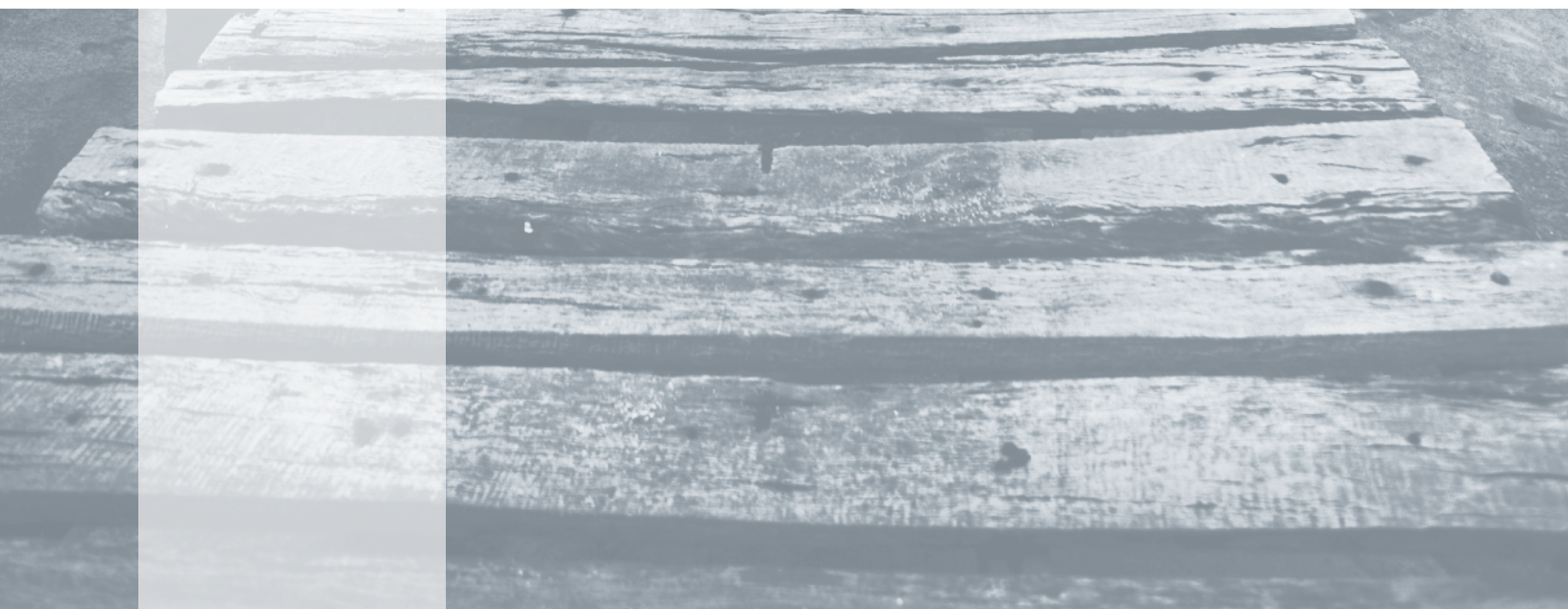




The Case of the Writer Who Couldn't Write

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Case Overview—Case A

In August, John Henderson submitted a résumé to the human resource department of Big Time Computers Inc. in response to an advertisement in the local newspaper for a senior technical writer. The résumé was forwarded to Big Time's Manager of Technical Publications, Laura Conroy, for her consideration.

Big Time Computers is a local high-tech firm with sales offices throughout the United States and Europe. At the time of the senior technical writer job advertisement, Big Time employed about 1,200 people. Big Time designs and manufactures high-end computer systems that sell in the \$500,000 to \$6,000,000 range. Big Time's products are sophisticated and complex, and the working atmosphere is highly technical. The engineering department is the largest and most dominant department. Engineers are in management positions throughout the company, including top-level management. Due to the sophistication and complexity of their products, employees in marketing, customer service, and technical publications are required to have strong technical backgrounds; many have engineering or computer science degrees.

The technical publications department employed 14 people. This included the manager, two senior writers (Mike Simpson and Craig Miller), seven writers, one technical editor (Clark Hanson), and three editorial assistants. The manager had a business degree and had been working in the technical publications field for 12 years. The senior writers had four-year engineering degrees; the other seven writers had engineering degrees, computer science degrees, or two-year associates degrees in a technical field. The technical editor had an English degree and an associates degree in electronics, and the editorial assistants had English or liberal arts degrees.

The department had a well-established set of procedures for new manuals and manual revisions. When given a writing assignment, the writer would do the necessary research by reading product specifications and interviewing the engineers involved with the product. The writer would then develop an outline which was reviewed by the appropriate engineers and the technical publications project leader responsible for that product. The writer then wrote a first draft which was edited by the technical editor and reviewed company-wide. The reviewer list included key people from each area of the company. After making necessary changes, the writer submitted the manual for a brief second review and made additional changes. An editorial assistant did proofreading and formatting before each review, and when the two reviews were complete, the editorial assistant did the final proofing and formatting. The manual was then printed. This extensive review procedure gave the writers a great deal of exposure throughout the company.

