



OCTOBER 2015

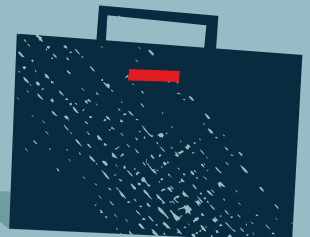
# intercom

THE MAGAZINE OF THE SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

## TECHNICAL DELIVERY: AN EXPANDED ROLE FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATORS 6

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT  
AND THE TECHNICAL WRITER 10

A PRACTITIONER'S GUIDE TO  
TEACHING TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION 12





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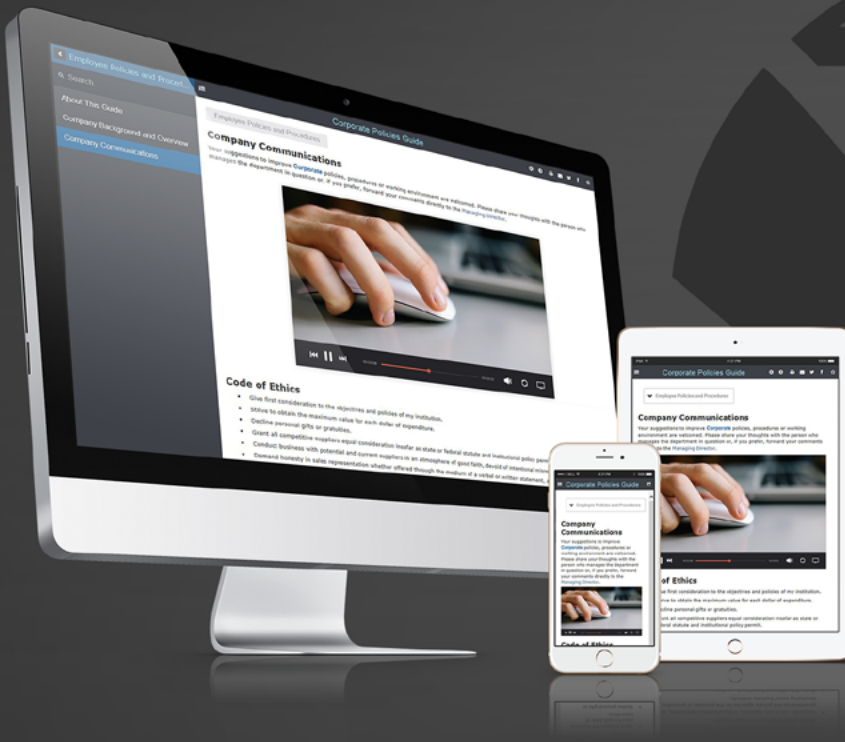
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# October 2015

Volume 62 | Issue 9

## 5 From the Editor

### FEATURES

#### YOUR CAREER

## 6 Technical Delivery: An Expanded Role for Technical Communicators

By TODD DeLUCA

How can you expand your responsibilities as a technical communicator and take the content you produce another step? By becoming a technical deliverer and knowing that the content you produce is received and used by your audience. This article shows how a technical communication department pushed beyond the traditional boundary of producing

content and entered the realm of publishing and reporting, for a result of more visible and accessible content.

## 10 Knowledge Management and the Technical Writer

By CHRISTINA MAYR AND LIZ HERMAN

Technical communicators strive to write usable documentation that provides the best and easiest solution, which means being part of knowledge management initiatives within an organization. Learn how a work team became involved in the knowledge management systems of its organization and improved their user documentation and entire user experience.

#### TEACHING & TRAINING

## 12 A Practitioner's Guide to Teaching Technical Communication

By MICHAEL OPSTEEGH

This article explores the variety of academic positions that are available to the well-suited practitioner and explains multiple methods for breaking into teaching technical communication. The author examines how a practitioner's skill set relates to teaching, explains the variety of educational settings and academic positions, and offers advice on how to apply and prepare for a teaching position.



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19



20



25

## SOCIETY PAGES

- 18 **New 2016 Gold Member Savings!**  
By STACEY O'DONNELL
- 19 **Save the Date for the 2016 Summit: 15–18 May 2016**  
By MOLLY JIN

## COLUMNS

- BEYOND THE BLEEDING EDGE
- 20 **Breaking Our Own Boundaries**  
By NEIL PERLIN

## STANDARD DEVIATION

- 23 **Finding Standards in the Wild**  
By ALAN HOUSER

## STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

- 25 **Twitter: Bringing a New Meaning to Serving Campus 24/7/365**  
By ELIZABETH ODERKIRK

## DEPARTMENTS

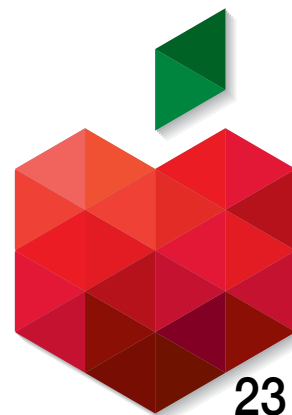
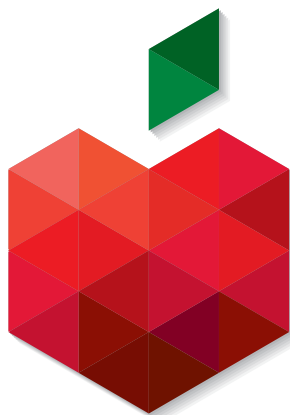
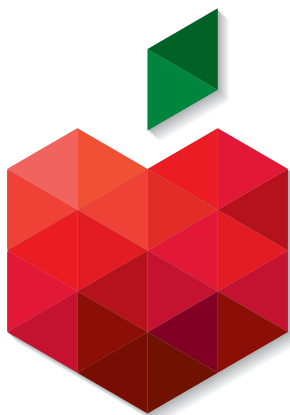
- FYI
- 27 **Mark Your Calendar**  
Organization Events Across the Globe

## MYJOB

- 28 **Being Your Own Boss**  
By MATT SULLIVAN

## ADVERTISERS

- C3 **Adobe**
- 2 **Boise State University**
- C2 **Doc-To-Help**
- C4 **MadCap Software**
- 4 **STC Affinity Program**
- 22, 24 **STC Membership**



23

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# A Note from the Editor



THE ARTICLES in this issue of *Intercom* focus on breaking boundaries and finding complimentary roles for which technical communicators are well suited—roles in delivery, knowledge management, teaching, and business.

In his article, Todd DeLuca calls technical communicators who work beyond just producing content to delivering it to users “technical deliverers.” He shows how a technical communication department went beyond the traditional boundary of producing content and entered the realm of publishing and reporting, for a result of more visible and accessible content.

Christina Mayr and Liz Herman believe that technical communicators strive to write usable documentation that provides the best and easiest solution. This means being part of knowledge management initiatives within an organization. In their article, they show how a work team became involved in the knowledge management systems of its organization and improved their user documentation and entire user experience.

Michael Opsteegh explores the variety of academic positions that are available to the technical communications practitioner and explains multiple methods for breaking into teaching technical communication. He examines how a practitioner’s skill set relates to teaching, explains the variety of educational settings and academic positions, and offers advice on how to apply and prepare for a teaching position.

Three columns in this issue also focus on breaking boundaries.

Alan Houser, guest columnist for Ray Gallon’s *Standard Deviation* column, has written “Finding Standards in the Wild.” He asks, “How can one judge the success of a standard?” and also whether the ISO standards can become more widely known and adopted among technical communicators. Elizabeth Oderkirk, guest columnist for Kirk St.Amant’s *Student Perspectives* column, provides a case study of Twitter use at Michigan State University, offering some best practices learned. I especially want to extend a sincere “thank you” to long-time columnist Neil Perlin who is retiring his *Beyond the Bleeding Edge* column after 14 years. His final column focuses on breaking boundaries by extending skills into new areas such as mobile, apps, augmented reality, the Internet of Things, and business.

Finally, check out two articles in the Society Pages about new Gold member savings (price drop to \$395) and Summit attractions in Anaheim in May 2016.

  
—LIZ POHLAND

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## intercom

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# Technical An Delivery: Expanded Role for Technical Communicators

By TODD DELUCA | *Senior Member*

## Introduction to the Problem

Do you know what happens to your content after you finish producing it? How confident are you that your audience receives it in a timely manner?

My guess is that there are times when technical communicators have put effort into a project or produced great content, only to discover that the people who were expected to get it either didn't receive it or know it was available. Or maybe you still get questions asking where your content is or when you're going to post it (even though it's already been published and available for some time).

Our technical communication team was encountering these situations often enough that it warranted a closer

look to see if there was a more effective way to make sure our audiences knew when and where to find the content that our team produced. We focus on software release documentation, so the content is both timely and critical for clients and support staff who need to understand software changes that impact their environments.

## What was the problem?

During this inspection to learn more, we discovered that there were unexpected gaps between when content was completed and when the intended audience finally received or learned about it. We had assumed there was a clear hand off of documentation, but found out that the messaging for

content availability varied, depending on who was leading a particular project or release. As a result, we received questions from people in the company who didn't know when or where to find content, even though the material was consistently posted and available in the same location. It turns out we weren't getting the word out quickly enough for stakeholders and we needed to bridge the communication gap, because what's the point in having great content if people don't know about it?

We were successfully doing our job of producing and providing good content, but there was a gap such that the message of availability of the content was not consistently making it through to our audience.

### What did we learn?

Our first concern was that maybe material was getting lost, posted to the wrong location, or maybe even deleted. For those conditions, we checked directories and links we provided and confirmed that the content was where it was expected to be and that people could access it. We next checked with our stakeholders to see if we could find the problem.

