SuperScript

STC ALBERTA

Volume 18, Issue 4 | Summer 2009

SuperScript is the official newsletter of the Alberta chapter of the Society for Technical Communication. We welcome your articles, feedback and questions to our editor. The submission deadline for our next edition is **Wednesday, September 30, 2009**.

President's Message

Jessie Channey, President

We have continued as a busy chapter! From May and June program nights, Calgary and Edmonton pub nights, email discussions and graduations to affiliate events with Digital Alberta and Town Hall meetings with STC head office, much is happening in the realm of STC.

Our townhall meeting with STC revealed an unexpected shortfall caused by a predominant reliance on member dues and the annual conference, coupled with our reserves being eroded by stock markets. STC wants your input to ensure our ongoing viability. There are many ways you can ensure your voice is heard and they are listed in my next article, The *State of the Society*. Our current and proposed action plan is detailed, and you can contact me directly at president@stc-alberta.org should you have any questions. Read more ...

The State of the Society

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At least once a day, we generally engage in chats that involve the economy. Lately, the main topic of discussion on the STC Presidents email list has also been the economy and the effect it has had on our Society.

While reading through numerous discussion threads on different STC email lists, one email in particular stood out. Senior member Richard Mateosian from the Berkeley Chapter in California summarized the current situation STC faces as a whole. Read more ...

New Members!

Erika Sakrison, Memberships Manager

We welcome three new members to our chapter: Sandi Boga of Calgary, Deborah Lambert of Calgary, and Linda Moore of Sherwood Park. This brings our total membership count to 165 individuals.

As we are all aware, our e-mail announcement list suffered a frustrating technical glitch in May. With the assistance of Jessie, Alex, and the technical support staff at STC, we now have the problem resolved and we're back to business as usual! I would like to thank everyone for their patience and understanding as we worked towards a resolution.

If you would like to recommend a friend or colleague to the benefits of STC, encourage them to review our website, particularly our profile under About STC Alberta. Better yet – pass along this edition of *SuperScript* for their reading pleasure, and invite them to join you at our next program night!

May Program Review – An Evening with SMART Technologies

Lloyd Summers, STC Guest

On May 21, 2009 STC Alberta hosted two separate presentations that blended very well together. The evening opened with an introduction to *Writing Help for Touch-Enabled Devices* presented by Ken Schatzke, followed by *SMART Graphics* held by Deborah Nakaska and Alex Tassioulas from SMART.

During his presentation, Ken touched on many of the new challenges encountered by SMART when creating help documentation for this new interactive medium. He explained how SMART is rethinking the standards on documentation procedures by focusing on both the limitations and advantages. Rather than relying on keywords and search indexing used by most companies today, SMART is placing more reliance on navigation across help topics through relevant links, information simplicity and larger font sizes to name a few. [Read more ...]

And Our Next New Heights Manager Is...

Mellissa Ruryk, New Heights Manager 2009

You! If you are looking for an exciting way to enrich your event management skills, why not take up the challenge to organize New Heights 2010?

You will receive:

- Bragging rights for a volunteer accomplishment which amplifies your resume!
- Lots of support from our chapter executive!
- A complete job description and access to an adequate budget to host a memorable event!

You will have an opportunity to manage all aspects of the event, including:

- Selecting the speaker, topic and venue,
- Determining the menu and catering,
- Organizing registration & payments, and
- Facilitating seminar details so the day flows smoothly.

For more information, attend an STC-Alberta event, email president@stc-alberta.org or newheights@stc-alberta.org.

Smart Volunteering

Article by Senior STC Member, Orange County Chapter

Previously published in the April 2009 issue of TechniScribe, the newsletter of the Orange County Chapter.

What if I told you that you could learn new skills on someone else's dime, try out new ideas with a "client" who is just appreciative that you're helping, and maybe even network yourself into a new job or a new direction in the process?

