organizations rely more heavily on verbal than written communication; often one person acts as an enforcer of unwritten guidelines. For example, two volunteers who are graphic designers ensure the consistency of one organization’s external documents, instead of developing written style guides. An executive director noted that her organization had fundraising guidelines, but they remain unwritten because she is the sole fundraiser: “I have it in my head.” Storing vital guidelines in the heads of leaders can cripple the organization. As McEachern describes, executive directors of 501(c)(3) organizations typically have many duties and too little time to oversee the work of other stakeholders (2001). When executive directors act as gatekeepers of the organization’s policies, they can cause a bottleneck that can either prevent stakeholders from performing their duties or increase the likelihood that stakeholders will not follow policies. Even worse, the unwritten policies can be permanently lost when the executive director leaves the organization. The long hours, low pay, and multiple responsibilities of executive director often lead to
burnout (McEachern, 2001). Executive directors can reduce some of their own stress and prepare the organization to thrive after their tenure by writing down policies and guidelines.

Some organizations are so small that stakeholders believe that verbal communications are enough to establish responsibilities and procedures. “It’s an oral tradition that if we get somebody new,….it’s brought to light that if you ever get a call from the media, you send it to so-and-so.” However, some participants believe that “verbal policies” should be written down to ensure that all stakeholders are aware of policies and that policies are being enforced consistently. For example, two executive directors believe that their organizations need written public relations guidelines to ensure that their organization is consistent in its interactions with the media.

The lack of written processes can cause problems that leaders do not always trace to the source. For example, two participating organizations lack a written board of directors selection process, but their executive directors said that they believe verbal discussions are sufficient to select ideal board members. According to fundraising expert Stanley Weinstein, boards should select new members using a strategic process supported by documentation that clarifies the strengths and shortfalls of the current board before identifying potential candidates (2002, pg. 284). Strategic analysis is supported by tools such as a nomination grid, which documents the skills, strengths, and characteristics of the ideal board; the qualities of current members; and the qualities that candidates should offer. When board members skip the analysis and begin the nomination process by suggesting potential candidates, they are unlikely to form a balanced board. Interestingly, one of the executive directors who said that her
organization does not need a documented selection process later said that she has not received the fundraising support that she desires from her board. Technical communicators can make connections between problems such as a lack of fundraising support and the ad-hoc verbal processes that cause them. By identifying the source of problems and documenting processes to prevent them, technical communicators can meet 501(c)(3) organizations’ needs.

No Need for Documentation

Eight of the twenty interviewees made 28 total comments indicating that they lacked documentation because it was unnecessary. For example, one organization lacks an employee handbook because it has no employees, and the board has no intention of hiring any. Another organization lacks a benefits policy because it offers no employee benefits beyond a salary. This finding suggests that technical communicators could fail to meet organizational needs if they assume that all organizations need the same types of documentation. Although certain types of documentation are more common due to government regulations or conventional organizational structures, even the most common of documentation—federally required 990 and 990-PF tax forms—are awkward fits for some nonprofits and do not adequately reflect their income (Aviv, 2004). Thus, technical communicators cannot effectively meet needs with a one-size-fits-all approach. Nonprofit organizations differ greatly, and technical communicators must expect documentation needs to differ as well. They should be prepared to learn about an organization—its structure, problems, processes—before proposing documentation development.
Documentation is a Low Priority

Organizations may lack documentation because developing it is not a high priority. Nine of the twenty interviewees made 21 total comments to this effect. One executive director offered a typical response when she said of their fund development policies, “They’re not written because I haven’t had time to get them written.” Several other interviewees explained that the organization has not made developing documentation a high enough priority for stakeholders to take time away from other tasks. One volunteer said, “I just think as a matter of priorities, it [developing public relations guidelines] was not set as a priority by the development director at that time, and so nothing has ever been generated.” Similarly, another participant said, “We have many other priorities that would be much more important than this particular thing [a style guide].” These comments suggest that nonprofit stakeholders know that they need certain types of documentation but do not take the time to develop it because staff members and other stakeholders at small 501(c)(3) organizations have multiple responsibilities that expand beyond their available time. Many stakeholders simply do not believe that documentation development is more important than their other priorities. Nonprofit organizations are characterized by their passion for mission, and stakeholders volunteer their time or work for substandard pay and benefits because they want to support that mission (Ott, 2001, McEachern, 2001). Therefore, they often prioritize the tasks they believe more directly support that mission.

Unfortunately, the lower priorities can have a great impact on mission effectiveness. Mark Haselkorn described how donors are often generous in response to
immediate needs but consider infrastructure expenses a lower priority—although the infrastructure could help prevent future needs: “A child is more compelling than a satellite phone, but a well-placed satellite phone can help reduce the suffering of many children” (Haselkorn, 2005). Stakeholders often prioritize tasks like donors prioritize giving. Meeting immediate needs—especially by directly interacting with clients—seems much more compelling than developing documentation. However, documentation can empower present and future stakeholders to help clients. For example, the domestic abuse shelter that participated in this study had an extensive volunteer handbook. It was 59 pages long with four sections containing information on domestic abuse, the services of the organization, organizational policies, and volunteer guidelines. Developing such comprehensive, detailed documentation can be a time-consuming task, which some stakeholders may consider less important than “mission-related” tasks. However, this handbook equips hundreds of volunteers to support the victims of domestic abuse. Technical communicators can support missions they value by developing documentation and freeing other stakeholders to perform hands-on tasks.

