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ADDRESSING IMPLICIT DISCRIMINATION IN YOUR JOB SEARCH ACTIVITIES

By Saul Carliner, Fellow
When the mass media stress youth (most television networks prefer their viewers between 18 and 49, or, even better, no older than 35), professional magazines talk about the technological agility of younger workers, and the general business press openly talks about the high expense of experienced workers, those of us who have a bit of experience and the gray hair to prove it have good reason to be concerned about age discrimination in our job searches.

Indeed, despite anti-discrimination laws in most countries and corporate statements guaranteeing equal opportunity, age discrimination does exist in the workplace. If you’re un- or under-employed, cosmetic surgery and Botox treatments probably aren’t viable options for covering your age.

So what can you do? This article—an update of my 2003 Intercom article on the same subject—offers five suggestions.

1. Despite messages to the contrary, employers really do value older workers.

Although the media tends to focus on youth, employment statistics for the current recession suggest that older workers have an edge over younger workers. For example, despite the exceptional number of job losses in the United States in January, employment for older workers (age 55 and older) actually increased. In contrast, the group facing the highest unemployment rates is the youngest members of the workforce, especially young males with little education. A subsequent article in the New York Times (Greenhouse 2009) suggests that employers value the dependability of older workers, who tend to be more punctual, take fewer sick days, and have a better sense of customer service.

2. On the other hand, keep these figures in perspective.

Although older workers are preferred, the New York Times article focused on their desirability for customer service positions, especially entry-level ones.

In contrast, other evidence suggests that older job seekers do, indeed, face challenges. Luo (2009) suggests that older professionals who are out of work need more time to find a new position than those who are younger. Similarly, an advice column for job seekers confirmed that many employers tend to shy away from older workers because employers presume that older workers lack energy and technology skills (Zimmerman 2009).

Furthermore, despite laws to the contrary, employers can discriminate in implicit ways. Some may not even realize that they are discriminating. For example, a number of organizations require that new employees have “current technical knowledge.” But a hiring manager who uses a private litmus test of requiring a bachelor’s degree that is no more than 10 years old or looking for certain trendy buzz words in a cover letter or résumé rather than checking the actual base of individual skills is practicing implicit discrimination.

Similarly, employers often perceive a person who has stayed “too long” at a job to be undesirable or, at the least, untrainable. At the most, they might blame them for their own layoff from a previous position. (Compounding things, the definition of “too long” varies, but the period can be as short as four years, though some people say it is twelve.)

3. Take advantage of your network to find opportunity.

One of the advantages of age is that, usually, the older we get, the more people we know. That’s an asset for finding a job, because—even in the days of the Monster board and online social networking applications—personal contacts are the strongest assets in a job search.

That’s because many of the best job opportunities are not advertised and, even when they are, organizations ask their employees to actively recruit qualified candidates. Research on human resources suggests that employee referrals are a preferred source of candidates (Taber & Hendricks 2003).

Merely having a network, however, is not the same as being visible in that network. On the one hand, visibility involves calling attention to yourself, and different people have different levels of comfort in that regard. On the other hand, for those who are uncomfortable speaking in public or unable to take on a leadership role in a group like STC, social networking software such as LinkedIn, Plaxo, and Facebook provides alternate ways to keep in touch.

For example, Plaxo not only tracks contacts but also informs users of updates to Flickr posts. Delicious bookmarks, tweets, and blog entries on various services. Facebook lets you update your status and communicate it to all of your “friends.” All services let you send mass email messages to selected contacts.

When using social networking tools to call attention to yourself, however, Jeremy Epstein, an expert in online community building, suggests focusing on two or three things you’re passionate about so people can “brand” you (cited from Lieber 2009). Ideally, the branding relates to the specialty in which you’re seeking work. It is also advised that job seekers limit their use of these tools, to avoid annoying their networks with too many unsolicited messages.

4. Focus attention on your accomplishments in your résumé.

Implicit age discrimination is most likely to occur when hiring managers first review résumés. Certain information can signal that a candidate is older or overqualified for a job. This could force a candidate out of the running for reasons that might not appear to be connected to age—but that, in fact, relate almost exclusively to it.

In most instances, when a qualified candidate goes through a personal interview, the hiring decision becomes less about the qualifications on paper and more about the individual in the interviewing seat. So the goal of the résumé is to entice a hiring manager to interview you.

Carefully consider whether to remove the dates of degrees and jobs from your résumé. The dates on your résumé are obvious indicators of your age. According to some employment experts, by removing the dates of degrees and jobs, you take away some explicit indications of your

Similarly, for a job, you might include only the following information:

Senior Technical Writer
BellSouth. Birmingham, Alabama.
Responsibilities included writing product documentation about central switches and maintaining the department style guide.

If your employer has changed names (as many have through mergers, acquisitions, and repositioning), use the most current name of the employer. For example, rather than saying you worked for BellSouth, say that you worked for AT&T.

(In fact, update all terminology on your résumé. For example, rather than mentioning a computer-based training project, call it an e-learning project.)

But Newton, Massachusetts-based career counselor Amy Mazur suggests that the practice of omitting employment dates “raises more red flags.” She adds that one of the things a candidate over 40 can offer is “longevity in the work world.” If you choose to omit dates, do so with this caution in mind.

Include only relevant degrees. Although hiring managers value education in general, too much education usually raises concern among employers. If you have several post-baccalaureate degrees and certificates, list only those that have relevance for the job of interest, less you look overeducated.

The number of degrees a candidate has earned is an indirect indicator of age: Only with the passage of time could a person complete many degrees. But some employers also believe that too many degrees are a sign of a perpetual worker.

In addition, consider dropping any incomplete degrees from your résumé, especially ones that you are not likely to finish. Some hiring managers could interpret incomplete degrees as an inability to complete work. For example, a person who completed their PhD coursework years ago but never wrote the dissertation (known as “all but dissertation” or ABD) should strongly consider dropping the degree from his résumé.

List current software.
List the software you’re familiar with on your résumé. This not only provides hiring managers with the keywords they seek, but it also tells them your skills are current. If you have experience with most of the products that are currently popular, list them by name (but not version, which could quickly become dated).

If you have mixed experience (familiarity with some current software but not others), list the software categories with which you do have experience, such as word processing, desktop publishing, single-sourcing, web authoring, and content management software.

Also, note the holes in your knowledge base and use that information to focus your short-term training efforts.

Limit accomplishments to the relevant highlights.
One challenge for an extremely experienced worker is limiting a résumé to two pages. Those who have extensive employment credits might consider removing some of their employment from the list.

Jobs that have little relevance to the one of interest, or those that involved working with outdated technology, are good candidates for removal. Suppose you began your career as an auditor, then moved into technical communication. You might lump all of the auditing jobs into a single entry of auditor for various employers, or remove these jobs altogether from your résumé.

Or suppose you have worked a series of 15 one- to three-year jobs in a 25-year job history, and some of those jobs were at start-up companies that folded before their products could be released. If other jobs show similar experience, you might remove the start-ups from your résumé.

Consider also that certain experience can make a candidate seem overqualified for a particular position. For example, someone who is applying for a position that requires two to five years’ experience, but has executive experience, might be perceived as considerably overqualified for this position.

You may be proud of each of your jobs, but removing some of them from your résumé may make you a more attractive candidate for a position.

Present profiles of successful projects.
As an alternative to removing jobs from your résumé, consider replacing your employment history with success profiles. That is, rather than listing jobs by employer, highlight the tangible successes in your work.

In this format, you might list your accomplishments as follows:
• Planned and implemented a 15,000 topic, single-source database on the Such-and-Such Product, on schedule, and within 2 percent of budget, while working as a senior project manager at the Morgan Corporation in Any Town, Indiana. Other job responsibilities included....
• Wrote the award-winning NikNak 3000 Help System, which received a Best of Show award in the STC Kentuckiana Chapter online commu-
communication competition, while working at the XYZ Corporation in This City, Kentucky. Other job responsibilities included....

Note that employment dates are not needed for these jobs, and that job responsibilities follow the description of the success.

Use discretion, not dishonesty.

Delete, but don’t be dishonest. Like a job application, a résumé is a legal document and therefore must be truthful and verifiable. (And be prepared for employers to verify what you’ve claimed.) But a résumé is also a persuasive document, so you can present the content in a way that calls attention to your assets and deflects attention from your perceived liabilities.

Removing information from a résumé is not the same as falsifying it. But if your effort feels less than honest, use terms indicating that additional information is available upon request. As noted earlier, headings such as “Education” and “Employment” can be replaced by headings such as “Education Highlights” and “Employment Highlights” to indicate that they’re not complete.

5. In the interview, show yourself off.

When you get the interview, wear your age and experience proudly. The purpose of deleting references to your age from the résumé is to make sure that hiring managers give you an equal opportunity to be considered for a position—and that some implicit factors of age discrimination do not affect your chances for an interview.

But once you’re in an interview, the experience changes. Some studies suggest that people who project a more youthful outlook are more likely to be hired, but fundamentally, appearance is an expression of personal style. If you need to change your style to get a particular job, perhaps that’s not the right job for you in the end.

Be proud of your age and experience and present yourself in a positive light. Avoid self-deprecating humor like “Back in the stone age when I began my career...” or “When I first started out in technical communication, we did it such-and-such way.”

Show yourself for who you are: a great job candidate with relevant experience and skills and boundless positive energy who would make a great addition to any team.

References


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I once cynically opined that politics is what happens as soon as you gather three or more people together in one place and one of them leaves the room. Friends tell me I may have been unduly optimistic in assuming that more than two people are required. Politics affects more than just nations: it rears its ugly head in families, schools, and pretty much anywhere else people gather—including the workplace. Without going all Machiavellian on you, or delving too deeply into the murky waters of heresthetics, I do want to emphasize that understanding how office politics works can be crucial to our survival as working professionals. People seem to inevitably play various power games when they assemble in groups, and understanding the rules of the game is the only way we can play it well.

Dennis Ross knows a thing or two about the art of politics, having served as head of the US State Department’s policy planning staff during President George H. W. Bush’s administration and as President Bill Clinton’s chief Middle East negotiator from 1993 to 2000. While reading a recent article by Ross, I was reminded of my statement. Ross has interesting things to say about how desirable conclusions can be negotiated, and his approach can be extended to the office politics technical communicators often face. Ross claims that, to be effective, negotiations must have the following characteristics:

• Our assessments must be driven by reality, not ideology or wishful thinking.
• Our objectives must be constrained by the means available to achieve them, whether our own means or the means we can persuade others to mobilize on our behalf.
• We must be seen as striving to create security and reach consensus, not merely manipulating people for our own ends.
• We must be present as actors in situations where we can be expected to provide useful inputs.
• We must act at the right time, rather than after an opportunity has been lost.
• Our words must be perceived as credible and reliable.

Let’s see how these principles apply, both theoretically and concretely, to technical communicators in the workplace.

Realistic Objectives
Many of the articles you’ll see in Intercom and STC’s community or SIG newsletters call for us to become user advocates by emphasizing the importance of documentation and product usability. In most workplaces, it’s simply not realistic to hope that we can instantly become the user experience experts, even if we’ve done far more reading and practical work in this area than our managers and product developers. On the contrary: demonstrating superior expertise can sometimes backfire if it makes someone higher in the organizational hierarchy look bad in comparison. (Been there, done that. Still smarting—and somewhat smarter—from the wounds.) Even if our long-term objective might well be to become the organization’s expert in user experiences, that’s a patently unrealistic initial goal.

