

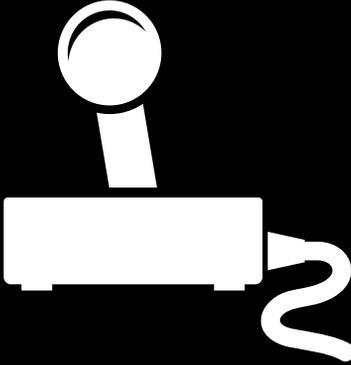
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THE MAGAZINE OF THE SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

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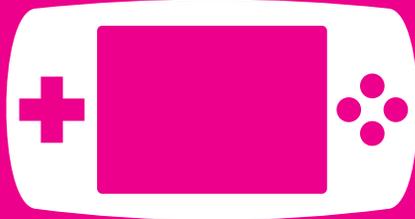
A stylized illustration of a computer monitor, a tower PC case, and a game controller on a blue background.

**GAMIFICATION IS HERE:
BUILD A WINNING PLAN!**

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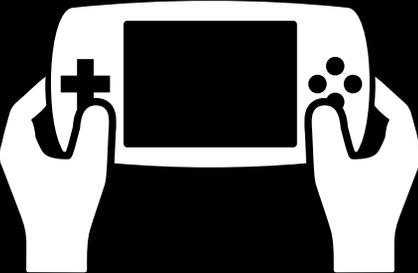
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A stylized illustration of two hands holding a handheld game console on a black background.

**INCLUDIFICATION:
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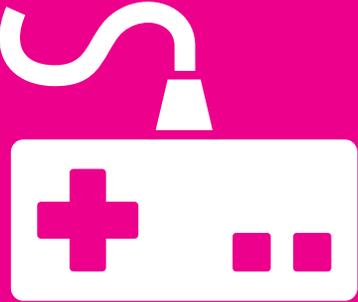
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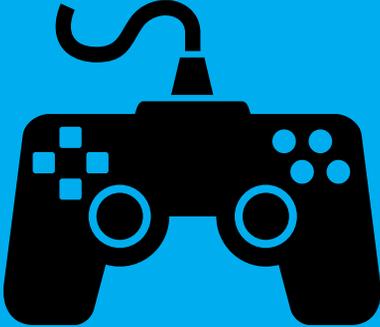
**ACHIEVEMENT
LOVES COMPANY**

A stylized illustration of a steering wheel on a black background.

**ARE YOU A MARKETEEER OR
A TECHNICAL COMMUNICATOR??**

A stylized illustration of a game controller with a cable on a pink background.

**ARE YOU A MARKETEEER OR
A TECHNICAL COMMUNICATOR??**

A stylized illustration of a game controller on a blue background.

**ARE YOU A MARKETEEER OR
A TECHNICAL COMMUNICATOR??**

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A stylized illustration of a directional pad (D-pad) on a yellow background.

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A Note from the Editor



WITH THIS FINAL ISSUE of *Intercom* for 2012, we bid a fond farewell to longtime columnist Dr. Bette Frick. She has been the author of the Business Matters column for nine years. She will be missed in this role, but will continue to assist *Intercom* as the chair of the Editorial Advisory Panel. Thank you, Bette, for all your insights into the world of freelancing, marketing, and independent business ownership.

Most of the articles in this issue focus on alternative media in technical communication. Marta Rauch from Oracle shows us how gamification is being used in industry to motivate users and enhance experiences. Steve Spohn, from AbleGamers Foundation, introduces us to the new term *includification* in making accessible games. And Student Member Gwendolynne Barr reports on interviews she conducted with technical writers who specialize in documenting APIs, SDKs, and Web services. She defines these terms and explains what it means to document them.

The issue also contains an article from a group of STC Fellows and Associate Fellows about how their company—SAS—supports their professional development. Readers will find many ideas here to take back to their own workplaces.

The STC publications and editorial staff wish you all a very happy holiday season and New Year. The editorial calendar for 2013 has been posted at <http://intercom.stc.org>. Take a look and consider submitting an article for the coming year!

—LIZ POHLAND
liz.pohland@stc.org

intercom

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Dear Colleagues,

As the Society prepares to celebrate its 60th anniversary in 2013, I am humbled by its work over the decades and excited about what the next 60 years will bring. I, along with the STC Board of Directors, am asking you to consider making a financial commitment to the long-term viability and sustainability of our Society.

With the end of the year fast approaching, now is the perfect time to give thanks and give back to our Society and show your support for the role STC has played for 60 years! And I trust that, like myself, you wish to support the Society in its continuing mission—to promote and advance the technical communication profession.

If you can contribute, you will be helping STC continue its tradition of excellent publications, conferences, and online courses for a new generation of technical communicators. We have launched new initiatives and partnerships to support technical communicators around the globe. The important thing is that you—among the best, brightest, and most loyal of our members—consider giving back to STC so that others can receive the professional support and benefits you have experienced as a member.

If you would like to donate to the Society, please do so by completing the digital form on the last page of this PDF. Someone from the STC office will contact you regarding your generous contribution. Remember that STC is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization and your donation may be tax-deductible.

Please consider joining me in helping to keep the Society strong and vibrant for the next 60 years and beyond.

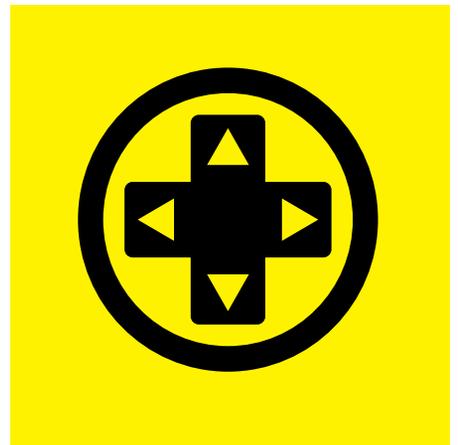
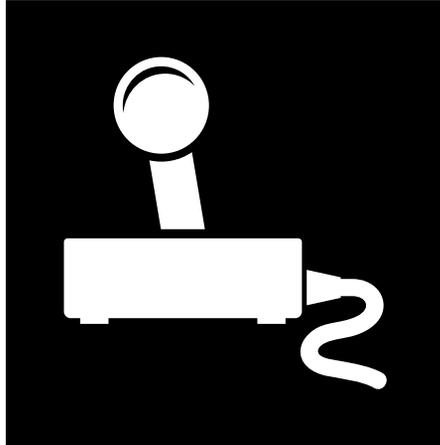
Yours in service to STC,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Alan Houser".

Alan Houser
President, Society for Technical Communication



Gamification is Here: Build a Winning Plan!



BY MARTA RAUCH | *Senior Member*

ENTERPRISE GAMIFICATION is growing at an impressive rate. Market research predicts that by 2014, over 70% of companies will have at least one gamified product, and by 2015, over 50% will gamify innovation (Gartner Press Release, 12 April 2011, www.gartner.com/it/page.jsp?id=1629214).

This rapid change brings opportunities for technical communicators who understand gamification and can create gamified user assistance. This article describes enterprise gamification, provides examples, includes resources for further learning, and suggests strategies for effective gamified user experience.

What Is Gamification?

Gamification uses game techniques in non-game situations to motivate people and drive behavior. Game techniques are often grouped in these three categories:

- ▶ **Game dynamics**—used to motivate behavior. Examples include scenarios and rules.
- ▶ **Game mechanics**—used to help users achieve goals. Examples include teams, competitions, rewards, and feedback.
- ▶ **Game components**—used to track users' progress. Examples include quests, points, levels, badges, and collections.

When implemented effectively, these techniques can make enterprise tasks as fun and enjoyable as games.

Effective for Social Media

Gamification effectively motivates people in social media. For example, Foursquare encourages frequent check-ins at fun locations, and Klout users check in daily to review scores and leaderboards (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Social Network Example: Klout Leaderboard

Results for Education

Gamification also shows excellent results for education. For example, Khan Academy, which has an effective gamified interface, provides millions of students worldwide access to effective online instruction. Due to its success, Khan Academy is being incorporated into U.S. public school curriculum (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Education Example: Khan Academy

Adopted by the U.S. Government

The U.S. government also recognizes gamification's benefits. According to the webpage of the Office of Science and Technology Policy, 23 U.S. agencies are incorporating gamification, including the National Institutes of Health, the Department of Energy, the U.S. Army, and NASA.



Figure 3. U.S. Government Example: Office of Science and Technology Policy

Benefits to Enterprise

As a recent Forbes article points out, gamification has become “a CEO’s best friend” (www.forbes.com/sites/danwoods/2012/05/14/gamification-grows-up-to-become-a-ceos-best-friend/). When gamification is implemented effectively, enterprises can:

- ▶ Increase user engagement
- ▶ Motivate customer participation
- ▶ Influence behavior
- ▶ Drive adoption, learning, and loyalty
- ▶ Improve quality of service
- ▶ Increase efficiency
- ▶ Reduce time and costs
- ▶ Drive profits

It's Big Money!

The market for gamification has enjoyed dramatic growth, surging from 155% in 2011 to 197% in 2012. Market research firms expect the market to jump from \$100M in 2011 to over \$2.8B in 2016. With 47% of implementations currently focused on user engagement, enterprise is the largest market segment, consisting off 25% of the gamification market (M2 Research).

Engaging Millennial Workers

Millennial workers, also called Gen Y, are currently 25% of the U.S. workforce. In 2014, this number will grow to 36%, and in 2020, to 46% (<http://onlinemba.unc.edu/mba-at-unc-blog/geny-in-the-workplace/>).

According to game designer and industry expert Jane McGonigal, a unique trait of millennial workers is that they have 10,000 hours of gaming by age 21 (www.youtube.com/watch?v=dE1DuBesGYM). This amount of experience qualifies Gen Y as expert gamers, based on the “10,000-Hour Rule” described in Malcolm Gladwell’s *Outliers*. Due to this expertise, Gen Y is most engaged when using game-like user interfaces. To motivate this workforce, employers must provide attractive enterprise gamification solutions for corporate innovation and internal processes.

Enterprise Gamification Examples

The following examples highlight a variety of enterprise gamification products and solutions.

IBM

IBM's Level Up for IBM Connections incorporates gamified strategies such as onboarding tasks that bring users quickly into the product. Gamification components include missions, levels, points, badges, and a leaderboard (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Enterprise Example: Level Up for IBM Connections

ROI for Gamified Translation

As reported by *Business Insider*, IBM's Social Laboratory successfully gamified documentation translation by awarding points to employees who contributed to an internal translation project. Employees were motivated to participate through points that could be redeemed for charities. The return on investment included improved accuracy, reduced project time, and millions saved in translation costs (http://articles.businessinsider.com/2011-07-20/tech/30034737_1_ibm-executive-ibm-employees-sametime).

Samsung

Samsung's online community includes a gamified loyalty program (see Figure 5). Players can unlock badges and levels by completing quests to learn about Samsung products (www.samsung.com/us/samsungnation).



Figure 5. Enterprise Example: Samsung Nation

Market research predicts that by 2014, over 70% of companies will have at least one gamified product, and by 2015, over 50% will gamify innovation.

Microsoft

To help customers learn about new features in Microsoft Office 2007 and 2010, Microsoft's Office Labs used a gamified approach. Their Ribbon Hero and Ribbon Hero 2 games have helped millions of users get the most out of the new version of their product (see Figures 6 and 7).

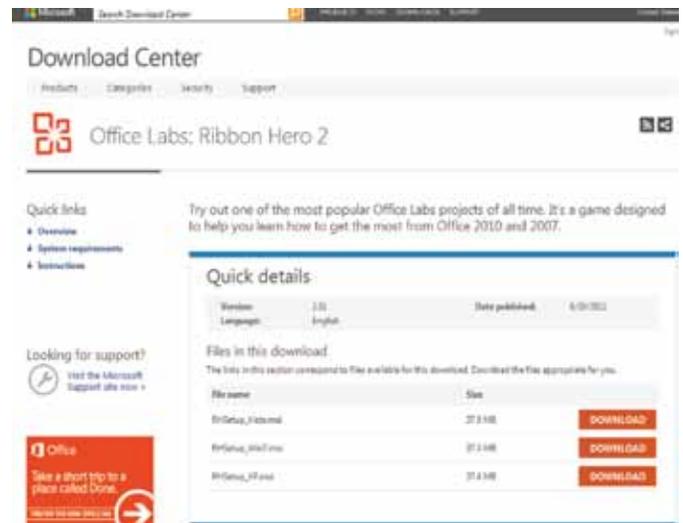


Figure 6. Enterprise Example: Office Labs Ribbon Hero 2 Download



Figure 7. Enterprise Example: Microsoft Office Ribbon Hero 2

Cisco

To give network customers an enjoyable way to learn to use binary numbers, Cisco created its popular Binary Game. According to Cisco's Learning Network, the game has been played "about a million times around the world" to help with the task of converting 8-digit binary numbers to decimals (see Figure 8).



Figure 8. Enterprise Example: Cisco Binary Game

Cisco takes gamification to the next level by providing games to help network administrators gain networking skills to prepare for professional certification (see Figure 9).

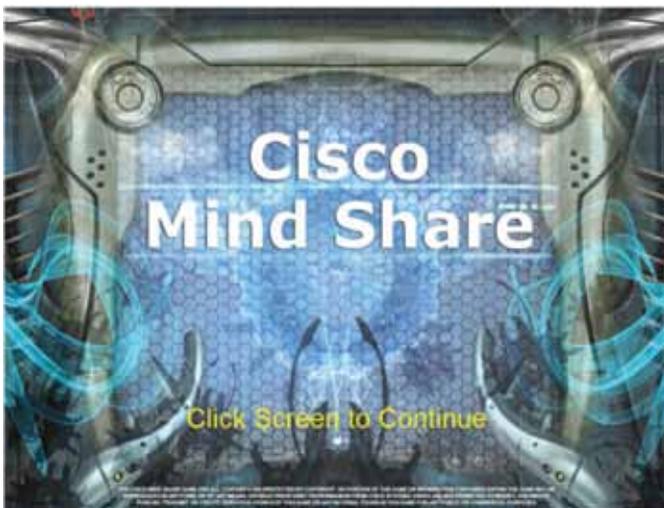


Figure 9. Enterprise Example: Cisco Networking Game

The Cisco Learning Network provides a Games Arcade where users can download learning games for Cisco products (see Figure 10).



Figure 10. Enterprise Example: Cisco Games Arcade

Market research firms expect the market to jump from \$100M in 2011 to over \$2.8B in 2016.

Oracle

The following examples highlight several recent corporate gamification initiatives. (Note: The statements and opinions expressed here are the author's own and do not necessarily represent those of Oracle Corporation.)

The Importance of Gamification

At Badgerville's recent Engage 2012 industry event, Nick Giannasi, vice president of Life Sciences Product Strategy, Oracle Health Sciences, spoke to attendees about the importance of gamification (see <http://badgerville.com/resources/events/engage2012/oracle-on-importance-of-gamification>).

Online Forum

The Oracle Forum (<https://forums.oracle.com>) is an effectively gamified community. Community members are encouraged to answer questions posed on the forum, and are given points for providing helpful answers. Top contributors are recognized on a leaderboard, with achievements shown by points and badges. The result is that all types of participants are motivated to contribute to the community.

Gamification Focus Group

To understand what motivates users to participate in Oracle's online communities, the Oracle Applications User Experience group conducted a focus group to gather input. Through guided discussions, they collected ideas and opinions on motivation, and received feedback on how game mechanics could encourage participants.



Figure 11: #GamifyOracle Twitter Hashtag as a Badge

Oracle Apps UX Gamification All-Hands Day

The Oracle Applications User Experience team also held a recent worldwide design jam, in which groups held a friendly, gamified competition to create effective new types of gamified user interfaces. Participants agreed that the event was a resounding success. According to Ultan Ó Broin, it was “a great way to learn about gamification, build team spirit, and create an innovative, contemporary user experience in a very agile way.”

Social Networks

To share information about gamification activities, employees use designated Twitter handles and a hashtag: @GamifyOracle, @GamifyOracleApps, and #GamifyOracle. Employees also post a gamification blog at <https://blogs.oracle.com/gamification/>.

Conference Presentations

Oracle employees share their learning about gamification at such conferences as the STC Summit, LavaCon, the Gamification Summit, Enterprise Gamification 2012, and Human-Computer Interaction International 2013.

Grassroots gamification initiatives, such as the ones described here, provide valuable opportunities for employees to learn and develop gamification techniques.

Game Changers for Technical Communicators

To provide successful user experience for enterprise gamification products, technical communicators need to adapt processes and apply new methodologies. Some sample considerations are described in the following sections.