Initially, we thought that maybe our audience never understood or learned where we kept the content (and couldn't find it). However, with some polling and research we learned that in most cases they knew where to find content, but simply were not aware that new content was recently posted and available for them to review or retrieve. It came down to an issue of prioritization and communication. People are busy, they skim stuff, they don't pay attention, they multitask, and messages get lost or glossed over. Additionally, we found out that our readers prefer to be told what's happening and that they want easy, quick access to material—they're a group that has a lot going on and they don't have the time or inclination to self-serve and go looking for documentation.

This discovery was a mixed bag. We were successfully doing our job of producing and providing good content, but there was a gap such that the message of availability of the content was not consistently making it through to our audience. Clearly we needed to reset our assumptions and expectations if we were going to make progress toward closing the gap.

Fortunately, this was an excellent opportunity for our technical communication team to expand beyond our more traditional responsibilities and gain recognition for identifying and addressing a known problem. Since the core issue was primarily a communication problem, we already had the necessary skills and experience to implement a workable solution.

### What was the solution?

So how did we bridge this communication gap and spread the word about availability of our content? We created a new team function called Product Delivery, whose primary purpose is to ensure that our stakeholders and audiences know about and have easy access to the content that the technical communication team produces.

In our company, when content is completed and ready for distribution, it is posted to a central location (like SharePoint or an intranet site) for others to retrieve. When this happens, the technical writer sends an email and notifies the project lead and a few other people that the material is available and provides a link to the file or source location. Previously, this was where the role for the technical communication team stopped. It was up to the project lead to notify a broader audience and provide a link or instruction on the availability of material (such as code or documentation). Now, with the product delivery function, this handoff step becomes a point where content is tagged and picked up for delivery (along with other recent content changes).

### How does this product delivery function work?

The closest analogy I can think of for product delivery is the model of magazine or newspaper publishing. For these publications, content (such as articles) is gathered on a regular schedule, collated, and packaged into a readable format. The finished product is then shipped to outlets (such as a newsstand) for readers to pick up or it is delivered directly to subscribers. Our product delivery process is similar to this. At the beginning of the week we poll and identify all of the content that has been created or updated in the past week. After that we gather and compile the content changes into a list (with hyperlinks to the source). We then copy the list into a product delivery template and publish our Product Delivery Report using two distribution methods. One we post as a PDF to SharePoint (like a newsstand) for readers to retrieve it. The other, we send (deliver) via email to subscribed readers using internal and external mailing distribution lists.

### What is in the report?

The Product Delivery Report is a simple summary sheet with a graphic banner image at the top (to look nice) and then a bulleted listing of the files and documents that have changed in the last week (see following sample). We also include the report date (when it is distributed) and a very short description of the report (for new subscribers who don't know what the report is). Note that both the PDF and email versions of the report look virtually the same, so the look and feel of the report is consistent regardless of the delivery method.

To organize the report contents, we use a basic outline in a nested bulleted list format. There are a few main sections that keep content from the same source grouped together. We also provide upper-level hyperlinks in the

report to Web-accessible folders and list the documents that have changed in that folder. An advantage of this approach is that subscribers are directed to the same location and retrieve the latest version of any posted document when they go there. Pointing to a location (instead of a file) acts like a basic navigation map and reminds subscribers where they should look for updates so that they can remember the spot and look for updates themselves. Also, folder links don't break if a filename changes, there are fewer individual links to test or validate, and it takes less time to put the report together.

To give more context for each changed document that is listed in the report, we specify the type of change (new or modified) and the date the file was posted or modified. This metadata help subscribers better understand the changes so that they don't have to spend a lot of time visiting a website to get the extra file information.

### Who do we serve with this function?

There are two primary audiences we intend to serve with the product delivery function and report. The first group includes internal stakeholders and staff who need or would like to know what and when information is being published and where it is located. The second group is those within the organization that interface and talk with our clients, including support and our services team members. Both groups are regularly reminded and notified of all of the recent documentation and file changes that they need to know about and that they can share or reference with clients (who ask them about it).

A third, unexpected group that we serve with product delivery are the clients themselves (who often ask about the documentation). Our company uses a shared intranet site to retrieve much of the same published material that our technical communication team produces, so that has become the source for a newer "client" version of the Product Delivery Report, which we began publishing a couple of months after the original Product Delivery Report. As a result of the product delivery function and report, the reach of technical communication has expanded to a direct audience and a derivative delivery report.

### Why should you consider product delivery?

Do you work with busy people? Of course you do. Busy people have to juggle and prioritize lots of things, including content. With more and more data and information to juggle, the status and location of content that they may benefit from can be lost in the shuffle.

This is one reason to consider adding product delivery services to your repertoire. It helps you stand out in an organization by meeting an underserved need of an audience that simply wants to know what content has changed and where they can get it so that they are kept current and can quickly pass on information to their stakeholders. You also will likely

## Don't just be a content creator, take it a step further and become a content deliverer as well.

receive positive recognition across the organization for the work (you were already doing, but people weren't paying as much attention).

Do you or your team ever get the same question asked multiple times? Before we became product deliverers, we were regularly asked where and when documentation would be available (often after it had been posted and sometimes by the same people). Now that we send weekly reports directly to almost the entire company, our team no longer gets these types of questions. We also don't rely on other people to answer questions about our work or need them to help spread the word about our documentation.

Given the amount of time and effort it takes to produce and publish our reports, the benefits of adding product delivery services has far outweighed any costs (which are mostly a little extra work). On average, it takes our team about two hours to review, compile, and publish the reports that directly reach hundreds of people each week.

Our writers don't object to the minor adjustments and they appreciate that their work is more visible because it is promoted and directly pushed to readers. We benefit from the increased visibility and perceived extra value our new service brings to the company. Who doesn't like to be recognized and appreciated for their work?

### Summary

We should all be thinking about how we can enhance our value and increase visibility within an organization—product delivery is one possible and effective way to do both.

I encourage other technical communicators to consider a similar proactive approach and to regularly notify their audiences that content is available and give them easy access to it. Don't just be a content creator, take it a step further and become a content deliverer as well. Just telling people more about your work can pay big dividends.

What do you think? Can you see benefits to adding or implementing this sort of activity? **I**

*TODD DELUCA (techcomm todd@gmail.com) has over 15 years of experience as a senior technical writer and currently manages a technical communication department. His professional background includes graphic design, editing, client communication, and software development documentation. Todd is an STC Senior Member and Conference Chair of the 2016 Summit. Other recent STC activities include Philadelphia Metro Chapter president (receiving a Distinguished Chapter Service Award) and Community Affairs Committee outreach team member. Todd has an MA in technical and scientific communication from Miami University (Ohio) and speaks at various regional and national conferences.*



# Knowledge Management

---

AND THE

# Technical Writer



BY CHRISTINA MAYR | *Member*  
and  
LIZ HERMAN | *Senior Member*

IN ORGANIZATIONS THAT PROVIDE products and services to customers, knowledge should be identified, captured, leveraged, and shared throughout various departments and functions. When documentation, marketing, and technical support all interact with customers, successful knowledge management can ensure a competitive, well-performing company with loyal customers. However, this often does not happen for various reasons and results in what is known as *knowledge loss*.

Customers feel the effects of knowledge loss the most. When product documentation doesn't solve a specific problem, the customer will turn to other sources, including online searches, user forums, and finally, calling customer support. What many of them find during their search for answers is that the official documentation doesn't provide enough information to solve their problem, so after a long wait on the phone, customer support might be able to provide a non-documented solution.

This knowledge loss affects us as well. As technical communicators, we strive to write usable documentation that provides the best and easiest solution, which means being part of knowledge management initiatives within an organization. This gives authors indirect access to customers' pain points that could be addressed by enhancing existing documentation or reaching the customer in a different way, such as through instructional videos.

When documentation, marketing, and technical support all interact with customers, successful knowledge management can ensure a competitive, well-performing company with loyal customers.

When Extreme Networks, a networking solutions company, acquired another company, the two technical support centers realized they needed to manage their knowledge differently. This gave rise to the need for Knowledge Centered Support (KCS), where support staff write knowledge articles as cases come in. These articles address the customer's specific concern and link to other sources, such as official Extreme documentation. These articles get linked to, reused, and improved upon, thereby reducing knowledge loss and enhancing knowledge transfer between two formerly disparate groups.

The new technical support group became known as the Global Technical Assistance Center (GTAC), and as engineers published knowledge articles for customer consumption, quality metrics started to improve as customers had a much better experience when contacting

customer support, both on the phone and in user forums (moderated by Extreme).

When the technical writing group at Extreme (known as InfoDev) became aware of GTAC's efforts, they quickly realized that they could acquire the needed access to customers. InfoDev crafted a plan to address these articles within the technical documentation with the goal to provide solutions in a less conspicuous way and possibly reduce the need for customer support.

Reducing the most expensive customer support points of contact is a goal of many organizations as phone support is particularly expensive. Technical writers can contribute to this effort by embarking on initiatives that transition high-volume customer inquiries to other customer service avenues, such as self-service portals that provide solutions to common problems.

