

# An Interview with Colleen Jones of Content Science



BY SCOTT ABEL | *STC Senior Member*

IN THIS INSTALLMENT of “Meet the Change Agents,” Scott Abel and content engineering maven Colleen Jones discuss how psychology, persuasion, and neuroscience play important roles in making content influential. They also

talk about the coming artificial intelligence revolution and the need for organizations to develop *content intelligence*. By “refining our knowledge and practice,” says the author of *Clout: The Art and Science of Influential Web Content*, technical communicators can “get it down to a science.”

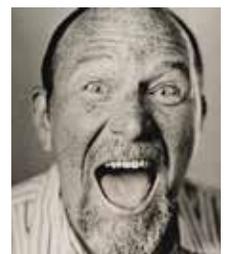
**Scott Abel:** Colleen, I’m super excited you were able to make time to speak with me today. Before we dive into the hot topics, tell our readers a little about yourself.

**Colleen Jones:** I’m a curious and committed content-loving geek who has worked at the intersection of content and technology for 20 years. Some people might politely call me *seasoned*. I’m especially enthusiastic right now about two things: helping large companies and organizations mature their approach to content and encouraging the advancement of content practice. By content practice, I mean methodologies and skills as well as technology and tools.

**Scott:** I love your company name. It speaks to me. What is Content Science? What does the company do and who does it serve?

**Colleen:** I named the company Content Science because “science” suggests big discovery, innovation, and paradigm shifts. At the same time, it also suggests refining our knowledge and practice, as the phrase “get it down to a science” implies. And, of course, it’s all backed with data.

Content Science partners with large (midsize to enterprise) companies and organizations to innovate their approaches to content, develop effective strategies to scale those innovations, and then optimize what works well. Our services and



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products help established companies and organizations modernize their approach to content. They're also a great fit for newer companies who want to embrace ongoing innovation.

**Scott:** What is a content scientist? What does a content scientist do?

**Colleen:** A content scientist blends analytic ability and creative problem solving into content discoveries and, ultimately, effective content strategies. A content scientist sees data and feedback about content as inspiration for innovation. Content and data scientists at Netflix, for example, played an important role in assessing the opportunity for creating groundbreaking original content. That resulted in the “content moat” strategy Netflix uses today. Talk about a repeatable and profitable strategy!

A content scientist also can help assess and optimize content through advanced techniques such as multivariate testing driven by machine learning. Again, Netflix is a famous example. Netflix tests different images to represent their content (movies, TV shows, etc.) and selects the image that correlates with more people clicking on and consuming the content.

Sometimes the content scientist is called something else, such as an analyst or strategist, but what matters is bringing scientific thinking to content decisions.

**Scott:** I've long believed that “content is a business asset worthy of being managed efficiently and effectively.” It's central to my philosophy. And, it makes sense in a business world struggling to determine return on investment from content. At Content Science, you seem to agree with my view, but take the idea forward a bit by adding that brands have a “significant ethical responsibility” to get content right. What do you mean by this?

**Colleen:** Psychology, persuasion, and neuroscience play important roles in making content influential. Content is powerful, in other words. Forward-thinking brands use this power wisely. For example, Starbucks, The Home Depot, REI, Red Bull, and The Coca-Cola Company have each made concerted efforts to tell stories with substance through content—brand journalism. While you might not agree with everything all of those companies do or stand for, you have to respect their effort to engage on a deep level.

And, of course, we view content quality—getting the facts right, keeping the content updated, providing enough detail to help people make informed decisions—as an ethical responsibility, too. Whether your content is making a sale or saving lives, the right thing to do is to get the content right.

**Scott:** Far too often, content creators and strategists are left to their own devices, using little more than tradition, outdated rules, and psychic power to guide their efforts. At Content Science, you talk a lot about content intelligence. What do you mean by this term?

**Colleen:** Yes, we are big advocates for content intelligence. I'm amazed at how often content creators and strategists work in data deserts. They're surrounded by tools and people with access to data BUT have zero useful content data and insights themselves. When content strategists or creators want to propose an idea or introduce a change, they are hamstrung because they can't look to the data for insight or validation. That has to change, and we're working hard to make that change happen. We developed the term content intelligence to mean the systems that take data from many sources and turn them into actionable

content insights. We encourage companies to develop a system of content intelligence that can provide constant feedback and insight—and that system is usually a combination of software, people, and process.

