

The Independent Perspective

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

You Oughta Be in Pictures: Technical Writers as Screenwriters

by Geoff Hart

It might seem unlikely at first glance, but as a technical communicator, you make a great Hollywood screenwriter—though that’s probably damning you with faint praise given the competition. Unlikely though it seems, you’ll find surprisingly many correspondences between the two professions. We’re increasingly being told to think visually when we write and design documentation, but what’s much less obvious is the fact that we’re already halfway there.

Discovering what’s important

In adapting a novel for television or for a feature film, screenwriters recognize that even relatively short novels contain far too much material to fit within the two-hour span of a typical movie. Thus, to produce a good script, they must find the quintessential essence of the novel they’re adapting. You can see how this is done if you understand the concept of “narrative theory,” an approach to literature which suggests that all stories contain three components, no matter how the author actually subdivides these components:

- Establish what protagonists want.
- Explain how they get what they want.
- Report what happens afterwards.

Any scene or action with a scene that doesn’t provide one of these types of information fails to reflect the novel’s essence. Even if the scene or action is interesting and innovative in its own right, screenwriters can’t afford to devote the time or production resources to capture and present that information.

These stages obviously parallel the process technical communicators follow. Just as in producing a script, we must sort through an enormous amount of information, including functional specification documents, marketing literature, scrawled notes from subject matter experts (SMEs), and so on to determine the truly crucial points for our audience. We then perform an audience analysis to identify the reader’s needs (what those protagonists want), figure out how to meet those

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Meet the Chapter-level SIGs!

by Cheri Taylor,

Welcome to a new column about and for the many chapter-level CIC SIGs in STC! The column will cover:

- News you can use about leading or participating in your local SIG
- Profiles of current chapter CIC SIGs
- Anything else pertaining to the local level!

I've wondered about the local CIC SIGs ever since I joined the society-level CIC SIG way back when. What cities were they in? What markets did they serve? What kind of people were members? How did they get together, and what did they talk about?

When I started helping the Carolina Chapter get its CIC SIG going a couple of years ago, my curiosity became an exercise in serious note taking and benchmarking. How many SIGs were there? How did they start? What do they do? What works in leading a SIG?

I went from feeling like I was just about the only independent in Raleigh, North Carolina to realizing that there are dozens in my area and hundreds in the many chapters throughout the world. My research showed that some chapters have large, sophisticated networks of independents, long-standing SIGs complete with online directories, active newsgroups, and monthly meetings. Others have informal groups of a handful of independents. And everything in between!

Are you curious about chapter CIC SIGs? Do you know how many there are and where they're located? All the ones we know about so far are listed on the society-level CIC SIG Web site. You can go directly to the chapter CIC SIG page at www.stcsig.org/cic/pages/localcicsigs.htm. There you will see:

- All 21 chapter CIC SIGs listed, with a link to their home page if they have one.
- A paper on how to start your own chapter CIC SIG.
- A link to join a newsgroup for leaders of chapter CIC SIGs.
- When I profile a chapter CIC SIG in future columns, I'll try to cover its:
- Current activities (what does it do as a SIG?)
- History of the group (who founded it and when?)
- Local market (which industries? how's the local economy?)
- Tips for being part of the SIG (why is it successful as a group, or not?)
- Tips for being successful independents (what works?)

If there is something else you wonder about local CIC SIGs, let me know and I'll ask the question!

Here is the query for next issue: Which was the very first chapter CIC SIG? I think I know, but I would love someone to prove me wrong! If you think you know which chapter CIC SIG was first, send me an email making your case. Just to see how far

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Independent

The Perspective

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Managing Editor: *Margaret Doss*

Assistant Editor: *Kelly Burch*

Copy Editor: *Doris Rash Konneh*

SIG Manager: *Dr. Thomas Barker*

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

We encourage you to send comments, suggestions, and opinions regarding *The Independent Perspective* or the CIC SIG to the editor at margaret.doss@usa.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 Margaret Doss at margaret.doss@usa.net.

Dealing With Cyber Terrorists

Information Warfare: How to Survive Cyber Attacks by Michael Erbschloe

by Thomas J. Lenzo

I received an announcement about the book, *Information Warfare: How to Survive Cyber Attacks* by Michael Erbschloe, on the same day that I received a letter from Superior Court notifying me of my selection for jury duty. Two months later, I spent a week of days in the service of the court and my nights reading this book. It was an interesting juxtaposition: reading about technology-based crimes that could not have been committed a few years ago, while participating in a legal system that has not caught up with that technology.

While the court docket dealt with typical civil and criminal cases, such as divorce, robbery, and assault, this book described crimes that could destroy entire businesses and negatively affect national and international economies.

Why should you be interested in this topic and read the book? The companies we work for, consult to, and do daily business with, are the targets of the described cyber attacks. As computer users, we also are targets of those attacks.

Erbschloe explains how hackers plan and execute cyber attacks. For example, he uses a detailed, fictional case study, an “electronic doomsday scenario,” where a small group of international hackers launch a sustained information terrorist attack. The case study explains how the attack is planned and executed its effects on the targets, and the collateral damage it causes. The case study also details how governments

and businesses react and strike back against the cyber terrorists.

In addition to the case study, the author provides detailed defensive strategies and tactics, counter measures that can help countries, governments and companies survive various types of cyber attacks.

At about the time I finished reading the book, the terrorists struck. I realized that many of the scenarios presented in this book are not as far fetched as I first thought. Erbschloe titled the “electronic doomsday scenario” as “Pearl Harbor 2,” a term we now hear regarding the September 11 terrorist attacks.