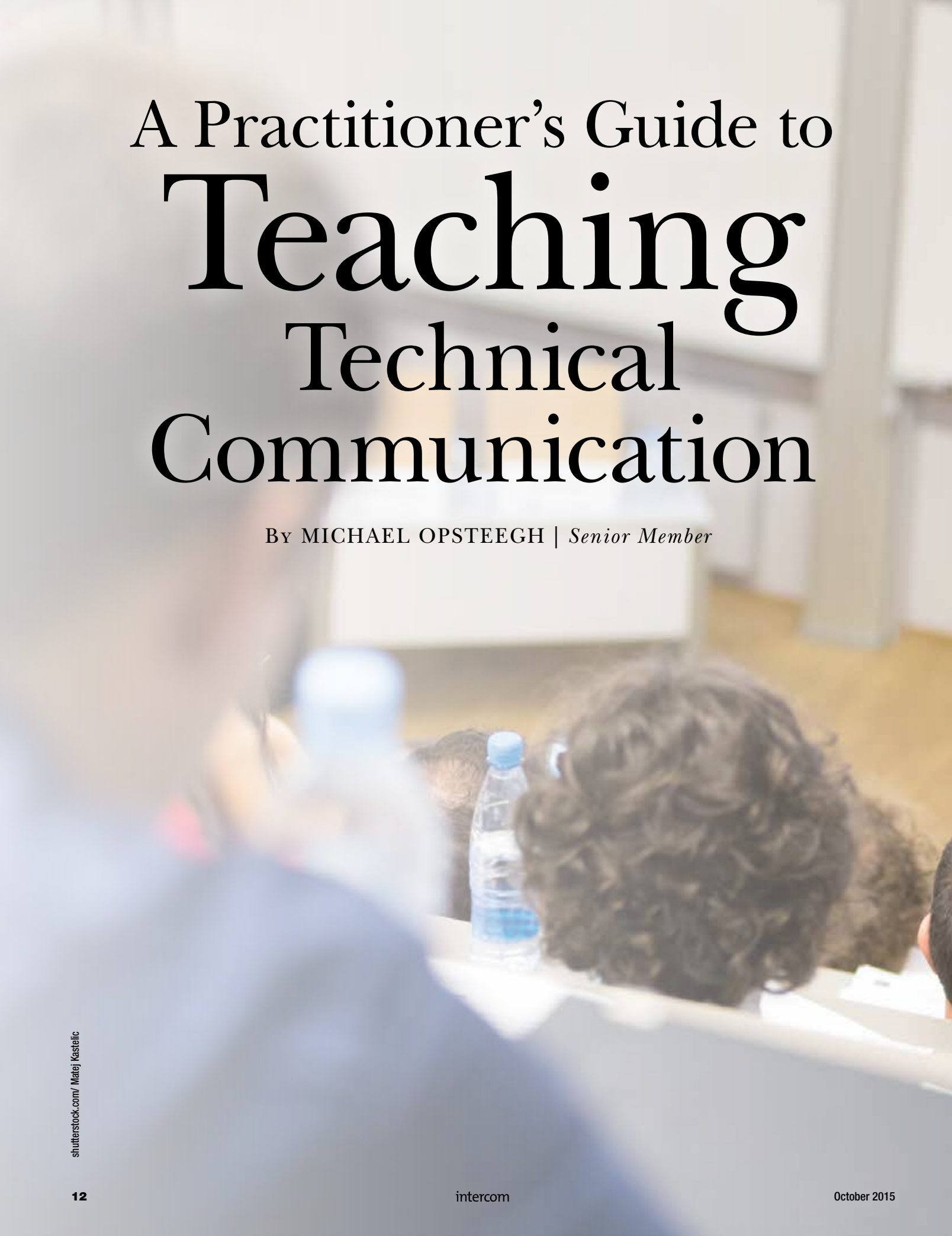
In a case study spanning five years, one organization recognized that its high-volume calls were things that could be either automated (such as password resets) or handled via self-service inquiries (such as how to initiate a project). Technical writers should look for these types of opportunities to help organizations make their customer service outreach better and reduce overall costs. Finally, technical writers can investigate how customer support tools are used and look for ways to improve written support in self-service portals, wikis, and company blogs.

At Extreme Networks, the InfoDev team is doing just that. By being part of the GTAC process, InfoDev has an opportunity to see what users need support with. This allows the authors to not only assist in making GTAC knowledge articles better, but also transfer that knowledge into the official documentation. InfoDev also monitors customer discussions on the user forums and looks for ways to proactively address their issues through improving existing documentation or by creating different solutions to hopefully reduce the speed at which users become frustrated.

Today's technical communicator must be aware of and engaged in the multiple resources customers use to find information and solve problems. By becoming involved in the knowledge management systems in your organization, you can improve the documentation and hopefully inspire lasting changes in the entire user experience. **1**

CHRISTINA MAYR ([christinaemayr@gmail.com](mailto:christinaemayr@gmail.com)) is the technical editor and content manager at Extreme Networks. She first became interested in knowledge management while working alongside engineers solving customer problems and decided to investigate this topic as part of her Master's thesis. Christina is also the president of the STC Carolina Chapter.

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# A Practitioner's Guide to Teaching Technical Communication

BY MICHAEL OPSTEEGH | *Senior Member*



TEACHING TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION can be a fun and rewarding experience, and it's an important and worthy endeavor. By teaching tech comm, you not only help advance the profession by training those who wish to enter the field, but you also help those who wish to enter other fields understand and appreciate the value of tech comm.

While teaching tech comm is a noble cause, it's also a lot of work. It requires many hours outside of the classroom, preparation, and patience. Class planning, office hours, late-night grading, mentoring, and responding to student questions takes a lot of time and isn't for the faint of heart. Weighing the tangible cost of time against the intangible reward of helping students become better writers, why would anyone teach tech comm? How does one begin teaching tech comm? And what are the challenges tech comm practitioners face in the classroom?



This article draws upon my own experience and informal conversations I've had with a handful of practitioners who teach part-time or who have transitioned into teaching full-time.

## Assessing Your Interest

Why do you want to teach technical communication? This is the first question I ask when my tech comm friends approach me for advice. Knowing why someone wants to teach tech comm helps me assess their level of interest and gives me insight into what they know about the academic world. You might be interested in teaching tech comm for many reasons:

- ▶ You want to make a career change.
- ▶ You need more secure retirement benefits.
- ▶ You want to supplement your income.
- ▶ You genuinely desire to share your knowledge and experience with students.

Of the practitioners I've spoken to, their interest in teaching traverses some or all of these reasons. Let's consider each of them individually to help assess your interest.

**You want to make a career change.** While this is certainly a valid reason, you should ask yourself why you're drawn to teaching rather than instructional design, training, project management, or other areas related to tech comm. Are you trying to escape some unpleasantness in your current job, or are you really compelled to teach?

**You need more secure retirement benefits.** While most full-time and some part-time professor appointments offer excellent retirement benefits, they aren't as plentiful as they once were. Many professors contribute a sizable portion of their paychecks to their pensions and contribute additional funds to a 403(b), similar to a 401(k) in the United States, to supplement their retirement incomes.

**You want to supplement your income.** Teaching part-time will generate additional income that you can use to pay bills or stash in your retirement accounts. Teaching part-time or adjuncting, however, doesn't pay a lot for the amount of time required. The national average pay for adjuncts in the United States in 2010 was \$2,700 per three-unit course (see "A Portrait of Part-Time Faculty Members"). This sounds like a lot of money, but when you consider the time spent in and out of the classroom, it's about \$10 per hour (Wessler).

**You genuinely desire to share your knowledge and experience with students.** This is by far the best reason for considering teaching tech comm, and some might say it's the only reason. That passion for fostering the growth of new writers and editors will help sustain your patience and perseverance through late-night grading sessions, bureaucratic idiosyncrasies, and even apathetic students. Teaching is challenging work, and your tenacity and skills are the key ingredients to your success.

If you're still interested after this sobering assessment, let's discuss the various settings and types of teaching appointments that are available.

## Breaking into Teaching

The path you take depends on where you are in your career, your education level, and your experiences. Based on these variables, you might want to teach in any of the following settings:

- ▶ Universities and colleges
- ▶ University extensions and continuing education venues
- ▶ Vocational Schools

Teaching is challenging work, and your tenacity and skills are the key ingredients to your success.

## Universities and Colleges

Universities and colleges are the traditional academic setting. Technical communication classes are often offered as electives in business, engineering, mathematics, or other degree programs, or they are offered within a dedicated technical communication program. The courses may be offered by English, business, or engineering departments and are taught by tenure-track professors or adjunct faculty, often called lecturers or instructors.

**Tenure-track faculty.** Tenure-track positions are full-time appointments. They generally require a PhD in the field in which you want to teach. Tenure-track positions are becoming more and more rare as colleges and universities try to cut costs by relying on lower-paid, expendable adjuncts. With so few tenure-track positions open, you have to be willing to relocate to the states where the jobs are available. Candidates with academic backgrounds are favored, but it is possible to pick up a PhD later in life and transition into teaching. The tenure-track positions may also require that you teach some general education classes and will require you to participate in committees and student advising. Depending upon the school, you may be required to "publish or perish," meaning that you're continually conducting research and writing articles and books to burnish the university's reputation.

**Adjunct (contingent) faculty.** Adjunct faculty positions generally require a Master's degree. Adjuncts are often called contingent faculty because they're hired on a part-time, as-needed basis. You might want to adjunct if you want to keep your day job and teach a class a semester in the evenings. Adjuncts are paid significantly less than their tenure-track counterparts, but adjuncts aren't obliged to sit on committees, participate in governance, manage programs, or advise students. They are often obliged, however, to hold unpaid office hours. Because

the work is contingent, and you have no control over when classes are offered, you may need to work with your employer to accommodate your teaching schedule.

### University Extensions and Continuing Education

Some tech comm courses and programs may be offered through a university's extension. These courses are designed for nontraditional students who have already started their careers or who are looking to start a second career. Classes are sometimes offered for credits, but are often offered for continuing education credits (CEUs), which aren't applicable to degree programs. Special courses may be designed for corporate clients and delivered on the work site. Instructors of extension courses are nonsalaried and are hired on a per-class basis. The pay varies greatly by institution.

