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NAVIGATING THE INTERNATIONAL VIRTUAL WORKPLACE

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NAVIGATING THE INTERNATIONAL VIRTUAL WORKPLACE

STRATEGIES FOR SMOOTH SAILING IN GLOBAL COMMUNICATION

BY Priti Thakur, Member
A Westerner once complained to his Asian manager about the trouble he was having with the office printer. The manager said, “What do you want me to do about it?” This really upset the employee, who thought that the manager was being unhelpful and impolite, and insinuating that it was wrong of him to complain. When the irate Westerner related this to another Asian colleague, his colleague did not find anything wrong with what the manager had said. “Didn’t he explicitly ask you how he could help you?” he asked.

In Africa, labels for products often depict the contents inside. Therefore, when boxes with the “internationally recognized” symbol for “fragile” (i.e., a broken wine glass) arrived at an African port, they were presumed to contain pieces of broken glass and were promptly disposed of in the sea without being opened!

The two incidents above exemplify the lack of global savvy that can lead to miscommunication between people. These examples show how even simple interactions between people from around the globe warrant a careful understanding of the underlying, much more complex processes that arise due to cultural, linguistic, legal, technological, or other differences. Understanding these processes is imperative for the success of all technical communicators working in global environments.

As organizations globalize, technical communicators find themselves interacting virtually with people from around the world. This international, virtual work environment may include little or no face-to-face interaction; communication times, topics, and complexity may vary; and other individual and/or organizational factors might come into play. Any number of communication problems may arise due to cultural differences.

Technical communicators need to equip themselves with the skills and knowledge to succeed in international, virtual work environments. This article discusses the factors that could cause communication problems in these global offices, and it also suggests policies and practices to avoid such problems and help facilitate cross-cultural communication.

Cultural Factors

In their book Culture and Organizations: Software of the Mind, Geert Hofstede and Gert Jan Hofstede state that culture is “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others.” They also talk about “dimensions of national cultures” that result in differences in peoples’ workplace behavior. When researchers talk about “culture,” they refer to the average behaviors and attitudes displayed by the members of a given culture. Culture is learned, and cultural traits show variations depending upon what characteristics constitute a particular culture. The way in which people express their feelings, how they interact in society, their perception of good or bad, and what practices or rituals they perform—all are modified by culture. These cultural variations translate into different patterns of communication and ethics in the workplace. Therefore, there is the potential for misunderstandings during communication that involves people from diverse cultures.

Potential Problems with Cultural Factors

Cultural factors dictate peoples’ behaviors and preferences toward technology and language use in the workplace. Even when virtual team members use similar technologies and language to communicate, cultural factors might still contribute to miscommunication. Cultural differences related to psychology, such as schema expectations (association of objects, concepts, or ideas that may vary in different cultures), can affect communication patterns as well.

As an example, when communicating with people from a collectivist culture, we should remember that in general they value relationships and group harmony over tasks, high-context communication prevails, and direct appraisal of subordinates is not appreciated. People from individualist societies like the United States, however, generally prefer and exhibit exactly the opposite traits. These types of key cultural differences between people need to be understood and communication patterns need to be altered to reduce complications.

International virtual office communication also involves varying cultural expectations of face (the tendency to avoid embarrassing situations, or in other words, to save face) that need to be dealt with. A person from one culture could inadvertently say or do something that may be inappropriate according to the expectations of a person from another culture and may cause him or her to lose face. Using directness in the communication process, for example, may be perceived as rude behavior by some cultures, while a less direct approach might be confusing for others.

Suggested Policies and Practices for Cultural Factors

The subtlety and complexities associated with cultures cause various problems. Moreover, these problems may be difficult to gauge and mend. Therefore, the need for heightening awareness about cultural issues is of utmost importance.

We must understand the universal yet varying expectations of face needs of people from different cultures and avoid doing anything that could be perceived as incorrect or offensive. The message that we send to our coworkers should be correctly interpreted, understood, and accepted.

Alongside Hofstede’s dimensions of national cultures, a measure of cultural difference as given by Fons Trompenaars (1998) suggests that the United States is one of the most strongly universalistic cultures where people favor rules over relationships. Therefore, Americans need to pay more attention to relationships when working with people from other (particularistic) cultures. In this regard, visiting our counterparts and having face-to-face communication or having regular telephone conversations and/or videoconferences to establish cordial relationships would help in fostering mutual understanding. The benefits of building these relationships include better cooperation, increased collaboration, quicker response time to...
requests, and more pleasure in working together as a team.

Making resources available for professionals to learn about cultural variations, as well as developing an appreciation of different cultures as a whole will pave the way for an excellent professional relationship with individuals from other cultures.

**Linguistic Factors**

Languages around the globe vary to a large extent. The relationship between language and culture is undeniably symbiotic. Language serves as a cultural expression without being completely synonymous with it. In most cases, a language functions as the basis of ethnic, regional, national, or international identity. Languages used by different cultures vary in terms of verbal concepts and in written text. Even the use of a single language (say, English) by people from different cultural backgrounds may show variation in terms of their understanding, preferences, and expectations. For example, British English may show a lot of variation from American English.

It is also interesting to note that some concepts or terms may be missing or unknown for people from certain cultures. For example, nations not as technologically advanced as others would find it hard to coin terms for these advancements in their language. Similarly, people who do not live in democratic nations might not have an equivalent word for “democracy” in their native language.

**Potential Problems with Linguistic Factors**

Since much of intercultural online communication is done in a common language—English—it leads to the assumption that all participants have the same linguistic understanding, preferences, and rhetorical expectations, despite their cultural differences. This wrongful assumption can lead to costly mistakes impacting not only the individuals concerned but also the organization(s). Existence of various dialects of English around the world also lead to communication problems.

Misunderstanding linguistic factors not only leads to miscommunication, it may also cause flawed work for the intended audience. Therefore, it becomes essential to communicate clearly, concisely, and effectively in the workplace so that bigger consequences affecting the audience/client can be avoided.

With regard to oral communication, linguistic problems may present themselves in the form of directness or explicitly stating things (this may be perceived as inappropriate in some cultures), tone, or the silence/pause/time gap while speaking (a pause may be considered awkward by some people, and the same pause may be considered too short and an interruption by others). A lack of face-to-face interaction in virtual offices means a lack of nonverbal (visual) cues, thus causing increased misunderstandings.

**Suggested Policies and Practices for Linguistic Factors**

Effective intercultural communication is not easily accomplished with just good language skills. Cultural differences, as categorized by dimensions, show variations in many aspects of peoples’ lives and impact their perceptions and expectations of rhetorical elements. Therefore, professionals need to familiarize themselves with key rhetorical principles. These can serve as a framework for them to understand varying cultural communication expectations.

To facilitate effective oral communication, professional communicators need to recognize the linguistic preferences of people from different cultures. For written communication, it is important to remember guidelines with respect to choices in grammar, punctuation, and visuals.

Three important practices that can minimize confusion and facilitate the flow of information between clients and coworkers from differing cultures are the processes of localization, internationalization, and translation. These processes help in “custom fitting” materials according to the culture of the target audience (localization), converting culture-specific materials into a more general format usable by members of many cultural groups (internationalization), and translating materials effectively from one language to another by accounting for the rhetorical expectations of different cultures (translation).

Measures that would help coworkers refine their language skills should also be supported and encouraged. Workplace communication is a two-way process, and if both parties are aware of linguistic differences, they can reduce misunderstandings and increase productivity.

**Technical Factors**

Technical factors affecting online virtual interactions include the use of various communication technologies or models. Team members may interact using simple electronic media such as phones, email, chat, or fax, or more advanced technologies such as videoconferencing, corporate intranets, various networks and databases, and other newer software.

When interacting with coworkers from around the world, one of the most important technological aspects to bear in mind is the extent of technological advancement in different places. While the use of the Internet and communication-related technology is increasing at an astounding rate around the globe, we still find considerable difference in availability as well as technological limitations in different locales.

**Potential Problems with Technical Factors**

If all or similar kinds of technologies are not available for people on both
sides of the communication process, it can become a major hurdle in effective communication. For example, the availability of reliable phone lines and Internet services are taken for granted in the United States, but with a lack of resources, power outages, and any number of other restrictions/limitations in other parts of the world, use of these technologies may not work smoothly for communication. Coworkers living in different regions (especially rural areas) may not have access to new communication infrastructures like integrated services digital network (ISDN), and employees in other countries may be subject to later release dates for software. Some other problems include incompatible networks, slow computers, and traffic on the network. Video conferencing solutions are either expensive and good quality, or cheap and unacceptably low quality. Broadband services may not be available everywhere, and installing dedicated lines could increase costs for the organization.

Security issues related to the use of various communication technologies may present a whole new set of problems, which may in turn require the use of security technologies. Bugs/flaws in systems (intranets) used might also create problems. Furthermore, not selecting the most appropriate and cost-effective technology can result in miscommunication, a waste of time, an increase in costs, and ultimately, a failure of the whole process. Inadequate resources to invest in new technologies and networks and a lack of support staff trainers can result in failure for the virtual team.

- Judiciously selecting and using the available technological options and accounting for the technical limitations of coworkers located in other places.
- Adopting strategies to overcome any security issues.
- Allotting resources for maintenance and upgrades.
- Encouraging and supporting team members to develop skills that foster an effective and creative use of media.

Legal Factors
Just as different nations have different cultures and languages, laws in different parts of the world also vary. Laws and ethics are not universal; they are related to cultural values. Different cultures have different values and varied concepts of ethical and unethical behavior. This translates to myriad professional ethics in international virtual offices.

Potential Problems with Legal Factors
Predicting the legal and ethical norms of a given culture is very difficult because of cultural complexities and variations. Also, what is considered legal in a particular culture may not necessarily be ethical within that same culture. In addition to this already complex situation is the advent of online communication technologies used in virtual workplaces, which are not restricted by any physical boundaries. Therefore, it becomes difficult to discern which laws apply or where one set of laws ends and another begins.

The laws governing the transfer and sharing of sensitive materials might pose the biggest challenge for international virtual offices. When information is transferred and/or shared, what is perceived as sensitive or personal information (copyrighted information) by one party may not be perceived as such by their counterparts in another part of the world. Misuse of such information by individuals in these nations would be very tough to stem. Moreover, what we think of as misuse might not even be considered so in a different national culture. For example, the United States is very concerned with privacy of financial and medical records. However, some cultures share such information, at least in part, with friends, family, and/or acquaintances. Therefore, professionals from a different culture might not hesitate to disclose such information to third parties.

