

Working between two worlds: *Our uniquely Canadian insight*

By Alice Jane Emanuel

Getting around

Since 1998, I have worked on various technical writing and editing projects dividing my time between Canada, Europe, and the Middle East. This admittedly different lifestyle started as an adventure that I hoped would spin out for a few months or years, giving me a chance to work, travel, and get over a painful divorce.

Well, barring sacrifices that have become *de rigueur* along the way (no home life, no stability, no steady paycheque, no home!!) things have worked out reasonably well. Projects have come often enough for me to live and to save a little. I've seen a bit of the world by living in various places instead of visiting. I've worked with some wonderful people and I've made lasting friends.

Between two worlds

The element that has never changed during this working experiment has been my unique position as a Canadian writer. It is safe to say that the English language in our world is either American-influenced or British-influenced. Without ever thinking much about it, I am firmly situated between American-English technical writing practice and British-English technical writing practice. I would not argue that either one is better since each is perfectly effective. But they are certainly different.

Consequently, here we are in the special middle ground occupied by Canadian writers, grammarians, and

linguists. Indeed, we are some of the few in the world who move easily between both practices! The more I experience this arrangement, the more I am convinced that being here is a great privilege. What's more, since no other people on Earth live in our unique place, with strong influences from both the American and the English sides of practical

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www.stcsig.org/canadian/index.htm

Distinguished Canadian Members series

By Pascale Bijoux



Featuring Carolyn Watt

Carolyn was not always destined for the technical communication world. How she got here is both surprising and exciting.

Out of necessity

Technical Communication was not part of Carolyn's original career plan—she had planned on being a clinical psychologist. But after graduating, she took a job in the order department of a dairy to think through her career. Surprisingly, it was at the dairy that she began her career in technical communication. The dairy was implementing a new computer system. As supervisor, Carolyn took on the challenge of learning the new system and then teaching her staff how to use it. Her implementation was so successful that she was asked to travel across Canada to all the dairy locations and teach their staff about the new system. And yes, that meant there would be procedures to write and manuals and booklets to produce. Carolyn took numerous courses to learn how to streamline procedures, design forms, and train staff. Her past experience in psychology was of great help to her; she had learned

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telephone. His productivity exceeds expectations, which pleases management, making him another example of telecommuting that works.

Peter's resentment is reflected in both the quality and quantity of his work. He reports to the office, as required, and produces a reasonable amount of adequate documentation, but he is not motivated to produce more or better. In this *lose-lose* scenario, Peter's manager is getting less and paying more for it, and there is at least one unhappy person involved. Unhappy people are prone to changing employers. This relationship between telecommuting and employee satisfaction and turnover is a contemporary issue that did not exist a few years ago, a result of the convergence of multiple rapidly changing factors (everything from the weather to the stock market has become unpredictable, right along with whether it's safe to go shopping today).

Lynn likes to keep her family and her life separate from her work. She does not want to invest in computer equipment at home and does not believe that her children would allow her to work undisturbed once they arrived home from school. She is more focused and productive while at work and is fully *not working* when she is at home. Lynn's experience demonstrates that telecommuting does not work for everyone.

Roger, for reasons known only to him, took egregious advantage of an opportunity to reduce his travel time and out-of-pocket expenses. How many managers conjure a mental image of Roger when the topic of working at home arises?

Profound changes to both technology and the workplace have occurred in the past few decades. Job security and loyalty to a company are long gone. The comfy relationship that my parents' generation knew (get a good job with good benefits, go to it every day for a few decades, and then retire with a decent pension) is all but a memory now.

The employee-employer relationship is rapidly approaching a supplier-customer relationship (where loyalty has declined as rapidly as Nortel shares).

If your employer has no more commitment to you than to a paper-clip supplier, and if changing jobs has lost much of the stigma it once had, how will companies retain enough of the best people to be able to continue to deliver their products and services?

Today, good employees never know which day may be their last, and employers never know when their best people might leave. At the same time, with more working couples and working single parents, the cost of replacing ourselves at home has risen

(child-care, home maintenance, cleaning, gardening, etc.). An employee (the service provider) in 2003 is more likely than ever to approach an employer (the customer) with new and innovative requests to renegotiate working conditions—job-sharing, working from home, on-site day care, flexible hours, even pets and naps at work—all of these have been at least tested somewhere in North America in this wild new 21st century!

The factors that motivate a person to retain a position with a particular employer were one of the topics in the October 28, 2002 edition of Maclean's magazine. Canada's top 100 employers were listed, and ten of them examined more closely.

