Independent
The Perspective

Fall 1999
Volume 10, Issue 2

Newsletter for the STC International Consulting & Independent Contracting Special Interest Group

Working Your Sources

by Whitney Potsus

A few months back, a friend was hired as the first full-time technical writer for a software company on the Connecticut shore. Because documentation used to be handled by a developer, the company was wholly unprepared for the changes that having a writer on staff would bring.

A month later, she e-mailed me—her plaintive wail audible even in the bits and bytes of digital text. "I don't understand these people," she wrote. "They don't make time to talk to me and when they do, they speak so far above my head I can't keep up."

Empathetic and sympathetic, I told her she needed to learn how to work her sources—one of the first things I'd learned in journalism school. Off I went to dig through the artifacts of my past life as a magazine editor, searching for a tip sheet I'd created for new writers unprepared for the rather quirky natures of the engineers and programmers we frequently interviewed.

"Working sources" is not to be confused with "interviewing SMEs"—it's something more basic than that. Briefly defined, it's developing your own credibility with sources as well as creating the kind of rapport where people are willing to make time to talk to you and share what they know. Simple as these tips may be, they're often overlooked by new and veteran writers alike.

On the Record

First, if you don't have one, buy a small tape recorder. As a journalist, I never went on assignment without one. For some reason, when I switched to technical writing, it took several months for me to unpack my recorder.

Why record meetings? Experts can talk very rapidly, and a listener's comprehension is clouded if speakers can't talk on the novice level. In addition, it's simply impossible to take notes and listen to everything a source says about an unfamiliar topic—you only wind up missing the big picture. You can replay the tape as often as you need, and share the tape with colleagues who would otherwise have had to conduct the same interview themselves. Your sources will appreciate your efforts to save their time.

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Columns

Time for Reflection

by Kelly Burch

Well… Here we are—the final issue of *The Independent Perspective* for 1999. "Millennium madness" is in full swing as 1999 is rapidly winding down and we have been inundated with what to expect from all of our technology in the coming year. Because so much of what we've heard in recent months has been dominated by a dizzying array of articles on the latest and greatest technology, this issue focuses more on "soft skills" rather than technology. As another fall comes to a close and that mad dash through the holidays begins anew, it is a good time to reflect on where we've been and where we want to go in the New Year.

Reflect on where you've been this year as you complete the 1999 CICSIG Membership Survey, included in this issue. There have been some changes this year, so please check out Thomas Barker's column to find out what you need to know before you complete the survey. How has your network fared in 1999? Networking is one of the most important skills an independent contractor has—if you've become a bit disconnected from the outside world, read Ken Mauro's article "The Network is Down" for some valuable insight on maintaining your own interpersonal network.

There are many ways to reflect on where you are going in the future. Thinking about making the jump to independence? You'll find some food for thought in Laura Vasquez's article "Consider It Carefully." Do you want to "go global" with your technical communication skills? Don't miss Magda S. Sourour's column "An International Challenge"—she provides some excellent information about how to negotiate with clients from other cultures. Want to get a handle on your projects in the New Year? Linda Landry has nine rules to help you tame the savage project.

In our cover story, Whitney Potsus tells you how to make the most of what you have right now in her article "Working Your Sources." I hope you enjoy this issue and have a safe and happy holiday season.

Until next year… ❖

Attention:

Columnists and Contributors

The copy deadline for the Winter issue is December 5.

The Independent Perspective

Fall 1999

Volume 10, Issue 2

The Independent Perspective, published four times a year, is the official newsletter for the International Consulting & Independent Contractor Special Interest Group (CICSIG) within the Society for Technical Communication.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

We encourage you to send comments, suggestions, and opinions regarding *The Independent Perspective* or the CICSIG to the editor at kburch@dallas.net.

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SUBMISSION

Articles and news items should be submitted to the editor by the first of the month prior to the month of publication. Please submit files in either text or Word format to Kelly Burch at kburch@dallas.net.

Changes in the 1999 CICSIG Membership Survey

by Dr. Thomas Barker

CICSIG members will find changes in the 1999 Rates Survey. Some of these changes are designed to give us better information about our members, but others are based on changes in the STC's policy towards membership surveys.

First, a Little History

In the past the STC did "rates" surveys that discovered what independents charged for their services. Rates surveys differ from "salary" surveys, in that rates

We all know that rate fixing is defined by the Federal Trade Commission as illegal.

surveys ask respondents to tell amounts that they set themselves as part of their contracting practice. A salary survey, on the other hand, asks respondents to tell amounts that are set by their employers. The difference, of course, has to do with a very sensitive issue for the STC—rates fixing. We all know that rate fixing is defined by the Federal Trade Commission as illegal. The STC doesn't want to get involved in that.

In fact, some other associations similar to the STC (in that they supported the work of consultants) got into trouble over this. If an organization "publishes" rates, then it's just a slippery slope to "setting" rates (or at least "endorsing" rates). To avoid this, the STC quit doing a rates survey, and concentrated on its popular salary survey.

However, it turns out that the STC can, in fact, do a rates survey if it identifies the rates as being historical information. That is, the organization and the CICSIG, may ask about rates, but not current rates. For this reason the CICSIG survey for this year asks you not about your rates as of now, but as of January 1999. Thus, when you answer the question about rates, make sure not to give your current rate, but the rate (average) that you received last year (based on your 1998 tax forms).

You will also soon learn that the STC has revived its rates survey using the same kinds of questions as the CICSIG uses: historical rates not current rates. This survey promises to be of great value to members of the CICSIG and the organization as a whole, because, as we all know, the membership of independents in the STC is growing. So next year you will have the benefit of rates information both from the CICSIG survey and the larger STC survey. Having both surveys will allow us to correlate and reinforce the information in each.