Legal problems (such as copyright violation) may also be revealed when companies attempt to make software products available relatively inexpensively or for free to clients and colleagues overseas. If some nations have weak copyright laws, it may lead to piracy and also
make it difficult for companies to track down the offenders. The work of virtual team members may also suffer without the necessary software products.

Suggested Policies and Practices for Legal Factors

As cultures around the world diverge in their laws, professional ethics, social setup, and personal morals and principles, it is imperative to take steps to protect ourselves from being part of any illegal or harmful processes. The following list could be useful for ensuring that copyright is secure and that privacy issues are adequately addressed:

1. Invest time and effort in researching and understanding the laws and ethics of the countries to which our colleagues belong. Become familiar with international copyright law and the differences between US and international copyright law.
2. Become acquainted with the policies and guidelines of the international employer.
3. Share only required materials. Refrain from transmitting or sharing specific personal information unless absolutely necessary.
4. Keep written documentation of materials requested by team members as well as records of materials transferred.
5. Ensure that your colleagues are aware that shared materials are copyrighted or information is protected by privacy laws.
6. Ascertain whether copyrighted materials are protected against unauthorized use by international copyright treaties or conventions.

Other Factors

In addition to the cultural, linguistic, technological, and legal factors discussed above, there are other factors which may contribute to confusion in international virtual offices:

Time Difference—Due to time zones, work can often be done around the clock in international virtual offices. However, this scenario might have a downside for tasks that require synchronized activities in different locations.

Selection of Team Members—It is absolutely essential in a virtual workplace to have a team of trained and experienced professionals who work well together. Mentoring new people in their field/job functions is not ideal in this setting.

Culture of the Organization—The culture of an organization is essential for the successful functioning of international virtual offices. Systems that encourage communication, cooperative work, and information sharing—such as rewards or measurement and control systems—should be in place to reflect team structures. A lack of resources for setting up and maintaining systems that cater to the unique needs of a virtual workplace would prove detrimental for the team and consequently for the organization.

Managerial Issues—In building virtual offices, managers must account for diversity in international cultures and ensure that all individuals in the virtual team can participate and benefit from interactions. If management exhibits reluctance toward a virtual work environment, is not flexible, or ignores any challenges that surface, then it becomes impossible for the virtual office to function effectively.

Becoming Globally Savvy

An international, virtual office team is more than a group of individuals working in isolation. In order to maximize overall performance, individuals from different cultures within a team need to be trained about appropriate communication practices. They also need to be made aware of steps they can take to avoid pitfalls due to cultural, linguistic, technological, legal, or other differences. Other than the steps listed for each factor above, we can also educate ourselves about specific cultures and their norms. By taking self-assessment tests about intercultural issues (such as the Trompenaars Hampden-Turner Test), we can improve our skills to function successfully in international virtual workplaces. When individuals are able to work effectively and efficiently while avoiding miscommunication, this will translate into effective and efficient functioning of an international virtual workplace.

Suggested Readings


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The Bill passed by a massive margin of 376–1. Although it was stymied before reaching the Senate, there is every chance it will become law under the new administration. This has enormous implications for all public documents and the professionals who write them.

There is nothing new, of course, in government mandating standards for professional practice. Most professions have legally prescribed reference points for their work. But the remarkable aspect of the Brayley Bill is that plain language lacks what other fields usually have: a professional infrastructure. There is no plain language equivalent to a College of Surgeons or Institute of Engineers. So, when the Bill had to set down what is meant by plain language, it resorted to referencing two government guidelines:

In implementing subsection (a), an agency may follow either the guidance of the Plain English Handbook, published by the Securities and Exchange Commission, or the Federal Plain Language Guidelines.

This suggests to me that plain language is starting to gain influence beyond the capacity of its existing institutional base. If we are to make the most of the Brayley Bill, it is time that plain language as a profession caught up.

Some senior practitioners have taken the first step by forming an International Plain Language Working Group in 2008. With representatives from the three major plain language organizations, and practitioners from a dozen different countries, the group has broad terms of reference to examine:

1. The definition of plain language and its scope.
2. Plain language standards.
3. A formal plain language institution.
4. Accreditation and training for practitioners.
5. Research and publications to develop the profession.
6. Advocacy and other activities.

I. The definition of plain language and its scope.

You’d think that by the time a field was being mandated in legislation, it would be well past a clear definition. Yet contention remains about what plain language constitutes, mainly because it has evolved so rapidly in recent decades.

Sixty years ago, texts such as Ernest Gowers’ Plain Words focused largely on elements of expression: word choice and sentence length, passive versus active voice, unnecessary jargon and cliché. These were the focus when plain English started to gain influence in the early 1970s. It attracted criticism as a result.
Then, from the late 1970s to 1990s, the scope expanded greatly, applying its core principle of audience focus to content, structure, and design in equal measure to expression. Good examples of this more comprehensive approach are Joe Kimble’s 1992 “Charter for Clear Writing” and Martin Cutts’ 1995 *Oxford Guide to Plain English*, which tripled the scope of the discipline compared with Gowers.

Yet recently, our definitions have become more generalized, focusing on whether a document achieves its outcomes rather than its linguistic elements. The Center for Plain Language definition is:

*A communication is in plain language if the people who are the audience for that communication can quickly and easily:*

- find what they need
- understand what they find
- act appropriately on that understanding

Technical writers or information designers might be wondering how plain language so defined differs from what they do. As Ginny Redish—one of the pioneers of plain language, information design, and usability—said in a recent interview:

*My definition of usability is identical to my definition of plain language, my definition of reader-focused writing, my definition of document design…. We’re here to make the product work for people.*

A consensus definition of plain language may end up mixing both of these strains, much as the Plain English Foundation in Australia does:

*Plain language means writing that adapts and tests the content, structure, expression, and design of a text so that a particular audience will achieve intended outcomes.*

2. Plain language standards.

A definitive definition is a crucial first step because it will shape the main practical outcome: international standards. Here again, there are two schools of thought, each flowing from the definitional positions that stress “elements” or “outcomes.”

On the one hand, private organizations offering accreditation of documents work with elements of content, structure, expression, design, and style, checking a document against best-practice criteria. They use checklists but require a great deal of expertise when applying them to each context. Examples include the Plain English Campaign’s Crystal Mark (UK), the WriteGroup’s WriteMark (New Zealand), or the Wordsmith Clarity model (Canada).

One the other hand, there is a strong case for basing standards in an iterative testing regime that focuses on whether a specific document actually works rather than what elements it uses.

Proponents of the first approach point out the cost and time associated with testing every document, and the contexts where testing is not appropriate. Supporters of a testing respond that it is more likely we can encourage organizations to test their documents than get a group of plain language practitioners to agree on techniques. The International Plain Language Working Group will need to resolve these differences.

3. A formal plain language institution.

With the standards hurdle overcome, the next question is where to house any plain language standards. Who will control them, distribute them, and update them? How will that be funded? The problem here is that plain language does not have a strong institutional base. Our two major international organizations have limited operations, no professional staff, and memberships in the hundreds rather than the thousands.

Plain Language Association International (PLAIN) was formed out of the Plain Language Network in 1993 and held the first of its six conferences in 1995. Only recently incorporated, its lifeblood is a lively international email forum. The most important journal in the field is published by Clarity, which has a larger membership but a narrower focus on legal writing.

The new kid on the block, the Center for Plain Language in Silver Spring, Maryland, holds an annual forum and boasts the recent success of the Brayley Bill, but its outlook is confined mostly to the United States. Professional organizations in other countries, such as
the Association of Swedish Language Consultants, have similar national limits. Other influential organizations mix public and commercial activities, including the Plain Language Commission in the United Kingdom, the Plain English Foundation in Australia, and the Writing Group in New Zealand.

All of these organizations are formally represented on the International Plain Language Working Group, and they will need to decide how to structure some kind of broader institution as a professional base for plain language. This may mean becoming foundation members of a larger body, much as professional accounting bodies band together for their standard setting.

4. Accreditation and training for practitioners.

Of course, it’s only a short step from setting standards for documents to setting standards for the practitioners who will apply them. Whatever definition the Working Group recommends, our standards are unlikely to be fixed, immutable rules. They will still require expertise in understanding how to apply them to each context. That then begs the question of the quality of practitioners themselves, and the need for accreditation or certification to regulate their work.

There are already some national models for doing so. The Association of Swedish Language Consultants has had an equivalent to certification through an academic program in a Swedish university. Begun over 30 years ago, it is highly competitive, with around 300 applicants each year for 20 places. More recently, another university has offered a further 20 places, and others may follow. The association will then look at becoming the formal authorizing body to test qualifications and issue certification.

Whether this would work at an international level would depend on the cooperation of a number of universities working in more than a dozen languages in over twenty countries. In many, plain language has minimal influence in the academy and is, at times, actively opposed.

Alternatively, a new institution could take on the task from the outset, including setting standards for practitioners, testing them against those standards, developing a charter of ethics, offering training and support, and re-testing and re-accrediting practitioners over time. It is one of the most fraught processes that any field can go through, but it is essential if that field is to rise to a profession. The Society for Technical Communication has had its own share of debate on this topic.

5. Research and publications to develop the profession.

With an institutional base and clear standards, a fledgling profession might then look at strengthening its research base. Too many of the principles applied in plain language practice stem from conventional wisdom as much as hard evidence. Increasing professionalism means separating what we assume will work from what we know actually does work.

In a recent conference paper, Karen Schriver cited several examples of long-cherished principles that do not stand up to scrutiny. One is the practice of using no more than seven items in a list, based on George Miller’s 1956 paper on short-term memory. But Miller’s insights related to memory when chunks of information are removed from view rather than remaining on the page. The conventional interpretation of Miller’s research turns out to be a misinterpretation.

There are too many similar examples where techniques are applied without a solid research basis. This does not mean they are wrong, but that we do not have enough scientific certainty about their effectiveness. In strengthening the research, a plain language profession will need to reassess the evidence for any technique it uses, identify those supported by solid evidence, and seek to verify or discard those that are under-researched. As with accreditation and training, a cooperative relationship with the academy will be essential, along with an expanded publication program.

6. Advocacy and other activities.

The final area of focus for the Working Group will be the potential for advocacy. Ironically, this was added late to the terms of reference, although the one thing that plain-language practitioners have been very good at is gaining public and political endorsement. The Brayley Bill is but the latest example of high-level government support. The media regularly runs articles highlighting poor language practice. The public seems to lap them up. In Australia not long ago, three books about language were simultaneously in the top-ten bestseller list.