Culture Resistant to Documentation

One of the more surprising findings was that only four of the twenty interviewees indicated that their organization’s culture is resistant to documentation development. For example, one executive director said that her organization has strong ties with the firefighting community, which she believes is suspicious of documentation: “They don’t necessarily want a written agreement… ‘Let’s not make it messy. Let’s shake hands and do what we say we’re going to do.’” Another response from an executive director
raises concern: “The less things we have in writing, the better. …You know the things you have documented sometimes work against you, often as many times as they work for you. And so I don’t really have any need to have things documented, so we just don’t.” Organizations without documentation may lack a legally tenable defense for their actions. For example, organizations that lack job descriptions cannot cite the failure to perform duties as grounds for employee dismissal. Employees can claim that they were unaware of their duties. Similarly, board members are legally responsible for ensuring the organization’s fiscal responsibility. If the organization does not document expenditures, it cannot prove fiscal responsibility, and board members can be personally sued.

Responses that illustrate a culture resistant to documentation provide a caution to technical communicators seeking to meet nonprofit organizations’ needs. While it is likely that an organization may need documentation and its stakeholders may be unable to produce it, some organizations are resistant to developing documentation. Technical communicators should be prepared to meet resistance by employing certain strategies:

Give Them What They Want: Organizations that resist developing certain types of documentation may be open to developing other types. For example, although one participating organization resisted developing joint fundraising guidelines, its stakeholders acknowledged the need for public relations policies. When interacting with organizations that are only partially resistant to documentation, technical communicators could ask stakeholders what types of documentation they need. By developing the desired documentation first and enabling stakeholders to see its value,
technical communicators may melt the organization’s resistance to documentation in other areas.

Show an External Need: Many organizations are motivated to meet external requests for documentation, so technical communicators may overcome resistance by showing a need from external sources such as funding agencies, private donors, or clientele. Sometimes evidence of need may be provided by government regulations or grant foundation guidelines. However, even information requests from private donors may be enough to prompt organizations to develop documentation.

Wait for the Culture to Change: Technical communicators need not be permanently deterred by a documentation-resistant culture because organizations’ cultures are dynamic. Technical communicators may encounter organizations that initially resist all efforts to document and later request help in developing documentation. For example, one organization began developing internal guidelines after it hired a new executive director who believed that documentation would prevent the volunteer burnout experienced under the previous director. Another organization’s culture changed when conflicts among stakeholders prompted a call for documentation that would guide their efforts and define their responsibilities.

Frequent Changes

Six interviewees made eleven total comments indicating that creating certain documentation would not be practical because of frequent changes. Sometimes the changes originate with the organization itself. For example, according to one executive director, her organization has had several very different fundraising strategies and types
of beneficiaries since the organization’s inception in 1999. Frequent internal changes can signify a lack of planning. The executive director with varying fundraising strategies leads an organization that lacks a strategic planning process. A well-defined strategic planning process would include measurable goals and evaluations of the efforts to meet those goals (Wolf, 1999, pg. 284). This information would be invaluable in defining an effective fundraising strategy and ensuring the consistency that would enable the organization to develop fundraising guidelines. However, sometimes changes originate outside the organization. For example, one volunteer works as a clerk, maintaining and filing paperwork required by foundations that support the organization. She lacks written instructions because the foundations change their requirements often enough to render instructions obsolete. In this case, the organization cannot prevent the changes; it must accommodate changes with documentation that is quick, easy, and inexpensive to update.

Compared to other reasons for lacking documentation, frequent change was relatively rare, but technical communicators should be aware that frequent changes in procedures or strategies could affect the usefulness of documentation. These organizations may benefit more from electronic documentation, such as an intranet or password-protected internet site, than print documentation, such as manuals. An intranet or internet site could host information such as organizational policies, report deadlines, and stakeholders responsible for various tasks—making the information instantly updatable and available to anyone with a computer and site access. If an organization has sufficient computer equipment and computer-literate stakeholders, the organization may prefer electronic documentation because it is faster to update and less
expensive to disseminate than paper. When developing documentation for an ever-changing organization, technical communicators should compare the benefits of paper versus electronic documentation.

Need for More Documentation

When interviewees explained why they lacked documentation, they often acknowledged the need for it. These responses did not explain the lack of documentation and are therefore not included in Table 5, but ten interviewees made 37 total comments indicating that their organization needs more documentation. For example, one volunteer had just become the president of the board. She was surprised to learn that the organization did not document when it referred clients to other organizations. Consequently, she is using her new leadership role to ensure that the organization develops guidelines for board members and for other volunteers—including referral documentation. Another participant had recently been hired as executive director, and she said that in her job interview, she had asked the board members why the organization did not have an employee handbook. She is now working with the board to develop a policies and procedures manual that will contain employee guidelines. However, newcomers were not the only interviewees who believed that their organization needed more documentation. One founding executive director said that her organization needs fund development policies and public relations guidelines. Another founding executive director said that her organization needs board orientation guidelines and written fund development policies.
Many of the interviewees said that when they became aware of the need for written documentation, they started taking steps to develop it. This documentation varied widely, including employee, volunteer, and board guidelines; fund development policies; and public relations guidelines. However, seven of the ten interviewees who said that their organization needed more documentation also said that they lacked documentation because it is not a high priority. This correlation suggests that stakeholders may acknowledge the need for documentation but consider other tasks more important. These organizations may welcome a collaborative effort with technical communicators who will create the documentation that stakeholders know they need, while enabling them to continue performing other tasks.