I won't use the dirty "V" word to taint this conversation. Let's just call it helping out, paying it forward, maybe even good karma. Works for me. I've been loaning my technical writing skills for free to a few nonprofit organizations over the last couple of years and, besides helping them with needed skills, I've received more benefits than I ever expected. I've learned how to adapt to new situations better, "to do more with less," and to think like a guerilla fighter in the war on providing maximum content on a minimum budget. [Read more ...]

Edmonton Events Summary 2008-2009

Deanne Wilson, Edmonton Liaison

The Edmonton branch has had a busy but enjoyable year. We had coffee nights, a holiday get together, and program nights via web conferencing. A pub night was held in June to ring in summer and discuss plans for events in the fall.

Coffee get-togethers are a great way for the Edmonton members to meet, visit with old friends and make some new friends too. Lively discussions abound and there is never a shortage of laughter. It was great to see some newer members come out to join us and we look forward to meeting more in future. Read more ...

A "Homebrew" Usability Testing Tool

Neil Perlin, STC Associate Fellow

Ask most software companies if usability testing is important and you'll get a resounding "yes!" Yet many of those same companies don't test usability because they think it's too difficult and time-consuming and requires complex and expensive tools.

There's an element of truth to this. Usability testing and recording can be difficult, time-consuming, and require complex and expensive tools. But it's also possible to get useful test results by adapting other tools that you already own, that may not have been designed for usability test work in the first place. Specifically, I'm talking about the visual training authoring tools like Adobe Captivate, TechSmith Camtasia, and Qarbon Viewlet Builder. I'll focus on Captivate because I consider it to be the most powerful tool of this type, but other such tools should be similarly configurable. Read more ...

Member Spotlight: Ken Schatzke

Jessie Channey, President

In case you didn't see it, our very own Ken Schatzke has a one-page article on *Touch Screens: From Seemingly Impossible to Increasingly Common* published in the June issue of Intercom. Check out his article in the "My Job" section on the inside back cover if you download the full issue.

Ken's biography in Intercom is characteristically modest ("actively involved with the Alberta Chapter"). In fact, Ken has held most positions on our council (currently Treasurer, but has been President, New Heights Manager, Program Manager, Registration/Hospitality Manager, and Workshops Manager)! Kudos to Ken on getting published!

Do you know someone in our chapter who has written an article? Have you written one? Please let us know so we can spread the word and celebrate our collective work by emailing newsletter@stc-alberta.org.

Learnings from Atlanta

Karen Lowe, Senior STC Member

Attendance at the STC Annual conference was down this year mostly due to the nature of the current economy, however, three of us from Alberta were able to participate. The conference trip was an exciting departure from my work routine for more reasons other than the nice Atlanta weather.

I went to sessions on Web 2.0 features, DITA (of course), creating better habits and selling the benefits of that to others, Component Content Management Systems and eLearning projects. The available sessions were also full of information around other various subjects including animation and video. There were too many to see, so I'm looking forward to accessing materials for the ones I wasn't able to attend. Read more ...

Quotes & Quips

"One day I will find the right words, and they will be simple." — Jack Kerouac (The Dharma

Bums)

"I love being a writer. What I can't stand is the paperwork." — Peter De Vries

"Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass." — Anton Pavlovich Chekhov

Submitting to SuperScript

Alex Kelly, Editor

Thank you to those who sent in articles to include in this edition of *SuperScript*. I know I appreciate being able to both read and include such an excellent variety of interesting information.

After a summer hiatus, we will renew our yearning to publish techcomm news in September. So please submit your comments, articles and questions to newsletter@stc-alberta.org by **Wednesday, September 30**. I hope you have a superb summer!

Dear "Ab-stc" (Abby)

Alex Kelly, Editor

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Dear Ab-stc,

Whatever happened to the bitter technical writer comic strip? I haven't seen any sign
since last fall.

Sincerely,
K.A.

