

Technical Correspondence: What Professionals Need to Learn

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Abstract

This article introduces common types of correspondence written by non-native English speaking technology professionals by examining the technical correspondence of fifty-two Chinese technology professionals over a one year period. Based on those observations, five common types of technical correspondence are identified. Examples of each type are provided as well.

Introduction

Correspondence, perhaps the most commonly used medium in technical writing, is often viewed as a mundane administrative task. However, for the non-native English speaking technology professional, correspondence provides an opportunity to promote laboratory activities within a technical organization. Successful articulation also means greater access to similar organizations abroad. Nevertheless, when writing in the workplace, technology professionals are often forced to rely on business correspondence materials owing to the lack of a more suitable reference. This article examines the technical correspondence of fifty-two Chinese technology professionals at the Industrial Technology Research Institute (Hsinchu, Taiwan) over a one year period. Based on those observations, five common types of technical correspondence are identified: technical cooperation, technical visits abroad, technical visits from abroad, technical training, and requesting information.

Five Common Types of Technical Correspondence

The technical correspondence of fifty-two Chinese technology professionals at the Industrial Technology Research Institute (Hsinchu, Taiwan) was collected and analyzed over a one year period. Their correspondence was categorized into the following five categories:

1. Technical Cooperation

Correspondence involving technical cooperation typically includes exchanging information, seeking technology licensors, paving the way for technology transfers, proposing how to proceed with technical cooperation, requesting participation in/or accreditation by an international body, and reporting the current status of related activities. Common patterns in correspondence related to technical cooperation include the following:

a. Stating the organization's intention of seeking cooperation. Simply stating the organization's desire to form a cooperative relationship with another organization helps avoid future confusion.

Examples are provided below:

"I'd like to propose a technological information exchange between our two organizations regarding environmental pollution prevention-waste minimization."

"We are seeking potential licensors of the Autoclaved Lightweight Concrete (ALC) product technology on behalf of local manufacturers in Taiwan, ROC."

"In addition to our in-house R&D, we are also considering the possibility of technology transfer, from a foreign

company, of a technology that is ready for (or close to) commercialization and that is already under patent protection."

"We are currently involved in a gear box development program and are seeking foreign partners who are capable of developing gear boxes or who can engage in a cooperative technical program with automotive manufacturers in the R.O.C."

"We are anxious to develop long-lasting cooperative relationships with manufacturers such as yours."

"We recognize that the continued success of our work depends on our sharing and exchanging experience with similar organizations."

b. Giving background information about the organization (e.g., mission, major activities, and achievements). Providing background information about the organization allows the other party to know whether both parties' interests and expertise are compatible.

Examples are provided below:

"Our organization, Mechanical Industry Research Laboratories (MIRL), is a subsidiary of the Industrial Technology Research Institute (ITRI) established by the government of the Republic of China (ROC)."

"One of our missions is to aid the local industrial sector by upgrading technology levels. One of our strategies is to license technology from abroad."

"The experimental results generated so far in this project have already been most helpful in Taiwan's environmental protection work."

c. Providing suggestions on how to initiate cooperation.

Examples are provided below:

"I am looking forward to hearing your ideas or suggestions regarding this information exchange opportunity. I would also like to arrange for a ten-day technical visit to your organization this upcoming May as the initial step of our cooperation."

"If you are interested in licensing this technology, please send the above mentioned information to the above address for evaluation."

"Further discussion, or a possible visit by members of ITRI to your production facility, would seem to be the appropriate next step."

"I suggest that ABC Corporation send a technical expert to UCL before the end of July and give a presentation, regarding the product development of this technology, to our scientists and technical staff."

"Please let me know if there are any areas of common interest you would like to discuss."

d. Commending the achievements and reputation of an organization. Sincerely acknowledging or commending the other party's success in a particular technology expresses the organization's intention to contribute toward as well as learn from the collaborative relationship.

Examples are provided below:

"Your corporation has a long tradition of providing outstanding engineering TP (e.g., Noryl) that has various properties and excellent quality."

"ABC Corporation is recognized as the global leader in developing, producing, and marketing transdermal drug delivery system."

"ABC's Biotechnology Group has developed some interesting products that we would like to understand in more detail before reaching the licensing stage."

"Stat-Rite 2300 is an excellent anti-static polymer that blends well with other thermoplastics and can be used in ESD applications. We believe that this permanent anti-static plastic has a strong market potential, especially in light of the emerging electronics industry in Taiwan."

e. Describing the reason(s) for technical cooperation. More than merely attempting to describe the organization's intentions, the writer should outline specific plans or describe what has been achieved so far.

Examples are provided below:

"A new facility is to be established in Taiwan to design, develop and produce auto transmission parts. Therefore, we are seeking partners for technical cooperation through licensing and joint venture agreements."