The 1999 Survey

The purpose of this survey is to gather and disseminate information about the nature of work done by members of the Consulting and Independent Contractors Special Interest Group of the Society for Technical Communication.

The 1999 survey also focuses on specific questions about what you would like the CICSIG to do for you. I look forward to these suggestions and ideas as we plan our future activities.

The 1999 survey appears as a self-mailing insert in this issue of *The Independent Perspective*, on the Web site at *http://english.ttu.edu/gscic/E-Survey/CICSIG_E-Survey.htm* and in e-mail form on STCCICSIG-L (the CICSIG e-mail list). Since there are multiple ways to respond to the survey, <u>please make sure you respond only once</u>.

CICSIG-L Goes Web

There's a new and easy way to subscribe to the CICSIG-L list. The list now has a convenient Web interface that makes posting and reading messages easier than before. The address is: *http://lists.stc.org/cgi-bin/lyris.pl?enter=stccicsig-l*

When the page loads, type your e-mail address in the appropriate field. Do <u>not</u> type in a password. You can also use this page to subscribe under another e-mail address, such as your home e-mail address. Once you're logged on you can Read, Create, Unsubscribe, and Search messages, as well as change your list settings, e.g., if you want a digested list or not. I urge you to explore this interface. It offers a number of advantages including:

- Scanning messages in the archive.
- Composing and reading messages at any computer connected to the Internet.
- Limiting the way you receive messages.

If you have any problems logging on to the Web interface, please e-mail me at tbarker@ttu.edu.

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BOOK REVIEW

Standards for Online Communication

review by Nancy Allison

Standards for Online Communication: Publishing Information for the Internet/ World Wide Web/Help Systems/Corporate Intranets

by JoAnn T. Hackos and
Dawn M. Stevens
John Wiley & Sons
Copyright 1997
ISBN 0471156957

Good Book, Confusing Title

When I first read the title of this book, *Standards for Online Communication*, I envisioned something like a case history presenting a corporate style sheet and explaining the decisions that went into it.

But this book is something else, and it might better be titled A Comprehensive Introduction to Online Communication. It reviews most aspects of researching, designing, and implementing online documentation. The book applies to all online documents—help systems, Web pages, online manuals, intranet pages, and so on. And, as the authors state repeatedly, this book is an overview. They urge their readers to take courses and use other resources to learn about particular issues in detail.

What This Book Will Do for You

By reading this book, you will learn how to analyze your users' needs. You will discover the broad range of issues related to the design of online documents. And you will explore the many questions that arise as you write, test, and implement your document.

Strengths of This Book

The book's great strength is in digging deeply into design and implementation questions. For example, a section called "Organizing your topics" contains twelve guidelines that explore how you might organize your information. The chapter on hypertext links contains 36 guidelines. This thorough exploration of the facets of online documentation is valuable for novice writers as well as for more experienced ones. It can also go far to educate managers and other interested parties.

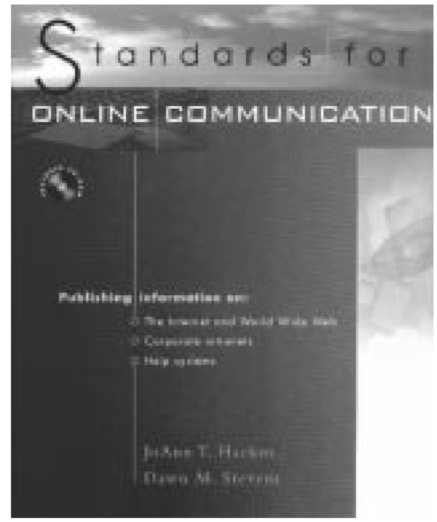
Structure of the Book

Each chapter contains conceptual explanations followed by guidelines. The guidelines are also listed concisely in Appendix A, providing a useful planning tool. Each chapter ends with a bibliography for further reading.

A CD-ROM presents the book in online format. Written in WinHelp, the online version includes a synchronous table of contents, but few other bells or whistles. Figures are presented in secondary windows so that you do not have to scroll between a figure and its text description. The CD-ROM presents a missed opportunity: it could have formed the basis of a useful discussion about single-sourcing.

A Few Drawbacks

The book omits two topics of great interest to online writers: single-sourcing, as mentioned previously, and the technical/signoff review process. Both involve fairly complex choices.



Online writers would certainly benefit if Hackos and Stevens explored these topics with their customary thoroughness.

The book also contains a few discussions that seem somewhat unrealistic. The sections about analyzing users' needs and testing the online document state that these activities are desirable. But the discussions lack supporting citations that could help a writer convince a skeptical manager to allocate the necessary resources. And the theory of Stages of Use (levels of user sophistication), explained in Chapter 3, does not seem to take learning styles into account, or to distinguish between software knowledge and subject matter knowledge.

In general, the lack of supporting citations weakens the book. (A similar book, William Horton's *Designing and Writing Online Documentation* has a broad approach but also provides extensive footnotes.)

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Consider It Carefully

by Laura Vasquez

Creating your own business can sometimes seem overwhelming, so carefully consider why you wish to become independent. Determine your specific goals, abilities, and limitations or risks for becoming an independent, including:

- Financial and lifestyle
- Emotional and psychological
- Family support

Financial and Lifestyle

Examine the financial feasibility of becoming an independent. Can you really afford to live with paychecks that arrive irregularly? How much money do you have in reserve? A suggested "cushion" is six months' salary because you may not see any income as you start your business. In fact, you may have rather hefty start-up costs, although it is not a prerequisite to go into debt in order to start your business!

