



Sound Views

The Newsletter of the Puget Sound Chapter of STC

Technical Writing as Seen from the Eyes of Several Professionals, part 1

By Robert Reynolds

I interviewed various technical writers who work in different industries to talk about their routines, specialized training and long-term outlook. As I compiled a list of potential interviewees from my fellow STC members, I realized the "writer" title was simply too narrow a term.

As the web has evolved into a wide variety of functions and web-based applications, the technical writing industry has similarly changed. From writing print manuals, we have expanded into a smorgasbord of niches, some traditional and others less so. That software update, prescription drug, or revamped financial statement may have a blog, FAQ sheet, white paper, and localization support associated with it.

So the sample set in this series isn't limited to "writers." Among other titles, editors and localization experts are included.

For this issue, we will profile writers in the travel, medical devices, and localization

niches. **Gene Openshaw** is co-author of seven of the Rick Steves travel guidebooks and contributes to other books in the series, as well as to Rick's PBS travel show and audio guide podcasts. **Mary Dulin** made the change from computer programmer to technical writer in 1997. She is currently employed at Physio-Control where she is a Principal Technical Writer. **Joel Petersen** worked in Japan for several years for a Japanese government-sponsored program known as the Jet Programme where he helped create publications for the program's participants. Upon moving to Seattle, his language skills helped him land a job at Nintendo of

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At The Next Chapter Meeting: Tuesday, November 18, 2008

- Topic: A Microsoft View of Terminology Best Practices
- Presenter: Panel
- Time: 6:00-6:45 PM: Networking and Buffet
6:45-7:00 PM: Announcements
7:00-8:15 PM: Presentation
8:15 PM: Informal Q&A
- Location: [Coast Hotel](#) - Bellevue, Washington
- Registration: [Register online](#) or call 206-623-8632 by 10:00 AM, November 17
- Cost: \$10 for members; \$15 for non-members; \$5 for students

From the President

By Mike Brazill

As I write this, it seems that we are in danger of living out the ancient curse "may you live in interesting times." Although I'm not looking forward to interesting times for our economy, on a positive note, I am excited about the interesting things that our chapter is doing this fall! We have added two committees, our peer review is in full swing, and an enthusiastic group of volunteers are continuing to support our community in a variety of ways.



Mike Brazill with speaker, Nabil Freij, at the October 28 meeting

New committee chairs come on board

I'm very happy to welcome the new Employment and Virtual Technologies committee chairs that have joined our leadership council this fall.

Our new Employment committee co-chairs, Jorja Gunderson and Nancy Carver, have our job site up and running again! We have been accepting jobs from employers since September. In my latest check on the site, I counted over 25 jobs that were posted within the last two weeks. The Employment committee is also looking into other ways to help our community explore opportunities and find work, including sponsoring a job fair and job discussion groups.

As chair of our new Virtual Technologies committee, Eric Sakshaug is finding ways to serve remote members and make content more widely available. He plans to publish slides and podcasts of our chapter seminars along with speaker interviews. He is also investigating other ways to add value to our community through virtual technology.

The peer review

The peer review is also in full swing this fall. Joe Welinske and the Peer Review team have been very busy soliciting and evaluating entries for our Art, Online, and Technical Publications reviews. With approximately 75 volunteers working on tasks such as judging, entry qualification, event planning, and promotion, we are looking forward to another successful peer review this year.

Volunteers

I'm very pleased with the number and quality of our volunteers this year. Their efforts make our chapter a valuable and reliable resource for anyone in the Puget Sound technical communication field. And just as importantly, they are having fun doing it! If you want to make new friends in our field, learn some new skills, and contribute to the community, volunteering at STC is a great way to do it. And we always welcome new volunteers. If you're interested, drop me a line at president@stc-psc.org.

