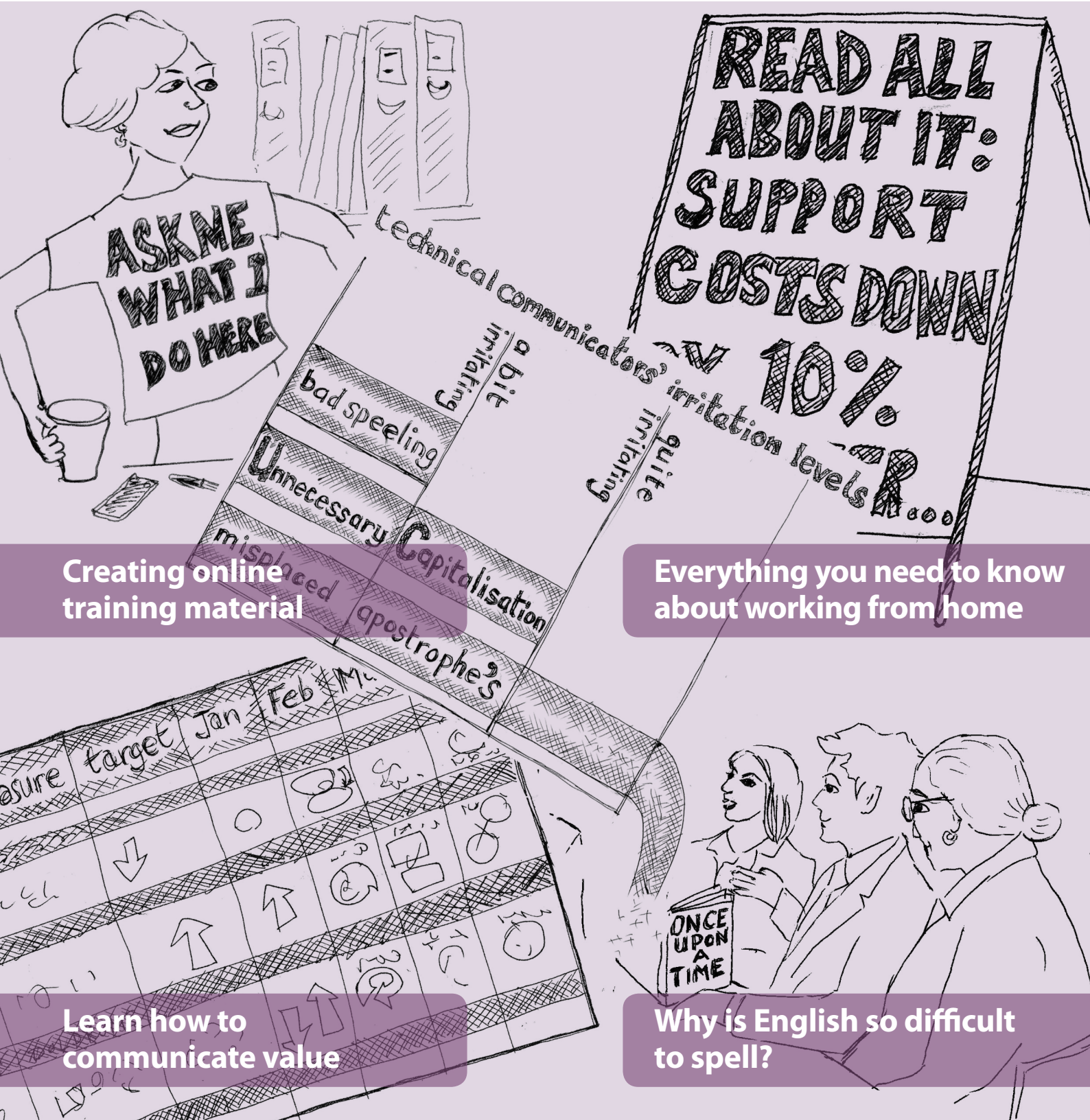


Communicator

The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators
Autumn 2013



Creating online training material

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Adrian Morse describes a day at Picis

My day starts with a 30-second commute from kitchen to study!

