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Chapter news

In the spotlight...Salary survey

Every two years, the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the STC conducts an annual survey of its members to gain valuable information regarding the types of members we have, the salaries people are currently earning, the independent contractor scene, and how satisfied we are with our profession.

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Look for an e-mail in early December inviting you to take the 2003 STC RMC Salary Survey. This year we are conducting the survey online. Your responses will be kept private and anonymous. Please make every effort to participate because the survey results are an important indicator of salary trends in the Rocky Mountain region.

If you do not have a valid e-mail address registered with the STC, please contact Molly Malsam at malsam@ecentral.com or 303-694-3701 to participate in the survey.

Welcome our chapter's new members!

New members for the months of September and October, 2003:

September 2003	October 2003
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Rita Braun• Susan Kordis	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lisa Alexander• Travitt Hamilton• Andrew Mereness• Amy Randell• George Stagakes

If you would like to make contact with anyone on the above list, please email [Helen Tuttle](#), Membership Manager.

Congratulations to our chapter's newest Senior Members!

- Timothy D. Bjokne
- Elaine Brofford
- Tracy A. Carpenter
- Alana L. Cote
- Tricia E. Cusick
- David A. Eason
- Jonathan E. Eng
- Debbie A. Matuskevich
- Kathryn E. O'Donnell
- Alysson M. Troffer

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Technicalities

This site is best viewed with Internet Explorer 5x or newer.

Editorial

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Technicalities is published bi-monthly by the Rocky Mountain Chapter (RMC) of the Society for Technical Communication (STC) and is distributed to chapter members, editors of other STC newsletters, and officers of the Society. It is available on request to anyone interested in technical communication. Other STC chapters and publications may reprint material if credit is given.

This newsletter invites writers to submit articles that they wish to be considered for publication.

Note: *By submitting an article, you implicitly grant a license to this newsletter to run the article and for other STC publications to reprint it without permission. Copyright is held by the writer. In your cover letter, please let the editor know if this article has run elsewhere, and if it has been submitted for consideration to other publications.*

Readers are encouraged to submit material on subjects of interest to Society and chapter members. Please credit repeated material and send a copy of the original material to: news@stcrmc.org.

The editor can be reached during the day at 303.405.8122 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. If you need to mail or fax articles and/or artwork, please contact the editor for a mailing address and fax number. The deadline for article submission is one month prior to issue release (first of the month, every other month).

The *Technicalities* staff reserves the right to edit articles for clarity and length; substantive editing of feature articles will be reviewed with the author prior to publication.

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A complete listing of all chapter officers and SIG Coordinators can be found at: http://www.stcrmc.org/chapter/officers_managers_2003-2004.htm.

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December 2003/January 2004

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Colorado State University offers M.S. in Technical Communication—A different kind of degree

Residents of 13 Western states can complete Colorado State University's M.S. in Technical Communication at in-state tuition rates.

"Residents from Alaska, Arizona, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming pay in-state tuition under the Western Regional Graduate Program," said Professor Don Zimmerman, graduate program coordinator.

Colorado State University seeks applicants for its M.S. in Technical Communication for the fall 2004 term.

Graduates have taken positions with high-tech companies such as Agilent, CoCreate, Hewlett Packard, IBM, LSI, Microsoft, and StorageTek; and with government agencies such as Los Alamos National Laboratory, NASA, United States Department of Agriculture, USDA Forest Service, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

Graduate students in Technical Communication develop research, evaluation, and communication management expertise and an understanding of communication theory. They can then specialize in information design and usability testing, communicating science and technology, communication and technology transfer, and telecommunications.

Students have the opportunity to work in five state-of-the-art computer laboratories for writing, editing, publishing, presentations, Web development, video editing, research, data analyses, and usability testing.

The faculty bring a unique mix of teaching, professional communication experience, and research to the program. Faculty members have generated more than \$6 million in outside funding from the NIH, NCI, NSF, EPA, USDA, and the USDA Forest Service over the last decade.

The Western Regional Graduate Program is administered by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education.

Located in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, Colorado State University is a Class I Carnegie Research institution. Fort Collins, Colorado, has been voted one of the top 50 small towns in America. The M.S. in Technical Communication is offered both on campus in Fort Collins and at the CSU's Continuing Education Offices in Denver.

For more information, visit the Department of Journalism and Technical Communication's Web site at www.colostate.edu/Depts/TJ/ms.htm; or write Don

Zimmerman, Graduate Coordinator, Department of Journalism and Technical Communication, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO 80523-1785; or contact Professor Zimmerman by e-mail at don.zimmerman@colostate.edu or telephone at 970- 491-5674.

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Environmentally friendly technical writing: A student perspective

by [Teresa Mikelson](#)

I spent the summer in Washington, D.C., interning for the Environmental Literacy Council. The Council is a bipartisan, non-profit organization interested in providing information for environmental science students and teachers. The internship was especially useful to me, as I got to combine the communication skills I am learning in graduate school with my undergraduate biology degree.

I spent the majority of my time writing summary articles for the ELC's Web site www.envioliteracy.org. The stories covered a variety of topics including biomes, sustainable agriculture, forestry, and energy issues. For each article, we created numerous links to reputable sites that gave more information on the topic. Aside from researching and writing, I occasionally answered "Ask an Expert" questions from students, especially if they were about topics in biology.

The internship was a valid and interesting version of technical communication. While much technical communication is specifically for profit, I enjoyed writing for the purpose of educating others. My primary goal was to distill complex environmental science and technology into easy-to-read summary articles that students could understand.

Teresa Mikelson is a graduate student at CSU in the department of Journalism and Technical Communication. She is originally from Wilder, Idaho. She can be reached at: tmikelso@lamar.colostate.edu.

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October chapter meeting: So, you have written your suicide letter; what's next? Or *Living Outside the Box*, by Mary Jo Fay

by [Joel Meier](#)

Before you duct tape garden hose to the tail pipe, at least tolerate a little eyestrain and hear me out. Mary Jo Fay had written her suicide letter and instead of taking the next step, she chose the opposite, and ran away from home. I, for one, am thankful that she did.

At one time or another I am sure that you have been asked to think outside the box. So, you brainstorm right there in the meeting, or you go back to your desk and come up with some inspirations that are out of the norm, innovative, and bold! Next, you present your ideas and what happens? Management decides to stay with the tried and true, regardless if it is working or not. At least that has been my experience. I can never get any buy-in to get out of these workplace *boxes* that cover me.

So, what is a box? A box, as defined by Fay, is a "behavioral pattern that holds its captive hostage, limiting the view of life's possibilities, excitements, and passions" (Fay, 2003). OK. Sounds familiar. On the surface this box thing seems no different than the one you just talked about that exists at work. But it is. One person is stuck in this box, and one person is the only one that can get you out of it. YOU! What are your boxes? Do these look familiar?

- Workaholism: Do I work late, on weekends, and lose vacation every year?
- Perfectionism: Am I the only one unhappy with my deliverable?
- Fear: Do I keep doing things the way we've always done them because fear holds me back from taking risks and trying new things?
- My past: Do I let the scars and painful memories of the past create issues in my present?
- Expectations of others: Do I keep doing everything for everybody else and forget to take care of myself?