As told in ten tales of successful innovation within the 100 top companies, a broad range of factors induced some of the most employable candidates to accept less money in exchange for autonomy over issues like when, how, and where tasks would be completed. Of course, a professional burger-flipper would have trouble serving up virtual burgers from home, so there are location-specific tasks that simply cannot be done remotely. Nonetheless, many workers have exchanged early departure on a daily basis for evening time spent on work taken home, allowing for the needs of children, meals, and family activities.

Writing is an activity that benefits from a quiet environment without disturbance, but it need not be tethered to a location.

Telecommunication companies stand to gain by demonstrating to the world that their products work, which perhaps explains their eagerness to encourage their staff to telecommute ("See, our people do not even have to be here to get the job done, thanks to our wonderful products and services"). According to AT&T, *High Technology Careers* (1999), a major telecom employer estimates that telecommuting saved them \$500 million from 1992–1998. They expected, at that time, to have eliminated an additional 11 million square feet of offices, reducing consumption of electricity (by 200,000,000 kWh/annum) and natural gas (by 350,000 million BTU/annum).

Many other astute management teams have concluded that they could also save money (and lots of it) and still get the work done well by giving up real estate (and desks) with people reporting to work only when necessary for meetings. Desks then become shared workstations available to anyone who wants or needs to come into the office. In a study on the environmental effects of commuting, Ericsson presented the *weekly* reduction in gasoline consumption possible if each of 220 million office workers worked from home one day per week—a total of 440 million litres! Their point, of course, is that all of that money could be spent on telecommunications products and services!

Stretch your imagination just a little (the exercise is good) to a circumstance where anything from competition to terrorism (or simply high energy costs) puts more and more companies into a position where the only way to remain viable as an enterprise is to cut costs drastically. The same managers who are today ordering that bums be placed into chairs in specific locations at specific times may tomorrow be ordering people to stay home and provide their own workspace, cleaning services, lunch spots, lighting, heating, landscaping, etc. ("If you wish to continue working for this company, you will telecommute!")

So get ready. Your office may be moving soon.

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communication, I believe it is a truly Canadian position. It is something we can be and should be (quietly, Canadian-ly, tremendously) proud of.

the subtle differences that may cause havoc for others.

Are we speaking the same language?

A recent project I worked on illustrates the state of affairs. I worked with two teams, a team of documentation specialists in the American Midwest and a team of business analysts and software developers in the English southwest. My American counterparts, a great group of documentation specialists responsible for a complex suite of interactive documents, wrote technical guides in ways that are perfectly effective in America. However, their equally intelligent and talented English users misunderstood or just plain drew a blank. Likewise, after meetings in the English office, the American team would frequently ask me what was said. And it wasn't just the accent; the English paradigm communicates ideas differently. My American co-workers sometimes missed things entirely but never through lack of intelligence or failing to pay attention.

And so it is, amazingly, that American-English technical writing can be misunderstood by English professionals, and English software developers and business analysts can be speaking gibberish as far as American technical writers can tell. However, my unique position as a Canadian allows me to bridge

Keeping the *lingua franca*

Without thinking too much about it, Canadians like me easily translate between these two equally effective modes of communication. This special contribution made by Canadians may rarely be

noticed. But it can play a great role in the smooth running of trans-Atlantic comprehension. I don't think an American would routinely tell an English person, "You don't speak English." But a surprising number of Brits over the years have, with varying degrees of vehemence, assured me that neither I, nor my English professors at university (many of whom grew up in England and graduated from English universities), nor any of my compatriots on the North American continent actually speak English.

The English language is the *lingua franca* of our world today... But which branch of the *lingua* is really whose *franca*?!

What parts of the world do you think are American-English influenced? British-English influenced? You may be surprised...

Japan?	American-English influenced
New Zealand?	British-English influenced
Israel?	American-English influenced
Egypt?	British-English influenced
Canada?	Both British-English influenced and American-English influenced!

Sure, it's sometimes hard to stay "Zen" in the face of this, —erm, bald provocation. Equally sure (to me anyway) is that anyone saying such a thing would be driven to it by the frustration of no longer being in charge of the language that shapes so much of the world today. In my less mature moments, I have been known to point out that there are sixty million British speakers of the language we call English but three hundred million American speakers. Since the answer is in the math, I usually feel 'nuff said.

