



Technicalities

President's Corner



page 3

Chapter News



page 5

Tools, Technology, & Technique



page 7

Colorado Connections



page 8

Professional Development



page 9

Volunteer Spotlight



page 11

The Continued Evolution of the Technical Writer

by Tina Hedlund

Two years ago, experienced technical writers could write their own ticket in companies that had difficulty finding and hiring experienced writers. Companies hired anyone they could find. But that has changed, along with the economy and America's sense of well-being.

Today, companies are laying off staff and cutting expenses, while still expecting the same products to ship on time and on budget. It's difficult to differentiate yourself or

your product when you're barely getting information products out the door. To buy breathing space and

Now that we've mastered the tools and content, how can we remain on the leading edge of the IT marketplace?

provide better targeted information for their customers, many technical publications departments are turning to single sourcing. By single sourcing I don't mean simply the repurposing of the same information into print, HTML, and online help using tools like Quadralay WebWorks Publisher. I'm talking about structured XML, modular storage of information types, metadata for customization, and the ability to deliver consistent user-targeted information to your customers through an XML content-management system.

It's a shift for which many technical writers aren't prepared. As a writer using

an XML content-management system, your job will lack originality in some senses, but it will also provide you with the ability to focus more on the structure and meaning of the content.

The good news is that the basic skills needed in an XML writing environment are sound writing techniques you probably already possess.

Structured Writing

Writing in a structured way allows you to reuse content in many formats and in many different deliverables. With XML, you pay closer attention to the content structure rather than the way it looks.

For example, in a FrameMaker or Word writing environment, you select a style and start writing. In XML, you do essentially the same thing, but instead of selecting a style, you choose the structural element. For instance, if you need to write a procedure for installing your widget, you first select "procedure" from the pull-down menu. Only a limited number of other structural elements are available when you choose a procedure because someone has already written a rule that says that a procedure can only contain a title, overview, and step-by-step instructions. You then choose the element "title" and type the title. This process continues until you have completed your procedure. The allowed structure is already in place (as defined by your

continued on page 10

Also In This Issue

- A Little Advice for the Road
- 28th Annual Art, Publications, and Online Competition
- Volunteer Leadership
- Moving Online!

- page 3
- page 4
- page 6
- page 10



Technicalities

EDITORIAL

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The editor can be reached during the day at 303.689.0022, via fax at 303.689.0055, and by e-mail at news@stcrmc.org. Please submit electronic files in ASCII text format and include a telephone number where you can be reached. To fax articles or artwork, please call the editor. The deadline for article submission is one month prior to issue release (first of the month, every other month).

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From the Editor

Do You Write in Flow?

by Stephen Wertzbaugher

As a technical writer and aspiring fiction writer, I am always searching for tools that will improve my productivity in both genres. For me, writing is on-again, off-again: some days my fingers fly across the keyboard so fast that my brain has trouble keeping up; while others it's a titanic struggle just to squeeze a single word onto the blank page. Many of my writer friends also complain of similar periods of feast or famine, so I guess this is a common phenomenon of our field. But does the creative process, whether used to create imaginary worlds or document a complicated software application, have to be so hit or miss?

While I have yet to find a book dedicated to finding your technical writing muse, the fiction-writing world contains many attempts to teach writers how to write in flow or find their muse. And while the systems described in these books are intended for the fiction or poetry writer, they can be applied by the nonfiction or technical ink-stained wretch who may be struggling with putting words to paper. One treasure that I discovered is *Writing in Flow: Keys to Enhanced Creativity*, by Susan K. Perry (Writers Digest Books, 1999).

What is "writing in flow?" Writing in flow is the currently fashionable phrase for the old writers' term, "finding your muse." When writing in flow, the writer loses all sense of time and space, becoming totally immersed in her work until some time later — minutes, hours, or even after an entire day — she remembers to breathe and pulls herself back into the physical world. During this time there are usually no thoughts of hunger or thirst, quotidian trivia like the bills and the laundry, or impossible deadlines. You are the words and the words are you. Writing in flow is the closest thing I've found to achieving a writer's heavenly high without actually ingesting mind-altering drugs.