"We are currently involved in a gear box development program and are seeking foreign partners who are capable of developing gear boxes or who can engage in a cooperative technical program with automotive manufacturers in the R.O.C."

2. Technical Visits Abroad

Correspondence involving technical visits overseas typically includes proposals for technical visits, topics of discussion, confirmation reminders, changing dates or itineraries, hotel accommodations and transportation, expressing appreciation for hospitality during stay, accepting invitations, and declining invitations. Common patterns in correspondence related to technical visits overseas include the following:

a. Proposing the visit and outlining preliminary details. A technical visit should be viewed as a way of satisfying an organization's need (e.g., information exchange, short training courses, or general understanding of their operations). Details such as time and discussion topics should also be included.

Examples are provided below:

"It would be much appreciated if you could arrange for me to observe your production line during my stay at ABC on March 19, 1993."

"I would like to visit the Special Carbon Division (or the Technical Center) of ABC Corporation/Massachusetts during the upcoming trip."

"Professor Liu from the Virginia Institute of Technology recommended that we visit your renowned institute and find a time to discuss our needs with you, as well as to learn of your own related experiences."

"We recognize that ensuring continued success of this program depends on our observing and understanding similar work in other countries. At this stage, I would like to arrange for a visit to your country."

"I am keenly interested in visiting Dr. Jones and his staff to learn of all the operational aspects involved with this program."

b. Explaining the purpose of the visit. A direct statement of what the writer expects during the technical visit may prevent confusion about what the other party is able or willing to provide.

Examples are provided below:

"We need to enhance our knowledge of carbon black in terms of the chemistry, characterization, and processing application (e.g., ESD protection, wire and cable, coating and UV protection). Such knowledge would also benefit our

customers, many of whom are manufacturers."

"Purpose: to understand and evaluate successful cases and the current status of the Japanese dye industry with respect to technology, equipment, and information on industrial waste minimization."

"Visits to compressor system companies that manufacture systems for heat pump or vapor recompression would be equally beneficial. Information regarding the variety of available heat pump systems would also be quite useful for future promotion of such systems in Taiwan."

c. Commending the organization's achievements. Complementing another organization on its achievements is not only good public relations. It also gives the organization a clearer idea of what your expectations will be when and if you pay a visit to their facilities.

Examples are provided below:

"Waste minimization is a global trend, and your country already has much experience in this area."

"As well known, ABC Corporation has the resources needed to produce good quality diverse carbon blacks."

d. Emphasizing the cooperative nature of the visit. The technical visit should be described in terms of a specific perspective. It is not only your organization that stands to benefit. A technical visit can also clarify the common interests and capabilities of both organizations. This may pave the way for future collaborative activities. The following

Examples are provided:

"I hope this visit will strengthen the ties of cooperation that bind our organizations."

"In light of these concerns, we are looking forward to collaborating with your organization in the near future."

"We hope this visit will open doors for further cooperation between our two organizations."

3. Technical Visits from Abroad

Correspondence involving technical visits from abroad typically includes inviting speakers, inviting a consultant or guest worker, setting agendas for technical visits, letters of approval-technical visits, financial arrangements, hotel accommodations or travel arrangements, and changing the dates of technical visits. Common patterns in correspondence related to technical visits from abroad include the following:

a. Inviting the speaker. Speaker invitations should include preliminary information on the role that the participant will play and the topics covered at the event.

Examples are provided below:

"In light of your renowned research and your contributions in the field of GRIN polymers, we would like to formally invite you to serve as the Invited Speaker at the upcoming GRIN Materials Symposium."

"We would like to invite you to give a talk at our upcoming silicone technology seminar."

"This is an official invitation to three ABC Corporation specialists, Mr. Smith, Mr. Jones, and Ms. Lin, to participate in a CGMP seminar and visit our local bulk pharmaceutical chemical plants."

"Please recommend one scientific expert to serve as a short term consultant at CMS, whose expertise is highly relevant to the following subjects."

b. Providing details of the event. The letter should include specific topics, time of the event, and perhaps a description of some of

the participants who will attend this event.

Examples are provided below:

"We are organizing a seminar on Conductive Plastics for Anti-static/ESD Applications that will be held at Union Chemical Laboratories/ITRI on April 16. The ultimate purpose of the seminar will be to provide a channel of communication between IC assembly houses and IC container manufacturers. The seminar will also focus on issues related to the properties and technology of conductive plastic compounds."

"The meeting will be held on April 25-26, 1994 at the National Central Library, Taipei. We hope that you can give two lectures, at 31:20-14:05 and 15:10-15:55 (4/25/94), respectively."

"Reception dinners are to be held on the evenings of April 25 and 26, and there will be a short tour of Taipei on April 29."

c. Compensating for the visit. Financial details regarding compensation should be stated as simply and directly as possible to avoid confusion.

Examples are provided below:

"Round-trip airfare ticket (business class) and accommodations will be provided."

