



IN THIS ISSUE:

From the President.....1
 Upcoming Events.....2
 Meeting Notice.....2
 Feature Article.....3-5
 Article 2.....5-6
 About the Chapter.....7
 About the Newsletter...7

What a Year We've Had Already!

by Russell Willerton, Snake River Chapter President



The year 2009 has certainly started with a bang... although that bang is more like an implosion of financial accounts, businesses, and benefits. It is precisely that ground-shaking set of events that has spurred us into action for the year ahead.

We had an excellent networking meeting on January 20th, and it became clear to me then that our chapter must increase its efforts to grow and expand opportunities for members. We will not shrink from the challenges around us, but we will rise up to face them directly.

We are taking steps in several areas to provide you the best possible return on investment for your membership dollars:

- Provide training in content management basics and DITA (Darwin Information Typing Architecture)
- Bring back the chapter's annual technical publications competition
- Provide a way for those who submit presentations for STC's Annual Conference/Summit to win registration paid by the chapter
- Increase and expand networking opportunities
- Update our online communication, including networking via Facebook
- Provide more food and better at chapter events

Our networking meeting was both exciting and sobering for me. Several in attendance were dealing with reduced hours and unpaid "furloughs" from their employers. Having just paid my own membership dues, I understand that your membership dues are a significant investment. I and the other members of the administrative council feel a strong obligation to make a difference for you this year.

I welcome your suggestions on how we can add value to your STC membership. Let me know what we can do to make this year in STC especially valuable for you.

Russell Willerton

February, March, April, May

February Meeting

This month we'll be meeting with the communications director for the Boise State College of Engineering. Margaret Scott will discuss challenges in producing print newsletters and the presentation will be followed by pizza!

Date: Monday, February 23rd

Time: 6:00pm

Location: Room 206, Liberal Arts building, Boise State University

Snacks: Pizza provided at the end of the presentation

Cost: Free to members*

RSVP to programs@stc-src.org by Feb. 20th

* Please contact Dr. Russell Willerton, our chapter president, if you are not a member but would like to attend this meeting. His e-mail is president@stc-src.org.

Note: If you are a member, you should receive an email from our programs manager, Amaya Berriochoa, a few days before the meeting to let you know the details. If you are not on the list, please e-mail her at programs@stc-src.org for information.

March & April Meetings

The meetings for these months are still under discussion. We'll post info on the website and in the next newsletter.

May Meeting

Instead of a May chapter meeting, we have traditionally sent a member of the chapter to the national STC conference. Please contact our president, Dr. Russell Willerton, for details.



Suggestions and Contributions

If you would like to be a speaker or would like to suggest one for one of our chapter meetings, please get in touch with Amaya Berriochoa at programs@stc-src.org. Also, if you have any ideas, suggestions, or profound announcements to make on the subject of meetings, feel free to make them known to Amaya.

We want to make meetings worth your time by providing knowledgeable speakers who will discuss important topics of technical communication with chapter members.

The Myth of the Myth of the Paperless Office

by Ronald W. Garrison, Senior Member of the Carolina Chapter



Ron Garrison

There's been a little bit of printer's ink in my veins ever since my sixth-grade class visited the local newspaper, where I marveled at what went into producing such a complex product every day. And anyone who writes for a living can, like me, describe a long love-hate relationship with paper as the conveyor of the written word. There's something physically appealing about putting pen to paper, as there is about picking up and reading a well-produced bound document.

But this medium that is as old as, well, recorded history may, like fossil fuels, CRTs, and beautiful gatefold LP record sleeves, have to eventually make way for its replacement. Paper presents difficulties that are increasingly intractable as the amount of information we use grows. We all know this. Yet recently a chorus of voices has emerged, saying that the "paperless office," a development widely predicted in the 1970s, is a myth. Now, we are increasingly told that such a vision, like nuclear fusion reactors, machine language translation, and a cure for cancer, is a mirage, forever receding into the future, unlikely to arrive in our lifetimes. To some, the paperless office has even become a metaphor for any technology that is promoted as desirable because it is more sophisticated rather than because of any genuine usefulness.

In my view such a conclusion is, to say the least, premature. Indeed, from one vantage point, we are already 99.997% paperless. The "How Much Information" study, to which I referred in a previous article, concluded that, of somewhere between one and two exabytes (10^{18}) of information produced globally in a year, "printed documentation of all kinds comprises only .003% (sic) of the total." This means that, whatever difficulties there are in dealing with the other 99.997% of that information, they cannot be solved by paper. If we cling to paper to avoid those problems, we leave unanswered the question of what to do with almost all of the information we generate.

