Lines & Letters

Northeast Ohio STC Newsletter

On the Front Lines

Current events and announcements for NEOSTC.

Nominations for the NEOSTC Board

by Jill McCauslin, NEOSTC Immediate Past President

It is time to announce a new slate of candidates for the chapter's board for the upcoming year, which runs from July 1 through the following June. The executive positions are all uncontested again this year, so no ballot is being sent. Instead, I'm simply announcing them in the chapter's newsletter. Any opposition to these candidates must be recorded within 21 days from the publication of this newsletter.

President: Beth Williams is an information developer with Rockwell Automation. She has been involved with STC for 13 years, starting as a student member of the Bowling Green State University chapter. Beth has served the Northeast Ohio chapter as treasurer for two years and is currently the vice president. Under the chapter bylaws, Beth automatically becomes the chapter's president in July.

Vice President: Lori Klepfer has been designing and developing information products for the past 14 years. She graduated Youngstown State University with a B.S., and was the first student out of the Professional Writing and Editing program--even before it was approved by the Board of Regents.

Lori moved to Cleveland to work for Allen-Bradley. She later became a training and technical communication consultant for CCS and Associates and then for marchFIRST. In 2001, she started her own training and technical communication company, LJK Consulting.

Lori joined STC as as student member and is now a senior member. Her services to the chapter have included:

- 1997, Northeast Ohio STC Technical Publications, Technical Art, and Online Communications Competition Chair
- 1997, STC Region 4 conference committee
- 1994-1996, Northeast Ohio STC Technical Publications and Technical Art Competition Chair
- 1993 and 1996, International STC Publications Competition Judge
- 1989-1994 and 2001, Northeast Ohio STC Publications Competition Judge

- 2001, Northeast Ohio STC Technical Publications and Online Communications Competition Committee Member
- Presenter at various chapter meetings over the years

Secretary: Kim Lindsey will remain as the chapter's secretary. She served this past year in the same position, and has been a member of STC for three years. Kim is currently a technical writer at Management Reports, Inc. She worked as a consultant at RADCom, Inc. prior to this position. Kim's previous experience was as a bench medical technologist.

Treasurer: Dennis Verbiar has agreed to serve as the chapter's treasuer for a second year. He is a senior member of STC. Dennis worked in the Information Design Department at Bayer Corporation in Oberlin in a variety of positions. He served as project leader, supervisor of technical writers, and as advanced medical technology writer. Dennis completed the Web Developers Certificate Program at John Carroll University.

These candidates will serve on next year's executive board with Kris Henige, who becomes immediate past president and will head the nominating committee next year.

I'd like to thank the following people who have agreed to either head or work on the following committees:

- Newsletter Editors: Sharon Ambro and Karla Caldwell
- Programs: Stephanie Webster
- Membership: Tricia Oleksy
- Employment: Myron Shawala
- Web Site: Ken Rogers and Rick Elliot
- Networking Lunches: Angie Dianetti
- Technicom: Maria Hlas and Jill McCauslin
- Public Relations: Jessica Hendricks

If you would like to volunteer for any of these committees, please contact any of the board members or the committee manager directly.

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Congratulations to NEOSTC's First Associate Fellow!

by Kris Henige, NEOSTC President

I am thrilled to report that the Board of Directors for STC has elected NEOSTC senior member Bege Bowers to the rank of Associate Fellow. My thanks to Jeanette Evans, who helped me gather the information for the nomination, and to Jill McCauslin, Linda Burke, and Lori Klepfer, who served as references.

This prestigious honor will be presented at the May 7 honors banquet at the STC Annual Conference, which will be held in Nashville, Tennessee, May 5-8, 2002.

A summary of Bege's qualifications and our proposed citation are listed below. Congratulations, Bege!!

Citation: For continuous and outstanding contributions to the field of technical communication and for promoting the profession through teaching, writing, and mentoring

Qualifications:

♦ Active in technical communication for over 16 years

♦ Member of STC since 1986

♦ Received Jay Gould Award in 1999

♦ Received Distinguished Chapter Service Award in 2001

♦ Co-founded and teaches in the Professional Writing and Editing program at Youngstown State University (YSU) in Youngstown, Ohio

♦ Established a student internship program at YSU

♦ Manages a high school technical writing competition for the Northeast Ohio Chapter

♦ Advises Youngstown State University student chapter

♦ Contributes regularly to scholarly articles and books

NEOSTC Free Confrence Drawing Winners Announced

The winners for the free admission to the Annual Conference were drawn at the March meeting. The winners are:

♦ Monica Lusk

♦ Kristy Benson

♦ Bill Wigglesworth

Thanks to everyone who participated and congratulations to Monica, Kristy, and Bill!