What incredible possibilities await you that you are not realizing? Isn't life supposed to be fun? Do you long to discover how to be positive and passionate again?

If you missed [Fay's](#) presentation, I suggest that you buy her book [Get Out Of Your Boxx!](#) She dropped a copy off at the check-in desk before the meeting, and I still have it! (Yes, she made me pay for it. I tried to argue that it was used but my best arguments did not avail.) By the time the meeting started, I had read to Chapter 3, *What Boxx?* After the meeting I jumped to Chapter 16, *Narcissism—Boxxed In By The Master Of the Universe.* It is an insightful piece of work. And of course, there is Chapter 11, but you will have to buy the book. I am not going to tell you about that one.

Work Cited

Fay, Mary Jo. *Get Out Of Your Boxx!* Out of the Boxx, Inc. Parker, Colorado, 2003.

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Letter to the editor

[Jack Shaw](#)*Littleton, CO*

I was out surfing and for the first time in over a year, I decided to look in on your *Technicalities* issue to see what had changed.

As it has in past decades, the old visibility issue has again come to the fore. And since you asked for input, in my 40-or-so years in the tech writing business, I've seen this issue come up again and again. So as an ex-STC member, I can't resist throwing in a word from the sidelines.

Visibility in the tech comm world is, to me, a synonym for "nobody (in tech. development, marketing, customer support, maybe even at home) loves me." In past lifetimes, I attended daylong, group-grope meetings on how to improve the image of technical writing and raise the consciousness (we said that back then) of tech writers among other mainstream functional groups.

Usually, the result was a pitiful little pamphlet given out at project meetings to all who would condescend to read it. We'd later find them made into paper airplanes or being used for coffee coasters at subsequent planning and development meetings.

Other times, we'd "escalate" (we said that, too, back then) our point with a pitch to higher levels of product development, entreating them to please let us play a role early on in the next project. On that latter note, the adage of being careful what one wishes for comes to mind because, indeed, they indeed put us in early. We were typically designated as scribes or super-administrators with the charter to take good notes, type them up (we did that instead of keyboarding back then—on something called the Selectric or "golf ball" typewriter) but otherwise we should listen and keep quiet. We weren't really team members, as it turned out.

How might we have been taken more seriously? Well, with the license age brings, I can say now what I wouldn't have then.

1. We weren't bonafide professional communicators, but rather cross-trainees from other areas: programming, hardware engineering, field service, the motor pool. People from any place the company could entice us with—yes, they really used this phrase—"a flair for writing."

Oh sure, we had done our college thing. Some of us were even English majors. But for the most part, we were transplanted techheads. In short, we weren't journalism majors or the like. And technical communication as a field of formal study was almost nonexistent. I recall two places that taught tech writing: UNC here in Colorado and RPI in Troy, NY. Bottom line: tech writers, unlike their

colleagues in engineering, were a polyglot bunch with no certifiable skill set. We winged it, and sometimes it looked as though we did just that.

2. We were, on the whole, managed by non-writers. There were exceptions, but most were themselves "lateral transfers" from other middle-level management slots where they had become redundant. It's not nice to say, but most tech-writing managers were Peter-Principle dropouts with little or no concept of what we did, no sense of advocacy for our task, and a real aversion to making it, themselves or us visible.

What could we have done differently? Lots. If it were (ahem) my company, I'd have:

1. Made our skills apparent to the developers and engineers by commandeering responsibility for early specification management, development and control. We'd have done a better job, done it faster, taken the specification monkey off the backs of the developers and been a focal point for project activity. That would have given us the knowledge to communicate as peers with the development drones.
2. Used the above as the basis for true user-level information development. We'd have had leverage to define the user interfaces and been able to test our own information rather than cram it in the box at the 11th hour. Respect, visibility and attendant appreciation for our efforts would have come naturally.

But that's then. This is now. What to do in the current bleak market? The wisdom of this H.K.U. alumnus would say:

1. In this era of overseas outsourcing, stop thinking of IT as the place to be. With the impending onset of the non-event of 1/1/2000 it should have been apparent that a whole lot of IT people would be pounding the pavement. Thousands were parsing old iron code, and many more writers were employed as an adjunct to that apparently wholly successful broadside effort. Look to such fields as grant and RFP writing, health/medical and hard-core engineering communication. I myself am now a property assessor/appraiser and the technical writing skills I acquired serve me admirably.
2. Get grounded in another discipline. Medical technology, energy exploration/transmission, automotive/transit system design—something outside the cobwebbed halls of IT. If you can't change disciplines, at least move away from the conventional areas of software design/update/release. PCs and the attendant software are rapidly becoming commodities like pork bellies, and user information and interface design are part and parcel of software development—architecture and interfaces are predefined as use cases and rules. The system developer will soon do it all.
3. Become multilingual in word and speech. The United States has always had a holier-than-them attitude about the preeminence of English as the language of business. It may well be. But it's no longer the sole province of native English-speaking countries. If there's any doubt, call your ISP help line and see who answers—I'd bet it's British English with a strong East Indian inflection. Accept the inevitability of the redistribution of technological wealth; you can't lick it, so learn to communicate with your non-English counterparts. I ride a motorcycle, and other like-minded people who do all say the same thing: riding makes you a better car driver. I believe that applies to mastering another tongue. It'll make your own native language skills sharper and more precise.

You might start with Hindi...

Cheers,
Jack Shaw
Littleton, CO

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Trends in writing for translation, part 1

by M. Katherine Brown

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Internationalization is not rocket science, nor does it necessarily require a significant capital expenditure on the part of the technical communication team. It does, however, add a layer of complexity to the content development process, and it does require planning, communication, time and effort to implement.

Much of content internationalization involves adapting processes to accommodate the needs of the localization team and following the basics of good technical communication — keep it simple, concise and clear; avoid jargon and acronyms; be consistent; understand the audiences; avoid text in graphics; and so on. Because these recommendations are so conceptually simple and so practical and cost primarily time to implement, managers often dismiss them immediately as ignoring the real-world issues. Ironically, issues of clarity, consistency and terminology in the source content, as well as insufficient or inefficient processes, are precisely the causes of significant and unnecessary costs in localization.

Several trends, both in business and in writing for translation, are changing the impact of these issues on the localization process. The economy, along with the current business focus on return on investment (ROI) and offshoring of professional jobs, pressures product development teams to create products better, cheaper and faster than ever before. Increased demand for products and services by non-US customers and the more restrictive regulatory environment that has developed in the European Union (EU) force simultaneous releases in the local language and require US-based companies to better understand their global markets. This increased demand, in turn, forces US-based companies and workers to recognize the need for process development, for training and for the development of new metrics for quantifying their work. Also, as a result of these increased pressures, technical communicators have had to develop creative solutions for producing large quantities of content in a myriad of formats, which has led to structured content and single sourcing content management. Structured content and single sourcing, as well as improved workflow technology, are then driving the move toward a streaming development model where the product and content are in constant flux rather than having specific releases of new versions.