Aside from paper's inability to deal with the sheer volume of information flow in today's world, it exhibits other serious limitations, as we all know. It is not readily searchable; important items are easy to misplace; it is difficult and expensive to duplicate in the quantities often needed, making the information on it vulnerable to disasters; and, of course, despite our much-cited ability to carry around books and other documents and read them almost anywhere, the lack of portability of large collections of paper is possibly the most serious problem of all. And for the part of the population without sight, printed pages cannot automatically be turned into speech.

We all know these things. Yet the adoption of new information technologies seems to lead to even larger amounts of printed material. The problem seems especially acute for the circulation of paper documents involved in day-to-day business, as distinguished from longer-term information storage. Mailed documents give way to faxes, and fax is gradually replaced with e-mail, only to result in e-mails being printed for permanent filing. Web sites replace printed catalogs, and MapQuest searches substitute for foldout maps, leading to more printing of information as it is accessed. Old habits die hard.

Printed documents are often generated out of fear of losing electronic information. This is not entirely an irrational fear. The same "How Much Information" report to which I once again referred also said that "magnetic storage is by far the largest medium for storing information, and is the most rapidly growing, with shipped hard drive capacity doubling every year. Magnetic storage is rapidly becoming the universal medium for information storage." I know I've already discussed data media longevity in a previous article, but a sentence like that one, alluding to our reliance on tiny, evanescent magnetic domains for storage, should give us all a creeping sensation of fear.

Even beyond issues associated with the physical media, it is all too easy to think you have read information accurately, because the operating system gave you no indication of errors, when in fact there was an error. It's also easy to think you have backed up data correctly, when in fact you have not, and you have not confirmed that the data can be correctly restored. These are insidious problems that regularly arise to take a bite out of even the experts. So why should the wider population of non-experts feel secure?

They can't. But they need to develop a solid basis for a sense of security because digital technology, while presenting a whole set of serious but solvable problems, is the only way to avoid the growing problems of reliance on paper. Even the best acid-free paper eventually degrades, bringing to a grim end whatever was impressed on it; it is combustible, edible, and sometimes even soluble; and it cannot easily be duplicated and spread to off-site locations. In the digital realm, many passwords are easily cracked, but ultimately passwords, encryption, and other measures offer a real chance for much more security than locks, cameras, and guards can ever provide.

Since the transition to paperless techniques is not avoidable, how is it going? Statistics seem hard to come by, and those that we do have seem inconclusive at this point. More than one source I saw referred to a 7% annual growth rate in printed paper, but Matt Bradley ("What ever happened to the paperless office?" Christian Science Monitor, December 12, 2005) said that the rate of growth in usage of plain white paper, which had been about 6 to 7 percent for many years, had been slipping, and was expected to be under 4 percent from 2004 to 2005. He refers to the metaphor of the "paper piñata," used by Paul Saffo (a technological forecaster at the Institute for the Future, Palo Alto, CA), in which a thin paper wrapping surrounds a digital core that is growing more rapidly.

Saffo's point seems to be that a growing "core" technology will, for a time but only for a time, cause older associated systems to grow as well. So just as a sphere growing in volume will grow its surface area, but more slowly, so the Internet can result in more printing for a time, just as videoconferencing can temporarily lead to more business travel. This does not indicate a failure of the new techniques to live up to their promise, but rather an enabling of more overall activity, with consequent growth in the use of both older and newer components of the system.

Clearly, the inside of the piñata is growing rapidly. Can anything shrink its skin, leading to a decline in the absolute amount of paper use? As always, this will involve the continuing development of technology, and its integration into our working habits. We should keep in mind just how recently computers have achieved any kind of real portability, and how short a time we have enjoyed cheap, convenient mass storage.

Improved displays, which have been slow in coming are a critical part of any true alternative to printed documents. But such developments are occurring, and developments in multiple critical areas proceed in parallel. We may see attractive paths to real paperless offices before most of us can even imagine them in detail. In the meantime, we can expect the Internet to reduce reliance on paper documents for reference purposes, and can anticipate that better typography and easier duplex printing will shrink documents by modest but important amounts.

In view of everything now known, from my perspective it appears that the current difficulty in the transition to a world of low and declining use of printed paper does not result from any critical and unsolved problems, and certainly not from lack of a need commensurate with the proposed solution. Rather, it arises from the truly huge and complex nature of this undertaking, the need for many millions of participants to incorporate the new systems into their working methods, and the incomplete development of key technologies involved.

The Myth, Cont'd...

There is a familiar pattern here, seen with other new developments such as the Internet: initial excitement, followed by disappointment and occasional reconsideration, then gradually by continued refinement, familiarization, and eventual acceptance. Nuclear fusion, computer translation, and cancer cures are still far from being future visions that belong to the past. Those long-deferred dreams may only be delayed. And like them, the twilight of the printed page may arrive, a bit late but no less welcome.

