

BLUE PENCIL

PITTSBURGH CHAPTER, STC

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Pick of the Issue



As members of the technical communication profession, we may choose to become contract, or freelance, writers. While this option provides flexibility and freedom, it also means we have to sell our work constantly. Chris Downs' article on marketing your writing business contains some helpful tips and resources for the independent writer. Check it out starting on page five.

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Surviving Outsourcing and Remote Work (pt. 1)

By Nancy Ott

Your project has moved to India, California, or even the office across town ... but you haven't. What do you do next? Here's a set of tips for dealing with the three biggest problems I've run into while working on outsourced, offshored, and offsite projects. My assumption is that you're on a project with people at a different location and have to make it work.

First, some terms:

Outsourcing — Work that's performed by another organization, often offsite.

This is not necessarily a bad thing for technical communicators. For instance, outsourced marketing and technical writing projects provide lots of work opportunities for independent contractors and consulting firms.

Offshoring — American companies outsource work to companies or divisions in other countries. This practice has generated a lot of controversy.

Inshoring, insourcing — Companies in other countries outsource work to American companies or divisions. This tends to be overlooked in discussions about offshoring.

Remote work, offsite work — Working with a group that is not at the same location you are. This is not always due to outsourcing, offshoring, or inshoring. For example, employees of larger companies will often work on projects with people at other sites.

Problem 1: Communication

Working remotely makes it more challenging to communicate with other members of your team.

Stay connected!

A "stay connected" attitude is more important than how you communicate. Common communication methods:

- Email
- Instant messaging
- Person-to-person phone calls
- Conference calls

Outsourcing, cont. on page 7



SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

President's Column

by Barb Stanton



A few weeks ago a student from the Writing program at the University of Pittsburgh emailed me to see if she could ask me some questions about technical writing, my responsibilities at my job and my thoughts on the profession for a project she was working on. Last week, a woman called me requesting more information about STC and wondered if STC was something that could help her in her career as a trainer. She has spent the greater part of her career putting together training materials and doing software training and was now looking for options to expand.

Both of these experiences really forced me to think about my career as a technical writer and how it has evolved through the years. A brief, yet unsuccessful tenure in the newspaper business lead me to technical writing full time. In the beginning, I was strictly writing end user guides. There was no involvement in the usability or user interface design; training was

done through an entirely different department; and marketing seemed to be so cool and creative and yet so far out of reach for me – the technical writer.

Here I am eight years later and user guides are a small percentage of daily responsibilities. Projects like the intranet and web site have become part of my weekly To Do list. Editing and creating templates for Statements of Work, proposals and RFPs are regular projects. Marketing has also crept into some of the responsibilities; and training is no longer an entirely different department.

All of these changes and the shifts in responsibilities and priorities are a sign of the times; a sign of the changes in business and in the demands of what the customer wants. The key to surviving these changes is constant professional growth and being able to adapt your skills and knowledge to take on these varied responsibilities. One of the questions the Pitt student asked was: *Do you think technical writers should have a degree in English writing? Why or why not?* That question required a lot of thought because yes the writing background is important but a lot of what technical writers do these days is learned through experience. The experience you have in the industry helps you to grow and continue to learn. The software, technology and distribution of documents are so different now than when I first started. Learning new skills and

strengthening your areas of interest and responsibilities are important for growing in the profession.

Since the experience of what a technical writer can do has expanded, it seems as if the importance of a technical writer in a company has also expanded. Technical writers are not just viewed as being able to write instruction manuals, but they come with a new set of qualifications to fit in other areas in a company.

It might be a good time to take a few minutes to evaluate your career as a technical writer and how it has evolved though years and see what you need to do next to capitalize on these changes in the profession.

Chapter Members Granted Senior Member Status

The following members of the Pittsburgh chapter of STC have been given senior member status by the Society:

- Debra Graminski
- Amy Hollister
- Jessica Kreger
- Phillip Miller
- Robert Moyer
- Barbara Stanton
- Mark Sullivan
- James Werling

Congratulations to each of them!

Society for Technical Communication

Notes from the National Office

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Membership at a Glance

(as of February 28, 2005)

National

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 Total chapters: 145

Pittsburgh Chapter

Total Members: 146
 No New Members

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April 20, 2005

Magical Numbers – Jean-luc Doumont

The magical number seven, plus or minus two, was made famous when George Miller, in his 1956 article, denoted it as the number of information chunks a person could hold in short-term memory. Miller’s insights into “our capacity for processing information” have been frequently misunderstood and misquoted. Contrary to popular belief, it turns out that seven items are usually too many for a communication to be effective. This seminar first exposes the seven-plus-or-minus-two myth by interpreting the number correctly as an asymptotic limit, per Miller’s paper. It then proposes other rules of thumb that prove more useful in practice, based on the numbers zero through six, and illustrates these concepts with numerous examples.

