

EDITORIAL2

TOPIC: EDUCATION AND TRAINING (ET*)

Technical Writing Taught Over the Internet · ET 08
by Lisa Moretto, USA 4

TOPIC: READABILITY / QUALITY/ USABILITY (RU*)

Quality in Technical Documentation:
 Do we Need to Rethink the Concept? · RU 30
by Barbara Giammona, USA 5

TOPIC: SPECIAL ASPECTS (SA*)

An Exchange of Views · SA 26
by Amo Fuchs, Israel and Ron Blicq, Canada 8

Building a Bridge to Europe · SA 27
by Ursula Wirtz, Germany 12

Management Content for the Intranet · SA 28
by Chani Sacharen, Israel 13

Comment on
 "Managing Content for the Intranet" · SA 29
by Alexander von Obert, Germany 16

Comment on
 "Impressions from German/American Projects" · SA 30
by Ami Wright 18

TOPIC: BOOK REVIEW (BR*)

Interface Design & Document Design · BR 1
Jens Hasler, Gemany 19

PROFESSIONAL EVENTS 20

NATIONAL CONTACT PERSONS (NCPS) 20

* Each Topic has a two-letter abbreviation, for example
 • RU for Readability / Quality / Usability
 • ET for Education and Training
 • SA for Special Aspects
 • BR for Book Review

The contributions (articles or comments) are numbered consecutively through the different issues of TC-Forum. When commenting to any of the contributions, please refer to these "codes" for ease of understanding.

IMPRESSUM

TC-FORUM (Technical Communicators' Forum) is a non-profit initiative supported by INTECOM, the International Council for Technical Communication.

Editor:
 Hans Springer
 Bergstraße 56
 D 91443 Scheinfeld, Germany
 +49 (0)9162 92 38 00 (voice)
 +49 (0)69 79 12 33 115 (fax)
 editor@tc-forum.org or
 Springer_Hans@t-online.de

Publisher:
 Brigitte Beuttenmüller,
 Stuttgart, Germany

Language & Style:
 Ron Blicq, Winnipeg, Canada,
 Lisa Moretto, Rochester, NY, USA

Graphics & Illustrations:
 Nils P. Smeby, Oslo, Norway
 Johan Näsström, Enskededalen,
 Sweden

Production:
 Wolfgang Buchholz, Stuttgart,
 Germany

Layout:
 Birgit Wieland, Matthias Scheurle,
 ViV Werbeagentur, Stuttgart,
 Germany

Address administration:
 Ami Wright, Cambridge, MA USA
 subs_tc-forum@tc-forum.org. or
 fax to +1 617 776 7878

Webmaster www.tc-forum.org:
 Alexander von Obert, Nürnberg,
 Germany; avo@twh.nbg.de

Next issues:
 ▶ September 2001 (deadline 10 Aug.)
 ▶ Paper Issue December (deadline 20 October)

© Copyright TC-FORUM 2001



Dear colleagues,

Next issue in
www.tc-forum.org only!

If you've received the previous issue of TC-FORUM, you'll know that this time there won't be a printed version of TC-FORUM. With this issue (2-2001) our little experiment starts. As announced, we'll publish issues 2-2001 and 3-2001 only on our website www.tc-forum.org, but not on paper.

With TC-FORUM 1-2001, you received a questionnaire and were asked to answer 6 questions (if you haven't answered them yet you can find the questions in our website as well). We want to find out what your opinion is about having only an electronic version of TC-FORUM and make our decision accordingly. Is it time to do away with paper? Is it sufficient to have TC-FORUM available electronically only – or is the additional paper version still required – desired – useful?

Depending on your answers, we'll decide whether to continue printing on paper or not from issue 4-2001 onward. We will inform you on the outcome in this website and our Mailing List tcf-gen, and, of course, in number 4-2001 on paper. The replies we've received so far suggest to maintain the paper version along with the electronic version. But they still require some deeper analysis.

Those of you who attended Forum 2000 in London have received the "Postharvest" by now. However, since we know that many of you didn't have a chance to attend, we'll include some subjects in this issue and hope you find them as interesting as we do and start commenting and discussing. Because, as you know, that's our purpose: to offer subjects for worldwide professional discussion – not just digestion. Thank you for helping us keep the communication process going.

Finally, let me close with saying:

Please continue sending us your interesting papers and/or comments to articles for a worldwide distribution to your colleagues! Because that's what makes TC-FORUM different from any other magazine and just so unique. A discussion forum made by communicators for communicators.

Thank you for your support.

Yours

Hans Springer

THANK YOU TO THE SPONSORS OF TC-FORUM:

DAIMLERCHRYSLER
Stuttgart, Germany



Stuttgart, Germany

- ▶ Transline Deutschland, Dr.-Ing.-Sturz-GmbH Reutlingen, Germany
- ▶ Foss Electric, Denmark
- ▶ ISTC, United Kingdom
- ▶ RGI International, Canada
- ▶ Tech Style, Israel
- ▶ IBM, Watson Research Center, USA

Become a sponsor of TC-FORUM and your company name will appear here.

Technical Writing Taught Over the Internet

ET 08

By Lisa Moretto, USA

Is it possible? Can a writing course be delivered effectively from a distance, without interaction from an instructor? It's not easy, but we think it can. In fact we are well into developing an online course which is entirely self-evaluated.

In eight separate courses we present approximately 90% of the concepts from our popular textbook *Technically- Write!*, including writing letters, requests, reports, proposals and email. The first three courses are mandatory and present the concepts of audience analysis, informative versus persuasive writing, document structure, and language skills.

Once a participant completes the foundation courses they can choose additional courses that are specific to their needs:

- Writing Effective E-mail,
- Writing Business Letters,
- Writing Short Reports,
- Writing Long Reports, and
- Writing Proposals.

There will be an exam testing the comprehension of the concepts and a course completion certificate.

So how does the participant learn without the feedback of a professional? The lessons are carefully designed to lead the person through the skill sets. A concept is presented in one or two screens and then there is a test. Because there is some type of interaction on every third or fourth screen, the course keeps the participant engaged and attentive. The tests vary. Some are multiple choice, some are selecting items from a list, and others provide areas for the user to actually input text.

