



connexions interview with  
**RONIT MAYER**

Transcript of the interview with Ronit Mayer, Director of Knowledge Management at SAP, in Israel.

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The video recording of this interview is available on the *connexions* Vimeo channel at <https://vimeo.com/channels/852448>

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

Sure, absolutely. I'm a director of knowledge management in a global company called SAP. My job today is to ensure that the product goes out with professional communication, and that includes all kinds of deliverables. In the past, we used to speak about a whole shipload of books, pdfs, and printed materials. Nowadays, professional communication is so much more than that. It's books, it's videos, it's social media, it's all of the above and more, and the field is developing all the time. So not only is my job



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to deliver, it is also to stay in touch with what's going on and to be able to predict the next thing so that my company stays ahead.

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

In my previous career, I was also in a global international company, so that was a very good preparation for where I am now. And I had similar responsibilities and of course similar global connections. I would say that the biggest professional... the biggest preparation for my professional career has actually come from the nonprofessional arena. Being a person that has lived in different countries in the world and who has traveled a bit and who's really living in a society with many, many, many different peoples from different areas, it is so impossible to be insular and to only have one type of facet or identity. You rub off and you learn from others and you integrate with others. And by virtue of this interconnection, you grow and that certainly helps your professional communication skills.

**What are some countries and/or cultures that you have lived in?**

Well, I grew up in Africa... in South Africa... my father was from South Africa and my mother was from Zimbabwe. And I moved after a period of time and I lived in North America—in Canada—for short periods of time. And I'm currently living in Israel. So I've literally been on three continents and have embraced and enjoyed the cultures of all the different continents and in addition, along the way, I have met many interesting people.

**What are some particular knowledge and skills that you gained from living in these different countries/cultures that you were then able to use in your work?**

First of all, professional work is divided into two. There is the kind of work that we do with others, the projects that we work on in our technical communication areas, infrastructure, architecture, delivery. We would like to rely on the best possible structures and the best possible practices in order to optimize our working environment. And this

means, first of all, getting this information from different people who have had this experience in different parts of the world. You cannot gauge best practices if you cannot speak to people and you cannot learn through their experience and see through their eyes what they are going through. So the first aspect of really enjoying different cultures is learning how to speak to people and learning how to take from them what they have to offer in the manner that they would like to give it to you. So that is about really being a person who is able to align with global strategy.

Then the other aspect is, of course, the delivery itself. As writers today, we absolutely need to be aware of what the consumers want and we absolutely need to know how to give it. And the consumers are different. Not only do they have different roles, but in the different countries, there are different expectations as to how documentation and the user assistance is delivered. So we also need to be sensitive towards that. We need to be sensitive towards the way they consume different types of information and also, of course, local regulations and local standards and legal guidelines for what is the bare minimum requirement.

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

Absolutely. I think that I would like to speak a little bit about Israel here because Israel is a very interesting country. It has 8 million people and not a lot of natural resources, so a lot of our energy and a lot of our deliverables, our international deliverables really come from the intellectual properties. And as such, there are almost 800 startup companies rolling out of Israel every single year. So I would say that the one thing I really like to mention is the innovation that is coming out this corner of the world. Everyone says that necessity is the mother of invention, and that is true. And a lot of innovation comes from necessity, and a lot of innovation comes from creativity. And one huge asset that you have in Israel—and we see it time and time again—is really the inventive and sometimes crazy ideas. But in the end ideas just grow and become socially acceptable and are even acquired across the different locations in the world. So I would say that that's very, very significant here. There is a mindset for change, there is a mindset for innovation, there is a mindset to do, to try, to dare. And that is very much part of the

local culture. And I think that anyone who is working in an international atmosphere, that is something they have grown to expect from Israelis. Definitely that would be something I would like to stress.

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

I think one of the major challenges that we have on the one hand is our global nature and on the other hand is our global nature! If you look at Israel specifically, it is a **company** developing in the international arena... it's a country whose native language is not English and therefore when you are out to create a product that also delivers on technical communication, you have to really go out there and find the right people to deliver this message. And that means looking from amongst the people in the area who can deliver the message. How can they deliver it? Can they do it in a manner that is globally and internationally accepted? So that is one of the big challenges is finding really the right professionals to really bolster your product.

I think that another challenge is also in general in professional communication is knowing what are trends and what is here to stay. I think there is a lot of hype around lots of different social media. And it's hard to know what will become standardized delivery and where we should put the focus. And I think that international... or companies that deal with technical communication professionally really need to be sure that they are jumping on the right bandwagon before they try everything. But the good news is that this means that for companies who want to invest in research and in really benchmarking, there's always a lot of research to be done and there's always ways to see who is using what. And the global community is, in the end, it's so small. So we really have very good ways to check whether there is a high level of adoption or not.