Student Writers: Start Thinking About this Year's Competition

Contest rules for the 2002 Student Technical Writing Competition are now available for students from Northeast Ohio and the Manitoba, Canada areas.

The top three entires from each area will receive $100, $50, and $25 respectively, and automatically become qualified for the annual International Student Technical Writing Competition.

Download the complete rules in Acrobat PDF, or contact Bege Bowers for more information.

Membership News

New NEOSTC members, membership status changes, and more.

Welcome New Members!

We'd like to personally welcome the following new members to the Northeast Ohio Chapter of the STC. If you see any of them at our meetings, be sure to introduce yourself and welcome them to the chapter.We're all in the same boat!

♦ Sandy Williams

♦ Danelle Baker-Miller

♦ Joe Piar

♦ Marge Cataldo

♦ Michael P. Lukas

♦ Beverly Peterson

♦ Daniel Schlossberg

♦ We'd also like to welcome a new member transferring in from the Palm Beach Chapter - Tammi L. McCune!

Congratulations New Senior Members!

We'd like to congratulate our newest group of STC senior members. To be a senior member, you must have 5 years membership in the STC.

♦ Edward T. Price

♦ Katie W. Stibora

If you see any of them at our upcoming meetings be sure to congratulate them!

If you know a new member that we've missed or if you have some membership news, please let us know. Send messages for the editors.

STC January 2002 Board Report

by Mike Bates, Region 4 Director-Sponsor

Chapters

The new Central Pennsylvania chapter was approved by interim action on January 22, 2002, given a $350 startup grant, and assigned to Region 4.

In Region 1, the Clarkson University student chapter and the Region 7 Tri-Cities chapter were dissolved because of continued inactivity regardless of the attempts to reactivate them.

Grants and Loans

A Special Opportunities Grant of $7,580 USD was approved for Dan Jones and Dan Voss for a study entitled "Marketing Technical Communication to High School Audiences: Creating a Tutorial for Teachers and Promoting a Writing Contest for Students." When the study is complete, a report will be published in Technical Communication.

A loan of $3,000 USD was approved for the Oklahoma chapter to host the Region 5 Conference scheduled October 4-6, 2002 in Oklahoma City, Okla.

New Award Program

A new Society-level award program was approved to recognize Special Interest Group (SIG) members for their outstanding work and dedication. This new program will be known as the Distinguished SIG Service Award (DSSA). The first awards will be selected by the board of directors and awarded next May at the Annual Conference in Nashville.

Teaching Fellowship

The first Teaching Fellowship for Practicing Professionals for $4,000 USD was approved for Stewart Whittemore. The goal of the STC teaching fellowship program is to promote positive academe and industry connections and to make it possible for practitioners to help in the education and training of future technical communicators.

Standards Organizations

The board of directors strongly supports a greater role for STC standards organizations such as IEEE, ISO, and W3C. As a result, they approved membership and will support delegate participation in the US Technical Advisory Group (an organization that plays a supportive advisory role for the creation of ISO standards). The board also approved delegate participation in the W3C (STC already is a member of that group).

Several Chapters Change Names

It was announced that several chapters have changed their names since the last board meeting: Sweden chapter changed to the Nordic chapter, the South Carolina chapter changed to the South Carolina Midlands chapter, and the Central New Jersey chapter changed to the New Jersey chapter.

Mike Bates is the Manager of Information Architecture at Rockwell Automation and Region 4 Director-Sponsor.

Meeting Wrap-Up: Help in Windows and Office XP

by Karla Caldwell, NEOSTC Newsletter Co-editor

The rumors were true -- well, at least partially. Bates explained that the newest versions of MS's operating system and office applications had all-but-eliminated the Office Assistant we all love to hate -- Clip-it. Users of the new XP products will no longer be confronted with the ubiquitous "It looks like you're writing a letter... can I help?" Instead, MS is peddling a kinder, smarter solution.

