



## Issues in Business Management

# What's the Value of Technical Communication?

by Donn Le Vie, Jr.

If you belong to any of the popular technical writing lists, you've undoubtedly seen one or more of the following rather innocuous questions posted recently:

*"Is 'SME' pronounced 'es-em-ee' or 'smee'?"*

*"Is it an 'FAQ' or a 'FAQ'?"*

*"Is it 'web' or 'Web'?"*

Equally puzzling are the number of essay-like responses generated to these questions. In an economy where we're all trying to do things to better secure our positions with employers and clients, such questions and detailed responses only serve to perpetuate the myths and misperceptions other organizations may harbor regarding the value of technical communications.

I recently discussed these issues with several peers, and we all agreed that questions such as these seem to indicate the following:

- People don't know how to conduct research for themselves, or are just plain lazy.

- People don't have enough real work to do.
- People are getting too caught up in the non-value-adding minutia instead of what constitutes real value in the technical communications world.

It was also our guess that it's mostly # 3 for a variety of reasons. Let's start with our profession.

### The Technical Communications Profession

Unlike many other professions, our work products rarely stand by themselves. The work product of an engineering team may be a new pager or PDA; the work product of a development team may be a general-market software application. Data sheets, programmers reference manuals, and microprocessor design guides don't have their own standalone markets. They are designed and produced specifically for supporting standalone products. Their value, therefore, lies in how well they serve as a conduit for transferring and trans-

lating knowledge about the product to customers or end users according to their requirements.

For years, we have been chasing the Holy Grail known as documentation metrics; and for years we've been fooling ourselves with the results of mechanical measures that have little or no bearing on how well a "document" serves as that conduit to enable or engage

*continued on page 7*

### Contents

What's the Value of Technical Communication? .....	1
Manager's Column .....	2
SIG Leadership Team .....	2
Book Review .....	3
5 Opportunities to Communicate the Value of Technical Communication .....	4
Hot Topic: Performance Factors.....	5
Upcoming Events .....	10

# Manager's Column

by Saul Carliner, SIG Manager

As I write this SIG manager's message to you, US flags have been raised from half-staff to full-staff, as the official mourning period ends following the tragedy of September 11. But the uncertainty that this situation created is bound to linger.

One known side impact is the effect on the world economy. The commercial airline industry, and those related to it, have already been hard hit. Despite a belief that technical communicators primarily work in high technology, the truth is, we work in many industries. We have had postings to our listserv from managers of technical communicators working in the cruise line industry and aircraft manufacturers, and STC has members working for airlines, hotels, car reservations companies, retailers, and other consumer organizations.

Common belief, too, is that opportunity will rise in the defense industry. During the last major economic slowdown, many of our colleagues in that industry were laid off, as the economy shifted from a defense-oriented to a consumer-oriented economy. Growth in defense spending affirms the pendulum-like nature of life.

Although I cannot predict the future, I do know that two things helped technical communicators survive the last downturn. The first is useful industry information, coming from sources within STC. In a challenging environ-

ment like this, we managers and business people need more than knowledge of the technology; we need knowledge of business. As a result, we will be strengthening the list of resources on our web site. These resources should give you a background on the economic forces that affect your work, and equip you to speak with upper management in terms that they understand, rather than the language of technical communication which, unfortunately, few have familiarity with.

The other thing that helped technical communicators survive the last downturn was a sense of community. Through this newsletter, our listserv, and our web site, we try to foster that sense of community. But we plan to further increase it in the months ahead. One way is through a link with Idea Watch, a local SIG of several chapters in the US Midwest, that reads and discusses books. Most of the books they discuss are management and business books, ones that your executives are reading. Idea Watch offers online discussions of the books, and I encourage you to participate by visiting them at [www.ideawatch.org](http://www.ideawatch.org).

Community provides support in difficult times, whether the difficulty be a management challenge in the workplace, the search for employment, or an uncertain world. And ultimately, community is what STC and this SIG offer to you. If you have sugges-

tions on ways that this SIG can be more responsive to our members' needs, please contact me.

