

The Perspective

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

FrameMaker Add-On Makes Indexing Less of a Chore

A software review

by Larry S. Bonura

Index Tools Professional v1.0

Developed by Silicon Prairie Software

<http://www.kagi.com/SPSoftware>

Release Date: 30 October 2000

Operating Systems Supported: Windows, Macintosh, SUN Solaris

Cost: Shareware (suggested price, \$30) (site licenses also available)

Silicon Prairie produces add-on software and utilities for Adobe FrameMaker. While the developers think FrameMaker is a superior tool for professionals who produce documentation, they have made some tools that make FrameMaker even better. One of those tools is Index Tools Professional (ITP) v1.0. This shareware package creates a plug-in using the FrameMaker application programmer interface that gives you better control when creating and formatting your index.

Installing the Software

Setting this up this shareware is simple and quick. After downloading the file from Silicon Prairie's Web site (<http://www.kagi.com/SPSoftware>), unzip the file. You can download versions for either FrameMaker 5.5x or 6.x. To use the program, copy the .dll file in the fminit/Plugins directory of the appropriate FrameMaker version. If you had FrameMaker open, close it, then restart the computer. You will see the **Indexing** menu item just to the right of Table, as illustrated in Figure 1 on page 8.

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Tying Up Loose Ends

Is it really 2001?

by Kelly Burch

You may have wondered what happened to the Fall issue of *The Independent Perspective*. Well, we're combining the Fall and Winter issues due to low content submissions and personal delays for the editor (me). Between tight release deadlines and computer problems, things fell behind. This is one of the hazards of taking on a volunteer responsibility—sometimes life gets in the way. I think I've said that before, but it's still true. Thank you for your patience.

Stepping Down

In this column, I need to take care of some administrative issues. The first is that I'm stepping down as editor at the end of this STC year. Although there is still one more issue of *The Independent Perspective* until then, I wanted to announce the open position as soon as possible in order to have plenty of time to find a replacement. I hope that among our over 2,500 members someone will be interested in taking over this critical task. There will be open positions for Assistant Editor and copy editors/proofreaders as well. If you are interested in helping with the 2001-2002 newsletter in whatever capacity, please send me an e-mail. Note to prospective editor volunteers: I will do everything I can to smooth the transition for you and get you going. Of course, as the new editor you will handle setting up your staff, but there will be plenty of support available for you during the transition.

Mailing Address Changes

I also wanted to remind members that if you need to change your mailing or e-mail address during the year, please contact STC. I order the mailing labels for the newsletter directly from STC headquarters. So if you report an address change to them, the updated address should be included in the next batch of labels I receive.

I have forwarded the past e-mails I have received for those of you who sent them to me, but I'm not sure of the reliability of that method. The STC Web site has an online address change procedure that is simple to use and should update your information very quickly. Go to www.stc-va.org/fmbr_menu.htm to take advantage of this method. You will need your STC membership number. You can find this on 5-digit number above your name on all Society level mailing labels.

Kudos to a Columnist

I wanted to take the opportunity to announce that one of our columnists, Magda S. Sourour, whose column "An International Challenge," has added an international perspective to the newsletter, has received a very prestigious appointment for the next two years. Magda was appointed as Manager, Marketing and Strategic Development for the Canadian Technology Human Resources Board. The Board is a government private agency that promotes the use and continuous revision of The Canadian Technology Standards (CTS), both

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Independent

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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 kelly1210@earthlink.net.

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ADVERTISING

We welcome advertisers whose subject matter is relevant to technical communication, or of interest to SIG members. For rates, please contact the editor at kelly1210@earthlink.net.

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 kelly1210@earthlink.net.

The 'Must-Have' Resources

For new and current independents

by Thomas Barker, CIC SIG Manager

As manager of the CIC SIG, I get e-mails from writers at various stages of emergence from corporate work into independent work. Sometimes the writer asks for general guidance in questions like "Where can I find out about contracts?" or "Are there some sites in [name the city] that can help me find independent contractor employment?"

On the other hand, I get specific requests, such as "Do writers ever work on a retainer basis?" or "Where can I get training in XML?" These questioners are doing the exact thing they should: consult industry resources as they continually explore their profession.

To respond to these questions I have put together what I consider the "must-have resources" for independent technical writers, and particularly those just starting out. These resources represent documents, archives, narratives, and lists that independents will want to revisit. Most importantly, they are the gateway to the industry where you will find the best minds shaping the professional activities of independents.

The Must-Have Resources

Getting Started in Consulting and Independent Contracting

<http://english.ttu.edu/gscic>

This online book, edited by myself and Karen Steele, former manager of the CIC SIG, still seems to have a lot of answers for those just starting out

in independent work. Chapter 1 "How to Be a Technical Writer" outlines the basics of independent work. Readers can then scan other topics such: setting up a remote office, marketing, insurance, working with customers, working overseas, and even retirement.

TECHWR-L

<http://www.raycomm.com/techwhirl/>

The predominant working mode of most technical writers is reflected in this list: independent contractors and consultants. Here you can get archives arranged by topic thread that can lead you to more information and help you shape questions about the industry. You can also find a mentor at this site.

STCCSIG-L

<http://lists.stc.org/cgi-bin/lyris.pl?enter=stccsig-l>

This site gives you a direct line to active independents and should definitely be part of your online community. This list allows you to ask a very focused question about contracts, technology, rate setting, and other topics.