_____


Dear K.A.,

We're glad you asked! We tracked down Rand, the bitter yet comical technical writer,
who plans to reappear in some future newsletter editions care of Jeremy Schroeder the
creator and author of Bitter Ink. In his spare time, Jeremy likes to poke fun at his
profession by drawing comics about poor, used and abused technical writers. Stay tuned
for more fun, wit and commiseration!

Sincerely,
Ab-stc
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Dear Ab-stc,

While I like the email discussion lists, I have often received out-of-office responses
sent back through the list. Can this be changed?

Sincerely,
G. Whillikers

_____

Dear G.W.,

The great news is, due to feedback such as yours, a technical solution was put in place
for all STC discussion lists. So you shouldn't have to read with jealousy everyone
else's holiday plans while you work away anymore!

Sincerely,
Ab-stc
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STC ALBERTA

STC Alberta News and Updates

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Summer 2009

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Our townhall meeting with STC revealed an unexpected shortfall caused by a predominant reliance on member dues and the annual conference, coupled with our reserves being eroded by stock markets. STC wants your input to ensure our ongoing viability. There are many ways you can ensure your voice is heard and they are listed in my next article, *The State of the Society*. Our current and proposed action plan is detailed, and you can contact me directly at president@stc-alberta.org should you have any questions.

Also, check out the *Smart Volunteering* article – for the first time this has nothing to do with SMART Technologies! But **you** would be smart to read the article and get involved with our chapter – an exciting year is ahead and you can be a part of it!

Our **May program night** was a great success with another full house in attendance! Many thanks to Ken Schatzke, our presenter as well as Treasurer, who encouraged his colleagues to familiarize us with some current and future SMART technology. With plenty of company insiders joining us as well, we learned of their career fair that weekend. There's more SMART news coming up, so keep reading!

Ruth Maryniuk and Jean Bauer savouring a brew at Brewsters

The arrival of sunny weather presented the perfect excuse to gather again at **Brewsters** May 28. Many attended, the sun *did* shine that day and we announced our 2008 financials over drinks and appetizers. While satisfying our "bar food cravings" we talked of how the market seemed to be opening up again and how some members were planning to take the summer off.

Heather Gummo, Monique Dietvorst and Teresia Lam satisfy their "pub food cravings"

While we did announce our 2008 financials at Brewsters, this was not in place of our **chapter Annual General Meeting**. Just a reminder, the timing of our chapter AGM has changed to winter to reflect a change in our, and STC head office's, fiscal year end. This change was implemented in 2008 as our current council was coming on board so no AGM was held. Once we confirm a date, we will notify you via our website, Announcement email list, and this newsletter.

Previously we had encountered a few issues with our **Mailman email lists** which are now resolved. Thanks to everyone for their patience while we sorted things out! Our Announcement list suffered a glitch so we used our Discussion list to ensure ongoing communication with our members. I'd like to extend thanks to our Newsletter Editor, Alex Kelly, who kindly fielded questions regarding what was going on with the sudden activity on that list.

And with summer starts the season of **graduations**! Not only do some of our Councillors have kids graduating, but we also had some future STC members crossing the stage. June 5 was convocation day at Mount Royal College and Dr. Glenn Ruhl (the Chair of Information Design with the Faculty of Communication Studies, and STC Alberta's MRC Liaison), ensured his graduates received our information package. In addition to introducing the Society, we included a congratulatory note to the students for finishing this important chapter in their lives. Congratulations again graduates!

In our endeavor to cross-promote **events with** Digital Alberta, I attended their DemoCamp hosted at the Next Media event in Banff on Friday, June 5, an event which highlighted some cool new technologies created right here in Alberta. From Apple iPhone gadgets to putting your favorite songs on what looked like a credit card, the presentations showcased up-and-coming entrepreneurs whose ideas might just be the next big trend. While there, I met Digital Alberta's Executive Director, Rene Smid, who invited all STC Alberta members to attend their future events. Several STC members and I also attended their annual BBQ on June 11 which started with a tour of SMART Technologies' cool new building next to CTI. It was great to see where all the magic happens!