Saul Carliner, Manager

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# Book Review: The Management Century: A Critical Review of 20th Century Thought and Practice

Reviewed by Jennifer Square

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*Editor's Note: We'd like to welcome Jennifer Square as our new Book Review Editor. Please contact her if you have a book to suggest for possible review, or would like to write a review yourself.*

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*The Management Century: A Critical Review of 20th Century Thought and Practice by Stuart Crainer*

February 2000  
Jossey-Bass  
New York, NY  
ISBN: 0787952249  
(hardcover)

"When in 1941 I first became interested in management, I asked around about who the important people in the field were. Then I called on each and requested a list of books and articles to read."

- Peter Drucker

If you're looking for an overview of management history or gurus, check out *The Management Century: A Critical Review of 20th Century Thought and Practice* by Stuart Crainer. The value of Crainer's work is that you don't waste your time hunting down individual management gurus yourself. He does the work for you.

In *The Management Century*, Crainer looks at management history from 1900-2000. Broken out by decades, the book provides a

timeline showing when influential books and articles were published and when leaders made their mark, contrasted with major business events. For example, Peter

business environment in which people work today emerged, and provides lessons to managers today.

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"Whenever you provide information about the effectiveness and value of communication products, recognize that each client assesses these issues in their own way."

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Drucker started his research for one of his initial books, *Concept of the Corporation*, by studying General Motors. This timeline lets readers view the century at a glance, see the events that happened and how they influenced business and business thought. Crainer also lists the top 5 articles from the Harvard Business Review, starting in the 1950s.

Crainer begins with 1900, describing the impact of Frederick Winslow Taylor's work in scientific management and its impact on such industrial giants as Ford and General Motors. Proceeding along, he explores why the work of Mary Follett (one of the first female management experts) was important throughout the century and the other gurus she influenced. Crainer also covers Max and Weber, they are in here, and Ray Kroc (the McDonald's founder), too. By presenting this decade-by-decade look at the development of business thought and practice, Crainer helps readers understand how the

Crainer's book is a must-read for anyone working in business. Pick up this gem and get started on the reading path!

For more on Idea Watch or other book reviews, check out: [www.ideawatch.org](http://www.ideawatch.org).

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## Newsletter Deadlines

This newsletter invites writers to submit articles to be considered for publication. By submitting an article, you implicitly grant a license to this newsletter to run the article and for other STC publications to reprint it without permission. Copyright is retained by the writer.

**Fall Issue:** September 15th

**Winter Issue:** December 15th

**Spring Issue:** March 15th

**Summer Issue:** June 15th

# 5 Opportunities to Communicate the Value of Technical Communication Products and Services

by Saul Carliner

Data alone does not demonstrate the value of technical communication products and services; communication does. Following are 5 ways to communicate the results to the internal or external clients we serve.

1. Information designs. If you want to communicate the value of your work, you need to begin on Day 1. Set clients' expectations of the results you intend to achieve by including observable and measurable objectives for the content and impact on the business. Educate clients on how to assess effectiveness by including complete evaluation plans, too, in your information plans. Include drafts of proposed Reader's Comment Forms and usability scenarios, and list business measurements to track.
2. Project status reports. Continue to manage expectations during the development process by regularly distributing

status reports through the development process. In the report, tell clients how you are managing budgets and schedules, and how you ensure editorial, production, and technical quality during development. Most significantly, alert clients to potential problems before they occur (rather than hide them from clients).

4. Publish annual reports. Publish an annual report that tells internal or external clients and prospects about users' responses to the communication products you developed and the business results you have helped clients achieve during the previous year. Not only is this a great means of reminding recent clients how you have helped

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“Data alone does not demonstrate the value of technical communication products and services; communication does.”

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3. Post-mortems. At the end of projects, teams tend to focus on an what went wrong. A post-mortem (a debriefing of the entire project) that includes members of the internal or external client team can identify not only the “don't let this happen again” moments, but also those things that went right. That leaves a more balanced impression with clients.

them, but it helps manage the expectations of new clients.

5. Informal communications. Always take advantage of opportunities to politely tell a client how you have helped them or others. When doing so, be careful about crossing the boundary between informing and bragging. For those wondering what that boundary is, you can always feel comfortable mentioning the subject when clients introduce it.

Whenever you provide information about the effectiveness and value of communication products, recognize that each client assesses these issues in their own way.

## Join the Listserv!

To subscribe to the Management SIG listserv, go to the listserv web site at:

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

Enter your email address and password.

