



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

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ISTC news

Technical Communication UK 2011 report

From Rachel Potts, ISTC Marketing and Community Manager team

Technical Communication UK was last week, and from all the feedback we've received so far it was a huge success. The ISTC launched this annual conference in 2009, and this third event was even bigger and better than the previous two. Over three days, more than 200 people came from as far away as Australia and Canada – as well as from just a few miles away – to take part in 6 workshops and 33 presentations, presented by 44 different speakers.

The event was supported by 18 sponsors (we had to turn others away, because we ran out of space). On top of this, there were fringe events organised by delegates and sponsors – a salsa class, early-morning running, beer and cake from Adobe, a gathering of Author-it enthusiasts We even had a film premiere – the launch

of a subtitled version of 'Appuyez sur le bouton' – a documentary about our relationships with instruction manuals, with subtitling enabled through the combined support of the ISTC and Information Design Association.

For those of you that didn't attend, you can still hear about some of the conference themes: some of the delegates have already written blogs about the event (see the Blog news); others are still working on reviews that will be published here in *InfoPlus⁺* soon.

You can see the slides for some of the presentations here: <http://t.co/HWYU3Sg2>, and we'll also be publishing videos of some of the sessions in the upcoming months too.

Finally, if you're based in the North West of England, there's an opportunity to hear more at the upcoming area group event in Manchester on October 6 <http://bit.ly/robSCz>.

For some of the conference team, this year's event was an emotional occasion. For Paul Ballard and myself, this is the last

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time we'll be directly involved in organising and running Technical Communication UK – we're both stepping down from the team to focus our energies on other ISTC projects. We're proud of what we've achieved in three years, but we both believe that the event will suffer in the long term if we don't make space for a new team, with new ideas, to take over. David Farbey has gamely stepped forward to lead the conference team next year, and we have confidence that he'll put together an excellent event. To quote one of our delegates on twitter: 'tcuk11 just

finished, and already I'm looking forward to tcuk12'.

Horace Hockley Award winner 2011 – Tony Self

From Paul Ballard, ISTC President

Each year the Council of the ISTC invites nominations for the [Horace Hockley Award](#), and selects a winner. The award recognises someone who has made a considerable contribution to the profession over a long period of time.

Tony Self, who is based in Australia, was unable to attend the Technical Communication UK conference to receive his award in person, but he sent a video of his acceptance speech and you can [watch that on his website here](#).

'I was surprised and very thrilled to learn I was the recipient of this year's Horace Hockley award, and so I would like to thank everybody very much for bestowing this honour upon me.'

Tony started as a technical writer in 1979 writing aircraft manuals, and as a young man interested in airplanes this was a dream

job. In those days he used pens and pencils because the typesetters and typists were those responsible for keyboard tasks.

While still at the aircraft manufacturer, he became interested in Computer Aided Design, and then later on when he was writing banking documentation, he got involved with Computer Based Training and hypertext.

In 1993, he co-founded Hyperwrite and still works through that company now as a consultant and trainer. He has always been drawn to working with emerging technologies, which today is less and less about help text and more and more about implementing DITA and XML database documentation solutions.

He has worked all over the world, established the Australasian Online Documentation Conference in 1998, and has been a regular lecturer at the Swinburne University's postgraduate programme in technical

communication.

Most recently, he has been involved with the OASIS DITA Technical Committee and chairs the Help sub-committee.

'I've had, so far, a very interesting and

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rewarding career. Technical communication has given me the opportunities to travel; opportunities to work on really interesting projects; opportunities to make friends: different people all round the world. I hope for all of you that technical communication is, likewise, a rewarding profession and one that is intellectually stimulating, and one that makes you feel good about yourself!

UK Technical Communication Award Winner

From Emma Bayne

The ISTC announced the UK Technical Communication Award winner at its annual conference. The overall winner was Alison Peck from Clearly Stated, collecting an award in the Instructional Class for Guide to ROSEGold.

The UK Technical Communication Award was sponsored by Doc-To-Help, with the presentation taking place at the Gala Dinner on 21 September 2011.

Hyperlinks disclaimer

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ISTC local area group news

When Psychology Met User Experience: A report from the ISTC NW meeting

By Richard Pineger

One of the largest gatherings yet, in addition to the tech communicators, the title of Christine's presentation drew in members of the Manchester digital fraternity and the BBC.

