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TECHNICALLY Speaking

STC Mission Statement: STC advances the theory and practice of technical communication across all user abilities and media.

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THE FINISH LINE

By Alison Weaver, editor

The countdown to receiving my master’s in technical communication from N.C. State is just weeks away. I have to admit I’m a little giddy just thinking about hanging the diploma in my office, reading something other than a textbook and participating in, say, a cooking class. But before I commence celebrating the end of my life as a graduate student, I want to reflect on what the past two and a half years have yielded me.

I started the technical communication program to expand my business opportunities, increase my skills as a communicator and develop new professional relationships. I accomplished these goals and so much more. I’ve made personal connections I expect to enrich my life for years to come, and I landed a job as the manager of marketing communications and usability testing for Futures Inc., a start-up software venture in RTP. My current position developed out of a technical writing internship, which Dr. Susan Katz found for me as part of her course, ENG498/583 Writing in Nonacademic Settings.

That’s why I strongly encourage each of you to take advantage of all that your graduate program and STC student chapter has to offer. I’m not alone in my urgings. STC President Nicole Black shares her own success story about how she used her experience in the IBM-NCSU Pathfinder Mentoring program to secure a co-op position at IBM.

Networking remains the primary vehicle for finding and growing your business opportunities – whether you are seeking an entry-level position, freelance job or a promotion into the highest ranks of your company – and social networking offers a powerful way to develop these connections. In this issue, Jen Riehle, Peggy Harvey and graduate John Martin write about three different social networking tools. Sarah McKone test drives another tool in her review of Adobe’s latest release of its technical communication software suite.

I leave you in good hands. Aisha Holmes will assume responsibility for newsletter editor in January, and my fellow officers are planning several events for the spring semester. For example, in April, we will be planning some activities around the international World Wide Web conference that will be held in Raleigh’s very own convention center. Check out page 11 for specific dates and locations of upcoming events, and watch your e-mail inbox for more information as the semester progresses. If you haven’t already joined the STC, I encourage you to do so. I’ve included an application on pages 12-14.

Finally, I extend a heartfelt thanks to the MS faculty and the many wonderful friends I have made during my time here at N.C. State. Keep in touch by e-mailing me at alison AT awordweaver DOT com.
IBM Pathfinder Program
By Nicole Black, President

When I first ventured into the technical communication program a little over a year ago, the idea of landing a job was overwhelmingly intimidating to me. I was fresh out of my undergraduate career, had no technical communication experience and felt miles behind my classmates in understanding the field. I'm in my second year of the program, and I must say, I don't feel that way anymore.

This is largely due to the fact that we are given such great opportunities in the technical communication program to make professional connections. One of the ways students can make these connections is through the IBM-NCSU Pathfinder Mentoring Program. I joined the program last spring, and I'm really glad that I did.

Most of you have heard Chris Dawson and Chris Pepper talk to you about Pathfinder in your classes. They will tell you that joining the program does not guarantee you an interview, and it doesn't. But you can make this program work for you. I did get an interview, and I did get a co-op position. I know this would not have happened if it had not been for my participation in the IBM-NCSU Pathfinder Mentoring program.

But even if your aim is not to work for IBM, the program can still benefit you. Even if you have experience in the field, this program can work for you. Talking to your mentor about what you want to get out of the program is important. My mentor knew that I did not have any experience in the field and that I was still struggling to understand what I could do with my degree. She set up lunch dates with people that worked in different areas of technical communication so that I could ask questions and learn how they got into the field and their jobs. This was a great way for me to network and make connections in a risk-free environment.

My mentor was also there during the scheduled program events to relate them to technical communication, as much of the program is aimed at engineers. I learned it was important to keep up to date on the current buzz words and hot topics the engineers are talking about, as they will become my future colleagues.