✔ Understanding user motivation.

The strength of gamification lies in how it motivates users. To achieve the benefits of gamification, communicators must understand what motivates their users to perform tasks. One way to develop understanding is through customer meetings, similar to the Oracle Application User Experience’s gamification focus group.

✔ Gamified user assistance architecture.

Gamification brings users through a range of activities, starting with onboarding and continuing through mastery. Sample architectural considerations include:

- ▶ Planning the player’s journey
- ▶ Providing onboarding
- ▶ Organizing content by quests and levels

Grassroots gamification initiatives provide valuable opportunities for employees to learn and develop gamification techniques.

- ▶ Maintaining motivation throughout the player’s lifecycle, from novice through mastery

✔ User assistance patterns.

Gamification borrows many user assistance patterns from games. A good way to understand these patterns is to play games. Sample patterns include:

- ▶ User interface strings for components such as points, levels, quests, badges, and leaderboards
- ▶ Onboarding tutorials
- ▶ Embedded tips and help
- ▶ FAQs, Forums

✔ Gamification terminology.

Gamification terminology includes components originating from games, such as:

- ▶ Badges
- ▶ Quests
- ▶ Levels
- ▶ Leaderboards

✔ Gamified messages.

In gamification, messages are a critical part of motivating users and are integrated within the game structure. For example, messages:

- ▶ Define goals and rules of the gamified system
- ▶ Introduce strategy and tactics
- ▶ Guide players toward mastery
- ▶ Provide feedback, encouragement, motivation, and rewards for leveling up, meeting goals
- ▶ Link to a game FAQ when necessary.

✔ Writing style.

The goal of gamified products is to make tasks fun and rewarding. To achieve this, the writing style is informal, friendly, motivational, and minimal. For example, ideal strings are the length of a tweet.

✔ Scheduling for play testing and iterations.

Gamified projects undergo several iterations of play testing and feedback. When scheduling gamification projects, allow time for multiple iterations of the product and its user assistance. An example of play testing is shown on the Microsoft Playtest site, <http://www.microsoft.com/en-us/playtest/default.aspx>.

✔ Administration and upgrade considerations.

Gamified products include administrative tasks for configuring components such as levels, rewards, and badges. When planning user assistance projects, consider the requirements of gamification administrators.

Because players are so motivated to achieve goals, upgrades can be disruptive. When scheduling upgrades, alert players in advance to complete current quests before the upgrade.

Gamification brings exciting changes to enterprise products that engage and motivate users.... The leaders in this field will understand, develop, and deliver effective gamified user assistance.

☑ Accessibility.

If your product is required to be accessible, ensure that gamified user assistance conforms to your company's accessibility guidelines. Sample game accessibility considerations are shown at The AbleGamers Foundation's websites (see www.includification.com and www.ablegamers.org).

☑ Localization.

Localizing games involves more than translation. Allow time for effective localization that considers the target country and culture. Sample localization considerations:

- ▶ Rewards: The same reward does not appeal to all cultures
- ▶ Quests: Customize to the country and corporate culture
- ▶ Leaderboards: Being #1 is not desirable in all cultures

SUGGESTED READING

7 Examples: Put Gamification to Work, <http://www.informationweek.com/thebrainyard/slideshows/view/232901489/7-examples-put-gamification-to-work>.

Cisco Information Through Play, <http://www.nomimes.com/casestudies/hunt/>.

Game Accessibility, www.game-accessibility.com/index.php?pagefile=visual <http://www.gameaccessibilityguidelines.com/guidelines/full-list/>.

Game Localization, <http://gamelocalisation.wordpress.com/>.

Gamification course taught online by Kevin Werbach through Coursera, <https://www.coursera.org/course/gamification>.

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Conclusion

Gamification brings exciting changes to enterprise products that engage and motivate users. To stay in the game, technical communicators must prepare for 2014, when over 70% of companies will have at least one gamified product, and for 2015, when over 50% of companies will gamify innovation. The leaders in this field will understand, develop, and deliver effective gamified user assistance. ■

MARTA RAUCH is a principal information developer and team lead at Oracle. She participates in gamification initiatives, has worked at two game companies, and completed an online gamification course through Coursera and Professor Kevin Werbach of the Wharton School. In 2012, Marta presented on gamification at an STC webinar, LavaCon, and the STC Summit.

With 20 years of experience in technical communication, Marta is a Senior Member in the STC Silicon Valley Chapter and has received 15 STC awards for individual and team projects at the local, national, and international level. Her articles have appeared in STC's Intercom, IEEE's electronic library, and the Center for Information Development Management Best Practices. In 2012, she was listed as one of the 400 Most Influential in #Techcomm and #ContentStrategy. Marta holds a BA from Stanford University, a teaching credential, and a certificate from UC Extension in managing the development of technical communication.

Includification: An Accessibility Movement

BY STEVE SPOHN



mobility: level one
>> remappable keys

INCLUDIFICATION MIGHT SOUND like one of the strangest words you've heard in quite some time, but it's much more than a word—it's becoming an entire movement. The origins of the word come from the term *gamification*, which is used by educators to explain game mechanics and game design techniques in non-game contexts, such as in a video game where the sole purpose is to teach the game or convey some sort of information.

At the AbleGamers Foundation (www.ablegamers.org), our overarching goal is to get the largest number of gamers with disabilities possible included in mainstream games. This mission includes independent and AAA or premier games like the ones you see advertised on TV. Everything we do—from community outreach to consulting with individual people with disabilities—is to reach the end goal of making games inclusive for those with disabilities.

When AbleGamers started in 2004, Mark Barlet had a vision. He wanted to make sure that anyone who has a disability has the opportunity to play video games just like anyone else. Before the foundation, there was very little information on how to make video game titles accessible. And even if you could make them accessible, there was very

little information on how large the disability market was, which made arguing for such options very difficult.

Since those days, our organization has knocked on the door of every single major developer, publisher, and gaming studio in the world. We've reached out to developers so often they have come to know our names. Over and over we would tell anyone in the gaming industry who will listen about the importance of accessibility options.

But a few years ago there was both a noticeable change in the attitudes of new developers we hadn't yet talked to and a new resolve in the friends we had made along the way. People were no longer asking us *why* accessibility was important; they wanted to know *how* to make things accessible in the most efficient way possible.

We had finally managed to convince publishers that leaving more than 33 million potential gamers out of their target market was a bad idea. Developers are mostly artists who simply want to share their visions of innovative, interactive stories with as large an audience as possible.

This gave us the perfect opportunity to appeal to both the goodhearted nature of helping those with disabilities just because it's the right thing to do and to the bottom-line

thinking of the powers that be. But we still had the problem of turning more than a decade of experience from our assistive technology experts into a meaningful informational package teaching developers the ins and outs of accessibility.

We live in an age where technology replaces itself at an alarming rate. Not only is the next generation of video game consoles knocking at our doors, the industry itself is moving toward mobile, 3D, and even virtual environments. The information needs to be conclusive, easy-to-understand, and updated on a consistent basis—fluid and timely with the ability to change as rapidly as the industry itself.

That's when the idea of *includification* hit us. There needed to be a set of guidelines that could be left on every coffee table, office desk, and resource library of all gaming studios, no matter the size.

What started as a simple idea to help developers understand accessibility a little bit better has turned into a masterpiece. *Includification* (www.includification.com) is a free, 48-page, fully illustrated roadmap for developers on how to make video games as accessible as possible in an efficient, cost-effective, and simple manner.

Accessibility is split up into three tiers—good, better, and best. We have found that the idea of accessibility can sometimes be daunting. Disabilities are widely varied into different types of disabilities and subtypes of those disabilities, and understanding the nuances of all of them can be intimidating.

Instead, the *Includification* document lays out the most common challenges faced by gamers with disabilities. We have included scenarios and developer exercises to help designers understand complex situations in an easy-to-digest format. The tiers allow accessibility to be reached in milestones.

The first tier is comprised of the options that are both easy to implement and considered standard, including subtitles, remap ability, and colorblind options.

The second tier is for items that may be more expensive or time-consuming to implement, but by including them, a large majority of gamers with disabilities would be able to play a given title.

The third tier includes more wishful-thinking items, such as slowing down the game speed to 25% and building in text-to-speech options for the blind.

Altogether, the document serves to counsel game studios when a game accessibility expert isn't around to advocate accessibility. Assistive technology hardware has come a long way, but software can often take the place of an expensive piece of equipment. Many people either don't know about or can't afford technologies such as eye-tracking equipment, but the inclusion of accessibility options as standard game design can help mitigate some challenges faced by gamers with disabilities.

Recently, we've made a push for the hardware aspects as well. Adroit was a first-of-its-kind controller aimed directly at the gamers-with-disabilities community. Two years later, it has helped hundreds of people by allowing individuals to set up switches any way they like to play the

same Xbox games as their friends and loved ones. And now, AbleGamers has taken an even bigger step toward making these devices available at public libraries.

On 10 October 2012, the Martin Luther King Public Library in Washington, DC, became home to the first permanent location of an AbleGamers Accessibility Arcade. With more installations on the way, permanent exhibits will quickly become the way people with disabilities can determine the right equipment for their particular situation without ever spending a dime.

AbleGamers has done these technology demonstrations all across the country at various events for a long time, but we also get messages afterward asking when and where the next event would happen. No matter how many we do, there always seems to be someone who couldn't make the event. The ability to hold these stations at locations around the United States is the first step to becoming all-inclusive.

Far too many individuals with disabilities approach us at expos around the country with the presumption that there is no way for them to play a game because of the challenges they face from the disability. Time after time we show people who never thought they could game the right technology makes it possible.

PopCap, makers of hugely popular titles such as *Plants vs. Zombies* and *Bejeweled*, report that as much as 60% of their player base describe themselves as disabled. With over one billion disabled individuals worldwide, gaming is quickly proving itself to be an invaluable tool for recreation, rehabilitation, and education.

Video games are used as a way to stay connected with friends and family no matter how far away they might be. They bring us closer together. They level the playing field. They allow us to have the experiences of running, jumping, and flying in ways we could never imagine.

You may never own your own band, but thanks to *Rock Band*, you can. You may never be an NFL quarterback, but thanks to *Madden 13*, you can be. You may never walk, but in *World of Warcraft*, you can fly.

These are experiences people of all abilities should have an equal chance to experience. Some of us just need a little bit of a helping hand. ■

STEVE SPOHN is the editor-in-chief of AbleGamers and outreach chair for the AbleGamers Foundation. He has been interviewed as an expert in gaming with disabilities and assistive technologies by MSNBC, CNN, PC World, G4, and multiple international journals. Steve has travelled across the country as a speaker at various venues and events, including PAX East, Games for Health, Assistive Technology Centers, universities, and many developer studios. In his time off, he is a Web designer, gamer, writer, and on to his newest endeavor, learning Japanese. He holds degrees in visual communication, information technology, Web design, and writing, with an MFA in fiction writing as his next goal. Steve is an active social media user and you can always find him on Twitter (@stevespohn), Facebook, and on the AbleGamers forums (www.ablegamers.com/forums).

INTRODUCTION TO DOCUMENTING APIs, SDKs, and Web Services

BY GWENDOLYNNE BARR | *Member*



WHAT IS AN API? What does it mean to document an API? And how can you get into this niche if you don't have a computer science degree? To investigate these questions, I interviewed four technical writers who specialize in documenting APIs and API-related products such as Web services and software development kits (SDKs).

- ▶ Denise Green documents SDKs for Gracenote, a division of Sony.
- ▶ Ed Marshall runs his own consulting firm, Marshall Documentation Consulting (www.marshalldocumentation.com).
- ▶ Richard Smith works at Netflix and documents an SDK for TV video streaming.
- ▶ Susan Gallagher is the author of the whitepaper, "Yesterday API was just another acronym; today I have to document one!" (www.stc-berkeley.org/RaggedLeft/2012/Resources/Gallagher__YesterdayAPI.pdf).

APIs let a company share the power of its software implementation without revealing the code itself. Enterprising developers use these APIs to create applications or “apps” that leverage the functionality of those implementations.

I also spoke with Charles Hoffman, Sunil Vemulapalli, and Alan Michels, who reviewed my article and gave me advice. I am grateful to all of them for patiently explaining the world of APIs and what their documentation is all about.

APIs on the Rise

An API (Application Programming Interface) is the means by which two software systems talk to each other. A Web service is a type of API often called a Web API. And an SDK (software development kit) is a set of tools that include the API to assist the application developer in using the API.

These days, offering an API to the public is all the rage. *Twitter* does it (<https://dev.twitter.com/docs>), *Facebook* does it (<http://developers.facebook.com/>), even *BART* does it (www.bart.gov/schedules/developers/). The question is, what are APIs, *exactly*, and why are so many companies creating them? In February, the Programmable Web blog counted 5,000 APIs (there are now over 8,000) and noted that “like the Wild West, there’s an ‘anything goes’ approach” to API development (<http://blog.programmableweb.com/2012/02/06/5000-apis-facebook-google-and-twitter-are-changing-the-web/>).

Back in 1999, Susan Gallagher wrote that encapsulation and modularity, principles of object-oriented programming (OOP), “are the forces that drive the development of APIs and SDKs.” Encapsulation allows for code to be hidden behind an interface; modularity allows for it to be arranged in classes hierarchically and easily packaged.

In other words, APIs let a company share the power of its software implementation without revealing the code itself. Enterprising developers use these APIs to create applications or “apps” that leverage the functionality of those implementations.

But encapsulation and modularity have been around for a long time. Why the sudden increase in APIs? Richard Smith thinks one reason is “the sharing of services between organizations.” Everyone benefits when services are shared: application developers gain access to a commercial service, end users have a tightly integrated app, and both companies—the one offering the API and the one using it—make money.

Definitions

Before we look at what the job of API documentation entails, let us clarify the terms.

What is an API?

An Application Programming Interface, or API, defines how one software component can communicate with another. “It’s a hook,” said Richard Smith, “that gives you access to someone’s software library.” That hook—that interface for programming applications—can be a set of methods that you call to access the functionality of a program.

More simply, when you physically click a button in Google Maps, you are “calling” some method in their code. Methods in computer code are like verbs in a human language. They define the actions of a program. The code that comprises Google Maps is loaded with such methods for the various actions you can take: search, get directions, zoom in and out, print, link, etc.

When another program wants to use Google Maps, it cannot physically press a button. It needs to call those methods within the code itself; that is, it needs to call them *programmatically*. And it can only call them if Google opens them to the public. Those shared methods are APIs—you insert them in your own application code in order to call the implementation code of Google Maps.

Say you want to create an app that displays, in Google Maps, all the coffee houses within a certain radius. You *could* attempt to write the entire program from scratch, recreating Google Maps code and mashing it with your coffee shop feed. But that would be a waste of time because Google Maps provides its API for free, and hence, programmatic access to the functionality encapsulated underneath.

In fact, someone has already created such an app called CoffeeSeeker. The website, *Google Maps Mania*, (<http://googlemapsmania.blogspot.com/>) lists tons of other Google Maps mashups. The video, *What is a Mashup?*, by David Berlind at ZDNet, is a good introduction to the concept of APIs and mashups (www.zdnet.com/videos/whiteboard/what-is-a-mashup/152729).

What Is a Web Service?

A Web service is a specific kind of API and is often referred to as a Web API. The big difference is that rather than implement the methods of another system in your own code, you send requests to that system. Put another way, a Web service is an API that uses a request-and-response architecture and is usually, although not always, executed over a network such as the Internet or an intranet.

But how do you know what to request? And how to request it? With a traditional API, you get an actual package of methods. With a Web service, you generally refer to a template from the Web service provider in order to make a valid request.

This template might be written in a language called Web Services Description Language (WSDL), a variant of XML, and referred to as “the WSDL” (pronounced WIZ-dull). Using this template, you create requests, perhaps in XML, that you send to the provider. The provider, in turn, sends a response in the same data format with the data you requested. Amazon.com is a Web service provider and you can see one of their WSDLs here: <http://soap.amazon.com/schemas2/AmazonWebServices.wsdl>.

Not all Web services use a WSDL, however. For example, to make requests to the *Directions (Web) API* in Google Maps, you simply pass your request in a URL such as this one for directions from Chicago to LA via Route 66: <http://maps.googleapis.com/maps/api/directions/xml?origin=Chicago,IL&destination=Los+Angeles,CA&waypoints=Joplin,MO|Oklahoma+City,OK&sensor=false>.

origin=Chicago,IL&destination=Los+Angeles,CA&waypoints=Joplin,MO|Oklahoma+City,OK&sensor=false.