And before we took a break for summer, we ended with a packed **program on Financial Planning**. Watch for a review to come in our next edition!

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The State of the Society
Jessie Channey, President, STC Alberta

At least once a day, we generally engage in chats that involve the economy. Lately, the main topic of discussion on the STC Presidents email list has also been the economy and the effect it has had on our Society.

While reading through numerous discussion threads on different STC email lists, one email[1] in particular stood out. Senior member Richard Mateosian from the Berkeley Chapter in California summarized the current situation STC faces as a whole. The following is a quote from his well-written article to also be published in the Berkeley Chapter newsletter:

> *"Here at the chapter level, we often look at the STC headquarters operation as something distant and out of touch. The truth, however, is that STC and its US [and international] chapters are one big organization. This fact became really important recently when headquarters gave us a report on our finances. Over the next 18 months, we face a large budget deficit and a severe cash flow problem.*
>
> *One cause of STC's financial problems is that we do not fund our activities entirely out of dues. We rely on a substantial surplus from the annual conference to make up the difference, but that surplus did not materialize this year and probably won't be there next year either."*

For those who aren't familiar with where our chapter gets its funding, our Treasurer, Ken Schatzke, explains: each year we receive dues rebates from STC headquarters in Fairfax, Virginia. The dues are based on the number of members we have so we as a local chapter can support activities for our local members. We also earn money from the activities that we hold, such as our monthly Programs and our annual New Heights conference.

Part of the remedy STC head office suggests is for local chapters to switch to a zero-based budgeting model and possibly return unused dues to help the organization stay afloat. Other suggestions are regularly made on the various lists and we'll continue to monitor these. See the below section on *How to Provide Your Input and Ideas* to include your comments!

Town Hall Meeting

STC has been holding several town hall meetings via web and phone for all chapters to participate. STC Alberta councilors joined these, and the following reviews the discussion on June 23.

Current Situation

- Expected shortfall for 2009 is 1.2M USD. This is forecast to go into 2010 if no action is taken now.
- Caused by overreliance on member dues, and the annual summit.
- Reserves eroded by stock markets.

Priorities of the Head Office

The current priorities for STC head office are to:

- Ensure viability
- Communicate value
- Define profession
- Improve practice
- Expand partnerships

Actions Being Taken Now

STC is currently:

- Reviewing the strategic plan (Complete)
- Communicating the financial situation (In Progress)
- Gathering input from members (In Progress)
- Creating an operating plan (To Be Done)

Actions Being Proposed

STC proposes to do the following:

- Cover operating expenses and generate new revenue by December
- Find long-term sustainability solutions
- Re-examine STC pricing
- Increase member dues
- Consider other revenue generating sources

Action Timeline

STC is/will be doing the following:

June	- Seek short-term funding (e.g. individual member contributions), - Seek long-term funding (e.g. planned giving such as legacies and trusts)
July	Increase cost of educational offerings and sponsorships
August – September	- Secure 500,000 USD from reserve funds held in chapter treasuries - Present 2009 chapter budgets - Draft 2010 chapter budgets
October	Increase member dues to cover the cost of providing services (mainly around publication costs)

How to Provide Your Input and Ideas

STC needs our active participation and support in saving the Society. If you are interested in

participating, or reading any background material, STC has put together several great resources:

- [STC ideas Ning network](#)
- Twitter (#stcorg)
- Presidents' listserv
- SIG leaders wiki
- Email to stc@stc.org

What STC Alberta is Doing

Having read the information, you may be wondering how this specifically affects you. The council has been discussing the Alberta Chapter's role in all this. Currently we are investigating whether Canadian or Alberta law limit any of the actions headquarters proposes.

We have also entered discussions with other Canadian chapters to hear the opinions of other STC leaders. As Schatzke mentions previously, the current budgets are being prepared and we will submit to STC head office in mid-August.

