

TECHNIQUES

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WELCOME TO THE FALL 2012 EDITION OF TECHNIQUES. FOR THIS EDITION THE ENG577-TECHNICAL DOCUMENTS, POLICIES, AND PROCEDURES CLASS SOLICITED, APPROVED, AND EDITED ARTICLES ABOUT TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION AND INTERVIEWS OF TECHNICAL COMMUNICATORS FROM STUDENTS IN THE TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION PROGRAM AT MINNESOTA STATE UNIVERSITY, MANKATO. WE HOPE THIS EDITION WILL OPEN YOUR EYES TO THE HUMAN SIDE OF THIS DISCIPLINE.

-TECHNIQUES STAFF

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Important Advice: An Interview with Elys Bank, Technical Writer Lacey Corbin

I first met Elys Bank while walking her through her new hire paperwork at the company I work for. During our small talk, I mentioned that I was using the company's education assistance to work on an MA in technical communication. She shared with me that she has her bachelor's degree in Communication, her master's degree in Professional Communication, and over ten years of experience in the technical communication field. In 2007, she left the field and for the past five years she has moved into a few different

health-related positions. These positions were opportunities she was able to pursue thanks to her experience as a technical writer.

Fast forward to October 2012, I learned that Elys was leaving our company to return to technical communication. I was excited and rushed over to her office to question her about the career change and gather advice about getting into the field. Hours later, I realized that Elys' experience is something that all technical communication students could gain from. I readily set out to interview

her so that I could share her wisdom. This is what she had to say:

WHY DID YOU LEAVE TECHNICAL WRITING?

I left technical writing for two basic reasons. First, it is the most volatile position on a software team. It is one of the first to be eliminated during a downsizing. Back in the late '90s, downsizing wasn't such a big deal because it was fairly easy to secure a new position. After I had my son, I free-lanced for a few years,

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Conversing with Students and My Computer: One Instructor's Reflection on Using Voice-Recognition Software

Brandy Opse

Can you imagine being able to hold your cup of coffee while your spoken word turns into text before your eyes? Can you imagine being able to remain standing, performing stationary exercises, while your spoken word transforms into text on the computer screen? Can you imagine the ability to position your body so that it faces the opposite direction from your computer screen while you produce documents by speaking out loud to your computer? These are all abilities I have been able to develop as a result of using Dragon NaturallySpeaking voice-recognition software. Although the use of voice-recognition in academia is usually discussed only in terms of its use among students and faculty who have disabilities, other private and public sectors, such as the medical and legal fields, have reported similar success using it (Zumalt 180). Today's professional 11.5 version of Dragon NaturallySpeaking, created by Nuance, offers all users the capability to dictate documents in Microsoft Word, navigate the web, create PowerPoints, and operate Microsoft Outlook. In my case, it saved my teaching career and enabled me to continue my graduate studies as an online learner.

A few years ago, I started to experience severe pain in both of my arms that began when I

was typing and then continued throughout the day. By the time I visited a doctor, I was in constant pain and unable to type or use a computer mouse without further aggravating my pain level. I was diagnosed with a repetitive stress injury in both arms, from which I still suffer today. Knowing that I needed to do address this problem in order to keep my job, I immediately purchased Dragon Naturally Speaking voice-recognition software and taught myself how to use the software to create assignments, communicate with students and faculty via e-mail, and manage my online courses.

After learning how to use the software, I began to realize how it could benefit many other instructors, and not only instructors with disabilities or repetitive stress injuries. Some of the benefits include better user mobility while operating a computer (which could reduce an instructor's susceptibility to repetitive stress injuries), an increased awareness of how to create more accessible documents for students who use voice-recognition software, and the potential to create shortcuts to lessen one's workload.