By Geoffrey J. S. Hart, Fellow
Instead, the goal must be to work into such a position gradually. Working for a former employer, I set a series of less ambitious objectives that would eventually lead me in the direction of a larger role. Initially, my goal was to get to know the programmers. I had no intention of becoming their friend (although if that happened, so much the better); all I wanted was to become more than a name on the organization chart and to get to know them well enough to be friendly at work. I achieved that goal by introducing myself—an obvious initial gesture many people never make—and by listening to them without asking for anything so that they could see me as more than a supplicant. My second goal was to find ways I could make myself useful to them. That happened when I had an opportunity to edit the text used in the user interface; by working directly in a text file using revision tracking, I was able to clearly communicate my requested changes in a way that minimized their work in reviewing and accepting those changes. Given that I was already editing the text, one of them asked me for help shortening some text so that it would fit better within the interface. Having done so, and having mocked up some alternative dialog box layouts to show what I was proposing, I demonstrated that my opinion was worth considering, and they subsequently began giving me opportunities to provide input on the interface. Shortly before I left to become a freelancer, I was even invited to a product design meeting so I could provide my input—my ultimate goal.

In each case, I succeeded by means of a low-pressure approach and by having the patience to accomplish a larger objective through a series of smaller steps.

**Understanding the Available Means**

As technical communicators, most of us have little power or influence in the workplace. This means that we must achieve our goals by means of persuasion. As STC Fellow Dan Voss memorably noted in a 1991 presentation, we are mice in a jungle full of elephants, and we won’t have much luck if we try to confront those elephants head-on. But as the fable of Androcles and the Lion reveals, sometimes small and powerless critters like us can find ways to earn the gratitude of more powerful beings who can help us achieve greater things.

At a former job, I volunteered to serve on a federally mandated workplace safety committee. Formally, I did nothing more than record the minutes, but informally, I also spent time getting to know the committee members and watching how decisions were made and how influence was exerted. When the employee representative serving alongside the management representative as co-chair of the committee stepped down, I offered to take on the position and was accepted in that role—in part because nobody else wanted it, but also because I’d gained a certain amount of credibility through my participation in the committee. Because this was a government workplace, my role as co-chair gave me a large amount of nominal power, but very little actual power. But because I had an opportunity to hone my skills at running effective meetings and achieving consensus, I was able to play a large role in shaping the committee’s recommendations—much larger than my actual power suggested—and in bringing those recommendations to people with power to implement them.

**Striving for Consensus**

If you’re the guy at the top of the organization chart, you have the power to tell everyone else what to do and how to do it, and the power to ensure that they do so. (Exercising this kind of power isn’t always wise, and I mention this possibility because it exists, not because I recommend it.) Most technical communicators are so far from that position that we can only see it if we use the zoom tool provided by Adobe Reader—and even then, only if we have a large-screen monitor. This means that we can rarely force others to do what we say, even if we’re right. Instead, we must use our powers of persuasion and clear communication to help others see what must be done, why it must be done, and how to do it.

In my case, despite having worn a surprisingly large number of hats during my career, I’ve worked primarily as an editor and writer. Both editors and writers develop considerable experience and skill in translation or interpretation. Whether you’re an editor working with authors or a writer working with product developers, you spend a surprising amount of time trying to understand what your colleagues want to accomplish and the words (for authors) or interfaces (for developers) they need to use to communicate. Less obviously, but equally important, you spend considerable time trying to understand what the audience must hear for the author or developer to accomplish a goal. Your role then becomes one of translating the author’s or developer’s thoughts into the audience’s context so that communication happens. Over time, you develop a skill you may never have noticed: an ability to understand the thoughts and needs of both the communicators and their audience. This places you in a powerful position: Because you understand both parties, you possess an understanding that neither party possesses. That understanding allows you to translate between them in much the same way that an interpreter at an international conference translates between two nations. By paying attention to more than just the words—by understanding each side’s needs, fears, and hopes—the best interpreters help to ensure that the two parties reach consensus.

By exercising this skill in the workplace, I’ve often been able to explain audience needs in a way that made sense to the authors I worked with, and in so doing, have been able to shape the nature of the communication. I’ll provide a more concrete example of this under *Acting at the Right Time*.

**Acting, Not Being Acted Upon**

After a few experiences of having our suggestions ignored, whether for good reasons or bad, most of us learn to shut up, focus on our jobs, and let others worry about larger issues. This leads to a certain numb passivity in which we accept whatever is done to us and surrender the will to become actors; in other words, we are acted upon, instead of acting. This kind of passivity is self-
fulfilling because we blind ourselves to opportunities for action and rob ourselves of a chance to accomplish something that would renew our desire to change things for the better.

A common example arises in software documentation. Having learned the importance of audience analysis and user-centered design, we begin the project full of enthusiasm and the desire to change the world. Inevitably, we encounter problems and request that they be solved. But the intractable realities of tight deadlines and overworked developers mean that there’s no time to act on those suggestions. So, after the third time a suggestion gets shot down ("great idea, wish we had the time"), we give up and focus on completing our part of the job—getting the user manual and online help ready in time for the product release. Eventually, the product ships, and we spend the next few weeks recovering from our exhaustion—possibly even taking some long overdue vacation or "comp time" earned through hours of overtime during the rush to meet the deadline. When we come back, the cycle begins again.

But what we’re missing is that even when product releases are tightly clustered, we usually have weeks or even months before the next major project starts gathering momentum. That’s when we have an opportunity to remind people of the problems we raised during the previous chaos, and when we have time to actually take steps to correct those problems. And speaking of time....

**Acting at the Right Time**

One of the things you learn in the Japanese martial art of aikido is that you should never meet strength with strength, but rather use the opponent’s strength against them. So, for example, rather than physically lifting opponents off the ground and throwing them around by sheer force of strength, you learn to feel shifting weight and apply your strength at the moment they begin to move; this lets you borrow their own strength to complete the throw. In the workplace, things are usually less violent, but the same principle applies: there are times when no amount of strength will be sufficient to move an obstacle, and there are other times when only a slight push is necessary—the obstacle’s own momentum will do the work for you.

In a former job, I’d been opining for some time that we needed to revise our reports to focus on user goals (implementation of our research), not just reporting of the research results. Though many people agreed that my suggestion had merit, nobody was willing to attack the status quo to make the necessary changes, which were perceived as risky. When the opportunity arose to survey our clients about how we conducted our research and disseminated the results, I volunteered to serve on the committee that created the survey. This gave me the opportunity to insert a few questions of my own and shape the form of several other key questions related to how clients used our research reports. When the survey results clearly indicated the importance of research implementation, I was given an opportunity to propose an implementation-focused redesign of our reports. By explaining how we could bridge the needs of our authors to communicate research results with the needs of our audience to implement those results, I was able to achieve consensus on how both goals could be achieved. The results were well appreciated.

**Achieving Credibility**

It’s always easier to persuade someone if they trust you—that is, if you have credibility. Each of the points I’ve raised in this article illustrates a way to gain credibility. Setting realistic goals shows that you understand the constraints that impede change and that you’re willing to move gradually toward those goals. Understanding the means to achieve those goals lets you adopt an appropriate strategy. Aiming for consensus helps you mobilize the resources necessary to implement that strategy. Acting, rather than waiting for someone else to act, lets you have some influence in how that implementation will occur, and acting at the right time ensures that your efforts won’t be wasted. The sum of these results is credibility: the perception that you are striving for achievable goals in a way that is consensual, not manipulative, and that leverages existing momentum to cause a change instead of attempting to force change to happen.

**Technical Communicators as Politicians?**

As technical communicators, our skills focus on communication, and as I hope you’ve seen, each of the criteria for effective statecraft can be applied in the workplace with a little help from communication skills. Unfortunately, doing so may require us to take a step outside our comfort zone. In my own career, I’ve proven to my satisfaction that it’s safe and effective to do so, and there are highly salutary consequences. But I’ve succeeded because I did more than write or edit quietly in my cubicle: I made a point of reaching out and making contact with my workplace colleagues, at all levels, and demonstrating that I was prepared to work both with and for them to help them succeed. Until I'd written this essay, it had never occurred to me that this made me a politician. I hope you’ll trust my words despite that.

**Suggested Reading**


As more and more companies are discovering, e-learning is a great way to train groups of employees or product users who are geographically dispersed. With businesses setting up operations across the globe and moving their products into foreign markets, trainees may very well include people whose native language is not English. It is becoming much more likely that an e-learning module will have to be translated into another language or languages.

Working with e-learning modules poses some special challenges for language service providers. Developers who prepare e-learning modules with translation in mind can avoid some of these challenges and save their clients a lot of time and expense down the line. Some basic knowledge about how translators work can help a developer to design e-learning applications in ways that facilitate a smooth translation process.

The Translation Process

Many people assume that interactive content is translated simply by having a translator look at what’s on the screen and translate it, followed by someone else who inserts the translated text into the code. It is possible to proceed this way, and it may seem like the cheapest option, but there can be all kinds of problems leading to unexpected expenses and delays. Suddenly, the cheapest option is not cheap at all!

Tips for Designing E-learning Modules with Translation in Mind
For one thing, it is very likely that some content will be missing from the translation. This could occur for a number of reasons:

- It is very easy to miss some content on the screen, such as buttons, feedback messages, and other user interface elements.
- It is very difficult to be sure that you have viewed every possible screen when the application includes many alternate answers, paths, etc.
- Some content, such as error messages, will not show up on the screen unless a certain event occurs.

Another drawback is that quality control is difficult when a reviewer has to continually go back and forth between the source text and a separate translation, rather than being able to see both versions side by side in one file.

And, in the end, someone else—possibly a higher paid someone—will have to spend the time reinserting the text in the file. Since this is also probably someone with computer rather than language skills, the opportunities for mistakes are enormous.

It is far more efficient and cost-effective if the translator can work from a single file into which the translator can directly insert the translation along with the original English. Therefore, the actual translation process implemented for this kind of work might look like the following:

First, all of the content that needs to be translated must be identified, extracted, and put into a file format that the translator can work with.

If the e-learning application is of any length and complexity—and especially if it involves a lot of technical terminology—the language service provider will want to prepare a multilingual glossary of important terms that are used repeatedly in the application. The translator can load the glossary into a translation memory for later use.

Next comes the actual translation. The translator creates a bilingual file—showing both the original text and the translation—which is then checked by a proofreader. Ideally, the translator will also use translation memory (TM) software that, as its name implies, actually memorizes what has already been translated. The TM can compare later content to earlier content to see whether a translation already exists. TM software ensures consistency of usage throughout a translation and across translations of related materials. TM can also save money because the same text does not have to be translated over and over.

The translator will also want be able to apply spell- and grammar-checking utilities to the translated content. The proofreader, in turn, should be able to mark the changes in the file, using a utility like Microsoft Word’s Track Changes, so that those changes can be reviewed during a quality check.

Finally, the translated material is automatically reinserted into the e-learning module, retaining all the original text formatting, hyperlinks, coding, etc.

What are the implications of this process for e-learning developers? We’ll look at three aspects of the development process: 1) choice of development tools, 2) design, and 3) writing content.

Choice of Tools
The usually simple task of identifying and extracting the translatable content poses problems in e-learning and other software applications. An e-learning application generally contains numerous fields for titles, page text, buttons, questions, and alternative answers, etc. All of this must be captured. In choosing e-learning development tools, developers should ask themselves how all this content will be identified and extracted for translation once the English version is complete.

Developers of authoring software have begun to address this issue. Two of the major tools, ToolBook (from SumTotal) and Lectora (Trivantis), have come out with translation modules, but they differ dramatically in how they operate. The ToolBook Translation System (TTS) exports the translatable content to Microsoft Access databases, which the translator then reads using special software. The software presents the translatable elements individually to the translator with a space to fill in the translation. The translation is saved to a second, translated database, which is then integrated with the e-learning module by the author.

