

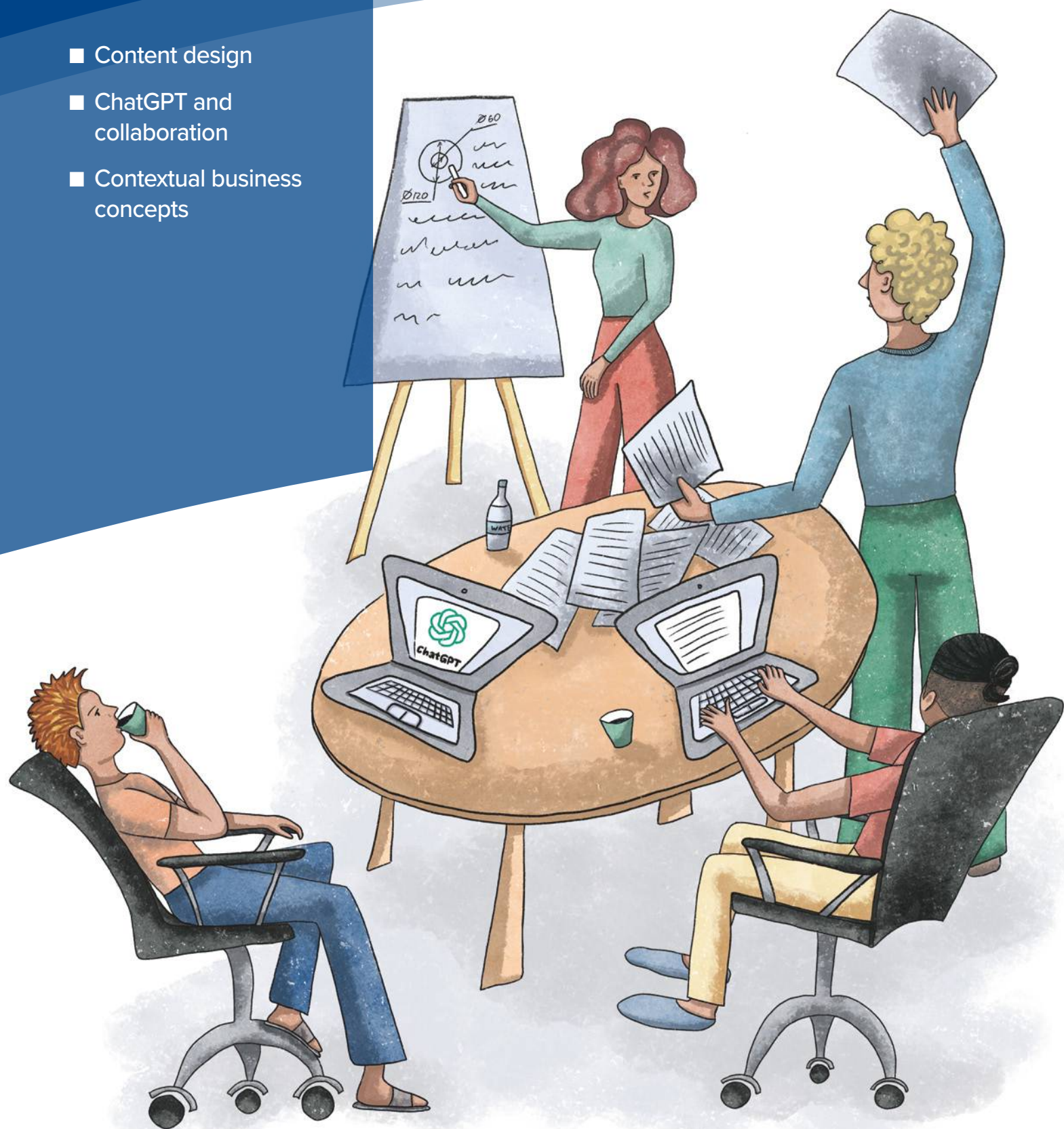
Communicator

The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators

Summer 2023

Writing collaboratively

- Content design
- ChatGPT and collaboration
- Contextual business concepts



President's View

Linda Robins shares the latest ISTC news.



This is a time of change in working methods, professional roles and ways of coping in a time of uncertainty. I wish you all well in adjusting to the world we find ourselves in. We in the ISTC can support each other by providing relevant and timely information and guidance. Remember: The ISTC promotes better scientific and technical communication. Take a look at our new-look website to help in your quest: <https://istc.org.uk/>



Source: ISTC website

Working methods

In my President's View of Autumn 2022¹, I reported on my attempts to follow the ideas introduced by Cal

Newport in his book, 'A World Without Email'². I had found it possible to at least manage the place of email in my working life to improve the value of my time spent working.

In a recent interview, Cal Newport admitted that very few of his potential converts are in a position to make radical changes to their working methods. In fact, he generalised as follows, "No one changes anything". But Cal himself has stuck to the changes he has made to his own working life and continues to evangelise. His message can be summarised as follows:

- **Use email sparingly:** Constant notifications distract from deep work and can be a fallback for 'performative' busy work.
- **Step away from the screens:** Cultivate boredom as a means to unlock deeper problem solving and strategic thinking.
- **Quit social media:** Take a selective approach to the network tools at your disposal. Use only the ones that have a net positive impact on your life.

With a background in researching and teaching distributed algorithm theory, Cal Newport is passionate about the need to cut out 'digital distractions' and to focus on 'Deep Work'. He argues that responding instantly to emails and messages works against serious thinking. One cannot concentrate deeply on a single problem or difficult project, or on long-term goals. So many 'knowledge workers' are expected to perform as if on an assembly line; he believes that insights "only really start flowing after 45 minutes of deep absorption". He writes that Galileo took over 18 years to work out the details of his pendulum experiment. I don't think such a luxury is likely to be afforded in an employee's working life but the opportunity for concentrated thinking is vital for good results.

