In this issue:

The ISTC is the United Kingdom's professional association for technical authors, technical illustrators, and information designers.

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This monthly *Newsletter* is e-mailed to about 1500 people. As well as ISTC news, the *Newsletter* aims to cover anything of interest to the profession. To subscribe, contact the Office.

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Editorial: Newsletter Editor. Letters: Letters Editor.
Events: Events Editor.

If you're reading a printed copy of this newsletter, go to www.istc.org.uk/pages/newsletters.php and open it online to explore the links mentioned.

For all e-mail addresses given in the *Newsletter*, don't forget to remove the **bonus amphibian** before e-mailing.

ISTC news

Article of the Year 2005

Communicator readers will have received Article of the Year ballot papers with the Winter 2005 issue. Please remember to complete and return them by **13 January**. If anyone is attending or organising an event in 2006 at which they could distribute copies of *Communicator*, please contact **Marian Newell** at journal.editor@istc.org.uk.

Subscriptions 2006

Don't forget that all membership subscriptions must be paid by **31 January**.

Keynote speaker sought for Conference 2006

The person that we approached to be our keynote speaker at Conference this year has had to turn us down, so we are now looking for other possible names.

The keynote speaker starts Conference off with a speech of 30–40 minutes after dinner on the first evening. In order to prevent delegates from dozing off from the effects of their dinner, a lively presentation is needed. There is no restriction on being provocative or controversial, and nor is there any restriction on the subject, except that it must have something to do with technical communication.

If you can think of someone who might be willing, please pass on their details by e-mail to conference@istc.org.uk.

No fee is offered, but the keynote speaker can have a free place for the whole of Conference if they want.

British Standards: January order

An order for British Standards will be placed early in January. Although the reason for this order is the updated BS 5261, you can order any standard at a discount (25% for ISTC members and 15% for non-members). For a list of standards related to technical communication, visit www.istc.org.uk/pages/standardstoc.php. To place an order, contact **Marian Newell** at journal.editor@istc.org.uk.

Subscription rates for retired members

Members are allowed a 50% reduction on their subscription fees if they meet the criterion set by Council, which is that they must be of state retirement age – 65 – and able to provide hard evidence of their date of birth in a form such as a copy of their birth certificate. If you think you qualify for this then please contact the Administrator on +44(0) 1733 390141.

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Business Affiliates news

New Grade 1 Business Affiliate

ABLEWISP

We are pleased to welcome Ablewisp as a Business Affiliate.

Ablewisp designs and writes technical documents, and provides compliance engineering and training. It specialises in making sense of complex information and producing clear product documentation, including:

- hardware and software user manuals
- process and procedural handbooks
- installation and service documents
- technical marketing documents
- training guides

Ablewisp's clients range from global corporations to pub game designers.

Stuart Miller of Ablewisp says, "Our unique experience in documentation and compliance ensures that documents we prepare meet the requirements of the relevant CE Marking directives. In addition, our compliance training and support gives companies an understanding of CE Marking and how it affects their products.

"Well written documentation improves the image of a product and its manufacturer. As Business Affiliates, we support the work of the ISTC in promoting professional communicators."

You can find Ablewisp at www.ablewisp.com.

Letters to the Editor

*In a letter published in the December newsletter, **Mike Faircloth** questioned the decision to run the 2006 conference midweek, and **Alan Fisk** responded on the behalf of the ISTC council, stating that the entire membership was canvassed on the subject recently.*

As might have been expected, this elicited the biggest postbag we've had all year!

What Conference questionnaire?

Unfortunately, I have no recollection of receiving a Conference Questionnaire – I'm usually pretty good at completing such questionnaires.

In the newsletter you state that "when the entire membership was canvassed only five percent repsonded".

Perhaps the poor response rate was because many others, like me, were unaware of the poll!

Helen Stirling

Weekends: work or leisure?

I'm writing in response to Mike Faircloth's complaint about the ISTC conference being scheduled on weekdays instead of at a weekend.

