

northbay news

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

Volume 8, Number 3, March 2001

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Your Portfolio As Your Representative

Ken Delpit
NorthBay News Staff

Having battled traffic from Santa Clara for three hours to reach the NorthBay chapter meeting last month, Lance Gelein posed a question. "Why have a portfolio?" Lance's list of answers to this question included several reasons:

- A portfolio sells a product — *you!*
- It answers many questions about your skills.
- It changes the job interview into a presentation about you.
- It helps you to organize your thoughts and to focus on you.



A portfolio is a tech writer's best friend.

The Importance of Selling Yourself

At best, a resumé can get you an initial interview. How well you present yourself during the interview usually determines whether or not you get a second interview or a job offer. If you speak in a monotone and present boring samples of your work, chances are you

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March Editorial

John Dibs
President

Our chapter continues to grow. As of February we are at 114 members. Joining us this month are Elisa Ignatius, Monique Semp, and Mary Ann Tharaldsen, as well as Katharina Frazier, transferring from the STC chapter in Vermont. Please welcome our new members. With the increase in numbers, I expect that chapter activities and functions will also take on increased energy and vitality. This month we will hold elections for the 2001/02 year.

Current Projects and News

Our search for a new ISP has been rewarded in a big way, with Sonic.net agreeing to host our chapter site as a non-profit organization fee of charge. I think this gesture speaks for itself with Sonic.net supporting a professional association such as ours. Please pass the

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We welcome articles, advertising, and news about meetings, workshops, and courses that pertain to technical communication. Please e-mail simple text to the editor at jdibs@earthlink.net. Advertising rates (per issue): \$20 for 1/4 page, \$35 for 1/2 page.

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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

Thursday, March 15, 2001

Chapter Officer Elections

2001-2002

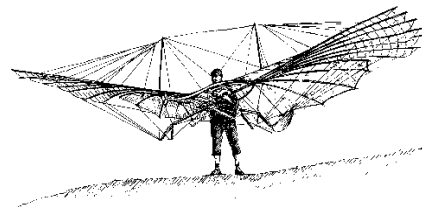
and

Open Discussion

Please come and support the NorthBay chapter. If you have not already considered running for an office, nominations are currently open for treasurer and hospitality positions, as well as vice president (we have traditionally have two VPs). If you wish to inquire about a position, contact John Dibs, NorthBay president at jdibs@earthlink.net.

Meeting Schedule

Location:	Parker Compumotor, 5500 Labath Dr., Rohnert Park	
Time:	5:30 - 6:30	Networking and Refreshments
	6:30 - 8:15	Introductions and Program
	8:15 - 8:30	More Conversation, Idea Swapping



Holding an office in the NorthBay chapter requires the ability to document anything, anywhere, anytime, without access to SMEs.

Your Portfolio

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shouldn't wait by the phone while holding your breath.

In contrast, having a well prepared portfolio can be a showcase for your skills, experience, and organizational and writing skills. A portfolio can demonstrate preparedness and breadth of experience. The organization and variety of your work samples in your portfolio can show your ability to handle a diversity of tasks. It can also increase your confidence and self-assurance during job interviews. In short, your portfolio gives you the chance to "wow" your interviewers.

The process of putting a portfolio together will be rewarding in itself. While compiling your portfolio, you will rediscover the many positive accomplishments that you might otherwise forget during an interview. The process itself helps you to reflect on yourself and to organize your thinking.

Even so, a good portfolio does more

A portfolio gives you the chance to "wow" your interviewers...and to promote your most important work product — yourself

than just add appeal and information to the interview. For one, it gives you a golden opportunity to promote your most important work product — namely, yourself. For another, it enables you to turn the interview into a presentation

about — you guessed it — you. It gives you a large measure of control over the topics that are discussed during the interview.

The importance of the shifting from interviewee to presenter should not be underestimated. It identifies you as a can-do candidate, one with confidence and enthusiasm. It paints you in bright, favorable colors that help you to stand out against a lackluster background of "traditional" interviewees, who simply respond to interviewers' questions.