STC Job Listing

<http://www.stc-va.org/fjobstart.htm>

You can search the national job listings from this page. The search form allows you to choose "contract" positions. To find job boards associated with individual chapters, you have to navigate to the job listing section of each chapter's site.

U.S. Independent Contractor/ Temp Agency Employee Survey

http://www.stc-va.org/PDF_Files/1999contract.pdf

Published in *Intercom* for the first time in the June 2000 issue, this survey contains the essential information needed to answer questions of rates and salaries. It also explores types of products and business models so key to the research of those contemplating detachment from the corporate iceberg. What this survey doesn't contain is a table of rates according to region. For rates by region the independent needs to seek out information from STC chapter job boards in the specific area. You can link to chapter job boards from the main STC job board page, shown above.

Keep links to the "must-have resources" on your desktop and visit these virtual communities often. Make them part of your ongoing professional dialog. ❖

In Search of Clients

The hardest part?

by Laura M. Vasquez

Perhaps the hardest part of consulting and contracting is finding clients. After you find potential clients, you may have to follow up periodically before you actually contract with them. For example, in April 1998 an interviewer referred me to one of his colleagues, whom I then contacted. I called every few weeks through August in order to remind him of my interest in the company. The contact called with a contract and approved my proposal in mid-September.

It is said that you will initially spend about 90% of your time marketing your business and about 10% of your time actually contracting. If your work is high quality and your marketing is effective, then you should eventually spend more time contracting than marketing. However, do not stop marketing while you contract with a client because you will be out of work when the contract is over.

The following four methods have proven very helpful to many consultants and contractors:

- Obtain additional or follow-on work with prior clients
- Network
- Market your services
- Read widely

Obtain Additional or Follow-on Work with Prior Clients

Additional work is “repeat business,” a project that comes at some time after completion of another project for the same client. Follow-on work comes immediately following another

contract with that client; sometimes the new contract is related to the prior contract. Obtaining more work from a prior or current client is, perhaps, the best way to find steady contract work. The client is already familiar with the quality of your work and likes the relationship with your business. Likewise, you are familiar with the client and the client’s needs and interests. In addition, you are confident that you will be treated fairly and paid on time.

Network

According to self-styled Networking Queen Susan Lynn, you should “Network everywhere, all the time, and with everyone.” The following are particularly good resources for networking:

- Professional organizations
- Chamber of Commerce
- Volunteer work
- Hobby-related activities
- Referrals
- Industry trade shows

Whenever you meet someone, introduce yourself and ask the other’s name. Question the other to learn more about your new acquaintance, and use the other’s name periodically in the conversation so that you remember it better. Exchange business cards and write on the other’s card as much information as you can that will jog your memory later. You should include at least where and when you met, as well as subjects discussed.

Periodically, pass along any job leads or other information that your acquaintance may find useful. For example, I keep in touch with a company at which I interviewed that follows Tom Peters’ ideals. When I receive advertising letters about local conferences at which Tom Peters will speak, I forward them to my interviewer.

Market Your Services

In addition to networking, you should market your services in a variety of ways if you expect to locate and to maintain business. The following are some suggested techniques:

- Distribute your consultant-style résumé
- Distribute a brochure that outlines your services and offers service-related tips
- Advertise, e.g., in newspapers, in trade publications, and on the World Wide Web
- Attend trade shows in your fields of interest and introduce yourself to vendors with problem documentation. Give your business card and ask whom to contact in order to help the company make a good product even better.
- Donate your services to local nonprofits to help with their fundraisers. Schools, for example, often need services donated for their silent auctions, e.g., one hour of free editing, Web site design, desktop publishing. Your business will usually receive at least a “Thank-you” letter and a listing in

the school newsletter, which is great—and free—publicity!

Read Widely

A variety of publications is available in or related to your field(s) of interest. It would be wise to review some periodically in order to remain current with the field and to locate networking and contract opportunities. These resources include:

- STC publications
- Trade publications
- Business calendar section of the newspaper
- World Wide Web

How to Retain Clients

The following guidelines should help you to retain clients and to obtain more through referrals:

1. Be honest with yourself and with potential clients. If you do not want the work or if you do not have time for it, then do not commit yourself to it.
2. Refer work to other well-, or perhaps better-, qualified consultants if you know in advance that you will not take the job.
3. Go beyond client expectations. Do it “better, faster, cheaper” than your competitors. (But beware of undercharging! Know the average rate and then factor in your own skills, experience, and overhead costs.)

4. Follow up periodically after your project has been completed. Remind your client of the work that you performed and see how the client’s needs have changed. Explain how you can help fill these needs.

Note: This series of articles is based on consulting and contracting experience in California, particularly in Orange County. Please consult local officials for guidelines, fees, and requirements in your own city, county, and state.

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. She can be reached by e-mail at vasqcomm@wans.net. ❖

Tying Up Loose Ends

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nationally and internationally, and assists Canadian industrial and occupational technology organizations in identifying and resolving human resource issues, which are challenging the industrial and technology work force. You can learn more about this agency at www.cthrb.ca.

When I last heard from Magda, she was getting ready to go on a national and international “Road Show” starting September 24, which was to include Ottawa, Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver, the United Kingdom, France, and the Middle East. She promises to share with us her adventures and discoveries while on the road in her upcoming columns. Congrats, Magda. We can’t wait to hear about it!

2001? What Happened to 2000?