So, how do you achieve this writer's nirvana? Perry's book delves into the subject, explaining exactly what writing in flow is and what it feels like, the master keys to writing in flow, and finally how to make your writer's flow happen. In this last section, Perry discusses several techniques writers can use to help induce the state of flow. And while I am sure that many of you already practice these techniques, it never hurts to be reminded of what we can do to improve our writing technique and productivity. A few of the techniques discussed by Dr. Perry:

- ▶ **Ritual and routine** — Ritualizing your behavior focuses your mind on your current task and removes the pressure of what others might think of your writing when you are finished. During this time there is no room for any distractions or thoughts except for what you are writing.
- ▶ **Clearing your desk** — Sometimes, when shifting priorities force us to begin a new project before the previous one is complete, staring at your notes and emails about the previous project can distract you. Clear this material from your desk so that it is out of sight, out of mind, before beginning the new project.
- ▶ **Just do it** — Many experienced writers have developed the ability, through years of patient practice, to enter the flow state simply by immersing themselves immediately and fully into their current work. If this works for you, then "just do it."

continued on page 4



Welcome! It's Time for a Changing of the Guard

by Martha Sippel

Another STC fiscal year has passed, and it is time for the changing of the guard. Yes, some of you voted me in as President, and now you can see (and hopefully read) my column on a bimonthly basis. You might ask, "Why should I care what the President has to say?" My many reasons follow.

The management of the Rocky Mountain Chapter of STC (STC RMC) is, as in other chapters, composed entirely of volunteers. People contribute time and effort to the chapter in many ways. Here are some of the benefits these volunteers provide through the STC RMC:

- ▶ Creating this newsletter
- ▶ Maintaining the STC RMC Web site
- ▶ Keeping our monies safe and growing
- ▶ Providing pertinent seminars
- ▶ Managing our local competitions
- ▶ Planning and providing speakers and food for our monthly chapter meetings
- ▶ Sending notices to local papers to advertise our events
- ▶ Providing scholarships

You can affect the STC RMC by contributing your ideas or your time. You might say, "I'm too busy. I don't even have time for myself and my family." However, even if you only have a limited amount of time, you can make a difference. It might even make you feel more valuable — and a recent survey says volunteering may extend your life. Surprised? I'm not. It's nice to positively affect others. Check out open positions posted on the Web site.

Other ways you can help? Write one article a year for *Technicalities*. More would be even better! And timeless articles — those with topics that are not time-sensitive and can be used when they are most needed — are invaluable. Have an idea? Write it down! Steve Wertzbaugher and the newsletter staff will be grateful.

Not interested in writing? "I write all day," you say? Or maybe you only have spare time during a certain part of the year? Don't be afraid to let us know you can help only for certain things or during certain times.

I am excited about this year and I hope you are, too. By September, I hope to have held a successful strategic planning session to formalize our continuing events and decide on new initiatives for next year. If you have ideas for the chapter, please send them to me at president@stcrmc.org. If you have a plan for implementation, please include it. Even if you cannot participate, we may be able to find volunteers to carry out your great idea!

Being one of the largest chapters in STC allows us the opportunity to make a society-wide difference. Are you a member of another professional organization? Do they provide services that you wish STC would provide? Do they hold specific meetings, seminars, competitions, or other events that you think would benefit our members? If so, let me know.

As a chapter, we won the Distinguished Chapter Achievement award under Linda Gallagher's leadership a little over a year ago. One of my goals this year is to fulfill the requirements that allow us to apply for this honor again. Your participation can help us achieve greater goals. Together, we CAN make a difference. Please consider taking the time to volunteer.

I think I can speak for others (probably not a good way to start out the year!) and say that your elected officers are all excited about representing you in the best manner possible. All we need is your support! Thanks in advance for participating, and I hope to see you at the next monthly meeting on September 19th. **RMC**

A Little Advice for the Road

by David C. Garrett

This is my third attempt at writing this farewell President's column. I liked the other two well enough, but they seemed far too negative and smacked of self-importance. What I really want to say is simply goodbye.

That being said, I also want to say that I think we've done quite well given the mess of the last twelve or so months. Both professionally and as just plain old people, everyone seems to have held up well. Most folks I know have crawled through their own dark valleys and emerged stronger and more flexible.

Obviously, dark days are still upon us. There will be no quick economic recovery and many good people will leave the profession. In retrospect, the brief, shining light of prosperity appears to have been an anomaly. The struggle for professional recognition and pay has been dealt a heavy blow — but perhaps someday, under the guidance of a new generation, the profession will become professional.

In the meantime, we take our professionalism where we can find it. Although as a group technical communicators are reactionary and damn proud of it, there are many who

continued on page 4

A Little Advice for the Road

continued from page 3

work quietly to realize the value of our trade — not through incessant whining, but through hard work and innovation. In the last several months, as the chicken littles scurried about, I've seen true professionals come to the fore. These people continue to embrace the modest ideal of providing value for their employers and clients. As is often the case in hard times, the group fails and the individual succeeds.