I paid nearly $5,000 for a business computer system in April 1997 when I planned to begin contracting seriously. In retrospect, I probably should have bought a less expensive, non-business system and used the extra money for software or other things. I "borrowed" from our personal account to pay for part of the expense and for other business-related expenses, such as STC dues, chapter meetings, monthly Internet charges, and business mileage (at 31.5 cents per mile, it adds up). After completing my second decent-paying contract—about a month of work in late Summer 1998—I was finally able to repay our personal account. I was also able to pay for all of my actual and projected business-related expenses for the year, with some profit remaining!

If you wish to have or to maintain a lifestyle that requires large expenditures, then you must be able to earn enough through your contract work. Chances are, you will not become independently wealthy, unless, perhaps, you are (or become) an expert in a very specialized, high-demand field. You can, however, survive comfortably on your income if you maintain both high-quality work and effective marketing techniques.

Contracting has been a good way for me to supplement our primary income and to relieve some of the financial pressure. My husband and I are now able to save some of this surplus for emergencies, and to invest some in our new house, e.g., to replace our heating ducts and to install rain gutters.

Emotional and Psychological

If, as I do, you simply wish to have a flexible schedule, then occasional contract work satisfies the desire both to take care of your family (financially and otherwise) and to maintain or to improve your skills base. It has been very challenging and exciting to be able to learn from and otherwise interact with other professionals. I relish the fact that I am using and improving the skills that I have studied and developed. It is also very gratifying to be able to realize a longtime dream and contribute in yet another way to my family.

Family Support

If you are single, you probably will not have to worry about this, but if you are married you should be sure that you have your spouse's blessing to go independent. Sometimes you may have to work long hours, in which you may not see your spouse much, or your spouse will need to watch the kids so that you can work. In late July 1998, for example, I worked 44 hours in less than a week in order to finish a project. That may not seem like much unless you consider that I am our sons' primary caregiver, that my mother-in-law was visiting that week, and that I still had to complete various household tasks.

On a more recent occasion, I worked until 3 a.m. in order to apply an inconsistent style guide as consistently as possible to my documents. The client had failed to supply the necessary materials in a timely manner, which infringed on my schedule, but I still had to complete the work on time! Afterward, I sent the client an evaluation letter in order to avoid similar problems in the future.

You may also have many business expenses that will have to come from family funds until you are paid, so good budgeting and moral support are necessary. It was rather stressful for my family and me as I incurred more start-up costs—such as a fictitious business name statement and monthly Internet charges—without any contract prospects. It was also difficult at first balancing a changing work schedule and household duties.

Fortunately, my husband has been very supportive of my business activities and helps significantly with the housework and with the children. In addition, now that I am earning some income instead of merely spending, my husband and I both feel more comfortable with the various scheduling adjustments and necessary business expenditures, including a babysitter for the times when I need to work during the day.

Laura is a Senior Member of the Orange County Chapter. She has freelanced since 1993 and officially started her company, Vasquez Communications Consulting, in 1998. ❖

Look for New Opportunities— Create Them If You Can't Find Them

by Magda S. Sourour

An Egyptian ambassador was in negotiations with a North American international consultant regarding the crafting of several substantial documents. The meeting went well and before leaving the consultant complimented "His Excellency" on his elegant tie.

Surprising the baffled consultant, the ambassador immediately presented him with the admired tie.

When anyone expresses admiration for material possessions, it is a cultural obligation for a Middle Easterner to offer the item to the admirer, thus applying the old tradition of showing no attachments to earthly belongings.

Someone learned a lesson.

At the next meeting, the North American consultant, more culturally savvy this time around, was able to use intelligence of the heart. He tactfully complimented His Excellency on some of Egypt's historical and national issues like the great pyramids and the terrific soccer team. No one was embarrassed, and the contract was signed.

Once the cultural element is understood, it is easier to join the global-mania, to get out there in the world with confidence and learn to negotiate the global way. It is also crucial to:

- Adapt services to the specific features of the international market.
- Track changes in demand with care.
- Assure first-class quality (and after-sales) service.

Success should follow. Yet, to persist in overcoming obstacles and setbacks while exploring foreign opportunities takes global thinking and global negotiating strategies.

By introducing valuable tips and helpful approaches, as well as internationally-oriented episodes, the author of this column strives to create continuous awareness about the importance of understanding the other side.

Previews of upcoming issues and insightful reading recommendations are also included.

International Piquancy...Suite

Because Japan functions under a group decision or "ringi," it involves all levels of the organization. To speed the decision-making process, the copy of a contract should be distributed to all members of the negotiating team.

Crossing the language barrier was a definite advantage to the North American international consultant who signed a contract with a Japanese client. Nevertheless, he needed to sharpen his cultural knowledge to avoid disappointments:

> The international consultant (on the telephone, a few days after signing the technical writing contract):
>
> "I would like to get started on the project as soon as possible, when should I expect the documents?"
>
> Japanese Client: "Hai, Gomen Nasai, (translation: yes, I am sorry) but in Japan our business finalization process is very lengthy, although most effective."
>
> International consultant: "But you and I have finalized the offer, and you signed the contract already."
>
> Japanese Client: "Oh! But in our business system, all our group members have to sign before the deal is final. Sayonara!"

Guess who is still waiting?

Global Thinking and Global Negotiating Strategies

It takes global thinking to succeed internationally. You must be aware that the negotiating strategies you intend to employ could differ from region to region. Also, the formality of your approach, as well as how you deal with differences and concessions, is crucial to the bond or relationship you will establish with your foreign prospect.

- Learn about the organization, the reputation, and the negotiating style of the other side, but keep in mind that familiarization and factfinding should begin before your first meeting.
- German, Swiss, and Japanese businesspeople expect specific well-organized, data-oriented

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presentations. Color slides rather than transparencies are recommended.

- In Egypt and China, the opening offer is really far from the final settlement; consequently, it is advisable to leave yourself a lot of room when negotiating with someone from that part of the world. In addition, never accept their first offer; they expect you to negotiate further. Do not disappoint them.
- Disagreement with a Middle Easterner trying to make his point can trigger quite a flow of emotions. Waving of the arms, screams, and loud sighs are part of the scenario. Do not take such forms of expression negatively or personally; it is part of their persona. Show understanding and patience.