The Help and Support Center is customized content at its best. Resources include access to browse MS's knowledge base, connections to user experts through forums, while still keeping the online documentation and tutorials present in earlier versions of the software. The search utility -- now PART of the interface -- works for full-text and offers natural language functionality.

What does customization have over Clippy?

The customizable Help and Support Center allows users to record and organize information they need most frequently using Task Panes and Smart Tags. Think of it as teaching Clippy to know when to offer help and when to keep quiet.

The Task Panes contain your frequently-used tasks including recently accessed files, templates, or an older file that you used as a model for the one you're working on now. Smart Tags take help one step further by allowing you to perform activities with the click of a mouse. For example, when writing a letter you can now use Smart Tags to get driving directions to the address, or even add the address to your address book.

The new interface for The Help and Support Center allows MS to maintain a consistent look and feel across

the board for its XP products. Whether you're troubleshooting with a wizard, or looking up a topic in the knowledge base, you feel like you've never left home.

The Knowledge Base = Flexibility

From a technical writing perspective, the online knowledge base offers a lot more flexibility than the traditional print manual. Typically, once the software has been released, Bates explained, writers must wait for the next version in order to update documentation. By housing all of the materials online, MS gives its writers the ability to continuously update documentation as more information is needed.

Users who rely on text-to-speech readers also reap the benefits of the flexible new publishing method.

Conclusion

Bates concluded with a discussion of the feasibility of XP's help innovations and its future. We still don't know if MS's customers will buy into the Help and Support Center, or if online, customizable help will really reduce the cost of providing user assistance. Only time will tell.

Mike Bates is the Manager of Information Architecture at Rockwell Automation and Region 4 Director-Sponsor.

Meeting Wrap-Up: Tri-C's Meeting of the Minds Symposium

by Sharon Ambro, Newsletter Co-editor

The day began with breakfast and networking among the symposium attendees. Then, Dr. Janet Schriver, Director of Technical Communication for Tri-C and symposium moderator, introduced Judy Glick-Smith , national president of STC. Glick-Smith discussed what's happening at the society level, such as the society executive board is revisiting the STC ethics policy and reviewing the process for making decisions at the board level. Glick-Smith also reminded all of us about the upcoming STC Annual Conference, May 5 – 8, at the Opryland Hotel in Nashville, Tenn.

Dr. JoAnn Hackos

Following the announcements, Schriver introduced Dr. JoAnn Hackos. Hackos's talk focused on where we are currently as technical communicators and where we need to be. With the current state of the country, Hackos sees people wanting to bring back the more-stable past. In this economic slump, we've experienced layoffs, outsourcing of technical communication projects,

and cutbacks on education spending and conferences. Hackos fears this push back into the old paradigm is leading us farther and farther away from our users. She asserts that there needs to be an "absolute revolution" in the way we're currently thinking.

We've all experienced the push for technical communicators to be involved in the design phase of projects. We, as communicators, have been successful with breaking out of our cubicles and starting our communication projects early in product development. However, Hackos states that becoming too involved in the supply chain, or pre-sales activities, often means getting farther away from our customers, or users. She contends that we need to be involved with customers post-sales too, because this is when the information we created becomes valuable. Hackos also argues that we need to break away from the misconception that designers and programmers are our subject matter experts. This fallacy leads us to write documentation that is about the program or design and not about how to use the product. The users, those who use the product in their daily work, are our subject matter experts.

Hackos asserts that we need to STOP writing documentation and START working for the customer. Otherwise, customer service and technical support representatives, with their lists of FAQs, will usurp our roles as technical communicators.

Gloria Gery

In her talk about the future of technical communication, Gloria Gery discussed moving into a different time, the Age of Integration. We need to move from artifacts, like documentation and specifications, to something fundamentally different, the integration of content with context.

Gery talked about this concept of integration within the larger concept of a knowledge management cycle, involving knowledge creation, classification and organization, filtration, representation, and integration. Gery asserts that knowledge classification and organization separate data from the application; it decomposes, structures, and stores knowledge for reuse. Templates, rules, and best practices all classify and organize knowledge. According to Gery, knowledge filtration involves using the context to determine the information the users want and need.

This knowledge management cycle leads into the integration of knowledge, the fusing of content with context. The purpose of knowledge integration is to help

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people do work, not to just document. Give the user just enough information to get his or her job done without being intrusive.