The Lectora system, on the other hand, exports all the translatable elements to a rich text file (RTF) that the translator can work with in any common word processing program. The translated RTF can simply be reimported by the author to create the new language version.

Strictly from the point of view of translation, the Lectora system has many advantages. The RTF file works with TM software, allows the use of spell-check and grammar utilities, and allows for a proofreader or other reviewer to mark edits using utilities such as Track Changes. TTS, in contrast, requires special software and does not allow the use of a translation memory or other utilities. (Certainly there are ways to extract the data from the Access databases that TTS creates and to manipulate it in other programs, but this requires a lot more preparation, thought, and technical skill on the part of the language service provider.)

These are only two of the many authoring tools out there. Many have no special utilities for translation or simply advise you to export an XML file. (Exports to one or many XML files do provide the necessary elements for a workable and successful translation process, if your language service provider knows how to handle them.)

The bottom line: When you consider the pros and cons of any authoring tool, one thing to take into account is the translation process.

Writing
The basic rule in writing for translation is to keep it simple: 1) avoid subordinate clauses, 2) use the active voice, and 3) be consistent in your choice of terminology by using the same words and phrases to express a concept throughout the document. In creative writing, you may make heavy use of a thesaurus. In technical writing, clarity is more important. And, in writing for translation, clarity is essential. Ambiguity is possibly the most difficult problem for translators. Brevity is also a virtue. Not
only is brevity a key to simplicity, but it also keeps expenses down, as language service providers typically charge by the word.

Previous articles in Intercom provide more detailed and invaluable suggestions for writing for translation (including the Suggested Reading at the end of this article). These guidelines are as important for e-learning content as they are for any content.

Design

Graphics

Any text in a graphic must be translated. The graphic also must be recreated with the translated text and the new graphic has to be reinserted in the module. If you can avoid it, don’t use graphics with text; add any text directly in the authoring program. When the use of text in a graphic cannot be avoided, make sure that the graphic is available in a form in which the text can be edited, as a layered Photoshop file, Excel spreadsheet, etc. Supply those files to the language service provider along with the export of the text. (Note: Some tools come with prepared graphics for common elements such as buttons. If they have text, don’t use them. Make your own.)

Avoid graphics that are culturally bound. Pictures of people should be as generic as possible. Graphics that rely on cultural references should be eliminated. For example, you might use a baseball or football graphic to illustrate a concept for an American audience, but the graphic may have no meaning in another country.

White Space

When text is translated into other languages, the final product can be significantly longer than the English version. When English text is translated into any of the major European languages, it typically expands by 30 percent. This can even be a problem with single words. For example, your “Search” button in English becomes your “Recherche” button in French.

Be sure to leave plenty of white space in your design to accommodate longer lines of text. Open up text boxes—even boxes for things like titles, buttons, and graphic labels—to allow for text expansion.

Planning Ahead

When the time comes for a translation project—or even when you are just looking for planning advice—it’s best to choose a language service provider who has experience with this type of content. The provider should also have the technical knowledge to adapt the approach to various development environments.

No matter how careful the planning, working with content extracted from a software application may present some unexpected challenges. A translator with no technical expertise will not be able to help overcome many problems. In fact, despite the fact that there are software tools especially for translating code like HTML and XML, many translators do not know how to use them. Since many e-learning development tools produce a Flash file, an XML export is often the easiest way to extract the text for translation.

The possibility of translation is something that should be on every developer’s radar. Whether or not your clients are planning translation from the beginning, talk to them about their future plans. They’ll be happy to know that you are thinking ahead.

Suggested Reading


Myriam Siftar (siftar@mtmlinguasoft.com) is the president and founder of MTM LinguaSoft, a language service provider based in Philadelphia, PA. Prior to starting MTM LinguaSoft, she worked in the IT field for 15 years.

STC will offer an early Early-Bird rate during December 2009.

Be prepared to save several hundred dollars
During tough economic times, many professionals start thinking about how they can use their skills to move into related fields. Technical communicators are no exception, and if you can boost your income at the same time, that’s all the better.

Fortunately, there is a field that technical communicators are uniquely qualified to pursue. It’s called marketing writing, and it requires many of the skills and talents that technical communicators spend their careers refining and mastering.

What Is Marketing Writing?

Marketing writers write content that informs readers and often persuades them to take action. Marketing writing also goes by many other names, such as copywriting, business writing, commercial writing, and so on. Some marketing writing is primarily informative, such as newsletters and case studies, while some is much more persuasive in nature, such as advertising and direct mail.

Marketing writers are typically only responsible for the words (called copy) that go into the marketing material they write. That means you can concentrate on writing great content and let the graphic designers worry about the layout and visuals (not that you can’t lend a hand).
Similar Skills as Technical Communication

Technical communicators excel at marketing writing because both fields require practitioners to do the same thing: deliver the right information to the right people at the right time.

Clarity Is Key

As all technical communicators know, technical communication isn’t just about writing. As hard as it is for non-technical communicators to envision, tech writers don’t just sit at their desks and pound computer keys all day long. While writing is obviously a significant part of technical communication, technical communicators spend a great deal of time creating communication processes, structuring information so that it’s easy to skim and search, and figuring out the best way to deliver a piece of information to a target audience.

According to freelance commercial writer and author Peter Bowerman, these sorts of skills are exceptionally useful to marketing writing. Bowerman explains that much of marketing writing is about making things simpler and easier to read. He also stresses that many industries, such as health care and high tech, need someone who can write clearly.

The User Is King

Technical communicators sometimes feel like quixotic figures on a never-ending quest to look out for the users. They care about the end user because, ultimately, what really matters is how well they’re able to use a product. In order to deliver the right information to these users, technical communicators must be adept at researching their audience to figure out how to provide them with the information they need, when and where they need it.

While developers and engineers might not share the same enthusiasm for designing with the end user in mind, this skill is of great value in marketing writing.

A large part of writing effective marketing material is being able to research the target audience. Who is the target audience? What motivates them and makes them take action? When you research these types of questions, and then address them in your writing, you’ll write clear, engaging content. If you don’t, then you’ll likely end up with turgid prose that your readers will toss out at their earliest convenience.

You Already Have the Knowledge

Everyone is an expert in something, and everyone has knowledge about some subject that others are interested in. Technical communicators can use their specialties and their writing prowess to do marketing writing.

According to Bob Bly, well-known copywriter and Internet marketing strategist, technical communicators can “use [their] aptitude for writing about technical subjects to write marketing materials for technical products.” For example, if you document high-tech software products, then you could write marketing material for high-tech software. If you document heavy industrial automation controls, then you could write marketing material for those types of products.

The key is that you know the product, the industry, and, most importantly, the ways users want to use the products. Engineers, software developers, and subject matter experts know quite a bit about the products they work on, but they often don’t think about how the users actually want to use those products. Technical communicators have this knowledge, which makes it much easier to present its benefits and features in marketing material.
A Different Style of Writing

While marketing writing requires a very similar skill set as technical writing, it does involve a different style of writing. The extent of those differences can vary quite a bit, depending on what exactly you’re writing.

Shorter Projects

Technical communication projects tend to be long in duration, measured in months, rather than days or weeks. Often times, these projects involve writing a large deliverable, such as a user guide or an online help system.

In marketing writing, projects are much shorter and tend to be more varied. It’s rare to see a marketing writing project last longer than a couple weeks. Rather than writing a long document or a help system, a marketing writer might write the content that goes into a product brochure or sales letter.

Of course, short projects shouldn’t bother anyone who likes a wide variety of work. Even though it might take some getting used to, it’s not really all that different from technical communication, when you consider the many different types of deliverables that technical writers produce in today’s economy.

Persuasive Writing

While technical communication skills are of great value in well-written marketing material, you still have to learn a thing or two about copywriting. As Bly explains, marketing writing is persuasive/sales writing, while technical writing is more instructional or informational.

Technical communicators primarily write to explain how to perform a series of tasks, whereas marketing writers write to grab their readers’ attention and to convince them to do something.

Fortunately, learning the marketing writing style is not all that difficult, particularly for a technical communicator who already knows how to write clearly and cohesively. According to Bowerman, learning the marketing side is the easy part. “If you learn a few basic marketing principles, then you can do very well with a writing background.” For more information about how to write great copy, see the suggested readings at the end of the article.

What Marketing Writing Looks Like

Marketing writing can take many forms, but some of the more common ones include:

- **Brochures.** Brochures can either inform or persuade. Typically, they’re used to advertise a product or service, to explain a process, or even to provide some handy information. There are many types of brochures, such as tri-folds or full, 8.5 x 11 pages.
- **Web Copy.** Because people read differently online than they read print, web writing requires short, concise chunks of content and uses lots of headings and lists so that readers can easily skim the content.
- **Search Engine Optimization.** These days, most web users navigate to websites through search engines, such as Google. Thus, there’s an entire industry devoted to Search Engine Optimization (SEO). As a marketing writer, you could make a career out of optimizing websites for search. Generally, SEO means tagging HTML with keywords that closely match the types of search strings that web users will use to find your site. It also helps to have a good understanding of how search engines rank search results.
- **Direct Mail and Email.** These are letters written to potential customers to convince them to take action. This type of writing tends to be better for creative types, because it requires very persuasive, engaging writing.
- **Newsletters.** Not all marketing writing involves persuasive writing. A significant portion of it, such as newsletters, requires a writer who can craft a clear message. While writers with a background in journalism might be tailor-made for this type of writing, anyone who can deliver needed information to an audience in language they can understand can excel at writing newsletters.
- **Case Studies and White Papers.** These are another example of informative writing. These materials generally take a common problem and show how a company’s product or service solves it.
- **Print Ads, Branding, and Tag Lines.** Products typically need to be advertised and branded, and creative marketing writers provide the content for these pieces.
- **Radio and TV Ad Scripts.** This type of writing must be very clear and concise, as other elements (such as video and outside distractions) are simultaneously consuming the viewer’s or listener’s attention.
- **Ghostwriting.** Few writers consider the ghostwriting market, but there are certainly opportunities out there, such as books, speeches, and articles, particularly for business executives.
Types of Marketing Writing

Marketing writing is generally split into two categories, business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-consumer (B2C). These terms mean pretty much what they sound like; B2B involves writing material for a business that is trying to sell something to, or communicate with, another business. On the other hand, a B2C writer would write material for a business trying to sell something to a customer.

You can succeed with either B2B or B2C, or both. However, unless you’re in retail, most technical communicators would probably feel more comfortable, and have more success, with B2B. In the end, however, it just depends on your personality and what type of writing you like to do.

B2B

B2B is more sober than B2C, and thus it is more fitting for someone who wants to write more informative, less “salesy” material. It also doesn’t hurt that the B2B world is, in the words of Bowerman, “absolutely huge.” If you think of all the businesses in the global economy, they all need to communicate with each other. And, often times, they also need to communicate internally, within their own departments. Product brochures, case studies, white papers, website content, and newsletters are just a few examples of the materials that businesses need to communicate in these ways, and marketing writers are needed to create the content that goes into them.

B2C

Most of us are probably more familiar with B2C, because we all come into contact with it on a daily basis. Advertisements, radio and TV spots, and promotional literature are just a few examples. In addition, while sales letters and direct mail (and email) are a part of B2B, they are also good examples of the types of materials that a marketing writer would produce for a B2C client.

If you are more creative, or if you just have a passion for creative writing, then B2C might be more appropriate. Bowerman states that writing this type of material, “isn’t just about clear, concise copy. It’s about punchy, direct, engaging writing.” To be a successful marketing writer specializing in B2C markets, you’ll need to find out all of the target audience’s hot buttons, and then push all of them in a way that will incite them to take action.