June 8, 2005

Adding Interactivity to Online Documents – William Horton

Passive reading, watching, and listening may allow users to gather simple information, but these methods are seldom effective in acquiring skills, gaining knowledge, or developing judgment. More and more, we need to make our documents interactive. This seminar will demonstrate simple

ways to fill your online help, electronic documents, and Web pages with meaningful interactivity that makes learning more like playing a video game than reading the dreaded manual.

June 22, 2005

One World Publishing – Single-Source Editing and Translation – Michael Plattner

Until now, international technical communication has treated single-source editing, translation/localization, and cross-media publishing as separate processes of document development for a global audience. In its life cycle, a translated document passes through many hands, including those of editors, translators, and producers--an inefficient process. Nowadays, continually decreasing “time-to-market” cycles demand an integrated process that is as fully automated as possible.

Upcoming Society Events

May 8-11, 2005

Mark your calendars. STC’s 52nd Annual Conference will be held in Seattle, Washington. The Preliminary Program was mailed with the February issue of *Intercom*. Information on registration rates was published in the November 2004 issue of *Tieline* (www.stc.org/tieline.asp). Information on the Leadership Day schedule (May 8) was published in the January 2005 issue of *Tieline*.

National Notes, cont. on page 4

National Notes, cont. from page 3

October 20-21, 2005

STC's 2005 Training Program will be held in Crystal City, Virginia (see below).

First STC Training Program in October

STC announces its first Training Program, which will be held October 20-21, 2005, at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Crystal City, Virginia, just minutes outside of Washington, DC. The program will offer five two-day, comprehensive courses on topics of practical interest to technical communicators. Professionals seeking to further their skills and marketability can attend one course from the following list:

- The Architecture of Content - Jonathan Price
- Creating and Using Personas to Improve Usability - Whitney Quesenbery
- Focusing on Content: Making Web Sites Work for Users - Ginny Redish and Caroline Jarrett

- Leadership in Information Management: Developing the Business Framework and Implementation Roadmap for Single Sourcing, Content Management, and Knowledge Management - Rosaline Tsai
- XML: From Hand-coding to WYSIWYG Authoring - Neil Perlin

Attendance is limited to 60 students per course; enrollment is expected to fill quickly, so encourage your members to enroll early. Advance registration opens in early May, and closes September 21, 2005. More information on registration and lodging can be found in the March issue of Tieline.

STC Launches 52nd Annual Conference Web Site

The Web site for STC's 52nd Annual Conference is up and running at www.stc.org/52ndConf. The site provides comprehensive, up-to-date information on educational and professional opportunities at the conference and includes a dynamic online registration form.



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Marketing Your Writing Business: March 16 CIC SIG Meeting- by Christina Downs

How many times have you said “I should have done that” in your business or in your life in general? We probably all have at one time or another.

One successful business owner advises that we not use the word “should” -- because no one is perfect. Mary Cvetan, owner of Cvetan Communications (www.cvetan.com) and a marketing communications and public relations writer with fifteen years of experience in the health care industry, led a discussion at the March 16 Consulting and Independent Contracting Special Interest Group (CIC SIG) meeting. Her advice at the meeting also included ensuring “key influencers” know about you, finding a good mentor or advisor, and being strategic.

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Major topics discussed at the March 16th meeting included sales, marketing, and pricing, and the discussion focused on what has worked for Cvetan and others in the group.

Sales

The two functions of sales include getting in front of the right people and then saying the right thing. Sales also requires discipline and follow-through. Cvetan suggested obtaining some sort of sales training (some forms are more expensive than others, but any type of training can be beneficial). Cvetan attended the Sandler Selling System program, from the Sandler Sales Institute, through Peak Performance Management, Inc., but she also mentioned that there exist lower-cost alternatives such as books and cassette tapes. In particular, sales training helped her in the areas of setting prices and negotiating

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deals. Cvetan stressed that this was something that worked for her.