So just a few last bits of advice and then it's back to the war: When you need guidance as to how to be a good and professional technical communicator, look to the individuals whom you respect. Pay attention to the mailing lists, but take your pundits with a grain of salt. Ignore completely anything stated with absolute authority. Don't buy books written by journalists or academics (unless the books are about journalism or academia). Remember that the map, no

matter how well illustrated, is not the territory. Just because something works well over there does not mean it will work well over here (and, in fact, it probably never worked particularly well over there anyway). Tools are simply tools. Your brain is the best tool, and a legal pad is a damn fine word processor. If it seems complex, have an expert draw a picture. If the picture is complex, it means the expert doesn't understand it either. Clients will always be in a hurry to get the deliverable but will never be in a hurry to pay you. Focus on a few skills and do them exceptionally well. Relax, breathe, and remember that deadlines are like a game of Whack-a-Mole — they'll just keep popping up as often as you knock them down.

So long, and here's to better times ahead. **RMC**

Do You Write in Flow?

continued from page 2

- ▶ **Musical aids** — Often, listening to certain types or even specific pieces of music can instill a flow state. This is one of my favorite flow techniques, and I use different kinds of music for different kinds of writing: classical and instrumental movie sound tracks for fiction; and folk music, certain types of rock, and jazz for technical and nonfiction pieces.
- ▶ **Simple silence** — Often, loud voices, ringing phones, and other interruptions stifle a writer's creativity. This was a really big killer for me when I first began writing, and under certain circumstances it still is. If silence is your road to flow, buy some sort of white noise machine

for your cubical, or if you are lucky enough to have an office with a door, close it before you begin to write. Better yet, invest in a pair of high-quality headphones capable of blocking extraneous sounds. Silence, you'll find, is golden.

I've tried all of the techniques discussed by Perry at least once and have chosen those that work best for me. And if you too need help with rediscovering or improving your writing productivity, I recommend Perry's book. After all, what could be better than having writer's nirvana at your beck and call, rather than waiting for a balky muse that may never sing? Writing in flow, how smooth the sound! **RMC**

28th Annual Art, Publications, and Online Competition

by Marella Colypas and Kathy Ramsey

Each year, technical communicators from the Rocky Mountain region and beyond submit their best work to our competition. Entrants may enter one or more of the three competitions (art, publications, and online) and may enter up to three names per entry. An entry may be submitted to more than one competition (e.g., art and online); an entry fee for each must be paid. You may enter your own work or that of a colleague or subordinate. Entrants need not be STC members. Competition entries are due by close of business October 25, 2002.

The goal of the competition is to showcase and encourage excellence in the profession of technical communication. We offer three competitions so that technical ideas expressed in different media can be evaluated, recognized, and shared. For most entrants, the heart of the competition is the valuable feedback they receive from colleagues who evaluate their work.

Entries that win a regional Distinguished award are automatically entered in the STC International Competition. Many of our local entries have won international-level awards in recent years. This speaks volumes about the professionalism and overall quality of the work produced in our area.

Because excellent technical communications work continues to thrive in the Rocky Mountain area, the 2002–03 competition should be the best ever. Look on the STC RMC Web site for more information. If you think it's time your hard work is honored and honestly evaluated, enter this year's competition. You'll be glad you did! **RMC**



Chapter News

Kicking Off the 2002–2003 Year

by Martin Smith and Jeanie Fogwell

We are starting off the 2002–2003 year with some very interesting topics! Find out more about how to single source your documentation in September. In October, listen to a panel discussion about where our technical communication profession is headed. For more information about these meetings, please visit our Web site at http://www.stcrmc.org/news_events/meetings.htm.

STC RMC Calendar

See the RMC Web site for more information about any of these activities.

August 2002



Summer Break —
Enjoy what's left of your summer!

September 2002



Tuesday, 9/3 —
Deadline for submitting articles for the Oct/Nov issue of Technicalities



Thursday, 9/5 —
STC RMC Council meeting



Thursday, 9/19 —
*Chapter meeting: Single-source publishing
Online SIG meeting*

October 2002



Thursday, 10/3 —
STC RMC Council meeting



Thursday, 10/17 —
*Chapter meeting: Where is Tech Comm going?
CIC SIG meeting*



Friday, 10/25 —
Deadline for submitting entries for the STC RMC Competition

September

Thursday, September 19

Single Source Publishing with FrameMaker

With its latest release of FrameMaker version 7.0, Adobe has combined the features of standard FrameMaker and FrameMaker+SGML into a single product. On September 19th, Martin Smith will demonstrate how these new features make it easier to organize existing documents and to produce online help systems.

For example, a programming language manual might organize language commands categorically and provide background information about each command, in addition to syntax and arguments. The SGML features in FrameMaker 7.0 make it possible to automatically label the various types of content in the manual, in this case categories, commands, background information, syntax, and arguments. Having the content labeled makes it possible to generate an online help system that excludes the background information and reorganizes the commands in alphabetical order. Martin uses FrameMaker 7.0 and his own help authoring program called VersiText in this way to produce printed and online documentation.