One Dragon NaturallySpeaking user feature that I came to appreciate as I began to use the software was the physical freedom it provides. It allows users

complete separation from the keyboard. Because I also use a "foot mouse" (yes, they do exist); I have more flexible mobility. For the most part, I am now able to choose from a variety of physical positions while I work on the computer. I can sit and hold a cup of coffee, stand up, or lie down on my side to dictate to my computer because my arms and fingers do not have to be positioned for repeated keystrokes and mouse clicks. I wish I had known about the software long before I was diagnosed with my condition. Due to the increased user mobility feature, Dragon NaturallySpeaking voice-recognition software offers, you are able to free your arms from the keyboard and mouse, vary your body positioning while you operate the computer, and increase your user mobility while you operate a computer through dictation. This is a significant benefit for computer users who suffer from repetitive stress injuries, are unable to sit for long periods of time, are not very experienced with keyboarding or mouse clicking, are ill and can't get out of bed, have various disabilities, and/or want to be able to sift through paper documents or scroll through their cell phone applications while dictating to a computer, for example. I have the ability to perform all of the above functions thanks to this software. Despite a few

drawbacks described below, you can enjoy greater mobility when you use Dragon NaturallySpeaking.

In addition to enjoying the increased user mobility, I have also developed an enhanced awareness of how students who use these types of applications may need to access and navigate course-related documents and material. "Normal" keyboard and computer mouse users may not recognize how simple online applications and features can improve an instructor's or student's usage of and navigation with online courses. For example, consider how many times you would have to say "scroll down" in order to make your computer screen scroll from the top of the first page of a course document to the last page of a course document. Or, consider if your webpage design took into account the use of assistive technologies; are you certain that your tabs are clickable via a voice-recognition command? If you use voice-recognition software, you will be able to recognize if voice-recognition software is compatible with your own user-design formats. Hands-on experience with such software will enable you to put yourself in your voice-recognition user's position and better enable you to create online material that is more accessible for voice-recognition users.

The use of voice-recognition software, even for instructors who don't need to use it out

of necessity, may also help to lessen their workloads. One primary feature of Dragon NaturallySpeaking voice-recognition that helps me minimize my workload is the "command" feature, which allows me to create individualized commands. The command feature is especially useful for re-creating specific content that is used routinely. For example, consider the routine use of your signature, course title, course management system login and password, or campus address. You can actually create a single, one-word command that will input one or more paragraphs' worth of text that will appear every time you dictate that command. For example, if I dictate: "address", the software will type my whole address, if I created the command. The "command" feature is one of many useful ways that this program can create shortcuts or work-arounds for instructors.

Note that it took me several months before I mastered the above-described software capabilities. There is a learning curve when you first start to use the Dragon NaturallySpeaking program. One of my greatest challenges using the program was managing the shift from typing to dictating my lesson plans, lectures, assignments, and online discussion prompts. Individuals do not ordinarily speak the same way they write. So I had to adjust my way of speaking to fit my writing style, especially for academic and professional contexts. On

the other hand, I found myself able to speak more freely to online students and to better verbally converse with them than through written text only. I began to compose student feedback in a more conversational tone. Learning these new skill sets proved to be a challenge. Since I had never used voice-recognition software before my diagnosis, I was obligated to learn a completely new set of dictation languages, commands, features, and tools. However, despite the learning curve and challenges inherent to mastering Dragon NaturallySpeaking, as for any new technology, I recommend that others learn how to use this program because of the capabilities and benefits users will enjoy.

Before you invest in this product, I do want you to be aware that there are a few drawbacks to its use, especially if you do not have a supportive or knowledgeable IT department to assist you. For example, you may need to program your computer to recognize the headset or microphone that you use, invest considerable time before you fully understand the directions provided in the user manual, and get assistance interpreting some of the errors received when you operate the program. The company, Nuance, does provide a level of over-the-phone technical assistance and a detailed user manual, which you can locate on their website: nuance.com.