In a relaxed and chatty manner, Christine fascinated us with witty insights into her transition from the world of academia to the cutting edge of user experience (UX) at Skype. On the way, she asked us to define psychology and helped us understand change-blindness and mental models. We finished off with a discussion of ways to automate and gather statistics from the

written feedback of 900M users – not easy – which led on to discussions of semantic architectures, wordle.net, markov chains, emotional parsing, and 'people browser' software utilising social intelligence.

No wonder then that at 2100 hours we adjourned to the Marble Pub for a pint of well-earned real ale. Thanks all for coming, thanks to MadLab for providing an excellent venue, and thanks Christine for inspiring us yet again!



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ISTC Affiliate news

New business affiliate: On Target Communications

OnTarget Communications provides content management services to organisations in the hi-tech, telecommunications, engineering, avionics, insurance, military, banking and other fields.



Its services include:

- Technical authoring and documentation services
- Translations and localisation services
- Placement services (contract and permanent)
- Technical author apprenticeship programme (new in the UK)
- Training and project management services

Its authors have expertise in creating and editing technical documentation, interface documentation, training materials and courseware, programming documentation,

online help, bid responses, marketing communications (MarCom) material, graphics etc.

On Target's four-month technical author apprenticeship programme is a work-based programme aimed at developing your skills in technical writing whilst gaining invaluable experience at the same time.

Clients include Hewlett Packard®, NICE Systems and NICE Actimize, Check Point, Verint® Systems, Inc., Microsoft Corporation, SanDisk, RADVISION® and many other international companies.

OnTarget is committed to working with you to create business value. We also understand your need to provide quality documentation to your clients. To explore how OnTarget Communications can assist you in finding a solution for your documentation needs please contact us. If you are looking for an opportunity to work abroad in exotic EMEA locations, just email us your resume. If there is a suitable vacancy that fulfils your requirements we will contact you to discuss the opportunities.

For more information, visit:

www.otclih.co.uk.

Industry news

A triumph for team indexing: 2011 Wheatley Medal

At the Society of Indexers annual conference at Keele University, the Society's President, Professor John Sutherland, presented the Wheatley Medal for 2011 to a team of indexers from the Netherlands, Caroline Diepeveen, Pierke Bosschieter and Jacqueline Pitchford-Belder, for their work on the index to The Encyclopaedia of Jews in the Islamic World (edited by N. Stillman and published by Brill in 2010).

According to the chair of the judging panel, Professor Cathy Shrank of Sheffield University, this was an exceptional index and a most deserving winner. 'The size of the task (indexing a five-volume work) was immense in itself, and indexing an encyclopaedia (which is itself a kind of index) requires something different from indexing other works. In this case, this difficult task was accomplished with scholarly authority.'

The judges also noted the excellent use of reader-friendly devices, the consistent practice of translating foreign language terms to make the text accessible to a less

specialist audience, the attractive lay-out, which was also easy on the eye, and the adroit use of double-postings. They singled out the scrupulous editing for particular praise. 'None of us found any clues to the fact that this index was compiled by a team. The overall editing [by Caroline Diepeveen] to combine three people's work must have been very thoroughly done. This is no mean feat in an index of this size. In short, the panel was deeply impressed.'

Joan Dearnley was highly commended for her index to *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and the Arts* (edited by M. Humm and published by Edinburgh University Press in 2010). The judges felt that she had risen ably to the various challenges it posed: a work focused on one person, requiring careful thought on how to break down the subject into multi-faceted categories; a multi-authored volume whose contributors had different styles and often used different terms; and, most significantly, a text dealing predominantly with abstract concepts.

'The index for this Companion more than met these challenges,' said Cathy. 'The indexer showed a remarkable ability for analysing the text, and produced an index which was responsive to, and usefully

reflected, the main subject of the book. This was a considerable accomplishment.'

Finally, Barbara Hird was commended her indexes to the *New Cambridge History of Islam*, vol. 1 (edited by C. F. Robinson) and vol. 4 (edited by R. Irwin, both published by Cambridge University Press in 2010). These indexes were submitted as separate entries; the panel – unaware that they were by the same person – found it impossible to judge between them. 'It was with some relief that we discovered that we could roll them together,' said Cathy. The indexing task for both these volumes was complex, owing to their size and detail. 'The indexes showed scholarship, and were comprehensive, clear, and helpful, with the glossing of foreign terms well-placed to aid the less-specialist reader. The indexer also dealt admirably with the challenge of transliteration and diacritics. This was exemplary, meticulous work.'