My favorite scheduled event was the mock interview session. Participants are not interviewing for real positions, but it still can be nerve-wracking. I was nervous for my first interview, and it showed. I took the feedback I got from the first manager that interviewed me, and I did much better for the second interview. A couple of weeks later, my mentor informed me that there was an open co-op position and that the hiring manager just happened to be the first person that interviewed me. This made me uneasy. He already knew my weaknesses. He saw me when I was nervous. I thought he surely would not be interested in interviewing me for an actual co-op.

My mentor told me to use the situation to my advantage. I wrote the manager a letter and sent him my resume directly. I changed my resume to better reflect my skills. I explained how I took his advice and what I’d been doing to improve my skills since I’d met with him. I got an interview, and that time it went very well. I’m fairly certain that if the funding had not fallen through for the position that I would have gotten it. He emailed me when a position finally did become available.

I can’t say that this co-op will turn into a full-time job, but if anything it will give me a chance to make more connections and gain more experience. One thing is certain that I would not have had this wonderful opportunity if I did not participate in the program.
Test Drive of Adobe’s TC Suite 2 Provides Experience, Saves Money
By Sarah McKone

After releasing the upgraded Technical Communicator Suite 2 in January, Adobe Systems Incorporated described the software package as, “a complete and integrated solution for authoring, managing, reviewing and publishing technical documentation, help systems, knowledge bases and training.” The “solution” is a highly valued Adobe product—evidenced by the price tag. Buyers will pay $1,899 for the suite or $949 to upgrade their previous suite.

Technical communicators who strive to maintain fluency in applicable software should be concerned about finding access to this updated product because the suite’s core programs upgraded to a new interface and additional software programs were added. The suite includes software for document and project management, the development and execution of help systems or training modules, the capture and manipulation of images, audio, and video, the production of presentation aids, among other things. The suite provides the user with the capacity to create and edit many compositions other than text documents, from Flash-based video to comment-infused PDFs. Still, justifying the upgrade cost in this economy will be difficult for both individuals and businesses.

Thankfully, Adobe recently invested in Runaware, a software-trial program that allows users to “test drive” TCS2 without downloading, subscribing or promising anything.

The test drive of the suite runs on Mac and PC operating systems from within the user’s internet browser and offers access to all of the suite’s software programs. For first-time or limited-experience users, it provides in-program tutorials to showcase project possibilities. For experienced users, the test drive offers a chance to navigate the suite’s new aesthetics and functionality. The new suite still includes its core programs, but they’re now adorned with upgraded interfaces that may remind some users of the latest Creative Suite 4 release in 2008.

There is good news for students who are interested in TCS2: JourneyEd.com and other online software retailers offer the suite to students at a discount. Even the reduced price is difficult to justify on a student budget, but it’s a start.

The core programs included are Adobe FrameMaker® 9, Adobe RoboHelp® 8, Adobe Captivate® 4, Adobe Presenter 7, Adobe Acrobat® 9 Pro Extended, Adobe Bridge CS4, Adobe Device Central CS4 and Adobe 3D Reviewer. Adobe also added Adobe Photoshop CS4 to the updated suite, putting the industry’s leading program for the creation and manipulation of images into the hands of technical communicators.

TCS2 clearly provides software that aids the development of projects commonly associated with technical communicators. Still, even with the available test drive, should technical communicators be investing their time just to experience these new programs?

According to online job listings, yes. To apply for a position such as technical author with the manufacturing leader SPX, applicants must have “in-depth knowledge of at least three Authoring/ Graphics tools (e.g., Arbortext Editor, Adobe FrameMaker and Adobe Photoshop).” Some postings write bluntly, “Applicants without strong FrameMaker skills will not be considered.” A particular job posting requested technical writers with no less than five years daily experience with Adobe FrameMaker and also mentioned Adobe products like RoboHelp, Photoshop and Illustrator.

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All industry leaders are not on board with the new
suite. Scriptorium blogger Sarah O’Keefe (find her at
www.scriptorium.com) was surprised by the TCS2
release. She thinks a heavier FrameMaker is not
what the industry is asking for because her
customers are requesting “lightweight XML
solutions” to manage their projects.

