

Writing successfully for everyone

Including accessibility in your documentation



Communicator

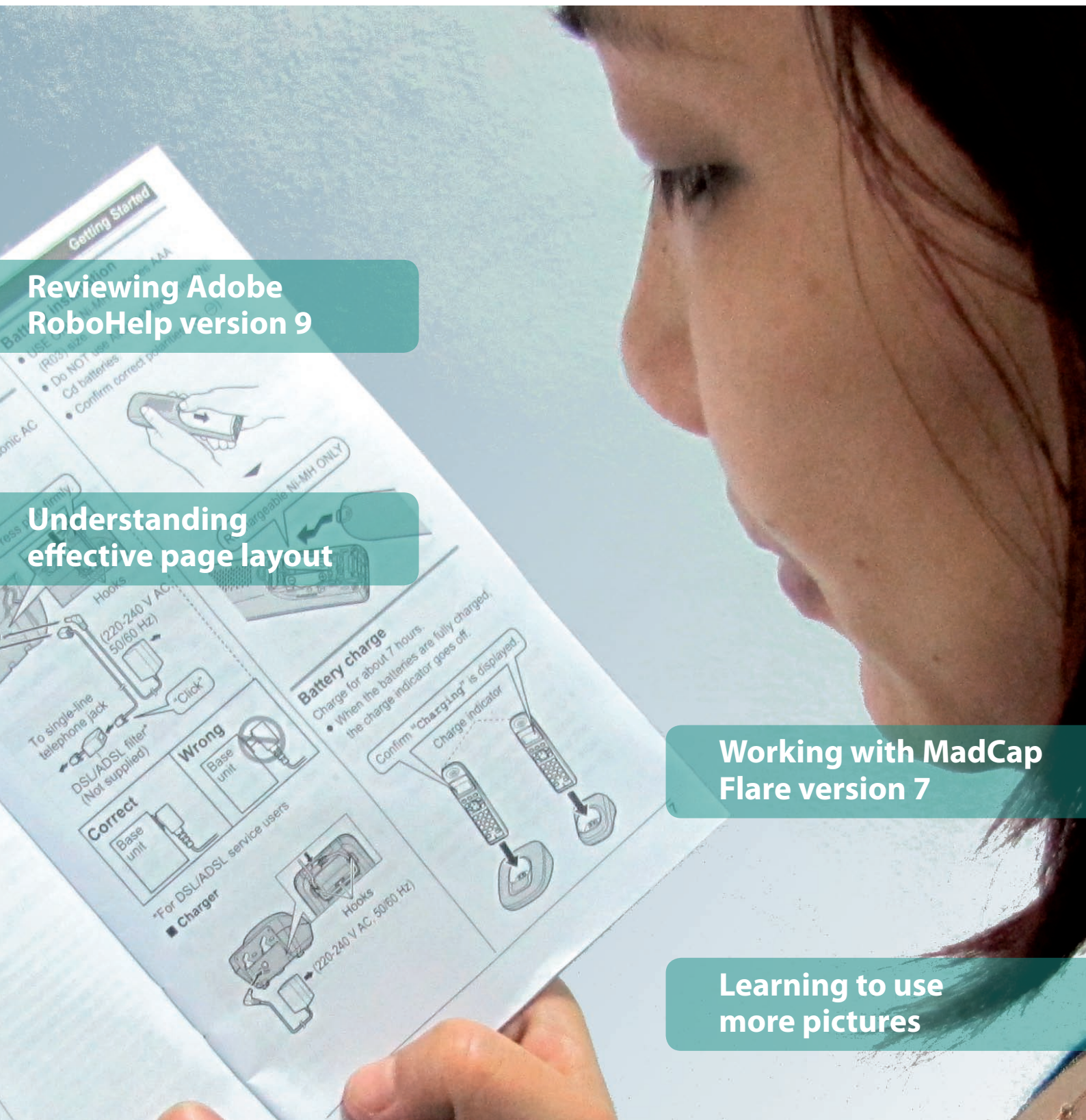
The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators
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Reviewing Adobe
RoboHelp version 9

Understanding
effective page layout

Working with MadCap
Flare version 7

Learning to use
more pictures





Presidential address

Reasons to be cheerful: part 3

At a time when many in our profession are uncertain about their future, being flippant about our prospects is not helpful. On two previous occasions in recent years (hence 'part 3'), I have presented my view that overall our prospects are good: I believe we are (still) working in exciting times and that technical communicators have plenty to be cheerful about.

