

SAN FRANCISCO

April 2004

ActiveVOICE

NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION, SAN FRANCISCO CHAPTER

April 21st Meeting

Non-Fatal Errors: Creating Usable, Effective Error Messages

Presenter: Emily Wilska

“Memory requests for some applications may be denied.” “Error 404: File Not Found.” “Error on page.” It’s easy to identify what kinds of error messages don’t help users, but it can be tricky to avoid them, and even more of a challenge to create the opposite: error messages that give users a clear indication of the problem, offer information to help them fix it, and provide tips on how to avoid the situation in the future.

In this workshop, we’ll explore what makes some error messages so bad, the simple steps that can make them better, and how good error messages can help make a technical communicator’s job easier. We’ll also look at ways of communicating to managers the value of good error messages—in terms of reduced support costs, happier customers, and better products.

Emily Wilska writes and edits various user assistance resources, including online help, on-screen text, user documentation, and error messages for MSN TV. She is also a volunteer copy editor for *Boxes and Arrows* (www.boxesandarrows.com) and helps maintain the San Francisco STC Web site.

May 19th Meeting

Stay Motivated and Thrive!

Presenter: Howard Miller

Technical communication has changed a lot in the last few years and will continue this way. How do you stay current and continue to grow in an ever-changing environment? This interactive presentation will explore how you can create the most success in your career—and in your life! Howard Miller is a professional Life Coach who is passionate about developing and coaching people to be the best they can be. In this program, he will combine lecture and exercises to help each of us get more motivated and excited about enhancing our careers.

Howard Miller has been training, consulting and coaching for over 15 years. In his extensive work with corporate and individual clients, he brings about in people the ability to supply capability for action. Miller firmly believes that if people were more accountable to themselves, they would have more self-respect, which would ultimately lead to a better world.

SEE INSIDE FOR MEETING TIMES, LOCATION, & MORE DETAILS!



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Repurposing Technical Communication

By Christine Holzbauer

Continually barraged with questions he did not have time to answer, the president of a condominium association, who is also a STC member, designed a website with FAQs for the residents, thus freeing-up his time to productively manage the complex. This is just one of the many examples provided by the attendees of January's STC meeting. The talk, given by award-winning technical communicator Mick Renner, Ph. D., energized participants to share their ideas on how technical communication can be extended to benefit their communities.

When technical communicators reach out to communities the results can be dynamic and unifying. Renner gave the example of a group of people who met regularly. Discussions tended to ramble, causing meetings to end much later than expected and leaving attendees exhausted. But creating an agenda improved the meetings by helping the group stay on track. As the meetings shortened, the participants' attention spans lengthened. Agendas also help speakers appear organized. This is just one of the numerous ways that technical communicators effectively use their skills. Renner started the audience discussion section with a story: At an auction, a French restaurant worker won the bidding on using Renner's expertise to write his resume. As a result, both Renner and the recipient benefited. Armed with his new resume, the bidder gained a good job, and Mick Renner enjoyed helping someone land a job. Attendees mentioned examples of how they applied their skills to the wider community. One STC member shared that she helped people in an organization get to know each other by interviewing them

and suggesting they write narratives that shared a little bit about themselves. After compiling the narratives and reading them at a meeting, people quickly became acquainted.

Another member explained how she resolved a problem using her technical communication skills. She worked with a group that could not reach consensus on a volunteer project. To facilitate communication, she drafted a document and presented it to them for discussion. After talking about the drafted document, the group was able to come to a resolution. In this instance, the drafted document and the technical writer reduced conflict to help bring about consensus.

As a teacher of visual design at UC Berkeley Extension program, Renner described interesting community projects undertaken by his technical communication students, which included creating a website for dispute resolution so that tenants in a co-housing situation could reach common ground, producing a guide for a wine and food tasting event to organize it, and helping to improve a website for the SPCA.

Renner spoke about the benefits of technical communication and briefly discussed how technical communicators differ from other writers. Technical writing is egoless, whereas other writing expresses the personality of the writer. Technical writing is not self-aggrandizing; it is by nature contributory.

The possibilities of technical communication in our communities are limitless. Simply put, technical communication bridges gaps and gets people to talk to each other, help each other, and work in teams.

Christine J. Holzbauer is a laboratory scientist and technical writer.

Moving From Commodity to Strategic Contributor

By Ricardo J. Cabello

To prosper—not just survive—in today’s economy, we must break out of the “anybody-can-write” mold in which we’ve allowed ourselves to be cast. We should be useful, rather than just be used. We must know our industry, including our competition; expand our knowledge of tools and technology with which we develop the products we make; and become better acquainted with the people in our industry—both our audience and our co-workers.

This was the theme of Andrea Ames’s presentation, entitled “*Transforming Your Career with the Economy and the Industry: Moving from Commodity to Strategic Contributor*,” at February’s meeting where she showed us how to rise above our current level of industry participation and understanding. A Technical Communicator and Information Architect for 20 years, a teacher and certificate coordinator at UC—Santa Cruz, and an STC board member, Ames gave us a model to follow in our rise from a “commodity” to a “strategic contributor:”

- Commodity
- Communicator
- Profit Maker
- Strategic Contributor

According to Ames, the work of today’s technical writer has been reduced to a **Commodity** level of appreciation and value: to package an inadequate product and accept for ourselves a lower wage for the same (or additional) work. We have been perceived by industry as less and less important in the past decade.

