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From the President's Desk

*by Steve Jong
Boston Chapter President*

I'm Steve Jong, and this year I am the president of the Boston Chapter.

First things first: Thank you for your support! I'm honored to serve in this role, and I look forward to the opportunity to give back to and help influence my chosen profession of 28 years.

If you've been following the affairs of the Society,

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6 Tricks Every RoboHelp Developer Should Know...

by Neil Perlin

Editor's Note: The following article originally appeared in the Macromedia Developer Center (www.macromedia.com/go/developer).

Introduction

No matter what your company or what your project, there always seems to be a few tricks that are vital to the success of any project. Every developer has a personal list of such tricks; this article is based on mine – six tricks dealing with project management (which actually apply to any authoring tool, not just RoboHelp), development, and maintenance.

Trick 1 – Define Development Standards

For long-term impact on project management, nothing beats standards. Without them, each developer on a project will drift toward different writing styles, fonts, font sizes, graphic formats, and so on. Even if you're the only developer, you've probably noticed similar inconsistencies creeping into your work. In the past, we got away with such inconsistencies because the editor could find and fix them. But how many projects have an editor these days?

By defining standards before the project starts, you won't have to go back later to fix inconsistencies. And, you'll avoid becoming a member of the "there's never enough time to do it right but there's always time to go back and fix it" school of project management.

Management Issues

Many doc groups don't create standards because they think it will take too long or is too complex. Here are some steps that can speed things up and reduce the complexity by helping you understand the environment in which you're creating the standards:

- Start from the top down – check for existing enterprise-wide standards. If there are any, are they relevant or are they just being forced on you because "they're the standards"? If the latter, try to

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Volunteer Your Way to Success

*by Karen Giventer
STC-Boston Volunteer Coordinator*

I've decided to share a little secret with you – it's this: I am not a joiner. Never have been, never will be. I didn't even join the girl scouts and my mother was the troop leader!

So why am I, a self-proclaimed, die-hard non-joiner, now an active member of STC? Why am I a volunteer coordinator, SIG leader, and council member. Why do I hope to recruit you to volunteer for STC jobs? Here's why. I enjoy, truly enjoy, volunteering with STC and I know you

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Boston Broadside 2004-5

Welcome to this year's first issue. After I introducing myself last month as the managing editor, many people in the Chapter emailed with what they would like to see in their newsletter. With a still tepid economy, many members cited an interest in improving their skills for the current job market. Others wanted to learn about new tools and better ways to do things.

Those thoughts haven't gone unnoticed among the *Broadside* Staff. In the next year, we will strive to provide articles and information from professionals all across the technical communication industry. In the mean time, keep sending those email messages.

*Jon Harvey
Managing Editor
Boston Broadside*

Upcoming Programs

by Greg Bartlett
|STC-Boston Programs Committee

Another year of interesting programs got off to an excellent start with our September 22nd program, "Employment Opportunities: Three Perspectives for Success," with Neil Perlin, Ed Alexander, and Taryn Light as the speakers.

This Year's Programs

Here are the programs we have lined up for the year. As you can see, we still are finalizing speakers for some of the programs. See the "Events" section of the Boston Chapter's Web site for details about the program throughout the year. We will also announce meetings to members via e-mail.

October 20—"Technical Communication: Working Globally"
(John Garison, Paula Berger, Bill Gruener)

Learn from first-hand accounts about techniques for succeeding in an increasingly global workplace.

November 10—(joint meeting with ISPI) "Tools That Change How We Work" (Panel)

Hear a panel discuss the organizational impact of tools that change how we work, focusing on some specific tools including version control systems Visual SourceSafe and Perforce.

December 15—"Context-Sensitive Help"
(Speaker TBD)

Find out how context-sensitive help can help address users who want help to be right at their fingertips as they work with the software, not off in a manual or a separate help system.

January 19, 2005—"APIs and SDKs: Breaking into and Succeeding in a Specialty Market"
(Ed Marshall)

Explore a potential new career path.

February 16—"The STACIEs"
(Competitions2004 Awards Banquet)

Enjoy an entertaining evening recognizing winners of our annual Competitions.

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Technical Communication: A View from Below

by Jonathan W. Baker
STC, Director/Sponsor Region 1

As August winds down, I am struggling to put some thoughts together about the field of Technical Communication. I don't know about you, but I am worn out talking about the economy, the changing technical communications field, the war in Iraq, terrorism, and just about everything else. In fact I am so bummed that I want a special SIG set up for burnt out, fried, and otherwise abused technical communicators. Maybe we can call it the Walking Wounded SIG or the Burnt Up, Used Up, Dried Up SIG.

OK. I am honestly trying to be funny. But there is some truth to the idea that this field is at least 3 years into perhaps the worst downward spiral we have experienced in 50 years. And many of us are feeling less than perfect, compared to how we felt about ourselves a few years back. I mean, don't you just want to have some fun, like back in the good old days of 1999. Everything was rock and roll, way back then. Jobs were plentiful and if you didn't have one on Monday, you surely would have a choice among two or three jobs on Tuesday.

So, how do we go about feeling better about our field and ourselves? I would suggest that this is a great time to go back to school. Whether you take a course in RoboHelp or Java, whether you get into a degree program or take an evening school crafts course, you will be doing something to help yourself. Everything you learn eventually adds value.

Last spring, I took a motorcycle maintenance course. I thought this wasn't related to technical communication, but then I learned that there actually are technical communicators out there putting together the motorcycle service manuals we used in class. It never occurred to me that my skills could be used in this business.

Another positive that came out of taking the class was that it got me out of the house and got me thinking about something other than work. There is LOTS of value in that.

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"6 Tricks..." (continued from page 1)

negotiate your way out of the least applicable aspects.

