

# Be Your Own Career Consultant

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*A technical communications career is one of the most versatile, flexible careers available for people who are willing to take responsibility for their own growth. As technical communicators, we've been able to create our own careers by setting clear goals and then looking for imaginative ways to achieve them. The purpose of this workshop is to share our proven methods, strategies, and resources with new and seasoned technical writers alike, enabling them to chart their own career course with confidence and creativity. Throughout the session, we will encourage attendees to share their own experiences, and to seek advice for current challenges from the group. We hope that our topics will be the starting point for a lively, productive discussion.*

## INTRODUCTION

Computer technology has changed the corporate world dramatically. For technical communicators, this is great news! Knowledge workers are in high demand, and anyone who can combine communications skills with technical aptitude is assured of employment in almost any economic climate. We are at the front lines of user advocacy, usability testing, and quality assurance. As technology matures, our role becomes increasingly vital, affecting every aspect of human-computer interaction. Our field of influence is becoming so broad that we can each create a career path that meets our own unique goals and desires.

So if you want to specialize in one format, be it help systems or white papers, you can make it happen. If you want to be a generalist, and do a little bit of everything, you can make that happen too. If you want to work for a large company, a small startup, or chart your own course as a freelancer, you can do it, do it well, make money, and have fun at the same time. You'll need a little bit of planning, a little perseverance, and creative implementation of the tools and techniques listed below.

RIGHTWriters is a good example of what can happen when you chart your own course. Since Terri Germann founded the company in 1994, we've used the methods described below to attract high-profile clients with exciting projects, and skilled, talented consultants to work on those projects. We know these strategies and tools work, and we're excited to share them at Currents 2001.

## BUILDING A STRONG PORTFOLIO

Designers have known for years that you're only as good as your portfolio. Yet we see so many technical writers (with great resumes) who just throw together a haphazard assortment of samples, present them more or less chronologically, and hope for the best. We think the job market is enough of a gamble already, and a good portfolio is the first step in hedging your bets.

Confidence is compelling, and creative problem solving is a highly desirable attribute. Being able to see "the big picture" and apply that vision to a specific task adds value to any organization. Use your samples to demonstrate all of your strengths, not just your proficiency with Information Mapping™ or ISO 9000.

Your portfolio is more than just samples of your work; it is the concentrated expression of your skills, talents, and professional principles. Give it the attention it deserves.

## Appearances Count

Your portfolio should be as brushed and polished as you are when you go on a job interview. Even if your portfolio is mostly electronic media, you should have a printed sample (even if it's just a screen capture) of your work available to show an interviewer and use as a conversation starter during the interview.

Whether you invest in a true artist's portfolio, or just a new briefcase, make sure your packaging is impeccable. Browse the aisles at your local office supply store and you'll find colorful and inexpensive binders, document cases, and carryalls. Group all the pieces relating to a particular project in one container, and become comfortable with opening and closing the fastenings. Make sure your pieces are organized in the order you want to talk about them, and practice removing and replacing them until you can do it quickly and smoothly, without interrupting the flow of your presentation.

You can even have several different sets of samples, each customized to showcase a particular skill set, genre (e.g., white papers, user guides, or instructional design), or the depth of your experience in a given technology (e.g., telecommunications, client/server applications, or digital imaging products).

## “The Medium is the Message”

Marshall McLuhan was talking about television when he said this, but we think it applies even more strongly to the Internet and multimedia. If you're a help developer or an interface designer, (or you just want to be) then you'll need an electronic portfolio in addition to a print one. Give the same degree of attention to your digital samples that you do to your print portfolio and your resume.

If you have digital samples, then you need a Web site. The Web gives you greater control over the presentation of your work and allows you to organize your samples effectively.

If you're going to have a Web site, make sure it's well designed and professionally presented. Don't include photos of your last vacation (unless you want to work as a travel writer) and don't include links to your children's school or to your pet causes. These things fall under the heading of too much information, and you don't want potential employers to judge you on anything but the quality of your work and your ability to present it effectively.

Consider putting all your electronic samples on a CD-ROM that you can leave behind after an interview. Kinko's and other copy services now offer CD-ROM creation services, and CD-ROM creation hardware is becoming less expensive every day. A polished CD-ROM catalog of your work, that includes a soft copy of your resume and a readme file detailing the highlights of your samples, is an impressive PR tool to leave with an interviewer.

## Sell Your Skills

Management guru Tom Peters has made a fortune teaching people how to build “Brand You.” What he means is that you can, and should, “transform yourself from an 'employee' into a brand that shouts distinction, commitment, and passion.” Now, this may seem a little rah-rah, but he's basically talking about good salesmanship. Your skills are your product, and if you sell them successfully, you'll get the work you want.

When you're organizing your portfolio, think quality over quantity. Choose three or four pieces that best illustrate the techniques and skills required for the job you want, and be prepared to talk in great detail about how you applied them. Discuss the goals for each piece, the constraints that limited your scope, and how you overcame them. Explain how the pieces in your portfolio relate to one another. Write a speech about your portfolio and rehearse it in the mirror, or role-play with

a friend. Do whatever it takes to make sure you're comfortable presenting your materials. You want the interviewer to remember your work, not your sweaty palms.

