

# Stimulus

Volume 26 No. 5 Nov/Dec 2000

*From the President*

## President's message

by John Holgate

*John Holgate is our chapter's President. He is currently working as a technical writer for data-analysis software at Cognos.*

Here we are at another holiday season. A time to rest. A time to look ahead.

We now have 311 members in the Chapter, our largest number ever! It seems that the technical communication field is growing very quickly in Eastern Ontario. By now, you should have received a membership renewal notice in the mail. Please send it in and join with 25,000 other technical writers, editors, graphic designers, multimedia artists, Web and Intranet page information designers, and translators worldwide as

members of STC in 2001.

The Chapter will be busy in the new year. We will hold monthly program events up until May. The great news is that all of our regular programs this year are free of charge for members. The January 18 event, led by Julia Cronin, an Information Architect at Nortel, is entitled "The Role of the Information Architect and Information Modelling." Upcoming are more program events, the annual Competition Awards event, and the Annual General Meeting.

We also plan to participate in the Carleton University Arts and Culture Career Fair in February. This is part of our effort to encourage students to consider the field of technical communication as a career choice. It also fulfills our mandate to educate the public about the role of technical communicators.

I look forward to working with you all in the year 2001. ☺

## inside

<i>From the President</i>	
<b>President's message</b> .....	1
<i>International Corner</i>	
<b>Designing your web site for the blind</b> .....	2-3
<i>Book Review</i>	
<b>How to make money in technical writing</b> .....	4-5
<i>Director-Sponsor Report</i>	
<b>Board considers chapter formation, branding, web site hosting</b> .....	5-7
<i>Whimsical Thinking</i>	
<b>A guide by any other name?</b> .....	8

### ***Online Professional Development for Technical Writers***

*Are you interested in furthering your career potential and developing your skills in the latest technologies? With 6 to 12 week online courses on topics ranging from Professional Technical Writing to XML Authoring, you can learn at your convenience without spending a lot of money!*

*Visit <http://www.online-learning.com> to get more information on our instructor-led, Internet courses. New sessions start monthly...*

*(STC members receive a 20% discount by mentioning their membership on course registration.)*

*Contact: [info@online-learning.com](mailto:info@online-learning.com)*

***Online-Learning.com***

# Designing your web site for the blind

by Guy Ball

*This article originally appeared in the December 2000 issue of TechniScribe, the newsletter of the Orange County chapter of the STC.*

You might wonder about the logic of designing a Web site for the blind and visually impaired. After all, Web designers seem to be moving toward visually rich sites that often embrace some sort of flash and dazzle to keep viewers interested or at least to point them in the direction that they need on the site.

Yet, those of us who are fully sighted forget that as we make the Web our main information vehicle, we may be cutting out millions of customers or potential customers. And these millions (5 to 10 million in the United States alone, by some estimates) have every moral and legal right to have access to that information.

For instance, Unisys has support sites where we post our latest documentation. We have scores of sales and marketing sites with information on our latest products. Are these sites accessible to an audience (blind or visually impaired) that cannot actually see the site but can only “read” it through the use of special software?

Obviously, the implication is even greater for consumer sites like Amazon.com or Buy.com. Are they ready to ignore a few hundred thousand customers who would use their site but can’t because of poor or incomplete design? If these companies would change their site design, even slightly, they may gain 50,000, maybe 100,000, new customers: all because their site design encouraged rather than discouraged viewers with impairments.

And many of these impaired viewers stay loyal once they find a site that works well for them. A recent article in *PC World*

magazine (September 2000) compared two sites using screen-reader software. The first, Hewlett-Packard, did well. All links worked properly and were easily recognizable (Investor Information, Drivers, HP Store, for example). Then the writer visited the Gap Online. Many of the links sounded like programming gibberish (Link, shorts\_men.asp?wdid=300, Map: wdid=301, Map:gapstore/cs\_returns.asp). One would suspect that the Gap has lost a large number of potential customers who will never return to the site.

## The problems

The blind and visually impaired use what are called screen readers to navigate the Web. These software programs look at the HTML file that creates a Web page on a computer. Then they synthetically speak exactly what that file tells them. The better readers will ignore or “understand” specialized HTML codes and speak the content that a sighted Web viewer would see. The result is content as accessible to a blind person as to a fully sighted one.