I cannot remember if I did actually respond to the poll about conference dates, but I'm certainly in the camp that would vote for weekday conferences, given the chance. I'd better start out by saying that I haven't yet gone to an ISTC conference, despite having been a member since 1979. A large part of the reason for that is simply that I invariably have plenty of other things to do with my weekends. Work is for Mondays to Fridays, but weekends are my time: time for gardening and the allotment, time for walking and bird-watching, time for woodwork and DIY, time for stone carving, mosaics and watercolours; time for theatre and cinema, time to spend with family and friends. Not work.

This is important because I strongly believe that ISTC business is work-related. Weekend conferences are for hobbyists and leisure activities: business conferences take place during the working week. Even if the ISTC conference is on a midweek schedule, I cannot guarantee that I would go, because it would still depend on how busy I was and how much spare cash there was in the business account. However, given the requisite spare time and cash, I would very definitely consider going to one or more days of a weekday ISTC conference, but I cannot envisage a situation in

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which I would be prepared to give up my time to attend a work-related event at a weekend.

As a self-employed freelance writer, I can choose which hours to work, and if a particular ISTC conference included events that I felt were unmissable, I would make every effort to attend, and just make up the hours with some extended evening working. I imagine other freelancers would have similar plans, and so I assume that Mike Faircloth must be an employed author. The thing here is just to educate your manager to appreciate that attending an ISTC conference is adding value to your working contribution. Any manager worthy of the name would surely see that developing skills and awareness of new developments in technical communication would be worth investing the (for businesses) relatively small sums involved (although I appreciate that it is still quite a significant sum, when you have to pay for it yourself). If I was a documentation manager, I think I would be more than happy to budget for at least one of my team of authors to attend the ISTC conference each year, and report back with details of what happened, for the benefit of the whole documentation team.

For me, when the ISTC schedules its conference at a weekend, it seems to be admitting that it shouldn't be seen as a serious, work-related event – more in the line of a bit of R and R for the troops: a fun weekend away from the office. If that's what the members want, then that's fine by me, but I probably wouldn't ever attend. However, when it schedules its conference during the working week, that seems to me to be making a statement that this is a significant business event: if you are serious about technical communication, this is something you don't want to miss. That's the difference, and I, for one, welcome the move to midweek conferences. I may even get round to attending one of these years.

Regards,

Dave Leonard

Pros and cons

While I can appreciate the "suck it and see" principle put forward by Alan there were a couple of ways that could have been tried to canvass opinion first of all:

1. The electronic mailing lists – there are some 300-odd members and a question here might have elicited more response than the membership survey.

2. Asking delegates at the last conference. They had a captive audience and a simple questionnaire, or even a show of hands, would have been an effective straw poll – would have, at least, given an indication if they'd attend a mid-week conference.

As for the change, there are pros and cons.

- If I'm staff and the company are paying then great – it's a win-win situation. Costs nothing and I don't have to give up a weekend. The last time I managed to get the company to pay but they saw it as commitment to training on my part that I was prepared to give up my time. For me, it was a big selling point (for them to pay) that I wouldn't be taking time off work as well.

- If I'm staff and they're not paying then it's lose-lose – out of pocket plus three days' holiday gone and the "is it worth that" scenario starts to creep in.

- If I'm freelance then it's like Mike said – it's costing me money and my weekend or it's costing me much more money and there will always be a cut-off point where it's not worth it. What that point is will probably vary from person to person.

I've already started my pitch for this year but don't know how successful it will be.

As to the point that mid-week will attract more delegates (possibly – we'll know soon enough) and more paying exhibitors (unlikely – what will bring more exhibitors is more delegates, be it at the weekend or mid-week).

So maybe there is a pool of "staffers" out there just rarin' to go to a mid-week conference but will this offset those who can't/won't go mid-week? Only time will tell.

Damien Braniff

And finally...

I am in favour of a midweek conference.

Darren Jones

Language news

Talk cock sing song!

Singlish (Singapore Colloquial English) is a colourful and vibrant slang drawing on English, Malay, Tamil, Cantonese, and other Chinese languages.

The Coxford Singlish Dictionary (http://tinyurl.com/2h75k) can be found at www.talkingcock.com, the local equivalent of *Private Eye*.