Business Climate

Everyone has heard the economists' doom and gloom statements for the past couple of years. The bursting of the "dot.com bubble" made investors wary and led to thousands of layoffs in the United States and elsewhere. Now, economists are saying that the United States is in a "jobless recovery," meaning that the economy is improving, but new jobs are not being created. The economists attribute this to offshoring, which means professional jobs are being sent out of the United States to

countries such as India where the average professional makes one-fifth the salary of an American in the same job. This phenomenon has been going on for several years in the manufacturing sector, but its application to professional jobs, such as engineering and technical communication, has investors worried and some Americans panicking about the potential brain drain. Offshoring may be less of an issue in Europe, where more stringent labor rules apply, but the implications are clear. In this economy, professionals must be able to quantify their value to the company if they are going to keep their jobs.

More than ever, companies are focusing on cost control and ROI. Product development teams, including technical documentation, need to understand their direct impact on the company's bottom line, particularly to the cost of localization where an average of \$4 is spent on localization for every \$1 spent on technical documentation. In other words, if a company is spending \$10,000 to produce the source documentation for a product, on average, the localization of that documentation will cost \$40,000.

By internationalizing the documentation and product, product development teams can significantly reduce the cost ratio between technical communication and localization without significantly increasing the documentation team's budget. This works because internationalization, in most cases, involves a modification of existing processes and an improvement in consistency in the source content. With improved editing, change management and error checking, problems are prevented (or caught and fixed) in the source before it goes to localization, rather than having to be fixed in every language into which the content is being localized.

For example, an error requires one hour to fix in the English source, the content is being translated into 34 languages, and it costs \$50/hour for the localization engineer to fix it. That one error has added 34 hours to the localization schedule and will cost \$1,700 to fix. If that same error is caught and fixed before it goes to localization, the error takes one hour to resolve and costs \$50. It doesn't take long for such errors to significantly impact localization costs.

In addition to internationalizing the product and documentation, product development teams need to automate their processes to stay competitive. Automation accomplishes several things when done appropriately. It enables skilled workers to focus on the more challenging and difficult aspects of a project that don't lend themselves to automation which, in turn, can lead to greater innovation and improved market share. It reduces the likelihood of human error by removing the people from the more repetitive, mindless tasks in the process. It reduces costs by enabling the same number of people to complete more work in a shorter period of time, and automation improves consistency and quality by ensuring that steps are performed the same way every time the process is used.

For example, IBM asked Lionbridge to help develop an internationalized multilingual support system for IBM. Within 18 months, IBM had saved 30% on localization costs for technical support and calculated that it only needed to deflect 45 calls per day to recoup the cost of maintaining the system in each language. Those kinds of cost savings make a huge difference to a company's bottom line and may mean the difference between success and layoffs.

In this business climate, service companies, including localization companies, are feeling the pinch as well. The localization industry is just coming out of several years of significant consolidation where many small companies have become several big ones. As these companies have consolidated, they have needed to integrate their infrastructure and to consolidate their assets, all while trying to meet the demands of skeptical investors who, having been burned by the dot.com bust, are wary of investing in companies that aren't yet showing a profit.

A side effect of being a public company is that decisions often get made based on what will look good on the next quarterly earnings report, rather than what is good for the long-term health of the company. As a result, it is often easier (in the short term) for service companies to reduce head count, which is an immediately obvious expense, than it is to fix the infrastructure redundancies and inefficiencies that occur when companies grow by acquisition. Since people are the primary asset that service companies offer to their clients, injudicious choices in the culling process result in a brain drain that can make it more difficult for these companies to meet their deadlines and to accommodate their clients' needs, particularly in a time of growing demand for localization services.

Increased international demand for localized content

Not so very long ago, non-US customers had to wait months after the English release of a product for it to become available in their languages if it ever did become available. Today, regulations require and customers worldwide demand simultaneous release in their local languages, particularly for highly regulated products such as medical devices.

For many US-based companies, 40% or more of their revenue comes from non-US sales, further driving the demand for localization (Morgan Stanley presentation, 2003). This business reality is forcing many US-based companies to reengineer their products, processes and business approaches so that the needs of their international customers are considered as an integral part of the product development cycle, rather than as an afterthought to the English release.

While process reengineering has been going on for several years and many multinational companies have become quite sophisticated at integrating localization into their processes, most US-based companies are just now becoming aware of this need. To quantify the costs associated with this endeavor, documentation managers need to treat it like a project and set it up as such in the project accounting system.

The MultiLingual Computing & Technology survey on writing for translation shows a wide range of experience related to this reengineering process. Some respondents have no idea where to even begin to look for resources on internationalization, while others are involved in developing sophisticated multilingual content management systems (CMS).

Most internationalization efforts fall between the two extremes, with the process reengineering taking the form of stronger editing processes, robust change management processes, some kind of version control, redesigned templates and content models, and more detailed style guides. None of these solutions requires a sophisticated technology-based CMS, a large usability testing lab or even a large capital expenditure. Any documentation team that has the commitment and the wherewithal to put in the time can develop a low-tech solution that will at least get the team started on the internationalization path.

The software development teams also show a wide range of understanding about internationalization, despite the fact that localizing the code is a significant part of product-related localization costs. Elements such as hard-coded strings, non-dynamic field labels and lack of white space on the screen significantly increase localization costs and yet are relatively easy to prevent and, if necessary, to fix (though retrofitting is often time consuming).

The localization industry, of course, has long been aware of the need for process integration as it responds to increasing pressure to shorten the localization cycle without sacrificing quality. Industry pundits lament the commoditization of localization as they scramble to find ways to consolidate their positions in a volatile market, to

automate their processes, to educate their customers and to accommodate the move from the traditional localization cycle, where the end of the cycle is clear-cut, toward a streaming release model, where the projects often have no clear end point. Bert Esselink touches on these issues in his article "The Evolution of Localization" (MultiLingual Computing & Technology #57 Supplement).

Process and metrics

Many technical communicators are frustrated by the process of creating global content. Localization is still an unknown quantity for most US-based documentation managers. They finish the English product and documentation and hand it off for the localization team to translate and develop multilingual versions, but in many cases these managers have no real understanding of what information, resources and schedules are needed to produce a quality language variant.

Conversely, localization teams often don't fully understand what feedback is useful to the documentation teams, are so overwhelmed with work that they don't take the time to provide it, or fail to recognize the unique expertise of their documentation team counterparts. One survey respondent said, "Localization project managers don't believe that technical writing is a specialized discipline. . . . Technical writers are considered no more than desktop publishers who understand grammar." This attitude prevailed at the localization vendor despite the fact that over half of this person's documentation team hold master's degrees in technical communication.

Overriding themes from survey respondents were more and better communication with the localization team; additional training on internationalization, both for working professionals and for the technical communication students who will soon be in the field; better customer service from the localization vendors and more transparency in the localization process; and improved standards, processes and guidelines, particularly regarding change management and editing.

Even the metrics used to measure output and to develop project estimates are different so project managers end up comparing results for measures that aren't completely related. For example, technical communication is estimated in hours per page while translation is typically estimated on a per-word basis. Technical communication estimates typically include the research, desktop publishing (DTP) and writing/revising time, while translation estimates typically have those efforts broken out as separate line items.

There are other issues as well. While both technical communication and translation require similar skills in writing, editing and research, these skills are applied very differently. Technical communication tends to be a highly iterative process that involves a great deal of interaction with the product development team and, particularly with new products, starts from a concept and moves through several iterations before being finalized.