When you paste the URL above in a browser, Google sends back an XML response with directions (see Figure 1). Search the XML response for “html_instructions” and you will see the same route as on the Google Maps GUI (see Figure 2). By parsing the data in a Web service response, you can extract the data you need to build an application.

Web services come in different flavors. For example, to send information, they can use one of several protocols such as REST, SOAP, JavaScript, and XML-RPC. They can also have one of several data formats such as XML, JSON, RSS, and HTML.

For more context on Web services, see: 1) *Introduction to Web Services*, by Hasan Mir at ZeroToProTraining; 2) Janet Wagner’s article, “The Increasing Importance of APIs in Web Development;” and 3) Brian Suda’s thesis, “SOAP Web Services.” Of course, don’t forget *Programmable Web*.

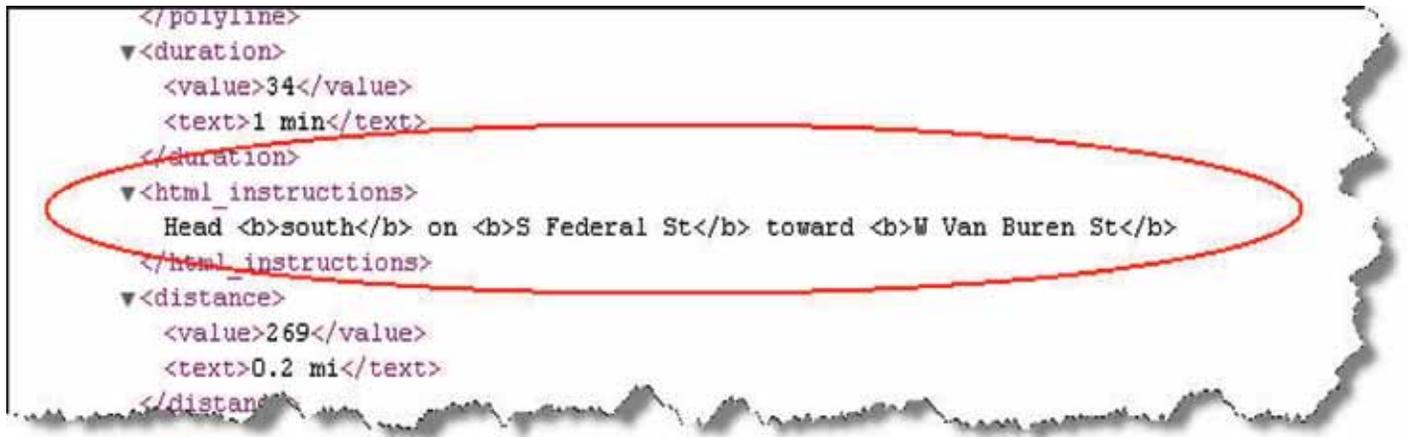


Figure 1

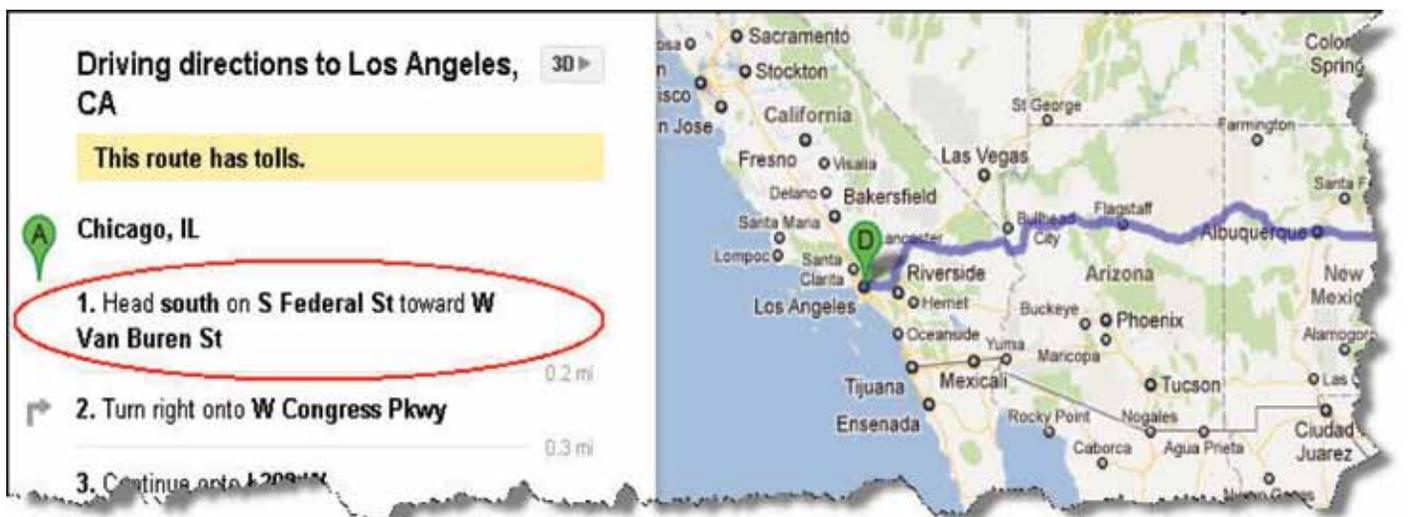


Figure 2

What Is an SDK?

A Software Development Kit (SDK) is a tool, or set of tools, that help an application developer use an API. Some SDKs are as simple as the API itself—a library of API calls and classes. Others come with fancy tools to help you build programs in a particular environment. A typical SDK might include one or more APIs, an API reference manual, and sample code.

An SDK is sometimes confused with an Integrated Development Environment (IDE) such as Visual Studio or Eclipse. An IDE is an environment that makes programming easier, much like Word and FrameMaker make technical writing easier (than in Notepad). An SDK is the content with which you develop a particular application, whether in an IDE or with a text editor such as Vim. In sum, an IDE is a programming environment; an SDK is the API plus materials to help you understand and use that API.

Some SDKs come with an IDE plug-in so that you can use that particular SDK within your favorite IDE. The Android SDK, for example, comes in a vanilla version (that you can use in Vim, etc.) or as an Eclipse plug-in that lets you develop programs for the Android platform within Eclipse.

- ▶ Android SDK: <http://developer.android.com/sdk/index.html>
- ▶ Android Eclipse plug-in: <http://developer.android.com/sdk/eclipse-adt.html>

On the Job

Let us take a look at APIs and SDKs in the context of two real companies. I talked to Denise Green at Gracenote and Richard Smith at Netflix.

Working at a B2B

Gracenote, formerly known as CDDDB, is an independent subsidiary of Sony that sells access to its large databases of metadata on CDs (and also DVDs) via APIs. Their music metadata, for example, is used in products such as Apple iTunes and Ford SYNC, which recognize and recommend songs based on your preferences.

From a developer's point of view, Gracenote has some code; that code has an implementation (hidden, for private use only) and an interface (open, for public use by authorized developers). The developers at Gracenote *implement* the Gracenote API. The developers at Apple and Ford *use* the Gracenote API.

Suppose Gracenote has an API call named `track.getArtist()` that returns the artist for a given track. The Ford code uses `track.getArtist()` to get an artist; the Gracenote code contains the logic to query some database and return the artist associated with that track.

Ford doesn't know and doesn't care how Gracenote goes about getting the artist; it just works. Gracenote keeps the implementation hidden, but exposes the interface (API) to Ford.

It is Denise's job to document Gracenote SDKs so that the software developers at Apple and Ford know how to use the appropriate API. This means she has to describe methods and write sample code using those methods. And she has to do this for several languages such as C++, Java, and Objective C, as Gracenote provides SDKs for multiple platforms.

Delivering the API and the App

We all know that Netflix rents DVDs and streaming video. What you might not know is that they also create APIs. TV manufacturers, for example, embed the Netflix streaming software into their own software so that you can access the Netflix movie catalog from your TV. Richard documents the SDK for that streaming software.

Netflix takes their SDKs a step further, and for some of their TV partners they write the application software, too. That is, they ship both the SDK, which their partners port, plus the "app" that uses the API in that SDK. They often do this because TV manufacturers work on extremely tight schedules. In retail, it's all about seasonal shopping cycles, and you can't reschedule Christmas, said Richard. For those who want to create their own differentiated app, Netflix provides design rules and guidelines.

Like Denise, Richard has to document SDKs for different platforms, but in his case, platform means the hardware architecture and components the TV makers use. Each TV platform is different, so what a developer needs to do to make the Netflix software work on that TV is also different. Richard has to understand each one.

Nuts and Bolts of Documenting APIs

The heart of documenting an API is commenting the code base by explaining what each method does, then generating documentation from those comments in the code. That is, you enter markup language in the code base, then perhaps run tools such as Javadoc or Doxygen against it to generate documentation.

Of course, getting permission to touch the code requires that the developers trust you. As Ed told me, you might need to prove that you are capable of entering doc comments without breaking the build. If you are competent, you may find yourself helping out in other ways such as recognizing and reporting bugs in the code itself.

API Documentation Deliverables

APIs need to be documented so that application developers know how to use them. A developer needs to know the *structure* of the API, the *functionality* of the API, and *how to use* individual software components, say Jim Bisso and Viki Maki in their book, *Documenting APIs*.

Joshua Bloch at Google thinks that a well-written API can be used without documentation; and yet, he says, "documentation matters." From the PDF of his talk,

The heart of documenting an API is commenting the code base by explaining what each method does, then generating documentation from those comments in the code.

“How to Design a Good API and Why it Matters”:
“Document every class, interface, method, constructor, parameter, and exception.”

Traditionally, the two most important deliverables include a reference guide and a programmer’s guide. Again, from *Documenting APIs*, the reference guide describes “the constituent parts of the API, such as the classes and methods.” The programmer’s guide is more conceptual and “provides a description of how to use the API” and “often includes tutorials and practical examples.”

Charles Hoffman, an experienced API developer, told me what he looks for in API documentation:

Reference Guide

- ▶ What the method does
- ▶ What data should be provided to the method and what data will be returned
- ▶ When the method should be used
- ▶ When the method should not be used
- ▶ Internal states being maintained, if any
- ▶ Side effects, if any
- ▶ Possible errors and exceptions and how should they should be handled

Programmer’s Guide

- ▶ Concepts of use
- ▶ Overview of the API and service being manipulated
- ▶ Examples of initialization, use, and shutdown
- ▶ Examples of common tasks

Richard Smith told me that today, more and more companies “are producing the same materials in topic-based documentation sets” rather than as a traditional “guide.” However you deliver your documentation, Ed emphasized that developers expect it to be complete, accurate, and well-organized.

The API Writing Process

While the approach to each job depends upon several factors, such as whether or not you receive a requirements specification, who the developers are, etc., the general process is something like this:

- ▶ Gather source documents (code, functional specs, WSDL, bug reports).

- ▶ Interview Subject Matter Experts (SMEs).
- ▶ Document use of each class, method, etc.
- ▶ Write code samples and tutorials.
- ▶ Meet with developer to refine understanding.
- ▶ Test and edit documentation.
- ▶ Generate and deploy documentation set.

API writing is an iterative process of reading code, talking to SMEs, and writing stuff down.

Richard emphasized that he likes to interview multiple stakeholders before writing. He doesn’t look at the developer as the only SME and, if possible, starts with the API consumer.

Ed added that he likes to check the code versioning system for code changes and the bug tracking system for new API-related issues. If possible, he also likes to install and use the product.

Susan mentioned running the doc tool itself—when you build the code from a tool such as Doxygen, you can see if the developer added or removed comments.

How Can You Become an API Writer?

I asked my interviewees if they thought that a computer science degree is necessary for becoming an API writer. Of the four, only Denise has a computer science degree. So the answer is no. What is required, of course, is the capacity and enthusiasm to learn about computers and their associated fields of knowledge such as hardware, software, programming, networking, etc.

If you have the desire to get into API writing, here are some of the things you can do to get started:

Read Literature on Documenting APIs. A terrific resource is the online *Developer Support Handbook* by Pamela Fox at Google. She dedicates the first chapter to API documentation.

The only book I know of that specifically addresses API writing is *Documenting APIs: Writing Developer Documentation for Java APIs and SDKs* by James Bisso and Victoria Maki. To get it, contact James at <http://bitzone.com/book.html>. This book was published in 2006 and my understanding is that a new version is going to be published soon.

Programmable Web is a website that lists tons of APIs and publishes an informative blog. Another blog, directed at developers, is The Amiable API, which has a post specifically on writing helpful API documentation.

The LinkedIn group API Documentation can be useful. Also, don’t forget to scan other blogs. You can find useful posts, such as Writing an API Reference Guide for iOS.

Read API documentation. Read the developer websites mentioned throughout this article. It is the very stuff you are going to be writing yourself. Google’s API and Web service pages might be overwhelming if you are just starting out. Twitter presents their APIs more simply <https://dev.twitter.com/docs/api/1/get/search>.

Play with API documentation tools. The following tools allow you to document the code and generate help documentation from it.

- ▶ Doxygen
- ▶ Javadoc
- ▶ Doc-To-Help
- ▶ Doc-O-matic

Take courses. If you don't know which courses to take first, refer to your chosen school's certificate programs for guidance. For example, City College of San Francisco (CCSF) offers a range of certificates in both computer science and computer networking. And many of the courses are online.

- ▶ CCSF Computer Science Certificates
- ▶ CCSF Computer Networking Certificates

Take advantage of open courseware. One of the more famous open courseware (OCW) sites is that by MIT:

<http://ocw.mit.edu/index.htm>. A great place to start is with their entry-level course on structured programming using Python. This course is not about Python per se; rather, Python is used as a tool to teach the principles

of computer science and the art of computing. For more OCW sites, refer to the open courseware consortium: www.ocwconsortium.org/en/courses/ocwsites.

Teach yourself to program. Free online schools and tutorials are popping up like mushrooms. Two of my favorites are *Udacity.com*, founded by Sebastian Thrun, and *Codecademy.com*.

Use an API and develop an application. Developing an app shows a potential employer that you understand code, how APIs work, and the overall process of implementing an application. Richard told me that the Twitter Search API is one of the easiest to use. To get started, you generally have to register at that site in order to get a key for access to the API. If something goes wrong, they need to know who you are. There is no reason to be afraid, even if you are just learning how to code. There are no "software developer" police so go ahead and register. **f**

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- More than 1000 professional translators, proofreaders, editors, and software localization specialists
- Cutting-edge language tools and technologies
- One-of-a-kind Multilingual Testing Center
- ISO 9001:2008 and ISO 13485:2003 certified



Are You a Marketeer or a Technical Communicator?

BY GEOFF HART | *Fellow*

WE TECHNICAL COMMUNICATORS like to divide our world into tidy categories, and usually only two—online versus print, handcrafted versus single-sourced, visual versus textual, and so on. One of the more interesting dichotomies is the gap between what we do and what the marketing writers (“marketeers,” in the words of an irreverent colleague) do. On the face of it, the dichotomy is simple: marketers persuade the customer, by fair means or foul, to *purchase* the product, whereas we teach them how to *use* the purchased product so they won’t return it

in disgust shortly after they’ve unwrapped it. But if reality were that simple, this would be a one-paragraph article.

Fortunately for my literary career, reality is more interesting.

One useful way to think of the difference between the two professions is in terms of *pitch*. If you hear that word and think “propellers,” you’re probably an engineer and should stop reading now and get back to work on that TiVo-killer you’ve been tinkering with. If your first thought was “baseball,” you’re a probably a manager with

an MBA, and this article is wasted on you. Go back to reading the *Harvard Business Review*. If “singing” filled your thoughts, you’re probably a graphic artist, and you should stop doodling and pay attention to what you’re reading. If you thought “spin,” you’re probably a marketer. If you recognized that each of these audiences defines the word differently, you’re unquestionably a technical communicator. But if you’ve ever secretly dreamed of becoming a marketing writer, there’s hope; you already understand the notion of market segmentation, a fundamental of marketing. Since understanding some of the differences in how the two professions see the world is essential to making the leap, here are a few thoughts that will point you in the right direction.

If you’ve ever been asked what you do for a living, or have tried to gain a colleague’s respect for your work, you’ve probably engaged in amateur marketing in the form of the infamous “elevator” speech. The goal is to explain what you do in a way that captures the listener’s interest in a matter of seconds, then communicates the essential message before they grow so bored they start prying at the door to escape. My traditional take on the elevator speech was to describe myself as a “professional idiot.” The *professional* part meant that, unlike an amateur, I get paid. (Not always well, but enough that I have time to write articles like this one.) The *idiot* part is clear to anyone who knows me, but for strangers, I put a positive spin on the notion: I can find a way to misunderstand anything, figure out why I had a problem, and then explain the concept so even a real idiot understands. (If you’re single, a word of warning: As pickup lines go, this is about as successful as showing someone your Palm Pilot and waiting for a compliment on your uber-geek status.)

