Letter from the President

A New Profession For Those Tough Times

By Catherine Titta Buerkle

You’ll never guess what’s new with me! I’ve ditched the technical communication profession (well, temporarily, anyway.)

I am now an official amateur subject matter expert (SME) in the area of rottweilers. Yep, that’s right, after about 100 hours on the Internet and a four-month and six-state search, the perfect “rottie” puppy has come home to live with us.

Her name is Bella, and she’s bright, happy, and very, very calm—a perfect companion for napping at my feet while I telecommute from my home office. (And yes, it’s tempting to lie down and catch a few Zs right next to her, but usually, duty calls.)

Teaching Old Dogs...

In addition to being a rottweiler SME, I’m now a trainer—obedience training, of course. We, or rather, I, have had two lessons so far.

There’s nothing as humbling as being a student again, is there? Both Bella and I feel the pressure to absorb the information and perform. Well, at least I do. She can be easily distracted with a chew toy at this age.

Anyway, going through the obedience training is kind of like starting over in a new profession. Learning the lingo, walking the walk, talking the talk, etc.

Breaking Into a New Field

Speaking of new professions, this past month I answered three or four e-mails from technical communicator wannabes. Boy, in this economy, I can’t imagine starting off in a new profession—or in the case

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of one guy, starting out in your first profession.

The competition is still tough for job openings in techcomm. The details I’ve heard is that a job opening often garners over 200 résumés. How can you stand out in that crowd?

Here are some of the pointers I gave to one person (a student looking for an entry-level position) who wanted advice:

- What does your portfolio look like? I’d avoid school papers from coursework, unless it’s clippings from the school paper. Do you have any technical writing samples? If not, try to rewrite something that already exists.
- If you don’t have any samples, take an existing manual (say Microsoft Word) and pick three to four pages. Take those pages and reread them—edit, rewrite, redesign. Then you’ve got “before” and “after” samples to walk an interviewer through what you can do on the job.
- Your cover letter should be extremely strong, to make up for the entry-level résumé.
- Consider volunteering for a non-profit organization to write their policies and procedures—or a manual for their computer system and processes. That work can count on your résumé as a “job.”

- Network, network, network. The quickest way to get a job or hear about one is to meet other technical communicators (for example, at an STC meeting).
- Consider volunteering for STC—you probably won’t get any great samples for your portfolio, but other more senior members will get to know you, and your work ethic, and could consider recommending you for a job.
- It’s really the personal connections that get your foot in the door, and the writing samples that get you the job. So work on both those fronts, and you’ll break into the field. It just takes time, so be patient and hang in there!

Do Not Try This At Home

While I hardly consider myself a professional rottweiler trainer after only two lessons, I will say that the networking (via e-mail) and bit of pleading that I did the past few months really paid off when it came to finding the perfect dog. Maybe finding the perfect technical communication job isn’t too different—you just need some good connections, a lot of diligence (and the pleading can’t hurt, either.)

Drop me a line at ctittabuerkle@yahoo.com, particularly if you have any dog training tips. Thanks for listening.

Tips and Tools

Favorite Microsoft Word Tricks

By Gina Tecos

As you get back into your projects after the holiday break, here are some great tips to jump-start the New Year. Many thanks to the Technical Communications staff at Creative Solutions for these helpful hints!

A more efficient search

Press CTRL+PAGE UP or CTRL+PAGE DOWN to find the previous or next occurrence of whatever you’re searching for. (This handy feature allows you to close the Find dialog and continue your search.)

Zoom, zoom, zoom

For those times when you need to zoom in quickly, or zoom out quickly; hold down the CTRL key and use your mouse wheel. (This works well in Outlook, too!)

Repeat the last command

Press the F4 key to execute the keystroke/command/function you last performed in the open document.

