



connexions interview with  
**KATHERINE (KIT) BROWN-HOEKSTRA**

Transcript of the interview with Katherine (Kit) Brown-Hoekstra, principal at Comgenesis, LLC, in the United States of America. Kit is an award-winning writer and consultant with a background in science and over 20 years of experience in technical communication. She is currently serving as president of the Society for Technical Communication (STC).

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The video recording of this interview is available on the *connexions* Vimeo channel at <https://vimeo.com/115350011>

**Can you describe your present career in light of international professional communication?**

Well, everything I do, currently, is related to international communication. Right now, I'm working with two clients, helping them build better global processes and content so that they can sell their products and services overseas more effectively, and more easily and efficiently; and working with them on their localization process. So, everything I do is related to that international communication and getting content ready for the global market.



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**What previous experience in international professional communication, if any, has prepared you for your present career?**

Virtually every job I've had in my career has had some component of international communication. One of my first jobs was working for a cardiac pacemaker company. And part of my job was to be the liaison between the technical communication department and the localization vendor. And so, that experience—which was the first time I'd ever really been exposed to localization—and so, that experience got me really interested in the problems and challenges and opportunities that are available with international communication. And it made me realize that everything I do needs to be done and designed with the world in mind. Because even if I'm not, currently, localizing the product, I might someday. And anything that I do to support my source audience and make that content more clear in the source content is also gonna help localization, as well.

**What would you say are particular accomplishments of international professional communication practice, research, and/or pedagogy in your region of the world or elsewhere?**

Well, I think what's really interesting is that I've been working in international communication for more than 20 years. And for a long, long time, it felt like I was starting from ground zero, every time I talked to somebody about it. But really interestingly, in the last three, probably, years, I've noticed just a big shift in the awareness of the need for global communication amongst American companies, amongst STC members, and just an increasing awareness and an increasing knowledge of what it's gonna, what it takes to create good international communication. And then, at the CPSTC... CPTSC conference in Colorado Springs—the acronyms!—it was very interesting to sit in on the global communication STEM for the day that Pam Brewer had created for talking about that, and hearing what some of the programs are doing to teach international communication, because I think that's a core skill for students coming out of a tech comm program today—because, if you have a website, you can potentially be a global company, whether you're translating your content, or not.

The other thing that's important to know is that 11% of the U.S. population, 40% of the Canadian population, are non-native English speakers. And so, even if you're not translating your content, creating that content in simplified, you know, controlled language, using controlled language following some of the principles that you would use for translation in your source content will help those nonnative English speakers, even if they're not reading translated content. So those are some things I think that are really coming to the fore in the past few years, in terms of making progress. Also, I think the technology has improved to the extent that it allows us to more effectively and more efficiently, you know, push content through the localization process.

**What would you say are some challenges of international professional communication practice, research, and/or pedagogy in your region of the world or elsewhere?**

Even though awareness has gotten better, I think that there's still a huge gap between those of us who work daily with localization and work daily with international communication, and those people who don't really necessarily understand that that's what they need to be doing. And so, I think that that's one of the challenges: continuing to build that awareness, continuing to improve the technology, continuing to work with localization vendors and help them move upstream in their client processes, and things like that. One of the things, you know, that's becoming really popular for many companies is doing Agile development. And so, now, what that means is that, then, the localization vendors need, are challenged to "How do I provide services in an Agile environment?" And so, there... in the last... I was just at Localization World, in Vancouver, and several of the sessions were discussions about how do you provide, continue to provide good quality service in that environment, and also pull ourselves upstream into the content development process.

When we first started doing localization 20... well, I mean, there's always been localization, but when industry started requiring localization—you know, the medical industry in 1990, when the EU put the directive that you will translate everything; that's really when things kinda took off—was when there started to be regulatory requirements for it. People were just happy to have content in their own language, and it was often, like, months later that they got it. Today, a customer expects it, not

only in their local language, but the same day that it's available everywhere else in the world. And with the same quality of content. And so... and customers are becoming more sophisticated. So, if they have a choice between a product that is created that sounds like it was made in their country and one that looks, that's obviously localized, they're gonna pick the one that feels like it was made in their country and feels more comfortable to their culture. And so, then you get, you start getting into "What degree of localization do I have to provide in order to support this customer at the level that they need to be supported? What's the ROI? Where's the cost-benefit line?" You know.

So, those are some of the challenges we're constantly defining, we're constantly expanding into new languages—it used to be that it was French, Italian, German, Spanish, maybe Greek, and Japanese and Chinese. And, now, most companies are doing 15, 20, 30, 40 languages. So you've got the scalability issue, as well. So, what works when you're only translating one or two languages, might not work if you're translating 30 or 40 languages, in terms of process.

So, those are some of the challenges that people have. And also, there's always that cost pressure, in localization. You know, everybody wants to do it as cheaply as possible—which may or may not be what really supports the customer the most. And so, again, you have to look at the size of your market, whether it's worth the cost to translate into that local environment. And yet, if you're in a regulated industry, like medical or financial, you probably have to, if you want to sell in that market. So, those are some of the challenges.

