

The CAPITAL LETTER

Society for Technical Communication
Sacramento Chapter Newsletter

October 2007

To Light A Fire

Hello Readers. It's fall. Rain's starting, the sun is hanging noticeably lower in the sky, and our chapter finds itself fighting to stay afloat. Yes, you read that right. With the new STC membership dues increase, we'll see some members electing not to renew. Those not renewing include our entire elected board. While the question of whether the value an STC membership has increased—or even held—as the cost has risen may be (is being) debated, what is certain is that the chapter can not be maintained without a board.

So here we are. Either existing, qualified chapter members come forward to take over, or the chapter ceases to exist. Take this as a call for volunteers.



The Sacramento chapter offers a lot of benefits to members, and would leave quite a void if it ceased to exist. If you are able to step up and serve on the board for at least the remainder of the term (term ends June 30, 2008), please contact any member of the current board to discuss how you can help. Contact information for the board is on page 2.

Speaking of benefits to members, our vice president of programs (and acting president), Ken Umbach, has lined up a Halloween treat for us.

Author R.D. Barnes will show us how to create a promotional book trailer using PowerPoint, and demonstrate his own—a trailer for his new collection of urban folklore, "Mind Shadows." For those of you who missed it, Karl Palachuk presented his Relax, Focus, Succeed program at the September meeting. See page 6 for a meeting report. Meetings are free, as always, to members.

There are, as usual, plenty of training opportunities available in coming weeks. Some may not be close enough for a day trip, but many are online, held right at your desk. See page 7 for a list.

Book reviews in this issue include Googlepedia (2nd edition), Beginning HTML with CSS and XHTML, and Software Testing Practice: Test Management. Reviews begin on page 4.

From chapter-sponsored software training, to networking opportunities, to lively meetings (and even a free newsletter), volunteers from your chapter are hard at work to provide value to you, the member. To keep it going, please consider contributing some of your time by serving on the board. The chapter needs you.

See you at the meeting!

Chris Masotti, Editor



SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

About The Capital Letter

The Capital Letter is published ten times a year, September through June, by the Sacramento Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication. Subscriptions are available to nonmembers for \$10 per year. Advertising rates are \$30 per quarter page.

We welcome letters to the editor, articles, and information regarding meetings, workshops, and courses pertaining to technical communication. Please submit in MS Word or plain text format. Articles may be edited as necessary for content and length. The deadline for submission is the 1st of each month for the following month's issue. Send submissions to the Managing Editor, Chris Masotti, chritti@sbcglobal.net or mail to:

The Capital Letter
5080 Oakbrook Circle
Fairfield, CA 94534

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About STC

The Society for Technical Communication is the world's largest professional organization devoted to the advancement of the theory and practice of technical communications. STC's more than 15,000 members include writers, editors, illustrators, graphic designers, multimedia artists, photographers, videographers, printers, publishers, educators, students and others whose work involves making technical information understandable by those who use it.

Society for Technical Communication
901 N. Stuart Street, Suite 904
Arlington, VA 22203-1854
703-522-4114
www.stc.org

STC Mission Statement

Creating and supporting a forum for communities of practice in the profession of technical communications.

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SACRAMENTO STC BOARD	
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Employment	Chuck Petch cpetch@cebridge.net
Webmaster	Jim Collins jimcol@charter.net
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President's Letter

By Ken Umbach, Sacramento Chapter Acting President

Crossroads

The Sacramento Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication is at a crossroads.

One road requires new officers — even if that requires changing the bylaws so that the president need not have served previously on the board. The other road requires winding up business and closing the chapter.

Your call.

If you want to see the Sacramento Chapter continue, then volunteer to take an office. Come to the October and November meetings and announce your willingness to take on one of the elected positions. We need president, 1st VP, 2nd VP, Secretary, and Treasurer. And we need volunteers to continue or assume roles with respect to the newsletter, the website, employment, education, and so on.

Else, stay tuned for news that the chapter is closing, as we cannot have a chapter without officers.

All that I can say for certain at this point is that I will let my own STC membership lapse at the end of this calendar year, as part of a wider winding-down of organizational involvements. I want to continue associating with the fine people of this chapter, and hope that even if the chapter dissolves there will be a way to continue meeting and communicating under some completely different and less structured (read: informal) umbrella. But other projects beckon and require choices.

STC is not the only organization that has trouble finding officers and other volunteers, of course. But the troubles of organizations in general are not the issue. The troubles of this particular chapter of this particular organization at this particular moment are the issue. Either new people step forward and take on the responsibilities or this chapter is at the *end* of its road.