As I grow older, I’m amazed how the years seem to fly by more and more quickly. Remember how much we all looked forward to Y2K and how it would be the most amazing year? Well, like the years seem to do, it has come and gone. It *has* been an amazing year in lots of ways, but now we’re turning our attention to 2001. As always, I’m making (and, of course, will subsequently break) lots of New Year’s resolutions. However, my resolutions are getting more realistic each year, and I’m going to try very hard to make 2001 the best year ever. I hope you’ll do the same.

Happy New Year! Until next time... ❖

The Writer's Legal Companion

A book review

by Christopher Juillet

The Writer's Legal Companion: The Complete Handbook for the Working Writer (3rd Edition)

by Brad Bunnin and Peter Beren
1998, Reading, Mass: Perseus Books
ISBN 0-7382-0031-X
354 pages including index
\$18.50 (softcover)

I've come to believe over the years that waiting to hire a lawyer until you need one is like waiting until you're gravely ill to purchase life insurance. It's far more expensive and offers far less benefit when you wait until it's too late. If you accept this premise, then a reasonable corollary is that if you delay learning about the legal issues of your field until you need to speak to a lawyer about them (that is, when you are sued or bring suit yourself), you will spend much more of your lawyer's time (and your money) learning how to work with him or her.

That is the real value of this book, written in very readable plain English by Mr. Bunnin, with a new chapter on the business of publishing by Mr. Beren added for this edition. A publishing consultant based in California with more than twenty years of experience as a literary lawyer, Mr. Bunnin writes with authority on a variety of topics of interest to working writers. Rife with sample contract language, letters, and forms, this work is an essential desk reference for those of us who make our living in the writing craft.

The Writer's Legal Companion is clearly intended for readers who are professional writers working largely

for trade book, textbook, or magazine publishers. As such, it is not a perfect fit for those technical writers who, either working full time or as independent consultants, limit their writing activities to the needs of their employers or clients. The field of literary law is broad and covers a number of specific topics, not all of which are germane to many working technical writers. I found, however, fully eight of the thirteen chapters to be either required or highly recommended reading for anyone working on his or her own as a self-employed technical writer or consultant; perhaps five are of significant value to technical writers who are full-time, direct employees:

- Chapter 1, "The Publishing Contract"—While definitely slanted toward the sort of publishing contract an author would sign with a book publisher, this chapter nonetheless contains information essential to the drafting of sound writing contracts. By substituting the word "client" for "editor" in much of the sample contract language, you'll be well on your way to entering into better contracts with the companies that use your services.
- Chapter 2, "Publishing in Magazines"—Of course, if you're a technical writer who publishes articles in magazines, you'll want to devour this chapter. For most independent consultants in the field, though, this shortish chapter will be of limited value.

- Chapter 3, "Collaboration"—Again, this is aimed at "authors" who are writing a book for the trade press or a textbook publisher. As such, it has limited value to working technical writers. One important point, however, is the issue that arises when several writers work together for a client on a large project. In such an instance, it may be determined by the court that a "partnership" exists, which can be dangerous, since in a general partnership, all partners are responsible for debts incurred by any partner on behalf of the partnership. Unless you've taken steps to set up a corporation, limited partnership or limited liability company, this may mean that your personal assets (car, home, boat, bank account, and so on) are available to creditors for things your partner does, either contractually or as the result of a personal injury. This can be the case, even if your agreement specifically states that "no partnership exists" between the parties; it depends upon the laws of your state.
- Chapter 4, "The Legal Relationship Between Writer and Agent"—Unless your market is structured such that companies employ technical writers only through agents, this section will be of little value.
- Chapter 5, "Watch Your Words: The Confusing Law of Defamation"—Again, this is geared toward helping writers protect themselves from being sued for

defaming others. It's hardly essential reading, but it's a short chapter filled with information that is probably good for anyone in business to know.

- Chapter 6, "The Right to Be Left Alone: Protecting Privacy and Publicity"—Like Chapter 5, this chapter is intended to help writers avoid court by avoiding the invasion of others' privacy. Again, it's good information to have, but not imperative for a technical writer to master in detail.
- Chapter 7, "What is Copyright?"—This chapter is absolutely essential reading for anyone who works with words. Mr. Bunnin's no-nonsense approach to copyright suggests a deep understanding of the area. Understand that treatises spanning multiple volumes have been written on copyright, which makes this 20-page chapter a cursory description at best, but it provides a solid introduction to this area and helps to set up the two chapters that follow.
- Chapter 8, "Copyright Formalities"—Short and sweet, this chapter describes what forms to use to register your copyright and where to send them. A key feature of this chapter is the inclusion of a wide variety of copyright forms, presented as completed examples, to help demystify the whole ordeal of registering your copyright.
- Chapter 9, "How to Protect Your Copyright"—Last in the

"copyright trilogy," this chapter offers a brief introduction to the sorts of legal remedies that are available to writers whose copyright is being infringed. Mostly, this sort of knowledge helps one make a better-educated decision as to whether to pursue an infringer by instituting a legal action.

- Chapter 10, "Tax and the Freelance Writer"—This chapter is definitely required reading for independent consultants and freelance technical writers. Certainly, it lacks the depth of treatment that any good tax attorney or accountant offers, but it is a solid introduction to the sorts of issues a self-employed writer faces.
- Chapter 11, "Legal Resources for the Writer"—No self-employed writer should venture forth without reading this chapter at least twice. Mr. Bunnin digs into his vast experience to help readers better locate, choose and use legal counsel. Of particular value is his explanation of how lawyers charge for their time and how to use them most efficiently.
- Chapter 12, "The Author and the Business of Publishing"—This rather lengthy chapter by Mr. Beren, focuses on business issues related to working with traditional publishing houses and will be of particular value to those who write trade books, textbooks and magazine articles.
- Chapter 13, "New Information Technologies and the Author"—

- This final chapter provides an interesting overview of the legal issues associated with emerging technology and how it is changing the relationship between writer and publisher (and between consultant and client). This landscape is changing quickly; thus, this chapter is but a snapshot of the recent state of the law, but portends some of what is on the legal horizon in this important area.

