Create one project and publish as many outputs as you need. Just use Doc-To-Help’s editor, author in Microsoft Word, or create content in an HTML editor. Doc-To-Help will produce online Help for desktop use, websites (NetHelp), and print-ready manuals. Automatic single-sourcing features ensure that you can publish all this from one project without re-formatting. Gone are the days of managing content in multiple applications and formatting content for specific purposes.

Download a Free Trial Today @

[www.doctohelp.com]
Features

Cover
5 Shifts in Technical Communication
By Neil Perlin
Over the past 30 years, the “technical” aspect of our work has shifted as our tools have evolved dramatically from typewriters to content management systems. Entering the second decade of the new millennium, our subjects are still technical, but the ways in which our users read about them are increasingly varied, promising further changes in our tools, technologies, and techniques. In this article, Perlin looks at where the “technical” aspect of publishing began and where he sees it headed.

Usability
9 Usability Testing Trends in Library Services
By Lindsey White
Librarians are increasingly taking on new roles for the institutions that employ them, often wearing additional hats as web designers and usability professionals in order to help ensure that online resources are user-friendly and easy to navigate. In this article, White looks at how librarians need to refine usability testing to gauge what is—and is not—working.

Your Career
12 Rants to Raves: Putting Your Best Self Forward in a Challenging Marketplace
By Barbara Giammona
What is it about our jobs that gives us so much to gripe about? While we all have something we can’t resist complaining about when it comes to our profession, is it possible that the complaining and commiseration has earned us a reputation for being whiners? Is it possible that, even when couched in humor, our keen observations could be holding us back professionally? In this article, Giammona takes our field’s most familiar rants and shows how to turn them into raves.
January 2010

DEPARTMENTS

Letter from the Editor

4 Intercom’s Upcoming Changes
   By Elizabeth E. Pohland

31 F.Y.I.

Looking Back

32 Looking Back with Sherry Michaels
   By Sherry Michaels

SOCIETY PAGES

16 STC Announces Honorary Fellow and Keynote Speaker
16 “Looking Back” Debuts
17 STC’s Future Already Looking Brighter in 2010
18 Discounts Available for Summit Travel
18 Getting Support from Your Supervisor
19 STC’s 2010 Election
20 Destination: Day Trips

COLUMNS

The Academic Conversation

22 Rhetoric and Technical Communication
   By Thomas Barker

Media Matters

24 Managing Color—Not as Hard as Herding Cats
   By Marc Lee

Advancing Your Career

27 2010: The Year of Reinvention
   By Jack Molisani

All Access

29 Accessibility On the Go
   By Linda Roberts and Lisa Pappas

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

All articles in Intercom are copyrighted by the authors unless otherwise indicated. Anyone interested in reprints, reproductions, or reuse must contact the authors for permission.

To advertise in Intercom, contact Ken Cibroski of Ad Guidance, Inc. at ken@adguidance.com. 283 Whistlewood Lane, Winchester, VA 22602 Ph: +1(540) 542-1155 Toll Free: +1(877) 965-7492 Fax: +1(540) 542-0550
Do you have something to say to the world?

We can help you say it—the way you mean it!

MultiLing Corporation has established itself as one of the premier full-service translation companies in the world. By combining the best in language technology with incomparable customer service, MultiLing saves you time and money. We make sure you understand what's happening and when, and that you get a return on your money again and again. You have big challenges as you compete in a global market. We have the right solution and the right tools to make sure your message is heard correctly. There's an easier and friendlier way to translate your product into other languages. Call or visit our Web site today.

Translation
Localization
Globalization
Translation Technology

Helping You Communicate with the World®

MultiLing
Language Services and Technology

US Headquarters, Provo UT, USA ph 801.377.2000 email global@multiling.com www.multiling.com
For the first time, many of you are reading Intercom on your computer screen. This transition marks the beginning of many changes to the magazine that you will see during 2010. If you’ve been a steady reader of STC emails and announcements, you are already aware of what’s happening; for others, including new members, I’ll summarize the major highlights of this transition.

Publications remain a basic benefit, delivered electronically. Intercom and the Society’s peer-reviewed journal, Technical Communication, are transitioning to web-based publications. In their electronic format, both publications will continue to be a basic benefit of STC membership. They will retain their current publishing schedules; Intercom will publish 10 issues a year, and Technical Communication will publish quarterly.

Print copies are still available for a fee. In response to members who voiced strong preferences for being able to hold a physical magazine in their hands, STC will continue to offer a print subscription for an additional cost to members who choose this option. (The print subscription option is available, for a separate fee, for Technical Communication as well.) For more information, visit www.stc.org/pubs/stc-publications-in-2010.asp.

In addition, for the first time Intercom will be available to nonmembers—in print form only—by subscription. (An order form can be obtained from www.stc.org/intercom/PDFs/intercom-subscription-form.pdf.) Technical Communication has already been available for nonmember subscription.

Multiple online formats are available for Intercom. Intercom will be available in several formats. HTML will be the primary format, but you also will be able to read (and download) the magazine in its entirety as a PDF using page-turning technology. The many recent improvements to this technology make the experience similar to holding a magazine in your hands. It also adds more complexity and richness to content because some advertisers will be able to embed videos and animation about their products or services into their ads.

Readers also will enjoy the convenience of being able to find additional information quickly, through links to www.stc.org, from articles about STC activities as well as to advertiser websites from individual advertisements.

For the convenience of individuals with accessibility issues, and for readers who simply want plain text, a PDF without links or graphics also will be available for each issue.

Although we have been discussing plans for this transition for more than a year, it will take several months to complete the implementation. We ask for your patience and constructive feedback as we activate the website, redesign the magazine, add new features, and much more.

I want to thank the Editorial Advisory Panel for their help in ensuring the quality of design and content during the discussions and planning cycle.

This promises to be an exciting year!
Once upon a time, the “technical” in “technical writing” dealt with the subject of the writing, not the publishing of that writing. Publishing was simple, using technologies that traced back to Gutenberg. That era ended in the late 1970s, when word processors began coming into wide use. Since then, the “technical” aspect of our work has shifted to the publishing side; the subjects are still technical but the publishing has changed dramatically, as evidenced by the profession’s name change from “technical writing” to “technical communication.” In this article, I’ll look briefly at where the “technical” aspect of publishing began and where it is headed.
Where We've Been

In the late 1970s, IBM Selectrics were mainstream authoring tools. Many writers, myself included, wrote with pencil and paper, then gave the paper to the word processing group for input. Technologies we now take for granted barely existed. (STC’s Andy Malcolm gave a speech in 1980 discussing whether technical writers should be allowed to write using computers. He reprised the speech at the “Beyond the Bleeding Edge” stem of STC’s 2002 conference; it remains one of the funniest and most ironic speeches I’ve ever heard.)

In the mid-1980s, ASCII-based (pre-Web) hypertext came on the market. It was replaced in the late 1980s and early 1990s by Microsoft’s RTF-based Windows Help, which began to be superseded by Microsoft’s HTML-based HTML Help in 1997, which began to be superseded by HTML-based WebHelp in the late 1990s and XHTML-based WebHelp in the mid-2000s. The new millennium also saw the emergence of new forms of content in blogs, wikis, Flash movies, and so forth (with hard copy still persisting). The main points from the proprietary (Microsoft), limited (largely local on Windows PCs) Windows Help and HTML Help output formats toward the more open (platform-, browser-, and location-independent) web-oriented WebHelp.

Where We Seem to Be Going

These shifts are changing how we create information and increasing the technical complexity of our work—changes that are continuing, and even accelerating, today.

Where We Seem to Be Going

Changes are hitting us from many angles, including unusual ones like sociology (“contextualizing” information to adapt it to different audiences’ cultures, as opposed to simply “localizing” that information), group dynamics (in jobs like “community content manager”), and more—too much to cover in one article. Therefore, this section focuses on changes in four areas—technology, methodology, writing/content, and management.

#1: Technologies

Some technological changes we can expect to see:

New XML-based documentation technologies. XML is best known in technical communication for XHTML and DITA, but other technologies are out there. Some interesting ones include:

- UOML-X (Unstructured Operations Markup Language—eXtended) from OASIS (the Organization for the Advancement of Structured Information Systems, www.oasis-open.org). The UOML-X committee’s charter is to “define an XML schema for universal document operations…suitable for operating printing documents…but is not restricted to these…documents.” (See www.oasis-open.org/committees/uomlx/charter.php.)
- RDF (Resource Description Framework) from the W3C (World Wide Web Consortium) is “intended for representing metadata about Web resources, such as the title, author, …of a Web page…can also be used to represent information about things that can be identified on the Web.”
- OWL (Web Ontology Language) from the W3C, is for “formalized vocabularies (ontologies)…covering a specific domain and shared by a community of users.” The RDF primer can be found at www.w3.org/TR/2004/REC-rdf-primer-20040210. View an OWL overview at www.w3.org/TR/2009/REC-owl2-overview-20091027/#Introduction.
- Dynamically reconfigurable outputs. One problem with documentation is our inability to create one output to handle everyone’s needs. We can use conditions to create multiple outputs from one project, but this creates multiple outputs to which we then have to steer readers. It works, but the development is inefficient and can be confusing. Instead, what we need is the ability to create one output that dynamically reconfigures itself based on readers’ login permissions, requests (“Only show me material related to Idaho”), or external stimuli (like an aircraft service manual whose content varies depending on whether the outside temperature is above or below freezing). This technology will simplify distribution of information by reducing the number of outputs. It would also let us create output that responds to readers’ needs rather than to our estimate of their needs.

Assessing the above-listed documentation technologies, neither UOML-X, RDF, or OWL have made major inroads into technical communication, but they’re examples of technologies that may affect us, as HTML did with HTML.
Help in 1997 or the way DITA may. They illustrate why it’s important to stay abreast of developments in the field.

The technology for dynamically reconfigurable outputs is under development now, but every effort that I know of is still proprietary. I expect it to appear in mainstream tools in the next few years. However, making this technology work effectively will demand a significant increase in adherence to design and coding standards.

A growing need to understand the purpose and consequences of dense technical options. Today’s tools increasingly hide coding behind point-and-click interfaces, but this simplification can inadvertently disguise the importance and complexity of increasingly dense technical features.

Consider the Mark of the Web (MOTW) in online help. Authoring tools let us turn it on with one mouse-click, but what is its purpose and what are the consequences of using it? Its purpose is simple and easily seen; its consequences are easy to learn. But some tools, such as MadCap Flare 5, now ask if we want to add a doctype declaration to our topics in order to let our browsers render the topics in strict standards mode as opposed to not adding the doctype and rendering in quirks mode instead. You can do this with one mouse-click, but it calls for both a technical understanding of the feature’s purpose and an understanding of the strategic implications, both of which are more complex than MOTW.

New XML-based outputs and new browsers will come with new capabilities. Taking advantage of those capabilities requires that we make increasingly technical decisions that necessitate increasing our technical skills.