One fact is clear: to be an officer of STC-Sacramento, one must be a member of STC ("the Society," or "National," or "International," or however you wish to style it). That requires a sizeable dues payment, which is becoming a barrier as dues increases continue. It also assumes a commitment to the profession, however loosely or broadly defined, of "technical communications."

So if you see yourself as in the technical communications field, sufficiently committed to invest the dues and valuing the benefits (publications and other resources), and interested in an active local chapter, then pick the road that leads to a continuation of this chapter. ♦



Book Reviews

Software Testing Practice: Test Management

Andreas Spillner, Tilo Linz, Thomas Rossner, Mario Winter

“**S**oftware Testing Practice: Test Management” is the follow up to “Software Testing Foundations” (reviewed in the September, 2007 issue of *The Capital Letter*).

But where “Foundations” dealt with the principles behind testing, Test Management moves up a level, addressing testing process models, organizing the test plan, test metrics, etc. Like Foundations, it’s intended as a study guide for International

Software Testing Qualifications Board (ISTQB) certification exams, but it will serve as a thorough guide to anyone seeking familiarity with test management concepts.

Throughout the book, Spillner, et al discuss the role of testing in the software development life cycle (SDLC), how to assess and improve the test process, and other specifics, but the underlying theme is that of risk management. After all, the test manager is often under pressure, at the end of the development process, to ensure delivery of a product at a certain level of quality—without delays. Doing so means having knowledge of risks, and having a strategy to identify and correct key vulnerabilities.

While its benefits to testers and test managers are obvious, the book also has much to offer a far wider audience. A principle that’s repeated throughout the book is that testing should begin as early in the development process as possible. Technical communicators (TCs) who have had to work entirely at the end of the cycle—under intense pressure—will sympathize. Much of the book involves concepts and tools that TCs would do well to know: working from requirements documents, making time estimates, process improvement. Software testers face many of the same challenges as TCs, and it’s interesting to see it from both perspectives. Several chapters, notably seven (*Assessing and Improving the Development and Test Processes*) and ten (*Staff Qualification and Skills*), apply to anyone involved with software development. Chapter ten is an enjoyable discussion of personality types (nine of them), and the ideal role in the testing process for each.

As would be expected from a group of leading voices in software testing, the book is outlined in great detail. This, along with extensive margin notes, makes scanning for relevant content a simple task for readers who are not along for the whole ride.

If you’re interested in taking the ISTQB Advanced Level exam, or in getting a feel for what managing the testing process is all about, this is probably as good and comprehensive a book as you’ll find. If you’re involved in any other aspect of software development, you’ll learn a lot here about the other parts of the machine. ♦

Chris Masotti

Beginning HTML with CSS and XHTML: Modern Guide and Reference

David Schultz, Craig Cook

Less than ten years ago, the World Wide Web was a very different creature. Although there were already millions of websites in existence, it was still something of a frontier. The domain name gold rush hadn’t quite ended, dot com fever was still spreading, and creating websites meant defining both content and format using only the Hypertext Markup Language (HTML)—nearly every page containing some hacks to achieve a desired visual effect.

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With time, more and more sites began to apply Cascading Style Sheets (CSS)—a technology that handles the presentation part, leaving HTML to handle structure. Then, a new markup language arrived—Extensible HTML (XHTML). XHTML offers some of the power of the Extensible Markup Language (XML), but with a finite set of tags. Today, web development is much more standards-based, and the majority of sites separate content from presentation.

David Schultz's and Craig Cook's "Beginning HTML with CSS and XHTML" is an introduction to creating standards-compliant websites using HTML and CSS. Readers with no web development experience—as well as those who have not done any for a few years—will find it an accessible and thorough means of getting comfortable with contemporary development methods.

Neither a step-by-step tutorial, nor a reference in the 'term, definition, usage example' sense, the book is more of a top-down guide with sample code. The authors begin by introducing the basics of XHTML and CSS, and work through the tasks required for building a site (adding content, using images, etc.), each time using examples from their pizzeria case study. Readers who want to get their hands dirty can use the abundant code examples to see the outcome on their own browsers. Those who just want an understanding of what's under the hood can jump from chapter to chapter at will—although concepts introduced later do build on the ones discussed at the beginning.

At heart, this is a guide to doing things right. From the proper use of tables (possibly the most abused feature of HTML in the past), to the basics of JavaScript, Schultz and Cook show the reader how to get it all done while playing by the standards rules. The final chapter, *Putting It All Together*, applies all of the book's lessons to building a simple, standards-based website.