Technical communicators spend, on average, less than a third of their time actually writing. Much of their time is spent working with the product development team on product design, informal product testing, interviewing subject matter experts, investigating tools, developing templates, designing help systems, DTP, testing compiled help, performing peer edits, mentoring other team members and so on. Because technical communicators typically work closely with the product development teams, they develop a deep knowledge of the product and often have a more holistic view of it than do the engineers, who typically focus on one or two aspects of the product. However, technical communicators rarely have control over the last-minute product design changes that inevitably cause significant issues in the content and cause consternation for the localization team. As one survey respondent said, "The process of educating writers, engineers, product and project managers about

translation requirements is ongoing."

Localization, on the other hand, is a production-oriented environment with specialists performing each function. Unlike the technical communicator who is frequently creating original content to explain a particular concept, the translator starts with existing source content and, therefore, has a limited number of ways to interpret those concepts, just as the output requirements, such as templates, limit the variation on the overall look and feel of the language variant.

While translators must transfer the meanings to another language, they do not typically translate word-for-word, but conceptual unit for conceptual unit so that the meaning of the concept is preserved in the translation. In addition, reputable localization companies use translators who are native speakers of the language being translated into (the target language) so that nuances of meaning are maintained and more accurate translations are developed.

Though translators must frequently research the context of something or may need clarification when the localization kit or glossary is incomplete, they have the source content, templates and structure to use as the basis for the language variant they are creating. The translator uses translation memory (TM) tools to facilitate consistency and focuses on the linguistic aspects of the content, and, while they may have a deep knowledge of the industry for which they are translating, translators typically do not possess the depth of product knowledge required of a technical communicator. DTP specialists and localization engineers put the translated content back into the desired output format. This task separation creates a more production-oriented environment for the localization team.

Both technical communicators and translators are highly trained professionals with significant expertise in their chosen fields. When technical communicators and localization team members fail to understand these fundamental differences in approach, communication failures can occur and frustration may ensue.

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E-learning: The 30,000 foot view

by Jack Wilson

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The e-learning landscape has certainly changed since its mainstream inception in the 1990s. When it first became popular, most online training was in the form of text with a few graphics. This type of training was often unaffectionately referred to as "e-reading". It did not have much instructional advantage over print-based training materials, although it did provide ease of modification, a lower cost of deployment, and increased speed of delivery. As e-learning became more popular, many companies began creating "catalog courses." These courses were developed and sold as "off-the-shelf" training and covered various topics from accounting to network administration. Many of these courses were also e-reading in nature, but some raised the bar and began including interactive practice activities and animated content presentations. While these catalog courses enjoyed some initial popularity, so many companies developed the courses that they quickly became a commodity. Several of these catalog course companies did not survive the technology sector downturn in 2000 and 2001. Consequently, the catalog course companies that exist today have decreased the amount of their offerings and/or focused on specific markets.

Even during the reign of the catalog course giants, another e-learning trend was starting to gain a larger share of the market. This was the custom e-learning offering. Customers began to realize the value of e-learning courses that were built specifically for their training needs. Many of the e-learning courses that are being developed today are custom courses. Companies have chosen to outsource this work to e-learning companies that specialize in custom course development and have the instructional and creative staff necessary to create high-quality courseware. As custom e-learning courses have gained in popularity, the media technologies used to augment and deliver the training have also improved. Custom e-learning companies are now competing to offer the most visual, highly interactive, media-rich e-learning courses available. This trend will continue as company networks and home broadband access are increasingly able to handle the high network bandwidth these courses require.

It's obvious that the advantage e-learning provides to organizations has made it a popular choice for training delivery. The advantages of mass distribution, tracking of learner performance, and interactive courseware, to name a few, have provided e-learning with staying power in the training industry. Of course, most companies are not switching entirely to e-learning for their training needs. Many have chosen to adopt a "blended" approach, by which they use e-learning when it is most appropriate and instructor-led or other methods when they provide a distinct instructional or business advantage. For example, a sales manager may want to provide a week-long instructor-led training session but does not have the budget or time to pull his sales force out of the field. Instead, he may choose to create a course that includes both an e-learning "pre-work" course and a one-day instructor-led workshop. Topics that would normally be delivered via a lecture can be studied by the sales force through the e-learning

course before the workshop, allowing the sales manager to focus the workshop on training that is more easily facilitated by face-to-face interaction, such as role playing activities. These blended approaches are becoming an increasingly popular way to provide a "best of both worlds" training solution.

So, if e-learning is here to stay, what does the future of e-learning look like? Many experts in the field say that the future of the e-learning industry is simulations. A simulation is an interactive computer program that simulates some aspect of the learner's environment or job tasks.



Example of sales simulator created by DigitalThink, Inc.

For example, a sales simulator might simulate the experience of selling a customer a product or service. The salesperson would interact with the simulation by making choices that affect the sale, receiving feedback on those choices. Simulations typically are a combination of several variables that make the experience more realistic to the learner, but not so many variables that it makes the experience overwhelming. The goal is to simulate the experiences that are the most important to facilitate learning, while eliminating unnecessary, extraneous experiences. Simulations have many advantages over traditional, linear e-learning courses. First, they typically immerse the learners in the simulated experience, allowing them to make mistakes and see the consequences of their choices. Second, they provide a more performance-based method of assessing student learning. And third, from the learner's perspective, they are typically more engaging than linear e-learning content. While simulations typically cost more to produce than traditional e-learning, customers are beginning to realize the benefits of using simulations in their training efforts and more e-learning companies are starting to offer this type of training.

What does all this mean to the readers of this newsletter? For those that are a part of, or wish to be a part of, the e-learning industry, it's all about your writing abilities. In particular, simulation scripting requires technical, instructional, and creative writing in order to be successful. This is especially true of simulations that immerse the learner in a scenario he or she must complete. Media treatment and delivery technologies are important aspects of simulations, but without compelling content and good scripting, the learner will not have the experience needed for successful learning to occur. Good writers will be key players in creating quality e-learning courses and simulations and will make a large contribution to the future direction of e-learning.

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September meeting review: *Self-Publish Your Book and Keep All the Profits*, presented by Marilyn Ross

by [Joel Meier](#)

Though not particularly interested in the topic of self-publishing, I am very glad that I showed up to the September chapter meeting to learn more about it. Marilyn Ross did a wonderful job explaining the ins and outs of self-publishing and gave some wonderful insights on how to maximize your profit potential.

Why self-publish?

Self-publishing is the choice of many authors because you can:

- Call the shots, which means that you control your own project.
- Get to market faster because you are your own publisher.
- Increase your profit margin, which means that you make more money than with publishers.
- Afford to give books away. This is a great marketing strategy.

Self-published books that you might know

Here are a few books that are currently self-published, or were originally:

- *What Color is Your Parachute?* by Richard Nelson Bolles
- *The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk
- *The Christmas Box* and *The Last Promise*, by Richard Paul Evans
- *Small Time Operator*, by Bernard Kamoroff
- *Who Moved My Cheese?* by Spencer Johnson and Kenneth H. Blanchard
- *Locks: How They Work and How to Pick Them*, by Dennis Steicker
- *The Wealthy Barber: Everyone's Commonsense Guide to Becoming Financially Independent*, by David Chilton

How to write a book that sells

Of course there is no one way to write a book. However, Ross gave several pointers that the novice author should consider:

Positioning

Think of all of the cookies in the supermarket. Each brand has "positioned" itself to be a little different. In order for your book to be well positioned, it must be different than the competition by being funnier, longer, and shorter—whatever will set it apart.