To remove your name from the Management SIG listserv, send a blank email to:

[leave-stcmgmtpic-l-15156J@lists.stc.org](mailto:leave-stcmgmtpic-l-15156J@lists.stc.org)

Note that the character after the second hyphen is a lower-case L.

*Saul Carliner, Fellow  
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## Hot Topic: Performance Factors

by Peggy Gerace-Roosa

*[Editor's note: This column provides a digest of a topic thread from the SIG listserv that deserves a more persistent form. Names and/or company references may have been omitted by request. This month, we list some of the criteria for technical communicators developed by Peggy Gerace-Roosa using the Lominger Performance Factors model. The complete list of Performance Factors may be found on our web site at <http://www.stcsig.org/mgt.>]*

Earlier this year, EarthLink's Human Resources Department spearheaded a corporate-wide initiative to streamline and refine our interviewing, hiring and managing practices. As part of this initiative, EarthLink management was introduced to Lominger's Performance Factors: a list of 67 distinct personality attributes and skills used to define and categorize job behavior. This list is part of an overall management strategy designed to ensure a common understanding of position needs.

The performance factors list distributed on the Management SIG listserv is a direct result of this initiative. Within my department, I employ 5 different career bands, or positions. Within each career band, I have identified a clear set of performance factors to be used in the hiring and promotion of employees.

Please keep in mind that this information is specific to the needs of my department within

EarthLink, and may not apply to everyone within the technical communications field.

The Lominger Performance Factors list is the intellectual property of SuccessFactors.com, Inc.

### Core Competencies

**Action Oriented:** Enjoys working hard, is action oriented and full of energy for the things he/she sees as challenging, not fearful of acting with a minimum of planning, seizes more opportunities than others.

**Approachability:** Is easy to approach and talk to, spends the extra effort to put others at ease, can be warm, pleasant, and gracious; is sensitive to and patient with the interpersonal anxieties of others, builds rapport well, is a good listener, is an early knower, getting informal and incomplete information in time to do something about it.

**Ethics and Values:** Adheres to an appropriate (for the setting) and effective set of core values and beliefs during both good and bad times, acts in line with those values, rewards the right values and disapproves of others, practices what he/she preaches.

**Functional/Technical Skills:** Has the functional and technical knowledge and skills to do the job at a high level of accomplishment.

**Informing:** Provides the information people need to know to do their jobs and to feel good about being a member of the team, unit, and/or the organization, provides individuals information so that they can make accurate decisions; is timely with information.

**Learning on the Fly:** Learns quickly when facing new problems, a relentless and versatile learner, open to change; analyzes both successes and failures for clues to improvement, experi-

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“Within each career band, I have identified a clear set of performance factors to be used in the hiring and promotion of employees.”

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**Dealing with Ambiguity:** Can effectively cope with change, can shift gears comfortably, can decide and act without having the total picture, isn't upset when things are up in the air, doesn't have to finish things before moving on, can comfortably handle risk and uncertainty.

ments and will try anything to find solutions, enjoys the challenge of unfamiliar tasks, quickly grasps the essence and the underlying structure of anything.

**Listening Practices:** Attentive and active listening, has the patience to hear people out, can accurately restate the opinions of others even when disagrees.

**Organizational Agility:** Knowledgeable about how organizations work, knows how to get things done both through formal channels and the informal network, understands the origin and reasoning behind key policies, practices, and procedures, understands the culture of organizations.

trivial many aside, can quickly sense what will help or hinder accomplishing a goal, eliminates roadblocks, creates focus.

**Self-Development:** Is personally committed to and actively works to continuously improve him/herself, understands that different situations and levels may call for

**Time Management:** Uses his/her time effectively and efficiently, values time, concentrates his/her efforts on the more important priorities, gets more done in less time than others, can attend to a broader range of activities.

**Written Communications:** Is able to write clearly and succinctly in a variety of communication settings and styles, can get messages across that have the desired effect.

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“Is able to write clearly and succinctly in a variety of communication settings and styles, can get messages across that have the desired effect.”

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NOTE: The Performance Factors (PFs) concept is copyrighted by Lominger at SuccessFactors. EarthLink has obtained permission to use the PFs (there's 67 of them in all). Although I did conduct a good amount of research, and performed the compilation myself, this section of the list is largely based upon Lominger's work.

The other competencies (basic skill sets, education, etc.), are my own. These were taken from the job descriptions I created for my department when I first took over, and have continued to evolve over the past 2 years.