Where you left off

Press Shift+F5 to go to the place in the doc where you last made a change. For example, I’m on page 20, when I realize I need to leave for the day. As long as I make a change on page 20—even if it’s just deleting a space and retying it—when I open the document the next day and press Shift+F5, Word will take me to page 20, right where I made the last change.
It’s November . . . it’s rainy and gloomy. I park my car outside the crypt, armed with a pen and a combination. I’m wondering about the others who went before me . . . will I find their remains or did they make it out alive?

I really thought I had the makings of a great novel when I set out to investigate the Ann Arbor storage locker containing years of our chapter’s history and memorabilia, but I was sorely disappointed when I unlocked the locker door and took a peek inside. No skeletons in that closet . . . not even cobwebs! Instead I found a stack of file drawers and bins, all organized and clearly labeled. Obviously someone had been here before me, and obviously that someone was a lot more organized than I! Truth be told, the only thing scary about the storage facility was the bathroom. But that’s another story!

So, what did I find in all those drawers and file boxes? Well, unfortunately, I didn’t find any photos of people with lampshades on their heads! In fact, there was a notable lack of photos in the crypt. But there is a lot of history in (surprise, surprise!) written form—old newsletters, old meeting minutes, old membership directories, etc.

After sorting through some of the earliest meeting notes, I’ve confirmed that the first meeting of our chapter was on February 28, 1957. Back then, our organization was actually called the Society of Technical Writers and Publishers and our chapter had a whopping 12 members that first year! By 1963–64, the number of members grew to 105. The organization appears to have had its ups and downs after that, with its name changing to Society for Technical Communication and membership levels changing from year to year. In March of 2000, our Southeastern Michigan chapter reached an all-time high membership enrollment of 404 members.

As I try to piece together stories from our chapter’s history, I’m finding that a lot of the information is lacking one very important element—the date! Surprisingly, even some old telegrams I’m finding in the files aren’t dated. This realization is causing me to change some of my own working habits, to make sure I include a date in most documents I generate. Of course memos, letters, and draft documents are generally dated, but I was surprised by the number of documents I generate that aren’t. Even something as simple as a recipe should be dated—and you’ll be especially appreciative of those dates if you’re the one charged with assembling the family cookbook!

One name is popping out at me frequently as I sort through some of our chapter’s history: Ernest “Ernie” Mazzatenta. I’m thankful that he took the time to document so many of the chapter goings-on that I’m now poring through. Prior to visiting “the crypt,” Nancy Hoffman and Chris Juillet (both past presidents of our chapter) suggested that I get in touch with Ernie to inquire about some of our chapter’s history. That led to two phone interviews with Ernie, who has retired to North Carolina. Ernie is a man of many words, all of them quite interesting. So rather than try to recap everything here, I plan to feature my interview with Ernie in our next newsletter.

Stay tuned, and meantime: Happy New Year 2003!

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Member Profile

Chris Juillet

By Brian Stout

An STC Fellow since 1992, Christopher Juillet is a lawyer and former technical writer/consultant. He is currently working in small business, intellectual property, Internet, and estate planning law. During the 1980s and 1990s, Chris was highly active in STC. He served two terms as chapter president, as well as various other chapter leadership roles, and was instrumental in forming the Consulting and Independent Contracting Professional Interest Committee in 1989. He also served as Assistant to the President for Professional Interest Committees (now Special Interest Groups) at the international level for three years.

Chris has written several hundred user guides, training programs, reference manuals, and articles as a technical communicator. These days, Chris works with legal clients to help them form and run small businesses, protect their intellectual property, and plan for their futures. He says he enjoys working as a lawyer because he has the opportunity to see and meet with clients who benefit from his work. “It’s very much like technical communication, but instead of learning and explaining computer hardware or software, I’m researching and analyzing legal issues, then advising my clients as to how to most effectively address those issues.”

Chris says his skills in technical communication are essential to meeting the demands of his law practice. His goal is to help people address and meet their needs within the context of the legal system. He finds that skills such as conducting interviews and performing research, understanding the client’s interests, balancing those needs and interests against what is possible, and crafting a solution that best serves these interests are invaluable skills in both law and technical communication.