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Internship as an Invaluable Experience: An Interview with Delissa Tabery Ann Widness



Delissa Tabery was an intern from mid-May to mid-August, 2012, at a large process management firm with divisions around the globe. In addition to Delissa, the team she worked on included five technical writers and a supervisor. The team wrote documentation while products were still in development. Each member of the team was responsible for different product categories and functioned as a “go-to” specialist for that category. Delissa’s main responsibilities included proofreading and editing existing content as well as developing new content for task-based user guides. She also worked on converting content to XML-based format, which is an invaluable skill to learn as it allows content to be easily reused—a time-saver which potential employers will no doubt be looking for.

WHICH OF YOUR SKILLS DID YOU RELY ON MOST AT YOUR JOB?

To be honest, I relied on my basic writing skills the most—simple editing for example and using active voice. I relied heavily on skills I learned in English 575 and 576. I had my

Chicago Manual of Style at my desk at all times and would use it as a reference frequently if the company’s style guide didn’t answer a specific question. I relied on skills I learned in 576 about task-based writing as well.

ARE THERE ANY TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION SPECIFIC SKILLS YOU WISH YOU HAD HAD BEFORE STARTING YOUR INTERNSHIP THAT YOU DIDN’T ACQUIRE IN SCHOOL?

Developing stronger skills in a variety of authoring systems would be beneficial but I am not so sure that it is feasible. I had learned RoboHelp (a tool from Adobe commonly used in technical documentation) over the course of one semester, but the amount that I was required to use it didn’t help me fully understand how to use it independently. I quickly learned the software program the company used but I would attribute that to using it nearly 8 hours a day and having a “real life” purpose for doing so. I was actually contributing to real documentation that real users needed.

IS TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION A VALUABLE PART OF THIS COMPANY’S WORK?

The answer to that question is yes and no. From my perspective, it seems that the worth of the team has come a long way recently—from being consulted as the product was in the final stages of production to actually becoming an integral part of the development

process. In all reality, their value is most recognized in how they can help the sales department sell the product. If a sales representative sees an opportunity to increase their sales through some type of documentation or translation project, then the technical writers are certainly valued! The bottom line at all companies is a huge factor in determining anyone’s worth.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE CHALLENGES THAT YOU FACED AS A TECHNICAL COMMUNICATOR AT YOUR WORK PLACE?

The biggest challenge I faced throughout the entire internship was learning and understanding the products I had to document. The software program I worked on documenting was archaic in that it was not user friendly—it didn’t work the way you would think it would or should so it left me asking lots of questions. And, not even the subject matter experts knew all the functionality because certain functions simply weren’t used anymore. Learning the hardware I documented was easier but also it was still a challenge because I came from an English background—I had to understand things that I have never had interest in understanding. For example, I had to understand how a vibration analyzer collects data from a large machine in a manufacturing plant—my brain has never had to think like that before! I certainly was impressed with my ability to

understand functionality of technological devices when it certainly isn't my strong discipline.

HOW WERE YOU SELECTED FOR THIS INTERNSHIP?

The internship was posted through Minnesota State University, Mankato's technical communication program website. I simply submitted a cover letter and resume to the point of contact. I was contacted for a writing test initially followed by two interviews—one was a phone interview with the supervisor and the second was with the Director of HR and the remainder of the technical writing team. I was offered the position shortly after my final interview.

DO YOU HAVE ANY EXPERIENCES AT YOUR JOB WHERE A LAPSE IN COMMUNICATION MADE YOU (OR SOMEONE ELSE) APPRECIATE THE ROLE OF A TECHNICAL WRITER ALL THE MORE?

I certainly have learned to appreciate technical writers on

a frequent basis when trying to figure out how to use a new device. For example, putting a new stroller together or understanding how to work the new baby monitor. I always try to figure out how to work things on my own and when that fails (and it always does), I am grateful for the instructions in the user manual!

HOW HAS GLOBALIZATION AND OUTSOURCING AFFECTED THE FIELD OF TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION AND YOUR WORK?