The self-evaluation occurs when the participant is asked questions about a piece of writing, which may be an example or it may be their own writing. The programming behind the course is constantly keeping track of the responses and sends them forward to the appropriate screens based on their learning progress.

Some may feel this is a step backwards, compared to the distance learning applications that use chat rooms and other forms of communication to keep participants in contact. And for some learner they have a good point. But this program is designed for the reluctant writer or the engineer who needs a course now and doesn't have the time to wait until the next semester begins or can't be online at a specific time. The major benefit of self-evaluation is that the course can be completed at the participant's pace.

Will it achieve the desired result for its participants? We certainly think so. There are too many technical people who must write and communicate in simple terms who have not had the proper writing training they need. Some may feel intimidated to attend a traditional in-person course. Some don't have the time to enroll in a three month course organized through a university.

The first three courses roll out this summer and will be offered free for a limited time. To check them out yourself go to www.rgilearning.com.

rgilearning.com is an affiliate of RGI International, a consulting firm specializing in oral and written communication skills. They have been writing textbooks and presenting in-house courses for nearly 30 years.



LISA MORETTO

Senior Consultant
RGI International
Rochester, NY
+ 1 716 462 3617 (voice and Fax)
RGI_Lisa@compuserve.com
www.rgi-intl.com

Quality in Technical Communication: Do We Need to Rethink the Concept? · RU 30

By Barbara Giammona, USA

(With thanks to Alesha Erbter for her reporting of the debate for the Forum 2000 *Post Harvest*)

At Forum 2000 last June, two seasoned technical writers debated the question of Quality in Technical Communication.

The following statement was the basis for the debate:

Technical communicators have always been proud of the quality of their work. Can it be that we are overdoing it? Do we need to change our understanding of what we do? Is readiness to compromise and economize to keep pace more important today than perfecting our work?

Barbara Giammona, who took the position in favor of preserving quality as we know it, has been a technical writer since 1982 and is currently the Manager of Information Technology Documentation for Morgan Stanley in New York City. She has a B.A. Degree in English and American Literature from the University of California, Irvine.

Bogo Vatovec, who took the position that it is time to re-examine our definition of quality, is a Senior Human Factors Consultant with Icon Medialab in Germany. He specializes in international software development, localization, performance improvement systems, and Internet-based solutions. Currently he is pursuing a Master's degree in Management and Organizational Behavior.

The following is a summary of the 90-minute debate:

Position Statement Pro

Barbara Giammona began the debate with a discussion of the importance of quality:

"It is still important to make the effort to preserve the level of quality in our work. We need to always ask ourselves if there is a point at which compromising the writing process also comprises the quality of the product, the completeness of the message, and the safety and satisfaction of the customer. I believe that there is still a value in upholding the quality of our work, even with the shortcuts available to us today, and with the time pressures of the marketplace. While we may change how we do our job, the end result should still be to strive for complete and correct communication."

Here are some reasons why quality is important:

- For the Customer/User of the product. A professional appearance makes a difference in product sales. Impressive documentation helps create customer trust and repeat business.
- For the employer. When high quality is expected and delivered, there is less liability and risk to the employer. "Done once, done right" saves money in production and personnel costs. Finally, "done right" preserves intellectual capital, so that the information provided by SMEs (subject matter experts) is not lost, misconstrued, or misunderstood.
- Because there are consequences for NOT upholding quality. Poor quality documentation can have many results ranging from user confusion and frustration to danger or even death. It can also affect the bottom line. Customers/users will not continue to work with companies that don't produce consistent quality products. If documentation is not written to a high level of quality, then translations will be more costly or inaccurate. When documentation is captured in only a "good enough," informal fashion, the document often becomes incomprehensible after the original authors or experts leave the company.

Quality in Technical Communication: (cont.)

- Pursuing quality makes standardization possible. Taking the time to instill quality allows for the time to establish and enforce standards. Adhering to standards helps avoid distracting small errors, fosters professional pride in the work, avoids work process slow-down, reinforces product branding, facilitates revisions and enhancements, and makes information easy to use and find.
- Good quality documentation can be understood by everyone and stands the test of time. Most well-respected works from the past are still understood today because they are well written. Good quality ensures that communication will always take place and that the information gathered will have lasting value.

Position Statement Con

On behalf of re-evaluating the concept of quality, Bogo Vatovec explained his position:

"Technical writing is a meticulous process: gathering information, structuring information, writing, rewriting, reviewing, editing, final checking, production. I've seen technical writers spending hours polishing one sentence, only to redo it all over again the next day. And improvement from a first draft to the final version is clear to all of us. But is it clearly visible to our customers and our managers? What is clear to our manager is the time spent working on these improvements. Is the time worth it? Have you ever thought that your users and managers simply cannot appreciate your quest for excellence?"

Writers' perception of quality work may differ from that of managers or users.

Even though Bogo was speaking with a heavy accent, his message was still clearly understood--and this was one premise of his position. Although technical writers may spend a lot of time writing and rewriting to represent their perception of "perfect" or "quality" work, managers and ultimately end users, may not notice or appreciate the difference. This incongruity stems largely from the use of the term "quality" and how

writers, managers, and end users of a document define it.

In re-evaluating the concept of quality, here are some important points:

- Technical writers should not confuse process with quality. Is it worth spending so much time rewriting documentation when the message is already correct? Instead of spending time focusing on individual pieces, focus on getting the information good enough within time limits.
- Who defines quality? Customer, manager or technical writer? It is easy to confuse our definition of quality with that of the customers or the managers. While we may be focused on perfection, they are more interested in time-to-market. From their perspective, the first product to market will be first to receive sales, as long as the product represents "reasonable" quality and fulfills the end user's expectations.
- Who do you really write for? Most writers would say that they write for the end user, but in fact, in typical product documentation, writers must first please the project manager and the product client. Writers can waste a lot of time trying to please all the audiences with absolute perfection.
- We all invest ourselves in what we work on, but that shouldn't overshadow the existence of deadlines. Especially in the case of the web-it is better to be there than to be late. Only 5-10% of the people use the online help, the information on a web site, etc. It is important that technical writers focus on delivering "good-enough" quality for that 5-10%, rather than wasting time on perfecting materials to their own standards of quality.

