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Newsletter of the Boston Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication

[Celebrating Excellence in Technical Communication – The STACIEs](#)

By Denise Dennett

Who says technical writers can't have their day? Technical writers win awards at the STACIEs, the Oscars of technical writing.

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By Carol Macbain

Forty-three technical communicators looking for their next "opportunity" came away from STC's Job Hunting Skills Workshop with additional resources – thanks to organizer Barbara Rosenstroch and our presenters:

- Bill Gruener, Schneider Electric
- Peter Miller, Cobblestone Consulting
- John Rohner, HJR & Associates, Inc.

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Program Report

Celebrating Excellence in Technical Communication – The STACIEs

The Oscars of Technical Writing

By Denise Dennett

The Boston and Northern New England chapters celebrated excellence in technical communication at the annual STACI (STC Technical Achievement in Communicating Information) awards banquet. The event was held on February 11, 2004 at the Sheraton Lexington Inn. More than 100 people attended to hear Jared Spool speak and to attend the awards presentations. Attendees were able to view the award-winning technical art and technical publications, with the exception of those sent on to the international competition.

John Garison introduced Jared Spool after dinner. Spool was from the User Interface Engineering firm (www.uie.com), a leading research, training, and consulting firm specializing in web site and product usability. Jared presented his own awards dubbed the GORIES (a spoof on the idea that Al Gore invented the Internet). During the presentation, Spool provided commentary about examples of good and bad web site design. Highlights included a visit to the Pfizer Web site, best known for Viagra and Zoloft, where one-sixth of its web site was dedicated to FunZone (<http://www.pfizerfunzone.com>), a place where kids can learn more about science. Spool also poked fun at the Janus web site (down the slopes with your investments), a bank in North Dakota (looks like Nickleodeon), and more.

User Interface Engineering provides user interface testing. Spool shared some stories about wrangling with the Environmental Protection Agency web site (www.epa.gov). One example Spool mentioned of poor usability on the Web was of a teenager who was trying to buy a gift for his girlfriend at a Web site. The teenager floundered when he was unable to determine from the sizes displayed on the Web page which size was equaled to a size 6.

On to the awards...

We would like to extend a heartfelt thanks to Ellen Lidington for all of her hard work. Lidington served as the General Coordinator for the competitions and was instrumental in its success.

Garison and Carol Marsh Hobday announced the Merit and Excellence award winners. They received a rousing round of applause. Garison and Hobday also announced the Distinguished award winners, who were presented with their award plaques by James (Jim) Lidington, the Boston Chapter President, and Mary Oliver Flebotte, Northern New England Chapter President.

Ellen Lidington announced the Best of Show winners, with the help of Jim and Flebotte.

The STACIEs were awarded to:



Award	Winner
Technical Art:	HP OpenView CASA Flash Promo Hewlett-Packard Company <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Douglas Bonin • Alex Hart • Dan Strange
Online Communication	Co-winners: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avid Xpress Products Tutorial Avid Technology, Inc. Andrew Harrington Joe Kasper Steve Mayer • Diagnosing Application Performance Problems using PROMON Progress Software Corporation Web-Based Training Development Group
Technical Publications	EMC ControlCenter Implementation Case Study, ControlCenter Reporting: Knowing What You Have EMC Corporation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Michael Howes • Peter Kashuatus • Scott Lamont

The full list of winners will be posted on both Chapters' web sites (www.stc-boston.org and www.stc-nne.org).

We would like to thank the program sponsors: Wing Group (<http://www.wing-group.com/>) and nSight (www.nSightWorks.com).

Denise Dennett is a Senior Technical Writer at Terason in Burlington, Mass., and she was the past year's coordinator for the Technical Publications Competition.

Communicating with Non-native Speakers

Multilingual Colleagues Give Tips

By Bill Gruener

Many Americans speak only English. Increasingly we find ourselves wanting or needing to communicate with business colleagues who speak English as a second or third language. Verbal communication can occur at a rapid pace, which can confuse and confound non-native English speakers. Slowing down is difficult, especially if the speaker is excited or in a hurry. A listener can be lost in a matter of minutes. Many people become oblivious to the listener trying to understand the message, leaving the listener dumbfounded as to what was communicated.