Technical **Communicators** do not write user manuals just because the marketing department “told us to make one.” We

design solutions to communication problems that confront our audience. When we strive to bridge the gap between a naïve or new client, we make our product easier to market. Rather than just creating online help, the Communicator “crafts user messages.” An excellent guide or resource for technical communicators is to simply attend STC meetings. Network with those that share similar concerns—and solutions!

The **Profit Maker** knows how to increase product value and reduce product release costs (without layoffs!). It was here, for example, that Ames recommended a class in managerial finance. By learning the tools and language used in our respective industry, we can better participate in meetings where our contributions can be placed in a more positive light. “Soak up knowledge,” said Ames. “Be thirsty for information. Drink up all the knowledge you can!”

The **Strategic Contributor** thinks beyond the bounds of the company and the product. The Contributor studies the competition and, therefore, knows the industry. She participates in activities that develop and nurture relationships with customers, including user groups, technical support, etc.

The bottom line is know the business you are in, speak the language, and know the people in your industry—both the clients and co-workers. Put yourself in a position to contribute, understand how to make your contributions known, and make alliances. You do not have to alienate anyone to achieve your goals.

Rick Cabello is a student at De Anza College, Cupertino. He can be reached at rickcabello@hotmail.com.

Our Meetings

When

Third Wednesday of every month.
6 pm: Networking and hors d’oeuvres; 7 pm: Program.

Where

Downstairs at the London Wine Bar:
415 Sansome at Clay.

Reservations

Make advance reservations at www.stc-sf.org. (Click Reserve Now.) Admission at the door is on a space-available basis.

Cost

With advance reservations:
\$10 STC members;
\$15 non-members; \$8 students.
At the door:
\$13 STC members;
\$18 non-members; \$11 students;
first-timers free with coupon
(from our Web site).

Directions

From BART

Get off at the Montgomery BART Station. Leave by the Sansome Sutter exit and walk straight ahead.

From the East Bay

Take the Bay Bridge (Hwy 80). Take the first exit, Fremont. Follow Fremont across Market, where it becomes Front. Go 1 block. Turn left onto Pine. Go 2 blocks. Turn right onto Sansome. Go 2 blocks.

From the Peninsula

Take Hwy 101 heading N. Continue on Interstate 80 heading NE. Take the 4th St./Embarcadero exit. Continue straight on Bryant for 1 block. Turn left on 3rd. Turn right on Folsom. Turn left on Fremont. Follow Fremont across Market, where it becomes Front. Bear right on Front. Turn left on Pine. Go 2 blocks. Turn right on Sansome.

From the North Bay

Take Hwy 101 heading S. Turn left on Broadway heading E. Go down Columbus heading SE. Bear right on Montgomery. Turn left on California. Turn left on Sansome.

Parking

The closest parking garage is at One Embarcadero Center. The entrance is located on Battery between Sacramento and Clay.

President's Notes and News

by Susan C. Becker

Susan Becker is a technical communicator and online help developer. She has 16 years of experience working primarily as a contractor in software development for the financial services and human resources industries. sbecker@codewords.com

Welcome to Our Chapter!

New Members

Jennifer Fong
Ilona Koren-Deutsch
Laura S. Miller
Yolande Y. Salyer
Patricia Vaughn

Transfer and Reinstated Members

Nadine Anderberg
Kathy L. Arizon
Jill Bentley
Mark Bernstein
Clifford V. Brooks
Don M. Falcone
Jessica E. Hart
Steve M. Rudman
Todd E. Smith
Lianne Takahashi
Nancy L. Weir
Jeffrey R. Wong
Ruth A. Wright

Congratulations to Dana Chisnell, our chapter's first STC Associate Fellow, an honor that recognizes senior STC members who have attained distinction in the field of technical communication. You may know Dana from her presentations at our chapter meetings, but you might not know that she also founded the STC's Practical Communication Committee, taught in the UC—Santa Cruz Extension Technical Communication certificate program, and co-authored two award-winning books. It's an honor to have an associate fellow in our chapter.

I'm also happy to announce that *ActiveVoice* has gone totally online. By discontinuing our print version, we save money on printing and postage and have an opportunity to expand and develop the newsletter. Let me know how you like it!

San Francisco Chapter Information

Web site: <http://www.stc-sf.org> **Phone:** (415) 820-1566 **Email:** info@stc-sf.org

Regional STC Chapter Meetings

San Francisco chapter meets the 3rd Wednesday of each month.

For details: www.stc-sf.org

Silicon Valley chapter meets the 4th Thursday of each month.

For details: www.stc-siliconvalley.org

Berkeley chapter meets the 2nd Wednesday of each month.

For details: www.stc-berkeley.org

East Bay chapter meets the 1st Thursday of each month.

For details: www.ebstc.org

North Bay chapter meets the 3rd Thursday of each month.

For details: www.stc-northbay.org

Sacramento chapter meets the 1st Wednesday of each month.

For details: www.stcsacramento.org

SAN FRANCISCO CHAPTER

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