In This Issue

The Zen of Error Messages

Rusty Jorgensen, NorthBay Chapter

Stop. That is the essence of all error messages, good and bad, long and short, clear and inscrutable. In a previous article (*northbay news*, March–April 2002), I argued that writers must ask "dumb" questions to transform error messages "Something broke." into information messages. I defined information messages as needing to be as specific and sufficient to answer the user's questions. But in so doing, I skipped lightly over the one aspect common to all such messages, error or information: both error messages and information messages indicate that something has stopped functioning.

Perhaps a mechanical device has ground to a halt, an electronic part has transmogrified into smoke, or a software process has run amuck. Error messages always mean that a user has been stopped in his tracks.

In this respect, error and information messages alike are stop signs. But unlike roadside stop signs where the next order of business is DMV-required knowledge ("Look, then proceed when safe."), these error signs may mean anything and, thus, nothing. The stopped user knows he needs to do something but he may not know what. The purpose of the

A Conversation with Steve Ross

Geneviève Duboscq, NorthBay Chapter

Downsized, counseled out, outplaced. If you've ever been laid off, you know the emotions a layoff can bring, including grief, anger, embarrassment, and maybe even relief.

Steve Ross, age 57, was laid off from his lucrative job as a technical writer at Cisco Systems' Petaluma facility in April 2001, after working only nine months. But he was better prepared than most of the nearly 8,000 Cisco workers who saw pink with their paychecks that spring.

A marriage and family therapist since 1990, Ross had worked for three years as an outplacement consultant, helping laid-off employees from an oil company shift from working to seeking jobs. But being a therapist, he said from his current home in Tucson, Arizona, was "the career that I really enjoyed most."

He got into tech writing in one of those lucky breaks you sometimes hear about. A woman he'd worked with on an outplacement project became a technical recruiter. When she called him in 1995 to see if he knew of a tech writer for a large company, Ross asked,

STC Mission Statement

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

Taking the 'Dis' out of 'Disabilities': Special Needs SIG Seeks Support

Just a reminder as the STC membership renewal process creeps up on its February 28 deadline … the Society's newest SIG, the Special Needs SIG, is still looking for new members

Still looking for new members

to support them in their twin mission to assist technical communicators with disabilities in the practice of our profession and to provide all technical communicators with information that will help them make our communication products more accessible to users with disabilities. A detailed mission statement is available at the Web site.
The SNSIG has already made significant progress: a comprehensive Web site
http://www.stcsig.org/sn/index.shtml
an online newsletter, first edition is posted at
http://www.stcsig.org/sn/newsletter.shtml
and extensive support to the 49th STC Conference, including publication of *Guidelines for Persons with Special Needs* and an *Addendum* thereto, a successful progression, and several articles in the *Proceedings* (conference materials available at:
http://www.stc-orlando.org/prodev/49notes/SNC.asp
But there is much yet to do, and to accomplish it, the SNSIG needs more people. It is looking both for Active members to join their initiatives and Patrons, whose affiliation will help the SIG secure the budget it needs to fulfill its objectives.

To support the Special Needs SIG

If you wish to support the SNSIG, you have two options:
(1) If you have not yet submitted your STC membership renewal, simply check the SNSIG box when you do.
(2) If you have already submitted your STC membership renewal, download the SIG sign-up form from:
http://www.stc.org/PDF_Files/sigform.pdf
and submit it directly to the Society Office. In either case, in order to be added to the SNSIG's newsletter and/or listserv without delay, contact daniel.w.voss@lmco.com or jvinegar@myranch.com.

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"What's a tech writer?" The recruiter wasn't entirely sure but knew it had to do with writing and using computers. That sounded like something he could do.

"I had learned from my outplacement experiences how to write behaviorally and to document my activities in a way that showed results," so he wrote a résumé that highlighted his skills as well as his background in English and psychology. He landed the job without an interview. "If they had interviewed me, my whole career as a tech writer would've been dead, because I would never have passed that interview."

Ross worked for three months on a human resources project for an energy utility. "My learning curve was really steep," he recalled, but the HR application dealt with people, "so I was able to hold my own." After three months, he had learned enough to go out on his own as a tech writer, doing increasingly technical work.