- Does your company have multiple documentation groups? If so, are there standards that apply across the groups? Do those standards apply to other groups that create documentation, such as marketing or engineering? If not, do those groups have standards? Are those groups willing to merge standards, an important point if your company is looking at single sourcing.
- Are there any common standards in your documentation group or does each project define its own?

Depending on what you find and who the participants are, ask:

- If there are standards, are they up-to-date? Appropriate? In force? Never assume that a standard is any of those things.
- If any standards apply to multiple groups, are they appropriate? Do they work? This is always a good question, but even more important if some documentation groups came aboard via acquisition since different group cultures can hamper the adoption of consistent standards.

Understanding the environment will help you integrate the development, buy-in, modification, archiving, and maintenance of standards into departmental operations and help ensure their continuity.

The Details

Different companies will define different mixes of standards, but there are some common and useful ones:

- Document templates – If your group creates standard types of topics – like concepts and procedures – you can create RoboHelp templates containing all required and optional elements for each topic type. Once all the developers have the templates, the developers can simply identify the type of topic they're creating, select that template, and get a consistent structure regardless of whom the author is. Templates won't work for all topics; there will always be exceptions. But using templates may let you standardize a large proportion of the topics you create.

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The Curse of Low Expectations

by Steven Greffenius
Boston Chapter Admin Council

In a lot of situations, you can benefit if other people underestimate you. If you can get your opponent in a chess game or a tennis match to be over-confident, you can be a tortoise to your opponent's hare. If people have low expectations of a candidate going into a presidential debate, it's easier to come out looking like a winner. That's what the campaign aides suggest, anyway. We know we try to calibrate expectations on the job all the time, regarding what we're able to do by a certain deadline. We want expectations to be low enough that we can exceed them without killing ourselves, high enough to maintain a general aura of confidence and respect. No one wants to be thought incompetent!

So why are low expectations a curse, if we stand to benefit when they're on the low side? The curse develops if we let them affect our own self-image. I read an article in the *Intercom* a while back. I don't remember much about the subject matter of the piece, but one statement confronted my brain and stayed there. The author said that technical writers can't ever know as much about the systems they document as the engineers who design the systems. Well, that's true enough. The disturbing thing was the author's extended premise that writers are so knowledge-poor that they depend almost entirely on engineers for their content. That section of the article might have been titled, *How to Manage the Spoon Feeding Process*.

When I read that part, I thought man, that's just what bothers me about our trade. We don't feel like we can do anything without subject matter experts, or SMEs. The first time I heard that term, it repelled me right away. Sure engineers are smart and they know a lot, but I can't think they like being called SMEs. We shouldn't adopt the term, either. Engineers are colleagues, people we collaborate with to create useful products. If you think of your collaborator as an SME, you'll never feel like an equal. You'll just return from the engineering division to the doc department, the ghetto of the non-experts.

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"6 Tricks..." (continued from page 2)

- **Styles** – Styles control how topic elements look, such as a Heading 1 style that defines level 1 heads as 14 point, bold, italic, and blue. At a minimum, you should define styles for all your heading levels and Normal. For more control, add styles for Notes, Cautions, and Warnings, bulleted and numbered lists at multiple indent levels, and table elements like row and column heads, cell body text, and bulleted and numbered cell body text. If you defined topic templates, you can define styles for the elements in the templates. This way, topics created using those templates not only contain the desired structure but the desired formatting also.
- **Skins** – A skin is the help version of a snap-on, snap-off cell phone faceplate. When you define a skin, all the settings are saved as an SKN file, which you can distribute, to all developers. Once they import that SKN file and apply it to the projects, each developer's projects will automatically have a similar looking interface without any further work on the developers' parts.

With just these three standards – templates, styles, and skins - you'll have gone a long way toward a consistent interface, topic structure, and topic "look". In addition, you can define...

- **Graphic file format** – Specifying a graphic file format can eliminate many problems later in the project or during maintenance. Developers won't have to guess which format to use (and, inevitably, pick the wrong one at some point). For the greatest file efficiency and tool flexibility today, you should save screen shots and line art in GIF format and photos in JPG format. However, picking one format, while programmatically inefficient, will streamline your work. (Note that you can use PNG in place of GIF. Or, if your environment supports it and you're comfortable using a fairly new format, you can use SVG (Scalable Vector Graphics) for both.)
- **Output format(s)** – RoboHelp supports various formats, some with names that can be easily confused. For example, is

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Perspectives on Employment

Review of the September Chapter Meeting

by Bill Gruener
Boston Broadside Staff

Employment, or no employment, is on every STC member's mind. The Boston Chapter's first program of the 2004-2005 season offered Neil Perlin, Taryn Light, and Ed Alexander talking about "Perspectives on Employment: Three Strategies for Success."

Neil Perlin presented new developments outside of technical communication that may provide opportunities for technical communicators. Neil said that we're facing a situation where we've got to "think outside of the box." Neil noted that in his

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Looking Back at the End-of-Year Celebration

by Bill Gruener
Boston Broadside Staff

Members of the Boston Chapter of STC gathered on June 16th for our annual End-of-year celebration.

Reception and Dinner

We gathered in the Blue Wing of the Museum of Science, which houses among other exhibits Star Wars fighter planes,



Changing of the guard. Jim Liddington (right), outgoing President, turns over the gavel to Steve Jong, the 2004-2005 Chapter President.

Mathematica, Mr. T. Rex, and the Big Dig story. The buffet included zesty appetizers, a variety of intriguing main courses, and sinful desserts. More members other than Tom LeBlanc of nSight returned to the dessert bar for biscotti and fudge sauce. Thanks to the Museum staff for an enjoyable evening and the caterers who were

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“Volunteer...” (continued from page 1)

will too if you give it a chance. Think about it. The payoff is enormous. For a small commitment of time, you can make business and job contacts, learn new skills, and get on the inside track about our industry and possible jobs.

Just Do It!