**What are some of the changes and/or research that are happening in your company?**

In SAP, we are currently moving... we are in a very, very large transition stage moving into the cloud arena. And this has required a massive change in mindset and a massive

paradigm shift from a technical communication perspective. And the move is welcome and it's something that we are all very much looking forward to. But it's hard work. For a company that for many, many years has been... given on premise delivery to welcome mobile and now to welcome cloud, you have to be ready from a tools perspective, from an infrastructure perspective, and most importantly, from the perspective of the people who really need to deliver.

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

You know, I remember very many years ago the key word or the buzz word was "single sourcing." And now people seem to have really aligned on that one and now we've moved on to DITA. I know that DITA was something that we embraced several years back in SAP. I think that what we are looking at now, at least in a setting wherein lots and lots of deliveries are created every day, is reuse. Looking at ways to reuse information in a manner that is both feasible and enables us to do language translation in an accommodating and an economical way. So I think that we are very much looking at the bigger picture now and the technology has supported us so far. And where it hasn't supported us, I think we are still looking for the next best thing.

**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?**

I think that what higher education is doing very well is putting a finger on the pulse of the different types of industries out there and what the industries needed. There is a lot of technical knowledge and technical understanding as to what is happening in the world. I think where we need to be doing better is soft skills. At the end of the day, technical communication is more about communication than it's about technical. And what we need to be doing is really embracing and trying to develop our communication skills as opposed to our technical skills. Once you have a technical aptitude, once you

have the technical know-how, it's kind of a binary, you know. Your understanding is there, but the communication side, that the harder side to develop and therein lies the challenge. And I think that higher education needs to be putting a focus there.

**As you mentioned, you have benefited from your international and cross-cultural experiences. How can our education system help provide or simulate that experience for students?**

I think that there is nothing like having on-the-ground experience, so if students have the opportunity to travel or if the students have an opportunity for exchange, then that is probably the first prize. But there's no doubt in my mind that that's not always feasible either because schools cannot facilitate it or because funds don't allow it. And frankly, we live in a world in which if you can meet someone face-to-face over the computer, then you don't necessarily have to duplicate that experience in a real-person setting. It can also be done digitally. So, I would say that how we can facilitate such a thing is really to create intercultural experiences and workshops across different higher-education institutions. So, to get technical communication students from different arenas and different places in the world to do joint projects together. I know that this is done in some schools already. But not necessarily just to work on a technical communications project, but to work on a cross-cultural project, to work on the challenges that people face when they work across the different arenas and really need to deal with different types of people with different ways of expressing themselves. So I would say, yeah, let's enable our students to have a cross-cultural experience with soft skills as the focus.

**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?**

I think that the industry is listening to what is happening. It's very exciting to watch. But educational institutions are really, really plugging in to what's going on. You know, in the past, who would have imagined that we would have courses on blogging and social

media? Who would have imagined that we would be talking about the way graphics can enhance deliverables and even replace them instead of standard documentation? Who would have thought about augmented reality? But the communication skills are really getting into the subject, so they are really listening to what is happening out there. And I think at the same time there also is certainly a sensitivity to diversity and to the uniqueness that the diverse voice brings into the picture, and whether that diversity be looking at the trends in communication from youngsters, or looking to how the third generation uses technology, or how do we prepare ourselves for the millennials entering.

I think that the higher education institutions are really in tune to the changes and to the undercurrents that are happening in the society. And that is really pushing towards the change in technical communication. So I think that they need to continue listening. I think that at the same time, we need to continue to really set the expectations, to give our needs, to make them clear, and to say as the technical communication managers today, what we need is a generation of writers and story-tellers and visual artists who are here to bring a narrative across in a simple and easy-to-consume manner. We need to express that gone are the days of sitting in front of the screen and trying to decipher what complex procedure we need to write. Now we have to think in terms of usability, ease of accessibility, how the information is presented, what is presented, how we write as little as possible but in the most clear and comprehensible way for the user. So we need to be telling the industry and we need to be telling the educational institutions that we have identified certain trends in the world and based on these trends we also would like to see students being educated.

### **Is there anything else that you wish to add?**

Well I would like to say one thing. I think that when I was younger, I didn't really imagine myself... I'm not sure that I even knew that technical communication existed as a profession. So I would imagine that, as a young child, what I was imagining that I would be when I grow up is a writer. And one of the first experiences of writing that I had was reading an international magazine for children and finding a pen pal in...or two pen pals in different countries. And I think if I have to, you know, I was thinking about it before this interview, that was probably my very, very first non-professional international communication. And it was a very, very exciting moment for me to write

the letter, to send it off, to receive a response from someone on the other side of the world. How fabulous was that, you know, how wonderful was that experience, to make the world a smaller place and to know that you are touching and talking to someone on the other side of the world.

Today, it's so much easier to do that kind of communication, but I don't want us to lose the thrill of that first time that we make communication and correspondence with someone on the other side of the world in a very unique and special way. So I hope that as much as the careers associated with technical communication develop and as much as the profession develops, I hope that it doesn't always feel like a profession and it feels more like something that we love doing. You know, we love writing, we love communicating, we do it well, and we never kind of lose the pen pal relationship with our user that maybe I had as a girl when I was 10 years old. ■