

# northbay news

The monthly newsletter of the NorthBay Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication

Volume 7, Number 2, February 2000

## In This Issue

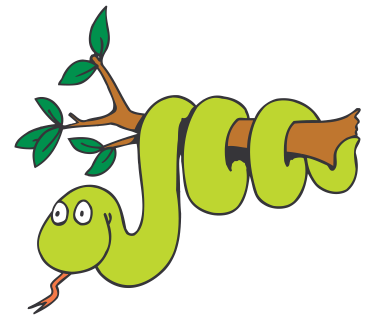
- ❁ *Our January Meeting*
- ❁ *From the President*
- ❁ *This Month's Meeting*
- ❁ *Region 8 Web Site Overhaul*
- ❁ *Interviewing Tips*
- ❁ *Sniglets (or 20 Words that Should Exist)*
- ❁ *Coming Soon*
- ❁ *Employment Opportunities*

## Our January Meeting An Evening with Andrew Davis

*Michael Meyer*

Once again, Andrew Davis of Synergistech returned to our chapter to tell us how the world of writing, and hiring writers, really works. A self-confessed writer of some ten years who went over to the "other side," (to be a recruiter, in other words), he has worked with some 300 companies and knows what their real needs are.

His topic was two-fold, but the topics were related: *What are the current and anticipated trends in contracting?* and *How does one interview a company?*



*Wanted! Flexible contractors!*

*Continued: See "Andrew Davis" on page 3*

## From the President

*Michael Meyer*

This month our regular "show 'n' tell" event arrives. There are a lot of clever people in our chapter with a lot of clever ideas, and I often think that show and tell needs to be a more regular part of our schedule. How many of you have had a difficult problem solved, or been given a key piece of wisdom, by a fellow chapter member? How many of you have had the pleasure of helping another avoid pitfalls you wished you had avoided?

That is the essence of an organization such as this. The food is great, the speakers are wonderful, but it is day-to-day helpfulness that knits it all together. Need I say more? Well, maybe . . .

So how about helping in a very important way by offering to serve the chapter more formally? Yes, elections are coming. Will you be there?



**northbay officers  
and committee chairs**

**president**  
michael meyer  
(707) 765-0618  
mmeyer@sonic.net

**first vice-president  
(programs)**  
john dibs  
(707) 792-1791  
johndibs@fairisaac.com

**second vice-president**  
open!

**newsletter/web**  
michael meyer  
*newsletter staff:*  
diana abele (diana@emaildrop.com)  
gary hayes (gehayes@ix.netcom.com)  
ken delpit (kdelpit@compuserve.com)

**membership/telephone tree**  
whitney parker  
(707) 537-1792  
whitneyp@aol.com

**hospitality**  
kurt huget  
khuget@namc.com

**treasurer**  
carolyne gibson  
(707) 577-2529  
carolyne\_gibson@hp.com

**submitting articles and ads**

We welcome articles, advertising, and news about meetings, workshops, and courses that pertain to technical communication. Please email simple text to the editor at mmeyer@sonic.net.

For our current advertising rates, please email or phone the editor.

**reprints and distribution**

If you reprint articles from the *northbay news*, please credit them and forward a copy to the editor. Reprints in non-STC publications are subject to the author's approval. Copyright © 1999 *northbay news*.

*northbay news* is free to NorthBay Chapter members. Nonmember subscriptions are \$6 per year.

**STC Mission Statement**

*The mission of the Society for Technical Communication is to improve the quality and effectiveness of technical communication for audiences worldwide.*

**This Month's Meeting**  
**Open Discussion and Idea Sharing**  
**(aka Show 'n' Tell)**

*with Everybody*

Our members have prepared some minipresentations they would like to share:

- *Top ten cool things you can do with Adobe GoLive*
- *Web site resources: show and tell*
- *Basic Web design: tools and tips*
- *Discussion of upcoming telecom seminar series*
- *Updates on courses in technical communications: UC Berkeley Extension, Sonoma State University*

And anything you'd like to share, too!

Date: Thursday, February 17  
 Location: Parker Compumotor, 5500 Labath Dr., Rohnert Park  
 (see map on back page)  
 Time: 5:30–6:30 Networking, Show and Tell  
 6:30–6:45 Introductions, Announcements  
 6:45–7:45 Program  
 8:00–8:30 ... More Conversation, Idea Swapping

**Region 8 Web Site Overhaul**

Andrea Ames, the Region 8 Director-Sponsor, reports that the Region 8 Web site has just undergone a major facelift, in addition to an organizational and informational uplift. See for yourself at <http://stc.org/region8/www/>. Please visit and browse, and catch Andrea's latest articles.