Fragmenting delivery options that complicate strategic documentation planning. Today’s documentation delivery options are fairly limited and well defined—Windows, Mac, PDF, printout—and use a fairly limited and defined set of browsers or viewing tools. But this neat world was far more confusing when documentation groups had to consider whether users had any browser, whether to deal with OS/2 or CP/M, and so on.

Today, new delivery options like AIR, smart phones, and so forth are returning the confusion to documentation planning. If all you create is online help for Windows PCs, these new options may sound irrelevant. But do you know your company’s strategic direction?

Every new documentation technology usually gets a similar response: “We don’t plan to use a website/blog/wiki/Twitter, etc.” But given the history of adoption of new technologies, can we be sure of that? A documentation group has to get involved in its company’s strategic planning process at the beginning in order to have its perspective included in the result.

#2: Methodologies

Some methodological changes we can expect to see:

An increase in cooperative writing. This writing model uses tools like Google Docs, Google Wave (http://wave.google.com/help/wave/about.html), or “cloudified” versions of Office 2010.

Cooperative writing is becoming more common, but it will not become the dominant model for a long time because it’s too different from what today’s technical communicators are accustomed to and what today’s authoring tools offer. (A 26 November 2009 post in a LinkedIn group opined that traditional help authoring tools will disappear because of the limits of their single-author model. However, these tools have been evolving since they appeared in the early 1990s, and I expect to see them add collaborative authoring features in the next few years.)

A broadening of the sources and uses of “user-generated content” for technical communication. As social networking becomes increasingly varied, technical communicators will have to work with content from nontraditional sources. For example, content from blogs or wikis might be usable in traditional help systems if there was a convenient way to repurpose that content. Even sources that may not have existed until very recently will have to be factored into documentation planning. For example, consider TweetBookz (www.tweetbookz.com/index.php), which takes up to 200 of your most recent tweets and prints them in book form, one tweet per page (thanks to Cheryl Landes for finding this). I mention TweetBookz as one more example of a new output format for tweets, which suggests that they might be pulled into traditional technical communication as well—another example of single sourcing.

Collaborative authoring and social media will give us more and more sources of and outputs for content, but we’ll face two problems. First, technical communicators will have to create content that adheres to code and design standards in order to make reuse of that content as easy and automated as possible. Second, technical communicators will have to determine how to handle content from subject-matter experts who don’t adhere to code and design standards but whose material is still valuable enough to be reused.

#3: Writing/Content

On the writing side, I expect to see:

Need for more rigorous topic-based content. The “document” isn’t the standard output anymore. Instead, it’s one of many outputs that we can create by extracting topics (content chunks) from a repository. The problem is that different outputs may use different topics in different sequences, so each topic must stand alone.

Writers whose primary outputs are online, then converted to hard copy, seem to have the easiest time adjusting to topic-based writing; those whose outputs are the reverse seem to have more difficulty. The only solution seems to be writing discipline, supported by information type templates and style sheets.

Need for greater control of topic-based content and awareness of how it can be misused. Building a bracelet for mom in arts and crafts class is a good analogy for topic-based single sourcing. The beads are your topics and the lanyard is the extraction script. There’s no penalty if you string the beads in the wrong sequence, but what if you string the topics in the wrong sequence or omit one? The ramifications may range from calls to tech support to lost data or physical injury. As single sourcing becomes more complex, the corresponding need for greater control of topics

January 2010

intercom

7
may force greater use of content management systems (CMS) or greater use of “pseudo-CMS” features in current authoring tools. (An Intercom article on the subject of using a help authoring tool as a content management system appeared in the May 2009 issue, at www.stc.org/Intercom/PDFs/2009/200905_32-34.pdf.) Similarly, what happens if one of your topics gets used by a competitor or used in some twisted form by a troublemaker in an online community?

As the number of outputs that we create increases, so does the need for more control of our topics. This isn’t that difficult, up to a point; it’s fairly easy to control and keep track of two conditional build tags in a project, for example. But as the number of conditions, variables, and other single-sourcing controls goes up, so does the risk of confusion. The solution is standards and documentation.

Reducing word count. Often, the words that get cut are filler that should not have been written in the first place, or that can be replaced by graphics. But how much can we cut before we cut real content? I’ve been involved in several projects recently where this was an issue—projects from the 1990s with a lot of verbiage, 1990s style, and so forth. The issue was how to cut some of the words to get a more modern, minimalist style without cutting real material that readers needed. One suggestion is to link to conceptual information on the web. This is a good idea, but the web-based material has to apply to our readers’ specific needs, and readers need web access.

Doing a better job of identifying our audiences and writing to those audiences will help determine what content we can omit. But this is a subjective issue that I expect will remain unsettled for years.

#4: Management

The developments in the previous sections will have two effects on management:

Standards for project management will be increasingly important. As projects and the technical environment become increasingly complex, the “wing-it” style of management will become increasingly ineffective for keeping current projects under control and for making sure that they’ll be reusable for future applications, some of which may be unanticipated today.

Documentation groups will increasingly need to justify their existence to management. If a documentation group can’t explain how it supports company goals for return on investment (ROI) and strategic direction, then the group’s work will likely be evaluated purely on economic grounds and outsourced to the cheapest provider.

Summary

Many of these developments may not affect us for years, or ever. The problem is that we can’t predict which ones will affect us when, so there are several things we need to do. I’ve mentioned many of these points in past articles, but I consider them important enough to repeat here:

• Stay current technically. You may never use DITA, but you should know what it is in order to be able to gauge its importance to your company. And to your own career.

• Stay current on business trends that might affect your operations. For example, if you’re going to be generating content to run on mobile devices and are considering supporting Google’s Android, it’s good to know why some companies think open source may kill Android’s chances of success (see InfoWorld’s online Developer World, 24 November 2009). Or why Google released its Chrome browser in 2008 into a world dominated by Internet Explorer. Such points might affect your strategic direction.

• Develop, promulgate, and enforce standards.

• Collect metrics to support standards development and to back up the contention of how the documentation group supports the company’s ROI and strategic aims.

• Get trained in your tools and, if possible, the underlying technologies. Many people are self-taught on their tools, often impressively so, but self-teaching can involve a lot of wasted effort and can lead you in wrong directions. Formal training gets you past the learner stage to more quickly make better use of your tools.

• Review your tools periodically to see if they’re still valid in a changing environment. For example, one of Adobe FrameMaker’s strengths compared to Microsoft Word has always been its ability to create long documents. This remains true if your primary output is hard copy, but does it still matter if your primary output is online, where we don’t need one 500-page document but rather 500 one-page documents?

• Accept the shift from “documentation” to “content.” Documentation is that boring stuff that no one reads; content, via wikis, tweets, blogs, and so forth, is viewed as the wave of the future. Technical communicators who object to choppy writing in content chunks or lack of control in user-generated content are raising valid objections that will still be ignored. Instead, we need to actively and enthusiastically participate in the shift to content.

As I write this article in November 2009, the field is in a serious downturn. Jobs are scarce and there’s a lot of uncertainty. Yet I fully expect the field to emerge from this slump, as it did in the previous four slumps that I’ve experienced. And out of each slump new technologies, jobs, and challenges have emerged that carried us for years. I expect this episode to be the same, and to take us into some really interesting and intellectually challenging new areas.

Neil Perlin (nperlin@concentric.net, www.hyperword.com) has 31 years of experience in technical communication, with 25 in training, consulting, and development through Hyper/Word Services of Tewksbury, MA, for various types of online formats and tools. He is a columnist and frequent speaker for STC and other professional groups, a senior member of the Boston Chapter, the creator and manager of the Beyond the Bleeding Edge sessions at STC’s annual conference, and an Associate Fellow of STC. He thanks Deborah Sauer, principal of Deborah Sauer Consulting, and Karen Bachmann, principal of Seascape Consulting, for their comments.
Usability Testing Trends in Library Services

BY LINDSEY WHITE, STUDENT MEMBER

As a graduate student, I spend much of my time hunched over a computer doing research at all hours of the day and night. Working full-time makes it difficult to visit the bricks-and-mortar library at my school, so I must make due with the online referencing services available. Distance learning and remote access have become the norm for academic institutions, with libraries experiencing a shift in how their patrons access their resources. As the library experience changes, so, too, has the role of the librarian.

Librarians are increasingly taking on new roles, whether based in a school, a law firm, or a hospital. New resources must be user-friendly and easy to navigate so users can find the information they need. Librarians must refine usability testing to gauge what is working and what is not. Librarians also can act as web designers or usability professionals; the professions are increasingly overlapping, necessitating additional training for librarians to stay relevant.

In Susan Feldman’s 1999 article, “The Key to Online Catalogs That Work? Testing: One, Two, Three,” she explains that academic librarians have always acted as translators for students, faculty, staff, and visitors in their search for information among the stacks of books. In the same way, she says, they must guide patrons of their online reference services as they search for the information they need. Feldman’s article further observes that:

- Users now have to navigate online catalogs and must learn to rely on language rather than the spatial awareness they needed in the bricks-and-mortar library.
- When conducting usability testing, it is vital to test the user interface of a library’s website because it is the part of the site that the user must interact with when connecting to the library online. The purpose and the audience for the website should be evident from first glance.
- Users should be able to ascertain immediately what they need to do to navigate the site.
- Ideally, librarians should conduct usability testing before the introduction of the online reference service in order to save time, expense, and embarrassment.

Usability Testing Trends in Academic Library Referencing

With the growing prevalence of online library referencing, several usability testing trends have emerged. They include testing of help services, combining usability testing with academic orientation, creating a persona, evaluating a website independently, and using web traffic tracking and analysis software. It is vital that librarians stay abreast of these trends to make sure their online referencing services are meeting the needs of their patrons.

Help Services

In their article, “A Survey of the Usability of Digital Reference Services on Academic Health Science Library Web Sites,” Cheryl Dee and Maryellen Allen (2006) explain that there is an online collaboration between users and librarians within an electronic environment. Often, librarians must provide
help to patrons who are working remotely. The help options that Dee and Allen list in their article include, but are not limited to:

- Email
- Web Forms
- Chat
- Video
- Customer Call Software
- Voice-over-Internet Protocol (VOIP)

There has been much discussion over which forms work best. Dee and Allen note that librarians must consider the scope of future technology when deciding which help services they will offer, and must be aware that users now expect a large range of services and access to several help options should they become confused. This need increases proportionately with the number of distance learners and remote users, all of whom expect these help services to be easy to find and easy to navigate. Like Feldman, Dee and Allen observe that improving the quality and scope of a library’s help services must be an ongoing process; they further note that the literature available on the usability of digital reference services is just beginning to surface.

**Combining Usability Testing with Academic Orientation**

In “A Tale of Two Needs,” Janet Crum, Dolores Judkins, and Laura Zeigen (2003) introduce the combination of usability testing in academic libraries and student orientation—a truly novel concept. Librarians are beginning to use the library tour section of campus orientation to recruit volunteers; instead of listening to a lecture, and likely retaining very little of what they are shown, students are able to learn about library resources in an interactive setting where they get to try them out first hand. In return, librarians gain valuable knowledge about the efficiency of their online resources through observation. The authors note a number of benefits yielded from this interaction:

- Students in orientation are an ideal test group because they have little familiarity with the specific library’s services, and they comprise a wide range of academic backgrounds.
- The hands-on experience has the potential to liven up an otherwise dull orientation session and provide practical information-gathering knowledge that can be used throughout the students’ academic careers.
- The librarians can focus on specific questions about the website’s use that pop up during the usability test.
- Students better retain and understand the information presented in orientation.
- The librarian-student relationship starts off on the right foot.