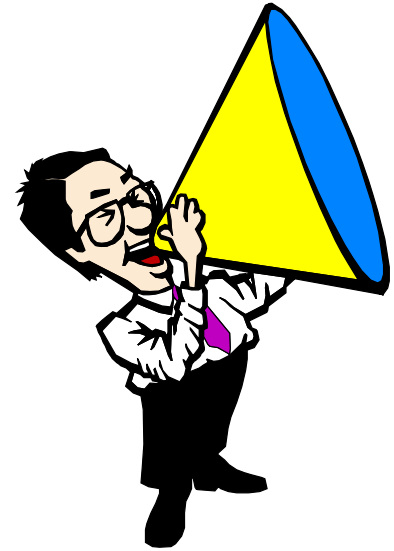
Contrary to being perceived as pushy, turning the tables often provides a surprising benefit. "Most interviewers are not skilled interviewers, especially engineering managers," Lance says. "They are actually relieved when someone else takes charge."

Getting There From Here

The first step in building a portfolio is to gather samples. You must choose wisely, though—not just any samples will do. Select your best work — and only your best work — from each of several types. Select pieces about which you are proud and eager to discuss. Select pieces that demonstrate your problem-solving abilities. Select pieces that have interesting stories behind them, and reflect positively on you. If a piece tends to make you apologize or want to explain its shortcomings, leave it out.

Don't despair if you have few or no "real" professional work samples. Use term and research papers from college. Use volunteer work or articles written for a organization's newsletter. Go beyond "writing samples" to include "communication samples." Recognize that "communication" involves more than text. Creative use of illustrations, layouts, color, organization, and so on, are fair game for demonstrating competence and professionalism. (Editor's note: *The NorthBay News* is an ideal medium for showcasing your skills!)

"Before-and-after" samples can be very effective at demonstrating your ability to improve a document. Before-and-after samples can also be a solution if



"If you're not proud, who will be?" says Lance.

you are short of real-world samples. Find a poorly designed or poorly written document (it's not difficult), redesign or rewrite it, and show how you improved it. The contrast of a polished document against notes scribbled on a napkin by an engineer can proclaim much louder than words your ability to spin straw into gold.

A word of caution, though: avoid using before-and-after samples from the company with which you are interviewing. Know-it-all who waltz in and brashly proclaim that a company is doing it all wrong usually do not make favorable impressions.

Organize the samples logically, by document type, or perhaps by industry. Include a table of contents. Make your portfolio professional, and don't skimp. An attractive binder will set you back a few bucks, but consider the impression that a pedestrian package makes. If you can't or won't be bothered to make your portfolio look first-class, what confidence will the

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hiring manager have that you will do first-class work for the company? Remember, your portfolio represents you.

Include color in your portfolio. No matter how well written and comprehensive, page after page of black text on white pages is boring. Naturally, you should black out any confidential information or change sensitive information such as company and product names.

Include your printed resumé. Unlike with electronic resumé, you have ultimate control over the appearance of a printed resumé. So, this is your chance to show your stuff on colorful (but professional) letterhead. Be sure to have extra copies (black and white is fine) of your resumé on hand. You don't want to be caught under-supplied when there is demand.

Business cards are a big plus, a token of yourself that you can leave behind. Resumés are usually filed away, and we all know how filing systems can resemble black holes. Business cards, in contrast, are sometimes put in a desk drawer or taped to the computer monitor or stuck in a wallet. Coordinated letterhead and business cards help show that you've got it together. *(Editor's Note: For an informative approach to resumé creation, see "More Than Just My Job: A Narrative Approach to the Competency-Based Resumé, with Steve Ross" in the April 1999 issue of NorthBay News.)*

Preparing For Your Interview

Now that your portfolio is underway, you are ready to observe "the First Commandment of Technical Communications," Lance says, "Know your audience!" No rocket science here — the more that you know in advance about a potential employer, the less time you will have to spend covering readily obtainable information during the interview, and the more time you will have to demonstrate your competencies and your enthusiasm.

"Do your homework," Lance says.

Familiarize yourself with the company. Browse their web site. Read the job description carefully, and make sure that it fits well with your skills and your interests. If you have questions about the job description, call the hiring manager before sending your resumé. Often, it's a good idea to call in advance, even if only to declare your interest and your intention to forward your resumé. Conversations in which you exhibit

*Never, ever, let
your portfolio out
of your hands. It is
your proprietary
intellectual
property. "Just say
'No!'"*

your interest and your abilities can help the hiring manager "recognize" your resumé when it arrives, and can keep it from the circular file.

