

blue pencil



April Meeting Recap: RoboHelp X3: A Discussion and Demonstration

By Nancy Carpenter

RoboHelp creates help systems for Windows and web-based applications. It is one of a suite of products that support production of help systems, interactive tutorials, and pdf preparation. For our April chapter meeting, Leslie Johnson demonstrated two of these products, RoboHelp and RoboDemo.

The goals of a help system are to answer questions as they are asked and to provide comprehensive documentation. RoboHelp is eHelp's proprietary format, and RoboHelp HTML — a section of the overall product — is a help authoring tool that can produce cross-browser and cross-platform help files. RoboDemo, another section of RoboHelp, produces small-size interactive tutorials.

eHelp is positioning the X3 version of the product to take the niche that ForeHelp left. The projects run on a browser. Here are some features that could help meet your needs.

RoboHelp

RoboHelp imports files in numerous formats, including Microsoft Word and FrameMaker .mif files. FrameMaker files are easier to use now. A plugin can convert the whole book to .mif, and upgrades are being made to support FrameMaker files more fully.

RoboHelp produces the common help files such as HTML, WinHelp, WinHelp 2000, dynamic HTML, Java Help, and Oracle Help.

Like most help authoring systems, it produces a 3-pane format with a toolbar and header at the top, text in the largest section, and navigation tools on the left. Navigation usually includes a table of contents, an index, and full text search. The text incorporates cross-references, context sensitivity, browse sequences, and pop-ups.

The WebHelp format uses a cascading style sheet that supports older browsers. This involves nesting an embedded style sheet, an external style sheet and inline styles that override all others. If the project does not look good in Netscape, you can edit the related .css file in the project.

RoboHelp has a WYSIWIG view, a True Code view that reveals the HTML and Java code, a link view to show how the parts are linked, and a topics view that lists topics. Of course, you can edit the code in any text or HTML editor, and can edit the WYSIWIG view in Microsoft Word 2000.

Context sensitivity provides help within a software program when you press a **Help** button or another function key. This requires a link from the screen's **Help** button to the proper location in the help system. You can develop your own map file or have RoboHelp develop it. This is a cross reference between the help button and the project.

Other helpful features include:

- Merge projects at run time or use a plugin that merges them without going through a server.
- Use conditional tags to select sections.
- Create an index manually using the Index tool. You type the keyword then drag and drop the project that would open on this keyword.
- Insert external hyperlinks.
- Split the project into sections based on selected paragraph styles.
- Localize a project. Default text such as messages in the help system can be translated into a selected language.

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Blue Pencil

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Message from the President

by Alan Houser

“You’re in for a tough time. However, if you can make it through this [economy], you will be in really good shape.”

A well-known local entrepreneur and journalist said this to me at a networking event late last year when I introduced myself and described my consulting business. I took two things from his advice: validation that our economic circumstances are extremely challenging, and affirmation that, in the long run, demand for the services of technical communicators will again be strong.

I believe these words ring true for all of us in the technical communication field. Many of you whom I’ve come to know have dealt with unemployment (for full-timers) or a drop in demand in your services (for freelancers and consultants) during the past 2-3 years. Several people with long-standing credentials in our field have commented to me that they’ve “never seen it this bad.”

Whether or not this is the worst “high-tech” recession in history, we must remember that tough times have happened in the past. I recently heard a professor at Carnegie Mellon’s Graduate School of Industrial Administration mention that he had started a high-tech business in 1969. Many of the more senior people in the room gasped. One even said out loud, “That was a really tough time.” When I entered the technical writing profession in the late 1980’s, one of my first memories was of watching laid-off co-workers carry boxes of belongings to their cars. In only a few short years, then-giants of the computer industry like Wang and Digital Equipment Corporation either disappeared or decreased drastically in prominence and stature.

We must also remember that these economic times will end. There are small, yet encouraging, signs that this may be happening already. I’m seeing more employment postings for technical writers than I’ve seen in some time. I’m seeing more high-tech economic activity than I’ve seen in some time. I’m seeing more writers – some of

whom who have been job-hunting for some time – find work.



Whether an economic recovery is upon us, or is still down the road, remember the entrepreneur’s words – “If you can make it through this [economy], you will be in really good shape.” Demand for our profession can only become stronger as technology-based solutions permeate more broadly across society. Even as technology becomes more of a commodity, there will always be a need to support people in using technology-based products and services. In providing this support, members of our profession will be creating and delivering information for more audiences and delivering that information in more ways than we have ever done before.