## **BUILDING YOUR NETWORK**

We think Richard Nelson Bolles, author of *What Color Is Your Parachute?*, may have said it best:

*"In its essence all job-hunting is a search not only for information, but also for people – that is, for human links between you and information, between you and a prospective employer, or if you choose self-employment, between you and prospective clients. These human links are called 'contacts.'"*

A strong professional network doesn't just happen; it takes diligent care and feeding. Schmoozing is only the tip of this iceberg. Your professional network is your best resource in the search for meaningful, fulfilling, and fiscally rewarding work. Manage it accordingly.

### **"Win Friends and Influence People"**

Dale Carnegie's courses are enduringly popular worldwide; and there's a reason for this: like Machievelli in a gray flannel suit, he's the man with the plan when it comes to getting people to like you and enjoy working with you. Carnegie was the master of "people skills", and as a technical communicator, your people skills are what sets you apart. We all prefer dealing with people we know and like; this is an axiom of salesmanship. Strive to be positive, pleasant, and productive in your professional relationships. Become a master of conflict resolution; this single skill may be more important than anything else you will learn in your life. It will enhance your professional reputation far beyond the limits of what technical skill alone can achieve, and it will make your working hours much more personally rewarding.

### **What Have You Done For Me Lately?**

When you leave a job or a project, don't forget the people who worked with you. Keep in touch regularly, even if you only have time for a friendly exchange of emails every few months or so. Keep them posted on your current projects, and ask them about their work. In this way, you can keep yourself informed about the overall job market. Information from your peers and past managers is the most relevant gauge of what you can expect when you are ready to make a move. Let your network know when you start a new job search. This informal networking is what Richard Bolles calls "the hidden job market", and it's where most people who like their work find new jobs. Also, be sure to ask the people you want to use as references for permission before you give their name to a prospective employer. In addition to being polite, it gives you an opportunity to choose those people who are most encouraging and enthusiastic about your prospects. We've interviewed people who looked great on paper, but lukewarm references made us think twice about hiring them. So make sure your references are prepared to describe you in glowing terms.

### **Find Your Flock**

In addition to informal networking, make time for formal groups, training, and events. The Society for Technical Communication is a great resource. There are also more specialized groups, like Women In Technology and WinWriters, that can be even more effective in connecting you to peers and potential job leads if your goal is to specialize in one single aspect of technical communications.

It isn't enough to just go to meetings, though. You have to actually introduce yourself to people, make conversation, even volunteer to be on a committee or contribute to a group project. In addition to building community, volunteer work done for a professional organization

demonstrates your work ethic, people skills, and problem-solving abilities to a larger pool of potential references and/or clients. People you work with on volunteer projects can be some of your strongest references over time. Don't overlook these valuable sources of potential references just because they aren't past co-workers.

## **BUILDING YOUR BUSINESS**

Even if you're happy in your current job and never plan to go into business for yourself, it still pays to think like an entrepreneur when it comes to managing your career. The corporate ladder has fallen apart, and your career path is what you make it. Entrepreneurs think this is terrific, because we know the only limits that need concern us are the ones we make or choose for ourselves.

Truth is, this philosophy applies to everyone. Recognize it, and this truth will set you free. In an article written for the New York Times in March 2000, Adrian Woolridge wrote:

*"A decade ago, corporate America tore up the social contract that bound employees to their companies. Downsizing and re-engineering made it clear that employees were expendable commodities, not valued resources. Workers today fantasize not about landing a 'dream job' but about having a 'portfolio career' -- one dream job after the other."*

We believe that if you apply the principles of entrepreneurship to your career, no matter what your goals are, you stand a better chance of achieving them.

### **The Entrepreneur's Way**

Entrepreneurs focus on building a body of impressive work for the purpose of creating "influence power," or the power of being known for making the most significant contribution in our area of expertise. Influence power is the power of our reputations, since we know word of mouth is the most effective sales and marketing tool known to man.

You will gain influence power when you have a strong portfolio and a broad network of references, and influence power is what gets you the opportunity to build them both. Doing your best work on innovative, interesting projects therefore becomes the alpha and the omega of career management.

### **Project Power**

Tom Peters, who gave us "Brand You", also talks about the importance of being project-driven:

*"Almost all work today is organized into bite-sized packets called projects... projects exist around deliverables, they create measurables, and they leave you with braggables. If you're not spending at least 70% of your time working on projects, creating projects, or organizing your (apparently mundane) tasks into projects, you are sadly living in the past. Today you have to think, breathe, act, and work in projects."*

Entrepreneurs think in terms of projects every day. We define and prioritize tasks; we think about the effect of each of our actions on the bottom line, we focus on meeting our clients' needs as effectively as possible. We do this for influence power, and for one other, equally important, reason: because we want our clients to pay our invoices. As entrepreneurs, we are constantly aware of the need to demonstrate our value to the client. (We like the cash and prizes we get in exchange.)