During his presentation, Martin will demonstrate the following:

- ▶ How to plan for single-source publishing.
- ▶ How to develop your own Element Definition Document (EDD) in FrameMaker 7.0 to structure your documentation.
- ▶ How to write a structured manual based on the EDD.
- ▶ How to cherry pick and reorganize the content that goes into an online help system with VersiText.
- ▶ How to generate the resulting help system.

Martin will be on hand to answer questions after the presentation. Copies of the presentation and sample CDs will also be available.

October

Thursday, October 17

Where is Technical Communication Going?

Technical communication has gone through many changes, is changing today, and will change tomorrow. As technical communicators we must be jacks-of-all-trades: know how to write, edit, and design a magazine feature; a technical manual; an ad layout; and a slide presentation. We must also become experts in a wide variety of software tools — FrameMaker, Word, Visio, RoboHELP, Dreamweaver, and countless other programs.

So where will all of this change take us? This seems to be the big question on all of our minds. Please join us for the October meeting where this fundamental question will be addressed. The discussion will also focus on:

- ▶ Local area prospects
- ▶ Salary expectations from both sides of the fence
- ▶ Innovative and successful job search techniques
- ▶ Market expectations for software tools and skill sets **RMC**

June Chapter Meeting Focuses on Being Consistently Invisible A Review of "Human Factors for Technical Communicators"

by Joel Meier

If you missed this, you missed more than a presentation. You missed the Memory Test. I recalled some items from the 2nd list, more items from the 3rd list, and 11 items from the 1st list. I am rather proud of the 11 since it was greater than the other two attempts combined.

Once past the sinking feeling that my memory was indeed failing (a feeling worsened by the folks who received nearly perfect scores, further debased by someone who noticed that our able presenter, Andrea Ames, switched the order of the hints on the first list, and finally plummeted to rock bottom by those who noticed that she switched the hints), I got the point. Humans use generalization and categorization to memorize.

Had I been able to generalize and categorize the lists easily, maybe even visualize a drop-down menu of directions, or fruit, or color, I might have been able to memorize as well as my colleagues. Andrea gave a wonderful definition of memory. It is:

- ▶ A storage place
- ▶ The data stored
- ▶ The means of moving the data into and out of storage

To memorize, humans categorize and generalize. We may not even know the categories, but we know where they are stored. We know that drop-down menus contain general descriptions of categories to come. Whether the general descriptions infer the correct categories is a much greater discussion. But we know that they are there, and we will run through all nine drop-down menus until we find it. We hope that we only have to sift through nine menus. Some say the "the magical number seven, plus or minus two" rule tells us to do so. I checked all the software on my computer and apparently, most agree with the rule. A few writers disagree (see the bibliography below). If we accept that the "magical number seven, plus or minus two" rule is a design that adheres to the facts of life, then I agree, it is a good rule.

Andrea names three facts of life for design:

- ▶ Users don't read; they scan
- ▶ Users don't make optimal choices; they "satisfice"
- ▶ Users don't figure things out; they muddle through

These facts of life are true. We perform them all the time. When we interact with software in our daily lives, there is generally one driving force: finish the task at hand and get on our way. The majority of the time we do not care how formulas calculate values in Excel. We scan and choose one that looks good. Nor do we care whether we chose the best formula for our computation. If it works, we are happy. If it does not, we do not want to know why it is not working. We want it to work, and that is all we want. We satisfice. We want to go home at quitting time. And we will muddle through until it gets close to that time. Because, really, that is what is all about, going home at quitting time.

How do we get our users home at quitting time? We need to be consistent in design and consistent in terminology. If you want them to click something, make sure that they know to click throughout. If you tell them to click something eight times and then click on something, someone is going to be confused. We must teach our audience our categories, load data in their storage places, help them muddle through, and get them home at quitting time — without their knowing it. We must be consistently invisible.

Some Things to Peruse

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Volunteer Leadership

by Rahel Bailie, Region 7 Director-Sponsor

Those who think that volunteer leadership is a breeze have probably never held leadership positions in a volunteer organization. If they had, they'd know how much more effort it can take to keep one's calm at the helm of a voluntary, not-for-profit organization.

The quality of my managers' leadership, over the years, has fluctuated wildly. From those with underdeveloped skills, staff steeled themselves for a rough ride. The necessity of getting a paycheck made them hang in as long as they could, braving abusive behavior, manipulative behavior,

and downright amateurish behavior, and eventually the manager would lose those with talent, and be left with the staff whose morale had been damaged beyond the confidence level of being able to job-hunt.