Imagine the difference that a better coordinated, professionally based organization could make in accelerating this impact. With a set of standards, professional accreditation, and continuing research, plain language can realize its potential to reform our public language, improve services, and maximize the opportunities of every citizen to participate in public life.

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For the past four years, I’ve lived outside India. Being an expatriate has given me a unique perspective; it has made me more responsive toward the issues of global awareness and cultural sensitivity. More importantly, working as a technical communicator in East Asia has rewarded me firsthand experience of the cultural differences and their implications on both my professional and personal life. Throughout this article, I’d like to share my experiences—good and bad—with Western technical communicators about what it’s like to work for a Korean company.
Learning to Appreciate a Different Culture

As more and more workplaces become multicultural, there’s a great sense of appreciation and respect toward employees from different countries, cultural backgrounds, or ethnicities. Take South Korean conglomerates like Samsung, for instance, where the concept of “global” employees has become quite popular. At Samsung, you’re more likely to meet contract employees from India, China, Russia, Ukraine, Japan, Germany, America, France, Turkey, Philippines, and Belarus.

Technical communication also requires sensitivity to diverse cultures. As professional technical communicators, we need to be more aware of cultural differences. By considering the cultural makeup of our audience, we can cater to their needs, without inadvertently causing any embarrassment or resentment. (This paragraph has been translated in Korean and Hindi above.)

Differentiating Between High-context and Low-context Cultures

If you’re writing for high-context cultures, such as Korea, Japan, China, or France, which assume that readers of technical documents should have enough knowledge about the subject before they begin reading, focus on the amount of detail you need to provide. Generally, technical documentation from high-context cultures offers little detail or explanation.

On the other hand, writers in low-context cultures, such as the United States, India, United Kingdom, or Germany, are expected to provide more detail in technical documents, since it is assumed that their readers know very little or nothing about the subject. Unsurprisingly, technical documentation from low-context cultures is far more comprehensive and elaborate than technical documentation from high-context cultures.

Knowing how much information to provide in a particular culture helps writers communicate more effectively. By considering the cultural background of your audience, you won’t overwhelm them with too much information (in high-context cultures) or too little information (in low-context cultures).

Respecting the Hierarchy

In every culture, unwritten rules govern many interactions. Understanding these rules can help you succeed in that culture.

Confucianism has introduced a structure of hierarchy, rather than a matrix, in most Korean organizations. Professionals are hired on merit, in tandem with social considerations. School affiliation and age play a major role in most hiring decisions in Korea.

Koreans place a lot of emphasis on title; it could be said that nowhere in East Asia does title hold more prominence than in Korea. Try addressing a Korean colleague of the same age group but higher designation with his name, and chances are you’ll be asked to prefix a title. If you don’t use a title to address someone higher in the value chain, Koreans are likely to consider you disrespectful or discourteous.

If the distance between top- and bottom-level organizational hierarchies is wide, technical communicators should resort to formal communication. If the culture encourages a flat organization, the communication automatically becomes less formal.

In order to succeed in a Korean company, you must consider the hierarchy between yourself and the final decision maker. Allow everybody in the middle to give their opinion and be included as much as possible.

Some Differences Between Korean and Western Workplaces

- According to an in-depth analysis of the “2004 Time Use Survey,” South Koreans spend more time at work than Westerners. Most Korean managers throw a fit each time a subordinate enters the premises late, even by a minute. Koreans are sticklers for punctuality, and most jobs vary from 30 to 40 hours a week, but you’ll always be encouraged to spend more time at work. If you’re interested in working in Korea, and you’re accustomed to flex time and telecommuting, be prepared to make some major adjustments to your lifestyle.

- In most East Asian nations, cultures tend to be collectivist. In other words, people pursue group objectives and respond to the groups’ needs. But again, several Western countries propagate individualistic culture, where personal achievement holds more prominence than other things. If you know your audience and their cultural orientation, choosing between “me-oriented” or “we-oriented” writing shouldn’t take long.

- People in East Asian countries—mostly Korea and Japan—prefer indirect modes of communication to direct
modes of communication. Countries like the United States, India, and Canada typically prefer direct communication. Each approach has its advantages and disadvantages. Koreans tend to shy away from Westerners who are loud, direct, or candid in any form of expression. In the Western world, it might be okay to ask questions, such as age and rank. However, in this part of the world, it’s considered inappropriate to ask many questions during meetings or conference calls. If you sit quietly and absorb everything that’s thrown at you, you’ll probably fare better than someone who doesn’t. People in East Asian cultures also generally do not contradict their supervisors or seniors as a point of respect.

**New Field, Greater Challenges**

Technical communication is a new and emerging field in South Korea—not many Koreans consider it a separate profession or a true academic discipline. In fact, very few know what we do and confuse technical communication with advertising, journalism, translation, or technical marketing.

In an exclusive interview with *JoongAng Daily*, a leading South Korean newspaper, Sohn Eun-rag, deputy director of the policy department at the National Statistical Office, stated that out of 1,414 job categories listed with the Korean government, “technical writer” was still classified under “translator,” implying that technical communication in Korea continues to remain unrecognized as a government-designated job. There could be many factors attributing to this, says Sohn, who feels that the field is relatively new—with only a limited number of technical communication practitioners, academicians, or service providers.

Changing the current scheme of things requires a gigantic effort and a fair bit of evangelism. Lack of proper technical communication education or training in Korea only makes it harder to cover enough ground. But on the bright side, less awareness about our profession also means that the market is ripe for exploration.

According to Chang Seok-jin, director of the Korea Technical Communications Association (KTCA), the product liability law passed in 2002 brought about a paradigm shift in the way Korean companies look at user manuals. Under the law, if a Korean company was found responsible for financial or physical damage as a result of its badly written instruction manuals, it could be booked for legal punishment.

**Overcoming Cultural Pangs**

As an expatriate in Korea, it took me just one week to realize how different Korean culture is compared to Indian culture. The Japanese occupation and the war with North Korea have left footprints on modern Korean culture.

The traditional values in South Korea stem from deep-rooted Confucian ideology. Confucianism or “The School of the Scholars” revolves around social, political, philosophical, ethical, and religious thoughts that have influenced the culture and history of South Korea up to the 21st century. Nowhere is this more evident than in Korea’s corporate system.

People in East Asian cultures also generally do not contradict their supervisors or seniors as a point of respect.

**More Opportunities for Practitioners, Service Providers, and Academicians**

As technical communication tries to establish a foot in the door here, big Korean companies like Samsung, Hyundai, and LG are creating opportunities for practitioners and service providers from foreign countries, inviting them to experience, and be a part of, their multifaceted culture.

A typical “work profile” for technical communicators in such companies will include writing such things as reports, business letters/memos, instruction manuals, sales and marketing materials, data sheets, proposals, e-communication, and translation materials.

Also, premier Korean universities are now inviting outstanding international technical communication educators and training professionals to Europe. But for the time being, the difficulty is that the market is considered a niche, and not many companies consider it rewarding enough to keep up with the growing need for technical communicators.
scholars and academicians, mostly from native English-speaking nations, to teach technical communication. For instance, the College of Engineering at Seoul National University (SNU) is planning to start a full-time degree course in engineering general and convergence technology, which includes technical writing as one of its main subjects. SNU sees two distinct advantages with such an arrangement—first, it will promote diversity of its faculty, student body, and curriculum; and second, it will beef up its position on the global map.

The University of Science and Technology (UST), a group of public universities and research institutions located in Seoul, Suwon, Seongnam, and Daejeon, provides special courses in technical communication and technical writing. Ewha Woman’s University also offers a master’s degree in professional writing and technical communication.

For miscellaneous short-term programs, visit the Korean Advanced Institute of Science and Technology (KAIST), which has a five-week intensive summer program to provide communicative practice in English.

How Technical Documents Are Written in Korea

Korean companies don’t understand why technical communication is important. For them, it’s always an afterthought or an additional burden. The result is, more often than not, poor quality documentation that smacks of inaccuracies and inconsistencies.

What surprised me when I started to work for Samsung was that some business units (BUs) recruited floor secretaries to write and format their user manuals in English. Other BUs relied on their internal resources (such as subject matter experts, programmers, design engineers, field application engineers, supervisors and managers, public relations officers, sales and marketing staff, and IT specialists) to write or structure technical documents. None of these people had real-life exposure to technical communication in their previous roles; also, they weren’t obliged by management to take up formal education or training in technical communication.

Among the most valuable and frequently used resources of Korean writers are digital and online dictionaries and thesauri, translation tools like Hunmin JungUm Global, and guidelines and standards documents for specific industries. Legacy documents are quite popular, too, as are technical documents from peer companies and subject-matter consultants.

Problem Areas

There are no technical publication departments or content business groups per se in most Korean organizations. Additionally, Korean companies lack the experience in setting up technical publication departments. The biggest surprise, however, is the absence of any accurate terminology for technical communication in Korean.

Companies here rarely focus on maintaining standard workflow processes, and they hardly use technology or tools for sharing critical information. Even Korean employees don’t share information frequently—if someone leaves the organization, they take the information along with them.

In the past, Korean companies have been on the receiving end of customer wrath due to poorly produced user documentation. Current technical documents do not meet users’ satisfaction either, and there are immediate problem areas that need to be addressed.

Most Korean technical writers have never lived in an English-speaking country, and they are used to writing long and unwieldy sentences, laced with grammatical mistakes, colloquialisms, and formatting issues. Making improvements and reducing the cost of creating, editing, and managing content has now become a critical strategy—something that did not exist in Korean organizations in the past.

Some of the bigger problems that continue to haunt the technical communication industry in Korea include: a lack of professional technical communication training on tools and the English language; the inability to hire local/foreign technical communication practitioners who are “right” for the job; few company-/enterprise-level style guides and prescribed patterns, templates, and standard formats to follow; inadequate ethical considerations; and a lack of usability testing.

Also, considerable inconsistencies exist between the writers’ criteria and the users’ standards of what comprises an effective document. The biggest discrepancy lies in honesty—there’s no such thing as copyright in Korea, or if there is, most Korean writers and managers are blind to it. Over the years, the need to hire foreign technical communication practitioners has increased tremendously in Korea. Several factors have fueled this demand, including globalization, customers who discovered inconsistencies in technical documents, difficulties with translation, and issues with comprehension.

