

Making a Six Making a Six-Figure Income as a Figure Income as a Technical Communicator

Presented by Jack Molisani

Reviewed by Robert Delwood, Senior Programmer Writer



Jack Molisani and Robert Delwood before the event.

Jack Molisani is a popular speaker for STC groups nationwide. A dynamic presenter, he discusses issues about starting or running a technical communications business, ranging from outsourcing technical writers, to in house writing projects, and project management styles. "Making a Six Making a Six-Figure Income as a Figure Income as a Technical Communicator" is actually a several part series with the emphasis changing each time depending on the audience. He is quick to point out that his presentations are not only his personal views and experiences but also the opportunities he discusses may not be right for everyone. The point is still the valid, though: It's the creative problem solving approach that is important. With the goal of a six-figure income in mind, he details his approach to solving that issue. The key is to set a vision and to have a plan. There is no magical formula, and nothing replaces hard work, a strong ego, and a little luck.

The problem as Mr. Molisani saw it was that traditional forms of employment are risky, limited, and low paying. Risky in that companies often see technical communicators as a commodity and are prone to layoffs. Less expensive writers can always be hired, the programming staff can do the writing, or simply do without the materials. Writers will cringe at that statement but can't deny it. The careers are limited. A typical path for a programmer, for example, could be from programmer to senior programmer, manager, VP of engineering, VP of operations, president, and finally CEO or board chairperson, or about seven steps. In contrast, communicators typically see four steps, such as starting out in some other profession, becoming a technical writer, then to senior technical writer, and perhaps documentation manager. Again, always with layoffs possible. Salary is likewise limited. Citing the STC salary survey, the first listing of a \$100,000 salary is either as a PhD, with 15 years experience, and/or as a document manager.

It was obvious to Mr. Molisani that the traditional writing path was not efficient, at least for salary. He decided to try something different. His first of three epiphanies was to become an independent contractor. This allowed him to charge more and get additional work, both of which increased his income. He understood his capabilities and matched this career path accordingly. One of his strengths was a program manager. He was able to write an outstanding documentation plan, a sort of a contract between him and the client. This kept the projects well defined, prevented mission creep, and made the project clear to everyone involved. He was also a fast producer and was able to finish projects ahead of schedule.

During contracting, he noticed that he was either getting too much work or that people were asking him for writing contacts. This lead to his second epiphany: Become a business owner. Rather than subcontract or give away writing jobs, be hired

writers. For first time in his career, he was earning money beyond what his personal time allowed. No longer restricted by a 40 (really, 80 hour) work week, he got a share of his employees' income. This new money stream represented an alternate source of income. That is, even if he stopped writing, some money could still come in. This led to his third epiphany: Get alternate income sources. As a result, his business changed from a writing company to a technical communications staffing company. Ultimately, he did stop writing altogether to focus on other income sources, and included founding LavaCon, an industry trade show.

The tactics of getting to where he wanted are also straightforward.

- Start contract work on the side. The adage "don't quit your day job" applies, and build clients and a reputation.
- Go to where the hiring managers are. The STC is a great organization but writers don't often hire writers. If you're a medical writer, go to medical organizations and meetings to pass out business cards.
- Build volume until you are "losing money" by working as an employee. A good measure of when to leave a job is if the projects you're turning down are worth more than your salary. In a real sense, you'd be losing money by going to your job.
- Build volume and sub-contract the overflow work as needed. As your business grows, sub-contract projects that you can't directly handle.
- Build volume until you can hire employees (if desired). Like leaving your initial job, there may come a time when sub-contracting starts to cost you significant income. At that point, consider the formality of starting your own company.
- Build alternate streams of income in parallel. Understand the many facets of technical communications. Writing is only a small part. Include as a service other features such as training, usability, interface design, program management, conformity to industry laws (in regulated industries). This also applies to employees in their own jobs to be seen as having a value added aspect of what they do.
- Read! Always be reading for the new ideas and insights. His short list includes:
 - *Think Positive, Send Out Ships, and The Wealthy Spirit* by Chellie Campbell.
 - *Get Out of the Rat Race and Rich Dad, Poor Dad* by Robert Kiyosaki.
 - *The Millionaire Next Door* by Stanly and Danko.

Certainly, there are risks with alternate approaches and those issues have to be addressed by each of us privately. In addition, there are legal, tax, and management issues and skills that were not mentioned. Not all ideas are right for all people but the alternate career paths are largely dependent of your personal perspective and creativity.