

SAN FRANCISCO
June 2002

ActiveVOICE

NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION, SAN FRANCISCO CHAPTER

June 19th Meeting

Future directions in online Help

Presenter: David Knopf

This presentation will provide a brief look at where we are today with online Help, Web-based Help, and Help authoring tools. What are the current trends? What's changed in the last two years? What's coming next? How can we best be prepared to take advantage of current and upcoming tools and technologies?

Knopf is president and founder of Knopf Online (<http://www.knopf.com>), a San Francisco-based consulting firm that specializes in technical communications, including documentation, online Help, Web-based information, and single sourcing. An expert in online technologies, Knopf is a Certified RoboHelp® Instructor and Consultant and a WebWorks® Publisher Certified Trainer. Knopf has taught dozens of seminars on how to think about, design, create, produce, and distribute high-quality online information products. Publications Knopf has written have twice won an Award of Merit in the STC's International Technical Publications Competition.

July 17th Meeting

Information architecture and the Web: Designing the user experience

Presenters: Caroline Drakeley and Anne Marie Smith

Information architecture. IA. You've probably heard of it. But what is it? While the field has been around and growing for years in software, engineering, and library science, very few people understand exactly what information architects do and how important they are in effective Web site development. This presentation will explore what IA is and why it's so important, what information architects do, the IA process, the relationship between IA and usability, the future of IA in Web design, and what skills and knowledge information architects need.

Smith and Drakeley are principal owners of InfoPros, a technical communication and staffing firm. Smith has been in the technical communication field since 1984. Drakeley has extensive experience in the publishing, marketing, and technical communication arenas. Drakeley and Smith are also instructors in the CSU, Sacramento technical writing, train-the-trainer, and e-business programs. They are frequent speakers at both national and local-level conferences in the area of online information, Web-based training, and Web usability. InfoPros was recently listed #165 on Inc. magazine's Inc. 500 list of Fastest Growing Private Companies.

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



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Creating a Portfolio that Sells

by Joseph Fong

At our March 20th chapter meeting, Victoria Maki of Bitzone spoke about how to develop an effective portfolio for the professional communicator. She gave attendees an overview of what a portfolio is, the advantages of having one, how to put one together, and how it can help during an interview.

Elements of a portfolio

A portfolio is an organized collection of writing samples in either hard copy or electronic format. It is a marketing tool for communication skills: By using a portfolio in a job interview, we are not just applying for a job but marketing our professional services. A portfolio also presents a breadth of experience that a single writing sample cannot show. The goal should be to make a clear connection between our resume and portfolio, which can help to organize an interview.

A well designed portfolio is an effective marketing tool: We can use it to sell ourselves to potential employers by showing tangible proof of our skills and experience. The portfolio conveys our mastery of core competencies, including interviewing and information gathering skills, critical thinking, technical writing, project and time management, and use of tools such as FrameMaker and RoboHelp. An effective portfolio provides supporting documentation that we, as professionals, can add value to a business and maximize its effectiveness. It also provides the opportunity to boast tactfully about ourselves, with the inclusion of letters of recommendation, awards, and other achievements.

Creating a marketing tool

A portfolio is especially useful for new technical writers to showcase our abilities. New writers can include documentation from school, internships, or work we have done on our own, such as documenting APIs for shareware or open source software. Volunteer to write for a non-profit,

such as the STC, or index another writer's manual.

A portfolio also focuses and helps us take charge of interviews; it shows specifically where our experience most clearly matches job requirements. Since we are marketing ourselves to hiring managers, we should put our most applicable and visually striking pieces at the beginning of the portfolio. An effective way of organizing a portfolio is with a table of contents and related topics placed in categories (for example, software manuals and help systems). For manuals, include the title page, table of contents, a sample chapter (no more than a half inch thick), and the index. For a Web site, include the main page and the most important secondary page. Online samples are also desirable and complement printed ones. If samples are proprietary in nature, redact or remove confidential information. Before bringing a portfolio to an interview, it is always best to have a colleague review it.

Effective interviewing

During an interview, we can highlight the most important pieces in our portfolios to demonstrate specific accomplishments or skills. For example, we could describe designing the template for a manual and reference the manual as a portfolio piece. One way to do this is to place the sample on the left side of the portfolio with a description on the right highlighting our contributions and the value they added to the organization. Also mention work habits by describing how a particular piece was finished in a short period of time. At the conclusion of the interview, provide copies of samples, but never leave an original portfolio on site.