Amount

Table 4 shows the frequency and distribution of interviewee comments regarding whether the need for documentation has changed. These comments indicate (1) increased need, (2) decreased need, and (3) unchanged need for documentation.

Table 4

*Frequency of the Amount Comments*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Amount of Documentation Required</th>
<th>Number &amp; Percentage of Occurrences</th>
<th>Number of Interviewees (18/20 total)*</th>
<th>Number of Executive Directors (10/10 total)*</th>
<th>Number of Volunteers (8/10 total)*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More documentation required</td>
<td>30 (76.9%)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No change in the amount of documentation required</td>
<td>6 (15.3%)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Table continued on next page.)
Interview Questions

The comments in Table 4 occurred near the end of the interviews in response to a two-question set: “How long have you been involved with nonprofit organizations? During that time, have you seen any changes in the need for documentation?” The wording of these questions may explain why more volunteers (5) than executive directors (1) indicated no change. Volunteers were not as involved with documentation as executive directors, and many volunteers lacked knowledge about their organization’s existing documentation. Therefore, many of them may not be aware of changes in the need for documentation.

More Documentation Required

In contrast, thirteen of the twenty interviewees made 30 comments indicating that they require more documentation. One executive director said, “They [donors] require LOTS more [documentation]. They want to know who else is donating; they ask a lot more critical questions. …We sat down with one of our donors for two hours. It's unbelievable what those people know now about an organization.” As suggested by existing literature, nonprofit organizations are asked for more documentation by a variety of donors and regulators—both government and private (Aviv, 2004, Bryant &
Lindenberg, 2001, Hopkins, 2001, Weinstein, 2002). Diana Aviv documents several reasons that donors and regulators are calling for increased accountability:

- Many leaders of smaller nonprofit organizations are unaware of “best practices” for organizational governance, as well as their legal responsibilities.
- The nonprofit sector is too diverse for a single set of standards.
- State and federal governments provide inadequate oversight.
- The media more closely scrutinizes nonprofits for scandals (2004, pg. 53-54).

However, small nonprofit organizations may not have the resources on staff to easily meet information requests to prove their accountability. Technical communicators can meet the need for more documentation not only by directly developing the documentation but by establishing processes that make documentation development faster and easier for staff members and other stakeholders. For example, technical communicators could develop a web template for an electronic newsletter. This template could reduce newsletter publication to little more than typing text into blank boxes—speeding the task and enabling it to be performed by stakeholders without web development experience.

Less Documentation Required

Only two interviewees made three comments indicating a reduced need for documentation. One executive director said that because she has developed relationships with the leaders of funding organizations, she requires less documentation to establish her organization’s credibility. Only one executive director, whose organization was the most culturally resistant to documentation, said that she has seen
an overall decrease in the amount of documentation required for her organization. This finding suggests that the need for documentation at most small 501(c)(3) organizations is not decreasing—a suggestion that is supported by increases in government regulations, private foundation reporting requirements, and information requests from individual donors.

Value

Table 5 shows the frequency and distribution of interviewee comments that indicate the value of documentation to participating organizations. These comments indicate four types of value. Documentation (1) helps stakeholders perform tasks to support the organization, (2) ensures stakeholders have a common understanding of information, (3) provides proof, and (4) addresses the organization’s mission.

Table 5

*Frequency of the Value Comments*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value of Documentation</th>
<th>Number &amp; Percentage of Occurrences</th>
<th>Number of Interviewees (20/20 total)*</th>
<th>Number of Executive Directors (10/10 total)*</th>
<th>Number of Volunteers (10/10 total)*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Documentation is a tool that helps stakeholders perform tasks</td>
<td>84 (37.8%)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentation ensures that stakeholders have the same understanding of information</td>
<td>78 (35.1%)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentation as proof</td>
<td>47 (21.1%)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentation in relation to organizational mission</td>
<td>13 (5.8%)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Number of Interviewees who made comments in this area.
Interview Questions

Interviewees described the value of documentation in response to semi-structured follow-up questions: “What value does documentation provide?” and “Do you think that documentation would have been useful? Why?” Unlike other topics, the value of documentation was mentioned almost equally by volunteers and executive directors. This finding suggests that although volunteers may not be as familiar with particular types of documentation, they believe that documentation can provide value. One of the more interesting findings is that the volunteers and executive directors shared similar ideas of documentation’s value, as evidenced by the relatively equal distribution of volunteers and executive directors in three of the four rows of Table 5.

Documentation as a Tool

Seventeen of the twenty interviewees made 84 total comments describing the value of documentation as a tool to support the organization in a variety of ways:

- To raise money: “If they [the board members] had a tool sitting in front of them, they could at least just polish up and be ready to make that phone presentation or have a couple of facts in front of them that might impress somebody… It would be an unbelievably useful thing.”

- To preserve continuity: “We had to write down the ways that we solicited feedback from the congregation… so that when we were not the officers anymore, the next officers would know what we were doing and could continue it.”
• To answer inquiries: “When there’s a question, I know that I can go to that book [volunteer handbook]… to find the answer to the situation and also… how to handle certain phone calls, responses that are appropriate.”