To encourage easier native-to-non-native communication, multilingual colleagues were polled for suggestions on how to better communicate with non-native English speakers. Their responses have been compiled into the following list:

- Speak slowly and enunciate clearly.
- Have face-to-face conversations whenever possible because body language adds meaning. (Every respondent stressed this particular point.)
- Avoid noisy locations where multiple conversations are taking place.
- Keep conversations one-on-one to avoid potential distractions.
- Avoid phone calls when possible, because they lack face-to-face contact.
- Pause often and ask if you've been understood.
- Use simple sentences, especially when writing. ["Click OK." instead of "Select the OK button and press."]
- Use widely accepted international business terms such as "PC" or "invoice."
- Use common English words found in small, simpler dictionaries. ["Please read the tech spec." instead of "Peruse the tech spec."]
- Choose a single, common verb that explains the action of a sentence. ["Analyze the profit margins in the ACME report." instead of "Give me your take on the margins."]
- Avoid two-word verbs ending with OFF, UP, or ON. ["She quit." instead of "She gave up."]
- Mind the use of the verbs "get", "look", "take", or "put" because those verbs have many varied meanings.
- Avoid verbs used colloquially. ["Deliver the work order to Bob in manufacturing." instead of "Hoof it to Bob."]
- Avoid everyday jargon and local expressions.
- Avoid idioms, idiomatic phrases, and metaphors. ["He was robbed." instead of "He was taken to the dry cleaners."]
- Avoid words from other languages adopted by the English language. [Use "appetizers" instead of "hors d'oeuvres."]
- Avoid humor based on knowledge of the language. [At a cookout, using the word "buns" (a bread item or a part of the body) could have multiple meanings.]
- Assume and accept that your listener does not understand everything you've said.

By following these suggestions you will increase the chances of being understood when interacting with non-native English speakers.

Bill Gruener is a technical writer working and living northwest of Boston, Mass. He has contracted with Schneider Electric, Fidelity Investments, and Sun Microsystems. He has extensive publishing experience before retraining as a technical writer and earning a master's degree in Technical and Professional Writing from Northeastern University.

Program Report

Technical Writers Discuss Three Single-sourcing Tools

Pick Your Workflow, Then Your Tool

By Christina Rothwell

Everyone seems to be talking about single-sourcing these days. Write something once and in theory it can be transformed into multiple outputs, thus saving time and money. The downside, however, may be the learning curve with using new tools. Three experts of single-sourcing provided a brief overview of three single-sourcing tools at the STC Boston chapter's January 2004 meeting at the Sheraton Lexington Inn.

Char James-Tanny, Sean Brierley, and Neil Perlin explained how single-sourcing can be done using AuthorIT, WebWorks Publisher, and RoboHelp. All three consultants emphasized that you should perform a needs analysis before you determine the tool you will use for single-sourcing. The tool your company is familiar with might not be the right tool for the job.

"You don't pick the tool and then figure out your workflow," James-Tanny said. "You pick your workflow and then your tool."

James-Tanny, an AuthorIT Certified Consultant and president of JTF Associates, Inc. (<http://www.helpstuff.com/>), said that the underlying standards, procedures, and workflows are as important as the tools. She added that after doing a needs assessment, it is too easy to lose sight of the solution to the problem and instead just go right to the tool. It is important to make sure you are using the right tool to fulfill your single-sourcing needs.

AuthorIT

James-Tanny provided an overview about one of the single-sourcing tools, AuthorIT, (<http://www.author-it.com>). AuthorIT version 4 lets you publish a book to the following outputs:

- WinHelp 4
- HTML Help 1.x
- HTML 3.2
- XHTML 1.0
- JavaHelp 1.x and 2.0
- Oracle Help
- Microsoft Word (97/2000/XP/2003)
- XML Enterprise Edition



Char James-Tanny discusses single-sourcing using AuthorIT.

All content is saved as objects in a database. You can write the content once and reuse it as necessary. For example, you can create multiple books using different variations of the topics in your database, James-Tenny said. You can also easily reuse content you might use in multiple books, such as a glossary or company information. The following can be reused:

- Topics (including partial topics, such as paragraphs). You can create objects as small as one character
- Graphics (linked or embedded)
- Hyperlinks
- Index entries
- Any other library object.

You can control the look and feel of your documents through customizable templates. AuthorIt uses its own authoring environment.

WebWorks Publisher

Brierley, a technical writer for more than 10 years, authors single-source documentation sets comprising context-sensitive HTML Help, online PDFs, and printed and bound documentation from press. Brierley provided an overview of how one would use WebWorks Publisher 2003 (<http://webworks.com/>) to create multiple outputs. WebWorks Publisher converts content created and saved in Microsoft Word or Adobe FrameMaker files to one of the following formats, Brierley said:

- WinHelp 4
- HTML Help 1.x
- HTML 3.2
- XHTML 1.0 JavaHelp Oracle Help
- eBook (Palm and Microsoft Reader)
- Print (handled by FrameMaker or Word)
- XML (+XSL or +CSS)
- WebWorks Help 4 (x-platform x-browser)

Brierley described the process of how you would use WebWorks for single-sourcing. First, you create a template in WebWorks by doing the following.