A well designed portfolio shows good organization, commitment to technical communication, breadth of experience, and that we are professionals who care about our careers.

Joseph Fong is an IT consultant in San Francisco: hightech@pcumail.com.

Usability Methods to Empower Technical Communicators

by Andria Strickley

Despite the abundance of complex methodologies used to describe usability, Dana Chisnell says the word itself is actually easy to define. Simply put, usability means that people using a given product can do so quickly and easily to accomplish their tasks. At our April 17th chapter meeting, Chisnell, owner of the consulting firm UsabilityWorks, spoke on how technical communicators can employ usability methods.

Though it may be simple to define, usability isn't always easy for a product's creators to predict. That's where usability testing can help. Though most often applied to software products, such testing also can help technical writers determine the accessibility of their manuals and Web sites. "Tech writers should really be tuned into usability because in many ways you are producing the thing that users see first," Chisnell said.

Chisnell explored three different methods of testing a product's user-friendliness: heuristic evaluation, focus groups, and laboratory testing. Each method has its advantages, depending on the available resources and the stage of development of the product.

Heuristics

Heuristics are guidelines or principles used to explain the problems people typically encounter in a product's user interface. Such guidelines might include task support (are task sequences clear and natural?) or presentation (is the product clutter-free and consistent?). In a heuristic evaluation, a team of at least two evaluators identifies the guidelines to be used, independently evaluates the user interface, and combines their findings into common recommendations. The advantages are that heuristics can be used at any time, and the method does not require actual users to be present. The evaluations also can be done in a relatively short amount of time.

Focus groups

Real-world users can give surprise insights into a product's design that heuristic evaluation can't. Usability focus groups can help assess what users truly need and determine how they make decisions about how to use the product. "You can put people in a fairly relaxed situation and ask them very specific questions about what they prefer and why," Chisnell explained. In addition, focus group participants can suggest added features and other improvements the product designers never even considered.

The disadvantage of focus groups is that, because participants are asked directly about their experience, they will tell evaluators only what they remember — or what they want the evaluators to hear. Laboratory testing, on the other hand, allows observers to watch a user in action and document each move that person makes.

Laboratory testing

In lab tests, observers generally sit in a room with one test user at a time, gathering very precise data about the person's actions. "You can get an idea of how many missteps people take before they find what they're looking for," Chisnell said. One benefit of lab testing is that, because it results in such exact information, the observations can be turned into statistical analysis.

Tech writers can use any of the three methods to test the usability of their documentation, Chisnell said. Whichever one they pick, they're sure to enhance the usability of the product as a whole. "Even if no one's doing anything about [the usability of] the software or hardware you're supporting," she said, "you can make your part of the product really great."

Andria Strickley is a communications manager in San Francisco: andriastrickley@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 between Sacramento & Clay.

Reservations

Make advance reservations at <http://www.acteva.com> (search for "stc"). 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 STC Members

Marco A. Araujo
Liza Boyd
Paul R. Buzzell
Michael Fiala
Roseanne M. Macek
Nathaniel J. McFadden
Jon C. Pendleton
Andria J. Strickley

Transfer and Reinstated Members

Ramna Brandt
Ann M. Cullen
Annalisa Dare
George Martin Dechant, Jr.
Teresa M. Hanson
Jennifer A. Kanouse
William J. Kearns
Mysti Rubert

Congrats on Senior Member Status!

Diane Kirsten-Martin

Election results

Chapter elections were held in May, and the results are in. The following officers begin their one-year terms on July 1.

Marc Smircich	President	Incumbent
Susan Becker	Vice-President	Incumbent
Ben Johnson	Treasurer	Last year's Secretary-Treasurer
Matt Ness	Secretary	Newly elected officer

Lu Rehling continues to serve as Past President.

Change of newsletter editor

This edition of the Active Voice is the last edition under Jennifer Crawford's supervision. Jennifer has done an excellent job of getting the newsletter out on time over the last year. But she has decided to pass the torch on to Kris Hahn, who will be the editor for the upcoming year.

San Francisco Chapter Information

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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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