Suncoast Chapter Virtual Chat, March 1, 2007

Note: Read the chat from bottom to top. It's in reverse chronological order.

Bernadette: Thanks Bear!

Bear: Night

Charles Arnold: Our department closing is O&O = Over and Out

Bear: Word support at: david.chinell@ge.com

Bernadette: Right back at ya!

Tom Johnson: Have a nice evening everyone.

Bernadette: I enjoyed 'meeting' each of you! Thanks!

Bear: HAH! Amen.

Bear: Fine by me.

Charles Arnold: It's great being on a chat with fast typists and good spellers.

Tom Johnson: Thanks for participating. I really enjoyed chatting with you guys.

Bernadette: That's fine with me!

Tom Johnson: Also, I have a one question survey regarding the chat experience. «link»

Charles Arnold: Thanks Tom. You are a delightful host.

Bernadette: Yes, thanks very much Tom. This was great!

Tom Johnson: One question: Do you mind if we publish the chat on the suncoast site?

Bear: Thanks to all, especially our host, Tom.

Tom Johnson: I said we'd go until about 8 p.m. Should we call it a night?

Tom Johnson: I try to keep up with a smattering of blogs.

Bear: Group: Delightful as this is, I must now away home.

Charles Arnold: there are some very knowledgeable MVPs here who can just plop in a URL that solves the problem.

Bear: It only takes about a half-hour to skim them in the morning. Since I'm responsible for application support for our group, it's VERY handy.

Charles Arnold: Here's the Adobe RH forum: «link»

Tom Johnson: Bear, how do you have time to read all those listserv emails?

Bear: Yes, I subscribe to that.

Tom Johnson: The best resource for tool questions is the Yahoo HATT listserv. HATT stands for help authoring tools and technologies.

Bear: Thanks

Tom Johnson: There are several MVPs who usually try to answer questions. Here's the Google Group RH forum: «link»

Charles Arnold: The Adobe RoboHelp user forum.

Bear: Sorry, I don't know what an RH forum is.

Tom Johnson: Yes, but it's not that helpful.

Charles Arnold: Is there a Google RH group?

Bernadette: Yes, it's been a few months but I have read the forums.

Charles Arnold: I have relied on them fairly extensively, and they have been a lifesaver for me.

Bear: Lazy, yes. But I also think we may undervalue our intellectual tools.

Tom Johnson: I use Google Groups when I have questions. It's a great resource.

Charles Arnold: Do you ever read the Adobe RH forums?

Bear: Yes.

Charles Arnold: Do you mean the user forums?

Bear: Word-PC, TechWrl, Freeframers, Acrobat etc. etc.

Tom Johnson: People get lazy when answers are freely given.

Charles Arnold: Which lists are you referring to?

Bear: ... easily be answered ... I mean

Bear: I mean that about 80% of the questions I see on the lists I read could easily be solved if the querant conducted a few simple tests.

Charles Arnold: Always reliable functions.

Tom Johnson: What do you mean by controlled tests?

Bear: You know, in the end I think my best tool has been my analytical intellect and my ability to perform controlled tests.

Tom Johnson: The thing about tools is, it needs to be something the masses can work. Otherwise how do you collaborate with people outside the tech comm dept.?

Charles Arnold: I'm glad someone has something nice to say about MS Word.

Bernadette: I've heard recently that it's going to be resurrected.

Tom Johnson: I use RoboHelp HTML, but I think it's a dying tool.

Bernadette: So far RoboHelp HTML. On a separate note, I am still a big MS Word fan.

Bear: Although I've been monitoring an AuthorIT list, and it looks like it can be as gnarly as anything.

Charles Arnold: What are the relative advantages of those two options?

Tom Johnson: The new DITA Stylus Studio tool that Mark Lewis is working on will sort of use Word.

Bernadette: Oh, re: AuthorIT, that's good to know Tom.

Charles Arnold: Do you prefer RoboHelp HTML or RoboHelp Word?

Bernadette: I have worked with MS Project in the past, am not using it now. No need currently.

Tom Johnson: Someone who was an expert in AuthorIT visited our chapter several months ago. I was asking him about it. He said that despite its single sourcing

capability, he still has to apply 15 macros to fix the output. That killed the appeal of AuthorIT for me.

Bear: And I get warm-fuzzies because Word is the publishing engine.

Bernadette: AuthorIT would probably be a good choice. I have heard/seen good things about it.

Tom Johnson: I would like to learn DITA, XML, and also master wikis.

Bernadette: Tom, I'm not sure what's out there. The question is, stick with RoboHelp, switch to something else? Go in a totally different direction? I have been out of the 'shopping mode' for quite awhile. I took a Framemaker class (not by choice) and am NOT a fan.