Different content

Do your research and find out what is out there. Although there are many ways that you could research, going to the Tattered Cover just to survey the field might not be the most productive. Surf Amazon to see what books have already been published on your subject. Go to the buyer of a major bookstore and ask for a recommendation of the three best books on your subject. Then buy them and study them.

Different packaging

Find a unique way to present your book. For example, one of Ross' clients packaged a cookbook targeted at starving students with a frying pan, while another included a pooper-scooper with a book about raising puppies.

Different pricing

Ensure that you adjust your pricing strategy according to your market. While starving students will probably not pay \$50 for a cookbook, lawyers and dentists might. So, if your cookbook focuses on, say, 100 creative methods for preparing Ramen noodles, price it accordingly.

Design

Ensure that you have a well-planned design for the cover, the spine, and the order form on the next-to-last page.

Remember that the front, back, and spine form the first impressions for potential buyers. Put the majority of your energy into the spine. It is what will display in the store. Use big letters and ensure that they are readable.

Choose the right size of type and leading for your book. You should also consider making the next-to-last page of the book an order form so that people who like your book can order more.

Printing

Printing is the largest expense you will incur. Two choices for printing are:

Print on demand

Print on demand is both a blessing and a curse. You pay more per book, but you can choose a short run and fewer volumes per printing.

Book manufacturing or traditional printing

Whether you print on demand or use a traditional publisher, you should consider the following:

- The best quantity to print is 3,000, which will help lower the cost per unit.
- Use even signatures of 16 pages, 32 pages, and so on.
- Use standard paper. Printers buy standard paper by the trainload. This will help keep your production costs down.
- Get an overrun on the covers. You can use these covers for presentations, order forms, and postcards.

- Consider hardcover versus soft cover. Hardcover books are perceived as more credible and are higher priced. However, soft cover might reach a larger audience.
- Price your book for profit. A book should cost five times the production cost. Make sure that your book is approximately the same price as other books in your subject matter.

Marketing, sales, and publicity

Marketing starts the minute you start writing the book, and never stops. Marketing strategies include ensuring that you ask for reviews, and writing standalone chapters that can be published separately.

Bookstores aren't your only options for sales. In fact, Ross said that 52% of all books are not sold out of bookstores. Other markets to consider are distributors, libraries, and schools.

Remember that self-publishing also means self-publicizing and self-marketing. Ross offered the following tips:

- Take every opportunity to get a review. Reviews beget sales.
- Send out news releases. Get in to the newspaper Entertainment section, Real Estate section, Business section, or wherever there is a fit for your creation.
- Get a mention in an article.
- Have a Web page and include a "Here is what people are saying" section.
- Make strategic alliances. Ask yourself: whose back can I scratch and who can scratch mine? Who has my market and how do I make a connection with them?
- Do not overlook catalog marketing. There is a catalog for everything.
- Outlets, hardware stores, hobby shops-market to them all.
- Remember the 80/20 rule: 20% of your activities will account for 80% of your results.
- Ask for what you want. Be clear.
- Make it easy for people to do what you want them to do. For example, send newspapers their own reviews.
- Follow up, follow up, and follow up.
- Finally, self-publicize and self-market before you go to a trade publisher.

Conclusion

The September meeting was a complete eye-opener for me. Ross made me see that self-publishing really makes sense as the first step to getting that book out of your head and to market.

For more information on self-publishing, email questions to Marilyn@MarilynRoss.com, or visit her Web site at www.communicationscreativity.com.

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Tips from the trenches

by [Deb Lockwood](#)

In my opinion, one of the most interesting questions you can ask a technical communicator is: "So, how did you get into the business?" It's interesting because everyone has a great story, and we all have come to approximately the same point by taking very different paths. This month, I asked our Rocky Mountain chapter members the following question: "How did you get into the technical communication field?" I received many replies, and without further ado, here they are:

Larry Beckett

I graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in Electronic Engineering Technology from the DeVry Institute of Technology in Phoenix. I went to work for HP as a line technician repairing equipment used to bond microchips to substrates. As I worked on the equipment, I began to notice patterns of problems with equipment breakdown, and I attributed much of it to improper operator use. I suggested to my boss that I could write a training manual for all new hires and existing operators to show them how to avoid causing equipment breakdown. My boss agreed, so I wrote the manual and started conducting training classes. As a result, equipment downtime decreased dramatically.

My boss suggested that since I seemed to have a natural flair for writing and training that I should look into being a technical writer with the company. I internally applied for a position in technical writing and was hired for the job. That was almost 25 years ago, and I've been doing it ever since. And I might add, loving it. I have always loved words, and now I get paid both to write them and to edit (read) them. I'm currently an independent contractor doing both writing and editing in Fort Collins, Loveland, Denver, and Longmont.

Kit Brown

I wanted to be a veterinarian and had just graduated with a biology degree from Colorado State University but had been declined admission to vet school. I knew that I didn't want to wash glassware in a lab for \$6/hr, which is about all you can do with a BS in biology if you don't have a teaching certificate, so I talked to my professors. One of my natural resources professors told me that I was a "pretty good writer" and that his buddy, Don Zimmerman, in the Journalism Department was starting a graduate-level program in Technical Communication and that I should go talk to him.

I was working for Ft. Collins' Parks and Recreation Department at the time, and on the day of my appointment, we had a major irrigation line break right about the time I needed to clean up to go to my meeting. All I had time to do was to literally hose the mud off before my meeting. Don looked a little worried when I walked in the door, but

he let me into the program anyway, and I became a member of the first graduating class from the MS program at CSU.

I started the program 15 years ago. Since then, I have been a freelance writer and editor, a technical editor for an environmental consulting firm, a technical writer and clinical coordinator for a medical device company, a senior writer for a financial management software company, a technical consultant for a localization company, and now own my own business, Comgenesis, LLC. My jobs have taken me all over the world, and since graduating, I have lived in Ft. Collins and Littleton, CO; Fargo, ND; and now Boise, ID. So far, it's been a fun ride, and I have made most of my job connections through my STC network.

Jane Ellen Combelic

I was mentored into this field. Almost twenty years ago, I was a "wannabe" who took creative writing classes and dreamed of being a writer. I was working part-time as a therapist in a small medical clinic, making a pittance. One day, I filled in for a colleague who was out sick, and I worked with a young patient whose mother happened to be a technical writer. Barbara and I hit it off, and she asked to see some of my writing. Some time later, Barbara told me about a contract editing position at the computer company where she worked. I'll never forget it. We were sitting at the kitchen table in the house where I rented a room, and my eyes popped when she told me the job paid \$24,000 a year! Amazingly enough, based on my dismal writing samples and Barbara's recommendation, I got the job. At the time, I didn't even have a bachelor's degree.