Currently, Chris’s law practice focuses on small business, contract, copyright, trademark, and Internet law. He also provides estate-planning services to individuals and couples. He holds a B.A. in Journalism from the University of Michigan, and a J.D. from Detroit College of Law at Michigan State University.

Scholarship Detail

Applicants for the the STC scholarships described in the display ad below must have completed at least one year of post-secondary education, be full-time students, and should be studying communication of information about technical subjects. The awards may be used for school tuition and expenses.

Applications must be accompanied by a transcript, letters of recommendation from two faculty members in the field of technical communication, and (very important) a 3-page essay stating career goals, interests, achievements. Resumes are counted as part of the 3 pages.

Applicants are judged on academic record, experience with technical communication, and potential for contributing to the field of technical communication.

SCHOLARSHIP APPLICATIONS AVAILABLE

Each year, STC offers scholarships to full-time graduate and undergraduate students pursuing careers in technical communication.

Four awards of $1,000 each will be granted for academic year 2003-2004.

Application deadline is February 15, 2003.

Application forms and instructions are available from the STC office:

901 N. Stuart Street, Suite 904
Arlington, VA 22203-1822
703-522-4114
www.stc.org
STC/SM Networking Lunches

STC/SM members gather for lunch each month to meet other technical communicators for professional networking and job sharing information. All interested technical communicators are welcome to attend in addition to STC/SM members. RSVPs are appreciated in order to secure sufficient table space.

Ann Arbor/Washtenaw County

Gatherings start at 11:30 a.m., but arrivals are welcome at any time. Contact Kathy Carter at 734-475-5865 (bluehoo@comcast.net) for more information or to be added to the e-mail reminder list. Networking lunch information is also available on the STC/SM web site. Note that dates and locations are subject to last-minute change.

2003 schedule to date:

January 23  Café Zola
February 26  Gourmet Garden
March 27    Café Marie
April 30    Red Robin
May 22      Seva
June 25     Olive Garden
July 24     Rio Bravo
August 27   Real Seafood

Oakland and Wayne County Area

Lunches will take place on the scheduled day beginning at 11:45 a.m. and ending not later than 1:00 p.m. If you would like to host a lunch (send out reminders, call the restaurant, welcome people to the table), contact Lynnette Pryce at 248-737-7300 ext. 22004. For more information or to reserve a spot, e-mail Lynnette at lynnette.pryce@compuware.com by 5:00 p.m. the day before.

2003 schedule to date:

February 5  Big Fish II (Stephenson Hwy, Troy/Madison Hts.)
March 12    Big Buck Brewery (Opdyke Rd., Auburn Hills)
May 7       Bonfire Bistro (Hagerty/7 Mi., Livonia)
June 12     Chili’s (Ford Rd., Dearborn)
July 9      Mr. B’s (Main St., Royal Oak)
August 14   Pegasus (Monroe St., Detroit)

Deadline: February 11

March-April issue of TECH comments

E-mail submissions to Lanette.Cornwell@buckeye-express.com

How To Join the STC/SM Listserv

1. Go to the Listserv web site at: http://lists.stc.org/cgi-bin/lyris.pl?enter=stcsme-l%20
2. Click Join stcsme-l
3. Type your e-mail address in the appropriate field. Your e-mail address is required for participation in the Listserv.
4. Specify optional information as desired, or click Save. Your submission will be confirmed.

January-February 2003
November Meeting Report

The Impact of Education on Technical Communication Careers

By Anne Clark and Maryann Bowen

For those of you interested in furthering your technical communications career through education, this meeting was extremely informative. All five speakers drew from their experience in industry and academia to address the following questions:

• What trends do you see in the field of technical communication in industry as well as academia?
• What are your recommendations for furthering one’s technical communication career?

