

Ragged Left

The newsletter for the
Berkeley Chapter of the
Society for Technical
Communication

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**Volume 22, Number 4
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April 8, 2009 Meeting Notes

Surviving the Recession: Meryl Natchez at STC Berkeley

Notes by J. Devney

"I grew my business by being paranoid about being unemployed." Meryl Natchez shared this and other bits of wisdom about building a business that has survived several recessions. Meryl is the founder of documentation consulting company TechProse, and she spoke to STC Berkeley in April on the topic of "How to Survive and Thrive in a Recession."

Meryl and TechProse have long been a part of the technical communication community in the Bay Area. Many of the attendees knew her personally, and some of the long-time chapter members recalled her last visit as a guest speaker more than ten years ago. Two attendees said that TechProse had gotten them work. (Full disclosure: I remember Meryl's last presentation, and I have worked for TechProse.) In this recent talk, Meryl addressed specifically the current economic situation, in which many chapter members are having trouble finding or keeping jobs.

She began with the story of how she started her consulting career. She took a risk. She quit a job she didn't like for a three-month contract. Then the contract fell through. Would she have been better off keeping the steady job? Maybe not. Her former employer laid off one-third of the staff the week after she left. Meryl explained the lesson she learned from this episode: "I didn't give up a secure job, I gave up the illusion of a secure job."

There seems to be a lot of insecurity in the workplace these days. For those people wondering if their current jobs are secure, Meryl offered some observations on what to watch for. Are there rumors flying about? Are the managers no longer walking the halls? Have they stopped giving straight answers? It might be time to look seriously elsewhere.

But don't wait for the telltale signs to start laying the groundwork for a job search. Meryl advises that you should always be networking. She began her networking in the technical communication field at the STC San Francisco meetings. Some of the attendees concurred, and added their own wisdom. Marla Wilson recommended joining professional organizations. Patrick Lufkin said that people might consider joining professional organizations for other fields. When another member needs a writer who knows the industry, they will already know about you.

And always remember that "nobody is too small to be nice to." Your reputation depends partly on how you treat people.

There are also steps you can take to increase your chances of being one of the survivors of a layoff, according to Meryl. Understand the status of a company in trouble, especially if you are a manager. That is, understand what your company's challenges are, and offer suggestions. For everyone, she suggests that you ask yourself, "how can I show that my contribution is valuable?" Let people know. Make the message "meaningful, not spurious." Don't just "hold onto the pole and do a good job."

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TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION is the bridge between those who create ideas and those who use them. Conveying scientific and technical information clearly, precisely, and accurately is an essential occupation in all sectors of business and government.

THE SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION (STC) has members worldwide. Its members include writers and editors, artists and illustrators, photographers and audiovisual specialists, managers and supervisors, educators and students, employees and consultants.

STC strives to:

- Advance the theory and practice of technical communication
- Promote awareness of trends and technology in technical communication
- Aid the educational and professional development of its members

MEMBERSHIP Membership is open to everyone. Classic membership is \$145/year with an additional \$15 enrollment fee. STC also offers Limited, E-Membership, and Student Membership options. To receive additional information and an application form via email:

- Send email to membership@stc-berkeley.org

INSURANCE Members of STC can apply for health, disability, and other insurance at STC group rates. For more information, contact STC office at stc@stc.org or (703) 522-4114.

WORLDWIDE ACTIVITIES STC's annual conference brings together more than 2,000 technical communicators from around the world for educational programs, seminars, and workshops conducted by experts in the field. Annual conference: Dallas, Texas, May 2-5, 2010. In addition the STC sponsors many regional conferences, which feature the same sorts of programs, seminars, and workshops on a more intimate scale. STC sponsors international and regional competitions in all aspects of technical communication. STC Special Interest Groups (SIGs) bring together members with common experiences and interests to share their skills and knowledge. STC SIGs include:

- Academic
- AccessAbility
- Canadian Issues
- Consulting and Independent Contracting
- Emerging Technologies
- Environmental, Safety, and Health Communication
- Illustrators and Visual Designers
- Information Design and Architecture
- Instructional Design & Learning
- International Technical Communication
- Lone Writer
- Management
- Marketing Communication
- Online
- Policies and Procedures
- Quality and Process Improvement
- Scientific Communication
- Single Sourcing
- Technical Editing
- Usability & User Experience

STC sponsors research grants and scholarships in technical communication. STC publishes the quarterly journal *Technical Communication*, the newsletter *Intercom*, and other periodicals, reference materials, manuals, anthologies, standards, and booklets.