### Vocational Colleges

Vocational schools frequently offer tech comm or business communication courses. These courses are for vocational degrees, and the credits often don't transfer to other colleges and universities. The level of education and experience required vary greatly by school; some require a Bachelor's degree while others a Master's or PhD. The compensation for teaching varies dramatically from school to school, and vocational schools typically don't pay as well as the colleges and universities.

### Gaining Experience

Now that you have an idea of the setting in which you'd like to teach and the level of education required to get there, you need to start building professional experiences that demonstrate engagement with the profession, knowledge of contemporary issues, and the ability to present information to an audience. Many of these suggestions are advisable of all practitioners even if they aren't interested in teaching tech comm.

#### Present at conferences like the STC Summit.

Developing and presenting an engaging and contemporary topic at a regional or international conference is a great way to develop your skills as a researcher and presenter. Don't forget to write the paper for the conference proceedings so you have a published record of your topic. A proceedings paper is an article that covers the information presented at the conference and documents any research you conducted.

**Present to STC chapters.** You don't have to save all your great presentation ideas for conferences. Presenting to local STC chapters is great way to build your repertoire and sharpen your ability to answer challenging questions extemporaneously and think on your feet when your example doesn't resonate with the audience. Even the best-planned presentations can go awry, so it's a good idea to learn how to adapt.

**Present to other professional organizations.** If you're presenting to an STC chapter or to another organization,

contact the local tech comm faculty and ask them to promote the event to their students. This will not only help give you more exposure, but it would benefit the students and chapter by building those connections.

Although, I placed heavy emphasis on giving presentations, this is not to say that presenting is the same as teaching. They're related in the same way a sprint is related to a triathlon. The presentation is one short part of the longer, sustained, and varied endeavor of teaching.

Flexing your presentation skills outside of the friendly confines of STC will help you learn to adapt to unfamiliar situations, people with varying attitudes toward technical communication, and different levels of familiarity with the topic. Presenting to other groups also helps strengthen your credibility as a presenter.

#### Contact the local university and offer to guest lecture.

This is a great way to introduce yourself to the faculty at your local college or university. You can often find the faculty names in the schedule of classes and their email addresses in the campus directory online. Send the professor an email a few weeks prior to beginning of the semester, when he or she is likely to be putting the syllabus together. Name the course you're offering to speak at (you got the course title from the schedule of classes), list three to five topics you could speak on, and ask if there's any room in the class schedule for you to guest lecture. If you don't receive a response, don't feel bad—professors have a lot to do with few resources. Try again another semester.

**Conduct workshops.** Conducting a half-day or full-day workshop is the closest many practitioners get to teaching: you have a presentation that must be sustained over several hours, you have activities to reinforce the concepts you're teaching, and you often have a learning assessment at the end. You could conduct workshops for your employer, an STC chapter, or as part of a preconference event.

**Publish articles.** For a tenure-track position, you'd want to publish articles in a peer-reviewed journal like *Technical Communication*. For adjunct positions, publishing articles in professional magazines like *Intercom* certainly helps bolster your credibility. Like presentations, publishing articles demonstrates a certain level of engagement with the profession, your desire to continue to learn, and your desire to share your knowledge.

### Projecting Yourself as an Instructor

Landing an academic job is very different from landing any other job, but there are some similarities. Don't forget the basics.

**Develop a curriculum vitae.** The curriculum vitae (CV), like your résumé, outlines your contact information, educational background, your work experiences, and accomplishments. In addition, your CV should also include details about your areas of interest, grants, honors, awards, publications, presentations, and professional memberships (see "Curricula Vitae (CVs) versus Resumes"). While you should distill your résumé down

to two pages, the details included in your CV may span several pages. For information on assembling a CV, check out the resources available through the Online Writing Lab (OWL) at Purdue.

**Start cultivating references.** Networking and references are important to every job search, and academic positions are no different. Keep in touch with conference organizers, chapter leaders, and faculty for whom you've guest lectured.

**Develop a portfolio of targeted writing samples.** Some academic applications require writing samples. Literature professors would include research papers or journal articles. A tech comm professor might also include those items, but it might be more appropriate to include technical documents that show your proficiency in the field. Check with the department chair to find out what types of writing samples the committee would consider.

## Getting Your Foot in The Door

One of the standard requirements on every faculty application is previous teaching experience. How do you gain experience if no one will hire you without experience? This is an age-old catch-22 situation. Your path to teaching tech comm depends upon where you are in your career and education, your publications and presentations, and how well the faculty know you. Here are some suggestions to help you get started.

**Teach classes as a grad student.** If you're enrolled as a graduate or PhD student, the best way to gain teaching experience (and reduce your tuition) is to become a teaching associate (TA). TAs teach lower-division classes under the supervision of a faculty member. While the syllabus and course materials are often prescribed to them, TAs lead the class discussion, grade the assignments and tests, and record final grades. There's limited funding for TAs, so it can be competitive.

**Volunteer as a member of a tech comm program's advisory board.** This one surprised me, but I know a few people who started teaching this way. Many tech comm programs have advisory boards that are comprised of industry leaders and practitioners who meet with the faculty regularly to explain what they expect students to know when they graduate and describe the current trends in the market. The faculty might explain the limitations of the program or state and institutional requirements to adjust the practitioners' expectations. Through this dialogue, the curriculum is regularly revised to address the needs of the market. Also through this dialogue, faculty and practitioners connect. When a class comes up that needs an instructor, the faculty may invite a promising advisory board member to teach it.

**Reach out to your alma mater.** If you made it through grad school and never had the opportunity to be a TA, reach out to some of your former professors. If you graduated within the past five years, and they remember you, they might be able help you figure out how deep the

adjunct pool is (whether they have enough classes for their current adjuncts, or whether they have too many).

**Apply everywhere.** If all else fails, play it by the numbers and apply everywhere you see an open position. This is particularly true if you're looking for a tenure-track position. Tenure-track searches are nation wide.

**Apply to one place over and over again.** This is a long shot, but it worked for me. If you apply to the adjunct pool every semester for several years, you might catch the department chair when a class suddenly becomes available.

If your teaching experience is a little thin, your associations with faculty members are critical. Establish those connections early by inviting faculty to presentations, offering to guest lecture, and volunteering to sit on the advisory board.

## Preparing for Classes

Long before you ever set foot in the tech comm classroom, you need to prepare. Reading the literature on technical communication, gathering resources, and planning classes takes time, but it'll help you prepare to demonstrate lessons for interview panels and develop your classes when you when you're hired. The following suggestions will help you get started.

**Read journal articles.** STC's *Technical Communication*, IEEE's *Transactions on Professional Communication*, and ATTW's *Technical Communication Quarterly* are all dedicated to technical communication research. Subscriptions to these journals require that you become a member or pay a nominal fee. If you want to comb through past articles, they often reside in databases that are locked behind a paywall. Find out if your local public or university library has a subscription to these databases so you don't have to pull out your credit card each time you want to read an article.

**Read technical communication textbooks.** Pearson Higher Education, Oxford University Press, and Baywood Publishing Company each offer a wide range of tech comm textbooks. Since textbooks can be expensive, check your public or university library or find used copies online. Review texts to determine which seem to offer the best advice, are the best organized, and the most up to date. When you're evaluating textbooks for courses you're teaching, keep price and availability in mind for the sake of your students.

**Gather examples of good and bad technical communication and add your notes.** You'll need real-life examples to analyze and discuss in class. Collecting and evaluating these pieces takes time, so start early. Add notes or create a spreadsheet to catalog each piece and record your own thoughts so you can remember why you selected each item.

**Look at course syllabi online.** Plug popular course names into your favorite search engine and check out the syllabi that come up. Course requirements may vary drastically from school to school, but you can find such commonalities among them as which textbooks and articles

seem to be the most popular, which assignments seem to work, and which topics are the most prevalent.

**Develop in-class projects.** No one wants to sit through a three-hour lecture. No one can absorb all that information, nor should they sit still that long. In-class activities break up the time, engage the students, and reinforce lessons by giving students the opportunity to apply what they just heard or read. Developing in-class activities takes creativity and thoughtfulness, and your first ideas aren't usually your best. You might get ideas from colleagues or from books and articles.

**Take a couple of classes.** They could be tech comm classes, but they don't have to be. Preferably, take classes from different professors. What does each professor do well, and what could they improve on? Try to do well in the class, so you have an understanding of the struggles students face. Study the classroom dynamic as much as or more than the subject of the class. As a current student you'll have access to the university library and access to some of those textbooks and journal databases I mentioned earlier (well worth the price of tuition!).

Yes, I just assigned you a lot of homework here. You might try some of these suggestions while you're trying to get your foot in the door, but you'll try all of them at some point throughout your teaching career.

## Reality Check

You've probably heard the pejorative expression, "Those who can't do teach," which infers that people pursue academic careers because they lack the skills to become practitioners. This statement couldn't be further from the truth. Teaching requires analytical and critical thinking,

organization, and the ability to communicate difficult and abstract concepts. These skills overlap greatly with the skills required of practitioners. However, teaching also requires management, advanced presentation, and interpersonal skills to effectively manage a classroom, adapt to situations, and accommodate a wide range of learning abilities.

Practitioners need to understand that teaching a class is not the same as presenting at a conference. Teaching requires sustained long-term planning and preparation, specific learning objectives, adherence to institutional standards, and fair and detailed grading criteria.

Whether you want to pursue a tenure-track position or adjunct on top of your regular job, your skills as a tech comm practitioner, presenter, and author and your desire to share your knowledge with the next generation of tech comm professionals will prove to be key ingredients to your success in the classroom. ■

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## RESOURCES

Here are a few of the resources mentioned throughout this article.

