

FINDING

In recent years, many in our community have reported considerable difficulty finding work. What with an uncertain economy, the continuing lack of perceived value for our profession, and the ever-present temptation to outsource our work to foreign shores, it's not easy finding rewarding work. (It never has been, but it certainly seems worse now.)

We seem to be in one of those uncomfortable periods of uncertainty in which employers find themselves huddling around the campfire, hoping the flames will keep the wolves at bay and pushing an occasional sacrificial victim (often a technical communicator) beyond the circle of firelight to pacify the wolves. In this article, I'll share a method that has helped me find work in the past, and that is keeping my feet safely warming by the campfire.

The method is simple to describe, but will take some moderately hard work to turn into a job. Here's the simple part: The job hunt takes only three easy steps.

Step 1:

Identify Your Passion

When you think about "technical communication," is computer hardware and software documentation the first thing that comes to mind? If so, you're hardly alone, and that means you're compet-

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ing for work with every other technical writer in your community and many who live much farther afield. In that kind of situation, the odds are excellent that it's a buyer's market, and that employers can pick and choose among job applicants—and can use that competition to bid down the price of your services. To sidestep that very unequal situation, you have to think outside the (computer) box and discover what other kinds of work you're passionate about. If it turns out that you're passionate about computer-industry jobs, read on: there's still much to learn from this article.

There are two ways to discover what you're passionate about: one that will satisfy your inner scientist, and another to satisfy your more emotional, artistic self. Other ways may work better for you—these are just suggestions, and by no means am I proposing that you use only one method. Both, alone and in various combinations, have worked for me at different times.

If you're the logical, scientific type, collect concrete data. What kinds of magazines, books, and videos are cluttering your house? If you find your tables piled high with books on gardening (I'm writing this in the spring), it's clear that you enjoy working with growing things. If you find you can no longer guide your car into the garage because of the piles of hiking and camping equipment you've taken down from the

attic, clearly you're passionate about the outdoors. If you find you've been obsessively reading a particular section of the newspaper other than the employment classifieds (for example, the business, entertainment, or society sections), that's another clue to your interests.

Don't limit yourself to the *printed* word. Ask yourself what kind of TV programs you've been watching, what kind of videos and DVDs are filling the shelves by the TV, and what kind of radio programs you've been listening to in addition to the CDs and LPs piled high by your stereo. The key here is to use these clues to identify things that you're reading or watching or listening to or doing purely for pleasure. You're *not* doing these things because someone is paying you to do them, and that means you're passionate about them.

If you're more of a touchy-feely, emotional type, put your subconscious to work looking for subtler clues. Every night before you go to sleep, place a pen and pad of paper on your nightstand, and remind yourself before you get horizontal that your goal this night is to dream about the kinds of things you'd most like to be doing. The trick here is to do something different from the conscious, eminently logical data-gathering I've just described; instead, you want your illogical, emotional, subconscious brain to do the work.

Odds are good that you're tired (you are, after all, preparing for sleep), and in that state, your fatigue turns off some of your higher critical faculties and un-

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leashes the power of your subconscious. There are many contrasting theories about what your brain is doing during the many hours you're asleep, but they all agree that your brain is doing *something*; it does not turn off like a lightbulb when your consciousness does. When you wake in the morning, immediately ask yourself a few questions: What was I thinking or dreaming about? What would I most like to do today, other than find a job? It's likely that, overnight, your subconscious has chewed away at the problem you set it to solve and has come up with a few ideas. Record the answers to these questions for a week or two, then look for patterns in your answers. The stronger the pattern, the more likely it is that you've found something you're passionate about.

Needless to say, this latter technique doesn't work for everyone without assistance. If you need more help, seek out a good psychologist or career counselor to help you through this exercise. These people are experts at helping you see the obvious things that you've been missing, and you may be pleasantly surprised at the results.

Step 2:

Brainstorm Opportunities in This Area

Now that you've got a list of subject areas that fascinate you, spend a few days thinking about these subjects and brain-

storming ideas about who might be working in these areas. If, like me, you have a broad range of interests, you may need to spend some time narrowing down the list of options. I recommend placing them in order, perhaps using the logical and emotional approaches I suggested above. You can come up with numerical rankings based on the depth of the piles of magazines, or simply stare at the list and pick the first item that attracts your attention. Whatever works. The goal is to cut your list down to manageable length.

