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Twelfth Night: An Evening of Networking and Connecting

The setting: A frosty evening just weeks before the holiday rush season. On December 12, about a dozen chapter members took shelter for a relaxing evening of drinks, food, networking, and socializing at our Twelfth Night event.

It was a great time to relax, eat even more holiday food, and rekindle old friendships. Thanks to M.J. for opening up her home to us. ✍



AMANDA GASTON (LEFT) AND M.J. PLASTER

Demand for Technical Writers Goes Unfulfilled

CONTRIBUTED BY JIM GIORDANO AND DAVID DUNN

In the coming year, expect technical writers to be even more difficult to find. The April 2000 report of the Information Technology Association of America (ITAA) reports in its study of the demand for IT workers that only 50% of the 63,753 open positions in technical writing will be filled.

ITAA surveyed 700 managers in both IT and non-IT companies about

the potential skills gap. Sixth among the hot jobs, the study found that IT companies had an average of 11 openings for tech writers, while non-IT companies averaged three openings. These companies were reportedly looking beyond traditional writing and editing skills. Most important were the abilities to analyze project requirements, perform research, and design documents.

Researchers were surprised that hiring managers showed an equal preference for hiring technical writers who had college training in the field and those with on-the-job and short-course training.

The full study (April 2000) is available from the ITAA. Consult their web site at <http://www.ita.org>. ✍

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Deloitte & Touche's Usability Lab

BY VIRGINIA PRYOR, NEWSLETTER EDITOR

On Tuesday, January 23, about 15 chapter members and several guests gathered in a conference room at Deloitte & Touche to experience the usability lab which Jacqui Miller was instrumental in founding.

The evening began with food, soft drinks, networking, and socializing, as usual. Then, we began the tour and demonstration of the usability lab, which has a video camera and a two-way mirror for observation. Christina Dunn and I volunteered to do the sample usability test on D&T's Intranet site. Christina was the "doer," I was the observer taking notes of her process, and Tom Weathington was the facilitator. Meanwhile, the rest of the crowd huddled in the booth behind the two-way mirror to observe.

After our ten-minute sample usability test, we resumed the meeting back in the conference room, where everyone discussed the results. Then, Jacqui gave her Power Point presentation, plus some informative handouts (a copy of the presentation is available at the following page on our chapter web site: <http://stcmidtenn.org/MeetingNotes/0101notes.htm>).

First, we discussed the definition of usability. As defined by Jakob Nielsen in the September, 1998 edition of *Alertbox*, usability is

"the measure of the quality of the user experience when interacting with something—whether a Web site, software

application, or any other device the user can operate in some way or another."

Thus, the main objectives in determining usability are determining what needs to be measured, and what method to use to measure these criteria.

Examples of things that might need to be measured with documentation or web sites are:

- Ease of use—the ability to find information quickly and easily, and use features and functions easily
- Usefulness of content—concise writing, scannable text, and so on

If you have a usability lab, you already have an established method for determining the usability of your documentation or products based on specific criteria applicable for your



CHRISTINA DUNN PERFORMS A USABILITY TEST

organization. For example, at Deloitte, the CSIT Usability and Interface Design Group asks the users to perform various tasks while they are observed in the lab. They have a script for the observer to use.

However, if you do not have that luxury, there are other ways to obtain similar information. For example, you can conduct live interviews of users with targeted questions, or conduct field studies, observing users with your documentation trying to perform different tasks, asking what is and is not helpful or intuitive.

As we discussed at length in the meeting, if your company does not already invest considerable time, money, and effort into usability testing, it will take a lot of persuasion and research to convince them to start. But, with a win-win attitude and a commitment to producing quality documentation, the convincing can be done—it just might take some time. Why not start your research at Nielsen's web site, listed on page 5? ✍



JACQUI MILLER GIVES HER PRESENTATION



TOM WEATHINGTON CONDUCTS THE USABILITY TESTING

The Job Bank

Cybersensor, Inc.

PUBLICATION WRITER

Cybersensor, Inc. provides its customers with state-of-the-art, totally integrated, end-to-end solutions. Our new, patented technology unifies field sensors, satellite, and/or terrestrial communication networks with our server web-based data delivery systems.

This is a creative opportunity to develop materials—such as user manuals, technical briefs, product installation guides, brochures, and web site content—for the Marketing Department.