**Creating a Persona**

The creation of a persona can be invaluable in testing the usability of an academic library website. In “Designing a Web Site for One Imaginary Persona that Reflects the Needs of Many,” Heather Cunningham (2005) describes how examining the specific needs of a fictitious user can help librarians develop an online reference source that can meet those needs, rather than the needs of the librarians or library administration. Testing an imaginary user helps librarians see the reference services from the user’s perspective.

In the development of an academic library website, librarians often have their own version of what the average user represents. By defining the persona on paper, all involved with system development can approach the project from the same page. To maximize the effectiveness of this approach, Cunningham recommends the following:

- Specificity in the user’s description is important so that the persona does not change during the design process.
- Information for the creation of the persona can be collected through interviews, surveys, and demographic data.
- Librarians should limit the number of fictitious personalities, because trying to meet the complex needs of all users inevitably fails individual users. It is much more efficient to approach the problem the other way around and, in fact, a primary persona will likely emerge on its own from the data gathering process.
- Librarians should apply multiple usability tests toward the same user.

**Independent Evaluation**

Darlene Fichter (2001) describes an independent evaluation in her article, “Intranet Librarian.” An independent, or heuristic, evaluation involves a group of usability experts going through online reference services in a focused manner, rating the usability. In this evaluation process, Fichter observes that the usability experts:

1. List the problems they find and grade their severity.
2. Compare the online reference service against a set of usability criteria established beforehand.
3. Look at a standard set of factors, such as user control, consistency, error prevention, recognition, and so on.
4. Brainstorm ways they can correct the problems.

Fichter observes that this is an attractive option because it is relatively inexpensive and efficient; however, there is a tendency toward biased criticism and experts may under- or overanalyze errors a new user sees.
Web Log Tracking and Analysis

In her article, “Using Web Server Logs to Track Users through the Electronic Forest,” Karen Coombs (2005) looks at librarians who use web log tracking to follow a library website’s usage and effectiveness. A server log can show what site features are being accessed and how often, it can be programmed to collect log files on different schedules (e.g., daily, weekly, or monthly), and it can be customized to gather particular data. However, Coombs explains that in order to form a coherent picture of user behavior, librarians must analyze the results using web log analysis software that is adept at searching for patterns in the data and generating thorough reports. The information gleaned from this software is also helpful in formulating future usability studies.

While web log analysis software can be purchased from a third-party developer, Coombs advocates developing a custom tool for several reasons:

• It allows librarians to analyze specific parts of the website and provide an uninterrupted and complete look at its usability.
• The analysis is available on an as-needed basis and allows librarians to quickly answer questions about the usability of their website.
• Librarians can change the format of the reports as library goals change.

Common Obstacles

There are several possible obstacles for librarians to overcome as they conduct usability testing on their online referencing services. They should always aim to gather unbiased, meaningful data with a clear goal in mind.

Edge Cases. Fichter observes that an edge case is an uncommon, but possible, use of an online reference service, but that focusing too much on edge cases can veer a usability study off course. Instead, she recommends that librarians direct their study at the core user to improve the overall functionality of the website or other resource.

Unconventional User Behavior. Fichter advises librarians to ensure that the user being observed does not deviate too far from the core users they are interested in learning more about; the users’ goals and background should be at least somewhat similar or else they will not be helpful to the usability study. However, she notes, only an experienced usability expert is prepared to make this judgment; librarians should not discount a user for simply taking an unexpected route to solve a problem or find needed information.

Ignoring Data. Librarians tend to want to explain away some difficulties that test users encounter when navigating online referencing sites. They may have a valid reason for their design choices, but Fichter says librarians should always be willing to step back and look at whether that choice is really meeting the goals of the user.

Unnecessary Testing. There should always be a clear purpose to testing the usability of online reference services. Otherwise, Fichter says the results will be meaningless and will not improve the overall value of service to the academic library.

Biased Testers. If possible, Feldman writes, the web designers and those with previous knowledge of the service should avoid involvement in usability testing because of the potential for skewed results. If this is not feasible, they should conduct testing in an objective manner.

Conclusion

Librarians are starting to set out into the new frontier of online referencing services. With all of the new technology on the horizon, the shift seems appropriate and necessary. Academic library patrons expect library websites to be easy to understand and intuitive; thus, web design and usability testing expertise is becoming a necessary skill set for the library science profession. There are numerous usability trends popping up in academic libraries across the country, and the analysis of these trends will keep librarians on top of their online referencing services, help them provide top-notch service to users, and allow them to learn from obstacles encountered by others.

Overall, the role of the academic librarian is experiencing an evolution that is both exciting and rewarding, providing them with more ways to serve library patrons in a digital age. As I work at midnight to find one last source to complete my research, I am relieved to know that the school library website will have what I am looking for, that I will know how to find it using navigation cues, and that I can always contact a librarian if I need extra assistance.

Suggested Reading


Note

All sources for this article were accessed by the author through Business Source Complete, EBSCOhost, on 11 December 2008.

Lindsey White (white4@alumni.unc.edu) is a graduate student at the University of Houston-Downtown working toward a Masters of Science in Professional Writing and Technical Communication.
Rants to Raves: Putting Your Best Self Forward in a Challenging Marketplace

We all do it—it’s human nature. We all have something that we can’t resist complaining about when it comes to our chosen profession. I’m the manager of a large global team, and even I do it. “We are the tail of the dog,” I’ll say when we get overlooked in the project planning process. “We’re the bottom of the totem pole,” I’ll sigh when we get overlooked for funding for tools or conferences. What is it about the job of the technical communicator that gives us so much to gripe about all the time? Is it any wonder that we’ve got a reputation for being whiners?

What really got me thinking about this was an interview I saw on the Today show in 2008 with former waiter Steve Dublanica, author of a book called Waiter Rant: Thanks for the Tip—Confessions of a Cynical Waiter. Steve had blogged about his work experiences, highlighting outrageous happenings in the restaurant where he waited tables in Nyack, NY. And you think we technical writers have things to complain about in the workplace! A number of technical communicators blog about their jobs, offering insight into the practice and pitfalls of our profession. I looked at these blogs to see if their authors had as many negative things to say about our profession as Dublanica had to say about his.

Many of the blogs revealed skilled writers offering advice on arcane details of writing or the nitty-gritty about the latest tools in our field. Others did offer sharp-tongued harangues about
the horrors that befall us in our line of work, often posting examples and lists of what we are subjected to: the whims of developers, the low level of respect received from other members of the technical team, being forgotten until the last minute on a project. I am still mystified by the one writer whose site, which advertises his services as a technical writing consultant, contains several wryly humorous lists of the pitfalls of our profession. Might a potential customer be put off by these negative messages, funny as they may be to us?

After years of hiring and managing technical communicators, I know that this tendency to be so keenly observant of our situation, often in a negative way, is a trait that could be holding us back professionally. What if we could take all the rants and turn them into raves?

That started me on a mission—to look for some of our biggest rants and find ways to turn them around. For research, I went into the field—starting with my own global team and working outward to several local STC chapters.

Our Favorite Rants

To rant, according to Dictionary.com, is “to speak or declaim extravagantly or violently; talk in a wild or vehement way.” I asked my team members and members of the San Gabriel Valley, Orange County, and San Diego STC chapters to rant about their work—to tell me their worst horror stories and most common complaints.

I was struck by the words of one writer who simply said, “I choose not to rant.”

“You mean,” I asked, “that you never complain about your position as a technical writer?”

“No, never,” she insisted. “What could it gain me?” And yet, 10 minutes into the exercise, she was ranting as loudly and passionately as the rest of us. It didn’t take long to start hearing some familiar woes being recited. Do you recognize any of these?

1. We have no budget. No one appreciates or understands what we do, especially management.
2. Everyone assumes we are experts in Microsoft Word—or that we are just here to make things “pretty.”
3. We are always left out of the loop or forgotten altogether.
4. We are treated as second-class citizens—there is a lack of recognition for what we contribute.
5. “Aren’t you just a glorified administrative assistant?” or “An administrative assistant could do what you do.”
6. Our management is reluctant to provide tools, ongoing training, or professional development.

With all these things to complain about (and many more listed in “The Ranting Hall of Fame” on page 15), why do we still do this job? Probably because we like to write. We are intrigued by learning about new things. We like technology. Maybe our special gift is the ability to organize things. We like seeing projects through to completion—being able to say, “I did that” when we look at a printed document or use a product feature we helped design. Some of us are great at detail, and writing requires a kind of attention to detail not found elsewhere. We like the creativity of designing information. We like the rigor of following structures. Our colleagues tend to be fun, albeit quirky, individuals. The list goes on. Despite our rants, there are a lot of reasons to like—and keep—this job.

So how do we combat our tendency to rant? How do we turn around our negativity into positive attitudes that might advance our career? Let’s see what our colleagues had to say.

Rants to Raves

Dictionary.com says that to rave is “to talk or write with extravagant enthusiasm.” After spending a good portion of time together ranting, I asked participants to tell me how they would turn these rants into raves.

RANT 1: We have no budget. No one appreciates or understands what we do, especially management.

RAVE: Remember, we are part of the details of most projects, and management likes to look at the big picture; when they see how we fit into that, we might be better understood and appreciated.

- Investigate within your own organization how the work done by the technical communicators has helped the organization. Where have you affected the bottom line (perhaps your colleagues in support or sales can provide data on that front)? How have you introduced innovations in your information delivery? Are print costs down? Are customers more satisfied because of the improvements you have made? Prepare a presentation for the appropriate members of management to show these results, and rehearse it so that you show your best selves.

- If a lack of a budget has kept your organization from achieving the kinds of valuable innovations that are described above, research how other companies are succeeding and benefiting in these areas and present a business case to gain a budget for similar activities in your company. Remember that budget planning cycles have long lead times. If you want something to happen next fiscal year, start asking for it at least six months before that year starts.

- Get out of your cubicle and make new friends. You should definitely know your SMEs and developers better than you already do. Plus, to make a presentation to management, you may need an advocate in management to get you in front of the proper people. Only through networking in the organization can you form these relationships.
your career

RANT 2: Everyone assumes we are experts in Microsoft Word—or that we are just here to make things “pretty.”

RAVE: Accept the compliment on your expertise and find ways to demonstrate the wider value of that work.

• If this “prettifying” is an activity for which you are gaining praise, accept it—any praise is good.
• If you are perceived as an expert at something, then you have at least some value to the company that you can point to! It’s a start.
• Put together a working session with key players in your organization that demonstrates how the “prettiness” you added to the document is actually serving a functional value—adding ease-of-use and clarity to your information. Point out how the writing itself, and not just its format, adds value. Ask for additional feedback and respond to suggestions from the audience.

