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blue pencil

Acrobat 5 Improves Its Act

By Robert P. Mohr

Adobe Acrobat has been a vital part of my tech writer's toolbox for several years. Whether they're white papers or manuals ready for printing, electronic documents that go out my employer's door go out as PDFs. Most of you already know the many advantages to using PDF so I won't elaborate on them here. Instead, this article will highlight some of the key enhancements provided in the newest version of Adobe Acrobat 5.0.

Creating PDFs

There are two ways in which I create PDF files: through Word or by scanning paper documents. Acrobat 5 installed without the ability to do either.

As a Word 2002 user, the loss of the PDFMaker macro was a serious setback. (A PDFMaker macro for version 2000 of Word did install and work properly.) However, the only way I could create a PDF from a Word 2002 document was to use Adobe's Distiller printer driver. This created a PDF, but it didn't automatically convert the document's built-in styles to PDF bookmarks. This is a feature I rely on quite a bit. Fortunately, a few weeks after installing Acrobat 5, Adobe announced a downloadable update that provided a PDFMacro for Word 2002. After installing the update and testing it, I found it worked just fine, and I was back in business. You can obtain the update by going to: http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/update.html. The update takes Acrobat to version 5.0.5.

The other missing piece was Paper Capture. Paper Capture contains an OCR engine that turns your scanned paper documents into searchable and editable PDF files. Single column documents convert more accurately than multi-column documents, but overall the OCR engine does a very good job. Paper Capture was a standard feature in previous versions of Acrobat, but not so with Acrobat 5. However, there is an option on the Tools drop-down menu for obtaining the Paper Capture plug in. You can get the plug in by clicking the link, which takes you to http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/pluginreg.html. From there,

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Who Wants to Be an Information Developer When They Grow Up?

By Heather Lazzaro

I'm an Information Developer. Yes, that's my job title, and if you think that it's difficult to explain to someone what a Technical Writer does, just try defining an Information Developer.

In a nutshell, my job consists of following user-centered design processes to structure and develop information for online viewing. Explain that to your Aunt Ethel, and she'll probably stare at you blankly. Or, if you're lucky, she'll come to the grand conclusion that "Oh, so you work with computers." Yes, I work with computers, and yes, I am a technical writer. But, I also have many responsibilities that expand far beyond the realm of traditional technical writing.

I spend most of my day working on design tasks. I'm not a graphic artist by any stretch of the imagination, but I do design the way information or interfaces should appear on the Web. That's where the "user-centered" part comes in. I have to do research to figure out what would work best for users be-

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Blue Pencil

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Employment Issues

Is now a good time to go freelance?
By Pam Schmidbauer

Associate Area Manager - Aquent

If you haven't been living under a rock, then you probably know that it's a tough job climate right now.

Since the decline of the dot-coms and the downsizing of various businesses, more people are looking for work, and many are asking themselves if it makes sense to start a freelance career. If you have what it takes and the client base, now is just as good a time as any.

The success or failure of any freelance business depends on your network of clients. If you plan on going freelance and you don't have a solid list of clients where you have a high probability of finding work, then you might want to think twice about freelancing.

How many clients should be on your list? That depends on how solid your list is rather than the length of your list of clients. Two or three strong clients are better than a list with 10 weak clients.

The biggest task at hand is finding clients who need your help. You know what you have done. You know what you can do. Now ask yourself: Who hires people like me? Who have I worked with before? How are they doing now? Do they hire freelancers? If they don't, do they know people who do? Think of everyone you know. Sit down and make a list of everyone you know and find out who they know. Go to networking events and make it a goal to come away with at least two potential leads. Don't overlook employment agencies. Many agencies are hurting right now as well, but their clients have to get their work done even if they have recently laid-off employees.

If you have a diversified skill set, if you are flexible, if you have a robust network of contacts, and if you are willing to take the time and find the opportunities, then now is as good a time as any to seek the freelance way of life.

Pam Schmidbauer is Associate Area Manager at Aquent and can be reached at pams@aquent.com or 412-322-4940. Aquent (www.aquent.com) is the world's largest talent agency for Web, creative, and IT professionals. In its 15-year history, the company has made more than 200,000 matches of independent professionals with client companies worldwide. Headquartered in Boston, Aquent leverages both the Internet and its global network of offices to provide independent professionals access to work, professional training and the same insurance, retirement, and cash-flow management benefits enjoyed by traditional W-2 workers.