The Role of STC and the Technical Communicator Network

Before we start analyzing the role of the Society for Technical Communication (STC) and Korea’s Technical Communicator Network (TCN) in elevating the technical communication profession, it’s important to understand how Koreans view the English language in general.

Previous studies on the English language may not have centered on writing, let alone technical writing. Almost all Koreans start learning English—both in its written and spoken variants—from as early as the third grade. They are adept at reading English; what they truly lack is the chance to practice speaking it with a native. And while written English is required for university graduation and for attaining employment with big companies in Korea, no one learns to write well.

Some Korean companies like Samsung require a good score in Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). However, even with so much focus on it, English has failed to become the preferred language for communication in Korea. Until it becomes sufficiently widespread, Koreans are unlikely to communicate in native English text or use its rhetorical styles.

In order to disseminate information, awareness, and understanding of the
technical communication profession in multicultural, professional, and business organizations in Korea, STC started a Korea Chapter in 2006, which currently has 21 members. In addition to the STC Korea Chapter, technical communicators in Korea can collaborate via Technical Communicator Network (TCN), a relatively unknown entity in Korea with more than 550 registered members. According to Mr. Yoon G. Won, president of TCN Korea, these numbers are going to increase in the coming years.

What Lies Ahead
The profession of technical communication will eventually grow in Korea, but it will take a long time for the profession to fully realize its social responsibilities. In the meantime, technical communicators eager to work in Korea must understand the social, cultural, economic, and political environments in which Korean companies operate.

Academics should focus on developing students’ knowledge and competencies in the use of English language for intercultural communication in business and professional contexts. By opening new university-level programs, they would help technical communication become the most sought after profession in Korea.

Practitioners should also learn the customs and the language of another culture. For instance, without sufficient knowledge of written and spoken Korean, foreign writers will always remain ill-equipped to explore the manner in which Koreans write about technology in their own language.

Finally, my recommendation for dealing with intercultural issues is to have an open mind and heart. While we are all unique in some ways, at the core we’re all the same. Our values, goals, and daily issues are pretty much the same. We might exercise different practices and customs, but they all fulfill the same basic needs or desires.

One thing I can say for sure: obtaining the necessary knowledge and skills to survive in a culture and practicing those skills until they become second nature requires effort, but the rewards are both heartwarming and dramatic.

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Not only do we work with people across the hall, across town, and across the country, but we also work with people we never meet from countries we know about only through Wikipedia or the Travel Channel.

Despite current financial upheavals, global work continues. The globalization genie is firmly out of the bottle.

Technology has provided us the ability to work in many ways, telecommute to save fuel and frustration, reduce travel costs, and use various forms of communication. The promise is there, yet the reality sometimes eludes us.

I’ve worked in situations where I reported to managers who were located miles away. Many times I felt as though they’d forgotten about me, and I was forced to beg for contact through email and invitations to conference calls, remind them that, “Hey! I’m still here! Over here! On the phone!” I’ve even been on conference calls where the folks in the conference room began writing on their whiteboard, saying, “Joe, imagine there’s a pyramid … with layers …” It was not the most connected way to work.

For the past 18 months, I have been managing remote user experience teams. First, as the director of global UX for Keane Inc. from July 2007 through August 2008, I managed teams in India, Nova Scotia, and three locations in the United States—sometimes these teams included people I’d never met in person. In my current position with PracticeWorks LLC, I continue to perform multi-shore collaboration; from my home office in Virginia, I collaborate with teams in the United States (Maryland, Georgia, and Delaware), Canada, the United Kingdom, France, and Asia.

**Principles to Live By**

Being remote doesn’t mean you have to be disconnected, yet it takes extra work to achieve a modicum of true connection, rather than perfunctory compliance. Understanding cultural ways of working has a profound effect on your ability to manage global teams.

**Communication**

Yes, I know it’s a cliché, but communication is critical to global collaboration. Communication with remote team members is even more critical than communication with your team in the office. If you are in an office with multiple people, but only a few of your team members are remote, you run the risk of unintentionally ignoring them. And if, like me, you manage the team remotely, then you need to be explicit and frequent with your communication.

I like to have a one-on-one conversation each week with each team member. I also try to have a weekly roundtable discussion as a team. On projects, having short, daily meetings can provide critical touch points and feedback you might not think of if you’re in the same office.

Yet communication is more than simply hosting meetings or sending out emails. It’s also about your overall approach and your commitment to keeping your team engaged and informed.

**Flexibility**

As a manager, your dispersed, diverse team counts on you. You need to engender trust. So consider adjusting your schedule.

Too often, local teams hold meetings convenient to them, disregarding remote team members. I’ve seen US managers hold meetings at 2:00 PM Eastern Standard Time, forcing fellow Indian employees to come to work at 12:30 AM India Standard Time.

When I managed a team of 25 people in three locations in India, I never met
them. However, I knew that they were looking to me for guidance. With a ten-and-a-half-hour time difference separating us, I knew that holding meetings in the afternoon in Eastern Standard Time would make it extremely difficult for them to participate. I knew they would; their work ethic was nonpareil. Yet by adjusting my schedule a little, getting up earlier or staying awake a bit later, I garnered respect because I showed them respect.

A meeting at 11:00 PM my time was a welcoming 9:30 AM in Chennai, Bangalore, or Noida. So what if I stayed up until midnight? By changing my schedule, I allowed my team to have as normal a life as possible.

Sensitivity
All managers need to be sensitive to the needs and the variegated lives of their team members. As a manager of remote technical communicators, user experience analysts, and other creative people, you must commit yourself to understanding their needs. Because you rarely (if ever) meet with remote team members in person, you need to get to know them and their culture.

If you live in Chicago but your team member works out of her house in the French Quarter of New Orleans, don’t set up meetings on the Monday before Mardi Gras. Even if she wants to attend the meeting, she won’t be able to hear you. Or if you have team members in China, know their holidays, such as the Spring Festival, so that you can respect their ability to participate in them.

Courage
Above all, you should show courageous behavior and attitude. Be fearless in watching out for your remote team members. We know the adage, “Out of sight, out of mind.” As a person who manages out-of-sight employees, you need to be their watchdog, their filter, and their advocate. To be these things, you need the courage to stand up for your employees when other teams and management forget about them or marginalize them.

In addition, by being courageous, you engender yourself to the team as well as binding remote employees to each other.

Tools
We now have a wide assortment of tools that can enhance your ability to manage work. Software packages, Bluetooth headsets, email- and video-enabled phones all have their place. But I like to think of tools that provide lowest-common-denominator assistance to creating a sense of presence and team.

Email
I know this may seem obvious, but email is probably the easiest tool to implement. We all use it, and we use it prolifically.

When working globally, however, edit your email writing style to match your recipient’s expectations. Avoid terseness and humor in email, especially irony, sarcasm, hyperbole, and other easily misunderstood rhetorical constructs. Email is notoriously easy to misinterpret.

However, email serves well as a record of conversations and can be used to clarify your intended meaning to your team members. When working with teams who speak different languages, communicating in print in a common language helps immensely.
Telephone

Although email certainly remains a key component of a global manager’s collaboration toolkit, the telephone provides the best approach. Connecting with a voice-to-voice presence solves many human contact issues.

In addition, using conference calls allows you to keep everyone connected on specific topics in tandem—we all hear the same thing at the same time. The proliferation of inexpensive conference calling software such as Skype (www.skype.com) allows you to create a conference call with 24 other people for very little money.

However, telephone communication has some pitfalls.

• Language: For many people, listening to a second language proves more difficult than reading it. And speaking in that language proves even more difficult, for reasons ranging from fear of making mistakes to being misunderstood. If you make global calls, ensure that you enunciate, slow down your speech cadence, and avoid contractions, neologisms, colloquialisms, and geo-specific examples.

• Clarity: When talking on the phone, being heard is critical. Because others can’t see you, they must rely on your voice alone. I know this sounds laboriously obvious, yet I continue to experience conference calls where the person speaking sits too far from the phone, or the people in the room talk to each other instead of directing their conversation to the person on the phone. When directing a conference call, don’t mumble, don’t write on the whiteboard, and make sure you speak into the microphone.

• Written follow-up: As soon as possible (but no more than 24 hours) after any major call, send a quick email summarizing any action items or key points.

If you use the telephone to communicate with your staff, make sure you adjust your habits according to your audience.

Videoconferencing & Webcasting

Videoconferencing and webcasting can provide even richer collaborative experiences than conference calling. The video experience helps create empathy, and webcasting enables rich collaboration of onscreen movement, images, and examples.

While videoconferencing can employ expensive hardware and software, for most uses, a webcam and free software work fine. For example, whenever I need to communicate with one or two other people, I use the embedded iSight camera on my MacBook Pro along with Adobe Acrobat Connect. Other tools that provide help include YuuGuu and DimDim.

Putting video, webcasting, and telephone together, I also enhance design meetings by having a whiteboard in my office behind my chair. My recipients can see me, but the camera can also view my whiteboard as I draw. While I

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Tools, techniques, and principles help you connect with team members, no matter where you or they are located.

Final Thoughts
Tools, techniques, and principles help you connect with team members, no matter where you or they are located. Yet above all, your best tool is empathy. Being empathetic with your team enables you to reach across borders and boundaries to connect, inspire, and lead.

Joe Sokohl (joseph.sokohl@practiceworks.com) has concentrated on crafting excellent user experiences, using technical communication, information architecture, interaction design, and user research for the past 17 years. As UX Lead for PracticeWorks LLC, he leads a team in effective integration of user experience into product development. Previously Joe held UX-oriented positions based in Boston, MA; Hamburg, Germany; Richmond, VA; Chicago, IL; and Durham, NC. He has also been a soldier, cook, radio DJ, and reporter once upon a time.
Tips for Writing a Document Destined for Translation

By George Rimalower, Senior Member

Authors of technical documents hold the key to creating successfully translatable materials from their original work. Once a document is handed off to a translation vendor, writers must be available to answer questions about content and phrasing. Without their critical input during the translation process, the translated piece can fail to convey the true meaning of the source document. In short, a translated document must convey the meaning, style, and intent of the source document and mirror said document in appearance.

Terminology to Avoid

Ideally, writers should be aware that their documents are slated for translation before they begin on a project in order to avoid cultural references that could confuse readers of the translated piece. For example, the Fourth of July means a day of national celebration in the United States, but it’s just another day in July in other regions of the world. Slang and colloquialisms should always be avoided. Saying something is “in the bag” in English means an issue is over or settled, but the same phrase could be taken literally when read by a non-English speaker. Using slang will require translators to find the best alternative words in the target language that convey the same meaning.