It can be helpful to customize your portfolio for a particular company. This is not as daunting a task as it sounds. If you have more than enough writing samples for your portfolio, select those that best demonstrate your ability to handle the job that you seek. If your experience is thin, emphasize the most favorable samples during your presentation.

This is not to say that you should include only samples that you know to be relevant to a particular job, however. You cannot always know exactly what types of samples to include and what types to exclude. Job descriptions are sometimes more fanciful than factual.

Even well intentioned job descriptions can miss the mark — the workplace is dynamic, not always compliant with narrowly defined expectations. Having a variety of sample types can give you an opportunity to show your versatility.

Rehearse your presentation. Be prepared to discuss not only the samples themselves and the documents that they represent, but also something about the development process for each. Coupled with a sample from the finished product, your articulation of difficulties encountered and overcome during product development shows you to be what all hiring managers seek — a problem solver.

The Interview Arrives...

Being enthusiastic during an interview doesn't always result in a job offer, but being indifferent almost never does. Find your passions and show your stuff. "If you're not proud," asks Lance, "who will be?" Think positive, think "can do." If you fret about getting no respect, "You probably don't deserve it," says Lance.

Never, ever, let your portfolio out of your hands, let alone leave it behind. "Just say 'No,'" says Lance. Your portfolio is your proprietary intellectual property. Unscrupulous managers have been known to exploit samples left behind without hiring or compensating the candidate.

The most important reason for saying "No" is that it breaks up what should be an inseparable pair — yourself and your portfolio. Once your portfolio is out of your hands, you lose the ability to narrate and to control its presentation. "Your portfolio is not the key," says Lance. "The key is your ability to describe the processes."

Far better than leaving your portfolio behind is to turn such requests into

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opportunities for further communications or another interview. Offer to come back at the manager's convenience to show more samples or to interview with other personnel.

Discuss the processes as well as the samples. Show your ability to overcome obstacles and to solve problems. Focus on your accomplishments. "Before and after" samples can very effectively show what your skills can bring to a company. "They show your ability to take nothing and to make something out of it, which is what we (technical writers) do," summarized Lance.

Summary

Lance offered a wealth of tips and good advice. A "reference card" version of his presentation would include the following highlights.

- Use your portfolio to sell a product — you.
- Use your portfolio to turn an interview into a presentation, about you.
- Make your portfolio attractive and professional; it represents you.
- Select only your best work for your portfolio.
- Communication involves more than text.
- Use color.
- Before-and-after samples can be especially effective.
- Include a resumé, extra copies, and business cards.
- Observe the First Commandment of Technical Communications: Know your audience.
- Do your homework: prepare for the interview, rehearse your presentation.
- Be enthusiastic during the interview.
- Use your portfolio to show your stuff.
- Discuss the sample and the process.
- Never let your portfolio out of your hands.

Lance Gelein can be reached at gelein@ix.netcom.com.



eWriter in the Workplace Conference

*Kristin Lund Meyer
NorthBay Chapter*

The Sacramento chapter of the STC and American River College put on the eWriter in the Workplace Conference on Saturday, February 24th, 2001. It was a very cold and rainy day, and anyone who went to the conference all the way from the North Bay deserves a medal. It was unfortunate that more people did not know about the conference. The organizers posted some of the session notes and speaker bios on the Web at www.stcsacramento.org/EWTW/home.htm.

Andrea Ames gave the keynote speech titled, "Stop Plugging Up the Dam and Help

*As technical writers,
we should participate
in making products
better rather than
just writing about
them.*

Build It Better." She asks, "Why are we plugging up the dam of unusable products with documentation?" As technical writers, we should participate in making products better rather than just write about them.

Andrea challenged participants with the question, Why are we writing instructions for products that should be intuitive? Many user interfaces still look like they did in the 1980s, but we are moving away from traditional interfaces towards info-rich interfaces. Technical writers need to stop trying to make users read documentation and start finding ways to make the end user more successful

with our products. Are we fixing ourselves right out of job? The answer is, no, according to Ames. We just need to think strategically and outside of the box. Technical writers need to rethink how we architect, organize, structure and design information. We need to rethink how we develop our information using new technologies and infrastructures. She says, "We are user advocates and in a perfect position to help with design and development."

The organizers planned the conference so that participants could attend four sessions. It was hard to pick and choose from the five or six that were offered for each time slot. Below are some notes on the sessions that I attended.

Psst! Wanna Buy Some Doc?