Eb-Arts.com noted graphics problems with
Photoshop in its review. Still, the site rated the suite
9 out of 10, and wrote “Adobe’s Technical
Communication Suite 2 fulfills its claims. Despite
minor issues with the graphics acceleration in
Photoshop CS4, the suite’s built-in workflows, multi-
data support like DITA and XML, the addition of SDL
AuthorAssistant for global authoring and all the
other features make this a standalone suite for the
creation of technical communications media.”

On an interview, it would be difficult to cite the test
drive as an example of software proficiency with the
TCS2. Still, it’s a start. Technical communicators will
be able to try this program on their own time and
gauge its ease of use or relevancy to their job
ambitions so that they understand whether they
would be interested in working with the software
suite on a daily basis.

Using the test drive program only to find that TCS2
is not a dream team of software programs wouldn’t
be the end of the world, either. The job seeker can
save time and effort by seeking jobs that do not
require TCS2 experience, and there are job postings
that value applicants with software experience of
more basic software programs such as those
included in the Microsoft Office Suite.

There is good news for students who are interested
in TCS2: JourneyEd.com and other online software
retailers offer the suite to students at a discount.
Even the reduced price ($739.98 on JourneyEd.com,
$739 on CreationEngine.com, $698.95 on
Studica.com) is difficult to justify on a student
budget, but it’s a start.

Adobe does request personal information when you
begin the test drive, and I did receive a predictable
sales call a few days after I used the program. The
Adobe representative asked me for more
information about my interest in TCS2. However,
when I told him bluntly that I was a student without
the spare funds for the suite, he did not argue.

“Well, we hope that you had a nice experience with
the program and that you will find an employer who
values your willingness to pursue and experience
Adobe’s software innovations,” he said.

Thanks Adobe. Me too. 😊

To the Editor:

Thank you for an exceptionally well-done first edi-
tion of Technically Speaking! As a past editor, I’m
very much aware of, and appreciate, the incredible
amount of work that went into creating it. I particu-
larly enjoyed the “Meet the New MS Technical Com-
munication Students” article! I think it’s a good can-
didate to become a regular feature. And thanks to
you and your staff, Technically Speaking is a good
candidate for my must read list this academic year.

Keep up the good work!

John Martin
Business Use of Twitter
By John Martin, Past-president, STC

In March of 2009, Gartner released a report on “4 Ways Companies Use Twitter for Business.” They include: 1) Directly, as a marketing or public relations channel, 2) Indirectly, letting their employees tweet instead, 3) Internally, to share ideas or to communicate about what projects they’re working on and 4) For inbound signaling, listening to what’s being said about the company, its products and services and its industry as a whole.

I started tweeting on behalf of the Office of Information Technology at N.C. State in September of 2008, shortly after joining the Information & News Services of the Outreach, Communications and Consulting group. Our Twitter account is @ncsu_oit. Negotiating a balance between representing the organization in a professional manner, yet taking advantage of the social aspect of social networking to attempt to build a relationship with our followers, I settled on three communicative purposes for our tweets:

- **Advertising** (workshops, seminars, services and events)
- **Announcements** (IT outages, change management, security incidences and so on)
- **News** (IT, education, social media, IT in education, social media in IT and social media in education)

Examples of our tweets can be seen at [http://twitter.com/ncsu_oit](http://twitter.com/ncsu_oit).

In April of 2008, I created a survey for our followers asking the following questions:

1. How long have you been following @ncsu_oit?
2. Does @ncsu_oit tweet the kind of information you’d expect from an IT organization?
3. Is the frequency of tweets from @ncsu_oit too often, too seldom or about right?
4. How did you find out about @ncsu_oit?
5. Would you attend a “Tweet-up” if @ncsu_oit sponsored one?
6. @ncsu_oit tweets in three categories (advertising, announcements and news). Do those categories “work” for you? Do you have other areas of interest?