Suggested Reading

The following resources will help you learn more about marketing writing and how you might make a move into the field.


Ben Hardesty (benhardesty@eaton.com) is a senior technical writer at Eaton Corporation, where he writes software documentation, marketing material, and internal communications for the IT department.
Other than my manager, there are no other technical communicators at my office. I easily fit into the category that STC members commonly refer to as lone writers. Over the past few years, I’ve built the following collection of foundation books for guidance. I consult some frequently, many are indispensable, and there are others I may never use for my work, but I still consider valuable for learning about new trends, technologies, and tools.

**Style and Usage Guides**


For companies that are closely aligned with Microsoft, this is an ideal reference to research what to include in an in-house style guide. There is a comprehensive section on general topics, including documenting the user interface, and advice on global, web, and software development content. Another section is a list of acronyms and abbreviations. The last part of the book, and the largest section, is a dictionary that explains usage for technical terms and common words and phrases.


This is an example-driven style guide, not a textbook, intended to supplement conventional style guides, which typically do not take translation issues or the needs of nonnative speakers into account. The Global English guidelines found in this book are designed to help colleagues around the world communicate more effectively. The Global English guidelines also show how to write documentation that is optimized for machine-translation, translators, and nonnative speakers of English.


A group of Sun Microsystems’ technical writers and editors are the authors of this guide devoted to the topic of creating technical documentation that is clear, consistent, and easy to understand. The coverage includes detailed grammar, punctuation, typographic, and legal guidelines. There is also extensive guidance on creating effective step-by-step procedures and techniques for documenting web applications and graphical user interfaces. Managers can use this book to get help with topics such as hiring writers, working with illustrators, and managing schedules and workflow.


This book tells writers, editors, or reviewers of technical information how to apply quality characteristics (e.g., accuracy, clarity, and concreteness) that make technical information easy to use, easy to understand, and easy to find. Most of the chapters focus on a single quality characteristic, with a series of guidelines about how to enhance each. There are extensive before-and-after examples, illustrations, and checklists.


This is a book about the best way to use words and phrases. It is not a dictionary, a book about style, or a compendium of dos and don’ts. The main audience is print journal professionals, but there is plenty of overlap in the types of usage questions that will come up in the day-to-day work among print journal professionals and technical communication writers and editors. The book consists of...
200 entries arranged alphabetically with cross-references. It is short enough to be read straight through, but also has the flexibility to be easily consulted when usage questions arise.

“The Basics” and Management


A book for learning all the basics about being a technical writer: The first section explains the necessary skills and the essential tools and techniques for delivering projects on schedule and on budget. The next section describes how to procure and organize information and write content. The last section includes advanced topics; it explains XML, structured authoring with DITA, and web 2.0 technologies (blogs, wikis, and more), which encourage the sharing of information on the Internet.


The four major sections—Getting Started, Managing People, Managing Products, and Managing Technology—provide the reader with the information needed to successfully manage documentation projects, people, and technology. The target audience is documentation managers, but the book is also meant for product development managers or marketing managers who have writers on their teams. The user-friendly structure resembles a reference guide.


This book is dedicated exclusively to the art of writing white papers. The author covers the four primary types of white papers and provides his extremely detailed, ten-step process for writing them. The technical communicator who is specifically assigned the task of writing a white paper for a corporation is the main audience of the book. Professors teaching a course on white paper writing, as well as engineers, marketing professionals, and freelance writers will also find this a valuable resource.


This book covers two major topics: the basics of building and managing a virtual team and evaluating the types of tools currently available for collaboration, such as wikis, blogs, and RSS feeds. The authors collaborated on a wiki when writing the book, which they opened up for readers as an example of how a wiki works.

Editing


This book is entirely devoted to the field of technical editing and is intended for technical editors, publication managers, and students. The major sections are devoted to learning about the editor’s role as a member of the product team, detailing how to do the editor’s job, and exploring an editor’s career. Included in the book are checklists for each type of editorial review an editor might perform and case studies that analyze problems editors might have working with writers and managing projects.


This is a comprehensive book on how to edit onscreen. It can be useful for those who have never edited onscreen before and need to know how and where to begin, and those who are currently editing onscreen but want hints and tips on how to be more effective. With concrete examples, the author chose Microsoft Word to demonstrate the principles of onscreen editing, but he attempts to make the techniques applicable to any word processor. The three main topics are: what onscreen editing is, what its advantages are, and how to implement it.


For those who learn more effectively by doing, this is a “hands-on” training book divided into several modules. Each module builds on lessons learned in the previous module. Data files necessary for the lessons are available for download on the publisher’s website. The files are necessary to complete the student activities presented in the book. Module topics include: The Editorial Process, Tracking Changes and Adding Comments, Spelling and Grammar, Find and Replace, and Formatting with Styles, Macros, and Advanced Macros. (A separate version is also available for Word 2003.)

Design and Presentation


This is a useful book for anyone who has something to design, such as a newsletter, brochure, or flyer, but has no background or training in design. Four basic concepts—contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity—used in virtually every well-designed job are explained in detail. By following these basic principles, the expectation is that the work you design will look more professional, organized, unified, and interesting.


This is not a book about Zen, but the author argues that the principles found in Zen can be applied to our daily activities, including presentations. Presentation Zen is an approach, not an inflexible list of rules to be followed. Garr Reynolds states that the aim of his book is to “help professionals free themselves from the pain of creating and delivering presentations by helping them see presentations in a way that is different, simpler, more visual, more natural, and ultimately more meaningful.” For example, the author makes a convincing case for slides to be used only as support for the speaker; they are never intended to stand on their own, so handouts of slides should never be passed out to the audience. The design section of the book includes 15 pages of “real world” slides that help illustrate the
author’s emphasis on simplicity, clear visuals, and understandability.

**Writing for the Web**


The goal of this book is to help readers with the task of providing their website visitors with high-quality content that is easy to find and easy to understand. It is a book about strategy and tactics, not about tools. There is a linear, logical path to the book, covering home pages, pathway pages, destination pages, and ending with how to get from a first draft to a final web page. The concepts of processes of user-centered design are emphasized throughout. The book includes “real world” website examples with useful explanations about what the author might do to revise web pages.


A book about how to design web forms and how to avoid design mistakes. The ideas in the book can be helpful for designing paper and other types of forms, but the focus is on forms found on the web. The authors present a three-layer model—appearance, conversation, and relationship. All three are needed for a successful form. The book is easy to read and full of helpful examples.

**DITA and XML**


Designed for authors and managers who want to read a book written in plain English to understand what DITA is all about. The book is particularly useful for those deciding if they want to implement DITA and for evaluating if a current or planned methodology is compatible with DITA. The “A Day in the Life of a DITA Author” section is valuable for understanding how an author would develop online content, create topics, and write structured content.


Intended for users new to XML, this book offers a case-study format for readers to learn the process of building a complete, functional, end-to-end XML solution. Each chapter takes one part of the single, main project—creating an online business product catalog—that includes reports, data input/output, workflow, stylesheet formatting, RSS feeds, and integration with external services such as Google, eBay, and Amazon.com. The unique approach to learning XML emphasizes the fundamentals of structured markup. The book is part of a “Problem—Design—Solution” series for readers to gain solid, workable solutions to real-world development problems.

David Kowalsky ([david.kowalsky@necam.com](mailto:david.kowalsky@necam.com)) is a technical writer at NEC Corporation of America. He is an STC senior member of the Puget Sound Chapter, where he writes book reviews for Sound Views, the chapter newsletter.

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Ann Wiley Named 2009 Leadership Community Resource Volunteer of the Year

BY JACKIE DAMRAU, Fellow, and Immediate Past Chair, Leadership Community Resource Committee

The 2009 Leadership Community Resource (LCR) Volunteer of the Year award was not presented during the 2009 STC Technical Communication Summit, as the recipient was unable to attend. It is my honor to announce that this year’s award was presented to Ann Wiley, a fellow in the STC Rochester Chapter. LCR Chair Jackie Damrau praised Ann’s contributions in the plaque citation:

“For your dedication and professionalism in successfully leading the Community Handbook and Pacesetter Explorers committees in providing deliverables on time with care and commitment for the Society and its members”

In the past year, Ann worked on the Community Handbook committee and the Pacesetter Explorers committee. For the Community Handbook committee, she quickly assembled an international team to go through the Handbook and remove all the dated material, add information from the international communities, and completely reorganize and reformat the document.

The Pacesetter Explorers committee was another accomplishment that Ann performed in stellar time with another group of STC members. She and her team visited many of the chapter websites, read through the Community Status Reports, and conducted an informal chapter survey to find innovations.

Paul Holland Named 2009 Outstanding SIG Volunteer of the Year

BY JACKIE DAMRAU, Fellow, and Immediate Past Chair, Leadership Community Resource Committee

The 2009 Outstanding Special Interest Group (SIG) Volunteer of the Year award was not presented during the 2009 STC Technical Communication Summit, as the recipient was unable to attend. It is my honor to announce that this year’s award went to Paul Holland, a senior member of the STC Lone Star Community and Northeast Ohio Chapter. SIG Advocate Karen Mardahl praised Paul’s contributions in the plaque citation:

“For your dedication, leadership, passion, and ongoing support of the STC Marketing Communication SIG and its members”

The Marketing Communication (Marcom) SIG has been struggling. Paul Holland, a SIG member and webmaster, stepped up when the SIG needed him the most to keep it afloat. He not only maintained the website, he set up a WordPress blog (www.stc-marcom.org/wordpress/), which was publicly praised by Scott Abel. The members began posting articles and the SIG is now on the road to recovery.

Jackie Damrau, STC Fellow and Immediate Past Chair of the LCR, presented Paul with this award at the 21 May meeting of the STC Lone Star Community. Jackie says, “Paul was completely surprised and was honored to know that his efforts were being well-received by the Marcom SIG members and the LCR. Way to go, Paul!”

Paul definitely deserves a purple heart and public recognition for keeping the Marcom SIG spark of life alive. His work is beginning to pay off nicely.

2010 Conference Hotel Details

The official conference hotel for the 2010 Technical Communication Summit, 2–5 May in Dallas, TX, is the Hyatt Regency Dallas on Reunion Boulevard. All of the hotel rooms have been renovated in the last six months. There are a wide variety of restaurant options from Wolfgang Puck’s Fifty-Six Restaurant at the top of Reunion Tower to Coffee’s Post for a quick cup of coffee and a danish. Staying at the Hyatt will put you in the middle of the action. The keynote sessions, education sessions, and social and networking activities will be only an elevator ride away.

This year’s room rate is $169.00 for a single or double accommodation. The Hyatt will start taking reservations after conference registration is open. The Hyatt offers 31 rooms that are fully ADA-equipped, with seven of these rooms providing roll-in showers. All hotel reservations may be made online with the Hyatt through the link that will be available on STC’s conference website.

Please note that if you make reservations through the Hyatt website you may find a room rate lower than STC’s negotiated group rate. This rate is a pre-purchased rate. Your credit card will be charged 24 hours after you have made your reservation. This type of reservation does not provide refunds for cancellations, nor can you make changes to your reservation. To ensure that you have received the best rate available, as well as the support of STC should you need to make changes or if problems arise, make your reservations through the STC conference website.
Applications for Fellow Due 5 October

By Christopher Juliet, Chair, Fellows Nominating Committee

Each fall, the Fellows Nominating Committee invites STC Associate Fellows who have held that rank for two years to submit information to the committee for potential nomination to the rank of Fellow. This honor recognizes members’ achievements in the field of technical communication, contributions to STC, or both.