At least that is the desired result.

Some of the problems occur when the Web designer includes graphics. If the navigation bar has the text link “software downloads,” the screen reader will speak those words. But if the navigation bar uses graphic buttons with no “alt text” description, the reader will ignore it or just speak the word “graphic.” If that’s the case, the visitor is now lost on the page and will not know where to go next. In other situations, poor or incomplete HTML formatting will confuse the reading software, causing it to skip content and links. Animation will cause

---

## Stimulus

*Stimulus* is the newsletter of the Eastern Ontario Chapter of the STC. It is distributed free to chapter members, libraries, other STC chapters and interested organizations in the region.

<b>Editor</b>	Tahirah Shadforth
<b>Editorial assistance</b>	vacant
<b>Design &amp; Layout</b>	Tahirah Shadforth (hard copy and PDF)

### Reprint Policy

All material herein is copyright of STC

Eastern Ontario Chapter. Other STC chapters are welcome to reprint articles from *Stimulus*. In return, we ask that you credit the author and *Stimulus* and send us a copy of the publication containing the article.

### Submissions

*Stimulus* welcomes submissions on topics relevant to technical communicators in the Eastern Ontario area. We reserve the right to edit articles for length, clarity, and suitability. Please send electronic copy (Mac or PC, .RTF or .TXT files). Mail diskettes or hand them to

the editor at a meeting, or send files via e-mail.

### Mailing address

*Stimulus* Editor, STCEO  
P.O. Box 78039  
Nepean, ON K2E 1B1

### E-mail address

tahirah@shadforth.com

### Printing

Allegra Print & Imaging  
1069 Bank Street  
(613)730-3000

the screen reader to jump around within text on a page, pulling words from different parts of the page and making nonsensical sentences.

### The law

We're starting to see the impact of three laws: the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, and Section 255 of the Telecommunications Act. More on these laws and their impact can be found at the Microsoft.com site (among others), but they are important for us all especially when we deal with the federal government (Section 508, particularly). Companies such as AOL, H&R Block, Intuit (Quicken), and Bank of America have already been subject to government and legal action.

### Are ugly, text-only sites the answer?

No, and neither is a duplicate page with no graphics. There are some very easy things that we, as Web designers, can do to make a graphics page work for the blind. Most include using the tools we already have to add some alternate text. Others are just a change in habits, with us doing something a bit different. With a little re-training, we can produce an accessible page with little additional work.

### How to fix it

Here are a few quick tips:

- ◆ Images and animation. Use the alt text or alt attribute function to clearly describe the function of each visual.

- ◆ Image maps. Use client-side map and alt text for hotspots.
- ◆ Multimedia. Provide a text description of video content.
- ◆ Page organization. Use consistent structure and cascading style sheets (CSS) for layout and style when possible. This allows users to modify their browser at one time to affect their entire visit on the site.
- ◆ Formatting options. Use heading tags with font attributes rather than calling out specific fonts in each usage. This allows visually impaired viewers to modify styles and font sizes to meet their needs.
- ◆ JavaScript, applets, and animation. Provide alternative content in case the active features are not accessible through the screen reading software.
- ◆ Check your work! Try using the validation tools, checklists, and guidelines available at sites like <http://www.w3c.org/TR/WCAG/>.

### Additional information

The following sites offer quite a wealth of information, as well as good examples and tips:

- ◆ IBM Accessibility Center (with a downloadable trial version of their Home Page Reader), <http://www-3.ibm.com/able/overview.html/>.
- ◆ SSB Technologies (Web Site Accessibility), <http://www.ssbtechnologies.com/accessibility.php/>. ☞

### A guide by any other name?

*(continued from page 8)*

#### In-your-face guide

All right, listen up! Read this, do exactly what it says, badaboom badabing, that's it! Or else. Hey, you want a #%\$^@\* user-friendly manual? Get outta here and see the inspirational guide!