Here are a few good sources of inspiration:

- Scan the Yellow Pages for any category that seems likely to be connected to your subject area. For example, if you're fascinated by cars, look under all the automotive headings—both the obvious ones, such as car dealers and repair shops, and the less obvious ones, such as rental agencies.
- Visit your local magazine store and examine the specialist magazines in your areas of interest. List contact information for all the advertisers and write down brief summaries (50 to 100 words) of all the articles that attracted your attention. Focus on the people and employers, but don't ignore things like new trends that might inspire you.
- Visit your local library and do the same thing, but using the card catalogue. Once you've found the correct set of shelves, invest an hour or two scanning for titles that jump off the shelves at you.
- If you don't read a newspaper daily, buy yourself a one-month subscription to the local daily or national paper. (Or read it while you're at the library.) Look for articles on the areas that interest you, but don't be too literal (i.e., don't just look for job offers). As noted later in this article, under "A Personal Example," a little lateral thinking often goes a very long way.
- Talk to your friends and professional colleagues, perhaps over a beer or coffee. You'll be astounded at the range of things these people are interested in, and some will overlap your own areas of interest. Apart from getting some new job leads, you'll also develop a much deeper understanding and appreciation of your friends and colleagues. (This is called serendipity.)

- Spend a few hours on Google, typing in keywords related to your area of interest and seeing what comes up in the results. If any keywords prove unusually productive, narrow your search to those areas.

Use all of these resources. The idea is to come up with a comprehensive list, and (as is always recommended for brainstorming exercises) to avoid censoring your findings during the early stages. Write down even the least likely ideas. There will be plenty of time to weed them out later.

Step 3:

Contact Potential Employers

Now that you've got masses of notes, invest some time putting them in order. Group the information into whatever categories seem most effective to you: most interesting vs. least interesting, most likely to provide work vs. least likely, closest to home vs. requiring relocation. The key is to find categories that make sense to you, then use those categories to structure your job search. For example, if you've been a long time between jobs, start narrowing down your list to focus on the areas most likely to provide an opportunity to find work. Similarly, if you want to work in a new city or country, push jobs near your home to the bottom of the pile, and if you want to work in the areas that are most interesting, push the less intriguing possibilities to the bottom of the pile. Prioritize!

Now it's time to begin contacting potential employers. Spend some time researching the possibilities revealed by this prioritization. Find out what kinds of communications work these people are doing—and what kinds they aren't doing. Find out what they're doing well—and what they're doing poorly. Company Web sites are a good place to start, but newspaper archives, annual reports, press releases, white papers,

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and product brochures are also productive sources of information. Your goal in this activity is to find out where you can fit within the company by defining what kinds of problems you can help it solve. Don't forget that nobody is going to hire you because of *your* skills—they'll hire you because of your ability to solve *their* problems.

Next, find out who in the company is doing this work. Elaine Brofford and Linda Latenser provided much useful information on one approach to using publicly available information in their talk at STC's 52nd Annual Conference in Seattle. Look for ways to research these people or their overall work group, and arm yourself with detailed insights into the problems they face and the solutions you can provide. Here's how you can learn more about these people:

- Their personal Web site or blog, not to mention their messages to e-mail discussion groups and Usenet newsgroups, tells you quite a bit about their personality.
- Professional societies such as STC provide an opportunity to actually meet these people. Whether you're more comfortable observing them from a distance or would be happy to walk right up and introduce yourself, this is a great way to get to know them and get them to know you.
- Hobby clubs, sports leagues, religious groups, and other social groupings are another way to meet these people.
- Newspaper articles and publications such as professional society or community group newsletters are another way to learn more—and better still, someone else has done all the hard work for you.
- People in our line of work tend to love writing, and don't just do it in their day

job. Do a literature search to find out what kinds of publications they've been producing in journals, magazines, symposium proceedings, and so on.

I'm *not* suggesting that you stalk these people. The goal is only to gain some insights into who they are and how you can approach them in a way that will offer you a chance to talk to them. The goal is to establish a point of contact, not to develop a good enough dossier to engage in extortion.