Lisa Veasey, Instructor and Program Advisor of the Scientific and Technical Communications Program at Washtenaw Community College (WCC), and Ann Blakeslee, Professor and Director of Writing Programs in the Department of English, Language and Literature at Eastern Michigan University (EMU), and Brian Pedell, Director of the Technical Communication Program at Lawrence Technological University (LTU), all mentioned that when they entered the field in the 1980s, they all had degrees in other fields. There were very few degree programs in technical communications. People employed as technical writers had training and experience in various fields, usually related to science or technology. Ann Blakeslee recalled attending her first STC meeting in the mid-80s and finding herself in a room full of (mostly male) engineers. People with English degrees and training as writers were generally employed as proofreaders.

In the last ten years or so, concurrent with the growth in technology, there has been a proliferation of certificate and degree programs in technical communications, many based on digital media. Now, a degree in the field is almost a requirement for employment. Lisa Veasey commented that “employers have found that those with technical communication degrees can get up to speed and complete the task at hand faster than those without.” Adam Conrad, Technical Recruiter for Resource Technologies Corporation, and Toni Pollock, Account Manager for Jawood Management Associates (and adjunct professor at LTU), concurred that employers now expect a degree or certificate in the field.

Skills Employers are Looking For

So, what skills are employers looking for with this degree? Clearly, students of technical communications must learn more than language skills. Lisa Veasey listed the following:

• Oral and written communication skills (still the most important)
• Project management skills (also extremely important)

Who Could We Be?

Toward the end of the meeting, the group brainstormed what different kinds of things technical communicators might find themselves doing in their careers. Take a look at this list and consider what an exciting field we’re in!

• Documentation specialist
• Web site designer
• Content developer
• Quality assurance analyst
• Customer support representative
• Corporate communicator
• Grant and proposal writer
• College instructor
• Product planning analyst
• Planning and development consultant
• Project manager
• Business analyst
• Corporate trainer
• Marketing communicator
• Journalist
• Information architect
• Policy and procedure writer
• On-line help developer
• Producer for videos and multimedia programs
• Writer for user manuals of all kinds
• Newsletter editor
• Scientific writer
• Sales and marketing communicator

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- Ability to obtain information from subject matter experts and communicate it well to others.
- “Tools” skills—fundamental programming knowledge, and expertise with the most popular software package. Brian Pedell added to the list some “big picture” skills:
  - Ability to analyze and identify questions, issues, and possibilities associated with a task or project
  - Advanced research and interviewing skills—knowing how to obtain hard-to-find information
  - Project planning skills
  - Process development skills—how to identify and address contingencies in a process, asking “what if” questions
  - Problem resolution skills

Should you go back to school?

If so, how should you prepare for the experience? The panelists offered the following suggestions:

- Determine what you want to do with your career. Depending upon your goals, you may need only a few specific courses rather than a full degree program.
- Research programs to find the one that will best help you meet your goal. In addition to course content, consider cost, flexibility, and makeup of faculty and student population.
- Focus on the subjects that universities are best equipped to teach (e.g., fundamental research and writing skills, business and project management); you can get training in the most current software tools through other means.
- Keep in mind that learning “does not come in a box.” Learning and education are lifelong processes. If you decide not to pursue a degree, you might consider obtaining a professional certification.

Regardless, you should commit to continuing education through workshops, seminars, and individual courses.

In short, take Toni Pollock’s advice: “Determine where you want your career to go, look for change, expect it, and embrace it.”

Thanks to our November speakers! Above: Brian Pedell (Lawrence Technological University), Ann Blakeslee (Eastern Michigan University), Lisa Vesey (Washtenaw Community College). Below: Adam Conrad (Resource Technologies Corporation) and Toni Pollock (Jawood Management Associates).
January Meeting Preview

The Business of Freelancing

By Cecilia Lorenz

The economy is soft. You’re laid off (or expecting a layoff). You’re sitting at home or at your desk wondering what to do next. You can knit your brows, drum your fingers and search monster.com, or . . .

