

INDEPENDENT PERSPECTIVE

Newsletter of the Consulting and Independent Contracting Professional Interest Committee

Spring 1993

You probably know a little bit about bulletin boards, wide-area networks, telecommunications, or electronic messaging already. But perhaps just a little.

profiles virtually every way of interacting electronically. And he does so with an abundance of screen examples, so you have a pretty good idea how your journey will look before you embark on it. The screens allow you to study the interchange and understand how a task (such as file transfer) occurs, from beginning to end, without the often discouraging pressure of doing while learning.

and servant") to message etiquette ("Don't use capital letters and lots of exclamation points TO EMPHASIZE YOUR MESSAGE!!! It may make the readers feel like you are shouting at them. Understated emphasis using asterisks is *much* better.>").

A particularly gratifying touch is that Hedtke takes care to credit electronic communication tools to the persons who created them and to provide historical and regional background on their development. It makes these very conceptual tools a little more human. It's delightful to find that FidoNet's regional divisions were possibly inspired by basketball conferences. There is a fair amount of folklore in these BBS, and Hedtke knows it. This book is a fine reference and an excellent motivator to anyone interested in electronic bulletin boards.

Guidebook to the brave new world of BBS

There are so many pieces to this large subject. *Using Computer Bulletin Boards* (2nd Edition), by John Hedtke of the Puget Sound Freelancer's Association, among other affiliations, brings all the pieces together.

Hedtke begins with one of the least technical (yet still comprehensive and very understandable) discussions around of telecommunications concepts, hardware, and software. He describes logging on to a BBS for the first time. Then he takes the reader through different ways of using a BBS: sending and receiving messages, communicating with the sysop (system operator), transferring files, reading news updates, participating in group discussions, and a whole lot more. Hedtke

Reference sections describe each of the major players in the BBS and online information worlds. Included are names, addresses and phone numbers *with* baud rate, parity, etc., for BBS and vendors of communications software, as well as a comprehensive glossary. The book comes with a 3.5-in. diskette containing a fully functional trial version of QMODEM communications software.

The book contains much more, too much to elaborate on further here. Hedtke covers everything from setting up your own BBS ("A sysop is generally viewed by the users as a combination of genie

John Hedtke, *Using Computer Bulletin Boards* (2nd Edition). 1992, MIS: Press, a Subsidiary of Henry Holt and Company (New York). 422 pages. \$29.95. **IP**

Reviewing a book about bulletin board systems, this issue's main topic

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From the editor

Electronic communication encompasses file transfer...bulletin boards...messaging...video conferencing...CompuServe...Internet...FidoNet...Usernet...Prodigy...America Online...Regional BBS... and is such a big world that it's easy to get lost.

Sure, we want to partake of this wealth of resources, but how can we do so without being overwhelmed?

A few comments I've heard while gathering information:

"Technical writers are naturals to lead in this area. It fits with innovations in publication, information dissemination, communicating."

"I'm reluctant to tell others what I use electronic mail for. It's like giving away my best fishing holes. Let them explore and experiment on their own. That's the joy of it!"

"For freelancers, regional and local bulletin boards (BBS) are the way to go. We post job opportunities, list agencies and headhunters, and find work partners."

"For freelancers and everyone, really, the Internet is the only answer. Where else can you co-edit documents with colleagues in Bangkok and interact daily?"

"For a group of people who are supposed to be full of initiative and technologically astute [independent technical writers], I'm constantly amazed at how few people make use of what's out there."

I've been exploring what's out there, and the diversity is dizzying. I previewed this issue as the "CompuServe" issue because that topic was handled about two years ago and I thought it might be interesting to reprise it with the large growth we've had since then. I found that CompuServe's usefulness as

a forum for independent technical writers is on the wane. Most independent writers in the "Working from Home" forum are would-be poets and the like, looking for agents and kindred spirits.