I have been working from home for seven years now. Picis, the company I work for, is based in Boston (USA) and before moving to Bristol I spent 10 years in its Barcelona branch.

I scan my inbox for anything that needs an urgent reply. Nothing today, so I get the housekeeping activities out of the way. I review and approve the timesheets for the technical communicators who report to me from various offices in Spain and the USA. Then I submit my own timesheet.

Now the fun starts. One of the authors has spotted a spacing issue with our MadCap Flare templates. The nerd within me leaps out. It's technical stuff like this that I enjoy most about the job and I like to sort out infrastructure issues as soon as possible before they balloon into bigger issues. I correct the page layout and stylesheet and then check to see if the same issue is present in our FrameMaker and Word templates. It's not, so I upload the updated Flare templates to our shared "external resource" folder. The updates are automatically pulled in to everyone's Flare projects and the world can go on turning.

On to the nuts and bolts of my job. Managerial duties take up about 15% of my days, leaving me plenty of time to get my hands dirty with writing. I have about 20 deliverables on my plate per release: PDFs, Webhelp and HTML Help. Today I need to get a user guide out of the door for review and

it just needs one more screenshot. My company produces medical software for hospitals. Installing the software is a far from trivial task: it requires upgrades to the database, server and clients as well as configuration of linked hospital interfaces. This can take months. To mitigate this, the developers have created a virtual environment that they update with each build and that's what I need to use for the screenshot. I start the VPN connection to the Boston server and then connect to the virtual client machine via Remote Desktop. I get my screenshot and then close the connection. I generate the user guide in PDF format using MadCap Flare and then initiate a shared review using Acrobat. Within minutes I see a comment appear in the PDF from a software quality reviewer in Boston. But hang on, it's only 6:30 am there, what on Earth are they playing at? Then I recall that like many of my US colleagues this one likes to reply to emails from home before heading to the office. A degree of sanity is restored.

As the Americans come online, the email bombardment begins. I go for lunch.

The kitchen is not the sanctuary I thought it was going to be. My four year old boy is playing the "I'm not eating anything until Daddy tells a story" game. I comply with my parental obligations, but on my way back to the study I can't resist a glance at the calendar to see how many days are left till he starts school. Now I feel guilty and must purge my soul with some effort estimations that I have been asked to provide to project management. This is hands down the worst part of the job. If each of my daily tasks were a Harry Potter class this one would be the Dark Arts. No matter which system we use the "guestimates" always seem to lie somewhere between using a crystal ball and flipping a coin. I give it my best shot and click Send. At the end of the day it seems more about being able to justify the reasoning behind the estimates rather than the numbers themselves.

A pop-up window reminds me of an inter-office requirements meeting for a new project. I phone in to the conference line early so I can have a quick chat in Spanish with my colleagues and friends in the Barcelona

office. The Americans join the call and the conversation switches to English. We discuss some changes proposed to a window in our product. I attend these meetings as much a receiver of information as an unofficial usability advisor. This time I point out an inconsistency with another of our products. I find that with agile development the scrum teams sometimes don't see the wood for the trees and that's where technical communicators, as custodians of cross-product knowledge, are on hand to help out.

It's crept up to 6:00 pm and the bulk of my work is done. I turn off my PC and return to family life. However, it is only 1:00 pm in Boston, so I check my emails before going to bed. No fires to fight tonight so I can sleep like a baby and dream of what the next day might bring. **C**

Dr Adrian Morse MISTC is Documentation Manager at Picis, a US-based provider of Healthcare software. Adrian has a scientific background (he holds a PhD in Physics) and became a technical communicator in 1997. He is an advanced user of Flare and FrameMaker.

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