She'll appreciate your feedback.

Andrew Davis

*Continued from page 1***The Contractor's World****Why companies hire contractors: the dreaded "P" word**

What motivates a company to hire a contractor? For one, many companies (surprise!) fail to Plan. That means they fail to hire in a normal way, and often grab what warm bodies they can to meet deadlines. They are also unsure of their cash flow, and don't want to make long-

boundaries are essential. (Being able to avoid rush-hour traffic by working at home has not surprisingly become a major incentive for contractors to sign on with companies that allow telecommuting.)

So contract for healthy reasons, not out of fear. Yes, you can earn up to two times (gross) what you might have earned at a "regular" job, but there is a down side. Don't fritter the difference, because you will need that extra money for taxes, supplies, and business development, as well as to hold you over between gigs (a plain necessity). You will also need to stay very informed, and to treat yourself completely as a business—with all that entails. As a contractor, you will also need to perform better than a "regular," as your increase in pay and anticipated skill (the reason the company brought you in, right?) imply you are a cut above the ordinary.

**The financial angle**

Andrew made clear the difference between the two methods of reporting earnings to the IRS—Form 1099 and Form W2. The former is for truly independent contractors; it is a self employment tax that requires the payment of quarterly estimates. To go this route, you should have an accountant who knows the ropes. In some cases the IRS can say a 1099 contractor is not truly independent, and disallow deductions while throwing in an additional tax burden. The law, and recent court cases, have made the 1099 route more problematic, with more and more employers staying away from this arrangement.

**Trends**

Companies are finding it harder and harder to hire qualified technical writers, but simply being an information gatherer and presenter is no longer enough. You must know the technology, increasingly the reason for hiring. An understanding of C, C++, and Java goes a long way, but

---

*"Companies are finding it harder and harder to hire qualified technical writers, but simply being an information gatherer and presenter is no longer enough."*

---

Andrew also made it clear that you don't need to be a hard-core programmer. (Why write if you could make the programmer's salary?) Being able to hold your own for a few minutes in an intelligent conversation about programming can often be sufficient.

**Time pressure**

If you've been too busy to notice, time in the Internet and telecommunications dimensions has sped up just a bit, with few luxuries of leisure. Products must ship sooner and sooner (at times even before they are developed), and companies come into existence and evaporate like clouds over the prairie. So



term commitments. So fire fighters are brought in by parachute—a solution that is not always the best. In some cases, Andrew noted, a bad contractor is worse than none, and stories abound of golden-tongued interviewees who failed to deliver in practice.

**Why be a contractor?**

Andrew made it clear that one should contract only for the best of reasons: to improve skills, to keep up with a rapidly changing industry, or generally to improve one's career. It is very easy to get rusty when you are slotted in a traditional job that cannot afford to have you change your tasks, despite your talents and desire to express them. Flexibility and variety are powerful attractive forces. So is greed.

In reality, though, contractors are much less secure than the "regular" folks, with fewer perks, more taxes and tax hassles, and an obligation to work like hell. In such circumstances, personal

*Continues* ➤

Continued from page 3

don't count on a lot of company loyalty toward you, as fixed costs (your salary, if such is the term) are a big part of your employer's financial equation. Surprisingly, though, contractors can outlast their salaried coworkers—perhaps



No coasting allowed!

because the former manage to keep a low profile and get their objectives achieved (a side benefit of not being allowed into endless staff meetings).

#### **The keys to contracting success**

Who thrives in this environment? Some behaviors, Andrew warned, will guarantee failure. He highlighted some common pitfalls, not the least of which is failing to treat yourself as a business at all times, and failing to collect all fees owed to you in a timely manner. Traits that help ensure success are good technical skills, autonomy (they didn't hire you so they could hold your hand), resourcefulness, resilience, versatility, tirelessness, and a service-oriented mentality.

Engineering chauvinism, with its inherent scepticism of writers and others of the "fluffy" marketing ilk, has not gone away, as a short survey of nodding heads in the audience confirmed. Good interpersonal skills are very important,

even though you are not formally part of the team. And by the way, no coasting is allowed. Save that for the regulars around you (they may be the reason you have a job).

#### **Changing trends**

Andrew gave us his take on where the market for contracting is headed (he also predicted the economy would provide at least another year of healthy demand for writers). First, large corporations are terrified of being audited over their contractor relationships, a result of a case a few years back involving the degree to which Microsoft had treated its contract workers much like regulars—and was obliged to give contractors similar benefits. The reclassification of independent contractors has since become a major activity in the industry. Companies prefer the W-2 relationship, and increasingly work through agencies that provide so-called contract workers (who, ironically, now work full time for the agency; so much for the illusion of independence). Contractors are also increasingly becoming disposable, like the rest of us.