DUTIES

- Participate with the product development team to gather information
- Research information for written materials
- Extract, translate, and simplify information so that it is clear, concise, accurate, and understandable at the user level
- Develop technical writing protocols and styles
- Integrate graphics with text
- Assist with written press releases, ad layouts, Power Point presentations, trade show graphics, and brochure design and layout

SKILLS & REQUIREMENTS

- 2–5 years combined education and experience in journalism or technical writing
- Portfolio of past work
- Preferred skills include: MS Office, Illustrator, Photoshop, QuarkXpress, or similar desktop publishing software

Submit your resume and cover letter to:
jobs@cybersensor.com or fax to:
(615) 860-8751.

Deloitte & Touche

TECHNICAL WRITER

Deloitte & Touche has an opening for a Technical Writer on the Communication Solutions team at its PracticeServiceCenter in Hermitage, TN.

DUTIES:

- Research and consult with clients to create new content for web-based projects, intranets, online, and paper products.
- Copyedit and publish content as HTML pages that adhere to Deloitte & Touche web standards, as set by the Communication Solutions group (following firm guidelines).
- Establish D&T style and quality standards for knowledge-sharing and communication projects (web, online, and paper). Share standards and other editorial and writing expertise with other D&T writing, editing, communication, marketing, and knowledge management groups.
- Consult with architects, program managers, project leaders, and clients on audience communication needs, training needs, and interface design. Analyze project requirements, D&T systems/products, and user needs to be sure the information design supports ease of use.

SKILLS & REQUIREMENTS

- Four-year college degree or work equivalent.
- Three to five years of experience as a technical writer and editor (or equivalent experience).
- Excellent writing, editing, design, task analysis, communication, interviewing, and negotiating skills.

- Ability to interpret technical information and communicate it effectively to nontechnical audiences. Ability to work with technical and nontechnical staff.
- Ability to work independently and as a team member. Ability to coordinate and complete multiple projects within tight time constraints.
- Ability to quickly learn to use technology tools for web site development and online help systems (such as FrontPage, Dream Weaver, Doc2Help, Word, and RoboHelp). Ability to extract information from software specifications, HTML, and alpha/beta software.
- Experience with PC- and LAN-based systems, web site publishing, Windows configuration, file management processes, word processing, illustration graphics, and desktop publishing applications, such as PageMaker and Quark XPress.

For further information, contact Craig Seifert in Deloitte & Touche Human Resources at (615) 882-7600. ✉

If you or your company has any open positions in the technical communication field, and would like to include them in our chapter's publications, please send information to the Employment Officer, David Dunn, and Web Site Manager, Ed Gregory (contact information on page 2).

Effective Listening Pays Big Dividends

By J. SUZANNA LAURENT, REGION 5 DIRECTOR-SPONSOR

A really good listener is a rare and priceless commodity. That's because effective listening skills do not come naturally. Few of us have ever been taught the value or the process of active listening, and those who have are the ones getting the results they want. They make it to the top of their professions, enjoy rich and fulfilling personal relationships, and suffer less from stress and worry.

The good news is that anyone can become a good listener. All it takes is the desire to learn the techniques that work. Listening is one thing that most people wish they could improve. Yet many people overlook the simple and obvious ways they can instantly improve their listening skills. Here are five guidelines that should help you improve your listening skills.

Use Your Mind

Being a good listener requires a conscious effort. You must listen with your mind completely engaged. Try listening for accuracy and inaccuracy—it helps keep your mind alert. Listen as if you are hearing the information for the first time.

Listen for the Whole Message

Many people tune in only to the words of a speaker, not the body language or tone of voice, so they do not listen to the whole message. To understand a message, both the verbal and nonverbal parts of the message are important. The purpose of good listening is to get the best understanding. You cannot do that if you only listen to part of the message.

Control Your Environment

Distractions can destroy listening ability. We are surrounded by noise in the office and at home. We can be distracted by physical barriers, such as the placement of a desk or a seating arrangement in a group meeting, or internal distractions. You can be a much more effective listener if you can control both your external and internal environments. If you can't control the environment, reschedule or move to another environment.

Take the Initiative

In order to make better listening a way of life, you have to learn new skills and rid yourself of "bad" listening habits. This takes time and practice. You can become a better listener just by learning and practicing one new listening skill every week.

Use Active and Reflective Listening

Both active and reflective listening use the same principles, but their purposes are different. In active listening, the listener responds to the speaker based on the listener's understanding of the message that was communicated. This person is part of an ongoing conversation, a give and take of ideas. Active listening is used in group problem-solving situations.

In reflective listening, the listener is primarily a sounding board for the speaker. The listener helps the speaker come to grips with the problem being communicated. Reflective listening is used primarily in one-on-one conversations.