The most basic way to become STC-active is to attend the monthly program meetings and SIG meetings. Don't wait for a topic that's perfect for you – just Go! Even if the topic doesn't directly relate to your work, you'll come away with some practical information. The information you take away might be as small as a Web site, contact name, or technical tip – or as important as a job lead or a solution to a technical problem. If you go to a program and come away without gaining at least one positive thing, I will personally reimburse you for the cost of the meeting. That's a promise.

Meetings lead to further involvement – you may want to volunteer for a specific job or perhaps you'll think of your own way to contribute to STC.

What's that mumbling I hear through my magic 2-way computer? You're saying, “But I just don't have the time! Between working, commuting, the kids, the Patriots, and the Sopranos, I don't have any spare time!” Okay, I hear you, but think about this: Involvement in STC can actually save you time. How? As a technical communicator, you must continually learn and keep up-to-date. As a business professional in a tough economy, you must continually make business contacts. Is there an easier, more spoon-fed way to learn and make contacts than to become active with STC?

What a Bargain!

At the cost of a few hours per month — either attending programs, volunteering, or both — you can gain tremendous experience, technical knowledge, and business contacts. It's not nearly as expensive, time consuming, or emotionally charged as going to technical seminars, cold-calling for jobs, or making elevator speeches to a room full of strangers.

I've turned on my magic 2-way computer again and I can hear more mumbling. You're saying, “Attending programs is one thing, volunteering is another.” Well, not exactly. It's a natural progression. At programs, you'll hear about STC activities and meet other active members. You'll soon find an area of particular interest to you. That's what happened to me, the confirmed non-joiner. I went to a few programs and little by little volunteered for additional responsibilities. No one asked for a lifetime commitment.

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“...President's Desk” (continued from page 1)

you know about the Transformation initiative. We heard a lot about Transformation at the Annual Conference in Baltimore, and you'll be hearing a lot about it in the months to come. The goal of Transformation is to provide more value to members. How is the Boston Chapter doing? I'm happy to report that we've won our third consecutive Chapter of Distinction award for large chapters. The award is based on an assessment of Chapter activities and services, so winning the award means that for the last three years, the Boston Chapter has done the most for its members. We have a good thing going here, and I con-

"The Transformation is a challenge to provide even more value, and we're looking for ways to meet that challenge."

sider it my top priority not to mess that up. The Transformation is a challenge to provide even more value, and we're looking for ways to meet that challenge. I hope we can offer more value to all our members, from newcomers to veterans, from people who can walk to events at the Sheraton Lexington to people geographically far away. I think ultimately the Transformation will make the Chapter even stronger than it is now.

My other responsibility is to keep the Chapter financially sound even as times remain tough and the Society adjusts its own finances. The Chapter rebate is lower this year than last, and will likely be lower still next year. I would like the major Chapter activities to be self sufficient. Toward that end, we have increased the program fee by \$5 *continued on page 8*

“6 Tricks...” (continued from page 3)

WebHelp simply “Web Help” with a typo? Is HTML Help just a web site that offers help, or something else? HTML Help runs under Windows, so isn't it identical to Windows Help? Some of the best horror stories I've encountered occurred due to confusion over output formats. It's a good idea to specify which format types you have to create, and to describe each one.

Other styles to define include index keyword standards and See Also keywords (with a brief description of what they are and how they work, since many people find them confusing). A quick and dirty way to tell what styles to define is to simply review RoboHelp's menus to determine which features apply to you and set standards for them.

Trick 2 – Write Them Down

Too often, we work hard to define standards but then never document them. The result is that material from different developers begins to drift apart. And, as the original developers leave and new ones come aboard, the standards become forgotten. The result? An expensive waste of time reinventing the standards for a project... perhaps even some embarrassment when you have to reinvent the standards for a project that you worked on but never documented.

Management Issues

Documenting the standards, usually in the form of a project spec, consists of nothing more than writing down the settings that you defined in the previous step. Some notes:

- Make spec maintenance part of someone's job description or else the spec will get forgotten.
- Assign spec maintenance to a senior writer to emphasize its importance. Assigning it to a junior writer sends a message that the spec isn't really important.
- Make the spec available to any developer by putting it on the intranet or in another easily accessed place. Don't let it get lost.

The Details

Some suggestions:

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March 16—“DreamWeaver: Bringing Interactivity Into Your HTML” (Michael Doyle)

Learn how to use DreamWeaver to create interactive HTML pages.

April 27—(joint meeting with Boston-IA)

“Creating Accessible Online Information” (“*Night of SIN*”)

Rotate among presentations by several speakers, to learn approaches for making information on the Web and online documentation more accessible to all readers.

May 25—“Online Showcase” (*Speakers TBD*) (held at The MathWorks in Natick, MA)

Try out award-winning online documentation and training, talk with the creators of the material and systems, and hear presentations by a few of the winners.

June 15—“End-of-Year Celebration” (location TBD)

Join our celebration as we recognize those who contributed to what I am sure will be another successful year of Chapter activities.

How We Decide What Programs to Offer

The Programs Committee (Stacie Barker, Bill Gruener, Taryn Light, Rick Lippincott, and I) had the following goals in mind as we put together the slate of programs and workshops for the year:

- Pick topics that address your range of interests. The year’s programs should cover several areas, including:
 - Supporting you in the job market and workplace.
 - Learning about tools of the trade
 - Developing writing and information presentation skills.
 - Recognizing outstanding accomplishments of those in our field.
- Find knowledgeable and effective speakers.

Continued on next column

- Stimulate you and offer you new ways of approachig your work.
- Provide practical information you can apply in your career.
- Make the programs interactive and fun.

I think the committee has put together a great year of programs and workshops that address these goals. We chose programs and speakers based on our experience, research, and input from many of you. Your input is really important: it helps the committee understand topics of interest to our members and sometimes even puts us on the trail of terrific speakers. So, please let us know about which topics you are interested in learning more and tell us about anyone you would recommend as a speaker. You can give your input through program evaluation forms or contact me directly.