- Add logo information for your company
- Define HTML styles for paragraphs, characters, tables, graphics, and pages
- Map relationships between FrameMaker tags and WebWorks Publisher
- Set Conditions

He added it may take some time to set up the template, but it only needs to be done once.



Brierley discusses how to set up a template in WebWorks Publisher.

Next you set up FrameMaker or Word files:

- GraphicsStyle, TopicAlias, (MediaTypes in Word), other markers as needed
- HTML style descriptions for paragraphs, characters, tables, graphics, and pages

Finally, you would open one of your FrameMaker books in a WebWorks Publisher template you created in the first step. The styles are already set up and mapped, except for overrides. You can generate your project by the push of one button. If you want, you can merge and/or deploy your project to the Web, a server, or Web-based Distributed Authoring and Versioning (WebDAV) system.

WebWorks lets you to continue to use the features in FrameMaker and Microsoft Word. WebWorks supports conditionalized text in FrameMaker and you can apply conditions, called Media Types, in Word, Brierley said. WebWorks lets you use the same content management tool for your FrameMaker or Microsoft Word source.

RoboHelp

Perlin, who is a certified RoboHelp instructor and owner of Hyper/Word Services (<http://www.hyperword.com/>), provided an overview of how one would use RoboHelp X5 (<http://www.macromedia.com/software/robohelp/>) as a tool for single-sourcing. RoboHelp X5 provides the following outputs:

- PDF
- XML
- FlashHelp
- WebHelp (regular and Pro)
- HTML Help
- JavaHelp (including V. 2)
- Oracle Help for Java
- WinHelp
- Hard-copy (such as Microsoft Word)

Topic-level and content-level conditional text is preserved when RoboHelp converts the files to the multiple formats. Perlin suggested keeping the number of conditions for conditional text low. Perlin reminisced about how he had 13 conditions on one project. The customer and he after awhile found it confusing with so many conditions.

In addition to creating their documents within RoboHelp X5, users also import the following formats into RoboHelp:

- HTML
- Microsoft Word
- MIF
- XML



Perlin discusses the multiple output formats of RoboHelp X5.

RoboHelp X5 also provides the following additional functionality with third-party software, Perlin said:

- PDF import and breakup into topics
- Direct export to PDF, eliminating the step of going to Word
- Import of and style application to unstructured Word documents. When RoboHelp imports unstructured Word documents, it parses the Word files and tries to assign equivalent styles in RoboHelp.
- Insertion of external Word documents during export to Word. You could have copyright information in a separate Word file. When you export the documents in RoboHelp to Word, RoboHelp inserts the copyright information into the Word document being created.

All three products mentioned in this article provide multiple outputs. Which tool you use depends on how it fits with your way of producing documentation. It is after all easier to adjust to a new tool if it fits into your pre-existing workflow.

Additional Information

The speakers suggested contacting user groups for more information about single-sourcing. The following is a partial list of some of the user groups available:

- Help Authoring Tools & Techniques (HATT) - <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/HATT/>
- WebWorks Publisher eGroup - <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/wwp-users/>
- AuthorIt Users Group - <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/authorit-users/>
- STC Single-sourcing SIG - <http://www.stcsig.org/ss/>
- RoboHelp - <http://www.helpcommunity.ehelp.com/robohelp/>

Christina Rothwell works as a technical writer for a software company in Burlington, Mass. and lives on the North Shore.

Job Hunting Skills Workshop for Members in Transition

Targeting, Networking, Interviewing, Negotiating

Three Presenters Share Expertise

By Carol Macbain

Forty-three technical communicators looking for their next “opportunity” came away from STC’s Job Hunting Skills Workshop with additional resources – thanks to organizer Barbara Rosenstroch and our presenters:

- Bill Gruener, Schneider Electric
- Peter Miller, Cobblestone Consulting
- John Rohner, HJR & Associates, Inc.

Targeting Companies

According to the January issue of *Intercom*, the areas that provide most technical writing jobs are software, hardware, telecommunications, and construction. Unfortunately, in our area, these have been some of the hardest hit by the economic downturn. Bill Gruener suggests looking at other industries that may require our skills, such as those affected by new laws requiring documentation of processes.