Schultz and Cook have put together a fine refresher on website development. With detailed coverage of all of the most important aspects of XHTML and CSS, lots of examples, and plenty of advice and warnings, it will serve well those who are new (or returning) to web development and have to come up to speed quickly. ♦

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Apress
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427 pp.
\$29.99

Chris Masotti

A Grand Tour Through the Belly of the Beast

Googlepedia: The Ultimate Google Resource, 2nd Edition

Michael Miller

The name is everywhere. It's become a verb. Five-year-olds who have hardly mastered many 3-letter words instantly recognize the multi-colored logo and can read the name in a flash (as witnessed firsthand). Of course, I refer to Google, the search behemoth turned video serving, free mail providing, backyard mapping monster. But that's not all—not nearly.

In his 2nd edition of Googlepedia, Michael Miller takes us on a tour of the nearly countless offerings available to visitors of that simple white page with the text box. Though many readers will be familiar with a few Google applications—

Gmail, You Tube, Google Earth—there are many others that are not nearly as well known. From the 'neat little tricks' category (calculations, conversions, and definitions performed right in the search box), to services like Google Base, there are dozens of Google wallflowers that sit quietly by while their better-known siblings steal the show.

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864 pp.
\$34.99

Miller builds from the basics of search, discussing how to tweak searches for better results, how to search for financial data, find people, and so on. From there he moves up to special search features and tools—maps, Gmail, blogging, and then to the more developed services like You Tube and Google Docs. Along the way, he showcases the strengths of each, but doesn't hold his tongue where he feels criticism is due.

One case where you can see this is with Gmail—Google's spectacularly successful free email service. Though Miller heaps praise on its 2.8 gigabytes of storage per account, its grouping of messages by conversation, and other plusses (Gmail generally scores high on usability issues), he takes Google to task on Gmail's inability to organize mail by folders (the search-not-sort paradigm). He repeats this in almost every chapter, praising the good, pointing out flaws. In *Should You Use Google Docs & Spreadsheets?* (p. 645), he provides a simple list of reasons why these apps may or may not serve the reader well.

Those in Technical Communications will find many of the reference and research tips quite handy. Chapters 7, 8, and 9 address searching for scholarly information, specialty information, and definitions, respectively. From using 'what is' and 'define' to find words and definitions, to performing patent searches, to locating material in academic publications, the reader will find Miller a seasoned guide. As ever, though, he offers a warning. In this case, it is that Google is merely a search site, and in using it you are relying on third-party information for whose accuracy Google will not vouch.

To the bottom line, then. Should you read "Googlepedia: The Ultimate Google Resource?" If you make regular use of any of Google's services (of which space constraints allow only a handful to be mentioned here), you could either find the information through careful, dedicated research, and print or bookmark your results—or you could keep this excellent, 864-page reference within reach. ♦

Chris Masotti

September Meeting Report

Staff

At the September meeting, Karl Palachuk presented his Relax, Focus, Succeed (RFS) program, in which he emphasized the role self-reflection plays in success. Karl conducted some exercises to illustrate how a single term (*success*, or *work*, for example) can be defined in a different way by every person in a room, and how important it is for each of us to take the time to realize what it is he wants from life.

Where many self-help programs stress the importance of action in achieving goals, Karl's RFS concept encourages us to relax, finding time to sit in silence every day to consider what's truly important to us.

Karl has authored several books for technical consultants, including "The Network Documentation Workbook" and "Service Agreements for SMB Consultants." His first non-technical book, entitled "Relax Focus Succeed," was published in 2007. This latest book is the basis of his RFS presentation.

Learn more about Karl's work at www.relaxfocussucceed.com. ♦

Area Events

10/10/2007

Using DITA with FrameMaker, with Scott Prentice

In this presentation you'll see the whole process of authoring and publishing DITA using FrameMaker, as well as the differences between Frame 7.2 and Frame 8.0. You'll see how to efficiently use DITA maps to generate different books that share common topics, in addition to using conrefs to reuse content within topics. You'll also see how quick and easy it is to generate various types of output using the Open Toolkit as well as building a traditional "Frame" book and generating a PDF through FrameMaker.

Santa Rosa

Information:

<http://www.stc-northbay.org/nextmeeting.php>

**10/22 -
10/25/2007**

Voices That Matter: Web Design Conference

You've read their books. Now grab the chance to listen to, learn from and mingle with your favorite New Riders authors and the most respected professionals in the Web design industry at Voices That Matter: Web Design, a conference hosted by New Riders.