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Book Review:

Microsoft 2.0: How Microsoft Plans to Stay Relevant in the Post-Gates Era

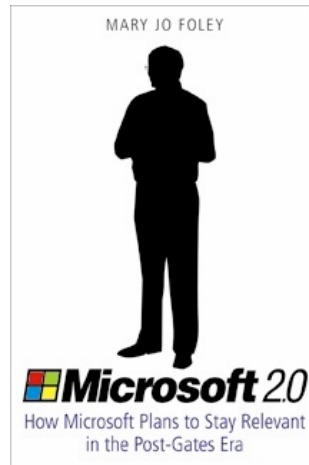
Reviewed by David Kowalsky

On June 27, 2008, Chairman Bill Gates ended his long run at Microsoft to focus more on work at his Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. *Microsoft 2.0: How Microsoft Plans to Stay Relevant in the Post-Gates Era*, is Mary Jo Foley's ambitious new book on the past, the present, and lots of thinking about Microsoft's future.

Foley, a freelance journalist, has been covering the tech industry for 25 years and is currently the writer of ZDNet's "All about Microsoft" blog

(<http://www.blogs.zdnet.com/microsoft>).

She calls the term Microsoft 2.0 her "Shorthand for the next chapter(s) in Microsoft's history. Microsoft 2.0 implies the new, Web 2.0-centric Microsoft. It also encompasses all the other non-Web-2.0 products, services, strategies, and technologies that will carry Microsoft into the coming decades (12)."



After an introduction and recap of the Gates era, the book devotes a chapter to buzzwords (eXperiences, common code-base, interoperable, and S+S [Software + a Service]) and then attempts a Microsoft 2.0 "Who's Who." The major conclusion: "Microsoft's future leadership story is rather murky right now (93)."

The next two chapters are titled "Products on the Near-Term Radar Screen" and "Big Bet Products." A key point:

"In spite of the current services emphasis across all Microsoft divisions, including the Windows client one, Windows software isn't going away. For the next few years – maybe longer – Microsoft will continue to make client-based Windows software the centerpiece of its product family (102)."

From a "bottom line" summary, a main point was that Microsoft is not afraid of taking on investments that

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Editor's Corner

By Mary Corder

One of the most appealing things about the technical communication field is that it is a growing one that also spans a variety of job roles and industries. The STC website notes that its membership is comprised of

"technical writers and editors, content developers, documentation specialists, technical illustrators, instructional designers, academics, information architects, usability and human factors professionals, visual designers, Web designers and developers, and translators—anyone whose work makes technical information available to those who need it."

Technical communicators typically specialize in a specific industry, often based on their interest and educational background, such as manufacturing, information technology, agriculture, telecommunications, health care and management, biotechnology, and pharmaceuticals. In this issue of *Sound Views*, you can learn more about three technical communicators in different industries in part one of a two-part series entitled, "Technical Writing as Seen from the Eyes of Several Professionals." Be sure to look for part two in the January/February 2009 issue of *Sound Views* to learn about more technical communicators in the Puget Sound region.

As always, I welcome any newsletter articles, suggestions, or ideas you have for making *Sound Views* even better. Feel free to send me your newsletter articles and feedback at newsletter@stc-psc.org.

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America where he has continued to develop his localization and technical writing skills.

A Day in the Life

The three professionals are varied in their daily responsibilities. Gene writes about art, history and culture for travelers. Mary's work with medical devices involves troubleshooting FrameMaker issues in existing documents, incorporating redlines from subject matter experts (SMEs), creating new documents, and working with translation firms. Joel works in product manufacturing processes, quality control and repair, and spends a great deal of time proofing and editing localization content for accuracy and readability.

Also varied are their typical daily routines:

Gene: I have two typical days. A couple of months a year I travel to Europe on research, where a typical day involves visiting museums, churches, castles, neighborhood walks, etc., to update information and check out new things. I confirm current hours and prices, and check out new paintings, statues, and sights. Since this in-Europe time is at a premium, I sightsee by day, then work at night in the hotel room with my laptop.