RANT 3: We are always left out of the loop or forgotten altogether.

RAVE: Get yourself pulled into the loop—no one will do it for you if it hasn’t been part of your company’s culture in the past.

• Force yourself to be proactive and persistent.
• Find out who owns the product development process and see if the technical communication activities are part of your company’s delivery checklist at all phases. If they aren’t, lobby with management to gain deliberate milestones in the project development life-cycle for your tasks and deliverables.
• Once again, get out of your cubicle and make new friends. Who are the project managers? Do the project leads and technical managers know you personally? Have you repeated your mantra, “Don’t forget documentation at the project kick-off” every day to everyone? Poke your head into meetings when you see members of your project team in a conference room and ask if there is anything on the meeting agenda that’s pertinent to documentation.

• If you are being forgotten too often, your organization probably doesn’t understand your value. Go back to Rant #1.

RANT 4: We are treated as second-class citizens—there is a lack of recognition for what we contribute.

RAVE: Don’t behave like a second-class citizen. Rise to the occasion and earn that respect and recognition if you (truly) don’t have it.

• Technical communicators are often very creative people. Where is there a hole in your organization that a person with great communication, research, and analytical skills can fill? Raising awareness for you as a professional with many skills to contribute can indirectly raise awareness for the value of the work you routinely do each day.
• Self-promote. This you can do through hosting brown-bag lunches, helping with related communications tasks (e.g., newsletters), or entering (and winning) STC award competitions. Look for corporate award programs that recognize key contributions and see how your group could be honored and spotlighted—what could be better at gaining recognition?
• Make yourself the “go to” person for information. Volunteer to organize the document repository for your project team, or offer to edit project documents produced by related areas of the company where your technical expertise can add value (e.g., marketing, training, or support materials), if those are not already your responsibility.

RANT 5: “Aren’t you just a glorified administrative assistant?” or “An administrative assistant could do what you do.”

RAVE: Well, just let ‘em go ahead and try.

• If there is an administrative assistant who is often pointed to as having strong writing skills and technical aptitude, suggest that you allow that person to take on a simple technical writing assignment. In parallel, have a member of the technical communications team do the same assignment. Compare the results. The administrative person will either prove to possess the raw material of a technical writer ready to join your team and be trained, or the comparison will underscore that there is a difference between having good business communications skills and being a professional technical writer. If you can’t tell the difference between the two versions, then you may have a bigger issue on your hands…but that’s a matter for a separate article.

RANT 6: Our management is reluctant to provide tools, ongoing training, or professional development.

RAVE: The keyword here is “professional,” so you need to underscore that your work is a unique discipline with skills, aptitudes, tools, and a growth path of its own and that you are a professional overall—not just a writer, or a techie, but someone whose unique perspective and complete portfolio of skills adds value to the business overall; in other words, make yourself investment worthy!

• Learn to build a business case that shows the financial benefit of any tool or training you are requesting. How much does it cost and how does it pay the company back? Management wants everything expressed in terms of dollars. Find mentors, advocates, and experts to help you learn to do this if you do not already possess the skills.
The Ranting Hall of Fame

- We are always the first eliminated when cuts are made.
- No one reads my work.
- No one reviews my work.
- There is inadequate project planning—documentation was overlooked by marketing, project management, and development and not included until the last minute, so there is inadequate time to do our job right.
- Hurry up and wait… hurry up and wait….
- I don’t get the same pay and respect as other technical professionals.
- There’s no advancement in this profession.
- “Everything” takes priority over us.
- It’s hard to show our value—we are a cost center, not a profit center.
- We are often managed by people who don’t know what we do or how we do it; we are often stuck reporting to strange parts of the organization (led by even stranger people).
- The technical staff expects me to complete their research and finish their unfinished work.
- There is an expectation that we will pick up the pieces in a project—be heroes! That we’ll work with no spec, no cooperation, and no support, and will somehow make a miracle happen.
- Management doesn’t understand what’s involved with doing our jobs well—both the time and the skills needed.
- The engineers or SMEs write the manuals, despite their poor language skills, and it’s considered “good enough.”
- The engineers or SMEs are not available to us, and when they are, they can’t communicate well enough to tell me what I need to know.
- The engineers or SMEs know what I need and choose not to share it with me.
- The engineers question my unique professional skills, especially my knowledge of language, grammar, and usage.
- The documents created by our company don’t look like they came from one company; no one enforces use of styles, branding, or templates.

Use formal structures in place in the company to advance your professional development. Use your annual development plan to document a request for particular training or conference attendance, pointing back to areas in your performance evaluation where your own manager is asking you to improve.

- Consider avenues for developing yourself outside the workplace—seminars, community college courses, or anything available through STC that can expose you to professional concepts that you may not practice today. How are your presentation skills? Your understanding of finance? Your understanding of your company’s industry, products, or related technologies? Look for avenues to sharpen your overall professional skill set so you are not seen as “just a tech writer,” but as a valuable professional.

The Manager’s Rant

I’d like to add one more rant to the list and challenge you to turn this one around for yourself. It’s called “The Manager’s Rant.” As a manager, I have found that the “rant-ier” the employee, the more likely that person will be a problem employee overall. Yes, we all have our common day-to-day gripes about the job. But those who dwell too much on them, and appear too hopeless about them, are often unable to rise above them. The manager’s rant says that the “rant-ier” the technical communicator, the tougher it is for the manager to make headway in turning around the culture of the company in the realm of technical communication. In other words, the more you rant, the less power I have as your manager to remove or repair the issues you are ranting about in the first place.

And consider this—how many of the rants shown in “The Ranting Hall of Fame” are really just the routine challenges of our job? How many similar items do you suppose appear on the “Hall of Fame” list for QA technicians, project managers, or support desk personnel? Sometimes it’s hard—that’s why they call it work. So challenge yourself the next time you are tempted to rant to look for how you can get that rant rectified. Step up and become an “anti-ranter”!

By the way, those blogs on technical communication are not all negative. On the contrary—there’s plenty of positive material to be found. We are, after all, a profession that attracts clever, creative, intelligent, and witty individuals. Who knows, maybe you can start an anti-ranting blog of your own: “Confessions of a Not-so-Cynical Writer.”

Barbara Giammona (barbara.giammona@gmail.com) is the technical publications manager for Invensys Operations Management in Lake Forest, CA, and manages a global team with operations in five US locations, Canada, and India. She has managed technical communicators for more than 20 years and has been a frequent presenter on management issues at STC conferences.
STC is pleased to announce that Erin McKean has accepted Honorary Fellow status and will be the keynote speaker for the Technical Communication Summit, STC’s 57th Annual Conference, being held 2–5 May 2010 in Dallas, TX.

A self-professed “dictionary evangelist,” McKean was most recently Chief Consulting Editor, American Dictionaries for Oxford University Press, and was the editor-in-chief of the New Oxford American Dictionary, 2e. Currently she is the founder and CEO of the new online dictionary Wordnik (www.wordnik.com). McKean also writes periodically for the Boston Globe’s “The Word” column.

“I really feel that I am an editorial Will Rogers,” admitted McKean. “I never met a word I didn’t like. There’s always something to admire about any word, even if it’s just the sheer chutzpah of it or how efficiently it disgusts you. I like how fluid and yet how precise they can be…and how marvelous it feels when you find exactly the right one.”

Alan Houser, Conference Manager for the 2010 STC Summit, and Phylise Banner, Honorary Fellow Committee Chair, are excited about the announcement. “We are thrilled to land Erin McKean for the opening keynote address at the 2010 STC Summit,” said Houser. “The STC Conference Committee wanted a keynote speaker who would appeal to our audience—people who work with words on a daily basis. Her talk will be an entertaining and enlightening start to the program.”

McKean’s other accomplishments include serving as the editor of Verbatim: The Language Quarterly, and authoring Weird and Wonderful Words, More Weird and Wonderful Words, Totally Weird and Wonderful Words, and That’s Amore. She also spent time as the editorial manager for the Thorndike-Barnhart Dictionaries. She has served on the board of the Dictionary Society of North America and on the editorial board for its journal, Dictionaries, as well as on the editorial board for the journal of the American Dialect Society, American Speech.

Houser expects an interesting and entertaining talk that STC members will relate to, stating, “Erin McKean’s career has been based on the love of words and an embrace of technology. Erin has taken the field of lexicography into the world of Web 2.0.”

McKean plans to talk about “the difference between looking at words through a microscope and through a telescope (and through a kaleidoscope!).” She says, “I hope that I’ll be able to give STC members a feel for the different ways words can work, and the different tools we can use to investigate them.”

You can follow McKean on Twitter at emckean, or follow her Wordnik project at wordnik. To keep up with all the latest news on the 2010 Summit, follow the Conference Twitter feed at stc2010.

“Looking Back” Debuts

A new department, entitled “Looking Back,” debuts in this month’s issue of Intercom. “Looking Back” will alternate with “Off Hours” and “My Job” as member-focused spotlights. This new department will concentrate on senior STC members—long-time technical communicators—and lessons they have learned in their careers that can be passed along to others. The hope is that their thoughts and advice can help other members avoid the same pitfalls or achieve the same successes.

We’re looking for volunteers to write or be interviewed for one of the three columns. “My Job” highlights members with a unique or interesting job in the field of technical communication, while “Off Hours” celebrates a hobby or side gig—your passion away from work. To volunteer for any of these three, please email Kevin Cuddihy at kevin.cuddihy@stc.org.
STC’s Future Already Looking Brighter in 2010

BY CYNTHIA C. CURRIE, STC President

With 2009 having come to an end, I am extremely pleased to be able to deliver some good news: STC has weathered the first and most severe crisis—that of a fourth quarter cash deficit. I want to express my sincere thanks to the chapters and SIGs for their support and partnership (as painful as it has been), and to the tireless efforts of the committees, the Board, and the staff in making almost $1M USD in expense cuts and cost savings.

In the past year, members have heard from the STC Board of Directors and staff more than 50 times—probably more than you wanted, considering some of our messages, but it was information you need to have. The impact on STC’s finances was unprecedented and affected all of us. Like my predecessor, I insisted that the Board’s actions and discussions be as open as possible and that community leaders and members be involved.

STC is stronger and better positioned for 2010 and the future:

• Our remaining reserves are conservatively invested and year-to-date activity reflects a net change in investment earnings of approximately $86,000. We hope to begin rebuilding our reserves by 2011.
• Dues have been restructured to cover the true basic costs of supporting the membership. And all members can now configure their memberships the way they want them.
• Our new Gold Membership offers an extraordinary package of services at an extraordinary savings, and I’m thrilled to see a lot more members have chosen this category than expected. (I chose it, too!)
• We offered up to 400 Recovery Packages to help members most impacted by the recession to remain members.
• We have increased our educational offerings in the form of online certificate courses and monthly live web seminars, which will help to prepare members for the challenges of the current and evolving workplace.
• We have a conservative, balanced budget for 2010! This is a solid way to begin the new year. I am grateful to all of you for your continued loyalty to STC, your dedication to improving the profession, and the Herculean efforts of our volunteers. I am proud to be STC President and I am looking forward to continued progress for STC as we climb out of the financial crisis for good and get on with the business of promoting the profession of technical communication, supporting our current members in relevant ways, and scouting for new members and others who will benefit from STC. The future is bright indeed!