The good news is our Alberta chapter has been well-managed in the past years and is financially sound and stable. We had a great 2008/9 season with well-attended programs and a successful New Heights conference, and we plan to continue to offer even more events and services to our members through 2009/10. As more information becomes available, we will continue to share the news via this newsletter.

If you have any questions, please email president@stc-alberta.org.

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[1]Excerpts from Richard Mateosian are taken from his email sent to the STC Presidents list on Friday, June 19, 2009.

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During his presentation, Ken touched on many of the new challenges encountered by SMART when creating help documentation for this new interactive medium. He explained how SMART is rethinking the standards on documentation procedures by focusing on both the limitations and advantages. Rather than relying on keywords and search indexing used by most companies today, SMART is placing more reliance on navigation across help topics through relevant links, information simplicity and larger font sizes to name a few.

During the second presentation, Alex and Deborah focused on additional challenges SMART has encountered, this time when selling products overseas. In one example, Alex explained how a simple ten-page document can quickly become 260 pages once localized to accommodate 26 different languages. To address these issues, SMART has introduced textless documentation to their existing products, meanwhile encouraging users to access SMART's online resources for additional information.

Deborah and Alex finished their presentation for the evening by sharing some of the exciting changes expected with SMART in the near future. They hinted at a better unified documentation source for textless documentation using 3D software to maintain up-to-date and accurate object dimensions. This will effectively reduce documentation creation times and improve accuracy.

Altogether both presentations were well received by a quickly growing number of attendees at

Alberta STC events. As with all the other seminars this year, the presenters were very knowledgeable and brought exciting new perspectives to new challenges when it comes to documentation.

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Smart Volunteering
Article by Senior STC Member, Orange County Chapter

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What if I told you that you could learn new skills on someone else's dime, try out new ideas with a "client" who is just appreciative that you're helping, and maybe even network yourself into a new job or a new direction in the process?

I won't use the dirty "V" word to taint this conversation. Let's just call it helping out, paying it forward, maybe even good karma. Works for me. I've been loaning my technical writing skills for free to a few nonprofit organizations over the last couple of years and, besides helping them with needed skills, I've received more benefits than I ever expected. I've learned how to adapt to new situations better, "to do more with less," and to think like a guerilla fighter in the war on providing maximum content on a minimum budget.

And I'm not alone. Look a little closer at the STC Orange County Chapter, and you'll see people who maintain dynamic websites, produce award-winning newsletters, coordinate educational programs, and organize some pretty great events—all on their own time and with no expectation of financial return.
But let's talk about sharing communication skills that are, at times, in short supply in the outside world. How many nonprofit groups could benefit from a few hours of your help in rewriting mission statements, program brochures, or event instruction materials for their staff?

Do you want to grow your skill set or offer yourself some variation from the same types of material you do day in/day out? How about creating a newsletter for your local community foundation or an informative website for a new cancer patient support group? Are you interested in history or science? Small museums are always in need of informative little brochures to help their visitors. They don't need to be fancy, just well written.

How about doing something that impacts not just one or two, but hundreds or thousands of people?

A few years ago, tech writer Sam Poppas was simply helping out when the teacher at his son's school asked him to speak at career day. Sam puts in his 40-plus hours a week and was content coming home and just dealing with family stuff, but he liked the idea of sharing his career with students. After his presentation, the principal asked if he could help out by writing a brief summary of a program the school was trying to get a grant for. Sam saw how disorganized they were and eventually took over the whole grant application, and the school won the funds. Sam commented that the feeling of elation over the success was unlike anything he'd felt at work for a long time. And without Sam's help, they probably would not have gotten the grant.

So, what sorts of projects might you be able to do? I've mentioned a few. Others I've personally helped with include editing, formatting, and publishing minibooks for a local historical society; collaborating with graphic designers on a downtown walking-tour guide; developing a video-based oral history program; and, my favorite, writing a book on local history for a mainstream publisher.

Did I get paid for any of this? Outside of the miniscule book royalty, nope. Nada. Did I learn new tools, have amazing control over projects, and feel like I impacted a whole bunch of people? You bet!