Also, I left space for the participants to say anything they’d like to about @ncsu_oit. We had only 9 people complete the survey, but the results were very interesting and affirmed what we were doing with comments like, “Your tweets have made me feel more connected to what’s going on with IT on campus,” and “I’m a student and mainly use the tweets to know what’s going on from an IT perspective as well as finding useful tips and tricks or services I didn’t know about.” You can view the full results of the survey.

One year after its introduction, @ncsu_oit has 249 followers, is following 208 accounts and has broadcasted 660 tweets.

Twitter can be used in business in other ways, too—for example, to keep abreast of your industry and to get a snapshot of what customers are saying about your products and services. With a tool like Tweetgrid, you can provide keywords related to the work you do such as computer operations, security and compliance and enterprise resource planning to watch a running update of what people are tweeting about on those topics. These search results can give you ideas about how to do things differently, uncover potential solutions to problems you might also be experiencing and provide a way to connect and collaborate with people. Click to see an example of this type of industry awareness using Twitter and Tweetgrid.

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You can get a snapshot of what people are saying about your product or service using this same technique. Say you are a sales rep, support person or developer for Microsoft’s Office products. You could use Tweetgrid to see what people are saying about each of those products. As a sales rep, you could incorporate what customers say they like in your sales pitch. As a support person, you could offer an immediate solution to a problem someone might be experiencing. And as a developer, you could glean requirements for future enhancements to your product or service.

Using Twitter for business is not without its challenges. The community building and reputation management aspects of using Twitter can be hard to measure and show a quantitative return on investment. In an operational sense, it’s a challenge to determine when to follow someone. If it’s a student, faculty or staff member of N.C. State, then it’s a no-brainer. We want to follow them, but it’s not always easy to determine that. In the short bio area provided by Twitter, that information is often not explicitly stated.

Because of the increase of Twitter spam, I usually take a look at individuals’ Tweet streams to see what kinds of things they tweet about before following them or following them back if they’ve started following @ncsu_oit.

Other Twitter accounts that we’re interested in following are organizations related to higher education, other college campuses and other IT organizations, all of which provide potential “retweets” to the community that is following us.

Finally, @ncsu_oit likes to follow other organizations at N.C. State who are using Twitter. Building that network strengthens the overall communications potential of the university. For example, when our IT organization announced that some labs would be closed for a short time before school started in the fall, we asked the person running one of the library Twitter accounts to retweet that announcement since one of the labs was in the library.

In recognition of the value of such an N.C. State Twitter communication network, N.C. State on Twitter (NC State on Twitter) has debuted. The site is a collaboration between N.C. State’s Web Communications team and the Office of Information Technology. It’s a collection of official N.C. State Twitter feeds to help you stay on top of what’s happening at N.C. State right now. Check it out! 😎

John Martin is a technical communicator in the Information & News Services department in the Office of Information Technology at N.C. State. He is also a 2007 graduate of the N.C. State MS in Technical Communication program and a past president and past newsletter editor of N.C. State’s student chapter of the Society for Technical Communication.
The Benefits of Blogging
By Peggy Harvey

Maybe you’ve considered starting a personal blog but wonder if it’s worth the effort. Perhaps you’re not sure where to begin. One thing to keep in mind when you’re thinking about blogging is that you don’t need to have every detail worked out before you start. Having a five-year plan before you begin is one way to do it, but there’s nothing wrong with starting small and talking about what you know best: You. Once you’re comfortable with blogging, you can gravitate toward a more professional outlook (or start a new blog with a professional intent). In the meantime, you’ll be gaining valuable experience blogging in a more casual setting.

Here are 10 reasons why maintaining a personal blog is worth the time invested:

1. **Communicate with friends and family.** A blog is a great way to stay in touch with friends and family. You can tell stories and share pictures all in one place and provide links to articles, information, pictures and other things on the web you’d like them to see. If you’re traveling, you can use a blog as a travel journal and allow people to read about the trip as you’re experiencing it.