In addition, five appendices provide resource directories on a variety of topics, a glossary of publishing terms, some sample publishing agreements, a comparison of current and former copyright law, and guidelines for obtaining permission to use works protected by copyright.

Overall, I found this work well worth reading. It is teeming with solid and valuable information that can, when appropriately employed, help one stay clear of legal difficulties. It provides the first steps in how to proceed when such difficulties cannot be avoided.

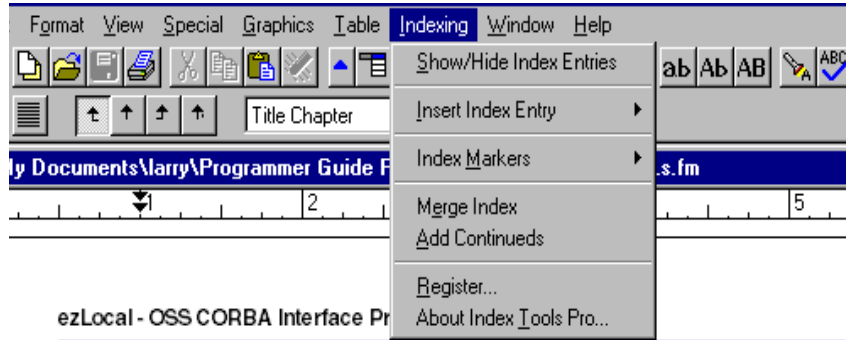
If your interest is in the area of writing for magazines, the trade press or textbook publishers, you'll find this entire book extremely useful. If you are a self-employed writer working for client companies producing manuals, training materials, web content and such, you will find a substantial portion, much more than half, to be a valuable resource. If you are a full-time technical writer employed by a company, you'll find less of import in

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FrameMaker Add-On Makes Indexing Less of a Chore

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Figure 1: Index Tools Professional menu items



Using the Features

This easy-to-use software provides tools to make FrameMaker's powerful indexing capabilities even better. Features include:

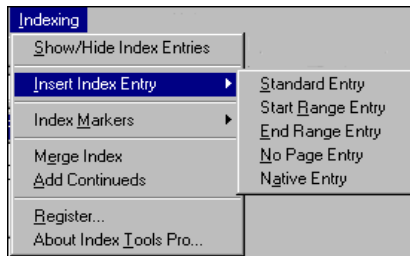
1. Inputting entries that are visible within the text
2. Formatting entries with merge capabilities as well as adding "continued" heads
3. Spell-checking index entries right in your document
4. Editing markers more easily

This tool allows you to enter entries right in the text of your document. To create an entry, ITP inserts a blank conditional text field in which you enter the text for each entry. Each entry is assigned as an Index Entry tag. Both the conditional text type and the Index Entry tag are created in the template when you create your index. They can be formatted as you please.

Entering entries is as simple as placing your cursor at the beginning or ending of a paragraph, selecting the type of index from the Indexing >

Insert Index Entry menu, which yields the drop-down options as shown in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Index entry types



Five choices are offered:

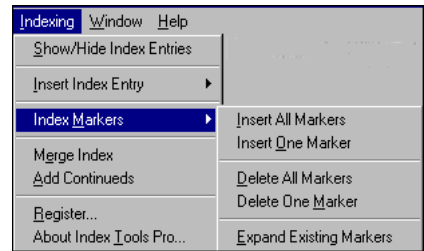
1. Standard Entry—Used for standard single-page index entries (can be entered from the keyboard using Esc i i).
2. Start Range Entry—Used to indicate the start of a page range (can be entered from the keyboard using Esc i s).
3. End Range Entry—Used to indicate the end of a page range (can be entered from the keyboard using Esc i e).
4. No Page Entry—Used for entries where the page numbers are

suppressed, for example, cross-references (can be entered from the keyboard using Esc i n).

5. Native Entry—Used for entries that require native FrameMaker index formatting, such as an alternative sorting order (can be entered from the keyboard using Esc i x).

You can insert entries one at a time by selecting Indexing > Index Markers > Insert One Marker, or use the keyboard shortcut.

Figure 3: Entering index markers



After the entries are inserted, they can be hidden or shown by toggling between them, either by using the Show/Hide Index Entries menu or by the keyboard shortcut, Esc i t. You must hide the entries before printing and generating the index so that your pagination is correct.

The developer suggests placing index entries after the paragraph to which the entry refers. This can create problems for exact placement if you are using long paragraphs. For shorter paragraphs, this should work fine. For tables, place the index entries immediately before the paragraph that contains the insertion point.

Once you've created your index entries in the ITP format, you must insert the entries into FrameMaker index markers. To do this, select Indexing > Index Markers > Insert All Markers. This will take all of the ITP entries and place them in the FrameMaker index marker format. You can then see the index marker symbols in your document and inside the FrameMaker Marker window. Save your FrameMaker file to save the entries and regenerate the index for the changes to take effect. Then view the generated FrameMaker index file.