Sam said it well. "I picked up new skills that I was able to bring to my work environment and it's made me a bit more valuable. And should something unfortunate happen to my job, I can move into grant writing to bring in some extra income." (He's already written a few more.)

Let's talk about the caveats, though. If you've volunteered for anything, you know there are too few people doing it and you will be called on for other unplanned roles. This is a great way to get burnt

out on a relationship with a particular group as your workload increases. Try very hard to limit the extra work you find yourself taking on to the tasks you really want to do. Try to suggest better ways to do existing things so that you're creating a value (and interest) to your work—not just filling a gap. This philosophy has kept me interested in continuing what I do (15 years with one group alone!).

Try hard not to impact your family time or the free time that's important to you. I tend to do a lot of my work late at night once my family has gone to bed. Learn about the group and their operation before you overwhelm them with your great new ideas. Often, an organization operates a certain way because of deeper reasons—or personalities. Your new idea might be wonderful, but it could also hurt them as everyone scrambles to accommodate something you're trying to change. (On the other hand, you could also be that breath of fresh air they've needed for years!)

Don't start a project you can't finish. I've helped out several groups with websites that the previous volunteer never completed. The group was left hanging to dry when the well-meaning webmaster got busy with something in his life. Don't enter into a project if you can't finish or gracefully complete it in a short time. (Remember, these people will talk—and they will either relate how you "walk on water" or left a big mess that no one could fix.)

Lastly, and possibly most important: Remember that some day you will not be there to help. For recurring projects, try to make your work as simple to follow as possible. Try not to work in complex tools if you can. I've created newsletters in Word and websites in FrontPage—all because I knew that whoever was going to take it on would not be using InDesign or Dreamweaver. I purposely designed things that can be easily updated by a novice. (I made sure they had lots of copy/paste solutions.)

At the start of this article, I spoke of the new skills you would learn, the new ideas you could bring to an appreciative client, and the new career direction you might stumble upon. The more you do, the more you will receive in return. It's worked for so many of us willing to give it a try. It isn't really rocket science, just wisely using your talents to help others.

Payback? Well, how about smiling faces, a very grateful organization, a successful event or project where you had serious input, and a wonderful feeling deep in your gut. All without worrying about how it was going to look on your yearly review.

And maybe, just maybe, a payback of a better, smarter you as you head off into the crazy job market.

About the Author

Guy Ball ([email](#), [guyball.com](#)) is a senior technical writer for EADS North America Test and Services in Irvine, California. He's volunteered his technical writing skills for over 20 years and swears it gave him skills that let him grow his career and discover new opportunities. He's written a couple of books, created a few organizational websites, developed an award-winning history coloring book for kids, and honed his professional skills helping on a wide variety of projects.

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A "Homebrew" Usability Testing Tool

Neil Perlin, STC Associate Fellow

Ask most software companies if usability testing is important and you'll get a resounding "yes!" Yet many of those same companies don't test usability because they think it's too difficult and time-consuming and requires complex and expensive tools.

There's an element of truth to this. Usability testing and recording can be difficult, time-consuming, and require complex and expensive tools. But it's also possible to get useful test results by adapting other tools that you already own, that may not have been designed for usability test work in the first place. Specifically, I'm talking about the visual training authoring tools like Adobe Captivate, TechSmith Camtasia, and Qarbon Viewlet Builder. I'll focus on Captivate because I consider it to be the most powerful tool of this type, but other such tools should be similarly configurable.

These tools are essentially non-stop screen recorders. They record activity on the screen as a series of consecutive screen shots, like frames in a filmstrip, which you can play back as a movie.

You can also annotate those frames with text captions, highlights, audio, video, animations, interactivity features, and more in order to create movies ranging from simple software demos to interactive software or sales simulations, or even surprisingly powerful eLearning. These tools are also cheap ($599 for Captivate), and quick and easy to learn (a two-day training course is enough to teach Captivate's basic features).