You’ve probably heard the notion that good documentation is good marketing, and it’s true. A colleague, who shall remain nameless for reasons that will soon become obvious, transitioned from technical writing to marketing many years ago. He once told me (off the record) of his first great marketing coup, namely gaining an important client through superior documentation. His company was competing with a strong rival product, and the client’s decision hinged on which product had the best documentation. Thinking quickly, my colleague printed the previous version’s documentation, slapped a cover on it with a new version number, and made the sale while the competitor was still writing their documentation. The client never looked beyond the cover, proving the marketing adage that what you say is often less important than how you say it. (If you’re breathless with admiration, you’re a marketer. If you’re gritting your teeth and wondering why the company hadn’t given their staff time to produce the documentation, you’re a technical writer.)

Web 2.0, described as the social networking revolution, provides another illustration of the relationship between marketing and technical communication. Marketers use Facebook, and the goal is to get people

to “like” your product. It doesn’t matter whether they can use it, just so long as your “like” count is an order of magnitude greater than your nearest competitor’s. Marketers are the guys on LinkedIn or BranchOut who crash the service because the developers didn’t account for so many connections. But if you’re busy participating in the online community that discusses (and disses) your company’s product, providing expert advice in response to their vexing questions while simultaneously taking notes about the user interface and documentation problems they face, you’re a technical writer—even if you recognize that this is also a great marketing opportunity. If you’re really doing this to avoid documenting your 100th dialog box of the day, you’re a *burned out* technical writer, and maybe you *should* be considering a career change to marketing.

Interface disasters are another factor that separates the marketer from the technical writer. You’re a marketer if you can find a way to convince your audience that an interface best described as an “artrocity” is actually an asset. You’re a technical writer if you can teach them how to use it despite its “asset” status. A fruitful middle ground lies in the recognition that marketers are also part of our audience: they need to understand how something works (or how it doesn’t) so they can lead the audience to the good stuff while concealing the bad. Come to think of it, that’s what many of us spend a significant portion of our time doing. Maybe the gap between what *we* do and what *they* do isn’t so great after all.

If, after reading this, you’re still not sure whether you’re cut out to be a marketer or might still be a technical communicator at heart, ask yourself what the word “branding” means to you. If your first thought is a program carefully designed to present a single, consistent, attractive image for your employer, you’ve got a promising future as a marketer. If your first thought is that it’s a painful, permanent, and degrading alternative to a tattoo, designed to show the world which company owns you, then you’re still thinking like a technical communicator.

Marketing has a long, proud history, dating back to the Garden of Eden and the snake who first talked Eve into trying out the apple with a money-back guarantee. (If you “Think Different” about this turning point in human history, then thank Apple’s marketing department.) Let’s be honest with ourselves here: if it weren’t for marketing, nobody would be buying the products we document, and we’d have to look for honest work. So while we may not want to embrace the “dark side of the Force” ourselves, we should be grateful it exists. After all, even unsung heroes aren’t much use without some bad guys to spar with. **f**

GEOFF HART (www.geoff-hart.com) has been working as an editor for nearly 25 years, both in government and the private sector, and is currently a freelance editor specializing in scientist clients for whom English is a second language.

When depending on mobile content, **why go with a jalopy?**

RoboHelp Says:

“Multiscreen HTML5 in RoboHelp 10”

The Facts

Each different screen size or device requires a separate template. For each new device that is released, you have to set up a brand new template for that device, or it may not display your information correctly. Sound responsive?

ePublisher Says:

“Truly responsive output in a single click”

The Facts

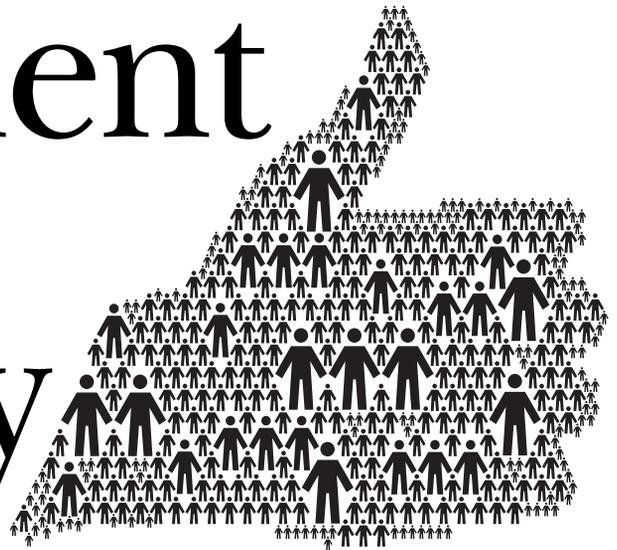
ePublisher’s secret sauce is the ability to mold any content to any screen size, without the need to create separate templates. All of ePublisher’s outputs are truly responsive, ready for any current or future device, and can be published in one click from FrameMaker, Word, or DITA.



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BY MICHAEL HARVEY, MEREDITH KINDER, JOHN KOHL,
PAT MOELL, LISA PAPPAS, and LINDA ROBERTS

IT'S GOT TO BE the free M&Ms. How else could SAS, a North Carolina-based company that produces business analytics software and services, attract the kind of talent to have six of its technical communicators named STC Associate Fellow or STC Fellow?

Of course that's a comical explanation. The culture based on trust and flexibility; amenities including a full-service Health Care Center, four cafes, and a full-service gym on a meticulously landscaped campus; and other resources are often cited when SAS consistently places on Fortune's 100 Best Companies to Work For in the United States. In fact, SAS recently was ranked number 1 on that list two years in a row. But it's more than amenities that attract and keep talent. The corporate culture that helps SAS enjoy an employee retention rate of close to 96% substantially contributes to its ability to hire and retain top technical communicators.

That culture cultivates ongoing learning and professional growth. How? For starters, the company stocks a full-service library that provides research services and resources comparable to those available at a university. It offers subscriptions to online reference libraries, collections of journal articles, and conference proceedings. If a publication is not available online, SAS librarians obtain it through interlibrary loan from local universities.

To encourage professional growth, management allows employees to spend work hours pursuing research interests. During the day, they can speak at conferences and to university classes and write articles or columns for publications and newsletters as long as it doesn't get in the way of work. This is as true for technical communicators as it is for R&D personnel.

Professional growth is further nurtured by mentoring and networking within the company. The publications division, which employs over 70 writers and editors, follows a formal process to mentor new hires. The assigned mentor explains division processes, provides access to company policies and

procedures, and serves as the go-to person while the new employee gets settled in their new role. Division processes are based on standards of excellence cultivated from industry-wide best practices. A dedicated mentoring team trains mentors, creating and updating materials for that purpose. Departments in the publications division hold regular meetings to discuss current work, technical issues, and hot topics. In other divisions, there might be a lone technical communicator or a smaller group. Mentoring within these small groups might be a bit less formal, but it is expected. Across divisions, the sense of community among technical communicators is strong and full of mutual respect.

Another important reason that SAS boasts so many high-achieving STC members is that management actively supports involvement in STC activities. For example, Fellow Pat Moell and Associate Fellow Meredith Kinder each had a two-year commitment as the co-manager of the STC Technical Editing SIG. While at work, they held volunteer teleconferences to help run the SIG, ran co-manager meetings, and hosted quarterly SIG teleconference meetings with invited speakers. Meredith worked on the chapter newsletter during work breaks. While Fellow Michael Harvey served as STC Carolina chapter president, he was able to transact some chapter business from his office. Fellow Lisa Pappas and Associate Fellow Linda Roberts currently co-author a regular column about accessibility named "All Access" for *Intercom*.

If SAS employees are actively involved in STC, the company pays membership fees each year. SAS also provides the time to attend regional and national conferences, especially when an employee is speaking or receiving awards or honors. When writers return from conferences, they post highlights so that other writers and editors at SAS can benefit from their experience. The company publically lauds the STC honors that employees receive. After the latest STC Fellowships and Assistant Fellowships were announced, the company's internal website posted a picture gallery of each honoree. SAS highly



Front row, left to right: John Kohl, Michael Harvey, Pat Moell. Back row, left to right: Linda Roberts, Meredith Kinder. Not pictured: Lisa Pappas.

values STC awards. Each year, technical communicators at SAS submit a number of entries to be evaluated for documentation awards. The hallways at Building J, which houses publications, are filled with the past-won awards.

At SAS, the technical communication profession has a great deal of visibility. One reason is that the publications division started a company-wide terminology management initiative. Representatives from several divisions have collaborated on tools and processes for standardizing terminology, and the team's efforts and goals have gotten a lot of internal publicity. Another reason involves Global English, which provides guidelines that make information more suitable for translation and easier for non-native speakers to understand, which also has received a lot of internal publicity. When SAS Press published *The Global English Style Guide* by Associate Fellow John Kohl in 2008, it was their first book that wasn't about SAS software. "It was gratifying that SAS recognized the importance of the guidelines and was willing to make them available outside of the company," says Kohl. "And by promoting the book internally as well as externally, SAS Press gave people in all divisions at SAS a better understanding of the value that skilled technical communicators can add to all types of publications."

In short, SAS truly understands the value of communication in general and technical communication specifically. Fellow Lisa Pappas says, "as an accessibility advocate, I have shared how, as we age, we may develop functional impairments that make it harder for us to use computers and technology. Through ergonomic assessments, SAS helps employees adjust their working environment to meet their changing functional needs, such as providing custom workstations to enable standing or sitting, voice-input or screen magnification software, and so forth." Associate Fellow Linda Roberts says, "I came to SAS after working as a contract technical writer at a small start-up. At the start-up, I was a lone writer who wore all the hats—writing, editing, testing, and production—trying to do what I could to help the development team. I found SAS to be quite different. It was one of the few companies left that is fully staffed and

has resources dedicated to writing, editing, production, project management, tools, and terminology."

Someone becomes an Associate Fellow when recognized by their peers as having attained distinction in the field. They then become Fellow after demonstrating that they've continued to make exemplary contributions. The SAS corporate culture provides a natural incubator for these qualities.

Every one of these Associate Fellows and Fellows would be happy to retire from SAS when the day comes. Because until that day, they know that their work is appreciated and that they will have opportunities to get better. And of course the free M&Ms help them stay energized. **f**

MICHAEL HARVEY (michael.harvey@sas.com), *STC Fellow*, is a senior technical writer at SAS. He has served in various leadership positions for STC Carolina and has presented at local and international STC conferences. His last article for Intercom was "Back to Basics: Skills that Never Lose Value." His professional profile is available at www.linkedin.com/in/mtharvey.

MEREDITH KINDER (meredith.kinder@sas.com), *STC Associate Fellow*, is a documentation specialist at SAS. She facilitates communication between the company, its customers, and the 2,600 employees of the global consulting division. She served twice as Carolina Chapter president and is past co-manager and treasurer of the Technical Editing SIG.

JOHN KOHL (john.kohl@sas.com), *STC Associate Fellow*, is a senior technical editor at SAS. For the past several years, John has devoted much of his time to terminology issues and to refining the Global English guidelines. As a linguistic engineer, John customizes and supports tools and processes that help make SAS documentation more consistent, easier to translate, and easier for non-native speakers of English to understand. He is a charter member of the Association for Machine Translation in the Americas.

PATRICIA G. MOELL (pat.moell@sas.com), *STC Fellow*, is a manager of the technical editing department at SAS with over 20 years' experience as a technical editor and manager. She served as co-manager of the STC Technical Editing SIG and has presented at the STC annual conference on several occasions. She is the recipient of the Frank R. Smith Outstanding Journal Article Award for "Technical Editing as Quality Assurance: Adding Value to Content" in Technical Communication.

LISA PAPPAS (lisa.pappas@sas.com), *STC Fellow*, is a senior development tester at SAS. While in SAS R&D, she developed strategies to assess and improve conformance of SAS products to international standards for accessibility. Before joining SAS, Lisa's career in the software industry has included engineering project management, Web design and development, and technical communication of various genres. She has served STC as co-manager of the Accessibility SIG and as a Director-at-Large.

LINDA ENDERS ROBERTS (linda.roberts@sas.com), *STC Associate Fellow*, is a technical writer for SAS Institute. She co-authors a regular column about accessibility, "All Access," in Intercom and has presented at the STC annual conference on several occasions.

Celebrate

STC'S DIAMOND ANNIVERSARY

AT THE

2013 SUMMIT

2013 TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION SUMMIT
5-8 MAY 2013

The Society for Technical Communication is where it all comes together, and nowhere is that more evident than at the Technical Communication Summit! Technical communicators from around the world will converge on Atlanta, Georgia, from 5-8 May 2013. Join them as STC celebrates its 60th anniversary at the annual Summit! Choose from over 80 sessions in 7 different tracks at the conference, with top technical communicators coming together to share their knowledge.

And the sessions are just the beginning of your Summit experience! In-person networking, the welcome reception and closing lunch, the Expo Hall, preconference education, the honors banquet, SIG meetings, and so much more are available to help you advance your career.

Visit the newly redesigned <http://summit.stc.org> for complete details on how you can celebrate STC's diamond anniversary—and find some diamonds of your own at the 2013 Summit.

Diamonds are forever, but the Really Early Bird rate of \$825 is not.
Register by 31 December and save!



Society for
Technical
Communication



TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION
SUMMIT '13
Celebrating STC's 60th Anniversary
5-8 May 2013 • Atlanta, Georgia

Details on the 2013 Summit Official Hotel

THE 2013 SUMMIT takes place 5–8 May 2013 in Atlanta, Georgia. This year, all events take place in one location—at the Hyatt Regency Atlanta in downtown Atlanta, within walking distance of many area attractions.

STC has negotiated a special conference room rate of \$169 for a single or double and \$179 for a triple or quad; you must register through the STC Summit website, <http://summit.stc.org>, to get that rate.

According to the hotel's website, the Hyatt Regency Atlanta boasts "true southern hospitality" in welcoming its guests. A recent \$65-million upgrade included adding "new chic, studio-style rooms." Nearby attractions include Peachtree Center Mall, Georgia Aquarium, Georgia

World Congress Center, AmericasMart, CNN Center, Phillips Arena, and the Georgia Dome.

Dining and entertainment options at the hotel include the 24-hour self-serve Market; Sway, a unique restaurant featuring three chef-driven menus; and Twenty-Two Stories, a celebration of Atlanta's past, present, and future.

Why stay at the official conference hotel?

Staying at the official conference hotel benefits both you and STC. Here are a few reasons to stay in the Hyatt Regency Atlanta for the Summit.

- ▶ **Convenience.** All education sessions are held in the Hyatt Regency Atlanta, meaning that you just have to come down the



AtlantaPhotos.com, © 2012, Kevin C. Rose/AtlantaPhotos.com

The Hyatt Regency Atlanta's lobby atrium.

elevator and walk to the right meeting room. No cabs, cars, buses, umbrellas, heat, wind, etc.

- ▶ **Networking.** There are so many informal networking opportunities beyond the official conference hours. Impromptu dinner parties start in the hotel lobby, hotel restaurants are full of Summit attendees, and the hotel bar is packed well into the night with all sorts of conversations, debate, and networking. You'll bump into technical communicators from around the world in all parts of the hotel.
- ▶ **Help keep Summit prices down.** Meeting our contracted room block enables STC to continue to negotiate affordable room rates for future meetings. Based on the number of rooms blocked, hotels will provide complimentary meeting space, which enables STC to offer discounted registration fees for a longer period of time.
- ▶ **Assistance from STC.** And finally, by staying at the official conference hotel, you'll have STC's assistance if there is a problem with your hotel reservation.

See you at the Hyatt Regency Atlanta! **i**

Conference Registration Now Open



CONFERENCE REGISTRATION for the 2013 Technical Communication Summit, taking place 5–8 May 2013 in Atlanta, Georgia, opened 1 December. Visit the Summit website, <http://summit.stc.org>, for full details on the Summit as they are available.

STC is again offering a limited "Really Early Bird" rate for the first month (with a cutoff date of 31 December). Be one of the first to register and pay only \$825 for access to all the great education, vendors, and networking that the Summit offers. That's a savings of \$225 over the regular rate of \$1,050 and \$400 less than the nonmember rate! After 31 December the price goes up, so act fast.

All conference events take place this year in the Hyatt Regency Atlanta—no walking from one building to another and back! Hotel registration also opened on 1 December, with a special STC rate of \$169 Single or Double; \$179 triple or quad. See this page for more information about the conference hotel.