Ron Garrison is a senior member of the Carolina Chapter of the STC. This article originally appeared in the Q1 2007 edition of the Carolina Communique. Ron can be reached by e-mail at rgarrison1@nc.rr.com.

ARTICLE 2

The Yellow Brick Road to Technical Communication

by Paul Mueller, Senior Member of the Houston Chapter



Paul Mueller

For those of us who communicate technical content for a living, we share many job titles, such as technical writer, information developer, technical communicator, multimedia engineer, content developer, and many others. Without one focused set of titles, how did we know this is what we wanted to do?

Making the Transition from Developer to Writer

The truth is, like many other technical communicators, I didn't. I graduated with computer science and mathematics degrees. I took a few technical communication courses at Penn State, but I had never heard of technical communication as a profession. I was going to be a programmer, like all good computer science graduates. But then, something happened. After developing my first database-driven security system, I had to document the system and train others how to use it. This process introduced me to my future career. I had always enjoyed teaching and coaching, and this was teaching through a different medium.

But how could I make the transition? I joined a writing shop as an entry-level writer. I first worked on a database product, and I was hired for my technical knowledge in that area. I thought I knew all about writing when I started. After all, I had written more than 100 pages to "document" the system that I had developed. I quickly learned how little I actually knew about creating quality software documentation. Luckily for me, there was a light at the end of the tunnel.

An Editor Guides the Way

The second important event in my career path occurred when I met my first mentor, my editor, Ria (you can meet her at www.dutchtrans.com), who was an excellent guide. She used each edit as an opportunity to teach me the guidelines and show me how to refine the content and present my thoughts in a clear, concise manner. She used a green pen so that it didn't look like my pages were soaked with blood, and we talked about various ways I could improve. I soon became much more aware of the senior writers around me, and I learned to watch and listen instead of show and talk. I am very thankful to all those mentors, including many who may never know about their profound impact on my future. We should all learn from each other.

The greatest element about technical communication is the opportunity to continually learn and grow. We are consistently faced with new challenges and ways to communicate content to our audiences. Even if we are in a standardized environment,

we can always look for ways to improve knowledge transfer to our audience. When we think we know it all, we actually fall behind and lose our drive and motivation.

EPSS Becomes a de facto Standard

When I started in technical communication, we wrote everything in books. Online help soon followed, providing all the printed content in an online format. These formats became standard, and terms like chunking and single-sourcing became the buzz words. The big breakthrough for me was the introduction of electronic production support systems (EPSS), which accompanied products and provided assistance in parallel. Delivering the information users need, when and where they need it, was a breakthrough approach and one to which I quickly latched on. The conference sessions and discussions truly inspired me to design and implement my first embedded help solution.

We continued to play with our embedded help implementation techniques, and talk with users about their experiences with the product. I also began presenting regularly at conferences about embedded help and discussing these ideas and methods with others. These idea exchanges were the key for me to find new ways to present information and expand my ways of approaching technical communication.

Today, we look at integrated user assistance as commonplace in many products. For example, wizards and text in the user interface are never considered to be forms of help. We learned that if we didn't call it help, people would actually read it and use it. We have also found ways to more closely integrate the online content with the product. For example, many help pages provide links that do something in the product itself to resolve an issue, such as a button to open a window and perform a specific task. Multimedia continues to extend our communication methods with demonstrations and tutorials integrated with the product. These powerful technologies and our creative minds help us find better ways to communicate effectively with a wide range of audiences.

As we move toward community-generated content and extensible user assistance through Wikis and other technologies, are we working ourselves out of a job? I believe not. This evolution is just the next step in our journey, and with it our role changes in the process. We now move toward helping to shape the content and to focus on accessibility and structure within these information sets. We become the information architects and we will develop ways to make it easier for others to develop standardized community-generated content.

What's Next?

True industry leaders never stop learning. Mentors share their knowledge and experience, and in turn they learn from the fresh perspectives of those they work with. We continue our discussions, share ideas, experiment and try new things, and watch, listen, and learn. From our idea exchanges at conferences and various events, future approaches that more effectively meet the needs of our audiences are born. I hope you will be a part of our future and I look forward to our continuing discussions as we find the next, better way.

This article was originally published in the January/February 2009 issue of the Devil Mountain Views, the East Bay Chapter newsletter. Paul Mueller is president of UserAid and has been involved in technical communication for more than 20 years. He has served as a director and a conference track manager for STC. Paul is also active in his local STC community in Houston and has held various positions in the organization, including president, vice president, director, and strategic advisor. Paul received the Distinguished Chapter Service Award in 2006.

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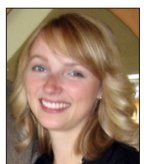
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ABOUT THE SIDEBAR NEWSLETTER



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