• To remind: “A lot of people think, ‘Now, I’m supposed to do something when I got through with this, but I don’t remember what that was.’ They have their packet. They can pull it out and look.”

Organizations need documentation that helps stakeholders support the organization. This documentation included board, staff, and volunteer guidelines—documentation that specifies what stakeholders are expected to do and how. These guidelines can vary from volunteer handbooks that apply to every unpaid stakeholder to job-specific desk procedures that detail a single staff member’s responsibilities. To meet these needs, technical communicators can look for stakeholder tasks that are unsupported by documentation. Further, technical communicators can correlate certain problems to a lack of documentation. For example, if a task is consistently performed incorrectly, technical communicators can develop documentation to remind stakeholders of the correct procedure. If an organization is restructuring, technical communicators can document staff and volunteer responsibilities to ensure continuity after tasks are reassigned.

Documentation Enables a Common Understanding

Seventeen of the twenty interviewees said that documentation is valuable when it promotes a common understanding of important organizational information. Interviewees made 78 total comments regarding how documentation can support
commonality among stakeholders. One of the most interesting things about these comments is how often they involve documenting expectations:

- “If it's in writing, and it's done in a calm moment, then you can refer back to it …You'll have your expectations stated.”
- “Guidebooks are there to help new individuals, such as myself, step into a position and know exactly what is expected of them.”
- “We want the board when they come on… to understand what's expected of them.”
- “I think more and more we’re going to have to have specific documentation for our expectations for our board.”

These comments demonstrate the importance of documenting the organization's expectations of its stakeholders—a practice that benefits both the organization and the stakeholders. Documentation, such as a volunteer handbook or board guidelines, can help stakeholders better prepare to meet organizational needs. For example, one participating organization has volunteer guidelines that describe the appropriate dress and regular hours in which volunteers are needed. Organizations also benefit from documenting their expectations. Thomas Wolf recommends that nonprofit organizations—even those with very few employees—develop job descriptions for three reasons: (1) To protect employees by clarifying their responsibilities and enabling them to prepare for performance reviews; (2) to protect organizations by enabling them to objectively analyze the performance of employees; (3) to appropriately distribute workload (1999, pg 117-118).
Small 501(c)(3) organizations struggle to fulfill numerous duties with few employees. Executive directors may unintentionally burden an employee with an unreasonable number of responsibilities if the responsibilities are not documented. By describing what each employee must do, organizations can identify unreasonable expectations before they cause burnout. Burnout is a common problem among nonprofit organizations (McEachern, 2004), and employees are not the sole stakeholders who struggle with it. Volunteers can easily be overburdened and burnout if their responsibilities are never documented or monitored. For example, one executive director said that her organization plans to develop volunteer guidelines to clarify the opportunities for new volunteers and to eliminate volunteer burnout. Before her recent hire, the organization relied on the same group of volunteers for all tasks. She wants to develop guidelines to redistribute and rotate volunteer responsibilities. “We have volunteers that have been fully committed for ten years now, and they’re burned. They need help.” Technical communicators can help 501(c)(3) organizations see the connection between burnout and a failure to document expectations.

When developing “expectation documentation,” technical communicators will rarely start from scratch. As Wolf notes, many organizations develop job descriptions but fail to update them (1999). Organizations should review and update their job descriptions annually and after they restructure, hire, or terminate employment. Similarly, federal regulations require 501(c)(3) organizations to develop bylaws, which are broad operating guidelines. Some participating organizations relied on their bylaws to describe board members’ roles, but bylaws are usually too general to provide enough guidance. Technical communicators can use these out-of-date or broad descriptions
and work with staff members to develop more detailed materials that can benefit stakeholders and the organization.

Documentation Provides Proof

In 47 total comments, sixteen interviewees said that documentation is valuable when it provides proof of aspects such as organizational spending, program effectiveness, and employment policies. Because organizations are increasingly asked to prove their accountability, this documentation provides much value. For example, records and accounting documentation create the paper trail that proves how organizations spend donations. As one volunteer noted, “There are just stacks of paperwork that are all related to verifying where and how the money was spent. …I think it’s necessary… because the people who are providing the funds need to know that they’re going into the right place.” Program evaluations and field reports can prove that the organization’s work impacts people, often providing poignant stories of individuals helped by the organization. These stories are vital in securing continued support: donors can envision the end result of their gift; volunteers are encouraged to continue donating their time; staff morale is boosted by the reminder of their purpose. One executive director summarized, “It makes sure that you’re saying you’re internally and externally accountable to your employees, to your donors, to your Board of Directors… It allows you to actually show people results of your programs.”

Documentation also provides legal accountability. For example, several organizations require employees and other stakeholders to sign documents agreeing that they have been advised of policies. “If we have an issue with one of our employees,
then we have something in writing that we can stand with,” said one executive director. Other comments suggest dire consequences for organizations that fail to maintain documents. Several interviewees mentioned the risk of legal liability: “The liability in America has made it [the need for documentation] just unbelievable. …You need it to be recorded in writing in signatures and even then… we have litigation that happens,” said one executive director. Another executive director voiced a common frustration: “I think that it’s getting to the point where more and more either lawsuits or regulations… are getting more and more cumbersome, more and more demanding, more and more time-consuming to keep up with what they are. And if you don’t, then you’re liable, and your board is liable.”