In order to use Captivate to record usability test results for later evaluation, you can set it up to:

- Record every screen on which a test subject takes some action, such as selecting a menu or sub-menu, making a field entry, making a mouse pick, or using a spin box or pulldown.
- Record the mouse path between these actions.
- Add a special effect to each mouse click for visual emphasis during playback.
- Add a descriptive text caption for anything that the test subject does that sends a Windows-standard call to the software being tested.
- Make all this happen automatically in the background, without distracting the test subject.
- Turn on audio recording, give test subjects a headset with a boom mike, (to make it unobtrusive), and ask them to speak their thoughts as they work through the steps of the test.

I've done this in dummy usability tests and it works almost perfectly, creating a rendition of almost everything I did on the screen. (I'll discuss the "almost" part at the end.) I can then view this "movie" for review and evaluation in a preview mode or publish a finished version for distribution to other reviewers. A playback control bar lets me stop or back up as necessary in order to study what the test subjects did.

This homebrew usability test recording tool isn't perfect, though all but one problem has a workaround. Here are the problems I encountered in my experiments.

- It's important to see a timer on the screen to gauge when a test subject performed some task and how much time elapsed between tasks. (Too much time may mean that a test subject was confused.) To get a timer on the screen, just set Captivate to record in full-screen mode in order to capture Windows' clock on the task bar.

  However, Windows' clock is useless for usability because it can't show seconds. I temporarily replaced it with a freeware plug-in called TClockEx (Taskbar Clock Enhancement) from www.rcis.co.za/dale/tclockex/menu.htm. This plug-in, from South African programmer Dale Nurden, lets you reconfigure the clock and seems to work fine under Windows XP even though it was created in 2000. I set it up to display the day of the week, the date, and the time in hours, minutes, and seconds, thus date- and time-stamping the test results as well as showing elapsed time in seconds between tasks. (As another benefit, seeing the time on the screen would help synchronize the movie with any video taken during the test.)
- Captivate uses the *End* key to stop recording screen activity. You can switch this function to a different key. I normally recommend against doing so because the *End* key is intuitively logical. For usability testing, however, I would reassign it to a key combination to eliminate the risk of a test subject accidentally hitting the *End* key and aborting the recording of the test, or if the application being tested actually uses the *End* key.
- Although recording in full-screen mode captures the clock, you may have to scroll vertically or horizontally to see it when you run the movie. Shrink the movie, using the *Resize Project* feature on the *Project* menu, to make sure you can see the clock in the lower-right corner of the screen without scrolling. I recorded at 1280 x 800, then resized to 75% for playback. This eliminated any scrolling yet kept the clock big enough to read.
- The playback control bar lets you review a movie at your own pace, but don't set the control bar Layout to Stretched. A stretched control bar extends the full width of the window and covers up the clock. To fix this, select Report/Skin, go to the Playback Control tab, select the Layout pulldown, and select Bottom

Left.

- Captivate is a memory hog and the application being tested may be buggy, so it's a good idea to reboot between tests and to run only Captivate and the application.
- The only problem with no workaround is Captivate's inability to record random mouse movement, such as that made by a confused user.

Summary

This type of homebrew solution doesn't eliminate all the barriers to usability testing. But it does offer a simple, flexible, convenient way to gather and evaluate test results. And, if you already own Captivate or a similar tool, it's free – always a strong point for any tool.

About the Author

Neil Perlin is president of Hyper/Word Services (www.hyperword.com) of Tewksbury, MA. He has 27 years experience in technical communication, with 21 in training, consulting, and development for online formats and tools like WinHelp, HTML Help, JavaHelp, CE Help, RoboHelp, Flare, Captivate, and others now known only in legend. Neil is a member of IEEE and STC, an associate fellow of the STC, and the founder and manager of the STC annual conference's Beyond the Bleeding Edge stem. You can reach him at nperlin@concentric.net.