Quality is an important consideration when producing documentation; however, technical writers need to remember for whom they are really writing and to conform to that audience's definition of quality. It is assumed that proper grammar, formatting, and language usage are important. But why spend time rewriting the same sentence when using the first (or second) version succeeds at delivering the correct message?

Rebuttals

The following are the comments made in response to the opening statements. Responses from Barbara Giammona:

- Errors undermine the importance of the message. Think of product instructions. How many times have we failed to use a product because the instructions were not clear? Good quality, which communicates correct, accurate information understood by the intended audience, helps assure that products are consumable.
- Sometimes we need to educate the "middle user," such as the project manager, to the value of quality work. Technical writers are not merely transcribers. We provide value-added services that help to elevate sales and reduce costs.
- Only 5% of product users may use the documentation, but what about internal usage? Since the remaining 95% of users may never read or consult the documentation, customer support personnel often rely heavily on the technical writers' work.
- Shouldn't writers take the time to edit or risk perpetuating bad information?

Responses from Bogo Vatovec:

- "Good enough" means that the materials give enough information to meet expectations.
- "Good enough" is also cheaper to produce, as long as customers are still satisfied. In one study, consumers chose the less perfect manual when presented with different levels of "quality" documents.
- Customer support personnel should know more than the end user. If the same documents are being used for both audiences, then isn't too much information being included in the product user documents?
- Technical writers' definitions of quality are set too high and vary from person-to-person and organization-to-organization. How can we expect to please everyone?

Conclusions

The ultimate answer to the question of quality in technical communication today probably lies somewhere in between the two positions in this debate. Aiming for extreme perfectionism may be as costly to a company as publishing sloppy, incomplete information. The value is difficult to measure. Sadly for the product consumers, pleasing the manager or internal client may be more important today than satisfying the actual user.

Quality is always worth striving for; however, today quality may no longer always be defined by the rigid standards of the typical technical writer. Our goal as technical communicators is to communicate information in the best way that time, budget, and our skills allow. As long as that goal is accomplished without causing difficulties for our employer or confusing or endangering the consumers of our work, then we can probably be said to be successful, even if we aren't perfect!

Time, budget and our skills determine the degree of quality.



BARBARA GIAMMONA

Morgan Stanley
750 7th Avenue, 33rd Floor
New York, New York 10019
USA
Barbara.giammona@morganstanley.com



BOGO VATOVEC

Icon Medialab
Gasstrasse 4
22761 Hamburg
Germany
Bogo.vatovec@icondmedialab.com

An Exchange of Views · SA 26

Between:

Amo Fuchs, Israel, and

Ron Blicq, Canada

Editorial Preface

The exchange of correspondence shown here evolved after Amo Fuchs wrote to me (with a copy to Ron Blicq), commenting on INTECOM's project for researching and establishing English-language documentation guidelines. He also commented on having electronic vs. paper issues of TC-Forum. I am reproducing their correspondence here, because it reflects the healthy and interesting exchange that can occur between technical communicators, even though they hold opposite points of view.

I've separated the chronological sequence of the correspondence in order to have the different arguments of our two colleagues to either item together in one of the two following parts:

*Part 1: Standards versus Guidelines + E vs. A
(English vs. American)*

*Part 2: Real versus virtual
(TC-Forum on Paper versus Screen)*

Part 1: Standards versus Guidelines + E vs. A (English vs. American):

■ **Amo Fuchs wrote:**
[Guidelines for English-Language Documentation](#)

To Ron Blicq's question I counterattack: is it really needed? I mean uniformization. Or maybe pidgination.

There are of course many different issues embedded in the question.

First, is the manual directed to an English or American audience? Firms make promotional videos in English, with a British speaker and

English vocabulary, and in American, with an American speaker and American terminology.

In writing it is much easier than in speech. With multilanguage word-processors, there is no problem in switching from English to American, from Canadian French to Belgian French, from Swiss German to Austrian German; to issue two or more manuals on the same topic but each in a different language.

This solution is adopted for "real hardware": If you buy an instrument from Hewlett Packard they deliver it from their distribution centre with the appropriate plug to the target country's socket (receptacle). To issue different manuals is even easier.

As long as the text is clearly understandable and does avoid misinterpretations, it is utterly irrelevant if you work for an "organization" or for an "organisation". But my main argument against uniformization is that languages do change, and so do orthographies (remember the recent reform of German writing).

If you set up "standards" or "guidelines" today, by 2010 they will be obsolete. Try to read a manual of the 70ies: today you would write it differently. But if you can operate the appliance with the old text, then the manual was well written, notwithstanding that here and there something would have been written differently in a "modern" text. However, if you will have difficulties in understanding it, i.e. to operate the machine according to the instructions, believe me, there are good chances that already then, in the 70ies, the operator may have faced problems in operating it.

Adding another regulating or standardizing or recommending body to the already existing academies will only add, not dilute confusion.

I dare say that even a mixture of English and American may be "correct", at least "politically correct". Haven't you met texts where, in order to be politically or generically correct, the pronoun changes from male to female every other sentence? It is a pain in the neck, you never know

to whom it refers. You may write "appendixes" and "tyre" (Italian being my mother tongue, I am particularly attracted by those esoteric letters). The real problem is when you have words with different meanings in different cultures.

To this problem, no uniformization will help, because people mentally organize themselves into understanding what is close to them. In this case the solution shall be split in two:

- For terms of the "general language", like the sample "presently", those terms shall be indeed avoided.
- For purely technical terms, a brief glossary shall be added, at the beginning or the end of the text, defining what the author understands with that term, and maybe adding some mathematical formulas, if relevant; and, of course, the author must be consistent. By doing so, you may expect that the reader/operator in 10 or 20 years will understand what you meant, even if in normal or even in professional language the semantics may have changed.

This is my \$0.02 worth of opinion.

Amo Fuchs

■ [Ron Blicq replied:](#)

I very much appreciated--and enjoyed reading--your rationale for not setting guidelines or standards. Views on both sides of the topic are valuable, and you are not alone in presenting an opposite view to mine.

We (INTECOM delegates) are going ahead with the project, but not to set standards or even advise particularly usage: our purpose will be to draw attention to problem spelling and problem words, and to offer comments to readers on the choices available to them.

