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Intercom, the magazine of the Society for Technical Communication, is published to provide practical examples and applications of technical communication that will promote its readers’ professional development.

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2008
AWARDS FOR
PUBLICATION EXCELLENCE

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At home or at work, 3D is everywhere and is quickly becoming the pictorial lingua franca of the 21st century. Because of advancements in technology, the ubiquity of broadband Internet and even the growing popularity of video games in the mainstream, people everywhere are beginning to expect realistic 3D experiences in their everyday lives.

“The use of proper 3D authoring tools will be critical for 21st century technical communicators.”

To remain effective, 21st century technical communicators must be extremely efficient and capable of producing next-generation content such as rich interactive 3D documents and applications. They must be able to start their technical documentation before the design is complete, and update it with minimal effort and rework. Most importantly, they must do all of this with less budget and time than ever before.

Today however, technical communicators face an ever increasing demand to create content for assembly instructions and service procedures, but do not have access to productivity tools like 3D CAD systems.

Without the proper 3D tools to create content, they are forced to continually request screenshots from engineering, re-create content through line art sketches and take endless digital photographs of product prototypes.

These workarounds are extremely time consuming and are often out-of-date before they are even completed. Valuable time-to-market lags can result due to delays in creating and updating documentation for important tasks such as final assembly and service documentation.

To help mold raw data into meaningful information, the use of proper 3D authoring tools will be critical for 21st century technical communicators. The right tools will improve communication and comprehension, while reducing overall costs and time to completion. Although this may sound like technology of the future, it is available today and is easier to operate and less expensive to implement than most would imagine.

Solutions such as 3DVIA Composer from Dassault Systèmes enable technical communicators to quickly and easily create and deliver 3D product information in the most usable and desirable format for their intended audience.

“Create a more efficient and cost effective organization while delivering superior technical communication.”

3DVIA Composer allows these professionals to leverage an enterprise’s existing technology investments in 3D CAD, PLM, ERP and CRM. By facilitating access to the 3D data, the technical communicators are empowered to add relevant contextual information and publish this into useable formats with a few clicks of the mouse. Rather than forcing users to work in a costly and complex 3D CAD environment, 3DVIA Composer is an easy-to-use, yet powerful tool designed specifically for technical communicators. With 3DVIA Composer, creating essential technical content is not only easy to do, it's also fun and engaging.

Rich interactive 3D documents, step-by-step images and animated procedures—from exploded BOM illustrations to interactive assembly instruction sheets—can be integrated into Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Web sites, Adobe PDFs and more.

Imagine replacing hundreds of pages of text, sketches and photos with a visual, wordless 3D interactive experience—virtually eliminating the need for local language translations while significantly reducing ramp-up training time for new employees.

“Empowered technical communicators will help companies improve profitability.”

Twenty-first century technical communicators will play a major role in significantly improving the throughput of usable 3D engineering design information into useful 3D-based documentation. This documentation can be made immediately available on the Web to all users who require product information. Armed with new technology, these newly empowered technical communicators will help their companies improve cost, quality and schedule: the primary components of profitability. They will create a more efficient and cost effective organization while delivering superior technical communication.

As 3DVIA Composer demonstrates, the technology to make this a reality is available today.

See the future for yourself at booth # 315 at the STC Technical Communication Summit in Atlanta, Georgia or online at 3dviacomposer.com.

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Google Earth 5

Google Earth has taken to the high seas with version 5.0. The popular geo-mapping application now contains more detail and information about the ocean floor. The search provider teamed up with several scientific organizations to string together maps from under the sea. Check it out at http://earth.google.com/.

Tech Layoffs

Concerned about layoffs in the tech industry? Cnet.com is tracking the tech downturn and its impact on the sector, “from the long-time industry leaders to the scrappy start-ups.” To read more, visit the website: http://news.cnet.com/Tracking-the-tech-downturn/2009-1014_3-6247138.html.

STC Address Changes in April

Beginning in April, mail to the STC offices should be addressed to 9401 Lee Highway, Suite 300, Fairfax, VA 22031. STC will save almost $200,000 annually with the move. Details reported on the STC website (www.stc.org).

Member Blog

Explore Anne Gentle’s blog Just Write Click (http://justwriteclick.com/) about technical writing, information architecture, topic authoring, social media, and other technologies that catch her eye. Intercom readers may also enjoy (and want to comment on) one of her recent entries about capturing content at STC’s 2009 Technical Communication Summit.

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Although I have experience in helping a wide variety of organizations think about how to powerfully position themselves, before I started my research on this article, I hadn’t thought much about the technical communicators behind the scenes—the people behind the instruction manuals and online help desks and other materials that help consumers know how to make or build or use products, or the people who help astronauts or submarine divers or doctors and their patients use and understand complex systems.

Armed with a mission to find the value of technical communication and how 21st-century technical communicators can better position themselves to be effective and more recognized and rewarded for their work, I contacted 15 active and articulate members of the Society for Technical Communication in order to explore what these thoughtful individuals had to say about this topic. My initial conversations generated more questions and many more contacts with something to say about this subject. By my deadline, I had reached out to 50 or more individuals—some self-employed, some working for consumer-electronics or technology companies, some working for defense contractors or government agencies, some academics.

From these interviews, I was surprised to learn how underutilized and underappreciated technical communication is, and how critically important a sophisticated appreciation of it is to the success of any endeavor. This article attempts to articulate what I learned from some very smart people about the state of technical communication today, and what technical communicators need to do to prosper in the coming months and years.

“Believing as I do that [the technical communicator] in the distant future will be a far more perfect creature than he now is, it is an intolerable thought that he and all other sentient beings are doomed to complete annihilation after such long-continued slow progress,” said Charles Darwin. Of course, he didn’t really say “the technical communicator,” he said “man,” but he could have been writing about this profession.

It’s apt that one of the new tools of the profession—Darwin Information Typing Architecture (DITA)—is named...
for this daring scientist, as an evolution in the field is bringing new life and a brighter future to a job that has been described as uptight and dreary. How and why is it changing?

Our tools and gadgets are becoming more complex, our jobs and entertainment platforms more specialized. Never have so many had such a great need for help in performing daily activities, such as writing a letter, talking on the phone, recording a movie, or making calculations. To paraphrase the archetypal news anchor in the 1970s classic film *Network*, “We’re mad … and we’re not going to take it anymore.”

Consumers are frustrated trying to use the products they buy. And when they can’t make them work the way they expect to, they return them. In fact, returns are staggering, representing perhaps as much as 20 percent of all consumer electronic purchases in the United States, and perhaps 9 percent in Europe.

In a groundbreaking study, “Big Trouble with No Trouble Found: How Consumer Electronics Firms Confront the High Cost of Customer Returns,” published in 2008 by Accenture, a global management consulting firm, the authors report that “the total cost of consumer electronics returns attributed to U.S.-based consumers was estimated at $13.8 billion in 2007. In Europe the estimated figure for the same period is $11.5 billion.”

What is even more significant, however, is that “62–85% of all returns, whether in the United States or Europe, can be characterized as ‘no trouble found.’” In other words, the products worked, but customers couldn’t figure out how to make them work, and the instructional materials provided didn’t help.

Clear and simple, that is a communications problem.

Accenture says that “both manufacturers and retailers have done too little to help consumers effectively adopt, apply, and implement the products they have sold them.”

Some examples are comical. Despite Apple Computer’s reputation for highly intuitive products, even tech-savvy consumers were stymied as to how to take full advantage of the features of the Apple iPhone. The documentation was so thin that *New York Times* technology columnist David Pogue found a profitable niche for his privately published *iPhone: The Missing Manual*—“the book that should have been in the box” but wasn’t.

But the serious impact of poor communication on corporate profitability is no laughing matter. For example, National Public Radio’s *Morning Edition* reported in 2006 that Americans “give up after an average of 20 minutes of futzing with an electronic device” and return it, and “companies write off most of these complaints as a nuisance.”

In September 2008, BioMed Central, an online, open-access publisher, reported on a study about the causes of medical litigation in Japan. The study found that poor technical communication was a key factor in malpractice litigation and in the courts “finding in favor of the patient.”

Scott Abel, president of The Content Wrangler, Inc., analyzed the labeling and related web instructions for a common pesticide and found them vague, ambiguous, and dangerously incomplete. He hypothesized that someone blinded by misuse of the product might have significant grounds for holding the company liable. Ironically, an attorney representing a client who actually was blinded in this way used Abel’s analysis as the basis of a suit.

Barbara Giammona, global manager of technical publications for IPS/Wonderware (an Invensys company), suggested another example: “Imagine the consequences of unclear instructions on how to operate a nuclear power plant!”

**Why Do Some Companies Undervalue Technical Communication?**

Why do so many companies tolerate or at least perpetuate a communications breakdown with customers? Why aren’t their technical communicators fixing the problems?

The problem with our profession, says Sherri Michaels, a 30-year veteran of training and communication, and president of her own firm, Michaels & Associates, is that the technical communicator in most organizations is an unknown
and unseen asset. “We’ve done a really good job of working in the background, and that’s not good. To have an impact, we need to be more opportunistic, to imbed ourselves in the core functions of our organizations—improving sales revenue, reducing risk, or increasing product acceptance.”

“Good documentation can be the differentiator between you and the competition,” says Giammona, “but too often management doesn’t understand that.”

If you want to understand the value that most companies place on their technical writers, look at the organization chart. Typically there’s a VP of Operations, a VP of Human Resources, a VP of Manufacturing or Engineering. You will rarely see a VP of Technical Communication—even though it’s a function that uniquely impacts the success of every other aspect of the organization.

Whether working with software or consumer electronics or pharmaceuticals, it’s the scientists and the engineers who are often considered the “brain trust” of their companies, and they are often controlling the communication function.

As Rich Maggiani, president of Solari Communications, puts it:

Engineers know how a thing works; the technical communicator knows how to use it. I like to use the metaphor of the automobile. The automotive engineer understands how the catalytic converter and all those other auto-mechanical processes happen. The person behind the wheel just wants to know that the car goes forward when they hit the gas, that it stops when they hit the brake, and that it turns when they turn the wheel. They don’t care what happens under the hood.

Emma Hamer, founding principal and senior associate of E. Hamer Associates, Ltd., would concur:

Most engineers get so involved with their product that they can’t put themselves in the shoes of the novice user, and in instructional materials they gloss over usability. In fact, the key skill of a technical communicator is to be professionally naïve—to anticipate what the user will need to know, and to ask good questions beginning at the early phases of design.

W. C. Wiese, a communications manager at Lockheed Martin and a 37-year veteran in technical communication, explains it this way:

In my years of proposal editing, I’ve never needed to build a propulsion system or a helicopter. I do my job best when I’m less-than-expert and in a position to decide whether an explanation makes sense to me. If it doesn’t, I have work to do. If it also wastes my valuable time and taxed patience, I really have work to do. I have a vision of myself as a corporate athlete, trained to help my company win in a Business Olympics. Our competitive events answer the questions: how can I make our ideas clearer, the offer more persuasive, and the proposal beat the submittal deadline while permitting the author team to mature their ideas as long as possible?

How did Wiese, who is not a technical expert, establish credibility with the design engineers and management team with which he works? “It’s what I’ve always liked about proposal editing,” he says. “You’re helping someone who’s out of time and offering a skill that contributes to their professional success. You offer yourself as a teammate who is committed to the success of others. A sincere curiosity about how things work and what a new user might need to know is our best contribution to the team. And when your skills can help other team members succeed, then all doubt about your value goes away.”

Why don’t most companies elevate their technical communicators? Why, given the evidence of the return on investment of a top-notch communicator—fewer product returns, higher reputation of quality, and fewer liability charges—do companies still underestimate their importance?

Rick O’Sullivan, economist and principal of Change Management Solutions, explains that “to understand why companies don’t always hire high-level technical communicators, you need to start by remembering that everyone acts in their own self interest.”

My suspicion is that often the guy who does the hiring doesn’t face any of those costs—they are born by the office of the corporate attorney, the marketing department, in customer relations. So the head of production or the engineering department cuts costs and comes in under budget while the costs for everyone else in the company are going through the roof. The people who are doing the hiring and paying the salaries are not responding to the benefits story that the Society for Technical Communication is touting because it’s not in their purview.

The engineer who is not hiring a top-notch technical communicator is not an idiot! He has a master’s degree from MIT. So why isn’t he doing what’s in the best interest of the firm? And the answer is that it’s not in the best interest of his department. The key to the success of the technical communicator is to communicate outside his department.

No doubt companies and consumers will benefit from the elevation in stature of the technical communicator. But if this is to happen, the communicators themselves are going to have to make it happen. And since the economy and the job market are radically changing, there is plenty of motivation to change.