A document may make perfect sense in English, but if it is not grammatically clear, the translation may be compromised. Translators are not copy editors. A single comma can change the meaning of a sentence. When writing is ambiguous, the translator has to decipher what the writer is trying to say, which wastes time as the translator seeks clarification.

When English is the source language, the word count of the finished, translated version will often expand. Writers need to allow for this expansion for documents that will be translated. For example, Spanish translations typically contain 20 to 25 percent more verbiage than the English version. Vietnamese expands by 30 percent. In fact, most languages, other than German, use more words to convey the same thought expressed in English.

Often when text expansion is an issue, some document designs prevent the flexibility to add pages or reduce the font size. It is helpful for the writer to keep these restrictions in mind. Sometimes the translation must fit a specific space in an advertisement or brochure. Other times, documents, especially health-related materials, are required by law to be a certain length and font size.

The Translation Process

When selecting a translation vendor, take into account the level of education, training, and experience their transla-
Audience and Timing Considerations

Technical writers can help with the translation process by communicating the type of audience, its education level, and cultural background. A Spanish-speaking audience in Florida, for example, with a large Cuban immigrant population may require a different translation than a Spanish-speaking audience in Texas, where most Spanish speakers are from Central America. This helps greatly when assessing a translated piece for readability, register, style, and usage.

With growing numbers of the US population speaking languages other than English as their primary language, and as more states mandate language translations in healthcare, finance, technical and other industries, translations can no longer be pushed to the back burner.

Have realistic timeframes for translations. If it takes three months to create a source document, it’s not realistic to expect the translated version to take three days.

Lastly, the style guide could include client-specific wishes with respect to layout formatting, punctuation, table of contents, index, numbering, footers, headers, and callouts. Having this tool in place allows the translation company to accurately and quickly make informed decisions, maintain consistency, and reduce the number of uncertainties, thus facilitating the translation process and, ultimately, lowering costs and turnaround time.

Translations can only be as good as the source document. Establishing a long-term partnership between writer and translation team will ensure quality translations that effectively communicate the intended meaning to targeted audiences.

George Rimalower (gpr@isitrans.com) is founder, president, and chief executive officer of Los Angeles-based ISI Language Services (www.isitrans.com). ISI is a provider of culturally and linguistically appropriate services including translations, interpreting, and diversity training.

Glossary and Style Guide

If projects are ongoing, the technical writer and translation company should take steps to ensure that current and future translations are consistent and accurate. Particularly in industries such as healthcare and finance, where jargon is rampant, the writer and translation company should identify terms and include them in a glossary for the use of the entire translation team. These terms can then be incorporated into a custom glossary to ensure uniformity throughout all future translations.

A style guide should also be developed as a joint effort between the translation company and their clients. This powerful tool outlines rules for sentence structure, capitalization, use of acronyms, usage of terminology, standard formats for copyright information, numbering, date and time representation, measurement units, and punctuation. The style guides give all interested parties the opportunity to construct conventions for name translation (geography, people, company, products, etc.), as well as conventions for keeping English as it is found in the original document.

Besides a project manager, the source document will pass through the hands of numerous other linguists before the project is complete. The project manager first gives the document to a translator who works in the source and target languages. The translator provides the preliminary translated text. The document is next given to an editor, who is responsible for reviewing the translator’s work and fine tuning the document—ensuring that translation flows properly and accurately and that there are no omissions from the source document. The document is run through translation management software that seeks matches for previously translated paragraphs, sentences, and strings. The next stop may be to the desktop publishing department where the translated version is placed in the source document design. A proofreader takes a final look before the project is sent to the client.

Tutors bring to the project. Qualified linguists are individuals whose credentials, training, experience, and expertise are demonstrated by a university degree in translation, preferably at the master’s level, as well as certification by the American Translators Association or its foreign equivalent. Extensive verifiable professional experience in translation and linguistics is another critical requirement.

While professional translators possess a solid linguistic background, they must also have a strong background in the document’s subject matter in order to render a linguistically and culturally appropriate translation that accurately captures the concepts and ideas that are specific to the subject. Reputable translation companies always approach translations as a team effort in order to capture the input of several subject-specific experts.

Most translation companies will assign a project manager to communicate with writers and other members of the translation team. It is the project manager who maintains the checks and balances to ensure that documents are translated properly.

If projects are ongoing, the technical writer and translation company should create conventions for name translation (geography, people, company, products, etc.), as well as conventions for keeping English as it is found in the original document.

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The 5 Most Important Reasons for Attending the STC Summit

By Cindy Currie, Fellow

1 Networking. Like the saying goes, “dig your well before you are thirsty,” and now is the time to build or expand your network. In today’s economic climate, it’s vitally important to have a large network of colleagues, business acquaintances, and friends. At the 2009 Summit, you’ll have unparalleled opportunities to expand your global network through intimate networking events with professionals from leading organizations, including some of the most successful technical communicators in the world!

2 Expand Your Knowledge. With more than 100 sessions organized into 6 tracks, you’ll be sure to find dozens of applicable presentations that will increase your value by augmenting your knowledge, updating your skills, and adding to your résumé. This isn’t your average “lecture” conference. We’ve created more interactive sessions than ever before.

3 Update Your Jargon. Are you still describing the value of your work with 1990s lingo? Learn how to persuade management that your contributions have a positive and direct impact on the bottom line. Attend the sessions, visit the exhibits, talk with your colleagues during breaks—find out how they describe moving to XML as an authoring source, structured authoring as an approach, and the ability to automate publishing tasks, as well as the value they bring to the bottom line.

4 Enlist in Our Job Bank. Attend the sessions devoted to job strategies to learn how to spot weaknesses or pitfalls that could eliminate you before you get started. Why reduce your employment chances to just responding to published opportunities when it’s a known fact that more than 90 percent of jobs are never published in the classifieds or website listings. Don’t limit yourself to posting your résumé on public job boards where you compete with millions of others who think they can write. The online STC Career Center is specific to technical communicators and is known to those who hire. Don’t forget, STC members get a 14-day advance look at new listings in the Career Center before everyone else.

5 Get It All. STC is capturing the audio and visual content of every session (excluding panels and roundtables) and will make it available to every attendee after the conference. This increases the value of the Summit enormously. With Summit@ aClick, you can “attend” every session that interests you, revisit the ones that you found to be most beneficial, and learn at the pace you feel is most comfortable. You won’t miss a minute with this special new feature!!

For more information about the Summit, visit http://conference.stc.org/
Atlanta: Big Fun at a Little Cost

BY JOE SCARDINA, Senior Member

You don’t have to spend big bucks to have big fun at the 2009 STC Technical Communication Summit. Atlanta, the host city, has a variety of attractions that are affordable and easily accessible from the conference’s location, the Atlanta Hyatt Regency. The Hyatt is located near the Metro Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA) station, Peachtree Center. For $12, you can purchase a MARTA four-day visitor pass that’ll give you unlimited rides on MARTA’s trains and buses (visit www.itsmarta.com for details). From the Peachtree Center station, you can visit any of the fun attractions below.

Atlanta Braves Baseball
(www.braves.com)
Enjoy America’s favorite pasttime at Turner Field (also called The Ted). Do the Braves’ tomahawk chop chant, see yourself and your friends on the Jumbotron TV, or just sit back and enjoy the Atlanta skyline.
Cost: $5–15 for upper box seats
Dates: 2 May, 3:40 PM; 3 May, 1:35 PM; 4 & 5 May, 7:10 PM
Getting There: MARTA’s Peachtree Center > MARTA’s Arts Center > Braves shuttle

Centennial Olympic Park
(www.centennialpark.com)
Visit Atlanta’s landmark for the home of the 1996 Olympics. The 21-acre park offers many amenities including the Fountain of Rings. See the water dance to music at the Fountain of Rings’ show at one of these times: 12:30 PM, 3:30 PM, 6:30 PM, or 9 PM.
Cost: Free
Dates: Open Daily
Getting There: 10 minute walk from MARTA’s Peachtree Center

Atlantic Station
(www.atlanticstation.com)
Take a walk around the block at Atlantic Station, the neighborhood where Atlantans live, work, and recreate. This community is filled with parks, shopping centers, and restaurants.
Cost: Free
Dates: Open daily from 10 AM–7 PM
Getting There: MARTA’s Peachtree Center > MARTA’s Arts Center > Atlantic Station shuttle

Atlanta Botanical Gardens
(www.atlantabotanicalgarden.org)
Stop and smell the roses at the botanical gardens, located in Piedmont Park. The gardens are filled with exotic plants, glass sculptures, and dazzling fountains.
Cost: $12
Dates: Tues–Sun; 9 AM–7 PM
Getting There: MARTA’s Peachtree Center > MARTA’s Five Points > Bus 97

Cyclorama
(www.atlantacyclorama.org)
View the largest oil painting in the world depicting the Battle of Atlanta during the US Civil War. The panoramic painting is 123 years old, four stories tall, and over 100 yards in length.
Cost: $8
Dates: Sat, 9 AM–4:30 PM; Sun, 12:30–3:30 PM
Getting There: MARTA’s Peachtree Center > MARTA’s Five Points > Bus 97

Inman Park Walking Tour
(www.preserveatlanta.com)
Stroll through the neighborhood of Victorian homes in Atlanta’s first planned community (1889) and one of America’s first garden suburbs.
Cost: $10
Dates: Sundays at 2 PM
MARTA: Peachtree Center > Five Points > Inman Park

For more spots on dining, shopping, and entertainment, visit these websites:
- http://atlantaregency.hyatt.com
- www.stcatlanta.org
- www.accessatlanta.com

Joe Scardina (jjsstechwriter@comcast.net) is the Public Relations Manager for the STC Atlanta Chapter and has been a technical writer in Atlanta for nine years.
Nominating Committee Seeks Candidates for Society-level Positions in 2010

Would you like to be a part of leading STC and ensuring that it remains a vital organization? You—and other members whom you know and respect—could have the chance by running for a Society-level position in 2010.

Do you have experience directing the implementation of new ideas? Do you want to coordinate programs that are beneficial to our profession? Are you ready to use your strategic skills to take STC to the next level? If your answer is yes, contact the STC Nominating Committee and let them know you are interested in running for office. If you know another member who should be considered for a position on our international board, please pass on that person’s name, too.

