

northbay news

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

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Getting a Job in Challenging Times

Alison Martin, NorthBay Chapter

Any job-hunting tech writer will tell you that there is definitely a recession out there. Posting a résumé on Monster or Dice typically nets few responses. Your résumé is probably competing with hundreds of others, and it may never rise out of the cyber black hole into which you sent it. How do we stand a chance in such a daunting market? Panelists at the March meeting shared their strategies, advice, and humor on getting a job in challenging times.

Andrew Davis of Synergistech Communications is a “recruiter in hibernation.” He says, “This recession is very, very real. I’d be in for-profit mode if it weren’t.” Synergistech is currently relaying job listings from hiring managers, listing hiring managers as the contact, and “letting those people get buried with résumés.” Connected with STC since the mid-eighties, Davis served as an officer of the San Francisco Chapter for seven years and helped get STC on the Internet in 1994.

Eunice Malley has been a technical writer for 15 years and is a veteran of Seattle’s boom-or-bust dependence on Boeing. She was recently laid off from Next Level Communications and now works for KT Consulting in Antioch.

John Dibs has an M.Div. degree and started his career in Helsinki, Finland working for a translator. His experience spans finance and telecommunications. Laid off from Alcatel
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Writer in the Workplace Conference

Beth Blevins, NorthBay Chapter

Elyse Lord, Editor, northbay news

Larry Lynch, Berkeley Chapter

Technical writers converged on American River College in Sacramento on April 6 to participate in the Sacramento STC Chapter’s *Writer in the Workplace* conference. With many attendees out of work, one overarching theme was that technical communicators must be imaginative and proactive about proving our value. This article summarizes four seminars.

Tips and Tricks for Project Management

Meryl Natchez, CEO of the technology consulting firm TechProse, presented tips and tricks for project management and also gave participants a test of their project management expertise.

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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.

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last April, he interviewed by phone for his current position at Barra in Berkeley while traveling in Poland.

Be an Opportunist

You never know how an opportunity might turn out. Malley's current job started as a two-week contract for \$25 per hour for a start-up consulting company. Despite the rate, she accepted the job. Several months later, she is still working for them. She enjoys the entrepreneurial atmosphere, has flexible hours, and says that the pay has improved significantly.

Network

Despite the economy, companies still need to organize their information. Attend different society meetings, for example, the Association for Women in Computing, or keep in touch with friends in areas like quality control engineering. Find out what companies are documenting and whether it's being done well; then talk your way in. If you're uncomfortable calling strangers on the phone, prepare a two-minute "elevator story" to quickly and easily explain the type of work you are looking for. Learn to use it in networking situations—including elevators!

Represent Yourself

"In this economy, being represented by a recruiter dooms your candidacy," Davis says. Companies have no budget for recruiters' fees of 20 to 30 percent, and too many good candidates are out there. For \$45, a company can post a job on Craig's List and get 300 applicants.

Make Your Location Irrelevant to the Hiring Manager

If you apply for jobs that are beyond the range of a reasonable daily commute from your home, be prepared to move or find accommodation nearer to work during the week.

If a company needs to fill a position badly enough, they may negotiate with you to telecommute once a week. But remember, it's a matter of trust. Dibs's employer, Barra, allows employees to work from home only after a minimum of one year's employment. New employees have little leverage and no track record to negotiate anything sooner.

Show Commitment to Growth and Challenge

In sifting out candidates, Davis looks for people who go above and beyond the stated goal, either making the company look good or saving money. Have the person's responsibilities grown over time? Is (s)he ambitious, curious, keen to grow? For the software development industry, Davis looks for skills in Java, XML, and document management systems.

Malley believes that analytical skills are key to technical writing, and that people with English degrees often have such skills. A candidate's enthusiasm for the profession and caring about producing a good product for the audience also influence her hiring decisions. She prefers hiring inexperienced writers: they're not jaded; they're willing to do more; and they can be molded. She suggests volunteering for your church or STC newsletters and Web sites, as this counts for a lot in a hiring-manager's eye.