When you target companies, in addition to looking for those that have problems you can solve, don't forget to ask questions like, "Which organizations have my kind of culture?" and "Which companies have problems that interest me?" Then prepare a positioning statement and competency list that highlights what you have to offer an employer.

Bill's Tip: Commit 40 hours to exploring directories (found in reference libraries) to get information about companies.

Information Gathering

First, select some companies likely to have jobs that fit your skills. Network with your contacts to refine these targets. Get more information about their needs and culture, then network some more to get inside contacts.

Internet Search

The Internet is a great information-gathering tool, but Gruener suggests you limit your time at the computer to 30 minutes per sitting. Use the Internet to get specific information, then get out and talk to people. Hours spent at the computer are ultimately not as useful as networking time for landing your next job.

Skill Identification

Do you know what you're good at? Writing, of course. Peter Miller suggests looking beyond the skills that all technical communicators share to come up with the skills and traits that set you apart from the rest. Look to your accomplishments outside the workplace and in your past, or ask other people, to find additional strengths.

After you have identified what you have to offer an employer, think of stories that will get the interviewer to visualize you effectively solving the company's problems.

Networking

Everyone does it, and everyone should do it more. There are many organizations that can help you network more effectively. (Many STC members have benefited from the reasonably priced windnetworking.org, which meets at various locations in greater Boston.) Networking helps you to meet new people and tell them what you're looking for. You never know who will be the person that can make things happen for you.

Resumes

Rule #1, according to John Rohner, is "Make it easy." Since different people have different preferences, use more than one approach.

- Online Application Forms – Prepare a cover letter and full resume as a text file to cut and paste into a company's online form. Sometimes this is a necessity to get into the database.
- E-mail -- Put the text file into the body of an e-mail and attach the word.doc as well, in case they prefer to read the formatted version. Interviewers will look at the text version first to see if they are interested before opening your attachment.
- Hand Delivery – Have your insider contact hand deliver your formatted resume to the appropriate person. (You still need to get into the database, so also do one of the above.)
- Snail Mail – Can't hurt, as long as you apply electronically as well.

Mention in each letter that you've also applied in another format for their convenience.

Persistence pays off. Put your greatest effort into the places most suited to your skills and interests.

Interviewing

Peter Miller says:

- Be on time.
- Looks count (appropriate clothes, a smile, a handshake).
- Bring extra resumes.
- When talking to HR people, avoid red flags; when talking to hiring managers, sell yourself.

Adapt your communication style to that of your interviewer, if you can. Be prepared for the usual questions, and ask questions yourself. A good final question might be, "Is there anything I can tell you that would help you make the decision to hire me?"

Salary Negotiations

The most difficult, but ultimately the most rewarding task, if done successfully – negotiating your salary. Peter Miller's approach is to:

- Defer – It's better to discuss salary late in the interview process, after you know more about the job. Indicate flexibility and that money is not your primary criterion.
- Ask – Ask for their range, then respond neutrally and move on with another question.
- Respond – In case you are required to respond to salary questions, find out what is realistic for your skills in today's job market.

Carol Macbain is a technical writer who provides documentation for international audiences. You can reach her at CJMacbain@aol.com.

What's All This About Outsourcing?

How Does It Impact the Technical Writing Field?

By Anne Kinsella

Unless you've been on a desert island, it's likely you've heard the buzz about outsourcing. While seemingly a lucrative opportunity for business, the potential for job loss on these shores is valid. Helen Chen, Development Manager for CollabNet, and John Garison, Documentation Manager for IDE, helped sift through the facts and fears of this much-touted topic during February's International SIG.

"I recognize the issues with the economy, both positive and negative. A lot of companies have gone for economic reasons. We are going to look at the pros and cons," said Chen.

Why do companies outsource overseas?

Companies outsource overseas for a variety of reasons. The big lure is they get three workers for the price of one, paying one-third of the average US salary for similar experience. "Programmers in India earn 20 to 30 thousand dollars a year. In theory it makes perfect sense, but sometimes theories don't hold," said Chen.

The economic reality is different from the projections. There is an average 33 percent increase in offshore costs. "Think about the fact that you're hiring a group of people from somewhere else. Huge information hump to get over and that's extremely difficult," said Garison.

Why are some jobs easier to offshore?

Not all jobs can be sent overseas easily. The jobs most amenable to offshore are call centers, help desks, and small software projects. Application programming and QA are to a lesser extent. Projects should be specific and well understood. Documentation is not a likely candidate.