In this presentation, Bonnie Graham argued that half the battle of selling documentation (whether to clients or in-house) involves educating the "buyers" as to why what we do matters to the business. (You'd think if you already got the job or if they're interviewing for the job, that they are convinced of its worth. But they're not.) She discussed how to identify your audience, define your product, and use proven marketing techniques to make sure that your boss (or future boss) understands what you are contributing.

Organization 101: Order From Chaos

I found this session to be very instructional. Gwaltney Mountford explained that the most critical task we do as writers is to order information so that we can clearly and logically present it to readers. The session covered various techniques for organizing your thoughts such as mind mapping, storyboarding, flowcharting, and outlining. I really liked Mountford's "low tech" methods of organizing a project. She does a lot of things with Post-its on a wall

Continues →

and flow charts. You can download her presentation on the Web site referenced in the first paragraph.

The Language of e-Commerce

The speaker, Keith Baile, surveyed terms and acronyms used in the field of e-commerce.

Gathering Information from the Elusive (and Sometimes Rare) SME Bird

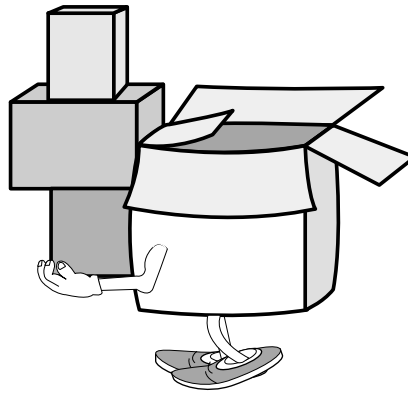
In this humorous session, Gwaltney Mountford, Susan Becker, and Melody Brumis presented information on how to get the information you need from engineers and other subject matter experts (SMEs) by understanding their different personalities. The panel presented their approach to studying SME habits using the analogy of bird watching. It was a hoot (pun intended)!

Conference Wrap-Up

The conference ended with the "eFutures Forum." The panel included Lance Gelein, Andrea Ames, Gwaltney Mountford, and Meryl Natchez. According to these experts, information was power in the 1990s but knowledge is power in the 21st century. People have discovered they can't take in all this information that's available without having help to make sense of it. Content is coming back! As the panel explained, right now is a very exciting time to be a tech writer. We are on the cusp of a big change in which tech writers will be much more valued. Just as skilled IT professionals were at the bottom of the recognition ladder five years ago but are now highly valued, so it will soon be for us bottom-of-the-food-chain technical writers! Whahooo!

The panel also suggested that if you're thinking about your future in your company, think outside the box. Think about how what you're doing can or will dovetail with your company's future. For example, you could learn web design if you think that will come in handy. Reassuringly, the panel indicated that technical communicators

shouldn't try to learn every technology out there. According to them, the core



Ways to add value to your company are sometimes found outside of the box.

requirements for a tech writer are as follows:

- Be able to learn new tools and become proficient using them
- Be a good communicator
- Learn the tools that bring you closer to the others in the company (such as those marketing). Learning tools such as RoboHelp and other help-authoring tools may separate you from the rest of the company. (You might need these, but you also need to find common ground.)
- Once again, don't feel that you have to learn dozens of tools. Learn FrameMaker and HTML and emphasize that you are a good communicator. When a potential client asks Andrea Ames if she knows all sorts of programs, she asks 'Why?' Then she continues, 'Let me tell you how I can be of value to your company.'

Finally, the panel recommended that you spend money on ergonomics. There's no excuse if you are telecommuting. You have to take care of yourself! If you are an employee, most companies will pay for ergonomic essentials. Find stores that allow you to try out equipment before buying. If you have carpal tunnel, consider using a voice recognition software program such as Dragon. Be responsible for your work environment!



The New SRJC Tech Academy

Trudie Folsom

NorthBay Chapter

I am taking the FrameMaker class at the new Santa Rosa Junior College Technology Academy this semester. The Tech Academy, located in Petaluma's Redwood Business Park, is a collaboration of the Santa Rosa Junior College and local telecommunications companies to meet the training needs of the North Bay high-tech work force. It is no coincidence that the Tech Academy is nestled near telecom giants Alcatel, Cisco, and Advanced Fibre Communications (AFC).