#### Literary guide

And you thought the maximalist guide was the epitome of verbosity! Here's a taste: "A small rectangular box donning a bright azure border appears suddenly, clamoring for attention with a series of beeps, chirping incessantly like a newborn robin straining its slender pink neck to grasp its mother's long-

awaited offering. Within this rectangular landscape, several smaller white boxes are strewn about as if at random, yet all stand facing the deep blue edge like so many cottages dotting the coast in a sleepy fishing village."

#### Feckless guide

Sometimes a piece of software is so easy to use, the interface so intuitive, that a manual is, well, absolutely redundant. Users won't ever read it, simply because they'll never need to. The manual just sits there . . . unopened, unquestioned, utterly feckless. Sheds new light on the term "RTFM". ☞

# How to make money in technical writing

by Carey Ryan

*This article was originally published in the September 1999 issue of The Galley, the newsletter of the Willamette Valley chapter of the STC.*

Would you like to earn a six-figure income? Peter Kent states in his introduction that, as a freelance technical writer, it is possible to make \$100,000 a year or more. Will everyone be able to earn \$100,000? No, but Kent sets that amount as an achievable goal for all freelance technical writers. *Making Money in Technical Writing* does not offer a get rich quick scheme. Instead it offers the knowledge we need to start a successful freelance career and begin taking the steps toward achieving a much sought-after six-figure income.

This book is aimed at helping us along the road to becoming successful freelance writers. It is not aimed at helping us become more skilled writers. While Kent briefly touches on a few things we should think about when writing, such as thinking about your readers, his primary focus is turning us into freelance writers.

Kent's primary goal is to help us earn more money through freelance technical writing. Kent has devised a three-step method to achieving our maximum income:

- ♦ Step 1: "Use the technical services agencies to find work for you."
- ♦ Step 2: "Move out on your own, make your own contracts, and cut out the middleman."
- ♦ Step 3: Form "a different . . . relationship with your clients, more of a consulting relationship."

Before the book delves into Step 1, Kent addresses some basic issues we should take into account before making the plunge into freelance writing. He gives us some advantages of freelancing—such as avoiding office politics. He then tries to balance the scales by pointing out some disadvantages—such as a lack of benefits like health insurance. Possibly the most important issue Kent brings up in the Getting Started section is the importance of knowing how much you make currently and how much you will need to ask for as a freelance writer. He provides a worksheet to help us determine how much we make an hour. This worksheet takes into account benefits such as long-term disability and medical insurance. After completing this

worksheet we are armed to go out into the freelance world knowing exactly how much money we must make to get ahead.

In explaining Step 1, Kent offers tips on working with technical services agencies. Contact as many agencies as you can—don't feel obligated to stick with one. The more résumés you send out, the better your odds of finding a good contract. When you limit your choices by working with just a few agencies, you limit your ability to choose how and where you will work, and for how much.

In Step 1, Kent also gives us some important questions we should ask agencies. Do they pay overtime? Where is the contract? How long is the contract?

## Cutting out the middleman

Kent then takes us on to Step 2—finding contracts independently of technical agencies. He points out something that is echoed by many seasoned professionals—networking is the key to success. The information you need is anything that will help you find work and get a good rate. You may not need work now, but you still need your network, because you can't build a network in a short time, and you can't learn all you need to know about the market in just a few weeks.

The author touches on a myriad of issues independent contractors face—paying estimated taxes, writing contracts, making tactful cold calls, just to mention a few. In several places, Kent merely skims the surface of these issues; however, he does this knowingly and points us to more extensive sources of information—this is the case when he discusses taxes.

## Becoming a consultant

Finally we reach Step 3—becoming a consultant. So what is the difference between an independent contractor and a consultant? According to Kent, a contractor may do the same work as an employee and usually works at the client's place of business. On the other hand, "consultants work independently and are not controlled or supervised by the client." Consultants will likely charge by the project and not by the hour. Kent believes consulting is where the real money is. By properly estimating a

project you can earn upward of \$100 an hour.

Kent reminds us that being a successful consultant is not an easy task. You will need to convince companies that they need your services—you will need to sell yourself. The more people you contact the better your odds. For good reason, this is a recurring theme in Kent's book.