Coordination with Other Organizations

We make an effort to coordinate with other organizations serving technical communication professionals. The November meeting will be a joint meeting with ISPI (International Society for Performance Improvement), which is “Dedicated to improving human and organizational performance” (according to the ISPI Web site). In April, we have a joint meeting with Boston-IA, an organization formed by P.J. Gardner, who has been an active STC member for years. Boston-IA focuses on “Bringing information architecture and Internet accessibility together” (according to the Boston-IA Web site). STC and these organizations have reciprocal arrangements to announce each other’s meetings. In fact, the “Related Sites” link at the top of the STC-Boston Web site is a useful resource for finding out activities of interest sponsored by other organizations.

We have also coordinated with the Northern New England STC Chapter to ensure our program dates do not overlap for the rest of the year.

There’s More to Programs Than Just Speakers

The topics and speakers are the heart of each program meeting. But programs are

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- Keep the spec short. Hundred-page specs are impressive but no one reads them.
- Define *and document* an exception process. One reason to have a spec is to reduce project variations. In reality, however, there will always be variations because of operational changes since the spec was written. To deal with that reality, define a formal process for deviating from the standards to prevent a relapse into chaos.
- Make the spec market oriented. Any project’s main goal must be to support users, not win awards.
- Keep the spec simple. Focus on what’s important, such as standards or a list of typical build errors and their solutions, and omit what’s unimportant or self-evident. (Be sure everyone agrees about what’s “unimportant” and “self-evident”.)
- Make the spec a living document. Review and modify it as necessary, especially at the end of a project when the reality of the project is still fresh in your mind.

Trick 3 – Use and Maintain Style Sheets

Many developers use so-called “local” or “inline” formatting. For example, let’s say you want to make the level 1 headings 14 point, bold, italic, and red. Many people highlight the heading text and select 14, bold, italic, and red from the formatting toolbar. This works but it’s inefficient, especially if you have to format a hundred level 1 headings (plus level 2 headings, level 3s, table column heads, and so on). It’s even worse when, after formatting all the level 1 headings as red, you have to change them all to blue. Styles eliminate this problem.

A style is the collection of all display attributes for an element. For a level 1 heading, for example, you’d create a style called Heading 1 and define its attributes as 14 point, bold, italic, and red. To apply all these attributes to text to make it a level 1 heading, you just select the heading text, open RoboHelp’s style pulldown, and select Heading 1. A few clicks instead of many.

More useful still is the higher editing efficiency. Let’s say you need to change all

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“Volunteer...” (continued from page 5)

Getting Started

A good way to get started is to take on a small, discrete task that you can complete with no need for a future commitment. Here are just a few one-time tasks that you can do:

Competitions Juror—Judge entries in the publications, online, or art categories. Enjoy a fun day working with your peers. View and read the best-of-the-best and learn about what constitutes excellence in technical communications.

Write One Broadside Article—This doesn't have to be a steady gig. Just write one article for starters. Think about it – you can dream up a topic and then call the experts in the field to learn more about it. You'll be networking, getting published, contributing to STC, and beefing up your resume all at the same time!

Find One Corporate Sponsor—Help find one company sponsor for one program. It's a great way to flex your sales and marketing muscles, as well as a brilliant excuse to call companies that you want to learn more about. No pressure. You're not on commission.

Plan One SIG Meeting —

Not ready to be a SIG (Special Interest Group) leader? That's okay. Think of one topic and one speaker. Whatever interests you is fine. You can plan just one SIG program for an existing SIG (such as the Online SIG or the Idea Watch SIG). If you recruit the speaker, we'll help you put the meeting together.



It's All in Who You Know

Networking! Everyone knows it's the key to a successful job search. Would you rather send an email to an anonymous company on Monster or contact a specific individual at a company of interest? Would you rather interview as one of many unknown people or meet with a manager or staffer with whom you have a personal relationship? Volunteer assignments with STC provide the perfect opportunity to expand your contacts – whether you need them now or later.

Say you're interested in pharmaceutical software and you think it's a growing area

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“Volunteer...” (continued from prev column)

of opportunity. Perhaps you can contact someone at a leading company and ask him or her to speak at the Idea Watch SIG. Perhaps you can write an article about this growing field, calling managers for quotes and opinions. Maybe you will contact the company to request that they sponsor a program or purchase an ad. You'll then have a rapport with someone at the company (or at least a name) that might later be helpful in a job search.

Power Up Your Resume

The skills and responsibilities that are part of your STC volunteer job will be assets you can stress in your company performance review, resume, and interviews. Here are just some of the attributes you can claim:

Leadership — The volunteer assignment will involve you being a self-starter and leader.

Professional Commitment — Your STC involvement shows that you are committed to the field of technical communications. It's not simply an area that you fell into with little professional interest.

Project Management — Managing a volunteer assignment from start to finish shows your project management skills and your ability to coordinate multiple resources, sub-tasks, and schedules.

Multi-tasking — Your work with STC performed outside of your normal work assignment strengthens your claim that you are able to multi-task and complete several important assignments at once.

Subject Matter Variety — If you want to write an article or plan a program about a subject that is apart from your normal area of expertise, you will show that you have an interest and ability in a variety of areas.

Here's How

Check out the STC-Boston Web site for a list of announced volunteer slots: www.stc-boston.org/chapter-info/jobs/volunteers.shtml

Don't stop there. Think about ways you'd like to contribute that might not be announced on the Volunteer List. Let's chat. Feel free to contact me at kkgg123@hotmail.com or simply introduce yourself at the next STC program.

“6 Tricks...” (continued from page 5)

level 1 headings from red to blue. Rather than change the color for each level 1 heading, simply change the color of the Heading 1 style and the new color automatically applies to every piece of text that uses the Heading 1 style.