If you already have an index created and wish to use ITP, you must expand the existing markers into the ITP format, check the entries, add and change what you need, then reinsert the entries into the FrameMaker format.

The other feature of ITP is the creation, formatting, and output in PDF of master indexes. Using ITP for this process ensures avoidance of numbering problems and inconsistency messages across the books that will be added to the master index. ITP master indexing capabilities depends on your system's memory capabilities. The developers say they have created master indexes for up to 60 books successfully.

Merging Index Entries

One great feature of this tool is its Merge Index utility. The merge process works by collapsing an index entry that uses two lines, but could only use a single line. For example, the following entry uses two lines:

indexes
described 25

The merge entry could appear on a single line:
indexes, described 25

When I index a book, I typically use a colon (:) to separate each index level. After creating the index, I have to go back and remove those colons where I only have one subentry. This handy utility eliminates the need to change any original marker and works instead on the final output index file by going in and automatically merging those entries that have only one subentry. What a time-saver!

To merge an index, generate the index as you normally would. With the

Figure 4: Inserted "Continued" Lines

| | |
|-------------------|---------------------------|
| index condition 6 | index markers (continued) |
| index entries | expanding 11 |
| alphabetizing 12 | hiding 15 |
| index markers | ranges 23 |
| deleting 9 | sorting 29 |
| duplicating 15 | updating 10 |

index document active, choose Indexing > Merge Index. During the merge process, ITP examines the paragraph styles in the currently active FrameMaker document. If it finds the appropriate paragraph styles, the process continues. This prevents the merging of non-index documents.

Adding "Continued" Heads

Another great feature, which also works on the final index output file, is the Add Continueds utility that automatically adds "continued" lines to groups of index entries that span

more than one column. This feature supports indexes that have entries a maximum of three levels deep, where columns are not balanced, and where the default index paragraph styles are used.

To add "continued" heads to your index, generate the index, then perform the Merge Index utility. With the index document open, choose Indexing > Add Continued. You then choose a format for the "continued" head. The Add Continued utility inserts "continued" lines for all groups of index entries that span more than one column, as shown in Figure 4 below:

Using the Documentation

The documentation is short and detailed. It takes about 15 minutes to read, understand, and apply the information. It takes about an hour to learn all of the features of the package. As you would expect, there is an index, which is detailed and useful. The documentation assumes that you know how to create indexes in FrameMaker, so it goes into great detail on how to use Index Tools Professional rather than explain the FrameMaker features.

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Contractor, Manage Thyself

Part I

by Ken Mauro

I recently found myself on contract within a division of a Fortune 50 corporation. I have done very little agency work but in this case the rate was good and the whole interviewing and hiring process took about four days. Unfortunately, the work experience did not turn out as I expected. In fact it was quite disappointing in many respects, except that it gave me, once again, the opportunity to examine and perhaps improve the way I react to surprises and disappointments on the job.

The first surprise (or should it have been?) was that bringing a new contractor on board in this division was not all that organized or efficient. I can understand people missing something here and there, but wouldn't someone put together a short checklist for themselves—stuff like paperwork, badge, computer, network sign on, database authorization, and some sort of list of departmental information?

I let those things pass, however, because I was essentially concerned with getting down to finding out what I had been brought there to do. The account representative gave me a description, but it didn't tell me much. Neither had the responses to my questions in the interview. So, on Day 2, the other contract writer and I sat down with the department manager and four of his managers. Seven people in a room for all of twenty minutes, and nothing came of it except some corporate jargon (we were given permission to roam the databases and kill a few forests worth of paper) and a spreadsheet printed in

color and very tiny type. I was so impressed that I couldn't bring myself to ask directly, "Why am I here?"

One good thing in all of this was the first lab manager who interviewed me. Unfortunately, his lab area was not to be part of my project, but we had a friendly relationship throughout my time there. First off, you have to like a guy who tells the agencies, "Stop sending me journalists! I need technical writers!" The other good guy was the lab manager in the area where I sat. Unfortunately, I did not report to him, either. But, again, you have to like a guy who occasionally and without warning triggers a .wav file of Dionne Warwick asking for directions to a California town.

Getting back to the other situation—what I was really supposed to be doing—the major problem was that no one seemed to know. On the other hand, the other writer had arrived two weeks before me and was semi-buried within a pile of specs and test procedures. Since I didn't really like the stuff I saw on his desk, I made a point to stay clear and not let any of it get on me. (Not my proudest moment, but I figured if he needed help he would say something.)

By Day 3, I was starting to get concerned. It's something like being a guest in someone's house, and your hosts (whom you do not know well) go to work for the whole day leaving you to your own devices. If you had knowledge of the house and what needed to be done, you could sweep out the garage, dust the furniture, put up some shelves or defrost the

refrigerator. But here, that approach wasn't going to work in a place with restricted laboratories and my own sparse knowledge of what needed to be done. I didn't feel I could just invent some work, yet I felt a need to be *proactive*. Yes, that's it!

Summoning my best professional telephone manner, I call the lab manager I suspect I am actually supposed to work with, asking if I can come into his lab and look around at the equipment and meet the technicians. The response is beyond disappointing; it's baffling. He refers me to someone else whom I have not met, reinforcing my suspicion that he had no idea why I am there, either. I locate this other fellow, but I'm the last person this guy wants in his hair. I resist the urge to get angry and return to my cube. Of course, I'm not connected to the network so there's not much I can do with my computer, like roam those databases.