Charles Arnold: I'd like to learn more about HTML/XML and javascript to enable user interactions with content.

Bear: Microsoft Project, AuthorIT, FrameMaker are the ones on my list -- not necessarily by choice.

Charles Arnold: But that is impossible with a paper intensive operation.

Tom Johnson: What new tools would you all like to learn? Anything specific?

Charles Arnold: Plus.... the company has discovered the economies of telecommuting.

Charles Arnold: I think that will provide an opportunity for more sophisticated reference documents.

Charles Arnold: We are beginning to see distributed operations units in the insurance industry.

Bernadette: Agreed, it is a web form with a server side program.

Charles Arnold: Again... to integrate sendmail with a web form requires a server side programs.

Tom Johnson: I agree with Bear that the tech comm. depts aren't often perceived as contributing to the financial profits of a company. Hence, one may not get a web server, but a file server.

Tom Johnson: Intercom had an article about setting up an email feedback address with javascript to identify the page the user was on.

Charles Arnold: We tried to capture form data on the NTFS, and I had one of our VB programmers put a script together, but we couldn't get it to work.

Bernadette: I created the customized feedback myself. It's not fancy but it's functional. One of the developers helped me to set it up so that their feedback comes directly to me to a special email address we set up for each product.

Bear: Lack of credibility.

Bear: That brings me back to another problem that's serious but not really technological or new.

Charles Arnold: They require a web server.

Charles Arnold: I convinced my company to acquire RH Pro, but then couldn't get them to install the server side components.

Tom Johnson: How do you embed the customized feedback reports into RH? Do you hear a lot from users?

Charles Arnold: RoboHelp Pro offers the user tracking reports.

Bernadette: Right now, what I do with my RoboHelp products is that I embed customized feedback reports that the user can respond to specific, open ended questions as well as add his or her own comments.

Tom Johnson: I would like to have a help system track hits, and then aggregate the most popular pages into a special category.

Bear: Visions of cameras tracking their eye movements. Impromptu usability studies with slightly different versions of text going to different users.

Charles Arnold: But it's difficult to convince anyone to host a site for non-IT units.

Tom Johnson: Wouldn't it be cool to embed a chat application inside a help system, and have the tech writer who wrote the product, or the support center, monitor it?

Bernadette: Agreed I have pitched that need before. The Training group does that sort of tracking. I don't have access to that same sort of system at the moment.

Charles Arnold: That is very true.

Tom Johnson: Charles brings up an important point about the web server. If all users are doing is reading static content, and we don't care to track their usage, monitor their hits, or personalize the delivery, we're not going to be effective in understanding our users.

Charles Arnold: It's just a standard shared drive.

Charles Arnold: No cgi capability.

Charles Arnold: Windows NT File Server.

Tom Johnson: What is NTFS?

Charles Arnold: I think.... we are stuck with a clunky only NTFS.

Charles Arnold: Those open up many new possibilities.

Bernadette: Yes

Charles Arnold: Bernadette.

Bear: What I mean is that UL or an entire bevy of equivalent agencies has to review and approve our products, so rapid revision isn't possible.

Tom Johnson: Another problem with keeping pace with technology is the sheer variety of languages, systems, tools, concepts, etc. There is so much to know. One can't know it all. But I think we have to be savvy enough to learn what we need to know at the moment we need it.

Bernadette: Which B are you asking, Bear or Bernadette?

Charles Arnold: B... are you allowed access to a web server for your content?

Bear: Our stuff is a tightly integrated part of an agency-regulated product.

Bear: Okay. But we're in a slightly different situation here.

Bernadette: I agree and I'm willing to learn about new tools and technology Tom. The question is, where to start, what's the right thing to get into? What do I recommend that the company invest in?

Tom Johnson: Right now a lot of the help we publish is static, but in several years user collaboration and input will begin to drive help. Look at the success of wikipedia, digg, amazon.

Bear: Why?

Tom Johnson: I'm convinced that wikis will eventually transform the way technical communicators create documentation on project teams.

Bernadette: IE 6.0

Tom Johnson: Bernadette, what browser are you using?

Tom Johnson: Part of the problem about keeping pace with technology is that we often work under tight deadlines. Bernadette mentioned the budget cuts and overtime. So at the end of the day, to learn new tools and technology, it's often on your own time.

Bernadette: And I got out of Training and into IT/TW environ because of all of the layoffs in the Training/Curricu lum Design environ.

Bear: I'd just like things to stay stable long enough to get two successive revisions of a manual out the door using the same tools.

Charles Arnold: So... DITA tool sets are really like science fiction.

