

June 2004

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This printer-friendly version of the *ActiveVoice* includes the same content as the online newsletter on the chapter web site (<http://www.stc-sf.org>). The text has been reformatted to reduce the number of pages required to print the newsletter.

June 2004 Meeting -- Project Management for Technical Communicators: An Introduction

Presented by Tim Bombosch

The June meeting is on Wednesday, June 16, 2004, from 6:00 pm to 8:30 pm at the London Wine Bar in San Francisco's financial district. For details about the meeting location and instructions for purchasing tickets, see <http://www.stc-sf.org/stc-meetings.htm>.

About the Presentation

Increase your job satisfaction and your value to your company by improving your project management skills.

When I ask technical communicators to describe themselves, they almost always identify their writing, tool, design or technology skills. But when I ask them why projects succeed or fail, effective or ineffective project management practices lead the list of reasons they give.

Technical communicators have a unique set of skills to be effective project managers. By improving your project management skills, you can advance your career, improve the quality of your work, and increase your job satisfaction.

With this presentation, I want to explore our understanding of how important project management is to our success as technical communicators. I will describe some of the most important project management practices as they relate to technical communicators, share resources for project management training and certification, and discuss aspects of project management you feel are most important to your daily work.

About the Speaker

Tim Bombosch is a certified Project Management Professional (PMP) who has been teaching, publishing, and managing projects for over 15 years. He specializes in developing communication solutions for enterprise software systems, including help systems, guides

for end-users, system administrators, and software developers, as well as GUI design, wizards, and training materials.

Before becoming a technical communicator, Tim completed his PhD at Stanford University, where he wrote about film, theater, and philosophy of the Weimar Republic and Third Reich.

July 2004 Meeting -- Your Writing Samples Portfolio: A Personal Sales Kit & Career History

Presented by Lu Rehling

The July meeting is on Wednesday, July 21, 2004, from 6:00 pm to 8:30 pm at the London Wine Bar in San Francisco's financial district. For details about the meeting location and instructions for purchasing tickets, see <http://www.stc-sf.org/stc-meetings.htm>.

About the Presentation

A writing samples portfolio is a critical tool for career advancement. No technical communicator's resume and/or cover letter is complete without promising that the job (or promotion) seeker has a portfolio of writing samples available. Which means that every technical communicator needs to decide what to include, how to pull everything together, how to present the resulting portfolio well, and how to efficiently and effectively update it over time.

Together, we'll walk through a step-by-step process for doing all of that, plus address any of your questions about developing and using a portfolio. Please feel free to bring your own portfolio along and to share your ideas about portfolios as well.

About the Speaker

Lu Rehling is the Director and Advisor for the Technical and Professional Writing (TPW) Program at San Francisco State University. She has over fifteen years of professional experience as a writer, editor, trainer, manager, and consultant. Recently, during a two-year leave of absence from TPW, she was

Manager of Technical Publications at AvantGo, Inc. (since acquired by Sybase, Inc.) She has held staff positions with Film Counselors Inc. and Applied Digital Data Systems in New York; The Quaker Oats Company and Sealy, Inc. in Chicago; and Microwest Terminal Systems Inc. and Shipley Associates in Utah. She also has done freelance work as an independent contractor and consultant.

Lu has prior professional experience in higher education, beginning with teaching as a graduate student at The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, (where she earned her Ph.D., A.M., and A.B. degrees in English Language and Literature). Before joining San Francisco State University, she held teaching appointments at The University of Utah, Salt Lake Community College, and Westminster College.

March 2004 Meeting -- White Papers in Your Future: Persuasive, Informative Writing That Supports the Sales Cycle

Presented by Beau Cain

Reviewed by Marc Smircich

On March 17, 2004, Beau Cain gave an enlightening talk on why white papers are important for the future of technical communicators. He explained what white papers are and how they open opportunities to sell our communication skills to employers. Beau presented a small sample of the materials in his class on writing white papers, which he teaches at San Jose State's Professional Development Center. Beau is also the recently elected Region 8 Sponsor for the STC.

What Is a Business White Paper?

A business white paper is a marketing document for presenting persuasive content. It describes how a product, service, or new idea meets the needs of decision makers. In other words, it is a tool that decision makers use to evaluate a product or idea. (Government white papers are a whole different animal outside the bounds of this topic.)