The current job opening was a new position at Big Time that was necessitated by an increased workload. Although some internal people wanted to apply for the job, Conroy believed that no internal candidates had the necessary skills for the position; besides, she thought it would be good to bring in new blood at the top. She found one strong résumé and began the hiring process.

In considering John Henderson's résumé, Conroy noted that Henderson had a computer science degree, was working toward a Doctoral degree, and had three years' experience as a technical writer in a local high-tech firm. Conroy was impressed with Henderson's credentials and scheduled an interview date. Conroy included herself, the technical editor and the two senior writers on Henderson's interview schedule. Conroy's interview was general, focusing on background, goals and work habits. Hanson, the technical editor, asked questions regarding writing skills and techniques, while Simpson and Miller, the senior writers, focused on Henderson's technical skills.

Conroy then met with the interviewers to determine if Henderson was qualified for the senior technical writer job. Conroy was pleased with Henderson's responses to her general questions and liked the writing samples he had given her. Hanson felt that Henderson had answered the interview questions well, but had reservations about his interpersonal skills and ability to integrate into the department. He also had some concerns about one of the writing samples. Simpson and Miller thought his technical skills were excellent and had no strong feelings either way about his interpersonal skills. Conroy, Simpson, and Miller all felt that Henderson should be hired; Hanson disagreed. Conroy checked two of Henderson's three references and got good reports on his skills and work habits. She hired him.

Case Overview—Case B

In August, John Henderson submitted a résumé to the human resource department of Big Time Computers Inc. in response to an advertisement in the local newspaper for a senior technical writer. After a short interview process in which three of the four individuals on the selection committee felt that he should be hired, Laura Conroy hired him.

Henderson spent a three-week training period learning departmental methods and procedures, becoming familiar with Big Time's products, and preparing for his first writing assignments. As a senior writer, Henderson was also expected to serve as a technical publications project leader for one of Big Time's product groups. During the training period, Henderson attended project meetings to meet the employees from other departments who were involved with that product group and to become current on what was happening within it.

Following the training period, Henderson started his first writing assignment, the revision of a software manual to reflect upgraded product software. Henderson went two weeks beyond the scheduled date for completing the first draft of the revision. In editing the first draft, Hanson felt that the writing quality and organization were poor, and suggested extensive changes before the manual was distributed for review. Henderson implemented these changes and prepared the manual for review. One week before the review, Henderson sent an advance notice email message to the reviewers, notifying them of the upcoming review. Mike Simpson, the project leader for the product described in the manual, pointed out to Laura Conroy that the message was sloppy, and had misspellings and poor grammar. He expressed concern that the credibility of the technical publications department was at risk if the quality of any of the written material that went out to the entire company was poor. Hanson and Simpson also expressed concern to Conroy about Henderson's writing ability.

Conroy decided to implement some procedures to monitor Henderson's progress and temporarily give him more supervision. She scheduled weekly meetings with Henderson during which he was to give her a detailed status report for the week, with particular emphasis on tracking manual schedules. She also required Henderson to send his work to the technical editor on a chapter-by-chapter basis, and each week Hanson would meet with Henderson to discuss his writing. Conroy also decided to postpone giving project leader responsibilities to Henderson, but she had him continue to attend project meetings with Miller and planned to give Henderson a project in the future.

Resentment was starting to develop in the technical publications department due to Henderson's failure to meet expectations. Several of the writers complained to Conroy because Henderson had been hired as a senior writer at a higher salary,