Although the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Occupational Outlook Handbook (2008–2009 edition) predicts that the ranks of the 49,000 employed “technical writers” will grow by 20 percent by 2016, that prediction was made before the devastating impact of the current economic recession.

“We are moving from an economy primarily driven by financial services and housing to one driven by health care and lifestyle management around an aging population. We aren’t going to see economic expansion in the housing marketing for some time,” says O’Sullivan.

And, O’Sullivan predicts, “software isn’t likely to be a major driver, because the cost of labor abroad and the continued explosion of Chinese software (and other product) knockoffs are driving the revenue from software development to China, India, and elsewhere out of the United States.”

The New Economic Drivers

Employment follows economic drivers, and opportunities for technical communicators in fields connected to
lifestyle management and medicine are likely to expand while employment in traditional housing and mortgage financing are likely to contract. Successful technical communicators need to be able to sell their skills and value independent of their industry or content, and they should not base their marketability on the expertise they have acquired in a specific field. O’Sullivan explains:

If you’re in a declining industry like financial services, your knowledge of financial services isn’t going to get you very far. If you’ve just been laid off by Lehman Brothers or Bear Stearns, another investment firm is not going to hire you. You need to be able to go to a pharmaceutical company and say “even though I’ve been working in finance, I will bring real value to your company.” You need to be able to explain what it is that you do, independent of the field in which you do it.

However, Emma Hamer disagrees:

The key to finding work in whichever industry you’d like to work in is really the same as it’s always been: understanding the sector’s information and communication needs, and highlighting and demonstrating your ability to meet those needs. For most sectors, that will include understanding the company’s end users, whether they are consumers, technical or professional users, or academic users.

Hamer continues:

Oddly enough, the two sectors that O’Sullivan mentions (financial services = out, and health and wellness = in) are neither industries most people associate with technical communication to begin with. Generally, once you explain what tech writers do, “regular” people will jump to “software manuals and user instructions.” But it’s important to remember that even things like the recipe on the back of a box of cake mix was written by a technical author of some kind, as are the signs in car parks explaining how to use the Express Pay machines, and the sign by the elevator explaining what to do in case of a fire.

O’Sullivan puts it this way:

Think about this. What do auditors “do”? If you ask, they are likely to respond that they “review the books, examine relationships of the firm with customers, and examine security issues.” But what they really do is reduce risk.

What does a technical communicator really do? Many will say that they “handle single sourcing, manage content, and assure that things are spelled right.” What they talk about is function—what software they use, the publications they produce. They forgot to think about why they do those things.

“The real work of a technical communicator,” O’Sullivan says, “is to keep the customer sold.” This means that the technical communicator ultimately must be thinking about the interests of the customer—their expectations of a product, including whether the product is well designed so as to be intuitive for most users or whether the documentation is clear, understandable, and anticipates customers’ questions. In this way, customers will be “sold,” believing that the company cares about them, and will not return the product in frustration. Since some products are not intuitive, and users will need instructions, customers want to be provided with the information they need in a quick, concise, and targeted way. Barbara Giammona puts it this way:

Today the customer wants access to the precise information they are seeking and they want it instantly. In the old days, companies would provide you with a manual and you would find where you put it, go to the index, find a topic, go to the page, and look for the answer. In a forward-looking world, young people today are going to Google, and in a second they can get exactly the information they want. Immediate gratification is the end-all be-all of our modern lives. Technical communicators have to meet that demand.

**Becoming Indispensable**

Many technical communicators do not understand the potential contribution that they could make to their employers. Too often the technical communicator awaits instruction or direction rather than taking the lead to identify where communication channels need to be opened, messages clarified. And often that direction is coming from individuals who themselves are not good communicators and who don’t understand how to recognize and evaluate communication processes.

Arun Jain was a career sales and marketing person with no background in technical writing. He saw a niche for that service among smaller companies and founded Bay State Documentation, a Boston-area company that helps small- to medium-sized companies with their technical documentation needs. The motto of Jain’s business is to “transform your technical documentation from a headache to a competitive edge.”

“In trying times like this one,” he says, “if you want to enhance your position, you have to expand your role of influence, your territory. You need to branch out and try to do things not on the cost side but on the revenue side—things that help the company get new business. If they choose to, technical communicators can get involved in a lot of areas that will help a company get more revenue.”

For example, Jain suggests, get involved in company training. “If you become an expert in creating training tools, the company’s dependence on you increases.”

According to Emma Hamer, “if you expand your role to impact the revenue side of the business, you become so valuable to the company that they couldn’t think about outsourcing you.”

Of the many skills shared by successful technical communicators, first and foremost is the ability to look around and...
see where productive communication is occurring and where it is not.

While it’s no doubt useful for a technical communicator working in a software development company to have a solid background in software engineering and computer science, someone who doesn’t may be at least equally valuable in a different way. The average user of most software will not have a technical or engineering background. A technical communicator who is not a subject expert can look at a product with the eyes of a consumer and...experience and explain to the product developer what will make the product difficult for the consumer to use. Often the developer is so close to his product that he assumes that aspects of its use are obvious. To him they are. To the average consumer they may not be.

Outsourcing and Offshoring

Another major challenge that technical communicators are facing is outsourcing and offshoring. These movements close down or downsize internal communications departments and hire contract writers, often finding those contract writers in India, the Philippines, or China, where labor costs are far lower than they would be in the United States or Europe.

Technical communication is certainly not the only field that is feeling the impact of this trend, and human resource and efficiency experts claim economies of scale in the surgical hiring of expertise through contractors who specialize in a specific function, such as training or technical writing.

“I recently saw a ‘top ten list’ of training companies, and of the ten, amidst companies like HP and IBM, there were two companies based in India,” says Sherri Michaels.

I found that very distressing. Some very good writing does happen offshore, but it must be touched for localization and credibility in the country where it will be used. Unless you live in this culture, there are idioms and perspectives that you simply can’t avoid. Technical communication is supposed to avoid using idioms, but a lot of the universal words used to describe products were “invented,” and you simply can’t avoid some jargon.

Instructional design features a much more conversational tone, and that’s where you will see a great deal of offshoring fall apart. And as you get into writing scripts for technical training, you see the offshore work begin to fray at the edges.

Globalization Is Here to Stay

Michaels also talks about globalization: “unless you’ve spent 20–30 years in a country, you just can’t fully relate.... Our customs and point of view are hard for the Chinese to grasp and vice versa. Even ex-pats living and raised in China don’t fully get the subtleties of the Chinese culture.”

I just got back from participating in a technical delegation to China and heard a common theme: the Chinese readily admitted that they don’t know how to communicate with us. In fact, they don’t identify technical communication as a career in China. That said, however, if China can figure out how to make money at something, they will do it.

“Consider this,” says Rick O’Sullivan. “The population of the United States is 300 million people. India has 300 million English-speaking graduates with Bachelors of Arts alone. The competition from India for employment is enormous,” he says.

According to Madhur Singh’s article in Time, “Dale Carnegie Comes to India” (15 April 2008):

the huge number of Indian workers staffing the world’s tech firms and call centers has given some employers the impression of India as a nation of 1.1 billion software engineers. But only 1 in 4 engineering graduates—and 1 in 10 graduates in other disciplines—are considered employable by multinational firms. While many graduates possess cutting-edge technical knowledge, their interpersonal and communications skills lag far behind. A study by the National Association of Software and Services Companies, India’s leading software and outsourcing industry organization, forecasts a shortage of half a million IT professionals by 2010, largely because of a lack of grads with the “soft skills” needed to fit into a cosmopolitan work environment.

To combat this shortcoming, according to Singh, the Indian engineers are turning in droves to communication schools and Dale Carnegie-like corporate training seminars that will increase their competitiveness for US demand. The message here is clear: smart workers in other countries are running hard to prepare themselves to compete with jobs now held by workers in the United States.

President Obama has promised to create 2.5 million new jobs for US citizens. The question everyone is asking is, “How we are going to keep those jobs at home?” O’Sullivan thinks it’s the wrong question:

How do we keep our jobs from being exported? You can’t. You have to keep reinventing yourself. Someone said that the average person graduating from high school today can expect to change careers four times before he retires. The days when you could go be a technical communicator for some company, crank out writing for 30 years, and then retire are gone.

Emma Hamer agrees. “There are people who bang the ‘Let’s keep jobs in America’ drum, but they are a minority—soon-to-be-extinct dinosaurs. Globalization is here to stay, and protectionism is not—and has never been—the answer.”

Mak Pandit, president of the India-based company Technowrites, and an STC member, is competing to provide Indian technical writers to US companies, and he is succeeding. “Globalization is happening,” he says,

because the world itself is changing. It is becoming flatter. Because of globalization, we will have more realistic pricing for products. Products may be designed in one geographic location, built in another, and sold somewhere else. The product prices will also become flatter. Companies will find it difficult to sell product at x value in one country and 2x in another. And products will cater to the world market instead of catering to specific geography. For example, every laptop today comes with a power supply that can work on 220 VAC, 50Hz and 110 VAC, 60Hz. This product complexity will require more support centers.
Pandit boldly predicts that, as a result of e-learning and web-based courses, education all over the world will become uniform. Multinational universities, now on the horizon, will take the lead to bring about this change. They will collaborate and grow, giving tough competition even to multinational companies. This will open up great opportunities in the education and training sector. And users all over the world will become more educated about consumer rights, and their expectations of a product’s function will grow. They will expect their own geo- and culture-specific needs to be fulfilled. A user in India will insist on having all the same features in their iPhone as a user in the United States enjoys.

“The profession and its practitioners do so much more than write,” Emma Hamer says, “and do so many more new things: they are usability experts, information designers, interface designers, business analysts, instructional designers. And they increasingly are becoming ‘hyphenated’—programmer-writer, developer-writer, business analyst-writer. Desktop publishers are becoming XML/DITA experts; indexers are becoming search-taxonomy experts. And they’re working in every industry. In short, they are content specialists, information brokers, user advocates, corporate bloggers, web architecture specialists, localization experts, translation coordinators. They are content wranglers.”

The Fundamental Tools and Skill Sets Are Changing

Whether it’s neglect from within an organization, or competition from abroad, the question that has to be asked is how can a technical communicator become visible and indispensable to his or her organization? How can he/she contribute to the bottom line of their company?

“A lot of people don’t understand what we do,” says Larry Kunz, senior information developer of Systems Documentation Incorporated.

Lawyers and doctors have a very crisply defined profession—we don’t. The work that STC members are doing to define exactly the body of knowledge for technical communication is will help. What, exactly, can an employer expect his technical communicator to know how to do? It will vary with the type of industry you are in—software, government, military, consumer electronics, or medicine—but there is a core body of knowledge that we all should have.

One core skill Kunz points to is the ability to package information so that it can be efficiently accessed and reused. “If I’m IBM, do I really want the expense of maintaining documentation for every model of ThinkPad out there,” he asks, “or do I want to reuse and repurpose information that I already have?”

Kunz cites Darwin Information Typing Architecture (DITA) as one specific methodology for the reuse of information. “The nod to Darwin is a nod to the idea of inheritance—a hierarchy of evolving information. Instead of presenting information linearly or in chapters, you organize your information around topics. This is but one example of a specific technical communication skill.”

There are so many specialized skills being adopted and developed to facilitate communication. “Technical communication encompasses disciplines like UI [user interface] design, usability, information architecture, information design, accessibility,” says Bogo Vatovec, president of Bovacon, a European communications and training firm. Each of these areas are disciplines in their own right and are also represented within professional organizations such as STC that serve their members in a much more concrete way. The reality is that the majority of STC members are not working within these specializations.

In an introduction to the August 2005 Technical Communication journal devoted to “The Future of Technical Communication,” Michael Albers writes:

In the past we have certainly seen a trend toward the integration of technologies into writing. For example, before desktop publishing, one would not have expected writers to know much about font or layout, as they were specialists in text, grammar, style, rhetoric, information, or any one of a number of fundamental “on-the-page” skills…. Now … job descriptions are likely to include a requirement that [applicants] know layout software, understand typefaces and white space, and participate in the physical production process.

“Although Michael Albers is right about his take, there is also an opposite direction,” says Vatovec. “The conceptual development and improvements in user interface design and communication principles created the technology that allows us to do this.” He continues:

The skill set of “technical writers” is expanding continuously as technical writers are being confronted with new technologies and other related disciplines. Many technical writers transit to these other disciplines through job rotation, job change, larger added value, and never come back to technical writing. That positions technical writing as an entry-level discipline.