**Scott:** Gaining insights from content can be challenging. Traditional approaches to measuring value are limiting, and most companies aren't very good at capturing—and acting upon—analytics. And, when companies make the effort, they often end up counting things that don't help them improve content effectiveness. Do you see the same challenges? And, if so, what can companies that value content as an asset do to measure performance and quantify effectiveness of their content?

**Colleen:** Yes, we see those challenges and many related ones, such as not being able to assess content return on investment because they don't understand whether the content is effective. I find this situation happens because the approach to evaluating content is haphazard, focusing on what is easy to measure, not what matters. Companies who value content as an asset can avoid this situation by planning a content intelligence system. That can start as simply as asking “What do I want to know about my content?” and then listing what insight or data would help you answer that question. From there, you can assess what tools and data sources could supply those answers. Most often, you will need an ecosystem of tools and data sources.

To make getting those answers easier, we developed a tool called ContentWRX, which evaluates content effectiveness by collecting voice of customer data and key analytics. ContentWRX cuts the hassle out of collecting content-focused feedback reliably and repeatedly. We also can



Colleen Jones presenting her ideas

couple ContentWRX with services to assemble data from ContentWRX and other sources—Web analytics, social analytics, satisfaction data, call driver data, media mention data, and more—to create custom reports or dashboards. We do whatever we can to help organizations make content intelligence part of their content operations.

**Scott:** Your firm, Content Science, produces a lot of useful content. One of my favorite sources is your digital publication, *Content Science Review*. Can you tell our readers a little about the publication?

**Colleen:** You just paid us one of the highest compliments I could imagine—calling our own content useful. *Content Science Review* is an online magazine dedicated to advancing content practice by offering a mix of practical articles, inspirational success stories, and in-depth research and guides. The Content Science team contributes as well as many of the world's leading companies, from Alibaba to American Cancer Society to AirBnB. Our topics include content strategy, content intelligence, leadership,

content operations, branding, content marketing, and much more.

**Scott:** In the fast-paced world in which we live and work, change is ubiquitous. Keeping up-to-date on the topics that matter and developing fresh, in-demand skills can be challenging. What is Content Science Academy and what types of educational classes are available?

**Colleen:** Content Science Academy is our answer to many requests at our in-person workshops to offer online training. We decided if we're going to do this, we're going to do it right. So, we created Content Science Academy as the world's only online training portal dedicated to content excellence. We offer some public courses and certifications as well as packages of certifications for large organizations who need to empower their content teams. We focus on certifications in modern content roles and skills such as content design, content engineering, content science, and content strategy.

**Scott:** Let's take a peek into your crystal ball. What are the major changes that will disrupt content creation, management, and delivery

over the coming decade? What skills do you believe technical communication professionals should consider adding to their toolboxes in the future?

**Colleen:** Automation, automation, automation. Content automation is going to the next level with artificial intelligence. Every competitive CMS will have some level of natural language generation in the next year or two, for example. Technical communication and other content-related roles will evolve. We need to focus on skills that will not be replaced by machines easily, such as strategy, modeling, and planning.

**Scott:** Technology is advancing at a record clip. Are you excited about the possibilities? And, if so, what are the most interesting and exciting technologies that you believe will play a major role in reshaping how we craft, consume, and interact with content?

**Colleen:** I'm a FANATIC about the possibilities of advanced technology for content. We *finally* have technology advanced enough to bring our longtime collective vision of delivering the right content to the right customers through the right channels at the right time a reality. I'm particularly jazzed about the combination of artificial intelligence, content intelligence, and personalization to create highly dynamic and responsive customer experiences. We can provide different screens with different messages and different content offerings to different customers in real time. We can advance chatbots to assist customers on demand. We can sift through volumes of data and content quickly and automatically write useful reports, summaries, descriptions, and more. And I'm only scratching the surface. The future of content and technology is so bright, we need serious shades. **f**