2. **Make new friends.** With a little effort you can make friends through your blog that you’d never have the chance to meet otherwise. Search for blogs you find interesting, comment on them and wait to see if the blog owners comment on yours—before you know it, you’ll be getting to know others through their blog as they’re getting to know you through yours.

3. **Provide an online presence.** Most employers today expect technical communicators to have an online presence. A blog demonstrates creativity and ingenuity on your part and is a link that you can hand to an employer—rather than letting employers search Google on their own and seeing what they find.

4. **Avoid web hosting issues.** When you maintain a web site you have to deal with web hosting, usually by paying for a service with adequate storage space. Creating a blog on a free service such as Blogger (http://www.blogger.com) or Wordpress (http://wordpress.com/) avoids those issues while providing plenty of storage space for a first-time blogger.

5. **Brand yourself.** No matter what you talk about your online presence should reflect YOU. Choose a template that reflects your personality in the way you want to present it: Colors, graphics and even fonts should give readers an idea of the type of person you are. Both of the free blogging services listed in No. 4 have free templates to choose from and walk you through the process of setting up the blog from start to finish. If you have web-design skills, you can customize an existing template or create your own from scratch, and no knowledge of HTML or CSS is required to begin.

6. **Create writing samples for employers.** Employers hiring technical communicators want to see writing samples and blogs are increasingly being included in the list of samples they’d like to see. Even if you’re only writing about your dog or the great dinner you made last night, you’re still showing potential employers your writing style and attention to detail. Always proofread and use correct grammar. Granted, a blog post on the great time you had at the game last night won’t substitute for professional writing samples, but it will augment what you already have.

7. **Develop professional connections.** You never know who might read your blog. Even if you’re not maintaining a technical communications blog, you’ll probably mention the topic occasionally. A blog is just one more way to let people know who you are and your interests.

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8. **Share your views.** A blog is a great way to share your passions. Whether it’s a hobby you enjoy, an assignment you prepared for class or just something you noticed on the bus the other day, you can write about it and share your opinions with others.

9. **Learn new things.** When you start a blog, you’ll want to participate in the community and look at other people’s blogs for ideas. When you do, you’ll discover worlds you never dreamed of, from custom templates and free gadgets you can incorporate into your blog to information on every topic under the sun.

10. **Have fun.** Writing a blog is fun. You call the shots—when, how, why and what—and meet interesting people along the way. You can develop your writing skills, showcase your web design talent (if you customize the blog template and layout) and demonstrate to potential employers that you “get” communication in the 21st century.

No article on blogging would be complete without the standard warning to always be careful about what you put on the web. The old adage, “Never say anything you wouldn’t want to see on the front page of the newspaper,” goes for blogging as well. While you should be sharing personal information on a personal blog, use good judgment on how “personal” that information should be.

Once you start blogging, you may become the next top blogger, or you may find blogging isn’t for you after all. You’ll never know until you try. See you in the blogosphere! 🌐

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**Ning: HomeGrown Social Networking**

By Jen Riehle

Are you a technical communicator? Do you spend time on N.C. State’s campus? Do you work with web sites? If so, I’ve got a tool, and story, for you!

Once upon a time not so long ago, a group of N.C. State campus web designers and developers decided it would be a good idea to increase our collaborative efforts. Lots of people at N.C. State were working on web sites and trying new tools, but word of mouth wasn’t an efficient way to share the news. These designers and developers searched for solutions and aid in our information sharing. Listservs, discussion boards and occasional meet-ups were considered, but none of the solutions targeted or engaged all the potential participants. What they found instead was Ning.

Ning is a web-based application that allows users to create their own social networks. Anyone can do it: Simply create an account, think of a socially engaging concept, invite a dozen or so of your closest acquaintances and off you go. A Ning site includes several useful tools, all of which are instantly available for use. Users can create groups, post to personal or topical blogs, upload video and audio files, and create and manage events. All posts include threaded discussions, RSS feeds and e-mail notifications, and all information types can find an outlet on a Ning site. Click the link [http://ncsuwebdev.ning.com/](http://ncsuwebdev.ning.com/) to check out the site.