To be part of this next wave of technical communication, we must maintain and improve our skills, learn and apply relevant new technologies, and stay current with industry trends. As a result, when the time comes, I expect that each of us in the technical communication profession will be “in really good shape.”

WorkQuest™ Group Shares Information, Ideas

The Pittsburgh Chapter's WorkQuest™ group continued its weekly meetings in March.

March 11th – Good Networking Interviews

Guest speaker Glenn Schillo, a lawyer, mediator, and grant writer, focused on good networking interviews. He stressed that when speaking with someone that you hope might give you a job lead, you should be polite, don't expect them to offer you a job, and be grateful for any help that you get. Some of his suggestions included:

- Establish a rapport with your contact
- Don't ask for a job, ask for guidance in your job search, their insight into the job market, etc.
- Ask for comments on the content of your résumé
- See if they can give you three or four other contacts who may lead to a job interview
- Ask for permission to keep in touch with them
- Send a written thank-you letter

March 18th – Asking Questions at Your Interview

WorkQuest™ member Rox Vanguard spoke to us about good first interview questions. Much of his research for this topic came from the book Don't Send a Résumé: And Other Contrarian Rules to Help Land a Great Job by Jeffery Fox. Rox told us to think of an interview as a sales call, since you are selling yourself. First find out what the interviewer is looking for then tailor your questions and responses to match his needs. Employers like candidates who ask questions about the company and listen to the answers. Don't talk about yourself all of the time. If your interviewer says something wrong or offensive, don't correct them and don't react. Rox gave us a list of 21

questions from the book that you can ask an interviewer. Here are a few of them:

- Why is your company successful?
- What does it take to be successful here?
- What differentiates you and your products from your competition?
- What are your expectations for the job?
- What are the concerns about this position?

March 25th – Psychological and Skills Testing

WorkQuest™ members Joyce Hall and Jim Gogots, along with their friend Judith Kajder, spoke on psychological and skills testing. Many companies ask you to take skills or psychological tests as part of the job interview process. These types of tests are also available for your personal use from testing services for a fee, or free from several sources including the Pennsylvania Career Links job service (through the Job and Career Education Center at the Carnegie Library in Oakland), and Priority 2, a job search self-help group.

Joyce told us that she had used testing services for her personal use in the past, and felt that they were a valuable tool for helping to define and focus your career goals. Joyce warned that if an employer gives a psychological test, it must be a test that is proven valid, which means that the test must give them information relative to the qualities they are assessing. In addition, the test is required to be accurate, meaning that it gives consistent results.

Judy, a former career counselor and job placement professional, discussed some of the different types of testing employers do. She said that many companies do either skills testing or employment testing, or a combination of the two. Employment test-

ing usually evaluates the integrity, aptitude, and personality of the candidate. Employment testing is often done because a job involves handling money or company secrets, because the employer wants to know if the candidate will fit in to the work environment, or because the candidate needs a particular level of intelligence to handle a position.

Judy informed the group that employers must be fair in the testing process. They must give the same test to all candidates who apply, and they must give the test to all candidates under the same conditions (time of day, lighting, etc.). Tests can include questions about many different topics, such as drug and alcohol use, honesty and personality traits.

April 1st – Tough Interview Questions

WorkQuest™ member Dennis McCarthy led a discussion on how to answer difficult interview questions. Dennis gave the group a list of resources (books and Internet sites) that give some examples of difficult questions you might get in an interview and constructive ways in which to answer them. He also brought a number of books with him. Group members took turns reading questions out of the book and having other members answer the question. Everyone then discussed the good and bad points of the ways in which the questions had been answered. One point that Dennis brought up was that an interviewer might ask a question not just to get you to give him information, but to see the manner in which you deal with that type of question.

WorkQuest™ was formed as a resource for you. Although the meetings are geared toward writers, everyone who is looking for work is welcome to attend the meetings. Many interesting topics are planned for the next month. Notices of the meetings can be found on the WorkQuest™ web site <http://home.earthlink.net/~workquest/>.



April Membership
Current Chapter
 147
Total STC
 18,270
Welcome:
 Tracy Grieco
 (new member)

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Notes from the National Office

STC's 51st Annual Conference - Call for Proposals

The call for proposals for STC's 51st Annual Conference was mailed as an insert with the April 2003 issue of Intercom and is posted on the STC Web site at www.stc.org/51stConf. The deadline for the Society of office to receive proposals is August 1, 2003.