*Peggy Gerace-Roosa, Member  
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**Patience:** Is tolerant with people and processes, listens and checks before acting, tries to understand the people and the data before making judgments and acting, waits for others to catch up before acting; sensitive to due process and proper pacing, follows established process.

**Perseverance:** Pursues everything with energy, drive, and a need to finish, seldom gives up before finishing, especially in the face of resistance or setbacks.

**Presentation Skills:** Is effective in a variety of formal presentation settings: one-on-one, small and large groups, with peers, direct reports, and bosses, is effective both inside and outside the organization, on both cool data and hot and controversial topics, commands attention and can manage group process during the presentation, can change tactics midstream when something isn't working.

**Priority Setting:** Spends his/her time and the time of others on what's important, quickly zeros in on the critical few and puts the

different skills and approaches, works to deploy strength, works on compensating for weaknesses and limits.

**Self-Knowledge:** Knows personal strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and limits, seeks feedback, gains insights from mistakes, is open to criticism, isn't defensive, is receptive to talking about shortcomings, looks forward to balanced (+s and -s) performance reviews and career decisions.

**Technical Learning:** Picks up on technical things quickly, can learn new skills and knowledge, is good at learning new industry, company, product, or technical knowledge, does well in technical courses and seminars.

## Salary Survey Results

The following comes from the STC Salary Survey for 2001. Figures are in US Dollars.

Average salary of technical communicators: \$54,140

Average salary of technical communication managers: \$64,180

Average salary of entry-level technical communicators: \$39,660

users in the full exploitation of a product, best intentions of publications competitions aside. Too often, there's little strategy associated with documentation metrics, which leads to little credibility with them.

There's nothing scientific about traditional documentation metrics; they reflect the perceptions of other people more than any thing inherent in the documentation. But measure we must. We've all heard that "the best predictor of future performance is past performance," and that can be a double-edged sword: it's good if your past performance has been excellent; not so good if it hasn't.

The documentation environment is littered with metrics that micromonitor any number of traditional "activities." But because they are internal measures that aren't linked to business strategy, they don't matter to executive management who control budgets or drive the corporate vision.

Purely mechanical "quality" metrics function only as evidence to those organizations that believe

technical writing can be "done by the numbers by anyone." Quantitative data is great to have, but I'd rather know how a document reduced a customer's product development time (that delta can be assigned a dollar value) instead of how many mechanical errors per page were detected—or whether "web" is spelled with a lower-case "w."

### **Why it is Difficult to Determine a Valuation Model**

There are a number of reasons why it is not easy to develop a valuation model for publications functions for the same reasons why it's not easy to come up with the definitive recipe for chili. The problem is that because it is now in vogue, there seem to be as

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"There are a number of reasons why it is not easy to develop a valuation model for publications functions for the same reasons why it's not easy to come up with the definitive recipe for chili."

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Technical communications is an enabling profession. We help enable the successful implementation of products, technologies, and services in a variety of industries and at many levels. We have to realize that we exist in a symbiotic relationship with the industries and technologies we serve; much like the shark and remora enjoy the benefits of a symbiotic co-existence. It just wouldn't work the other way around, and the same is true for our profession.

many valuation models as there are valuation consultants. But like chili recipes, valuation models do share some basic tenets:

- They attempt to create and maintain an alignment between the function in question (documentation in this case) and business strategy
- They require all parties to clearly articulate goals and expectations for a given project
- They try to assist executive management to determine a clear hierarchy of priorities

Most valuation models are borrowed from finance and business strategy disciplines, but even then, most focus on the value of tangible items. Once you throw into the mix intangibles such as improved knowledge transfer or more efficient data-to-information-to-knowledge conversion, the task of assigning value becomes far more difficult.

*continued on page 8*

## **HELP WANTED**

We're looking for presenters to participate in the SIG-sponsored progressions at the STC Annual Conference in Nashville, May 5-8, 2002.

Progressions are a great way to break in as a speaker. You'd give a short (10-15 minute) presentation to a table of 10-12 people, then conduct discussion on your topic for another 10 or 15 minutes, and repeat for a total of three times in the time block. It is a fun, casual session that gets lots of information out in a short period of time.

If you'd like to speak on a topic relating to either Managing People or Managing Projects, please contact Judith Herr at [herrj@home.com](mailto:herrj@home.com).