Ross worked as a contractor or an employee for several Bay Area companies, including Harris Communications, Hewlett Packard (pre-Agilent), TrueTime, and Cisco.

Of the satisfactions of tech writing, Ross said, "producing something concrete that you can see, either something brand new or a major improvement over poorly written original documentation, the immediacy of that is very compelling and pleasurable." Knowing he produced clear documentation that helped users was "very gratifying."

But the work was stressful "because, as my jobs increased in technical complexity, I reached a point where I couldn't fully understand what I was writing about." And for someone who likes to get things right, that proved frustrating.

"But I was able to write adequately because I know how to write, and I know how to interview people, and there was existing documentation. And between all these things, I could make sense out of what I wrote. But I never had the big picture." He added, "The ideal technical writer is also a technical expert, ... and that combination is hard to find."

"It's an odd field in a way, tech writing," Ross continued, "but I loved it. I loved using the computer, and I love writing. And I love helping people. ... This was a really interesting and a lucrative way of doing that, but it was never really satisfying because I didn't really care about these products. Once I got to Cisco, there was hardly a human element about anything that I wrote about." But the money was good.

When Ross learned of his layoff and the cushion of six months' severance pay coming, he took it all as an opportunity: "I asked myself, 'Why don't I go back to doing work that really means something to me and get back into counseling?'"

He found work as a therapist in the fall of 2001 with PsychStrategies in Sonoma County. "I learned how to work behaviorally with people who were depressed and anxious. In the past, I had shied away from behavioral work, [so I] was surprised at how well the techniques worked. ... I really enjoyed the work, and people were benefiting."

Ross might have stayed longer, if not for the health of his wife, Juleen. Although the couple had moved from Novato to Petaluma due to the chemical sensitivities that had troubled her since 1989, the open landscape brought dangers of its own: neighbors upwind of them used pesticides that caused his wife repeated grand mal seizures. Once they solved the pesticide problem, the new roof the Rosses put on their house proved dangerous to her as well. They knew they had to get out. Through the Environmental Health Network, the couple learned of a chemically sensitive woman in Arizona who wanted to start a community. The Rosses contacted her and went to Tucson to look around. Instead of joining that community, they bought a 20-acre property nearby on

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which they are having a house built, with what Ross calls "a healthy green design." In order to minimize any health risks, they are taking pains to research and discuss every material—including the insulation, adhesives, caulk, and roofing—that the contractor will use. Some of the skills Ross developed as a tech writer are coming to bear on the house project: his ability to research, conduct interviews, and use the Internet.

Once the house is built and the couple settles in, Ross expects to go through the process of becoming certified to practice therapy in Arizona. He might be tempted to work again as a tech writer, but "I realize that I have to focus on what's important to me." Additionally, he said of tech companies, "Buildings without windows that open and housing a lot of people, workstations, printers, faxes, etc. are physically unhealthy, even dangerous from an environmental perspective." He would be a tech writer only if he could telecommute.

Asked what he might like to tell people about the process of losing and finding work, Ross said, "The main issue around being out of work and finding a new job is related to self-esteem." People tend to underestimate themselves. They look at the job they've been doing, and "it's like a big tangle of coathangers." They have difficulty seeing the many skills and abilities they bring to their work.

People tend to underestimate themselves.

"What I would suggest," said Ross, "is that people really tease out with a fine-toothed comb what they did and break down any task into the smallest pieces that they can possibly pull out of it, and then figure out what skill each of those requires. And those skills should find their way into their résumé." The process of building a résumé is a type of self-discovery.

More importantly, he mused, "If you're able to do what you love doing, do it, if you have a choice. Try. Go with your heart, where most meaning lies for you personally. ... If you can't find work that is directly where your heart is, build your heart into what you can do."

Steve Ross has done both, and he has been fortunate enough to find again the work that he loves to do.
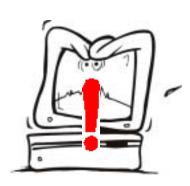
The Zen of Error Messages

error message, then, is not to labor the obvious (something broke) but to enable the user to get going again.

When I worked at Alcatel with software designers on error messages, I always returned to one simple question: "Does this error message enable the user to continue?" The good ones did. We worked on the other ones until they enabled the user to continue. Some were worded better than others; life is rarely as perfect as we'd like. But all got the job done by enabling the user to continue.