Volunteer leaders have no such luxury. At the first hint of dysfunctional behavior, their team members can leave — that's without a notice period, of course — and find greener pastures in which to contribute. Volunteer leaders need to have the ability to motivate their teams to reach their goals, and to make that experience a pleasant one. The rules of

continued on page 7



Regaining the Muse

by Dana Cline

Many people have told us that creativity is not required for our jobs (maybe they read those RoboHelp ads). These people have probably never been touched by the Muse, much less been abandoned by the Muse as we all have been from time to time.

Most of us have had the experience of sitting in front of the screen, staring, eventually entering a few sentences, only to stare some more, perform a few edits, and finally delete those pitiful fragments and start over. Once we've lost the Muse, how can we get it back?

The best way is to remove distractions. Forward your phone to an answering machine. Exit your email program. Shut your door, if you're lucky enough to have one.

When this doesn't work, another way is to induce distractions. Sometimes if you don't concentrate on a problem, your subconscious will produce an answer. There are several ways of producing this type of distraction.

One that occasionally works for me is adding music. The right music can focus the mind and guide its thoughts.

Those of us who work in Cubeville can always use headphones, but make sure you get a comfortable pair. I leave the music selection as an exercise for the student, as what works for me probably won't for you.

Another good method involves physical removal from the workspace. Sometimes this can mean a wander around the office for ten minutes, other times it may require a half-hour hike around the neighborhood. Less often, drastic measures may be needed — a complete change of scenery for an extended period.

Commonly referred to as vacations, these can often refresh, invigorate, and give one a new outlook on life. In my case, it was last week's visit to Glacier Bay, Alaska, where I sat in the sunshine and watched a glacier calve. In the high-tech fields, few people take vacations at all, and rarely do they actually do something they've never done. Many of them need to. You may be among them.

Tool, technique, or tip? You decide... **RMC**

Volunteer Leadership

continued from page 6

corporate politics don't really apply in the voluntary sector. The dismay that staff members feel when their clueless manager gets promoted to director doesn't alarm volunteer teams. If anything, the volunteer leaders feel the alarm as their team members slip away, to another team in the same organization, or perhaps they leave the organization entirely. The result is that the reputation of the leader suffers, as does the health of the organization.

What this means for a volunteer organization such as STC is that we must be careful of the leaders we choose.

We want them to have integrity and take responsibility. We want them to speak up when it's appropriate, and butt out when it's not. We want them to be wildly supportive when we have a brilliant idea, and we want to be let down gently when our ideas turn out to be not so brilliant. We need them to be respectful of us so we can be respectful of them. We want to do our work, and we want to have fun doing it.

As a volunteer organization, we must be careful of the leaders we choose.

We need to have confidence in our leaders, but our leaders also need to have confidence in us. Our leaders want to know we're working toward our goals without getting derailed along the way. They want to know we're getting along with our team mates, and that our personalities aren't getting in the way. They want to be re-assured when their leadership styles are working, and they want to be told gently when they're on a fruitless track. They want to be able to count on our support during the good times and the hard times.

They, like us, want to be confident that people say the same things behind our backs that they do to our faces. They, like us, want to be appreciated for our individual and collective efforts. In fact, there is no "they" and "we" — we're in this together, and the more we appreciate those around us, the more appreciation we'll see reflected in them.

Rahel Bailie is a partner in Bailie Technical Services Inc. and a senior STC member. You can reach her at rahel@bailie.com. **RMC**



The Colorado Job Market: Professional-Eat-College Graduate

by Stephen Wertzbaugher

In the last issue of *Technicalities* I wrote about the state of the technology industry in Colorado, based on an article published in the *Denver Post*. In that article, local technology company executives questioned a survey conducted by the Information Technology Association of America (ITAA) that indicated that the technology industry would rebound in the next twelve months, creating a shortage of qualified workers. Generally, hiring managers for local technology companies agreed that the recovery of the technology industry in Colorado would be slower, taking more time than the twelve months indicated in the ITAA survey.

And now, according to another article published recently in the *Post*, the horizon isn't much brighter for job seekers, especially college graduates. According to the article, recent graduates are wading into an already over-crowded job market flooded with laid-off professionals chewed up and spit out by the recent economic downturn. This isn't surprising, especially as, according to economists and the state labor department, there are 42,000 fewer jobs and 46,000 more unemployed in Colorado than last year.

According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers, which connects employers with college services offices at universities, employers expect to hire 36.4 percent fewer college graduates this year than last. This is especially true in the Colorado technology and telecommunications industries, which participated in a hiring frenzy in the late 1990s, recruiting large numbers of college graduates at high salaries. Now, many of those jobs no longer exist, and many large companies such as WorldCom, Global Crossing, Hewlett-Packard, Agilent, Qwest, IBM, Level 3 Communications, and Sun Microsystems are either

Recent graduates are wading into an already over-crowded job market flooded with laid-off professionals.

not hiring at all, or are hiring only in small numbers. Add to this that many of the former technology and telecommunications powerhouses are in bankruptcy, on the verge of bankruptcy, or under investigation for dubious accounting practices, and you have the perfect recipe for too many workers and not enough jobs.