Why the reprise?

Two recent projects that my colleagues and I have been working on might help to illustrate why the assertion is still relevant: compiling operation and maintenance manuals for security fencing, and transforming the way a large data provider supports its customers. Two enquiries from two organisations that couldn't be more different. Both operating in highly competitive and regulated markets and neither with an existing technical communicator. They were both doing it themselves (badly) and they could see that it was just going to get worse. They described what was wrong in different ways, with their own jargon, their own sense of 'we are special, our world is complex, how could you possibly understand?' It gave me so much pleasure to say to both (in effect) "Don't worry, stand back, let me through, I'm a technical author".

More of the same, and then some

The encouraging sign I see, and I don't know why I am still surprised by it, is that many of the same things

that drove the need for technical communication expertise 10 years ago are still there. But there are also new trends that give us reason to cheer. As I write the list now, some look counter-intuitive and even contradictory:

- Products are becoming both simpler to use and more complex to maintain
- Regulation is increasing and affecting more industries
- Producers and users are getting further apart: complex supply chains
- Producers and users are getting closer: simple supply chains
- English is still the world language
- Using local language is increasingly important
- Customers expect better information about what they buy

There is not the space here to delve into why each of these helps our prospects, but I invite you to challenge me in person on any one of them. I also admit that some of these are more progressive than others – the prospect of your future career being driven by the need for manuals that meet health and safety regulations may fill you with dread – but technical communication exists as a response to specific needs. Some of those needs have been around for a while and some of them are new.

Fortune favours the brave

If, as I suggest, technical communication exists as a response to specific needs, how do we avoid the risk of waiting for someone to tell us that they need us, and then no one does? Even worse, we wait for someone who used to need us to tell us they don't need us any more.

I take the view that there are more changes that are helping us than changes that are not. But to take advantage of them, we need to make the connection between what people need and what we can do to deliver it for them. But what that is may not be in your current job spec. It may not be using the toolset you have used for the previous five years. It may not be in the same industry you have been writing about since you were 20. It might need to be in 15 languages, or it might mean that others do the actual writing.

There are more and more reasons for people to need what we can do for them. If we can see the connections and adapt, we can continue to have plenty of reasons to be cheerful. **C**

Paul Ballard MISTC

E: president@istc.org.uk

The Institute

The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators is the largest UK body for people engaged in technical communication. The ISTC encourages professional development and standards, provides research resources and networking opportunities, and promotes technical communication as a profession.

To join the ISTC, change your grade, or get involved in what we do, contact the ISTC office on 020 8253 4506 or istc@istc.org.uk.

The Council and its supporting team

Paul Ballard (President)
president@istc.org.uk

Peter Fountain (Treasurer)
treasurer@istc.org.uk

Theresa Cameron (International)
international@istc.org.uk

Elaine Cole (Administration)
istc@istc.org.uk

Membership

Linda Robins
membership@istc.org.uk

Iain Wright
iain.d.wright@btinternet.com

Marketing

Rachel Potts (Marketing)
marketing@istc.org.uk

John Lee and **Gordon McLean** (Website)
webmaster@istc.org.uk

Community

Rachel Potts (Local Area Groups)
areagroups@istc.org.uk

Emma Bayne (Surveys)
emma.bayne@telia.com

Andrew Marlow (InfoPlus+ Editor)
newsletter.editor@istc.org.uk

Elaine Cole (Forums)
istc@istc.org.uk

Professional Development and Recognition

David Farbey (Education)
education-policy@istc.org.uk

Alison Peck (Education)
alison@clearly-stated.co.uk

Education Admin (Course enquiries)
education@istc.org.uk

Galyna Key
(UK Technical Communication Awards)
awards@istc.org.uk

Communicator Journal

Katherine Judge
commissioning.editor@istc.org.uk

Technical Communication UK conference

Paul Ballard
president@istc.org.uk

Resources

Linda Robins
review.manager@istc.org.uk

Emma Bayne (ISTC History)
emma.bayne@telia.com