This is an interesting question. For me personally, it has not been a problem but I do have a concern that it will be a problem in the future. The company I worked for is global and two of the members on the technical writing team I worked with were in the Philippines. I think because the company is global, there is a push (and an excuse) to hire outside the company's primary location in the United States. The only thing that was really outsourced at the company I worked with

was translation—and I'm not so sure it is uncommon to outsource translation. However, depending on the translation procedures a company uses, it could conceivably be done in-house.

ARE YOU GLAD YOU DID IT, AND WOULD YOU DO IT AGAIN?

I am certainly glad I did it and I would absolutely do it again. The experience writing in a "real" environment and documenting "real" products is invaluable. I feel like this experience is what will really help me find employment after graduation. In addition, it gave me the confidence to know that I can document and write outside of an academic setting.

Globalization: An Interview with Malaka Khlok, an International Student Suguru Takebayashi

Globalization. What do you think of when you hear this word? And when do you realize most that the world is now getting progressively global? Technologies, including the Internet, are the easiest and most useful way to experience cultures outside your country. What is it like for an international student, whose first language is not English, to work in a technological field

in the United States? As an international student myself, I am interested in this point.

Malaka Khlok, an international student from Cambodia, currently works as a programmer analyst at Taylor Corporation in North Mankato. In the interview I asked him about his internship and work experience.

YOU CAME TO MANKATO TWO YEARS AGO. WHAT WAS, IF ANY, THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CAMBODIA AND THE UNITED STATES THAT YOU FOUND MOST SURPRISING?

KHLOK: (Laughs) Snow. We don't have snow in Cambodia.

WERE YOU COMFORTABLE WITH STUDYING TECHNOLOGY IN ENGLISH?

KHLOK: I have always studied technology in English. We often use English on websites in

Cambodia. We don't really use our language in technological fields.

I KNOW YOU ARE WORKING, INSTEAD OF TAKING A CLASS ON CAMPUS. COULD YOU TELL ME WHAT YOU DO?

KHLOK: I am a programmer analyst. I currently work at Taylor Corporation, which consists of more than sixty companies. Taylor is based in North Mankato, and it provides many kinds of services, including a wedding service. And my job is to help other workers in this company with technical difficulties. Right now I am helping Human Resources update and edit job descriptions on its website.

ARE YOU BUSY EVERY DAY?

KHLOK: Depends. Usually I get one ticket a day. A ticket is a notification that someone is having a technical problem. I get those tickets either by email or through what we call Alloy Navigation System. Sometimes I get four tickets a day, sometimes none.

WHEN DID YOU START WORKING FOR TAYLOR?

KHLOK: I started my internship at Taylor in May this year. And I got promoted to a full-time position in September. I work Monday through Friday. I get credits for doing my internship, so I don't have a class on campus any more.

YOU ARE AN INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY MAJOR. HOW IS YOUR JOB RELATED TO TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION?

KHLOK: I get tickets electronically. They tell me what kind of problems they're

having, how they want me to help, and so on, and I respond to them.

HAVE YOU EVER HAD ANY DIFFICULTY COMMUNICATING ELECTRONICALLY?

KHLOK: Yes. Because I'm new at Taylor, I don't know much about the company yet. Also Taylor is a big company, and there are many offices and departments that I have never worked with. So when they talk about projects and company policies that I'm not familiar with, I get lost. They also use a lot of abbreviations.

WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT THEY'RE TALKING ABOUT, WHAT DO YOU DO?

KHLOK: I ask them. It's OK to email them back to make sure what they are talking about.

I WOULD LIKE TO KNOW ABOUT TECHNOLOGIES IN YOUR COUNTRY. HOW WOULD YOUR JOB BE DIFFERENT IN YOUR COUNTRY?

KHLOK: First of all, there aren't many programmer analysts in Cambodia. If I go back to Cambodia, probably I would teach at schools. Also, my job would be different because emails are not common in Cambodia yet. So, my coworkers would ask me for help over the phone instead of by email.