And to rub salt into an already painful wound, starting salaries for recent college graduates are down as well — as much as 14 percent from last year for college graduates who majored in computer information systems. That means a \$50,000 per year starting salary a year ago will be only about \$43,000 per year now — if the hapless job-seeker can find a job at all.

So, in the face of the toughest job market seen in almost a decade, how can college graduates even hope to snag that elusive first interview? College career resource centers are probably the best resource for recent graduates, according to the article, because those are the people who are in touch with employers. Graduates should also research the companies they are interested in, highlight their experience, and try to get an internship. Another tried-and-true method for the recent graduate is to target a specific industry or job, research an employer, and know how they fit into that company before the interview.

The present tough job market means fewer jobs for more workers; both previously employed professionals and recent college graduates. But because of their inexperience, many college graduates face an even greater challenge in searching for their first professional job after college. That means they need to work smarter and harder at finding a job than their more experienced competition. And while this may seem bleak, college graduates entering the job market at this time should not lose hope — there are jobs, but like that last elusive Easter egg they may require additional diligence to find. **RMC**

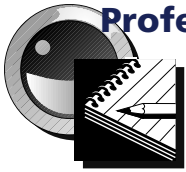
Where's Your Special Interest Group?

By Stephen Wertzbaugher

If you feel the need to share common interests, techniques, and technology with other like-minded people, then the STC RMC SIGs are perfect for you. A SIG, or Special Interest Group, brings people with common interests and experiences together for a lively sharing of skills and knowledge before the general presentation during our monthly chapter meetings.

In September, the Online SIG will meet to discuss the wonderful world of the Web. If you are an independent consultant or contractor, or just interested in the world of being an independent contract technical writer, be sure to attend the CIC SIG meeting during the October STC RMC chapter meeting.

SIG's are a wonderful way to meet other technical communicators who share the same experiences and interests. Got that itch? Then scratch it at the September or October STC RMC chapter meeting Special Interest Group presentations. **RMC**



My Own Business: Where Do I Start?

Part 1 of 2

by Hugh Gallagher

Editor's note: This is the first part of a two-part article on working as an independent technical communicator. Part 2 will run in the October-November Technicalities.

In the wake of recent layoffs, workers are abandoning the illusory security of being an employee for the entrepreneurial world of the small business owner. While this is exciting, it can also be daunting. How do I get started?

Part 1 of this article will consider the skills and personal traits that are important success factors for independents, and will suggest some directions for you if you fit the independent profile. Part 2 of this article will address important concerns for every independent, including finances and taxes, setting up an office, insurance, and professional development.

Here are some questions to consider that will help you get started — or change your mind:

Do I have what it takes?

Before running off at full speed in the wrong direction, make sure you are suited for self-employment. Not everyone is. Be honest with yourself. Here are some questions to answer:

- ▶ Are you a realistic risk taker, not a high-risk taker?
- ▶ Do you like challenges?
- ▶ Can you live without a regular paycheck, emotionally and financially?
- ▶ Are you self-disciplined?
- ▶ Are you tenacious and self-confident?
- ▶ Are you well organized and good at organizing others?
- ▶ Are you willing to work more than 40 hours per week, a substantial portion of which is unpaid?
- ▶ Do you take rejection well?
- ▶ Are you persistent?
- ▶ Do you love being in charge?
- ▶ Will you seek help with areas of running a business you are not expert in?
- ▶ Do you enjoy learning new things and keeping your skills current?
- ▶ Are you self-sufficient?
- ▶ Are you a persistent problem solver?
- ▶ Are you good at setting and achieving goals?
- ▶ Are you able to live with modest to high levels of uncertainty?
- ▶ Do you think you can do things better than your boss/company?

Certainly, you do not have to answer yes to all of these questions to be a successful entrepreneur. However, the more you can honestly say yes to, the higher your chance of success in striking out on your own.

What do I want to do? What products or services should I offer?

To increase your chances of success, find something that gets you excited. This will provide you with the energy and satisfaction that will keep you going. If you need help figuring out that “one thing,” consider hiring a professional career counselor or visit the self-help section of your library or bookstore.

Here are books I've found helpful:

- ▶ *What Color Is Your Parachute?*, by Richard Nelson Bolles (updated annually).
- ▶ *I Could Do Anything, if I Only Knew What it Was*, by Barbara Sher.

Okay I know what I want to do, where do I go from here?

That's way too complicated for me to answer completely in this article. I hope to address different aspects of this question in future *Technicalities* articles.