*continued from page 7*

That's one reason there isn't and probably can't be a first-order relationship between the technical communications function and financial outcome. Investment in the technical communications function usually has what is called a "third-order" effect, meaning that it improves some intermediate valuation, such as product/customer support, which promotes customer confidence, which in turn results in increased product sales.

One model, the balanced score-

## **How Value is Used**

Before assigning value to information, you need to think about what you mean by "value." The most obvious is using dollars or some other accepted currency that provides a measurement for assessing commercial viability.

Two major metrics associated with value are cost effectiveness and cost-benefit. A cost-effectiveness analysis helps determine the best approach for achieving some task or objective (as it could apply to information content or media format, for example).

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"Ultimately, value derives from the ability of information to influence or drive product purchases—a key consideration for technical and marketing publications."

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card ([www.bscol.com](http://www.bscol.com)), tests corporate strategies against traditional time-lag indicators, such as quarterly financial results. It can also test against forward-looking indicators such as customer satisfaction, and report necessary adjustments. The balanced scorecard method (and a few others) attempts to define those often-missing in-between steps with quantifiable, measurable, and monitored methods.

Once you understand what the limitations are for defining a first-order technical communications valuation model, you have a better understanding of how to design a third-order valuation model that can integrate with models used in other functions. Let's look at some major considerations about establishing value.

A cost-benefit analysis compares several investment levels for achieving various degrees of information granularity. In other words, a highly detailed and market-focused industry report for sale to a select market will be more expensive than a generic, widely available "state of the industry" report you can download from the Web, often for free.

## **The Relative Nature of Value**

We can't always assign a numerical value to information, so we have to recognize that this relative value is determined by the many contexts by which it will be viewed or consumed. Word count and relative value show no direct correlation; the value of "Intel Inside"—just two words—is worth billions of dollars. Top Secret information in a hardware

specification might be worth \$X dollars for Company A, but could be worth \$2X dollars to Company B, who is the market runner-up. Such information can lose its value altogether if it becomes widely available, which means its value has been diluted. Ultimately, value derives from the ability of information to influence or drive product purchases—a key consideration for technical and marketing publications.

## **How Information Context Influences Value**

The value of information varies from one person or organization to another because that information derives its value from how someone will make use of the information. The same unit of information will have different value to marketing, operations, development, and customer support because of the different contexts with which the information will be consumed.

Ours is not a profession that lends itself to numerical precision when it comes to information value because of these and other influences. One consideration that receives little mention is the time value of information. We've all heard about the time value of money, whereby its value increases or decreases, depending on how that money is invested. Many companies today operate from a "time to information" marketing philosophy that reinforces the idea that winning the mind-share of a target audience is a prerequisite for a product

*continued on page 9*

becoming the market leader. In this context, information release is as critical as product release.

### How the Transformation of Data to Information Influences Value

Raw data provides little, if any, immediate value.

It is only after raw data has been subjected to some type of transformation, be it data mining, graphical or textual representation, or statistical analysis, can some context be assigned to the transformed raw data, which in turn allows some value to be assigned to it. And that is no easy task, as we have seen. With addi-

tional transformations, information can become knowledge, further defining the context and influencing its value.