"Day 4," I intone toward the security desk, half-whistling the Nightline theme as I trek the long hall to my cube. Placing my lunch and coffee bottle out of the way, I decide to reconnoiter the area to find out what's up, but no one's around. Where are these people, anyway? I extend my search to a larger part of the building. The endless aisles of cubicle walls take some getting used to. Personally I find them a little unsettling, preferring the good old days when you walked into an engineering department and looked out over a sea of drafting tables. Here, it's cube city and I half expect to run into some guy with pointy hair.

Software Review

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I end my tour at the other writer's cube and kill most of the morning with him, until he looks at his watch and realizes he has to leave for a lunch appointment. Back in my cube, I decide it's time to eat my pb&j sandwich. (Yes, they had an excellent cafeteria but I was in something of a frugal mindset at the time.) A manager sees me and asks me how it's going, extending his hand. I shake his, smile and say, "Nothing's going. This is my fourth day here and I'm not working on anything." The smile fades a bit as he backs away, mumbling something about having to "talk to someone."

Tactical note: I was told later by the other writer that this was exactly the wrong thing to say. A true Bozo no-no. "You *never* do that!" he tells me, as if I'd just thrown a dead cat through the front door of church. "You're probably right," I say, "but it was the truth, and it was kind of a fun thing to say. You should've seen his face." He gives me a sour look.

I'm safe in my cube, alone, with the fluorescent lights under the shelves turned on and briefcase open; my meager attempt to create the illusion of activity. Something's missing, though. My computer is not on, and the monitor is dark. Enter anyone's cube, and the bright display tells you that work is being done, or at least what could be work. But with my monitor off, all doubt is removed. "My user is doing nothing!" is the message to all. Of course, I could be thinking about my work, but how would anyone know? I turn the machine on, hoping to suggest to

others that, even with just the login screen displayed, real work is *about* to start.

It's going to be a long afternoon. My sandwich is history, and the coffee is just about gone. That sounds like something from the diary of a shipwrecked sailor. "Does the writer of the diary die?" I wonder. What could have been an enjoyable out-of-body experience comes to an abrupt halt as my favorite manager asks, "Ken? Can you step into my office for a moment?"

This is it. They figured it out, and there's nothing for me to do. I'm going to be shown the door. "Ken, while we plan the procedures project a bit longer, can we ask you to work with [real name changed to protect the innocent]? Zork here has a software application for internal use and it needs documentation. We had one of the interns working on it, but it was never finished."

That wouldn't have been my first choice, but it was something to work on and it meant I could stop threatening my favorite lab manager by announcing, "I quit. Call me when you guys get motivated." Always got a good laugh, since he knew at my hourly rate I wasn't going anywhere.

In Part II, we'll take a look at how I could have played my cards better than I did. My advice is simple—read how I handled the situation, then do the opposite when it happens to you.

Ken Mauro is an independent contractor specializing in machinery and manufacturing. His e-mail address is kmauro@ameritech.net. ❖

Recommendation

I'm not easily sold on indexing software or utilities. Initially, I was skeptical of using this tool because it required you to mark the entries separately from FrameMaker. When I saw that the ITP-created entries were inserted into FrameMaker index markers, I was sold. And after playing with it, I'm delighted with its simplicity and utilitarian worth. This tool makes entering, editing, finding, and updating entries a snap. It also makes your index look more professional by merging single entries and adding continued heads to entries that jump columns. And it takes you out of using the Marker window with all of its limitations. And you can spell check the entries. And you will be a happy technical writer and indexer when you use the Index Tools Professional.

Larry S. Bonura is a senior technical writer at DSET Corporation in Plano, Texas. He is the author of The Art of Indexing. ❖

Contractors' Wish List and New Year's Resolutions

by Jodie Gilmore

Although the holiday season is behind us, I wanted to share my "Contractors' Wish List" (in case Santa is preparing for next year) and a set of New Year's Resolutions for 2001. If you see yourself in these lists, know you're not alone! (Misery *does* love company, after all!)

Contractors' Christmas Wish List

My life would be easier if I had:

- Clients that pay early, and give tips.
- Word processing software that does what you want, how you want, when you want, *and* where you want it.
- A spell checker that knows the jargon—automatically.
- An e-mail program that filters out junk mail and unconstructive criticism, but moves high praise to the top of the inbox.
- An operating system that automatically cleans up cookies, temp files, and caches.
- An office with more shelves and filing cabinets, more space, and doesn't double as the bedroom and family TV room.
- A modem and phone line that actually connects at the posted speed.
- A verbal graphics program. I type "Draw a square, then a circle at each corner connected with out-facing arrows" and voila—I get a picture.
- A gift box containing patience, humor, and forgiveness pills, preferably chocolate-flavored.

- A cordless phone with a 1/2-mile range, that filters out traffic, wind, kids' voices, and my involuntary snorts of disbelief when a client states a budget and timeline.

My 2001 New Year's Resolutions

I vow to:

- Not underestimate time and cost just to land a contract.
- Not wait to the last minute to start projects I know I'll hate.
- Not sacrifice usability and readability just to pander to a client's claim, "We've always done it that way."
- Not wait until midnight Sunday night to submit my timecards.
- Network more and vent less.
- Learn at least three new skills.
- Land at least one contract that uses one of my new skills.
- Gain at least one new client.
- Manage my finances more clearly, so income and expenses are easier to track.
- Update my Web page regularly—at least once a month.