Online Graduate Certificate in Technical Communication

We’ve got an app for that

idc.spsu.edu

Only 6 courses to complete the certificate:
• Technical Writing and Editing
• Foundations of Graphics
• Information Design

Plus 3 electives from a wide variety of online course options such as:
• Information Architecture
• Web Design
• Instructional Systems Technology
• Information Graphics

Apply the certificate to the online MS degree
• 6 more courses

Information Design & Communication Graduate Program
Discounts Available for Summit Travel

STC has set up discounts on airfare, car rental, and shuttle bus tickets for those attending the 2010 Summit in Dallas, Texas.

The Dallas airport (DFW) is the largest hub for American Airlines, with the majority of flights to and from the airport operated by the carrier. American Airlines is offering STC members a 5 percent discount on all fares purchased through www.AA.com or by calling +1 (800) 433-1790. Use Authorization Number 9540AV to receive this discount. The discount is good on all flights to DFW from 30 April through 7 May.

Avis Car Rental is also offering a discount to Summit attendees. The discount varies depending on location and type of car, but it is roughly 10 to 15 percent. To receive this discount, use Code G027999 at www.avis.com or call +1 (888) 754-8878.

Finally, if you wish to take a shuttle bus to and from the airport rather than renting a car, SuperShuttle is offering a discount to Summit attendees who pre-purchase using our special code. Attendees can receive the discounted rates to and from the Hyatt Reunion Tower by booking their shuttle at www.SuperShuttle.com or by calling +1 (888) 258-3826 and referencing group code VE8BG. The fee for the SuperShuttle is $14 one way or $26 round trip (normally $17 and $32), or $55 one way or $108 round trip for an ExecuCar sedan, which seats three to four.

Visit the STC Conference website at http://conference.stc.org and click on the “Hotel-Travel” menu bar for easy access to all travel discounts.

Getting Support from Your Supervisor

Would your employer be willing to pay at least part of your expenses to attend the Technical Communication Summit in Dallas, TX, 2–5 May 2010? It couldn’t hurt to ask! Consider writing a memo to your supervisor that explains how you and your firm would benefit from your attendance. The following model is based on a memo that worked for its author. Feel free to modify it for use within your company.

Dear [your supervisor’s name]:

To help provide [your company] with the most current professional methods and technological advances in editing/writing and report/publication management, I would like to attend the Society for Technical Communication’s 57th Annual Conference—the Technical Communication Summit—in Dallas, TX, 2–5 May 2010. The conference will offer sessions in tracks, including [select a few] Communication and Interpersonal Skills; Design, Architecture, and Publishing; Education and Training; Emerging Technologies; Managing People, Projects, and Business; Professional Development; Usability and Accessibility; Web Technologies; and Writing and Editing. The following sessions are of particular relevance to our company:

[List the sessions that you think will benefit your company most. Refer to the list of sessions in the conference Preliminary Program, available on the conference website.]

Although I will try to attend these particular sessions, some of the most popular may be closed because of limited seating. In that case, I will choose alternates. I also will have additional access to almost all of the sessions after the conference through STC’s SUMMIT@aClick. This service provides access to the sessions online as MP3 files, audio and video synched to PowerPoint, and STC is the only meeting in the technical communication field that offers this. Our company can also benefit from the conference Proceedings, which includes papers from many conference sessions and is provided free to all full-conference registrants.

Costs:

[List transportation costs, registration fee, cost of meals, and the price per night of the hotel room. These are posted on the Society website.]

Summary of benefits for [your company]:

The sessions will provide me with more knowledge of report production, editing, writing, management concepts, and government contracting. This knowledge will enable me to handle [a particular project] with more professionalism and confidence, which will reflect favorably on [your company]. I will be able to pass on much of this information to coworkers, to access SUMMIT@aClick repeatedly throughout the year, and to use my notes and copy of the Proceedings as a valuable reference.

Sincerely,
[Your name]
STC’s 2010 Election

The election slate presented below reflects changes to the composition of the Society Board of Directors. Based on the results of the Knowledge-based Governance Survey of the membership conducted in August 2009, the STC Board of Directors voted during its 24 August 2009 meeting to amend the Society Bylaws to reflect the following position changes:

- Remove the Second Vice President position
- Remove one Director position
- Change Director terms to two years
- Allow Directors to serve two consecutive terms

The bylaws specify that the First Vice President automatically becomes President the following year. Michael Hughes automatically succeeds to the office of President from his previous office of First Vice President. Additionally, Hillary Hart automatically becomes First Vice President from her previous position as Second Vice President (which is now eliminated). Therefore, neither Michael Hughes nor Hillary Hart will appear on the ballot.

Members previously voted for the position of Second Vice President, with the person elected to that position automatically serving as First Vice President the following year and President the year after that. With the elimination of the Second Vice President and Hillary Hart’s succession to First Vice President, there is no position to elect this year. In 2011, members will have the opportunity to elect a First Vice President.

A full copy of the revised bylaws is posted on the STC website at www.stc.org/PDF_Files/bylaws.pdf.

Members of this year’s nominating committee are Jackie Damrau (manager), Thea Teich, Carolyn Klinger Kelley, Sandi Harner, and Suzanne Guess.

Procedures for STC’s 2010 Election

The annual STC election will be held from 9 March to 8 April 2010. Only members who have paid their dues by 28 February 2010 will be eligible to vote. Membership forms and payment must be received by the STC office by 28 February. There are no exceptions to this requirement.

An option on the renewal forms and new member applications for 2010 allows members to receive their election materials via mail. In March, members who selected this option will be mailed the election slate, candidate biographies, and voting instructions. Members who did not select this option will receive these materials by email.

Be sure to renew your membership by 28 February to have a say in STC’s future!

Preliminary Slate of Candidates for Society Office

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Office</th>
<th>Candidate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secretary</td>
<td>Rachel Houghton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Steven Jong</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Directors
(Three positions to be elected, each for a two-year term.)*

- Nicky Bleiel
- Al Hood
- Tricia Spayer
- Makarand (Mak) Pandit
- W. C. Wiese

*Nicky Bleiel resigned with one year remaining in her term. The remaining year will be filled by electing the top two candidates from the list of nominees. These two candidates will serve a two-year term each, while the third candidate will serve the remaining year of the vacated position.

Nominating Committee
(Two positions to be elected, each for a two-year term.)

- Lory Hawkes
- Nathaniel Lim
- Linda Mikkelsen
- Preeti Mathur

Learn cutting edge localization skills and earn ATA credits!

Localisation Certification Program

- United States: San Francisco
  - March 22–24, 2010
- Canada: Gatineau, Quebec
  - June 21–23, 2010
- Europe: Cologne, Germany
  - September 6–8, 2010

Localisation Project Management Certification

- United States: San Francisco
  - March 25–26, 2010
- Canada: Gatineau, Quebec
  - June 24–25, 2010
- Europe: Cologne, Germany
  - September 9–10, 2010

Start online today!

centerforregionalandcontiningeducation.csuchico.edu/localize
The 2010 Technical Communication Summit will be held 2–5 May 2010, in Dallas, TX. The Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex is full of great attractions for the most adventurous among us. In November and December, Intercom explored Dallas and then Fort Worth. This month we offer suggestions for those coming to the area a few days early to check out some of the wonderful and uniquely Texan activities.

Houston, Austin, and San Antonio are all four to five hours away and there are many other wonderful places to visit that are only within a day’s drive; you can go and get back in plenty of time for the Sunday evening festivities.

Canton First Monday Trading Days
(http://firstmondaycanton.com/Default.aspx)

Are you the one who organizes hunts to garage sales? Love flea markets? Then the First Monday Trading Days in Canton are for you. Held the Thursday through Sunday preceding the first Monday of the month (in this case, 29 April–1 May), the May event is one of the largest events of the year. The weather should be great and you’ll be able to walk over 100 acres of shopping area. What started more than a century ago as a flea market has become home to some of the most exciting, cutting-edge home furnishings, antiques, and collectibles that can be found anywhere. Over the past 150 years, a lot has changed in the Original First Monday Park, but the genuine, down-home, interpersonal relationships between vendors and shoppers is the reason people keeping coming back.

Southfork Ranch
(http://foreverlodging.com/foreverinfo.cfm?PropertyKey=93&ContentKey=2923)

For thirteen years, television sets were tuned into 356 episodes of Dallas, one of the longest-running series in television history. Every week, viewers invited themselves to Southfork, the ranch the Ewings called home. Today, Southfork continues to welcome visitors from around the world as they come to see where Dallas was filmed and to experience the lifestyle made famous by the Ewings. They have a tour and afterward you can walk around the ranch grounds.

Scarborough Renaissance Festival
(www.scarboroughrenfest.com)

If you’ve never been to one of the many Renaissance festivals held around the country, then you should attend “Scarby,” as the locals tend to call it. One of the premier festivals in the country, Scarborough is open Saturdays and Sundays from 10 April through Memorial
Day. Pack your bodices and your finery and step back in time to enjoy swordplay, comedy, music, and other unique entertainment on 21 stages. Witness artisans create one-of-a-kind works of art. Browse 200 quaint shops for unique handmade jewelry, clothing, leather goods, and other offerings. Feast like a king on food and drink from around the world. Grab a Texas-sized turkey leg and stroll among the villagers of Scarborough. Spend the day in the 16th century and have the time of your life.

Historic Cities

There are several small towns near Dallas that feature historic homes from the 1800s and early 1900s. Each of these towns presents a unique experience and a little bit of history.

McKinney

(www.visitmckinney.com/index.asp)

Located just 30 minutes north of Dallas, directly off of 75 (Central Expressway), McKinney is home to one of the state’s largest historical districts, where turn-of-the-century homes line the streets and more than 100 unique restaurants and shops can be found. There’s plenty of wonderful shopping and you can check out the three wineries, two of which are located right on the square.

Waxahachie (www.waxahachiechamber.com)

Given that the town was first settled in 1845, it’s interesting that the Scarborough Renaissance Festival is one of their biggest events. However, it is not their only event and Waxahachie has plenty of charm. The Ellis County Courthouse is one of the most photographed structures in Texas and 20 percent of the National Historic Registered sites in Texas are in Waxahachie. Like McKinney, there are pretty places to walk around and the weather in May can be lovely!

Archer City (Booked Up)

(www.bookedupac.com)

You may have heard that Larry McMurtry has turned his love of books into a giant used bookstore—actually, he’s turned downtown Archer City into a town square of multiple bookstores. It’s a little farther than some of the other towns mentioned, but if you are a book junkie, this is a place that you have to experience.

