

SAN FRANCISCO

December 2002

ActiveVOICE

NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION, SAN FRANCISCO CHAPTER

December 18th Meeting

Holiday Party

We're having a special event to bring this year to a festive conclusion. There will be a party at the London Wine Bar from 6 pm to 8 pm with wine and food included. During this time, you can enjoy some hors d'oeuvres and savor some of the wines that the London Wine Bar has to offer. It's all included in the price of admission.

This party will be a lot of fun. It's a chance to spend a couple of hours socializing with your colleagues, and we will have door prizes. It's just the thing that's needed to bolster your spirits for the last two work days in the week and for fighting the mobs during last-minute shopping.

RESERVATIONS REQUIRED: For this special event, advance purchase of tickets through our web site is required. Go to <http://www.stc-sf.org> and click Acteva. The deadline is Tuesday, December 10, 2002. The cost is \$15.00 for STC members and \$20.00 for non-members. No tickets will be sold at the door.

January 15th Meeting

Add Life to Web Sites with Dynamic Features

Presenter: Kris Hahn

Have you created Internet or intranet sites that you wish did a little more than display static text and graphics? Wouldn't it be nice for visitors to be able to search for information on your web site? Or, would you like your site to refer to visitors by name? How about a feature that stores information from the visitor and updates the content of web pages dynamically? For example, your visitor could upload a document to the site, and then see an updated list of documents, including the one that was just uploaded. Now, a technical communicator with little or no programming experience can add these features to web sites with Dreamweaver and public domain software. Come to the meeting and see, step-by-step, how Kris recently created an intranet site with these features for an East Bay client. Kris is a senior technical writer who has written many manuals about programming, administering enterprise applications, web mapping, and web-based digital design.



SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

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

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Human Factors for Technical Communicators

By Jane Ransom and Sue Edwards

During the dot.com debacle, several people close to Andrea Ames had lost their jobs and become financially dependent on her. Then, last November, the technical communicator's own consulting contract was cancelled and she found herself unemployed.

Andrea, an STC Associate Fellow, immediately put the word out to fellow STC members. "By the end of the day, I had four job offers." She accepted one at IBM Corporation, where she still works as Senior Information Developer.

Moral of the story? Be active in the STC. "What you put in, you get out," Andrea promised the audience at a recent San Francisco Chapter meeting. That was encouraging news for everyone, but perhaps especially for newcomers such as ourselves.

Andrea gave a lively and what she called an "experiential" talk, involving the audience in a series of word-list memory tests. The tests helped demonstrate that memory can be strengthened by the logical grouping of information. And this is key, Andrea said, to designing effective product interface, particularly in online Help and web sites. "Informational context is critical," Andrea said. "Provide a paradigm or model, something for users to hang onto."

The ways in which memory works (or fails to) comprise some of the "human factors" that technical communicators should address, she said. Another such factor is the lack of computer experience among many end users. Therefore, when labeling buttons, for example, don't use abbreviations that inexperienced users may not understand. "Give 'em words," said Andrea, who also serves on the STC International Board of Directors.

"Users don't enter our world; we have to enter theirs," she said. "We want them to feel at home."

One way to make users feel more at home is to help them retain information by presenting it in logical groups or "chunks." Andrea demonstrated this point by reading aloud several lists of 20 words, then testing the audience's ability to recall them. Not surprisingly, participants had most trouble remembering a list of 20 unrelated words (*duck, ream, jowl, blot, etc.*). Conversely, most participants did best with a list whose 20 words fell evenly into five obvious categories, such as colors (*red, blue, green and yellow*) or fruits (*apple, grape, banana, pear*). Logical relationships aid memory, which is why good toolbar menus are so useful, Andrea pointed out, for they group large amounts of information within simple hierarchies, so that users can remember where to look for what they need.

Once you've established such an information structure, don't violate it, she warned. Don't, for example, misplace items in illogical categories, or use different terms—such as *Choose* and *Select*—to mean the same thing. "Inconsistency in information is evil. Users may make wrong decisions or get confused."

To help tech communicators understand the human factors that shape an end user's experience, Ames recommended three books: *Don't Make Me Think*, by Steve Krug (Que, 2000); *The Design of Everyday Things*, by Donald Norman, (Currency Doubleday, 1988); and *Human Factors for Technical Communicators*, by Marlana Coe (John Wiley & Sons, 1996).