Overall the judges felt there was a very strong field this year, and extend their thanks to all the publishers and indexers who had submitted work. However, sadly, there was not a single scientific or medical work amongst the eighteen entries.

About the Wheatley Medal and the Society of Indexers

The Wheatley Medal was established in 1961 by the then Library Association and the Society of Indexers to recognize and encourage excellence in indexing. The panel of judges includes representatives from the Society, from the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) and from the academic community. Further information and a list of past winners is available on the Society of Indexers website (www.indexers.org.uk).

The Society of Indexers was established in 1957 and is the only professional association of indexers in the UK. It aims to promote indexing, the quality of indexes and the profession of indexing. In addition to its well-respected online distance-learning course, it runs a programme of workshops at various venues throughout the UK, and publishes a quarterly journal (*The Indexer*) and a series of occasional papers on specialized aspects of indexing. Publishers and others searching for an indexer need look no further than the Society's directory of Indexers Available, online at www.indexers.org.uk, where they will also find considerable advice on commissioning indexes.

For further information, visit:
www.indexers.org.uk.

Book review

Five Steps to MadCap Flare in 2011

Reviewed by Alison Turner MISTC July 2011

In summer 2010 The Communicator carried a review by Ed Clayton of the book Five Steps to MadCap Flare by Lorraine Kupka and Joy Underhill. It was at that time I chose Flare version 6 as the main authoring tool for a small telecoms company I was joining. I read the review with interest, but at that time the book dealt with Flare version 4.2.

There are two phrases which crop up frequently wherever Flare is discussed. The first is 'steep learning curve' and the second is 'very responsive to user feedback' – these two interact. Flare moved to version 7 in March 2011 and to version 7.1 last month. So any book which aims to help you up the steep learning curve has to be updated frequently to keep pace with the software developers.

Five Steps to MadCap Flare seems to be the only book out there which assumes its readers are not only new to Flare but new

to topic-based authoring. In this way the book finds a niche which is distinct from the extensive help system and documentation available with the product.

Five Steps to MadCap Flare was comprehensively updated last summer to



deal with Flare versions 5 and 6. It no longer bothers with differences between pre- and post-version 4 implementations, which Ed Clayton found distracting, but otherwise his review is still valid. The book is a well-structured alternative to an initial training course. It can help you with that very first document, providing tips and best practice from people who know the pitfalls. (Though I might quibble

that one or two of the best practices, such as altering the double-click behaviour of the table of contents window, are not so much best practice as the authors' preference.)

I was surprised by some omissions, in particular Global Project Linking, which is a great strength of Flare, but I appreciate a line has to be drawn somewhere to avoid overwhelming new users. Reference material of longer term value is generally in the tables. My favourite table was one which set out all of the options for 'creating links'. Another dealt with 'index formatting', which is one of those tasks that needs to be done a few times before the steps sink in.

The Five Steps to MadCap Flare V7 Supplement which comes with the main guide was disappointing. The strength of Five Steps to MadCap Flare lies in its logical structure. It chooses just the essentials and leads you through each feature only when it needs considering. So I really wanted the supplement to tell me: 'If you are working through Step 5A of the guide you will find x a little different in version 7'.

The introduction gave me a sinking feeling when, hot on the heels of the warning it was not comprehensive, the authors added: 'This supplement lists features alphabetically, not by their importance or location in Five Steps to MadCap Flare.' MadCap are perfectly

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good at describing their new software features in isolation from one another, so the supplement added nothing. Sorting the sections of this supplement to follow the steps in the main guide would have made it so much more useful. As it stands the supplement does no more than show that the authors are aware of (nearly) the latest version of Flare and have content ready for the next update.

On balance this well-structured workbook continues to be ideal for those new to Flare and authoring tools. You should work systematically through all five steps, preferably in your first week using the tool. In the areas that 'Five Steps to MadCap Flare' discusses, version 7 is not so different from version 6. That said I would still recommend the book to users of Flare version 7 or 7.1, but would suggest the supplement is best left on one side – until you find something in one of the exercises is not behaving as you were led to expect.