Creating Effective Documentation Plans

STC Telephone Seminar
with JohnV. Hedtke

Where: Your office

When: February 20, 20021:00 PM - 2:30 PM EST

This presentation by international award-winning author John V. Hedtke will show you how to create a documentation plan using a standardized format that works for planning printed manuals, online help, and book and magazine proposals. You'll learn how to identify what you want to be written, how you want it to be written, and who will do the work. Hedtke is the author of more than twenty-two books and has more than twenty years' experience in computers and technical writing. He has developed and written documentation and books for many leading software products and has received more than twenty regional and international writing awards. For more information about the seminar and to register online, visit the STC Web site at www.stc.org/seminars.html.

Acrobat 5 Improves Its Act

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you can download the utility and install it. Once installed, the usual Paper Capture option appears in the Tools drop-down menu. This is a very worthwhile tool if you plan to scan paper documents and give them the ability to be searched and edited. Without it, documents scanned and saved to PDF are treated as graphics in the sense that you can't select text and the PDF isn't searchable. Also, the resulting PDF files are usually much larger in size.

Extracting PDF content

Sooner or later you'll find yourself in a situation where you have to extract text and/or graphics from a PDF for which you don't have the source document(s). In earlier versions of Acrobat, this was quite a chore. Copying and pasting text only went so far, and of course, there was a lot of reformatting to be done. Acrobat 5 alleviates this problem somewhat by letting you save PDFs as RTF files which can then be loaded into your favorite editing tool. Be aware that the resulting RTF file may not turn out exactly like the PDF. For example, if the PDF had a multi-column format, the RTF file will not, since columns are not supported in RTF. Acrobat 5 also enhanced the extraction of graphics. Images can be saved in one of several formats: TIFF, JPEG, or PNG files. The PDF file itself can also be saved as an image file.

Protecting PDF content

The other side of the content coin is protecting the PDF so it can't be altered. Acrobat 5 provides security measures in the form of password protection with a few options: You can lock the file to prevent edits, or copy and paste operations, or you can prevent the file from printing.

Enhanced forms

I've never had the need to create PDF forms, but someone out there must. Acrobat 5 includes many new form tools—including the ability to submit form data in XML format. Other form enhancements include spell checking and the ability to digitally sign a form.

Triggered operations can also be added to forms to do things like automatically calculate expressions and validate data. For example, you can validate a social security number in an Adobe PDF form before it is entered into a database system.

Batch operations

One feature that's long been missing in Acrobat has been the ability to transform multiple source files (such as Word docs) into an equivalent number of PDFs in a batch mode. I once wrote a Word macro to do this, but it wasn't easy. I was happy to see that batch operations are now part of the standard product.

Addition of XML

Acrobat 5 expands the way PDF files can be searched by allowing you to create and embed metadata in the PDF. The metadata is written in XML that can be indexed by search engines. Here's an example that Adobe uses to illustrate this capability: eBook publishers can add a metadata field to enable digital books to be searched by their ISBNs.

Advanced print controls

In the enhanced Print dialog box, you'll find options to print odd and even pages; rotate and center pages; specify overlap; print ICC colors as device colors; emit halftones, transfer functions, and undercolor removal/black generation; and select transparency quality .

Summary

If you're an old-time Acrobat user contemplating the move to 5.0, I highly recommend it. I found Acrobat 5, coupled with its downloadable updates, to be worth the upgrade price.

Bob Mohr is a senior member of STC and a technical writer at BillingZone,LLC. He can be reached via email at bob.mohr@billingzone.com.

New STC Chapter Formed

Taken from an announcement printed inTieline. Johnstown was in the Pittsburgh chapter and is now a part of this new chapter.

At the board meeting in Las Vegas, Nevada, January 24-26, 2002, STC's board of directors approved the formation of the Central Pennsylvania chapter. This is the Society's 151st chapter.