**You say that something that works when you are translating into one language does not necessarily work when you are translating, or localizing, into 12 languages or more. Can you provide an example?**

Well, first of all, if you have a 100 files—source language files—that you're translating into French, okay? I don't, necessarily, have to have a content management system or an automated process to manage those 100 files for one language. But, if I'm doing that with 30 or 40 languages, I'd better have some kind of automation built in there, because that 100 source files equals 100 files in every language that you're translating into.

The other thing is that, if you're only translating into one language, or, you're just doing English, you can get away with manually doing style overrides, and things like that—you shouldn't, but you can get away with it easier. But if you've, all of a sudden, got 20 or 30 languages, and you're doing style overwrites in every language, you've just added probably tens of thousands of dollars to your localization cost, just by doing that. If you're not optimizing your graphics for international audience, it's... you can get away with, if you're doing one language, recreating that graphic for that language. But if you're doing 30 or 40 languages, you can't afford to recreate that graphic for every single language.

So, those are the kinds of issues. And, then, you've got the feedback loop between you and the localization vendor, as well. You know, are you getting your, you know, if they're only translating into one language, maybe they can tweak the, they can fix any problems that they find. But again, 30 or 40 languages, you've just, you've exponentially increased your cost. So, pulling that stuff upstream, improving the quality in the source, and automating, finding ways to automate some of these, the more tedious parts of the process are what you have to do when you start expanding into other languages.

**How do you see technology or changes in technology impacting, maintaining, or altering international professional communication practice, research, and/or pedagogy in your region of the world or elsewhere?**

Well, I think the last 25 and 30 years have just seen a huge change in the way we do our business and run our lives, just in general. And if you think about it, even the last 5 years, we've seen huge changes because of the advent of mobile and the maturity, the increasing maturity of mobile technology. So, now, where I used to have, have to work in an office and have, you know, and transfer files manually, and do things, you know, all that... that's all automated. So, from that regard, we have... there are, now, apps that allow you to do machine... well, there's machine translation available right off Google, right? Google Translate is a machine translation thing. So, it's not necessarily a good one from a professional translation perspective but, if it's an email from my in-laws, you know, I can put it through Google Translate and get the gist, and understand, you know, what I need to do.

So, technology is changing the way we view localization, and makes it easier and more accessible. For the professional translator, there are now mobile apps that, if they get an assignment, they can be anywhere. They can be sitting on the beach, and, if they have a smart phone and the right app, they can, they can do the translation right there, you know. They don't have... we're not tied to an office, any more. We're not tied to a particular location. You know, it used to take days or weeks to get information from one part of the world to the other. Now, we can communicate with the space station in milliseconds, you know, and virtually anywhere on the planet in milliseconds. And so, all of those changes mean that the speed with which we have to provide localization, localized products, if we want simultaneous release, also increases. And so, we have to find ways to automate, and make more efficient all of those processes. So, I think... you know, and then we're talking... that's not even talking about social media and social... so you're talking, you know, how do you translate Twitter? You know, is it...? There's a lot of discussion about that. Is crowd sourcing the way to go with that? Is it...? Is machine translation the way to go? You know, is...? And, maybe, it's a combination of all of these things. Or should it be professionally translated? Because, then, you have... risk of miscommunication because of poor translation. So you have to think about the ethics, the technology, the ability of the technology, the capabilities of the technology, the speed of change, the expectations of the customers, and manage all of those things.

**You speak a lot about translation and about localization, but it seems that translation plays a huge part in localization.**

Translation is part of localization, but not the whole story. So, translation is probably what most people think about when they talk about localization. Because translation is the transference of concepts from one language to another, so that people can be understood. Localization adds to that cultural expectations, color choice, layout design, regulatory, those... those kinds of issues that are culturally specific. So, in addition to transferring the content, the meaning of the content from one language to another, you are also identifying how to present it. Some cultures are more formal than others. For example, I would not say something the same way in Japanese that I would say it in Spanish. I would not speak to a coworker the same way in Spanish that I would speak

to my boss. For example, I would use a more formally, the more formal *you*. English doesn't necessarily make those distinctions. And so, part of localization is understanding what level of formality is required for that particular application. Sometimes, there are choices of words that mean the same, maybe mean the same thing, but have more or less technical or specific context... so, where choice terminology management becomes part of that localization and translation. Regulatory, graphical... graphic design, and what are the cultural expectations so the ethnography of the locale that you're going into, that all comes into play with the localization. It gets, it comes through with the translation, but translation is only part of that.