Nuuchahnulth dictionary

Nuuchahnulth, a native Canadian language spoken for 5,000 years, now has its first dictionary, *A Concise Dictionary of the Nuuchahnulth Language of Vancouver Island* (http://tinyurl.com/8cdws). Compiled and edited by **John Stonham** of the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, the 537-page dictionary includes 7,000 words with a grammar, glossary, and place names. Also known as Nootka, the language Nuuchahnulth has three basic vowels and 40 consonants. It is perhaps the world's pithiest language; a three-letter word means "wipe the tears from one's eyes with the back of one's hand".

The University news release http://tinyurl.com/7hd2h includes an audio clip and an extract from the dictionary.

To hear more Nuuchahnulth spoken and learn about the culture, go to the Nuuchahnulth home page http://nuuchahnulth.org.

Exclamation marks – doncha luv'em!!!

*In November we reported that communications company ampers@ (www.wherewordswork.com) has been revising and updating BAA's style guide, and gave its views on the use of semicolons. Now it's the turn of the exclamation mark. Thanks to ampers@'s **Alan Paterson** for the following report.*

The poor old exclamation mark seems to be a bit "Billy No Mates", as young Jamie might put it. Certainly the old BAA style guide we were updating was unequivocal: "Do not use! It looks like you are shouting." The BBC's digital guide was hardly more enthusiastic: "Exclamation marks should not be used for emphasis or to 'strengthen' jokes – they are meaningless". Shouting? Meaningless? Ouch!

Visualfiles (Leeds based)

Visualfiles has earned the reputation as the market leader in Case & Matter Management and has a client base of over 500, with a total of 20,000 users.

Working in the Development department to help design, develop and maintain comprehensive help systems for the Visualfiles product range: SolCase, Visualfiles and Manila (.NET product), and to compile and distribute internal and external release notes, as and when required.

Key tasks

- Use Robohelp HTML to redevelop and maintain the help system for SolCase V7, SolCase OnLine, Visualfiles, Browser and Manila (.NET product)
- Develop and maintain help systems for Visualfiles' other products
- After each release of software, compile comprehensive release notes for distribution internally, via the intranet and externally
- After each release of software, review the appropriate help system to ensure that the content is up to date, relevant and accurate
- Ensure that relevant personnel have up to date versions of the help systems for installation and updating client systems: support, installation team and consultants

Visit www.visualfiles.com for details.

Why do people dislike the exclamation mark so much? Simply, we suspect, because it is overused, and indiscriminately at that. Exclamation marks make writing look more exciting! More lively! More fun! And if you want to heighten the effect, why, just use three!!! A half-bright teenager could do it. Which is no doubt why many who do end up looking like half-bright teenagers, and why so many corporate guides, erring very sensibly on the side of caution, advise against doing it at all.

One thing is for sure: better to avoid it altogether than to use it badly. But that doesn't mean it can't be used properly. We use exclamation marks – occasionally. Sometimes for emphasis, BBC misgivings notwithstanding. If something is genuinely exciting and you want to drive the point home, an exclamation mark might be just the job. The fact that it's so often used in an attempt to inject life into the mediocre doesn't mean it has no place marking out the genuinely distinctive.

It can also be used for humour, to signal ironic intent, to "take the hex off'" something that might otherwise cause offence. It can be a way of ending a potentially risky sentence with a clear sign not to take offence (or think I'm fool enough to be in deadly earnest about this). Would the conclusion of the first paragraph of this piece have been better with a full stop?

Ultimately, as BAA endorsed for their updated guide, rather than an outright ban: "Use very sparingly, only when genuinely called for, and never more than one".

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Industry news

Edissero

One of the better-kept secrets of the past two years has been recruitment agency Edissero. The agency specialises in supplying technical authors, documentation managers and other information development staff. Those who remember TMS in its heyday will already know two of its principals: **Debby McKenna** and **Louise Taylor**. You probably haven't heard of the agency because it has been concentrating on its established customers up till now, but it hopes to raise its profile in 2006. You can find the agency at www.edissero.com/.

Happy birthday to AuthorIT

AuthorIT is about to celebrate its tenth anniversary in 2006, after a record year of sales.