Writing white papers requires switching to marketing communications. But as Beau pointed out, technical communicators have a full complement of transferable skills for marcomm. Both kinds of writing require knowing the audience, understanding the project requirements, mastering the product features, following style guides, and completing the cycle of planning, review, and approval.

Changing Times, Changing Markets

During the dot com boom, companies were focused on being the first to get product to market. Other considerations, such as development costs and profitability, were secondary. Employers were willing to spend lavishly to hire technical communicators to create user assistance for the products.

In the dot bust world, things are different. Profitability is now the primary focus. To cut costs, managers are no longer spending lavishly to hire technical communicators. In this environment, everybody's work must contribute to profits. And this is where white papers come into the picture. They allow technical communicators to create documents that describe how a product, service, or concept satisfies the needs of decision makers during all phases of the sales cycle.

Ten Types of White Papers That Open Up Doors

There are 10 types of white papers. Each has a different purpose and role in the sales cycle. Beau used Table 1 on page 3 to sum up the types of white papers.

Each type of white paper in this table points out an opportunity for technical communicators to increase their value to employers. Beau put it this way: "Technical communication professionals can insinuate themselves into all of these areas by writing white papers for each phase of the sales cycle." And that is a very good thing.

Marc Smircich is a technical communicator with over 15 years experience in documenting enterprise-wide systems for human resources, payroll, and financial applications. He is also the newsletter editor and treasurer for the San Francisco Chapter STC.

April 2004 Meeting -- Non-Fatal Errors: Creating Usable, Effective Error Messages

Presented by Emily Wilska

Reviewed by Keith A. Albert

Although error messages are everywhere, they are seldom as helpful as they could be, reported Emily Wilska at the April 2004 meeting. Why not? Error messages often contain technical jargon or potentially offensive terms, flag a problem without fully describing it, fail to suggest how to avoid it in the future, and end up confusing instead of assisting the user.

A better error message would timely deploy at an appropriate place; clearly describe the problem, its magnitude and its remedy (if one exists) in everyday language; not blame the user and quickly return her to her task. Even a modest amount of planning and elementary usability testing can pinpoint likely areas of difficulty for your likely users. Addressing these issues early on can help prevent users from encountering errors and a produce more directed, effective user documentation.

However, despite all precautions, there will always be errors. Some users read little or no text, different users interact variously with programs or websites, there often is not sufficient space for explanatory text, and technical communicators cannot always advise on software functionality, page flows and layouts.

When choosing a format, a technical communicator should consider the following three factors: the technical limitations of the documented program or website; the amount of information the user needs; and the quantity and type of user input required.

Short chunks of information are best handled in pop-ups, while larger amounts of information can be referred to a full-page text or split into smaller segments by using a pop-up with a *More Info.* button. If the number of requirements from the user is few (as in stating password rules), bulleted lists work well. Similarly, when the user can't fix the problem or only basic user action

Table 1: The Types of White Papers

Type	Function	Stage in Sales Cycle
Thought Leader	Establish the organization or product as a leader, define the playing field, set the agenda, and specify decision criteria. Establish the credibility and authority of the organization.	Early review
Business Benefits	Establish the reasons why the organization needs this product.	Early review
Competitive Review	Position product and differentiate from competitors.	Early review
Position Paper	Clarify the organization's position on an issue relevant to the purchase, such as a standard or regulation.	Early review
Corporate Overview	Position the company and define its strategy.	Early review
Evaluator's Guide	Provide a thorough explanation of features, functions, and positioning.	Early review and technical evaluation
Technical Review	Offer an in-depth discussion of technical issues that may become obstacles.	Technical evaluation
ROI Analysis	Provide a framework for evaluating the return on the investment.	Pricing and financing discussions
Implementation and Configuration Summary	Provide guidance on selecting the appropriate configuration of product and add-ons.	Detailed evaluation
Services Guide	Explain accompanying services and support programs.	Detailed evaluation

is required, pop-ups work best. More substantial user interventions are better served by a full page.

