Writing Outside the Computer Industry

by Catherine McNair

Most, but certainly not all, STC members in southwestern Ontario work for the computer industry. Curious about technical communication positions in areas other than the computer industry, I phoned and e-mailed some of the people who work outside the computer industry in southwestern Ontario. People were willing to talk, though not always to be identified. They expressed a sense of isolation at being a minority within the technical writing community. Here’s a brief summary of what I learned from talking to these people.

Government  Government is a large, confusing employment sector that includes several levels and numerous associated institutes and boards. Within this complex configuration, many technical communicators have found work producing reports, strategic plans, proposals, articles, handbooks, and instructional videos—almost anything but computer documentation. Permanent government workers (as opposed to those on contract) tended to have duties beyond those of a traditional technical communicator (if there is such a beast), such as support, plant inspections, and visiting consultants.

Education  The educational sector is largely government-funded, but I’ve separated it out because it’s such a locally visible sector. I didn’t reach anyone at the universities, but I did talk to people at the school board and at community colleges. Tasks in both cases were similar and, as with other government workers, fairly wide-ranging: documenting in-house computer systems, training, and providing support—not a job for people who can’t stand interruptions and require a strict 9-to-5 work schedule. Other duties that varied with the specific place included user interface design (lucky!), keeping up with education policy, acting as a liaison with government, translation, and newsletter writing.

Health  Primary health-giving is another government-funded field, but via e-mail I heard from people who worked in for-profit medical sectors that sell medical equipment or pharmaceuticals—and there are several pharmaceutical companies in Toronto. Their audience tends to be scientists or physicians but, interestingly, none of the writers had training in those specific areas. They wrote policy and proce-
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The Carolina Chapter publishes the Carolina Communiqué monthly to provide reliable and timely information to Chapter and Society members. We encourage other STC chapters to reprint the material in this publication provided they credit us and send a copy of the reprint.

We also invite our readers to submit material for consideration in the Carolina Communiqué. E-mail articles and letters to the editors or mail them to:

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From the Editor  by John R. Stuart

On a Prayer, These Pages

She appeared from out of the West (at least west of Glaxo), a voice out on the air (well, the telephone), in answer to my prayer (okay, an ad in the Communiqué) for a muse extraordinaire (alright, a talented graphics designer) to guide me through my dark despair (the newsletter design blues).

Sure of herself in the light (as seen within these here pages), and nimble of pen in her own write (check her Getting Participation in Reviews) for she’s equipped with appetites bright (for laughing, writing, and designing) that doth make our editorial load light (she’s a strong and real contributor), and indeed she’s one of our best (she’s of her word and her words are real thoughtful). Fellow mortals (O readers ours), open your portals (be kindly to this kind young woman) to one of the Carolina Chapter’s own (she’s working for a living in RTP).

Ladies and ladies, a great fanfare for our newest Staffer (put your hands together), a name already in the lights (our masthead), Kim Spangler, without whom the beauty of this issue would be impossible (thank you, Kim). 🙌

Getting Participation in Reviews  by Kim Spangler

I was flipping through the latest edition of Technical Communication when a programmer friend of mine dropped by. He expressed amazement that there’s a society for that sort of thing, and wondered what in the world would we talk about at our meetings? Insulted by his ignorance, I informed him, in a very haughty tone, that between shots of Cuervo and discussions about the cognitive ramifications of implementing ISO 9000 standards into a cross-strata management organization, we often debate the best way to make programmers understand that we are their Friends and Mean Them No Harm.

Actually, most programmers are happy to have a writer assigned to their project, because it means their manager won’t expect them to write the documentation while they are (here’s the punch line) testing the system. However, they are always shocked when that same writer expects them to read the manual, check it for technical accuracy, correct it, and attend a review meeting. And that writer is equally shocked to discover that those same programmers who were so glad to see her/him will now do anything to avoid reading about their own application.

Most writers begin their first job in an idealistic fog. They labor under the delusion that they can help users, just by the power of their ability to clearly explain the application. So a writer starts the project by asking for silly things like recent specs and a working, stable version of the executable. Then the writer submits a thoroughly edited draft to all relevant members of the team. Who then promptly drop it in the trash.

And so the first seed of doubt is planted. Could it be that nobody wants to review this lovingly crafted work? This ode to the wonders of the rules-based application?

The writer then goes through several strategies in attempts to coax the developers into reading the manual:

1. The Memo Phase—Characterized by a misguided desire to encourage these obviously shy and modest developers to attend the review because their “input is essential to the accuracy of this manual.”

2. The Face-to-Face-Confrontation Phase—You venture into the cubes of the developers to find out exactly why they are so busy they can’t respond to your e-mail or messages, only to find them playing four-way interactive Doom.

3. The Appeal-to-the-Project-Manager Phase—Your project manager would be happy to meet with you to discuss your concerns, but she is on her way to a meeting. Then she is meeting with her boss to discuss why her project is so far behind schedule. Then she is spending the rest of the week at a conference on “Better Management Through Meetings.”