To mark its anniversary, AuthorIT has announced that it has five new product releases scheduled. A "sneak preview" of the first new product to be released in 2006 is available at www.authorit.com/ftp/public/awmtvad.wmv.

TechScribe helps technical experts

TechScribe is helping a leading-edge software company to provide clear guidance for its customers.

"Scitech develops the market-leading EnABLET statistical software that speeds up the planning of oil and gas field developments and chooses optimum plans such as the best place and time to drill wells," says **Neil Dunlop**, Director of software and consulting house Scitech (www.enscitech.com). "It's used around the globe by many major oil companies. We invited **Mike Unwalla** to our European User Group meeting, to explain how he's improving the current user manual."

"My role is to collect all the information and opinions that the Scitech team provides, and then resolve any conflicts. Scitech people then review this, and ensure that the product really does what the user guide says. They also clarify any remaining conflicts. It's the hardest project I've ever worked on!" says Mike.

Ceri Lloyd, Coordinator of the User Group, says, "Mike was given the task of producing clear documentation. His questions forced us into clarifying matters for our new users. This is just what we wanted."

"It was a great privilege to be invited to the User Group meeting. Learning directly from users about the problems that they face when using software and documentation will ensure that users get the type of documentation that they need," says Mike.

Standards news

Major IT service management standard goes international

BS ISO/IEC 20000:2005 is the new standard for IT service management and replaces BS 15000. BS ISO/IEC 20000:2005 promotes the adoption of an integrated process approach to deliver effectively managed IT services to meet business and customer requirements. The standard aims to meet the needs of the wider international audience and to provide a common understanding of the management of IT services worldwide.

The BS ISO/IEC 20000 series provides industry standard criteria that enable organisations to benchmark their capability in delivering managed services, measuring service levels and assessing performance. See www.bsi-global.com/IT for more details.

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Awards news

2006 Gold Quill Awards call for entries

The International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) is now accepting entries for the 2006 Gold Quill Awards. Sponsored by Towers Perrin, this year's Gold Quill Awards programme continues the association's 35-year tradition of rigorously testing the work of communicators and recognising excellence in business communication. The early bird deadline is **2 February 2006** and the final deadline is **9 February 2006**.

Each year the Gold Quill Awards competition attracts more than 1,000 entries from IABC members and non-members in over 25 countries. The programme crosses communication disciplines and reviews entries from professional communicators ranging from strategists to tacticians.

Some of the award categories that showcase writing include:

- *Writing* – Original material written for a particular communication project. This includes technical writing, writing for online distribution, advertorials, news releases, interpretive or expository articles, etc.
- *Publication Design* – Design of internal or external publications in all formats, except electronic. This includes magazines, newspapers, brochures, leaflets, tabloids, newsletters and annual reports.
- *Publications* – Production of internal or external publications in all formats, except electronic. This includes magazines, newspapers, tabloids, newsletters and annual reports.
- *Electronic and Digital Communication* – Computer-based communication projects produced for internal or external audiences that primarily use electronic production and/or delivery tools. This includes blogs, wikis, electronic newsletters, internet sites, intranet sites and electronic annual reports.
- I*nternational Communications* – Programmes targeted at international audiences, including multinational consumers and international organisations.
- *Multilingual Communications* – Programmes targeted at bilingual and/or multilingual audiences, including non-native language.
- *Multi-Audience Communication* – Programmes targeted at more than one internal and/or external audience.

For the complete list of categories and to access the Gold Quill Awards call for entries, visit www.iabc.com/awards/gq.

Manufacturing Excellence Awards 2006

For a quarter of a century, the Manufacturing Excellence Awards have been acknowledged as rewarding excellence and best practice in UK manufacturing.

MX2006 has now been launched and entry forms are being accepted.

See www.MX2006.org.uk for further information and details of how to enter.

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Software news

New Google extensions for Firefox

Google has released beta versions of two new extensions for Firefox 1.5.

Blogger Web Comments enables you to see what bloggers are saying about a page you're viewing and also make your own blog post about it, all without leaving the page you're viewing. See http://tinyurl.com/9vz9q.

Google Safe Browsing alerts you if a web page that you visit appears to be asking for your personal or financial information under false pretences. At present, only the US version is available.

