

TCANZ Conference

'Communicating with users: moving online and to the web' was a great success. **Mike Unwalla** gives his perspective.

The Technical Communicators Association of New Zealand (TCANZ) held its conference on 8-9 September 2005 in Christchurch, New Zealand. Topics covered content management, information design, localisation, professional development, standards, and tools & techniques. I was at the conference; here I give a brief overview of the sessions that I attended.

Gary Moore, Mayor of Christchurch, and Rod Oram, a financial journalist, opened the conference with interesting introductory speeches. Hearing people from outside the profession speak of the benefits that technical communicators bring was a refreshing experience.

In the keynote address, JoAnn Hackos spoke about topic-based documentation architectures, and in particular, she discussed DITA (see 'Darwin Information Typing Architecture' in *Communicator*, Summer 2005, for an explanation of DITA). Whilst topic-based authoring has many benefits, JoAnn pointed out that one should not artificially force text into topics. Sometimes it is necessary to have a linear approach to the delivery of text.

Patrick Hofmann followed by showing how to bring consistency to visual information. He suggested the use of templates to ensure consistency of graphic images. To obtain the best results, he recommends that pictures are drawn at actual size, rather than being scaled in the word processor.

The CEO of AuthorIT, Paul Trotter, spoke about the convergence between single source content management and localisation. He explained that because content management deals with low-level items, it is possible to track everything in the localisation process. The AuthorIT product suits localisation, and has a special localisation module.

Marie-Louise Flacke spoke about localisation in Europe. I was surprised to learn that in the German market, long-winded documents with complex phrasing and footnotes were often necessary, because simple text implies that the product itself is trivial. That just goes to show that localisation is much more than just a straightforward translation of text.



Panel members at the closing session (left to right): Carol M Barnum, JoAnn Hackos, Tony Self, Bill Hackos, Bogo Vatovec, Paul Trotter

Usability engineering has parallels to technical writing. Bogo Vatovec explained how to make the transition from technical writer to usability engineer. He said that people in both professions were user advocates, and that the transition was a natural choice for many technical communicators.

Ruth Hamilton explored the design decisions that we need to make in our documentation: purpose, audience, resources, constraints, solutions and deliverables, and project goals. She discussed the key elements: medium, layout, format, colour, graphics, navigation, structure, and sequence.

At the start of the second day, Carol Barnum discussed how we communicate with users from around the world. She gave fascinating statistics about the use of English, which is not particularly well used compared to some Asian languages. The Asian market is growing rapidly, for example, China has the second largest economy, and it is growing by about 10% a year. Some companies use wordless manuals (or manuals with high graphic content) to reduce localisation costs but Carol showed that this does not always work.

Structured authoring is an important aspect of information design. Tony Self explained how XML and schemas such as DocBook and DITA help authors to write structured content. He said many large organisations such as IBM and Adobe have embraced the use of DITA.

Single sourcing is an important aspect of content management. Rebecca Officer explained that there are different meanings for the term 'single sourcing': she uses it to mean the re-use of content in different

documents (rather than producing content in different output media). She then showed how to use some of FrameMaker's features to create a single-sourcing solution.

In his second presentation, Patrick Hofmann showed how to use the right visual images for localisation. He suggested that different groups of people need different symbols, and he gave many amusing examples of where symbols can cause confusion.

Bogo Vatovec spoke on trends in our profession, explaining that technical writing and usability have been perceived as costs so, in difficult economic times, practitioners are laid off. A few years ago, there was a boom in technical communication but, instead of focusing on how we add value, we acted like 'geeks' and concentrated on internal arguments and buzzwords rather than business issues. We lost out. Now the market is recovering, we cannot afford to make the same mistake again.

The closing panel discussion was fascinating, with certification one of the topics. Bogo suggested it would not be useful because outsiders would not understand its meaning. Bill Hackos added that, as we cannot define our jobs, we are not ready for certification.

I can't do justice to the event in a short report: I enjoyed it and learned many new things. And New Zealand technical writers are a great crowd! **C**

Dr Mike Unwalla FISTC has been documenting software products since 1994, as a freelance technical writer since 1999. E-mail: mike@techscribe.co.uk Website: www.techscribe.co.uk