Offshore workers are not adept at designing new products and do not know the product business areas. Part of the problem is cultural, according to Chen. "Offshore workers are not used to taking ideas and running with them. Only certain people are allowed to think creatively," she said. They typically are good when directions are meticulous.

"I've seen QA very successfully done. It took years to establish. They had very specific test cases all automated. It freed up all the regress testing," said Chen.

What are some problems companies face?

"Return on investment is not there at the beginning, takes about three years. If they [the company] are looking for a quick hit, they are not going to get it," said Garison.

Companies underestimate the complexity involved. Often they are unwilling or unable to provide necessary materials or fall prey to offshore vendor promises. Many first and even second attempts fail. Companies then decide to make productivity gains without understanding the realities of economics.

"Companies are not getting results; they are getting lots of questions. Three years in the ramp up time and you'll have the mind meld going on," said Chen. "To do it takes a lot of work on both sides. Grow the relationship, grow the knowledge carefully. You have to think about the human element. It would be easy if it was just technology," she said.

What is the best approach?

Companies that offshore to augment their existing talent are likelier to do well. They succeed when they select workers for their team by looking at resumes and conducting phone interviews and insisting workers are not involved with other projects. Having presence at the offshore site is also essential.

Communication problems with co-workers are common and easily encountered when they are 9,000 miles away. English as a second language doesn't help. Because offshore workers fluency levels are mixed, their approaches are different. They may not ask questions or share our sense of urgency. Only US workers get in early and stay late, according to Garison.

Time displacement is also a concern. There is a ten-hour time difference between the East Coast and India providing very little overlap in the workday. If a problem is not resolved immediately, it can result in a full day's delay.

Should we be worried?

According to Chen and Garison, we should and should not be worried. Future growth may be limited domestically while it increases offshore but in the best situations, no jobs are lost. For tech writers, there is not much to worry about today, but there could be challenges ahead. Currently, documentation done offshore requires considerable editing. English language skills, at the level required, are hard to find.

"We want to make sure our skills are up to date. Re-engineer ourselves," said Chen.

Anne Kinsella, a graduate of Northeastern University, is a freelance writer working out of her home in Littleton MA. She can be reached at annek@pop.net.

President's Message

Celebrate with STC at the Boston Museum of Science

STC Chapter 50 Years Old and Still Growing

By Jim Lidington

Boston Chapter Members it's June and we're hurtling toward completion of another year at the Boston Chapter of the STC. That means the End of Year Celebration is coming up: it's scheduled for Wednesday evening, June 16. We've planned an exciting evening at the Boston Museum of Science to cap off 2003/2004! There will be great food, drink, and conversation as well as awards and a special program. Admission is only \$25 including parking (with member discount), so save the date. If you're not a member, it's a great time to join! Check out www.stc-boston.org for details.

So why celebrate? Here are a few reasons: the Boston Chapter is as strong as ever as we close out our 50th year as a chapter and a society (yes, we were the original, founding chapter of STC). Earlier this spring we regained our status as the largest chapter in the world. We had a great year of monthly programs, with the best participation we've had in years and a new program attendance record of 163 in September. Our Chapter SIGs are strong and presented an impressive slate of programs and meetings of their own. Our competitions, jointly sponsored with the Northern New England Chapter, are the largest of their kind in the world. We ran four professional development workshops, which all sold out within days. We're adding new members. Need I say more?

The Boston Chapter is working hard to provide value to our members but we're always looking for new ways to serve you. If you have an idea for a program, workshop, or SIG, let me know. Even better, volunteer to make it happen. We have a vital, resourceful organization in place to support you, and together there is much we can accomplish!

Jim Lidington is the president of the STC Boston Chapter. He can be reached at James.Lidington@S1.com.

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We welcome articles, advertising, and news about meetings, workshops, and courses that pertain to technical communication. When you submit an article, please let the editor know if this article has run elsewhere, and if it has been submitted for consideration to other publications.

Please send article ideas and articles to Margaret Garcia-Nokes at bostonbroadside@yahoo.com.

Article submission deadlines:

- August 1 (for September/October issue)
- October 1 (for November/December issue)
- December 15 (for January/February issue)
- February 1 (for March/April issue)
- April 1 (for May/June issue)
- June 1 (for July/August issue)

Advertising submission deadlines:

For information about advertising rates and procedures, contact Anne Louiselle at alouiselle@attbi.com.

- June 17 (for July/August 2004 issue)
- August 19 (for September/October 2004 issue)
- October 14 (for November/December 2005 issue)
- December 10 (for January/February 2005 issue)
- February 15 (for March/April 2005 issue)
- April 15 (for May/June 2005 issue)