Make your plans now for the 2013 Summit and save. Register fast and register first to be sure you get the best rate possible. **i**

Welcome to Atlanta

BY RACHEL MAHAN | Student Member

THE STC ATLANTA CHAPTER welcomes you back to the South for the 2013 STC Summit. While you already know that the sessions will be cutting-edge, you may not know that the conference is also steeped in history: This year marks its 60th anniversary. It is fitting, then, that as soon as you step off the plane at Hartsfield-Jackson, you will be greeted by a host city both modern and historic, with everything from skyscrapers to antebellum landmarks.

While Atlanta is a large city, the conference takes place in the heart of downtown, near unique restaurants, parks, and some of the city's most famous attractions. The city's public transit system, MARTA, stops a block and half from the Hyatt, making even far-flung attractions readily accessible.

If you're in need of a caffeine pick-me-up, right across from the Hyatt is Corner Bakery Café. Their affordable menu features salads, grilled paninis, and a seasonal selection of soups. Just down the street is Max Lager's Wood-Fired Grill

and Brewery. Their 1913 building includes a patio and deck. In addition to handcrafted beers, their menu features surf and turf choices: steak, barbeque ribs, and shrimp.

About a block away in the other direction is Hard Rock Café Atlanta, complete with a motorcycle owned by Elvis. Across the street, sample Brazilian fare and enjoy the festive décor at Fire of Brazil. If you're interested in southern cooking and live entertainment, walk one block more to Sweet Georgia's Juke Joint. Their menu includes fried green tomatoes, fried chicken, seafood étouffée, and grits.

For a city with over 400,000 people, Atlanta has lots of green space. Hundreds of parks dot the city, including Centennial Olympic Park, a gathering spot designed when Atlanta hosted the 1996 Centennial Olympic Games. The 21-acre park is just a few blocks west of the Hyatt. Visit the Fountain of Rings for one of the four interactive water shows that play every day, or visit the walk-up hamburger stand for a burger and milkshake.

At the north end of the park is the World of Coca-Cola. Visit the

"Vault of the Secret Formula" and try your hand at replicating the recipe virtually. Taste interesting flavors, such as Raspberry Coke or Orange Coke, and when you're finished, walk up to the northwestern corner of the park to the Georgia Aquarium. The aquarium contains over 10 million gallons of water. Current exhibits feature beluga whales, Arctic penguins, and manta rays.

Gone With the Wind fans and history buffs will appreciate the history of Atlanta. The Margaret Mitchell House is a few MARTA stops from the Summit. You can visit the apartment where Mitchell wrote her famous novel. In addition, the associated Literary Center hosts a lecture series featuring a mix of locally and nationally known authors.

The Oakland Cemetery lies a few MARTA stops south of the Summit location. The cemetery is one of the antebellum fixtures of Atlanta. Established in 1850, the cemetery contains graves of both Union and Confederate soldiers, along with Margaret Mitchell, Atlanta Mayor Maynard Jackson, and Bobby Jones. Guided walking tours are provided, and be sure to include a stop at the Six Feet Under Pub and Fish House next door. Their menu includes a raw bar, fish tacos, and, of course, fish and chips. Relax and check out the Atlanta skyline from their rooftop bar.

In addition to these nearby attractions, there are hundreds of other restaurants and venues, such as the Tullie Smith House, an antebellum plantation house; the Fernbank Museum of Natural History; the Fox Theatre, which hosts live entertainment; and Turner Field, the Atlanta Braves' stadium.

For more information or to plan your trip, check out the Atlanta Convention and Visitors Bureau website at www.atlanta.net. In addition, look for upcoming articles in *Intercom*, follow the Atlanta Chapter on Twitter (@STC_Atlanta), and read the blog for more details as our Summit approaches. **f**



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The World of Coca-Cola.

Invest in Your Future. Build Your Career.



Rediscover the Value of STC Membership



When our members asked for more value, we took it to heart. We've added new benefits and services, changed our community-funding model based on member feedback, increased recruitment incentives, and reduced the cost of dues for on-time renewal, all while redoubling our dedication to member support and satisfaction.

New benefits at a glance for 2013:

- Over 70 free members-only archived Web seminars
- Free access to the annual STC Salary Database
- Free sponsored live webinars on hot topics and tools
- Discounts on software, products, and services through the new STC affinity program

In addition, members still receive all the benefits they've come to expect, from free access to our publications to discounts on education, conference, and the new Certified Professional Technical Communicator™ program.

"Returning after 10 years ... STC is new and different (and I'd say improved). ...I have already taken advantage of a number of the free webinar courses and so far they have all been *great!!!* I've joined several SIGs and am eager to get involved in each of them. So far I have been quite pleased with what STC has to offer and definitely plan on renewing my membership for the foreseeable future!"

— *Melanie Lee,*
2012 STC Member

To receive the limited-time rate of \$195, go to stc.org/renew today!!

Why Join a Chapter?

BY BEN WOELK | *Senior Member*

I'VE STATED MANY TIMES that I believe that the communities are the heart and soul of STC. For many members, communities are the face of STC and where they will find the most meaningful interaction. Geographic communities (chapters) are where members engage one another, learn from one another, and sharpen their skills. (Many chapters are also finding ways to serve a more geographically diverse membership by providing virtual meetings and webinars.)

We're in our annual membership renewal period. There's an additional fee to belong to a geographic community and some of you may wonder whether chapter membership is worthwhile. I asked the Rochester Chapter council members what they found to be of the most value. The key theme for all of us was *opportunity*.

Here are some of the *opportunities* you may receive from joining and participating actively in a chapter:

1. *Networking face-to-face* with like-minded intelligent individuals who are committed to a wide range of technical communications activities.
2. *Receiving recognition* for your company, department, and yourself by entering local tech pubs competitions and receiving feedback from your peers.
3. *Volunteering* as a publications judge and helping others improve their craft.
4. *Helping an organization* reinvent itself to keep pace with a changing profession and society.
5. *Mentoring* others and helping them advance in the profession.
6. *Participating* in local and regional conferences and events.
7. *Developing* leadership skills by serving on council and committees.
8. *Building* self-confidence and credibility.

9. *Improving* yourself by learning new technical skills to apply to your job.
10. *Staying informed* about available employment opportunities and hiring entities in your geographic area.
11. *Belonging* to a respected group of dedicated diverse professionals.
12. *Forging friendships* with a great group of people who face similar challenges.

Choose membership in a chapter. They're led by dedicated people who are striving to provide services to their members. More importantly, participate actively by attending chapter functions and working as a volunteer. That's where you'll receive and provide the most value. ■

BEN WOELK is a past president of the Rochester Chapter, a community that had an almost 80% membership renewal rate in 2011. He's currently serving as the STC Community Affairs Committee Outreach Lead, leading a team whose mission is to serve the STC communities by mentoring community leaders, sharing best practices, and serving as an advocate for and liaison between the communities and the STC Board.

STC, Social Media, and You

STAY CONNECTED WITH STC wherever you go! STC's Notebook blog (<http://notebook.stc.org>) includes multiple posts during the week on STC events, communities, hot topics, and more. On Twitter, follow STC @stc_org and follow the #stcorg hashtag; get information about the Summit from @STC_Summit or #stc13. Are you on LinkedIn? Search for the Society for Technical Communication group, or visit www.linkedin.com/groups?gid=2926. And we're on Facebook, too, at www.facebook.com/STC.org.

STC has more videos up on YouTube as well; find us at www.youtube.com/Society4TechComm. Sign up for our RSS feeds—click the RSS icon on the STC home page, STC's Notebook, and both *Intercom* online (<http://intercom.stc.org>) and *Technical Communication* online (<http://techcomm.stc.org>). Visit MySTC at www.stc.org/mystc and get involved in STC's own social network, just for technical communicators. It's all part of staying connected and getting more out of your STC membership. ■

Community Achievement Award Applications due 23 January

STC CHAPTERS, SIGS, and student chapters are all encouraged to apply for the Community Achievement Awards, which honor the outstanding accomplishments of STC communities. There are three levels of recognition: Merit, Excellence, and Distinction. The CAAs will be presented at the 2013 STC Summit in Atlanta. Two of the outstanding CAA honorees will also be awarded "Most Improved Community" and "Community of the Year."

The 2012 Community Achievement Award Guidelines and applications are available on the STC website at www.stc.org/membership/recognition/awards/1221-community-achievement-award.

Applications and supporting materials should be emailed to Steve Skojec (steve.skojec@stc.org), director of community relations, and Dale Erickson (dale_erickson@att.net), Community Achievement Award chair. ■

In Memoriam: Richard A. Meyers,

BY LINDA OESTREICH | *Fellow*

RICHARD A. MEYERS, an STC Fellow, died on 24 August 2012 of non-Hodgkins multiple lymphoma at his home in Milton-Freewater, OR. Dick was 80 years old. He and his wife, Ruth, were active in STC for many years—not only at the local level, but also at the Society level for conferences. I became an editorial assistant in 1976 and joined STC in 1979, and Dick Meyers was one of the people who guided my career, helped me realize my potential, and supported my advancement in the Society.

He was a tall, lanky man and had a way about him that made it hard to dislike him. His natural tendency was to help others. He was a giant among us in the San Diego Chapter in the 1970s and 1980s, and I had the pleasure of being his friend

and protégé. I served with him in that chapter and on several special committees that put on conferences, seminars, and monthly meetings.

Dick was a guy who gave encouragement freely. With his guidance, I delivered presentations, ran conferences, taught classes, and pushed myself professionally. Dick was a natural teacher. He was also a pioneering consultant back in the day when contract technical writing was something new. He was the consummate *technical* writer; he was well-respected by those in aerospace, manufacturing, and other technological areas of the day. Dick was computer savvy when computers took up whole rooms, and according to Ruth, he is still getting calls from folks who want him to “drop by” to look at their computer systems. Right up until he died, Dick was helping others understand

computers—he taught computer-challenged seniors at Blue Mountain Community College and Walla Walla Community College, and I know he did so by sharing stories along the way.

During the 1980s, Dick often came to my technical writing classes as a guest speaker. He was always interesting, fun, and ready to tell a story and share his knowledge. In addition to his love of technical communication and STC, Dick loved basketball. He leaves behind two sons (Chris and Jon), who were both involved with the sport. And, I had to chuckle as I read his obituary—Dick had no granddaughters, but he had seven grandsons! I bet each one is as tall as he was and each plays basketball!

For years, I used in my classes an article that Dick wrote entitled, “Technical Writer, TECHNICAL writer, Technical WRITER.” The

Why Join a SIG?

BY LORI MEYER | *Associate Fellow*

IF YOU ARE A MEMBER of an STC geographic community, you know the many ways it can enhance your STC membership. Many members have also come to know the value of another group of STC communities—Special Interest Groups (SIGs). SIGs are virtual communities that reflect the diversity of skills and interests in the technical communication profession. STC’s more than 20 SIGs include members who share common experiences, goals, and challenges. Each SIG provides access to a body of knowledge through resources such as newsletters, webinars, discussion lists, websites, blogs, special programs, and social media outlets.

Joining a SIG provides many opportunities to support your profes-

sional development and enrich your STC membership. Examples include:

- ▶ Expanding your skill set in one or more special-interest areas, which provides value for your employer, increases your marketability, and contributes to the technical communication profession.
- ▶ Keeping abreast of changes in your special-interest area and their impact on the profession.
- ▶ Networking and building friendships with fellow STC members who share your technical knowledge, interests, and challenges.
- ▶ Volunteering, developing your leadership skills, and receiving recognition for your contributions.
- ▶ Sharing your expertise through demonstrations, presentations, workshops, newsletter articles, and mentoring.

SIGs welcome members of all skill levels. They provide an excellent opportunity both to teach and to learn. You can build new skills, expand the skills you have, and mentor newcomers.

SIG membership links you with like-minded professionals all over the world. The small membership fee can open the door to good things for you, your career, and your profession. During this renewal period, add a SIG to your STC membership. Find out more about SIGs by visiting www.stc.org/about-stc/communities/special-interest-groups/category/sigs. **i**

LORI MEYER is a member of eight STC Chapters and five Special Interest Groups (SIGs). An STC Associate Fellow, she is currently serving as co-chair of the Rochester Chapter Spectrum conference, co-manager of the Technical Editing SIG, and director-at-large of the Carolina Chapter. She also volunteers for the East Bay, Palm Beaches, and Northeast Ohio chapters, and is a member of the STC membership committee.

1931–2012

premise was about whether one should hire folks for their technical expertise or for their writing expertise. I wonder if he's laughing now—40+ years later—to know that the argument is still going on!

In my search through the Web for information on Dick, I found that he was born in Newark, NJ, but spent most of his school years in Allentown, PA. After serving in the Army for a short time, he married Ruth Parlin, and in 1960, they moved to California. Both of his boys graduated from Mt. Carmel High School in San Diego. Dick soon began to write technical manuals and proposals supporting projects at companies such as General Dynamics and Convair. He was president of STC San Diego from 1980–1982, and because of his influence on the profession and in STC, Dick was honored as an STC Fellow.

Technical communication and computer literacy were Dick's life. He loved to help folks with their résumés and made it part of what he gave back to those who knew him. In recent years, he taught at "A Writers Retreat" at the Milton-Freewater Arts & Craft Weekend. I had to chuckle at the write-up for that weekend: "Have you something to say? Or specifically—WRITE? Attend this workshop and pick up a few tips to write it better.... Among his accomplishments, he's edited screenplays, autobiographies, novels, poetry, and personal memoirs. Let Dick Meyers motivate you to start getting it down on paper.... Now retired, he brings a wealth of experience to this workshop and promises to keep it lively and challenging."

So many memories—so many reasons to smile. Dick truly did keep it lively and challenging! Another of STC's greats is now writing user guides for keeping the gates of Heaven in tip-top condition. ■

Brand-New Certificate Course Starts in January

STC INTRODUCES another certificate course to our lineup in early 2013, with Usability Testing Essentials: Hands-on Workshop and Best Practices, presented by Carol Barnum. The course starts on 8 January and takes place every Tuesday through 26 February, from 10:30 AM–Noon EST (GMT-5). While this is the first time STC offers the course, Barnum has a rich history in the subject. "I've been teaching a course like this at my university for almost—gasp!—twenty years," she stated. "And I've written two books on the subject. But I've never taught the course fully online, so this will be a first for me."

Whatever job you hold, user experience is—or should be—a part of it. That's why usability testing is such a good fit for technical communicators. Technical communicators are the voice of the user, so why not also be able to share what we learn from users by observing how they work with our products? We learn from them, educate ourselves and other product stakeholders about who our users are and how they interact with our products, and make our products better as user experience improves. What's not to like in this picture?

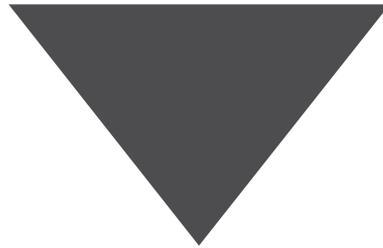
Whether you are self-taught, unschooled in the topic, or looking to upgrade your skills, this certificate course will take you step by step through the process of planning and conducting a test, analyzing the results, and reporting them—with the goal of educating yourself and other stakeholders on the user's experience

and advocating for more testing, more often. You will work in small teams on a project of mutual interest and share the results with the rest of the attendees. With lots of discussion to help digest the material and learn from each other, you will progress through the stages of planning, testing, and reporting. Your deliverables will reflect a fully developed test project that you can share with others to promote your skills in usability testing.

"If you want to know what we'll cover in eight, fast-paced, highly interactive weeks," Barnum explained, "the short answer is everything—everything related to planning and preparing to conduct a usability study, then analyzing and reporting the results. You'll end up with a great portfolio of your work products to show all that you have learned and all that you can do to uncover and understand user experience."

STC's certificate courses explore subjects in-depth over the course of several weeks. In addition to the practical work skills that you will develop, participating in a certificate program provides you with a unique, live opportunity to learn directly from an instructor and to also exchange ideas and tools virtually with the other participants in the program. The courses are \$595 for members, \$995 for nonmembers, and \$295 for student members. See www.stc.org/education/online-education/certificate-courses for our full lineup and to register for Usability Testing Essentials: Hands-on Workshop and Best Practices. ■

Become one of the first Certified Professional Technical Communicators™



Why earn your Certification?