Emma Hamer agrees:

One of the most significant trends in the profession is the shift from unstructured to structured authoring, with or without using Extensible Markup Language (XML) and the Darwin Information Typing Architecture (DITA). Take this one step further, and you get to what is now being called “Intelligent Content.” Yet early research indicates that approximately 1 in 5, perhaps even 1 in 4, people currently working as technical communicators will not be able to grasp the concepts of structured authoring.
As the profession evolves, and the intellectual effort ... to master the required skills increases, some people will inevitably be left behind and become unemployable. Their work, which will be at the lower end of the complexity scale, will either be outsourced to lower-wage countries or automated (think of database publishing on steroids). The good news: the more “related skills” you have, and the more complex the information challenges that you can solve, the more sought after you will be, and the higher your earning potential.

Bogo Vatovec explains his view:
My belief is that the number of “technical writing” jobs will decline over time. Technical writing will be an entry-level position for a trainee to learn the subject matter. Instead, the industry will look for people with a broad range of skills who can also write. That is, technical writing and writing in general is becoming an “essential skill” and not an “added value” skill for the future. The universities offering master’s and similar degrees in technical communication are hitting in the wrong direction.

A lot of technical communicators are going into business for themselves,” says Larry Kunz. “The cream of the crop sets up their own businesses,” and companies outsource their internal communications needs to them. “The disadvantage is that you no longer have the internal capability—the institutional knowledge—in your organization. Companies that outsource lose the ability to do documentation well, but more than that, they lose that communication skill set that should span every aspect of the company.”

Demonstrate Value
“A good technical writer becomes a consumer advocate. Consider lawn mowers and other things that have whirling knives—you have to give consumers some basic proficiency and also do enough documentation to protect the company from customer misuse,” W. C. Wiese says.

We added up the value of the successful proposals a friend has worked for his company—he’s helped win $20 billion in new business! He wasn’t alone, of course, but he was an important part of the team.

We need to show our employers that we can help them earn “$20 billion in business.” Technical communicators have to join the team, and they have to see that their success has a lot to do with making other people successful. When I work with a proposal VP or director, I know that his compensation and his career depend on whether he brings in this new piece of business. If he’s successful, he’ll make more money and get promoted. To the extent that I help him succeed, he is more likely to depend on me as a trusted resource. Over time, this is spectacularly satisfying—business relationships that come back.

Survival Strategy
As products, processes, and relationships become more complex; as companies cross national borders and oceans to seek markets for their products; as speed-to-market increases, technical communication becomes an increasingly critical component of any successful business. Smart executives and managers should compete for the best technical communicators out there, empower them to really impact their organizations, and reward them for doing so. But life isn’t fair; it’s just real.

To succeed and prosper, and to fulfill their potential to truly impact the clarity of message and the understanding between organizations and their customers, technical communicators must move away from their comfort zones and assert themselves. They need to define their own opportunities and then move boldly forward. In short, it’s time to adapt or move over.

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Recession-Proof Your Career

By Jack Molisani, Associate Fellow

Editor’s note: Part I of this series, “Job Hunting in a Recession,” appeared in the September/October 2008 issue of Intercom.

In the first installment of this article, I addressed immediate actions technical communicators can take to increase their chances of finding work during a recession. In this installment, I discuss near- and long-term career strategies for:

1. Increasing your chances of surviving a layoff.
2. Increasing your ability to find work in case you do get laid off.

One would think that if you do a good job at strategy 1, you won’t need strategy 2, but mergers happen and companies sometimes offshore complete departments, so it’s best if you do both to maximize your chances of staying employed.

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Increase Your Chances of Surviving a Corporate Layoff

There are three main actions you can take to avoid being laid off:

• Add value to your company.
• Ensure that management recognizes that you add value.
• Repeat as needed.

Add Value to Your Company

The main strategy to staying employed is to make yourself so valuable to your company that they wouldn’t even consider letting you go. This is not as hard to do as you might think.

Here is an excellent example: When Andrea Ames delivered the keynote presentation at LavaCon 2008 in Honolulu, she shared one of the strategies that enabled her to become the first person in the history of IBM to rise from an information-development role to her current level in the company. When people ask her what she does for a living, she replies, “I solve business problems.” Not “I’m a technical writer.” Not “I create writing standards.” Not “I coordinate changes to the user experience.” While she may actually do those things as part of her job, they’re not the way she approaches her job, and they are

Send Out Ships

You’ve probably heard the expression “when my ship comes in.” Any idea where that expression comes from? In the nineteenth century, merchants in Europe would mortgage everything they owned to build and provision ships to sail to the new world. When (if) the ships finally returned loaded with furs and spices and other goods, the merchants would be rich beyond their wildest dreams. However, as Chellie Campbell says in her book The Wealthy Spirit, “Some people are going down to the dock, waiting for their ship to come in—but they haven’t sent any out!”

You have to send out ships. Every call you make, every business card you give out, every newsletter article you write, and every presentation you give is a ship that might someday come in. It may take weeks or years for those ships to come in, but if you send enough out, they will come in.

So the secret to ongoing prosperity and “job security” is to keep sending out ships!

For more information, I recommend the books The Wealthy Spirit: Daily Affirmations for Financial Stress Reduction and Zero to Zillionaire by Chellie Campbell.
certainly not how she identifies her corporate mission. She finds problems her company is experiencing and then finds solutions.

How does she find problems to solve? She asks for them! About every three months, she makes a point to ask the executives in her division, “What problems are you running into?” Then she looks at what her organization can do to help solve those problems. Even if the problems are not directly related to her area, there are often actions her group can take as part of a larger solution. In short, she strives to be an innovative solution provider and profit center, not a commodity-like tech pubs cost center (see sidebar).

What a great way to increase your job security! Who in the world would lay off an individual who’s continually saving the company money and helping to solve management’s problems?

When was the last time you looked for problems to solve in your company or workplace?

Ensure that Management Recognizes You Add Value

I recently started classes at a local business school and was looking forward to applying the information to my career, specifically how to better market my services. However, I soon found out that before I could take the marketing courses I wanted, I had to take a course in public relations (PR).

I was not happy about this since I thought PR was a nefarious undertaking—something done by big corporations to cover up embarrassing events or by politicians wanting to manipulate public opinion. The definition of PR I read in Public Relations News certainly supported my viewpoint:

Public Relations: The management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or an organization, and executes a program of action to earn public understanding and acceptance.

While that definition might apply to a public relations firm with clients like Exxon or General Motors, I didn’t find it very applicable to me.

Next, I read Effective Public Relations by Scott Cutlip and Allen Center, who described PR as “Empathetic listening and persuasive communication.” While this was closer, I knew this definition of PR applied more to defusing a heated labor dispute than advancing a technical writer’s career.

It wasn’t until I read a series of articles by L. Ron Hubbard that I really started to understand how I could apply PR to my career as a technical communicator. In the article “A Redefined Definition of PR,” Hubbard explains that a more accurate definition of PR is “Effective cause well demonstrated.” This is a definition I can apply!

The documents I produce consistently win awards. I volunteer with my STC chapter. I organize community service days. I’m a professional in my field, and the products I create are excellent demonstrations of my ability. But how many people are aware of my good works (other than my mother and fellow tech writers, of course)? Not many.

No one else would take the time to advertise my accomplishments, so I sat down and wrote a PR plan for myself (see sidebar). Suddenly my visibility increased and I started landing new clients. PR works!

Day in and day out, you are constantly demonstrating that you are a professional in your field. Do people know? Get the word out!

Increase Your Ability to Find Work

Now that we have looked at ways to increase (and promote) the value you bring to your current employer, let’s look at some actions you can take in the future to ensure continued employment when the next recession comes along.

There are three main strategies to increase your long-term marketability:

• Expand the industries you serve.
• Expand the services you offer.
• Start your own business.

Expand the Industries You Serve

While you and I know a good technical communicator can learn and document anything given sufficient ramp-up time, most companies these days want technical writers who already have experience in their industry: biotech companies want writers with experience in biotech, construction companies want writers with experience in construction, etc. So what can you do if you have been working in, say, accounting companies your entire career and want to move into a new field?

One option is to take classes in different fields—but which fields? What classes will make you most marketable? That varies depending on the country and region in which you live, so I suggest doing some research. First, look at what investment advisors are saying are the hot growth industries two, five, ten years out. If those industries are growing, there will be a need for technical writers!

Another option is to monitor the types of jobs being posted on job boards like DICE.com, Monster.com, etc. By
monitoring such sites, you can see the types of companies that are hiring in your area, and you can take classes to prepare yourself for those jobs.

Yet another option would be to find someone who already services those industries, preferably an independent contractor or outsource writing company with projects that can be done off-site. Ask to help with their projects by writing a section of the manual, indexing the book, generating the online version—anything that will enable you to list the project (and industry) on your résumé. By gaining experience with just one such project, you can leverage it to get another and another until finally you are well-established in the industries in which you want to expand.

And keep in mind, the more industries in which you can be established, the greater your chances of finding work if any one of them slows down. (For example, you could have concentrated on your other clients if your banking clients put all their projects on hold after the mortgage crisis hit.)

Expand the Services You Offer

As technical communicators, we are blessed with almost limitless career options (see sidebar). An accountant’s career options are pretty much limited to, well, accounting. But a technical communicator can leverage his or her core competencies to move into fields other than technical writing. We can do instructional design, stand-up training, and user-interface design. We can advise companies on accessibility and usability issues, become full-time project managers, and more. And we can do these things in the biotech industry, the manufacturing industry, the software industry, etc.—the choices and combinations are endless!

Will it benefit you to go back to school for an additional certificate or degree? Yes. Will that take a few months or a few years? Probably. But remember, we are talking about how to prepare for the next recession after the economy recovers from its current slump. (And considering it might take a while to get out of this slump, you’ve got plenty of time to prepare for the next one!)

Creating a PR Campaign

There are four basic steps to applying public relations to an area:

- **Research:** Don’t make the mistake of assuming you know what your audience thinks and feels—find out for sure. Even informal surveys can reveal some surprising results!
- **Planning:** Does your company publish a newsletter? Do they post success stories on their intranet? Do they grant awards for accomplishments? Once you have researched ways you can publish your accomplishments, make a plan for what you will do and create a timeline.
- **Communication:** If you are a contractor, communicate your accomplishments to prospective clients. If you are an employee, communicate your accomplishments to your current or prospective employers. Make sure people in your company know the value you bring to the organization.
- **Evaluation:** As with other endeavors, evaluate your performance at the end of the project. Whether you measure the effectiveness of your PR campaign with a new opinion survey or by an increase in your paycheck, strengthen what worked in your plan and change what didn’t. (Then, of course, write and execute your PR plan for the next year and get to work!)

For more information, see Suggested Readings at the end of the article.

Start Your Own Business

One option for taking control of your income and increasing your chances of staying employed is to become an independent contractor, consultant, or business owner. Here is an anecdote from my own career that illustrates this concept:

When I made the leap from employee to independent contractor (and subsequently business owner), my mother would wring her hands at the feast-or-famine nature of contracting and plead with me to get a “good job” with “vacation” and “benefits,” under a misguided notion that a salaried job equals “security.”

Later, when half of California was laid off in the recession of the 1990s, my mother proudly stated, “Thank God you own your own company!”

Many of my clients cut back on outsourcing at that time, but having multiple clients and multiple streams of income enabled me to at least survive the economic downturn, in contrast to staff employees who lost their complete incomes when they were laid off.

I’m not being negative so much as realistic when I say there is no such thing as job security. Even the members of the United Auto Workers union are finally realizing a company can’t keep workers on payroll if there is no money to pay them, collective bargaining agreement or not.

Actually, I can further clarify my earlier statement: there is no such thing as job security when you work for someone else. I have job security because I know I will do what it takes to find enough work to keep me (and my employees) working. Sometimes it takes long hours and a great deal of persistence and follow-through, but believe me, it pays off in the long run.

After I started my technical writing business, I used to call the documentation manager at a local consumer electronics company every three months asking if she had any work to outsource. For a year and a half the answer was “No,” but I always replied, “OK, I’ll call you again next quarter!” I never gave up and sure enough, one time I called and the answer was finally, “Yes!”

Not only did my persistence land us a major client, but we did such a good job producing that manual that it won an STC publications competition award. And when the product we documented was reviewed in *PC Magazine*, the author specifically mentioned the user documentation, saying, “The concise manual made setup easy.”

You better believe I made a color copy of that review and have shown it to every potential client I have met since,
Take Control of Your Career

I heard a saying once that went something like “you don’t get to vote on the way things are—you already did.” To me, this means that the choices you made in the past led you to where you are today, and the choices you make today will determine the opportunities you will have in the future. I like to take this notion a step further: you not only choose the path you walk, you create the path you walk!

Not happy with your current job and/or economic condition? Well, fine—acknowledge the choices you made that led you there, chalk them up to one of life’s lessons, and start creating your tomorrow.