The Central Pennsylvania chapter has been assigned to Region 4, and covers the areas of Johnstown, Altoona, and State College, Pennsylvania. The acting chapter president is John H. Thomstatter. John can be reached at (814) 269-2508 or at thomstatt@aol.com.

With the Death of Dave Ross, An Era Has Passed

We sadly announce the death of Dave Ross, friend and colleague. He died on January 20, 2002 at Passavant Hospital following a brief and rapid deterioration in his health.

Dave was the only treasurer that most of us in the Pittsburgh Chapter have known. A familiar face, a comfortable presence, a gracious spirit. Many of us have posted fond remembrances of him on the Chapter web site. We will miss him greatly.

January

Total STC Members	24,600
Chapter	217

New Members

Nancy Barta-Smith

Jennifer L. Hucko

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Who Wants to Be an Information Developer When They Grow Up?

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fore I can complete my designs, which may consist of a PowerPoint prototype for an application or a Visio representation of a Web site's navigation. Usability testing, whether conducted in a traditional lab setting or done informally among colleagues, is a must. I need to test each design to see it will work for users, and if it won't, I continue to make modifications until test results are favorable. My final step is to create the Web site, or to work with a developer to create a Web-based application.

Some of my writing deliverables consist of software procedure documentation because I create help for the applications that I work on. But my writing repertoire also includes requirements documents and functional specifications for new intranet projects that our department originates, based on user need. For example, I'm currently working on a project to enable employees to register for corporate blood drives via our intranet. I had to figure out the requirements for such a project and design how it fits within our intranet before a developer could even begin to work on the application. I'll also have to create intranet pages that contain information about the blood drive and how employees should register to donate.

When I'm not working on projects for my own department, I function as a consultant to other groups within our company, helping them to understand what I do and how they can incorporate similar processes into their projects. For example, a department may have books of paper information and have no idea how to get that information onto the intranet. That's where I come in. I help them to sort through that information and learn how to display it on the Web. I often train them on the best way to use a software application, such as Microsoft's FrontPage or Allaire's HomeSite, to do that. I also develop training materials, which are yet another form of documentation.

So, you see, as an information developer, I really have the best of all worlds. I have an opportunity to research, design, write, and teach. As a child, I certainly never would have said, "I want to be an information developer when I grow up." But I'm glad that's where I ended up!

Resources

For more information on information development and user-centered design, check out these Web sites:

http://home.netscape.com/computing/webbuilding/studio/feature19980729-2.html

http://www.useit.com/

http://www.foruse.com/default.htm

Heather Lazzaro has been an information developer at Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield for two and a half years. She can be reached via e-mail at heather.lazzaro@highmark.com.

When Communicating Information Matters

Penn State's new Technical Communications Certificate program—coming March 2002

- Find the right words
- Develop effective editing strategies
- Use items such as tables to convey ideas
- Build project management skills

To find out how, please visit: www.psutechcommcert.org/ofbp

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February STC Chapter Meeting: Creating and Presenting a Successful Portfolio

If you haven't created a portfolio in several years, you might be surprised to learn that some of the rules have changed. Your on-line portfolio may be as important, if not more important, than a traditional portfolio of your printed work.

This month, Marlene Miller and Nancy Ott will provide information about creating and presenting successful traditional and on-line portfolios. Marlene and Nancy have offered this expertise at several of our round table discussion meetings, and also as the prime topic for a meeting. Their tips are invaluable.

Parking for this meeting will be easy! You can park in the Federated Investors Tower garage for $6.00. There also are two nearby garage that charge an evening rate of $3.00 — one at Smithfield and Liberty Avenues, and one at Ninth and Penn Avenues.

WHEN: Thursday, February 21 2002, 6:30-8:30 pm.

WHERE: Federated Investors Tower, 19th Floor, 1001 Liberty Avenue (at 10th Street) in downtown Pittsburgh.

COST: There is no charge for this meeting. Light refreshments will be provided..

RSVP: Please reply by 3 pm on Wednesday, February 20, to Darlene Mullenix, Meeting Coordinator, by calling her at (412) 288-8676 or by emailing her at dmullenix@federatedinv.com.

society for technical communication

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FEBRUARY, 2002

WHO WANTS TO BE AN INFORMATION DEVELOPER WHEN THEY GROW UP?