The consequences of improper documentation are dangerous for nonprofit organizations. For example, organizations must maintain detailed fundraising records for at least three years. This information is a matter of public record and is open for inspection by the agencies of every state in which the organization raised funds. If the records are incomplete or faulty, the state agency can revoke the organization’s registration to raise funds—crippling both its income and reputation (Hopkins, 2001, pg. 36). Similarly, many 501(c)(3) organizations are required to file annual information returns with the Internal Revenue Service. Organizations that are late in filing their documentation are charged a daily fine from the due date until the IRS receives the paperwork. If an organization fails to file or submits fraudulent documentation, its leaders can be imprisoned and personally fined.

Nonprofit organizations can also suffer negative consequences for failing to maintain nongovernmental documentation. For example, many foundations require
periodic reports according to a specific format. Organizations that fail to submit proper
documentation are unlikely to win a second grant. Even private donors weigh the
professionalism of communications when selecting organizations to support. As Adrian
Sargeant and Elaine Jay found in their 2004 study, professionalism is an important
component of selection for all donors. However, donors who make bequests have
higher expectations of nonprofit organizations in every factor studied, and the
professionalism of communications is the most significantly higher expectation among

Technical communicators can help nonprofit organizations meet demands for
accountability and professional communications. First, by helping organizations develop
a style guide, technical communicators can ensure that organizations maintain
consistency in external documentation. Style guides can include information such as
organizational colors, typefaces, standard language for issues specific to the
organization, explanations of common acronyms, locations of electronic files such as
the logo, and other information that can support stakeholders in producing consistent
documentation. In addition, technical communicators who work with organizations on a
project-specific basis (such as a service learning opportunity) may provide more value
by simplifying the development of reports or other types of “proof” documentation rather
than by developing a single document. Funding and regulating agencies request
documentation regularly, and they often require very specific document formatting and
content. Therefore, technical communicators may develop checklists, formatting
guidelines, and templates to speed the development of “proof” documentation.
Documentation and Organizational Mission

The last group of comments regarding the value of documentation involved the relationship between documentation and an organization’s mission. Only six interviewees commented on this topic a total of thirteen times. However, the comments are interesting because they contained diametrically opposed viewpoints. Some interviewees believed that documentation can support an organization in fulfilling its mission, and some believed that documentation impedes mission fulfillment. For example, one executive director claimed that detailed documentation helps organizations by keeping stakeholders on task and ensuring that organizations remain true to their mission. The opposite view is represented by another executive director: “I think documentation should be kept at a very minimum. Whenever you’re taking dollars for non-profit agencies, and you’re spending a large percentage of those dollars for support staff to maintain documents, you are not spending the money that you’re raising to accomplish your mission.”

The way stakeholders perceive the relationship between documentation and mission is often related to the organization’s culture. For example, the executive director who sees a positive relationship between documentation and mission leads an organization that is creating guidelines for each group of stakeholders: board members, staff, and hands-on volunteers. She blames many of the organization’s problems—such as volunteer burnout—on a lack of documentation to guide their efforts. With a focus on increasing professionalism and human resource management, she embraces documentation as a tool to help the organization meet its goals. In contrast, the executive director who views documentation as a threat to mission fulfillment leads a
strongly documentation-resistant organization. This organization keeps only the records required by law and resents requests for additional documentation. According to the executive director, “The biggest problem that we have with documentation is that we get so many requests from the city and from the city personnel for records of things.” This resistance to documentation explains the negative relationship that stakeholders envision between documentation development and mission fulfillment.

Despite opposing views of documentation, both sides agree with an interviewee who said, “a nonprofit’s goal [is] to always fulfill their mission.” This finding is important for technical communicators because mission fulfillment is unique to the nonprofit sector. For-profit entities exist to make money, but nonprofit entities exist to fulfill their missions. Therefore, the motivation for developing documentation should be to support stakeholders in fulfilling that mission—directly or indirectly. Even mundane documentation common among for-profit entities can support a nonprofit’s mission. For example, one volunteer said she answers phone calls and refers to her volunteer handbook to determine how to respond to certain inquiries. Therefore, a simple list of names, phone extensions, and job titles supports the organization’s mission because the list enables this volunteer to connect callers with the stakeholders who can help them.

Technical communicators should be aware that a nonprofit organization’s mission is its reason for existence and that documentation should support that mission. This awareness can enable technical communicators to explain the value of documentation in a way that appeals to stakeholders. Luke describes the importance of framing issues because “…it influences whether or not individuals will feel the problem
is urgent and worthy of attention” (1998, pg. 156). Technical communicators should employ this principle when working with nonprofit organizations. Instead of explaining that an internal phone list can help volunteers to “get the job done correctly,” technical communicators can explain that it will enable volunteers to “quickly connect domestic abuse victims with the services they need and better ensure their safety.” By strategically framing the need for documentation, technical communicators may overcome an organization’s resistance to documentation.

Summary

In summary, the information provided by participants answers my research questions by identifying needs that technical communicators can meet and by describing how organizations currently address those needs. The findings suggest that organizations often ignore the need for documentation until a problem develops and only rarely develop documentation to meet anticipated needs. Thus, technical communicators can work with nonprofits to proactively develop documentation. Other findings suggest that many stakeholders know their organization needs more documentation, but stakeholders do not make the time to develop it. These stakeholders may believe that documentation does not support their mission or that their other duties are more directly mission-related. Therefore, technical communicators can help these organizations by collaborating with busy stakeholders to develop documentation and enable them to continue performing their other duties.