Back home, I have an office at Europe Through the Back Door where I do most of the writing. I do research on the Habsburgs, Picasso, Roman sewer systems, the Byzantine Empire, the geologic layers of the Acropolis -- whatever information travelers may find interesting. I'm lucky to be able to do this work and get paid for it.

Mary: As the lone staff writer at Physio-Control, I am defining the tech comm style and processes for the company. This position requires a lot less writing and a lot more massaging content than in my previous positions. Much of the content is dictated by regulatory agencies such as the FDA and by internal subject matter experts, so my job is to update existing documents to meet the latest requirements and to ensure that revised documents are translated appropriately.

Joel: Typically, I review what new documentation has been released overnight from our parent company and then prioritize and assign localization and/or writing work appropriately. The remainder of my day is spent

editing, translating, or authoring content, depending upon the demands of the day.

Writing teams are small in this sample. Gene's travel writing team consists of ten people, eight writers/editors and two map/graphics people. Although Mary mentioned that she is the lone staff writer at her firm, she hires contract writers as needed. Joel has two direct reports, but he also works closely with engineers who also author content related to manufacturing engineering.

The frequency of cycles is surprisingly varied. At Rick Steves, March-October is the heavy writing season when researchers travel to Europe and send back their content. In the office, the editors try to get everything to the publisher by autumn to get the new editions into the stores by the December holidays, so this is a pretty consistent pattern. In the medical device industry, existing documents require frequent updates to meet new regulatory requirements and/or product changes, which can occur anytime from once to many times a year. At Joel's firm, the life cycle of a typical product is more than one year, and the documentation that is localized or written tends to follow the product's life cycle.

Skill Sets and Tools

As job requirements are constantly evolving, we talked a little bit about skill sets, tools to know, and supplemental training specific to the niches in this sample.

For the travel industry, travel experience is key. Even if the job only entails editing a researcher's words, it's extremely helpful to have been to the place that is being written up. It clears up many possible misunderstandings. As far as researching goes, it's quite physically and mentally demanding. When you're on a schedule, there's lots of walking by day and writing by night, which can be grueling even for the young and fit.

In the medical device industry, an important asset is the ability to work in a highly regulated environment, to ensure that all defined procedures are followed.

From a localization perspective, a familiarity with the language of the source information is very helpful, and from a manufacturing perspective, a high aptitude for

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About Sound Views

Sound Views is published for members of the Puget Sound Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication.

Managing Editor

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Kassie Koledin
 David Kowalsky
 Robert Reynolds

Submissions

All members are welcome to submit articles, comments, and letters. Articles must address topics of interest to technical communicators, especially to those in the Puget Sound region of Washington.

Send articles in Word (doc), Rich-Text Format (RTF), or ASCII (txt) formats to the Managing Editor (newsletter@stc-psc.org). Accompanying graphics or photos should be provided as separate files.

The editorial staff reserves the right to edit letters and articles for length and clarity.

The submission deadline for the next issue of *Sound Views* is December 15, 2008.

Reprints

You may reprint original material appearing in *Sound Views* as long as you acknowledge the source and send a copy of the reprint to the Managing Editor.

For more information about the Puget Sound Chapter of STC, visit the website at www.stc-psc.org.

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Board Member Interview: Charlie Kyle

Interview by Kassie Koledin

What is your official position on the STC Board?

My official position is Web Services Manager.

What are your official duties as a member of the board?

My duties include officiating as chairman of the Website Committee, which has four members. We're presently trying to determine a direction for the website. Previously the website was based on Plone, a web content management system, which was run and maintained by three or four volunteers who were experienced with Plone. However, these volunteers eventually left to do other things and the website stopped working.

The Association for Services, Inc., an organization that works with professional organizations on websites and Mike Brazil then put up a quick and dirty website. However, this website is not as easy for employment agencies and members to post job openings. We need more direction from members as to whether to continue with this website or to go back to the Plone website.

How long have you been in this position? How long have you been a member of STC?