If you look for opportunities (I mean really look—don’t wait for opportunities to come to you) and develop multiple income streams in multiple industries, you have a better chance of staying employed should one industry “recess” more than the other. For example, the biotech and healthcare industries didn’t suffer the same crash that the high-tech and dot-com industries did. The smart thing would be to have clients in multiple industries in order to minimize the risk of any one of them crashing. But how many of us did that? (I do now!)

If you expand the services you offer, if you build a support team, if you build and maintain your professional networks, you can use each and every one of those channels should you need employment options in the future.

You create the career path on which you walk.

Have you decided where you want to go?

Start walking!

Suggested Readings

For more information about applying PR to your technical communication career, see “Advancing Your Career Using Public Relations” in Intercom (July/August 1999).

For information about how to become more valuable to your company, see “Expanding Your Sphere of Influence,” Intercom (June 2005).

For information about the basics of public relations, read Speaking from Experience based on the works of L. Ron Hubbard, published by Concept Technologies, Inc.

For more information on how to create a public relations campaign, read Effective Public Relations by Scott Cutlip and Allen Center, published by Prentice Hall, Inc.

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Monday, 7:30 AM: I sit at my office desk on a lovely Vermont morning, preparing for my workday, head down, focused, planning web edits, help text, and user guide additions when the phone rings, startling me.

“I need a favor,” the voice begins, without preamble, dangling that last word. Urgency fills the air, then “Dude! A big favor.”

It’s Sallie, the trainer I had been contracted to work with over the past year. I smile. We are friends. Sallie travels a lot and time together, even a phone call, is precious.

“Sallie, I thought you were in California?” I ask.

“I am.” I’m perplexed a bit by this, but quickly gather the situation.

“You are? What is it, 4:30 AM there? You’re not at the client’s site working? Are you?” I fire these questions off in rapid succession.

“Yes. To all of that.” There’s a pause. “That’s why I need the big favor.”

The favor was simple to explain but certainly not simple to complete.

The Project

Before going to California, Sallie was creating new course descriptions and customizing existing ones for a new client. That was the favor: could I complete this project for him?

I had recently created some of these course descriptions myself, so I understood the content. What I didn’t know, at least at this point, was that Sallie had barely begun. The course descriptions Sallie had already outlined needed to be changed; all the new course descriptions still needed to be created. In other words, I was starting from scratch.

I created almost five dozen course descriptions, compiling them into a course catalogue, designed with a standard letter-size format. The catalogue was distributed in both a printed version and an electronic PDF.

To create the course catalogue, I used a process that, for the sake of a label, I call traditional technical communication. I worked on this project over five years
ago. Today, in the burgeoning world of social media, that same project might proceed quite differently, employing a process that, again for the sake of a label, I call social media technical communication. I explain—and contrast—both processes below.

Why compare and contrast these two methods? Many reasons, actually; to demonstrate how social media is changing the way we communicate, to engage our audience in a dialogue, to create a sense of community, and to better meet expectations.

**Traditional Technical Communication**

I knew the drill on how to proceed within the specified guidelines, and the skill set I needed to tap for this project: interview, write, design.

First, I interviewed. I met with the project manager to define the scope of the project. The project manager, while understanding the software’s major features, was certainly not a technical expert, being more in tune with marketing and sales. From that meeting, I learned two things. First, the new client had purchased the basic software package with a number of add-on features; I needed to create a course description encompassing all of these features. Second, the client needed to train over 200 employees, all of whom would be taking multiple courses.

I next met with numerous subject matter experts (juggling their schedules with mine) to discover the features of the various add-on packages—how these features worked and how they were used to get work accomplished.

Next, I wrote. I created a list of the courses that needed to be offered (58 in all), and I defined the context for each course description. The list included many existing course descriptions, all of which needed to be customized, as well as about three dozen new courses. Since there were so many courses being offered, I decided to create a numbering scheme, somewhat like college course offerings. I used round numbers in the hundreds for major add-on features and tens level for each area within the add-on (such as 210, 220, and 230).

Each course had a number enabling the client to see a clear progression of areas and topics. Each course description contained a title, a list of topics presented, objectives, audience, maximum class size, skill level, prerequisites, and contact hours (this last one being important because it related directly to billed hours). Subject matter experts provided technical comments. Without an editor, I had to edit and proofread the materials myself.

Finally, I designed a course catalogue. I used some existing corporate sales materials as a basis for my design, included the corporate logo, tagline, and corporate font. The catalogue had a cover page, copyright information, a table of contents, and the course descriptions (each cleanly presented on one page). As a final deliverable, I printed and created a PDF of the catalogue for the project manager.

Not once during this entire project did I speak with the client or any personnel who were to be trained. I created the course catalogue entirely based on information from the project manager and the subject matter experts. The project manager delivered the completed course catalogue to the client, fielded comments from the project administrators (not from managers whose staff would be trained, nor from any member of this staff), and reported these comments back to me. I was completely hidden behind the corporate veil, left alone to write in peace.

The bottom line: I created, they used; it was a fairly standard one-to-many communication.

I worked on all of this in 2003. Looking back, the process was lovely—in an introverted and myopic sort of way. Still, the course catalogue I created got the job done and, after a few minor tweaks, was ultimately accepted by the client.

**Social Media Technical Communication**

With the advent of Web 2.0 in the last couple of years and its myriad social media, that same project today would proceed much differently (given an enlightened corporation, I suppose). While I would still tap into my core technical communication skills—interviewing, writing, and designing—the creation and implementation of the course catalogue would follow a decidedly different path and it would be better because of it. If I were to take on this catalogue in today’s social media world, I would be:

- the expert, providing content for collaboration (not simple consumption).
- on the front line, visible for all to see—the extrovert (not hidden and anonymous).
- an enabler (or moderator if you will) soliciting, interacting, and gathering comments and reactions from engaged users in short, fluid cycles (not disengaged, unknown users).

So how might this work in a social media world? Consider this process:

I would still start out by interviewing the project manager and the subject matter experts, but I would also interview the client project administrators, their front-line managers, and certain expert and novice users (essentially, my audience). What I would gain is invaluable insight into how the client intended to use the software to get work done, who the users are and what they need to learn to perform their jobs, what the basic challenges of the managers are, and how this client defines a successful training program.

Next, I would write the course descriptions based on all this information, knowing first-hand the client’s goals in order to better meet their expectations. I would still create the course numbering system and the categories to describe each course, but rather than that being...
Implementing a Social Media Dialogue

Social media is all about creating community by engaging people through interactions and conversations around a shared goal. For this project, the shared goal is clear: creating courses that effectively train users to efficiently do their jobs. I could implement this community in a number of ways.

- A **blog** creates an opportunity for all users to comment on whatever is posted, whether it’s the course content, the description, the process, the training plan, or whatever else affects the shared goal. I could use a blog to present discussion topics about the entire process (an 8,000 meter view).

- A **forum** is another great way to create dialogue. A forum can maintain a number of different threads on various topics, with the community able to quickly read past comments and post their thoughts.

- On a **wiki**, I might post course descriptions, with the community rewriting them. Wikis must be carefully managed to capture the collective knowledge of the community.

- A **mini social network** could capture the essence of the community members and their backgrounds and expertise, all in an effort to bring everyone together. I would moderate all of these social media interactions, and I would be responsible for managing, collecting, evaluating, and including the most relevant comments and feedback. This is where my expertise as a technical communicator would most come into play.

In a different vein, I would also be responsible for setting the tone of the conversation, which could prove to be formidable, given the right set of circumstances. This is where my social skills would be most valuable, as well as my position as the expert.

**The Bottom Line**

Imagine yourself working for this client: Management has just chosen a new software package that you must know how to use in order to get your job done. Picture the meeting where you are told that you must attend a series of half-day and full-day training courses; it is an imposed decision.

Now envision this meeting in the social media setting. Together with your community of colleagues, you are participating in a series of half-day and full-day training courses that you all helped create. Wouldn’t that work better?

In a social media setting, the skill set of the technical communicator grows. The ability to successfully apply these skills, however, becomes more transparent. Ultimately, though, while the line of authorship blurs, content would become richer, deeper, more useful, and would include multiple ownership or collaboration. A collaboration through social media, properly undertaken, results in the truest form of audience-centered content. And isn’t that what technical communication is all about?
Although problems will vary from company to company, common problems associated with an out-of-date manual in my company include some of the following examples.

- Coworkers consider the style guide abandoned due to lack of updates and choose to no longer use it as a reference. If the style guide is not updated, it will be harder for editors to defend their decisions and assert influence over company documents. In his online piece "Learn how to implement an effective web style guide," Gerry McGovern states that writers take pride in their documents, and when editors cannot make decisions, the writer’s ego will win or the company will end up with content that is based on compromise instead of style.

- Coworkers have become disconnected from the rest of the company and are only aware of the tasks in their product line, creating their own terminology. Varying terms for the same item influence the translation and localization processes for international companies. The more terms that are used, the more the reader will be confused about the company’s message. This confusion will also cause more headaches for the translators themselves and disrupt an otherwise smooth and clear translation process.

- Because they lack an up-to-date style guide to expedite their work process, coworkers sacrifice etiquette for time and now produce careless emails, letters, and memos. Your company may not publish textbooks or best-selling fiction, but in a corporate atmosphere, every person in the company involved with communication is a publisher. If there is no consistent style, every published document, no matter the form, will send conflicting messages to the reader.

As illustrated by these examples, the lack of a style guide will play a significantly negative role within a company.

**Style Guides: Secure Your Brand**

Good editors know that style guides make a company more productive—fewer changes to a document mean fewer costs, fewer discrepancies, and less wasted time in the long run. Good style guides include every aspect of a company, especially the guidelines dictating the company’s brand. In “Brand Beyond Marketing,” Laura Pasternak reminds us that despite what many people believe, brand isn’t all about a logo and a catchy tagline. It includes multiple components such as customer service, employee communications, corporate philosophy, and advertising and marketing efforts. In short, a brand is a promise, and that promise needs to be placed at the center of the organization—to be the responsibility of everyone in that organization.

A consistent approach to the brand not only prevents confusion about what the brand stands for, but it also helps build trust in the brand and leads to a positive consumer experience. Consider the varied pieces of communication created by a company at any given time: memos, letters, brochures, posters, invitations, flyers, booklets, catalogues, magazines, and newsletters. Carnegie Mellon University, one of several colleges that have online style guides, reminds us that each
of these communication pieces is important to the creator—each has its own priorities and objectives. But each publication will only be effective if it reflects consistency and clarity in its message.

Marketing pieces, specifically, may have overlapping readers. Imagine the confusion that will occur if each publication is trying to send a different message. What will the reader conclude about your company? Does it seem unified? Does its brand seem strong? Can it be trusted? We want our readers to answer yes. This information alone should be motivation to keep your organization wanting to promote internal unity through the use of a style guide.

As companies continue to feel the pressure of the struggling economy, some editors may find themselves lone individuals in a sea of survival—more work, less pay, smaller staffs, or no staff at all. Maintaining the corporate style guide seems to be at the bottom of the priority list, but a corporate editor’s job is to help the company solidify its branding and key messages with overall clarity and consistency.

Keeping a style guide updated is no easy task, but its consistent revision is essential to your company’s success. Even if updating the style guide isn’t your responsibility, all editors—from the largest staff to the lone editor—must step up and support the importance of a style guide, all in the name of solidifying company uniformity. As a lone editor, I decided to take charge of my company’s style guide revision, and along the way, I discovered four main steps that are necessary to be successful. Each step is noted below, along with suggested ideas for how to complete each step. Adapt these suggestions to your own company’s situation.

Compile New and Updated Company Information
Most problems are caused by miscommunication or no communication at all among individual departments. These problems can spread across the company. Compiling information can be a time-consuming task—some individual suggestions might take longer than others and could require more networking to get the answers you need.

Make yourself visible. The sooner you start to do this, the better. Often times no one will know who to talk to about writing style. If employees have a contact person, they’re more likely to make a phone call or send an email to confirm a trademark before they send it out incorrectly to thousands of people. Let department managers know you would like to meet with them to discuss current department strategies so you can help them communicate their messages accurately and knowledgeably. Or, if you have a larger staff, assign each editor to be a contact person for specific departments.

Find out general company standards and vision. You might have to meet with a vice president or other member of upper management, but make sure you’re current on the company’s vision, core values, and other information that should be common knowledge throughout the company.

Meet with each company department. A lot of your style guide revisions can be made solely by talking with each department and learning how they operate. Which terms are official? Which are merely department slang? Find out every term the department uses, what products they sell, what terms they capitalize, what products they are developing, what images they prefer to use in their marketing pieces, preferred colors and logo usage, and common marketing phrases or key messages. Talk about existing processes, if any, or brainstorm new ways you can help each department meet their needs in conjunction with company standards.

