



# Boston Broadside

The Boston Chapter Newsletter

January/February 2010

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## President's Message

By Arun Jain



Ladies and Gentlemen:

On behalf of the STC- Boston, I want to wish you a happy and prosperous new year!

I know that last year has been a tough year for many of our members, and the employment environment is still challenging. But we see signs of stabilizing and are very hopeful that things will pick up in 2010.

Our main focus remains on bringing you programs on technologies and skills that you need to be successful as technical communicators. Rick Lippincott and the Program Committee are working hard to put these together, and you can get more information on our [Web site](#).

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## Eternal Truths: Getting and Keeping Jobs

By Cheryl Landes

You received the call—an interview for that dream job. You arrive at your appointment on time, dressed professionally, with copies of your resume and portfolio in hand. You're prepared to answer every question thrown at you and, at the end, it seems that everything went well.

Now you're waiting by the phone, expecting a call that says, "You're hired!" But it never comes. You're feeling as though you were dumped by a suitor ready to propose to you.

### What Happened?

Well, maybe something was missing; an eternal truth that should prevail throughout the job search and your employment at any company, according to Karen Burns, author of *The Amazing Adventures of Working Girl*. There's no magic formula; in fact, it's much simpler. It involves a shift in thinking.

### The eternal truth: Instead of focusing on yourself, focus on the company's needs.

"Yes, it's really that simple," Burns said during the August meeting of the *Career Exploration SIG* in Redmond, Washington, sponsored by the Puget Sound Chapter of the American Society for Training and Development.

Once you're hired, staying focused on your employer's problems, wants, and needs is also the key to keeping a job. "It's not always successful," Burns said, "but it works most of the time."



It's also important to determine how your position fits into the company's "bigger picture." How does your role help the company achieve its mission and objectives? How does your work contribute to the company's bottom line—in other words, help it make money? When you can answer these questions, you fully understand your role in the company and how your contributions can help it to be successful.

"Don't think of the job as yours," she cautioned. "Think of it as something your employer hires you to do."

Burns's book chronicles her experiences throughout her career, which started as a babysitter at age 13. Since then, she has held 59 jobs (a varied mix of contract and regular, full-time positions), 43 of which she landed through networking. "Networking," she says, "is the most effective way to get a job."

Burns's positions ranged from a public relations account executive to teaching French military officers to speak English with a lisp (the lisp wasn't intended, she admits). Each of her jobs is described in separate chapters in her book, accompanied by a lesson she learned from it. She calls her lessons "eternal truths."

Her top ten eternal truths are (in ascending order):

- 10) Things seem impossible only until you do them.
- 9) If you don't ask for something, you will never get it.
- 8) Make friends before you need them.
- 7) The farther out of your comfort zone you leap, the more people will step forward to catch you.

*Eternal Truths, continued on page 2*

If you have not done so already, it is time to renew your membership. For any membership-related questions, feel free to contact me or Bill Gruener, our Membership Chair.

We are still looking to fill the position of Second Vice President for STC-Boston. This is a progressive path that leads to becoming the President of the Chapter. You will learn a lot about how to run a large chapter and pick up organizational and people skills that will help you everywhere.

Feel free to contact me anytime at [president@stcboston.org](mailto:president@stcboston.org) or (978) 852-7019.

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## Middlesex Community College: Writing Technical Information Certificate

*MCC's 125-hour Writing Technical Information Certificate is a career enhancement opportunity for individuals who have well-developed writing skills and want to improve their effectiveness in communicating technical information. Classes run one night per week (Thursdays 5:45–9:45 p.m.) and one Saturday (9 a.m.–5 p.m.) per semester. Courses are not eligible for waivers or vouchers.*

### Authoring and Distributing Technical Documents

**Description:** Are you responsible for writing technical documents? Do you want to learn how to author and distribute usable information using the industry's standard tools? Join us for this 15-week course and learn the introductory skills needed to make information usable, create books and PDF files using Adobe FrameMaker, design a Web page, create an online help system, and convert HTML to XML. Well-developed writing and computer skills, plus familiarity with technical documentation are recommended for this course.

**Winter/Spring 2010:** Thursday nights: February 25–June 3, 2010; one Saturday class: May 15, 2010 (9–5)

**Time:** 5:45–9:45p.m.

**Location:** 591 Springs Road, Bedford, MA

**Tuition:** \$1,499

**Instructor:** Andrew Harrington

**Application deadline:** February 16, 2010

- 6) Authority isn't given to you; it comes from you.
- 5) It's the stuff you don't do that you regret the most.
- 4) Believing you know it all is a sure sign of ignorance.
- 3) How you actually do your work is as important as the actual work you do.
- 2) Life is supposed to be a little bit dangerous.
- 1) It's never too late to be the person you were meant to be.