San Francisco

Information:

<http://www.voicesthatmatter.com/webdesign2007>

10/24/2007

e-Workshop: Making Procedures Work!

Ineffective—or non-existent—procedures can lead to mistakes and performance errors, poor product quality, failed audits, fines for noncompliance, a swamped help desk, and high stress and low morale. What can writers do to improve their procedures and avoid painful business problems?

In this e-Workshop, participants will discuss why procedures are a problem in many organizations, take the first steps toward improving the effectiveness of their procedures, and apply a checklist to identify their procedure problems.

Information:

www.infomap.com

10/27/2007

ActionScript 3.0: From the Ground Up Tour

Based on Moock's best-selling Essential ActionScript 3.0 (O'Reilly, 2007), this one-day event covers the fundamental skills you need to program for Flash Player and Adobe AIR. Topics covered include object-oriented programming, classes, objects, variables, methods, packages, conditionals, loops, operators, functions, event handling, displaying things on screen, and compiling and running programs.

Whether you're a new Flash developer or just looking to formalize your ActionScript 3.0 knowledge, you'll leave the day invigorated with new ideas and equipped to face new challenges.

San Francisco

Information:

<http://www.adobeas3tour.com/>

Area Events

11/1/2007

What's New in Adobe Publishing Tools? with Max Dunn

A recent flurry of updates to Adobe publishing tools gives savvy technical writers many opportunities to expand their creativity and their productivity. Learn about the new capabilities of two of these essential publishing applications, FrameMaker 8 and InDesign CS3.

Danville

Information:

<http://ebstc.org/chapter-meetings.html>

11/8 – 11/9/2007

6Sight The Future of Imaging Conference: Mikkel Aaland

What Happens When A Billion People Worldwide Become Equipped With The Tools Of Visual Communication?

In the past four years the number of cameras in people's hands worldwide has increased by 600%. It will double again over the next five years. Total number of cameras of all kinds sold in 2000: 85 Million units. Projected 2008 sales: One Billion units. Pervasive, web-connected imaging and the explosion of user-generated visual content are transforming how we communicate with each other in our personal, work, and community lives.

Monterey

Information:

http://www.pmai.org/index.cfm/ci_id/33544.htm

11/14/2007

Using Learning Objects to Manage and Reuse Learning Content, with Ray Eisenberg and David Sanchez

This presentation focuses on how Autodesk has adopted a strategy to facilitate the efficient development, modification, and reuse of learning materials using a single-source asset-based approach to content development and delivery. Using a learning content management system (LCMS) and a learning object approach based on information mapping principles, the presentation shows how Autodesk has been able to meet the demands of its over 6 million user customer base and deliver content to multiple constituents, in multiple languages, in different modalities from a single source repository.

Berkeley

Information:

<http://www.stc-berkeley.org/Home/index.shtml>

Treasurer's Report

Robyn Adams

Members Only: The balance sheet and profit & loss statement are available in their entirety at our Yahoo Group (http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Sac_STC).

Next STC Sacramento Meeting: Wednesday, October 17, 2007

Speaker: R. D. (Ron) Barnes

Author R. D. (Ron) Barnes will demonstrate the use of PowerPoint 2003 to create a promotional "book trailer" featuring still photos and audio. Ron's book trailer introduces his recent urban folklore fiction collection, "Mind Shadows," an appropriate choice for the Halloween season. Ron will discuss the techniques used to promote his "Stephen-King-meets-Rod-Serling" style fiction and share something of the personal background that led to his style and stories. Technical communicators will enjoy a distinctive view of how the widely used PowerPoint may be adapted to promote the written word.

About Ron (R. D.) Barnes

Ron (R. D.) Barnes is a budding fiction author, poet, musician, itinerant minister and award winning Toastmaster in the Sacramento area. He is also a 17-year state worker, currently employed as a Business Services Assistant with the California State Library. His first book, "Mind Shadows: Tales That Awaken Your Midnight Dreams," is a polished collection of urban tales and novellas birthed from the family story-telling sessions of his childhood. Ron currently lives in the Rosemont area of Sacramento with his 7-year-old son, Raymond.

Free to STC Sacramento chapter members

Free to first-time visitors and Friends of STC, \$5 for non-members

Place: [Coco's Bakery and Restaurant, 7887 Madison Avenue, Citrus Heights](#)

Networking/No-host dinner: 6:00 pm, **Presentation:** 7:00 pm

Info: http://stcsacramento.org/03_Meetings.htm