Dialog with Hackos and Gery

Following lunch, the symposium attendees got the opportunity to ask Hackos and Gery questions. This session became a lively discussion where we gathered knowledge from two movers and shakers of technical communication.

Presenter Bios

Dr. JoAnn Hackos, President of Comtech Services Inc., in Denver, has authored over 50 publications in the field. Dr. Hackos consults with many companies in the development of user-oriented information and the management of enterprise content. She also delivers professional workshops for information managers, technical communicators, product developers, and business managers in strategies for effective information management and user-centered product design.

Gloria Gery, founder of Gery Associates, Tolland, Mass, is an expert in performance-centered software design and interactive training and performance support systems. Ms. Gery develops training and education strategies needed to operate complex technical communication computer technologies.

The Esoteric Editor

by Karla Caldwell, Esoteric Co-editor

So. You've never been to an STC annual conference? Well, there's never been a better time to go. This year's conference is right around the corner in Nashville, Tenn. from May 5-8.

You can't argue with the location. I searched Orbitz.com and found a direct flight (round-trip) for $130 -- that's less than it costs for a round-trip Greyhound ticket! Play around with the pricing and departure/arrival dates, and you may do better still.

One adult can get a room at the Ramada (only three miles from the airport) for about $45 a night. If you can get a person to share the cost, you can do three nights for roughly $80.

While you generally have to go on your own for lunches, early risers can grab breakfast courtesy of the STC, and if you go to any of the celebration dinners, you can knock off some more meals that way (I personally recommend doing at least one -- either the awards dinner or the welcome reception).

Since Nashville is a tourist city, you can expect to pay a little more for a sit-down dinner, but you can also expect to have access to the usual gamut of fast-food favorites. Heading off-site to a restaurant can be a great way to get to know fellow conference-goers. You'll be surprised how many say yes to a little sight-seeing and dinner trip if you just ask.

The conference itself, while the most expensive part of the trip, is worth every penny. Expect to meet technical communicators from all over the world who share your passions and pet peeves. Pick your sessions carefully, and if there is going to be more than one of you attending from the same company, try to split up and get even more for your money.

If you're the only one representing your company, you can always hit the product fair and pick up tons of free gifts for your coworkers (it sure beats buying $15 keychains at the airport as an afterthought before you leave).

Most importantly, remember to have fun. It's not every day that thousands of technical communicators descend on our nation's country music capital, so take in a concert or show. I'm sure it will be something to write home about.

Please send letters to the editors.

Creating Your Own Web Site

by Bill Beadle, NEOSTC Senior Member

First, register your domain name. Your Web host will perform a search on the name you choose to see if it is available. Be prepared to submit several names. The Earthlink fee for the search and registration is $40. Domain names have to be re-registered every three years.

Second, have your Web host set up your site on its server. Earthlink charges $25 to set up a basic Web site with 175MB of memory, 10 GB for traffic, and 10 e-mail addresses. Set-up takes a day or two. They e-mail you when the site is ready. The site costs $19.95/month to maintain.

Next, create the files for your Web site on your local drive. The Web site will consist of the HTML files, graphics, and whatever else you want to include. You can use a tool as simple as Notepad or as sophisticated as Dreamweaver for the HTML. Your network provider should also be able to supply you a free HTML editor you can download. You can have someone else do the coding for you, but as a tech writer this is a skill you may want to develop.

You should also check on the host server's operating system. If it is a Unix system, like Earthlink's, you will have to follow Unix protocol in naming your files. Unix is case-sensitive, so Myfile.html and myfile.html are seen as different files. Spaces are not allowed either, which means you can name a file myfile.html or my_file.html but not my file.html. (The tech support people will patiently explain this, subtly letting you know they are accustomed to talking to idiots.)

When your Web site is ready, it should contain a file named index.html. The server will open this file when a visitor accesses your Web site. Initially, index.html will produce a message such as "This Web site is currently under construction." You must replace this with your own version of index.html, containing the links to your Web pages. In my Web site, index.html creates three frames into which it inserts a company logo, a JavaScript menu linking to the pages of the site, and a window displaying the active page.

Your Web host should provide you with free file transfer protocol (FTP) software to download your files to your Web site, but you should thoroughly test them beforehand on your local drive. Once the files are downloaded, your Web site is ready to use. You will then want to check it out thoroughly online to make sure the screens look the way you want and all of the links work. You can change the Web site at any time by downloading a new version of one or more of your files.