### Curriculum Vitae

Online Writing Lab (OWL) at Purdue University, <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/641/1>

### Journals

*Technical Communication*. Society for Technical Communication (STC), [www.stc.org/publications/technical-communication](http://www.stc.org/publications/technical-communication)

*Technical Communication Quarterly*. Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW), [www.attw.org/publications/tcq](http://www.attw.org/publications/tcq)

*Transactions on Professional Communication*. Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE), <http://pcs.ieee.org/transactions-of-professional-communication>

### Textbooks

Baywood Publishing Company, <https://baywood.com/books/BooksBySeries.asp?series=7>

Oxford University Press, <https://global.oup.com/ushe/disciplines/english/business-and-technical-writing-courses>

Pearson Higher Education, <http://www.pearsonhighered.com/educator/discipline/Technical-Communication/91000068.page>

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"A Portrait of Part-Time Faculty Members." Coalition on the Academic Workforce. 14 June 2012. [www.academicworkforce.org/CAW\\_portrait\\_2012.pdf](http://www.academicworkforce.org/CAW_portrait_2012.pdf)

Wessler, Seth F. "Your College Professor Could Be On Public Assistance." NBC News. 6 April 2015. [www.nbcnews.com/feature/in-plain-sight/poverty-u-many-adjunct-professors-food-stamps-n336596](http://www.nbcnews.com/feature/in-plain-sight/poverty-u-many-adjunct-professors-food-stamps-n336596)



# New 2016 Gold Member Savings!

BY STACEY O'DONNELL | *Director of Member and Corporate Engagement*

WE OPEN THE 2016 membership season with some exciting news. Our Gold Value Package membership, once priced at \$425, has been **reduced to \$395!** Renew your membership or join today and enjoy benefits that build your professional career and help you stay ahead of your coworkers.


For new members considering the 2016 Gold Value Package, now is a great time to join STC because you'll get the next couple of months of 2015 for free. This will give you plenty of time to take advantage of your Gold exclusive benefits, including:

1. Five live or recorded webinars
2. Free chapter membership
3. 20% off all online courses
4. Early Bird registration pricing for STC's annual conference in Anaheim, CA, 15-18 May, any time during the year
5. Ten free print issues of *Intercom* magazine
6. All Classic benefits

Here's something new you may not know is coming to STC members this fall! We are re-launching our Certified Professional Technical Communicator (CPTC) program. This program will offer a three-tiered professional certification: Foundation, Practitioner, and Expert. STC members will receive a

\$245 savings when registering for the CPTC exam. And the Gold Value Package will be even more valuable for those members collecting CEU credits for their CPTC certification.

Year after year, the Gold membership category has extremely high join and renewal rates. This means that STC members feel it provides great value for the cost. But, don't forget, that all membership categories continue to receive the same Classic benefits, such as—online subscriptions to the award-winning *Intercom* magazine and *Technical Communication* journal; a personalized education report card; access to the Salary Database; our library of over 140 free, on-demand seminars; discounts from Liberty Mutual, MadCap, Office Max, Lenovo, UPS, and others with our Affinity Program; member-only pricing on STC webinars, online courses, recorded sessions, and the annual Summit; a 14-day advance viewing on all jobs posted to the STC Job Bank; and networking opportunities across the globe.

I invite you to go for the Gold in 2016! Renew your STC membership or join today and be a part of your Society. Visit [www.stc.org/membership](http://www.stc.org/membership) for more information or email [membership@stc.org](mailto:membership@stc.org) with any questions. We look forward to a successful 2016! 

## STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION

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There were 601 copies of INTERCOM published in September 2015. The average for the preceding 12 months was 515. The paid/requested outside-county mail subscriptions for the September/October 2015 issue were 561; the average for the preceding 12 months was 470. Total distribution for September 2015 was 561. The average for the preceding 12 months was 470. Twenty free copies of INTERCOM were distributed by mail in September 2015 and the average number of free copies distributed during the preceding 12 months was 25. Twenty copies of INTERCOM were not distributed in September 2015, and the average number of copies not distributed during the preceding 12 months was 20. The percent paid/requested circulation in September 2015 was 93 percent; for the preceding 12 months, percent paid/requested circulation was 95 percent.



# Save the Date for the 2016 Summit: 15–18 May 2016

**BY MOLLY JIN** | *Director of Meetings and Education*

STC'S TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION Summit 2016 will be held 15–18 May in Anaheim, California. Anaheim is situated in the heart of sunny Southern California and is renowned as a top meeting destination. STC has secured an Expo Hall and education meeting space all on one level of the newly renovated Anaheim Marriott, making it the ideal choice for the Summit. While we are sure you will be excited about all that the Summit has to offer, we hope you are just as excited about visiting Anaheim as STC is.

Anaheim and surrounding Orange County offer a plethora

of activities to suit every visitor's whim. We encourage you to explore all that Anaheim has to offer and consider extending your Summit stay to experience Southern California at its finest. Here is a quick peek at just a few of the things you can do in Anaheim:

- ▶ Orange County offers access to 42 miles of gorgeous California coastline and dozens of lively beach towns.
- ▶ Anaheim is renowned for its world class theme parks, several of which are within walking distance from the Anaheim Marriott.
- ▶ Sports enthusiasts take note: Anaheim is home to MLB's Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim, 2002



*Lobby at the Anaheim Marriott*

World Series Champions, and the NHL's Anaheim Ducks, winner of the 2007 Stanley Cup.

- ▶ The Anaheim GardenWalk, just steps from the Anaheim Marriott, is an outdoor shopping and dining mall. In addition, the brand new Anaheim Packhouse just opened, offering scrumptious bites from around the world, local fare, live music, history tours, foodie and gardening classes, craft beer, and specialty cocktails all under one roof.
- ▶ Up for an adventure? Orange County also offers whale watching tours, sportfishing, and boating.

Be sure to check out the Anaheim Convention and Visitors Bureau website at [www.visitanaheim.org](http://www.visitanaheim.org), where you'll find sample itineraries, maps of the area, and information on dining, shopping, beaches, and all the things that make Anaheim the perfect destination for the 2016 Summit.

So what are you waiting for? Now is the time to mark your calendar and make plans to join us at the 2016 Summit! Check out [summit.stc.org](http://summit.stc.org) for hotel and registration rates, and be on the lookout for the full schedule of events soon. We look forward to seeing you in Anaheim! **I**

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*Disney California Adventure® Park*

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# Breaking Our Own Boundaries



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BY NEIL PERLIN | STC Fellow

“Technical writers don’t use computers.” (Circa 1980, from two writers who turned down a job in a Digital Equipment Corporation documentation group that had just adopted word-processors.)

“Should Technical Writers Be Allowed To Use Computers?” (The title of a 1981 speech given by an STC senior member and reprised in one of my favorite “Beyond the Bleeding Edge” presentations at the STC Summit in the mid-2000s.)

“I’d never take a job that required me to use Word.” (Spoken by many people....)

“Content is key. Tools aren’t important.” (Overheard from multiple people between 1994 and today.)

“I’m not involved in the business side of my company’s operations.” (A common comment from many.)

“Social media? Over my dead body.” (Spoken by multiple people between the late 2000s through today.)

*Note: This column is based on my keynote presentation at TCUK ’15 in September 2015.*

IT’S HUMAN NATURE to stick with what we know and what we are good at. But in a profession whose bow wave is steadily moving forward *and opening new areas for technical communicators*, that attitude can stunt a career. Every job has to have boundaries based on the nature of the work, but many of the boundaries that I hear about are self-imposed, like the quotes above (all real, some from people I know). In this column, I’ll suggest three ways to break out of self-imposed boundaries—expand, extend, and avoid pigeonholes. I’ve discussed some of these in past columns but I consider them significant enough to repeat here.

## Expand (Your Current Strengths)

This is the simplest option. You already have strengths in particular areas, perhaps an authoring tool like Flare or RoboHelp or a methodology like Agile. Simply expand your strengths as they relate to that tool or methodology. For example, if you’re comfortable with Flare or RoboHelp at the GUI level, develop code-level expertise with the CSS or XHTML that’s below the surface. That will let you troubleshoot, let you make the tool do things that it might not be able to through the GUI, perhaps even make the tool do things that the vendors hadn’t thought of. All of which, for a small investment in time and effort, will make you more employable. And if you’re thinking that you’re not a codehead, that doesn’t mean you can’t turn yourself into one.



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](mailto:nperlin@concentric.net).

## Extend (Into New Areas)

This is the option with the greatest potential payoff because it takes you into areas in which there may be little or no competition. (Of course, look carefully to see if there's little or no competition because you're the first one in the area or because the area's connection to technical communication is tenuous. If it's tenuous, then the question becomes whether the connection might grow over time or whether it won't, in which case you're moving not only into a new area of technical communication but also into an entirely new field. Because of that uncertainty, never drop what you're currently doing to move entirely into the new area. I know people who have and who almost put themselves out of business when the new area failed.)

That said, what new areas are there? It's hard to say because new areas are only obvious after the fact, but here are some possibilities ranging from obvious to speculative.

## Mobile

It's risky to trust statistics on the Internet, but articles like this are very suggestive—"The world is going mobile. Mobile Now Exceeds PC: The Biggest Shift Since the Internet Began" at <http://searchengine-watch.com/sew/opinion/2353616/mobile-now-exceeds-pc-the-biggest-shift-since-the-internet-began>.

As mobile becomes more common, online documentation itself will have to shift to mobile form in order to follow the larger trend. Going mobile may not always be relevant—accounting software isn't likely to be used in the field, for example—but it's worth checking to see whether your company is going mobile and you just don't know about it. It's also fairly easy to take traditional technical documentation mobile as the latest versions of our familiar authoring tools now support it.