Most frequently, resistance implies that an interest from the other side still exists; it is a universal negotiating strategy. Break through it by finding ways to meet the needs of the client. Moreover, if reach an impasse with your international counterpart, think in terms of keeping the relationship going while considering the following steps:

1. Emphasize mutual interests.
2. Encourage actions by setting a deadline.
3. Let your client select the appropriate environment for the next meeting.
4. End the discussion with an amusing, culturally correct story.

A Chameleon

If you accept a business meeting with an international prospect before familiarizing yourself with the new culture, your success will depend on how fast you can adapt to it.

The secret lies within your capacity to transform yourself into the persona you wish to acquire. Becoming a chameleon takes some training as well as some improvisation skills. This is the time to test your creativity. How quick are you? Make it your next challenge.

Anticipation

Trust is vital to build negotiating strength. The next column will analyze global trust, encouraging you to keep your personal integrity when dealing internationally. Furthermore, it will also contain useful advice on how to do business with Latin Americans without driving each other “loco.”

Proficient in French, English, Italian, and Arabic, Magda S. Sourour is a technical support consultant with SINTRAC Information Technology Corp., a Canadian consulting firm. She can be reached by e-mail at info@sintrac.com. ❖

Insightful Reading

Soros, George, T*he Crisis of the Global Capitalism*. Library of Congress cataloguing in Publication 1998 edition. The author shows us how to embrace the concept of the open society.

The index contains terminology used in the text, but it does not contain likely synonyms. For example, legacy documents is listed, but such related phrases as “converting print documents to hypertext” or “print manuals, converting to hypertext” are absent.

Buy This Book?

Yes, if you want a thorough and knowledgeable introduction to most aspects of planning, creating, and implementing online documentation. This book may also be a useful tool for educating management about what it takes to design a usable, effective online document.

Nancy Allison is a freelance technical writer specializing in online help. Her e-mail address is gardener@world.std.com.

This article was originally published in the Summer 1999 issue of Hyperviews:Online, *the STC Online Information SIG’s online newsletter.*

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Harangued and Harried?—Nine Rules to Gain Control Over Your Projects

by Linda Landry

Managing client relationships is about control: control of the project, control of your time, control of your sanity. If being at the end of a whip isn't your style, but you feel project circumstances sometimes put you there, you probably could be doing more to manage the relationship.

One thing is for sure—if you don't manage your client relationships, they will manage you. Here are nine client management rules you can begin using immediately to gain more control over your work life.

1. Stay in control of your part of the project.

You might not be able to influence the overall outcome of the project, but you can certainly influence how your team works together.

I worked on a project recently that consisted of a development and business analyst team, a small group of technical writers, and me in the role of technical course developer. By working from functional specifications and being flexible about changing our documentation as the application changed in development, we actually beat our deadlines.

This meant we could start pre-training earlier than planned and could post materials on an Intranet site for preview. Even though the development side of the project was mired in chaos, beating our project plan helped give the overall project a positive image to the rest of the company.

2. Follow your own personal work ethic.

If you are working onsite for any amount of time, you might observe what looks like a 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. work ethic. If you look closer, you might also see that many employees spend much of that time socializing.

Don't be tempted to hang around just because everyone else is still in the office. One of the reasons independents are hired is that we work quickly and get the job done on time. Sure you can charge extra hours, but personally, I'd rather get my work done in 40 hours and spend the rest of the time taking classes, learning new tools, and pursuing personal interests.

One thing is for sure—if you don't manage your client relationships, they will manage you.

Of course there are times when extra hours are needed. But if you are in control of your work, you will be able to judge when this is warranted. One of my clients, who is a manager in a large insurance company, was so used to my 40-hour weekly schedule that she always apologized whenever she needed me to work extra hours. This was because I set the expectation that I would not work extra hours unless it was necessary.

3. Set deadlines for your clients.

Often we are dependent on others in order to meet our own project goals. If I need information from subject matter experts or analysts, I tell them the date I need the information and ask if they can meet this date. Usually the answer is yes. I then follow up until I get what I need. If I'm still waiting for information and am in danger of missing my own deadlines, I let my client know. This gives everyone a heads up and allows the manager to step in.

4. Be proactive about meeting client-set deadlines.

Related to the previous rule, this one means going the extra mile to get what you need. On one project, I was working from documentation and functional specs to design several courses for non-technical end users. I was told I wouldn't have any access to the application. When I asked why not, my contact answered that he didn't have access.

I soon learned that there was a test lab across the hall. One day I wandered in and asked if I could schedule time to "play" with the system and test my documentation. "Of course! Just tell us when you need the app and we'll clear out," was the unexpected response. When my original contact learned of this, he expressed surprise that I was "allowed" access. Actually, without it, I couldn't have done my job.

5. Diagnose the emergency—before you act.

If it looks like the house is burning down, anyone's impulse is to act immediately without thinking too much. But maybe there's just smoke from the kitchen. Or maybe it's just smoke from the chimney!

We've all had clients call us in a panic. Determine if there is a bona fide emergency before you prescribe a course of action. Start by probing. What exactly is the problem and when was it noticed? Why is it a problem? What are the repercussions? Understand the specifics first, and then move forward to fix them.

6. Demand respect for your work.

This is a tricky one because consultants are often the highest paid and yet have the lowliest of lives in a corporation. One large company I consulted for routinely excluded consultants from all meetings, including meetings that discussed the consultants' work. This attitude filtered through the company in other ways, resulting in almost complete isolation of consultants.