The Nominating Committee will consider all recommendations as it draws up the 2010 slate of candidates. As part of the committee’s review process, it will contact all potential candidates to confirm that they are interested in running for STC office.

The members of the current nominating committee are Carolyn Kelley Kinger (carolyn.klinger@verizon.net), of Olney, Maryland, and Thea Teich (teichtmc@aol.com), of Cincinnati, Ohio. Please feel free to discuss your ideas with either of these individuals. A new chair for the Nominating Committee has been selected, but that appointment was not confirmed when this article was submitted for publication. STC would like to thank Suzanna Laurent for the two years she served as chair of this committee. Two additional Nominating Committee members were chosen in the 2009 election, but their names were unknown when this article was submitted for publication.

Open Positions and Qualifications

In the year ahead, the STC Nominating Committee will develop a slate of candidates for the following positions:

- Second Vice President
- Secretary
- Director (two positions)
- Nominating Committee (three positions)

The STC Board of Directors depends on experienced business, academic, or Society leaders. All candidates should be senior members, have experience working at a strategic level, be comfortable making decisions collaboratively, and be focused on outcomes. Ideally, they should have Society-level leadership experience, but key to these roles is strategic business experience or a strong academic background with professional skills managing people, projects, and budgets. Being an STC board member is a chance to leverage these skills, to learn how to lead a nonprofit organization, and to ensure that the Society continues providing members with opportunities, services, and more. Candidates interested in the positions listed above should also have the following characteristics:

- Candidates for second vice president must be passionate about the tech comm industry, have in-depth knowledge of Society-level processes and practices, and be experienced in implementing large business, policy, or educational initiatives outside of STC.
- Candidates for secretary should be detail oriented, focused, and able to multitask. They should be familiar with taking minutes and maintaining records.
- Candidates for director should have some STC community-level experience and a background that includes strategic business experience or a strong academic background, with professional skills managing people, projects, and budgets.

(Continued on page 27)
The highest rank that the Society for Technical Communication can confer upon a member is that of Fellow. The select few who become Fellows are Associate Fellows who have attained eminence in the arts and sciences of technical communication through service that has distinguished both the Society and the profession.

2009 Fellows

Rahel Anne Bailie
Canada West Coast and Israel Chapters; Canadian Issues, International Technical Communication, Management, Single Sourcing, and Usability & User Experience SIGs

Charlie J. Kostelnick
Iowa State University Chapter; Academic SIG

Victoria Koster-Lenhardt
TransAlpine Chapter; Management and Usability, & User Experience SIGs

Janis G. Ramey
Pittsburgh Chapter; Consulting & Independent SIG

Ralph E. Robinson
Toronto Chapter; Policies & Procedures and Quality & Process Improvement SIGs

Garret H. Romaine
Willamette Chapter; Academic SIG

Martha K. Sippel
Rocky Mountain Chapter; Consulting & Independent Contracting and Usability & User Experience SIGs

Jane L. Smith
Phoenix Chapter; Consulting & Independent Contracting and Instructional Design & Learning SIGs

STC recognizes and honors deserving senior members by conferring upon them the rank of Associate Fellow. Those selected as Associate Fellows are exceptional individuals who have consistently demonstrated meaningful contributions to the Society and to the profession over a period of years.

2009 Associate Fellows

Karen L. Bachmann
Orlando and Suncoast Chapters, AccessAbility, Consulting & Independent Contracting, Information Design & Architecture, and Usability & User Experience SIGs

Karen L. Baranich
South Carolina Midlands Chapter, Instructional Design & Learning SIG

Susan C. Becker
San Francisco Chapter, Information Design & Architecture and Usability & User Experience SIGs

Lori J. Brown
Atlanta Chapter, Technical Editing SIG

Sharon V. Burton

DJ Cline
Silicon Valley Chapter; Usability & User Experience SIG

Marella M. Colyvas
Rocky Mountain Chapter; Information Design & Architecture and Technical Editing SIG

Nancy W. Coppola, PhD
New York Metro Chapter; Academic SIG

David D. Dayton, PhD
Metro Baltimore and Washington DC Chapters; Academic, Information Design & Architecture, Single Sourcing, and Usability & User Experience SIGs

Scott DeLoach
Atlanta Chapter; Information Design & Architecture and Instructional Design & Learning SIGs

Robert J. Dianetti
Northeast Ohio Chapter; Management SIG

Elizabeth G. Frick, PhD
Rocky Mountain Chapter; Contracting SIG

Sharon K. Garrity
Oklahoma Chapter; Consulting & Independent Contracting SIG

Bonni J. Graham
San Diego Chapter; Usability & User Experience SIG

Jeffrey J. Haas
Atlanta Chapter; Online SIG

Patrick Hofmann
Australia Chapter
Candidates for the Nominating Committee should have excellent judgment about people and be well acquainted with members at all levels of the Society. They also must understand the goals of the Society so that the candidates they select can meet the needs presented by those goals.

The Nominating Committee welcomes your suggestions about potential candidates for the positions listed here. If you think that you or someone you know should be considered, please fill out the application form on this page or download it from the STC website (www.stc.org) under Members/Admin Docs, and return it to STC by 1 July 2009. Alternatively, members attending the Technical Communication Summit in Atlanta, Georgia, 3–6 May, may turn in their forms at the Nominating Committee table in the exhibit hall. Summit attendees are welcome to drop by the Nominating Committee table to learn more from committee members.

(Continued from page 25)

STC Is on Twitter!

We’re posting up-to-the-minute details about the STC Technical Communication Summit, 3–6 May, and will be using the hashtag #stc09 this year. Follow us for updates at http://twitter.com/stc_org.

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).

Caroline Jarrett
United Kingdom & Ireland Chapter; AccessAbility, Information Design & Architecture, Technical Editing, and Usability & User Experience SIGs

Cheryl A. Landes
Boston and Puget Sound Chapters; Consulting & Independent Contracting, Instructional Design & Learning, Marketing Communication, Technical Editing, and Usability & User Experience SIGs

Deborah K. Lockwood
Rocky Mountain Chapter; Consulting & Independent Contracting and Lone Writer SIGs

Patrick B. Lufkin
Berkeley, East Bay, San Francisco, and Silicon Valley Chapters; Management SIG

Preeti Mathur
Twin Cities Chapter; Consulting & Independent Contracting and Instructional Design & Learning SIGs

Jill McCauslin
Northeast Ohio Chapter; Consulting & Independent Contracting and Management SIGs

Patricia G. Moell
Carolina Chapter; Instructional Design & Learning, Management, Technical Editing, and Usability & User Experience SIGs

Jeffrey A. Randolph
Orange County and San Diego Chapters; Scientific Communication SIG

Lu Rehling
San Francisco Chapter; Academic SIG

Sally J. Spahn
Quad Cities Chapter; Consulting & Independent Contracting, Management, and Technical Editing SIGs

Honors Reception

The new Fellows and Associate Fellows will be honored at STC’s 2009 Technical Communication Summit, 3–6 May 2009, in Atlanta, Georgia. An honors banquet will be held on Tuesday, 5 May. (A reception will precede the banquet at 7:30 PM.) Tickets for the banquet and reception are $75 and can be purchased using the conference registration form online at http://conference.stc.org/docs/2009-Summit-Registration-Form.pdf.
Distinguished Chapter Service Awards

The Society for Technical Communication has long recognized the importance of the hard work and commitment of its chapter members. Without their energy and enthusiasm, the Society would cease to be the largest, most effective, and most prestigious organization of technical communicators in the world.

In 1988, the Society initiated the Distinguished Chapter Service Award (DCSA) to recognize exemplary dedication to the chapter and its activities. The first awards were presented in 1989. Following is a list of DCSA winners for 2009.

Atlanta
Jeff Albers
Dr. George Hayhoe
Linda Van Sickle

Berkeley
Ben Lukas

Birmingham
Sara Beth Scudder

Boston
Greg Bartlett
Linda Fritz
William B. Gruener

Chicago
James Jones

East Bay
Ken Evans

Houston
Erika Frensley
Deborah Long

Indiana
Scott Abel

Lone Star
Melissa P. Haughton

Montreal
Marta Cepek

New Mexico Kachina
Ellen Cline

Northeast Ohio
Stephanie Webster

Oklahoma
Linda S. Stark

Palm Beaches
Rachel Alexander

Pittsburgh
Chuck Lanigan

Rochester
Lori Meyer

Rocky Mountain
M. Katherine (Kit) Brown
Carmen Carmack
Deborah Lockwood

Southeastern Michigan
Sharon McDonnell
Christine Pellar-Kosbar

Southwestern Ontario
Margie Yundt

Distinguished SIG Service Awards

In 2002, the Society initiated a formal awards program to recognize the commitment and hard work of members of its special interest groups (SIGs). The Distinguished SIG Service Award (DSSA) recognizes length of SIG membership, consistency of service over the duration of membership, and variety of service.

Following are the winners of the 2009 Distinguished SIG Service Award:

Consulting and Independent Contracting
Linda Gallagher

Instructional Design & Learning
Robert Hershenow

Lone Writers
Shari Gray

Technical Editing
Michelle Corbin

Usability and User Experience
Karen Bachmann

Distinguished Service Award for Students

In 2005, the Society introduced a special awards program, the Distinguished Service Award for Students (DSAS), designed to recognize exemplary dedication to student chapters and their activities. Only student members who are currently attending school on a full-time basis are eligible for this award. The winners of the 2009 DSAS are listed below.

Orlando Chapter
Daniel Beck

Cedarville University Student Chapter
Adam Evans

“My Job” Calls

Do you have a unique job in the field of technical communication? Does each day bring forth new and exciting challenges, opportunities, and experiences? If so, consider writing an article for the My Job department in Intercom. We are always looking for members who want to share their interesting careers with the rest of STC. Send your article ideas to intercom@stc.org today!
New Sigma Tau Chi Members Named

The STC Board of Directors recently elected six new members of Sigma Tau Chi (STX), the honorary society for students of technical communication. STX recognizes students enrolled in baccalaureate or graduate technical communication programs who have a cumulative grade point average of 3.5 or above, are exemplary participants in STC, and demonstrate a potential for significant contribution to the profession. The new STX members at the undergraduate and graduate levels are as follows:

**Undergraduate**
- Molly Bunton
  - Missouri State University
- Erin SanGregory
  - Cedarville University
- Daniel Beck
  - University of Central Florida

**Graduate**
- Teresa Spear Counterman
  - Missouri State University
- John Strange
  - North Carolina State University

For more information on STX, please contact the STC office by email at stc@stc.org.