Conclusion

These five guidelines for improving your listening can give you quick and immediate results. There are dozens of good books about becoming a better listener. By putting these guidelines to use and learning more about how to become an effective listener, you will be able to "listen up" and hear what's really being said. ✍

Top Web Sites for Technical Communicators

In its membership survey for the year 2000, STC asked its members which web sites they most often visited as part of their job. Based on the responses, the following is a list of the top twelve sites (in alphabetical order):

- 1) www.adobe.com—Adobe Systems, Inc.
- 2) www.altavista.com—search engine
- 3) www.frameusers.com—reference site for Adobe *FrameMaker*
- 4) www.google.com—search engine
- 5) www.macromedia.com—Macromedia, a company that makes advanced web tools
- 6) www.microsoft.com—Microsoft Corporation
- 7) www.m-w.com—the Merriam-Webster OnLine Language Center
- 8) www.useit.com—the site of usability expert Jakob Nielsen
- 9) www.webmonkey.com—a resource for web developers
- 10) www.whatis.com—an encyclopedia for the information technology industry
- 11) www.winwriters.com—WinWriters, a resource for technical communicators specializing in software user
- 12) www.yahoo.com—search engine

Candidate for STC 2nd Vice President

BY THEA TEICH, SENIOR MEMBER, SOUTHWESTERN OHIO CHAPTER



Hello. Please let me introduce myself. I'm Thea Teich, and I'm running for 2nd vice president of STC. That means a four-year commitment to Society leadership, which is something I look forward to, should I win your votes.

My Background

I've been a member of STC since 1988. I've been director-sponsor of Region 4, Public Relations Manager for the 1999 annual conference, and a member of the academe-industry committee. I've presented at many annual and regional conferences. For the Southwestern Ohio chapter (SWO), I was president, vice president, and competitions manager (for three years). I also served on the 1997 Region 4 conference committee and the SWO professional development committee. I regularly judge local STC competitions, have judged international competitions, and have won publications awards.

What I Bring to the Table

First, I bring a "can-do," implementation-focused orientation. Determining the optimal way to transform

projects from plans to production—and then doing it—is how I've earned my living for many years.

Second, I believe that to make good decisions, input from people who don't think exactly as I do or who have different priorities is necessary. I listen.

Third, I bring a breadth of experience to the office. Technical communicators work in varied situations—and I've been through most of them. Independent, corporate, nonprofit, educational, downsized, upsized, overwhelmed—I've been there.

Fourth, and perhaps most important, my aim is to use the talent and capabilities we have as an organization to foresee the trends in our profession so we can plan for them and better help STC members meet the needs and opportunities presented by those trends.

Our profession's value to the world at large is increasingly recognized. Part of the reason for that is the times we live in. But another part of the reason is that we have a professional organization that represents us as a body; we are no longer an amorphous conglomeration of easily replaced "support services."

Now that we've determined "to design the future of technical communications (our new mission statement), my goals involve focusing our efforts on the professional development of our members so they can answer the classic job interview question, "Where do you want to be in five years?" By exploring trends and possibilities now and helping members prepare for them, we can work toward—instead of merely respond to—what will happen five

Please remember to vote in the upcoming STC elections. You can do so either on the traditional paper ballot or electronically at the STC web site. I hope you'll vote for me for 2nd vice president. But the important thing is to vote.

For more information about me, please visit my web site, www.TeichTMC.com. You may also contact me at Thea@TeichTMC.com. Thank you for your time and attention. ✍

Meeting Notice

"Rx for Your Help"

PRESENTED BY M.J. PLASTER,
MTC SENIOR MEMBER

DATE: FEBRUARY 20

TIME: 6:30 PM - NETWORKING
7:00 PM - PRESENTATION

PLACE: RAMADA INN AND CONFERENCE CENTER, Complimentary parking, 920 Broadway, Nashville

DETAILS: To create help files, we need a great help authoring tool (HAT). But who among us doesn't have a long wish list for our help tool of choice? If you need strategies and solutions for dealing with the bugs in your HAT, you won't want to miss this session. Join us for an evening of dissection, diagnosis, prescription, and cure. We'll explore quick, easy, and inexpensive solutions to all our small problems.

The format will be primarily demonstration followed by Q&A. ✍

Techno-Savvy

By TIM HUNTER, CHAPTER PRESIDENT

In 1989, my dad bought a cassette converter to plug into the eight-track tape player of his 1976 Monte Carlo. It was shaped like an eight-track tape. It was designed so one could plop a cassette into it, slide the retaining arm over the cassette, and then shove it into the eight-track tape player.

Then, in 1998, my dad bought a portable CD player, connected it to his cassette converter via the CD conversion kit, complete with the black plastic cassette with wires coming out it. He then plugged the converted converter into his eight-track tape player to listen to a CD of a 1950s recording of Elvis. It was at that moment I accused my dad of maintaining a hotline to the Russian space program, just in case they needed him for ideas regarding how to rig the Mir to last another year.