Given the rapid update cycle at MadCap, perhaps the authors are waiting for version 8 before they bring the whole guide up to date again. The niche for this book is still there as Flare grows up.

Blog news

Post conference blues

By Gordon McLean MISTC

Back home after the Technical Communications Conference, and my head is still buzzing with thoughts, ideas, and revelations (if you only attend one conference next year, I strongly urge you to make it TCUK12).

Thankfully, as ever, various bloggers were in attendance, most notably Colum McAndrew who wrote up his notes and thoughts from the sessions he attended in [Day One](#), [Day Two](#), and [Day Three](#). Elsewhere, your best source of tidbits is the [Twitter hashtag #TCUK11](#), and some of the recorded sessions will be available [on the conference website](#) soon.

As well as presenting at the conference, David Farbey also posted the third part in his series 'Myths About Content', [Content is Easy to Find](#) in which he reminds us that 'Arranging and categorising information in a way that suits you is absolutely fine as long as all the people looking for that information are guaranteed to be exact clones of you in their experience, their attitudes and their intuition, which is unlikely.'

Quick links to the bloggers and their posts:

Colum McAndrew:

www.cmcandrew.com/robocolumn/archives/2708

www.cmcandrew.com/robocolumn/archives/2715

www.cmcandrew.com/robocolumn/archives/2726

Twitter #TCUK11:

<https://twitter.com/#!/search/TCUK11>

Conference website:

www.technicalcommunicationuk.com/

David Farbey:

www.farbey.co.uk/index.php/2011/09/another-myth-about-content/

Joshua Porter:

<http://bokardo.com/archives/interface-design-is-copywriting/>

Jared M. Spool:

www.uie.com/articles/persona_value_suck

Rhonda Bracey:

<http://cybertext.wordpress.com/2011/09/12/word-custom-headers-and-footers-the-easy-way/>

Zombie Ipsum:

www.zombieipsum.com/

Looking outside of technical writing often brings an interesting insight to areas in which many of us are involved. In his post [Interface Design is Copywriting](#), Joshua Porter states that ‘Designing an interface is largely an exercise in choosing the right words. When you lay out a page, you’re choosing copy for the headline, sub-headline, call-to-action, content area, graphs and analysis areas, error messages. All of these design elements are built out of words.’

Those of you with a passing interest in Usability will have heard of Jared M. Spool. He recently wrote about the use of personas, highlighting [5 Ways To Suck Value Away From Your Persona Projects](#). Personas are useful in many areas of a project, particularly technical writing ‘The best designs come from everyone on the team having a deep understanding of what it’s like to be a user. When they all share that same understanding, it’s easy to create designs that meet the users’ needs. ... A well-executed persona project captures your research, encapsulates your design requirements, and helps you prioritize your innovative ideas and insights.’

And finally a couple of quick links. Firstly, the ever helpful and wonderful Rhonda Bracey helps Word users understand [How](#)

[to create Custom headers and footers](#), and with Halloween approaching what better way to generate temporary filler content than [Zombie Ipsum](#), ‘Zombie ipsum reversus ab viral inferno, nam rick grimes malum cerebro.’

As ever, if you know of a blog that you think others would be interested in, please get in touch at blogs@istc.org.uk.

A technical writer for almost 17 years, Gordon has been blogging for almost 10 of those. He monitors a large breadth of blogs covering most aspects of technical communications. You can download the full list of RSS feeds from his blog at www.onemanwrites.co.uk.

John Seamon's Charity Motorbike Ride Blog

Technical communicator John Seaman is maintaining a blog of his forthcoming charity motorbike ride. As soon as he’s sufficiently recovered from cancer treatment, he’ll be riding the length of the country and visiting some of the less-loved, more out-of-the way corners of our country. He’ll be posting pictures and an odd fact or two about them too. Please show your support. Visit <http://bigrideforcancerresearch.blogspot.com/> perhaps it will inspire you to contribute a quid or two to Cancer Research UK.

Training courses

October

- 3 Introduction to technical authoring**
Short course for new technical authors and people in other roles who need to carry out technical authoring work. Covers audience analysis, structuring and designing documents, writing in plain English, punctuation and grammar, designing an effective layout, reviewing and proofreading.
- 10% discount for ISTC members.
- Armada, Bromsgrove, Midlands.
www.armada.co.uk/technical-author-training-course/.