Research past and current documents. Find as many pieces of corporate literature that you can. Look for common words, phrases, design and writing standards, product terminology, and any other elements that could become standardized.

Update current grammar trends. This task can be a bit tricky. Figure out how much detail you’ll address about style, but keep in mind that not everyone in the company cares about grammar as much as you do, let alone will they have a copy of Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style* on their desks. You also can’t list every concern that could arise, so choose an existing well-known style manual such as the *Chicago Manual of Style* or the AP* style guide to be your default fallback on questions not addressed in the corporate document.

Form relationships with decision-making colleagues. Team up with those who make company decisions such as general terminology and names for new products. You’ll stay current with ongoing information to add to your style guide artillery.

Organize Your Information with a Template
Once you’ve spoken with everyone you deem appropriate, you’re ready to revise the style guide with more accurate information. All of your facts and figures may be overwhelming, especially if you have information that previously didn’t exist in the style guide, so consider adapting a modified template outline to easily update permanent categories. Arrange your compiled information into the appropriate category. Some topic category suggestions include:

- Terminology/company style sheet
- Glossary of common company terms
- Trademark usage
- Photography and graphical elements
- Punctuation and capitalization
- Type and font guidelines
- Guidelines for individual product lines

You can add more categories as needed, but with these established areas, you’ll always have a permanent location to add information about new elements as they are introduced, such as new product lines, logos, graphics, etc.

Promote Awareness Throughout Your Company
Once you’ve got your style guide revised and in place, you need to remind employees that it still exists. And for those who joined the company without knowing about the style guide at all, make them aware of its significance. How do you get people to care about using the style guide?
A style guide is only as good as those who use it. Is the guide’s location accessible to all employees? If your company has the resources, consider putting your style guide online. Print documents tend to get lost or destroyed more frequently, and they’re also harder to maintain and keep current. An online guide will help you keep information up-to-date more quickly and accurately, and it can be accessed by everyone everywhere at any time. Employees can also reference information more quickly.

If you cannot create an online guide, you might choose another option such as emailing the guide on a monthly basis, or printing it out and distributing copies to each department.

**Training**

Know that you might not influence and correct your entire company right away. Old habits die hard, and new ones can be hard to accept. But the sooner you promote the updated guide, the sooner your company’s situation may change. Suggestions:

- Work with your human resources manager or other company employee who maintains company communication and have them announce the location of the style guide.
- Visit each department and tell them about the updated style guide yourself so you know they are aware that it has been updated.
- If you have a smaller company, volunteer to host training sessions about the style guide. Larger companies may present more difficulty for training, but if you have the time, visit individual departments and give them a helpful tip or two about the style guide. Or see if you can train department heads and have them train their staff. Follow up with each employee a few weeks later to make sure the training was completed.

**Maintain and Evaluate Future Updates**

To keep the update process more organized, you should set some standards for future updates. You’ll also have to figure out how you want to evaluate those standards. Again, you’ll want to modify these suggestions to fit your company’s circumstances.

- Decide how often the style guide should be updated and let people know (i.e., one month, three months, six months). If they know it will be updated, they’ll learn to trust it more often.
- Establish a process for updating the style guide. Have employees send email updates when they notice inconsistencies in documents. At the designated update period, take all the emails you have and make sure you incorporate them into your guide.
- Talk with company employees about the style guide. Ask them what sections they reference, if any, and how often. If employees respond that they do not use the style guide, ask them why they don’t use it and what you can do to make it more applicable or useful to their jobs. Follow up with them at a future time to see if your efforts have made a difference. Your ultimate goal is to have everyone tell you they use the style guide—and that they use it often.
- Get involved with whoever sends out company announcements. If you have a newsletter coordinator, ask if you can write articles about an aspect of the style guide on a regular basis.
- Continue to train employees using a method that is best for your company. Training can occur every six months or every year, or when significant changes occur.

When you’re finished with the style manual’s deep cleaning and return to the daily editing routine, don’t become discouraged if you don’t see change right away. Continue to work with managers and others in the company to stay up-to-date on terminology and product information as soon as it is available. If you help all employees feel like they can be part of the continual revision process, they’ll be more willing to contribute to its success. No matter if you continue to update the style guide on your own or have help from other colleagues, you’ll have completed a significant task that the company will thank you for in the future.

**Suggested Reading**


Cargenie Mellon University Writer’s Style Guide. www.cmu.edu/styleguide/.


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Recruiting Advice for New Writers

BY CHRIS KRASKA, MEMBER

The deadline had arrived for the final assignment in my technical writing program. I dropped the assignment through the professor’s mail slot, but doubts continued to nag. Should another “final” edit have been done? Could an instruction have been written better? Fortunately, reason prevailed, and I turned in the assignment with a sigh of relief. The hard part was over and all I had to do now was to find a job.

But the hard part had just begun. Unless you’re fortunate enough to have enrolled in an intern program or are able to find work through contacts, landing a first job can be one of the most difficult tasks you’ll undertake. There are lots of job postings, but all of them want writers with at least two or more years of experience. Those elusive years of experience are as easy to acquire as cheap gas.

Apart from reviewing the job ads and calling everyone I know, I considered enlisting the services of a recruiter. I looked at several recruiting firms on the Internet but wasn’t sure which company to call or what approach I should take as a new writer. I attended my local STC chapter meeting and asked for advice on choosing and working with a recruiter. I received some helpful information, but the best advice came from my chapter president who recommended that I interview several recruiters for Intercom. Apart from getting some useful information that could be shared with new writers everywhere, I would also be establishing a relationship with the recruiters serving my area. Excited by this challenge, I immediately started considering what questions to ask.

Using the phone book and the Internet, I came up with a list of recruiters. Most of the recruiting firms I chose to call were in Toronto, but I selected a few from other cities around Canada and the United States in order to get a broader perspective. I then proceeded to call each of them to arrange an informational interview. Fortunately, most of the recruiters I called work with technical writers, and a few of them do so regularly, but most had never received any requests for new writers. Regardless, most of the interviewees had some advice to offer.

These are the questions I asked in my interview with a summary of the responses I received.

What kinds of companies typically use recruiters to hire technical writers?

From the recruiting websites, it appears that all business sectors take advantage of recruiters to help them find personnel. Technical writers can expect to find jobs in health care, education, the sciences, manufacturing, IT, financing, and engineering. The recruiters I interviewed received the majority of their technical writing jobs from software companies, financial companies, and manufactures of high-end business and industrial products, such as programmable logic controllers and commercial printers.

A recruiter’s website may tell you which industries the recruiter specializes in. Many operate in all fields, but a few focus on specific sectors, such as health care or IT.

What types of jobs are typically available for new technical writers?

Most companies use recruiters to find experienced technical writers. New writers are rarely hired this way. Finding the right person requires the placement of a job ad where a technical writer would find it, collecting and analyzing résumés, conducting interviews to verify qualifications, viewing portfolios, and calling references. Most companies are reluctant to use their HR staff for the length of time it takes to find the right person; instead they use recruiters to do the legwork. New technical writers rarely require the same level of scrutiny that a more experienced person would need, and companies prefer to hire them by other means, typically by posting a job ad in a newspaper or online. On the occasions when recruiters were used to find new writers, they were hired to perform simple tasks such as content editing, basic graphic design, and simple website development.

How do recruiting agencies typically find work for technical writers?

Technical writers are required to submit a résumé to a recruiter. The recruiter enters the résumé into a database and uses the information to try and match existing writers to a job posting. Writers are also encouraged to actively review the job postings on the recruiter’s website and to alert the recruiter whenever they find a job that appeals to them.

Once a recruiter finds writers that might be suitable for a particular job, they will arrange interviews with the selected writers to determine which one is best qualified to fill the job posting.

What steps should new technical writers take to make themselves more marketable?

In most cases, technical writers should have a degree or experience in the area about which they are writing. Most employers want to minimize the length of time it takes to get a writer up to speed. A writer with the relevant industry experience knows the job terminology, the processes, and the culture to successfully create the documentation required of them. Quite often, technical writers acquire technical writing certificates to compliment their careers.
A technical writer should also acquire working knowledge of a variety of software program types. A writer should know a word processing program (typically Microsoft Word), publishing software (FrameMaker, QuarkXPress), a graphics program (Illustrator, Visio), an HTML authoring program (Dreamweaver, FrontPage), and a help authoring program (RoboHelp, Flare).

Soft skills are also an important area that should be developed. Technical writers are always communicating with subject matter experts (SMEs), managers, coworkers, and end users. If a writer can establish a comfortable rapport with others, then they have a better chance of getting the gainful cooperation they need to get a job done. Technical writers may also be called upon to give presentations, therefore comfort with public speaking should be established.

The ability to self-start is also a desirable trait in a new writer. With writing departments often operating under tight budgets, the quicker a writer can leap into his job and develop his role, the better his chance of maintaining a successful relationship with his employers.

Another tip is to volunteer and get some experience. Volunteering builds confidence and writing competence, gives exposure to a work environment, and increases the quantity and quality of your portfolio. The time spent volunteering is also a way of building the experience required for most jobs.

Networking is the final step a new writer can take to become more marketable. Because many jobs today are found through word of mouth, knowing more people increases your exposure to job opportunities. Networking also improves your soft skills, provides opportunities to gain information, and gives you a friendly ear. You can increase your circle of contacts by attending networking events, job fairs, and your local STC chapter.

What are the characteristics of a successful technical writer?

Most of the characteristics that a new writer should acquire are also the same qualities that help define a successful writer. Successful writers are experienced in the areas they write about, they have excellent social skills and network frequently, they are experienced with several software packages, and they are enthusiastic self-starters.

Successfull technical writers learn to become good time managers. They know how to multitask and prioritize jobs in order to complete assignments on time or ahead of schedule. With tight deadlines being the norm, the writer who keeps to schedule keeps working.

Another feature of successful writers is the quality of their portfolios. Over time, writers build on their body of work. Each portfolio piece exhibits the writing and formatting talents of a writer as well as offering some quantifiable proof about a writer’s familiarity with a software package or what kind of work might be produced in a certain length of time.

How do recruiters pay technical writers?

Companies will hire a technical writer either as an employee or as a contractor. Writers hired to work as employees will receive their pay from the companies that hired them. The recruiter is paid his finder’s fee, and his relationship with the writer is typically completed for that hire, except for the occasional call to maintain a relationship.

Writers who are hired to work as contractors maintain a steady communication with their recruiters and are paid on a pay schedule determined by the hiring company, which could be weekly, bimonthly, or monthly. A contractor will submit his hours and all acquired expenses (such as travel, phone calls, rentals, etc.) to the recruiter. The recruiter then adds his fee to the bill and submits it to the employer.

How do you deal with companies that don’t pay when they’re supposed to?

Most recruiters have no problem receiving payments from their respective customers, and recruiters should always pay when they say they’re going to. If you hear about a recruiter who is negligent in meeting payment obligations, conduct research to become more informed. Talk to the grieved writer to find out what happened. If there have been any complaints registered against a recruiter, they should show up in a call to the Better Business Bureau or a Google search online. If a recruiter appears suspicious for any reason, conduct extensive research or avoid him/her.

What’s the best way of enlisting the services of a recruiter?

New writers should research the various recruiting agencies and find out which one best represents their talents. Once you’ve created a short list, submit a résumé through the Internet and follow up with a phone call. It is likely that a recruiter won’t be able to do much for you as a new writer, but at least you’ve established a relationship. Keep in contact with your recruiter and update your résumé as you acquire experience.

Many recruiters have a job subscription service that sends out email updates of new job postings. Sign up for this service. Search the job postings aggressively and apply to any for which you qualify. If a recruiter finds a job that matches your qualifications, they will contact you.

What next?

Above all, be positive. Finding your first job takes a lot of legwork and patience. Working through a recruiter as a new writer may not land you your first job, but it begins a relationship with someone who will probably be of great assistance once you gain some work experience. As with most jobs, who you know is as important as what you know. The more contacts you establish as you progress through life, the richer you’ll be.

I’d like to thank all the recruiters who took time to partake in my interview. I’d especially like to thank Jack Molisani of ProSpring, Marshal Schnapps of New Media Links, and Phil Vlachavik of Technical Temps, Inc., for their extensive help.

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Rise to the Occasion: Downsizing Magazines Need Your Expertise

By JoAnne Castagna

We've all seen the headlines: "Major magazine slashes staff, offers employee buyout, announces personnel consolidation." This got me thinking—what does this mean for technical writers, like me, who pitch stories to engineering and scientific trade magazines? Will these magazines be more willing to publish my articles because they have fewer staff members?