Start thinking about becoming an independent business owner. The days of being a “one-company-employee-for-life” are gone. Even if you work for another company right now, start imagining yourself as a one-person company—Professional Person, Inc.—a business with skills and contacts ready to service a wide variety of technical communication clients, both internal and external to the company. At our January meeting, you’ll learn how others are making the “Business of Freelancing” work for them and whether you have what it takes to do the same. We’ll hear from two guest panelists who have started their own businesses and are maintaining successful careers as independent business owners and contractors.

We’ll hear insights from:

Mary Jo David, Write Away Enterprises. Mary Jo is not only the STC/SM Vice President but also a successful one-person business communication shop set up as a sole proprietorship. Mary Jo will share with you the highs and lows of starting and operating your own business. Write Away was founded in 1997, and since then, Mary Jo has ridden the crest of a booming economy and faced the challenges of a slowdown as well. Find out what she has learned about accounting, marketing, and just plain managing a business, while at the same time getting the actual work done.

Harold “Speed” Gant, Special Events Management and Consulting specialist and member of the Small Business Administration’s SCORE (Service Corps of Retired Executives), will share his 40+ years of experience as an independent consultant and business owner. Speed has not only successfully owned and operated a thriving events consulting firm, but has also serviced other business owners as a Freelancing.” It just may be the start of something big!

Catherine Titta Buerkle, Consultant. Catherine is an independent usability and technical communication consultant, freelancing on her own after running a successful business (ArborComm, Inc.) for six years. As President of ArborComm, she won the Best Small Business of the Year award for 2000 from the State of Michigan Small Business Development Center. Titta Buerkle can explain the fun and pitfalls of hiring employees and running complex projects with virtual teams, and provide guidance on how to get your business going without letting it get you back. Catherine is also the current President of the STC/SM chapter.

So get focused, get determined, and get over to the January 2003 STC/SM meeting, “The Business of Freelancing.” It just may be the start of something big!

February Meeting Preview

Writing in the Medical and Science Industries

By Cecilia Lorenz

You’ve documented software applications, manufacturing systems, business processes, task-specific equipment and other vital tools. But have you found your niche? Where else can your well-honed technical communication skills take you?

Join us at the February 19th, 2003, meeting of the Southeastern Michigan Society for Technical Communication and learn about medical and science writing from the professionals. Our guest speaker, Ricia Hughes of the American Medical Writers Association, will share her wealth of knowledge and experience regarding:
Telephone Seminars Continue in 2003

What is a telephone seminar?
A telephone seminar is much like a large conference call in which the speaker gives a presentation over the phone. To participate, you simply dial the 800 number, enter your personal identification number, and you’re connected. You then just sit back and listen to the presentation and join in the lively Q & A session that follows.

What are the benefits of telephone seminars?
- They can save you time and money.
- You can listen to speakers without having to travel a distance to see them.
- You pay per site and not per person, so the cost per person can become almost negligible, depending on the size of your group.

How much do they cost?
- U.S. site, $145 U.S.D.
- Canadian site, $160 U.S.D.
- Overseas site, please contact the STC office.
- An additional $10 will be charged for registrations received less than five days before the seminar.

Seminars scheduled for 2003
- January 8, 2003, “Organizing and Leading a Software User Interface Design Team,” led by Diane Feldman and Carla Merrill
- February 5, 2003, “Creating Persuasive Executive Summaries,” led by Stacia D. Kelly
- March 12, 2003, “Making the Complex Clear and Pretty,” led by Phylise Banner
- March 19, 2003, “Evaluating an Index (even if you only have five minutes),” led by Seth Maislin

All seminars take place from 1:00 –2:30 p.m. EST. For more detailed information about or to register for any of these telephone seminars, please visit http://www.stc.org/seminars.asp.
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Whatever It Takes

by Mike Murray
Orlando Chapter President

When I spoke recently about why it’s so important to renew your STC membership, and especially important during tough economic times, little did I know that the very next day the Society office would distribute e-mail invitations to begin renewing online right away!

Renewing was easy for my co-worker and me. Throughout the year, we mention STC and how it benefits what we do at our jobs. When it came time to renew, it was just a matter of confirming the obvious. A brief e-mail to our supervisor resulted in an immediate “Yes!”