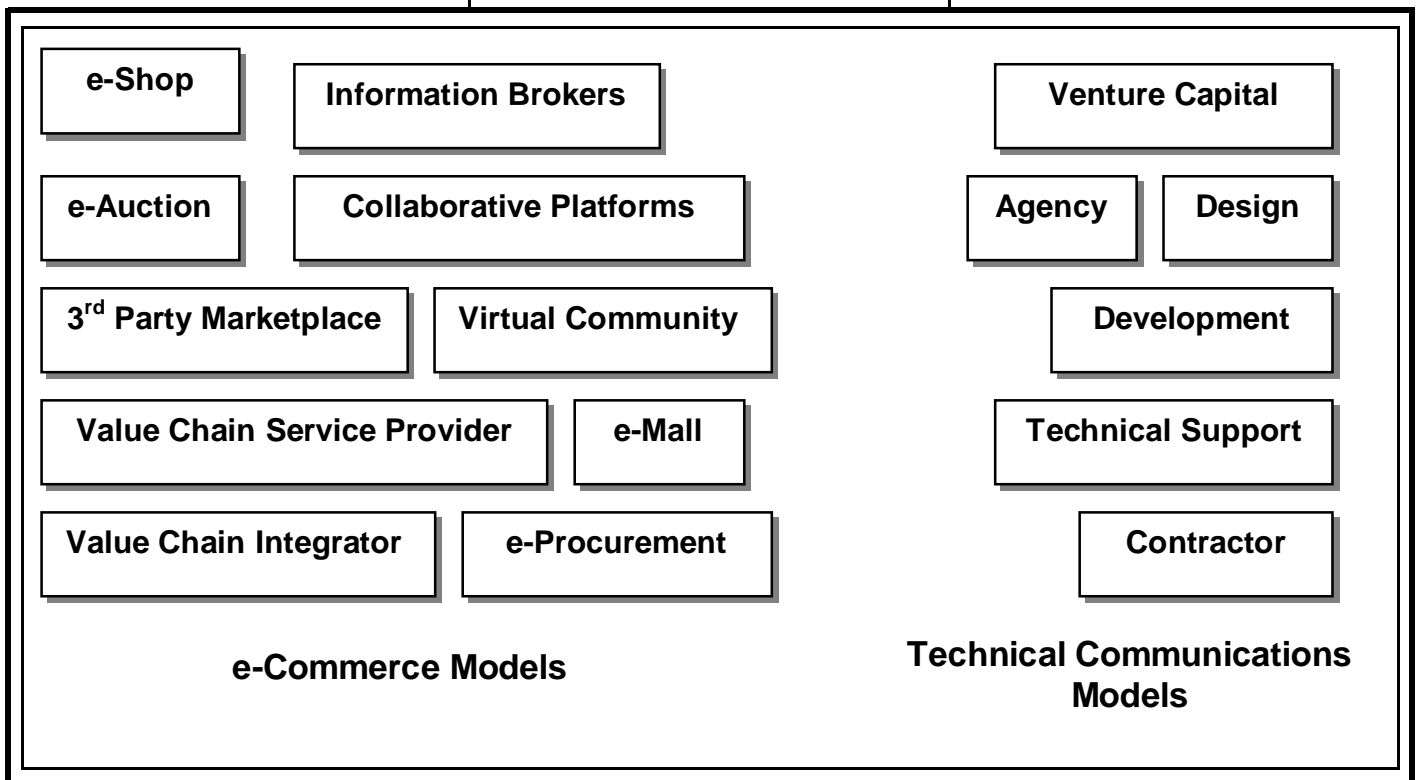
### Architectures for Technical Communications Business Models

Technical communications business models use architectures based on how an organization perceives, communicates, and measures its value. In the days of the dot.com blitz, this is how the major e-Commerce models were developed. Some of the business-to-consumer models were more successful than others; the business-to-business models in use today are struggling to estab-

lish validity in the marketplace. The figure below shows those models, and six common business models for technical communications, as identified by Saul Carliner recently in a presentation at Tech-Comm 2001 in Washington, DC.

Each of the technical communications business models comes packaged with unique sets of advantages and disadvantages, but they do offer some structure for quantifying results for determining value.

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## Upcoming Events

### February 16, 2002

The annual FutureTense conference, sponsored by the Twin Cities Chapter, will be held at the Earle Brown Center, Minneapolis. Informational contact is Jim Romano, Conference Manager at [jromano@prisma.com](mailto:jromano@prisma.com).

### March 22 - 23, 2002

The Atlanta Chapter is sponsoring Currents 2002 at Mercer University, Atlanta Campus. Contact General Manager Julie Scott at [Julie.Scott@choicepointinc.com](mailto:Julie.Scott@choicepointinc.com) for more information.

### April 6, 2002

The Sacramento Chapter is sponsoring the annual Writer in the Workplace conference at American River College. Anyone wishing to join the fun and excitement as a volunteer should send an e-mail message to Sunny Bishop at [SunnyBishop@SBtech-Comm.com](mailto:SunnyBishop@SBtech-Comm.com).

### May 5-8, 2002

STC's 49th Annual Conference will be held in Nashville, Tennessee. STC's annual conference is the world's largest gathering of technical communicators. Among the many highlights of the conference are educational sessions, workshops, vendor exhibits, and displays of the winning entries of the Society's international competitions.

For more information, visit the STC conference page at [http://stc.org/2002\\_conference.html](http://stc.org/2002_conference.html).



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