So what can we contractors and consultants do regarding cyber terrorism?

First, since we rely on computers to get the job done, we must do the following to protect our systems.

- Back up all the files on a regular schedule. A recent fire at the home of a colleague emphasized the need for keeping back-ups away from the home office at an off-site location.
- Regularly update the operating system and application files, especially for e-mail clients.
- Make sure the anti-virus software has an up-to-date profile. Update the profile on a weekly basis.
- Add a firewall, especially if connected to a cable modem or DSL. Zone Alarm is a free download firewall available at www.ZoneLabs.com.

- After installing the firewall, test it via the various applications such as Leak Test on the Gibson Research Corporation web site <http://grc.com>.

We often sign non-disclosure agreements when we start projects and have to return any client materials at the end of a project. If you ignore the security of your computer, you might lose intellectual property belonging to your client and incur a legal liability. Who wants to be held liable for client contents stolen by a hacker?

Second, we can use our knowledge of dealing with cyber terrorists to help our clients. If they ignore computer security, they can lose their intellectual property, go out of business, and possibly take us with them.

Too many companies rely on hardware and software to protect them from cyber terrorists, while ignoring the human factors. As a security consultant said: The successful executive asks “What is our security policy and have we revised it lately?” The unsuccessful executive asks, “Do we have a security policy?” We can write those security policies and procedures for our clients, using the detailed advice in Erbschloe’s book. Another resource for information on fighting cyber terrorism is the System Administration, Networking, and Security Institute (SANS). The

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Looking Back: CIC SIG Activities in 2001-2002

by Thomas Barker, CIC SIG Manager

The CICSIG has been unusually productive this year, mainly through the efforts of those who seized opportunities and explored the value of contributing. Events conspired to make this year difficult and fragmentary to an already fragmented and disparate group. Yet as we head into the end of our professional year, culminating with our annual conference, the CICSIG reflects an unusual and gratifying sense of the independent profession. That sense, I think, is a deeper sense of professional identity as leaders in a more clearly defined arena. The accomplishments I describe below reflect the independent's renewed sense of professional identity.

Preparation of a Special Issue on Consulting and Independent Contracting

CICSIG members submitted articles for a special issue on consulting and independent contracting for *Technical Communication* to come out this May. The table of contents includes the following:

- "Introduction to the Special Section on Consulting and Independent Contracting" by Thomas Barker and Kathryn Poe
- "Are you ready for the e-lance economy?" By Doug Florzak
- "Defining the Employee Status of Independent Contractors: A Review and Report on the Legal Issues for Technical Communicators" by Rhonda Clements

- "Consulting versus Contracting" by Andrea Ames
- "Technical Communication Consulting As A Business" by Stephen Poe

Activities of the STCCICSIG-L list

James Brady, List Administrator, kept the list going this year with few glitches. The list currently serves almost 300 CICSIG members and covers topics of interest to all independents, including project assessment, consultant skill sets, sub-contracting issues, tax-related issues, mileage tracking, on- and off-site working, resources for independents, bidding, responding to economic slow-downs and many other topics. This list sets the tone for professional discourse among independent technical communicators.

STC CICSIG Directory

Mike Starr has agreed to be the guiding light for a new project to establish a directory of CICSIG members. Modeled loosely on the print-based PDF directory supported by the Chicago STC chapter, this resource would list skills and contact information for independent technical writers. Another model for the directory is The Boulder Writers Association. (www.bwa.org/membdir/index.htm) Mike has formed a committee of roughly a dozen CICSIG volunteers to design the site and has, as of this writing, put up a prototype of the intake page. Development of the Directory will proceed using a special list set up for the purpose and plans are to finalize

designs at a special meeting this year in Nashville.

Directory Development Committee Members:

Eileen F. Bator
Howard Kiewe
Jan Wright
Betsy Frick
Hilary Harris
Laura T. Young
Rhonda Bracey
Barbara Wellnitz
Jack Massa
Jodie Gilmore
Julia Land
Carol Elkins
Tami Westen
Brian Berry
Ralph F. Rumpf

Newsletter

Transitioning from a paper-based newsletter to an online version was no easy matter. But thanks to a well-conceived publications plan devised by Margaret Doss last August, the transition is well underway.

Sponsoring Conference Events

This year the CICSIG sponsored a discussion panel on partnering among independents and a progression on a number of topics of interest to both beginning and advanced independent contractors and consultants.

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Tale of a Freelancer

by Rich Leon

No, it was not a case of, "Gee, when I grow up I want to be just like those tech-writing action heroes in the movies," (of which there are none!) -- though I'm probably the only person on Earth who confesses to reading gadget manuals cover to cover. No, this career choice was a natural outcome of my innate curiosity about the two greatest forces that shape our lives today: Culture and Technology.

Improvising a Career

Motivated by my intense interest to learn how machines do their thing and the impact they have on society, I earned degrees in Engineering (Georgia Tech) and Sociology (U. of Florida) and accepted a position at GE, one of the world's most admired corporations (and producer of many fine hi-tech gadgets).

As a Technical Sales Engineer and Product Planner with GE, I was exposed to the many faces of corporate life: the Good (how to design a better mousetrap), the Bad (unrealistic deadlines for shipping the mousetrap), and the Ugly (jockeying for the credit). It was all very entertaining, and I was learning a lot. But something big was happening in the world outside of GE: something that would change all the rules about buying and selling mousetraps ... and I wanted in on it!