The conference will be held May 9-12, 2004, in Baltimore, Maryland. The conference theme is "Navigating the Future of Technical Communication." For more information, please contact Buffy M. Bennett at buffy@stc.org.

Nominating Committee Seeks Candidates for Society-Level Positions in 2004

Would you like to help STC remain a vital organization?

Are you good at listening to and implementing ideas? Do you think you can help direct and administer Society-level activities? Would you like to represent our membership on ceremonial occasions? Could you help coordinate an array of programs beneficial to our profession? If your answers are "yes," tell the STC nominating committee that you would be interested in running for office. If you know another member who should be considered a candidate for a position on our international board, please add that person's name, too.

The members of this year's nominating committee are Michelle Ratcliffe (manager), Suncoast chapter; M. Katherine Brown, Snake River chapter; Nan J. Fritz, Boston chapter; and two others to be determined in this spring's election. Please feel free to discuss your ideas with any of these people.

Open Positions and Qualifications

During the STC year ahead, the following positions will be filled by election:

- Second vice president
- Secretary

- Director-sponsor for Region 4
- Director-sponsor for Region 6
- Director-sponsor for Region 8
- Two nominating committee members

All candidates must be senior members. Candidates for second vice president must have extensive leadership experience, preferably in positions at the Society level. Candidates for secretary should have strong communication skills and leadership experience at the chapter or regional level. Candidates for director-sponsor should have a history of successful STC leadership, preferably at the chapter or the regional level.

The nominating committee welcomes your suggestions about potential candidates for the positions listed here. If you think that you or someone you know should be considered, please fill out the accompanying form and return it to STC by August 1, 2003.

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STC Member

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- Set the alternative fonts.
- Set font size in percent as well as point size. Percent is not one of the selections in the dialog box, but it accepts percent if you type it.
- Add a **Print** button.

RoboDemo

RoboDemo produces small-sized interactive tutorials using Flash format. It has 85 percent of the Flash functionality without the steep learning curve. You will need a Flash plugin to get the full functionality.

The interface is similar to PowerPoint. Each page is a screen shot to which you apply audio and captions, and set to fade in or out on cue. RoboDemo also has a band-

width analysis that helps you to decide if your users can to view the presentation.

Project Management

You can manage the development of your help project in RoboHelp itself. You can organize the sections of the project into files and folders, then generate a table of contents from these. Using this table of contents, you can track progress, export a report, and email it to reviewers. In addition, in conjunction with RoboHelp Office Pro, it gives real-time analysis of user activity on a help site.

Training

The software should be fairly easy to learn since its user interface is familiar to Word,

PowerPoint, and FrameMaker users. You can get a 15-day trial version of X3 to evaluate. The tool itself has help resources. eHelp has an on-line help community that posts samples of work and a library of Skins that you can use to customize the look of the help system. The help system within RoboHelp contains a sample of a typical application, complete with all common topics. You can edit it to produce a project.

Leslie Johnson has used RoboHelp since the early 1990's to develop projects in various Help formats including WinHelp and WebHelp. She is an STC member.



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Access Database Primer, Part 4

by Robert P. Mohr

In last month's article, I discussed how to create a query and how to create a report based on the results of the query. So far in this series, we have created tables, forms, queries, and reports. Each of those objects were accessed individually through the Database Window. In this article, I'll discuss how to create a menu-driven interface for the database and how to change the way Access behaves when the database is opened.

Access contains a very useful utility called the Switchboard Manager. It enables you to build a menu-driven interface, and add a little polish, to your database. Before creating the menus, there's one bit of housekeeping to do: create a simple macro to close the database and exit Access.

To create the macro:

1. Select **Macros** from the **Objects** list in the Database Window, and click the **New** icon. The Macro Designer is displayed.
2. Select **Quit** from the drop-down list in the **Action** column. Notice the **Save All** option appears at the bottom of the screen. This will automatically save the contents in any open objects and close them without prompting.
3. Select **File > Save**, and name your macro, **QuitAccess**.
4. Select **File > Close** to close the Macro Designer.

Now create the main menu:

5. Select **Tools > Database Utilities > Switchboard Manager**. You are prompted to create a new Switchboard. Click **Yes**. The Switchboard Manager dialog box is displayed with a default page listed (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Switchboard Manager dialog box

6. Click **New** to create a page for the Reports menu.
7. Type **Reports Menu** for the name of the new Switchboard page, and click **OK**.