Leadership Recognition	Professional Status	Professional Development
Show your employers you are a technical communication leader who is committed to establishing worldwide performance standards for the field.	Join an elite group of professionals who have demonstrated their technical communication knowledge and proficiency.	The educational requirements of certification are one more reason to continuously maintain and upgrade your knowledge. Add certification to your career development plan.
Portable Career Credential	A Sense of Achievement	Experience Validation
When you change jobs, your certification credential travels with you and will enhance your employability and compensation.	Give yourself the confidence to excel at your job.	Certification confirms your experience and competency in technical communication, your commitment to the profession.

The CPTC assessment encompasses broad areas of practice that represent the major activities performed by technical communicators. The certified practitioner demonstrates proficiency in the following areas:



- **User, Task, and Experience Analysis**—Define the users of the information and analyze the tasks that the information must support.
- **Information Design**—Plan information deliverables to support task requirements. Specify and design the organization, presentation, distribution, and architecture for each deliverable.
- **Process Management**—Plan the deliverables schedule and monitor the process of fulfillment.
- **Information Development**—Author content in conformance with the design plan, through an iterative process of creation, review, and revision.
- **Information Production**—Assemble developed content into required deliverables that conform to all design, compliance, and production guidelines. Publish, deliver, and archive.

Employers know that certified practitioners earn more than their uncertified colleagues, because employers find that certified professionals are more likely to be successful hires and valued employees.

Visit www.stc.org/certification for more information and to submit your application.

Multimedia Economics 101



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BY MARC LEE | *Senior Member*

INSTEAD OF DISCUSSING media tools you can use for your technical communication, in this column I'll cover a tool that may be more useful than all the others: multimedia economics. So instead of concepts like bits per second, file type, download latency, MIME types, and pixel dimensions, we'll use terms like fixed and variable costs, metrics, development ratios, opportunity costs and "make vs. buy."

As in all economics writing, I have to make some simplifying assumptions to get this discussion going. In this column I'll do three things:

1. Spec a typical training module to base the discussion on, with the generic features and costs that we usually find in e-learning projects.
2. Discuss key metrics that can be used to measure the scope and cost of a module.
3. Discuss variables that can affect the cost or price of a module.

From this approach, you should be able to apply the information to your own situation even if the details vary. Although in my business I am usually on the vendor/developer side of the table, I will try to be client-developer "neutral" to the extent possible. That way, no matter whether you view these economics from the perspective of a developer (someone who is bidding the job) or the client (someone needing the job done), the concepts should apply equally.

Model Multimedia E-learning Module

Media can be used for technical communication and training in many ways. You can create a screencast of your company's website navigation using Captivate and push that to your customers; you can record a video of your company's product packaging and post that to YouTube for your customers to view. Here, however, we'll use as a model a complete e-learning module and discuss its costs and variables.

The model-training module for purposes of economic analysis has the following specification:

- ▶ Approximately one hour playing time
- ▶ Hosted on the company website or intranet; could be distributed on DVD also
- ▶ Includes instruction on the topic with intermittent review questions and quizzes to assure comprehension by the users/students
- ▶ Self-playing with voice-over narration
- ▶ At least some interactive and animated elements
- ▶ Navigation and user controls provided on the module interface
- ▶ Reference material in the form of a glossary and external links to more detail on topics covered
- ▶ SCORM-compliant to assure test results can be recorded (SCORM is a Sharable Content Object Reference Model, the e-learning standard for data communication between module and host system—usually a Learning Management System)

This set of features would constitute what we normally think of as an e-learning module. Of course individual cases can vary—a lot! For example, the client might want it to play on other platforms such as a smartphone or tablet. They might want multiple versions for different audiences. They might want it translated. They might want it longer or shorter. They might want more interactive elements, usable in a live classroom setting, etc. All these would affect cost.

How It's Developed

A module of this type consists of slides as the main structural element. This is the way the technology in the field has evolved over the past five or so years: The paradigm is to build the basics in PowerPoint, use the advanced PowerPoint features, convert the PowerPoint to a Web-playable version using Adobe Flash technology or one of the mobile platforms such as HTML5 or iOS (iPhone/iPad), add in features from other tools such as Flash if needed, and host on a company website. This is the development



This column addresses media subjects for technical communicators. It discusses graphics, audio, animation, video, and interactive media as they relate to technical communication. Please send comments to marc@mlmultimedia.com.

model used by Articulate Presenter, Adobe Captivate, and Articulate Storyline (three of the leading development tools today) as well as many similar but lesser-known tools.

Let's clear up any confusion that might exist with the term *slide*, which typically refers to PowerPoint slides for lecture presentations and even general business communications such as status reports. Professional e-learning developers may start with slides that are similar, but deliver a very different end product. With instructional design included in the development of the slides, the appearance and "feel" is very different from the typical PowerPoint with headlines and bulleted lists.

The example in Figure 1 shows the evolution of a slide from standard PowerPoint to a slide enhanced for instructional purposes with custom art. When all the assets—audio, video, custom art, animation—are included, and all the slides published, the end user's overall experience is more like viewing a video than a slide presentation.

Metric: Hours Per Hour

Now let's consider useful ways of breaking down the economics of a module such as this. As mentioned, a typical module might take an hour of run time. We recommend that no module (single session with the student)

exceed one hour. If your content will not fit into a one-hour chunk, consider breaking that module into parts. On the other end, the minimum length, where substantial instruction can be communicated on a topic, would be 20 minutes to a half hour.

If you are estimating or asking a developer to estimate a job like this, how can you price this project? An industry rule of thumb is that it takes between 100-300 hours to develop an hour of content. That's quite a range and many things can affect which end of the range a project falls on, as we'll learn more about later. We call that the "hours per hour" metric—the typical or average number of hours it would take to create an hour of training. This can be a very useful metric, especially if you're considering a large project with many hours of training involved.

Metric: Slides Per Hour

A good economic tool is to validate one number or price point by a second metric—slides per hour. You might call it "triangulation"—getting back to the same number by a different path.

As mentioned, our basic building block for a module is slides. How many slides? Well it's just good instructional design to keep the pace up, moving from slide to slide relatively quickly. We generally recommend

that a single slide last no more than 30 seconds to retain student interest. It's a rule that can be broken and often is, but on average, it's a pretty good metric. Remember that our model-training module consists of one hour of training. Thus, you can say that a typical module is made up of 120 slides: 60 minutes x 2 slides per minute = 120 slides.

Combining the Two: Hours/Slide

Let's see if we can combine these two metrics usefully. Say you are bidding a one-hour e-learning module and you think it should take 200 hours for development. If you estimate that there are 120 slides in this one hour of training, you are saying, on average, that you will spend 1.66 hours (an hour and 40 minutes) per slide. It's important to keep in mind that the hours/slide metric is a net economic cost, on average, for that slide, and shouldn't be compared to building a slide deck for the quarterly business review.

Going into the economic cost of that slide are all the development deliverables and ancillary tasks:

- ▶ Content research.
- ▶ Content outline (2-4 pages) giving the basic topic sequence and some of the media suggestions for various topics' coverage. This requires client approval.

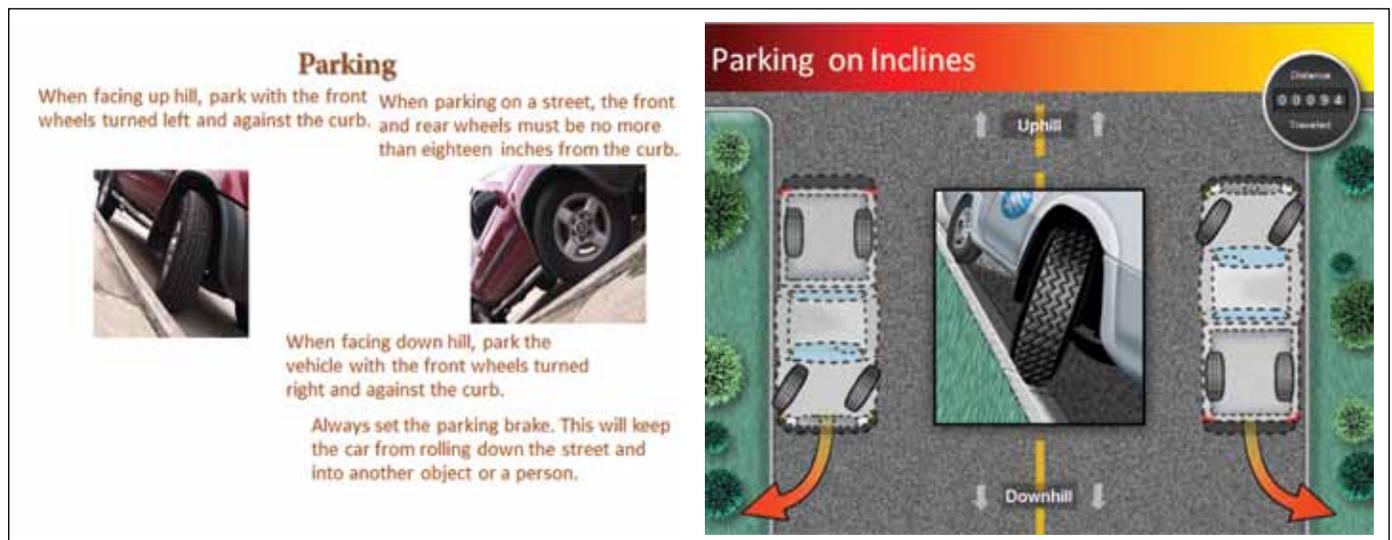


Figure 1. Rough and Final Slide Design (from a slide built for Tri-State Generation and Transmission)

Variable	Change	Effect on Cost
Length	To some degree, cost is variable with length of training. There are some fixed costs but you can save this way. Note: this is not just a mechanical reduction. You will lose content. That's the trade-off.	If you can cut 20% of the length, figure at least a 10% cost savings. This is because there are some fixed costs associated with any project than can't be squeezed out by length reductions.
Content Development	All e-learning modules must have a content source—usually company manuals or existing PowerPoints, videos, etc. To the extent that the content is well developed, you can save on your development costs. This is a highly variable area and individuals may disagree on what “well-developed” content consists of. Tread carefully knowing that a big possible impact on costs can result here.	The difference between having your content in a well-developed form from the beginning versus having the developer do the research can be as much as a 25% savings.
Media Assets	Another big cost of multimedia e-learning is the media. This can consist of Flash animations, videos, photos, custom art work, audio files, and so forth. This is a large part of the work developing a module: for one of our projects recently, the project media folder contained 2,404 media files.	If you provide all media assets to the developer at the beginning, this can have as much as a 30-40% savings. Note that the converse is also true. If the developer is to provide new media assets, such as on-location video or Captivate animations, this can increase the cost by 20-40%.
Interactivity	There are many definitions of interactive e-learning elements: from point-and-click multiple-choice quizzes to custom-learning games to simulations of operating a machine.	True custom interactivity is expensive. Each example of a complex game or simulation in a project can significantly affect the average “hours per slide” ratio for the project. Depending on scope possibly a 30-50% cost impact either way.

Table 1. Variables that Affect Cost

- ▶ Storyboard: a mockup of all slides including the voice narration text. This is the PowerPoint phase and also requires approval.
 - ▶ Voice-over script.
 - ▶ Integration of assets and publishing.
- The cost or hours to develop a slide includes much more than just building the final slide. Given the content and the types of media that are needed to present this training, does it make sense that you could, on average, create the slides including all development tasks for a little over an hour and a half per slide? That puts the economics into a different perspective and may make you consider your 200-hour estimate. Or it may make you reconsider your content and what it takes to instruct on this content.

Price

With the above information in mind, you're more or less in a position to gauge the overall cost of the project. If you or your developer charges \$50 per hour, then at 100–300 hours for one hour of training, you'd be looking at \$5,000 to \$15,000 for a completed training module. If you estimate, say, 3 hours on average per completed slide, for one hour you'd be looking at about \$15,000 for the completed

project. Using our example of a 200-hour project, the development cost would be \$10,000.

Price Compared to What?

These numbers may surprise you (although I hope not, because they're quite real). You have to consider the opportunity cost of not having the module. Depending on the situation (for example, OSHA safety or HAZMAT training), consider the cost of a violation, which can run into the millions of dollars. Also consider the “make-buy” trade-off: you compare the cost of making the training internally versus hiring an outside vendor. For example, if you want to purchase an Adobe Captivate license and develop your own software product demos, that is a good option: a license costs somewhere around \$700. That's considerable savings; however, your learning curve on the tool (which is an internal cost) may exceed the cost of the expert developer doing it. In sum, sure you can pay less, but what is the true cost of a lower price?

Variables

Let's take the \$15,000 or the \$10,000 price points. Looking at them economically, what can be done to

reduce costs into the \$5,000 range? Let's say you have a fixed budget and you know where you need to be. Table 1 shows variables that can affect the cost and can move the hours/hour ratio considerably:

This brings us full circle—whether we start with a budget in mind or start with a project goal in mind, we can use economic tools to structure the project so that it meets the client's needs and provides the developer with sufficient time to do the job right.

Conclusion

Unlike earlier columns, this article does not offer you an insight into tools you can use to enhance your communications with media, but hopefully it gives you another set of tools: those that help you understand how the quality, scope, and approach to a multimedia e-learning project can be traded off against costs using “Multimedia Economics 101” tools. ■

MARC LEE (marc@mlmultimedia.com) is owner of MLMultimedia, a multimedia and e-learning consultancy. Marc has been a member of the Rocky Mountain Chapter for about 20 years and was chapter president from 2004–2005. Marc has a PhD in English from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

The Future is Cloudy, And It's Now



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BY NEIL PERLIN | *Fellow*

EVER HAD A TECHNOLOGY sneak up on you? There's no one clear event to which you can point and say "this is when it happened." Instead, the technology slowly insinuated itself until it reaches a critical mass that you suddenly notice. This happened recently when I spoke with consultant Karl Hakkarainen for a blog post he was writing called "Documentation's New Cloud Models" (http://develop.inthecloud.drdobbs.com/author.asp?section_id=2283&doc_id=247452).

I hadn't thought of myself as working in the cloud but, as Karl and I spoke, I realized that I was

doing that more and more. In this column, I'll describe three examples of cloud-based work that I've done recently, then draw some conclusions as to what the cloud might mean to tech comm.

What Is "the Cloud"?

From Wikipedia, at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cloud_computing:

"Cloud computing is the use of computing resources (hardware and software) ... delivered as a service over a network (typically the Internet). The name comes from the use of a cloud-shaped symbol as an abstraction for the complex infrastructure it contains in system

diagrams. Cloud computing entrusts remote services with a user's data, software and computation."

An analogy—think of electricity that's generated somewhere and delivered to users over the grid. We don't know or care where it's generated as long as a lamp lights up when we plug



This column presents overviews of new technologies that may affect technical communicators in the near future. If you have feedback, or would like to suggest topics for subsequent columns, please contact Neil Perlin at nperlin@concentric.net.

it in. The cloud is similar—we don't know where the data is stored and processed as long as it's there when we plug our PC into a network.

The cloud isn't perfect. Corporate users have concerns about security that cloud vendors are working to handle. And yet, for nonproprietary data or noncritical work, the cloud has some benefits.

Example 1: ViziApps Studio

ViziApps Studio (www.viziapps.com) is a mobile app development tool that I've used since 2010 and for which I'm a certified trainer and consultant. ViziApps is completely cloud-based. Neither the tool nor the apps that I'm working on are on my PC. Everything is in the cloud and, as long as it all works, I don't care where.

And, by and large, it all does. The tool will sometimes slow down due to network traffic loads. A timeout feature logs me off if I'm inactive too long. It can be hard to keep the training up-to-date because, with the tool on the network, it's in continuous-release mode; features may get added or changed overnight. But if a bug pops up, engineering's fix applies to any computer that I may use. No point releases to worry about installing.

Working in the cloud like this isn't that new. If you use Google Docs (now Google Drive), you're working in the cloud. But working in the cloud can have some interesting and unexpected benefits.

For example, I can use ViziApps Studio on any computer without worrying about what version is on what computer. That's expected. What I didn't expect was how the tool handles photos taken with the iPhone or Android camera as part of an app. Rather than my having to name and store photos, they're named and stored in the cloud automatically. All I have to do is call the URL for a photo, knowing that all the housekeeping details are handled for me by the cloud software. That brings up my second example.

Example 2: Moving Help Project Resources Into the Cloud

MadCap (www.madcapsoftware.com) Flare projects store images with the project and distribute them with the deliverable files. This means that the deliverable for a graphic-rich help system can use a lot of disk space. I encountered this issue, and an unexpected cloud-based solution, in July when I wrote help for some of the database functionality in ViziApps Studio. The final help system was about 20 megs big—a lot of graphics.