When responding to our initial survey (the survey to determine whether there is a need to continue with the project), the majority of technical writers indicated they would like to have some guidelines, some help in making decisions on which style or words to use.

When I was a technical editor for a large engineering firm, I produced a style manual that provided guidelines for the engineers when they wrote reports and proposals. In Canada, we are particularly affected by the spelling/word choice problem: historically, most Canadians are influenced by the British spelling style, but geographically we are so close to the US--which has 12 times the population of Canada--that we are influenced by their magazines, newspapers, and television. Teachers and their students in the schools are similarly affected: one teacher will tell the students to write "centre" and "labour", and another will tell them to spell "center" and "labor".

The style manual for the company dealt with that spelling problem and recommended rather than prescribed a certain usage for each word. It also contained many other words that gave trouble; for example:

- Should you write "preventive maintenance" or "preventative maintenance"? (Although most people at that time wrote preventative, I recommended preventive, which has since become the preferred form.)
- Should you write "oriented" or "orientated"? (Again, I recommended the simpler form.)
- Should you treat "data" as a plural or singular noun? (I said data was considered plural in academia but was singular [representing one assembly of information] in technical writing.)
- Should you put punctuation inside or outside a closing quotation mark? In the UK, the punctuation is placed after the quotation mark; in the US, it is positioned before the quotation mark. (I prefer the UK positioning and this becomes a point of contention between me and my textbook editors!)

But what does someone to whom English is a second language do? Are they even aware of these differences?

Two of my textbooks--Technically-Write! and Communicating at Work--each contain an extensive glossary with guidelines such as these to create awareness among and give guidance to Canadian engineering technology and business



An Exchange of Views (cont.)

administration students. (A different edition of "Technically-Write!" is published in the US, and in it the guidelines are entirely US-oriented.)

The point you make about writing English-style for products to be sold in the UK and American style for products to be sold in the US is valid. But to produce different manuals is costly and many firms would prefer to have just one document. The intent of the guidelines will be to suggest which to do for English-language documentation that is to be used worldwide.

Monitoring
language
developments
is a continuing
role of
INTECOM

I do not view the guidelines as a fixed and unchangeable document. It will be a continuing role of INTECOM to monitor language developments worldwide and regularly update the guidelines to reflect these changes. (I do the same with each new edition of my textbooks.)

You have given me reason to think more about the rationale for the project and I very much value your views.

Ron

■ In his reply, Amo said:

Concerning two of your examples: "data" and "curriculum". Those are Latin words and, being "Latin", notwithstanding my German name, I cannot but follow the rules. "Hier bin ich und kann nicht anders" said Luther (I am here and cannot otherwise). But for other words, including Latin and Greek words "acculturated" in other languages for 100 years or more, I am ready to swing.

I just want to tell you of some other experiences.

I have three "Webster" dictionaries (one Merriam and two other), and found divergences among them, and not only of nuance.

I have two "Roget-Thesaurii" (?) and once found a word having NOT ONE other close meaning (unfortunately I forgot which it was!).

I read about the forthcoming reform of German orthography several years ago in a Swiss paper, in French. The author of that article was very

positive and was regretting that nothing was done in French. He mentioned different spellings, not only between the Robert and the Larousse, but also in two dictionaries published by the same publisher! (No reference was made to Canadian French! I use the Canadian French keyboard emulation on my multi-language word-processor because it is the closest to the American keyboard, the French keyboard being a little pain in the neck. and elsewhere...)

Amo

■ Ron commented by return:

When I created the style manual for the engineers at CAE Industries, I referred to numerous texts, journals, and publications to identify a consensus from which I established company standards. When I created the glossaries for textbooks *Technically-Write!* and *Communicating at Work*, I accumulated over 20 different authorities, ranging from the US Government Style Manual, several manuals of style (Canadian Press, Chicago, New York Times, IEEE Standards, a Civil Engineering Dictionary, and so on).

Today, for the international study, I have accumulated several US dictionaries, from 600 to 2000 pages (including the Random House Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language), several British (a Chambers – one standard, one technical – and three Oxfords), and two Canadian (the Canadian Oxford is a superb dictionary, one of the best). I am fascinated by them, by the depth of knowledge and research they contain. This could be a life's study in itself!

However, I came up with an interesting contradiction: When trying to identify whether to write "email" or "e-mail", I discovered that in two British Oxford dictionaries one recommends "email" and the other says "e-mail"! (I prefer email, but the trend seems to be drifting toward inserting the hyphen.)

Have you read "The Professor and the Madman" by Simon Winchester? It's about the making of the original Oxford English Dictionary and contains extraordinary information about a US Professor, James Murray, who contributed much, although he bordered on the edge of madness.

Published by Harper Collins, ISBN 0-06-017596-6.

Ron

■ **And Amo replied:**

I agree. "Entre nous". Yet I find you wasted money in purchasing so many dictionaries.

I have only a few, and found enough discrepancies.

I am currently translating a philosophical text from French to German. As usual, whenever I have to think about a word, i.e. a "meaningful" word - it is always the bad choice that comes to my mind first. I have a "dictionnaire des synonymes", but compared to the "thesaurii culture" of English, a very mature one (notwithstanding some occasional shortcomings as reported recently). The French one is still in its infancy.

So I translate it into English (occasionally it is similar [but caveat! -- there are many false friends], check alternatives in English, and find the good term to be used in German). I have been told that my translation was occasionally better than the original – but, as I said, it is a philosophical text, and I like philosophy as a hobby.

Amo

**Part 2: Real vs. Virtual
(TC-Forum via Paper vs. Screen)**

■ **Amo wrote:**

To the issue "real vs. virtual" I say that I definitively prefer the real thing. I get the feeling to be "treated" as a "real" person, although I know that the shipments are made automatically. But I am at least a name on a list. Since the bulletin is published only a couple of times annually, I can store it easily. I can turn the pages at my pace. I am ready to pay a modest sum for the "real" version, and am even ready to accept a modest amount of adverti(z)(s)ements.

In short, virtual reading is ok for a short help, to glance at and discard. An item read on paper, or

on a clay tablet (3000 years ago) is remembered better.