Over the next few years, Barbara taught me everything I needed to know, and I ended up with a permanent technical writing position in the same company. The skills she taught me I use to this day, and I will forever be grateful to her for taking me under her wing. I've tried to do the same with young editors and writers along the way. It's been a great field to be in, and at all the companies I've worked for I've met fabulous people. In fact, it's been a blast! Now if I could only finish that novel I started way back when...

David Eason

I did a lot of writing in the Army to interpret personnel and finance regulations for the average soldier, and I was rather good at it, so I had developed an interest in writing long before I took the technical writing class. And a few years ago, my mother sent me a box of stuff from high school. My old essay tests were in the box, and when I read them, I realized that I could actually string words and sentences together rather well even way back then (the early '60s). I retired from the Army in February 1984 after 20 years of service and started college at CU-Denver, taking business courses. One of the requirements was a business/technical writing class. I took it and had so much fun that I decided that when I grew up, I wanted to be a technical writer. I changed my major and finished with a BA in English Writing.

Angela Estes Rank

I often think I'm the exception to the rule of how people become technical communicators, though probably only because I discovered it at a younger age than many. I stumbled onto technical communications when I was in college at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. I wanted to major in English as a freshman but was concerned about finding a job after school. After changing my major three times, I finally decided that I should explore the English department more fully. Imagine my surprise and joy when I learned that the department had a technical writing track! I was thrilled that I could major in English while learning a valuable and marketable skill

for my future career. I worked at a technical writing internship for a year prior to graduation and landed my first professional technical writing job two weeks after I left school. Seven years later, I know I stumbled onto the right career for me.

Linda G. Gallagher

I'm going to go a little bit backwards in chronology. The final impetus for my becoming a technical communicator as my main focus was a layoff. In 1993 I was laid off from Southwestern Bell in St. Louis, MO. Before that, I'd had several jobs in the "Bell System" at Bell Labs, Bellcore, and Southwestern Bell for 12 years. While the responsibilities of those jobs were different (state regulatory, federal regulatory, department administrative functions like budgets, HR, facilities, etc.); the common thread in those jobs was communicating some type of technical information to people who were new to the particular technology.

Having been unhappy during much of these 12 years in the corporate environment, I decided to seek a different path. Over more than a year, I analyzed what type of work I wanted to do and in what type of environment I wanted to do it. I read books (including "What Color is Your Parachute?") and took various aptitude tests (available for free from the state of Missouri at the time). Ultimately, after much introspection, a short list of things I was good at and liked doing boiled down to the field of technical communication. I knew that was what I wanted to do. Further, I determined that I wanted to do it as an independent. It took a while to come to that conclusion, but when it came down to it, I was completely unable to state what type of company (large, small, people-oriented, etc.). So, when the layoff came about a year after this analysis, I took the opportunity to enter the field of technical communication as an independent. That was 10 years ago. STC has been instrumental in my ability to succeed in the field.

Hank Hering

I was working as an electronic technician at StorageTek when I discovered technical writing. I took a career test at the Front Range Community College (FRCC) Career Center. One of the results was technical writing. The Career Center had a book that described various career options. The information in the book described the functions of a technical writer and who hires them. I noticed StorageTek on the list. One of the writers at StorageTek was kind enough to discuss his role as a technical writer. By the time the conversation was over, I was ready to check into classes at FRCC. Shortly thereafter, I was enrolled in my first class. After completing the degree at FRCC, an opening at StorageTek gave me just the opportunity that I needed. I continued my education at Metro State and have worked as a technical writer for 13 years.

Dawn Schwaderer

I was an English and Psychology major out of college and worked my way into middle management at a manufacturing plant. There I developed and documented business and production systems to help the plant achieve ISO 9001 certification. That experience led me back to my true love: understanding a process, then helping others understand it through effective writing and training. I also came to realize that being a technical communicator would better fit my desired lifestyle. I made the change, worked full-time with a software development group for a few years, and then converted to part-time independent contractor after I started a family. The job allows me to choose my projects and hours so that I can spend more time with my young child.

Brad Shannon

First off, while I have done a lot of communicating about technology in my career, I consider myself more of a "technical marketing" writer than a tech writer. I went to University of Illinois thinking I would be a chemical engineer. ChemE 370, which was Thermodynamics, ended that line of thinking.

While wondering what program I was going to transfer to and still get out in a reasonable time with a diploma, I spotted a poster with information about Miami University's MS in scientific and technical communication. This is the first I had known that there was such a profession. While I enjoyed my engineering and technical classes, I just was not really competing very well (small rural high school education vs. big suburban Chicago high school college preparatory programs). I had gone for engineering because science and math were what challenged me in high school, while English and other communications classes were not that challenging. I decided to play to my strengths with my communication skills and communicate about technology. So I transferred to the English and rhetoric program to graduate. I worked editing peer-reviewed research journals, then a trade journal, before moving into high-tech PR and marketing communications. I took classes at Colorado State toward my MS in technical communications and now just need to finish my thesis.

Martha Sippel

During the summer of 1992, I was a geologist at a small oil and gas firm. My coworkers were distraught when several employees were laid off in one fell swoop. In addition, my husband had been working overseas for two months, and the next week, we were meeting in Europe for a long-awaited, well-deserved, two-week vacation when I found myself one of the unemployed. Many of my friends and coworkers asked, "Will you still go on vacation?" I answered, "I am not going to cancel this trip. I haven't seen my husband in two months. He has been working in harsh conditions and desperately needs a break. I will find another job, and if I don't go on this vacation, I'm sure I'll regret it someday!" People thought I was crazy, but I am happy to say that we had a wonderful time (even during France's truckers' strike and my unemployment). I not only found another job; I discovered a new career. Things happen for a reason. You may not always know what it is, but if you are patient and maintain a positive attitude, things work out for the best.

My career in the petroleum industry taught me to be versatile and flexible. After returning from vacation, I evaluated my skills by taking several aptitude tests and researching careers and reading books. I highly recommend the book, "Finding Your Perfect Work: The New Career Guide to Making a Living, Creating a Life" by Paul and Sarah Edwards. I still review certain passages occasionally to motivate me to find more satisfying contracts. In fact, I recently noticed that our September speaker, Marilyn Ross, is profiled in this book.

I discovered that I enjoyed writing about technical topics. After all, it was a major part of my job for 16 years. I then analyzed careers with the potential to earn a respectable salary and decided to go back to school. I enrolled in Metropolitan State College's Technical Communication degree program, choosing an emphasis in technical writing and editing. I joined STC as a student member and am still involved today. Since graduating, I have worked as a senior technical writer for three firms and managed an intranet at a major environmental engineering firm. I am now an independent consultant working part-time from home. The freedom allows me to pursue my passions and hobbies that are unrelated to my professional career.

Lisa Stevens

I had done many other types of writing in the previous years, such as newspaper, newsletter, brochure, and magazine writing. A friend figured I could probably write technical documentation, too, so she offered me a job.

Philip M. von Hake

For all I know, I may have been pre-disposed to the field of (technical) communication since a fairly early age. Throughout my school years, I always seemed to spend more time on term papers and similar writing projects than I did on any tests or other assignments. I earned my bachelor's degree in Information Systems from CU, thinking I'd eventually become a Systems Analyst. I also had a jack-of-all-trades job at a small software company in Boulder. We all soon realized that I couldn't do software programming, even if my life depended on it! Luckily, though, they did need somebody to write the user manual. That was 1987, and I've always found at least some work doing that ever since.