You can save all your styles together in a style sheet file. RoboHelp automatically uses a style sheet called Default. You can modify it to meet your needs or create a new, custom one for your settings. Creating a custom style sheet offers another benefit. You can send the style sheet file to each developer in your group with instructions to use it. The result is a consistent look for each topic from each developer who uses that style sheet.

If other authors send you documents written in Word for import into RoboHelp, styles add another benefit. If the authors applied styles to their headings, RoboHelp can automatically break the Word document up into separate topics upon import. For example, you can tell Word to create a new topic every time it finds text in a level 1 and level 2 heading. This is a huge time-saver when you want to convert a 30 page Word document into separate topics in RoboHelp – much faster than doing so by hand.

Finally, consider that adding styles to your content is the first step is adding structure to that content. If you're moving toward XML-based single sourcing, structure is vital.

Style sheets aren't perfect. One problem is development discipline. With the formatting toolbar at the top of the screen, it's too easy to just use local (inline) formatting. But local formatting overrides style sheet formatting. So you have to develop the discipline to ignore the formatting toolbar or even hide it (select View/Toolbars and deselect Formatting).

Another problem is that your style sheet can fill up with “pseudo-styles” if you import documents that use styles that don't match those in your style sheet. For example, your style sheet may define Heading 1 through Heading 6. However, you're importing documents whose authors used Head 1 through Head 6 or H1 through H6. Those styles get added to your style sheet, which now contains 18 heading styles instead of 6. The long-term solution is to

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“The Curse...”(continued from page 7

So how do we exorcise this curse, given the benefits we can realize when engineers don't expect too much from us in the way of technical knowledge? A psychological remedy is to keep other people's beliefs from affecting our own beliefs. If engineers don't expect much technical expertise on our part, we don't have to lament their occasional condescension. Let them think what they like. The difficulty lies in lamenting their belief and believing that they're right. A degree of dependence becomes total dependence.

Here are some practical ways to escape the dependent state of mind:

- Make stuff up. Yes, you read that correctly. I was working on a pretty tight schedule in an area that was new to me, and my document still had a lot of information missing. When I told the project manager that my technical contacts weren't returning my calls, he told me to make things up. I told him I couldn't do that. He said sure you can. So I tried making some educated guesses and plugging them in. It turned out that my guesses were pretty close, and the people who knew the answers to my questions could easily correct my inaccuracies once they saw the material written down. As we all learn so often, we know more than we think we know.
- Treat your engineering colleagues as equals. Don't over-estimate their knowledge and skills. Then you become, in your eyes, a high-tech stenographer waiting to take dictation on matters that are largely beyond your comprehension. Treat collaborators as you would like them to treat you, and you'll find that you treat yourself better as well.
- Be as active as you can in seeking new knowledge. I know from long experience that it's difficult to find time to do much of that. Building up technical knowledge about the systems you work with, though, is a sure source of job satisfaction. Yes, we can claim a lot of expertise in the tools of the trade, and that's a source of some satisfaction, but I think the truly attractive thing about technical writing is the opportunity to learn about lots of interesting technologies, innovations and methods. We get to learn how things work.

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“6 Tricks...” (continued from page 6)

get the authors to use consistent styles. Until then, you have to review your style sheet periodically to check for and delete pseudo-styles. (Remember to change them in the topic files as well.) This is one of those housekeeping chores that's part of every project. Fortunately, it's an easy one.

Trick 4 – Avoid Special Effects

RoboHelp offers a range of DHTML-based special effects for text and graphics. They're fun to create (try the rock-and-roll effect on an image of a snake, for example). They're also fun to see...

Once.

Few things are more irritating than trying to find information, especially if you're in a hurry, and having to sit through a special effect that you've already seen, over and over. Furthermore, such effects rarely add much to the content, increase development, maintenance, and debugging work, and may not work on some formats or devices, a concern if you're single sourcing. So avoid special effects unless you're creating sales or marketing pieces that users will probably only look at once or twice.

Trick 5 – Generate Often

The more often you generate the output, the easier error correction will be. You'll have a smaller set of errors to correct each time you generate. Plus, if you're prone to making a particular error, the more often you generate the faster you'll spot and correct that error.

How often to generate depends on your preferences and PC. As a baseline, I generated a 2,400 topic WebHelp project, primarily text-based, on a 750 MHz laptop with 512 Meg of RAM in about 3 minutes. The same project took under a minute on a 2.6 GHz PC.

Such times will affect when you generate. You might decide that a generation time under a minute means you can generate any time you want, whereas a 3-minute generation time means you might only generate when it's time for a break. At the other extreme, a 20-minute generation time, which I've experienced, means that I would only generate at lunchtime. It's up to you.

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“...Programs” (continued from page 5)

organized so that you get a lot of other benefits in addition to the presentation.

- From 5:30 to 6:30, you can network with others to establish connections with others in our profession. It's fun getting to know our peers, and as you know, networking is a key element in finding out about career opportunities, as well as learning from others facing the same challenges you are.
- The “formal” part of the meeting starts with announcements of upcoming activities.
- There is also an opportunity to announce job openings (I have hired several people through contacts made at STC programs).

The programs also provide a good setting for finding out about opportunities to get involved in helping STC in a wide range of activities. Volunteering to contribute to making STC activities happen is very rewarding. But that's a whole other story!

What, You Haven't Attended an STC Program Yet?

If you haven't made it to an STC meeting, you've missed out on a lot.

It's easy to register: Just go to the [“Events” section of the STC-Boston Web site.](#)

All events are held at the Sheraton-Lexington Inn in Lexington, Massachusetts, unless otherwise indicated in the program schedule.

Admission is \$20 for STC members and \$30 for non-members. The late registration fee is higher. Special pricing applies to the End-of Year Celebration.