But our story is not over. The little Ning-site—that could needed more than a URL and a few occasional ramblings. What social networking site can survive without, well, the social network? Without content to post, users had no reason to visit the site. Without visitors to the site, who would post? The vicious catch-22 befuddled the already busy web staff of N.C. State.

*Continued on page 9*
New STC Dues Structure Announced

In response to revenue shortfalls caused by the recession, STC developed a new pricing and dues structure.

The new model represents a pay-as-you-go approach and provides a sustainable way for the organization to provide valuable benefits to its members. These cost $250 per member, on average.

In 2010, dues will cover basic member benefits with a la carte pricing for additional features. The core benefits remain, but with some changes. (See highlights in the list to the right; check out the STC web site for more information.) The 2010 membership fees, approved by the Board of Directors, are:

- Basic Membership: $215
- Student Membership: $75
- Retiree Membership: $145

Changes include:

- Basic dues do not include membership in a chapter and SIG.
- Chapters and SIGs can be purchased for $25 and $10, respectively.
- Print subscriptions to Intercom and Technical Communication are available for $30 and $75. Members will receive e-versions.
- Payment installment plans will be offered.
- Activity fees will be implemented in 2010 and will include fees for fellow applications and international competitions.
- Membership grants and activity scholarships will be available for under- and unemployed.

These changes will ensure STC is more efficiently organized, more focused on up-to-date service delivery and ready to move into the future as a financially stable organization far less prone to economic impact.

Riehle, Ning, Continued from page 8

Happily a few small changes to campus web business-as-usual helped out significantly. First, the administrators of the site began to generate some new content. They created a weekly column called “The Best Thing Ever (This Week)” that highlighted a tool, web site or application each week. Along with that, the administrators began a weekly digest highlighting recent topics of interest that appeared on the site: a popular blog post, an interesting article, a new bit of shared code and more. Finally, they began moving all relevant content onto the site. If someone posted something useful to a list, they also put it on the Ning site. Comments about a conference or meet-up? Put it on Ning! Eventually Ning became the place where people put their web-related content; it became the norm rather than the afterthought.

The N.C. State Web Developers Ning site will celebrate its one-year anniversary in November. The site now has nearly 200 members. There are 16 groups on topics ranging from Adobe to CSS to accessibility. There have been more than a dozen events posted on Ning. Some of these were unrelated to N.C. State, but other posts were specific events designed to pull together the members of the Ning site for face-to-face introductions, brainstorming and sharing. Contributions aren’t mandatory. You can simply follow along or spend some time browsing the site and see if there is anything of interest to you. Or, once you’re feeling adventurous, join a group or two, submit questions, offer links to tools or articles and post information about local web events. It takes lots of contributions to keep the social network social ... and to give this story a happy ending for everyone!
Meet Your 2009-2010 STC@NCSU Officers

Nicole Black
President

Sarah Egan Warren
Faculty Advisor

Myra Moses
Newsletter Manager

Jen Riehle
Vice President

Alison Weaver
Newsletter Editor

Peggy Harvey
Membership Manager

Christin Phelps
Treasurer

Sarah McKone
Secretary
The following events are planned. Please visit the STC-NCSU web site or monitor future issues of *Technically Speaking* for updated information as it becomes available. All dates and events are tentative and subject to change. To read minutes from past STC-NCSU chapter meetings, visit [http://clubs.ncsu.edu/stc/meetings/index.html](http://clubs.ncsu.edu/stc/meetings/index.html).

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<td>DECEMBER 4, 7 PM</td>
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<td>WATCH YOUR INBOX FOR DETAILS</td>
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<td>DECEMBER 19</td>
<td>NCSU FALL 2009 GRADUATION</td>
<td>RBC CENTER</td>
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