This book is filled with enough references to keep any of us busy for quite some time. He points out books, Web sites, magazines, and organizations—including the STC, which he mentions often.

The main downfall of this book is the fact that some of the information is a bit

outdated. In two separate instances he cites surveys from 1988. Despite this downfall, many of the ideas behind this book are timeless—network, sell yourself, and write well.

While this book does have a few downfalls, it is a success in fulfilling its purpose. It gives us the information we need to be financially successful technical writers. 🐾

*Making Money in Technical Writing: Turn Your Writing Skill Into \$100,000 a Year.*

Peter Kent. 1998. New York, NY: Macmillan General Reference. [ISBN 0-02-861883-1. 280 pages.] \$16.95 US.

## Director-Sponsor Report

# Board considers chapter formation, branding, web site hosting

by Kitty Aughey

*Kitty Aughey is the Director-Sponsor for Region 1.*

The STC Board of Directors met in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, from September 14 through 17 and covered a great deal of ground, including:

- ♦ Forming a policy about chapter formation outside the United States and relationships with existing technical communication organizations in other countries.
- ♦ Branding and corporate identity.
- ♦ Web site hosting for chapters.
- ♦ Approving Merit Grants. Congratulations to the chapters with so many innovative and important programs in the works—particularly our Central New York Chapter!

These major issues were addressed along with the “regular” STC business of, among other subjects, chapter affairs and program areas, including research, special interest groups (SIGs), professional development, competitions, conferences, communications, and external affairs. Because this article has to be relatively brief, these subjects cannot be described in detail. Several of them could easily be main topics of articles. It took the board two and a half long days to deal with them. So, please contact me if you have any questions.

## Committee and program updates

- ♦ The board authorized the STC office to conduct a membership drive using the

services of a professional marketing company.

- ♦ STC will become an affiliate member of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). The annual fee for this is \$5,000. W3C determines standards for Web-based communication, among other wide-ranging concerns of specific interest to STC.
- ♦ The board acknowledged three new chapters approved by the Executive Council over the summer:
  - The San Luis Obispo Chapter in Region 8.
  - The Texas A&M Student Chapter in Region 5.
  - The Netherlands Chapter in Region 4.
- ♦ The Instructional Design & Learning SIG was approved with an initial budget of \$1,900.
- ♦ Denver, Colorado, will be the location of the STC Annual Conference in 2006.
- ♦ Minneapolis, Minnesota, will be the location of the STC Annual Conference in 2007.
- ♦ Freya Winsberg of the Phoenix Chapter was appointed program manager for the STC Annual Conference (Seattle, 2003).
- ♦ The Conference registration fee for members for the STC Annual Conference in Chicago in 2001 will be \$420. The discounted rate for speakers will remain \$350.

*(continued on page 6)*

## Board

(continued from page 5)

- ◆ Edward Carbrej, Boston Chapter, was appointed manager of the Jay R. Gould Award Committee.
- ◆ Dale Erickson, Lone Star Chapter, was appointed manager of the New Media Delivery Systems Committee in the Communications area.
- ◆ Jon Baker, Boston Chapter, was named manager of the New Media Publications Committee in the Communications area. This gives Region 1 representation.
- ◆ Jack Molisani, Los Angeles Chapter, was named manager of the Chapter and Regional Conferences Committee in the Chapter Affairs area (2nd Vice President).
- ◆ Amy Burdan, Hoosier (Indiana) Chapter, was named manager of the Scientific Communication SIG.
- ◆ Roy Hartshorn, Toronto Chapter, was named manager of the Canadian Curricula in Professional Development Committee in the Professional Development area.

### Merit grants and loans to chapters

- ◆ A merit grant of \$3,000 was awarded to the Central New York Chapter to implement a comprehensive revitalization/growth plan.
- ◆ A merit grant of \$3,000 was awarded to the Mid-South Chapter to build its scholarship fund.
- ◆ A merit grant of \$3,000 was awarded to the Atlanta Chapter to build its scholarship fund.
- ◆ A merit grant of \$1,200 was awarded to the Hoosier Chapter to develop the Insight Award to recognize Indiana corporations and organizations that innovatively use the skills and capabilities of their technical communicators.
- ◆ A multichapter loan of \$6,000 was given to the Mid-Valley and Willamette Valley Chapters to host the Region 7 conference in Portland, Oregon, in October 2001.
- ◆ A merit grant of \$3,000 was awarded to the Alberta Chapter to construct a

portable display to be used at the all-Canada Smart 2000 Conference and Exposition in November 2000 and at regional professional, educational, and community events.