Thriving in a World Gone Web

No one saw it coming -- not even Mr. Microsoft himself. The explosive growth of the Web caught everyone off guard. No wonder. This new technology, like nothing before, truly delivered on the promise of

"information at your fingertips" on an unprecedented global scale. Multimedia content could be readily shared between individuals and organizations across the world using a friendly, graphical user interface complete with magical hyperlinks, colorful images, cute animations, funky sounds, interactive applets, and dynamically updated content. This was a real breakthrough, a watershed, a whole new paradigm for the information age. Commerce and culture would never be the same.

Naturally, I wasted no time in bidding farewell to GE. I filled my shelves with computer books and magazines, declared myself an independent Internet Software Developer (an improvised title at the time) and set about learning the meanings behind the words and alphabet-soup acronyms that constituted the new lexicon of the Internet: AD, ASP, BIND, CGI, COM, CORBA, DBMS, DNS, EJB, Extranet, FTP, HTML, HTTP, Intranet, ISAPI, Java, JavaScript, Kernel, Linux, MAPI, NNTP, OOA, OOD, POP3, RAS, SMTP, SSL, TCP/IP, UML, VPN, VBScript, WAP, XML, Y2K, and ZAW (and these are just the appetizers!). So much to learn, so little time...

While working as a freelance Internet Software Developer, I crafted a few database-driven Web sites, established some semblance of credibility as a Sun-certified Java Programmer and Developer, designed and implemented a Web-based, real-time-data monitoring system, taught software engineers at Motorola the basic principles of object-oriented programming and Java application

development, and authored a course on distributed Java and CORBA programming.

Call of the DOT-COM

In 1999, I took a brief intermission from freelancing to work as a Team Lead with a "dot-com" company offering a compelling and innovative Web-based groupware service. While there, I managed a team of software engineers struggling to deploy a real-time, automated provisioning and billing system. I also taught in-house courses on basic and advanced Java programming and volunteered to take on the thankless (but vital) task of building and maintaining complex development servers.

Managing servers meant keeping track of all hardware and software changes to a large set of precisely configured Web, Application, and EJB development machines -- and rebuilding them whenever a hapless developer corrupted the machine by installing "unauthorized" (i.e., gaming) software. I learned a lot about the various components, systems, and procedures needed to support 24x7 Web-hosting services.

The dot-com experience also revealed the devastating impact that inaccurate and incomplete documentation had on managers and developers who wasted countless hours struggling with "features" that were never properly documented and had to ultimately be reverse engineered.

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Start Your Home-based Business Before You Start Your Family

by Robin Schuckman

Working in the corporate world, having someone tell me what to do, when to do it, and whether or not I did it correctly, wasn't so bad—when I was young and single.

“Right now I'm single, and it's easier to just go with the flow of society and let someone else manage my time,” says Heidi Denkers, a technical support representative for a high-tech company in Salt Lake City.

But knowing that married life is just around the corner, I'd like to start planning for my family now. And in doing so, any career changes or lifestyle changes I want to make should be done soon.

As of last October I was working in the corporate world, doing what they wanted me to do, when they wanted me to do it. I didn't have much say in who was hired as my assistant, and there was very little respect from management. I didn't feel that I was in a healthy work environment. I could do better. And so I moved on.

I searched for months for just the right job. And found nothing. Finally the day came when I needed to give my notice at my corporate job, and so I was on my way to self-employment, or no employment at all.

I immediately set up shop in my apartment with a new computer system, printer, scanner, file cabinets, and full-hearted support of my parents, my fiancé, and his family.

I was on my way to my home-based business in desktop publishing and technical editing.

After a few weeks of having my own business, my soon-to-be mother-in-law said, “You know what you're really doing, don't you? You're preparing to start a family. By working from home, you'll be able to stay at home with your kids.”

I guess I hadn't really considered it before I started my business; but it's true, it will allow me to be a stay-at-home mom, when the time comes. I feel lucky. I'm starting my home-based business before I start my family.

Getting Started

Starting your own home-based business can be time consuming. That's why it's suggested to get your business started before the little munchkins come.

Get the majority of your networking, marketing, and business setup done before your little ones distract you from the important parts of running a business.

First, decide what type of business you want to run from your home, and then decide on a business name. Register your business name by calling the Business Information Center in your state capital. Then get your business license at your local City Hall.

Visit your local Small Business Administration office to get additional information on getting started.

Create some business cards, letterhead, and envelopes with your new business name. You'll need

something tangible to hand out to potential clients.

Networking is truly the number one way to get your name and business known to the public. Try a referral organization such as Business Network International, a group that meets once a week solely for the purpose of passing referrals among members. Join your local Chamber of Commerce. Participate in local activities. Join professional organizations such as the Society for Technical Communications, or an equivalent organization in your field of expertise. Volunteer your time and your services until you feel you've developed a client base.

All of this may take months, even years, to get setup to a point that you feel comfortable. Remember that there will be ups and downs until things are running smoothly. Don't despair. By getting the edges smoothed out now, you'll save some headache and heartache later when you may not have as much time.

Once your business is running smoothly, then add the children and decrease the workload to fit your family's needs.

In my case, I can network all I want now, but once I start my family I can either put my business on hold or I can choose a few of my most important quarterly clients who will support me and my family on a part-time basis. Keeping a few clients on a part-time basis will allow my business to keep in touch with the industry as well as prepare for the future when the kids are in school.

Self-employment Has Its Ups and Downs

Having your own home-based business has its advantages as well as its disadvantages.