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 *InfoPlus*⁺ readers, please contact the Newsletter copyeditor at newsletter.editor@istc.org.uk.

If you would like to promote your course or event to ISTC members, why not consider giving ISTC members a discount for courses and events listed in our newsletter. For more information, please email istc@istc.org.uk.

...October

- 4-5 Intermediate technical authoring**
Building on basic course, teaching key issues that define high quality technical authoring. Learn to use a detailed end-to-end writing process to design, draft, and improve technical documents, developing critical skills, create more effective technical documents, and present a consistent and homogenous document set to the users.
10% discount for ISTC members.
Armada, Bromsgrove, Midlands.
www.armada.co.uk/technical-author-training-course/.
- 6-7 Advanced technical authoring**
Intensive course for career technical authors who want to improve their skill set and the quality and effectiveness of the documentation they produce.
10% discount for ISTC members.
Armada, Bromsgrove, Midlands.
www.armada.co.uk/technical-author-training-course/.

- 13-14 Website creation essentials with Adobe Dreamweaver**
Course for new or novice website designers, and anyone who is responsible for creating or updating web pages. Teaches how to design, develop and maintain a professional website using Dreamweaver. During the course, delegates create a fully functioning website.
10% discount for ISTC members.
Armada, Bromsgrove, Midlands.
www.armada.co.uk/dreamweaver-training-course/.

- 17-18 Basic and Intermediate Adobe RoboHelp**
Course for beginners, teaches how to use RoboHelp to create online help in most popular formats, and produce hard copy guides in Word format from the same project.
10% discount for ISTC members.
Armada, Bromsgrove, Midlands.
www.armada.co.uk/robohelp-training-course/.

- 19 Advanced Adobe RoboHelp**
Teaches the use of RoboHelp's advanced features. Covers the use of styles and stylesheets, the development of skins, creating context-sensitive help and using the RoboScreenCapture and RoboSource utilities that are bundled with RoboHelp.
10% discount for ISTC members.
Armada, Bromsgrove, Midlands.
www.armada.co.uk/robohelp-training-course/.

- 20-21 Introduction to Adobe Photoshop**
Course for beginners, teaches how to create and edit images including colour corrections, working with layers, compositing images and preparing images for use on the Web.
10% discount for ISTC members.
Armada, Bromsgrove, Midlands.
www.armada.co.uk/photoshop-training-course/.

November

- 1 Social Media in Journalism training workshop**
The Social Media Academy will be hosting a Social Media in Journalism training course in London. The one-day training workshop costs £395 + VAT with a 15% Early Bird discount if you book before Friday, 14 October. The one-day workshop will be packed with social media in journalism case studies, hands-on exercises and business consultancy. There are limited places available and seats are booked on a first-come first-served basis.

Social Media Library, London.
www.socialmedialibrary.co.uk
- 2-3 Basic and Intermediate Adobe FrameMaker**
Course providing thorough grounding in FrameMaker used in unstructured (standard) mode covering most popular features and a wide range of techniques for generating printed documents of a high standard.

10% discount for ISTC members.

Armada, Bromsgrove, Midlands.
www.armada.co.uk/frame-maker-training-course
- 3-4 Introduction to Adobe Captivate**
Course for beginners, teaches how to create web enabled simulations, demos and tutorials for software applications.

10% discount for ISTC members.

Armada, Bromsgrove, Midlands.
www.armada.co.uk/captivate-training-course
- 4 Advanced Adobe FrameMaker**
Teaches the use of FrameMaker's advanced and difficult-to-grasp features when working in unstructured mode (standard FrameMaker). Learn how to produce books comprised of multiple documents, generate a table of contents and index, and insert cross-references.

10% discount for ISTC members.

Armada, Bromsgrove, Midlands.
www.armada.co.uk/frame-maker-training-course
- 7 Introduction to technical authoring**
Short course for new technical authors and people in other roles who need to carry out technical authoring work. Covers audience analysis, structuring and designing documents, writing in plain English, punctuation and grammar, designing an effective layout, reviewing and proofreading.

10% discount for ISTC members.