Michael Kuperstein, ViziApps' CTO, suggested that it might be possible to reduce the size by removing the graphic files from the deliverable, storing them separately in the cloud, and replacing the paths in the img commands in the help topics with the URLs to the now cloud-based images. I'd never thought to do this but it seemed feasible. A call to MadCap support indicated that it should work. And it did. Moving the graphics files into the cloud reduced the deliverable's size from 20 megs to 3, with no slowdown in the display of the topics. So, with no real difficulty, a "traditional" help project moved into the cloud.

Example 3: Cloud-Based Training With SnapGuide

If you use elearning tools like Captivate, Camtasia, and Mimic, you have to move the deliverable files up onto a server. It's not inherently difficult, but what if the uploading could be done automatically for you? Enter SnapGuide (<http://snapguide.com/>). (Thanks to STC member Craig Prichard for pointing me to this tool.)

SnapGuide is a smartphone-based tool for quickly creating training slide shows, like a very light version of Captivate, et al. It basically integrates the phone's camera and note-taking capability to create slides that combine photos and textual instructions. To teach someone to change a tire, for example, you'd take a photo of each step, add instructions to each

photo, and save all the "slides" as a slide show.

SnapGuide isn't as powerful and feature-rich as the mainstream e-learning tools. But I was able to use it to create a slide show showing how to use Windows 7's calculator to convert a number from decimal to binary, in fifteen minutes, half of which was spent fumbling since I'd never used SnapGuide before. My best time to create the same movie using Captivate, which I've used for ten years since its inception as RoboDemo, is about 45 minutes.

In addition to being simple and quick, SnapGuide offers another benefit—it moves the movie up into the cloud for you. All you need to do is distribute the URL and anyone can run the movie on a mobile device or on a full-sized screen. The housekeeping has moved into the cloud.

Summary

The idea of moving our applications and files into the cloud isn't exotic by itself now, although its use for tech comm may still be. But look at specific tasks you perform to see if the cloud may make them more efficient or effective in unexpected ways. (Like my moving the graphics to the cloud for the ViziApps help project and reducing the deliverable's size by 85%.) After that, I'll be paying more attention to other tasks that I perform to see how the cloud might benefit them. ■

NEIL PERLIN (nperlin@nperlin.cnc.net) is an internationally known consultant, strategist, trainer, and developer for online content in all forms from traditional online help to mobile. To this, he brings 33 years of experience in tech comm, 27 in online formats and tools past, present, and future (having represented STC to the W3C). Neil is MadCap Certified for Flare and Mimic, Adobe Certified for RoboHelp, and ViziApps Certified for the ViziApps mobile app development platform. He provides these services through his company, Hyper/Word Services (www.hyperword.com). He is an STC Fellow and the founder and manager of the Bleeding Edge stem at the STC Summit.

Interview with Marcia Riefer Johnston

BY SCOTT ABEL | *Senior Member*

SA: Marcia, thanks for taking time to chat with me today. For those who don't know who you are, tell us a little about yourself and what you do for a living.

MJ: Chatting with you is a treat, Scott. Thanks for this chance to talk to my favorite professional community.

Over the last twenty-some years, I've done lots of things that qualify as technical communication, mostly writing, mostly self-employed, mostly in Upstate New York during my children's growing-up years. The Central New York STC Chapter served as a hub for networking and learning; I couldn't have sustained an independent career without them. I now live in Portland, Oregon, where I'm discovering new opportunities and am getting to know a new group of STCers through the Willamette Valley Chapter.

I couldn't have dreamed up a more satisfying career. If I had seen an ad describing it—"Work your own hours! Work from home! Get paid to write!"—I wouldn't have believed it. At its best, contracting has been an exhilarating way to work. Of course, I've seen dry spells, fearing I'd never work again. I've done a few 9-to-5 temp stints. When you work for yourself, you make the best of the choices in front of you. You also do what you can to generate choices, and you say yes to things you've never done before.

In fact, you can say yes to almost any job when you have strong writing skills. To write well is to think well. What I do for a living, really, is think.

I've created brochures, white papers, websites, online Help,

e-training modules, and loads of manuals. I've managed a tech-pubs department, taught tech writing to engineering students, led indexing workshops, participated on user-experience teams, and performed content audits (known affectionately among content strategists as *those big hairy spreadsheets*). I've used every software application I could get my hands on, from FrameMaker to Dreamweaver to XMetaL. Angle brackets and I, we're like `<i>this</i>`. My idea of a beach read is the latest book on DITA. Despite the variety in duties and deliverables, though, I do the same thing over and over: ask questions, analyze, clarify.

As one early boss put it, "I'm paying you to be a pain in my behind." I consider this skill a core competency—one that some bosses appreciate more than others.

How did you get involved in the field of technical communication?

After graduating from a liberal-arts school (Lake Forest College, just north of Chicago), I went straight into the Syracuse University Masters program in creative writing. With that fresh degree in hand, as I was wondering what kind of work people would pay me for, I received an invitation from Karen Szymanski, who was looking for a technical-writing intern to spend the summer working for a company then known as Magnavox CATV (later Philips Broadband) just outside of Syracuse.

Technical writing! I had never heard those two words together. (We're talking the pre-Dilbert era. Tina the Tech Writer—to whom other characters say hilariously

maddening things like "Your first draft was boring, so I added a bunch of exclamation points"—hadn't yet entered the collective consciousness.)

From the moment I heard the term, technical writing clicked for me. I wanted to write, and I had always been drawn to science. I liked figuring out how things work or why something is the way it is. And I liked explaining things, especially when I got to see the light go on in someone's eyes.

My unpaid summer internship with Karen launched a lifelong career. I can't thank her enough for not only opening that door but also showing me, just when I needed it, that the door existed.

You've written a book called *Word Up! How To Write Powerful Sentences and Paragraphs (And Everything You Build from Them)*. I was honored that you asked me to write the foreword.

I'm honored that you wanted to write the foreword. I can't imagine a better one. Anyone who'd like a peek can find the full text here: <http://howtowriteeverything.com/foreword-by-scott-abel>.

Before we dive in and talk about the book, why did you write one? Was it something you always wanted to do?

I've always loved books—reading them and

making them. My own books didn't always have words. I filled them with pressed leaves, with photos, with vanity plates we saw on family trips. But even though I didn't always think of myself as a writer—in college I originally planned to major in psychology or math—I always liked the idea of making a book.



In the digital age, change happens quickly. This column features interviews with the movers and shakers—the folks behind new ideas, standards, methods, products, and amazing technologies that are changing the way we live and interact in our modern world. Got questions, suggestions or feedback? Email them to scottabel@mac.com.



It's magical, the way such a simple, tangible object captures powerful, intangible things: concepts, made-up characters. From my earliest years, books enlightened me, comforted me, entertained me, transported me out of my own skin. It seemed natural to want to do the same for other people. I had the impulse to create a book long before I had anything to say.

Why do we need another book about words? And what makes your book different from others?

I'm a sucker for books on writing. I have shelves full of them. Some of them I find, ironically, unreadable. The best writers bring me a smile as they teach me new things or as they tell me old things in a new way. Spend some time flipping through Bryan Garner's *Garner's Modern*

American Usage—don't let its heft intimidate you—and see if you don't find yourself smiling at his playfulness and erudition. (When's the last time you heard anyone described as both erudite and playful?) Garner turns the misuses of *of* into a page-turner. Before I read that entry (look under *o*), it never occurred to me that *of* indicates flabby writing.

There, a free tip. Eliminate most *ofs* in your writing. Conciseness. Vigor. Voilà!

Another book that enchants me is Arthur Plotnik's *Spunk and Bite*, a rollicking guide to rollicking writing. When you've loved an old Strunk and White to the point of disintegration as I have (as if your affection might someday, Velveteen Rabbit-style, transform it into a living companion),

you can't help but get a kick out of Plotnik's refreshing poke at the venerable classic.

I also admire Lynne Truss's *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*—a book dedicated to, of all things, punctuation—and Mignon Fogarty's "Grammar Girl" blog. I have too many favorites to list here. (I do list them in the book.)

So yes, books on writing abound. If you piled them all up, you'd have a precarious, weird-looking stack reaching ... way up there. But the world can't have too many writing books of the kind I like to read, the kind I set out to write. My book doesn't say the same old things in the same old ways. It follows its own advice. Practices what it preaches. Shows what it tells. It uses powerful writing to talk about powerful writing.

What do you think technical communicators will appreciate in your book?

This book addresses all writers, not just those of the technical persuasion, but it does include some topics especially near to tech writers' hearts. For example, one chapter addresses writing for the small screen. Hint: I don't say, "Keep it short."

One of my favorite chapters (don't tell the other chapters) is "How to Do How-To." Well-written procedures make the world a better place—at least for the individual who desperately wants someone to *just tell me right now how to make this darn thing work.*

Useful step-by-step instructions can save the day.

You might assume that any tech writer can write useful instructions. That's what we do, right? Not so fast. In his August 16 guest post "Core Skills for Technical Writers Often Overlooked" on Tom Johnson's *I'd Rather Be Writing* blog, Vinish Garg, Director of Operations in Technical Documentation at Vhite Systems, puts it this way: "Most of the tech comm resources ... talk about topics such as XML or DITA, single sourcing, indexing, documentation management, or usability ... However, I feel that somewhere along the way, mastery of the basics has been overlooked."

Many of the 48 (and counting) commenters said things like "I couldn't agree more."

I consider procedure-writing skills among the often-overlooked basics. Even writers who wield DITA <step> and <choice> elements all day long don't necessarily know the best way to craft what goes between the codes.

Speaking of DITA, do you agree with those who consider employers misguided when they emphasize tool knowledge over communication skills?

Glad you asked! (Okay, readers, I confess. I fed Scott that question. Hey, haven't you ever written an FAQ? You don't think all of those questions come from customers, do you?) As a matter of fact, I do agree. At a recent interview, I was asked, first thing, to take a FrameMaker test to prove that

I understood how the tool worked. Then I was grilled on the differences between old Word and new Word. So I've learned where to find the table-formatting options on the ribbon—this is a reason to hire me as a writer?

Imagine hiring a pianist based on his or her ability to identify the keys.

You seem to enjoy language and have fun with it. Your book is filled with humor and intelligently crafted wordplay. I think this is why I enjoyed it so much. It wasn't a chore to read.

That's the way I hoped readers would feel. Writing this book was a hoot.

As for humor, I don't know how to be funny, but I like to share things that I find funny. If someone asked me how to hit a reader's funny bone, I'd say, write with integrity. Convey what you find funny as truly as you can, leaving unstated whatever people will get on their own. The most satisfying laughter comes from recognition.

What role can humor play in the way technical communicators communicate with their readers? Wouldn't we all love for readers to find our technical information as engaging as a cartoon! Unfortunately, what one person finds hysterically funny may strike another as boring or confusing or offensive, especially across cultures.

Under the right circumstances, though, the risk can pay off. Some companies weave humor into their technical communications brilliantly. For example, see the demo videos for the to-do-list app TeuxDeux (pronounced *to do*) at www.teuxdeux.com. The FAQ on this website also cracks me up even as it tells me things I want to know.

Example:

Q: I really need to create recurring tasks.

A: We hear you on this. We don't use TeuxDeux this way, but we get this request a lot. We're going to spend some time thinking of the best way to implement it without injuring the overall interface. Also, not to nitpick, but that is more of a statement than a question.

Even if you've never written an FAQ, how can you not be smiling right now? On the inside? One corner of your inner mouth?

For more technical writing that tickles, look no further than the nearest T-Mobile GI "Getting Started" guide, which is downloadable, as of this writing, from <http://support.t-mobile.com/docs/DOC-1488>.

Example:

Water will damage your phone and accessories—even a small amount such as water droplets from a soda in your car cup-holder, melting snowflakes, tears of joy, squirt-gun crossfire or steam from hot water in the kitchen or bathroom.

Any writer who pulls off saying "tears of joy" in a manual has my respect.

(Thanks go to tech writers nonpareil Amy Reyes and Mark Hartz for pointing me to these examples. Note that one of them did not find the other's example all that funny. Need I say more about the risks of using humor?)

For more on humor in technical writing, see the TechWhirl page dedicated to the subject: <http://techwhirl.com/technical-writing-humor>.

Share with us some of the surprising things about language that you learned while researching the book?

One of the best things about writing this book was making discoveries. I set out to share some things I thought I knew about language usage: rights and wrongs, dos and don'ts. Turns out, you can't trust what you know. There I was, confidently telling people to put commas around name suffixes—*Joe Bob, Jr., is a regular chip off the old block*—when my editor cleared her throat (as much as a throat can be cleared in an email) and gently announced that the experts behind the *Chicago Manual of Style*, the guide we were following, had changed their minds on this point a couple editions back. When it comes to name suffixes, parenthetical commas aren't wrong, exactly, but, as of 1993, the commas are no longer recommended (see

www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/CMS_FAQ/Jr.Sr.III/Jr.Sr.III02.html).

Now, some of you reading this may consider such changes piddling, and in the scheme of things, I agree. Here's the thing. One minute you're standing on solid ground. The next, you realize that the ground has moved. Where do you put your feet? So much for confidently telling people what to do.

Over and over, I dug into style guides and other references to back up my claims. I had books piled up around my feet so that my husband could hardly get to my desk to bring me the latest cup of coffee. (Every writer should be so lucky.) Over and over, I found that experts: a) often disagree with each other, and b) sometimes unanimously discount things that English teachers have said for years.

Here's another example of a surprise. Until I started doing this research, I never questioned what constitutes a part of speech. Boy, did I have a lot to learn about the modern take on nouns, verbs, and other word types. It stunned me that some linguists no longer classify certain words, like prepositions, as parts of speech at all. My grammar-loving sister ranks this news up there with the deplanetization of Pluto. I wrote a long chapter and a substantial glossary based on the insights that this surprise led to. (Yes, you can end a sentence with *to*. More on that shortly.)

Books are finite information products. They are limited by page count. Were there things you would have liked to include in the book, but could not for space or other reasons? Yes! Because my audience is so broad—anyone who writes or teaches writing—I left out a topic that usually comes up only in business circles: the question of how to define *good enough*.

When I started out as a professional writer, my workgroups placed a high value on content quality: accuracy, usefulness, clarity, conciseness, consistency. These days, more and more I hear people use the phrase *good enough*—as in *not so good*

but let's not get picky—to promote what strikes me as a shift in values.

Obviously, business is about sales, not literature. Improved efficiency keeps writers in jobs. Schedules must be met, compromises made. Even when working on a glossy annual report, a professional writer needs to draw a line between good enough and perfect.

The line that interests me more, though—the line with even more business value—is the one that customers would draw between writing that's good enough and writing that's not, writing that works for them and writing that doesn't. Unfortunately, rather than reaching out to learn where customers draw that line, some companies turn inward, defining the phrase *good enough* by drawing their own line, conveniently, at the top: *Don't make it too good*. In those cases, good enough has no discernible limit at the bottom.

In those cases, bad is the new good. The worse, the better. Doubt this? I once heard a project manager proclaim in a user-manual review meeting, "Ugly is good." It was my manual. For reasons beyond my control, it was ugly. It wasn't good. It got approved anyway.

To thrive, companies and their writers need to keep the *good* in *good enough*.

To the extent that I qualify as a change agent (this column is called "Meet the Change Agents," after all), I suppose it's in the area of encouraging companies to put more effort into evaluating content quality from a customer's point of view. Not exactly a new idea. And not easy to do. But we're a creative bunch. It can be done.

Take Amazon. According to Leo Frishberg, a user-experience pro who spoke at an STC chapter meeting in Portland earlier this year, Amazon tests its Web pages to determine the effects of sentence-level differences—a semicolon vs. a period, for example—on usability (and, of course, on sales). Remarkable. Amazon experiments with punctuation. Amazon experiments with punctuation? Amazon experiments with

punctuation! I suspect that Amazon stops tweaking when the tweaking stops improving their results.

Imagine all companies taking *good enough* that seriously.

Can you describe some of your efforts to encourage companies to evaluate content quality from a customer point of view?

Sure. Let's take product instructions, the type of content I've worked on the most. One strategy for encouraging companies to evaluate quality is to befriend the user-experience team—or get on it if possible. Ask the folks who test the products for usability to test the user documentation, too.

You may meet with resistance. Testing the documentation takes extra time and planning. Keep making your case. Smart companies want to find out how well their procedures support what users need to do—especially procedures that could reduce common support calls. Do new users invariably get stuck at Step 4? Does everyone in the test group misinterpret a certain key image? Does person after person expect to find a procedure that's missing altogether? Fixing these problems before the product ships, and before the text gets translated, could give the bottom line a boost.