Flexibility, freedom, ability to work when inspired, and being able to work from the comforts of your own home are positive aspects of self-employment for Susan Gulka, a personal and business success coach in Sherwood, Ore. Flexibility has allowed Susan and her husband to “truly enjoy the time we have together in the evenings and on weekends.”

Being able to manage your schedule will allow you the opportunity to participate in more of your children’s activities.

Working at home can also eliminate the everyday commute. Not having to commute allows you to spend more time with your family. Michael Tevlin, technical writer and owner of Strategic Communications says, “I’ve been home almost every day when my kids get home from school. I don’t have to worry about what they’re getting into. I also do the food shopping and cooking for the family, and I never did that before.”

Self-employment can be appealing to full-time working mothers. Linda Whisenhunt, a full-time medical researcher for a large hospital, wishes she could work at home to raise her son. “I have to put him in daycare. Someone else spends a fair amount of time with him. It’s quite costly. I miss being with my son.”

With a home-based business you need to be able to weigh the needs of the

business against your own needs and the needs of your family. You can choose what takes priority.

“I’ve been able to build my family and my business at the same time, and keep them well-balanced,” says Lisa Bayha, an independent fashion coordinator with Weekenders’ USA.

Being the boss of your own business also has its disadvantages. There are the financial worries, the long hours, taking ownership of any mistakes, and the commitment and motivation required to run a business. The business is with you 24 hours a day.

There can be a lot of pressure to make your business successful before you start your family. Hopefully when that time comes you won’t have any worries about money.

“When you are self-employed, your job is your life,” says Garth Chain, a self-employed mortgage consultant. “If my clients call Saturday or Sunday at 8 am, I need to answer the call. If I don’t, other people will get the business.”

If you’re not careful, your business can consume all of your personal time. It can take away time from family, friends, hobbies, and yourself, and cause tension on the home front.

Jane Glasser, an independent technical writer, combats these disadvantages. “You need to take advantage of the freedom of self-employment and learn to say NO! Self-employment can be a blessing to family life, but you need to draw strict lines and, while your kids are young, give more time to your kids than your work. Otherwise, your

family begins to resent ‘the office’ and everything that goes with it.”

What About the Future?

“I chose to work from home doing something I love, and also to have time to raise a family in the future,” says Gulka. “I have realized that some daycare will be needed to work my business part-time, but I look forward to the flexibility!”

“If we have children, we feel that it might be easier in some ways since we’ll both be home all the time anyway, and we can take time off.” Scott Runkel, Director of Technology and owner of his home-based business Hypix Media, Inc., adds, “I think being self-employed will set a good example to our children of the fact that you can make your own way of life.”

What the future holds is up to each one of us individually. It’s all about choices. We can choose to work full-time in the corporate world, where someone else spends more time with our children than we do. Or we can choose to start our own home-based business now, get it up and running, and enjoy the flexibility and freedom we deserve to raise a family. The choice is yours.

Now married, Robin Schuckmann is still building a strong clientele before beginning her family. She is an independent contractor in desktop publishing and technical editing, and owner of Print Media Solutions in Tigard, Ore. Robin can be reached at print.media@verizon.net. ❖

The Independent's Guide to the 49th Annual STC Conference

compiled by Thomas Barker, CIC SIG Manager

Use this handy guide to sessions dedicated to the concerns of independent contractors and consultants.

Monday, 10:30 AM-12 Noon

PD 2L

Tools for the Independent

Location: Jackson E/F

Ready to go on your own? Or move into sales and marketing? This paper session provides you with tips and tricks of this trade. Learn about starting your own company, developing a portfolio, and responding to requests for proposals.

Monday, 2 PM-3:30 PM

Consulting and Independent Contractors SIG Business Meeting

Location: Belmont C

PD 3J

Skills for Changing Careers in Technical Communication

Location: Hermitage C

We can choose from many different careers—writer, trainer, usability expert, Web designer, indexer, etc. This progression outlines the skills you need to change careers and answers your questions about how that new career might compare to what you're doing now.

PD 3M

Setting Consulting Rates

Location: Jackson E/F

Learn how to price your skills. This session describes a business model for setting consulting rates that you and your clients can live with.

PD 3V

Marketing Yourself as a Technical Communicator

Location: Cheekwood G/H

Learn about an essential skill for all technical communicators—how to market yourself in order to enhance career opportunities. This session isn't about doing your resume; it's about using specific marketing techniques to stand out from the crowd.

Tuesday, 8:30 AM-10 AM

PD 5I

Topics in Consulting and Independent Contracting

Location: Hermitage C

This progression features topics of interest to self-employed technical communicators and those who would like to be self-employed.

Tuesday, 11 AM-12 Noon

PD 6G

Are You Ready to E-lance?

Location: Jackson E/F

Learn about electronic freelancing! This demonstration describes "e-lancing", explores its implications for technical communicators, and demonstrates how to take advantage of the Internet as an e-lance marketplace.

Tuesday, 2 PM-3:30 PM

MG 7V

Writing a Contract: Key Facts to Protect Yourself

Location: Hermitage A/B

Learn key facts for writing a business contract to protect yourself. Topics include SOW, payment terms, cancellation provisions, ownership and copyright, liability limitations, and modifications.

PD 7J

Developing Your Own Professional Web Site

Location: Jackson E/F

Proclaim yourself to the world through the Web. This demonstration provides a jump-start for creating your own professional Web site by working through a series of questions and considering examples from other sites.

PD 7O

Should You Incorporate?

Location: Hermitage D

Technical communicators who are contemplating becoming independent can discover whether incorporation is for them. This session considers the advantages of different types of legal entities for business.