There is increasing pressure from companies to bring independents into the permanent fold, and more and more contracts indicate this temp-to-perm trend. Companies don't want to lose their leverage over what may be their best talent. They also fear the damage that can be caused by hiring the wrong individual, and this path gives them time to observe before committing. The stakes for management have increased, and hiring the wrong individual, as noted earlier, can be worse than hiring no one at all.

#### **The three-year view**

Andrew sees more W2-based contracting, as well as fully incorporated 1099 types. He sees a trend toward telecommuting, and feels that the privilege to work at

---

*Visualize Yul  
Brynnner, Charles  
Bronson, Steve  
McQueen et al.  
riding into the  
village with  
their laptops,  
then splitting  
when the job is  
done.*

---

home will be increasingly stipulated. One of the interesting trends he foresees growing is "virtual teaming," where independent contractor-samurai band together temporarily (or longer) to complement each other's skills. One might be a programmer, one a writer, one a graphic artist, one a Web designer, one an editor, one an accountant (yes, businesses need accountants) . . . the mix potential is great. Visualize Yul Brynnner, Charles Bronson, Steve McQueen et al. riding into the village with their laptops, then splitting when the job is done. The objective is to realize that many jobs are beyond the natural capabilities of a single mere mortal, and a proven ability to deliver as a team is a great marketing tool. And finally, noted Andrew, there will also be more stress and fingerpointing, because companies will still fail to Plan.

Continues ➡

**Andrew Davis**

*Continued from previous page*

**Interviewing well**

The second, and related, topic that Andrew addressed was the skills needed to succeed in an interview. Start with showing an interest in the company, for example. Visit their Web site, investigate their products. What is the market, the audience for docs? Don't be shy, and don't be dumb. [See *Interviewing Tips, following this article.*]

Once in the interview, maintain eye contact, and be sure to "connect." "Connect" is short for "show a spark of interest." Sure, fear can be a component of the traumatic "interview event," but we're grownups. Be present, Andrew exhorts. Act like you care, and show professional interest in issues. How does the company do things? What tools, approaches, and philosophies prevail? How about showing (heaven forbid!) [look that one up] a little passion? Engineers, if no one else, will appreciate it.

Don't be timid. Ask hard questions. Then let the interviewer work to entice you. It is, after all, a two-way street. Let the interviewer talk. Show you can solve the company's problems. Empathize with what they are trying to do, or with any problems they may be having (one reason they may be interviewing you). Respect their concerns, and don't fail to ask how you can grow in the documentation group. According to Andrew, they are looking for an excuse to hire you, but they need your empathy and alliance to close the deal. So tap into their dreams—and make sure you deliver.

**And if you are the hiring manager**

Andrew also showed the picture from the other side of the table. Special skills are needed in hiring contractors, as such individuals have had to master the smoothness that makes the interview successful. Unfortunately, such golden-

tongued ones do not always work out in practice. Firing can be a difficult process, even when contractors are involved, so incompetent ones are often kept on board as a matter of simple convenience. Too often employers (back to the P word) — having failed to Plan—are so behind that they hire in a panic, and pay the price.

You, as the contractor, need to sense bad situations and avoid them. Remember, some things are not fixable beyond a certain point, so don't bother trying. Also, don't bother being a perfectionist. In the battle between the pragmatist and the perfectionist, the former wins. As for doing things the client's way, don't worry too much, counseled Andrew. The client doesn't have a way. That's why you're there.

**Parting thoughts**

When the questions were turned over to the audience, Andrew offered his characteristic nitty-gritty advice.

*How much programming does one need to know?* Well, how about enough to talk about Java issues, for example, such as inheritance and polymorphism. About two minutes will do. You are a writer, after all.

*How much HTML does one need to know?* Enough to patch tags, which is what many jobs are about. Turn bold to italic, or create ordered lists. Exciting work. Pattern recognition goes a long way.

*How much XML does one need to know?* A simple interest and basic awareness of this markup language is more than is often expected.

*What is more important, tools or a knowledge of the industry in which you wish to work?* Tools come and go. More important is an ability to learn tools. Too many employers are shortsighted in this area. For the writer who actually knows a product and its market, opportunities abound.

Finally, for career development

courses and related information, visit [www.synergistech.com/develop.htm](http://www.synergistech.com/develop.htm), dial 888-WRITEJOB, or send email to [pubpros@synergistech.com](mailto:pubpros@synergistech.com).