You also have to set up your e-mail addresses for your Web site. Your Web host will provide you with a number of default e-mail addresses. Earthlink provides ten addresses, using the format defaultnamexxxx@earthlink.net (for example, techman1234@earthlink.net, techman1235@earthlink.net, etc.). You have to inform them to associate these default e-mail addresses with aliases you want your visitors to use. In my case, I've associated techman1234@earthlink.net with wbeadle@tech-manual.com.

In order to use your e-mail you also have to set up a Dial-Up connection on your local computer, using a mail server of your choice. The Web host's tech support should be able to walk you through the set-up with minimal pain.

Finally, even though you have a working Web site and e-mail, it is unlikely anyone will visit your site unless you actually send them the URL. In order to become more visible on the Internet, you have to register your site with the major search engines, such as Yahoo, Google, etc. Earthlink provides a software tool ("Netmechanic") that will automatically register your site with these search engines for a one-time fee of $25. When you run the software, it asks you to enter keywords that point to the site (e.g., "technical writing"). There is such a backlog of new sites that it can take 4 to 6 weeks to register with a popular search engine. You are advised to run the software monthly to ensure that once you are registered, you stay registered.

Incidentally, Netmechanic will also check and correct your HTML code, notify you of any bad links on your site, and even check your spelling, if you want.

This has been my experience creating a Web site using Earthlink as the Web host. If this is not typical and someone has had a very different experience using another host, I would invite him or her to share that with us.

To share your experience with securing a domain name and Web hosting, e-mail the Lines and Letters editors.

How to Assess Prospective Client or Employer Writing Needs

by Sandy Woodthorpe, NEOSTC Member

Economic downturns affect most of us writers at least once during our careers. Businesses eliminate our jobs, impose hiring freezes, and deem us a "luxury they can't afford." Some managers assign our work to secretaries, engineers, programmers, sales reps, and well, anybody who can use Microsoft Word! After a while, this two-for-one bargain can even work its way into job descriptions and help-wanted ads. It may require the sting of market competition, unbearable workloads, looming deadlines, and customer complaints before somebody says, "Hey! We need a writer!" It's wise to keep your eyes wide open when looking for a job or an assignment under these conditions. Wearing blinders can get you broadsided.

To avoid misunderstandings and unearth the occasional diamond in the rough, our excellent communication skills come in handy. The objective is to get the prospect to explain exactly what he or she means by the statement, "We need a writer." Most people are grateful for sincere interest in their needs. If you pose questions casually and share information, the prospect will elaborate freely. Here are some opening questions to help you start things rolling:

♦ What is your definition of a writer?

♦ How do you rate the quality of your current writing?

♦ Have you used a professional writer in the past?

♦ Why do you need a professional writer now?

♦ What is the duration of the need?

These questions may seem elementary. That's okay. This is a "back to basics" approach. Asking the prospect for his or her definition of a writer will reveal expectations, as well as how he or she regards members of our profession. The second question will help you assess current satisfaction level and appraisal criteria. If the prospect has hired a professional writer before, the response to the third question will provide clues to the rates they have paid, plus opinions on service and any biases. The reply to the fourth question will draw specific projects and expectations into focus.

The last question will help you determine job scope so that you can evaluate whether the opportunity is short-term or long-term, and worth the pay.

Each answer generates more points for you to clarify. Keep asking for examples and confirming your understanding until you have a clear idea of what the prospect needs and wants. For example, if they say they need a mule, they expect a mule. Not a thoroughbred. Evaluate the opportunity. Can you can live with the mule?

Seeing others' needs within the context of our own experience is human. Writers often share war stories about the lack of understanding or recognition we receive, the decline of standards, and the compromises we make to earn our living. Unsurprisingly, these discussions reach a high pitch during tough times. By learning what the market is really saying, we can decide which compromises we're willing to make and possibly, do some consciousness raising along the way.

Sandy Woodthorpe has written marketing and technical communications as a freelance and staff writer since the 1980s. You can contact her at sandyleew@earthlink.net.

The Role of Technical Writers in Developing E-learning

by Ron Kurtus

Presented to the Society for Technical Communication Wisconsin chapter, January 9, 2001. Reprinted with permission from www.school-for-champions.com.