Formed in 1953, STC has today become the largest professional society in the world dedicated to advancing the theory and practice of technical communication.

LOCAL ACTIVITIES The six northern California chapters of STC conduct a variety of individual and joint activities. See page 4 for contacts for these chapters. See page 5 for a list of other local organizations in which STC members may be interested.

SUBSCRIPTIONS This newsletter is free to members of the Berkeley chapter.

ADVERTISING RATES The *Ragged Left* is not accepting advertising at this time.

SUBMISSIONS *Ragged Left* publishes original articles and illustrations. We edit them to meet our needs. You retain copyright but grant every STC publication royalty-free permission to reproduce the article or illustration in print or any other medium. Please talk with the editor for details of how to submit articles and illustrations.

The deadline for unsolicited submissions is the last Friday of odd-numbered months.

Other STC publications are hereby granted permission to reprint articles from *Ragged Left*, provided such reprints credit the author and the specific *Ragged Left* issue, and a copy of any publication containing such a reprint is sent to the *Ragged Left* editor.



Unfortunately, said Meryl, technical writers don't think like this often enough. Richard Mateosian added the observation that "what we do doesn't add value. We have to align ourselves with the company vision." Meryl agrees. She's had many long discussions about where to put a comma: an important issue to another documentation person, but not to upper management, the people who make the important decisions about the company and about what happens to its employees.

If you are laid off, Meryl reminded the audience to put the event in perspective. "None of this is personal, and much of it is not intelligently done." In an interview for what might be your next job, the wrong thing to do is to complain that you were treated unfairly in the layoff.

Meryl had a few other helpful comments about the recession. In her opinion, "The dot-bomb was worse for our industry" than the current recession, so many audience members have already survived harder times in the job market. And the recession will come to an end at some point. She advises that you ask yourself where you want to be "on the other side of the dip" and plan accordingly.

If you are a business owner, "watch the numbers." Meryl says that in the "dot-bomb," she used what she had learned in the earlier recession. "The company is more important than any individual." This was a hard lesson to learn. She cut back "way before I needed to," in order to ensure the business's survival.

If you are a consultant, remember that you are the expert, and let your clients and potential clients know what skills you bring to the table.

And don't forget working with agencies, like TechProse. And help them out: Polishing your reputation as a cooperative person can help you, too. Agencies call their consultants and ask who's hiring. If you bring in a new client, you will go to the top of the agency's list.

The evening ended with a question-and-answer session. Judy Herr asked: "What

about people who don't know how much longer they want to work? How long does it take to build a business?" Meryl said that the better question is, "How much do you want to enjoy your work?" She says she loves TechProse, but "it's not my heart's work."

In response to a question about an older worker looking for a job: "I would focus on my expertise, not on my age." And related to that was a question about someone looking for part-time work. Meryl said, "Part-time work can be of value but nobody ever asks for it. Don't say 'part-time,' say 'extremely flexible.'" Linda Urban added, "focus on projects."

The final question of the evening was asked by EJ, Richard Mateosian's daughter. She noted that the evening's discussion had been aimed at people in mid-career. "What about young people?" EJ asked. Meryl told her that she should ask "How will your gears engage with the world? What do you love to do, and how can that become a career?" This is probably good advice for all of us.

Joe Devney has been a technical writer since the mid-1990s, and an active member of STC Berkeley almost as long, including three terms as chapter president. He has worked on two assignments for TechProse, several years apart. His most recent big project was not writing, but getting a master's degree in Linguistics at Georgetown University.

President's Notes

by Richard Mateosian

We don't yet know how the STC financial crisis will play itself out, but the Berkeley Chapter has done its small part to help. Recently we sent \$6,000.00 to headquarters to help us get past the immediate cash flow problem. Last spring we spent \$1,500.00 to help three chapter members attend the STC annual conference. This helped boost attendance to above the break-even point. Our chapter funds now total approximately \$5,500.00, and we don't expect to receive any income from STC membership renewals until January 2011. We need to be careful about spending, but we should be able to continue our usual activities without significant changes.