The most important set of findings identifies the value that documentation provides small 501(c)(3) organizations. These findings suggest how technical
communicators can identify common documentation needs of nonprofit organizations. The comments in the Lack set of data establish that different organizations may need different types of documentation. However, it is in the Value set of data that the clearest patterns emerged, suggesting that small nonprofit organizations need documentation that

• Serves as a useful tool for stakeholders
• Promotes a common understanding of important information
• Provides proof of activities, expenses, and outcomes

These three criteria for valuable documentation appeared in the interviews of almost every participant. Therefore, these findings suggest that most organizations may need documentation that will provide the same type of value. This list of values provides an important starting place for technical communicators who are trying to identify the needs they can meet at 501(c)(3) organizations. In addition, these findings can guide technical communicators during documentation development to ensure that the final product will be useful to stakeholders.

Thus, my study findings suggest that

• Current stakeholders are often aware that the organization needs more documentation, but they do not make development a priority because they may not believe that documentation development supports the organization’s mission.
• Nonprofit organizations value documentation that enables stakeholders to better perform tasks to support the organization.
• Nonprofit organizations value documentation that communicates the organization’s expectations of stakeholders.
• Nonprofit organizations value documentation that can be sent to external reviewers to prove the effectiveness or accountability of the organization.

Limitations

This study’s limitations stem from its small sample size of twenty participants from ten organizations. It is an exploratory study designed to identify needs of the participating organizations, draw connections between technical communicators and nonprofit organizations, and suggest topics for further research. Therefore, the results of this study cannot be generalized.

However, the findings do provide new information regarding the technical communication needs of some 501(c)(3) organizations. These findings include clear patterns of responses from executive directors and volunteers at organizations with widely varying missions. By identifying these response patterns—particularly the value that documentation provides—this study provides an important springboard for future research into connections between technical communicators and small 501(c)(3) organizations. The final chapter summarizes these findings within the scope of existing literature and suggests avenues for future research to benefit both 501(c)(3) organizations and technical communicators.
CONCLUSIONS

This study addresses issues previously unexplored in technical communication literature. As Rachel Spilka (2000) and Dave Clark (2005) discuss, much technical communication research intentionally produces practical results, but this research traditionally focuses on for-profit businesses. Early research in the technical communication field largely sought to produce results useful to practitioners in business. Then trends such as activist research and service learning affected technical communication research by shifting the focus to include the nonprofit sector. However, much activist research focuses on public policy and large nonprofit organizations—not small 501(c)(3) organizations (Grabill, 2000, Bowdon, 2004, Rude, 2004). While some service learning literature—such as that of Clark (2005) and McEachern (2001)—includes small nonprofit organizations, the focus is on technical communication students and instructors—not nonprofit organizations.

Therefore, my study explored an area of technical communication that has received little, if any, attention from technical communication researchers. Previous technical communication literature does not identify needs of small nonprofit organizations and relate those problems to the technical communication field. To fill this gap, my study identified documentation needs and practices within 501(c)(3) organizations with an annual budget of $5 million or less. My analysis of interview transcripts from executive directors and volunteers produced clear patterns in their responses:

- Current developers of documentation at small 501(c)(3) organizations
- Reasons why organizations create documentation and why they lack it
• Value that documentation provides these organizations

Identifying this information enabled me to pinpoint the most effective approaches for technical communicators to use in meeting needs at small 501(c)(3) organizations. These approaches included (1) creating tools such as templates and checklists to enable organizational stakeholders to more easily develop documentation, (2) clearly explaining how documentation can support an organization’s mission, and (3) building upon outdated or broad documentation to develop useful, detailed guidelines. These practical implications empower technical communication practitioners, researchers, instructors, and students to meet needs of small nonprofit organizations. Further, technical communicators can meet needs without engaging in lengthy needs assessments—an ineffective approach described by Clark (2005)—or shallowly focusing on end products without examining the broader context as Scott (2004) and Rude (2004) warn against.

Activist researchers claim that technical communicators should use their professional strengths to benefit their communities (Bowdon, 2004, Grabill, 2000, Grabill & Simmons 1998, Clark, 2004, Rude, 2004). However, much activist research—such as that of Grabill (2000), Rude (2004), and Bowdon (2004)—focuses on engaging in public policy development. Like previous activist research, this study empowered technical communicators to benefit their communities, but it differed by focusing a sector somewhat overlooked by activist research: grassroots nonprofit organizations. Consequently, this study provided the basis for future technical communication research in the area of non-profit documentation development.
Avenues for Future Research

One of the primary avenues for future research is an expanded version of this exploratory study. An expanded study could increase several factors for additional information: geographic areas, number of organizations, types of nonprofit organizations, and types of stakeholders such as clientele or staff members other than the executive director. Such a study could validate the results and determine whether these results can be generalized throughout the small nonprofit sector. An expanded study would be particularly useful if it focused on the value that documentation provides small nonprofit organizations. In the exploratory study, the “value” findings produced the strongest pattern and most practical implications. Therefore, an expanded study of documentation’s value could verify these initial results and produce additional findings useful to technical communicators involved with nonprofit organizations.