Error messages should clearly state what is wrong and quickly return the user to her task. Carefully consider how much information your audience needs to know and use task-oriented language. Furthermore, avoid Yes and No buttons because their prevalence and overuse causes many readers to simply click through without reading them. Imparting brief technical data may be of use if a technician will use it to troubleshoot the program. Finally, whenever possible, clearly state the action each button of the error message performs.

The tone of your error messages is enormously important to both the user's feeling about her interaction with your product (and consequently your product's subsequent reputation). Accordingly, error messages should never reprimand the user, but instead gently direct her towards corrective action. Error messages can employ a simple imperative, a fault-free declara-

tion or a combination of the two. In the password choosing example, a simple imperative message might be *Type a password that is at least 5 characters long*, a fault-free declarative, *Your password must be at least 5 characters long*, and a combination phrase, *Your password must be at least 5 characters long. Please type a password in the box below*.

In conclusion, the quality of the error messages written into your product has a huge impact on the reception of your program or website. Writing error messages that make sense helps reduce help and documentation. Additionally, bad error messages can run up huge costs in customer service and greatly reduce customer satisfaction. By emphasizing that good error messages are a sensible investment that will reap significant future rewards, technical communicators can encourage management and the development team to plan and budget for their inclusion.

Keith A. Albert is a technical communicator in the Bay Area.

Janet Bran and Ancilla Allsman receive Distinguished Chapter Service Awards

By Susan Becker

Congratulations to our two Distinguished Chapter Service Award winners: Ancilla Allsman and Janet Bran! The DCS Awards acknowledge the work of chapter members who provide exemplary service to the Society through their dedication to the chapter and its activities. Award winners are nominated by the chapter and approved by the Society's Board of Directors.

Ancilla Allsman has served continuously as the layout and production editor of our chapter newsletter, *ActiveVoice*, for six years. During that time, she provided continuity, working with five newsletter editors and five chapter presidents and not missing one of the 22 issues. Ancilla also served as our chapter vice president and has been a valuable member

of the program committee for several years. The citation on her award reads:

In recognition of your sustained contributions to the San Francisco chapter, especially your consistent support in the production of our chapter newsletter, *ActiveVoice*.

Janet Bran received her DCS Award jointly from the San Francisco and East Bay chapters, because of her involvement with both chapters. Janet recruited and leads the team that redesigned and maintains our chapter Web site. She is also a Web weaver for the East Bay chapter. She has served as president and treasurer for our chapter and treasurer for the East Bay. Her award reads:

In recognition of your ongoing commitment to the San Francisco and East Bay chapters, especially your leadership in improving the quality and usability of our chapter Web sites.

President's Notes and News

By Susan Becker

Chapter Scholarship Awarded to Nancy Weir

Each year our chapter sponsors a scholarship competition for students in the Technical and Professional Writing Program (TPW) at San Francisco State University. This year we awarded a \$1,000 scholarship to Nancy Weir.

One of the judges commented that Nancy's writing sample showed "how technical writers can contribute to an organization by providing instructions on how to use a general-purpose product for the specific needs of a company." Another used a phrase we don't often find associated with our writing: "elegant prose."

I first met Nancy riding the N Judah from our jobs downtown just before she started the program at SF State. I'm glad she is doing well in the program and that our chapter can provide support to writers like Nancy.

Chapter Elections

In May, we elected these officers for the year beginning July 1, 2004.

- President: Susan Becker (I'm back!)
- Vice President: Julia Cope
- Secretary: Larry Pastori
- Treasurer: Marc Smircich

There were also changes in non-elected volunteers. Tim Bombosch took over as programs manager and Jeff Scattini as announcements manager in March. Arianna Dogil stepped down as newsletter editor with the April edition, and Marc Smircich has taken over that role with our new online *ActiveVoice*.

My thanks to our out-going officers, Reyn Johnson, Ben Johnson, and Joseph Fong, and to all the volunteers who worked so hard to make this a good year for the San Francisco chapter.

STC Continues Transformation Process

I had the opportunity to attend the Annual Conference in Baltimore, supported in part by chapter funds. The main buzz at the meeting concerned the Transformation. We heard more details about how the Society is changing to better serve the members, including plans for different levels of membership like "classic" and "e." For a crash course in the transformation, you can read the two newsletters distributed at the Conference at www.stc.org/transformation.asp.