Dibs has seen companies delay hiring because they cannot reach a consensus on the skills they want: writing versus industry-specific knowledge. He's seen a trend in companies

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looking for industry-specific skills such as a financial background rather than writing skills so that the writer “hits the ground running.”

Be Honest

A lot of job descriptions out there call for, as Davis puts it, “people who don’t exist, who might have worked for their competition once, but probably in a parallel reality.” Companies “know darn well these people don’t exist. Don’t claim skills you don’t have.” Do talk about what you do know about the subject, any classes you may have taken in it—demonstrate initiative for digging beneath the stated goal.

Hiring managers have asked Davis to write listings requesting experience in programming languages that aren’t even out of alpha development or that have been commercially available for less than a year, for example, C#. “It’s impossible to have two year’s experience in these languages!” Interpret such requirements as needing to know, for example, about object-oriented development skills, what the language does, what’s different about it, and how you can learn more. Demonstrate commitment to learning the new language.



Do the Research

Lists of specific tools on job listings mean that employers want to see that you’ve used tools in a given category. Davis suggests that you research tools you don’t know: Download a demo from the Web and compare it to similar tools you know so that you can talk intelligently about it. Again, show commitment to learning it. Understand how employers perceive the difference between tools such as Word and FrameMaker.

Neuter Your Writing Samples and Post Samples on the Web

Be prepared to leave your portfolio samples with hiring managers, but don’t leave your entire portfolio there; leave copies instead. Davis recommends posting samples to a Web site of downloadable Acrobat files.

Accompany each writing sample with an introductory note explaining how you did the job, the help you had, the tools you used, the time constraints you worked under, and the information resource constraints, for example, subject matter experts in a distant country. Describe how you’d improve upon the project the next time, what you like about it, and what you loathe. Davis says, “If you represent it as perfect work, you won’t get the job.”

Even if you’ve signed a nondisclosure agreement, you can still provide writing samples that show your capabilities. Ensure that the sample does not lay bare the heart of your former employer or client’s intellectual property.

Davis recommends providing the table of contents, a couple of pages from the index, an interim chapter, and a reference chapter that is so abstract and out of context that “they’re never going to get it.” Take the core factual information out. Use “ACME Software” and change the names of the functions to “Mickey Mouse.” “Make it silly, but keep the structure that you worked so hard to create and enforce,” he says. Demonstrate that you understand the scope of the subject, can organize it, and can make it relevant to the appropriate audience.

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If you're doing contract work, ask for a clause in the contract to let you take a copy of whatever you produce as a writing sample. If you're a staff employee, make clear in advance that you want a neutered copy of the writing when you leave.

Provide References

HR departments are often paranoid about giving references, and company lawyers tell employees not to give them.

Under California and federal law, a company that employs somebody who gives another person what is perceived as a bad reference is liable for defamation of character. The employer is accountable for the actions of that employee regardless of when that reference was given.

Davis suggests getting around this by providing off-the-record information for contacts: personal e-mail addresses and home phone numbers. Explain that this person is still at the company and has been asked not to give formal references. Demonstrate your gratitude to references for their willingness to take a risk.

"The references that count are the ones that the candidate does not give you," Davis says. A couple of calls traced through the grapevine to a candidate's peers asking what the candidate was like or if he or she was reliable and effective are the references that stick, Davis says.

Say "Let's Do Something Reasonable" When Negotiating Salary

You want to feel respected, and the company wants to get value for its money. If the company has interviewed you, it is taking you seriously.

"Even in this economy, no self-respecting employer will lose a candidate over a \$5,000 difference in salary," Davis says. But he points out that hiring managers don't control their own budgets as they did 10 years ago. "They used to get a budget, and they could hire as many as they could fit into it. Now they get a head count with a salary range depending on the responsibilities and what the hiring manager can negotiate."