■ **Ron Blicq replied:**

Like you, I prefer the real thing. I spend enough time in front of a computer screen as it is, consequently to leaf through a newsletter or journal is a restful pleasure. As an example, I belong to two societies, A and B. A has put its newsletter on line; B is retaining a print newsletter. I know much more about what is happening with society B, because I take brief pleasure in leafing through the newsletter and identifying the pieces of information I want to read. I also make a quick mental note of upcoming meetings and make a point of attending them. With society A I know much less of what is going on, and regretfully occasionally miss a meeting because I am not aware of it I don't want to use my time surfing for information. Additionally, the presence of that piece of paper is a reminder of events I would like to attend (I know, computer purists would look at my viewpoint with disgust!).

Editorial postscript:

Ron wrote to me, saying: "I long to meet Amo personally, so we may continue our dialogue in person."

Wouldn't you, dear readers, like to let us know your opinion on these very valid subjects?



RON BLICQ

Senior Consultant
RGI International
rgi_ron@compuserve.com



AMO FUCHS

P. & A. Fuchs
P. O. Box 20535
Raanana 43515, Israel
pauletfu@post.tau.ac.il
+972 9 7714072 (voice)
+972 9 77140711 (fax)

Building a Bridge to Europe · SA 27

by Ursula Wirtz, tekcom, Germany

Early in April, delegates from the European societies for technical communication met for the first time in Brussels, following a joint invitation by tekcom – the German society -- and ISTC – the UK institute. Among the represented societies were CRT (France), FTI (Sweden), ISTC (United Kingdom), STD (Finland), STIC (Netherlands), TECOM (Switzerland) and tekcom (Germany and Austria).

The most important outcome was the formulation of a joint declaration of intent to found a European-wide ‘umbrella’ organisation.

After welcome speeches by Anke Harris (Past-President ISTC) and Claus Noack (President tekcom), Michael Fritz, executive director of tekcom, explained in an introductory presentation why these two societies had taken the initiative. The aim is to provide a voice for and meet the needs of members, for whom Europe as a political, economic and social entity has become more and more important.

He put an emphasis on fields where the priority interests of the different national societies coincide, such as

- European-wide standardisation of qualifications,
- The development of academic, vocational and further training in those countries where activities of this kind do not exist,
- Knowledge and information exchange between European countries and especially the candidate countries,
- Lobbying activities in the institutions of the European Union (EU) in the field of standardisation and directives, and
- Fund-raising for cross-border projects in technical communication and in the support for those European countries where national societies are still being developed.

Topics discussed included ways to make the representation of the interests of technical communicators more efficient, and how to raise awareness within the EU institutions of the need to improve quality standards for technical communication, throughout the European Union.

The participants agreed that these aims could best be achieved by joint efforts and that the

foundation of a European organisation was indispensable for this purpose.

During some five hours of discussion, a draft joint declaration of intent (drawn up by tekcom and ISTC) was reviewed and modified, culminating in a unanimously-approved final draft of the declaration.

(As a next step the national societies have to give their consent to the foundation of a European umbrella organisation and to ratify this joint declaration).

The following day, the same delegates participated in the 1st European Colloquium for User-Friendly Product Information, held in Conference Room 1C47 of the European Parliament.

The approximately 40 present included

- Representatives of three Directorates General of the European Commission,
- Experts in consumer issues, and
- Delegates from the European Standards Bodies – CEN, CENELEC and ETSI.

Two of the many speakers were Jim Murray—the Executive Director of the European Consumer Organisation (BEUC) – and Pieter Parlevliet—the Secretary General of CENELEC.

One particular outcome was that Carl-Heinz Gabriel (tekcom) will take part in the production of a new European Standard for product information, representing our proposed new European organisation.

The encounters of these two days were held in an agreeable atmosphere of openness and friendship between the delegates, and generated a sense of optimism, of renewal, and the will to pursue and achieve these common goals.



URSULA WIRTZ

tekcom
Eberhardstr. 69-71
7013 Stuttgart, Germany
+49 711 65704-0(voice)
+49 711 65704-99 (fax)
info@tekcom.de

Managing Content for the Intranet · SA 28

By Chani Sacharen, Israel

Communication over the Intranet can change how a company's employees and departments work as a team. This is especially important for companies with branches or subsidiaries overseas.

With the explosion of the Internet, we've all become information junkies. Making sure that your site is well designed and that content is easily accessible is a real challenge.

As technical communicators, we are often faced not only with the task of writing content for the web, but sometimes we're lucky enough to decide what should be included in a web site and how the content should be organized. Web design, like fashions, must keep up-to-date with the latest look. We're no longer plagued with the black backgrounds that were so popular a few years back. Any respectable company will revamp their website design at least once a year. But how many really change the content and its basic organization? A web site's initial content organization tends to stick around for a long time. That's what makes it so imperative for us to carefully plan what the design and content will include.

When it comes to Intranet sites, this is even more important. The goal of any Intranet site is to facilitate cooperation between employees or between different locations of a single corporation. We want to make employees' lives easier by providing them with a single repository for all their information and tool needs.

This article provides a summary of the basic guidelines you should follow when designing website content.

Before You Begin

Before you begin designing, there are a number of issues that you should carefully research:

- Purpose of the site. Who is the intended audience, what are their needs and what information and tools are they looking for.

- User needs. Discuss the web site with the target users and find out exactly what they want – not what you think they need.
- Maintenance. Who will maintain the site. This is an ongoing live project where information must not remain static. Who will make sure information is updated on a regular basis and that the technical aspects are running smoothly?
- Potential cost savings. What tasks can you move online to save people time or to save publishing costs? Forms, templates, newsletters, company booklets, surveys, databases can be moved to the intranet site.
- Content. Look at other web sites and think about what should appear on yours. The contents of your site and the navigational concept are what make or break it. Think about the links you want to include for other pages, other sites, and related information.
- Available technologies. Make the most of new technological advances to add tools such as reference information, company calendar, employee web pages, online conferencing, video libraries, downloads for files, etc.

Six items to carefully research.

Remember, unlike hardcopy material, intranet sites can be, and should be, updated as often as is needed. Fashions for web pages change quickly; make sure you stay up-to-date and redesign when necessary.