As an aside, as one who believes in usability testing and an iterative approach, we tested some of the more dubious messages to see whether they did their job. Typically this meant asking just a couple people in the office what they'd do when faced with the error message in question. If their answers indicated they'd be able to continue with the task at hand, we called the deal done. Otherwise we revised the message and reviewed it again. Contrary to the opinions of some, this process was not long or expensive; indeed it was usually short, sweet, and satisfying.

I knew, and the software developers came to understand, that each error message, when displayed, meant that somewhere, sometime, some fellow human being just had just had progress halted. Stopped.

News Briefs

STC: Telephone Seminars

Creating Persuasive Executive Summaries, February 5, 2003, 1-2:30 pm EST
Presentor: Stacia D. Kelly

Do you think your executive summaries could be tighter? Cleaner? Provide a more polished view of your services to your clients? If you answered yes to any of these questions, you need to attend this seminar. You will learn how to develop a professional, persuasive executive summary that will get your proposals in the hands of the decision makers and get you results. This seminar will take you through all the steps necessary to create an effective executive summary in order to enhance your sales proposal.

Fast and Easy Time Management, February 13, 2003, 1-2:30 pm EST
Presentor: John Hedtke

None of us has "enough" time, so it behooves us to manage our time effectively. This seminar will introduce you to the basics of time management and show you how to plan your tasks and set your priorities for the maximum effect. You'll learn how to do the following:

- Identify time management problems
- Set priorities and create an effective to-do list
- Create a daily time log
- Identify your personal cycles and patterns

All of the techniques involved are simple to add to your daily routine and don't require tons of extra equipment or significant changes to the way you do most things. Instead, you'll get a couple extra hours of productivity daily just by adding 5–10 minutes of planning at the start of the day.

Cost: With a telephone seminar, the cost is per site, not per person. $145.00 USD
An additional $10 will be charged for registrations received less than five business days before the seminar. Sign-up today!
http://www.stc.org/seminars.asp

Discussions by Industry Experts on Quark, InDesign, and PDF Technology, February 26, 2003

Location and RSVP available early February. For more information, contact program@bookbuilders.org.
http://www.bookbuilders.org

15th Writer in the Workplace Conference, March 29, 2003

This year's conference looks at the technical communication profession, including how to manage your career and develop professionally.
Conference speakers will include visionaries from industry, academia, and government. Of special note are our keynote and luncheon speakers.
For details and updates, please refer to:
http://www.stcsacramento.org/WIW2003/index.htm

STC Region 8 Conference, Has Been Postponed Until July 2003

If you have any questions about the conference, contact Patrick Morrissey at patrick.morrissey@idc-mcs.com.
For details and updates, please refer to:
http://www.stcregion.org/region8/r8_conferences.htm

Professional Development Opportunities

Java for the Absolute Beginner
New classes start on the third Wednesday of every month, online
$60
http://www.javaonline.org

Re-Engineering Corporate Courseware for the Web: N6536T
February 12–March 19, online
$500
http://www.onlinelearning.net/CourseCatalog/

Introduction to SQL: MS301.8
February 17–March 24, online
$180
http://www.hwg.org/

FrameMaker Template Design Seminars
February 17–18, San Jose
$1000, discounts available for group signups
http://www.microtype.com/training/FMTemplateDesign.pdf

FrameMaker-to-Acrobat Advanced Techniques Seminars
February 20–21, San Jose
$1250, discounts available for group signups
http://www.microtype.com/training/FmAcro-seminar.pdf

JavaScript for Educators: An Introduction: N6596T
February 20–March 27, online
$500
http://www.onlinelearning.net/CourseCatalog/

Introduction to FileMaker
March 10, 2003, San Francisco
Free
http://www.acteva.com/go/sba

e-learning Workshop
March 11–13, San Francisco
$1095 early bird
http://vignettestraining.com/workshops_dates.htm

XML for Writers
March 20–21, Reno, NV
$825, discounts available for group signups
http://www.usabledesign.com/

Electonic Editing: EDP 046896
April 8–22, San Francisco
$295
http://www.unex.berkeley.edu

SANS Security Essentials Bootcamp
June 11–16, 2003, Monterey
$2895 early bird
http://www.sans.org/bootcamp03/