

**Breaking into a specialised market**

Learn about APIs and SDKs



# Communicator

The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators  
Autumn 2012

Read the latest review of  
Adobe RoboHelp 10

Improving your customers'  
user experience

Learn about the Lean  
methodology

Translating health topics  
for developing countries



## Patrick Hofmann's iconic day

Writing this article was an eye-opener. In my entire life, I have never written daily journals or diary passages except when I travelled overseas. I couldn't go to sleep in a foreign bed without jotting down the day's events, which usually focussed on what I ate, and perhaps more embarrassingly, what I drank.

Almost inexplicably, as my travel schedule hit its peak in my mid-thirties—as I circumnavigated the globe from North America to Europe to Australia and New Zealand repeatedly—I stopped writing the journals. Did travel turn tedious? Was the novelty of being away, or of journal-writing, no longer there? Did I have nothing special to record or share anymore? If there were a 'None of the above' line ending this list, I'd tick it, with a ton of hope and a bit of uncertainty.

Perhaps ironically, I am still 'away' or 'overseas'. Although I've lived in Australia for seven years, working at Google's Sydney office for five, I must confess that the fertile Canadian fields of southern Ontario are still home for me. I still remain in close contact with 'home' but never seem to write detailed accounts of my time here in 'Oz'.

So, if I were to write today's events in the spirit of my old travel journals, and perhaps with the time-stamped precision of the research-based diary studies that I would conduct for my past clients, what would I write?

**07:09:** Awake to another glorious Sydney winter's morning, beaming with sunshine. The Opera House and Harbour Bridge somehow feel closer to our balcony this morning: I reckon the

air is crisp, cool and dry. Perfect for a morning run!

**08:04:** Back from my 9k run through the Botanic Gardens, along the Harbour foreshore of Farm Cove, around the Opera House, and back to Darlinghurst. No record-shattering time: just my typical 40 minutes. Two colourful lorikeets greet me from my balcony: they must envy my banana-blueberry smoothie.

**08:55:** Arrive at the Google office in Pyrmont, after a brisk 3.5k walk through the city. Many of my fellow designers and engineers are working overseas at the moment, so the office is quiet and today's calendar is almost meeting-free. This then should be a rip-roaringly productive day!

**10:14:** I get through my emails. My inbox fills up every night with messages from my colleagues overseas. It's a healthy daily melee of icon requests, meeting invitations, design questions, user feedback, project updates, bug reports, and a couple of really compelling research reports.

Today, there's one unique standout. One of my product managers sends me a link to a report on Japanese TV about Google Maps Coordinate. I feel like this product is my baby: a workforce management tool that visualises where your mobile workers are and what jobs they are doing, so that work can be scheduled in a smarter, more efficient way. I spent a full year designing the end-to-end user experience of both the mobile and browser-based applications, and it was recently launched on the market.

Although it's exciting to witness and read how the tool is helping many businesses, it's rather novel to see it profiled on a foreign-language news programme on the 'old' medium of television! Am I being woefully sentimental?

**10:43:** I get pulled into an enthusiastic whiteboarding session on another of my products: the Manage Locations tool for Google Places. Like Google Maps Coordinate, it's a business tool. It enables businesses with multiple locations to manage their online presence, to connect their customers with the locations closest to them, and to make data changes to multiple locations all at once.

These spontaneous whiteboarding sessions and standup meetings are perfect for on-the-spot problem-solving and designing. In only eight minutes,

my colleagues and I have come up with a solution.

**11:01:** I resume work designing a new library of on-map icons that will support our Google Maps Enterprise products. Amid my other projects, it's been many months in the works—an hour here, a couple there—all combined over time into an expansive series of over 400 icons that will help our engineers and enterprise customers build better custom maps.

**13:07:** I grab a bite at our canteen upstairs. Although Google's canteens are infamous for generously providing free food, they're also a great way to draw and connect people together from distant teams across the office. Today, I have a delicious poached salmon with my colleague Mary.

**13:31:** I continue with my icons. Boy, I love to illustrate: even more, I like taking all the rules I learned as a technical communicator to illustrate the ideal icon. How can the icon be as efficient, as brief, as meaningful, and as intuitive as possible? In what ways will the user 'use' the icon, and what attributes must the icon have to ensure that all types of usage are satisfied?

My icon design is a combination of vector illustration and pixel-by-pixel painting. Rather than merely building elements to make a whole, I seem to take shapes then carve or chip away them, perhaps like sculpture. Despite the seemingly tedious nature of it, I could do it for hours.

**17:54:** Wow, I've been chipping away non-stop for 4.5 hours! And I polished off about 20 new icons. Time to give my eyes a rest, to call it a day. The sunset is fully in progress, painting the Sydney skyline with an insatiable orange hue.

What a treat to record my day in this fashion. But why don't I do so everyday? Perhaps the lengthy, consolidated prose of the daily journal has been replaced by looser, tinier, featherweight updates on Twitter, Facebook, and Google+: for better or for worse?

Whatever the medium, recording our activities consistently from day to day can help us compare them. Perhaps our daily routines are like our users: although they're rarely identical, we can certainly draw patterns, trends, and conclusions from them.

---

**Patrick Hofmann**  
E: phofmann@google.com