Studies have shown that: 1) people have little patience for poorly designed sites, 2) people don't want to scroll for information, and 3) people don't want to read (Jakob Neilson 1996). With the explosion of the Internet, we've all become information junkies. Making sure that your site is well designed and that content is easily accessible is a real challenge.

Developing Content

To decide which content should be included, you need to clearly define the purpose of the site and related objectives, the target audience and its requirements, and what and how success will be



Managing Content for the Intranet (cont.)

What is the measurement for success of your website?

measured. For example, some companies will make sure the success of the site is measured by the number of daily hits. In that case you'll need to think of different strategies that will make people want to visit your site.

Define a content model that specifies what content is required by the site, where it will be placed, its source, navigational links and a uniform presentation theme. These issues must be resolved in the design stage to make sure visitors to the site get what they're looking for.

Develop guidelines to ensure that content, navigational links, and presentation remain consistent throughout the site. This gives visitors a feeling of familiarity and makes searches more intuitive.

Make sure you address issues such as: body text, titles, and fonts, creating effective page titles, links, tables, how to improve performance, content guidelines regarding confidentiality, and use of certain terms.

Find an owner for the different areas of your site and decide who is responsible for keeping the page's content up to date.

Issues for International Audiences

Clear communication with the target audience involves special considerations when an international audience is involved. If English isn't a person's native language, chances are they may be working with a dictionary and will stop reading if a sentence gets too long or if they come into contact with too much local jargon.

The usual rules for clear and concise writing make things easier for non-native English speakers.

- Be consistent. Lack of consistency creates a steeper learning curve.
- Use short clear sentences that are no longer than 12 words.
- Use the active voice not passive.
- Refrain from defining new terminology.
- Be politically correct.
- Check that graphic images which are not universally recognized will not be offensive to certain audiences. Be sure the right message is being communicated by the image.
- Make sure references to dates, units of measure, time, or money are in a format understood by everyone. For example, use January 13, 2000 rather than 13/01/2000 or 01/13/2000.

Setting up the Pages

Once you decide what will be on each page, follow these basic rules for setting up the page.

- If you think users will need to print out information from your pages, design special printer-friendly controls or provide them with pdf files that can be downloaded or viewed directly from the web.
- Make sure each page has a very clear and descriptive title at the top. People shouldn't have to browse through the page to see what it contains.
- Add meaningful keywords so your pages can be reached by different search engines.
- Don't underline text for emphasis since users will mistake it for a link. Bold is a better choice for emphasizing terms.
- When you present video clips or audio clips, clearly label the icon so people know what they're getting into.
- If you have files for download, be considerate and list the size of the file next to the download link. This will help people decide whether they can go for coffee while waiting or if lunch is a better choice.
- Each page should contain a complete idea or concept. Don't spread a single concept over multiple pages and make your users load new pages. At the same time, try to limit the content to two or three screens per page. For really long pages, put a small table of contents at the top of the page, so people know what is available.

- Take into consideration different browsers, screen resolutions, and font settings to see how they impact the look or functionality of your page. Test each page to make sure it is readable and printable.
- Whenever possible, keep text left justified and with a "ragged" right edge.
- Use a text and background color combination that has a high contrast (e.g., black on white, yellow on blue). Always choose a light background color. It's best to use a maximum of two text colors per page (one color for text and another for links).

Writing for the Web

The writing style we use for the web is like everything else nowadays. Short, concise, and to the point. Here are some tips on how to keep things from dragging out.

- Use short, simple, familiar words. Keep sentences short; these are easier to read, understand, and remember.
- Avoid technical terms that may not be familiar to all users and spell out acronyms when first used.
- Keep paragraphs short. Use one idea per paragraph.
- Use headings within a page to help structure information and to provide the users with visual cues on the content.
- Write about your subject as if there were no links in the text. For example, don't use: "Click here to go to our employment section," do use: "Our employment section provides a list of our current job opportunities."
- People tend to scan rather than read pages on the web. To call attention to specific information, you can use highlighted keywords, or bulleted lists.

Getting People to Use the Intranet

There are a number of ways you can provide employees with incentive to point their web browsers in your direction. Some ideas are starting an online lottery, where people have to fill out a form on the Intranet in order to try winning a T shirt or other fun item. Putting up a slide show with pictures from the latest company party or event is always a sure fire winner. This makes it easy to download pictures. In my experience, Dilbert and the daily cafeteria menu tend to be the most popular daily drawing cards.

There is also the matter of getting managers to supply you with material for their projects. The only idea I've come up with is to try and get this task included in the managers' yearly goals. Their scores will be evaluated based on whether they supplied material on their projects or areas of expertise and how often they updated this material.

Involve managers in keeping your website up-to-date.

Case in Point

At IBM, we first defined our target audience. We determined that the audience would be made of two parties: 1) Local employees 2) Other IBMers who are looking for technologies or will be working on a joint project. To this end we decided to divide our homepage into two areas, Research Technologies and the rest...

"Research Technologies" describes the departments and projects being done. Information for each project is divided into categories such as General Description, Motivation, Papers or Publications, Press Releases, Business Partners, Users, Contact Information, etc.



Managing Content for ... (cont.)

Structure your homepage to address different target groups.

"News" contains links to Company calendar of events, news items, employee news bulletin board, publications, and awards.

"About Us" contains links to the org chart, employee home pages, and company employee lookup.

"Services" contains links to the departments that provide services to employees including Human Resources, Library, Finances, Communications, ISO, Intellectual Property, Office Support, Information Services, and Helpdesk.

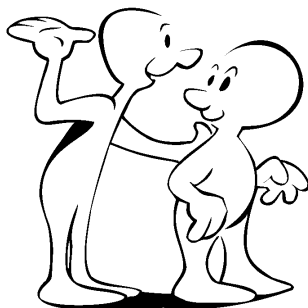
"Other" contains links of importance that we wanted to be just a click away from the homepage. These include transportation, cafeteria, fitness center, visitor information, and travel tips.

We also decided to use the homepage itself to point out updated pages or news features.