Davis suggests saying what you were making and what you hope you can be worth to the company. If hiring managers balk, request that the conversation continue, and find out if you will be able to earn what you're worth after you've proven yourself. "They like that," he says. Show hiring managers your appreciation that they're in a corner. "Make them look good, make them win, and they will most likely make you win." Davis says that hiring managers know what it's like being a candidate, and they don't want to be one again soon either.

Dibs adds that holding off from talking about money too soon can allow you time to bond better with your potential employer. He experimented with disclosing his salary and found that interviewers did not push him to do so.

Bear in mind that salary isn't the most important part of the picture. Being a good fit is a better motivation, so putting off salary discussions until you have a better idea of what the job involves is a sensible strategy.

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Watch for These Trends

Technical writers continue to prove their value in new ways. "It used to be that tech writers spent 80 percent of their time researching and writing," Davis says. "Now it's unlikely they spend 20 percent of their time or more writing." You can pick an area of expertise in which you think there is going to be a sustained market and pursue it with more intensity: for example, by creating HTML or XML pages, or by taking control of on-line production, or of your document management system.

Be Open-Minded

When Chris Muntzer was laid off in 1994, no engineering positions were available, so he took what he could get: a temporary job as a technician on the swing shift at HP. Determined to have more "irons in the fire," he kept an open mind and looked for a second job.

A listing for "security electronics" at the county jail caught his eye but appeared to require qualifications he didn't have. He applied for it anyway and later found himself in a dark, smoky bar looking for the interviewer who'd described himself as "heavysset and most likely holding a glass of Bass." Muntzer landed the job.

Muntzer likes to joke that he's spent time in each of the 243 cells in the Sonoma County jail extension. He emphasizes that, by being open-minded, he found himself eight hours' work per day on top of a day shift at HP. A good result, he notes, provided he didn't forget where he was: the language and culture at HP were very different from the language and culture on the jail construction site.

For More Information

Andrew Davis can be reached at www.synergistech.com or 1-800-WRITE-JOB.

New Chapter Officers Appointed

At April's meeting, the NorthBay Chapter appointed the following officers:

President

chris muntzer

Co-Vice Presidents

rolfe dlugy-hegwer & trudie folsom

Co-Hospitality

michele green & ron douglass

Membership

barbara herbert

Scholarship Manager

michele green

northbay news Layout

ancilla allsman

Returning officers include

northbay news Editor

elyse lord

northbay news Copy Editor

geneviève duboscq

Treasurer

liz kaiser

Webmaster

trudie folsom

Writer in the Workplace Conference

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Avoiding Scope Creep

Natchez told the audience that obstacles like *scope creep*, and underestimating a documentation project, are avoidable if managers observe the following basic project management strategies when developing a project plan:

1. Find the right people to ask questions. Build an informal network of experts in addition to official resources.
2. Create a detailed project plan that describes the target audience, the purpose of the documentation, and assumptions. Include a table of contents and an estimated page, screen, or word count.
3. Granularize the schedule and assign deadlines to each granule (or module). Determine the time that each task requires, multiplying the initial estimate by three (as a rule of thumb) to achieve a realistic estimate.
4. Encourage the customer or end user to participate in documentation development.

Implementing a Project Successfully

Natchez shared the following tips for success at implementing the project plan:

1. Remove obstacles before starting. For example, if the project requires multiple reviewers, choose one person to synthesize the reviewers' edits and reconcile any conflicts.
2. Use a succinct format for status reports.
3. Keep the number and length of meetings to a minimum and take minutes.
4. Look for the simple fix.
5. Create a team environment. Prioritize and focus on what you can do today to keep the team on track. Provide clear, measurable objectives for each team member. Monitor members' progress, and let members know when they do well.
6. Allow for human errors and problems.
7. Remember that attitude is everything. Stay positive and confident.