Another avenue for future research is the cause of internal problems at nonprofit organizations. As reported in this study, organizations’ problems are often caused by poor communication. For example, one executive director reported receiving insufficient fundraising support from her board members. Because the organization lacked a board member selection process and board member guidelines, the insufficient fundraising may stem from missing documentation. A study that identifies and analyzes problems at nonprofit organizations may provide significant value for technical communicators if—as this study suggests—it traces these problems to communication and documentation. The future study could also benefit nonprofit organizations by identifying the root causes and suggesting how to solve and prevent problems through documentation.
Analyzing the original sources of documentation could provide another
interesting future study. Several executive directors in this exploratory study said that
they begin their development efforts with another organization’s documents: “I looked
around and got it [board of directors selection process] from other nonprofit.” Other
participants reported using online documentation: “There’s a nonprofit management
website that has a whole library of management topics and forms… so you're not
starting with a blank screen. You can go in and see what somebody else has designed,
and you can then edit and alter it.” It would be interesting to identify the most effective
and useful sources of “starting documentation” and to analyze these documents for
design, readability, and other factors. This future study could enable technical
communicators to identify sources of high quality documentation. In addition, the study
could identify common flaws—such as poor design or language ambiguity—in nonprofit
documentation.

Another interesting avenue for research is documentation management at small
nonprofit organizations. One of the volunteers had a frustrating experience in locating
the organization’s records from many years ago: “As it’s [the organization] changed over
the years, the documentation has not kept up…. Sometimes your documentation is only
as good as the person keeping the records.” Documentation can only provide value if
stakeholders can locate it. Therefore, a related area for future research is knowledge
management at small nonprofit organizations. The analysis of practices in
recordkeeping, server organization, documentation security and distribution, filing,
document flow, and other knowledge management areas could uncover a broad
expanse of needs that technical communicators could meet.
A final area for future research is the relationship between internal and external documentation, i.e., documents with an internal audience such as staff members and documents with an external audience such as foundations. One of the executive directors lamented her failure to keep her donor database up to date. Because she lacked this vital internal documentation, it impeded her efforts to produce external documentation such as appeal mail: “If you have your internal documentation, you are ready with your external documentation.” A study could provide much value by analyzing internal documentation such as donor databases or job descriptions and external documentation such as appeal mail, newsletters, and annual reports. This study could identify which internal documentation, such as client records or donor databases, offer the greatest benefits in producing effective external documentation, such as program reports or appeal mail. Findings could help nonprofit organizations with few human resources prioritize their documentation development.

Conclusion

Nonprofit organizations meet manifold needs in our communities: sheltering the victims of domestic abuse, educating children with learning differences, providing forums to experience art and music. Yet these organizations face challenges that can threaten their effectiveness and even their existence. Nonprofit organizations must meet increasing demands for professionalism in their communications, recordkeeping, processes, and programs. However, grassroots nonprofits such as the organizations in this study often lack the human and financial resources to meet these demands. The organizations face difficult a decision: whether to reduce the focus on their mission and
increase professionalism or risk the consequences of insufficient documentation. These consequences can range from losing financial support to functioning inefficiently to risking legal liability.

Influenced by trends such as activist research and service learning, technical communicators are seeking avenues to benefit their communities. Technical communicators excel in increasing the professionalism of organizations, largely by developing documentation. This exploratory study discovered the natural fit between the needs of small nonprofit organizations and the strengths of technical communicators. Future research is vital to enable technical communicators to support the grassroots nonprofit organizations that in turn support our communities.
Hi, my name is Rebecca Walton. (Person’s name) referred me to you and suggested that you may be willing to let me interview you as part of my Master’s thesis research. Do you have a few minutes for me to tell you a little about it? Oh, okay, no problem. When should I call you back? Okay, good. I'll give you a call (repeat day and time). Thank you.

Hi, this is Rebecca Walton. How are you? Good. Well, I wanted to tell you a little about my Master’s thesis project and ask if you would participate in my study. First, let me just tell you that your time commitment would be 20-40 minutes, total. I’d be happy to come to (name of organization) for the interview; I’d bring a consent form and a background survey for you to fill out. That should take maybe 5-10 minutes, and then I’d like to interview you for 15-30 minutes. So that would be your involvement if you decide to participate.

I’m working on a Master’s in technical writing at UNT, and I’m interested in technical communication within the context of small 501(c)(3)s. Basically, what I’m trying to find out in my research is what are the needs of these nonprofit organizations that technical communicators can meet.

I’ve been doing a lot of research about trends that are affecting 501(c)(3)s, and that’s what got me interested in this topic. Meeting some of the new demands on nonprofit organizations is a great fit for technical communicators. In my thesis project, I’d like to bring that research down to a more specific level by interviewing executive directors and volunteers at a variety of small 501(c)(3) organizations and pinpointing their needs.
One thing you should know is that to pinpoint needs, I’m going to be asking you about what doesn’t run smoothly at your organization sometimes. You may be asked to share information that you probably would not want to become public knowledge, so I’ll be taking several steps to protect your confidentiality: for one thing, I won’t ever refer to organizations or individuals by name—not in early drafts, any journal articles that may come out of this, or my thesis itself. I’ll be using vague descriptors like “one volunteer at an animal shelter in Arlington.” That kind of thing. The consent form I would bring you spells out the purpose of the study, your rights as a participant, and the ways I’ll protect your confidentiality.

I’m really excited about this project because I think that technical communicators have a lot to contribute to 501(c)(3) organizations, and I’m not convinced that either side knows it. I’m hoping to write some journal articles based on my research and get the word out about what organizations like (name of organization) really need, what they typically lack, or the demands being placed on them. Then I could tie those needs to technical communicators. I’m hoping to generate interest in the tech comm. community about using their skills to benefit organizations like yours. I think it would be really great.