Needless to say, this made communication more than a little difficult. After a while, I was so out of the loop that I resigned the account. The aggravation wasn't worth it to me. I learned from this experience that I should have followed my rule about being proactive. I should have told the client that I must be invited to team meetings and any meeting that covered my work in order to complete the job to the client's satisfaction.

7. Bill regularly.

I know consultants who let their billing slip, and their clients respond by not paying the invoices for months. Make sure your clients' accounting departments are used to seeing regular invoices from you. Many companies have net-30 policies in place for their large vendors, but seem to put the "small" irregular invoices aside. My experience has been that if an accounting department becomes used to seeing regular invoices from me, they'll pay the invoices more or less on time.

8. If you're not getting paid, appeal personally to contacts within the company.

Last year I wrote an annual report for a small technical company in Florida and thought we had built up a pretty good rapport over the course of the project. After I sent my invoice, I heard nothing for two months, despite my repeated calls.

I eventually contacted one of the company's board members in New York, who I just happened to have a brief conversation with midway through the project. I appealed to him as a small business owner who depended on my clients paying their bills on time to make ends meet. Within 10 days, I had my check.

9. Always look toward the long term.

All successful business people know that it costs less time and effort to get more work from existing clients than to sign on new clients. Consider every project just one notch in a long-term relationship with every client. Companies choose consultants who know their business, and who understand their business needs. No one likes to start from scratch with every project. Leverage your knowledge of your clients and reap the long-term rewards.

Linda Landry is a technical communications consultant who specializes in developing technical courses and creating marketing communications materials. She has been consulting for five years and has over 10 years of experience in the IT industry. She can be reached at L_Landry@bit-net.com. ❖

Secrets, Hoaxes, and Illustrations— I Had a Busy Summer

by Thomas P. Lenzo

Secrets

I was on a commuter bus from New York City. Shortly after we left the bus terminal, the passenger across the aisle from me took a laptop out of his briefcase and turned it on. He logged on using a screen name and password, opened a password-protected document, read it, and began copying parts of the document to a series of e-mails, frequently accessing an address book. The laptop's sharp display enabled all those seated near him to see everything he was doing. The document he was working on was a data security analysis of a company.

This made me think about how I protect the business information provided to me by my clients. I certainly don't read it in public. When I have more than one client, I keep their files separated, using multiple briefcases and disks as necessary. Look at how you protect your clients' information. Is it secure? Is it safe? What else can you do to protect it?

By the way, I didn't read the document the traveler was working on. Seeing what he was doing inspired me to write this.

Hoaxes

I received the following e-mail from a well-intentioned friend:

> *Subject: Here Kitty - Virus Alert!*
> *Subject: Fw: virus alert, please forward*
>
> *If you receive an e-mail entitled, "How to Give a Cat a Colonic," DO NOT open it. It will erase everything on your hard drive.*
>
> *Forward this letter out to as many people as you can. This new information was announced yesterday morning from IBM.*
>
> *Please share it with everyone that might access the Internet. Once again, pass this along to EVERYONE in your address book so that this may be stopped.*
>
> *AOL has said that this is a very dangerous virus and that there is NO remedy for it at this time. Please practice cautionary measures and forward this to all your online friends ASAP.*

The message had been forwarded multiple times and included several hundred e-mail addresses.

There is no "Here Kitty" virus. It was an Internet hoax. While computer viruses are a real danger, hoaxes spread via the Internet regarding viruses, an e-mail tax, and dying children consume far more bandwidth and work time than do viruses.

Here is some information regarding Internet hoaxes.

Hoaxes instruct you to "Forward this letter to as many people as you can." This will clutter up lots of e-mail boxes and negatively affect bandwidth and productivity as the recipients open, read, and, if they're gullible, forward it to others.

"This new, information was announced yesterday morning from IBM." Since most organizations don't send such announcements, go to their Web sites and research what you received.

This made me think about how I protect the business information provided to me by my clients.

You're supposed to "share it with everyone that might access the Internet." Sending this mail to everyone would be the best way to spread real viruses. Also, thanks to the forwarding, the recipients now have all those e-mail addresses. Those addresses could be used to spread more hoaxes or to send out real viruses.

Visit these sites for Internet hoax and computer virus information:

Start with *PC World*'s "Virucide" article in the February 1999 issue or search for it online at *http://www.pcworld.com*.

Data Fellows Corporation publishes data security products and has a very detailed anti-virus Web site at *http://www.datafellows.com/vir-info/*.

Rob Roseberger's Computer Virus Myths Web page at *http://kumite.com/myths/myths/* has easily understood contents.

If IBM "issued the warning," check the IBM anti-virus page at *http://www.av.ibm.com*.

The Computer Incident Advisory Capability of the U.S. Department of Energy (CIAC) was established to serve the DOE, but its work is shared throughout the Internet community *http://ciac.llnl.gov/ciac/CIACHoaxes.html*.

The Symantec/Norton AntiVirus Research Center is at *http://www.symantec.com/avcenter/*.

Although they've been bought by Network Associates, McAfee still has a useful web site at *http://www.mcafee.com/*.

Illustrations

If a picture is worth a thousand words, what I saw at SIGGRAPH 99 was worth billions. SIGGRAPH 99 was the 26th International Conference on Computer Graphics and Interactive Techniques. Some 43,000 computer graphics professionals from six continents gathered at this week-long conference and exhibition in Los Angeles to showcase the latest developments and to chart the future of the technology into the next century. Some of what I saw:

- The Sobrio company's Tabellio, a set of modules for tracking and managing digital documents *http://www.sobrio.com/*.
- The Web 3D Consortium showed the latest technologies and applications that we'll use in the next generation of the web *http://www.web3d.org*.
- Geometrix demonstrated 3Scan, a product that captures three-dimensional images using an inexpensive laser pointer, a digital camera, a turntable and software, rather quickly and at a relatively low cost *http://www.geometrixinc.com/*.
- If you're new to 3-D graphics, check out *http://www.alice.org/* for demos and a free software download to create your own.
- HASH, Inc. demonstrated Animation Master, a complete, low cost, animation software program *http://www.hash.com/*.
- Immersion's mouse allows you to "feel" what you see on your Internet browser *http://www.force-feedback.com/*.
- Genuine Fractals and Genuine Fractals Print-Pro allow the user to increase the resolution and size of images without degrading image quality *http://www.Altamira-Group.com*.
- There were extensive career services and a job fair at the conference.