Tip of the Month.....

Whenever you land a new job, contact your references to tell them about it. They will be happy to hear that you got the position.

...President's Desk" (continued from page 4)

for members and \$10 for non-members, effective with the October program. This year's lineup of programs is excellent, and we hope you'll find them worth your while.

Finally, the reason we can offer such a broad range of activities and services is because of volunteers, starting with the Administrative Council and extending to committees working to offer you programs, SIGs, the Competitions, the Web site, the Job Bank, the *Broadside*, and more. Volunteers are the real strength of the Chapter. I feel my investment of time and energy in the Chapter and the Society has paid dividends over the years. Volunteering is a strategy I can recommend to you all.

I look forward to working for you, and with you, over the next year!

The Curse..." (continued from page 8)

Being active in knowledge acquisition means just what it says: read everything you can, talk with lots of people - not just SMEs, write thorough notes before and after your meetings, think about what you don't know and how you can learn it, think about what you do know and how you can extend it. More rapidly than you expected, you'll absorb more about your subject matter than you thought you could. Your active search and integration of new knowledge with old will make you an expert, too. Then let the SMEs think whatever they like.

...from Below" (continued from page 8)

A few years back I took a Webmasters' certificate program from a local university. It gave my career a good kick at a time I needed it. The interesting thing is that I really never became a Webmaster, but it sure is great to have that knowledge in my inventory of skills. Employers liked to see my interest in learning, too. I don't think it really mattered to them what the subject matter was; it showed that I was engaged and willing to learn. If you want to stay in this field for the near term, maybe it is time to sign up for that technical course to advance your skills and differentiate yourself from everyone else.

Personally, I do believe that many in STC want to do nothing more than be good technical communicators. And that is a great goal. Not all of us should move on to other things like information architecture, usability, or project management. Some writers simply want to be writers and some editors want nothing more than to edit. To stay in these areas, advanced technical knowledge is essential. The more you have; the better. Some of us will go on to those other disciplines, but it doesn't change the fact that we are all communicators and need to keep our skills - both technical and communication - fresh.

If you haven't been back to school in the last 3 years, it is time for you to give it serious thought. The STC Web site (www.stc.org/academic.asp) has listings of some educational programs that are meaningful to our field, but don't forget to check out your local colleges and universities. I just found out that there is a college in Massachusetts which is providing a very robust program in Communication and Information Science. And yet, even with years of Chapter experience in Massachusetts, I had never heard of this program. So the message is to get out there and turn over some stones to find some of the neat things going on in your own community.

I am about to embark on my next learning adventure - a Masters of Science, Human Factors in Information Design. I recommend that you do the same.

On the STC front, the transformation is progressing. If you haven't heard about the transformation or aren't clear on what is happening with the transformation, contact me or the Director of your choice for fur-

Continued on next column

...from Below" (continued from prev column)

ther information. If we don't have the answers, we probably know someone who does. Be sure to check out the transformation pages on the STC Web site www.stc.org/transformation/Default.asp. (NOTE: you do have to log in to get to this page.) The Web site is the authoritative source. There are still lots of transformation activities underway and the Board will be reporting out on the current status of our efforts soon after the September Board meeting. In addition, we are already planning sessions on the transformation for our annual conference in May. If there is something you want to see or hear from us, let us know.

Look for some changes in your membership renewal forms this year. We are beginning to roll out the new membership packages - Classic, Limited, E-Membership, and others - this fall. Again, if you have questions about these packages, contact me or another Director. In addition, the office will be able to answer any questions about the membership packages.

Finally, it is September. That means your Chapter is about to get into full gear. I've chatted with many of the Region 1 Chapter presidents and you have a great group of people working on your behalf. Get out and support them by attending Chapter events. It is a great way to network and keep up with your local technical communications community. In fact, volunteer! Most chapters will welcome you with open arms. And Chapter work is extraordinarily rewarding. So jump in and see what happens.

About the Society for Technical Communication

Mission: creating and supporting a forum for communities of practice in the profession of technical communication.

For more information, visit us online at:

Society for Technical Communication

www.stc.org

Boston Chapter

www.stc-boston.org

Looking... (continued from page 3)
ever present and efficient without being annoying.

Viewing Exhibits

Boston Chapter members had open access to the interactive exhibits of the Current Science and Technology Center and the Blue Wing. We wandered through the three floors socializing, viewing, and meeting old friends and making new ones.

Awards Ceremony

The highlight of any End-of-Year celebration is the awards ceremony hosted by the outgoing president, this year, Jim Liddington.

Two Chapter members received special recognition for their tireless contributions and devotion to the Boston Chapter. No surprise to anyone, Joan Wotkowicz and Marguerite Krupp received Carbrey/Landers Awards for exceptional volunteerism. Rich Feitelberg, our tireless webmaster, received both an ISP/Internet Heroics award and annual recognition for his commitment to maintaining www.stc-boston.org/.

Jim thanked the outgoing Council for their work and efforts this past year. And, we the membership thank you, Jim, for your willingness to serve and your commitment to offer your energies to the Boston Chapter.

Jim thanked all Chapter members for our participation, which gives us, members of the Boston Chapter, a reason for celebrating our third consecutive Chapter of Distinction Award.

Concluding the awards ceremony was the introduction of the incoming President, Steve Jong. We wish you the best of luck for next year, and I'm sure all members will do what they can to make 2004-2005 a great STC Boston Chapter year.

Wireless Technology Presentation

Ending the evening, Dan from the Museum staff gave a lively interactive multimedia presentation on new developments in wireless technology. To demonstrate the principles of and the importance of electromagnetic fields and waves, Dan started his talk by asking Wendy Boston and Craig Austin to break a magnet powered with a AA battery: they succeeded. Then Karen Giventer and Barbara Casaly

Continued on next column

Looking... (continued from prev column)
waltzed across the floor charging each other first as an electrical impulse and then as a magnetic force. Dan used the museum's impressive 4-screen monitor to teach us why wireless technology has become such an integral part of our lives.