For now I recommend visiting the U.S. Small Business Administration web page: www.sba.gov/starting/

Planning can make the difference between creating a successful business or one that struggles. The SBA has outlined a business plan you may find helpful. This may be more detailed than you need; just use the sections that are pertinent to your situation: www.sba.gov/starting/indexbusplans.html

The SBA also provides workshops to help you get started: www.sba.gov/starting/indexworkshops.html

Another useful resource is the Colorado Resource Guide: www.state.co.us/oed/guide/

Also, the IRS booklet on Starting a Business and Keeping Records will help you get started: www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/p583.pdf

And of course you should check out STC RMC's freelance FAQ: www.stcmmc.org/jobs_freelance/freefaq.htm

How do I find prospective clients?

Major ways to market your business include:

- ▶ Advertising
- ▶ Public relations
- ▶ Word of mouth (networking)
- ▶ Cold calling

Advertising and public relations efforts can be expensive and may not be effective if you aren't opening a retail business. Cold calling is another option, but unless you are a real salesperson, you may not be comfortable with this.

continued on page 11

The Continued Evolution of the Technical Writer

continued from page 1

DTD or schema) and you, in a sense, are just following the formula.

When writers begin structuring their information, most find that they don't know their users well enough to structure it properly. In many cases, they don't even know that the problem is an incomplete view of the user experience, but instead assume that the DTD doesn't accommodate necessary levels of hierarchy. If you write according to the structure of product functionality, this assumption would be true. But if you write easy-to-use task-oriented documentation, the hierarchy would be necessarily flatter. The solution: Know your user.

Writing for Reuse

As you write information types such as procedures, keep in mind how the content may be used in all deliverables. Maintaining this mindset will be one of the most challenging issues for you as a writer. It is something that will be addressed through proper project planning and an understanding of the deliverables.

If you are writing information types for three different models for delivery in print, HTML, and online help, it will take significant planning to determine what information is common and what information is appropriate for each deliverable. Specifically, you will need to become an expert in the user tasks associated with the product, in addition to the product itself, so you can determine what information is in common and what is different to support all dimensions of reuse (differences in model, deliverable, and so on).

To write for reuse, you will need to become an expert in the user tasks associated with the product.

Metadata

You've heard that metadata is information about information, but how does it apply to a technical publication? Like conditional text in FrameMaker, metadata can be used to show or hide information.

Metadata allows you to customize information to a specific user community. For instance, you can easily create a procedure for beginning users, intermediate users,

and expert users in-line just by assigning a metadata value. If you have predefined metadata, you just choose the appropriate value from a pull-down menu. During production, a production specialist would set the values that would show. For example, only the information specific to experts or beginners could be printed for a hard-copy book.

In the most sophisticated cases, you will have to choose a series of metadata. Most commonly, this metadata will be related to differing models or product versions, specific roles, and use experience. Other metadata, such as author name, content version, and workflow status, will be assigned automatically by the content-management system.

Collaboration


How you work will also change. The number of people you interact with will increase dramatically. You can no longer write a book in isolation with your subject-matter expert as your only contact. You may write by user task to ensure that it is appropriate across deliverables. Many organizations have found that this method is the only way for writers to appropriately decide what information is common and what is different when writing to different models or product versions. Editors ensure consistency and the overall integration of content.

If you are sharing information between departments, for instance with the Training department, you will have to collaborate with departments you have never had to consider before.

It Sounds Like A Lot of Work...

It is, but a lot of the time you currently spend "tweaking" the layout will disappear, and you will have the opportunity to differentiate yourself as a professional technical communicator. Many of the skills you already possess to accomplish these "new" tasks aren't possessed by anyone else in your organization.


If you're interested in learning more about content strategies and XML, you can subscribe to a free Content Management e-newsletter at www.comtech-serv.com.

Tina Hedlund is a Senior Consultant with Comtech Services, a management consulting and information-design firm based in Denver. Tina is also the Managing Editor for the Best Practices newsletter. She can be reached at tina.hedlund@comtech-serv.com. 

Moving Online!



To serve you better, *Technicalities* will be moving from print format to online format sometime later this year. The *Technicalities* staff is excited about the change because of the many benefits it offers to STC RMC members. The primary benefit is the ability to deliver the newsletter to you more quickly. No more printing or mail delays! We'll be able to notify you by e-mail that the newsletter is available and you will be able to peruse its content at your convenience — from anywhere that you have access to the Internet.

We'll keep you posted about our progress with the format conversion. If you would like to assist in the transition from print to online newsletter, please contact Steve Wertzbaugher at news@stcrmc.org. 



Volunteer Spotlight

HOT! HOT! HOT!

by Helen Tuttle

It's in the 90s again as I write this in my non-air-conditioned office. The stock market has gone into retreat and the dirty linen of our nation's morality is being aired daily. "What's a body to do?" you ask.