Near the end of last year, we introduced

Continued on next page



recession pricing for our meetings. This represents a drastic cut from our earlier pricing, which was designed to make meetings pay for themselves. We know that many of us are financially strapped, and we want to make it easier for all of us to stay connected. We want to continue recession pricing, but it will have to increase a little, because we are losing more on each meeting than our limited reserves can support. The greater the attendance at each meeting, the smaller the necessary price rise. Starting this month we will no longer send postcards announcing our meetings. This will save us approximately \$3.00 per meeting attendee each month, based on our current average attendance of a little more than 20. You can check our website (www.stc-berkeley.org) for meeting information and sign up there for email announcements.

Things will get better financially, but our profession will change. The plain vanilla tech writer jobs that were so plentiful in the late 1990s will not come back. Firms have found other approaches to – and less expensive sources for – what people in those jobs used to provide. I recommend that you download Andrew Davis' notes on that subject from <http://tinyurl.com/lp2j9u>. Because of his 15 years at the head of Synergistech, Andrew is in an excellent position to advise us. We should listen to what he has to say.

Other STC chapters in Northern California

East Bay: www.ebstc.org

North Bay: www.stc-northbay.org

Sacramento: www.stcsacramento.org

San Francisco: www.stc-sf.org

Silicon Valley: www.stc-siliconvalley.org

Software Localization Practices and Issues

Presentation by Bing Hong of OSIsoft, Inc.; notes by Nicki Davis

Bing Hong of OSIsoft, Inc. in San Leandro spoke about localizing software and documentation.

First, some terminology:

Internationalization (I18n) is the process of making a software application language-neutral. Once the source code is language-neutral, you can localize the application into any language.

Localization (L10n) opens up opportunities in international markets; government regulations often require it, and bidding checklists often include language support and character set support. Asian markets are particularly sensitive to language. They expect localized training, technical support, and documentation.

OSIsoft provides software products in English, French, Spanish, German, Simplified Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese (Brasileiro), and Russian.

Software is easier to localize if you internationalize the source code. In the past, OSIsoft created an English version of its software and then localized it into each target language. Developers had to rebuild the binary for each language, and each binary had to be tested separately. This approach became impractical as the number of supported languages grew. OSIsoft solved this problem by internationalizing its software. It now provides a language-neutral binary with language packs for the supported languages. Users choose the desired language when they install the software. The language-neutral binary needs to be built and tested only once for each release, and all localized products have the same functionality and look-and-feel.

Localization is more than just translation. Programs like TRADOS can be used to auto-



mate translation, but the process is far from simple. For example, an expression such as “Chapter 1” must be rendered as “1 Chapter” when translated into Chinese. Localization testing ensures that software is correctly localized into different languages.

Guidelines for software developers (and for writers of user assistance) when working with localized software:

- Don't hard-code UI strings. Put localizable strings such as menus, dialog boxes, and error messages into resource files for translation.
- Make font sizes variable. Localization engineers might need to customize the font size to make the text fit.
- Leave plenty of room on dialog boxes, text frames, and controls. A good rule of thumb: Localized text increases the number of characters by 30%. If the number of characters in the English text is less than 10, allow more space.

Guidelines for technical writers:

- Avoid sensitive areas such as culture-specific examples, gender-specific references, political symbols, and so on.
- Remember that you are twice-removed from international users: Author > translator > customer.
- When designing documentation, consider that customers usually meet your English product first. They expect the localized product to have the same look and feel.
- Standardize document design so that organization of content is predictable. Modular content helps.
- Pre-translate key terms, industry lingo, and unique usage.
- When writing documentation, ask yourself: Is this comprehensible to a foreign language speaker who is technical, but not an expert? Can my foreign language customer find the information they need once this is translated?
- Simplicity is best. Use short, declarative sentences. Avoid jargon and acronyms.
- Conceptual diagrams can transcend language barriers. However, avoid embedded text in graphics. Embedded text makes graphics more difficult to localize.

- Screen shots need to be localized into every language, so use them only when they add value.
- Documentation length and complexity geometrically increase costs, schedule, and logistics, so be brief.