Going mobile will require that new material be written and coded following mobile best practice. Legacy but still-relevant material will

have to be rewritten and recoded for optimum performance in a mobile environment. The skills needed for that, like CSS and XHTML, may be intimidating at first but learning them will make you a better, more flexible, and more in-demand technical communicator.

## Apps

Once documentation goes mobile, the next step isn't too far—apps. It sounds like an unlikely career path for technical communicators, but creating online help was once viewed as equally unlikely. Just as tools like Doc-to-Help, RoboHelp, and others let us create online help without working in code, so too do new GUI app development tools. I'm personally certified in one called ViziApps ([www.viziapps.com](http://www.viziapps.com)); you can find a list of others at [www.markus-falk.com/mobile-frameworks-comparison-chart](http://www.markus-falk.com/mobile-frameworks-comparison-chart). And there are interesting areas of overlap between mobile documentation and mobile apps.

## Augmented Reality

Augmented reality may not seem relevant to technical communication, but think about it in terms of overlaying documentation or training on top of real environments, and possibilities suddenly appear. SDKs are available now for the Oculus Rift, Hololens, and Google Cardboard, the latter at <https://developers.google.com/cardboard/android/>. For more information about augmented reality and virtual reality in a technical communication context, see my column "Trying Virtual Reality on the Cheap With Google Cardboard" in the June 2015 issue of *Intercom* (<http://intercom.stc.org/2015/06/trying-virtual-reality-on-the-cheap-with-google-cardboard/>).

## Internet of Things

One of the most interesting new technologies around is the Internet of Things. Here's a definition from Wikipedia ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet\\_of\\_Things](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_of_Things)): "The Internet

of Things (IoT) ... is the network of physical objects or "things" embedded with electronics, software, sensors, and connectivity to enable objects to exchange data with the production, operator and/or other connected devices." Because the IoT is based on "things," there probably won't be much business writing traditional user documentation. But there might be business documenting the APIs and SDKs needed to create the IoT.

## Business

Few technical communicators I've met have a business background. This puts us at a disadvantage because the crucial thing about most technical communication is whether it supports our company's business strategy. Understanding that strategy, which requires at least a basic knowledge of finance, accounting, marketing, and strategic planning, lets us tailor our work to the company's benefit and, incidentally, makes it easier to request funding for new tools. (Note: I have proposed a mini-MBA track at the 2016 Summit that would give overviews of finance, accounting, etc. I have no idea whether the idea will be accepted, but it would be a quick and easy way for technical communicators to at least learn the basics. We'll see what happens.)

## Avoid Debate Pigeonholes

Like every other field, technical communication has its share of debates/feud—Word vs. Framemaker, online vs. print, Flare vs. RoboHelp, and so on. One that's been with us for years—I first encountered it in 1994—is the content vs. the tools debate. My experience is that this argument tends to be driven by the claim that tools are a minor issue and that the focus must be on the content. My response has always been that both are important. Without content to publish, tools are irrelevant. But without tools to publish the content, the content is irrelevant. The point is that if you adhere to either extreme in this or



any other debate, you pigeonhole yourself and limit your options.

### How to Break Out of the Boundaries.

Move out of your comfort zone. This is a cliché but, like many clichés, it has an element of truth. Make the effort to learn about new subjects that relate directly and indirectly to technical communication. STC meetings are a great way to do this, but look beyond STC as well, to professional societies related to the type of work you do, including technical interest groups like Boston's WebInno (<http://webinnovatorsgroup.com/>), Mobile Monday ([www.mobilemonday.net](http://www.mobilemonday.net)), and others such as those on meetup (see [www.meetup.com](http://www.meetup.com)).

### Summary

I've now in my 36th year in technical communication. In those years,

there have been times when things were slow and old lines of business or tools were dying. But there have never been times when things were boring or limited. Opportunities are out there if we just look for them and break out of the boundaries that prevent us from doing so.

This will also be my last Beyond the Bleeding Edge column. I began writing it in 2001, with a column on location-based wireless Web services. Subsequent columns covered topics like voice portals, the W3C, grid computing, responsive design, and the CSS float property. It's been a lot of fun but, after 14 years, time to shift focus. My thanks to past STC president Mark Hannigan and then Assistant to the President Deb Sauer who green-lighted the original Beyond the Bleeding Edge stem and gave birth

to this column, the editorial staff at *Intercom* over the years, and to everyone who's sent me suggestions, ideas, and critiques over the years. It's been a lot of fun. **I**

NEIL PERLIN ([nperlin@nperlin.cnc.net](mailto:nperlin@nperlin.cnc.net)) is president of Hyper/Word Services ([www.hyperword.com](http://www.hyperword.com)) of Tewksbury, MA. He has 36 years of experience in technical writing, with 30 in training, consulting, and developing for online formats and tools including WinHelp, HTML Help, JavaHelp, CE Help, XML, RoboHelp, Flare, and others now almost unknown. Neil is MadCap-certified for Flare and Mimic, Adobe-certified for RoboHelp, and Viziapps-certified for the ViziApps mobile app development platform. He is an STC Fellow and the founder and manager of the Beyond the Bleeding Edge stem, which ran at the STC Summit from 1999 until 2014.

**"I HAVE AN ENTIRE NETWORK OF SUPPORTERS, THANKS TO STC!"**

"Being a member of STC has allowed me to meet practitioners who I would normally never interact with as a student. I have received invaluable feedback and instruction from the people I have met through STC, and I know that I have an entire network of people who support me and desire to watch me succeed."

*S. Gale*

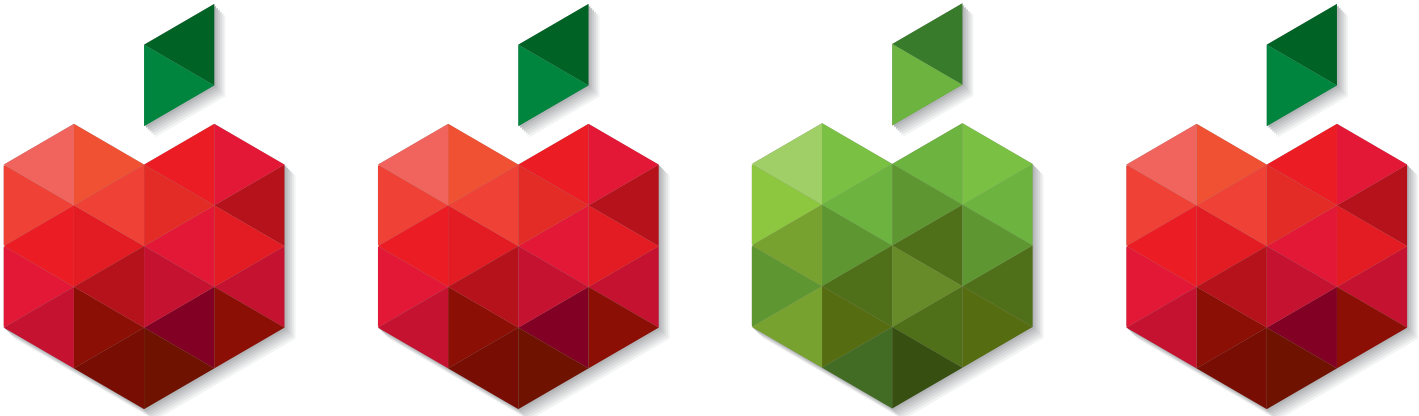
MY NAME IS SAMANTHA GALE AND

**I'M AN STC MEMBER**



# Finding Standards in the Wild

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BY ALAN HOUSER | Fellow

MANY YEARS AGO, I worked on an “industry standard” version of the UNIX operating system, designed by a software consortium to compete against Microsoft Windows. The product’s interoperability and security features, and its multi-vendor installed base, would make it a viable competitor.

However, only one computer manufacturer sold the product. There was no real benefit for customers to adopt the operating system, and Windows is still with us.

Standards exist in many forms, and have many positive effects. Standards ensure the interoperability of our computer networks, power grids, and transportation systems. Standards ensure that our food and drugs are safe. But not all standards are widely adopted, and not all standards are successful.

How can one judge the success of a standard? Metrics might include: awareness of the standard, its popularity, and whether the standard achieves its goals.

## Whither DITA?

Consider one popular technical communication standard. The Darwin Information Typing Architecture (DITA) has a substantial following. DITA is

Our guest columnist for this edition of Standard Deviation is former STC president Alan Houser. He raises an important question that leads us to ask yet another: should we have general, independent standards for technical communication, or are we best served by sections included in specific industry-related standards?

supported by a range of commercial and open-source software. Communities of practice have arisen to share knowledge and promote the use of the standard to meet organizations’ business goals (the Yahoo DITA-Users email list recently surpassed 4,000 members). Without question, DITA has achieved mindshare among a substantial number of technical communicators.

DITA is developed by the DITA Technical Committee, a working group within the OASIS standards body (<https://www.oasis-open.org>). OASIS funds its operations through member dues, and provides its standards at no cost. Thanks to the OASIS funding model, organizations can:

- ▶ Download and read the DITA specification
- ▶ Assess its appropriateness for their business requirements
- ▶ Find information about DITA best practices from sources including email lists, web content, trade-press books, free webinars, and training classes.

Arguably, the free availability of the DITA specification has contributed to its success.