### Author's Bio

*Cheryl Landes, an award-winning technical writer and STC Associate Fellow, is the owner of Tabby Cat Communications in Seattle. She has more than 18 years of experience as a technical writer in several industries: computer software, marine transportation, manufacturing, and the trade press. She is a member of the American Society for Indexing (ASI) Board of Directors and is active in STC on the chapter and international levels. She speaks frequently at STC and ASI meetings throughout the United States and Canada.*

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## Studies Find “Gaming the System” Hampers Learning

*By Cheryl Landes*

Can students finish online tutorials successfully but not learn the content? While that question may seem strange, the answer is actually “yes,” thanks to a phenomenon called “gaming the system.”

When students game a system, they succeed at completing online tutorials without reading, studying, and synthesizing the information delivered, according to Ryan Shaun Joazeiro de Baker, Assistant Professor of Learning Science at Worcester Polytechnic Institute's Department of Social Science and Policy Studies. Students treat the tutorials like video games, devising strategies to beat the system. They will make systematic guesses and abuse the online help by going through each hint until they find the answer.



While gaming leads to faster-than-average performance, it doesn't lead to robust learning. Students who game learn half as much as students who don't. For example, “Students can generate and interpret five scatter plots of data without understanding scatter plots,” Baker said.

Baker presented the results from three cognitive math tutorial studies he conducted at the Boston Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems' (CHI) monthly meeting at Sun Microsystems in Burlington on September 8. These tutors dispense help based on the students' conceptual level; in other words, how well they completed each math problem. The students receive new math problems based on the skills they haven't mastered. Once the students complete those problems correctly, the tutor delivers a new set of problems to build upon the skills they learned already.

Cognitive tutors can be effective, Baker said, but they're not as good as one-on-one tutors. The average student achieves 51 percent of pre-post gain with a cognitive tutor.

Why do students game? Baker found three reasons:

- The content in the tutorial is boring.
- The user interface isn't clear.
- The help provided in the tutorial isn't sufficient. It does not provide the assistance students need, because the information is confusing or missing.

## Writing and Managing Effective Information

**Description:** Do you want to learn how to communicate technical information effectively? Learn how to conduct audience and task analysis, work with subject matter experts, understand product documents and the product development cycle, write clear procedures, manage writing projects, and make content usable. Well-developed writing skills are recommended for this course.

**Dates:** Thursday nights: October 7, 2010–January 2011; one Saturday class: TBA

**Time:** 5:45–9:45p.m.

**Location:** 591 Springs Road, Bedford, MA

**Tuition:** \$1,499

**Instructor:** Chuck Murray

To apply, please submit resume and cover letter to Sheila Morin at [morins@middlesex.mass.edu](mailto:morins@middlesex.mass.edu) or visit <http://www.middlesex.mass.edu/careertraining/certificates/writingtechinfo.htm> for detailed information.

Source: Middlesex Community College



## Reflections on STC's Value for Members, or Getting the Most from Your Membership

By Cheryl Landes

In my doctoral studies in education, we live and breathe reflecting. We're asked to reflect on just about everything, from how we're feeling when we start a new class or program phase to our impressions at the end of each experience to recalling key learning events as a child or teenager. While we wonder whether our continuous reflection is overkill at times, it's an excellent reminder of the different points along our journey and a celebra-

*Reflections, continued on page 4*

For more information about the gaming the system project, see <http://users.wpi.edu/~rsbaker/gaming.html>.

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## Social Media's Effects on Communication

By Cheryl Landes

I grew up on a small farm. Our nearest neighbors were one-half mile away, but that didn't hinder communication. Despite the distance, everyone was attuned to the latest news: births, marriages, deaths, the kids' achievements, weather reports, the harvest outlook, and exciting gossip from the Big City. There, "Big City" was a sprawling metropolis of 1,000 residents nine miles from our farm.

When we visited each other, we never scheduled any appointments. We walked, rode our horses, or drove pick-up trucks or tractors to our neighbors' homes. Our social excursions often lasted from a half to a full day. The coffee was always brewing, and delicious snacks awaited anyone who arrived unannounced. Longer visits ended in the hosts serving hearty suppers to the guests before their journeys home for the night.

During those rare occasions when we couldn't visit face-to-face, we would call each other on the telephone—on a party line! If no one answered, we didn't have voicemail to leave a message. Instead, we would try calling again.

How times have changed! Today, most of our communication is conducted through technology instead of in person. Now we have e-mail, voicemail, texting on wireless devices, and the latest arrival on the block—social media.