My own knowledge of electronic communication—though I've participated in a number of ways—is neither accurate, complete, or up-to-date. I welcome—no, I invite!—any corrections, clarifications, or additional information you readers may offer. Are we ready to embrace the venue of the future? In fits and starts, let's help each other get there. **IP**

INDEPENDENT PERSPECTIVE

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Independent Voices

Letters

to the editor

I am looking for information about starting my own business as a freelance technical

writer. I'm interested in current books, articles, and additional reference material—people, publications, organizations, etc. All the books I've been able to find so far are at least 5-10 years old. I'm looking for something more current.

Brian K. Lyngaas, Cedar Rapids, IA

How about it, people? Do you have any leads? Any "bibles," favorite books, SBA guides, general pointers? We could compile the information for general use. What's your vote for most useful material? Let me know, and please include a short (25-50 words) statement telling what's so good about it. Please send responses to Susan Witter, Editor, *Independent Perspective*, 65A Albany Place, East Greenbush, NY 12061.

(See *Letters*, page 6)

PIC FOCUS

Puget Sound Freelancers' Association

by Susan Witter

A group with a definite mission, and which manages to find a lot of positive energy to fulfill its mission, is the Puget Sound Freelancers' Association. It's been in existence for 6 years, founded by Joe Marek. PSFA is described by its current leader, John Hedtke, as an "unofficial" PIC—loosely affiliated with STC. Hedtke's (and PSFA's) portfolio of services is anything but loose, however.

meet potential contractors; and printing and desktop publishing experts who discuss their specialties.

Meetings are held the 2nd Wednesday of the month from 7 to 9 pm at the Art Institute of Seattle. The meetings are free, which encourages newcomers. Most of the several hundred members are writers. From 15 to 40 members attend an average meeting.

members to reviews or ordering information on books of interest. Hedtke mentioned a book he's written, *Using Computer Bulletin Boards*, as an example. (See the review on page 1.)

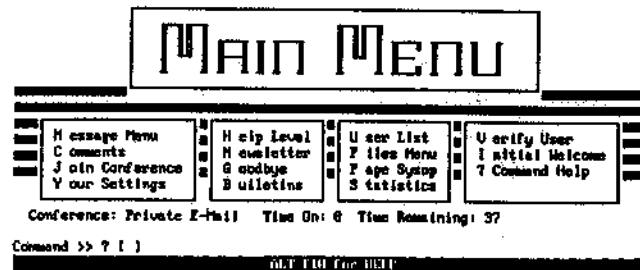
You can leave messages and converse with other bulletin board users—an especially enjoyable and sometimes expedient means for writers to communicate. In fact, your conversant doesn't need to be reachable when you send the message. And you can read your messages when the time is right for you...so unlike the phone which often seems to ring (and demand your attention) at just the wrong time.

You can send files to others on the bulletin board, or download files to your PC. This may be the perfect environment for cooperative editing.

PSFA uses the same BBS software as the STC bulletin board—Wildcat. So you won't have any trouble using it if you have signed in to the STC bulletin board.

Through monthly meetings and, more uniquely, through the bulletin board, PSFA members maintain contact with each other and with the world of contracting in ways that really hit home.

Reach the Puget Sound Freelancers Association's bulletin board with your modem at 206-784-5193. **IP**



The Puget Sound Freelancers' Association boasts its own easily used, menu-driven bulletin board system

First, its mission:

- to help members make more money than if they were home watching TV;
- to help new independents get started;
- to provide opportunities for training and seminars on topics of interest to freelancers.

"Topics of interest" might mean a resume workshop, tax tips, business planning, insurance, or marketing. There have been seminars on each of these topics in the last year or so. Special meetings have included panels of documentation managers who talk about what they want in freelancers; contracting agencies who send representatives to

Dialing for services

A really unique aspect of the PSFA is its dial-in bulletin board. It provides a wealth of resources to its members—and it's easy to use.

The bulletin board serves as a clearinghouse for job information—agencies, head hunters, etc. It covers the Northwest well and even includes jobs in major metropolitan areas in other parts of the country.