CHANI SACHAREN

6B Moshe Dayan St.
Kfar Sava, Israel 44539
+972 9 767 0808 (voice)
+972 9 7657 986 (fax)
sacharen@netvision.net.il



Comment on "Managing

By Alexander von Obert, Germany

Chani Sacharan provides an excellent check list for those involved in creating an intranet Web site. To make my point I would take a similar path. But a comment gives place for a few additional thoughts influenced by some emerging technology. These remarks are aimed at larger sites (several 100 to several 1,000 pages):

>>With the explosion of the Internet, we've all become information junkies.<<

It got much easier to distribute information. And you got a chance to update information after it was published. Finally, we switched from "push" (you had to send a copy to every single receiver) to "fetch" (people have to actively access your documents). This increases the demands on the information source to create easily accessible, valuable material. But we need not follow the layout styles of tabloid newspapers. Optical effects might be pleasing at the first visit but simply get annoying at the third.

>>Web design, like fashions, must keep up-to-date with the latest look.<<

I simply don't think so, especially when dealing with an intranet. My own designs hardly push the old HTML 3.2 standard to its limits, nevertheless some of them are quite popular. For example: <http://www.tw-h.de> has some 1,500 page views a month (not counting what many people seem to use from their browser and proxy caches) and the layout of that page is anything but sexy. My Web site has some 10 pages that have more than 500 page views a month. Many of these pages need heavy scrolling as I wish to offer the possibility to print everything about a topic in one piece. If you need further convincing use the following search string at <http://www.altavista.com>:
+link:www.techwriter.de -host:www.techwriter.de

The speed of my designs is especially admired. Often company networks are heavily loaded so that many pages need several minutes to load – unless a time-out occurs and nothing appears at all. Most of my pages have a data volume below 10 kB, including graphics. They get through even when nothing else works on the network. The typical load time is about 2 s, even on modem lines.

Content for the Intranet" . SA 29

>>We want to make employees' lives easier by providing them with a single repository for their information and tool needs.<<

And we should take another step with our authoring tools as this is about the only way to keep our larger sites consistent: At the source code level we should try to keep a single instance of any bit of information.

As an example, look at the TC Forum Web site: For every author I keep a single information node. This is the only place in the source code that contains his or her name, address and so on. Neither the articles nor the tables of contents do on source code level. If an author submits another article or sends me an e-mail with a new address I update this node. Afterwards you get this new address even when reading an old article by this author. Using the same relations in the other direction I offer a list of all articles the author published in TC Forum.

If you manage to work on this level many colleagues will use your site without being forced to: You offer them something they desperately need and cannot obtain otherwise. You can integrate information into knowledge on the premise that logically connected information nodes should be directly linked. In some cases this approach is superior to a database solution where you must query your way through several tables. My biggest intranet site has 2,300 pages that are connected by 73,000 links. It grows by some 30 pages and 1,000 links a week.

>>A web site's initial content organization tends to stick around for a long time.<<

>>Develop guidelines to ensure that content, navigational links, and representation remain consistent throughout the site.<<

Some of this is simply a limitation of many of the present authoring tools. As soon as you distinguish between your knowledge base and its representation in a specialized output instance you can automate much of your output creation. For example in April I added a navigational column to my Web site. This brought the number of links up from some 3,000 to more than 7,000, even though I removed a few of the links of the former design. No, I did not touch every single

page – I changed the algorithms to publish the information that was there in the source document.

The data modeling of my source code hardly depends on how the output document might be organized – but on what information is to be published. I try to identify the types of information I have to deal with and what types of relations exist between these types of information. My prime consideration is to keep a single bit of information only a single time.; e.g., if I mistype a person's name I need to change only a single information node. This is superior to the typical search-and-replace routine as it even works if there are several people with the same name.

Within these information nodes XML can be the technology of choice. An emerging technology to model and manage information on the abstraction level used here is described by ISO/IEC 13250:1999 (Topic Maps – Document Description and Processing Languages).

The Author:

Alexander von Obert has a degree in electrical engineering (Dipl.-Ing.) from the University of Erlangen/Nuernberg, Germany. He has been a technical author since 1984. Since 1989 he has been self-employed. He is the Web master of the TC Forum Web site.



ALEXANDER VON OBERT

Urbanstr. 2
90480 Nuernberg
Germany
+49 911 40 39 03 (voice)
+49 911 40 39 04 (fax)
avobert@techwriter.de
<http://www.techwriter.de>

Comment on SA 25 (Impressions from German/American Projects) · SA 30

By Ami Wright, USA

Dear Dr. Thiele,

You have written some very interesting articles for TC-Forum in the past. Your article in the March 2001 issue is another very interesting one.

I have not yet worked on any German/American projects, but over the past few years I've worked with three different French companies. (I'm American.)

I also found that there are communication difficulties that go beyond the language barrier. There are definitely language problems, but there are other issues that are more pervasive and more subtle. Even speaking the same language, the rhythm of working is different.

There is one point in your article that I would like to address from the American perspective. You mention the intrusive question "What is your background?" and note that "A person's educational background sometimes seems to be much more important than a person's professional competence."

"What is your Background"

From the American perspective: the question "What is your background?" does not necessarily mean educational background. The intent is to see where you fit in the project. This is another variation on the question "What's your role in this project anyway?" It is fine for you to respond with information about your professional experience. From the German perspective, the question is probably still intrusive, but not quite as narrowly focused.

As an American, my impression is that we, as a culture, are less concerned with educational qualifications than Europeans tend to be.

I hope to see more of your articles in TC-Forum in the future.

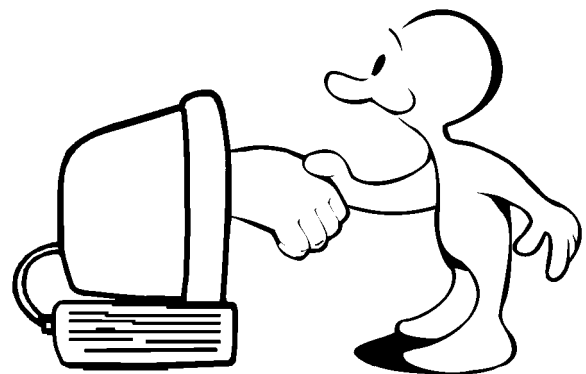
Regards,
Ami Wright

AMI WRIGHT

Freelance Technical Writer
ami@ziplink.net
+1 617 776 7738 (voice)
+1 617 776 7878 (fax)
<http://www.ziplink.net/users/ami>

Reply by U. Thiele:

"I discussed this with our American partner again, and in principle she shares my point of view. I also understand your perspective, and I agree to your last sentence: For a German it is still surprising to be confronted with this question, which I understand is very important in American business."