Annual Conference Hot, but Worth It

During the Conference this year, the temperature was in the high 80s outside, but pleasantly informative inside. Even if you didn't make it, you can review many of the conference presentations at www.stc.org/51stConf/sesMaterials.asp.

I enjoyed attending several sessions on Usability and Information Design including "Guerilla Usability for Tech Writers: Lowering the Water Instead of Writing about the Bridge" by Steve Krug, author of the Web usability guide, *Don't Make Me Think*. I learned that he doesn't look like his illustration in the book! (View his cartoon self and real

self on his web site, www.sensible.com, and judge for yourself.)

My favorite session was Ginny Redish's "Applying Research to Practice: What's Relevant Today?" in which she provided research results that support some of the practices I follow on the job. Her article in the June issue of *Intercom*, "Writing for the Web: Letting Go of the Words," covers many of these principles.

You can start planning now to attend next year's conference on May 8-11 in Seattle. That's much closer to home and quite a bit cooler! I hope to see you there.

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.

Editor's Emendations

By Marc Smircich

With the June edition of the *ActiveVoice*, I'm taking over for Arianna Dogil, who has done an exemplary job of getting the newsletter out on time for the last year. Now it's my turn to take on that task.

The Transition from Print to Online

The June 2004 edition of the *ActiveVoice* has a completely new look. For the last 3-1/2 years, the newsletter has used a print-based format with a fixed page layout that is exactly four pages long. With this edition, we have switched to an HTML-based format designed for online reading. However, we also provide a printer-friendly version for those who want to print out the newsletter and read it offline.

This change in format is one of the results of the decision to discontinue mailing out printed copies of the *ActiveVoice* to members of the San Francisco Chapter STC. When the chapter was mailing out printed newsletters, we adhered to a strict limit on length to manage printing and production costs. In March, we discontinued

mailing out printed newsletters, but we kept the print-oriented design for the newsletter during the transition to the HTML-based newsletter format.

More Flexibility in Coverage

With the HTML-based format introduced in the June edition, the length of the *ActiveVoice* newsletter is no longer limited to all the news that fits on four pages. I won't claim that we are emulating the New York Times in providing "All the News That's Fit to Print." But the online format does have the following additional content:

- An expanded "President's News and Notes" column. No longer limited to 140 words, Susan Becker is able to provide substantial news about our chapter scholarship, new officers, the STC's transformation, and the STC Annual Conference.
- Chapter news when the situation warrants it. For example, Ancilla Allsman and Janet Bran received Distinguished Service Awards at the May meeting. In the print format, there might not have been room to insert an article to commemorate this important occasion. (We occasionally stuck in an extra short article.)
- Helpful columns. Janet Bran, our lead web weaver, has written a "Web Tips" column on how to get Google and other search engines to index your web site. Howard Miller, who spoke at the May meeting, provides tips on how to stay motivated to do our best in a world that can be discouraging at times.
- Region 8 news. From July 25 - 27, 2004, the Region 8 Conference will be held at UC Davis. This is a conference no one should miss, especially those of us who could not make it to Baltimore for the STC Annual Conference in May. Once you read Patrick Lufkin's articles about the Region 8 Conference, you'll understand exactly what I mean.

Where Do We Go from Here?

The June newsletter is the chapter's first foray into a new paradigm. (Finally, I found an excuse to shoehorn the word *paradigm* into this article.) Since this edition is the first one published under my watch, I was learning as I went along. And I'll continue to learn more as time goes by. ("Play it, Sam.") So don't be surprised if future editions do not look quite the same as this one. There's always room for improvement.

I am interested in hearing what you think about the new look for the *ActiveVoice*. You can email me at newsletter@stc-sf.org.

New, Reinstated, Transfer, and Senior Members

Here is the membership activity since the last newsletter. We welcome the following new, reinstated, transfer, and senior members. As of the end of May, the chapter membership was 195.