Any Associate Fellow who was inducted to that rank at or prior to the 2008 STC Annual Conference may submit an information packet to the committee. The committee reviews each candidate’s information packet and contacts the identified references. Based on evaluation of the information collected, the committee forwards nominees to the STC Board of Directors for consideration.

To be considered for selection as a Fellow, an Associate Fellow must have accomplished at least one of the following:
1) performed important work and attained distinction in the field of technical communication,
2) done notable original work that has contributed to the advancement of the field, or
3) made significant contributions to the Society and helped to tell STC’s powerful story. In addition, they must have attained eminence in the field of technical communication through their outstanding achievements in and contributions to the arts and science of technical communication.

In addition, completed applications must be received by the committee no later than 5 October.

Send them to committee chair Christopher Juillet at chris@juilletlaw.com. The STC Board of Directors will consider nominated candidates in January 2010. The Society will recognize our new Fellows at an honors banquet in May at the 2010 STC Technical Communication Summit in Dallas, Texas.

For more information, refer to the Fellows Nominating Committee web page at www.stc.org/recog/honors01_Fellow.asp or contact committee chair Christopher Juillet at chris@juilletlaw.com.

Please note that there is now a one-time, $25 administrative fee.

Associate Fellow Recommendations Due 5 October

By Nancy Hoffman, Chair, Associate Fellows Nominating Committee

Each fall, the Associate Fellows Nominating Committee invites STC communities and members to recommend senior members for the rank of STC Associate Fellow. This honor recognizes members’ achievements in the field of technical communication, contributions to STC, or both.

Any voting member of STC may submit a candidate’s application to the Associate Fellows Nominating Committee. The committee reviews each candidate’s application and contacts the identified references. Based on evaluation of the information collected, the committee forwards nominees to the STC Board of Directors for consideration.

To be considered for selection as an Associate Fellow, the candidate must have been active in the field of technical communication for at least 15 years and a member of the Society for at least 10 years, as of the application submission deadline. The candidate also must have accomplished at least one of the following:
1) performed important work and attained distinction in the field of technical communication,
2) done notable original work that has contributed to the advancement of the field, or
3) made significant contributions to the Society and helped to tell STC’s powerful story.

In August, communities and Society leaders received an email message describing the nomination process and the information required for a candidate’s consideration by the Associate Fellows Nominating Committee. This information is also available on the STC website at www.stc.org/recog/honors01_aFellow.asp. Upon request, the Society office will email community presidents or SIG managers a list of all eligible candidates in their communities. Please email your request to Lloyd Tucker, Director of Education, at lloyd.tucker@stc.org.

Communities and individuals should use the Recommendation for Associate Fellow form and refer to the completed sample forms on the STC website at www.stc.org/recog/honors01.asp.

The committee recommends involving Associate Fellows, Fellows, or members who are experienced in submitting Associate Fellow applications. Also, the committee strongly recommends that the submitter be fully convinced that the candidate meets all the criteria for recommendation as an Associate Fellow.

Completed nomination packages must be received by the committee by 5 October. Send them to committee chair Nancy Hoffman at CreeksCom@aol.com. In January 2010, the STC Board of Directors will consider candidates nominated by the Associate Fellows Nominating Committee. The Society will recognize the new Associate Fellows at an honors banquet in May at the 2010 STC Technical Communication Summit in Dallas, Texas.

For more information, refer to the Associate Fellows Nominating Committee web page at www.stc.org/recog/honors01_aFellow.asp or contact Nancy Hoffman, chair of the committee, at CreeksCom@aol.com.

Please note that there is now a one-time, $25 administrative fee.
STC’s Notebook

STC’s electronic newsletter has been transformed to a blog format. Postings generally occur biweekly; and more often when news warrants according to STC’s communications department. The blog, open to members and nonmembers, adds value to membership by increasing the timeliness of information posted and creating a more dynamic connection between members and the STC office through reader comments. Visit STC’s Notebook at http://notebook.stc.org.

Sigma Tau Chi, Alpha Sigma Applications Due 1 November

BY DAVID DAYTON, Chair, Honorary Societies Committee

The Society encourages qualified students to apply for membership in its honorary societies, Sigma Tau Chi and Alpha Sigma.

Sigma Tau Chi recognizes students enrolled in a baccalaureate or graduate technical communication program who have a cumulative grade point average of 3.5 or above, are exemplary participants in STC, and demonstrate the potential for significant contributions to the profession.

Alpha Sigma recognizes students enrolled in two-year and certificate technical communication programs who have a cumulative grade point average of 3.5 or above, are active participants in STC, and demonstrate the potential to contribute to the profession.

In early September, details and applications will be sent to all directors of academic technical communication programs, Society directors, and advisors of STC student chapters. If you meet these qualifications or know of a student who does, please request an application from one of these contacts. The application materials are also available on the STC website at www.stc.org/recog/awards01_STX-AS.asp. Students who are accepted into Sigma Tau Chi or Alpha Sigma receive one year’s membership in STC, a pin, and a T-shirt. The STC Board of Directors will notify the selected students after its January meeting.

Completed application forms and supporting documents should be emailed as attached Word or PDF files to David Dayton at dr.david.dayton@gmail.com no later than 1 November. By the same deadline, an official transcript must be mailed directly from the applicant’s school to this address:

David Dayton
2006 Glenhaven Place
Silver Spring, MD 20902

For answers to questions about the application process, please email David Dayton, chair, Honorary Societies Committee, at the email address listed above.

Shari Scott Gray Receives 2009 Distinguished SIG Service Award

BY WHITNEY POTTS, Senior Member and Manager, Lone Writer SIG

It’s with great joy that I announce that the 2009 Distinguished SIG Service Award (DSSA) was awarded by the STC Board of Directors to Shari Scott Gray, immediate past manager of the Lone Writer SIG, for 10 years of extraordinary service.

Shari served as sole manager of the SIG for nine years, and as co-manager for one year. During her decade of service, she epitomized all the qualities of “distinguished service”: commitment, longevity, loyalty, generosity, open-mindedness, open-heartedness, fiscal responsibility, creativity, balance, diplomacy, patience, humor, and more. So very much more.

As a result of her management and efforts to keep online discussions open, friendly, and positive, the Lone Writer SIG listserv—a primary member resource—became one of the most active communities in the STC. Beyond the listserv, Shari made sure the SIG was represented at the annual STC conferences with SIG presentations, SIG booths, and SIG networking and social activities during and after conference hours. Generous of spirit, she was always ready with helpful support and positive acknowledgement when presenters and organizers most needed it.

Shari consistently provided a warm and welcoming environment for SIG volunteers, giving them the freedom and support to share their existing skills—and develop new ones—to the fullest extent of their ambition, interest, and schedule availability. This openness led to the launch of many resources for members, including a newsletter, a members-only website, a blog, a wiki, and much more.

Shari richly deserves this award because she is what we technical communicators strive to be: good communicators and good citizens. The Lone Writer SIG membership is deeply grateful to her for her outstanding leadership and unwavering dedication. She is the kind of person we should all emulate as STC members and leaders.

The award was not presented during the 2009 STC Technical Communication Summit, as Shari was unable to attend. It has since been safely delivered into her hands and now hangs above her desk at work.
STC’s Newsletter Competition

By Elizabeth Bailey, Fellow and Manager, Newsletter Competition

The STC Newsletter Competition rewards excellence in chapter, student chapter, and special interest group (SIG) newsletters that communicate news about and develop interest in the Society for Technical Communication. All communities are encouraged to enter the competition.

Three consecutive issues of either a paper or online version published between 1 February 2009 and 31 January 2010 must be submitted. Online entries must include a URL and a note on the entry form stating the three consecutive issues to be evaluated. For paper entries, nine copies (two may be photocopies) of each issue must be submitted. The Newsletter Competition Entry Form and Newsletter Competition Supplemental Checklist, along with the Rules for the STC Newsletter Competition, are available for download from the STC website at www.stc.org/comp/chapterCompetitions01_NEWS.asp.

Remember to include a completed supplemental checklist for each issue you submit.

Change in Annual Conference Tracks

The call for proposals for STC’s Technical Communication Summit is currently up and running. There is a change in the 2010 tracks: The program advisory committee has decided to drop the Applying Research and Theory to Practice track in favor of putting research topics in each of the subject tracks. This change seeks to bring research-based topics into the mainstream of the Summit program. The program advisory committee wishes to emphasize the importance of research-based proposals in all areas of technical communication. Moving the sessions to the subject track will also be in line with the STC Strategic Plan, which calls for research items to emphasize their practical application.
The ABCs of XML

By Sarah O’Keefe, Associate Fellow

To succeed as a technical communicator, you need writing ability, domain expertise in your product area, and a reasonable understanding of publishing tools and technologies. If you want to remain relevant (and employed), XML is rapidly becoming part of the required knowledge set. You don’t necessarily need to become an XML expert, but you do need to understand what an XML workflow looks like and whether it makes sense for your organization. This article discusses the three most important reasons that you should consider XML.

Automation

In traditional authoring tools, we write content and apply formatting to that content as we go. In an XML-based workflow, we create content only. Formatting information is added later when the content is rendered into its final output format or formats. This results in the following:

• Information is more flexible because it does not have formatting attached to it. When you are ready to publish, you select the output type you want and generate the output.
• Writers lose the ability to tweak formatting as they are writing. Although many writers find this new reality a bit painful at first, it does increase the writer’s productivity by eliminating formatting responsibilities.
• The automated formatting can be attractive, but it’s not as good as output produced by hand-crafting each deliverable.
• The publishing process is automated and very, very fast.
• Automating the publishing process lowers the cost and effort of creating content, especially for organizations that produce content in multiple languages. In an industry survey conducted by my company, 70 percent of respondents reported that implementing structured authoring reduced their cost or effort of developing content (O’Keefe & Pringle 2009).

Baseline Architecture

There’s nothing new about the idea that we create content once and publish it into multiple formats. Single-sourcing workflows have been around for many years. However, many of the older workflows start with proprietary file formats, such as Word or FrameMaker, and then transform them into other formats, such as HTML. If you choose XML as the baseline architecture for your content, you are storing information in an open format that does not belong to any specific vendor. By doing so, you achieve the following:

• You can create content in a variety of XML editing tools.
• You can manage content versions and workflow in a variety of content management systems.
• You can publish content through a variety of publishing tools and technologies.
• You reduce or eliminate what application developers call stickiness. Software is sticky when it is difficult for a software user to move from one application to another. Stickiness is generally bad, unless you are in the business of selling software.

Some of the information that you work with may need to be available in several different places. For example, the error messages that appear in software might also need to be in an error message reference. It’s possible to create an XML file that becomes the source file both for the software error message and for the error message appendix. Similarly, the technical support organization might have information in their knowledge base that should also be included in product documentation. Instead of burying information in a proprietary tool, you can use XML to expose content to many different uses.

I expect XML content to play a critical role as technical communicators integrate their professional information with user-generated content. If your organization provides user forums, a wiki, and other venues for the user community to contribute content, you should consider using XML to manage that content.
discuss your products, you need a way to combine that information with the official, corporate documentation. XML will provide the bedrock for these efforts because of two critical features:

- You can embed metadata in XML files and use the metadata to determine what information is displayed to end users.
- You can control the presentation of XML content so that you can clearly separate official information from user-generated content.

**Consistency**

Document consistency is an important component of document quality. All documents from a single organization should be consistent in:

- Terminology—Industry terms should be used consistently throughout all of the content.
- Look and feel—For each document class, all white papers should have the same design, all web pages should have the design, and so on.
- Organization—That is, if the style guide indicates that warnings should precede the step that the warning applies to, the warnings should always precede the step. If a procedure has prerequisites, those prerequisites should always appear in the same place.