Putting Ideas to the Test

Natchez concluded her presentation by asking workshop attendees to apply her project management suggestions when completing an exercise. She asked attendees to agree upon the purpose and format of the deliverable (a contact list of workshop participants), an overview of the process, subtasks and the time required to complete them, a person responsible for each task, and assumptions.

Participants uncovered typical issues in project plan development, such as underestimating the time required to complete tasks and not identifying assumptions in the plan. For instance, as Natchez pointed out, participants assumed that all Writer in the Workplace participants would want to be on the contact list.

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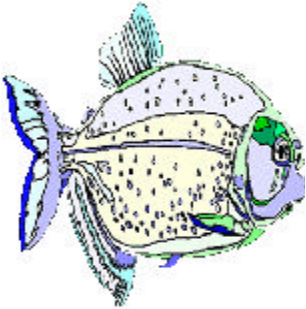
Piranha or Nirvana: Winning at Office Politics

According to international speaker and content management consultant Lance Gelein, most technical communicators are “lambs for slaughter.” If we want to coexist with more politically savvy professionals, we would be wise to brush up on our political skills.

Politics Are a Part of Life

Gelein pointed out that no office is immune from politics. Being politically savvy is more important when

- ◆ Resources are scarce.
- ◆ People work in a competitive environment (for example, only a certain percentage of people receive bonuses each year).
- ◆ Performance standards are subjective.
- ◆ Role definitions are unclear (for example, someone’s job is to look busy).
- ◆ Employees are emotionally insecure.
- ◆ Organizational structures reveal many layers.



Testing Your Political Savvy

Gelein next administered a test called “How Political Are You?” Participants marked statements such as “The boss is always right” and “A person who is willing and able to work hard will succeed in business most of the time” as true or false. (The politically savvy answers are true and false, respectively.)

Gelein correctly predicted that most of our scores would reveal us to be “lambs for slaughter,” although a handful of writers would qualify as “straight arrows” or “survivors.” Few technical communicators are “climbers” and “corporate sharks.”

Gelein then pointed out the danger of thinking like a lamb: We might *think* we are working in nirvana—until the day we get laid off. To help us think about our corporate environments, he gave us a quiz he called “What’s your Corporate Culture—Piranha or Nirvana?”

Participants tagged statements such as “[At my company] rumors are the main communication tool” and “When a mistake happens on a project a victim is named to suffer” as true or false.

After tallying quizzes, participants classified companies as ranging from piranhas (time to look for a new job) to nirvanas (do everything possible to prove your value to the company and stay put.)

The Seven Habits of Politically Savvy People

Gelein identified seven habits of politically savvy people:

1. Don’t gossip.
2. Tell the truth.

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3. If someone praises or criticizes you, do some research to find out what's behind it.
4. Define and design clear job roles.
5. Expose "dirty shark tricks" when you see them (politely, of course).
6. Don't allow anyone to get something on you that someone might use against you later.
7. Make emotional deposits (spend time producing and contributing rather than playing political games).

Writing in Small Spaces

When your writing target is the micro screen of a personal digital assistant (PDA), documentation consultant Holly Gallup advises you to buck current wisdom and "think *inside* the box." You've only got 160 by 160 pixels to work with (at least with a Palm), so what you write and design has to fit in that tiny space.

Gallup focused her remarks on devices running on the Palm operating system (OS). She noted current efforts to marry cell phones and PDAs into what may be "the next big thing": smartphones functioning as wireless modems that can download e-mail and Web pages to the built-in PDA in real time.

Think Small: Less Is More

In preparing content for the "little screen," writers should start by abandoning the desktop metaphor, graphics, and fancy layout. Think in terms of users entering and retrieving information rather than browsing. Menu bars must be small and clever. The Palm OS supports simple graphics but delivers poor resolution; be aware of memory limitations. "The content *is* the system," according to Gallup. PDAs are about "getting information and taking it with you."