While the vast majority of my work has been with software documentation, I've spent most of the last two years or so trying to position myself as more of "full-service Communications Consultant" (i.e., Web design, marketing communication, public relations). Similarly, I've tried to move beyond the information technology field into what I call sustainability or green-future issues: energy, land use, transportation, waste management, green building, water issues, etc.

Today, while most of my bread and butter is still coming from software documentation, I envision a near-term future in which PvH Communications will be a full-fledged, full-time venture, working on "a message to help clear the air!"

Rodger Ward

I started writing documentation out of necessity. Working as a product manager for a communications equipment manufacturer, managing special assemblies that fell outside of the company's standard, PBX and data transmission products, I wrote rudimentary installation and user documents simply because my clients needed the documentation and existing company resources could not fulfill the need. When a layoff eliminated my job, I investigated writing positions in the Documentation and Education Departments, but without success.

To help decide what to do next with my career, I took an interest assessment at a nearby community college and subsequently enrolled in a series of courses to get a feel for several new employment directions. Desktop publishing seemed like fun, hazardous materials offered robust employment growth but seemed terribly dry, but technical writing felt like putting on an old, comfortable, flannel shirt.

Foraging for a writing job, with my limited documentation credentials, was a disappointing experience even in flush employment times. One individual from my class found a position through a job-study program and another individual negotiated an editing position through a haz-mat instructor. I accepted a \$10 per hour desktop publishing job at a small translation firm, hoping that I could find writing opportunities with one or more of the company's software translation clients; a real back-door approach, for sure. Persisting in that position for two years, and moving through several positions, my hopes came true with a small contract from Hewlett-Packard. One success built on another with HP and contributed quickly to my steep learning curve, experience, and ability to compete successfully for new positions in technical communication.

It's interesting that when I reminisced briefly through these experiences, I could still feel both the fear from unemployment and the "...old, comfortable, flannel shirt" sensations again.

Mark Werner

I came into the technical communication field by becoming involved in an undergraduate engineering magazine at the University of Minnesota. I started out in electrical engineering as an undergraduate, but after a few quarters, I learned that engineering wasn't for me. At the same time, I had been volunteering at the magazine, and I told the staff there that I was looking for a different area of study. A few of the staff members there knew of Minnesota's technical communication program, and they recommended that I look into it. I tried out a few of their classes there and loved them. So I ended up changing my major to technical communication. I continued with the magazine and became its editor-in-chief. In the last two years of my studies, I landed summer internships with IBM, which naturally transitioned into a full-time job for them in their Information Development group as an information editor.

Kristi K. White

In the late 1980s, I was eager to break out of a sales support career in the office furniture industry. After 18 years managing large projects, I was burned out and ready for a change. I knew I didn't want to continue doing this job for the rest of my life, but had no idea what I would do next.

At the suggestion of a close friend, I began seeing a career counselor and exploring my talents and desires. She, along with several of my colleagues, told me I was a good writer. I had always enjoyed writing and language, but it had never occurred to me that I might actually get paid for doing it. The career counselor knew of a local company that sometimes hired technical writers on a contract basis and suggested I give that company a call. Although they didn't need anyone immediately, they did call me back within a few months to arrange an interview. There was nothing on my resume that said I could write or that I could do this job. Throughout the initial interview I sensed the employer's skepticism. At the end of the interview, I asked if there were anything I could do to demonstrate my skills. The interviewer said that yes, I could write up a summary of the interview and mail it to him. I ran down to my car and scribbled some fast notes on everything I could remember. The next day I wrote it up in longhand and mailed it to him. The result: a second interview.

My then-future boss told me that my summary demonstrated that I was a good listener. Other managers said that it showed I could put two sentences together and put the period in the right place. After a third interview, they made me an offer of contract employment, which I accepted immediately. (It is important to note that, to make a career change, I went from making \$36,000 a year to making \$12 an hour. I filed for bankruptcy later that same year.) Within three months, the company put me on permanent status with a starting salary of \$27,500 (in 1990).

As a developer of training materials and operating procedures for the petrochemical industry, I learned so much and identified skills that I didn't know I'd had. For example, I learned I was good at interviewing people, making them feel at ease and drawing information out of their heads. I gained a great deal of self-confidence, thinking that, "If I can learn this, what else might I be capable of?"

This first job in technical communication was the beginning of a lucrative, new 12-year career. After five years in the petrochemical arena, I switched to software, which of course is where most of the tech writing jobs are. Virtually all of the tools I use I've learned through practical, on-the-job experience, coupled with a few workshops.

Laid off from a software company in January of 2002, I was unemployed for a year and eventually accepted a much lower-paying position as an administrative assistant for a non-profit organization. It's always good to have a variety of skills and experience to fall back on!

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Where do you write: Here, there, or everywhere?

by [Ron Arner](#), *Managing Editor*

Where do you do your best writing? Do you prefer to write in a peaceful place where there are no distractions, or do you prefer a populated, noisy atmosphere? If you work in more than one location, do you find one type of environment to be more conducive to productivity than another? Do you like to do your writing in one place and your computer work somewhere else?

I thought I knew exactly what kind of a space I wanted to write in, so I began planning to finish a spare bedroom in my basement into a deluxe home office. I wanted a sophisticated home network, high-speed Internet access, a drawing table, bookcases, and, most importantly, bright colors, stress-relieving gadgets, and fun posters. In my opinion, keeping my home office fun would keep me interested in my work and therefore more productive. I even planned to turn the rest of the basement into a home entertainment center, so I could take TV and/or video game breaks from my work whenever I wanted.

I was a little disappointed, therefore, when listening to the audio version of Stephen King's *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. To my amazement, this world famous author did not think like I did. In fact, here's how he describes the ideal writing space:

The biggest aid to regular (Trollopian?) production is working in a serene atmosphere. It's difficult for even the most naturally productive writer to work in an environment where alarms and excursions are the rule rather than the exception...You can read anywhere, almost, but when it comes to writing, library carrels, park benches, and rented flats should be courts of last resort.

So I'm going in the wrong direction with my home office design? If I understand King correctly, I'm about to make a major mistake that will stifle my creativity rather than support it. Should I have one office for my computers, Web design work, home finances, etc., and another (simple) office just for writing? How many rooms in my house is it going to take to be able to work from home?

While pondering my options, I remembered another book I'd recently read, *Lillian Too's Easy-to-use Feng Shui*. I didn't think her advice on office décor would be much different than Stephen King's, but I wanted a second opinion anyway. Too's advice deals mainly with the layout of the office—never sit with your back facing the door, for example—and the shape of office furniture. What she did mention about the décor itself wasn't anything like what I was thinking. I'd even planned on using AOL CD-ROMs for a window curtain; my tribute to Trading Spaces. Definitely not auspicious in the Feng Shui sense of the word.

I decided to investigate one more aspect of work place layout to see if it would shed

any light on the subject: ergonomics. 3M has a wonderful "self-help" ergonomics site at: <http://www.3m.com/cws/selfhelp/index.html>. There's a nineteen-question workplace evaluation survey, a list of stretches for different parts of the body, and advice on how to set up an ergonomically sound workstation. While I found the input on the Web site invaluable as far as how to make an office physically comfortable, it still didn't shed any new light on the debate about what a writing space should be.