So what do you think about this? Do you have any questions? Would you be willing to let me come interview you?
Background Questionnaire

You can refuse to answer any or all of the questions below.

1. What is the name and type (e.g., animal clinic, church, homeless shelter, etc.) of the nonprofit organization with which you are involved?

   Name: ___________________________  Type: ___________________________

2. What is your role with the organization?  □ Executive Director  □ Paid  □ Volunteer  □ Volunteer (in any position other than Executive Director)

3. When was the local chapter of the organization founded? ___________________________

4. How many people serve with the organization?
   - Full time paid staff  □ 0  □ 1-5  □ 6-10  □ 11-25  □ 26+
   - Part time paid staff  □ 0  □ 1-5  □ 6-10  □ 11-25  □ 26+
   - Regular volunteers (once a week or more)  □ 0  □ 1-10  □ 11-50  □ 51-100  □ 101+
   - Occasional volunteers (less than once a week)  □ 0  □ 1-10  □ 11-50  □ 51-100  □ 101+

5. Approximately how many paid staff members leave the organization each year for personal or professional reasons? ___________________________

6. How many executive directors has the organization had in the last 10 years? ___________________________

7. How many current donors (within the last 18 months) does the organization have? ___________________________

8. How many people are served/reached by the organization? ___________________________

9. Does the organization have the following written guidelines, procedures, or policies?

   | Employee Handbook | Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes | No |
   | Volunteer Guidelines | Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes | No |
   | Board of Directors Selection Process | Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes | No |
   | Board of Directors Orientation | Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes | No |
   | Fund Development Policies | Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes | No |
   | Public Relations Guidelines | Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes | No |
   | Organization Style Guide | Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes | No |

10. Does the organization collaborate with other nonprofit organizations in any of the following ways?  Is there written documentation for this collaboration?

    | Joint fundraising | Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes | No |
    | Collaborative programs/services | Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes | No |
    | Referrals | Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes | No |
    | Sharing resources (building, staff, etc.) | Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes | No |
    | Sharing knowledge (procedures, lessons learned, etc.) | Yes | No | Yes | No | Yes | No |
APPENDIX C

CONSENT FORM
Research Consent Form

Before agreeing to participate in this research study, it is important that you read and understand the following explanation of the purpose and benefits of the study and how it will be conducted.

Purpose of the Study

This study is based on a hypothesis that small 501(c)(3) organizations have needs that can be met by the professional skills of technical communicators. Experts in the charitable nonprofit sector claim that global trends are affecting 501(c)(3) organizations. Reflecting these trends, the information from study participants may form a pattern of organizational needs—needs that technical communicators can meet.

The study’s research objectives primarily center on:
- Identifying needs relevant to technical communication of 501(c)(3) organizations with an annual budget of $5 million or less
- Identifying patterns of needs across organizations
- Identifying trends that are affecting these organizations
- Predicting how these trends may affect the organizations in the future if the needs are not met

Benefits of the Study

By achieving the research objectives above, this study will enable small 501(c)(3) organizations to identify or even predict common needs that can be met by technical communicators. This will allow these organizations to seek expertise from people who can help them. Further, this study will clarify to technical communicators how they can best contribute to small 501(c)(3) organizations as employees, consultants, or volunteers.

Procedures

You will fill out a background survey and then participate in a 15-30 minute interview, either in person or by phone, depending on your location. I will record and transcribe our interview, coding your responses to establish patterns when compared with the responses of other participants. I will store the recordings and transcriptions in a locked file cabinet, to which only I will have a key. Before throwing away the transcriptions, I will shred them, and before throwing away the recordings, I will destroy the tapes.

Foreseeable Risks

You will not be taking any foreseeable risks by participating in this study.
Confidentiality of Records

Only I will know your name and the name of your organization. I will not share this information verbally or in writing. Even when sharing draft copies of data or responses for review by my thesis committee or others, I will protect your identity and that of your organization by coding people by role (e.g., volunteer A) and using vague descriptors for organizations (e.g., a battered women’s shelter in Dallas, Texas).

Review for the Protection of Participants

This research study has been reviewed and approved by the UNT Institutional Review Board (IRB). You can contact the UNT IRB at 940.565.3940 or sbourns@unt.edu with any questions regarding your rights as a study participant.

Your Rights

Sign below to indicate that you

- Have read or have had read to you all of the above
- Understand what the study is about, how the study is conducted, and why it is being performed
- Have received answers to all of your questions
- Have been told the risks, as well as the possible benefits of the study
- Understand that you do not have to participate in this study and that your refusal to participate or decision to withdraw will involve no penalty or loss of rights or benefits
- Understand that you may be removed from the study at any time
- Understand that you can contact Rebecca Walton at [redacted] or Dr. Lynne Cooke of the UNT Technical Writing Program at 940.565.2050 with any questions about the study
- Understand your rights as a study participant and voluntarily consent to participate
- Have been told that you will receive a signed copy of this consent form

_________________________  __________________________
Your Signature                  Date

I certify that I have reviewed the contents of this form with the subject signing above. I have explained the known benefits and risks of the research. It is my opinion that the subject understood the explanation.

_________________________  __________________________
Signature of Principal Investigator  Date

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REFERENCES