8. Select the default Switchboard page name and click **Edit**.
9. Replace the current Switchboard name with **Mini-Knowledge Base Main Menu**. This becomes the window title.
10. Click **New**. Now you can create a menu option.
11. Replace the default **Text** with **&Content Input Form**. (The "&" creates an accelerator key, so that the menu option can be accessed using the Alt+C keystrokes.)
12. Select **Open Form in Edit Mode** from the **Command** drop-down list.
13. Select **Personal Knowledge Base** from the **Form** drop-down list (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Enter a menu option

As you might have guessed, the **Text** box holds the name of the option as it will appear on the menu. The **Command** box tells Access what to do when the option is chosen. Since I chose a form operation, The **Form** box is where I specify the specific form.

14. Click **OK** to create the menu option.
15. Repeat steps 6 thru 10 to create menu options for the **Source Entries** and **Topic Entries** forms.
16. Click **New** to create a menu option to access the Reports Menu.
17. Enter **&Reports Menu** in the **Text** box.
18. Ignore the **Command** box because it defaults to Switchboard page.
19. Select **Reports Menu** from the drop-down list.
20. Click **OK**.
21. Click **New** to create a menu option to close the database and exit Access.
22. Enter **&Exit** in the **Text** box.
23. Select **Run Macro** in the **Command** box.
24. Select **QuitAccess** in the **Macro** box.
25. Click **OK** to complete the menu option.
26. Click **Close** to return to the main Switchboard Manager screen. Now the Reports Menu can be created.
27. Select the **Reports Menu** Switchboard page and click **Edit**. Now you can enter options to access the two reports.
28. Click **New**. This should look familiar to you by now.
29. Replace the default **Text** with **Knowledge Base &Contents**.
30. Select **Open Report** in the **Command** box.

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Access Database Primer, Part 4

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31. Select **Knowledge Base Contents** in the **Report** box.
32. Click **OK**.
33. Repeat steps 24 thru 28 to add the **List of MS Word References** report.
34. Click **OK**.
35. Click **New** to add an option to take you back to the main menu.
36. Replace the default **Text** with **&Return to Main Menu**.
37. Ignore the **Command** box because it defaults to a Switchboard page.
38. Select **Mini-Knowledge Base Main Menu** from the drop-down list.
39. Click **OK**.
40. Click **Close** to return to the Switchboard Manager dialog box.
41. Click **Close** again to close the Switchboard Manager dialog box.

If you select **Forms** in the **Objects** list, you should see a new form called **Switchboard**. Double-click it to view it. Mine looks like this:

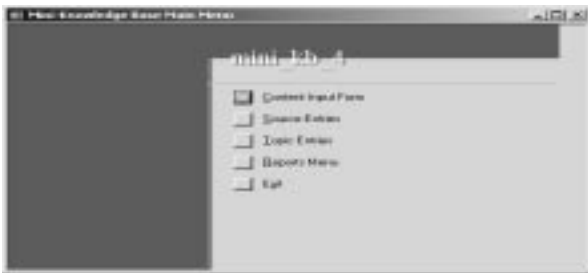


Figure 3: Default view of the Switchboard form

The look of the Switchboard form can be modified using the Form Designer. You can alter yours if you wish. Here is how my Switchboard form looks after a few changes:



Figure 4: Modified Switchboard form

The last step is to control how Access behaves when this database is opened:

42. Select **Tools > Startup** to display the Startup dialog box (Figure 5).
43. Type **Mini-Knowledge Base** in the **Application Title** box.
44. Select **Switchboard** from the **Display Form/Page** drop-down list.
45. Turn off **Display Database Window**.
46. Click **OK** to save the changes and close the dialog box.

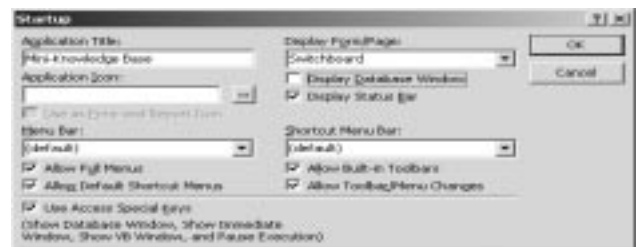



Figure 5: Startup dialog box with changes made

Test the start-up settings and the Switchboard menus:

47. Close Access.
48. Create a shortcut on your desktop to your database file.
49. Double-click the shortcut to launch Access and load your database. You should see your main menu and standard toolbar within the Access environment.

Obviously, the idea of the menu interface is convenience when entering and retrieving data and reports. If you want to perform maintenance operations, such as editing a form, changing a table or some other object, click the Database Window  icon. You can then access any of the objects in the database as explained in previous articles.