**Wednesday, 8:30 AM-10 AM
PD 9G**

**Partnering Among Independents:
A Participatory Research Project**

Location: Jackson E/F

Learn why partnering (job sharing) has become popular among independent technical communicators. This panel discussion describes the experience of two sets of partners using a discussion list to explore marketing, business structures, and compatibility.

Wednesday, 2 PM-3:30 PM

UID 111

**Using a Consulting Methodology to
Propose New Solutions**

Location: Presidential Chamber A

In this workshop, participants learn a basic consulting methodology for designing custom documentation solutions to meet the unique business needs of multiple clients. ❖

Manager's Report

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- Getting Starting as an Independent Technical Communicator, Linda Gallagher
- Contracts: Avoiding Problems (and establishing a way to protect yourself), Richard P Maggiani
- Marketing Yourself with Client Case Studies, Chris Keefer
- Marketing Yourself as a Marketing Writer, Jack Massa
- Making the Most of Quitting, Thomas Barker
- Creating and Using Your Portfolio Effectively, Becky Hall
- How to Network, Robin Schuckmann

Linda Gallagher took over the management of the SIG progression this year and has done a great job of keeping every body on time and informed.

The discussion panel on Partnering Among Independents grew from an idea at last year's SIG networking luncheon into a participative research project on the topic. This year the members of the panel tracked their interaction using a Yahoo group site. The results were informative and unusual, and reflect both on the benefits of partnerships in supporting one another in work and the rigors of partnerships that dissolve. Participants in the panel at the conference include Thomas Barker, Barbara Sturni, and Ruth Nicolich. ❖

Book Review

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Institute published sample policies at www.sans.org/newlook/resources/policies/policies.htm.

Information Warfare: How to Survive Cyber Attacks by Michael Erbschloe
Hardcover - 315 pages (June, 2001)

McGraw-Hill Professional Publishing; ISBN: 0072132604; List Price: \$29.99

Tom Lenzo is a training and development consultant with more than 25 years experience in high technology environments. He also "retired" in 2000 after ten years as the Employment Manager for the San Gabriel Valley STC Chapter. He can be reached at tlenzo@worldnet.att.net. ❖

Locally Independent

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SIG was first, send me an email making your case. Just to see how far back we're looking, the society-level CIC SIG was approved by the STC board of directors in January 1989. But remember, sometimes chapter-level SIGs form before their associated society-level SIG does! Who was first?!

You can reach Cheri Taylor at techwords@pobox.com. Cheri has been an STC member since 1988 and independent since 1994, when she started her company, TechWords, in the Research Triangle Park, North Carolina area. When the Carolina Chapter CIC SIG formed in January 2000, she was suddenly a lot less lonely. ❖

What I Learned from Dear Abby, a 13-Year-Old Hacker, and Others

by Thomas J. Lenzo

When I became a consultant almost 20 years ago, I learned that a successful consultant's time consists of billable hours, learning, and marketing that learning. This article shares some of what I've recently learned.

I attended the Internet Content Conference West (as opposed to ICC East which was held in New York). I learned:

- Content is king; it's the most valuable thing on the web.
- The future of content on the web is you will get what you want, when you want it, via the delivery method (e.g., PC, PDA or pager) you select.
- Research indicates that people multi-task while using computers. You need to know what else your reader is doing while they're using your manual or opening an online help file.
- Jeanne Phillips, co-author with and daughter of Pauline Phillips, explained the success of their Dear Abby column and web site (www.DearAbby.com): high standards and regular, credible contents. Compare that to most of the web sites you visit.
- While broadband (DSL, cable modem, etc.) is necessary to the success of full motion content delivery, there are no successful sites just because of broadband, and there are problems getting it installed. (I learned that first-hand.)

While writing this article, the Internet Content web site, while it had lots of resources, ceased to exist. I learned that content may not matter in the dot com shakeout.

The Internet Security Conference (www.TISC2001.com) was at the same location as the Internet Content Conference, but attracted a different audience. Here I learned:

- Companies are having serious problems with internal and external computer security.
- Everyone is a target: there were 30,000 reported attacks on computers and networks last year and the rate of attacks is increasing exponentially.
- Hardware and software such as firewalls can only do so much to protect computers and prevent attacks.
- There is agreement in the security industry that policies, procedures and training regarding computer security must be developed, implemented and enforced.
- Policies and procedures are also needed regarding privacy, web site access, and corporate e-mail use.

There was discussion at the conference regarding Steve Gibson: he's the inventor of **SpinRite** and has several tools to protect your computer on his web site. Steve's web site was attacked and shut down by a 13-year-old hacker. Read the story on his web site <http://grc.com/dos/grcdos.htm> to learn that any computer is vulnerable to a similar attack. His site and this conference

taught me about "script kiddies." They are hackers with limited technical expertise using automated tools they've downloaded to conduct disruptive attacks on the computer community.

Since most of us work from home, we are responsible for the security of our computers and can market ourselves to write the security policies and procedures that companies need.

After spending eight or more hours a day writing, e-mailing, and researching, the last thing I want to do is spend more time on my computer playing games. But after attending the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) I learned that maybe I should. The expo gave me the following insights into the world of digital games and the gamers, also known as our future employees and colleagues:

- Games are mainstream and ubiquitous via PC, the Internet, cell phones, pagers, PDAs, and game boxes.
- Game consoles are aiming at having multi-functional capabilities including Internet access and voice communications between the gamers.
- Gamers are technologically literate and intuitive: they don't use the Help menu when they run into problems, preferring to solve the difficulty themselves.