I went straight to the source and spoke with several engineering and scientific trade magazine editors, who cover a wide range of topics including civil and military engineering, architecture, environment, archaeology, and wildlife. They told me that due to magazine staff downsizing and increased public demand for online services, many editors are now hungry for more writing from outside industry experts.

"Fewer editors on staff and expanded responsibilities for online content have increased the time demands on trade magazine editors and are leaving less time for staff-generated content," said Bob Drake, editor of Civil Engineering (CE) News Magazine and Civil Connection and Bridges e-newsletters, published by Zweig White Information Services, publications that cover the engineering, architecture, and environmental consulting industries. He continued, "Consequently, we more often—sometimes exclusively—rely on editorial contributed by readers and other groups aligned with our readers and markets."

Other trades are ramping up their online content. "Our web space and reader traffic has expanded dramatically and our content needs are so much greater now. The red carpet is out for user-supplied content," said William J. Angelo, senior Northeast regional correspondent for Engineering News-Record, a global publication that covers the architectural, engineering, and construction industries.

Outside expert content is also in greater demand because there is less expertise on magazine editorial staffs. Fewer editors on staff are leaving "niche areas where inside knowledge is needed," said Tony Slinn, editor-in-chief of Lloyd’s Register-Fairplay Ltd., an international publisher of the 125-year-old weekly maritime news magazine Fairplay, monthlies including Dredging and Port Construction, Safety at Sea International, Fairplay Solutions, and Ports & Harbors; as well as numerous data guides for the shipping industry. "This is where editors will turn to outside specialists for help, assured that the facts and figures will be accurate and the story will appeal to readers looking for insight."

This is an ideal time for technical writers to collaborate with their subject matter experts (SMEs) to get articles published with trade magazines. Not only will trade magazines benefit by your articles, but also by you and your SMEs.
Benefits of Writer-SME Collaborations:

• **Combine your skills:** Many SMEs who work in technical fields haven’t received article-writing training in college and, because of this, they are less likely to attempt to write an article on their own. This is where they can benefit by collaborating with their technical writer(s).

• **Gain positive exposure:** SMEs have great stories to tell, and this can bring positive exposure and possibly new business opportunities for your SMEs and your organization.

• **Build a lasting relationship:** Once you successfully collaborate with an SME on an article, he or she is more likely to approach you to collaborate on future articles.

I’ve experienced many of the above benefits as a technical writer-editor for the US Army Corps of Engineers, New York District, and so have the SMEs I’ve collaborated with, including engineers, biologists, geographers, and archaeologists. Thanks to these benefits, my agency asked me to create an article-writing course to help our SMEs work with me in order to publish more articles together. The course combines information mapping news-writing techniques with methods I’ve developed based on feedback from our personnel. Information mapping is a technique of dividing and labeling information for easy comprehension, use, and recall. The course shows SMEs an easy-to-follow five-step process for quickly getting an article on paper. The course also discusses the importance of having a story idea, identifying target audiences, and including visuals. To follow is information from this course that will help you work with your SMEs on getting the word out about their stories.

### Before You Write

Before you begin to write, you need to know what your story idea is and who your readers are.

Your story idea should be timely and should discuss something that would be of interest to your readers.

Your readers may be your colleagues or individuals outside of your organization. Whichever reader you write for, you need to write the article in a language they will understand.

### Five-Step Writing Process

To demonstrate each of the following steps, portions of a news article written by an Army Corps engineer (in collaboration with me) will be shown (Figures 1–5). He wrote an article about the recently completed Federal Creosote Superfund Site Project, an environmental cleanup project that was performed by the Army Corps’ New York District.

**Step 1: Write the First Paragraph**

Write the first paragraph, or lead, to your news article. The first paragraph is called the lead because it should capture a reader’s attention and “lead” them into your story.

To create the first paragraph, you should answer the six news questions—who, what, where, why, when, and how—with short, single-sentence answers (see Figure 1). Combine the answers to these questions to create one short paragraph. (It’s OK if you don’t get all of the answers in the first paragraph, but you should try to get most of them.) The rest of the answers can be moved to the next paragraph (see Figure 2).

You may be wondering, “Why do I have to cram all of this information into the first paragraph?” The reason for this is because many readers skim the beginning of news articles and don’t read them in full. If the first paragraph intrigues them, they may read more of the article. This is why it’s important to get the key information at the very beginning of the article.

**Step 2: Brainstorm Questions**

Brainstorm a list of questions you feel your readers would ask about your subject matter. Do this by thinking of several who, what, where, why, when, and how questions.

Envision that you’re speaking with someone about your project, preferably someone who isn’t familiar with it. What questions would they ask you about the project?

It doesn’t matter how many questions you come up with or if some are redundant (see Figure 3).

![Figure 1. Answers to the six news questions as they pertain to the Federal Creosote Superfund Site project.](image)

![Figure 2. The first paragraph of the Federal Creosote Superfund Site Project article. The paragraph was created by combining the answers to the six news questions.](image)
Step 3: Create an Article Outline

Take your list of questions and move them into an article outline. Place the questions in the areas (paragraphs) of the outline that you feel they would best be answered (see Figure 4).

I always suggest thinking of the beginning, middle, and end of your outline as the beginning, middle, and end of your project. This will help you decide where to place the questions in the outline.

For example, if you’re writing an article about a project you recently completed, the beginning of your outline would answer questions that pertain to the beginning of your project, such as the project’s history or what initiated the project; the middle of your outline would answer questions about what occurred during the project, such as the project’s construction; and the end of the outline would answer questions about the completion of the project and what’s going to happen in the future.

To help you do this, I suggest placing the numbers 1, 2, or 3 next to your questions (“1” standing for questions that relate to the beginning of your project; “2” standing for questions that relate to what happened during your project, and “3” standing for questions that relate to what happened at the end of your project or what will happen in the future). Place the “1” questions somewhere in the first few paragraphs of the outline; the “2” questions somewhere in the middle of the outline; and the “3” questions somewhere in the last few paragraphs of the outline.

Step 4: Write a Quick Draft

Now that you’ve created an article outline, it’s time to write a quick draft of your news article.

Figure 3. A few of the brainstormed questions developed by the Army Corps engineer who managed the Federal Creosote Superfund Site project.

Figure 4. How the brainstormed questions were used to create an article outline.
Importance of Photographs, Maps, and Other Images

Visuals are vital to an article’s success in communicating your story. Images that show what you explain in your article will help readers grasp what you’re trying to describe.

Photographs should be high-quality digital images showing people in action instead of posed photos. Always use captions describing what’s being shown in the photo, including the full names of individuals in the photo. Also give credit to the photographer or, if the image is a graphic, the creator. Images obtained from other organizations require their written permission.

You’ve already created the lead paragraph; now you are able to write the rest of the article. You’re going to create the remaining paragraphs the same way you created the first paragraph.

Create each additional paragraph by answering the questions you’ve listed for the paragraph. It’s OK if it takes you more than one paragraph to answer the questions.

As an example, let’s look at the questions our engineer selected for his second paragraph. He answered these questions and created this paragraph (see Figure 5).

If you realize that answering a question doesn’t seem suitable in an area of the article, then put the question aside to be answered elsewhere in the article.

Your quick draft should really be performed fast. Don’t stop writing to edit or look up facts, just keep on writing. You want to get your thoughts down quickly; you can edit and insert facts later.

Step 5: Edit

Now you can edit! Read your article aloud. Hearing your words will help you catch spelling and grammar errors and see where information needs to be moved, added, or deleted.

Make the article concise by keeping these writing tips for engineering and scientific trade magazines in mind: Paragraphs should be somewhat short, generally no more than one to two sentences that express one thought; and words should be simple and easy for readers to understand.

Make sure your article flows—paragraphs should logically transition to one another.

Your writing should be conversational. Write how you speak; in other words, how you would verbally explain something to someone is how you should write it.

Ask someone else to read your article, preferably someone not in your field and unfamiliar with your subject matter, because he or she will be able to quickly notice when something is unclear.

Dr. JoAnne Castagna (joanne.castagna@usace.army.mil) is a technical writer-editor and writing instructor for the US Army Corps of Engineers. JoAnne has two decades of experience as a public relations writer and has created copy for radio, TV, and numerous national and international publications. Her work can be viewed at www.drjoannecastagna.com.
World’s Largest Meeting of Technical Communicators

This May in Atlanta, Georgia, STC will host the largest gathering of technical communicators as it has done annually 55 times before. More than 100 education sessions will be presented from Sunday evening to Wednesday afternoon, 3–6 May. Top practitioners, academe, consultants, and researchers in the field of technical communication will present new material on cutting-edge technology, trends, and issues, mixed in with the staples of solid communication techniques and topic areas. But perhaps what will be remembered most is how STC solved the dilemma of wanting to be in two places at once to benefit from all of the quality presentations.

For years, attendees have struggled with choosing which one of the concurrent sessions presented in the Final Program to attend. With ten or more sessions offered at one time, choosing the most relevant one has been a perennial problem—but no more. STC will capture the content (audio and visuals) of almost every session and make it available to attendees at no additional cost. “This will increase the value of the attendee’s experience enormously,” promises STC President Mark Clifford. After the conference, STC will sync the audio with the presentations and make it available (by passcode) on the website for at least six months, allowing attendees to reap the benefits of more than 100 sessions at their convenience. STC’s Summit is the only meeting in the technical communication field that offers this added bonus.

“I am delighted that STC is able to do this,” adds Clifford. “I can now ‘attend’ all those sessions I missed. SUMMIT@aClick will also allow me to revisit the ones that I did attend and to refresh my memory of the fine points made by the speakers. It adds real value to the conference package.”

An added feature to STC’s website allows members to directly access information about the education sessions from a database that is updated almost daily. Education sessions cover a wide variety of topics and are organized into six tracks: Applying Research and Theory to Practice; Designing and Assessing the User Experience; Designing and Developing Content; Delivering People, Projects, and Business; and Managing, Promoting Your Profession; Managing People, Projects, and Business; and Producing, Managing, and Delivering Content. The database also contains details on the content of Leadership Day, preconference workshops and tutorials, and preconference certificate sessions.

All of these education sessions and the SUMMIT@aClick bring greater value to conference attendees. Recognizing the impact of the current economic condition, STC has worked even harder to keep attendees’ costs down, including lower hotel expenses. The Hyatt Regency Atlanta, where all conference sessions and events are planned, has a room rate of $174.00 (plus 15 percent tax), which is 21 percent less than the 2008 conference hotel rate in Philadelphia. The Hyatt’s conference rate is the same for single or double rooms, and a food court is adjacent to the hotel. The Hyatt can be conveniently reached by train from the airport (near the baggage claim area) for less than $2. The conference registration rate for members is still $200 less than nonmembers (which ends up saving you more than the cost of membership dues).

To assist those who must request funding from their employer to register and attend the conference, STC has created a sample memo that can be used to emphasize the necessity and benefit of attending the Technical Communication Summit.

For those thinking of skipping the 2009 Technical Communication Summit because of the downturn in the economy, think again! With myriad resources onsite, education sessions, and the advantages of networking among the best and brightest of technical communicators, the annual conference is the best place for job hunters to be—there are job postings onsite, numerous opportunities for networking, updates on industry trends, new software announcements, and everything needed to stay ahead of the game. Savvy technical communicators know that STC is their professional home and that the annual conference is the best resource to advance their career. Register for the 2009 Technical Communication Summit online at http://conference.stc.org/.

Conference Overview

- Conference begins Sunday evening with general session on trends and reception in EXPO Hall
- More than 100 sessions, organized by six tracks
- More advanced sessions are identified as Institutes
- Registration includes two receptions and morning and afternoon refreshment breaks (Honors Banquet requires optional fee)
- Captured content of nearly all sessions (SUMMIT@aClick) included in registration fee
- SIG lunches ($35) on Monday and Tuesday enhance networking opportunities
- Job Bank in EXPO Hall
- Preconference events include certificate sessions and tutorial sessions (optional fee required)

“But perhaps what will be remembered most is how STC solved the dilemma of wanting to be in two places at once to benefit from all of the quality presentations.”

Specialized Learning Begins Even Before the STC Summit

The Technical Communication Summit, STC’s 56th Annual Conference, offers extraordinary opportunities for in-depth exploration of hot topics in technical communication. The certificate programs, held just prior to the Summit, continue to be extremely popular with attendees. Combined with the variety of learning experiences offered by the regular conference education sessions, the certificate programs give technical communicators the in-depth knowledge they need to stay on top of trends in a constantly evolving profession.

Institutes offer additional in-depth learning experiences. Their content is designed for technical communicators with more experience and is presented by experts in selected topic areas.