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. ❖

Book Review

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this book, but still, I believe, there is enough solid information to justify a cursory read. Whatever your interest in writing, technical or otherwise, full-time or self-employed, if you work with words, *The Writer's Legal Companion* has a place on your reference shelf.

Christopher Juillet is a technical writer, consultant and attorney based in Michigan. He is an STC Fellow and founding manager of the Consulting and Independent Contracting Special Interest Group. ❖

The Most Valuable Investment Tip You Will Ever Get: Invest in You

by Rob Houser, Region 3 Director-Sponsor

It's time to start planning your professional development for the year 2001. Do you know what you will have to learn to remain competitive in the marketplace? Here are three questions you need to answer to create learning goals for the upcoming year.

Question 1: Is there ONE skill I could improve to do my job more effectively?

You probably have a good idea of what skill needs to be strengthened. Often the part of our jobs we avoid or save until last are the ones we need to improve. Even if you think you know what needs improvement, ask somebody else to help you answer this question or verify your assumption.

If you're a full-time employee, ask your boss during your performance review for ONE suggestion of how you can improve or add a skill to enhance your performance. Knowing what the boss values helps you decide where to concentrate your effort and allows you to show progress at your next review. If that's too uncomfortable or your boss refuses to make a suggestion, go to a trusted colleague.

If you're a contractor working for an agency, ask the agency to find out from the client what one skill you could improve to be more effective. Or, ask the client yourself when the contract is over (or now if you plan to be there 6 months or more). If you're self-employed, ask someone who works closely with you for one suggestion of what you could improve.

Skills determine performance. If the response you get is a tool, save that for the next question. Probe for a more

skill-oriented suggestion by asking what you already do that you could do better. You might also try making the question less personal by asking what one skill is most important to succeeding in this department/company.

Keep in mind that the skill may fall outside your formal education. For instance, you might be a great help author but need to learn more about telecommunications so you can work more effectively with your subject matter experts. Industry knowledge or more in-depth technical abilities can improve your job performance significantly.

Question 2: Is there ONE tool that would increase my value?

For better or worse, the business world is tools-oriented. Although we know that there are underlying skills required to use any tool effectively, many employers assume that if you don't have the tool knowledge you don't have the ability to do the work. For example, most job ads list a tool like RoboHELP rather than the ability to design online help. Managers want people who can hit the ground running. If you don't know the required tool, you might not get a chance to take on a desirable project.

If you're a full-time employee, ask your boss what ONE tool you could learn to benefit the department/company. Sometimes managers know of upcoming projects that you haven't heard about yet, so you might get the jump by learning the tool ahead of time.

And it's often easier to get funding to attend training that was suggested by your manager.

If you're a contractor or are self-employed, talk with the agencies and look at the job ads to see what tools command the best pay. In the Atlanta chapter, a survey conducted two years ago showed that the top three tools in demand for the Atlanta contract market were FrameMaker, RoboHELP, and Visio. Knowing the most common tools can translate into more job opportunities. Don't overlook niche tools, though. Knowing a tool that few people know can command the highest rates (such as SAP or Visual Basic).

You'll probably generate a list of tools. Prioritize them (or ask your boss to) and pick one for the year.

Question 3: Is there ONE tool or skill that I would like to learn?

This tool or skill is for you. You may envision yourself doing something else or working someplace else in another year, and undoubtedly you will have to learn some new skills. Or maybe you just have a strong interest in a topic and want to pursue it. Pick something that motivates you and moves you towards your long-term goals.

You might want to move closer to training, so you identify a skill like instructional design or a tool like Authorware. You might want to move into a job that focuses on web-based solutions so you identify a tool like DreamWeaver or Flash. Maybe you have an interest in photography, foreign languages, or graphic design. Even if the skill doesn't benefit your current job, it can move you in a positive direction.

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Using the Internet to Find Your Next Project

by Thomas J. Lenzo

When I became a consultant almost 20 years ago, I learned that the life of a successful consultant consists of billable days, learning new skills, and marketing those skills for the next gig. I also learned via my marketing and through 10 years as an STC Chapter Employment Manager that the vast majority of consulting projects are the result of referrals.

But you've got an Internet connection and it might be hooked to a fast DSL or cable-modem line. And you're not established enough to get referrals or the referrals have dried up. So you think about finding that next gig online. After all, there are anywhere from 3,000 (according to the Wall Street Journal), to more than 100,000 (according to Weddles.com) Internet job sites posting more than 20 million jobs. One of them has to have a project for you.

You've heard that companies use the Internet to post jobs because it is cheaper and faster than using classified ads in a newspaper. This method is also self-selecting because applicants must have computer skills in order to search the Internet, find the posted job, and apply for it. Those skills make the applicants the most sought after job hunting demographic. Also, the Internet is on 24x7 while personnel might only be open from 8 a.m. until 5 p.m. Monday through Friday and you're working then. Or maybe you have an urge to do a project in another geographic area and online job postings might lead you to one.

Of course, you have to ignore all the research that indicates Internet users are disappointed and frustrated with

online job hunting due to their poor results. My survey of local professionals bears this out. Or as one colleague said, "you have a better chance of finding a safe, romantic relationship online than you do of finding a job."

Before You Start

The following suggestions apply to both online job sites and company-based sites.