Special Thanks

One of the most important events in the STC year are the competitions. For several years Ellen Liddington served as General Coordinator and has done an outstanding job. Supporting her were Denise Dennet managing the technical publications competitions and Carol Marsh Hobday and Joan Wotkowicz managing the online communication competitions. This writer has had no experience with the technical art competitions, but I'm sure Kathy Guarente offered equally as vigorous management. All have worked wonders to make the Boston Chapter a leader in entries and winners. "Thanks" goes to all the judges for their efforts and to Deanna Dysert, Patty Morin, and Wendy Yurick Wing for the STACIES Award Banquet, and thank you Patty Morin for coordinating the Online Awards Showcase held at the MathWorks in Natick.

Recognition Recipients

Council members—Donna Ayres, Michael Ball, Greg Bartlett, Helen Chen, Jon Harvey, Steve Jong, Ellen Liddington, Taryn Light, Anne Louiselle, Lynda Schiff, Ilana Sztaimberg, Dave Van Camp, John Welle.

Competitions committee—Cindy Currie, Mark Decker, Denise Dennett, Deanna Dysert, Mary Oliver Flebotte, Don Fournier, Kathy Guarente, Carol Marsh Hobday, Steve Jong, Cheryl Magadieu, Patty Morin, Barbara Patterson, Michael Pytlak, Barbara Rosenstroch, Steve Straight, Pam Taylor, Dave Van Camp, Wendy Yurick Wing, and Joan Wotkowicz.

Programs committee—Greg Bartlett, Barbara Casaly, Karen Giventer, Bill Gruener, Rick Lippincott, Angela McAlister, and Barbara Rosenstroch.

SIGS—Marie-Anne deWarren, Lori Gillen, Karen Giventer, Steve Greffenius.

Internet—Barbara Casaly

Broadside—Margaret Garcia-Nokes, and Christina Rothwell

Perspectives... (continued from page 3)
twenty-plus years in technical communication, change is the constant and that the standard models keep disappearing. Neil listed five possible trends that may provide opportunities. Doc groups can leverage some opportunities, and some opportunities individuals can use. He started with the most concrete and moved to the "far out."

Single Sourcing and Microsoft Word

Neil states, "Lots of companies are using Microsoft Word as a single-sourcing tool, and the users know only the basics". He recommends that the doc group create short courses teaching Microsoft Word. Also, he recommends advocating style sheets by either creating style sheets or showing others how to create style sheets. Neil believes that technical communicators will win the hearts of cost conscious managers when those managers realize the ease and speed of global changes using style sheets.

New Ways of Presenting Information in a Visual World

The world is using more digital cameras and phones, and those devices make taking a picture of a failed part or unique behavior easy. A quick picture sent to tech support can speed a resolution. Neil recommends that technical communicators think of new ways to use cameras and phones and digital pictures to distribute information.

Information Retrieval for Single Sourcing

One of the important elements of single sourcing is information retrieval or retrieval by keywords. Creating keywords is very similar to indexing, and technical communicators are indexers, identifiers of keywords. To find new opportunities, consider employers who could potentially need someone to create valuable keywords for them.

Increasing the Doc Group's Involvement in Standard Setting

The regulatory impact of legislation like the Sarbanes-Oxley Bill requires many companies to document information and procedures once known by word of mouth. The organization and presentation of information is a natural for technical communicators.

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Policies and Procedures for Non-High Tech and Non-Regulatory Companies

For consultants by choice, Neil believes we can approach a whole class of organizations who for the first time are putting content online. Those organizations are banks, brokerage firms, and insurance companies, and the content they’re putting online is policies and procedures.

Taryn Light realizes that many of us are without employment, and she addressed “How to Survive Emotionally, Physically, and Financially during Unemployment.” Taryn provided a checklist of unemployment “To Do’s.” Her list is innovative, creative, practical, and positive. Taryn made no bones about the fact that unemployment is still somewhat gloomy but she hoped her list would help us stay positive. The following are highlights.

Emotionally

- Tell your friends and family about your “between” situation. If they know, they may be able to help.
- Update your resume and create two or three versions each with a different focus.
- Write your elevator speech (who you are in 30 seconds) and practice, practice, practice.
- Create a job search journal and update it daily.
- Contact The Career Place in Woburn (781-932-5500). If Woburn isn’t close, ask for the closest Career Place. It’s a free service of the state.
- Attend free workshops at The Career Place.
- If someone treats you to lunch, write a thank you note, put their name on a list, and when times are better, you can return the treat.
- Do free things with your family like visiting a museum with a free pass from the library.
- This author would add to the list: Find a friend, counselor, therapist, and talk about the feelings.

Physically

- Get up, get dressed, and go outside of the house—every day.
- Get exercise, like taking a walk.

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“6 Tricks...” (continued from page 7)

Trick 6 – Use Forms to Solicit User Feedback and Track Usage

We never get enough user feedback. Is the help useful? Would users change anything in it? Do users even know the help exists? Depending on your situation, you can solicit feedback in two ways. You can create a user feedback form and, if you have RoboHelp’s Pro version, you can use the usage logging and tracking feature.

User Feedback Forms

It’s easy to create user feedback forms in any version of RoboHelp. Create the questions as a topic (or use Word or Framemaker and then import the question file into RoboHelp), and use RoboHelp’s Insert/Form and Insert/Form Elements features to activate them. RoboHelp’s form tool is limited compared to a dedicated forms package, but it’s perfect for the kinds of feedback we usually want - typos, format problems, inaccuracies, extra index entries, and so on. The biggest challenge is to keep the form short and focused.