Document consistency makes readers feel more confident that the information is correct. XML is especially useful for ensuring consistency of look and feel and organization. Consistency of look and feel is achieved by creating document design standards and then implementing them in the automated publishing workflow—documents are always generated the same way and have the specified look and feel.

When you author in XML, you have a set of rules that govern the structure of the information you are creating. For example, the rules can specify that:

- A heading must always have at least one paragraph that follows (no stacked headings).
- A bulleted list must contain at least two items (no single bullet lists).
- A lesson plan must have at least two objectives.

The exact rules will depend on your content and your stylistic standards. As you create content, you can verify that your information follows the rules that you have established; this process is called validation. One basic principle of XML is that you cannot process files that are invalid. Instead of asking an editor or a peer to review content to ensure it conforms to the required structure, the authoring software can prompt you to insert the needed components at the appropriate location. This is called structured authoring—a publishing workflow in which consistent organization of information is defined and automatically enforced.

**Do You Need XML?**

Your organization may or may not need XML right away, but you do. Our industry survey found that nearly 50 percent of respondents are already using structured authoring; by 2010, a majority of respondents expect to be using XML. You need to learn and understand XML so that you can keep your career options open.

The technical side of XML is not much more difficult than HTML; if you can handle a few HTML angle brackets (<p> or <h1>), you can learn XML. The concept of structured authoring is a bit more challenging. If you have worked in an environment where the template was rigorously enforced, it’s only a small step over to structured authoring. If, however, you don’t like using styles and prefer to format everything as you go, you are going to loathe structured authoring.

The question of XML is more complex for companies. Implementing an XML-based publishing environment is difficult and usually expensive. It requires a new set of tools, new skills, and a new mindset from the content creators. Implementation generally takes 6–12 months and often requires outside consultants. Given those barriers, there needs to be a compelling rationale for making the change. That said, organizations should not wait too long before deciding on an XML strategy. In addition to significant cost savings, XML provides the foundation on which you can build more advanced content platforms. For example, you could:

- Integrate content across departments.
- Integrate with user-generated content.
- Integrate with software products.
- Personalize content based on user profiles.

In other words, the ABCs of XML are just the beginning of the road.

**References**


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 (available at www.scriptorium.com/papers.html). Sarah is an STC Associate Fellow and member of STC’s Carolina, India, TransAlpine, and UK Chapters and of the Consulting and Independent Contracting, Europe, and Management SIGs.
Avoiding Job Application Black Holes

By Jack Molisani, Associate Fellow

How many of you have seen a job posted on the Internet that seemed perfect for you, and the posting said, “To be considered, send your résumé to resumes@BlackHoleNeverToBeHeardFromAgain.com”?

The Internet is both the best and the worst tool when it comes to job hunting. It is the best tool because you can search for a job anywhere in the world and have the results in seconds. It is also the worst tool because it takes all human interaction out of the job application process, and along with it all possibility of your ability to assert positive control over your job search.

So what’s a job hunter to do?

*Keep what works, skip what doesn’t, and figure out how to make the system work for you.*

By all means, search Internet job boards such as DICE.com, Monster.com, and the job listings at STC.org and your local chapter. Make a list of all the jobs for which you’d like to apply. If the job posting lists an actual person to whom you can send your résumé, then go ahead and send your résumé per the submission directions. Follow up in a week or so if you haven’t heard back.

But what should you do if the job description doesn’t list a real person, just a URL to an online application? Or worse, a generic email like jobs@BlackHoleNeverToBeHeardFromAgain.com?

Good news! There is a datum, a natural law about job hunting:

> **The better the personal relationship you have with the person to whom you are sending your résumé, the better your chances of getting an interview.**

For example, what would you do if you applied for a job using a personal email address? I bet not nearly as good.

Personally, I’ve never been that keen on waiting in line with the masses. Instead I try to find a more expedient, personal, and favorable solution. For example, say you are at an airport and your connecting flight is cancelled. Don’t wait in line for an agent to handle the 40 or 50 people in front of you; pick up a phone and call the airline’s reservation number—instantly you are next in line!

A similar approach can be taken when job hunting. When a job is posted on a company or Internet job board, the company will receive tens, if not hundreds, of résumés from applicants. An even worse scenario is when résumés from all job applicants at a company get sent to one email address. (All of which, by the way, are probably processed in the sequence in which they were received, meaning who knows when they will get around to reading and processing your application.)

Which brings me back to my airport analogy. How can you avoid “waiting in line” until someone gets around to processing your job application?

*Locate a job using the Internet boards and then apply for the job using a personal relationship.*

When I say “personal relationship,” I mean contacting a specific person with a direct communication such as email (good), phone (better), or in person (best). And assuming you don’t have family members who are hiring managers, you’re going to have to build those relationships.

The first thing I suggest is to use your professional networks. Go to chapter meetings and find someone (anyone) who works at XYZ Company. Ask that person to pass on your résumé to the hiring manager. Not only will you stand out by getting a personal referral, YOU’D GET AN INTERVIEW.

Conversely, what do you think the relative chances would be of getting an interview if you applied for that same job by just sending your résumé to jobs@XYZCompany.com? I bet not even your résumé is not just one of many sent for one job, but it’s also mixed in with résumés for all open jobs at the company, plus those who are just submitting résumés to be kept on file, plus the inevitable spam that arrives at a company’s jobs@ email address. (All of which, by the way, are probably processed in the sequence in which they were received, meaning who knows when they will get around to reading and processing your application.)

Finally, when you’re going to have to build those relationships.

The first thing I suggest is to use your professional networks. Go to chapter meetings and find someone (anyone) who works at XYZ Company. Ask that person to pass on your résumé to the hiring manager. Not only will you stand out by getting a personal referral, 

You might not get the job, but at least you’d get an interview.

If the job posting lists an actual person to whom you can send your résumé, then go ahead and send your résumé per the submission directions. Follow up in a week or so if you haven’t heard back.
but the referring person may also get a finder’s fee. Can’t find anyone who works at XYZ Company? Check professional and social networking sites such as LinkedIn.com, Plaxo.com, Facebook.com, MySpace.com, Classmates.com, etc. to see if there is anyone at the company to whom you are connected. Look for someone who has a similar job who might be in the same department (a tech writer if you are applying for a tech writing job, a project manager if you are applying for a project manager job, etc.), but don’t be afraid to try anyone else in the company if you don’t have a connection to a direct counterpart. Then ask for an introduction/referral to the hiring manager or to someone in human resources (HR) if your contact doesn’t know the hiring manager. Emailing your résumé to someone in HR is the third option, somewhere between a personal referral to the hiring manager (best) and emailing your résumé to jobs@ (worst).

One more tip about finding someone in HR to whom you can email your résumé: Over the past year or so I have observed this curiously illogical phenomenon: rarely do company websites or job postings list HR or recruiter contacts at the company, but almost all corporate recruiters have a profile on LinkedIn who is! So if you can’t find someone that you know at XYZ Company through networking and the job posting doesn’t list an HR contact, then search LinkedIn for someone who is an HR contact at the company, and send a message asking if you can apply for a job by sending your résumé directly to him or her.

He might say “Sure!” or he might say “Apply online and I’ll watch for it to arrive.” Either way, you now have someone who will personally handle your application and pass your résumé on to the hiring manager!

Getting Creative
Suppose you have tried using your personal and professional network and you still can’t get a personal introduction to someone in the hiring process. What then? Well, now you have to get creative.

Here is an example of how you can be creative and in control of your job search, but keep in mind that this is only one idea out of hundreds of ideas—the sky’s the limit!

Chapter newsletter editors always need articles, so write an article on hiring trends in your area. Pick the top ten companies in your area for which you’d like to work, call their documentation manager (or whatever field you are in), and ask, “I’m writing an article for my professional organization’s newsletter on hiring trends in the industry—do you have five minutes for a quick interview?” Start by asking generic questions about their department, then ask about their plans to hire contract and permanent people over the next six months. Finish by asking if he/she would like to see a copy of the article when it is published. (They almost always will.) Then get their contact info. Suddenly, you are on a first-name basis with the very people who would hire you! Plus, you know if they are hiring, when they will be hiring, and which positions will be open!

You still have to write the article, of course, but you have a reason to follow up and an opportunity to mention that you are interested in the position if they say they are currently hiring or will do so in the future.

There are many ways to assert positive control over your job search. Network, get referrals, become more than an anonymous email in a generic HR inbox. All it takes is a little creativity and a whole lot of legwork.

But if you are unemployed, you’ve got the time, right?

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Conversation in Research

Thomas Barker, Fellow

I believe that conversations make the most enjoyable and productive pastimes for technical communicators. By conversations, I mean various forms of information exchange, such as chat, dialogue, argument, discussion, professional discourse, gossip, and conference networking. Conversation as a metaphor suggests the power of knowing something: to be “conversant” in a topic. In this first column, I’d like to explore how conversations shape research, underlie the practice of communication, and guide our teaching.

A conversation can easily lay the groundwork for something bigger. For example, I recall a discussion I had with a colleague about his consulting job with a client in Florida. The contract specified manuals, help files, FAQs, and so on: the usual deliverables for a consultant. This friend, truth to tell, would prefer to design marketing campaigns than write manuals. But not in these hard times.

I had been reading about what were then interaction technologies, the kinds of systems that have since been invented yet. The conversations had not been opened up yet, so he didn’t call them “social” at that point.

I remember this and other questions as points of departure and learning. What better way to launch this column?

Conversation in Research

I firmly believe that all topics one might encounter in conversations with technical communicators could result in productive research. I challenge my graduate students this way all the time. Research questions lie hidden in our most casual conversations. Of course, those who engage in practical but scholarly inquiry—research—might not see conversation quite so casually. A casual conversation resembles more of a self-organizing ramble of thought than a directed inquiry. Yet researchers often start with conversation as the basic approach. For example, researchers using interview techniques—a qualitative approach—require a lot of sitting down and talking. Steinar Kvale and Svend Brinkmann take this approach in their book Interviews. Conversation, the authors tell us, works as a metaphor for research because it “is a basic mode of human interaction.” They assert that interviews differ from conversations because researchers guide interviews. Conversations take on their own direction, but interview conversations follow research questions. Nevertheless, questions, and where they take us, lie at the heart of research.

Let’s say you were to investigate the question of conversation at the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW) conference. There you’ll find people talking about discourse, discourse analysis, argumentation and rhetoric, and all the varieties of discussion and talk that make up the scholarly conversation. For academics, the scholarly conversation happens in journals and at conferences. Taken literally, for example, one might want to investigate the outward forms of conversation: hand motions, conventions of expression, sounds and “umms,” and body language. Sean Williams at Clemson University explores conversation in this way, by looking at how elements of conversation theory correspond with knowledge-making in technical communication.

You can also view conversation through the lens of knowledge management. Knowledge management and conversation both describe the exchange of knowledge between individuals or groups. Miriam William at Texas State University has partnered with Daisy James of the City of Houston in a recent investigation of public involvement in air control policies in Houston. Their col-

This column focuses on a broad range of practical academic issues from teaching and training to professional concerns, research, and technologies of interest to teachers, students, and researchers in colleges and universities around the world. Comments and suggestions are welcome. Send them to me at thomas.barker@ttu.edu.
laboration illustrates conversation as metaphor for public communication. In this study, published in Technical Communication Quarterly, the authors describe how the Bureau of Air Quality Control applied four levels of public involvement from simply informing citizens to actually engaging them in conversations about policy deliberations.

So for academics, conversation means both something to investigate and the methodology we might use to investigate it. But what does conversation mean to practicing technical communicators?