New Members

Susan Bunker
Evan Klein
Patrick Newman
John C. Patterson
Chris G. Radcliff
Jeffery J. Scattini
Kelly A. Siegle
James Wald

Reinstated Members

Tim Bombosch
Mary A. Choy
Lilac Epstein
David A. Fonseca
Gilbert Gonzalez
Bradd S. Graves
William C. Grout
Anne L. Howard
Peter T. Jew
Brenda E. Jordan
Christine M. Kruse
Gerald B. Morgan
Sara Van Dyke

Transferred into Chapter

Ellen A. Chiri

Senior Members

Dana F. Utz
Marianne Walter

John C. Dvorak to Keynote STC Region 8 Conference

By Patrick Lufkin

He's knowledgeable. He's brash. And he won't hesitate to tell you what he thinks!

John C. Dvorak is one of the world's best-known computer columnists, and you'll have a rare opportunity to hear him when he gives the main keynote address at the 2004 STC Region 8 Conference. The address will take place at the stylish Mondavi Center Theater on the UC Davis campus, Sunday evening, July 25 at 6 p.m.

Dvorak is best known for his award-winning columns in *PC Magazine*, where he has been a contributing editor since 1986. He also hosts the syndicated radio show "Real Computing" on NPR, and "Silicon Spin" on TechTV.

Dvorak has won eight national awards from the Computer Press Association, including Best Columnist and Best Column. Dvorak's work also appears in such publications as *Boardwatch*, *Computer Shopper*, and *MicroTimes*. He is the author of several books on computing including the popular *Dvorak's Guide to Telecommunications*. His latest book is *Online-The Book!*

Nothing if not outspoken, Dvorak is expected to share his opinions about computing, Windows, communication, offshoring, and more.

The talk will be followed by a reception in Buehler Alumni Center, where attendees will have a chance to meet Dvorak, network, and enjoy the free buffet.

In keeping with Dvorak's popularity, tickets are also available to the general public at \$25. Access to the talk is included in most conference packages. STC members whose access is not covered by conference fees may attend Dvorak's talk for \$15 upon presentation of their STC membership card.

All tickets include access to the talk, the reception and an all-day pass to the Pavilion.

Part of the ticket proceeds benefit the UC Davis M.I.N.D. Institute. The

M.I.N.D. Institute is a division of the UC Davis Health System that treats, researches, and educates others about neurodevelopmental disorders including autism, dyslexia, Attention Deficit Disorder, and related problems.

For additional information on the conference, visit the conference Web site at <http://www.stcregion8conference.org/>

Exciting Region 8 Conference Shaping Up

By Patrick Lufkin

After months of hard work, the STC 2004 Region 8 Conference is taking shape. The conference will be held on the campus of the University of California, Davis, on July 25-27, 2004.

With more than fifty presentations, a pre-conference leadership seminar, keynote speakers for each day, a Pavilion trade show, and an after-conference barbeque, this year's Region 8 conference promises to be one of the largest and most exciting STC regional conferences ever planned.

Charting a Bold Course

Organized under the theme *Charting a Bold Course*, the conference is geared to give technical communicators the information and skills they need to navigate in today's economy.

"We are really looking forward to the conference. Whether someone is just starting out or is a seasoned professional, we believe they will find what they need to help them flourish and prosper in the profession," conference director Eric Butow said.

Conference Sessions

Whether they are interested in content development, emerging technology and tools, managing projects and people, or advancing their career, attendees will find plenty to choose from. The full list of sessions can be found on the conference Web site at <http://www.stcregion8conference.org/Program.htm>.

Keynote Speakers

The conference will have a keynote speaker for each day.

- John Dvorak -- John Dvorak, well-known book author, and outspoken *PC Magazine* columnist will speak at the Mondavi Center on the evening of Sunday, July 25. In keeping with Dvorak's popularity, tickets will also be available to the general public for his address.
- Jared Spool -- Founder of UI Design, Jared Spool is a recognized pioneer in Web design and one of the most knowledgeable and dynamic speakers in the usability industry.
- Andrea Ames -- STC President
Andrea Ames is a technical communicator who specializes in user-centered product interface and online information architecture and design.

Pavilion

When not attending sessions, conference attendees can visit the Pavilion, a center for all non-session activities. The Pavilion will hold sponsor and exhibitor booths, product demonstrations, light food, and tables for gathering, relaxing, and meeting friends.