If you want to use games within a training environment, here's what makes a great game session: it starts fast, is easy to learn, requires no tutorials, has an easy, simple interface,

and is fun and not a demo. Successful games have a plot and/or conflict, develop community, and teach strategies. Episodic development means gamers keep coming back to that game.

Finally, I learned that there is a problem with wireless handheld games and PDAs in that they enable cheating in school.

One other thing I learned: buy a good office chair. My office chair broke after many years of long days. Researching its replacement, an article in the Wall Street Journal said that companies save money by purchasing refurbished or used office furnishings because “with the exception of chairs” most office furniture does not wear out. Like you, I spend lots of hours in front of my computer, so I decided to get a new chair that would provide me with comfort and support. As for buying quality, I figured it’s like buying a good suit: wear it a couple of times and you forget how much it cost.

So I bought a Herman Miller Aeron chair. You’ve seen them in movies and on TV. Once you get over the sticker shock (\$699.00 plus shipping or tax) and sit in the chair for a while, you realize that you made a smart investment. The chair comes in three sizes, so make sure you get the one that fits you. After I brought my chair home, it took me several minutes to make the eight adjustments of height, degree of tilt, and tilt resistance for my body.

A fellow-STC member also bought one. She says, “One week after buying the chair the shooting pains in my shoulder blades ceased!” Buy your Aeron at local showrooms, online at www.hmstore.com, or at other on-line stores.

So that’s what I learned. I hope you learn something from it.

Tom Lenzo is a training and development consultant with more than 25 years experience in high technology environments. He also “retired” in 2000 after ten years as the Employment Manager for the San Gabriel Valley STC Chapter. He can be reached at tlenzo@worldnet.att.net. ❖

Tale of a Freelancer

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Unfortunately, the company suffered the same fate of so many other overly optimistic Internet startups: Investors got weary of hearing the same old one-last-round-of-funding-to-success story and took their hopes (and cash) elsewhere.

Back to the Future

So now I am back doing what I do best and enjoy most: learning new technologies, helping others learn new technologies, and fine tuning my skills as a professional technical communicator.

And I am ever vigilant, watching for the next big techno-evolutionary movement: the one that will once again redefine how we live and work. What a magnificent story in the making: culture and technology, inexorably intertwined, synergistic, shaping each other’s destiny, yet revealing precious little about that future world in which our grandchildren will work and play...

A member of the Palm Beaches STC Chapter, Rich Leon is a graduate of the Georgia Institute of Technology and the University of Florida with degrees in Engineering and Social Science. He is a Sun Microsystems certified Java Programmer and Software Developer and has held positions in both large and small technology companies. These days he is an independent consultant specializing in software development, documentation, training, and project management and teaches HTML, Java, JavaScript, and other Internet programming courses at the Florida Computer and Business School. His email address is rleon@queryosity.com. ❖

You Oughta Be in Pictures: Technical Writers as Screenwriters

Continued from page 1

needs (how they get what they want), and determine the consequences of meeting those needs (what happens afterwards). In effect, we provide the context readers need to understand a task, lead them through the steps required to accomplish the task, and tell them where to go from here.

Writing instructors sometimes claim that all literature is based on “only five plots” (the actual number varies), including that traditional favorite, “boy meets girl”; in their eyes, all stories simply retell one or more of these plots. (For example, a modern twist on that plot could be “boy meets girl over the Internet.”)

Documentation illustrates this hypothesis much better than screenwriting, since our arsenal of plots is even more restricted—for example, to tutorials, user manuals, reference manuals, and policies and procedures documents. Our creativity becomes evident only when we elaborate on these standard “plots” to create something new and effective.

Writing as an act of translation

Adapting a novel to the screen transforms a long series of words into a shorter sequence of images, punctuated by dialogue, just as technical writers turn engineering specifications or an obscure interface into documentation that instructs and enlightens. In effect, both screenwriters and technical writers take concepts that exist solely in the minds of a product’s designers (whether that product is a novel or software) and translate them into

something the audience can understand.

Even when working in a single language, technical writing requires the same act of translation as screenwriting; we start with abstract concepts and convert them into something the audience can appreciate more easily. SMEs and our audience often speak dramatically different languages, with non-overlapping vocabularies, and have entirely different needs and goals for a product. This situation creates a gap between what the audience must receive and the means by which we can meet those needs. By translating from one language into another, we bridge that gap and ensure communication occurs.

The medium constrains the message

When writers choose between developing a film script rather than a theatrical play, they explicitly pick the medium for their message just as we do when we choose between online help and printed manuals. In both cases, the choice of medium constrains the tools available for presenting our message. For example, movies permit the use of astonishing special effects and changes in location that are simply not possible in plays. As well, picking the actors and location imposes very real constraints on what writers can accomplish with their script: for example, actors can’t reveal their inner dialogue without speaking it aloud, few can successfully show complicated emotions that a writer took pages to describe, and none can survive some of the more

interesting environments (e.g., the inside of a volcano) we might want to show on film or in a novel. The need to show these things onscreen may dictate the choice of actors and production methods; it’s hard to imagine making the recent movie *Final Fantasy* without recourse to modern computer animation.

Technical writers face the same challenges when we design printed manuals and online help. Sometimes, only an animation will adequately convey the information we must communicate; and because most types of animation can’t be achieved in print, we may require online help to communicate a concept.

Conversely, we must sometimes sacrifice an effective technique because we lack the tools or time to use it; for example, if we lack film or animation experience, we can sometimes achieve a reasonably good result through “sequential animation,” in which a series of static images shows the most important steps in a dynamic process.