DO CAMBODIAN PEOPLE NOT USE EMAIL AT ALL?

KHLOK: Many young people use cell phones and iPhones. But not old people.

I'M CURIOUS HOW YOU VIEW TECHNOLOGY FROM YOUR CAMBODIAN PERSPECTIVE. IS THERE ANY DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TECHNOLOGIES IN YOUR COUNTRY AND THOSE HERE?

KHLOK: Yes. First off, the Internet is slow in Cambodia; it's much faster and definitely better here. Also, all TV programs in Cambodia are about praising the government. Everything on TV is like, "Oh, how great our government is! They help us so much!"

SOUNDS LIKE THERE IS NOT MUCH FREEDOM OF SPEECH IN YOUR COUNTRY.

KHLOK: Kind of. I need to tell



you my country's history. There was genocide in Cambodia in 1979. Everything was destroyed by Pol Pot's military. Schools were used as prisons, and the pagoda was used as a killing field.

DOES THE GOVERNMENT CENSOR INFORMATION ON THE INTERNET?

KHLOK: There is no law regarding censorship in Cambodia. But they are thinking of making laws to censor the Internet so that they can block any website that opposes the government.

IS THE INTERNET COMMONLY USED IN CAMBODIA?

KHLOK: Prices for Internet use are getting lower. But most old people cannot read and write. So many people can't use the Internet. And the Internet is safer in America because I rarely get attacked by computer viruses.

DO YOU THINK TECHNOLOGIES IN THE UNITED STATES MAKE YOUR LIFE CONVENIENT?

Khlok: Sure. You know what, I have a funny story. When I started working as a GA at the Memorial Library, and when I had a question, I would go to my boss's office and write down answers in my notebook. I could have used my MavMail instead of walking all the way to his office! I was not used to using email. (Laughs)

SO, NOW YOU USE YOUR EMAIL SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO WALK.

KHLOK: Right. Technology saves me time.

SINCE YOU'RE AN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT AND ARE WORKING IN THE

UNITED STATES, I WOULD LIKE TO ASK YOU ABOUT TECHNOLOGY BECOMING GLOBAL AND CROSS-CULTURAL. WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THAT?

KHLOK: When I hear globalization in technological fields, I think of outsourcing. Outsourcing could be a problem.

WHY?

KHLOK: Because jobs flow to other countries where labor is cheaper. It might be difficult to find a job in the United States in the future.

THAT'S TRUE. DO YOU NOT WELCOME GLOBALIZATION IN TECHNOLOGICAL FIELDS?

KHLOK: I do. I actually believe globalization is good because I believe in the freedom of being able to go to and know about other countries. I think Cambodians don't know much about the outside world. The future of the Internet will bring well-balanced information and freedom of speech to the people of Cambodia.

FINALLY, TELL ME ABOUT DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AMERICAN WEBSITES AND CAMBODIAN WEBSITES, IF ANY?

KHLOK: It's hard to find web pages written in Cambodian.

WHY IS THAT?

KHLOK: Because, to type our language, we have to install language software. I search for information in English.

DO CAMBODIAN PEOPLE IN CAMBODIA USE ENGLISH FOR THEIR WEBSITES ALL THE TIME?

KHLOK: Cambodians are trying to globalize themselves, so

to speak. They want to use English. For instance, job search sites are usually in English.

REALLY? WHAT IF YOU CAN'T READ ENGLISH?

KHLOK: People who can afford to use the Internet are usually able to read English. In other words white collar jobs are posted on those websites. People who can't read English or use computers look through newspapers for help wanted ads. Blue collar jobs are in print materials.

SO, THE INTERNET IS ONLY FOR WEALTHY AND EDUCATED PEOPLE.

KHLOK: Yeah. But I think Cambodians hope there will be more websites in their language.