An online form also fixes a common problem with paper feedback forms – the fact that no one uses them. The typical paper feedback form is just too much trouble to fill out; you have to copy it, fill it out, fold it, put it in an envelope, etc. But online forms are almost effortless. They can be filled out and sent with just a few clicks, so people are far more likely to use them. And offering rewards for responding, such as a T-shirt or the silly toys given away at conferences, can help increase your feedback rates.

RoboHelp Pro’s Usage Reports

If you have RoboHelp Pro, there’s another set of reports at your disposal. These reports present information about seven categories of information:

- Unanswered Questions – Questions that users type for which they don’t find an answer.
- Frequently Asked Questions – Questions that users ask most often.
- Areas Requiring Help – Areas about which users ask questions most often.
- Frequently Viewed Content – Topics that users view most often.
- Usage Statistics – Information about when users are using the material. This might indicate a need for more server capacity in

Continued on next column

“6 Tricks...” (continued from prev column)

response to user complaints about slow access at 9 AM, for example.

- Question Trends - The number of answered versus unanswered questions over time.
- Errors - Various help system errors.

These reports are pre-defined, unlike the user feedback form. You can’t tailor them; you can only generate them. However, they offer an enormous amount of information that you can get by simply running the forms, as opposed to having to wait for a user to fill out a feedback form.

The beauty of using the two types of forms, if you can, is how they complement each other. The Pro forms provide a lot of usage information without your having to do anything, but the format is fixed. The user feedback form can be tailored to seek out any information you want and, by giving users a place to type free-form text, may even give you information that you never thought to look for.

Conclusion

The comparatively crude help authoring tools of the mid-1990s required that developers spend much of their mental effort just running the tool. Today’s tools have eliminated most of that requirement and allowed developers to focus on the important things – the project and the content. But increasing project size, along with ROI and time-to-market requirements have made things more complex again. “Best practices”, like the “top 6 tricks” help us control that complexity and get out of the office on weekends.

About the Author

Neil has 25 years experience in technical communication, with 19 in training, consulting, and development for various types of online documentation and tools including WinHelp, HTML Help, CE Help, JavaHelp, RoboHelp, and some now known only in legend. Neil is a columnist and frequent speaker for the STC and other groups, a senior member of the STC’s Boston Chapter, the creator and manager of the Beyond the Bleeding Edge stem at the STC’s annual conference, and an Associate Fellow of the STC. Neil provides training, consulting, and development for online help and documentation, XML, and single-sourcing through Hyper/Word Services of Tewksbury, MA. He can be reached at nperlin@concentric.net, www.hyperword.com.

“Perspectives...” (continued from page 10)

- Go to bed at a reasonable hour and keep a regular schedule.
- Eat wholesome food, not junk, and drink lots of water.
- Save money on services: an example, go to the Middlesex Community College, 44 Middle Street, Lowell for very reasonably priced dental services (978-656-3250 or 781-280-3250).

Financially

- Stop making unnecessary purchases: buy only what you need.
- Work a part-time job. (You can earn up to 1/3 of unemployment compensation without a penalty.)
- Put your credit cards in a drawer or safe place—and out of convenient reach!
- Look for “Buy One, Get One Free” coupons: check local advertising flyers.
- Shop with coupons.
- Have three meatless meals a week, which will save \$25 a week, \$100 a month, \$1200 a year.
- Sell stuff on eBay.
- Join Small Business Service Bureau (SBSB) to get medical insurance. To become a small business, apply at your town hall and fill out a form for a d.b.a. (doing business as).

The proceeding is the short list. For more great tips, contact Taryn at taryn.light@verizon.net

Ed Alexander, an executive sales coach, who helps people boost their professional profile, opened his time by stating that he would tell us exactly what he would tell us if each of us were his client. He created a profile boosting campaign, which includes

- Planning
- Marketing ourselves
- Analyzing cash flow
- Networking
- Researching companies and industries
- Creating marketing brochures
- Conducting progress reviews
- Honoring battery maintenance

Ed expanded:

Continued on next column

“Perspectives...” (continued from prev column)

1. Create a plan.
2. Ask how long it will take to get to there from here, how long can I live on my savings.
3. Mark these dates on the calendar and make changes when those dates arrive.
4. Don’t let them slip.

Ed emphasized the need for a consistent, well-planned marketing campaign. Besides keeping the marketing brochures up-to-date, marketing includes additional efforts: volunteering especially for high visibility task forces, writing articles, speaking. And, the marketing techniques tie in with networking. The more people know who you are and what you have to offer the better the chances for finding the opportunities. Marketing brochures for an individual include resume, business cards, stationary, and photographs, but we should think of them as marketing and not just things we pass out.

As Ed introduced the concept of progress reviews, he shared that he is “soft on people and tough on results.” He recommended that we conduct progress reviews. Conduct them with a coach, or a friend who acts as a coach, or alone if need be, but conduct them. His final point, battery maintenance, was equal to Taryn’s point about keeping emotionally fit.

Before the speakers, Steve Jong introduced himself. He is the 2004-2005 Chapter president. Greg Bartlett announced that MathWorks in Natick is hiring and looking for technical communicators with experience documenting programs or with a math background. If you have either of those qualifications, contact Greg at: Greg.Bartlett@mathworks.com.

The Broadside Staff

The *Boston Broadside* is published six times throughout the calendar year and would not be possible without the hard work of dedicated volunteers. I would like to thank the following people for their contributions.

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.....

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- Greg Bartlett
- Karen Giventer
- Steve Jong
- Steve Greffenius
- Bill Gruener
- Neil Perlin

Thanks a bunch!

Jon Harvey
Managing Editor
Boston Broadside

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Write for the Broadside

The *Boston Broadside* encourages Chapter members to share their skills, thoughts, and ideas with other professionals in the Chapter.

If you would like to write for an upcoming issue of the *Boston Broadside*, send an email message to: bostonbroadside@yahoo.com.

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