Despite its infancy, social media has already turned communication upside down, according to STC Fellow Rich Maggiani, Communication Consultant for Solari Communication in Essex, Vermont. "It's the wave of the future...or perhaps, the 'tsunami' of the future," he said during his presentation, "Social Media and Its Effect on Communication," at the STC-Connecticut Chapter's first meeting of the season on September 18.

Maggiani defines social media as "communication channels enabling authentic, personal engagement of one human to another." Through these channels, people want to interact with one another in meaningful dialogue, be heard, engage in similar activities, and conduct business ethically. Above all though, the communication must be genuine and relevant. "Trust has shifted from leaders to peers, from official messages to conversation," Maggiani said.

"People communicate in a variety of ways through social media," Maggiani said. This interaction is affecting practically every aspect of our lives, from keeping connected to friends and family to how we conduct business on a daily basis.

The most common means of communicating through social media are:

### Social Networking Sites

Social networking sites encourage people to share information for purposes ranging from interacting with friends to promoting themselves professionally. Facebook, the

*Social Media, continued on page 4*

tion of our accomplishments along the way.

As STC members, we often forget about all of the benefits we receive. We renew our membership every year, attend meetings and help with activities, but do we reflect on the value we receive from our membership? On September 15, we were given the opportunity to do just that at the monthly STC-Philadelphia Metro Chapter meeting, “Getting the Most from Your STC Membership.”

The evening started with attendees introducing themselves and describing how STC helped in their career development. Several themes emerged: job referrals, educational opportunities, and learning and enhancing skills through volunteering.

Then Barrie Byron, Competitions Manager, and Marc Gravez, STC-PMC President, shared their experiences in the PechaKucha 20x20 format. PechaKucha restricts speakers to a presentation of only 20 images, each for 20 seconds.\*

When Byron became a technical communicator 25 years ago, she didn't know anything about STC. She learned about the society through her Toastmasters' membership, nine years into her career. After she joined STC in 1993, she quickly discovered these benefits:

- Building a cohesive network of peers
- Developing leadership and negotiation skills through volunteer activities
- Accessing learning tools and resources
- Increasing industry awareness by sharing information about technical communication

She has also used the Technical Publications Competitions' criteria to develop documentation for her employers and clients. As a bonus, the documentation she entered in the Annual Competitions received awards. “STC is my professional community,” Byron said. “We speak the same speak. We walk the same walk.”

Marc Gravez started his presentation by saying, “STC is your professional home. It's everywhere in the world.” Then he reported experiences similar to Byron's, except that he used STC's salary surveys to negotiate his pay for his latest jobs.

“We talk. We listen. We work together. We help each other,” Gravez concluded. Nothing can be more valuable than a closely knit network of people helping each other and reaping the rewards.

most popular of the social networking sites, originally started for friends and family to swap personal information. Now businesses are developing fan pages on Facebook to pitch their brands, products, and services.

IBM uses Second Life, a social networking site that allows users to create an “alternate scene”; that is, a society in which one can assume a separate identity to develop scenarios for how the company's products are used.

LinkedIn is a popular professional development site where users can post resumes and update connections in their networks on projects and other career-related activities. LinkedIn also has a growing section of job postings, and users can publish recommendations for colleagues and refer their connections to hiring managers.

### **Blogs**

Blogs are Web sites dedicated to expressing opinions about things. Topics range from political commentaries to personal interests to professional development. Even businesses are using blogs as public relations and marketing tools. For example, Best Buy encourages its employees to blog on Blue Shirt Nation. The blog fosters community between the company's employees and its customers.

The benefits for Best Buy are enormous. Its customers feel connected because they can communicate directly with employees who are experts on the company's products. This interaction makes customers feel valued, as though Best Buy genuinely cares about them. As a result, sales increase. Employees also feel valued from this communication, which increases their loyalty to the company. In the retail industry, the normal employee turnover rate is from 40 to 60 percent. The turnover for Best Buy employees active on Blue Shirt Nation is only eight percent!

### **Wikis**

Most of us are familiar with Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia in which anyone can contribute or edit articles. But one of the fastest growth areas for wikis is in developing and maintaining technical documentation. For example, Motorola has an external wiki for the Moto Q device called EverythingQ wiki. Users can write about the device on the wiki. Motorola also has a blog where users can post comments, in addition to an open source community for writing code for the Moto Q. Another example is Aviation Supplies and Aeronautics, which uses a wiki to publish its technical documentation. The writers don't interview the subject matter experts (SMEs). The SMEs write the documentation on the wiki; then the writers clean it up.