I have been a board member since mid-August 2008. I joined STC in 1980 because at that time, technical writing was a new thing in the world of computers and documentation. I had a lot of questions about how to document, how to be a technical writer. Technical writing classes were available, but there were not college degree programs. So I became involved with STC for professional development and to get trained as a technical writer.

What is your job/career outside of STC?

I have been working for the last three to four years as a contract technical writer for Attachment. Before this, I did contract work for Motorola and Pfizer. If you ask what my specialty is, I'd have to say online help. That's really what I enjoy doing. Lately I've been trying to gain more skills in web design and documentation.

Do you feel like the work you do with STC benefits your career in any way?

Working with STC does benefit my career and skills. When I took web development classes through University of Washington Extension, I didn't get a chance to use what I had learned until I became Web Services Manager for STC. I was one of the co-founders for the Spokane STC chapter and doing that gave me a lot of skills in administration and management.

What will you do to bring new things to the STC table?

One of the things I will be doing is to get feedback about our website options from user professionals. This week I will be going to Info Camp and

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may take as long as ten years to show a profit. Also key take-aways were that Microsoft is planning large Xbox investments over the next few years and looking into getting the Surface multi-touch technology into one or more consumer factors much faster than originally planned.

The final two chapters of the book examine the current and future revenue sources from which Microsoft will make billions, and what Foley calls "Untried but Unavoidable" business models Microsoft may adopt as the tech market changes. A paragraph that summarizes these chapters:

"Microsoft really needs to find a way to keep Windows and Office relevant as the notion of Web-ified, virtualized software and services take off in the coming decade. Microsoft needs to keep trying new avenues to find its way in the gaming, advertising, and mobile markets. It needs money and time – and those are things that only cash cows like Windows and Office can provide (167)."

Foley does not outright predict Microsoft's future. Instead, in the concluding chapter, for Microsoft 3.0 (a time-frame of the next decade or so), she takes a safer approach by doing things like explaining risk factors that could influence the future. Who and what was included? Chief Software Architect Ray Ozzie, CEO Steve Ballmer, Google, Apple, Adobe, Silverlight, Digital rights management (DRM), Internet Protocol Television

(IPTV), generation X/Y/Z, and the One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) generation.

Suggestions for improvement for a future paperback version of this book: remove the oversize callouts that are on almost every page. Include chapter summaries. Revise the parts that speculated about the Yahoo-Microsoft merger since at the time the book was written it was still a possibility, but now it is not.

Microsoft 2.0 is not going to have a lot of new information for people who already follow the news of the company very closely, but for others, it is recommended reading for the valuable insight into the technology strategy of arguably the world's most important software company.

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In *Microsoft 2.0*, Mary Jo Foley called Web 2.0 "one of the most overused and meaningless terms in the tech business." Okay, but aren't there still some books out there on Web 2.0-related topics worth reading?

My short list:

Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything. By Don Taps and Anthony D. Williams
Once You're Lucky, Twice You're Good: The Rebirth of Silicon Valley and the Rise of Web 2.0. By Sarah Lacy

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comprehending technical content related to manufacturing engineering is essential.

In all the medical, scientific, and engineering fields, you'll be working with engineers and other SMEs to understand technical concepts, and you're expected to work independently to retrieve necessary information. Other skills deemed critical to have are a proficiency with publishing tools, and an attention to detail.

The most commonly used tools in this sample were Adobe's products, as well as Microsoft Office:

- Adobe: FrameMaker, Acrobat, Photoshop, InDesign, Distiller,
- Microsoft Word and Excel
- Graphics software: Canvas
- Translator's Workbench by SDL International, and other translation memory tools.

Graphic skills would be very helpful for working on medical devices, but less so for localization or travel writing. Coding skills, although not required for writing, would be useful for development of tools to facilitate routine tasks.

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Training backgrounds were varied:

Gene: A well-rounded liberal arts education is necessary to write and edit material about Europe with its diverse languages, history, and culture.