Jane Ransom is an experienced editor, previously with the New York Daily News and has held a position as creative writing professor of New York University. Sue Edwards is a Senior Research Associate with Millennium Pharmaceuticals, experienced writer, and student enrolled in the UCB Certificate Program for Technical Communications.

October Meeting: Resources Website Under Development

By Patrick Lufkin

Do you need links to sources of online technical communication instruction?

How about links to sites that could help you in your job search?

Or a quick definition for an elusive acronym?

If so, you might want to check out the collection of links and useful information that has been gathered and posted by technical writer and trainer Michelle Cadieux.

Michelle spoke at the San Francisco STC's October meeting where she showed an in-progress website designed to share the information she has been collecting.

Michelle owns her own business, Creative Communications, where she does journalism, research, and marketing work. She is widely traveled, has taught English as a second language, and is currently working on a MA in Theater Arts with a concentration in digital media.

For today's market, Michelle urged technical communicators to leverage their skills. "It's not that much of a stretch from being a technical writer to putting your information on the web and becoming a web-based trainer," she said. If you do want to explore stretching your wings, Michelle's site would be one place to start. Michelle has grouped her information under such headings as education, multimedia, accessibility, trainers, trade associations/events, job/salary, marketing, archives, and news.

The education section contains links and, in some cases, annotations to a variety of educational sources ranging from full university technical writing programs to online tutorials. While the obvious links are here—SFSU's Technical and Professional Writing program, for example—so are links to many other opportunities you may not have thought of. For example, I found links to such hidden gems as Contra Costa County's Regional Occupational

Project's Technology Center, an excellent source of inexpensive professional level tools courses.

The trade associations/event section contains links to a wide range of professional associations, writers and editors' societies, training and performance improvement groups, and a miscellany of other entities that might be of interest to technical communicators.

For those interested in learning new tools or in polishing their skills, the multimedia section includes a large collection of links related to software documentation, online help systems, Dreamweaver, FrameMaker, Photoshop, Flash Animation, Authorware (for designing online courses), and more.

The job/salary section contains links to employment information including a list of national and local job banks, as well as sites where you can post your resume. There are also some links to the latest salary information.

Not all of the links are to other groups. Many lead directly to articles and other valuable information. One link, for example, leads to the conference proceedings for Sacramento's Writer in the Workplace conference, which is packed to the brim with valuable advice from industry experts and insiders. In a few places Michelle has also posted articles or other pieces of useful advice.

While Michelle's site is still very much "under development," there is much there to reward a visit. As you visit the site, if you think of additional resources that should be listed, let Michelle know. To view the site, visit:

<http://www.geocities.com/sftechtrainer>

To find out more about Michelle and her many projects, visit:

<http://www.geocities.com/creativecommunications/>

Patrick Lufkin is a member of the San Francisco Chapter STC.

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 between Sacramento & Clay.

Reservations

Reservations

Make advance reservations at <http://www.stc-sf.org> (click Acteva)
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 Marc Smircich

*Marc Smircich is a Senior Technical Writer for Quintessential School Systems in San Mateo, California. He has 14 years of experience documenting financial and human resources applications.
Email: info@stc-sf.org.*

Welcome to Our Chapter!

New Members

Thomas W. Devine
Jonathan D. Fong
David Grabstald
Mike E. Kushner
Amy J. Morris
Jane R. Ransom
Peter S. Weygant
David F. Yetter

Transfer and

Reinstated Members

Bara T. Bonnet, James K. Donley,
Tyana M. Harte, Kristen M. Kelleher,
Kala N. Klaumann, Margie Levinson,
Jeff Mattson, H. Lynn McNeill,
Jane D. Randolph, Matthew W. Wood

Congrats on Senior Member Status

JuLee E. Burdekin
Ann M. Cullen
Sherri L. Davis
Brandy Donahoe
David W. Hulbert
William W. Westbrook

This is my final column for 2002. Where has the year gone? It's only a couple of weeks before Christmas and three weeks before the start of 2003.

One disappointment for this year has been the continuing bad job market. I hope that those who do have jobs have survived the stress of having to do more with less. And I hope that at least some of you who are looking for work have found employment. Let's all ask Santa for an improved job market in the new year.

No matter how busy you are, I hope that everyone can spend time with friends and family during this holiday season. It is so easy to get caught up in earning a living that we forget to make time for what is truly important.

I look forward to seeing you at the holiday party and at regular meetings throughout 2003.

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 2nd
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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First Class Mail