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Learnings from Atlanta

Karen Lowe, Senior STC Member

Attendance at the STC Annual conference was down this year mostly due to the nature of the current economy, however, three of us from Alberta were able to participate. The conference trip was an exciting departure from my work routine for more reasons other than the nice Atlanta weather.

I went to sessions on Web 2.0 features, DITA (of course), creating better habits and selling the benefits of that to others, Component Content Management Systems and eLearning projects. The available sessions were also full of information around other various subjects including animation and video. There were too many to see, so I'm looking forward to accessing materials for the ones I wasn't able to attend.[1]

While the sessions themselves were obviously the largest benefit, an extremely important side-benefit was networking – talking, eating and drinking with other technical communicators. There really are others struggling with similar issues – things to which my non-writer friends' just can't relate. Advice and commiseration were free-flowing throughout the conference, both between and within sessions.

Another benefit was the chance to revitalize my professional spirit. The more I talked to others, the more I began to remember the good things about my job – the things I enjoy, the things that I would never get from a non-writing job. Listening to other attendees talk, their excitement came through and became contagious. Conversations reminded me of why I like being a technical communicator: how we help reduce user frustration while adding value to the products our companies deliver.

I also had the honour of presenting a session entitled *The Two-Click Mandate.* This session topic might sound familiar to STC Calgary members since it's something my team and I have been talking about for over two years. The DITA project we have delivered was well-received as a functioning example of how to use DITA with other technical communication theories and techniques. The idea of doing the work for the user to make their life easier was also an area touched on by the keynote speaker, David Pogue – an extremely entertaining presenter. By doing what we do as communicators, we truly can help others succeed.

Overall, I believe the profession is gathering momentum, even in these tougher economic times. When the ecomomic pendulum swings back up, the companies using the talents of technical writers will enjoy their competitive edge. Best of luck to you communicators during the ride!

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[1]STC captured the audio and visual content of more than 100 conference sessions which will

soon be available on the STC website. Called SUMMIT@aClick, this allows attendees to reap the benefits of **all** sessions at their convenience, and allows those who could not attend to purchase access online. STC's Summit is the only meeting in the technical communication field that offers this added bonus.

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Society for
Technical
Communication

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STC ALBERTA

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STC Alberta Activities

Check out our Programs, Workshops, Administrative Meetings, and Social Events for an opportunity to meet & greet, learn a tool or skill, or further develop your technical and writing expertise.

The calendar shown below outlines upcoming Alberta Chapter events. These events, unless otherwise stated, are held in Calgary. Please see our Edmonton page for a listing of "Upcoming Events" in that city.

2009 Upcoming Events

Administrative Meetings

- October 1, 2009
- November 5, 2009

Our Administrative Council holds monthly meetings and guests are welcome to join us. Learn more ...

Throughout the year, STC Alberta presents a wide variety of opportunites to learn, share and to become involved in the field of technical communication. Through workshops, social events and regular meetings we endeavour to:

- Present the latest information regarding theory and practice of technical communication
- Provide opportunities to learn and experiment with new tools and techniques
- Open up opportunities to network by meeting and exchanging ideas with fellow STC members
- Provide on-the-job training and opportunities to share your skills through our mentoring program.

Register in advance for all Programs and Workshops through our online registration page.

Note: When space is limited, preference is given to current STC members.

STC Society for Technical Communication

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STC ALBERTA

Edmonton

The distance between Edmonton and Calgary makes it impossible for most STC members in the Edmonton area to attend many chapter meetings. Consequently, some years ago, the Edmonton members decided to form a subgroup within the chapter.

The Edmonton group meets about six times a year (approximately every two months between September and May). We sometimes meet to discuss technical communication issues, sometimes to conduct technical communication workshops, oftentimes to just chat. If you're an Edmonton area STC member, then consider coming out to our meetings.

For more information about the Edmonton group within the Alberta Chapter STC contact the Edmonton Liaison.

Society for Technical Communication

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