Marketing

Cvetan said that marketing involves getting new clients and keeping the old. In today’s economy, what are the most effective marketing strategies? Group members discussed various methods they have used or plan to try to market their businesses. Such methods include the following:

- Networking that leads to GOOD word-of-mouth (Cvetan pointed out that not all word of mouth is effective)
- Joining and becoming involved in professional organizations (Cvetan mentioned that she was a member of The Small Business Network (www.tsbn.org) and the International Association for Business Communicators (www.iabc.com), but there are plenty of others, including STC (www.stc.org))
- Writing articles, even on topics outside your business specialty (Cvetan and other meeting attendees have utilized this method)
- Giving presentations
- Making cold calls
- Sending directed mailings (Cvetan suggested using www.accudata.com to help identify target companies)
- Possibly trading services with another professional in a different field, where you both need what the other provides (Cvetan gave an example where this worked between her and another professional)

Marketing, cont. on page 6

Marketing, cont. from page 5

Pricing

How do we know what to charge clients? The problem with talking money is that pricing is relative. When entering into a sales meeting, it helps to have a general idea of where to start.

The following are some ways the group discussed how to research prices to charge or how to test prices real-time:

- Check the STC salary surveys and other salary surveys
- Join online discussion groups that discuss pricing (can be done anonymously)
- Test prices by providing a range to clients (with the high end 25% more than you are aiming for)
- Test prices by high-balling a few clients (once you have enough work that you feel comfortable taking such a risk). You will still lose contracts either way; you might as well try higher prices.
- Tell a potential client that, in the past for other clients, for similar work you have typically charged between X and Y (and start a little high in case they balk)
- Ask for a client's budget first, before any price negotiations.

Some words of advice from Cvetan: Do not get offended at low offers, and continue prospecting. (For example, don't let one low-ball destroy your momentum if you are cold-calling.) However, you do need to decide your price range ahead of time and stick to it. If your business plan calls for you to be a Mercedes, do not accept the fees of a Hyundai. In this situation, nobody wins when you low-ball (or when you accept a low-ball offer).

Useful Resources

Resources suggested at the meeting include the following:

- "The Well-Fed Writer" by Peter Bowerman
- "Diary of a Small Business Owner" by Anita Brattina
- "What to Charge: Pricing Strategies for Freelancers and Consultants" by Laurie Lewis
- www.accudata.com

Chris Downs works full-time as a technical writer and is also starting a writing, editing, and eBooks business (724-532-3669, Chrdowns@aol.com, <http://www.members.aol.com/chrdowns/writing.htm>). She is a member of the STC WorkQuest group (<http://home.earthlink.net/~workquest/>).

Meet a Graphic Facilitator - by Nancy Carpenter

Peter Durand, cofounder of AlphaChimp, is one of the top graphic facilitators in the world. Given that impressive credential, what is a graphic facilitator? Our March chapter meeting addressed this question.

Graphic facilitators help people to develop and visualize ideas at meetings and they communicate the event and its results. These events are primarily in-person meetings, not web events or video conferences. Peter noted that meetings are indispensable to creating the connections between people that enable them to work better together. He has facilitated design meetings all over the world.

The graphic facilitators are part of the organization team. They help to set up a meeting space and activities that will encourage interaction and creativity. They then document the event in video and text, listening for themes and patterns and

adding illustrations where these crystallize the results. They keep the meeting context in mind and filter the events as they summarize. Finally, they end up with a few workable ideas.

Peter applied facilitation experience to technical documentation and offered some insights. For instance, "everything speaks." In meetings, a facilitator can add an unusual element such as plants or music to change the tone and stir people. What can we add to a manual to spark the reader's interest? A manual is an interactive, non-linear experience. On-line documentation uses hyperlinks and a good navigation plan to help the user access the information. Printed documents provide a table of contents, an index and cross-references. Is there a change in design that could make the information more accessible, the experience more satisfying? Finally, how can we help people to see that documenting a project matters? These questions and others like them are the focus of graphic facilitators.

Grammar Game – Answers to Previous Column (“Watcher Beware! or, How the Media Make Us Stupid”)