Looking at the variety of classes offered at the Tech Academy is like peeking at the qualifications portion of a strong resumé: Visual Basic, MS Access, Windows 2000 Professional, UNIX System Administration, Networking Practicum, FrameMaker, and Technical Writing for the Workplace, and Windows Command-Line Basics, to name a few. The Tech Academy also has classes in management such as Decision Making Skills and Conflict Mediation. There's even a short course that will help you get up to speed with your new Palm Pilot.

Surrounded by clean and modern facilities, it's a delight to sit at the new, high-powered computers donated by generous telecommunications companies. My Thursday morning FrameMaker class is filled with fellow career changers, self-employed writers, and employees sent by their nearby companies. The atmosphere is closer to that of high-tech office than a college classroom.

Summer classes are already listed on the Tech Academy's Web site (see URL on next page) and according to instructor Barbara Heiman, the Academy will offer an expanded curriculum for the fall,

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including Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop and Macromedia Dreamweaver. But to succeed, the Tech Academy needs continued feedback and support from the business community. What skills do you and your employees need? What time is most convenient to attend classes? Believe me, the Tech Academy is listening — after receiving feedback that morning classes are not convenient for everyone, the Tech Academy added an evening section of the Introduction to FrameMaker course this summer and fall.

An open house is scheduled on Friday, March 16, from noon to 6 p.m. Stop in and take a peek, see a demonstration, and say hello to Tech Academy Director, Tom Boag and faculty.

Santa Rosa Tech Academy
1372 North McDowell Blvd., Suite H,
Petaluma
(707) 775-2861
www.santarosa.edu/techacad/

Tom Boag, Director
tboag@santarosa.edu



March Editorial

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word about Sonic's services to friends and colleagues. Several of our members have personal Web accounts with Sonic and speak highly of the quality of service they receive.

It seems that many companies, particularly in the telecom industry, are experiencing a slowdown or retracted growth curve lately. Having worked in the mortgage banking industry for several years, I shouldn't be so surprised by the peaks and valleys caused by market trends, but it does humble us to see forces larger than any corporation or individual

at work shaping our professional lives. The changing times comes at a period of growing interest by students and local educational institutions in technical communication courses and workshops. I hope the current atmosphere won't discourage career exploration.

Regarding education, I spoke this month with Bev Henningsen at the SRJC internship program. Bev supports SRJC students looking for work in various fields. If your company will consider hiring an intern, please contact Bev. The SRJC internship program prescreens potential interns and asks for a minimum commitment of four months from both sponsoring companies and the interns. Companies such as Autodesk, OCLI, and Data Flow have taken advantage of the internship program so far. What a win-win situation for both sides! Employers get to observe and benefit from the valuable skills of interns, and interns get to build the confidence they need to kickstart a career. Please consider approaching your manager about arranging for an intern. You can e-mail Bev at BHenningsen@santarosa.edu or call 707-527-4329.

Finally, member and former chapter president Whitney Parker continues her involvement with the Gordon Scholarship Fund. As this issue goes to press, a

campaign is underway to raise funds from local companies and institutions. (Guidelines for the Gordon Scholarship Fund will be included in next month's newsletter.)

The STC Touchstone 2000 committee will recognize donations to the Gordon Scholarship at the Touchstone 2000 Awards Event to be held this coming Saturday, March 24, at the San Ramon Marriot, and will prominently display the names of any donors. Donor organizations can place information about their companies and about job opportunities for technical communicators on a table in the exhibits area. Due to the time restriction for this event, please make a contribution in the next few days, with a check payable to: STC Gordon Scholarship Fund. Send donations to: Attn: Laura Fischer Touchstone 2000 3620 Chestnut Avenue Concord, CA 94519 To ensure that contributions are recognized, again, given the time restraint, please include an e-mail to Whitney Parker at WhitneyP@aol.com and Judy Herr at herrj@home.com. Also, consider going to the Awards Brunch and Workshop! For information and a registration form, visit www.stc-touchtone.com.



Coming Soon!

Touchstone 2000 Awards Brunch and Workshop

Saturday, March 24

San Ramon Marriot

For information, see www.stc-touchstone.com

SRJC Tech Academy Open House

Friday, March 16

12 noon - 6pm

1372 North McDowell Blvd., Suite H

Petaluma

707.775.2861

We meet on the third
Thursday of each month

Our April Meeting

**Thursday,
April 19, 2001**

Topic:

Putting XML to Use

Parker Compumotor
5500 Labath Drive
Rohnert Park
stc.org/region8/nbc/www/