SO YOUR FUTURE JOB WILL BE TO DEVELOP WEBSITES IN CAMBODIAN AND MAKE THE INTERNET ACCESSIBLE TO ALL CAMBODIANS?

KHLOK: (Laughs) Maybe.

New IT Student on Campus Pushes Technology to the Max

Meridith Teitz

Megan Bening, a freshman Information Technology (IT) student here on the Minnesota State University, Mankato, campus, almost assuredly wins the prize for the most technology devices used on a daily basis. Some of these devices you may be familiar with already and use yourself, and some you will learn about from this article. Megan, who is blind, needs all of them in order to access class materials and complete course assignments. Her impressive array of tools includes a MacBook Air, Braille Note Apex, HoverCam (used to capture images of print documents and convert them to electronic Braille), BookSense for audio textbooks, a Kurzweil scanner and software for reading print text, an SD card reader, iPhone and iPad, Mac TV, Mac mini, and a Refreshabril display. The most technologically advanced of her collection is the Aftershokz head phones, which enable sensory conduction through bone structure and, fitting into the space in front of the ear, leave the ear canal open for her to listen for traffic noise and to orient herself.

Are you sufficiently impressed? Well, she also owns the usual set of electronics most everyone brings to campus, including a DVD player for movies (Megan's are in Audio Described format) and microwave oven (Megan owns a talking microwave she found in a Mankato pawnshop after

a three-year search). She also has had to master a number of procedures she uses to convert files into accessible formats right in her dorm room. Megan described one of the procedures she uses most frequently:

If I get an email from a professor that has content in PDF format, nothing I have can actually read PDF files. If I pull it up on my iPhone or iPad, I need to use AirPrint to make a hard copy and then scan with Hovercam so I can convert the file to html and then it becomes accessible.

Think about how time-consuming it would be for you to have to take a similar number of extra steps just to be able to read something sent to you. Those of us with full use of our hearing and sight take these capabilities for granted; those who do not have this advantage have to find a way through software incompatibilities, hardware expenses and use their inner strength to push through these kinds of boundaries.

Megan has used complex technology her whole life, and fortunately, some of her high school coursework was rigorous enough to prepare her for college-level studies. In 5th grade, she received her first laptop and began vastly accelerating her already highly advanced listening skills. In a recent interview with the author, she provided numerous details about the manufacturers

of her devices, and a highly sophisticated description of how they function. Megan aspires to be, and is working hard toward becoming, an IT consultant. Specifically, she'd find it rewarding and challenging to consult with companies, analyze their IT systems, figure out what upgrades are needed and undertake the upgrades herself. Naturally, she explains, she finds the complex task of writing code difficult, given that the editing software used to detect bugs and errors is not accessible to the blind, even using her JAWS (Job Access for Windows) screen reader.

Pursuing a career as an IT specialist is challenging her vast array of hard-won skills. Megan described the following scenario that she has already faced and will have to adapt to on a regular basis.

Imagine you have 100 lines of code to correct and your syntax is off on one line so your program won't run. Because Braille is read one line at a time and, unless it is embossed in hard copy Braille, you can't look back and forth at the lines. It would be too tedious to have someone actually speak the code character by character, so the error must be located in Braille (which has a different configuration code for both math and computer language) or have someone check it by sight alongside of you.

In the blindness community, such an assistant is called a

“Reader”, and many blind professionals (including David Peterson, the former governor of New York) employ readers to help them digest the massive amounts of print materials they need to conduct their work every day.

Some of the technology barriers Megan faces result from the continual array of software upgrades. Imagine mastering MS Office 2003, only to have it replaced by MS7 and MS10 with the accompanying vision-oriented enhancements. Megan has to determine if the basic operating framework of a program is sufficiently different enough to warrant the significant learning investment she would have to make in order to adapt to the new software. While most of the new ‘bells and whistles’ of software program can improve its use for sighted persons, it doesn’t necessarily mean she will be able to take advantage of them. And, as you might imagine, the same kinds of software design issues that may challenge

one of us can become almost insurmountable for her, putting significant demands on her time and energy .