In case you're wondering about the abbreviations I18n and L10n, the numbers represent the number of characters between the first and last letters of the word.

Nicki Davis is a Senior Technical Writer at OSIsoft, Inc. in San Leandro and is the Treasurer of the Berkeley Chapter of STC.

Web usability column

Usability... in use.

by Eric Hughes, Managing Director, Simplexity, LLC

Eric Hughes' column on usability will return in October.

Other Organizations

American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) of Northern California. Meets periodically at various Bay Area locations. www.amwancal.org

American Society for Training and Development, Mount Diablo Chapter. Meets monthly in Danville. <http://mtdiabloastd.org/>.

American Society of Indexers, Golden Gate Chapter. www.asindexing.org/site/chapters.shtml#golden

Association for Women in Computing, San Francisco Bay Area chapter — www.awc-sf.org/

International Association of Business Communicators, San Francisco chapter. A network of professionals committed to improving the effectiveness of organizations through strategic interactive and integrated business communication management — <http://sf.iabc.com/>

National Writers Union (UAW). A labor union for freelance writers of all genres. — www.nwu.org

Northern California Science Writers' Association. Quarterly meetings & other events. www.ncswa.org



STC News

Increase your network and net worth—join STC today!

<http://www.stc.org>

The Society for Technical Communication (STC) advances the theory and practice of technical communication across all user abilities and all media. For more information about STC, send an e-mail to stc@stc.org or visit www.stc.org.

Chapter News

Leadership Positions Available

We are looking to fill several leadership positions! Contact Richard Mateosian if you are interested. See <http://www.stc-berkeley.org/VolunteerOpportunities/volunteer.shtml> for a list of open positions.

Meetings

Our chapter holds a dinner meeting the second Wednesday of each month. See *Berkeley STC Meeting Location and Directions* on page 8.

Upcoming Meetings

Forensic Linguistics: Real-Life “CSI” with Word People

by Joseph J. Devney, M.A.

Wednesday, September 9, 2009, 6-9:30pm

Highlands Country Club

110 Hiller Drive, Oakland, California

Program

Ransom notes, terrorist threats, stalker letters...the language used in these documents can give clues about their authors. Forensic linguists apply linguistic analysis to legal documents of all types, and work both with lawyers and law enforcement. This presentation will focus specifically on analysis of written evidence—criminal or potentially criminal communications—using real-life examples. Learn about what the language used in the document can tell us about its author, and the techniques used to find those clues.

Speaker

Joe Devney is a “word person” himself. He has been a Bay Area technical writer (and STC member) for many years, but his lifelong interest in language is now taking him in a new direction. He took a sabbatical to earn a Master’s degree in Linguistics, and found out about the fascinating field of Forensic Linguistics.

You may know Joe from his STC activities. He was president of Berkeley STC for three one-year terms, and has served as a judge for technical communication competitions at both the local and international levels.



Ten Legal Tips for Current and Would-be Independent Contractors

by Dana H. Shultz

Wednesday, October 14, 2009, 6-9:30pm

Highlands Country Club
110 Hiller Drive, Oakland, California

Program

Working as an independent contractor can be exciting, challenging, and gratifying, all at the same time. Yet, before proceeding down that path, technical communicators should make sure that they are not exposing themselves to legal risks unnecessarily.

This program will help you identify and avoid those risks. Examples of what you will learn include:

- How to choose the right type of legal entity (sole proprietorship, corporation or limited liability company)
- How to identify and protect your intellectual property
- How to collaborate with other service providers
- How to distinguish independent contractors from employees

Speaker

Dana Shultz is a business-savvy licensing and intellectual property attorney with in-depth knowledge of law, business and technology. Dana provides legal services to startup and early-stage companies and, on occasion, to individuals who provide their professional services as independent contractors. He publishes the High-touch Legal Services Blog at <http://danashultz.com/blog/>.

Meeting/Dinner Prices

Special Recession Pricing

Reserve in advance

First timers: Meeting only or dinner free!

STC members and students:

Meeting only free, dinner \$5.00

Non-members:

Meeting only \$10.00, dinner \$18.00.