Tyler, Rose Capital of the Nation


To the east of Dallas is Tyler, the “City of Roses,” and while the Rose Festival is in October, it is still worth a trip to this town to visit the beautiful Rose Museum and Rose Garden. You can also catch the Texas State Railroad from Palestine just up the way (or you can board at Rusk) and experience southern hospitality. Or you can check out the wineries and other attractions located in this lovely part of East Texas.

Be sure to visit us at the Lone Star Chapter desk at the Summit. We’ll have up-to-date information on fun and interesting activities to make your trip to Texas even better.

Elisa Miller (emillerstc@gmail.com) is the immediate past president of the Lone Star Chapter and the local conference coordinator. She is an information architect/usability specialist.
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, or visit http://theacademicconversation.blogspot.com.

Rhetoric and Technical Communication

By Thomas Barker, Fellow

Technical communicators think in terms of message, what we convey to administrators, users, customers, employees, and the public. But what if we pause, step back, and think in terms of the reader’s experience with our text? Doing this—thinking about the reader’s experience—is thinking rhetorically. Good writers do it naturally. Put simply, rhetoric means message in context. What we take that to mean—how it shapes research, teaching, and practice—makes up my current discussion of the academic conversation.

Academics think they know everything, but they don’t. They do know, however, what to do in the face of uncertainty. You reason, a colleague of mine is fond of saying. She points out that rhetoric shows us how to approach certainty in uncertain situations, such as choices about technical processes, motivations for investments, and decisions about enterprise solutions. One of my students, who works in nuclear energy, has challenged me on this point, and rightly so. Writing in situations when any leak can kill demands certainty at all cost. Nobody likes to admit that nuclear risk is “socially constructed.” Tell us if it’s dangerous or not, Mr. Expert! But facts have their limits. Experience tells us that we can never completely trust a valve, pump, or sleepy operator. Rhetoric helps us reason through options when we face these uncertainties.

So the study of rhetoric means the study of messages in the context of uncertainty, contingency, constraint, adversity, diversity, and human nature. Can technical communicators in universities, classrooms, and workplaces handle that? Of course we can.

Rhetoric in Research

To some, rhetoric means bombast or persuasion or manipulation or something loud but empty of meaning, belonging to politics and not technical communication. To researchers, rhetoric means the examination of media, writing, publishing, and technical communication itself from the perspective of human readers and writers. One look at Rhetorica (http://rhetorica.net) and you’ll see that some concerned technical communicators care about what Jon Stewart says on The Daily Show as well as other bias in the media. On the Rhetorica site, which offers analysis and commentary about media ethics and the rhetoric, propaganda, biases, and spin of journalism, you’ll find a useful page called “A Rhetoric Primer” that claims to be “A short rhetoric textbook for students and professional communicators.” If you’re interested, that page offers the basics. Rhetoric does derive from the study of men—Aristotle and Cicero, for example—whom we only know as marble statues. But it also has modern theorists, such as Kenneth Burke and James Kinneavey. In our field, prominent rhetoricians include Carolyn Miller, Steve Bernhardt, and Dorothy Winsor. Rhetoric has things like “canons” and uses words like “exigence” and “kairos.” These terms and principles make up the scholarly side of rhetoric.

To those not schooled in Aristotle and Cicero, however, rhetorical research means the study of how people read visuals (Technical Communication, May 2006), the study of audiences for usability (Technical Communication, May 2005), the study of effective typography (Technical Communication, February 2004), and the study of editors and their clients (Technical Communication, November 2003). Scott Graham’s recent study of agency and rhetoric in the discourse of biomedicine specifically asks the question, “What part do patient and doctor perceptions of brain-scans play in evaluating diseases like fibromyalgia?” In asking this question, Graham helps us think about technology in the context of use.

Rhetoric in Teaching

In the classroom, how do we prepare students and guide their thinking if we don’t have rhetoric? One approach takes the view that students need “facts and formats.” This view recalls the “message and media” approach that provides an incomplete picture of what technical communicators really do. We all know that the workplace challenges students to understand complex politics, allegiances, prior knowledge, and conventions. No simple formula can professionalize students.

Some academic studies with a rhetoric base examine effectiveness of textbooks. For example, Joanna Wolfe studied why 12 popular textbooks fail to prepare engineering students to negotiate “the kinds of documents and rhetorical situations” at the heart of engineering education. According to the Online Writing Lab at Purdue University (http://owl.english .purdue.edu), rhetoric helps...
students understand what we call “the rhetorical situation,” make rhetorical choices, and understand the rhetorical context—basically, how to wise up to the new world of the workplace.

Pedagogy, the key term for teaching technical communication, is a term that refers to “the whole context of learning” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pedagogy). Here we don’t mean pouring information into students like we fill a gas tank. Thanks to rhetoric and the writing of theorists like Paulo Freire, we mean education that helps students build critical attitudes toward technology. Rhetorical education helps students think about becoming better technical communicators. So they look beyond cool features to the main question: “How will a user apply this feature in the workplace?” For this reason, Kristin Pickering at Tennessee Tech University looks in her essay, “Student Ethos in the Online Technical Communication Classroom,” at how educators can help students from diverse backgrounds build learning identities that will effectively transfer to the workplace.

Pedagogy gives theory to learning. It helps students think about the context of their learning, what we call “rhetorical awareness.” Rhetorical awareness consists of purpose (why write the document), audience (who will read the document), stakeholders (who might be affected by the document), and context (what’s the background in which the document will function). One of my colleagues at Texas Tech, Rich Rice, wrote me recently, “Rhetoric is purpose. For me, nothing exists outside of purpose because if there is a text of some sort, someone or some group created it for someone or some group.” In Rich’s class at Texas Tech, undergraduates think about art on our campus by filming commentary from students, faculty, and staff to record reactions and evaluations. Such an approach puts the user, the consumer, and the public at the center of art, communication, and technology. It helps students think about the context of their preparation for practice in technical communication.

Rhetoric in Practice

Another colleague at Texas Tech, Sean Zdenek, sees technical communication—the world of practice, content management, document design, information technology, and graphic design—as “applied rhetoric.” I asked Sean what that meant and he replied, “The study of rhetoric is the study of users, readers, contexts, exigencies, speakers, writers, personae, media and their effects, dialogue, collaboration, persuasion, identification, misunderstanding and its remedy, and accessible information.” Sean’s website (http://seanzdenek.com) looks at new media and classroom use through the eyes of accessibility. “Students with disabilities are in danger of being either excluded from the new media revolution or accommodated as afterthoughts of pedagogies that fail to anticipate their needs.” Work in this area of technical communication helps us think about accessible captioning of movies and alternative texts for podcasts. We need to think through these new areas of communication.

Broader work in rhetoric and technical communication looks at how we think about technical communication in global, distributed, and outsourced environments. Are you looking at new genres or types of documents coming from colleagues in India or China? Do you wonder how to negotiate as a publications manager with a team of writers you’ve never met? Are you confused about professional ethos and identity in socially networked client/consultant environments? Rhetoric—the situated study of writers and contexts—can help practitioners understand types, writers, and readers of those documents.

When I face clients with tough questions, face tough decisions about documentation types, or face questions about proposal formats, I always ask one question. When I am in a quandary over funding for resources, staffing of documentation projects, and uncertainty over issues of delivery platforms for documentation systems, I always ask the same question.

What will the impact of my decision be on the users of this product, policy, system, or technology? It’s a question that gets me thinking about all the aspects that affect my work: readers, formats, content, style, and management. It’s a rhetorical question. It helps me think through uncertainty.

Conclusion

Can rhetoric make you a better technical writer? Considering that rhetoric surrounds everything that technical communicators do well—connect with readers, tell the truth, encourage thought, explore new forms in words, images, and sound—I would have to say, yes. But it also makes us better professionals by showing us ways to think about uncertain areas: questions about ethics and human values that play an important part in our work.

Additional Reading

Computers and Writing Community open discussion (http://old.nabble.com/TechRhet-f29599.html)


The Rhetorica Network (http://rhetorica.net)


Dr. Thomas Barker is the director of technical communication and rhetoric at Texas Tech University. A fellow of STC, he is also manager of the Academic SIG and a member of the Environmental Health and Safety SIG. He has published in Technical Communication and Technical Communication Quarterly, and is the author of Writing Software Documentation: A Task-Oriented Approach.
Managing Color—Not as Hard as Herding Cats

By Marc Lee, Member

If you work with documents, websites, or specialized multimedia tools, color is bound to be a factor in your work. In this issue, I’ll discuss color with a little theory, plus some practical tips to help you get better results.

Color is supported by great technology today that, once you have basic understanding, will allow you to make the most of it. I’ll cover:

• The RGB color model (the most common among digital color models)
• Specifying colors using the RGB model
• Indexing RGB graphics for more efficient use of files
• JPG files for photos and the JPG quality scale

The RGB Model

Almost all of today’s PC monitors use the RGB (red-green-blue) 24-bit model, which is based on an “additive” or “emissive” color process. There are also other well-known color models such as grayscale and CMYK (cyan, magenta, yellow, and black), which is used for printing and is based on a “subtractive” or “absorption” process of color perception). RGB-rasterized computer graphics conceptually exist in a three-dimensional space in which the x and y (horizontal and vertical) dimension are the pixels lying flat on the “surface” of the image. The model then goes back into the third, or z, dimension extending “behind” each pixel. The color information is contained in the z dimension. This is what is meant when people speak of so many bits per pixel—it’s how far back the model extends under the “surface.” The three-dimensional model is metaphorical only. The actual data storage in video RAM will have a different organization. But it is a useful mental picture to remember.

In theory, there could be an image with only one bit per pixel, in which case there would be no z dimension at all.

In that situation, each pixel in the image would consist of only on or off states (black or white, for example) that could be addressed by one bit. That would actually work for some very simple types of line art or diagrams, but not for color in the sense we’re discussing. Common pixel depths include 4-bit, 8-bit, 24-bit, 32-bit, and even 48-bit images; most common are 8-, 24-, and 32-bit, which correspond to 256, 16+ million colors, and 16+ million colors plus an “alpha” channel (not color, but opacity or transparency information). If you have a Windows PC, the built-in Paint program includes the following choices for saving an image:

• 16-color BMP
• 256-color BMP
• 24-bit BMP
• Other formats

The first two correspond to 4-bit and 8-bit color depth (2^4 is 16, 2^8 is 256).

Correspondingly, computer graphics cards have a pixel depth or color capacity. In today’s computers, most color cards have at least 24-bit capability. There are a lot of variations in monitor color options, but the main point is to ensure you have your monitor set to the highest color capability when you work with color.

As expected, there is a direct correlation between bit depth and file size. For example, think of an image that is 100x100 pixels on the x-y dimensions. That’s a total of 10,000 pixels. If there were 8 bits per pixel, the file size would be 80KB. A 24-bit format would make that image 240KB. In the smaller image, there could be 256 colors; in the latter, 16+ million. Depending on the situation, either choice might be appropriate.