Members may view the titles and content of certificate programs and institutes and register online at http://conference.stc.org/register/.

Certificate Programs

Attendees who participate in the preconference certificate programs are exposed to the broad range of thinking and issues within a subject area. Participants who complete a program earn a certificate of attendance.

Many of the certificate programs relate to scheduled Summit education sessions and are meant to be a further examination of one aspect of the topic area. Instructors will recommend education sessions on related topics from the Final Program (attendance at these sessions is not required for the certificate, but recommended for a more complete understanding of the topic).

STC received an overwhelmingly positive response from participants in past certificate programs:

- “I am so glad I came … I learned not only [important] information that will help my company, but also things that will help me be a better technical communicator.”
- “You definitely proved that teaching TechComm CAN be fun … you reinforced the details involved in this profession. The expectations … give me an edge and up my value. Thanks for the detailed discussion, the real-life examples, and the knowledge you have bestowed.”
- “You gave me the confidence that I am on track and need to stand up for what is the ‘correct’ way/process to produce quality docs!”
- “The certificate program at the Summit … was a resounding success! Your course did wonders for settling my confidence in my choice of career.”
- “The certificate program made the whole trip [to the conference] worthwhile. I enjoyed the certificate program and the conference—learned a lot and established some good networking contacts.”

This year, the certificate programs will be held Saturday, 2 May, and Sunday, 3 May. Attendees can choose from the following certificate programs:

- Content Management—presented by Alexia P. Idoura
- DITA: From Legacy to the Future—presented by Bernard Aschwanden
- TechComm 101—presented by Ginny Redish
- Technical Communication Manager Certificate—presented by Saul Carliner
- Adobe TechComm Suite

For those desiring an additional, but shorter preconference learning experience, STC will offer nine, half-day, preconference workshops.

Preconference Workshops & Tutorials

- A Quick Look at Adobe Captivate—presented by Neil Perlin
- Accessibility of Websites for Users with Disabilities—presented by Lisa Pappas and Jennifer Jobst
- Best Practices for Developing User Assistance—presented by Jack Molisani
- An Overview of Flare—presented by Neil Perlin
- Creating and Maintaining Blogs for Your Products—presented by Tom Johnson
- Collaborative Tools—presented by Scott Abel
- Usability Toolkit—presented by Daniel Szuc

Comprehensive Rates. Registration fees for the two-day certificate program are $1,395 for STC members ($1,795 for nonmembers), and includes full registration for the Technical Communication Summit. Members who wish to only take a certificate program without attending the Summit, may do so for $895 ($1,195 for nonmembers). The half day preconference sessions are $350 for members and $650 for non-members.

Institutes

Institutes are conferences-within-the-conference designed by experts in the field and featuring invited speakers with extensive and unique knowledge of their areas. Each institute consists of at least four conference sessions, runs concurrently with other sessions during the Summit, and is included in the conference registration fee.

Institutes include:

- E-Learning—organized by Mark Steiner
- Usability—organized by John Yesko
- Collaborative Technologies and Techniques—organized by Char James-Tanney
- Structured Authoring and Content Management—organized by Sarah O’Keefe
Education Sessions

More than 100 education sessions are scheduled during the Summit. These sessions, a combination of proposed papers and invited topics, will cover a multitude of issues affecting technical communication at all levels of experience. Sessions are organized in six tracks for convenience:

- Applying Research and Theory to Practice
- Designing and Assessing the User Experience
- Designing and Developing Content
- Developing Your Skills and Promoting Your Profession
- Managing People, Projects, and Business
- Producing, Managing, and Delivering Content—and Publishing Information

The conference program can be found at www.softconference.com/stc/.

For more information, please visit the conference website at http://conference.stc.org/.

Table 1. Conference Rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Early Bird Rates (by 21 April)</th>
<th>Walk-in Rates (after 21 April)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Member</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student Nonmember OR Retired Member</td>
<td>$325</td>
<td>$355</td>
</tr>
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</table>

* Early Bird rates have been extended through 21 April.

Members Get $200 Break on Summit Registration as STC Extends Early Bird Period

STC is sensitive to the impact of a downward economy on members’ ability to attend the 2009 Technical Communication Summit, 3–6 May in Atlanta, GA. As part of its own economic stimulus plan, the Society will extend the Early Bird discount rate for members until 21 April.

“I am so proud of our Finance Committee for approving this extension,” exclaimed STC Executive Director Susan Burton, CAE. “This will keep the registration rates affordable and, in effect, give a $200 credit to every member who missed the original deadline and wants to attend the conference.” The Early Bird discounted rate is $200 less than the standard rate of $995 that was originally effective 18 February. Member Early Bird registration rate for the conference is $795; the onsite registration rate for members is $1,095. Conference room rates at the Hyatt Regency Atlanta are also affordable at $174 for single or double accommodations, 21 percent less than last year’s room rates.

The Summit is comprised of more than 100 education sessions organized into six tracks: Applying Research and Theory to Practice; Designing and Assessing the User Experience; Designing and Developing Content; Developing Your Skills and Promoting Your Profession; Managing People, Projects, and Business; and Producing, Managing, and Delivering Content.

Top practitioners, academe, consultants, and researchers in the field of technical communication will present new material on cutting-edge technology, trends, and issues, mixed in with the staples of solid communication techniques and topic areas.

A Preliminary Program is available on the STC website in PDF form, as well as a live database of titles, speakers, and descriptions for all sessions being presented. Members who wish to have their company pay for their professional development may find the document Help in Justifying Your Attendance beneficial.

Complete details about the conference schedule, registration rates, hotel information, and registration can be found on the STC conference website at http://conference.stc.org/.

Not all sessions at STC’s Summit are from the podium. “Progressions” are a very popular series of roundtable discussions where a subject matter expert leads the discussion of the topic in brief 20-minute sessions. Comments on evaluation forms indicate attendees get as much value from one-on-one discussions, such as progressions and during coffee breaks, as from more formal presentations.
What makes a technical communicator a technical communicator? What are the skills and domains of knowledge specific to technical communication? What do technical communicators need to know in order to practice, teach, and move the TC profession forward?

An STC task force is attempting to answer these questions by developing the framework for a body of knowledge for technical communication. For the past 18 months, the STC Body of Knowledge (BOK) Task Force has worked to locate, classify, and make accessible that body of knowledge through what we refer to as the Technical Communication Knowledge Portal.

Why is a body of knowledge necessary for technical communication?

First of all, a profession cannot be recognized as a profession until it is defined as such. Engineers, for instance, have a body of knowledge they must master before they can practice as engineers, whether structural, electrical, or mechanical. Although technical communicators may not yet want such a highly codified and subdivided set of skills and practices, we do need an authoritative place to find answers to that eternal question: “What do technical communicators do, anyway?” New practitioners need to see their professional development pathways spelled out, along with concomitant educational/training opportunities. Veteran practitioners need a means for assessing their progress and determining what additional training they may need. Or they may simply need quick access to guidelines for new techniques and technologies (structured authoring, content management, etc.). And executives, who may never have heard of technical communication, need a place to find out what it is that technical communicators can do for their companies.

Secondly, recent studies of technical communicators show that writing is just a part (and sometimes a small part) of what successful technical communicators actually do. In a co-authored survey by Conklin and Hart (see Technical Communication, November 2006), only 8 out of the 75 responses listed “writer” as a unique identifier. The data show that communicators seem to be spending about the same amount of time on communication processes as they are on creating end-user documents or products. If we want to maximize our value to the business functions of corporations and agencies, we need a body of knowledge that will make that value clear to employers.

To fill these needs, the STC BOK Task Force, co-chaired by Hillary Hart and Mark Hanigan, is developing a taxonomy of defined domains and skills that will be accessed through the TC Knowledge Portal. As envisioned, the Knowledge Portal will:

- Help technical communicators assess their own level of knowledge and skills
- Provide easily accessible information for those wanting to hire technical communicators or enter the profession
- Define the profession as a specialized set of skills, abilities, and knowledge

Last September, when the proposed site map for this portal was posted on the STC website, about 150 STC members provided comments. The task force is currently incorporating those comments into a revised map/taxonomy. By February 2009—again, with your help—we can start populating the site with content (definitions, articles, original content, and links). By May 2009, we hope to have at least one of the ten top-level domains populated with content, at least down to the third level.

Look for updates and progress reports on this project. And please contact Hillary Hart for more information: hart@mail.utexas.edu.
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In addition to exhibit booths, STC’s Expo Hall includes a Vendor Showcase Theater where companies discuss product improvements and present tutorials or live product demonstrations.
Going Local

By John G. Bryan, Senior Member

With his fingertips, Howell slid a business card across the table to Sonnefeld. It wasn’t Howell’s card.

“This is our agent for all of Sub-Saharan Africa,” Howell said. “You’ll arrange all African localization contracts through Preston. He will be expecting a call from you this week.”

“Mr. Okubu is a localizer?”

“No,” Howell said. “He simply handles all contracts and subcontracts for us. He’s a business agent.”

Sonnefeld was surprised. Never before had a client insisted on directing localization of the documentation prepared by his company. As a multiple-language vendor, he had always used his own staff for the most common languages and cultures and had a set of reliable subcontractors for all others. Using an unknown third party to arrange localization with remote subcontractors of unknown reliability could lead to products that reflected poorly on his own company. Still, Sonnefeld’s contract with Howell addressed only English-language documentation in the United States, Britain, and Ireland and stipulated that Howell must approve subcontracts for all other localization services.

“How does Mr. Okubu get paid for his services? Will that come out of the subcontract?”

“Well, actually, your subcontracts will be with Okubu himself. You will negotiate a price with him, and he will then subcontract with the African localizers. You won’t need to get involved in those individual negotiations at all.”

Sonnefeld didn’t like the sound of that arrangement. “I hope that doesn’t mean we won’t have direct access to the localizers. It’s a collaborative process, you know.”

“Don’t worry. You will have access. Preston’s role is just on the business side. He will put you in touch with the African localizers, and you can collaborate all you want.”

The next morning, Sonnefeld phoned Okubo’s office in Lagos. Okubu wasn’t available. So Sonnefeld followed up with an email introducing himself, his company, and the scope of the services he would need Okubu to arrange. He attached the company’s standard contract template for localization services, having filled in the African locales for which the services would be required.

When Sonnefeld received no response five days later, he again phoned Lagos, again to be told that Mr. Okubu was unavailable. He asked the woman who answered the phone whether Mr. Okubu had received the email and attachment. She said that he had and that Mr. Sonnefeld would receive a response quite soon.

Another week passed, and Sonnefeld still received no response. He phoned Howell, who said, “Don’t worry. I’ve been talking to him. He’s reviewed your contract, made changes—just minor changes—and he should be getting that to you in a day or two.”

And Howell was right. The next day, Sonnefeld received the revised contract by email. The changes were not minor. In fact, the contract appeared to incorporate the scope of services Sonnefeld had prepared in an entirely different contract template, one that established Okubu Enterprises as sole agent for all of Sonnefeld’s localization activities in Africa.

In essence, Okubu would get a cut of all work—regardless of the client—that Sonnefeld would do in Africa until the termination of the contract.

“Calm down,” Howell said when Sonnefeld got him on the phone. “That’s just Preston testing your limits. Tell him ’No,’ and he’ll back down.”

“Or come at me with some different demand.”

“Well, yeah, probably, but that’s just the way of doing business over there.”

“How did you ever get connected to this guy?”

The phone line fell silent for a few seconds. Then Howell said, “Let’s just say that taking on Preston was the price of getting some contracts in Nigeria. And then in South Africa, then Zimbabwe. He’s well-connected. You work with Preston and you get contracts. He’s a very effective agent for us.”

“And if you don’t work with him?”

“You don’t work with Preston and you don’t get the contracts. Instead, your competitors get the contracts. That’s just the way it is. They have a different business model over there.”

Sonnefeld wasn’t naïve.
Howell was talking about using Preston Okubu to route bribes to people who could award contracts. He couldn’t say that, but the meaning was obvious. And now Howell was willing to entangle Sonnefeld in the same scheme.

“And I suppose that extends to us also? We don’t go through Okubu and then what?”

Sonnefeld could almost hear the shrug over the phone line. “Well, then, we terminate your contract and hire someone who will go through him. And,” he added, “I probably couldn’t hire you in the future for any services at all.”

**Discussion**

The US Foreign Corrupt Practices Act (passed in 1977 and revised in 1998) makes illegal the bribing of foreign officials to gain business advantage. In this case, however, Howell’s customers are not foreign officials but business people. So, setting aside for the moment issues of legality—either under US or foreign laws—consider the ethical questions raised by this case.