Armada, Bromsgrove, Midlands.
www.armada.co.uk/technical-author-training-course/

...November

- 8-9 Intermediate technical authoring**
Building on basic course, teaching key issues that define high quality technical authoring. Learn to use a detailed end-to-end writing process to design, draft, and improve technical documents, developing critical skills, create more effective technical documents, and present a consistent and homogenous document set to the users.

10% discount for ISTC members.

Armada, Bromsgrove, Midlands.

www.armada.co.uk/technical-author-training-course/.

- 10-11 Advanced technical authoring**
Intensive course for career technical authors who want to improve their skill set and the quality and effectiveness of the documentation they produce.

10% discount for ISTC members.

Armada, Bromsgrove, Midlands.

www.armada.co.uk/technical-author-training-course/.

Events news

Mediterranean Editors and Translators (MET) meeting 2011

Quality in English translation and editing – from research to practice and back

The final METM11 program has been published. Plenary speaker Dorothy Kenny (Dublin City University) addresses a publishing and translation issue of growing importance: the post-editing of machine translation. The Saturday plenary speaker, Ros Schwartz (literary translator and current chair of English PEN's Writers in Translation committee), will focus on deep text revision from another perspective. Parallel presentations in several threads include tips for community interpreting and improving your working environment, insights from corpus linguistics on legal English, advice on peer revision and mentoring among language professionals, translating museum audio guides, indemnity insurance for language professionals, and practical implications of biomedical publishing trends – in addition to panel discussions that highlight the theme.

A new concept – Town Hall Meetings – will offer a chance to voice concerns in smaller groups and hear of others' experiences and views. The aim is to generate ideas, raise issues, and encourage new pathways for future MET programs.

Participants can also sign up for scheduled networking get-togethers around a variety of professional interests or issues. These small gatherings will take place at breakfast, lunch, and dinner times on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday.

When

20-22 October 2011

Where

European Institute of the Mediterranean, Carrer Girona 20, Barcelona, Spain
Barcelona is a vibrant, cosmopolitan city with much to offer. Information about travel and hotels can be found on the MET website's local information tab.

For more information

Visit: www.metmeetings.org.

Events listings

October

6 North West Technical Communicators Group: TCUK 2011 post conference

If you weren't able to attend TCUK come along to this to find out what went on. Discover what the latest buzz in technical communication is and find out what the highlights of the conference were.

<http://nwtcgoctober.eventbrite.com/>.

This section introduces new events and reminders of the most relevant events in the coming months. ISTC events are highlighted. You can view previous events listings on the ISTC website's Newsletter archive at www.istc.org.uk/Publications/Newsletter/newsletter.htm. To include an event in the listings, please email events@istc.org.uk

6 Sign Design Society meeting
Morag Myerscough from studio Myerscough will talk about environmental graphics. The talk starts at 6.30pm in The Gallery.

www.signdesignsociety.co.uk.

10-12 Localization World Silicon Valley

This 3-day programme consists of proven strategies you can use to reach multicultural and multiethnic audiences, both home and abroad. Silicon Valley, California.

www.localizationworld.com.

13 West of Scotland area group meeting

Gordon McLean will be presenting a report from the Technical Communication UK 2011 conference. Come along to talk about latest news and trends in communication, or just to meet other communication professionals. The event is free and open to anyone interested in technical communication. From 7.30pm onwards at Waxy O'Connors pub, 44 West George Street, Glasgow, G2 1DH. Please make your way to McTurk's Room on the middle level.

For more information, contact westscotland_areagroup@istc.org.uk.

...October

18-19 Streaming Media Europe 2011
In-depth sessions, case-studies, how-to's and panel discussions designed for content owners, video creators, online marketers, corporate communications professionals, agencies, broadcast, cable and satellite professionals, technology suppliers and manufacturers, and educators.

Olympia Conference Centre, London
www.streamingmediaglobal.com/conference/2011.

18-20 tcworld conference 2011
The tcworld annual conference.

Rhein-Main halls, Wiesbaden, Germany.
www.tekom.de/tagung/tagung.jsp.

19-20 xSolutions 2011
xSolutions is for professionals who sell, install, purchase or have responsibility for the day-to-day running of audio and video communication technologies within commercial facilities.

ExCeL London.
www.xsolutionsonthenet.net.

20-22 Mediterranean Editors and Translators (MET) meeting
Quality in English translation and editing – from research to practice and back.

Barcelona, Spain
www.metmeetings.org.