I started to doubt that I could be productive in a "loud" atmosphere. Then I remembered seeing a story on J.K. Rowling some time ago, which said that she spent a great deal of time writing in a café when she was working on the first Harry Potter book. In order to make sure I wasn't just imagining things, I did some research on the Web and found an interview with her from February 3, 2000, in which she was asked if she still writes in cafés. "I still write in cafés, but I go to different ones now!" was her response. (<http://www.scholastic.com/harrypotter/author/transcript1.htm>)

Well! At least I have one kindred spirit who doesn't always write in mystical silence. Nevertheless, I think I'll give the issue a little more thought before I commit to painting my basement walls fluorescent orange. Perhaps the best thing I can do is try writing in several different locations to see which one I like the best. I think I'll try a library, a Starbuck's, and someplace in-between, like the Tattered Cover. Then I'll look over the writing I did in each location and judge it for length, grammar, and overall quality. I think this will be the best determinant in deciding what kind of a writing place is best for me. Then I'll make up my mind and choose between a simple door and a beaded door curtain, have my basement re-wired, and write away.

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Experiencing what so many of my peers have faced

by [Frank Tagader](#), STC RMC President

This column was going to be about being recharged after attending the Region 7 Conference in Calgary. And, while I got a few good ideas at the leadership session following the main conference, a few distractions sidetracked my ideas on the society and the profession.

After the conference I was going to take a week's vacation and drive from Calgary to British Columbia and then down the coast to Seattle and visit family in coastal Oregon. Well, the trip started out great, with a drive through Banff and a night in a beautiful spot in British Columbia before making my way to Vancouver.

But Vancouver proved my undoing-I came down with pneumonia. Here I was, at the furthest point from home, and what had represented my freedom (my car) now became an anchor. I couldn't get home without driving. Vancouver was cold and rainy and in that clammy atmosphere I got sick. I decided to start heading home through Seattle, but there I ended up spending three days in a hotel room raiding the honor bar for bottled water and fruit juice.

At this point, I knew I needed medical attention, but I was intent on getting home, picking up my dog, and seeing my regular doctor, so I gamely hit the road. Well, a few days later I had made my way as far as Ogden, Utah, but at that point I decided the emergency room was the place for me. I got the medical attention I needed and the next day was back on the road for home.

I recuperated at home through the weekend of Oct. 19, and on the 20th, feeling a bit better, headed back to work-only to be called into my director's office with the news that my position was one of four being eliminated in our department before the end of the year! My company of over nine years had been acquired; the new company had a different way of doing things, and my position was not in their plans.

So, now I find myself in the same unenviable position many of you have faced in the past few years: looking for a job in a tough market. I am completely out of practice when it comes to hunting for a job. While many of you have already provided me with leads (I do really appreciate them), it is still a daunting task to look for a new position when you have spent so long in the nice groove of a satisfying job.

In my last column, I speculated on having to take a new path. Well, the path is before me, and I hope I have the tools to deal with the uncertainty.

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Market changes afoot: What does this mean for technical communicators?

by [Rahel Bailie](#), Region 7 Director-Sponsor

One of my activities as a self-employed consultant is to monitor various job boards. The job boards I monitor include those that list positions and contracts for technical communicators, but more importantly, they include boards for the industries we support: software development, engineering, and manufacturing. This gives me a daily temperature reading on the industry where I'm most likely to find clients and contracts.

This past week, the activity on the job boards has shot up. Between Nov 21 and 28, 2003, one Vancouver job board had 163 jobs posted, with almost a dozen of them being communication-related jobs: technical writer, instructional designer, marketing communications manager. This encouraging news was confirmed by a consultant from Boston, whose business suddenly got very busy; all consultants in his firm are fully booked. Does this mean that the economy is bouncing back, and what does this mean for technical communication professionals? How can we reconcile this apparent economic recovery with the opposing trend of jobs moving from North America to Asian countries?

Certainly, the increase in North American development jobs is encouraging for North American technical communicators, just as the surge of product development in countries such as Singapore, India, and China is encouraging for technical communicators there. Generally speaking, product development generally indicates a corollary need to communicate product features, through marketing communications, the user interface, user instructions, and internal documentation, and the communication jobs are kept in close proximity of the development jobs.

What we must keep in mind, however, is that as markets mature - and the software industry, where so many technical communicators are employed, is maturing along with all other industries - and profit margins are narrowing, companies continue to find ways to be competitive. We consumers like our software to be inexpensive, and we hunt around for the absolute best deals. To provide us with those deals, companies need to find ways to cut costs, then cut costs more, and then cut costs even more. In an industry with few raw materials, where the largest cost is of the brain power of its staff, the way to cut development costs is to cut labour costs. If work can be fit into a formula and done where labour costs are less, that will happen.

From my Canadian perspective (keeping in mind that Canada was one of the first countries to which American companies sent their work "off-shore"), I see the current migration of jobs around the globe as inevitable. As much of the hard-goods manufacturing of the world has gone to China, thereby stocking North American dollar stores with inexpensive merchandise, so follows the knowledge industry, to satisfy the market demand for discounted products.

What this means for me as a technical communicator based in North America is that I need to make strategic career choices. If I choose to specialize in the type of work that is moving to another part of the world, I can look harder to do that type of work locally, or I can follow the work to wherever it goes, the way that actors migrate to Los Angeles. Or I can look for the type of technical communication work that, by necessity, stays closer to home. I would tap into communities adjacent to technical communication, to encourage cross-pollination of ideas and see what types of work is suited to someone with my abilities, work that doesn't come with the title of "technical writer" but involves a using my skill set and qualifications. I would build my network outside of the technical communication community, getting to know the decision-makers in new areas and getting known there, as well.

What it would mean for me as a technical communicator based in a country with an emerging economy is that I would want to build my credibility as a professional who delivers top-quality work that satisfies the demands of a head office that may be overseas. I would tap into the body of knowledge that exists in print and online, to find a way to exceed the documentation standards out there, and deliver work that works for clients and end users. I'd find out what makes the market tick, and figure out where my skills should be going. I would find a colleague or peer as a mentor. I would connect into existing technical communication communities, attend meetings, take courses, and subscribe to listservs. I'd cultivate a "buddy" relationship with a technical communicator in my area of interest, and find ways to share information about the demands of technical communication in various markets around the world. I'd look at trends and determine what's coming, so I can stay current and not lose my work in a year (or two, or five) to another country with even lower labour costs. I'd ensure that my company knows, every step of the way, how much value I add to the product and the company, and make management see that I am a value contributor instead of a cost centre.

The next few years will be very interesting times. From new tools, such as software that writes instructions by recording screen actions as you complete tasks on screen and creating content objects for content management systems, to new trends that include moving jobs around the world in a global economy, we are continually made to examine our personal employment situations and our profession to look for interesting opportunities. One of my activities as a self-employed consultant is to monitor various job boards. The job boards I monitor include those that list positions and contracts for technical communicators, but more importantly, they include for boards for the industries we support: software development, engineering, and manufacturing. This gives me a daily temperature reading on the industry where I'm most likely to find clients and contracts.

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