One section lists current and upcoming events. Another section contains an online version of the newsletter.

A library of information is accessible—from short papers written by

America Online (AOL) is a newcomer in the network service provider ranks. By the standards of industrial strength services like Nexus/Lexus and CompuServe, it's a light-

on key words, etc., with the ability to save to disk anything of interest that comes up). Third, I have a self-managed 401(k) and I use various services to get advice in that area.

free of charge. It seems fair to get a test drive.

The starter software was so easy to install that I gave the task to a typically technophobic 16 year old kid—who not only got it up and running without problems but who also took the same liking to it that I had.

In general, I'd recommend that anyone in the information business (and that includes technical writers) get a modem and start finding ways to access data online. It's quickly becoming an absolute necessity, not to mention a wonderful convenience. Not long ago I discovered a way to get to the Library of Congress card catalog as well as the catalog of my county library. These tricks have made initial searches for information a lot easier. There are also an increasing number of federal agency bulletin boards, some with 800 numbers. Put that together with all the information you can get via CD-ROM, and you're set for some tremendous fun and the ability to accomplish whatever matters to you.

To contact America Online, call 1-703-893-6288. I believe their free offer is still good. **IP**
STC member Steve Whitney is principal of Crescent Communications in Tacoma Park, MD.

America Online—why I like it

by Steve Whitney

**"I was attracted
to its
refreshingly
friendly appeal"**

weight. But I was attracted to its refreshingly friendly appeal, and by the fact that I could get what I needed most from a network service at a price that seemed right.

About its basic appeal. When I first saw it demonstrated, AOL simply stood out. First, its interface is icon- and menu-driven (read: simple to use). I use a lot of different software and easily get mixed up. AOL was made for people like me. AOL has some kind of licensing arrangement for Apple computer to use its interface, which means that the leader in user-friendly applications feels the same way I do.

About its features. AOL includes Internet electronic mail without additional charge (at least for now). I can keep up with my colleagues and professional associates worldwide from my home office without getting killed on network fees. It also has a good newswatch service (where I can search news as it breaks based

About AOL's smart business approach. America Online pioneered (I mean really pioneered!) treating non-technical Americans with intelligence and respect. First, their interface is what an interface should be—an aid, not an obstacle. Second, they let people like me use it free on a trial basis. At the demo I saw, the AOL reps handed out free starter diskettes and gave each taker 5 free hours of network use. You could sign on, use it for five hours, and decide, all

STC's Bulletin Board System

In a very timely move, the January 1993 *Intercom* featured an article entitled "STC's BBS-A Valuable Resource."

The article describes how you establish communication with the bulletin board, what to do when you get there, and the menu options you can choose to look around. If you skipped over it, read it. And consider trying it.—Ed.

On January 12, the U.S. Supreme Court issued a new test for whether a home office is the principal place of one's business. The Court accepted the Internal Revenue Service's argument on government appeal from lower courts at the expense of a Maryland anesthesi-

ness expense (miscellaneous deduction) for work done for their employers at home. In addition:

- 1) This use of the home office must be for the employer's, not employee's, convenience; and
- 2) The employer must not be paying rent

week. For 10 to 15 hours per week, he was preparing his invoices, updating his patients' records, and conducting his own continuing education activities from a room he used regularly and exclusively at home; none of the hospitals would provide him with office space.

The Court found that what Soliman does for a living is anesthetize people. Given the nature of this activity, where it was performed, and the amount of time he spent there, the Court found that the hospitals were his principal place of business, and his home office expenses were not deductible.

The Court also noted that no particular formula can be applied to a situation; a determination of deductibility would have to rest on the facts and circumstances of each case.

A current IRS publication (No. 587, Catalog 1514T, undated, for 1992 returns, page 2) approves the example of the outside salesperson who spends a substantial amount of time at home maintaining business records and making appointments. Whether this example is now consistent with the IRS position in Soliman is difficult to figure out. (The particular situation of outside salespeople is being administered

(see *Office*, page 6)

Another taxing decision

Supreme Court gives new test for "principal place of business"

by Jim Stirewalt

ologist. The case is *Commissioner of Internal Revenue v. Soliman*. The vote was 8-1, with Justice Stevens dissenting.