It really doesn’t take much thought to realize why, regardless of how good or bad the economic conditions, severing your ties with STC is a very bad move. If, for some reason, my employer had been unwilling to pay my $125 renewal, I would have done whatever it took to renew it myself—whatever it took! Why?

Lifeline
I think of STC as my lifeline to the technical communications profession. If not for the connections that come from mailing lists, meetings, and publications, I would feel like I’m on a desert island, wondering what wonderful new things are developing in the world around me. I couldn’t stand that! I pride myself in delivering the best possible products and services to my customers, and if I’m not keeping in touch, I can never be sure if I’m doing that. I owe myself and my customers a lot more!

Networking
I don’t know that I ever really valued networking quite as much as I do since joining STC. I’ve found out again and again just how small this world is as I’ve met people with similar interests who have energized me and changed my life in so many ways. I’ve seen time and time again members who have persistently networked and found technical communications jobs that make them excited to get up in the morning and start their work day. You can see it in their eyes in the chapter meetings. It’s extremely fulfilling, and I want more!

Friendships
While I certainly expected to develop new friendships in STC, I never ever expected that the friendships I would make in STC would become the best and richest I would have anywhere. The next time you see me, I invite you to look into my eyes and ask me about the friendships I’ve made in STC, and you’ll know that I’m not exaggerating in the slightest. I want to hang around these people for a long time, so you can be sure I’ll always renew my membership.

Well, those are my reasons, what are yours? Is it the high-quality publications? I literally read Intercom cover-to-cover every month. What a great magazine! Is it the Annual Conference? I think I’ve been to seven or eight, but who’s counting? Is it our chapter meetings with the quality content that you’ve asked for? Is it the chapter members themselves who are so energetic and who seemingly would do anything in the world they could to help you? Whatever the reason, it doesn’t take much thought to know that renewing your STC membership as soon as possible is a “no-brainer.”

Whatever it takes...

3rd Annual Worst Manual Contest

Submitted by Jim Desmond,
STC Sr. Member
jimd@tecstandards.com

Just a reminder for the holiday season: when all else fails, read the manual!

Have you ever been so frustrated with a manual or set of instructions that you cursed the author and wished you had never bought the product in the first place?

Does this sound familiar? How about $100 for your frustration? Technical Standards, Inc. (TSI), a Southern California documentation services company, is offering $100 for the winning entry in their third annual Worst Manual Contest.

Send a manual or set of instructions that is hard to understand, poorly written, or just plain wrong. Send it if it has bad grammar, too much legalese, is poorly translated, or has missing steps. If it is the worst entry, you will win $100.

You don’t have to send the whole manual; excerpts of the worst parts are okay. The deadline for submissions is January 31, 2003, so check those holiday gifts for potential entries. Entries must be in English. For complete contest rules, see the TSI Web site at www.tecstandards.com. The winner will be announced on the Technical Standards web site on February 28, 2003.
Conferences and Meetings of Interest

February 26-28, 2003
USITS ‘03
Seattle, WA
www.usenix.org/events/usits03/
To bring together a diverse collection of researchers and engineers to help define the future of Internet applications, technologies, and systems

March 14, 2002
Technicom
Twinsburg, Ohio
Jill McCauslin
jmccauslin@radcominc.net
One-day conference hosted by Northeast Ohio Chapter STC. Keynote by Judy Glick-Smith, “Embracing Change: Finding New Ways to Apply Your Technical Communication Skills.”

March 19, 2003
Conference of Association of Teachers of Technical Writing
New York, NY
www.attw.org/default.asp
In conjunction with the College Composition and Communication Conference

April 11, 2003
Spectrum 2003
Rochester, NY
Kathryn Wise
hhkwise@frontiernet.net
Annual conference of the Rochester STC chapter

May 18-21, 2003
STC@50
Dallas, TX
www.stc.org/conferences.asp
50th Annual Conference of the Society for Technical Communication