Background of eLearning

Many companies are looking at ways to increase the training of their workers and managers. Some are also seeking to provide more training to their customers or users and even suppliers. Standard classroom training can be expensive when employees have to take time off from work. If travel is necessary for the training session, cost may rise even further.

Solution is eLearning

A valid solution is eLearning, which primarily covers bomputer-based training (CBT) and Web-based training (WBT). Online tutorials and online help for software products are also sometimes included as part of eLearning.

Delivery methods for eLearning

CBT is usually delivered on a CD-ROM, while WBT is obviously delivered over the Internet. Online help is traditionally delivered with the software application.

Previously, CBT titles were developed on high-end authoring applications such as Macromedia Authorware and Asymetrix Toolbook. Authorware is still being used, especially since it allows streaming of audio and video files through the popular Shockwave plug-in. Meanwhile, Asymetrix changed their name to Click2Learn and seem to be phasing out Toolbook.

Present trend

The present trend is to develop the eLearning material that is browser-based, so that it can be distributed both on CD-ROM and online. The CD-ROM version may include more audio and video, while any testing and certification would be done over the Internet. Even online help is going online. At the very least it is HTML-based.

Role of technical writers

Companies typically use their training personnel and instructional designers to develop and write the training material. With the emergence of eLearning, many companies are increasing the role of technical writers to development and writing process.

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Role expanded

The role of the technical writer or technical communicator has expanded from being someone who can write well and can effectively gather information from subject matter experts, to a person who can not only write technical copy but can also use sophisticated tools to publish the material online.

Must know tools and techniques

Knowing how to use programs like FrameMaker, RoboHelp, Acrobat, and graphics and illustrator programs like PaintShop Pro, Photoshop, or Illustrator is no longer enough. The technical writer must now learn how to develop Web pages and eLearning material and use the tools required for those tasks too.

Tools and techniques

The writer must learn to use the special tools employed in developing eLearning. This includes instructional design software, course management tools, Web page tools, and even some multimedia applications.

Tools

There are a number of tools that can be used for developing eLearning.

Instructional design

A solid approach to developing eLearning is to follow instructional design principles. A top tool for this task is Designer's Edge from Mentergy. This application leads the development manager, designers and writers through a series of steps and includes forms to fill out.

Course management and testing

Graded testing for certification cannot be done off a CD-ROM. It must be controlled and done online. An application for managing a course and providing controlled tests is ASPTESTS, developed by Lanex. Besides managing the course, it provides templates for creating test questions, choices, and correct answers. Groups of questions can be randomly displayed so that students will not be able to "fudge" tests through repeated entries.

Tools for developing Web pages

The major applications for developing Web pages and Web sites are Microsoft FrontPage and Macromedia Dreamweaver. FrontPage is easier to use, but Dreamweaver is more sophisticated and assures the pages won't be only Microsoft-specific.

The Coursebuilder add-on to Dreamweaver helps to add quizzes and interactivity to web pages. Macromedia Flash is also used to develop animations that download quickly on the Web.

Writing techniques

In developing eLearning, you should follow good instructional design, planning the needs and knowing the audience, before writing the material.

Following design steps

Well-designed instructional material is thoroughly thought out. First, management determines their requirements. They analyze needs, draft a mission statement, create an audience profile, and write objectives.

Then the writer can proceed in a step-by-step manner:

1. Outline content

2. Lay out course map (with training)

3. Define treatment

4. Select learner activities (with training)

5. Storyboard course

6. Produce media (with graphics design)

7. Author course and write content

8. Test and evaluate course material

Need special writing skills

Each of these areas requires special writing skills. The writer certainly needs the ability to outline and organize the content of the course and to write a treatment or a short essay that defines what the course is all about. The writer also needs to be able to layout the instructional material as a storyboard. This can be similar to script writing.

Online help mind-set

Writing the content requires the same mind-set used in writing online help. Short sentences should be used and there should not be too much material on a page or screen. More can be learned in small chunks and users don't want to scroll much.

In conclusion

Companies are employing technical writers to develop eLearning, working alongside trainers and instructional designers. The role of the technical writers is expanding, and they must learn to use new Web-based tools, as

well as to learn new techniques for writing e-learning material.

Resources

The following links to software companies and books are good resources on this subject.