Specifying Colors Using the RGB Model

Here are some color specifications as they might be found in a web page’s source code:

<body bgcolor="#ffffff">
<font color="#ff0000">
<span style="color : #9933ff;">It’s interesting to see how the 24-bit RGB color model

Figure 1. Three “dimensions” of computer graphics
fits with the way colors are specified in various tools and settings—in this case, HTML and CSS. The # is just the syntax in these languages signifying that what follows is a color. Other languages use something like “#FFFFFF” where the Ox represents code for a hexadecimal (base-16) number. Let’s look at how these hex numbers work and how they fit with our basic color model.

Each pair (FF-FF-FF) is a two-digit hex number representing one offset in the RGB color space, the first for red, next for green, the last for blue. (Hex numbers span the 10 numeral characters [0-9] plus six alpha characters [A-F] to count to 16 per digit.) In the “FF-FF-FF” case, each pair is a two-digit hex number, representing base-ten 255—so, in decimal, our HTML tag is asking for color number 255-255-255. That’s the highest possible number for each, corresponding to white. Black would be #000000 (decimal 0-0-0). Other colors would be #FF0000 (255-0-0), pure red; #00FF00 (0-255-0), pure green; and #0000FF (0-0-255), pure blue. And that shows our RGB model living within the hex color code. Browsers are sophisticated enough now that programmers can just say <body bgcolor=”white”> if they want. But it’s still common to see the hex codes in webpage source.

It bears noting that the 24-bit, RGB model appears to be quite widely accepted for specifying colors in many settings. The previous example shows how it can work in HTML and CSS.

The same notation is also used in Adobe Photoshop and most programming languages that can specify color. There are other color data representations that specify things like luminance and saturation, but color languages are far too vast to cover here.

**Indexing RGB Graphics**

Most images at least start with the full RGB 24-bit model, yielding 16+ million possible colors. A neat trick is to make a 256-color image as realistic as a 16-million-color image. This is known as indexing. The key to this trick is the custom color table or palette. It’s another application of the old 80-20 rule, in this case stating that often only a very small subset of the available 16+ million colors (namely, 256) is really needed for a good image. In Photoshop, for example, you can take a normal image in raw Photoshop format (PSD) or in BMP or PNG (all of which use or support the RGB 24-bit model) and select Indexed Color under Mode. In this process, Photoshop goes through the image and, through one of its indexing algorithms, selects 256 colors that will be needed to maintain this image’s fidelity to the largest degree.

Having selected its 256 colors, Photoshop builds a color table (see Figure 2) representing its selection of the 256 colors best suited to reproduce the full-spectrum image. It then adds that table of 256 colors to the image file—a huge savings in bits per pixel. Substituting that table for the 24 bits of color per pixel in the full-spectrum image, Photoshop gives virtually the same realism to the scene that the original image had. The term “indexed” refers to the fact that—instead of each pixel’s 24 color bits addressing one of 16+ million colors—the individual pixel data addresses (or “indexes”) one of the colors in the color table that is shipped along with the image. The slight variations in colors, which provide smooth transitions with no banding, can be maintained in the indexed image because the color spectrum in the diagram is relatively narrow—mostly blues, grays with some darker greens, plus white. The two forms of the image—the full spectrum and the indexed—are shown in Figure 2. As you can see, the trick worked pretty well in the case of the mountain scene.

Be aware that different images can have different results. If the palette of the image is limited to one or two of the primary colors and various shades of those, then the image likely will retain its original quality, as

**Figure 2. Full RGB and indexed color palettes**

[Image of Full RGB and Indexed Color Palettes]
is the case with the mountain scene. If the image has colors from a wide spectrum, it’s likely that 256 colors will be inadequate.

I urge you to experiment with your images in the RGB and indexed modes using Photoshop or another tool; I think you’ll be surprised. The advantage of indexed color is that the image’s file size will be a lot smaller if the colors are indexed. A typical indexed image is about one-third the size of the full RGB version and that’s purely the arithmetic of going from 24 bits per pixel to 8 bits. In the case of the photos in Figure 2, the full-spectrum file is 1044KB and the indexed version is 325KB, about a 69 percent reduction. This is almost a textbook example, but individual results can vary.

Photos, JPDFs, and JPDF Quality
Most people know that for photographic art the JPDF file type is the best one. JPDFs (or, in Windows file extensions, .jpg) have a quality scale that lets you trade image quality for file size on a scale from 100 to 0, where 100 is as close to the original photo as possible and 0 is zero attention to quality with a huge reduction in file size. The details and advanced math of how this works exceed the scope of this article, but the net result is interesting, as I’ve tried to illustrate in Figure 3. For a typical photo, the quality loss is not linear, while the file size is. This means that you can go from 100 to, say, 60 or 70, and see very little change in quality, depending on the situation. But you will see a clear linear reduction in file size.

This is what the blue-striped area in Figure 3 attempts to illustrate. The area above the green line and below the red is the part of the graph where quality loss is not as fast as file-size reduction—and that’s a net win in file size versus quality. The graph in the figure is conceptual only, but I think your own experience with JPDFs will reflect similar relationships.

The author would like to thank Senior Member, Al Kemp, for reviewing this article and providing useful technical comments for the Mac universe and for non-Photoshop users.

Marc Lee (marc@mlmultimedia.com) is owner of MLMultimedia, a multimedia and e-learning development consultancy. He specializes in e-learning and develops in Adobe Flash and Captivate along with the usual web content creation tools. Marc has been a member of the Rocky Mountain Chapter for about 20 years and was chapter president from 2004–2005. Marc was co-founder of the Denver Metro E-learning Developers (DMELD) and he has a PhD in English from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.
Let me start with a confession: Scott Abel was right and I ignored his advice.

I am referring to the explosion of social media and networking services, such as Facebook, Twitter, blogging, and so on. I should have started riding the wave of social media more than a year ago when Scott advised me to, but I resisted, thinking it was nothing but a passing fad.

Why am I airing my confession in such a public forum? Because I bet that many of you have a similar resistance to jumping on the social media bandwagon.

Let me share a few epiphanies that led to my newfound enthusiasm for social media.

I had just started using Twitter but didn’t know much about the third-party tools that expand Twitter’s capabilities, so I made a point to attend Scott’s hands-on Twitter workshop at the recent LavaCon Conference in New Orleans.

During the workshop, Scott explained how Twitter is more than just a vehicle to tell your friends, “I’m going for coffee!”—it is also a valuable tool for developing your personal online brand, for promoting your business, and more.

For example, he mentioned certain tools that search for keywords in Twitter posts and aggregate them into a news feed that websites can integrate into their content. I’d never seen that personally, so I acknowledged that as interesting, but didn’t take any action as a result.

The next morning, I was listening to Scott speak on the future of eBooks, but slipped out mid-session to check my email. When I did, I found an email from Google alerting me that a page with the word “lavacon” had been indexed, so I clicked on the link to view the page. (I have a Google Alert for “lavacon” to monitor what people are saying about the professional development conference that I organize.)

The page that displayed was a “Breaking News 24/7” website, and on the right side of the page was a concatenation of Twitter posts. Someone (Alan Houser) had just tweeted something from Scott’s eBooks session at LavaCon, and it was posted in a real-time news feed.

I could hardly believe my eyes. Scott had just explained this functionality the previous afternoon, and here it was in play!

And what was truly remarkable was the fact that I was just in the room where Scott was speaking on the future of eBooks! So between the time I walked from the session to the registration table:
1) Someone tweeted Scott’s prediction,
2) A third-party Twitter application captured the tweet and aggregated it into a news feed,
3) The news feed was displayed on a breaking news website,
4) Google indexed the webpage, and
5) Google sent me an email alerting me that a webpage containing “lavacon” was just indexed.
All in less than five minutes? This is what Scott meant by the power of social media.

Another epiphany from the conference: You attract Twitter followers in direct proportion to the content of your tweets.

I’ve been using Twitter for months, but the content I post usually consists of tips and advice on how to land a job or advance your career. Thus, many of my followers are people looking for new jobs. However, being a recruiter, I have two distinct customers: the clients from whom I get jobs to fill, and the candidates I find to fill those jobs.

So my second “ah ha!” moment was when I realized that I’ve been looking for jobs to fill, yet I’m only tweeting about subjects of interest to candidates. In other words, I’ve been neglecting a major percentage of my target audience: HR recruiters or hiring managers who have jobs to fill and who can use agencies to fill them.

So to attract people with jobs to fill, I need to tweet about subjects of interest to people with jobs to fill.

This seems like a pretty obvious datum now, but sometimes you are so focused handling day-to-day problems that you forget to add tasks to your to-do list that move you forward toward achieving your long-term goals. (Thanks to Andrea Ames’ keynote presentation at LavaCon for that reminder.)

My third epiphany came the next morning while I was eating breakfast with professional career coach Emma Hamer. We were discussing the job market and mistakes professionals make when interviewing for jobs, and she added that many seasoned professionals find it difficult to state what skills they bring to a potential employer.

“Difficult?” I said, “Shoot, I can ratt[e off 10 skills I have without even blinking!” and proceeded to do so. She listened attentively, nodded, and said, “That’s great, Jack. But you’re listing attributes (something about you) and activities (things you do), not skills. Which skills make you good at what you do? So you are great at business development. Wonderful. Which skills make you great at business development?” (Hint: interviewing, active listening, establishing trust, building rapport, etc.)

“If you can’t articulate what skills you bring to the job, then why would anyone hire you? Be prepared to show people, with concrete examples, what skills you have and how you’ve used those skills to great effect and how you can do the same for them.”

Oops. I keep forgetting that while I’m a professional in my field, other people are professionals in theirs. Maybe I should spend less time thinking I can do it all and more time asking for help from other professionals. (Which in my case would be listening to social media experts and my career coach who can help me reach my career goals.)

Wow, three life- and career-changing epiphanies in less than 48 hours! And the last occurred over breakfast in a hole-in-the-wall dive bar in the New Orleans French Quarter—not a place known for being an incubator for personal and professional development!

To recap, here are my recent lessons learned, and thus my advice to you:
• Don’t resist change. Change happens. Embrace it.
• When change happens, actively look for how you can use the change to advance your career.
• Harness the potential of social media. You have a point of view, so figure out what you want to say and then say it. (Or, at least, start retweeting other people’s points of view with which you agree until you feel comfortable publishing your own.)
• Identify your target audiences, and address each of those audiences with customized personal and business communications.
• Have a plan. Your “Internet footprint” shouldn’t happen by accident (Rahel Baile, Managing Your Online Brand).
• Don’t tweet about what you think others might find interesting—tweet about what you find interesting. “Your people” will find you (Chellie Campbell, The Wealthy Spirit).

Not happy with your current boss, job, situation, or salary?
2010 may be the year to reinvent yourself!