The 2000 SIGGRAPH conference is in New Orleans *http://www.siggraph.org/s2000/*. For additional information about SIGGRAPH 99, e-mail me.

Tom Lenzo is a training and development consultant with more than 25 years experience in high technology environments. He is also the Employment Manager for the San Gabriel Valley STC Chapter. He can be reached at tlenzo@worldnet.att net. ❖

The Network is Down

by Ken Mauro

No, not the electronic one that connects computers and printers to each other and the outside world. I'm referring to the other kind; the one that, working correctly, would connect me to the outside world of business contacts and new customers.

For independents, steady work from one or more customers is a nice situation and a two-edged sword. It's great to have continuing business and steady money, but over the past few years I must have found it all too easy to get wrapped up in customer and project issues at the expense of upgrading and maintaining my own personal network. When one of my major customers flew into the side of a financial mountain and gave me the heave-ho, along with some long-term employees, I found myself scrambling to replace that lost income. On the other hand, I saw this development as the right time to do some network rebuilding. No time like the present.

My first thought, though not my first choice, was to try to replace the lost business by going with an agency short-term. I freely admit to being a babe in the woods, having worked only twice before with an agency about ten years ago. I posted my resume at several locations on the Internet and started contacting agencies directly in response to job postings on the well-known sites like *monster.com*. I can't say the experience was good, primarily because I never did find work that way. (Ahh, high on the list indeed.) Beyond that, I didn't develop much respect for agency people in general; about a third of them appeared to be brain-dead. For many others, words like half-hearted, uninformed, and slow-moving come to mind. I suppose you could write off my dismissive viewpoint as sour grapes, but the fact is that some agencies never responded at all to inquiries. Why is that? Is it because they receive hundreds of e-mails and resumes and just can't manage it all? How does one explain an initial response, followed by radio silence from the so-called account executive? No phone calls, no e-mails returned; I never did figure it out. A rare few were efficient, knowledgeable, and seemed to know what they were about. Unfortunately, they took care of me in all ways except coming up with a good job match.

> *I saw this development as the right time to do some network rebuilding. No time like the present.*

It wasn't all bad. There was one brief encounter when a tired recruiter told me, "I've been looking at resumes for technical writers all afternoon. If I see 'HTML' and 'online help' one more time, I'm going to poke my eyes out." As it turned out, he was looking for someone to write manufacturing and safety procedures. On that one, I stayed close to the phone for a week waiting for a telephone interview. Finally someone called and said, "They hired someone else." This kind of thing happened twice; I suspect in both cases that the HR weenies were involved.

I continued to check out listings posted on the Internet, an exercise that reinforced the timeliness of Rob Houser's words in the spring and summer issues of IP regarding personal training plans. My own plan had fallen into disrepair, so the time spent reading listings was worthwhile in that regard. I now have a better idea of the skill sets companies are seeking. I don't like them, but at least I have a better idea. One of the other things I started doing again is mining classified ads for leads. I look for categories like engineers (whose companies design and build products and who would need proposals, manuals and design standards publications), service technicians (who might need installation, conversion, and repair procedures), and manufacturing or quality assurance managers (whose departments require all kinds of procedures related to safety, product inspection, and calibration). I figure it can't hurt to write, call or fax and occasionally I hit paydirt.

My father had an expression. Well, he had many, but a favorite was, "More luck than brains," offered as a humorous observation of the ways my brothers and I handled some of our affairs. However, luck and good timing do have their place in life. Mercifully, the Yellow Pages print ad came to the rescue, allowing a machine tool manufacturer to get in touch with me. "Would service bulletins be the kind of thing you do?," the sales manager asked. A brief smile crossed my face as I thought of Dad. "Well," he said, "I've got some that have been prepared by our service technicians. What I really

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need is a writer to clean them up. They don't have to be perfect, but they should look professional." I was happy, but not thrilled. A nice layout and some cleaned-up English is all this guy thinks he needs.

That attitude changed once he faxed the drafts over to me, asking for a quote on how much it would take to clean them up. Oh, this was much more than a matter of grammar and typefaces. Yet as much as I wanted to ask The Big Question, I held off. (The question being: Has anyone actually tried following these procedures on a real machine?) Sometimes it's better to wait for the right moment to initiate a customer awareness session. My reasoning is that people like this fellow are typically focused on getting a pesky assignment completed and crossed off their list. Thus, their need to find

a professional plumber to simply come over and clear that clogged drain. Eventually, we got to the Big Question and others. Several days and more than a few billable hours later, I had written the bulletins, and we had also videotaped the procedures out in the shop, surfed various Web sites to see how other companies do bulletins, devised a document layout, established an ongoing name-and-number scheme for the various product categories, made PDFs, and hashed and rehashed the weighty matter of "service bulletin" versus "service advisory."

I can't say the network is up and running at peak performance, but I can say I have a renewed commitment to its continuous maintenance and improvement. I also have another customer to fund the effort. Whether it was luck, brains, or some combination of both, I'm grateful.