Software

- Mentergy Designer's Edge - Instructional design application

- Macromedia Authorware - High-end CBT and WBT tool

- Asymetrix (Click2Learn) Toolbook - High-end CBT and WBT tool

- Microsoft FrontPage - Web development tool

- Macromedia Dreamweaver - Web development tool

- Macromedia Coursebuilder - Course building add-on to Dreamweaver

- Blue Sky (eHelp) RoboHelp - Online and HTML help tool

- Lanex ASPTESTS - Course and test management tool

Books

You can buy the following books from Amazon.com or your local bookstore:

- *Web-Based Training Cookbook* by Brandon Hall, Wiley Computer Publishing, 1997 ($39.99) An excellent book, giving a thorough explanation of WBT. Includes CD-ROM with case studies.

- *Web-Teaching* by David W. Brooks, Plenum Press, 1997 ($25.00) An academic guide for designing interactive teaching on the Web.

- *Designing Web-Based Training* by William K. Horton, John Wiley & Sons, 2000 ($35.99) Horton's books always emphasize the importance of the user interface.

- *Web-Based Training: Using Technology to Design Adult Learning Experiences* by Margaret Driscoll and Larry Alexander, Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998 ($44.95) A a popular book, looking at WBT for adult learners.

- *Building a Web-Based Education System* by Colin McCormack, John Wiley & Sons, 1997 ($39.99) Considering the design and management of a complete system of courses.

Contact the Author

Do you have any questions, comments, or opinions on this subject? If so, contact me at ron@ronkurtus.com with your feedback. I will try to get back to you as soon as possible. Be sure to state the title or subject matter, so I know what material you are referring to.

Designing a Web Site for a Corporate Intranet

by David Dick, STC Usability SIG Newsletter Editor

Purpose of a Corporate Intranet

The corporate intranet is the focal point for company-wide information, programs, and events. It serves three objectives:

- Supports top-down communication by publishing executive decisions, vision statements, and strategy discussions.

- Provides a portal to services such as travel (reservations and reimbursements), training courses (external and internal), time sheets, and job opportunities.

- Reduces the emphasis on e-mail and printed material to share information throughout the organization.

All this considered, usability is an integral part of the corporate Intranet because staff productivity and efficiency will suffer if it is poorly designed.

Structure of a Corporate Intranet

The structure may primarily consist of the organization's service departments such as Human Resources, Marketing, IT, and Security, and company-wide programs and projects. In addition to the service departments, the corporate intranet consists of the following sites:

- Projects

- Departments and Divisions

- Personal pages

- Clubs and Staff Events

Projects

Everybody wants to know about projects and activities, and persons involved (with links to personal homepages). If the corporate intranet has sites dedicated to projects then you should publish

information about how your department/division contributes to them and links to publications and reports.

Department and Division

Everybody wants to know the mission of departments and divisions, and contribution to company-wide projects and activities, publication of documents and reports, and staff assignments.

Personal Pages

If your corporate Intranet has a "Who's Who" database, including links to personal homepages is a must. The personal homepage can contain information such as involvement with projects and activities, skills, experience, training, and interests, and links to clubs, departments, divisions, projects, documents and reports authored. Always use good judgement when including personal information on a personal Web page and get permission before you publish.

Clubs and Staff Events

All work and no play is not fun. Clubs (sport or hobby) and staff events (picnics, charity drives, etc) should have their own Web site or page on the corporate intranet. Publication will increase awareness and may increase membership.

Design Considerations

The same principles for applying usability engineering to product design apply to designing a Web site for a corporate Intranet. These principles include:

- Specify the context of use

- Specify user and organizational requirements

- Create design solutions

- Evaluate designs against requirements

Specify the Context of Use

A Web site on the corporate Intranet should satisfy one or more uses. If not, there is little justification to dedicate time and effort to design it. A good way to begin is to brainstorm the context of use with co-workers and your manager. The following are some issues to consider:

- What services and information will the Web site provide?

- The Web site should reflect on the mission of the department/division and provide links to tools (and instructions on proper use of the tools), information

(headlines/projects/people), career and training, documentation/publications, and a link to a central search facility. These categories can form the framework of your homepage.

- Are there any localization issues (for example, sales offices) to consider?

- If your company has staff working out of state or country, consider their information needs as well. Common questions to common problems usually handled by phone calls and e-mails can be resolved by making the information readily available on the Web site.

- Are there any employees for whom the Web site much satsify accessibility design issues?