No advance reservation

STC members and students:

Meeting only \$5.00

Dinner (if available) \$10.00

Non-members:

Meeting only \$15.00

Dinner (if available) \$21.00

Special cost notes:

- Non-members are always welcome to STC meetings at the non-member rates.
- All members of the San Francisco Chapter of the IABC are welcome to register for Berkeley STC General Meetings at the member price by midnight on the day before the meeting.

Meeting Agenda

-
- 6-7pm Check-in, networking, conversation, and dinner.
- 7:00 - Chapter business, announcements, and introductions. Anyone can announce jobs that they know about.*
- 7:15 - Formal program. Usually we have a speaker or panel of speakers on a topic related to the business or technology of technical communication.
- 8:30pm - Conversation, offline questions for the speaker, follow-up on job announcements
- 8:30 - Clear the room. Move conversations to the sidewalk.

* **Attendees**, please announce open positions, and bring job listings for distribution.

Recruiters are welcome to attend meetings, place literature on a designated table, and talk with attendees one-on-one during the informal parts of the meeting. We ask them not to announce specific jobs during the formal announcement period, but they are free to stand up and identify themselves.

Similarly, we ask anyone else with commercial announcements to confine themselves to calling attention to the availability of literature on the designated table.



Berkeley STC Meeting Location and Directions

Highlands Country Club

110 Hiller Drive

Oakland, California

Information at <http://www.stc-berkeley.org/MonthlyMeeting/directions.shtml>

View from the Highlands Country Club

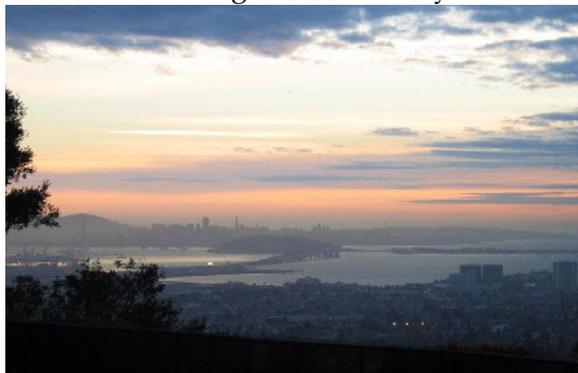


Photo courtesy of Rhonda Bracey

By Car

From San Francisco

Cross the Bay Bridge to I-580 Eastbound. Remain in the right lane, until Highway 24 Eastbound (toward Berkeley and Walnut Creek). Continue eastbound until the Tunnel Road off-ramp. Exit will loop around to the west, crossing back over Highway 24. Turn left at the stop sign. Follow Tunnel Road/Caldecott Lane to traffic signal. Veer to the right, and follow Hiller Drive halfway up the hill. Highlands Country Club will be on the right-hand side of the street.

From Walnut Creek

Take Highway 24 Westbound through the Caldecott Tunnel. Stay in the right-hand lane, taking the first exit after the tunnel ends, the Tunnel Road exit, going towards Berkeley. Follow Tunnel Road to the complex intersection and stop light, at Tunnel Drive, Hiller Drive, and Highway 13. Veer to the right, and continue halfway up the hill on Hiller Drive. Highlands Country Club is on the right-hand side of the street.

From I-80 and Berkeley

Take Ashby Avenue to the Highway 13 exit. Ashby becomes Tunnel Road at the Claremont Hotel. Continue on Tunnel Road (through the split-level section) to the stoplight just before the Highway 24 overcrossing. Remain in the left lane and make a sharp left U-turn around the Firestorm Memorial Garden, on to Hiller Drive. Continue halfway up the hill. Highlands Country Club will be on the right-hand side of the street.

From Hayward

Take I-580 Westbound to Highway 13 north. Continue on Highway 13 past the overcrossing of Highway 24. At the stoplight, turn right, then left, onto Hiller Drive. Continue halfway up the hill. Highlands Country Club will be on the right-hand side of the street.

Parking

Please park on the street. The club's parking lot is for members only.

Public Transit

Prefer to take BART? The Rockridge station is closest. Send email to president@stc-berkeley.org to ask about transportation from BART to the meeting.

AC Transit bus E from SF via MacArthur then Rockridge takes you as far as Tunnel Road & Roble Road, with a half mile walk uphill on Hiller Drive to the Hillside Country Club.