The importance of testing end-user instructions was impressed on me during my internship at Magnavox CATV, a manufacturer of cable TV network equipment. My fellow intern, Tim Voorheis, and I had just finished documenting how to use a cable TV box, at that time a new contraption. Tim and I had interviewed engineers, played with the device, written and illustrated all the steps, even color-coded the user tasks. We had created a mock-up of the printed piece we envisioned, including step-tabs that invited people to jump straight to the task they needed—the print equivalent of hotlinks. We had done everything we could think of to make this document foolproof. We had created, I was sure, a thing of beauty, something better

than either of us could have created alone. A winner.

One lunch hour, our mentor, Karen, snagged a colleague for an impromptu test. I couldn't wait to see the look of delight on our tester's face. Karen handed the woman our color-coded mock-up. Tim and I watched (quietly, as instructed) from behind. With the instructions in one hand and the remote in the other, our tester dutifully pressed the correct buttons ... and wondered why the cable TV box did not respond. How could we have anticipated that anyone would point the remote at the ceiling? Yet there she was, holding the remote straight up and down, moving her gaze back and forth from our pretty pages to the uncooperative remote.

In fact, we had illustrated the remote exactly that way—straight up and down. Our illustrations were two-dimensional, floating in white space with no context. It never occurred to us to tell people to aim the remote at the box. We had been blind to our assumption. Karen instantly knew what to do: revise our cover to show the remote pointed at the cable TV box.

Success! Without that simple 15-minute test, though, we would never have known that we had an information problem to solve.

I have been known to poke fun at editors who fancy themselves members of the “grammarati.” These are the types of inflexible folks who think rules are rules and the way they were taught in school is the way it is. No matter what. Why is this not true? A thoughtful defense of rules has its place. Of course, usage inevitably changes. Yesterday's no-nos are today's just-fines. *Enormity*, which today usually means “enormousness,” once widely meant “hideousness.” Years ago, anyone who used this word in today's sense would have been universally considered wrong.

Bryan Garner has developed what he calls a Language-Change Index, which gauges, on a scale of one to five, how widely accepted a given usage has

become. I find Garner's perspective fascinating and broad-minded: he defends usage guidelines even as he describes states of change.

What is one of the most often repeated rules of grammar that actually isn't a rule at all?

The first so-called rule that comes to mind is “Never end a sentence with a preposition.” (Are you hearing a certain English teacher's voice right now?) This “rule” has been called a “durable superstition,” a “remnant of Latin grammar,” an “artificial ‘rule,’” and “one of the top ten grammar myths.” One editor reports having seen many a “tangled sentence due to reluctance to end a sentence with a preposition.”

And were you taught never to start a sentence with a conjunction, like *and*, *but*, or *or*? Never to allow passive voice to be used? Never to slip in a sentence fragment like this one? Forget about those “rules,” too.

Of course, you have to understand the rules (and the nonrules) to know when, why, and how to break them. Try breaking that rule.

What advice can you share with writers who are thinking of authoring their first book?

What better way to get your name out there than to put it on the cover of a book? Anyone can self-publish now. If you've got a book in you, go for it.

Gather a good team: readers—lots of readers—and an editor, a page designer, an illustrator, a publishing expert, a publicist. (You can do it all yourself, but you'll miss opportunities, and you might do something you'll later regret, like mistyping Shakespeare's birth date.) If you hire professionals, prepare to spend a surprising amount of money. Consider it an investment in learning, like taking a course in publishing, except that instead of getting a grade, you end up with a sellable product.

Figure out how much time you'll need to pull your book together. Double that estimate. Then add a year.

Be willing to be wrong.

Writers are often voracious readers. What are you reading right now for pleasure? And, what book has been sitting on your shelf for far too long but you still haven't managed to find time to read it.

I can't wait to get back to other authors' books. How did you know? The book that has been sitting neglected on my nightstand too long is *The Man Who Loved China* by the prolific Simon Winchester. His writing gives me chills, and his subject matter always enlarges my world.

The book I'm reading now for pleasure is Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*. I look forward to discussing it with my husband; he's been recommending it for years. I used to consider reading a purely private indulgence, but I've come to relish book conversations. You learn a lot about people from their responses to a book you've read in common, especially when their responses differ from your own.

In fact, other people's responses always differ from your own. No two people ever read the same book or the same anything. When the writer in you comes to this realization, you gulp.

Where can *Intercom* readers get a hold of your book?

Forget what I just said. I hope that all of you will read the same book: *Word Up!* Print and ebook versions will be available from Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Powell's, etc., on 27 April 2013, National Tell a Story Day. Mark your calendar.

If you'd like a reminder, subscribe to my blog, where I post book news: www.HowToWriteEverything.com or email me at marcia_r_johnston@me.com and I'll add you to the super-ultra-exclusive, all-the-hip-people-are-on-it alert list.

Might you want to blog about this book? Contact my publicist, Jessica Glenn, MindBuck Media, Author Publicity and Public Relations, +1 (503) 998-8770, mindbuck@gmail.com, www.mindbuckmedia.com. She just might send you a PDF of the advance reader copy. **f**

Most successful independents also realize that networking is effective in obtaining referrals and work. Here's a suggestion though: Instead of seeking help for yourself while networking, interact with others with a personal goal of helping everyone whom you contact.

Let's say that you meet Jackie at an event. You "interview" her informally to learn what she is trying to accomplish. Then you ask: "How can I help you?" Perhaps you can give her the name of a potential client or someone who could provide an informational interview. You give graciously and freely of your knowledge and contacts. You must not expect anything in return. This is counterintuitive, of course, but giving freely primes the pump for you. I've done this for years and 45% of my current business comes from referrals from friends and colleagues.

22. Attend Trade Shows

Full disclosure: I have not had much success with exhibiting at trade shows up to now. But then again, I'm not sure I did the right things in the past. Perhaps I didn't select the trade show carefully enough or publicize my presence there. Maybe I could have had an interactive PowerPoint show on my laptop to highlight the benefits of buying my services to help draw people to the booth or had better banners and marketing material.

Even if you never exhibit at a trade show, you can still attend a show to do your stealth research on competitors and future clients.

23. Be Elected Leader of an Industry Group

You will receive great recognition and respect by being elected as a leader of an industry group; you'll also greatly enhance your brand. Your path to election will take a few years and a lot of volunteer work. Professional associations always seek good talent, and you'll quickly develop leadership skills.

Of course, you must be strategic and decide that it's the right group to serve as leader. Then, study the

organizational chart of the group and map out your path.

Make sure you know why you're going for the position (and yes, I think "ego" is a fine reason to drive yourself to serve, as long as you accomplish great things for the organization with all that ego energy).

24. Offer Free Consultations and Presentations

If introverts are recoiling from this idea, consider free, low-stress consultations so that you can demonstrate your expertise to individuals or small groups. You will also qualify them as clients in this experience.

On the other hand, extroverts can't wait to offer free presentations to existing or future clients as a great opportunity to showcase their expertise to many people at a time. Make sure that your handouts contain valuable information and clearly show how to contact you. You'll get new clients, referrals, and repeat business this way. BINGO!

25. Get Professional Awards and Other Recognition for Your Work

I remember our family's refrigerator door—it was covered with our school papers, our behavioral awards ("good citizen of the week"), and our Scout badges. Psychologists call it "positive reinforcement." We know it just feels darn good to be recognized for our accomplishments. (Thanks, Mom and Dad, for being excellent models and encouraging us to continue to strive to be better at everything!)

As adults, professional awards bring credibility and respect, which for business owners leads to referrals and repeat business. It's just plain fabulous to be recognized as an expert in our field. Eventually, it leads to money in the bank, too. BINGO!

We all realize that these awards don't just happen. Eight years ago, I set an intention to be recognized as an Associate Fellow (and later a Fellow) of STC. Then I strategically performed, volunteered, presented,

and published to put in place the credentials to earn that award (not to mention the 40 hours it took to document these activities for the application).

OK, so you've figured out what you need to do to earn your reward (and generally, you need to demonstrate breadth of service in many fields and other organizations). You've received your award, hopefully with a lot of fanfare and new clothes for the event, etc. What's next?

You'll need to implement your own publicity plan for your award. It won't be enough to merely post a copy of the award on your refrigerator! Here are some suggestions: Post on your website, blog about it, post it on LinkedIn, send press releases, add it to your bio and resume, and start looking for your next opportunity!

Yes, marketing *is* a lot of hard work. But then, so is starvation, and not nearly as much fun as playing Bingo. And if you are still afraid of failing at any tactic, remember the words of Samuel Beckett, which should inspire all marketers: "Try again. Fail again. Fail better."

Farewell

This will be my last column for *Intercom*. It's been a great nine years writing for STC independents, and in the process, I've learned more about business and marketing than I could ever have on my own. Thank you for your kind emails and contributions to the column. Special thanks to Betsy Frick, the former editor of this column, who passed on this great opportunity to me in 2003, and to my gentle editor, Liz Pohland. ■

ELIZABETH (BETTE) FRICK, *the Text Doctor* (efrick@textdoctor.com), teaches technical and business writing in companies and organizations nationally and edits medical documents. She holds a PhD in English from the University of Minnesota and is board-certified as a medical editor by the Board of Editors in the Life Sciences.

Mark Your Calendar

Organization events across the globe

F.Y.I. lists information about nonprofit ventures only. Please send information to intercom@stc.org.

1 29 Nov–1 Dec
The India Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication has scheduled their 14th Annual Conference at the Chancery Pavilion, on Residency Road, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India. For more information, contact: STC India
conferences@stc-india.org
www.stc-india.org/conferences/2012/

2 28–31 Jan 2013
Annual Reliability and Maintainability Symposium (RAMS) 2013 will be held at Rosen Shingle Creek Resort in Orlando, FL, 28–31 January. This year's theme is "Reliability, the Key to a Better Bottom Line." For more information, contact: RAMS
+1 (603) 863-2832
www.rams.org

4 3–7 April 2013
The American Society for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T) will hold the IA Summit in Baltimore, MD. For more information, contact: ASIS&T
asis@asis.org
<http://2013.iasummit.org/>

3 14–18 Feb
The 2013 American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Annual Meeting will take place at the Hynes Convention Center and nearby hotels in Boston, MA, from 14–18 February. For more information, please contact:
AAAS
+1 (202) 326-6450
meetings@aaas.org
www.aaas.org/meetings

5 14–17 April
The International Society for Performance Improvement (ISPI) will hold its Performance Improvement Conference at the Silver Legacy Resort in Reno, Nevada. For more information, contact:
ISPI
+1 (301) 587-8570
conference@ispi.org
www.ispi.org/AC2013

6 17–19 April
The American Society for Indexing (ASI) will be holding its annual conference at the Hotel Contessa in San Antonio, TX. For more information, contact:
ASI
conference@asindexing.org
www.asindexing.org/

7 5–8 May
The Society for Technical Communication celebrates its 60th anniversary with its annual Technical Communication Summit. The 2013 Summit takes place in the Hyatt Regency in Atlanta, GA. For more information, contact:
STC
stc@stc.org
<http://summit.stc.org>

* STC-related event

Toddlers and Tech Comm

BY ALYSSA FOX | Senior Member

MY KIDS ARE MY PRIDE AND JOY. Being their mom brings me my happiest moments, even when things are hectic. I also love what I do in my career. Using similar principles and tricks in both areas helps me balance my life in a way that keeps me busy, but fulfilled.

Plan, Plan, and Plan Again

Parenting requires planning, planning, and more planning. Being a working mom requires that I lay things out the night before, religiously update my calendar, and frequently communicate with other family members. If I forget to do those, it means one of my sons doesn't get his homework done, or misses a scout meeting if I have to work late because I didn't tell my husband. If you don't plan well as a parent, it's likely that someone else in your family will be negatively affected.

At work, if you don't plan well, it affects other people similarly. If you are working on a project with other writers,



The author (right) with her two children, Ronin (left) and Slade (center).

it's important to plan appropriate workloads and milestones for your tasks.

Otherwise, someone on your team could become overloaded and stressed, and eventually burn out. Or the project team could be waiting on you to deliver an important release if you plan ineffectively and don't incorporate realistic milestones into your overall schedule.

Keep it Together

Keeping track of all my kids' needs for school, scouts, and piano lessons, my needs for my job and STC responsibilities, and my husband's needs for his activities requires mega-organizational skills. I am a big list maker and use paper, calendars, and apps to keep us all coordinated. If Monday at my kids' school is Hawaiian Shirt Spirit Day and I send them in their crazy hats, thinking it's Crazy Hat Day, you can bet I won't hear the end of it for a while. I have also been teaching my sons how to keep their own calendars, and use them to track their own details. You can never start your kids too early on organization, right?

The same goes for technical communication. Handling multiple deliverables, people, and sometimes projects requires structure and tools to keep everything straight. Forgetting important details in user documentation or in an explanatory video can set up your users to fail, which none of us want to do.

Consulting the Experts

As their mom, I know my kids and how they tick probably better than anyone around. I can generally tell when they're actually sick or when they're faking. I can help them with their math homework still (my oldest is in 5th grade, so he hasn't surpassed my math recollection yet). But there are times when things come up with them that are outside the scope of my knowledge. When my six-year-old fell off a bunk bed and busted open his eye, I knew I should take him to the ER. I can't do stitches, and I doubt he would want me to.

Technical communicators should have a level of technical knowledge that facilitates their writing the big-picture view of how a product might work. But when they don't understand why a product is working a certain way, or how the architecture of the product affects the performance, it's prudent to bring in an SME to help them understand more fully. Taking a guess doesn't benefit the writer or the audience for which they are writing.

Agility is Key

Finally, remember that having kids *guarantees* that things will not always go according to plan. So while planning is important, having the ability to "bob and weave" when things come up is equally important. Nothing is more stressful than being so wedded to an idea or plan that any deviance sets you off. Flexibility is essential when dealing with kids.

Agility is also an important skill in technical communication. Being able to roll with the punches and changes to plans makes you a more valuable asset to your team than one who can't adapt to updates. Ideally, you'll be getting constant feedback from your users and will need to respond in a timely manner.

Summary

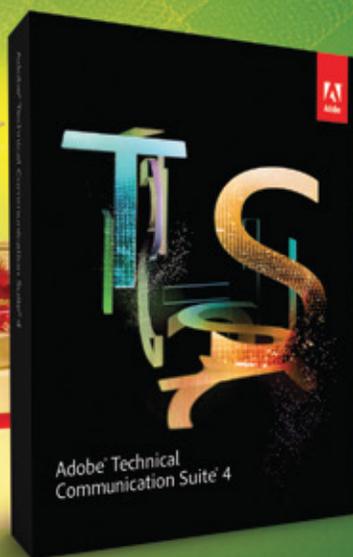
Balancing such an active life can be difficult at times, but remembering these principles has helped me as I juggle my family and professional responsibilities. Often, until you get things down on paper, you don't realize how much is really going on and where you can improve. As Marcus Aurelius said, "The secret of all victory lies in the organization of the non-obvious." Now please excuse me while I make my to-do list for tomorrow. ■

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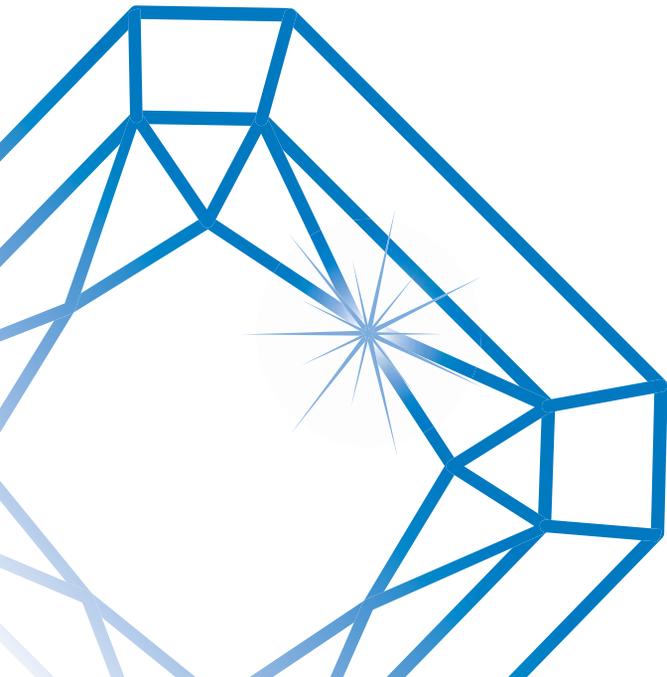


Contact STC Business Development Manager, Stacey O'Donnell, +1 (571) 366-1915 with any questions.

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