Perhaps this is another positive case in support of remote working provided the individual can be free of distractions. I spent a year or so with a software development team where we were co-located with Support service staff. An alert sounded with a 'buzz phrase' whenever a call came through.

Eventually the words invaded my dreams as well as my working day – when I was awake, the alert effectively destroyed or at least scattered any original thoughts and was a drag on productivity.

I will persevere with Cal Newport's recommendations within the scope of real-life conditions.



Source: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/World-Without-Email-Reimagining-Overload/dp/0241341418>

Artificial Intelligence, the continuing story

I mentioned in my Spring 2023 President's View³ in discussing the impact of the arrival of ChatGPT on the scene, that I was trying to keep up with developments. Now talk of AI is so much in the mainstream news, this is difficult, but, I believe, necessary. Two recent publications provided particularly useful information:

John Naughton writing in the **Observer** newspaper⁴ sets out the reasons for the current explosion of applications and interest in these. He views the following significant dates as equivalents in moving developments in technology into the mainstream:

- 1993 - Mosaic, the first modern web browser was launched- and people in the wider world became aware of the existence and power of the internet.
- 2023 - ChatGPT enters the mainstream; machine learning technology has been around for ages but now with the entry of ChatGPT, it is rebranded as AI and the world

wakes up and says, "Wow this is what AI is about." OpenAI was funded by Microsoft – now everyone is bringing out their own Language Learning Models (LLMs).

John Naughton also suggests that Generative AI has come into the mainstream because four unconnected developments have come together to make something happen:

- Availability of powerful cloud-computing power
- Previously unimaginable quantities of data provided by the internet for training LLMs
- Significant improvements in algorithms boosted by neural networks
- 'Loads of money' provided by insanely profitable tech giants.

And now the new technology will become commoditised, then new products and services will build on them and it will really take off with features in ubiquitous applications such as Word and Excel. As John Naughton comments, "*Technology always escapes into the real world.*"

The **New Scientist** recently published an 'AI Special'⁵. This issue includes several useful articles covering different aspects of recent developments. There is also a handy AI timeline. The 'leader' provides a telling observation,

"While it takes years to trial a new drug, new AI models are appearing almost weekly."

ISTC News

What our members do

I am privileged to see the application forms of prospective members, also the CPD records members submit for review each year. The range of sectors supported and the variety of output of our members is extensive and increasing. I am very keen to learn more about the working methods used, constraints and the positive aspects of different fields. We welcome information from our members to help expand our respective knowledge. This can help the ISTC Council manage our professional organisation better for our members. Also of course we can all learn more about career prospects across the profession.

Our upcoming TCUK23 in-person event is a wonderful opportunity to meet many other technical communicators – in presentation, workshop and social

settings. There are so many networking opportunities offering significant benefits with lasting positive outcomes.

And what we tell the world

We review our mutual understanding regularly and update the details on the website

Here is our latest offering:

- Value of technical communication.

TCUK 23 latest

As mentioned a few times TCUK23 will take place, live and in person, on 26-27 September 2023, at voco® St. John's Hotel, Solihull.

At the time of writing, detailed plans are well underway. There is plenty to do now and of course as we near the designated dates.

You can join in by logging into the website and visiting the TCUK forum area, or by emailing us at tcuk@istc.org.uk.

ISTC Meets monthly online meetings

Details of previous ISTC Meets sessions are available on the ISTC website at istc.org.uk/events

The presentations are short (half hour, plus questions), and are provided free of charge. It's a good opportunity for members to stay in touch, share knowledge, and practise presentation skills, as well as something to include in your CPD.

Please follow ISTC Meets on our Eventbrite page for ease of registration and to be notified of upcoming events.

UKTC Awards

This year the Awards presentation ceremony will be held at the TCUK gala dinner as we used to do pre-pandemic.

For this reason the closing date for Awards entry submissions is earlier than usual to allow the winners time to arrange attendance. This year, the deadline for entries is **30 June 2023**.

It may not be too late. There are some rules to follow, so take a quick look at them. Then fill out the entry form that is available in our website. **Go on, you and your team deserve it!**

Do members know what work is paid for and what work is done by volunteers?

Background

We run adverts from time to time inviting

ISTC members to consider volunteering for projects or regular activities - either as a Council member or a volunteer reporting to Council. We haven't told our members lately what this entails or what is excluded.

Paid roles and activities

The following are paid for from members' subscriptions:

- Administration managed by ASL (including Advertising)
- Commissioning editor (*Communicator*)
- Layout and printing for *Communicator* (Greenhouse Graphics)
- Copy editor and layout editor (InfoPlus)
- Expenses for travel and accommodation on ISTC business
- Day rate for attendance at events representing the ISTC.

Voluntary activities

Everything else: time spent according to the volunteer's availability. All we ask is for a reasonable commitment to a specific project or ready response for continuing activities.

Council activities

We will take a tour through the function and admin areas on the ISTC Council, featuring the activities and opportunities for volunteers. These will be presented in a series of 'snapshots' in InfoPlus.

Important note

We would like to you all to benefit from the expertise and experience of our ISTC members. Also the opportunity to serve on Council or to volunteer and report to Council can present career opportunities. To make sure no Council member has too much to handle, we plan to double up on roles so that there is always a fallback and someone to discuss ideas. Everyone will be a winner! ■

References

1. President's View Autumn *Communicator* 2022
2. 'A World Without Email' Cal Newport: ISBN 978-0-241-34141-4 (2021)
3. President's View Spring *Communicator* 2023
4. John Naughton, *The Observer* 20 March 2023
5. *New Scientist* 'AI Special' (No. 3435, 22 April 2023)

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