If you're a full-time employee, you have to figure out who your client is to demonstrate your value to them. It may be your manager, or it may be the user of the product you're documenting. It may be your subject matter expert, or your CEO. Your client may even change frequently based on the projects you're working on, their status, and an assortment of other variables. The point is, you have to satisfy your client to get paid. Your payment may be a bonus, a promotion, or a better job at another company.

So whether you're a freelancer, or a corporate chevalier, seek out projects that enhance your skills and help you reach your long-term goals. Think about ways you can add value to your company or your clients, and pitch your best ideas with enough detail to start a conversation. You won't always wind up with a contract, but you will build a reputation for being creative, resourceful, and hard working.

## CONCLUSION

Most of our ideas are fairly simple and straightforward; we don't claim to have reinvented the wheel. We do stress three consistent themes in our career philosophy:

- ❑ Take responsibility for your work and your professional growth
- ❑ Pay attention to the details
- ❑ Believe in yourself

If you apply these three principles to building a portfolio and network of references, you'll find plenty of opportunities to build the career you want.

Finally, to borrow the title phrase from one of our favorite books, "*Do What You Love, the Money Will Follow*," do not aspire to become a consultant in the technical communications field simply because you've heard you can earn a decent living or you can telecommute (most days). Do it because it is your gift and calling, and because you have the skills and abilities to support your career choice.

We offer our individual support, and the support of RIGHTWriters, the next time you want to make a career move. Keep in touch!

## ABOUT RIGHTWRITERS

Since 1994, we've been providing technical writing, editing, and publication services to a wide variety of hardware, software, and systems developers. During those years, we've earned a strong reputation for producing documents that are consistent, top quality, and highly effective.

### Biography: Terri Germann

Terri Germann has forged a two-decade career built on writing and producing a wide variety of award-winning publications for industry leaders across the country and around the world. She is President and CEO of **RIGHTWriters, Inc.**, a consulting and staffing firm for technical writing projects to companies across North America, and is a contributing writer to *Competitive Edge* magazine.

After earning a BA degree in English and an MA degree in Journalism at the **University of Georgia**, Terri quickly progressed to international success at **Unisys Corporation**. During her nine years there she coordinated on-site development at the **Hong Kong Bank**, and also managed a group of a dozen writers that won 12 awards in publication competitions by the **Society for Technical Communication (STC)**. While working for **Alltel Information Services**, she won a Distinguished Award in STC competition, and recently received an **APEX Award** for her work with **Novient, Inc.** Her resume includes leaders from a variety of vanguard businesses across the continent: **IBM Corporation, Vector Consulting, Geac Computer Systems, S1 Corporation (formerly Security First Technologies)**, and **NCR Corporation** in Canada.

In 1994, Terri co-founded **BJT and Associates**, providing training materials and on-site instruction for corporations and government agencies around the world. That same year she co-authored the **Personal Victory Series** to teach success skills to youth and adults. Two years later she co-authored the **R.A.V.E. System**, which teaches individuals and teams how to develop the necessary tools and habits for championship performance.

### Biography: Wendy Giddens

Wendy Giddens is a Client Relationship Manager for RIGHTWriters, Inc. and is responsible for ensuring that services provided through RIGHTWriters are of high quality and are delivered to meet and exceed its client's expectations.

Wendy has 14 years of combined experience in the areas of training and development, customer satisfaction, and usability, which she gained with large corporations such as **GTE** and **ALLTEL**, and through her independent consulting opportunities with Fortune 500 companies. Wendy uses her combination of skills in interpersonal relations, facilitation, communications, coordination and organization, and analysis in her current role with RIGHTWriters.

Most of Wendy's professional positions have required her to work closely with clients on several levels, ranging from entry level to senior executive and officer level. She also works with clients as a volunteer at two non-profit organizations.

Wendy received her BA degree in Marketing and Communications from the University of Washington, in Seattle, Washington. She has also completed numerous professional courses in the areas of customer relations, management, training and development, and usability throughout her career.

### Biography: Karen Morrione

Karen has over 14 years of experience in Marketing Communications, Technical Communications, and Public Relations. She earned a dual B.A. in English and French literature at

Auburn University. Her resume includes projects for a distinguished and varied list of clients, including **BellSouth**, the **Institute of Nuclear Power Operators**, **Acsys, Inc.**, and **NCR Canada**. She developed and implemented a PR campaign that won the Georgia Governor's Award for Economic Development for **Solvay Pharmaceuticals** in 1993. In 1997, she produced **Iterated Systems'** prize-winning entry for the **NBC Desktop Video Showcase**, which demonstrated their ClearVideo technology.

As a Marketing Consultant for **RIGHTWriters, Inc**, Karen assists clients to define and implement an integrated communications strategy that encompasses all products and services.

In 2000, Karen began sharing her expertise as a marketing maven by speaking and writing about marketing communications. She has been a Guest Lecturer at Kennesaw State College and has written articles for such prestigious publications as *Working Woman* magazine.