Bear: But now I'm coming right back to the same problem.

Tom Johnson: I agree that content management may solve some of the publishing problems, without requiring people to be tech savvy. But I've also heard that only about half of CMS implementations are successful.

Bear: I started in software around 1977 but left after about five years because of the constant change in technology.

Bernadette: Scary!

Charles Arnold: Often they think that page numbers are a revolutionary advance.

Charles Arnold: I have typically worked in environments where the level of publishing expertise is quite low.

Bear: Like using the OS directory structure to define publication structure.

Tom Johnson: We're on the verge of doing a lot of DITA related things in our chapter. Reason being, we have Mark Lewis, who is writing documentation for the company that is producing the DITA Stylus Studio.

Bernadette: Thanks, see this is my problem, I'm the only one doing what I'm doing and I'm not able to keep up with the new tools of my craft!

Bear: It has a lot of staggeringly great ideas wrapped up in it.

Bear: And extensible implementation of SGML for technical writing that includes a production toolset.

Tom Johnson: DITA (Darwin Information Typing Architecture) is an XML language. The main gist is that it allows you to single source / repurpose your content without duplicating it manually.

Charles Arnold: Isn't DITA a publishing workflow methodology?

Bernadette: Ok,I don't even know what DITA is.

Bear: I'd have to say I'm counting on content management to take us to the next level here.

Tom Johnson: I feel a bit ignorant because I haven't learned DITA yet.

Tom Johnson: Bear, you said the main issue you see is "keeping up with the right technology and fighting to increase productivity without making our jobs horrid." What do you see as being the right technology?

Charles Arnold: I have trouble keeping up with the rapid pace of innovation in the IT world and the many ways to deliver content.

Tom Johnson: I also asked the others what they think the most pressing issues for technical writers are today. Do you have any input on that?

Charles Arnold: But good, experienced copywriters can ask for big bucks.... and are highly valued on the creative teams.

Charles Arnold: There is much more demand for technical writers...

Charles Arnold: Technical writing is easier in many ways... but not as interesting creatively.

Charles Arnold: I convinced them that my familiarity with their product line qualified me to be their technical writer.

Tom Johnson: Which is better, copywriting or technical writing?

Charles Arnold: The packaging machinery company was one of our advertising clients.

Charles Arnold: I was an adverting copywriter.

Tom Johnson: 1995? What were you doing before that?

Charles Arnold: lines to package inkjet cartridges.

Charles Arnold: Where I published user material in MS Word. My first project was the HP "Heart of Gold" packaging

Charles Arnold: In Sarasota.

Charles Arnold: I started my tech writing career in 1995 with a packaging machinery company

Charles Arnold: Sure...

Charles Arnold: RH is either more intuitive, or I am more familiar with it.

Tom Johnson: Charles, the others introduced themselves a while back. Would you tell the others a little about you?

Charles Arnold: I have been trying to crank out a publication.

Charles Arnold: Thanks.... anyhow.

Tom Johnson: Charles, have you been using your new copy of Flare that you won last month?

Bear: Me neither. You're officially the expert.

Bernadette: No, not me, sorry.

Tom Johnson: Someone gave me a copy of QuarkXpress, but I've never had an occasion to use it. Sorry Charles.

Charles Arnold: Has anyone had experience migrating a QuarkXpress document to RoboHelp?

Tom Johnson: In RoboHelp, I have styles for everything. Then I use macros to convert the styles to our how-to guide format styles. I even have macros to make icons and table columns suddenly appear.

Bernadette: I also author directly into Robohelp and have generated the documents from there as well but have not always been pleased with the output, even with identical styles.

Tom Johnson: In fact, they focused mainly on usability, not new features. That said, there is some cool functions that show you previews of your selections without having to actually make them.

Bear: Tom -- that's our approach too. Author in RoboHTML using identical style names, single-source out to Word for publishing.

Tom Johnson: I played around with Word 2007. It's cool, but no new mind-blowing functionality.

Charles Arnold: I hear it's the most annoying release yet.

Bernadette: Not yet

Tom Johnson: I author directly in RoboHelp and output them into Word. I think if RH is to be used as a single sourcing tool, it has to contain the source material.

Charles Arnold: Has anyone seen Word 2007?

Bernadette: Wonderful news Bear! I am a regular word user but don't get into macros much! I do work with RoboHelp also.

Charles Arnold: Tom.. do you clean the Word files before you import them into RH?

Tom Johnson: Thanks for the offer to help with macros. I actually have about 20 different macros running, and it converts it 90%.

Charles Arnold: I'm in the process of migrating documents to webhelp systems for my company.