**Interviewing Tips**

*Steve Ross, NorthBay Chapter*

Andrew Davis didn't mention any of the following, but you might want to avoid some of the following behaviors. Vice-presidents and personnel directors of the one hundred largest corporations were asked to describe their most unusual experience in interviewing prospective employees. Here they are.

- A job applicant challenged the interviewer to arm wrestle.
- Interviewee wore a Walkman, explaining that she could listen to the interviewer and the music at the same time.
- Candidate fell and broke arm during interview.
- Candidate announced she hadn't had lunch and proceeded to eat a hamburger and French fries in the interviewer's office.
- Candidate explained that her long-term goal was to replace the interviewer.
- Candidate said he never finished high school because he was kidnapped and kept in a closet in Mexico.
- Balding candidate excused himself and returned to the office a few minutes later wearing a headpiece.
- Applicant said if he was hired he would demonstrate his loyalty by having the corporate logo tattooed on his forearm.

*Continues* ➤

## Interviewing Tips

Continued from previous page

- Applicant interrupted interview to phone her therapist for advice on how to answer specific interview questions.
- Candidate brought large dog to interview.
- Applicant refused to sit down and insisted on being interviewed standing up.
- Candidate dozed off during interview.

The employers were also asked to list the “most unusual” questions that have been asked by job candidates:

- “What is it that you people do at this company?”
- “What is the company motto?”
- “Why aren’t you in a more interesting business?”
- “What are the zodiac signs of all the board members?”
- “Why do you want references?”
- “Do I have to dress for the next interview?”
- “I know this is off the subject, but will you marry me?”
- “Will the company move my rock collection from California to Maryland?”
- “Will the company pay to relocate my horse?”
- “Does your health insurance cover pets?”
- “Would it be a problem if I’m angry most of the time?”
- “Does your company have a policy regarding concealed weapons?”
- “Do you think the company would be willing to lower my pay?”
- “Why am I here?”

Also included are a number of unusual statements made by candidates during the interview process:

- “I have no difficulty in starting or holding my bowel movement.”

- “At times I have the strong urge to do something harmful or shocking.”
- “I feel uneasy indoors.”
- “Sometimes I feel like smashing things.”
- “Women should not be allowed to drink in cocktail bars.”
- “I think that Lincoln was greater than Washington.”
- “I get excited very easily.”
- “Once a week, I usually feel hot all over.”
- “I am fascinated by fire.”
- “I like tall women.”
- “Whenever a man is with a woman he is usually thinking about sex.”
- “People are always watching me.”
- “If I get too much change in a store, I always give it back.”
- “Almost everyone is guilty of bad sexual conduct.”
- “I must admit that I am a pretty fair talker.”
- “I never get hungry.”
- “I know who is responsible for most of my troubles.”
- “If the pay was right, I’d travel with the carnival.”
- “I would have been more successful if nobody would have snitched on me.”
- “My legs are really hairy.”
- “I think I’m going to throw-up.”



## Sniglets (or 20 Words That Should Exist)

Whitney Parker, NorthBay Chapter

- **ACCORDIONATED** (ah kor’ de on ay tid) adj. Being able to drive and refold a road map at the same time.
- **AQUADEXTROUS** (ak wa deks’ trus) adj. Possessing the ability to turn the bathtub faucet on and off with your toes.
- **AQUALIBRIUM** (ak wa lib’ re um) n.

The point where the stream of drinking fountain water is at its perfect height, thus relieving the drinker from (a) having to suck the nozzle, or (b) squirting her(him)self in the eye (or ear).

- **BURGACIDE** (burg’ uh side) n. When a hamburger can’t take any more



Are you a carperpetuator?

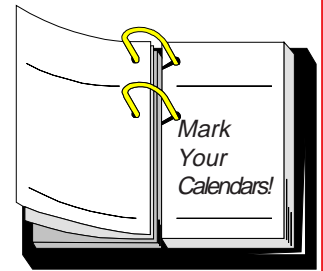
torture and hurls itself through the grill into the coals.

- **BUZZACKS** (buz’ aks) n. People in phone marts who walk around picking up display phones and listening for dial tones even when they know the phones are not connected.
- **CARPERPETUATION** (kar’ pur pet u a shun) n. The act, when vacuuming, of running over a string or a piece of lint at least a dozen times, reaching over and picking it up, examining it, then putting it back down to give the vacuum one more chance.
- **DIMP** (dimp) n. A person who insults you in a cheap department store by asking, “Do you work here?”
- **DISCONFECT** (dis kon fekt’) v. To sterilize the piece of candy you dropped on the floor by blowing on it, somehow assuming this will remove all the germs.
- **ECNALUBMA** (ek na lub’ ma) n. A rescue vehicle that can be seen only in the rearview mirror.