### **Content Communities**

Content communities, sites where people can view and exchange content, run the gamut. Here are a few of the most popular communities:

- Del.icio.us, for posting bookmarks to favorite Web sites. These bookmarks can be accessed from anywhere, as long as one has an Internet connection, and can be shared with anyone.
- Digg, where people post articles they like to share with others (They “digg it.”)
- StumbleUpon, which aggregates Web sites by keywords of interest
- Flickr, a photo sharing site
- YouTube, a video sharing site

### **Microblogs**

Microblogs, such as Twitter, contain short bursts of communication limited to 140 characters per post. People use microblogs to update their followers on what they're doing and recommend articles and Web sites of interest. Businesses are also using microblogs to announce special offers and discounts for products and services. Some hotels, such as the Hyatt, now have concierge services on Twitter, where guests can make or extend reservations, order room service, and request dry cleaning. JetBlue

*Reflections, continued from page 4*

\* For more details about PechaKucha and meetings in your area, see <http://www.pecha-kucha.org/>.

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## Job Opening

Charles River Development is seeking a senior technical writer.

- Ten or more years' experience documenting complex enterprise-level software
- Experience designing and developing on-line help
- RoboHelp experience
- Familiarity with document source control systems, specifically RoboSource
- Experience with system administration of multi-tiered systems
- Experience in the financial sector a huge plus
- Ability to work on multiple releases concurrently a must
- Javascript a plus

The writing team consists of six writers and is responsible for documenting the Charles River Investment Management System. Our current online help system includes over 2,500 topics and 4,000 graphics.

Contact: [timothyvandawalker@crd.com](mailto:timothyvandawalker@crd.com)

Source: Middlesex Community College

*Social Media, continued from page 4*

monitors customer comments on Twitter. When a customer has a question or problem, JetBlue responds quickly.

Social media's effects on communication are undeniable and powerful, according to Maggiani. Not only has it affected communication in general, but it has also changed the way technical communicators work. Traditionally, technical communicators were introverted. They worked in isolation and didn't get credit for what they did. Now with social networking, they're extroverts and experts. "Everyone knows who you are, and you're the funnel through which this [information] all flows," Maggiani said.

The future of social media is uncertain, but despite the unknowns, it's definitely here to stay, Maggiani observed. "We're in a transition. Things are changing, whether we like it or not. Social media is a slice of this. The whole method of communication is changing. It's continuing to change, and no one knows where it's going. The means of communicating instantaneously will not go away."

### Author's Bio

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## Alma Nahigian, Former STC-Boston Chapter President, Dies

Alma L. Nahigian, STC Associate Fellow and former STC-Boston Chapter President (1992-1993), passed away December 4, 2009, after a long illness. Those of us who knew Alma will remember her kindness, ready laugh, and fondness for "yellow stickies." A dedicated professional, she always gave her all and was always fun to be with.



Standing (l-r): Carol Landers, Ed Carbrey (after whom the Landers-Carbrey Spirit of Volunteering Award is named), Marguerite Krupp, John Minniti, and Alma Nahigian. Seated (l-r): Joann Carbrey, Lori Gillen, and Mark Leeuwenburg.

*Alma Nahigian, continued on page 6*

## The Broadside Staff

The *Boston Broadside* is published six times throughout the calendar year and would not be possible without the hard work of dedicated volunteers. Many thanks to the following people for their contributions:

### Broadside Staff

Sharon Popovsky  
*Managing Editor*

Karlyne Hutchings  
*Copy Editor*

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This Issue's Contributors:

Arun Jain  
Marguerite Krupp  
Cheryl Landes

**Thank you, everyone!**

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### Write for the Broadside

The *Boston Broadside* encourages Chapter members to share their skills, thoughts, and ideas with other professionals in the Chapter.

If you would like to write for an upcoming issue of the *Boston Broadside*, send e-mail to: [boston.broadside@gmail.com](mailto:boston.broadside@gmail.com)

*By submitting an article, you implicitly grant a license to this newsletter to run the article and for other STC publications to reprint it without permission. Copyright is held by the writer. In your cover letter, please let the editor know if this article has run elsewhere and if it has been submitted for consideration to other publications.*

*Alma Nahigian, continued from page 5*

In addition to her long career as an editor, Alma also taught for Northeastern University's graduate Technical and Professional Writing Program. Alma truly loved everything about the STC, and she had many friends throughout the organization. She was one of the Society's greatest cheerleaders. Her spirit lives on in the Society she loved. Those who would like to do so may make a donation in Alma's honor to the Alzheimer's Association, 311 Arsenal Street, Watertown, MA 02472.

Submitted by Marguerite Krupp

## About the Society for Technical Communication

**Mission:** *Creating and supporting a forum for communities of practice in the profession of technical communication.*

For more information, visit us online at:

Society for Technical Communication

[www.stc.org](http://www.stc.org)

STC-Boston Chapter

[www.stcboston.org](http://www.stcboston.org)