Mary: I earned a certificate in technical writing and editing from the UW in 1996. Understanding the fundamentals of technical writing is essential – the ability to follow a style guide and write clearly, concisely, and consistently. Framemaker skills are essential in this position.

Joel: I took Japanese language classes, and trained using translation memory and current publishing tools for both paper and paperless content. Aside from living and working in Japan for some years to acquire my language skills, I have taught myself how to use these tools and refined my writing/localization skills while on the job.

Looking Ahead

Lastly, we discussed the short and long term outlook of a technical writer in the sample industry. Needless to say, everyone is feeling the effects of today's economic conditions to some degree:

Gene: Because so many people travel off their investments, in today's recession I'd expect the market to be slow for another year or two.

Mary: In general, medical devices are required to provide a certain amount of product documentation with each device, so the need for technical writers will continue. In these difficult economic times, employers are looking to cut costs, so there may be less need for contract writers in the coming months. Mergers and acquisitions may also eliminate some positions.

Joel: Given the latest economic challenges, I believe that most industries are shrinking to some degree. However, I believe that the video game industry is holding up reasonably well. As people strive to save their money, I believe that many people will view video games as a comparatively cheap alternative to other forms of entertainment.

The long term outlook, however, is more positive for all three disciplines. People will always travel, and

they'll always need information; the medical device industry will always have a need for technical writers due to regulatory requirements; and there will always be a demand for in-home entertainment options.

Lastly, I asked my participants to share any information about how they got into their niche, and any suggestions for new or job-seeking writers:

Gene: My career path took a turn when I was 13 years old in the junior high school cafeteria line and met a geeky fellow student named Rick Steves. We went on to backpack through Europe after high school, and Rick and I have collaborated on various projects ever since. I worked in the arts for many years, writing music. Eventually, I needed more financial security and benefits, which brought me back to ETBD. I feel fortunate to work in a place with many talented people, doing work that helps travelers expand their horizons.

Mary: I was a computer programmer for over ten years before becoming a technical writer. The understanding of programming concepts and the software development life cycle has been very helpful in all of my technical writing positions.

I became a full-time permanent technical writer at Medtronic/Physio-Control after working here as a contractor. STC is a great place to network. I've met lots of interesting folks at the monthly meetings, by participating in the annual peer review, and by volunteering on the STC board.

Joel: I found my current job because I was persistent in pursuing it. Having the skills on paper will get you in the door, communicating well will get you through the interview, and being pleasant, persistent and sensitive to the fact that everyone has a busy schedule will help them remember you and think of you as a potential colleague.

The next part of the series, with three more subjects, will appear in the next issue.

Robert Reynolds, a new STC member, transitioned into a technical writing career last winter. In his previous life, he worked as a software tester and before that, a landscape designer/environmental planner. He currently works at EDIFECS in Bellevue.

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plan to give a presentation on our current website situation with the hope that I will get some useful input as to what we can do. Another thing I am doing is trying to set up a wiki that STC chapter members could use to provide input.

What would you like to accomplish before stepping down as a board member?

I would like to pick a direction for the STC website that would be workable for the next two to three years.

What do you enjoy the most about STC?

I enjoy getting to know and work with other professionals who are dedicated to what they do. I used to work remotely, so I didn't have daily contact with other technical writers. I especially enjoy the people at STC. They are excited about their profession and looking to give back to the writing community. I find that very nourishing.

If you were to meet someone who was interested in filling your post next year on the STC Board, what kind of skills would you tell them he or she needed to have? What advice would you pass along to them?

Someone who is interested in filling my post next year would need to have a basic familiarity with website development as well as the capacity to enjoy collaborative work with other people. This STC chapter is definitely the place for you if you are looking to improve and practice your skills in a forgiving environment.

Kassie Koledin is a part-time student in the Technical Writing Program at Bellevue Community College. She is also a part-time medical records coder at Harborview Medical Center and the Everett Providence Medical Center. In her varied past, she has worked as a reporter, Social Security claims representative, and quality assurance as-

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