Ken Mauro is an independent working in Chicago and the Midwest. He loves the word "functionality" and wishes more people would use it. ❖

List Administrator Needed

We are looking for someone to take over the duties of List Administrator from the SIG manager. Those duties include:

- Approving members' requests to join.
- Maintaining the list of subscribers.
- Helping list members with subscription problems and issues.
- Publicizing the list.
- Reporting on the list to the SIG manager.
- Monitoring the list (to detect spam, advertising, and other inappropriate messages).

Because of the list's new Web interface, the duties of the CICSIG-L list administrator have gotten much easier. For example, you can easily see and groom the list of participants. The job takes about two hours per week and a little attention every day or two. You don't need special software other than an Internet connection, an e-mail client, and a Web browser.

The benefits of being the List Administrator are:

1. Visibility in the national contractor/consultant community.
2. A chance to serve the CICSIG.
3. A chance to learn about listserv software.

If you're interested in taking on this position, please e-mail your willingness to Thomas Barker, CICSIG Manager, at tbarker@ttu.edu. ❖

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Within the first month after unpacking my recorder, I reduced my e-mail traffic and meeting schedule by half. I was able to learn new information the way I needed to learn it, and didn't have to ask anyone to repeat it in the process.

Map the Landscape

As much as we hate to admit it, politics is part of the job. And just as cub reporters have to spend time getting to know the folks at city hall, new technical writers need to get to know their colleagues.

Simple observation reveals a lot, but so can taking a friendly soul to lunch. You don't want a gossip or a closet malcontent, but you do want someone who has been around a while. Start with a few subtle questions; then let your pal do the talking. Knowing peoples' areas of specialization is helpful; knowing their pet peeves can be a lifesaver.

For example, an acquaintance who works for a manufacturer of ultrasound equipment learned that an engineer was positively evil when approached in his office, the hallway, or right after a meeting. But when caught in the coffee room, he was a gregarious fountain of information. At our company, we have a very sweet man who is also one of the busiest people on staff. He is a cross between the White Rabbit from Alice In Wonderland and the Soup Nazi on "Seinfeld." He simply has no patience for "data smog"; get to your point in 50 words or less, or you've lost him.

Craft Your Questions Well

Some sources have no tolerance for people who can't speak the right jargon, and asking these people ambiguous questions diminishes your credibility with them. Further, novice questions are often so tentative and vague that SMEs don't even recognize what's being asked. New writers are expected to have a learning curve, but you'll want to move along it at a fairly reasonable clip. Try writing out your questions; then ask a co-worker to review them with you. This way, you learn the proper jargon, your reviewer can sometimes direct you to a better source, and you enter interviews with more precise questions.

Some sources have no tolerance for people who can't speak the right jargon, and asking these people ambiguous questions diminishes your credibility with them.

In my case, my boss invested a lot of time training me on our software. The first draft of our new administration manual came back with comments like, "Go ask so-and-so about ______"; other times, he'd send questions to the developers, copying everything to me. The result: I quickly learned our jargon in a friendly atmosphere, the developers and I spent our meetings focused on more important things, and my boss and I received many compliments on the completed manual.

Planning Can Pay Off

Admittedly, production schedules don't always allow enough time to get work done. But with a little planning, you might be amazed at what you'll get in return.

- Sending questions ahead of time can be a lucrative habit. Interviewees will invite other sources to meetings, or developers will copy little-known files from their PCs to the network. Once, while writing a magazine article about LANs, I'd sent questions to an engineer. The next morning, as I started the interview with him, a package arrived with a diskette of technical drawings he'd done for their manuals; we put a source note on the sidebar and our illustrators had an easy week.
- Letting sources read what you've written with their information, especially when direct quotes are involved, builds trust. It frequently gleans more information as well.
- If you have the choice of a phone or e-mail interview, and time permits, take e-mail. Phone interviews are often interrupted or limited to begin with. E-mails, though, can be answered when your source has time, and you'll likely get better answers for the effort.

Timing Is Everything

In every company, there are good and bad times for meetings. Sometimes, approaching someone 10 minutes before another meeting to schedule your interview can get things off to a bad start. Flextime can make appointments on Mondays and/or Fridays virtually impossible. And despite popular opinion, lunch meetings rarely accomplish as much as people think they will.

When you set up your interviews, use common sense; tap into the information you gathered about your colleagues, and—most important—allow yourself enough time to redirect questions or reschedule canceled appointments.

Once you're comfortable with the local lingo, and know the lay of the land, you'll find that in a very short time, you'll be a lot more independent and a lot more confident going into an interview.

Whitney Potsus is now a technical writer for Retail Marketing Systems in Shelton, CT. She is also the editor of The Solitary Scrivener, *the newsletter of the Lone Writer SIG.*

This article was reprinted from the April/May 1999 issue of Imprints, *newsletter of the STC Central Connecticut Chapter.*

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WHERE ARE THE CHAPTER CICSIGS?

by Cheri Taylor

Several STC chapters have active local CICSIGs associated with them. These local SIGs carry on a variety of activities, such as holding regular meetings, maintaining a Web site, and compiling a directory of area CICSIG members and their services.

As a new feature for the CICSIG Web site, we've been collecting a list of the STC chapters that have active local CICSIGs associated with them. If you belong to your local CICSIG and your chapter is not listed, please send an e-mail to me at taylorcw@compuserve.com and let me know your SIG exists!

If your chapter does not have a local CICSIG and you want to start one, we plan to post information about starting one on the Web site soon. We'll notify you through the newsletter when this is available, or check the Web site periodically for updates.

Most of the links shown below connect directly to the SIG's home page; for others, you will need to navigate from the chapter's home page to the CICSIG information.