Previously (and currently), business expense for operating a home office may be deducted from business revenues if:

- 1) the home office is used both regularly and exclusively for a trade or business, and it is the principal place of business; or
- 2) the home office is used both regularly and exclusively for a trade or business, and it is a place where one meets patients, clients, or customers in the normal course of the trade or business; or
- 3) the home office is used both regularly and exclusively for a trade or business, and it is a separate structure not attached to the home.

These criteria apply as well to people claiming an employee busi-

ness expense for use of the home space.

None of these tests have changed, and none of the appropriate IRS publications (including Nos. 334, 529, 535, 583 and 587) will likely change either. What changed was whether "the place" is "the principal place" of the business.

New Test

The new test doesn't have a name, but it could be called "the time and/or importance" test:

- 1) How important is the activity to the conduct of the business? Indeed, what is the essence of your vocation, and where do you perform it?
- 2) How much time do you spend at each of your places of business?

Dr. Nader E. Soliman, an independent, was anesthetizing patients at several area hospitals for 30 to 35 hours a

Office (from page 5)

under an IRS "Proposed Income Tax Regulation.")

The overriding principle always used with regard to business expenses is that if you spend money to make money, the money you spend is deductible. More formally, the expense must be both ordinary (common and accepted in your field) and necessary (helpful and appropriate). To be

necessary it does not have to be indispensable (IRS Publication No. 535, Catalog No. 15065Z, undated, for 1992 returns, page 2).

This opinion is merely the interpretation, presumptively faithful, of an existing statute. There is not a constitutional or some other fundamental legal principle at issue. In such instances, when persuaded, Congress

will merely change the statute.

STC members who wish to work collectively on this issue should contact each other outside of STC auspices. **IP**

—Reprinted from the February 1993 Writing Consultants' Newsletter.

Jim Stewart is a Senior Member of STC's Washington Chapter.

Letters (from page 2) The 250% Solution?

As a freelance technical writer for five years, I know first hand that Solon Economou's estimates of the costs of doing business (*IP*, Spring 1992) are grossly exaggerated. In order to match a \$40,000 annual salary, he says, a freelancer must make \$100,000. Absurd!

Instead of using statistics to figure out employee benefits, let's look at some *real* numbers. Medical insurance—about \$7,000 a year for a family, maybe a lot less. (I've recently joined an HMO, and now pay \$3,900.) For disability insurance, I pay about \$1,100. Extra FICA is a maximum of \$5,123.30 (1991 figures). That's tax deductible, though, so you only really pay a maximum of about \$3,700 more than a salaried employee...

If you are paid \$40,000 salary, you don't get *extra* for vacations and holidays! (And Mr. Economou is basing his freelancer's income on only 1,248 billable hours.)

I haven't included worker's comp and unemployment taxes, because I don't have to pay them. So my extra expenses are about \$8,500... Add several thousand to replace a company's contribution to a 401(k), and that's still a lot less than the \$20,000 Mr. Economou suggests.

Next, business expenses. My business expenses average around \$10,000 a year. I don't rush out and buy everything on my wish list right away, nor do I scrimp...

Mr. Economou, however, suggests \$40,000 to cover business expenses, "additional taxes" and a little "profit." What is

"profit?" As a sole proprietor, profit is your income after paying valid business expenses, so let's not confuse the issue by adding another category of take home pay. Mr. Economou was claiming \$100,000 was needed "to maintain an equivalent living status," not to make you a wealthy investor.

If I make \$80,000 this year, my income, according to Mr. Economou, will be the equivalent of a \$32,000 salary. Believe me, I couldn't support my wife and kids on \$32,000...

You can certainly make \$80/hour—or more—as Mr. Economou suggests. But it's wrong to say that you *have* to make that sort of money just to "break even."