What Megan feared most when she came to the university was having difficulty navigating her way around the campus grounds. She was relieved

and surprised to learn that the support provided by the State Services for the Blind was better than what was available to her in high school. A state-funded Orientation and Mobility Specialist spent a significant amount of time helping her learn her way around the campus and sharpen



her navigation skills. Learning the campus layout was not as difficult as Megan had anticipated, given that most of her classes were held in the STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) buildings. “My hometown only had two stop lights and

I didn’t get the opportunity to learn busy intersections,” she said, “until I had to live in south Minneapolis and navigate bus transit as well.” In south Minneapolis, Megan’s best friend was her screenless “Captain GPS” system. “I actually got training for a week in Michigan on the independent use of that GPS system.

We went to baseball games, canoeing, bowling, and rock climbing that week while using the GPS. It was fantastic.”

While she has traveled extensively by air to a variety of foreign countries and even taken a cruise, Megan gained her personal skills in cooking and self-sufficiency through a summer-long residency at a special program at Vision Loss Resources in the Twin Cities. As she explained, “The stove was not my friend until I had to work on it daily, as well as use the oven to cook for others.”

College life is more than using tools to get your work done; it’s about developing lifelong relationships with a wide

variety of persons and exploring the many opportunities only available in this environment. Megan feels accepted on campus, for the most part, and mentions that she feels that way because individuals on campus help her address some of the things some blind people can’t

see to address, adjust, or fix. She often forgets that even though she cannot see the problems, those who can see can and do help with such things as: good hygiene, appropriate table manners, matching clothes (enabled by a color identification app on the iPhone or another electronic device), wearing fashionable clothing that is not stained and, perhaps most significantly, keeping the appropriate amount of personal space between her and another person. Megan explains:

When blind people get together and we are comfortable with each other, the degree of space between us shrinks very noticeably. A group of 12 of us were [sic] heaped on a loveseat watching a movie once. Sighted people have this distance between them, their 'bubble' so to speak, that keeps them comfortable. Blind people are more comfortable with touch, perhaps because we can't see. I have had to make my 'bubble' larger because I am with sighted people and try to operate off their personal cues.

Megan believes it is up to her to educate those who have never had personal interactions with blind persons and might rely on the tendencies to be overly protective, dismissive, or even rude. For example, she recounted an instance when she was searching for a door knob she knew was in front of her, but did not know was more centered and higher than

she had anticipated. Megan knew others were nearby and waiting for her to successfully locate the doorknob, and who honestly didn't know what level of help to give her. After she finally found the doorknob on her own, she turned to them and said, "THAT is what you call a 'blindy-findy' moment." The laughter that ensued diffused the situation, but it was clear that her peers felt uncomfortable because they don't want to be seen either as taking control or doing nothing to help. There is a line between the two, Megan explains:

It's a matter of telling people when you need help and when you don't." She's had people offer too much help out of an over-developed sense of pity that can border that can make her feel extremely uncomfortable if the boundaries of personal space are crossed. She also faces the difficult situation of determining, without any visual information, if the person is just over-helping, flirting, or worse.

Megan admits that she does not want to be quizzed about how she functions so well without being able to see, absent some kind of personal relationship with the questioner. Identifying yourself and making brief small talk helps her to get a bearing on who you are before she feels free to answer your more personal questions. Start from a position that in most regards, college life is the same for her

as it is for you. Your biggest challenge is also hers. What might that be?

Procrastination.

Megan's technology helps her do many things, but surmounting the personal motivation necessary for keeping up with time management is, in fact, one thing technology still can't do for any of us.