Region 1

Boston
www.stc-boston.org

Eastern Ontario
Forming (Contact Tahirah Shadforth, shadforth@webruler.com)

New York Metro
stc.org/region1/nyc/www.index.html

Toronto
www.stctoronto.org

Region 2

Carolina
Forming (contact Cheri Taylor, taylorcw@compuserve.com)

Philadelphia Metro
stc.org/region2/phi/pics/index.html

Pittsburgh
www.stcpgh.org/index.html

Region 3

Atlanta
stc.org/region3/atl/www/index.html

Region 4

Central Illinois
www.prairienet.org/cil_stc/homepage.html

Chicago
stc.org/region4/chi/www/index.html

Northeast Ohio
Forming (contact Barb Philbrick, caslonsvcs@ibm.net)

Region 5

Alamo (San Antonio)
stc.org/region5/asc/www/sig.htm

Austin
stc.org/region5/aus/sigs/sigs.html

Houston
stc.org/region5/hou/contractorsPIC/

Lone Star (Dallas/Ft. Worth)
stc.org/region5/lsc/www/cicsig/cic.html

Region 6

Manitoba
www.pangea.ca/~cicsig/

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Independent
The Perspective

Society for Technical Communication
c/o Thomas Barker
Department of English
Texas Tech University
Lubbock, TX 79409-4039

Bulk Rate
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Dallas, Texas
Permit No. 00910

CHECK IT OUT !

1999 CICSIG MEMBERSHIP SURVEY

INSIDE !

NEWS BRIEFS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Where are the Chapter CICSIGs?

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Region 6, cont.

St. Louis
www.stc-stlouis.org/cicsig.htm

Twin Cities (Mpls./St.Paul)
stc.org/region6/tcc/sigs/consulting.html

Region 7

Rocky Mountain (Denver)
stcrmc.org/sigs.html

Willamette Valley (Portland, OR)
www.stcwvc.org/sigs/
sigs_contractors.html

Region 8

Los Angeles
stc.org/region8/lac/www/skill.htm#STC

North Bay (N. San Francisco Bay)
Forming (contact Kirsten Barquist
or kbar1@earthlink.net)

San Diego
stc.org/region8/sdc/www/contract.htm

Silicon Valley (Northern California)
stc.org/region8/svc/www.index.html

Cheri Taylor is the owner of TechWords in Raleigh, NC. She is also the manager of the STC Information Design SIG.List of STC Chapter CIC SIGs. ❖

STC Book Reviews Now on Society Web Site

STC book reviews, as published in Technical Communication, are now located on the society's Web site at http://www.stc-va.org.

To access the reviews, first select the "Publications" button on the left-hand side of the home page. Select the underlined "STC Press" button at the top of the publications page. Next, select the "Book Reviews" link.

All reviewed publications are available by selecting the Amazon.com or Barnes and Noble Web sites as noted on the main Book Reviews page. ❖

CICSIG MEMBERSHIP SURVEY

Instructions:

Please mark your choices clearly.

When you've completed the survey, fold this page into thirds with the address information showing, tape the edges shut, attach a stamp, and mail it to Thomas Barker, CICSIG Manager.

****

Tell us about your employment.

From the choices below, please select one that best describes how you earn a living.

[ ] a. As an independent contractor
[ ] b. As a staff employee
[ ] c. As a staff employee who also does some work as an independent contractor
[ ] d. Other

Note: If your answer to question 1 is "a. As an independent contractor" please complete the rest of the survey. If not, please do not complete the survey.

Is your business a:

[ ] a. Sole proprietorship
[ ] b. Partnership
[ ] c. Limited liability company
[ ] d. Corporation
[ ] e. Other

Tell us about your business focus.

What kind of work do you do for your clients? (check all that apply)

[ ] a. Editing
[ ] b. Copy writing
[ ] c. Indexing
[ ] d. Desktop publishing
[ ] e. Web site design
[ ] f. Training
[ ] g. Public relations
[ ] h. Create business plans
[ ] i. Establish policies/procedures
[ ] j. Other ______________________________

What do you produce for your clients? (check all that apply)

[ ] a. Promotional materials
[ ] b. Web page design/illustration
[ ] c. Hardware manuals
[ ] d. Corporate communications
[ ] e. Magazine/journal articles
[ ] f. Multimedia presentations
[ ] g. Indexes
[ ] h. Marketing/advertising materials
[ ] i. Technical reports/documents
[ ] j. Graphics/design
[ ] k. Textbooks
[ ] l. Software manuals
[ ] m. Newsletters
[ ] n. Online information systems
[ ] o. Training materials
[ ] p. Other

What percentage of your work would you characterize as:
% consulting (giving expert professional advice)

____

versus
% production work (performing writing and editing tasks)?

____

How do you get new clients: (check all that apply)

[ ] a. Cold calls
[ ] b. Referrals
[ ] c. Advertisements (print or Web)
[ ] d. Agency
[ ] e. Other

Check the two most important reasons why you are an independent contractor.

[ ] a. Opportunity to make more money
[ ] b. Flexibility in work schedule
[ ] c. Prompted by getting laid off interests
[ ] d. Best way to break into the field
[ ] e. Need for autonomy/independence
[ ] f. Makes the most of my skills/
[ ] g. Other

What was your hourly pay rate (asking rate) for the 1998 tax year, as of January 1, 1999?
$ per hour for contracting _________________
$ per hour for consulting _________________

Tell us about yourself.

What is your gender?
[ ] Female [ ] Male

Please enter the zip code of your home address: _______________

Are you an STC member? [ ]

Are you a CICSIG member? [ ]

What is your e-mail address? (optional)

____

Place First Class Stamp Here

Thomas Barker
CICSIG Manager
Texas Tech University
Department of English
Lubbock, TX 79409-4039

CICSIG Member Survey Inside

Instructions:

1. Fold top and bottom portions back at lines to form an envelope. Make sure that the mailing address shows clearly on the outside and the survey is on the INSIDE.
2. Tape the open edges.
3. Place a first-class stamp in the designated spot.
4. Drop it in the mail.
5. You're done!

Thanks!!!