You can go to www.writemohr.com (Free Stuff section) and download a copy of my versions of the databases in their current state at the end of each article. This concludes the series on creating a database application with Access. I hope you found it useful, and I encourage you to experiment with Access to learn how it can help you be more productive.

Bob Mohr is a senior STC member and the author of The Elements of Word. He can be reached via e-mail at rpmohr@writemohr.com.

May Spring Fling

Join us in closing out the 2002-2003 STC season. Enjoy food, drink, and tech talk outside on the patio at the Church Brew Works in Bloomfield. For directions, please visit our chapter web site at www.stcpg.org/calendar.

RSVP by May 27 to:

Darlene Mullenix

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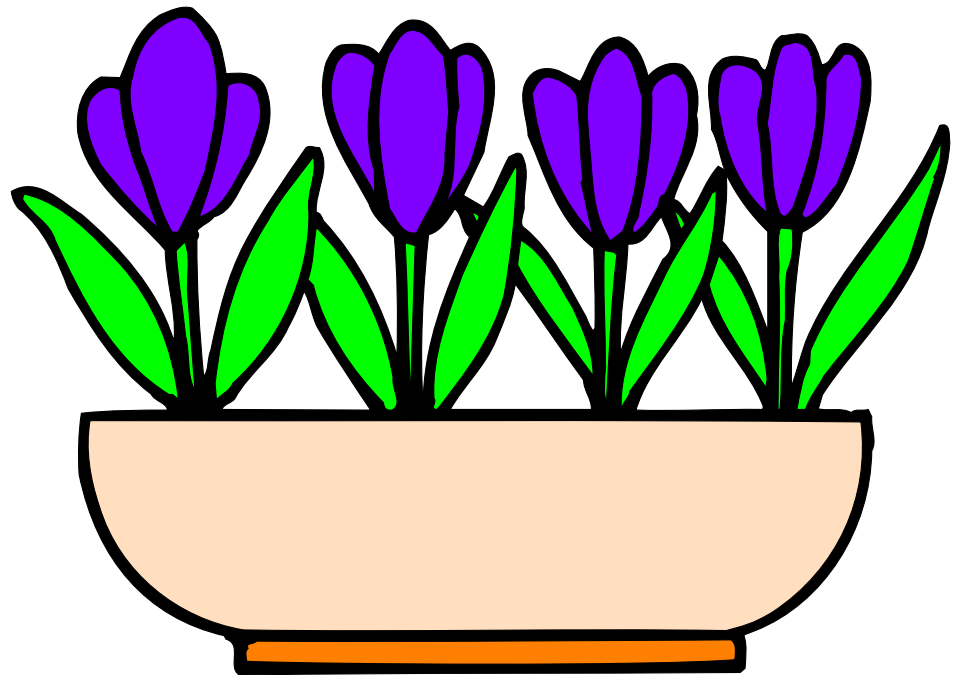
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Editorial Note

The next issue of the Blue Pencil will be published in early August. Would you like to submit an article? Do you have ideas for articles you would like to see? Send them to Meg Papa (mv0t@andrew.cmu.edu). Have a good summer!



May Independents and Lone Writers SIG Meeting – The Value of the Writer

The latest buzzwords in the industry seem to be *ROI* – Return On Investment – and *value*. Some questions companies pose when making an investment decision include: “What kind of ROI can I get on this purchase?” “What is the value of this investment for the company?” These buzzwords are not only used when a company is looking to purchase a product or service, but they are also used in the decision to increase corporate headcount.

So, how do we as technical writers answer these questions? How can we provide a significant ROI for a potential employer or client? How do we prove how valuable we

are? And most important, how do we explain what exactly it is that we do?

Please join us in our attempt to answer these and other questions about the value of the writer in a company at the Independents and Lone Writers SIG meeting at 6 p.m., Tuesday, May 20, at the Panera Bread Company on the Boulevard of the Allies in the South Oakland. Barb Stanton and John Clark will help generate a discussion on ways to illustrate how valuable a writer can be to a company. Please come with some of your ideas and methods for answering these questions as well to help in the discussion.

This discussion is relevant to independent writers because you need to sell your business and convince prospective clients of the value of solid and effective communication pieces. It is important to lone writers because as the only writer in a company, you need to let your employer know what you can bring to the business.

There is no charge for this meeting, however Panera has great pastries, sandwiches and salads to purchase. Please RSVP by Monday, May 19 to Barb Stanton (bstanton@seec.com) or (412) 893-0383.