- Have a good resume in two formats: ASCII and Word.
- Keep the resume simple—emphasize your quantifiables and qualifiables.
- Read the directions on the site before applying or posting your resume.
- If the site is using a resume or resource database, identify what terms it searches on and make sure your resume includes those terms.
- Use HTML, animation, and similar techniques only if it is appropriate to the job and you know the recipient can read the format.
- Don't post your resume as an attachment unless instructed to do so.
- Name your resume file **yourname.doc**. Do not name it **resume.doc** since dozens of other job seekers probably used that same name when they submitted their resumes to that site.
- Make sure your e-mail message and your resume include your e-mail address and your telephone number.
- Remember that your e-mail address may be the first impression

you give to a potential employer—cutewriter@aol.com may not look professional.

Job Sites

These are Web sites that exist to advertise jobs, advertise job seekers, and sometimes to provide career or job information. Some of the sites are for permanent positions, some are for contract, and some for both. As I write this, some sites are merging, so consider this a disclaimer regarding the currency of sites due to those changes.

Sites specifically for contractors include: www.eLance.com, www.FreeAgent.com, www.Guru.com, www.IQ4hire.com, and www.Monstertalentmarket.com.

Currently, the largest job sites based on the number of visitors are:

- www.Monster.com
- www.Jobsonline.com
- www.HotJobs.com
- www.CareerPath.com, which lets you lock out companies you don't want to contact
- www.Headhunter.com,
- www.CareerMosaic.com, which is the oldest site
- www.Jobs.com
- www.Dice.com, which is for computer professionals
- www.FlipDog.com

Other Helpful Sites

There are other sites that can help you with your online job search:

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- The best place to start is www.rileyguide.com. While it doesn't post jobs or resumes, it provides lots of organized, up to date information about online jobs.
- The Wall Street Journal publishes a free Web site of career information at www.careers.wsj.com.
- The Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration Web site www.doleta.gov is the Federal government's resource for this area.
- The magazine *US News and World Report* put an issue about jobs and careers on line at www.usnews.com/usnews/nycu/work/wo4find.htm.
- If you use the classic career text *What Color is Your Parachute?*, then go to www.jobhuntersbible.com, it is the online supplement.
- Weddles—www.weddles.com—publishes many paper and online items about all aspects of job hunting.

Corporate Web Sites

Another approach to online job hunting is to go to the Web sites of the companies you want to work with. Many companies list their job openings on their Web sites, along with lots of information about themselves. One suggestion: if you see a permanent job that interests you but you don't want adaptive" or "real" job, apply for it on a contract basis. Due to the low unemployment rate, I've seen companies hire contractors just so they can get the work done. On the down side, keeping this section of their Web site up to date is not a priority for many companies.

One Web site you must check out is <http://216.150.27.141/archives/>. The site calls itself *the dot.com dead pool*. It is an interesting--if somewhat profane site--with rumors about the potential demise of firms associated with the Internet, including online job sites. I contacted colleagues at a couple of the companies mentioned on the site and the posted rumors were fairly accurate.

Final Thoughts

According to the technical writers I talked with, the biggest frustration regarding online job hunting is the failure of the posting organization to reply to or acknowledge the receipt of a resume or application when people respond to a posting. I tested this and it happened to me with the several jobs I applied for during the development of this story.

Also while writing this, I wrote an article on how to deal with recruiters for the *Quill & Disk* newsletter published by the San Gabriel Valley STC Chapter. Contact me and I'll e-mail a copy to you.

Lots of luck in your search for your next project, be it via online or from a referral.

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. ❖

CONCLUSION: Create a written plan and execute it.

After you have answered these three questions, you need to identify ways you can achieve these learning goals. Don't just think in terms of corporate classes, although those are often effective. Also consider conferences, books, web-based training, certificate and graduate programs, and community schools. Identify all of the possibilities for each learning goal, making sure to note cost and availability.

Next, make choices based on your budget and schedule. Your company should be providing some support for your training. If not or if you are self-employed, consider it a business expense and pay for it yourself. Take your training early in the year while the budget is still available and you still have time to apply your new knowledge to projects during the year.

Once you have a plan, formalize it by writing a brief memo to your boss or yourself. State your learning goals, detail your strategies for achieving them during the next year (including dates and costs), and get the memo signed to show commitment to the plan. If you work for yourself, sign the memo yourself to indicate your personal commitment to the plan.

Training is an investment in you. Don't short-change your career by putting it off. Force yourself to take the time to learn three new things this year. If you execute this modest training plan, you will have the best kind of job security available--you will be excellent at what you do.

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Independent
The Perspective

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NEWS BRIEFS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

New XML Discussion List Available

XML-DOC is a new online mailing list for documentation professionals and anyone else interested in discussing the application of XML tools and techniques to the creation of documentation.

Topics that are highly encouraged on the list:

- XML-based content/document management systems
- Single-sourcing with XML
- DocBook, the SGML/XML DTD for documentation
- Transitioning to XML authoring from a FrameMaker environment
- Converting legacy documents to XML

- Publishing (transforming and delivering XML content)
- XML training and certification
- Document analysis and data modeling
- Profiling and customizing for multiple audiences and delivery formats

List moderator Michael Smith said, "My hope for XML-DOC is that it will not only help to raise the level of awareness about XML in the documentation community, but also give us, as technical communicators, a clear point of contact with the XML developers and product vendors who are now creating and refining the XML authoring tools, content

management software, and XML publishing solutions that many of us will eventually end up using."

To subscribe to the list, send a blank e-mail message to:

xml-doc-subscribe@egroups.com

You can also subscribe at the XML-DOC web site:

www.egroups.com/subscribe/xml-doc/

Michael Smith is an STC member from Austin, Texas. If you require further information you can reach him at smith@io.com. ❖