26 SciTech: Innovation UK
This event brings together some of the leading figures in science, engineering and technology for a high-level meeting on how we can turn science into commerce.

The Barbican, London
www.publicserviceevents.co.uk/172/scitech-2011.

Back pages

My other life

By Kai Weber

Desert hiking and tech writing never seemed to have much in common. One is a perfect pastime, the other a job. Little did I know how they both challenge me in similar ways.

In my day job, I'm Senior Technical Writer for SimCorp in Frankfurt and Copenhagen: I create and maintain user manuals and online help for our investment management system SimCorp Dimension. We're currently (as of fall of 2011) using Word for manuals in PDF and an in-house help tool for online help in CHM, but we're in the process of migrating everything to MadCap Flare for single sourcing.

Many of my professional tasks are pretty standard: I document newly developed or enhanced features in topics for release notes and user manuals. I try to make sense of the product and the underlying specifications. I seek out SMEs (subject-matter experts) for help when I'm lost on my own. I consolidate topics into user manuals. I try to pace myself well so I finish in time, even though I don't really know how long I'll take when I start.



Bear Canyon near Tucson, Arizona

I really enjoy my job for its interaction with different colleagues, for the joint effort to deliver a good, useful product. I sit in an office, divide my time between my PC and my colleagues – and I regret when sunny summers outside pass me by. Which is where my other life comes in.

Hiking canyons and desert floors

For about 15 years, I've been an avid desert hiker of the American Southwest. Day trips only, thank you very much – I'm not out for any 'Survivor' trips. As I've explored the Chihuahuan, Sonoran and Mojave deserts

on foot, I've come to appreciate, respect and love them intimately. I know the cacti and the bushes and detect animals and their tracks. I recognise the clouds, the friendly, fluffy ones and the fateful ones about to release a monsoon. I enjoy the hues of the sky, the orange at dawn, the deep blue before noon, the purple at dusk. I relish the smells, the herbal sagey dryness and the creosote's syrupy resin after a rare rain. I move among the sounds, above the crickets' chirps on the ground, beneath the canyon wren, a small fella of a bird who sounds like he can't get his pickup truck started.

Walking in solitude, I let go of the words that I harness as a technical communicator. Often they accompany me on my trails, swirling around me like a flock of birds that feed on the only spirit for miles around. As they dissipate, they reveal my passions to myself and the challenges I enjoy.

Enjoying the challenges

There's the trail that's hard to find, as it crosses sheer rock or has been washed away by recent flooding. It gives me pause, not unlike an unknown, new feature without anyone around to ask how to proceed. Nothing left to do, but take a few steps back, try one way, evaluate, weigh, try another and decide on the most promising path, while

allowing for the possibility of error. Like that one hike up a wash with no guidance other than the park ranger who mentioned a rock arch on the canyon's rim to the right and a slot canyon to the left.

Then there's the difficult, challenging terrain that taxes the body, not unlike difficult, unknown concepts that tax the mind. That's the time for patience and endurance, focus and concentration, because I know that carelessness can get me into trouble. Like that hike down and up the Grand Canyon when there was no doubt about the path, but the steep climb back out is just really strenuous. Regardless of the path and the terrain, I need to plan well and pace myself, before time and provisions run out. I only carry a limited amount of water as I set out and don't know exactly how long it will last me. But with experience, I can gauge better how fast I will have to move to make it in time.

At work, time is my water: I don't know how long I will take when I set out on a new manual. Experience helps me to come up with a reliable guess. But there's always the risk that I lose my path and don't know how to proceed. Or that the terrain proves unexpectedly difficult.

The most important lesson, however, has been this: If something goes wrong - don't panic! I just need to pick up the pieces, retrace my last steps if necessary, and carry on. Moving faster or taking shortcuts usually doesn't work, but will only wear me out faster.

At the end of the day, if I'm lucky, both hiking and technical communications leave me with a feeling of satisfied achievement. I appreciate both, my job and my pastime, and the balance they afford me.

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For feature articles, press releases, affiliate news and other general content, please ensure your submission arrives by 20th of the month prior to publication. For example, in the case of a June publication, copy should arrive by 20 May.

For ISTC news or event details, please ensure your submission arrives by 24th of the month prior to publication. For example, in the case of a June publication, news should arrive by 24 May.

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