- ◆ A merit grant of \$2,070 was awarded to the Alaska Chapter to construct a portable display for use at regional professional, educational, and community events across Alaska.
- ◆ A chapter loan of \$3,000 was given to the Los Angeles Chapter to seed a multichapter, self-sustaining, technical publications, online communication, and art competition in Southern California.
- ◆ A merit grant of \$1,500 was awarded to the East Bay Chapter to further develop its Technical Literacy Program.

### Budget

STC follows a system of zero-based budgeting. It cannot operate or begin the fiscal year at a deficit. The board approved a budget for FY 2001 with income of \$4,725,250, expenses of \$4,711,849, and a net surplus of \$13,401.

### Chapters and membership outside the United States

The board adopted the following policy statement:

1. At the Society level, STC does not actively initiate the formation of chapters. STC provides information from the Society office to any individual who inquires about formation of a chapter. The Director-Sponsor of record is copied as a point of contact for the requestor.
2. STC is a member of Intecom, an international consortium of technical communication societies. As a courtesy to that membership, in response to a chapter formation inquiry from outside the United States, STC will, in the Society office's response, advise the requestor of existing organizations in the requestor's country. The contact person of record of the member Intecom organization and the STC Intecom representative will be copied, as applicable.
3. Chapters shall be admitted when fifteen members of a given geographic area

petition for chapter status in accordance with STC bylaws.

4. Once a chapter is formed, STC will provide an equal level of support with the following exception: In terms of professional/government relations, STC shall focus on the United States as the Society is incorporated in the United States.
5. In terms of membership, if there are extraneous costs associated solely with the residence of a member outside the United States, these costs may, as deemed necessary by the board of directors, be passed on to the affected member.

### **Branding and corporate identity**

The board approved a new logo and stationery program for the Society. Chapter presidents should receive specific and detailed corporate identity information, i.e., how to use the new logo and various design elements in chapter stationery and hard- and electronic-copy materials, before the end of the year.

As most of you know, past president Mary Wise announced the new STC mission statement, “Designing the Future of Technical Communication,” at Leadership Day at the Orlando conference in May. Another external brand tool is the organization’s “story,” a brief explanation of what the organization stands for, who its members are, and how it views its future. The STC board approved the STC story—our consistent “face” we present to the rest of the world. While it is not meant to replace the more extensive literature we provide to prospective members and others, the story is the “elevator message” we can use to briefly explain who and what we are.

### **STC story**

Through information sharing and industry leadership, STC helps professionals design effective communication for a technical world. Because technology touches everyone, STC promotes public welfare by encouraging the development of better-educated professionals whose jobs are to make complicated information usable by

many.

The organization’s growth has mirrored our growing dependence on technology. Initially, STC was primarily made up of engineers who, among other activities, wrote instructions and descriptions of how electrical and mechanical products worked. A profound change took place as the pervasiveness of technology and the need to understand it became an integral part of our everyday lives. With the emergence of the Internet and online communication, our members now focus on supporting all aspects of the rapidly evolving world of technology.

The organization began because those working in the field recognized themselves as professionals with unique training and career issues. Today, STC is nearly 50 years old, with 150 chapters and 25,000 members worldwide. It is the largest organization for technical communicators. STC offers industry leadership and the education, networking, and information required in a world where change is “the way it is.”

### **Web site hosting**

For the past several years, the board has been dealing with a number of difficult issues related to decentralized versus centralized hosting of chapter Web sites. This issue has been made urgent as bandwidth needs have exceeded what our current Internet Service Provider (ISP) can make available.

Over the next few months, committees in the Communications area, managed by Lory Hawkes, AP for communications, will be developing and implementing a transition plan that will enable chapters to select their own ISPs and maintain their own Web sites in a decentralized system. Such a system means that, within some general guidelines (we do have to present a fairly consistent “face” to the world; see the section on branding, above), chapters will have greater creative latitude and capabilities to develop and change their Web sites.