- As a common practice, it should be possible to display the contents of the Web site without relying on graphics for the benefit of users with text readers. You can probably obtain more information about staff with special needs by contacting Human Resources.

Specify User and Organizational Requirements

Your Web site should contribute to cooperation and communication between users and other departments.

By concentrating on the services and information that the Web site will provide, you can identify potential users (visitors) who can also participate in usability testing. Identifying user and organizational requirements provide objectives and goals to satisfy users' expectations and a basis for evaluating design against requirements.

Create Design Solutions

I recommend the following strategy for creating design solutions:

- Use a template

- It may be possible that the corporate communications department of your company has created templates for a Web site. In which case, I strongly suggest that you follow the corporate standard. Following the corporate standard will resolve basic design decisions for navigation, graphics, and page layout. A consistent layout will contribute to ease of use and provide uniformity of the corporate intranet.

- Many Web site designers prefer not to follow the corporate standard because it's not mandatory. Web page aficionados believe they can do better and

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generally contribute to the bloopers popularized in GUI bloopers: Don'ts and Do's for Software Developers and Web Designers.

♦ Organize site structure

♦ The best method to organize the site is according to how users see it. To achieve this goal you can either follow the recommended guidelines (style guide) or (in the absence of guidelines) according to result of usability testing.

♦ Site structure should reflect the tasks users want to perform and information (chunks) they want to see.

♦ Consider Design

The design of the site should conform to recommended guidelines (style guide). In the absence of guidelines, the Web site should satisfy accessibility requirements. The Usability SIG Web site has a list of valuable resources to help you get started.

Evaluate Designs Against Requirements

The prototype should reflect the initial design of the Web site. Usability testing will identify design issues that will need to be corrected before making it available to the user community.

When you have completed the prototype, invite members of your organization, department, and division for a "test drive." Provide testers with tasks to accomplish and information to find.

With your lessons learned, improve the design and retest it until you have resolved the design issues.

When you are confident that the design satisfies user and organizational requirements, publish your Web site on the corporate intranet Web server and advertise it on the corporate Intranet homepage.

You are Finished – What's Next?

Improving content and quality is 80 percent of your job to maintain content, quality, and usability. Be prepared to investigate the number of users to your site and the pages they visit. In this way, you'll identify popular and unpopular pages (information) and tools.

If you identify an increase in the number of users to a particular site/tool then redesign the homepage to simplify visitor access.

Pages that have no visitors indicate that they are either of no interest and should be removed or visitors don't know that the pages exist. Conduct a survey to identify

their value to the user community before you make your decision.

Redesign the site to improve productivity and efficiency, especially for forms and tools. A "face lift" is always a welcome change to regular visitors if it helps to improve navigation.

Provide contact information and link to your e-mail address so that visitors can contact you and either praise or comment on your site. Praise builds confidence and criticism provides suggestions for design improvements.

REFERENCES

♦ ISO 13407:1997, *Human-Centered Design Processes for Interactive Systems*

♦ Nielsen, Jakob, *Designing Web Usability: the Practice of Simplicity*

♦ Johnson, Jeff, *GUI Bloopers: don'ts and do's for Software Developers and Web Designers*

David Dick designs Web sites for the SWIFT corporate Intranet and is Editor of Usability Interface: newsletter of the Usability SIG.

Networking Lunches

The April Networking Lunch will be held on the 10th at the Mentor BW3.

The May Networking Lunch will be held on the 21st at the Fox and Hound.

The June Networking Lunch will be held on the 13th at the Peninsula Winking Lizard.

Lunches begin at noon. Contact Angie Dianetti to RSVP.

Regional Opportunities

Workshops, conferences, and events in and around Ohio.

Cuyahoga Community College Hot Topics Seminars

Get introductions to software packages such as Framemaker and RoboHTML.

♦ Date: May 5-8, 2002

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STC International Conference

Conference attendees come together each year to share information about every aspect of their work. Besides its many networking opportunities, the conference provides a program of approximately 200 technical sessions. These are 60- to 90-minute presentations, each conducted by one or more experts in some area of technical communication. Date: May 5-8, 2002

Structured Writing Workshop by JoAnn Hackos

Learn how to write for single-sourced documents.

♦ Date: May 20-21, 2002

Content Management Conference by JoAnn Hackos

If you're trying to manage corporate data, reuse your content, and deliver information through many media, join your peers at this key industry event.

♦ Date: June 3-4, 2002