Bear: Tom -- I live to serve the Word user. Feel free to bug me directly any time when you need macro help. Same goes to all in the chat!

Bernadette: Tom, one thing I have found helpful in a pinch is to design the guide first and then convert it to RoboHelp. Not always the best solution but it works when in a hurry to get both out the door.

Tom Johnson: I agree that budget cuts are a serious challenge, since the tech comm. dept is sometimes seen as expendable. When I saw the news yesterday about the stock market, I was nervous.

Bear: And yes, I am up on macros (VBA).

Bear: For me it's keeping up with the right technology and fighting to increase productivity without making our jobs horrid.

Bernadette: I also do editing. Right now I am serving as both the TW and co-writing/editi ng/giving feedback to 7 SMEs who have been recruited to help me meet aggressive deadlines.

Tom Johnson: Welcome Charles!

Charles Arnold: Good evening. Sorry I'm late.

Tom Johnson: Bear, so you're an expert with macros? I recently spend a few weeks trying to create macros that would transform our RoboHelp output into our printable guide format.

Bernadette: The most significant challenges and changes have been the budgets have been slashed for projects/trainin g/user communication in general. No time/budget/inte rest in keeping me trained in my field. That is my biggest challenge right now. Years ago, I was regularly sent by FPC to conferences/semi nars. Now it's a rare event.

Tom Johnson: Bear, I'm also curious to hear what you think the most significant challenges are for technical communicators today.

Bear: I also design our information products and maintain our VBA modifications to Word. To keep myself grounded in reality, I spend about 30% of my time doing production writing.

Tom Johnson: Do you dedicate all your time to editing, or do you also write documentation too? We have a full time editor where I work. It seems like editing would be a difficult job.

Bear: Unofficially, I do a lot of "favors" for other departments.

Bear: I edit the work of six writers in our Tech Pubs department.

Tom Johnson: Bear, as an editor, do you edit the work of other technical writers, or for the entire company, or what?

Bear: I'm the Technical Editor for GE Security in Bradenton.

Bear: I'd love to, provided my connection will stay put.

Bernadette: Tom, to tell you the truth, I'm not sure how many years. It has been difficult for me to attend meetings as I am the only TW on staff and so am bogged down with deadlines/OT

Tom Johnson: Bernadette, what do you think some of the most significant challenges are for technical communicators today? Has it changed since you first began in the tech writing industry?

Tom Johnson: That's cool. Carillon is a nice area to be during the day.

Bernadette: Yes, I worked at Florida Power before this company so I've been doing this type of work awhile. 😃Sounds as if we might be work neighbors as my office is in Carillon.

Bear: IE6

Tom Johnson: Bear, would you like to introduce yourself?

Bear: I'm using IE6.

Tom Johnson: Bernadette, how long have you been in the STC?

Tom Johnson: What browser are you guys using?

Tom Johnson: Wow, it sounds like you have a lot of experience in the industry.

Guest_3265: Hi Tom, this is the first time I am participating in a chat, so please Bear with me. I work at Spheris, it's a medical transcription company based in TN. Our office is in St. Pete. I've been in overall combination of user Documentation/Cu rriculum Design/Training for about 25 years total. Doing mainly user doc and on-line help for the last 10 years with this company.

Tom Johnson: I'd like to introduce myself too. I work at Raymond James in Tampa, live in St. Petersburg. I'm a member of the Online SIG. I also have a blog that I maintain regularly at idratherbewritin g.com

Tom Johnson: Bernadette, try typing your name in the little box below the chat window where it says Guest. Then it will show your name instead of guest.

Tom Johnson: Welcome Bear.

Tom Johnson: Bernadette, would you like to introduce yourself? For example, I know that you live in Palm Harbor (from the member map). Would you like to share any details about where you work, how long you've been in the industry, your SIG, etc?

Bear: Here am I.

Tom Johnson: Am I correct in assuming we have just two people online -- Bernadette and me?

Tom Johnson: Also, note that the chat window has a character limit. It 's several lines. When you click return, it sends the message.

Tom Johnson: Keep in mind a few things about the chat. First, make sure you type your name in the little box below the window so that your name appears rather than Guest.

Tom Johnson: Hi Bernadette.

Guest_3072: Hi my name is Bernadette Webber

Tom Johnson: Welcome Suncoast members and friends to the first virtual chat meeting of the Suncoast chapter. Tonight we'll begin with some member introductions and then briefly explore the topic, What are the most significant issues for technical communicators today?

Philip Rastocny: The site has come a long way folks. Kudos!

Tom Johnson: The next virtual chat will be this Thursday at 7 p.m. Just show up here (on this site).