Interface Design & Document Design · BR 1

Westendorp, Piet; Jansen, Carel;
Punselie, Rob (Hrgs.):
Interface Design & Document Design,
Rodopi: 2000, Amsterdam

In this book, the editors make an in-depth discussion of the development of the integration of product documentation, e.g. the online-help of the products. The mention of online-help should reveal that the main theme of this book lies within the area of software.

The book documents a conference on "Interface Design & Document Design," which took place on the 28th and 29th of May, 1998 in Eindhoven, Holland, and contains speakers' comments and lectures.

In their speeches, Westendorp, Jansen and Punselie make it clear that a product should be understood as a sum of the product itself and the documentation of that product. This they have determined through an investigation of the software and its documentation in view of the user's mental processes.

The contents of the other speeches handle other aspects much closer to the development of On-line Documentation on a basis of user investigation. Two speeches describe different ways to create on-line help:

- Development of the Online-Help to Microsoft Office.
- Development of the Online-Help to MacOS 8.5.

Another speech describes the so called "Assistants", that represent another form of the usual documentation:

- Description of the "Assistants" from MacOS

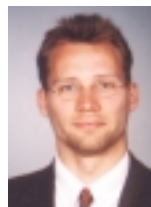
The other speeches handle the development of a user interface and it's effect on a certain user group, as well as a general view of the themes:

- Development of a user interface considering older users.
- Effects of the design on the physical, cognitive and emotional needs of older users.
- General considerations towards the development of user interfaces and documentation, as well as the final arguments for future development in this area.

The book handles quite deeply all aspects which are important to the design of user interfaces and writing of software documentation. All of the authors' comments are based on well-researched and thorough investigations.

Although the conference "Interface Design & Document Design" occurred a few years ago, the content of the discussed theme is still just as important now as it was then.

The book addresses not only technical authors, who are the ones responsible for the creation of the necessary documentation, but also developers who could profit from taking a look at this book.



JENS HASLER

Technical Author
transline Deutschland GmbH
Reutlingen, Germany
j.hasler@tiscon.com



Professional Events

CALL FOR PAPERS:

October 21 - 24, 2001, Santa Fe, NM

ACM SIGDOC 2001

Communicating in the New Millennium

As we enter the new millennium, communication is becoming increasingly global. English-only Web sites are fast becoming a limiting factor in the intellectual exchange of ideas and information. Indeed, the printed document is giving way to electronic formats, including non-textual and multimedia representations of critical information.

SIGDOC is the Association for Computing Machinery's (ACM) Special Interest Group for Documentation, a professional organization dedicated to advanced topics in documentation for and with computers.

SIGDOC 2001 will provide an opportunity for the exchange of information related to exciting new research and experience reports in areas including (but not limited to)

- National language support in all forms of documentation
- Migrating to multilingual Web sites
- Cultural issues for international audiences
- Making documentation available in multiple formats
- Fundamental design principles that transcend the medium

Please submit a 500-word proposal describing your topic, objective, and presentation format (paper, panel, poster or demonstration, tutorial, or working session). Proposals must be sent as an email attachment to

stillley@cs.ucr.edu on Friday, April 6, 2001.

Authors of accepted proposals will be notified by May 22, 2001. Final versions of accepted papers are due July 13, 2001. Proceedings will be published by the ACM. Selected papers will be considered for publication in a special issue of the ACM Journal of Computer Documentation.

For more Information see
www.cs.ucr.edu/~stillley/sigdoc2001

National Contact Persons (NCPs)

Austria:

Victoria Koster-Lenhardt
vkosterlenhardt@eur.ko.com

Australia:

Julie Fisher • +61 3365 2592 (fax)
strype@onaustralia.com.au

Belgium:

Patrick Goyvaerts • +32 3 240 3759 (fax)
goyvaerp@bec.bel.alcatel.be

Brazil:

Delio Destro • +55-16-236-4955 (fax)
ddestro@flexwrite.com

Canada:

Ron Blicq • +1 204 488 7294 (fax)
rgi_ron@compuserve.com

Denmark:

Thomas O'Connor • +45 4226 9322 (fax)
toc@foss-electric.dk

Finland:

Maria Lahti • +358 2040 2610 (fax)
maria.lahti@sonera.fi

France:

Philippe Uziel • +3 1 43 45 18 46 (fax)
phil@citi2.fr

Germany:

Brigitte Beuttenmüller • +49 711 657 40 13 (fax)
Beuttenmueller.B@t-online.de

India:

Vishadkhadutt D. Patil • vdpat@yahoo.com
Frederick Menezes • fmenezes@veritas.com

Israel:

Julian Zelenko • +972 9771 8189 (fax)
techstyl@netvision.net.il

Italy:

Riccardo Renna • +39 59 898305 (fax)
riccardo.renna@tetrapak.com

Netherlands:

Rob Punselie • +31 4027 57710 (fax)
pres@stic.nl

Norway:

Tove Østberg • +47 2202 6050 (fax)
tove.ostberg@comtext.no

South Africa:

Chris Curwen • +27 16 3492031 (voice/fax)
techwrite@pixie.co.za

Spain:

J. Antonio Bardera Pinuela • +34 945 185 099 (fax)

Sweden:

Johan Näsström • +46 08 648 00 37 (voice/fax)
johan.nasstrom@odata.se

Switzerland:

Reto Schilliger • +41 1 767 18 66 (voice/fax)
rschilliger@access.ch

United Kingdom:

Anke Harris • +44 1202 294222 (fax)
harris@mapline.com

USA:

Jeffrey L. Hibbard • +1 9149 452 018 (fax)
jeffx@us.ibm.com

Thomas L. Warren • +1 4057 446 326 (fax)
twarren@okway.okstate.edu

Please feel free to contact either the Editor or your NCP for any questions concerning TC-FORUM.