CORBIN, CONTINUED

which was ok, but when I went back to working full time, I needed something more stable. The second reason was boredom. Sometimes, in certain companies, there is a very slow development cycle with very few new products. This can result in writing and rewriting the same thing over and over. I needed more variety than that to be happy.

DID YOU HAVE A CHECKLIST OF THINGS YOU WERE LOOKING FOR WHEN YOU GOT BACK INTO THE FIELD?

Here is what I was looking for, getting back in the field: a stable and profitable company, a supervisor that I liked and that understood the writing process, the opportunity to work on lots of different projects, and the potential for career growth and promotion.

WHAT QUESTIONS SHOULD ASPIRING

TECHNICAL WRITERS ASK THEMSELVES BEFORE HEADING IN ONE DIRECTION OR ANOTHER?

They should ask what kind of pace they like to work in. Some places have a lot to do but over a longer development time. Others have a very short development cycle. They should also think about the level of technical knowledge they want to learn about and write about. Some writing goes to the general public and that documentation is not geared to expert level users. Other books are for IT professionals and need very detailed and intricate instructions. It is like the difference between writing about how to use Gmail and how to network the Gmail server.

WHAT QUESTIONS SHOULD YOU ASK IN A JOB INTERVIEW TO GAUGE HOW IT'S GOING TO BE?

Ask about the development cycle and about who the subject matter experts that will be giving you the information you need are. You should also ask about the document review cycle (who edits your work). You should ask if you are going to be assigned to one development team or if all writers help with all the teams. Different places do this in different ways.

WHAT ARE THE PROS AND CONS OF WORKING IN A TECHNICAL FIELD?

Pros of working in a technical field are that it is really exciting, fast paced, and there can be a lot of money in it. If you enjoy learning about the newest technology, you will really

like it. There are often really smart people who work in technology and you can learn so much from them. The biggest con is that it can be unstable. In a downsizing situation, the technical writer is often the first to be laid off because they are not vital to getting the software out the door.

WHAT SHOULD ALL TECHNICAL WRITERS KNOW?

All technical writers should know basic word processing programs. Also, there seems to be a real trend towards document development in a Wiki format. Some minimal photo editing is also helpful for screen captures.

HOW SHOULD YOU ANSWER QUESTIONS ABOUT SOFTWARE YOU DON'T KNOW?

Yes, you are right; there will be software you don't know how to use. Your answer, if asked about it in an interview, is "It's my job to learn new software so well that I can explain it to others."

What I learned from talking with Elys is that the technical communication field is so far reaching that you need to make some decisions about what it is that you're looking for before you accept a technical writing position. In her case, her negative experiences have taught her what she does and doesn't want out of a technical writing job. Talking with her has given me a lot to think about and inspired me to write out some of my own preferences and job interview questions. It's important to remember that an interview is

as much about you interviewing them as it is about them interviewing you. In a technical field, there can be many exciting opportunities; just make sure that you know what you want to do before you accept the job.

OPSE, CONTINUED

For instructors to take full advantage of voice-recognition software, they need a campus-wide support system. Specifically, they need on-demand support staff, so that that users have access to adequate training opportunities and IT assistance when necessary. I hope this article provides disabled and non-disabled instructors with an overview of how Dragon NaturallySpeaking voice-recognition software can be used to create and manage online course material, prevent repetitive stress injuries, and enhance their awareness of students' needs.

SOURCES

Zumalt, Joseph. "Voice-Recognition Technology: Has It Come of Age?" *Information Technology and Libraries*. 24. no. 4 (2005): 180-5.

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For more information about the Technical Communication program at Minnesota State University, Mankato, please check out our website at www.english.mnsu.edu/techcomm.

You can also contact our PROGRAM DIRECTOR,

DR. NANCY MACKENZIE

507-389-5505

NANCY.MACKENZIE@MNSU.EDU

For more information about the Minnesota State University, Mankato, student chapter of the Society for Technical Communication please contact Dr. Lee Tesdell or Dr. Jennifer Veltsos.