For More Information
To follow Jack Molisani on Twitter: JackMolisani
To follow Scott Abel, The Content Wrangler: scottabel
To follow Andrea Ames, IBM: aames
To follow Rahel Baile, Intentional Design: rahelab
To follow Chellie Campbell, author of The Wealthy Spirit: chelliecampbell
To follow Emma Hamer, Professional Career Coach: EmmaHamer
To follow Alan Houser, Group Wellesley: arh

Jack Molisani (jack@ProspringStaffing.com) is an STC Associate Fellow and the president of ProSpring Technical Staffing (www.ProspringStaffing.com), an employment agency specializing in staff and contract engineers, project managers, and technical writers. Jack also produces the LavaCon Conference on Professional Development (www.lavacon.org).
Accessibility on the Go
BY LINDA ROBERTS, SENIOR MEMBER, AND LISA PAPPAS, ASSOCIATE FELLOW

The ability for all people to use web pages on mobile devices is just as important as it is on a traditional computer. Luckily, many guidelines and standards that were developed for the web apply to mobile devices. According to the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), “Web sites can more efficiently meet both goals when developers understand the significant overlap between making a Web site accessible for a mobile device and for people with disabilities” (14 October 2008).

If you are designing with accessibility in mind, you are already headed in the right direction. In addition to the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0, the W3C has also developed Mobile Web Best Practices 1.0 that apply just to mobile devices. Users of mobile devices and people with disabilities experience similar barriers when interacting with web content. The W3C explores those barriers in “Shared Web Experiences: Barriers Common to Mobile Device Users and People with Disabilities” (2009). Some of the biggest crossover issues are described below.

Images
Most web pages are created for users with large computer screens in mind. These pages might contain large images that, when brought to a mobile device, might become cumbersome and disorienting—especially if the user uses software to enlarge (zoom) the pages. “Alt text” is also as important as ever since many mobile device users choose not to display images due to the speed of their connections.

Lengthy Content
On small screens, the user can see only a portion of content and the relationship of visible content to material out of view might be lost. This mobile experience is similar to that faced by users with restricted fields of vision or using a screen magnifier. Efforts to minimize scrolling and to provide inter-page landmarks aide accessibility on mobile devices.

Screen Readers
For mobile web pages, provide consistent and minimal navigation at the top of the page. Screen readers can overload a user quickly due to the number of menus and options on a small page. Users need consistent navigation as they can lose context easily.

Color
Make sure that information on your mobile web page is not solely conveyed by color. Mobile devices can be used almost anywhere, and this includes places with poor lighting conditions (think about use at night on the side of the road). In addition, some screens might have limited color palettes, making it difficult for users to discern color differences.

Link Intent
Traditional web users might be annoyed when they click on a link, only to find unexpected content. This inconvenience intensifies for people with disabilities who might have navigation challenges. On mobile devices, returning to the source page might be difficult or use unnecessary bandwidth.

Dynamic Elements
The inclusion of blinking or scrolling text or images to engage the user might instead have a negative effect on mobile devices. With real estate a premium on the small screen, moving elements such as those included in sidebar advertisements might distract the user from the primary task. The effect is even worse for mobile users with disabilities whose cognitive or visual challenges may hamper their ability to perceive content.

Input
The small keyboards or touch screens that come with mobile devices can be hard on all users, especially for users with motor issues. This advice, plus the information in the W3C standards, goes a long way toward producing a better experience for not only people with disabilities but also for all mobile users.

REFERENCES


—. (14 October 2008) “Web Content Accessibility and Mobile Web: Making a Web Site Accessible Both for People with Disabilities and for Mobile Devices.” www.w3.org/WAI/mobile.

—. (11 December 2008) “Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.” www.w3.org/TR/WCAG.


Linda Roberts is a senior technical writer for SAS Institute and a member of the STC Carolina chapter. She authored a paper on accessibility, “Using Access-Centered Design to Improve Accessibility,” published in Technical Communication 53 no. 1 (February 2006), and has spoken at three STC Summits on accessibility topics.

Lisa Pappas is an accessibility analyst with SAS Institute. She is past co-manager of the STC AccessAbility SIG and an STC Associate Fellow. Lisa has also spoken at a number of STC Summits on accessibility topics.

Images encountered by people with disabilities when using web pages on mobile devices. If you have feedback, contact Linda Roberts at lerober1@yahoo.com.
Advance Notice

Are you the first to know—or the last?

Move to the head of the line. Your STC membership assures you a place at the start of the race. Be in the know and noticed first. Whether it’s a 14-day lead on new STC Career Center postings, advice on how to increase your value to an employer, or exclusive educational offerings, you’ll have the advantage of a quick lead.

Gain early access. As a member in the Society for Technical Communication, the profession’s premier membership organization, you’re always up to date. STC benefits—including webinars, online professional publications, chapter membership options, the annual conference, and more—assure you’re knowledgeable and one of the first to become well informed. Move your career in the direction you want it to go.

As low as a couple of pizzas a month. With fast delivery of cutting-edge studies. Tips on the latest jobs.

Get noticed right now. Visit www.stc.org and renew your membership. Advance and enhance your professional capabilities.

Professional Partner, Significant Exchange.
FYI lists information about nonprofit ventures only. Please send information to intercom@stc.org. For STC’s complete calendar of events, visit www.stc.org/edu/relatedEvents01.asp.

1. San Diego, CA
2. San Francisco, CA
3. Dallas, TX
4. Minneapolis, MN
5. Atlanta, GA
6. Maastricht, The Netherlands
7. Vienna, Austria
8. Orlando, FL

18–22 February 2010 1.
The 2009 American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) annual meeting brings science and technology professionals from across disciplines and around the world to gather and discuss new research, emerging trends, and exciting new possibilities. The annual meeting will be held in San Diego, CA. For more information, please contact:
AAAS
+1 (202) 326-6450
meetings@aaas.org
www.aaas.org/meetings

17–22 April 2010 2.
The International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI) will hold its Performance Improvement Conference in San Francisco, CA. For more information, contact:
ISPI
+1 (301) 587-8570
conference@ispi.org
www.ispi.org/AC2010

2–5 May 2010 3.
The Society for Technical Communication (STC) will hold its 57th Technical Communication Summit at the Hyatt Regency Dallas at Reunion Tower in Dallas, TX. For more information, contact:
Lloyd Tucker
+1 (571) 366-1904
lloyd.tucker@stc.org
http://conference.stc.org

The American Society for Indexing (ASI) will be holding its annual conference in Minneapolis, MN. For more information, contact:
ASI
conference@asindexing.org
www.asindexing.org/site/conferences/conf2010/index.shtml

14–18 May 2010 5.
The Council of Science Editors (CSE) will hold its annual meeting, “The Changing Climate of Scientific Publishing—The Heat Is On,” in Atlanta, GA. For more information, contact:
CSE
+1 (703) 437-4377
CSE@CouncilScienceEditors.org
www.councilscienceeditors.org/events/annualmeeting/0/index.cfm

The 4th International Maastricht-Lodz Duo Colloquium on “Translation and Meaning” will take place in Maastricht, The Netherlands. For details, contact:
Dr. Marcel Thelen
+31 43 346 6471
m.m.g.j.thelen@hszuuyd.nl
www.translation-and-meaning.nl

The International Terminology Summer School (TSS 2010) will take place at the University of Vienna in Vienna, Austria, jointly organized by TermNet, the International Network for Terminology, and the Center for Translation Studies. For more information, contact:
TermNet
+43 1 23060 3965
events@termnet.org

1–4 June 2010 8.
Join the Association of Proposal Management Professionals for the 21st Annual APMP International Conference and Exhibits at the Walt Disney World Dolphin in Orlando, FL. The focus of the event is “Going Green: A Global Initiative—All Things Considered.” For details:
APMP
http://www.apmp.org/ca-29.aspx
Looking Back with Sherry Michaels

What I am today was formed by traveling a winding path to get here. I learned a lot by doing things I hated to do, working for people I didn’t like. I learned who I could count on, and also when I couldn’t count on them. I had to learn that lesson sooner or later, and sooner was better.

Early years of working with a NASA rocket scientist reject, “Dr. Thomas,” and a grizzled old computer operations cowboy helped me to learn self-reliance and to question the obvious. The rocket scientist was our systems administrator, and (unbeknownst to me) he programmed the job code to “dump” when my programs ran. The cowboy gave me a hint to this predicament in an expression on his face, and I understood it wasn’t my code causing the “dump.” After teaching myself how, I found the hidden dump code and brought it to my manager, who found my initiation very humorous.

I also learned to document programs then, because none of the other programmers would. Some of the systems I wrote were in existence 20 years later. They couldn’t have been supported if I hadn’t learned to document the processes, put together use kits for our internal clients and leave the programmers “breadcrumb” comments to explain the logic. Checking back on my work years later, it was good to know how solid those systems were, and that something good remained out of the work I disliked so intensely.

Throughout my years in the technical communication industry, I’ve learned that the hardest thing about the work we do is communicating. We like to write, the peace of communing within our own minds. We can rattlle off technical aspects because we’ve learned to in order to have credibility, and credibility is important to our livelihood. Sometimes, though, it takes the inexplicable reactions of our audience for us to understand that we haven’t done the fundamental job of communicating.

I’d like to have been clearer in how I said or wrote my communications. I’d like (most importantly) to apply the acid test of assuming best intent as I read communications sent to me. I prize this lesson highly, having learned it (and perhaps continue to relearn it) as a past leader in STC.

I’ve evolved a few additional acid tests to apply to my communications that I am working hard to incorporate every day:
1. Am I clear on who my audience is, and why they need certain information?
2. Am I using a tone and voice that enables the communication, rather than hobbles it?
3. Am I assuming a friend on the other end of the conversation? Am I reducing (or eliminating) words that could be emotive or distracting?
4. Have I gained the collaboration of my audience in my writing? Was I accountable, direct, and honest in my voice?
5. At the end of the assignment, did I make things clearer, or did I clutter up the landscape for a majority of my readers?

These lessons are culled from four decades of a work experience spanning enormous cultural, corporate, economic, and leadership changes. I hope they are helpful to you. You can add your own lessons, and here in the great wealth of knowledge of STC, you can share that and gain still more from others. I’ll look forward to seeing yours among a collection of experiences in this column.
**EXPAND YOUR HORIZONS**

Make the 2010 Summit in Dallas your destination for the best expertise in Technical Communication education. Choose from an extensive selection of more than 85 sessions from tracks including Writing and Editing, Architecture and Design, Professional Development, Managing People, and more. Explore the advanced world of STC institutes through sessions that take an in-depth look at topics. Experience it all 2 to 5 May.

Expert speakers from the global technical communication profession will lead education forums, address general sessions, and provide informal exchanges of ideas. Pre-conference workshops, certificate opportunities, SIG meetings, and the EXPO Hall are the ticket to your career growth.

Visit [http://conference.stc.org](http://conference.stc.org) for complete details and registration access. 2010 is the year to stretch your professional capabilities. And Summit 2010, 2 to 5 May, at the Hyatt Regency Dallas at Reunion Tower is the place to start.
HOW SUITE IT IS
Introducing MadCap’s New Authoring Suite

MADPAK MULTILINGUAL

What happens when you combine today’s most powerful content authoring and multimedia applications with MadCap’s fully integrated translation and localization solution? One exceptional authoring suite designed for the global marketplace.

Download your free 30-Day trial NOW!
www.madcapsoftware.com | +1 (858) 320-0387