I've made fun of him. I've chastised him. I've mocked him. But, he has never stopped smiling as he drives down the road in his 1976 Monte bobbing his head to a CD of "You Ain't Nothing but a Hound Dog" on a CD played in an eight-track tape player.

Technology is the driving force of what us technical communicators do today. We use technology to wake up; to make our coffee; to get to work; and to communicate through the written and spoken word. If we don't embrace it, whether we're documenting it or documenting with it, we slowly lose our foothold in our field.

Lately, I have embraced the technology of the personal desk assistant (a.k.a. PDA, Palm Pilot, and handheld computer). I use it as a scheduling tool, phone and address book, web connec-

tion, dictionary and thesaurus, global positioning system, calculator (especially handy for automated conversions from standard to metric), guitar tuner, and runner's log. I use it to read novels and stories to my children, to check reviews of restaurants, to read the news, and to keep a shopping list by store, aisle, and cost. When I can afford the attachment, my PDA will be my phone.

As a technical writer, my PDA serves as a documenting tool, one that is much smaller than a laptop. I have a keyboard that connects to my PDA. After I document a procedure, I "hot-sync" (synchronize the data with a serial or USB connection) with my laptop, drag the WordSmith .doc file into Word, and presto!

If you have thought about buying one, check out the sites I've listed below. Go to a Nashville Palm Users' Group Meeting. Visit Best Buy, CompUSA, or Staples to actually put one in your hands. My company gives a \$150 allowance toward purchasing a PDA. Check to see if yours does. If you already have a PDA and are using it only as a day-timer, considering expanding your use of it. After all, it *is* a computer.

In case you're wondering, I wrote this article on my PDA. Enjoy these links, which only skim the surface of what's actually out there:

- www.pdastreet.com
- www.palmgear.com
- www.visorvillage.com
- www.innogear.com
- www.interpug.com/npug
- www.isilo.com

- www.coola.com/condui-treadme.html
- www.avantgo.com/frontdoor/index.html
- www.jungleport.com
- www.peanutpress.com/index.cgi/015950103-58428-65251
- www.omnisky.com ✉

Phone Seminar

Usability Testing

If you want to conduct usability testing but don't know how to get started, this telephone seminar will answer your questions, including how to determine what to test, how many subjects to test, and where and when the test should occur. You will also get a toolkit of forms and examples from a usability test to help you plan and conduct a successful test and analyze the results.

WHEN:

Part I: Wednesday, March 7, 2001
1:00-2:30 PM Eastern Standard Time
Part II: Wednesday, March 14, 2001
1:00-2:30 PM Eastern Standard Time

COST (PER SITE, NOT PER PERSON):

U.S. Sites: \$250

An additional \$8 will be charged for registrations received less than five days before the seminar.

SPEAKER:

Carol M. Barnum (see her bio on page 8).

For detailed information, and for a registration form, visit the following page on the national STC website:
www.stc-va.org/usabilitytest.html.

Publications Awards Banquet

WHAT: The Middle Tennessee STC Chapter's awards banquet to recognize the winners of the 2000 Technical Publications Competition.

WHERE: The Vanderbilt University Club

WHEN: Thursday, March 15th at 6:30 P.M.

SPEAKER: Carol M. Barnum will be the guest speaker. She is a professor of technical communication at Southern Polytechnic State University in Marietta, GA; a technical communications consultant specializing in custom training and usability; an award-winning author; a top presenter at STC annual conferences; a Fellow of STC; and a recipient of STC's Jay R. Gould Award for Excellence in Teaching Technical Communication. She was a member of the STC board of directors for seven years, 3 years as a Director-Sponsor and 4 years as Assistant to the President for Publications. Her most recent book, *Usability Testing and Research*, is being published in the Allyn & Bacon Technical Communication Series, and will be available in October.

COST: \$5.00 STC members, spouses, significant others, & guests with an invitation
\$20.00 Non-STC members & visitors without an invitation

Because this is a catered event, reservations will be required for attendance. Additional details (including the document feedback forms) will be forthcoming. If you have any questions, please call one of the competition managers (contact information is on page 2).

Member News

Congratulations!

TIM HUNTER, Chapter President, and **RITA JOHNSON**, Technical Publications Manager, are now Senior Members of STC.

Tim is Technical Documentation Manager at Square D's Nashville Airpark facility.

Rita is Project Management Team Leader at Tanner Corporate Services, Inc. ✍

If you have any news you'd like published, please send it to the Newsletter Editor (contact information on page 2).



society for technical communication

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