Another parallel involves the need to pick the most effective combination of visuals and text to achieve a certain effect; where screenwriters would choose a particular film sequence, we might use graphics, and where they would choose dialogue, we’d choose writing. The balance between visuals and text falls within the realm of information design. Consider, for example, the difference between a relatively verbose film, such as Kenneth Branagh’s *Much Ado About Nothing* and one that is relatively inarticulate, such as most Arnold

Schwarznegger films. The producers have different goals and, thus, choose a different balance of text (speech) and graphics (action sequences).

The time-tested patterns available to authors form a third parallel between screenwriting and technical writing. Films use tropes, clichés, archetypes, and other familiar “patterns that work” in much the same way that technical writers use certain rules of thumb to produce our manuals. Sometimes, we must use these tools in specific ways to meet an audience’s expectations; other times, we must break away from these conventions and challenge the audience to respond differently. Knowing which strategy to pick is tough, but the right choice makes all the difference between success and failure.

Revision and more revision

After we gather the material required to produce a script—or a user manual—we play around with it until we can develop an appropriate structure. Once that’s in place, we write and rewrite the material until it’s clear and stripped down to its essence. This material then collides hard with the constraints imposed by our medium and our audience: TV writers often have less than 45 minutes of actual story time per hour-long show, whereas software users have limited patience for reading long documents. Thus, conciseness is vital. Everything that we present must work, and must work well; to do so, it must build on what’s come before and lead into what follows. Anything that doesn’t move the story along briskly

should end up on the cutting-room floor in a film and should be excised from our manuals. Interestingly, this approach is part of the philosophy of the minimalism movement.

We don’t get no respect

Having completed what we consider the perfect final draft, we then show it to someone who will rudely disabuse us of this notion. In screenwriting, that person is the film’s producer or director. Like SMEs, these people may have considerably less artistic talent than we do—not to mention less taste and less audience knowledge—but they’re the ones who call the shots. In both screenwriting and technical writing, the writing is the relatively easy and inexpensive part, even if it doesn’t seem that way to us, and both factors are unlikely to inspire respect for our work.

Producing the actual product (whether film or software) costs so much more that the writing may nearly disappear in the final accounting. In this context, it’s not surprising that writing becomes an afterthought—something to be done quickly, long after completing the marketing and product development. This is why Hollywood films usually aim for and meet appallingly low standards—and why we often complain that we lack the resources to produce manuals we can be proud of.

In the film business, producers and directors often consider writers to be the enemy of production. Just as product developers don’t want to waste time on documentation and marketing managers don’t want to

delay a product’s ship date to accommodate our needs, a producer’s response often becomes: “Why are you interfering with production? Just write the script and leave us in peace so we can make the movie.”

Developers often do their best to avoid interacting with us, particularly when we’re constantly acting as user advocates and trying to improve the user interface, just as producers often actively exclude writers from the set of a film; writers who really care about their film will frequently protest what the directors, producers, and actors plan to do to their precious script. One cause of the recent labor unrest between the film industry and its writers lay in exactly this problem. It will be interesting to see whether they have any more luck establishing a means of living together than we’ve had.

Audience incompatibilities

A final problem we share with screenwriters is that of mutually contradictory audiences. Screenwriters must write both for the producer who’ll buy the script and the audience they want to see the movie, whereas we must write for both the managers who will approve our documentation for release and the actual readers of our documentation. Where these audiences have different characteristics, their contradictory needs require serious compromises in what we produce. To accomplish our goal of producing something to be proud of, we must learn how to

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A Kinder, Gentler Workplace

by Jodie Gilmore

Companies pay us contractors and consultants big money (ha!) for our great ideas and ability to “think outside the box.” Instead of expending all that creative energy on improving our clients’ documentation, let’s cogitate on some improvements to our workplace. Here’s a few ideas for additional office equipment, to get us started:

Venting Machine

A cross between a phone booth and a Coke machine. Has a video screen and a control panel loaded with buttons with labels like “Wow—that happened to me once!”, “Gee—that’s too bad!”, “I can’t believe he did that to you!”, and “You think THAT’s bad...!” Instructions: Enter the booth and close the (soundproof) door. Scream, wail, and tell your sad and frustrating tales, then push the appropriate button. The screen displays a sympathetic face, and the sound track plays 2 minutes of sympathetic phrases, noises, and stories.

Portable Telescope

The world’s a-buzz with wireless technology, “always on,” and instant access – to information. What about food?? Who can think about voice-over packet switches and deadlines when your stomach is growling and your brain is screaming “must have sugar!?” This device weighs less than 2 pounds and easily fits in a briefcase. When the munchies strike, just press a button and in 4 minutes out pops a hot, fluffy scone. Unfortunately, the current model does not include butter

or jam, so you must provide your own.

Micro Floss-essor

Been to the dentist lately? Did you get your every-six-months lecture on the benefits of flossing? Well, wouldn’t it be easier to keep your teeth (and your dentist) happier if all you had to do were smile at your CPU? With this new technology, tiny laser beams clean between your teeth while you smile. Best when used with the Flattery Charger.

LaserJets printer

Tired of standing in line to get tickets, or waiting on hold for 20 minutes when you call TicketMaster? Then this one’s for you. For a modest monthly fee, you can print your own tickets. Simply input the game and seats you want, and press Print!