Outstanding Journal Article Award

Each year, the editor of Technical Communication appoints a judging committee to select the outstanding article from the previous year’s issues. Judges base their decisions on article content and form. The award honors the memory of Frank R. Smith, during whose 18-year tenure as editor Technical Communication became established as the flagship publication of STC and the profession.

Jay R. Gould Award Winner

The Jay R. Gould Award for Excellence in Teaching Technical Communication honors the distinguished teaching career of the late Professor Gould. His academic mentorship guided many into the technical communication profession. The Gould award honors excellence in teaching that becomes true academic mentorship: the personal and professional concern that the best teachers extend to their students beyond the classroom. This mentorship continues beyond graduation as former students grow throughout their professional careers.

To be eligible for the award, a nominee must have been a member of the Society for Technical Communication for at least ten years and must have been involved in postsecondary education for at least fifteen years.

This year’s winner of the Jay R. Gould Award for Excellence in Teaching Technical Communication is:

**Ann Jennings**
- University of Houston
- Houston, Texas
- Senior Member

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Ken Rainey Award Winner Chosen

In 2007, STC established the Ken Rainey Award for Excellence in Research to celebrate and honor the late Professor Rainey’s passion for research that results in improvements to technical communication, especially to practice. The award acknowledges the importance of exemplary research to technical communication and encourages excellence in technical communication research by honoring those whose research studies have made an outstanding contribution to the field.

This year’s winner of the Ken Rainey Award is:

**Carol Barnum**
- Southern Polytechnic State University
- Atlanta, Georgia
- Fellow

Roger Munger, PhD, is an associate professor of technical communication at Boise State University where he coordinates undergraduate and graduate internships for the English Department. His teaching and research interests include green writing, eco-friendly printing processes, internships at socially just and environmentally sustainable companies, publications management, and service learning. Roger’s workplace clients include US Fish & Wildlife Service, National Park Service, US Geological Survey, Winter Wildlands Alliance, Northwest Animal Companions, Idaho Mountain Search and Rescue Unit, and Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticide. His scholarship has appeared in journals such as Technical Communication, IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication, Technical Communication Quarterly, Proposal Management, Technical Rescue, and Metropolitan Universities. Roger is author of Designing Documents and Understanding Visuals (2008) and Document-Based Cases in Technical Communication (2005). He is also a vegan and activist for animal rights. The article for which he is honored is “Green Printing: A Guide to Environmentally Responsible Printing.”

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- John Strange
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For more information on STX, please contact the STC office by email at stc@stc.org.
Building Efficient Multilingual Workflows

BY SARAH O’KEEFE, Associate Fellow

In building a business case for XML-based publishing, one common argument is that localization will be more efficient because document production tasks are streamlined and automated. This column describes two technology standards you might use in multilingual workflows: the Extensible Stylesheet Language (XSL) and XML Localization Interchange File Format (XLIFF).

Formatting Automation with XSL

If you have content in XML format, you can use XSL to transform the XML into deliverable formats, such as HTML. For example, given the following XML content:

```xml
<note>This is a note</note>
```

You can transform the XML content into the HTML markup shown here:

```xml
<p><b>NOTE:</b> This is a note</p>
```

To do so, you need a simple transformation template, shown here:

```xml
<xsl:template match="note">
  <b>NOTE:</b>
  <xsl:apply-templates/>
</xsl:template>
```

The XSL code in the preceding example, however, would only work in English. For other languages, you need to modify the “NOTE:” text. Instead of embedding the note text directly into the template, you can set up the template to use a variable, as shown here:

```xml
<xsl:template match="note">
  <b><xsl:value-of select="notetext"/></b>
  <xsl:apply-templates/>
</xsl:template>
```

Then you can define the variable value based on the language of your document (this example assumes that you have already specified the language in the “$language” variable):

```xml
<xsl:variable name="notetext" select="document('labels.xml')/strings/label[@name = 'note'][@language = $language]"/>
```

The “en” setting is for English; the “de” setting is for German (Deutsch).

If your template needs to support more than a few languages, you’ll end up with a lengthy `<xsl:choose>` statement for each repeated text item, such as note, caution, warning, table of contents, index, next, and previous. Instead, consider creating a file that contains all of the text strings. For the note and caution text, you might see the following:

```xml
<strings>
  <label name="note'language='en">NOTE:</label>
  <label name="note' language='de'>HINWEIS:</label>
  <label name="caution' language='en">CAUTION:</label>
  <label name="caution' language='de'>VORSICHT:</label>
  ...
</strings>
```

Assuming that the strings are stored in a file named labels.xml, you could define your note text variable as shown in the following example:

```xml
<xsl:variable name="notetext" select="document('labels.xml')/strings/label[@name = 'note'][@language = $language]"/>
```

This approach is much more elegant than a lengthy `<xsl:choose>` statement. It’s also easier to maintain; when you add a new language, you simply add a new `<label>` entry for each string with the appropriate name, language setting, and text value.

I recommend separating all language-specific information in your transformation templates in this way so that you can easily modify the language strings.

A multilingual XSL transformation process lets you convert XML source content from any supported language into final output (such as HTML) in seconds. The cost savings are potentially enormous. Consider an (hypothetical) organization that localizes 400 pages of new content every year into eight languages. (For our simplistic example, we’ll ignore the effect of translation memory.) Four hundred pages would contain approximately 250 words per page, and at $0.25 per word per language, the total localization cost for these 400 pages would be approximately $200,000 for the eight languages. According to Nick Rosenthal, managing director of Salford Translations Ltd. and a past president of STC’s UK Chapter, desktop publishing (that is, formatting) typically accounts for 30–50 percent of the total project cost in localization. Thus, the DTP cost component would be between $60,000 and $100,000. By implementing automated publishing from XML through XSL to your final output(s), you could cut that cost “all the way down to zero,” says Rosenthal. This simple example demonstrates that automating formatting could save significant time and money. Of course, you must balance the potential cost savings against the cost of implementing an XML-based workflow.

BY SARAH O’KEEFE, Associate Fellow
Removing Authoring Application Dependencies with XLIFF

XML Localization Interchange File Format (XLIFF) is a standard for storing and exchanging localized content. XLIFF itself is an XML vocabulary, but it is not intended for authoring or for direct use by localizers. Unlike XSL, you can use XLIFF in a non-XML-based workflow.

Localization companies work with a huge variety of proprietary formats, such as Word, InDesign, FrameMaker, QuarkXPress, and many more. For translation purposes, they generally move information into specialized translation workbench software, do the language work, and then move the translated text back into the publishing application. XLIFF offers a standard format in which to accomplish these exchanges.

Figure 1: Translation workflow with XLIFF

According to Maxwell Hoffmann, director of Document Globalization Practice at Globalization Partners International, XLIFF “parallels the intent of XML” by making localizable information portable. It does not, however, require you to implement an XML-based authoring workflow.

XLIFF files store information in chunks (or segments) using the <trans-unit> element. Most often, these chunks are paragraphs. To use XLIFF in a translation process, you first extract source content from its original format into an XLIFF file. For example, you might have the following information (with simplified markup):

```
<topic>
  <title>Ants</title>
  <p>Ants are interesting</p>
</topic>
```

You extract the various segments into an XLIFF file and put unique identifiers in as placeholders:

```
<topic>
  <title>(id = "1")</title>
  <p>(id ="2")</p>
</topic>
```

The XLIFF file initially contains just the source text:

```
<xliff>
  <file original="ants.xml" source-language="en" target-language="de">
    <body>
      <trans-unit id="1">
        <source>Ants</source>
      </trans-unit>
      <trans-unit id="2">
        <source>Ants are interesting</source>
      </trans-unit>
    </body>
  </file>
</xliff>
```

After processing, the translation for each segment is added to the file:

```
<xliff>
  <file original="ants.xml" source-language="en" target-language="de">
    <body>
      <trans-unit id="1">
        <source>Ants</source>
        <target>Ameisen</target>
      </trans-unit>
      <trans-unit id="2">
        <source>Ants are interesting</source>
        <target>Das könnte gefährlich sein.</target>
      </trans-unit>
    </body>
  </file>
</xliff>
```
You could include multiple targets (with appropriate language attributes) in a single file or even multiple versions of a single language (such as a draft and a final version). Rosenthal notes that you can also use XLIFF to package a large collection of DITA topics and conref files into a single large file for translation management purposes. After translation, the localized content is delivered back to the various component files.

Even if you are creating content in a “traditional,” non-XML workflow, you may find that XML has insinuated itself as a content exchange format. In addition to XLIFF, the TMX standard is used for exchanging translation memory content between translation software programs. Typically, authors and localizers would not even be aware that these technologies are being used. XSL would normally be used in a workflow where source content is stored in XML, so authors would be working in a structured authoring environment. Because translators generally modify text within existing content structures, they usually do not work in XML editors. Instead, they have specialized translation software, which manages the XML tagging for them. XML’s importance in multilingual workflows is not limited to content created in XML and to structured authoring, it also facilitates the transfer of content from application to application.

Documentation for Standards

XLIFF: www.oasis-open.org/committees/tc_home.php?wg_abbrev=xliff

XSL: www.w3.org/TR/xsl/

Many thanks to Maxwell Hoffmann, director of Document Globalization Practices at Globalization Partners International, and Nick Rosenthal, managing director of Salford Translations Ltd., for their assistance with this article.

Sarah O’Keefe (xmlstrategist@scriptorium.com) is founder and president of Scriptorium Publishing Services Inc. (www.scriptorium.com) based in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina. The company is focused on implementing tools and processes to optimize publishing workflows. Services include developing and deploying XML-based structured authoring environments, configuring authoring and publishing tools, and providing technical training. Her publications include Publishing Fundamentals: FrameMaker 7, The WebWorks Publisher Cookbook, Technical Writing 101, FrameMaker for Dummies, and numerous white papers.

Not everyone knows...

STC members see new job postings listed in the Career Center 14 days ahead of everyone else.

The two-week advance look at job postings is an exclusive STC member benefit. Visit the STC website (www.stc.org) for more resources available to members during tough times.
The Perils of Passion
in the Classroom

BY ALEXA CAMPBELL, Fellow

Are you ever in despair about your job? Do you feel that you are the only one who cares about what you do? That students are ungrateful, lazy opportunists? That administrators are misguided or worse? That your colleagues are conspiring against you? Do you feel like Sisyphus, forever rolling that stupid boulder up the hill?