*Peter Kent
Lakewood, Colorado*

Technical mechanics and marvels aside, there is something exhilarating about telling some-

it's very easy to express something in a way that offends the recipient—often without the sender

edly expressed their disgust and dismay at the low level the discussion had sunk to, and eventually the comments about how to bring the discussion back on track became less and less admonitory. Along the way a few rules were proposed: the small group of flammers could continue their discussion privately if they wished; personal attacks had no place in a group forum; etc. We all learned something about letting emotions flow freely from mind to computer.

Another aid in avoiding flaming has been the use of very simple icons made up of punctuation marks to express emotion, so that the reader gets those ever-important nonverbal cues (see page 8).

Addiction and Expense

Once you find places to put your electronic energy (and electronic places to receive things from), you can become "plugged in" for hours at a time—to the detriment of your other work and your phone bill. With best intentions you check in early in the morning, read your mail, respond, send some files, ask questions of an information source...then find that your morning is gone and your billable work

(See *How*, page 8)

How It Is to Communicate Electronically

by Susan Witter

**"It's an
in-basket
that still
commands
attention"**

body something via computer.

It's an in-basket that still commands attention—more so than paper in-baskets or phone messages. The reasons for this may be many. For some people it's still a novelty. For others it's the freedom of doing so at their leisure, and when they are best suited for reflection. For others it's the thrill of correspondence.

There are disadvantages, though.

Flaming

One of the more interesting phenomena of electronic communication has been the tendency of almost every participant, at one time or another, to verbally abuse his/her correspondent. When you speak face-to-face with someone, or even talk over the phone, there is enough emotional pulse-checking that in general you manage to get your message across with a modicum of angst on either side. At least, we have developed the mechanisms to make it possible to minimize bad feeling. Whether we choose to or not depends on the context. Over an electronic communications medium,

being aware that he is doing so. The recipient immediately heats up and seizes the opportunity to dash off a scathing reply. A few clicks of the keys to type the message, a tap on a function key to send it—

"There! I sure told him!" And it escalates from there. This is called flaming. Seems ludicrous, doesn't it? An amusing trifle. But I've witnessed it, and it isn't so funny. The flaming I witnessed was on an electronic discussion group about the environment. A dispute developed about how bad it was for animals and the environment for people to eat so much meat...and among two or three participants, pretty soon questions were being tossed around about whether plants feel pain when we pick and eat them...doubts about the manhood of the vegetarian...and suggestions of savagery on the part of the confirmed meat-eater. It started out being funny but it ultimately became embarrassing and painful to the other participants.

The situation was resolved in a novel way. A group conscience seemed to emerge where onlookers repeat-

Emotion signals in electronic mail

"Making faces" began with the need to express emotion in electronic mail, but it has become a race to dream up innovative, humorous images of the sender. Here are a few examples. Do you have any favorites of your own? Send them!

Look at these sideways!

:)	smile
: -)	smile
:(frown
:(sadness (crying)
>:(anger
:o	surprise
8-)	wide-eyed
; -)	winking
: -[pouting
: -,	smirking
P: -)	smiling baseball player
@: -)	smiling person wearing a turban
= : -)	smiling Uncle Sam
: -)////>	smiling person wearing a tie
@>-, '—	long-stemmed rose (save this for abject apologies)

IP

How (from page 7)

not yet started. Then you get the phone bill for your connect time!

How can you make use of the electronic resource without being overtaken by it?

One obvious solution is self-discipline, learned only after much anguish. Another, of course, is to do your connecting late at night when the rates are cheapest.

Another solution to keep that phone bill down: sign on, download all your mail in compressed format, sign

CHANGE OF ADDRESS?
Do you have a new address or phone number? Please send it to:
C&IC PIC
Post Office Box 1725
Ann Arbor, MI 48106

off, handle the mail on the PC (including writing responses) and then send it back up. There is special electronic messaging software that takes care of all this for you.

Do those of you who are plugged in have any other observations about how electronic communication affects you? Let us know!