"Please pay in advance for the round-trip airfare ticket, and other incidental expenses; retain the receipts as well. We will reimburse you (by check) prior to your departure of Taiwan."

d. Making preparations before the visit. The speaker should not be given any last minute surprises with respect to what materials and future information is required.

Examples are provided below:

"Please fax us your curriculum vitae, lecture topics, and half-page abstracts before January 31, 1994, as well as the complete papers before March 1, 1994. Please fax and send all our materials to me on time so that we will have sufficient time for translation and printing."

"I also need your curriculum vitae, including name, date of birth, place of birth, nationality, marital status, academic qualifications, professional experience, scientific achievements, current scientific activities, other science-related activities, and selected publications."

4. Technical Training

While technical visits overseas (point #2 above) may only last a couple weeks, the correspondence for technical training is more detailed since the length of stay may be up to one year. Correspondence involving technical training typically includes invitations to speakers, guest worker applications, application cover letters, suggestion letters for training content, training course confirmations, arranging accommodations, application rejection acknowledgements, and appreciation letters upon return from training program. Common patterns in correspondence related to technical training include the following:

a. Proposing the training course of guest worker period. Proposing the technical training period should be stated with confidence in the organization's ability to meet the organizational or individual needs.

Examples are provided below:

"Could you provide a short training course on the current developments and applications of MS in polymer research?"

"Would you allow me to serve as a guest worker in your laboratory?"

"I would like to serve as a guest worker in your laboratory for six to eight months."

b. Describing the applicant's current work and research interests (as related to the training program). Providing as much information about the applicant's individual background or organizational requirements or needs will allow the reader to determine whether he or she can be of assistance.

Examples are provided below:

"I have a masters degree in Materials Science and Engineering and have received special training in thin film deposition photolithography and chemical etching. I am currently designig a process that would integrate these technologies for the development of a pressure sensor that is based on a metal thin strain gauge."

"The Pressure/Vacuum Measurement Laboratory at the Center for Measurement Standards is planning to develop the primary pressure standard (PPS) of the mercury manometer so as to promote and strengthen our laboratory's measurement capabilities."

c. Clearly stating how the training course can benefit the applicant's organization. A clear statement of what the applicant expects to gain from the training course will avoid further confusion.

Examples are provided below:

"I also agree that the introduction of Molecular Simulation at UCL would provide a more thorough understanding of the polymer morphology-structure property relationship and the directions for research activity."

"You laboratory, one of the leaders in this field of research, could provide me with a marvelous opportunity to learn about sensor manufacturing."

d. Setting an itinerary or set of topics that will be covered during the training program. Stating the applicant's expectations of the training itinerary may prevent later disappointment.

Examples are provided below:

"I hope that through this short training program we can determine the systems and research topics that need to be focused on. The following topics may be a helpful guide for you when deciding the contents of this short training course. Of course, you should feel free to ammend or expan on any of these topics."

"We hope to enhance our technical knowledge of PPS, particularly with respect to temperature measurement and control, anti-vibration, and pressure control."

5. Requesting Information

Correspondence involving information requests typically includes requesting program information, requesting company information, requesting product information, requesting technology information, requesting reference materials and price quotations - information services. Common patterns in correspondence related to requesting information technical training include the following:

a. Stating the organization's interest in the requested information. Requests for information should not be viewed as merely a means to obtain information. Instead, information requests should be considered as the first step in identifying the mutual interests of both organizations. For instance, how will the other organization benefit from supplying this information?

Examples are provided below:

"We intend to explore other possible applications of these films, particularly in the IC, electronics and packaging industries here in Taiwan."

"We plan to file an IND for scopolamine T.D.D.S. with the Bureau of Drugs (Taiwan's counterpart of the FDA). Please

provide us with the following documents and samples required by the Bureau."

"Our laboratory is currently developing a flow measurement test rig. Our design consultant suggests the use of ABC valve products on some of the mechanical components. The following is a list of items we are interested in purchasing from your company."

b. Requesting information. By clarifying your organization's interests, you allow the reader to make a correlation between the interests and goals of both organizations.

Examples are provided below:

"Please send me introductory information as well as other relevant publications that explain your strategies, methodologies, achievements, and future objectives."

"Since our goal closely resembles that of your organization, we would like to develop a partner relationship with your Industrial Material Exchange Service and, in this way, facilitate information exchange and other possible collaborations.

Conclusion

This article has identified five common types of correspondence written by non-native English speaking technology professionals. As a preferred alternative to business correspondence materials that often do not match the writer's requirements, the common types of technical correspondence introduced here allow technology professionals to articulate their goals of promoting laboratory activities and creating collaborative ties with their counterparts abroad.

References

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For Your Students

You may refer your students to a set of sample correspondence in template form at http://mx.nthu.edu.tw/~tedknoy/html/ku_eng.html.

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