**Conversation in Practice**

I recall a conversation that took place when I was with a group of students on a field trip. We were listening to an executive talk about how company knowledge (he drew a circle) needed to overlap with customer knowledge (he drew another, intersecting circle). I will never forget that drawing. This fellow had thought about what we now see as a commodity in technology: users and customer support in the same conversation. I saw this coming when I realized that phone support representatives had to use the same manual I did. Things have changed since then. For many technical communicators, conversation means a dialogue with subject matter experts or with users. How does conversation get implemented?

- In her book *Letting Go of the Words*, Ginny Redish asserts that “Good web writing is like a conversation.” She illustrates the point by looking closely at the interaction of a person searching for web information, asking a question, and the web page providing the answer, which leads to more questions, and so on. You can apply this kind of a question-and-answer sequence to step-by-step documentation, dialog boxes, and other traditional documentation forms.

- Like conversation, good documentation, Mike Palmquist of Colorado State University tells us, holds the writer accountable for information, adds something of value to each exchange, and requires an understanding of what information a listener or reader needs.

- Anne Huff, in *Writing for Scholarly Publication*, argues that writing, and in particular scholarship, is social and based in “the lively exchange of ideas.” According to Huff, ideas “grow and change” during a conversation. We learn during a conversation, or as Huff puts it, interests and knowledge become “subtly shifted.”

- The web company Get Satisfaction (www.getsatisfaction.com) has built a business model out of the conversation among customer support specialists and customers. They offer “people-powered customer service.” If you’ve got questions about a product, Get Satisfaction will put you in touch with like-inquiring customers and support helps. They make the conversation happen among companies, employees, and customers. Want help on Twitter, PBWiki, or Visiblog? Find a friend!

What does this trend toward conversation tell us about technical communication, academic or otherwise? It points to something quite obvious to most communicators but under the radar to others in industry, government, and education: knowledge can’t thrive outside the social activity that creates it. Knowledge—organized, validated data—most naturally grows at the source, where the chatter and babble of conversation can itself thrive.

**Conversation in the Classroom**

The sources of knowledge —conversation, engagement, give and take—grow in the hallways, email lists, and classrooms of universities and businesses. Conversation, exemplified by Socratic questioning and answering, has long represented the key strategy for engaging students in learning. Similarly, what we call “best practices” in the workplace requires conversation and information sharing among employees. Cliff Figallo and Nancy Rhine suggest this in *Building the Knowledge Management Network: Best Practices, Tools, and Techniques for Putting Conversation to Work*. They encourage the creation of a “knowledge-swapping community” in a company. The best ideas, they assert, “bubble up from the bottom of the organizational chart.”

Creating a “knowledge-swapping community” also fuels university education. In our graduate program at Texas Tech University, each candidate has a committee of professors who add something to his or her preparation. The committee chair has the academic background in the candidate’s research area, and the other faculty cover other areas: history, research methodologies, minor or supporting areas, and so forth. The educational process at this level creates conversation at its best, with a concerned group of professors collaborating on exam questions, proposals for topics, and the culminating “conversation” known as the PhD defense.

The new Body of Knowledge (BOK) project undertaken by the Society for Technical Communication also represents this kind of conversation, on a large scale, about what we do in technical communication. The wiki format offers a lively venue for BOK talk.

The give-and-take of intentional information between two or more people leads to enlightenment, shapes practical information solutions, encourages the educational activities of our profession, and makes conversation a dominant metaphor for our wired, transparent times. So let the conversation begin!

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Dr. Thomas Barker (thomas.barker@ttu.edu) is the director of technical communication and rhetoric at Texas Tech University. A fellow of STC and recipient of the Jay R. Gould Award for Excellence in Teaching Technical Communication, he is also Manager of the Academic SIG and a member of the Environmental Health and Safety SIG. He has published in Technical Communication Quarterly, and is the author of *Writing Software Documentation: A Task-oriented Approach*. His current research interests are in community engagement for public health issues.
Social media has transformed the way we communicate. This column discusses the intricacies and ramifications that social media has on our everyday personal and professional lives. Suggestions for topics you’d like explored are welcome. Email me at rich.maggiani@solarinet.net.

On Twittering

BY RICH MAGGIANI, Fellow

Twitter is all about sending and receiving 140-character (or less) microblogs. In other words, short text messages. Twitter is based on a bird metaphor. So, in Twitter-speak, messages are called “tweets.” This appears to be the electronic equivalent of the phrase, “Oh, a little birdie told me,” which is what my mother used to tell me whenever I wanted to know the source of her knowledge about some transgression of mine that she gleefully related, with a wry smile.

Twitter is also all about you following other Twitter users and other Twitter users following you. You must have followers to receive tweets. You receive tweets from the people you are following.

If you are not yet using Twitter, here are some basics to get you started. It’s quick and easy to establish an account and set up your home page. For experienced Twitter users, perhaps you’ll pick up some useful tips.

Tweeting

Tweets can be about virtually anything. Twitter suggests answering the question, “What are you doing?” But as one well-known wag put it, “Who cares what you’re doing right now, anyway?” I heartily concur. So if you’re not answering Twitter’s query, what do you tweet? You tweet anything that your followers will find worthwhile, and perhaps their followers as well, and their followers, and on and on. Why? Because tweets can be re-tweeted—in other words, sent along to other followers. Tweeting can quickly become viral.

Whenever you send a tweet, Twitter increases your “Updates” counter on your home page. (I don’t know why Twitter just doesn’t call these “Tweets,” but, oh well.) This counter is a good way to tell if someone is actually sending tweets. When you visit their Twitter page, you can browse through their tweets and assess their value.

You can respond to a tweet in two ways: publicly (all of your followers receive your reply) or privately (only the tweeter receives your reply; this is called a direct message or DM). To respond publicly, begin your reply with @ followed immediately by the username of the tweeter, then write your reply. For example, “@richmaggiani What a great tweet!” To respond privately, begin your reply with the letter D, leave a space, add the username, then write your reply: “D @richmaggiani Hmm, about that last tweet.”

Forwarding a tweet to your followers is called re-tweeting. A re-tweet contains four parts with a space between each one: the letters “RT,” an attribution to the original tweeter with @username, relevant text from the tweet (such as a link) or the entire tweet, and possibly your added comment. Why re-tweet? Reasons include forwarding tweets your followers would find interesting and spreading breaking news.

To enhance the chances of your tweets getting re-tweeted, don’t use all 140 characters. Instead, shorten your tweets by the number of characters it would take to re-tweet them. For instance (Caution! A little math here), someone would have to write “RT @richmaggiani” at the beginning of my posts to re-tweet them. This takes up 16 characters; 17 when you include the space needed before attaching my post. Doing a little subtraction, this means my posts should be, at most, 123 characters long (140 minus 17).

Get Followers by Following

Before you can follow and be followed, you must create an account and complete your Twitter profile. You might be tempted to skip or skimp on your profile; I suggest you don’t, since it’s your profile that gives others information about who you are. This can help you build a Twitter community that includes like-minded people. And be sure to include a photo or some other graphic image that indicates something about who you are. Many users simply do not follow others without profiles or photos, myself included. I like to know—and see—who I’m following (although I do make exceptions for organizations and people I know personally).

In order to get followers, you begin by following others. Once you follow people, they receive an email regarding that fact (if they ticked that box in the Twitter Settings) and can then follow you—if they choose. Look through your Facebook buddies, LinkedIn connections, past emails, contact lists, and those business cards you’ve collected for people to follow, and then search for them using Twitter’s built-in tools:

• Click Find People (on your Twitter home page) to search for people individually.
• Through the same Find People dialog box, find people with email
accounts on other services (such as Gmail and Yahoo) or by submitting their email addresses.

- Click the Suggested Users tab (http://twitter.com/invitations/suggestions) which provides a random list of people to consider.

- Browse through the flow of tweets at http://twitter.com/public_timeline and find some interesting people (or some get-alifers, depending on your perspective).

- Go to http://search.twitter.com, type in some search terms, and receive tweets that contain those search terms.

There are many other ways to find people, especially top influencers in your chosen field. I’ll let you judge the value of finding people to follow using these methods:

- Go to http://eefollow.com to find people via tags. For example, enter “celebrity” or “blogger” as a tag and see who you find.

- Go to http://twollow.com to automatically follow people based on keywords (similar to tags).

- Enter search terms at http://twitseeker.com for a list of people whose tweets or profiles contain those terms.

- “Discover and maintain great relationships” (their blurb, not mine) at http://mrtweet.net. You follow Mr. Tweet (an owl, how tweet), and he sends you a list of people you might be interested in following. And some final words on followers and following: Decide on a strategy for following. Some people follow everyone who follows them; some pick and choose their followers. Just because someone follows you, doesn’t mean you have to follow them. Show some discretion; don’t bother following the person who has 12 followers, is following 532, and has sent only one update. Some people grow their followers and followings to huge numbers, to the tens and hundreds of thousands, even millions (of course, those people are famous: check out @BarackObama or @Pogue, this year’s STC annual conference keynoter). What do you want: quality, quantity, or both?

For the most part, unless you are a celebrity or a recognized thought guru, balance your number of followings and followers—keeping them within 10 percent of each other is a good idea. And send a valuable tweet fairly often. One of the most important aspects of being on Twitter is to engage in the discourse. This helps build your Twitter community.

Including Links in Your Tweets

With only 140 characters, you don’t have a lot of room to include lengthy URLs in your tweets. Thus, the advent of tiny URLs created through services creatively called URL shorteners. URL shorteners translate any URL into a tiny URL. (For example, one of my blog entry URLs is 92 characters: http://www.solari.net/toward-humanity/2009/06/08/promoting-your-company-through-social-media/. I translated it into a tiny URL of only 19 characters: http://bit.ly/W9dWt.) Some URL shorteners tempt you with other goodies, such as tracking click-throughs.

So here’s a short (and in no way complete) compendium of URL shorteners and some of the features they offer:

- http://tinyurl.com/: Probably the most popular URL shortener, they promise their shortened URLs never expire, and they offer a preview feature. (See below for a discussion of previewing.)

- http://bit.ly/: This service allows you to track your links. After you create your account, you get to see how many people actually clicked the shortened URL sent in your tweet. These shortened URLs are also indexed by Google.

- http://cli.gs/: Cligs bills itself as short URLs with analytics. You need to create an account, but there are a lot of cool tools to track the click-throughs of your shortened URLs. Among their many features are interactive charts and the ability to target your links geographically.

- http://is.gd/: Their simple and quick interface enables you to create the shortest URLs and allows you to create a preview link as well.

- http://untiny.me: This service allows you to translate any shortened URL back to the original URL with its inherent context. You can then decide to proceed to that page. You can also (ironically) go to http://untiny.me to expand any shortened URL.

The State of the Twittersphere

This is merely the tip of the Twitter iceberg. There are many (too many?) tools and services available to create, track, send, read, search, categorize, group, follow, and be followed, as well as tips, rules, steps, and etiquettes for using Twitter—a seemingly simple yet complex tool. I’ll address some of the more prevalent and useful tools in a future column, as well as more tips that can enable you to get the most out of Twitter. Toward that end, email me your own favorite tools and tips and tell me why they are your favorites. I’ll include the best in future columns.
This column focuses on the basic principles of information design, the branch of technical communication that uses an understanding of how we humans process and understand information to develop more effective techniques to present that information. Please send your comments, questions, articles, and suggestions for future articles to the column editor, Geoffrey J. S. Hart (ghart@videotron.ca).