by Meg Papa, Blue Pencil Managing Editor

1. “Every agent has one case that haunts *them* [him or her].” (Without a Trace promo) I know using “him” or “her” is awkward, but that doesn’t change the fact that the subject is singular and the objective pronoun is plural. Other solutions might be “All agents have one case that haunts them” or “Every agent is haunted by one case.” Also, since the agent who was the subject of the promo was clearly identified as female, “Every agent has one case that haunts her” would have been acceptable.
2. “*To Boldly Go [Boldly] Where No Man Has Gone Before.*” (Star Trek tag line) This problem of the split infinitive was much more controversial when Star Trek first launched almost forty years ago. I wasn’t around for that, but I remember reading about the creator’s conscious decision to split the infinitive because it sounded better. While some still believe splitting an infinitive is a no-no, it is a much more acceptable practice now.
3. “*What if God ~~was~~ [were] one of us?*” (Joan of Arcadia title song) This line is a hypothetical statement, for which the subjunctive (were) is the correct form of the ‘be’ verb, even for first person singular.
4. “*K[C]artoon Knuggets*” (web cartoon) This little nugget isn’t just wrong, but misses the point, I think. Not only are there two misspelled words, but the phrase fails the alliteration test, since the “K” in knuggets is not pronounced. I suppose the guilty party could have been aiming for visual alliteration, but the butchering of the language takes all the fun out of it.
5. “*Inspire the Next [need noun here].*” (Hitachi ad) Since when are adjectives acted upon, or used alone as objects?
6. “*Roomier. Versatilier.*” (Toyota ad)
7. “*Adrenalitis sufferer.*” (Toyota ad)

Regarding #6 & #7, I just can’t stand advertisements that use made-up words to be cute. What happens is that some people (of all ages, unfortunately) can’t tell cute from accurate, and start thinking that some of these words just may be real. The challenge for a writer is to be creative, memorable, and funny using vocabulary that actually exists!

8. “*Customer can receive Cash Back from Toyota or can apply Cash Back to ~~D~~[d]own P[p]ayment.*” (Toyota ad small print) Okay, grammatically, there is not really anything wrong with this statement. My beef is with the excessive capitalization. It seems like the writer of this text capitalized every noun, not just proper nouns. “Customer” as the first word in the sentence, and “Toyota” as a proper noun, should be capitalized. What about “Cash Back”? If it is a trademarked phrase, one could argue it should be capitalized if that is the way it was trademarked. Since almost all carmakers promise cash back, I have my doubts about the trademark issue. There is no excuse for the phrase “Down Payment” to be capitalized. It is a common phrase used by everyone in the automobile and real estate industry.
9. “*Whether you live in a big city, or a small town ~~like me~~ [as I do], you can make a difference.*” (NFL public service announcement) I absolutely adore this one. I’m sure the speaker did not mean to equate himself to a small town, but that is exactly what he did. The fact that this gaffe was part of a very polished, professionally-done PSA for the NFL makes it that much more distressing (yet funny).
10. “*We just have to keep our nose to the ~~grinder~~ [grindstone].*” (Eagles’ coach Andy Reid) Ouch! All I can say is, if you are going to use clichés, make sure you quote them correctly. If you are going to alter a cliché, make sure you do so purposefully.

Outsourcing, cont. from page 1

- Video conferences
- Web conferences
- Web demonstrations
- Faxes
- Collaboration tools (see *Problem 2: Coordination*)
- Combinations of the above (e.g., web demo with conference call)

Time shifting

Connecting during “business hours” becomes more complicated when communicating across multiple time zones.

- Schedule conference calls or demos at times when all involved can participate, which may mean early morning or late night calls.

- Use asynchronous communication methods such as email.

No money to travel?

Use web conferences, video conferences, conference calls, and other remote meeting techniques. Sometimes, though, you need to meet in person.

Outsourcing, cont. on page 8

April Chapter Meeting - Strategic Career Planning for Technical Communicators

Speaker: Bob Dianetti, STC Region 4 Director-Sponsor

Date: Monday, April 11, 2005

Time: 6:30 – 8:00 p.m.

This talk will discuss several areas of growth for technical communicators over the next several years based on observed trends in both the domestic and global economy. There are many areas where we can thrive that may not be obvious to those already in the industry. The talk will be highly interactive, with a real-world case study or two discussed during the session. A longer description can be found at the STC Pittsburgh web site: <http://www.stcpgh.org>.

Cost: \$5 STC members; \$8 non-members; \$3 unemployed and students

(includes hors d'oeuvres and beverages)

RSVP: by April 6 to Darlene Mullenix - 412-288-8676 or dmullenix@federatedinv.com

Location: Pittsburgh Technology Council building, 2000 Technology Drive, Pittsburgh, PA. Directions @ <http://www.pghtech.org/aboutus/directions.asp>

Outsourcing, cont. from page 7

Get involved!

If you're working alone, fight isolation by volunteering, taking classes, and attending professional meetings and networking events. Talk or exchange personal email with your remote co-workers, but don't overdo it. (Added benefit: it's usually easier to work with people once you've forged a personal connection.) And don't forget your social life!

(Next month, look for the conclusion of Nancy's article, which will address the problems of coordination and culture.)

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Open Committee Chairs (3): Employment Information, Publicity, & High School Writing Competition

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