4. The Total-Resignation-and-Despair Phase—Why am I here? What is my purpose? Is it lunchtime yet?
Nichols Report: How to Succeed as a Technical Communicator

by Michelle Corbin Nichols

Presenters included: Judith Bronson, Kenneth Cook Jr, David Dobson, Roger Grice, JoAnn Hackos, Jeffrey Hibbard, Bill Horton, Marty Shelton, Jonathan Price, Stephanie Rosenbaum, Constance Kiernan, and Andrew Malcolm

This was clearly one of my favorite sessions of this year’s STC conference. Several expert technical communicators who had been in the business for quite some time were given two minutes to explain to a very attentive audience how to be a successful technical communicator. Each presenter had their own view of how to succeed and found clever ways of presenting those success factors. For example, Bill Horton had us build a paper airplane and Jonathan Price taught us a prayer (“Please let the software slip”). Here is a quick synopsis of the success factors:

- Do not be in awe of the computer, it is merely a tool.
- Learn and use correct English.
- Be a salesperson or educator for technical communication. Make sure they all know your worth.
- Know the product, service, or process you are documenting.
- Understand the audience’s tasks, but more importantly, understand the audience as people, who are all very unique in their abilities and desires.
- Remember that good writing skills are the foundation of all other work we perform.
- There are no shortcuts.
- Present ourselves with indisputable competence.
- Consistently pursue excellence in all work.
- Exhibit positive, responsible behavior at all times.
- Be open-minded and respect others’ opinions.
- Keep all of your promises; recognize your limitations.
- Work at building socially synergistic relationships.
- Remember that technology is a tool.
- Learn the habit of listening.
- Volunteer and give something back to the communities you work and live in.
- Be proud of your accomplishments and continue to set goals.
- Be confident; don’t put yourself down, and be an extrovert.
- Actively seek ways to work with, learn from, teach, share with, and help others with the work.
- Be ready and prepared to deal with and accept change.

Membership News

reprinted from the News & Observer, 10/30/95

Lottie B. Applewhite has received the Harold Swanberg Distinguished Service Award from the American Medical Writers Association.

The award, named for one of the founders of the American Medical Association, is given for outstanding contributions to medical communication or to the profession.

Applewhite is a former occupational therapist who has worked as an author’s editor for 27 years, specializing in sports medicine. A resident of Carol Woods Retirement Community in Chapel Hill, she attained the rank of major in the U.S. Army and directed training programs for occupational therapists at The Presidio in San Francisco.

Now you’re ready to take on more challenges. Manage a committee. Judge a competition. Run for chapter office.

Expand your horizons to the Society level: join a Society committee, present a paper at the Annual Conference, or serve on a regional conference committee.

Opportunities abound. I guarantee that you can find one that suits your time availability, your energy level, and your personality. As Tracey Chircosta, President of the Washington, D.C., chapter says: “Volunteering is fun!”

Financial and Insurance

Banks, insurance companies, and venture capital companies employ technical communicators, though they form but a tiny fraction of the total number of employees. Though I’ve lumped these industries together, the writers I spoke to in each reported different duties. The bank required a financial background to produce cost justification studies, marketing reports, and process improvement studies, and other projects. At the insurance company, it was mainly software training and writing, while the venture capital company needed some help with grant proposals.

That is just a summary of what some technical communicators who don’t work in the computer industry do. If I’ve piqued your interest in any particular area, feel free to contact me (cmcnair@spicer.com). My sincere thanks to everyone who helped out with this article—it would have been impossible without you.

duration manuals, newsletters, user’s guides, and medical tests.

Engineering Consultants

If you look in the phone book, you’ll see numerous engineering consultants listed. And engineers need all kinds of writing: policies and procedures, standards, environmental reports, proposals, safety regulation project descriptions. The problem is that they don’t always know it. This is a potential market for contract writers, but it does take some selling to convince these firms that they need communication services (let alone that you’re the best provider). Still, it is possible.

Manufacturing and Retail

Here we head back to computer documentation, because some firms, such as K-Mart, Canadian Tire, and some seed companies, develop their own in-house software that, in turn, requires documenting. The audience is internal and, in some cases, isn’t very technical. The actual documents produced, however, should be familiar to those working in the computer industry: reference manuals, quick reference guides, release bulletins, online help.
President’s Message  by Bill Albing

This fall I attended two conferences related to our profession: SIGDOC’95 in Savannah, GA, from Oct. 2-4 and the STC Region 2 Conference in Baltimore, MD, on Oct. 14. The two had audiences of about 100, similar in both size and professional background. The value in attending these conferences was the energy they created by coming together. It was something hard to measure, but it was definitely there. I learned what these conferences were about and they were definitely beneficial to my professional development.

Special Interest Group, DOCumentation (SIGDOC) is a subgroup of the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM). Insights I gained from SIGDOC presentations include:

- **Contextual inquiry** is the fancy name for learning the user’s environment.
- The extent of user-centered focus in writing is growing. This involves learning the user environment to better write task-oriented user documentation.
- Software is available (and may even be free) that creates a DTD for SGML using the documents already created.
- Online help development tools will be as common as word-processors on the desktop of a technical writer.
- Creation of Web documents really is an issue of information distribution and not its creation (writing). I wonder to what extent we should allow papers on such topics at a conference such as this.
- At some point, the distinction between reader and author may blur because of the electronic nature of the information.
- The talk on project management was traditional and common sense, with no new perspectives.
- The profession is changing, but no one has approached the subject comprehensively.