**Attention Deficits**

Geoffrey J. S. Hart, Fellow

The human brain is surprisingly ineffective at noticing what’s going on around us, particularly when we’re distracted. This has important consequences whether we’re designing printed pages, help files, or websites, or documenting a user interface. In this column, I’ll discuss three aspects of this problem and the constraints they impose on our designs.

**Change Blindness**

Change blindness is what happens when we fail to notice that some aspect of our environment has changed. It’s not surprising that subtle changes will escape our attention. Many of us are familiar with Microsoft Word’s “customize” cursor: when you press Control+Alt+[hyphen], the cursor changes from the familiar pointer arrow into a large boldfaced minus sign, providing a visual cue that you’re about to “subtract” the next toolbar icon or menu choice you click from Word’s interface. This follows interface-design best practices, which state that a tool’s appearance should change to communicate a change in its purpose. But this design choice fails because the feature provides no additional warning (such as a confirmation dialog box) of what is about to happen. That warning wouldn’t be necessary if users noticed the cursor change, but most don’t; the archives of the copyediting-l and tech-wr-l discussion groups reveal dozens of plaintive queries from Word users who inadvertently deleted a handful of icons or menu functions because they didn’t notice the cursor change—they were too busy focusing on their real work.

What’s more surprising is that even drastic changes may be missed. An actor may change between scenes without the change being obvious, and Hollywood directors use this to their advantage whenever they substitute a highly trained stunt double for a famous actor during a fight scene. But it also happens in the real world. In one experiment, a researcher stopped a pedestrian to ask for directions, and in mid-explanation, the explainer was interrupted; during the interruption, a second researcher replaced the original. About half of the test subjects never noticed, even though the second researcher didn’t resemble the original. The video of this experiment can be viewed at [http://viscog.beckman.uiuc.edu/flashmovie/12.php](http://viscog.beckman.uiuc.edu/flashmovie/12.php).

The phenomenon interferes with communication whenever a change happens that our audience may fail to perceive. In such cases, we must find a way to document the problem sufficiently clearly that anyone searching the help file or the index can research the consequences of failing to notice a change and how to fix it. For example, Word’s help file should (but does not) include a topic on “missing menu or toolbar items,” with many synonyms used to help readers find it.
Change blindness was a key plot device in the movie version of *The Andromeda Strain*, in which a warning light changed from green to red and a main character failed to notice this change because they suffered from red-green colorblindness. Although changing an indicator from red to green (e.g., from stop to go, from bad to good) is a standard interface convention, it’s not necessarily a good choice; red-green colorblindness is the most common form as it affects up to 10 percent of men in some ethnic groups (fewer than 1 percent of women show any form of color blindness). This means that up to 10 percent of our audience may be incapable of detecting the color change, quite apart from the proportion who simply miss it. One solution would be to use a green checkmark and red cross so that viewers who can’t perceive the color difference can still perceive the shape change. For the most crucial changes, a pop-up warning message is better; as such messages are harder to ignore.

### Attention Blindness

“Inattentional” blindness is a closely related phenomenon: we focus so much on one thing that we ignore something else (i.e., we exhibit inattention). Possibly the most famous demonstration of this phenomenon is a classic experiment by Christopher Chabris in which test participants were asked to watch two groups of people passing around basketballs: they were explicitly instructed to count the number of times the ball was passed between one group, a difficult task given the simultaneous presence of a second group of players and how quickly the ball and players were moving. Can you count the number of times the white players passed the ball ([http://viscog.beckman.uiuc.edu/flashmovie/15.php](http://viscog.beckman.uiuc.edu/flashmovie/15.php))? If you didn’t notice the actor in the gorilla suit who walked through the scene, you’re not alone. Astonishingly, roughly half of the test participants never noticed! “But I don’t document gorillas or basketballs!” you may exclaim. Fair enough. But you do document things that change, and you do produce documentation for people who are intensely focused on important tasks that consume a high proportion of their attention. Indeed, when people are focused on something other than what we’re documenting, our documentation may be the least-important thing on their mind. We can’t control the context in which our audience works, and we can’t force them to pay attention to something important by interrupting their work with anything but the most crucial pop-up messages (as anyone who’s cursed Windows Vista can attest), but we could at least try to document the problem for the developers and explain the problem and any possible solution to the users.

### Split-attention Effects

The split-attention effect is similar. Given that we have a limited amount of attention for any given task, the more things we must pay attention to, the less of our attention is available for each thing. This is why it’s so dangerous to drive while using your cell phone: if you’re sufficiently interested in the conversation to pay attention, you won’t be paying attention to the more important task of driving safely. Combine this with change and inattention blindness, and you can understand why many jurisdictions have made it illegal to drive while using your phone: the distraction can increase the frequency of collisions by 400 percent. A common legal loophole that lets you drive and talk if you use a hands-free phone, thereby keeping both hands on the wheel, entirely misses the point.

How does this phenomenon affect us? For one thing, we must learn to simplify our designs as much as possible to reduce the distractions crying for the audience’s attention. Minimalist design is not just esthetically pleasing; it’s also more “invisible” and avoids distracting users from what is truly important. Most website designers should learn this lesson; when every aspect of a web page shouts equally loudly for attention, the entire page becomes a “tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing” (quoted from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*).

Subtler problems arise. When designing data graphics, we’re told to define the graph’s line or color patterns in a key inside the graph rather than describing it in the caption. This advice is not just about aesthetics; it significantly improves the viewer’s ability to comprehend. If the patterns are described rather than shown, viewers must first comprehend the description and then translate the meaning into a visual pattern they can seek within the graphic; if they imagine the wrong meaning, they’ll search in vain. Even if the description is clear, viewers must switch back and forth between the caption and the graph each time they want to understand any pattern, wasting time and unnecessarily increasing the required mental effort. Placing all the information within the key eliminates the comprehension problem and the need to translate between textual descriptions and visual images.

Directly labeling the visual features of a graph is even more efficient: it eliminates the need to glance back and forth between the key and graph. This is why graphics labeled with callouts (explanatory text connected to key features by arrows) are easier to use and understand than graphics with numbered keys that describe the meaning of the numbers in a separate list. Comprehension is more direct, and we eliminate the need to search for the definitions of the numbers.


### Attention-deficit Disorder?

Attention-deficit disorder is a hot topic, with debate raging over whether it’s a true syndrome or merely pharmaceutical marketing propaganda. Perhaps the truth is that this is more of a spectrum than an absolute: research in cognitive science suggests that everyone suffers from this disorder in varying degrees. As technical communicators, we can’t prescribe Ritalin for our audiences, but we can learn to minimize their distractions and help them focus on the task of completing their work.
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3. Dallas, TX
4. New Orleans, LA
5. Louisville, KY
6. New York, NY
7. Houston, TX
8. San Diego, CA

15–17 October 2009

The Plain Language Association InterNational (PLAIN) will hold its biennial conference, themed “Raising the Standard,” at the Four Points by Sheraton at Darling Harbour in Sydney, Australia. For more information, contact:
PLAIN
PLAIN2009@plainenglishfoundation.com

19–23 October 2009

The Human Factors and Ergonomics Society (HFES) will hold its 53rd annual meeting at the Grand Hyatt San Antonio in San Antonio, TX. For more information, contact:
HFES
+1 (310) 394-1811
info@hfes.org
www.hfes.org/web/
HFESMeetings/09annualmeeting.html

22–24 October 2009

The American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) will hold its annual conference, “Blazing the Trail,” in Dallas, TX. For more information, contact:
Dane Russo
+1 (301) 294-5303
amwa@amwa.org
www.amwa.org/default.asp?id=433

25–27 October 2009

The LavaCon Conference on Career and Professional Development will be held in New Orleans, LA, at the Astor Crowne Plaza Hotel. For more information, contact:
Jack Molisani
+1 (866) 302-5774, ext. 201
info2008@lavacon.org
www.lavacon.org/

27–31 October 2009

The Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT) will hold its 2009 international convention entitled “Integrative Approaches: Meeting Challenges,” at the Galt Hotel and Suites in Louisville, KY. For more information, contact:
AECT
+1 (877) 677-AECT
aect@aect.org
www.aect.org/events/

28–31 October 2009

The American Translators Association (ATA) will hold its 50th annual conference at the Marriott Marquis Hotel in New York, NY. For more information, contact:
ATA
+1 (703) 683-6100
ata@atanet.org
http://atanet.org/conferencesandseminars/annual_conference.php

29 October–1 November 2009

The Association of Earth Science Editors (AESE) will hold its annual meeting, “Earth/Energy/Editing,” at the Doubletree Guest Suites in Houston, TX. For more information, contact:
AESE
kwhite1@sugar-land.oilfield.slb.com
www.aese.org

7–10 November 2009

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) will hold its 2009 International Conference: Delivering Value, at the San Diego Marriott Hotel & Marina in San Diego, CA. For more information, contact:
PRSA
+1 (212) 460-1400
www.prsa.org/IC2009/
Saving Lives as a Technical Writer

By Laura Carpenter, Member

When I tell people I’m a technical writer at the Blood Bank of Alaska, they squint a tad and ask, “The blood bank needs a technical writer? What is there to write?”

Some people here, including our CEO, wondered the same thing before I came aboard a year and a half ago. Since blood is considered a drug, we are monitored by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and thus we must follow strict protocols to comply with the FDA guidelines. It is my job to transform the FDA guidelines and those of other governing agencies into understandable, concise steps that our staff can follow and perform.

Such procedures include drawing the blood, storing the blood, and distributing the blood. We must also validate each new piece of equipment, and I write those protocols as well.

Currently I am working on validation protocol and standard operating procedures for a new alarm system that will alert us if any of our product storage spaces are close to going out of temperature. I recently finished a project on notifying donors who receive positive test results (every unit is tested for a panel of diseases, including hepatitis and HIV).

Mount Redoubt’s recent eruptions and the volcano’s continued activity remind us to improve our emergency action plan, which I will help rewrite. The Blood Bank of Alaska provides blood products to hospitals across the state, from above the Arctic Circle in Barrow to the rainforest of Sitka. Our centers span more than 400 miles, from Fairbanks to Soldotna. When ash falls closes the Anchorage airport, we must make arrangements with hospitals and the state emergency agencies to make sure all Alaskans have a sufficient blood supply.

Not only am I the only technical writer at the Blood Bank of Alaska, but I am also the only writer to work for this organization in such a capacity. I define my position as I go—which can get interesting because some folks don’t yet realize that writing policy is not the same as determining it (I don’t decide what you do; I decide how to tell you to do it).

Prior to creating this position, various people wrote documents, but their main job was something else (such as lab supervisor or quality assurance assistant). As such, our standard operating procedures, forms, and documents have a variety of formats, terminology, and style. Using my background in journalism and as a copy editor, I created a style guide, streamlined our revision process, and developed a corporate voice for our procedures. We have more than 1,000 documents (1,332 in use at the moment), so I haven’t yet been able to update them all, but slowly I am working my magic and creating clean, consistent, and easy-to-read documents.

I also use my journalism experience when researching projects. I shadow recruitment, lab and blood collection staff, and become a bridge between different departments because people who register and screen donors may not always understand the job of the person who ships the blood.

This summer I took a second job with an event management company. We time and help organize road races, triathlons, and marathons. I didn’t expect my technical writing skills to come in so handy, but I use my skills frequently when I send letters to volunteers and committee members and must provide succinct, straightforward directions. I also plan to write the instructions to use our timing equipment because right now the steps are all in one coworker’s brain.

The procedures I write make it easier for staff to understand and perform their job so that we can get the best use of every donated drop and save the most lives. Knowing that I can make such a difference by doing what I love—writing—makes me feel very lucky indeed.

Laura Carpenter (lcarpenter@gci.net) lives and writes in Anchorage, Alaska.
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