Free Resume and Portfolio Reviews

In keeping with the theme of helping attendees advance their careers, the conference features free one-on-one resume and portfolio reviews from working professionals. Those interested in receiving a review should sign up ahead of time on the conference Web site and bring their resume or portfolio to the conference.

Pre-Conference Sessions

In addition to the regular sessions scheduled for Monday and Tuesday, Gold and Platinum attendees can attend pre-conference leadership sessions on Sunday, where STC leaders will share insights into the changing world of technical communication.

After Conference Barbeque

Of course, a conference should not be all work and no play. Throughout the conference there should be plenty of time to meet friends, network with colleagues, and enjoy the learning atmosphere on the campus of UC Davis. The conference ends with an after-conference barbeque.

Registration

Several differently priced packages are available, depending on how you wish to participate. Registration is quick, easy, and online at the conference Web site at <http://www.stcregion8conference.org/Registration.htm>.

More Information

For more information and regular updates, visit the conference Web site at <http://www.stcregion8conference.org/>

Web Tips

By Janet Bran

Search Engines and Your Web Site

Getting people to find your web site can be challenging. When you are looking for a web site you probably go to a search engine like Google, MSN, Yahoo or whatever is your favorite. Ever wonder what makes some web sites appear on the first page of your search, while others appear on page 10? It's called Search Engine Optimization or SEO, and every web site needs it.

SEO can get time-consuming, complicated, and sometimes expensive. But let's start with a few basic tips on how to optimize your web site.

Search Engine Registration

Register your web site with Search Engines. You don't have to register your web site with every search engine, but start with the big ones like Google, Yahoo, and DMOZ. Most other search engines list the web sites that are already registered with the big ones.

- Register with Google at <http://www.google.com/webmasters/1.html> and read "Submit Your URL."
- Register with Yahoo at <http://search.yahoo.com/info/submit.html> and click "Submit Your Site For Free." Yahoo requires that you register a username to use this feature.
- Register with DMOZ at <http://www.dmoz.com/add.html>. Read the instructions carefully and take your time to do it right.

Meaningful Title Tags

Put your service or product name in your Title tag. HTML uses tags to identify your web site and help search engines know what your web site is about. A search engine will look for your web page Title tag to learn about your business. The Title tag is embedded code that won't appear on the web page. It appears in the Title bar of your browser but most people do not pay attention to that so it is more important to focus on its value for search engines. Use words in your Title tag that tell the search engine about you such as "technical writer san francisco" or "web page editor."

Unless your name is Condeleeza Rice, using your name in the Title tag won't help you very much. People who search for your business on the Internet will search for your type of product or service, not your name. So be sure to use a Title tag that tells the search engine what you do. The following is the HTML code for a Title tag; it appears at the top of your web page within the <head> tag:

```
<title>web page editor</title>
```

Cool Web Sites

Ever wonder what it would be like to pop a water balloon in outer space? Well NASA wondered. Check out their experimental results at: <http://micro-gravity.grc.nasa.gov/balloon/blob.htm>

The first printed book ever: <http://www.bl.uk/treasures/gutenberg/homepage.html>

Janet Bran is a web designer and technical communicator. She is founder of www.BeautifulWebSites.com, a web development company that creates web sites to help you make money.

Applause

By Howard Miller

When I was growing up my dad received a birthday gift from a family friend. It was a box that said "Unappreciated?

Underrated? Underestimated? Take A Bow!" When you opened up the box,



you pressed a button. A flood of applause, screams of more, encore, take a bow and bravo filled the room.

For the last 20 years, whenever I went home, I asked my dad if I could take the box. He would say no! Finally, when they moved he let me have his birthday present. I unabashedly admit that from time to time I go to that box, push the button and take in all the applause. How many of us readily acknowledge praise from others and most of all, from ourselves? We tend to get too embarrassed and self-conscious to accept the praise.

By accepting praise and applause it helps us:

- Be nicer to ourselves
- Get motivated to do what we want
- Feel damn good and special!

Don't you deserve some applause? Of course you do! Have a great rest of the week and take a bow!

About the Author: 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. Howard firmly believes that if people were more accountable to themselves, they would have more self-respect, which ultimately leads to a better world. Howard Miller is founder of Fulcrum Coaching at www.fulcrumlifecoaching.com.