**What kinds of international and intercultural experiences and skill sets has higher education taught students to help them transition to industry? In what ways could higher education do a better job preparing the next generation of graduates for international professional communication?**

That's a challenging question because it's... You know, I think that the principles of creating content for international audiences need to be built in to every technical communication class that's taught. There, also, then need to be classes that offer a deeper dive into the theory and practice of international communication, multicultural communication. I think that we need to start teaching foreign languages at an earlier age in the U.S. school systems. And I think it needs to be compulsory. You know, that some foreign language education needs to be compulsory at a younger age because, not being able to speak, fluently speak a second or third language puts you at a huge disadvantage in today's society. Yes, English is the language of doing business, worldwide, but flavors of English are very different in different regions. And wouldn't it, isn't it kind of weird to be sitting in a room with a bunch of Chinese or Japanese business people and not be able to understand anything that they're saying, during really intense negotiations. I think you need to, at least, have a base level of knowledge of a few other languages, and I would, probably, if I was picking a language today, I would pick Mandarin, you know, or Spanish, depending on what part of the US you live in. But, you know, if you wanna be in international business, definitely Mandarin, or Japanese, or something like that. So, I think you need to have some knowledge of another language because, unless

you know how to speak another language, or at least understand the learning process for acquiring another language, it's very difficult to understand how those other, how those people that you're communicating with think, because how you think is dictated by your language and the way that you... is, to a certain extent, dictated by your language and the way that you express yourself.

It also helps you understand the cultural things. It may not be as obvious. You know, there are some things that are obvious, when you first look at somebody, or when you first meet somebody, you know, that cultural differences or cultural similarities. Other things are a little less obvious until you communicate, you've been communicating with them longer, and understanding another language helps you understand their world-view, helps you understand what's important to that culture, because, if they don't have a word for it, maybe it's not that... maybe that isn't something that's important, or known, in a particular culture.

And, just having that base level of knowledge gives you a more open mind, I think, and helps you understand what your cultural biases are because, anytime you're working multiculturally, one of the most important phases is understanding what your personal biases and cultural assumptions are, so that you know if something is making you uncomfortable so that you can identify "Is this a cultural assumption? Is it something that's really happening?" you know. And maybe take a broader view of this situation, rather than taking something personal that might not have been intended that way. It might just be the way that culture communicates. So, I think all of those things are really important. And I think every child in... on the planet should be exposed to those concepts at a very early age.

**What has industry done well to help higher education teach international and intercultural experiences and skill sets, or to help their own employees develop such experiences and skill sets? What else might industry do to help prepare the next generation of graduates for international professional communication?**

There are partner industry–university partnerships where they do coop... I forget what it's called, cooperative education, or something like that, where they spend a semester taking classes and, then, a semester working. I think those are really valuable experiences.

iFixit, at the CPTSC conference, was telling us about a program that they have where they partner with programs... with technical communication programs to create actual content for their website, and work with them to help them promote. .. I'm not sure that it's, necessarily, international communication per se, but when I was talking to them, there's definitely a component that could be added that would, you know, in terms of translating the content, and preparing the source content for translation and localization—that they're talking about how they could build that in.

So, I think there are a lot of little... things that are happening, kind of in a one-off situation where the company is partnering with one university and donating the equipment, or donating software, or donating time, you know, or having coops and internships. But I don't think there is really a... umbrella of... you know, a consortium of companies that are saying "Okay, this is what we're going to do to support international communication." I think it's more of a one-on-one relationship kind of thing. And I... would it be nice if that was more of a kind of organized thing? Sure, but I don't know that that's realistic, you know. I think it's gonna continue just being personal relationships with academics and industry professionals.

### **Are there any final comments you would like to make?**

This is one of my favorite topics, so I could talk about it for days. But I would say, if I was a student, today, interested in international communication, I would be attempting to get those multicultural experiences. I would... if I'm looking to hire somebody I want, somebody that has that multicultural experience, that understanding of how to write for an international audience, how to simplify my content, you know... I didn't talk at all about the QA, the editing QA and change management processes. Those are absolutely critical to successful localization because localization is very much garbage in garbage out, so having solid editing and QA and change management processes, and understanding what that means, I think, make you more hireable, and also... and not just for localization, but also for content management system... you know, working in a content management system, those are important; for working for accessibility, those are important.

I've been thinking a lot about this, lately, that there's a lot of overlap between accessibility—which is usually meant to refer to people with disabilities or different

abilities, and how they access and utilize, and use the content—there’s a lot of overlap between what works for that audience and what works for localization. So, we need to start thinking about how can we build it into our processes. It shouldn’t be a separate thing. International communication should just be communication. That it should be built in as a standard... and as a best practice. ■

## About the Interviewee

Katherine (Kit) Brown-Hoekstra is an STC Fellow and STC 2014-15 Society president, an experienced professional, and a small business owner with over 23 years of experience in technical communication, much of it working with localization teams (sometimes on the client side and sometimes on the vendor side). As principal of Comgenesis, LLC, Kit provides consulting and training to her clients on a variety of topics, including localization, content strategy, and content management. She has a BS in biology and an MS in technical communication, both from Colorado State University.

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