Chunk, List, and Layer

On the desktop and laptop, you can place related blocks of information side by side, but PDAs are different. As a result, you need to chunk, list, and layer.

Break up information into bite-sized units to minimize scrolling. Use bulleted and numbered lists. Layer by hyperlinking items on a list or headings on summary paragraphs to fuller explanations of each item. For example, the Palm program AvantGo allows you to download a series of news summaries from the *New York Times*. Clicking the title brings up the full article.

Limit Graphics Use

Limited graphics can be useful in navigation bar icons of commands or menu choices. A Help menu could display all the icons with an explanation of what each does. Icons can range from a graphic symbol to a letter of the alphabet in a square to represent the menu item (M for maintenance log, S for service request).

For More Information

- ◆ "Information Design for the Small-screen Interface" by Michael Albers and Loel Kim, *Technical Communications* 49:1, 45–60



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- ◆ *Palm Pilot: The Ultimate Guide* by David Pogue
- ◆ *Palm OS Programming: The Developer's Guide* by Neil Rhodes and Julie McKeehan
- ◆ *Palm OS Programming Bible* by Lonnon Foster
- ◆ www.avantgo.com/developer/reference/styleguide.html
- ◆ www.palmos.com/dev/tech/docs

CBT for CBT: Countless Beneficial Tips for Computer-Based Training

Technical communications specialists Ellyn Armstrong and Donna Bryant shared their experience developing computer-based training (CBT) for Adventist Health. They defined CBT as “self-paced, interactive online training” and cautioned that only projects with multiple users and stable content are suitable for CBT.

They described their development process: planning the project, storyboarding the lessons, creating the frames in the CBT authoring tool, and testing and deploying the CBT.

Planning the Project

Armstrong and Bryant advocate first putting together a multidisciplinary team to develop content and then assessing your audience's needs. Are some users ESL speakers? Are they from different age groups.

Develop templates that follow the instructional design formula for each lesson. For example, begin by stating lesson objectives; explain the content in the frames that follow; and provide users with at least one practice frame and a summary.

Storyboarding the Lessons

Create the storyboard to show exactly how frames will look and function. Have a user interaction, such as a matching exercise, or a mouseover effect, on at least every third or fourth frame.

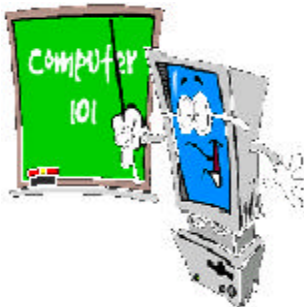
Creating the Frames in the CBT Authoring Tool

Allow about 2.5 hours to create each frame. When developing frames, be sure your graphics illustrate concepts that are described in the text, and vice versa.

Testing and Deploying the CBT

Test the usability of your navigation after creating the first two lessons. When you've completed your CBT program, enjoy it.

You can find URLs to presentations at www.stcsacramento.org/WIW2002/index.htm. The next Writer in the Workplace conference will occur on March 29, 2003.



Professional Development Opportunities



WebWorks Publisher Macros: Advancing Beyond the Basics!

May 21, San Mateo
\$395

http://www.webworks.com/training/wwu_schedule.asp

User Experience 2001/2002 Conference

June 2–6, San Francisco
\$540 to \$2,200

www.nngroup.com/events

Content Management: Strategies for Single Sourcing

June 3–4, San Francisco
\$995–\$1,195

<http://www.cm-strategies.com>

Web Animation with Flash

June 9 and June 16, San Francisco
\$300

<http://www.media-alliance.org>

Hands-On Introduction to Java Programming

June 9–July 6, San Francisco
\$650

<http://www.unex.berkeley.edu/cat/124578.html>

WTI Smart Partnering Conference and Exposition

June 18–20, Santa Clara
Cost varies

<http://www.witi.org/center/conferences/santaclara/>

E-Learning Workshops

June 18–20, San Francisco
\$995

www.vignettestraining.com/workshops.htm