Escape from e-mail hell

Overwhelmed by e-mails – particularly after the Christmas break? A new free download from Microsoft might help. SNARF, the Social Network and Relationship Finder, is based on the idea that social network information can help the user: a message from a manager might be more important than a message from a stranger, for example.

SNARF triages the senders of the e-mail you receive and displays them in a tri-paned window. People are ranked by the frequency of the correspondence.

Another feature is the Thread View, which shows all messages in an e-mail conversational thread in chronological order, and placed in a tree to show the conversational structure. Only the new text of each message is shown, to avoid repetition.

At present, SNARF works only with Outlook 2002 and 2003. For more information and the download, go to http://research.microsoft.com/community/snarf/.

Training courses

Listings are restricted to scheduled courses that are low cost or are in some way unusual. Listings are a service to members. A listing does not imply ISTC endorsement.

If you hear of any training courses that you think might be of interest to *Newsletter* readers, please contact the Newsletter Editor.

Course providers

Regular course providers include:

Society for Editors and Proofreaders. Contact details vary from course to course. See the programme on their website at www.sfep.org.uk/pages/training.asp.

Society of Indexers. For more information or to book an in-house workshop, telephone 0114 292 2350 or e-mail admin@indexers.org.uk, or visit the website at www.indexers.org.uk/trquals/workshop.htm.

Courses

January

11 *Proofreading for editors*. London, Publishing Training Centre. £329 + VAT. www.train4publishing.co.uk/.

27 *Assessing digital images*. Learn how to spot-check digital images in Photoshop to assess their quality before sending them to repro. London, Imago Publishing. £195 + VAT for half day. www.imago.co.uk/training/assessing%20digital%20images.pdf.

31 *Editing in Word*. London, Publishing Training Centre. £329 + VAT. www.train4publishing.co.uk/.

February

9 *Indexing: Getting to grips with the text*. Get help with the most challenging aspect of indexing – identifying the indexable elements. London, Society of Indexers. £120 for non-members. www.indexers.org.uk/workshops/9-2-2006.pdf.

9 *Fast reading*. As a working professional you probably use several reading strategies for different kinds of task. By matching technique to task you can read much faster and with better understanding and recall of the content. London, Popcomm. £445 + VAT. www.popcomm.co.uk/courses/writingediting/fastreading.htm.

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Events

These pages introduce new listings and include reminders of the most relevant events in the next two months. ISTC events are listed in bold.

For a more extensive list, see the ISTC website at www.istc.org.uk/pages/conferencetoc.php. To include an event in the listings, please e-mail events@istc.org.uk.

January

11   *Sign Design Society talk: Researching a font for BAA airport signs*. A talk by **Rob Waller**, Head of Information Design at Enterprise IG. BAA's black on yellow signs are a familiar sight to air travellers in the UK, but the seriffed font they use is relatively uncommon at airports, or in signs generally. With Terminal 5 at Heathrow approaching rapidly, BAA wanted to review the principles of the signing system so commissioned Enterprise IG to undertake a technical evaluation, with special emphasis on the font. Enterprise IG combined three methodologies: legibility testing, a customer survey looking at connotations and preferences, and an expert review. This presentation will share the outcome of the research, and will reflect on testing methodologies. www.signdesignsociety.co.uk/

11–14   *Bett 2006 Education Technology Show*. Olympia, London. www.bettshow.co.uk/

11–13   *Technical writing for the pharmaceutical, medical device, and biotech industries*. Malvern, PA, USA. www.globalregulatorypress.com/?features/events_calendar

February

7–11   *Screen Expo Europe*. This new digital media networks and digital signage event will provide the industry with a forum to gather and display the latest technology and content in this rapidly growing sector. Targeted at retail, leisure, hospitality, transport, public access areas, local government, education and commercial property, the event will also contain a full conference plus workshop and seminar activity. Screen Expo will also launch the first edition of *Screen Media Magazine*, a new, dedicated and highly targeted magazine for the industry. The organisers expect more than 2000 visitors to the show, which is fully supported by The Screen Forum (www.thescreen.org), the BCMA (www.thebcma.info) and the IPA (www.ipa.co.uk). Earls Court 2, London.