Then I take a deep breath and remember —if this is what perfectly intelligent Brits believe in even the

**Some English to English translations
from this very article!!**

<u>Canadian</u>	<u>American</u>	<u>British</u>
coworker, colleague	coworker	colleague
paycheque	pay check	wages, pay packet
technical writer	technical writer	technical writer, technical author
nuff said	nuff said	thank you, that will be all

smallest degree, perhaps my unique position as a Canadian editor and writer can help further each side's understanding of the other.

Alice Jane Emanuel is a Senior Member of the STC Montreal chapter. She has worked in several countries gaining valuable experience with the two fascinating main branches of the world's lingua franca. Contact Alice Jane Emanuel at jane@ajemanuel.com or visit www.ajemanuel.com

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how to listen to others and, as a result, how to produce documentation that met the users' needs.

Professional move

In 1983, the dairy merged with another dairy and Carolyn was laid off. She began work at a consulting firm the very next day but was laid off while she was having surgery. So in 1985, Carolyn decided to open her own consulting company. Her goal was, and still is, to help customers help themselves. Her company has changed over the years to meet the changing marketplace. Today Carolyn is the president of CWA - The Customer Experience Company. She helps companies deliver an exceptional customer experience. "It's really quite simple," says Carolyn. "Make sure that your processes make it easy for customers to do business with you. That's our Workflow Simplification or flowcharting piece. Helping companies communicate clearly with their staff, suppliers and customers—that is where technical communication comes into play. And finally, working with the people to help them deliver the brand promises you make to your customers."

With over 25 years' experience in the business world, Carolyn has seen the constant evolution of our field. She appreciates our success and progress, especially when it comes to education. Today there are numerous courses being offered to Technical Communicators. The educational system is beginning to recognize the field and award certificates and degrees the same way it would for other academic disciplines—more so in the United States than here in Canada, but things are changing for the better.

The sheer number of professional technical communicators currently practicing the profession has more than quadrupled over the last 25 years. Although many come to our profession by pure coincidence or because of a previous job that exploded into a new career path, there are also a growing number of students who choose this profession early on and make it a career goal.

Paving the way

While serving on the international board as the Assistant to the President for Professional

Development, Carolyn Watt was in the right place at the right time, thankfully for all Canadian STC members. When the Canadian Issues Committee ceased to operate a few years ago, Carolyn, Alexa Campbell and others decided to put forth an idea to the Board to start a Canadian SIG where issues and topics of interest to Canadian members could be explored. At the time, Carolyn was the only Canadian member on the board. Although we are close neighbours, many felt that the Canadian contingent needed a voice of its own within the STC family. Thanks to their efforts and dedication, STC recognized this need. By their participation, Canadian members have kept this group alive and kicking! We don't do it often enough, so this first installment in the Outstanding Canadian Member series is a way to acknowledge those who have come before us and paved the way. We can safely say that Carolyn was instrumental in keeping the Canadian voice alive and well within STC

Parting words

Carolyn has worked across Canada and in the United States. In 1995, she travelled to Paris with the

Two technical writing programs



UVic offers a BA in English with a minor in Professional Writing, which takes 4 years to complete. The courses teach students to write for technology, science, business, and

government, both on the Web and in hard-copy with the opportunity for gaining practical experience through a co-op option.

Applicants are accepted after a year of study in the English Program.

Contact:
web.uvic.ca/pwengl/tourframeset_lo.html

Seneca College in Toronto offers a one-year, full-time post-graduate certificate in Technical Communications. The first semester of the program prepares the student for the co-operative work placement (which takes place in the Winter semester). An integral component of the program, the work placement experience provides students with the opportunity to apply



knowledge and skills gained in the first academic term. In turn, students acquire on-the-job knowledge and skills which are applied to projects during the second academic term.

Contact:
www.senecac.on.ca/fulltime/TECC.html

International Board and met many STC international members. She attributes her successes to her ability to listen. Carolyn feels that "communication is key." She strongly believes in the value of STC and has been a very active member throughout her career. She's a popular speaker at the annual conferences. When asked what advice she would like to give her fellow Canadians, newcomers, or seasoned professionals looking for a different twist, she doesn't hesitate to advise us to look out for people's feelings and to listen to what they are saying to better assess their needs. After all, that is what her new company is all about... "People don't remember what you do for them, they remember how you make them feel."

With a career that spans two plus decades, and teaching experience in both the corporate and academic settings (George Brown College and the University of Toronto), Carolyn has always been a strong supporter of clear communication. People need to be heard.

We are pleased to honour Carolyn as a Distinguished Canadian Member!