## Heretofore ISO

The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) offers a set of standards relating to information development and content management. (Until 2013, STC funded a part of this effort). These standards codify processes and best practices, and include requirements for planning, writing, and testing user documentation. The ISO working group most recently published *ISO/IEC/IEEE 26531:2015, Systems*



Standard Deviation is a column all about standards—a subject that affects most of our lives, but that we seldom think about. As the title implies, I want to keep the conversation lively and engaging. I’m always looking for guest columnists, and we welcome feedback with comments or requests for standards-related topics to cover. Email me at [rgallon4stc@culturecom.net](mailto:rgallon4stc@culturecom.net).

and software engineering—Content management for product life cycle, user and service management documentation.

There's just one problem. Finding these standards in the wild has been challenging. In all of my travels among technical communication circles, I've only encountered one technical communicator who is using these standards.

While my experience is anecdotal, there is evidence to back it.

These ISO information development standards vary in price from approximately 150 to 200 US dollars, depending on the source from which they are purchased and the financial exchange rate (ISO sells the standards in Swiss Francs). Tables of contents are available for preview, but to obtain the standard for any sort of assessment or deployment, you must purchase it.

And apparently, that's a problem. When STC looked at the rates of purchase through the ISO website, the numbers were grim. In 2012, ISO/

IEC/IEEE 15289: 2011, *Systems and software engineering—Content of life cycle information items (documentation)* showed 15 copies sold. The remainder were in the single digits. (These figures only show sales directly through ISO. Other channels exist, but ISO is a major sales channel).

### A Path to Relevance?

Can the ISO standards become more widely known and adopted among technical communicators? Possibly, through the following actions:

- ▶ Education of prospective users of the benefits of the ISO standards. This would ideally include criteria for self-selection ("These standards may be helpful if you are in the following circumstances...").
- ▶ Formation of communities of practice. Who are using these standards, and what business benefits do they experience?
- ▶ Increase education of the standards' goals and contents, to

increase prospective adopters' confidence before a purchase decision.

- ▶ Change the distribution model. Find sponsors for making the standards publicly-available. A handful of ISO standards are available under this arrangement.
- ▶ Develop the standards under a different organization that would foster greater publicity and adoption.

Even with these changes, other technical communication standards are freely available for inspection, use, and deployment. Best practice information is available in textbooks and other sources, both freely available and for cost. In this context, I fear that the ISO standards are doomed to serve a very small niche. And that's unfortunate. **i**

*Do you need to follow a standard in your job? Let us know which one by leaving a comment on this article online or by contacting rgallon4stc@culturecom.net.*

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# Twitter: Bringing a New Meaning to Serving Campus 24/7/365



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**BY ELIZABETH ODERKIRK**

AS AN UNDERGRADUATE student working in the communications department at Michigan State University (MSU)'s Infrastructure Planning and Facilities (IPF), I observe many of the progressions MSU goes through to keep moving forward and to communicate with its campus "customers" to "keep campus running 24/7/365." Part of my job at IPF is to alert these customers to maintenance and construction occurring on campus. I also provide individuals with information on the clear roads and paths they can take at times when maintenance work is occurring. Like many technical communication offices, the IPF communications department strives to reach a range of audiences by using several communication methods, including internal and external

websites, newsletters, social media profiles, and more.

Within this context, social media is a major communication technology we now use to interact with students, faculty, and staff on a regular basis. Twitter, in particular, has become a key technology, for it allows us to engage quickly and effectively with our customers. Specifically, Twitter has become central to:

- ▶ Updating the MSU community on the status of problems they've reported; and
- ▶ Responding to comments and questions regarding construction, inclement weather, and building maintenance issues.

Though IPF is somewhat different from other companies and businesses, the communications department is not. Like many other communications, public relations, and marketing teams,

we have a commitment to communicating clearly and efficiently with our campus customers about our products and services. Our experiences using Twitter can therefore be of benefit to individuals currently using or who are considering using Twitter to interact with others. To illustrate this idea, I will focus on a particular MSU-based Twitter feed.

## Twitter Users Told Us "what to fix" through @wtfMSU

In the fall of 2013, MSU's undergraduate student government association, the Associated Students of MSU (ASMSU), started a new Twitter feed called @wtfMSU ("what to fix MSU"). The purpose of this feed was to allow Twitter users to alert the MSU community to maintenance issues affecting their daily activities. The majority of these users were MSU students who already actively turned to Twitter as a place to have a voice and share opinions. The @wtfMSU feed, in turn, allowed for a two-way channel of communication and allowed individuals at MSU to quickly and directly contact the different departments associated with addressing certain issues. As such, this channel also allowed employees of those departments to respond quickly to questions and provide real-time updates on projects.



This column features the work of individuals currently enrolled in or recently graduated from educational programs in the field. Contributors examine how theories and concepts encountered in their classes can be applied to technical communication practices. To submit a column, email the editor at [STAMANTK@ecu.edu](mailto:STAMANTK@ecu.edu).



## Who Was Involved

People tweeted to @wtfMSU for a variety of reasons, and ASMSU did its best to direct users to the MSU division best able to address a particular problem. For example, IT Services, MSU Police, and the MSU Residential and Hospitality Services unit (managing Eat at State and Live On) all have active Twitter accounts. They all regularly monitored tweets to @wtfMSU and #wtfmsu to make sure issues in their domain were addressed in a timely manner.

When @wtfMSU started, it became clear that many students did not know which university division to contact when they encountered issues or wanted to provide feedback on something. As a result, some tweets would be directed toward IPF's Twitter account @MSUFacilities, but those messages really needed to be sent to Live On—MSU's Residence Education and Housing Services.

To address this issue, representatives from various MSU divisions met monthly to clarify the division of services and provide insight on current events for cross-promotion. These discussions, in turn, informed how to best use @wtfMSU as a resource for collecting and sharing information. This method is not unique to MSU. Many other organizations rely on cross-departmental meetings to discuss the most effective approaches to addressing various communication tasks. By bringing together a variety of people working in different positions, this approach helps provide fresh perspectives to what is an age-old problem—connecting to and communicating with an audience.

## How It Works

The @wtfMSU feed has been used less in recent months, but many Twitter users continue to tweet issues directly to us at @MSUFacilities. For tweets that are within IPF's domain, such as over-heated classrooms, the process works as follows: an IPF employee tweets back to the users

to thank that person for the notice and to ask for the specific location where the problem occurs. Once IPF has collected more details about the tweeted issue, an employee will email IPF Dispatch Services so a worker will be sent to the location in order to address the problem. The process continues like a normal work request from there: dispatch opens a work order for the issue and notifies the correct department within IPF to send someone to the related location. Typically, IPF receives an update on the issue within 24 to 48 hours, and these updates include a summary of what caused the issue or an update on how a given problem was fixed. An IPF employee then tweets an update on the issue to the user(s) who first noted the problem.


## What We Changed

Before @wtfMSU, most IPF work requests were called into Dispatch by on-campus employees or submitted via online service request forms. These methods worked well, but they also limited who on campus could notify IPF of problems or request service for an issue. For example, students and non-employees could call IPF dispatch if they knew where to find the number or where to go to access an online form. However, if someone wanted to complete and submit an online service request form, that individual needed to also provide departmental billing information. These factors created limitations, and IPF had to adjust its business process to accommodate requests originating from Twitter by creating a new general "requester" identity in our billing system.

## Twitter Best Practices

From my experiences managing the IPF Twitter account, connecting with an audience means connecting with individuals in a meaningful way. The catch—you only get 140 characters to get the message across! Here's a list of recommended best practices on Twitter use in large, organizational contexts:

- ▶ **Tweet as often as possible**—Users need to know you are there!
- ▶ **Interact quickly**—Users who tweet to your organization are looking for a rapid response. They may want help with a product or to say thanks for great service, but they always deserve a response for reaching out.
- ▶ **Engage meaningfully**—Ask questions, post did-you-knows, share interesting ideas, and ask for some in return! Letting customers know their voices are heard keeps them engaged and shows them they are important.
- ▶ **Keep it positive**—People who find your tweets amusing or uplifting are likely to respond positively toward your organization. I like to cross-promote successes from around campus (e.g., student organizations that won a competition or hosted an event).
- ▶ **Make it personal**—Show customers your organization is made up of real people by tweeting about them (with their permission). Tell users what these folks are working on and what have they done recently.

Social media, like Twitter, has affected professional interactions as well as social interactions. Not only does it allow a large population to report issues directly, but it also gives people the opportunity to learn about the folks who work for your organization and to interact with them directly. Before, people might have had to wade through countless forms before they could get an issue resolved; now, 140 characters or less are all that's needed to get the process rolling. 

*A junior at Michigan State University, ELIZABETH ODERKIRK is busy studying for her two Bachelor's degrees in professional communication and user experience, coordinating social media and the website for IPF, and conducting research on using proto-personas to develop a study abroad app. To contact her, find her on Twitter at @CorgiGirl24 or email her at oderkirk24@gmail.com.*

# Mark Your Calendar

## Organization Events Across the Globe

F.Y.I. lists information about nonprofit ventures only. Please send information to [intercom@stc.org](mailto:intercom@stc.org).