1. If Sonnefeld refuses to work with Okubu, Howell will terminate the contract and will not hire Sonnefeld in the future. In this bad economy, Sonnefeld needs all the work he can secure in order to keep his small staff employed. But, even if he negotiates a more favorable contract with Okubu, he can be confident that some of the money he pays to Okubu will go toward bribes. If he plays along with Okubu and Howell, he probably won’t be guilty of any illegal act, and he will secure the much-needed work. What should Sonnefeld do?

2. Localization includes adapting products to local languages and cultures. Does it also include adapting business practices to local customs? If bribery is a standard way of doing business in some cultures, does that relieve someone from our culture of the ethical burdens of our culture?

   Even if bribery is standard to some business cultures, does some ethical imperative demand that we look beyond those practices to assess their effects on people who do not have the opportunity to engage in those practices?

---

John G. Bryan (john.bryan@uc.edu) is a senior member of the Southwest Ohio Chapter. If you would like to submit an ethics case scenario, please contact him at the University of Cincinnati at the email address listed above.

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March 2009
Pulling DITA Out of Your HAT

BY NEIL PERLIN, Associate Fellow

In October 2008, MadCap Software (www.madcapsoftware.com) announced that a version of Flare due out in early 2009 will support DITA. This version, according to MadCap, will, among other things, “seamlessly import DITA content,” “create DITA content externally [and import it automatically],” and “generate and publish DITA content.” In January 2009, Adobe released version 8 of RoboHelp with support for DITA Map import. This version, according to Adobe, will “assist ... with ... import of a DITA Map file or topic into an existing RoboHelp project” and “import a DITA Map file to create a RoboHelp project.” I haven’t checked to see what other help authoring tool vendors are up to regarding DITA support, but I have to assume they’re hot on MadCap and Adobe’s heels. This, in my opinion, represents a big shift in the DITA space. That shift is the subject of this column/opinion piece.

The Background

Before I go on, I need to postulate several points:

• **Structured information is good.** Structured information helps readers because it’s easier for them to get and keep a mental picture of the information in a document when that information is written consistently. Structured information also helps technical communicators, because it’s easier to write chunks of information when there’s a consistent structure to use rather than having to decide, or remember, what structure to use with each new chunk.

• **There are many ways to create structured information.** Three of these methods, which formed the core of a panel discussion between myself, Alan Houser, and Sarah O’Keefe at STC’s 2008 annual conference, include DITA (Alan), structured Framemaker (Sarah), and a mix of templates and style sheets (me).

• **DITA has significant advantages over the other two approaches noted in the previous point.** It’s vendor- and tool-independent, unlike structured Framemaker, and it programatically enforces document structure, unlike the templates-and-style-sheets approach.

So DITA should be widely used within technical communication to produce topic-based, structured content for single sourcing and multichannel publishing. Interestingly, it isn’t. In my experience with companies in and out of high-tech, most shy away from DITA after their first exposure. Why?

Why Not Use DITA?

I’ve heard many reasons for not using DITA, but the relevant ones for this column are:

• **The need to buy a new tool.** With this comes the costs of buying the tool, getting trained to use it (or the hidden cost of *not* getting trained), and lower productivity during the ramp-up period.

• **Free tools aren’t free.** The DITA open source toolkit is free, but it’s more technically demanding than a GUI-style tool, so tasks can take longer and have a greater risk of errors. You may also have to use multiple free tools to do what an integrated, GUI-style tool will do, which again takes longer and increases the risk of errors. Finally, if you ever need to hire contractors, there are fewer who are comfortable at a more technical level, so they’ll be more expensive.

• **It’s not just a tool issue.** Creating DITA content requires you to change how you structure and write content and how you think about structuring and writing that content—to move from a document orientation to a topic orientation.

• **There’s often no web-oriented output.** DITA tools offer many outputs (PDF, Eclipse Help, HTML Help, and JavaHelp) but don’t seem to offer a web-oriented output like the WebHelp offered by help authoring tools (HATs). According to several vendors, this is due to the costs of providing such an output. They noted that the outputs offered by the DITA tools are mainly predefined by other companies, such as HTML Help from Microsoft or JavaHelp from Sun. This makes it easy for the DITA tool vendors to offer these outputs. Creating a “WebHelp” output would be harder because each DITA tool vendor would have to create its own. Such a web-oriented output would also have to be tested with each new release of a major browser, also an expensive proposition.

• **It’s difficult to justify if you’re not doing translation.** If you create material that’s destined to be translated, it seems to be fairly easy to derive the concrete data needed to test whether adopting DITA is cost-justifiable. But if you’re not translating, cost-justification seems to be a lot more difficult.

So DITA offers some major benefits, but also some problems that are significant enough to deter its adoption. How might HAT support for DITA affect this situation?

The Impact of the Help Authoring Tools’ Support for DITA

When I wrote this column in December 2008, I only know of one HAT vendor, MadCap, that had announced DITA support. When I updated this column in February 2009 for publication, Adobe had appeared on the scene as well, and I fully expect other HATs to add DITA support in 2009. So what follows are observations on HAT support for DITA in general.
• You may not have to buy a new tool, but instead you can continue to use your familiar help authoring tool. This eliminates the cost of buying the new tool and the cost of the lost productivity during the ramp-up period. (This point presumes that the HAT-generated material will meet DITA standards. If it doesn’t, you may still be able to use the HAT to generate web-oriented help by creating the DITA content in a regular DITA authoring tool, then importing it into the HAT for output to the web-oriented format.)
• Working in a GUI-style HAT eliminates the complexity (and cost) of using more technically demanding tools, or multiple tools. It also means that there will be more contractors available since you’d be looking for a contractor who knew how to use HAT to produce one particular output.

These points above make it far easier to cost-justify a move to DITA simply because you’re not spending as much money.
• Creating DITA content in a HAT still means you need to switch from a document orientation to a topic orientation, but not having to learn a new tool at the same time means fewer changes to handle at one time.
• You’ll be able to output your material in a web-oriented format.

So how might these factors affect DITA? There are two possibilities:
• They increase the use of DITA by making it easier to cost-justify and to create the content. DITA simply becomes one more output created by an authoring tool that you already have and know.
• They decrease the use of DITA by making it easy for useful early adopters to back out. Companies that moved to DITA early on only to regret the decision have not had any easy way out. Being able to import DITA content into a help authoring tool and convert it to some other format provides that way out.

In my opinion, the first possibility is the most likely. Structured documentation is useful, and DITA is the most widely known standard for creating structured documentation. By lowering the barriers to entering DITA and making it easier to back out, I expect that the HATs’ support for DITA will spread its use. If you’re currently using one of the major help authoring tools but have been considering switching to DITA and moving to another tool in order to do so, talk to your HAT vendor first. It might make DITA more convenient than you expect.

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3. Orlando, FL
4. Portland, OR
5. Pittsburgh, PA

22–26 March 2009 1.

The American Chemical Society (ACS) will hold its 237th ACS National Meeting & Exposition in Salt Lake City, UT. For more information, contact:
ACS
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help@acs.org
http://portal.acs.org/portal/acs/corg/content

6–7 April 2009 2.

The STC Rochester chapter will host spectrum 2009, the longest-running STC chapter conference, at the Hyatt Regency in Rochester, New York. This year’s theme is A Golden Opportunity: Celebrating Fifty Fabulous Years, commemorating spectrum’s 50th year. For more information, contact: Anne McNelis and Jennifer Ferris STC Rochester spectrumconference@gmail.com. www.stc-rochester.org/

17–22 April 2009 3.

The International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI) will hold its annual conference in Orlando, FL, at the Walt Disney World Dolphin Hotel. For more information, contact:
ISPI
+1 (301) 587-8570
conference@ispi.org
www.ispi.org/AC2009/


The American Society for Indexing (ASI) will be holding its annual conference, “Scaling the Heights,” in Portland, OR, and the Doubletree-Lloyd Center Hotel. For more information, contact:
ASI
kmertes@hotmail.com
www.asindexing.org/site/conferences/conf2009/index.shtml

1–5 May 2009 5.

The Council of Science Editors (CSE) will hold its annual meeting, “Show me the Data—The Science of Editing and Publishing,” in Pittsburgh, PA, at the Hilton Hotel and Towers. For more information, contact:
CSE
+1 (703) 437-4377
CSE@councilscienceeditors.org
www.councilscienceeditors.org/events/annualmeeting09/index.cfm


The Technical Communication Summit, the annual conference of the Society for Technical Communication (STC) will be held at the Hyatt Regency Atlanta in Atlanta, GA. For more information, please contact:
Lloyd Tucker
+1 (571) 366-1904
lloyd@stc.org
http://conference.stc.org/


The 2009 IEEE International Symposium on Technology and Society presented by the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers (IEEE) will be held in Tempe, AZ. For more information, contact:
ISTAS
www.ieeessit.org


The Society for Scholarly Publishing (SSP) will hold its annual meeting in Baltimore, MD, at the Marriott Baltimore Waterfront. For more information, contact:
SSP
+1 (303) 422-3914
info@sspmet.org
www.sspnet.org/Events/spage.aspx
After a long day at work as a technical communicator for DuPont, STC Associate Fellow Bill Collins relaxes by practicing his instrument of choice—the Appalachian or mountain dulcimer. A rather unusual instrument, the mountain dulcimer is a small diatonic folk instrument that sits in the lap, has three or four strings, and takes its antecedents from northern Europe.

Seventeen years ago, Collins’s mother gave him an oddly shaped gift under the Christmas tree that turned out to be a mountain dulcimer. She had purchased it for him because “she liked the looks of it. She’s a musician also and she had seen it in a music store and thought it would look nice on a wall.” But the dulcimer became more than just a decoration when Collins, who already played the guitar and other instruments, discovered there was a local club for dulcimer enthusiasts. He went to the club, learned how to tune it, and he fell in love with it and “ended up playing it more than anything else.”

After the initial introduction to the instrument, Collins bought a few books and began going to weekend festivals in the Northeast and South where he participated in classes and workshops. In this way, he was able to teach himself the mountain dulcimer. His self-education was effective; he now gives private lessons in his home and also teaches at festivals and workshops.

The music of the mountain dulcimer is quiet, and the fashion in which it is played is comparable to a bagpipe. Because there are only a few strings, the melody is played on one string while the other strings serve as “drones.” A lot of modern players, however, add chords, and although it’s not the traditional way to play the instrument, it has become common. There is a repertoire of dulcimer music from the southern Appalachians that most players know, but many also play Irish and Celtic music, classical, and even some pop. Pop artists like Joni Mitchell and Cyndi Lauper have used the mountain dulcimer in some of their recordings. Lauper even had the opportunity to study with the great dulcimer player, David Schnaufer, whom Collins also studied with for a few weeks.

The mountain dulcimer is a solo instrument, but there are local clubs where players gather together. Collins goes to his local club in Wilmington, Delaware, where he and fellow musicians play mostly traditional music. Although his passion is for the mountain dulcimer, Collins still plays guitar and also owns a tenor banjo, pennywhistles, bowed psaltry, and lap harp. He says, “most dulcimer players own more than one dulcimer because they are relatively inexpensive and light—there are bass, baritone, and soprano dulcimers, as well as hybrids of dulcimer and banjo. You can get carried away.” (Today, Collins owns 14!)

Collins has also published three books of arrangements as well as composed some original music. The books he published were arrangements of old Shaker music, a book of Irish jigs, and a book of harp tunes composed by the famous Irish, blind composer from the early eighteenth century, Turlough O’Carolan.

Collins enjoys attending dulcimer festivals all over the East, including Vermont, New York, Connecticut, and West Virginia, where he teaches and performs; some favorite performances have been the August Dulcimer Daze festival in Vermont and one at Shenandoah University in Virginia, where he had very rewarding playing experiences: “It’s gratifying when you feel that you’ve played well, the people really liked it, and it all went off without much of a hitch.”

Although he has been playing for years, Collins is “usually in kind of a tizzy before performing.” However, he finds that studio recording can be even more stressful than playing in front of a crowd. “Even scarier than performing was being in the studio recording—there with just a recording engineer and playing partner; [it can be] worse than playing in front of a few hundred people…the pressure of the microphone [can] be very inhibiting.” Samples from The Sum of the Parts, the CD he recorded with 2008 National Mountain Dulcimer Champion Nina Zanetti, can be heard at http://cdbaby.com/ cd/collinszanetti.

For Collins, playing the mountain dulcimer is his passion, and the instrument plays a significant role in his life: “the appeal [of playing the dulcimer] is that the music side of things is so different that it allows me to go in a different direction mentally and emotionally than [my] day-to-day job—a very soothing relief from staring at a computer all day…. It has evolved into a rewarding obsession.” 

Bill Collins performing with his mountain dulcimer at a festival.
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