You are not alone. Many educators experience these feelings, as do many technical communicators. You labor diligently for little reward. Your finest work goes unnoticed and unrecognized. You do your best to provide a learning environment for people, and, if you do your job well, they don’t notice your skill. And what does it all matter anyway?

We all have our bad days, when, like Hamlet, we moan, “How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world!” But when all days are bad days, we may be on our way to burnout.

What is burnout?

The term burnout was coined in 1974 by a psychiatrist named Herbert Freudenberger. He saw coworkers at an alternative health agency as they suffered a gradual emotional depletion and loss of motivation and commitment. Around the same time, another researcher, Christina Maslach, observed a similar job-related phenomenon. Ultimately, she described burnout as having three dimensions, and these dimensions continue to be the standard for studies in burnout:

- Emotional exhaustion—feelings of being emotionally overextended and exhausted by one’s work
- Depersonalization—having an impersonal response toward others, especially clients or students
- Reduced personal accomplishment—a loss of personal self-efficacy

Researchers seem to agree that burnout develops gradually and is persistent. It is generally discussed as a work-related phenomenon.

What causes burnout?

The literature on burnout is extensive, and there are many theories about the causes of burnout. Studies suggest the following contributing factors:

- Role conflict, role ambiguity, and role overload
- Workload
- Lack of control over establishing and following day-to-day priorities; lack of opportunities to participate in decision making
- Insufficient reward and the accompanying feelings of continually having to do more for less
- Unhealthy team dynamics; poor communication; interpersonal conflict
- The absence of trust, openness, and respect
- Conflicting values, in which choices that are made by management often conflict with their mission and core values
- Being ignored: no responses to emails, suggestions going unheard, being avoided in status meetings, being passed over for projects and responsibilities
- Poor support systems
- Inadequate training
- The inability to reach career goals

There is some research that looks at sociodemographic factors such as age and sex, but the results are not conclusive. There is also some evidence that burnout is more common among women and single, divorced, or widowed men.

Burnout affects people at all stages of their careers. Beginners may burn out quickly when they find all their dreams of “changing the world” are met with brick walls and strong resistance to change. Those at the end of their careers may also burn out as a result of the cumulative effect of job stress.

Burnout can occur to anyone in any occupation, but it has been most often studied in elementary and secondary school teachers and in healthcare workers. There is some anecdotal evidence about burnout among post-secondary instructors and technical communicators, but little or no research.

The lack of research, however, doesn’t mean that burnout doesn’t exist. As educators, especially educators in technical communication, we are affected by a number of the factors listed, such as:

- Role overload—responding to the demands of administrators, students, and colleagues
- Very few rewards
- A lack of respect for our skills—anyone can write, and therefore anyone can teach technical communication
- A lack of respect for our subject—we may find our courses undermined by other instructors who think that writing courses aren’t important

How can burnout be prevented?

Several studies provide lists of activities that institutions can engage in to prevent burnout among their staff. For example:

- Consult with staff on matters directly affecting their jobs
- Provide adequate resources to support staff, such as training and technical support
- Provide detailed job descriptions and expectations to reduce role ambiguity
- Create and maintain clear lines of communication by providing performance feedback
- Facilitate professional development activities

But if your workplace
doesn’t acknowledge that it is contributing to your burnout, what do you do? In general, the advice is to learn stress-management techniques such as relaxation, meditation, and exercise and to practice time management. This advice makes sense: burnout starts with stress. If you are in a stressful job and you don’t manage your stress well, you are susceptible to burning out.

However, stress management can go only so far. Ultimately, you may reach the conclusion that your organization is broken and you’re not going to fix it. Your only choice may be to leave. If you can, get out. If you can’t get out, then you have to assess for yourself how you can re-focus your priorities so work is less important and other aspects of your life are more important.

These are the things I have found helpful when I felt overwhelmed and needed to nurture myself a little:
- Choose to do only those things that you truly enjoy. Turn down jobs, volunteer or otherwise, that don’t give you pleasure and make your heart jump in anticipation. You may need to practice saying no, but you can learn.
- Simplify your life. Clear out junk, both electronic and otherwise. Don’t attend meetings. Throw out that pile of reading that you’re not ever going to do.
- Cultivate friendships at work.
- Go out for lunch. Take breaks. Arrive and leave on time.
- Put some energy into support systems outside work—develop friendships and interests that take you away from work.

**How can burnout be cured?**

People who are burning out tend to react in one of two ways: they act out in various forms of socially unacceptable behavior, or they withdraw and refrain from expressing any opinions, ceasing to have an active role in their organization. It’s hard for others to help because they may not recognize the behavior as a symptom of burnout. They see only someone who has become extremely difficult to deal with. If you are suffering from burnout, you will find yourself increasingly isolated from people who might otherwise have helped.

The literature suggests that being cured of burnout is not a do-it-yourself project. But a burned-out case can recover, with help. After all, a burned-out wreck was once a brilliant flame. From the ashes of that fire, you too can be reborn, as the phoenix.

But it takes some work. Remember how hard the angel in *It’s a Wonderful Life* had to argue to persuade George Bailey, a classic case of burnout, that his life hadn’t been wasted?

**And finally.**

This is my last column for *Intercom*. I am journeying toward retirement and readjusting my life accordingly. I have enjoyed the past four years of these columns, and I know a few of you have, too, if your comments are to be believed.

If this column touched a nerve, consider this: When was the last time you told any of your teachers how much you learned in their classes, or how grateful you are for their presence, however fleeting, in your life? If you are like me, the answer is “I can’t remember if I have ever done that.”

If you feel as though you are sliding toward burnout, feeling overworked and underappreciated, think of those countless students out there who, like you, never bother to thank a teacher. You may have touched someone’s life in ways you cannot imagine. And you’ll never know. Keeping your passion for teaching alive is a matter of faith.

Recently, I said to a class, “You know, my job isn’t to put barriers in your way. My job is to create an environment where you can learn things that will be useful to you in your careers. I’m here to help.” That statement was met with stunned silence, and then, a quiet voice murmured, “Cool.”

It’s these moments that I hoard. I pull them out in bleak times to nourish my shriveled soul. That’s what keeps me going.

**Alexa Campbell** is founding president of the STC Manitoba Chapter, founding manager of STC’s Canadian Issues Community, and an STC Fellow. After teaching high school for many years, she found her passion in technical communication and eventually returned to the classroom to teach technical communication at Red River College in Winnipeg, Manitoba. She completed her master’s degree in adult education at the University of Manitoba in 2006.
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2. 23–25 April 2009
The American Society for Indexing (ASI) will be holding its annual conference, “Scaling the Heights,” in Portland, OR, at the Doubletree-Lloyd Center Hotel. For more information, contact:
ASI
kmertes@hotmail.com
www.asindexing.org/site/conferences/conf2009/index.shtml

3. 1–5 May 2009
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:
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4. 3–6 May 2009
The Technical Communication Summit, the annual conference of the Society for Technical Communication (STC), will be held at the Hyatt Regency in Atlanta, GA. For more information, please contact:
Lloyd Tucker
+1 (571) 366–1904
lloyd@stc.org
http://conference.stc.org/

5. 18–20 May 2009
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What do you do with a textile engineering degree when you don’t want to be a textile engineer? My obscure engineering degree led me down a path to two technical communication careers.

With a solid technical education in one hand and a passion for writing in the other, I decided to become a technical writer after I graduated from college. My undergraduate degree helped immensely when I started my career, as I worked with engineers, and my technical knowledge allowed me to easily understand and translate information about turbines and electrical cabinets for my end users. Later, I completed a certificate program in technical writing that confirmed my interest in the discipline, and I went on to pursue a master’s degree in technical communication. In graduate school, I learned skills, such as document design, that I could apply immediately at work. I was also introduced to instructional design, which at the time served as an interesting course that contributed to my general body of knowledge as a technical communicator.

Years later, I started applying my technical communication skills outside my full-time job as well. A firm believer in Maya Angelou’s quote “when you learn, teach,” I developed a technical writing course that I taught for a year at Georgetown University. I drew upon what I learned in my first instructional design class and wanted to learn more about the field.

I found myself following a familiar pattern as I transitioned to the next phase of my career. I completed a graduate certificate in e-learning and was again able to apply much of what I learned in school at work. After taking an Adobe Captivate course, I approached the CIO of the company where I worked at the time for a Captivate license. I created e-learning videos, as opposed to online documents, for two proprietary software applications. The response from the 15,000-plus user base was positive. As I implemented newly acquired teaching and learning strategies in preparing the company’s trainers to teach online, I realized I was also ready for a change.

After months of searching, in May 2008 I landed a job as an instructional designer at Adayana Government Group, a consulting firm in Northern Virginia. I hit the ground running designing instructional strategies for an instructor-led training course conversion for the US Air Force. The course was for software used to plan missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Since the software is also used by coalition forces, I got to meet members of the Royal Air Force when I took the classroom course in preparation for the conversion.

I enjoy managing multiple projects and producing work for a variety of audiences. Current projects have me visiting Marine Corps Base Quantico to consult with subject matter experts, writing narration scripts and knowledge check questions for American Red Cross communication processes, and editing client furnished information. In addition, I create course design plans and storyboards to tie course content together. The interactive nature of the courses requires going beyond just the text and graphics. I work with graphic designers and programmers to generate innovative design strategies, including unique ways to integrate Captivate and standalone Flash files.

I’ve taken advantage of Adayana’s commitment to the professional development of its employees. Last year, I became a certified developer for the OutStart/EEDO ForceTen learning content management system and completed a course in blended learning offered through the American Society for Training and Development. This spring, I will complete a master’s degree program in instructional design.

I keep one foot in the technical writing world in various ways: I continue to use many of the same skills in my new profession, including writing clearly and concisely, organizing information in a logical manner, identifying appropriate graphics, and interviewing subject matter experts. I now teach a continuing education course in technical writing through the Fairfax County Public Schools Adult and Community Education program. I also maintain an active membership with STC.

A solid technical communication background can pave the way for many different career paths. For me, it has led to the world of instructional design.

After working as a technical writer for a decade, Savita Taylor (staylor@adayana.com) is now an instructional designer with Adayana Government Group in Falls Church, VA. She holds an MS in technical and professional communication from Southern Polytechnic State University, and in May 2009 she will receive an MEd in instructional design and development from George Mason University.
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