- *EIFFELITES* (eye' ful eyetz) n. Gangly people sitting in front of you at the movies who, no matter what direction you lean in, follow suit.
- *ELBONICS* (el bon' iks) n. The actions of two people maneuvering for one armrest in a movie theater.
- *ELECELLERATION* (el a cel er ay' shun) n. The mistaken notion that the more you press an elevator button the faster it will arrive.
- *FRUST* (frust) n. The small line of debris that refuses to be swept onto the dust pan and keeps backing a person across the room until he finally decides to give up and sweep it under the rug.
- *LACTOMANGULATION* (lak' to man gyu lay' shun) n. Manhandling the "open here" spout on a milk container so badly that one has to resort to the "illegal" side.
- *NEONPHANCY* (ne on' fan see) n. A fluorescent light bulb struggling to come to life.
- *PEPPIER* (pehp ee ay') n. The waiter at a fancy restaurant whose sole purpose seems to be walking around asking diners if they want ground pepper.
- *PETROPHOBIC* (pet ro fob' ik) adj. One who is embarrassed to undress in front of a household pet.
- *PHONESIA* (fo nee' zhuh) n. The affliction of dialing a phone number and forgetting whom you were calling just as they answer.
- *PUPKUS* (pup' kus) n. The moist residue left on a window after a dog presses its nose to it.
- *TELECRASTINATION* (tel e kras tin ay' shun) n. The act of always letting the phone ring at least twice before you pick it up, even when you're only six inches away.



## Coming Soon!



### March

#### Election Time!

Yes, it's time for pundits, talking heads, soft money, and a change of the guard. It's all up for grabs, folks, so come with a mind to participate in another year of a great chapter.

### October

#### STC Regions 7 and 8 Pan-Pacific Conference

For the latest information, see [www.pan-pacific.org](http://www.pan-pacific.org), and Jack Molisani's articles there. If you wish to present, the **deadline** for **Call for Papers** is March 1, 2000. Acceptees will be notified by May 1.

## Employment Opportunities



### Contract Technical Writer

Inference in Novato is looking for a writer familiar with UNIX/Solaris to write/update documentation for a Windows NT to Solaris port of their enterprise software. Requires superior written and oral communication skills, a knowledge of client/server architecture, a thorough knowledge of Solaris, FrameMaker, HTML, and online help systems. Contact Erika Fish, Technical Publications Manager, at [erika.fish@inference.com](mailto:erika.fish@inference.com).

### Senior Technical Writers

Pre-IPO company in San Rafael needs writers to document a Network Resident Server, including developing training workshops. For much more detail, contact Lyla McEachren at [lyla@foxhunt.com](mailto:lyla@foxhunt.com), or at 707.987.4435.

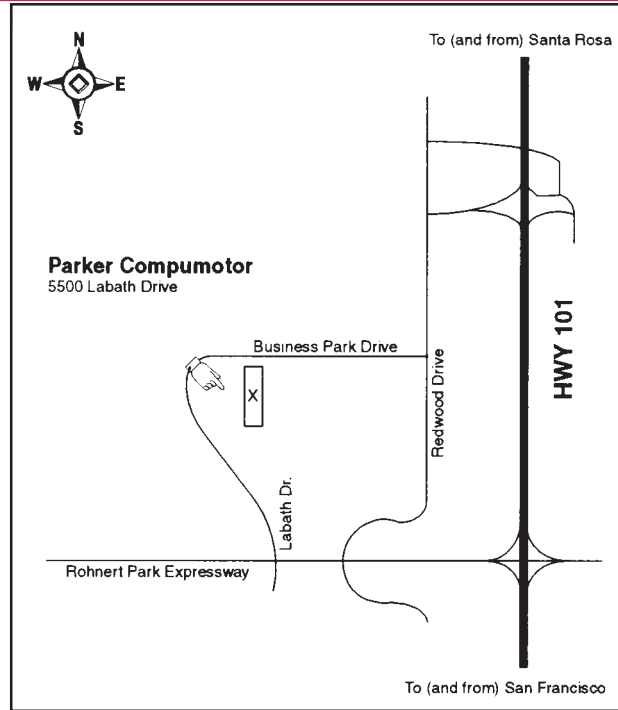
# We meet on the third Thursday of each month

## Our next meeting

*February 17*

Parker Compumotor  
5500 Labath Drive  
Rohnert Park

[stc.org/region8/nbc/www/](http://stc.org/region8/nbc/www/)



## northbay news

c/o

4389 sonoma highway  
santa rosa, ca 95409