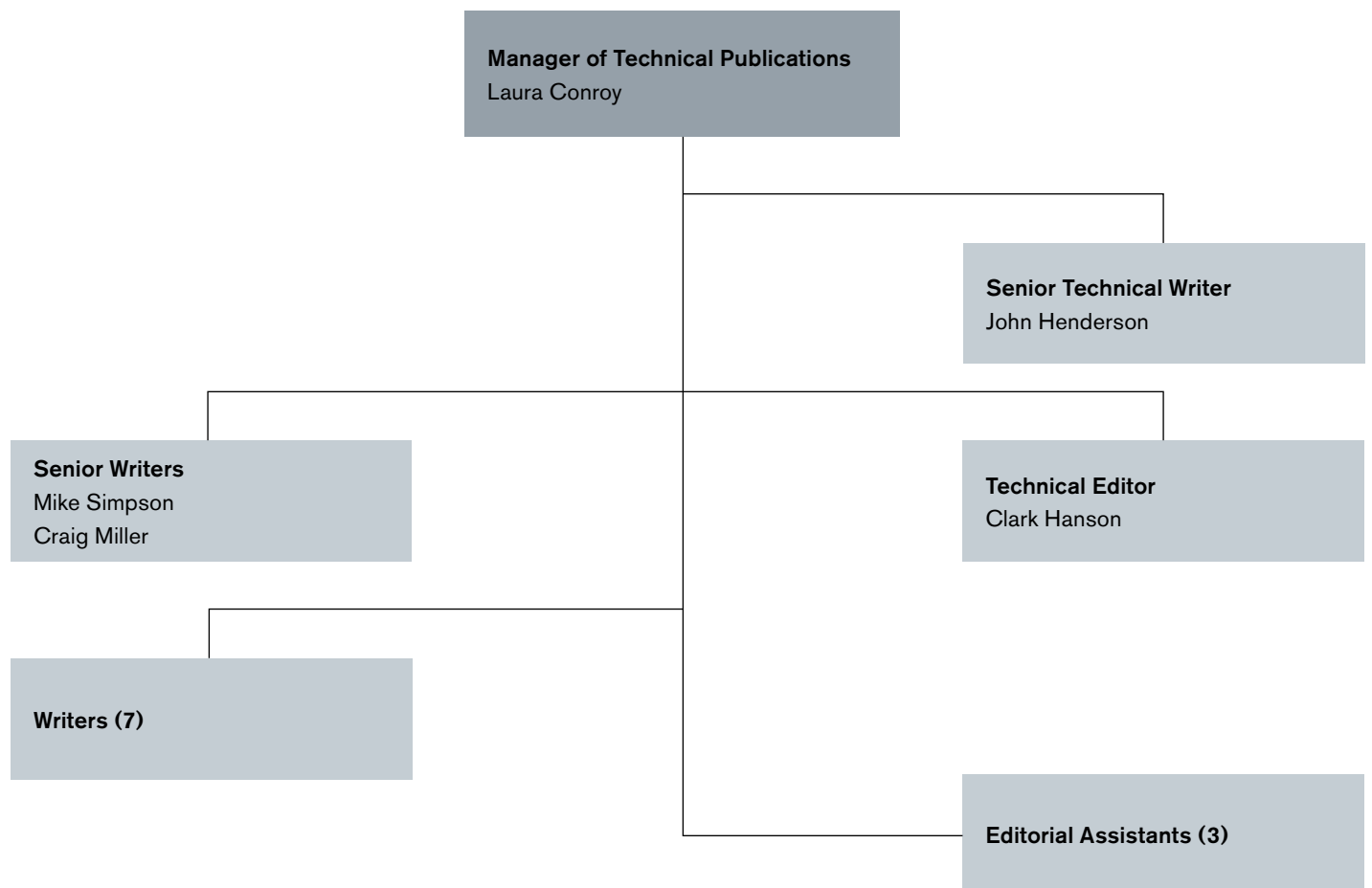
yet his writing skills were apparently inferior to theirs. Miller also expressed dissatisfaction at having to serve as project leader for two projects when the expectation was that Henderson would take one of the projects. Hanson fell behind in his editing assignments because of the extra time he was spending with Henderson, and the editorial assistants complained about the quantity of cleanup required because of Henderson's poor work. In private meetings with dissatisfied employees, Conroy expressed faith in Henderson's abilities and urged patience while she worked on developing his skills.

Henderson showed signs of improvement in his writing skills and his ability to meet deadlines under the procedures implemented by Conroy. As a result of this and because Henderson now had four months' experience at Big Time, Conroy assigned Henderson to write a marketing article on a topic related to his area of technical expertise. Henderson was to work with a marketing engineer and a marketing product manager to develop the article by a specified date. When the initial review of the article was due, Henderson gave the first draft to the marketing department without any review or edit from within the technical publications department. Marketing was dissatisfied with the organization and content of the article; Dick Sanders, marketing product manager, met with Laura Conroy to express this dissatisfaction. Although Conroy assured Sanders that technical publications could complete the article to his satisfaction and on schedule, Sanders decided to have the article written by a marketing employee.

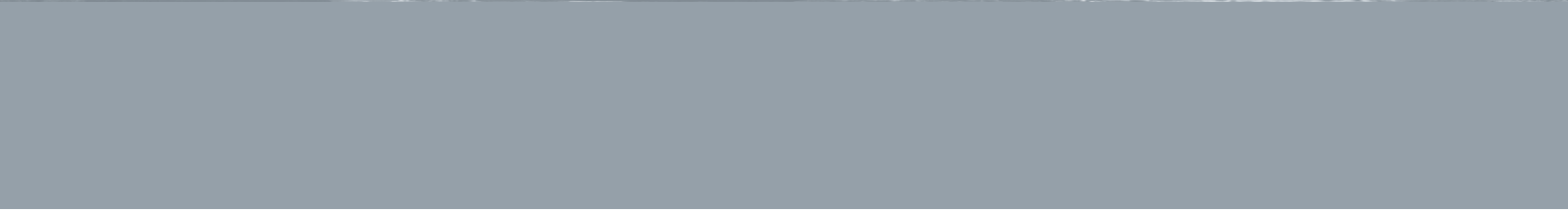
Though his writing skills were slowly improving, lingering resentment continued about Henderson's status and salary as a senior writer. Morale in the department was low. Hanson continued to have a difficult time fulfilling his editing responsibilities because of the extra time he was spending with Henderson, and Miller couldn't meet manual schedules because of the time spent fulfilling project leader responsibilities for two projects. Laura Conroy knew that it was time to act.

Big Time Computers Inc.

Technical Publications Department



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