The answer is to look around you. Do some good for someone else. Put down your fear and open yourself to new experiences. Cry a little — laugh more — and know that others are trying to do the same thing.

Your good deeds and helping hands will mean something different to each of you. The RMC council hopes that some of you will recognize that we need your help and that our arms are out in welcome. We have several openings for volunteers. If you don't see anything here that appeals to you, we're always open to suggestions.

Volunteer Coordinator

In this job you will fill open volunteer positions. Activities including attending monthly council meetings, and advertising open positions through word of mouth, announcements, e-blasts, and any other form of communication that you can develop. You can also polish your journalism skills by contributing a bi-monthly article highlighting the contributions of a volunteer in our organization or other volunteer topics of interest to our membership.

Co-manager of the Publications Competition

Ed Hanson is willing to co-manage the Publications Competition but he needs assistance. In this position you will help conduct the chapter-level publications competition, which recognizes superior work of chapter

members, and identify qualified chapter entries for the international publications competitions.

Your major activity will be to organize the event. Tasks include overseeing competition finances; finding volunteers to assist with key areas of the competition; finding qualified judges; producing the Call for Entries; and selecting the "Best of Show."

Manager of the Membership Committee

The purpose of the Membership Committee is to increase membership and to distribute STC information to chapter members and potential members. The Committee currently has several members, and needs a manager to oversee activities.

Committee activities include contacting and welcoming new members, having application forms and STC brochures at each meeting, and submitting membership material to the newsletter editor every other month. The Membership Committee also holds new member orientations before the monthly meetings.

Please help us build our chapter into an organization of which you can be proud — one that provides services that enhance the technical communications field and provides employers with a powerful resource for our skills.

For more information about any of these volunteer positions, contact Helen Tuttle at A1newwoman@hotmail.com.



My Own Business: Where Do I Start?

continued from page 9

As you probably already know, most professional businesses get new clients through referrals. Prospective clients want to have a certain comfort level before they will hire you. This is why word-of-mouth marketing is most likely the way you'll want to go.

Joining various types of professional and networking organizations is an effective way to make the contacts you need for your business.

If you want more information on word-of-mouth marketing, I recommend reading *Building Your Business with Word-of-Mouth Marketing*, by Ivan R. Misner, Ph.D.

Good luck with developing your client list! But remember that this is still not all you need to be concerned about. In Part 2 of this article I'll address important concerns you'll need to consider as you set up your business, including accounting and bookkeeping, taxes, contracts, insurance, and setting up your office. How you approach these tasks can make — or break — your new business.

Hugh Gallagher is the owner of Soft Docs & Hard Dollars (www.softdocsharddollars.com), which provides accounting consulting and technical writing services. Hugh can be reached at hughg@softdocsharddollars.com.





The mission of the Society for Technical Communication is to improve the quality and effectiveness of technical communication for audiences worldwide.

For the latest chapter news, visit our Web site at www.stcrmc.org.

Upcoming STC RMC Chapter Meetings September

For more information about chapter meetings, see the article on page 5 and the STC RMC Web site.

Single Source Publishing with FrameMaker

When: Thursday, September 19
 Where: Tivoli Center, Room 440
 Auraria Campus, Denver
 Cost: Members \$5
 Non-members \$8
 Students free

Agenda:

- 5:45 - 6:45 p.m. Online SIG meeting
- 6:00 - 7:00 p.m. New member orientation
- 5:45 - 7:15 p.m. Networking and snacks
- 7:15 - 9:00 p.m. Announcements and program



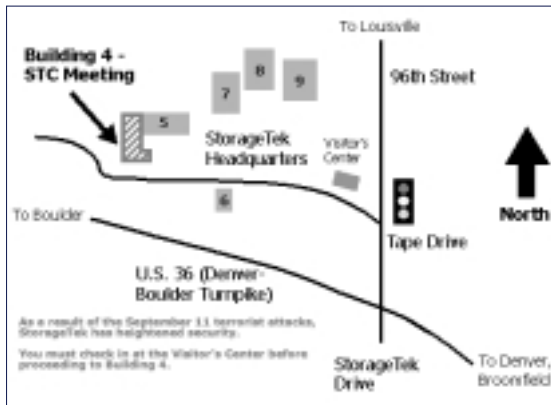
October

Where is Technical Communication Going?

When: Thursday, October 17
 Where: Storage Tek, Eastside Cafe
 Louisville
 Cost: Members \$5
 Non-members \$8
 Students free

Agenda:

- 5:45 - 6:45 p.m. CIC SIG meeting
- 6:00 - 7:00 p.m. New member orientation
- 5:45 - 7:15 p.m. Networking and snacks
- 7:15 - 9:00 p.m. Announcements and program



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