For the STC Region 2 Conference, the benefits included connecting with the Region 2 Director-Sponsor and with the STC President and confirming my sense that we focus too much on the product and not on the process of documentation. In between the Pope’s visit and the Million Man March, 100 technical communicators came from all over Region 2 to meet at the beautiful Inner Harbor in downtown Baltimore. There were STC members from Israel, Taiwan, Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina, Washington, DC, and Baltimore. In his keynote address, Saul Carliner, STC President, discussed one of the most important aspects of our profession—communicating to our clients the value we add to technical documentation. Yes, we all know the value of understanding the end user of our documents, but we must also be able to show measurable value to the client as well. He then listed those measures and encouraged us to consider them on all our projects.

In a valuable afternoon session, the presenter summarized the types of electronic tools available to technical communicators. It was a comprehensive summary and included how the user would use the documents created with each of these types of tools.

In size, it is comparable to the Summer Conference of our own Carolina Chapter. In excitement and energy it was an equal. I spent some time chatting with other chapter presidents and got some good ideas about improving the Chapter’s operations.

In conclusion, I discerned three major trends in our profession:

- User-centered (not just usability) focus and methodologies are becoming more accepted and expected.
- Just as the writer has more control of the task, the writer is asked to convey the information across several media, making the task more challenging.
- More information and documentation is going online and not just as an electronic copy of the document available on a computer screen. The information upon which the documents are based is becoming more distributed and yet still integrated to other information that spans the enterprise.

The conferences brought people and ideas together. Though so much interaction is available online these days, face-to-face meetings are still valuable and allow speakers a chance to present their ideas in a visual and full-dimensional way. Keep in mind that the next STC Region 2 conference may be in Charlotte (next fall) and the next SIGDOC conference will be in RTP, chaired by none other than our own Dr. Brad Mehlenbacher.

Many sleepless nights before divining a New and Improved Trickery strategy. It goes something like this: “Hi Bob, here’s the first draft of the manual. I just finished making the copies, and you know, Ben had written this hysterical limerick about Roxanne in Marketing, but I can’t find it anywhere. It must have gotten mixed up in the copies. But I’m sure you’ll find it when you review the document.”

At this point in my story I just have to gloat: they took the bait like starving trout. Of course, there was never any hysterical limerick, but that only encouraged them to actually attend the review meeting, in the hopes that somebody else would find and read it aloud.

They probably won’t fall for that same trick twice. I’ll have to think up another one. Maybe, “Ben downloaded this really very naughty .GIF image from the Net, but I can’t find it anywhere. Must have gotten mixed up in the copies. But I’m sure you’ll find it when you review the document.”

from 2

5. The If-You-Can’t-Beat-‘em, Join-‘em Phase—It’s amazing how quickly lunchtime arrives when you’ve been playing Doom all morning.

At some point, though, you have to get at least one developer to look at the document, even if that means pummeling him about the head and shoulders with the damn thing. However, this is very tiring, and besides, it doesn’t help. I’ve recently discovered a new strategy, which is winning accolades the world over:

6. Trickery Phase—This strategy did not reveal itself fully to me in its present perfect state, and it was not entirely my idea. I was inspired by the story of another technical writer experiencing the same problems. This is what worked for her: “I know there are some errors here and there, but I’m sure you’ll find them when you review the document.” Now, maybe she was working with an advanced form of developer, but mine didn’t bite. So I spent some time chatting with other chapter presidents and got some good ideas about improving the Chapter’s operations.
Meeting Announcement

The Carolina Chapter’s next meeting:

What: Annual Christmas Social ($5 admission charge)

When: Tuesday, December 12, 1995

Where: Data General Corporation, 62 Alexander Drive, Research Triangle Park, NC.

From Raleigh: Take I-40 West toward Chapel Hill. Take exit 279A, to Alexander Drive. Take a right at the light; you are now on Alexander Drive. Continue on Alexander Drive for 1.8 miles. Data General is on the left. From Durham, take the Durham Freeway to the end, at Alexander Drive. Take a right at the light; continue on Alexander Drive for 1.8 miles. Data General is on the left. From Chapel Hill, take NC54 to Alexander Drive. Turn left onto Alexander Drive; Data General is on the left about 1.6 miles. (Call Michael Uhl at 541-4283 if you need more information.)

Currents ‘96 Conference and Pre-conference Workshop

Feature: In a one-day workshop, William Horton on “Say it in pictures: Visual literacy for technical and business communicators”

Where: Mercer University, Atlanta, GA

Date: Friday and Saturday, February 16 and 17, 1996

Price: $240 for Workshop and Conference, $175 for Workshop, $90 for Conference

For more information: http://www.osoft.com/stc_atlanta/currents/ or
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