

Figuring Out What to Learn

STC-Boston CIC SIG Meeting
October 25, 2006

Presented by:
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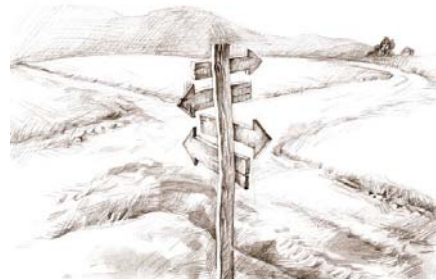
Why do this?

- To learn new skills
- To improve existing skills
- To keep abreast of trends
- To remain employable
- To expand your freelance services
- To increase self-esteem

How do I start?

With all of the information out there these days, the best way to start is to determine your interests. Otherwise, you'll become overwhelmed quickly!

- In which areas are you interested? Think about anything in which you're interested, technical and non-technical. Make a list.
- After you make this list, which areas jump out at you? These will be the areas in which you're truly passionate.
- Seek information about these areas through the Web and the local library. (Often even a small library can have access to a lot of information.) Also talk to friends, colleagues, and acquaintances.
- Get involved in professional organizations related to your interests by attending meetings and volunteering. The experience can help you expand your freelance services or even change the focus of your business, if it makes sense from a marketing standpoint.
- Keep a lookout for trends that may spark your interest. More information about how others spot trends is included in the next section.



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Examples of how others look for trends in their fields

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Katharyn Bine, ICF Consulting, Fairfax, Virginia

- "1. I read a lot: chat messages such as the Lone Writers, the paper, *Wired* magazine. I'm also devoted to NPR. This helps me hear about trends in society and technology. I think following societal trends is more important than following information technology trends, in part because they are more enduring and easier to track.
- "2. I participate in STC meetings where I am likely to meet people who do work different from mine.
- "3. I am friends with the people at work who are investigating and implementing solutions that are new, so that I hear them talk about them.
- "4. If the W3C has a committee to develop standards, then I'm at least curious about the approach or technology.
- "5. I actually try not to be trendy. I try to be that perennial classic that gets updated a bit every year. Knowing the tools of the trade is valuable, but I want to be employed because I'm smart, resourceful, and adaptable. I use Word, but I've tried to avoid being labeled a 'Word driver' because then I become a cipher for other people's words. Maybe that wouldn't work in other markets, but it certainly seems to work here.
- "6. I am always looking for subject matter areas that are interesting. According to Richard Nelson Bolles' excellent book, *What Color is Your Parachute?*, it's best to do what you love; the money will follow. Actually following that advice is so difficult but absolutely worthwhile."



Kristin Manke, Technical Editor, Richland, Washington

"After almost 15 years in the field, my belief is that I probably have a 50/50 chance of spotting the next trend accurately in technical communications. So, I'm taking the approach that the best way to go is to develop the best base skills I can and then to explore those areas that amuse me. By taking on what I find exciting and interesting, I take the time to learn more and find new ways to apply it."

Neil Perlin, Hyper/Word Services, Tewksbury, Massachusetts

Neil and I had several conversations by e-mail when I started preparing for this presentation in May. Here are excerpts from our discussion.

- Q. Do you ever try any active searches on the Web looking for information? Or is the information you glean from these publications and URLs you receive from others your primary resource? My method is very similar to yours below, except my list is mostly different.
- A. Yes, but in response to something that I've first read or heard about or experienced. That way, the search has focus.
- Q. How do you decide what you'll pursue? Others who have discussed this topic with me say they'll pick what interests them. One person quoted Richard Bolles, the author of *What Color is Your Parachute?*... "Do what you love, and the money will follow." That's hard for some people to do, but

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certainly is good advice. After all, if you don't enjoy what you're doing as a career, why do it? You're spending most of your life doing it!

- A. The things I pursue fit into my "online content" framework—e.g. mobile devices as content presentation mechanisms, Ajax as a content preparation mechanism, CMS as content storage mechanisms, metadata as content retrieval mechanisms, and so on. Without that sort of filter, there's just too much out there.
- Q. One person says she looks at societal trends more than the trends in her field. Do you ever look at societal trends? If you do, how much weight do you place there compared to your technical niches?
- A. I look at societal trends all the time. They help form the structure in which technology exists, even as technology itself also creates societal trends. *Smart Mobs* by Howard Rheingold was an excellent book about the rise of mobile devices.
- Q. What about professional organizations aside from STC? Do you keep track of what's happening in other organizations? I'm an active member of the American Society of Indexers and attend the BostonCHI monthly meetings to learn more about usability. I also track information on the American Society of Training and Development's (ASTD) site, but haven't joined the organization yet.
- A. I either belong to or sort of follow activities in other groups as well, although my focus happens to be on STC...I pay some attention to ASTD and periodically attend local meetings, and I belong to and am going to be writing a column for IEEE PCS [Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers Professional Communication Society]. Sometimes the information can be negative but still useful. For example, I was struck by the low interest in and awareness of XML and Flash shown at a [name of organization omitted to protect privacy] meeting last spring and have been mentioning that in speeches as an example of a market untapped by traditional practitioners.

Neil also provided a copy of his reading list, which is included below. He said, "It's about a year since I looked at the list, and it's interesting to see what's changed in light of changing market forces and my changing interests. Ten magazines disappeared from the list because they went out of business."

- Regular reading includes *Wired*, *Intercom*, *Technology Review*, *Science News*, *InfoWorld*, *HealthCare Informatics*, *Business Week*.
- Irregular reading includes "Airline magazines, *Scientific American*, *Discover*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *PC Magazine*, three national Canadian papers that occasionally run high-tech columns, the NIST (National Institute for Standards and Technology) web site, and various other web sites that I happen to find or that people send me."



Rich Stakutis, Phoenix Controls Corporation, Acton, Massachusetts

Rich does marketing research as part of his job responsibilities. When he conducts research, "I cross-reference trends from both owners and consulting engineers (two different stakeholders with different interests) in order to validate the trends." In other words, he identifies trends by looking for consistent information from various sources. Once he identifies these matches, he validates his findings.