March

19–20   *TCeurope AGM and 6th European Colloquium for user-friendly product information*. Brussels, Belgium. www.tceurope.org/upcoming_events/upcomingevents.htm

23–27   *IA Summit 2006: Learning, Doing Selling*. The 2006 Information Architecture (IA) Summit is the premier gathering place for information architects. Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. www.iasummit.org/2006/

Volunteer required to compile Events lists

The current Events list compiler is standing down due to domestic commitments. We are therefore looking for a volunteer to take over this role.

The job consists of summarising relevant events for the Events calendar in the monthly *Newsletter*, plus (when appropriate) longer sections on more interesting events or ones we've been asked to publicise.

In addition to the *Newsletter* Events list, there is the Events page of the website to maintain. Ideally this should be done monthly, but updates up until now have been less frequent.

For further information or to volunteer, please contact events@istc.org.uk.

The back page

A hit on stage for Ron Blicq

ISTC Fellow **Ron Blicq**'s latest play, *Closure*, which had won an Honourable Mention in Queen's University's 2005 Herman Voaden National Playwriting Competition, was successfully produced in October in Ron's native Guernsey.

Closure concerns a wartime flyer in the Royal Canadian Air Force who is contacted in the present day on behalf of a son whom he never knew he had. (Although Ron flew in the RCAF in the Second World War as a navigator on the Mosquito aircraft, he absolutely denies that there is any autobiographical element!) The father makes it clear that he wants no contact with this surprise son, but his journalist granddaughter is not prepared to accept this, and applies her investigative skills to track down her elusive grandfather.

For more details, see www.bbc.co.uk/guernsey/content/articles/2005/10/26/closure_feature.shtml.

Court victory against spammer

"When our clients give us 4oz flour, 2oz butter, some yeast, water and of course a pinch of salt. We add a few secret ingredients to produce the glossy, soft, mouth-watering loaf that exceeds all expectations.

"This is at the heart of what we do. Then we present it with silver service to the gathered audience and once they have tasted the sweet and delectable flavour – we take their order."

So gushes the mission statement of Media Logistics (UK), an "electronic direct marketing" company based in Falkirk.

One member of the audience who found the bread distinctly unpalatable was **Nigel Roberts**. Repeatedly spammed by Media Logistics (UK), he sought damages under Regulation 30 of The Privacy and Electronic Communications (EC Directive) Regulations 2003. He also asked under the Data Protection Act for details of the data that the company had obtained and stored about him and who had supplied them with his e-mail address.

Getting no reply, Nigel pursued his case at Colchester small claims court and was awarded £270 damages and £30 costs. His victory is believed to be the first of its kind. Legal experts think that higher courts would award larger sums.

Nigel has had another kind of victory. A search on the company's name showed that nearly all the top results are articles about the court case.

"Alan Fisk? I'm surprised you've never met him"

ISTC Council member **Alan Fisk** finds himself trapped in a world of fiction at the mercy of a cruel master. Alan Fisk is a major, but unfortunate, character in *At Fault* by **Angus MacDonald**. It begins mundanely enough for him, Chapter 2 opening with, "Alan Fisk cautiously opened his front door..." But soon, he's feeling "a twinge of panic" no doubt the cause of "his backside beginning to sag a bit" and the first of many "tears streaming down his face".

Before long, "Fisk's shoulders felt like they were being seared with a hot poker."

Recurrent dread is Alan's lot: first "Fisk's body shook with fear" and later "Fisk's jaw was twitching in fear". And back comes the pain. "Fisk ... slumped in agony from the searing pain shooting down his left neck muscle and into his shoulder."

If that's whetted your appetite, you can find out more about the book at http://tinyurl.com/e2sva.

Could the character be based on the real-life Alan? Here's an extract from page 126: "Documentation? Fisk's moment of elation turned to dread. ... 'There is no documentation,' he said."

Alan is himself a novelist: his books include *The Strange Things of the World*, *The Summer Stars*, *Forty Testoons*, *Lord of Silver*, and *Cupid and the Silent Goddess*. Rumours abound that his next work features a series of mishaps befalling a character called Angus MacDonald.