The issues mentioned in this article are far-reaching and important, but the discussions here are necessarily brief. Please contact me with your questions at [kathleen.aughey@kodak.com](mailto:kathleen.aughey@kodak.com). ☺

**STC Eastern Ontario Chapter  
2000-2001 Executive**

**President**

John Holgate  
john.holgate@cognos.com

**Vice-President**

Visnja Beg  
visnja.beg@alcatel.com

**Treasurer**

Rick Lorenz  
rick\_lorenz@hotmail.com

**Secretary**

Scott Wahl  
swahl@bridgewater.com

**Acting Program Managers**

Scott Wahl  
swahl@bridgewater.com

Visnja Beg

visnja.beg@alcatel.com

**Acting Membership Manager,  
Volunteer Co-ordinator**

Scott Wahl  
swahl@bridgewater.com

**Competition General Manager**

Gordon Brown  
gbrown@nortelnetworks.com

**Canadian Issues Committee Rep**

TBA

**Education Manager**

Jeannie Bacon  
jbacon@effia.com

**Newsletter Editor**

Tahirah Shadforth  
tahirah@shadforth.com

**Web Manager and Employment  
Manager**

Robin Kelsey  
webmaster@stceo.org

**PR Manager**

Mindy Sichel  
mindy.sichel@cognos.com

**Algonquin Student Rep**

TBA

**Directors**

Tara Bourbeau  
tara.bourbeau@ottawa.hummingbird.com

*Whimsical Thinking*

**A guide by any other name?**

by John M. Ostrander

*John M. Ostrander is a Senior Member of the Eastern Ontario chapter of the STC.*

After reading Rob Houser's article "Should We Be Writing Strategy Guides?" in the September/October issue of *Intercom*, I've been wondering if maybe we're creating too many new document types. I mean, does it really matter how we label a well-written, task-oriented manual filled with concrete examples?

We now have user's guides, reference guides, how-to guides, getting-started guides, beginner's guides, tutorial guides, strategy guides. What's next? Well, I can think of a few more document types for tech writers to ponder:

**Maximalist guide**

Created in a world without hard deadlines, the maximalist guide pontificates on every single nook and cranny of the software, right down to the last OK button. Replete with everything from annotated screen-captures to an annotated bibliography, such guides are bound to exhaust their subjects. Traditionally, every maximalist

guide refers to the *Official Rock Paper Scissors Strategy Guide*, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, the source text for Emerson's famous quote about "consistency," and instructions on how to repair your kitchen sink.

**Inspirational guide**

Takes the concept of user-friendly to a higher level. Readers of an inspirational guide often discover the truth about the product they're using, themselves, the cosmos, and more. Among its many gems: "Deep and profound is the Configuration Dialog. Dwell within, mindful and patient. For guidance along this path, press F1."

**Icing-on-the-cake guide**

A.k.a the afterthought guide, this last-minute attempt to document a product should have been an essential ingredient at the outset of the development cycle. Despite the heroic efforts of its tech writers, such hurried documentation is often a recipe for disaster.

**Half-baked guide**

Like its cousin the icing-on-the-cake guide, the half-baked guide is a rush job. Even if it's begun early in the product-development process, this manual is snatched, perhaps literally, from the writer's hard disk and delivered fresh to the customer. Although readers may notice the "preliminary" stamp on the title page, they'll also see every "need more info here" and "we better fix this before we ship" internal note peppered throughout the doc. For incompleteness and inaccuracy, this guide takes the cake.

*(continued on page 3)*

**STC Eastern Ontario Chapter**

**Mission Statement (2000/2001)**

Our chapter's mission is to work together in a spirit of community to promote and develop professional technical communication.

**Address:**

P.O. Box 78039  
1460 Merivale Road  
Nepean, Ontario K2E 1B1

**Web site:**

<http://www.stceo.org>

**Algonquin Technical Writer Web site:**

<http://www.cst.algonquinc.on.ca>

**Telephone:**

(613) 860-0542