### 1 30 Sept–3 Oct

The American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) will hold its 75th annual conference, with a theme of "Quest Toward Brilliance," at the Grand Hyatt San Antonio in San Antonio, TX. For more information, contact: AMWA  
+1 (301) 294-5303  
[amwa@amwa.org](mailto:amwa@amwa.org)  
[www.amwa.org/events\\_annual\\_conference](http://www.amwa.org/events_annual_conference)

### 2 1–3 Oct

The Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication (CPTSC) hosts its Annual Meeting at Utah State University in Logan, Utah.  
CPTSC  
[tbbridge2@cox.net](mailto:tbbridge2@cox.net)  
<http://cptsc2015.ou.usu.edu/>

### 3 26–30 Oct

The Human Factors and Ergonomics Society (HFES) will hold its 2015 international annual meeting at the JW Marriott in Los Angeles, CA. For more information, contact: HFES  
+1 (310) 394-1811  
[info@hfes.org](mailto:info@hfes.org)  
[www.hfes.org/web/HFESMeetings/2015/annualmeeting.html](http://www.hfes.org/web/HFESMeetings/2015/annualmeeting.html)

### 4 4–7 Nov

The American Translators Association (ATA) will hold its 56th annual conference at the Hyatt Regency Miami in Miami, FL. For more information, contact: ATA  
+1 (703) 683-6100  
[ata@atanet.org](mailto:ata@atanet.org)  
[www.atanet.org/conf/2015](http://www.atanet.org/conf/2015)

### 5 6–10 Nov

The American Society for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T) will hold its Annual Meeting in St. Louis, MO. For more information, contact: ASIS&T  
[asis@asis.org](http://asis@asis.org)  
<https://www.asist.org/events/annual-meeting>

### 6 8–10 Nov

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) hosts their international conference in Atlanta, GA. For more information, contact: PRSA  
+1 (800) 350-0111  
[www.prsa.org/Conferences/InternationalConference/](http://www.prsa.org/Conferences/InternationalConference/)

### 7 25–28 Jan 2016

The Annual Reliability and Maintainability Symposium (RAMS) 2016 will be held at Loews Ventana Canyon in Tucson, AZ. This year's theme is "R&M: Critical to Success in a Technology Reliant World." For more information, contact: RAMS  
+1 (603) 863-2832  
[www.rams.org](http://www.rams.org)

### 8 11–15 Feb 2016

The 2016 American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) Annual Meeting will take place at the Washington Marriott Wardman Park in Washington, DC. The theme is "Global Science Engagement." For more information, please contact: AAAS  
+1 (202) 326-6450  
[meetings@aaas.org](mailto:meetings@aaas.org)  
<http://meetings.aaas.org>

\* STC-related event

# Being Your Own Boss

BY MATT SULLIVAN | Senior Member



THE TOUGHEST QUESTION I Get: What Do You Do For A Living?

My job is to help organizations create and deliver content, especially when it involves video, interaction, and mobile delivery. I think the best things about my job are the flexibility in my schedule and the variety of things that I get to do. I work online with folks

around the globe, either one on one, or in small groups. I also get to assess client workflow and identify potential productivity gains. In some cases I've reduced their cost of production by better than 80%. Those are fun clients to work with!

## How I Pay the Bills

Here's a look at the things I've been doing this year. I don't consider it what I'm doing for a living because I'm actively moving away from these revenue streams to produce and deliver training products (managed courseware), not services (hourly/daily training).

- ▶ Software trainer
- ▶ FrameMaker book author (new version just released at [www.techcommtools.com/framemaker-reference-book](http://www.techcommtools.com/framemaker-reference-book))
- ▶ Tech docs workflow specialist
- ▶ Online branding (as a service)
- ▶ Tech comm video production and training
- ▶ Courseware developer (as a service)

There's also the admin and down time that goes with being your own boss. The down time this year, however, has been a blessing, allowing me to revise my FrameMaker reference book and develop a series of online courseware offerings.

I mentioned earlier that I've been changing paths. While I still do training, production, and consulting, I've been moving toward creation of knowledge products rather than hourly or daily training. My goal is to create better, more robust resources and to deliver those resources to a wider audience at a lower overall price point. I'm doing this because I believe tech comm is evolving faster than ever. Years ago I watched someone stand up at a conference to refute the notion that to succeed in tech comm we would all need to interact with engineers and customers; that we'd need to do more than just write text. To me that concept seemed perfectly logical, but I was surprised at the fear I saw at that time. As we all know, it's no longer just about text, and it's *also* not just about working with stakeholders. We're increasingly becoming chef, cook, and bottlwasher. And we're expected to be expert at all of them. I firmly believe that we'll soon be expected to provide interactive and video content in our docs, that those docs will increasingly be accessed on mobile devices, and that we'll have near primary

responsibility for the marketing of that content. In short, we'll be running our own autonomous agencies within our companies, if not running our own companies outright.

But where will the extra time and effort come from? I submit that we can carve out the time and energy to do these things by stepping away from our need to have 100% perfect documents. Instead, by striving for 90% perfect formatting, we eliminate the sort of custom tweaks in our documents that more often than not take more time than they should, and generally come back to cause extensive rework during revisions. This in turn frees up bandwidth that can be used to address media and marketing concerns.

## Where I'm Headed

So the more important question then is "what will you do and what do you *want* to do for a living?"

For me, I will be using the experiences I've had in tech comm to create knowledge products that produce residual income. This gives me the satisfaction of interacting with students and provides a greater return for my effort by casting a wider net for my audience. The courseware itself isn't enough, however. It needs to be accompanied by marketing efforts to let folks know that the courses are available.

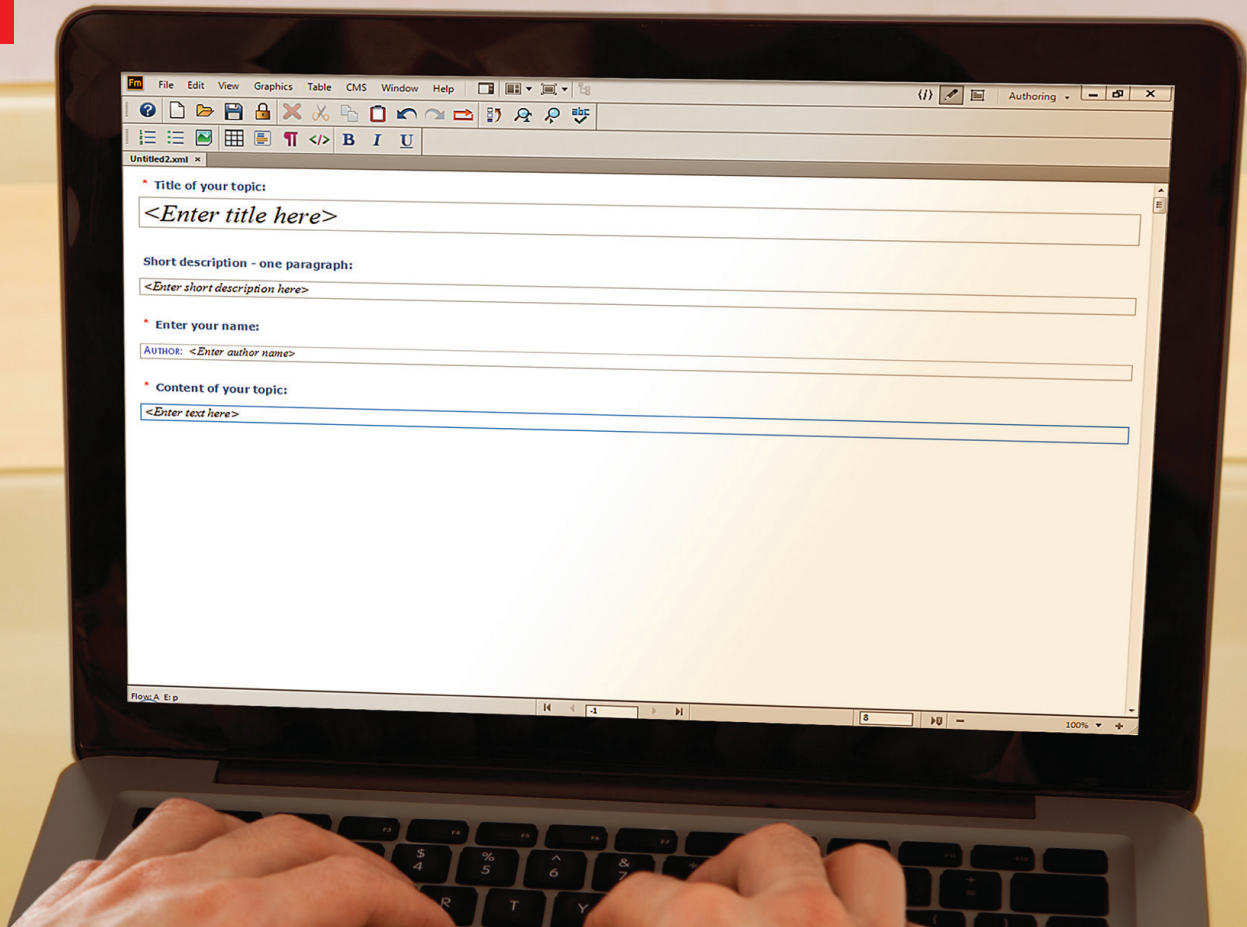
I taught an STC tech comm video course earlier this year that showed me the increasing demand in the market for online training, and the need for something closer to university-level content. As a result, I took a course (online) to learn how to create more intense online courses. I now have a beta version of my tech comm video course, and two other FrameMaker courses. You can sign up for free versions of those courses at <http://training.techcommtools.com>.

## Something to Think About

Years ago technical communicators were irked when marketing wanted control of our content. We knew it was a bad idea, and time bore that out. But what we didn't admit was that marketing was right: Our content wasn't being properly promoted. It's still not. Carve out time to tell people about your content and what you do. Tell them on Twitter, FaceBook, and YouTube. Tell them in an email blast and blog post. Run webinars to show them how phenomenally good you are at what you do, and how much your content can help them. Be a marketer for yourself!

You create content, and that means that there's no one more qualified to promote and market that content. And make no mistake about it, in 2015, content marketing *is* marketing. **i**

MATT SULLIVAN *is the founder of Tech Comm Tools and a member of the Orange County STC Chapter, one of the host chapters for the 2016 Summit. He provides training and workflow solutions for tech comm groups.*



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