Office Fan

If you are feeling a bit blue and the Flattery Charger didn’t do the trick, try this – you’ll soon feel like the coolest thing in the office! Choose from three settings, depending on what kind of positive strokes you want: Cheery Cheers, Laudatory Limericks, or Sing-a-long Songs). The first cheer goes like this:

One, two, three, four!
Your graphs are clear, your words
are sure!
Five, six, seven, eight!
You write so well – you’re so great!!

Flattery Charger

A little praise goes a long way. And it’s a good thing, because many of us get

very little. But there’s hope. Small enough to take with you anywhere, this machine takes over where your boss left off (3 years ago). Simply push a button to hear enthusiastic, sincere praise, such as “Wow—you did that in three days? Most tech writers couldn’t have done it in three months!” and “Instantly accessible, easy on the eyes, and cracker-jack writing – well done!”. Add-ons include a scanner so the responses can include phrases from your actual document, and a second CD-ROM with 45 more accolades.

Smoke-and-Mirrors Detector

Especially useful in bidding and scope-definition situations. This useful critter sounds a loud and annoying alarm anytime it hears phrases such as “Won’t take long,” “This is the last change, for sure,” or “Don’t worry – we’ve got plenty of time, and the budget is firm.”

BRU-4-U software

A combination of intelligent code and wireless technology, this device tests the ambient temperature outside, your hormone levels, and your biorhythms, then recommends one of 1800 different coffee drinks. A monthly subscription service keeps your favorite flavors stocked up. Here’s a few of the results:

32 degrees outside and you’re feeling shiverish?

We recommend: “Viking Blend,” a hearty, full-bodied coffee that’s sure to warm your heart.

85 degrees outside and you’re feeling lazy?

Cover Story

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We recommend: An iced coffee made with “Lavazza Crema E Gusto”, a special Italian blend of Robusta, Indian, and Brazilian Arabica beans that produces a rich flavorful coffee with hints of chocolate.

72 outside and you’re wondering why the hell you took this contract when you could be home dangling your toes in the river?

Program has performed an illegal operation (trying to adjust your vacation balance and embezzle \$400 from the petty cash fund). We recommend: Going for a walk while we reboot the system.

Now it’s your turn – send me your best ideas in this vein at jgilmor@fulcrumcomm.com, and we can do an “Improvements II” next year!

Jodie is a freelance technical writer in the Portland, OR area. In addition to being a part-time writer, she’s a full-time mom and a part-time farmer in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains. ❖

produce something the producers and managers will accept but that still satisfies the audience’s needs. As is true for any situation where compromises are necessary, the solution lies in negotiation in an effort to achieve consensus; where the other party in the negotiations has far more power than we do, the solution lies in developing both a mutually respectful relationship and strong powers of persuasion.

"Cut! That’s a print"

In the end, when the product finally ships, technical writers experience the same sense of insecurity about our role that screenwriters undoubtedly do. A film may be garbage by any reasonable literary or artistic criteria, yet still earn hundreds of millions of dollars if the special effects or the actors provide what the audience seeks. In an environment shaped so strongly by economic needs, the true judge of a product’s quality often becomes how well it sells, not whether it lives up to our own subjective standards for merit. Most technical writers I’ve spoken to felt much the same about their efforts: we would have done better if we’d been given the time and support we needed.

On the plus side, the cliché that every technical writer is a budding novelist has some truth to it and offers some hope for those of us who are frustrated novelists. Given that writing novels is a tough business to enter, perhaps we’ve been targeting the wrong market. With all our skills and experience in the trenches, we’d probably make better screenwriters.

Thinking of a career change? Maybe you’ve got a bright future in Hollywood!

Note: This article was stimulated by a presentation given by screenwriter Tony Babinski at a meeting of STC’s Montreal chapter.

*Geoff Hart (ghart@attcanada.ca) is a senior member of the Society for Technical Communication (STC), and works as a writer, editor, translator, and information designer. In addition to contributing frequently to the *techwr-l* (technical writing) and *copyediting-l* (editing) Internet discussion groups, Geoff also writes a monthly column, "User’s Advocate". ❖*

Independent
The Perspective

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

NEWS BRIEFS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Jamming in Nashville

Musically inclined technical communicators won't want to miss Open Jam 2002 at STC's 49th Annual Conference in Nashville, Tennessee. All STC singers and musicians are welcome to showcase their talents at this informal gathering, which will be held in the Ryman Chamber of the Opryland Hotel at 6:30 PM on Monday, May 6. A short session by The Rough Drafts (an all-STC amateur group) will get things started, and then the stage will open to performers of all styles. Music lovers are welcome to enjoy the show and cheer on their STC peers. For more information, visit the STC conference Web site at www.stc.org/OpenJam2002.

STC's 50th Annual Conference Call for Proposals

The call for proposals for STC's 50th Annual Conference was mailed as an insert with the April 2002 issue of Intercom. The deadline for the Society office to receive proposals is August 1, 2002.

The conference will be held May 18-21, 2003, in Dallas, Texas. The conference theme is "STC@50" in honor of the Society's 50th anniversary in 2003. For more information, please contact Buffy M. Bennett at buffy@stc.org.

Upcoming STC Regional Conferences

Region 5 Conference

When: October 4-6, 2002

Where: Hilton Inn Northwest in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

What: The conference theme is "Geared for Success on Route 66."

Contact: Suzanna Laurent at slaurent@prodigy.net or (405) 951-9371

Region 8 Conference

When: October 18-21, 2002

Where: San Ramon Marriott in San Ramon, California.

What: The conference theme is "Theory and Practice, Vision and Reality."

Contact: Sarah Lee Hauslinger at shauslinger@intraspect.com