Based on the information you've accumulated on the employer's needs and on the people who work for that employer, use those skills that you've acquired over the years to develop a compelling strategy for gaining and holding their attention. You can use this to structure a telephone call or, if you aren't comfortable on the phone, a query letter that demonstrates the following:

- Clear knowledge of the employer and its industry or specialization
- A deep understanding of and insights into the problems the employer faces
- A focused explanation of how you can help them solve those problems
- An understanding that you're writing to a person, not just a position

It's a truism that the best jobs go unadvertised; indeed, as you'll see in the next section, I found three of the four positions I've held during my career without ever responding to a traditional classified ad. In any event, whether or not this truism is literally true, it does offer two important insights: First, if the job hasn't yet been advertised, you won't be competing for it with every other technical communicator in your area. Second, communications managers and personnel managers both hate the hiring

to work in a WORK doesn't interest you.

process: They resent the time it takes to weed through hundreds of resumes and schedule interviews, and the expense of running ads in dozens of newspapers or online job sites. This means that if you can make a compelling case for hiring you, human nature will do the rest and follow the path of least resistance. It's clearly easier to hire you outright than it is to do all the hard work of holding a formal competition. (Of course, many companies still require such a competition, but at least you've created an opportunity to compete for a job where none existed beforehand.)

A Personal Example

I first faced the problem of finding work midway through graduate school, when I was working on a degree in forest biology and resenting the fact that I had to focus so narrowly on my own research topic when it was clear that everyone else was doing equally interesting work. It was fascinating to read about that work, but the writing skills of most of my colleagues were distressing. At the same time, I was discovering my own talent for and joy in writing, and computers were finally beginning to become useful tools for writers. It took a long time for me to realize that research was much less interesting to me than *communicating about research*, but once I realized that, there was no looking back.

Initially, I followed the traditional approach of scanning the classified ads for opportunities in scientific communication or writing about computers. There weren't many ads, and those I did respond to produced no results. But then I got a clue, and started thinking differently about my job search. I mentioned earlier that newspapers can be a

productive means of finding work if you don't let yourself get too literal. Once I realized that, I got my first job in only two weeks. One day, I noticed that IBM was running a two-page ad to hire dozens of engineers—but not a single technical writer. I wrote to IBM to point out that all these engineers were clearly producing something that would need to be documented, and that I was the ideal person for the job. There was some initial confusion over why I had applied (“we don't hire forest biologists because IBM doesn't develop trees”), because the manager who called me never saw my cover letter. I quickly explained why, and had a job two days later.

My second job came from replying to a traditional classified ad—so don't completely ignore that approach. But I found my third job by noticing that a forestry research institute (more than 600 miles from my home at that time) was building a new office in my hometown and expanding its lab facilities. There was no indication whatsoever that it was hiring anyone, but I wrote to ask whether the expansion might mean too much work for the existing communications staff. As it happens, it did, and I had a job one month later.

When I decided to become a freelancer in late 2003, I spent some time thinking about the kind of work I most wanted to do. My niche has clearly always been in scientific communication; I've always loved the sciences (witness the piles of science magazines and textbooks in my home), and spend a lot of time thinking about things scientific. As well, I reminded myself that, over the years, I've always enjoyed the challenge of helping authors who have English as their second or third language. This was clearly the area I needed to research: I

wanted to work with scientists writing journal articles. As a result, I contacted every peer-reviewed journal whose subject matter I even vaguely understood (there are more than 15,000 journals out there!) and informed them that I wanted to work with their problem authors “to provide you with manuscripts so well written you only need to think about the science when it comes time for peer review.” I emphasized that this would be an arm's-length agreement: The journal would do nothing more than give the authors a PDF version of my brochure, with no indication that it approved my work in any way. It was purely a “your English is not acceptable to this journal, so before you resubmit your manuscript, have it edited by a pro; here's one person who can do this work for you” type of deal.

I didn't get many “hits” initially, but several journal editors had a desperate need for exactly this kind of service, and began sending me referrals. I'm now busier than I've ever been as a result of this marketing work. Not only are the journals pleased with the results, but authors are referring me to their colleagues at a ferocious rate.

A Dream Career

In the modern world, there is a mind-boggling array of areas in communication, and what fascinates me (science) may bore you to tears. And vice versa, of course. For example, the financial services sector offers many employment opportunities, but you won't be competing with me for work. (See Sandy Larsen's “Technical Writing in the Finance Industry” in the April 2005 issue of *Intercom* for some inspiration.) More power to you if such jobs interest you!

My take is that life's really too short to work in a job that doesn't interest you. By following the steps I've described in this article, you'll have a much better chance of discovering what you'd really like to be doing with your life, and a good chance of figuring out how to get people to pay you to do this work. ❶

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