

# Communicator

The Institute of Scientific and Technical Communicators

Autumn 2023

Writing for SaaS

- Establishing a company glossary
- The key to successful developer documentation
- The cost of the cloud



# President's View

Linda Robins shares the latest ISTC news.



## TCUK23

At the time of writing the TCUK23 team is putting the finishing touches to the conference programme. This will be our first in-person conference since September 2019. So while I have been serving as President, we have been experimenting with, and improving on, the online form for TCUK.

It is exciting right now to realise that we have the chance to meet in person with vendors and delegates alike and to enhance our conference experience with face-to-face networking opportunities. As well as building on our past experience of in-person conferences and the recent online events, we have asked our members about their preferences. We now appreciate that delegates would like more quality time with vendors and more opportunities to try different software packages. Our TCUK23 programme reflects this. We hope all participants will benefit from our curated programme.

I expect to benefit from presentations and workshops that will boost my knowledge and prospects professionally. Importantly too I am relishing the prospect of spending time with so many technical communicators and learning from their experiences. I look forward to reporting to you in my Winter *Communicator* President's View.

## Working methods

Since my last President's View, I have been collecting snippets and articles relating to the changes in work patterns post-pandemic. There are conflicting trends; experiments in flexibility and

reduction of working hours against return to in-office and rigid '9 to 5' time observance. From the plethora of material, I conclude that although we don't know what will emerge longer term, it is fair to say that the 'worker' now has more choice in where to work and in scheduling of hours; not necessarily in all roles, but at least the employee can reasonably look for flexibility and an element of personal choice.

There are some roles still advertised as fully remote where pre-pandemic a day at home at most would have been allowed effectively as a concession. Set against this is the counter trend of organisations dictating that 'back to the office' is the way to go. As part of the drive for the Civil Service to revert to office working, Jacob Rees-Mogg had taken to leaving 'Sorry I missed you' notes for civil servants not at their desks when he toured the offices.

Recently though the move has been to a hybrid pattern of some days in the office in the working week. This seems to apply to high-profile, high-tech companies too, even though a physical presence in the office is not necessary to fulfil the role; in fact, the office environment can be a distraction. Most notably, the providers of video-conferencing technology, Zoom have just announced new work requirements where any worker within 50 miles of a company office must work there for at least two days in a week. In promoting Zoom's new 'structured hybrid approach', Eric Yuan, the Zoom chief executive observed, "To let employees work anywhere has sort of become a fashion."



There are undercurrents of distrust in the effectiveness of working from home. However, this is countered by studies showing productivity increases where staff can work remotely; also the working day can be adjusted to allow for global business more readily. I am tracking studies to see how evidence is amassed in support or otherwise of these views. For the most part the trend is to a hybrid pattern of at least some days in the office.

In the meantime, there is plenty to think about.

## Working 'smarter'

I am very encouraged by some positive outcomes from working during the pandemic. I am thinking mostly of methods adopted during online meetings, which have been continued and adapted for use in hybrid and in-person gatherings. Some of this is anecdotal, but mostly I write from experience as a participant,

In the medium of online meetings (usually held using video-conferencing) it is essential to focus on the agenda; this ensures all participants are engaged and allowed to participate fully. Methods developed have broadly been carried into hybrid and 'in-office' meetings since they have been seen to get results. Now we have fewer 'rambling' meetings where a few participants are allowed to stray from the agenda.

These are some effective ways of encouraging focus and inclusivity:

- **Weekly check-in meeting:** Team members outline their key tasks for the week; input needed from others; concerns if any. Team Leader (chair) elaborates and re-assigns as needed. Team's goals and activities are understood by all. This may seem obvious, but was not necessarily much deployed pre-pandemic.
- **Lightning talks:** the speaker presents a topic, quickly and clearly; limited to between five and 10 minutes (usually five minutes only); if everyone has a slot, it is a **data blitz**.
- **Anchor meetings:** there can be three types of anchor:
  - ♦ A piece of information that influences the outcome of the

meeting (either positive or negative effect)

- ♦ A clear and specific purpose for each item on the agenda
- ♦ A person designated to ensure that the participants remain focused on the meeting's objectives.

### Productivity tips

I am always on the lookout for ways of working more efficiently and effectively. Ideally I'd like them to be 'simple' to adopt and implement. Tim Harford of the Financial Times appears to be on the same mission. In the Financial Times magazine (FT.com) of 5/6 August<sup>1</sup> he unveiled his three secret productivity principles:

- 1. Look ahead:** ('further, more frequently and thoughtfully than seems sane'). For example, look at tomorrow's calendar at the end of each day; on Friday look at the whole of the following week and so on. Have a quarterly plan with broad outlines of what you hope to achieve. In this way you view each activity in the context of future plans.
- 2. Clarify:** Make sure you know what you wish to achieve; in reviewing regularly, make sure you retain the essence and delete the unnecessary elements.
- 3. Be content:** Accept that you will never be on top of everything; don't worry about this; you will keep adding new ideas.

### Artificial Intelligence, the continuing story

Another quarter brings another The New Scientist AI special issue. This one is entitled 'Living with AI'<sup>2</sup>. The articles are as follows:

- What AI can do to make your daily life easier
- Why AI is about to transform the economy
- The biggest scientific challenges that AI is already tackling
- How does ChatGPT really work?
- Can AI ever become conscious?

At the start of the year as ChatGPT was being talked about and then put to use, there were, say, two or three articles a week on AI in the scientific and technical press; now there are half a dozen a day in the mainstream media. The prospect of AI in all aspects of our life is exhilarating and slightly disturbing.



This is not least because there is much talk of the monetising of AI and of the scope for fraud and subversion. It is too early to tell how generative AI will be used for the good of society or otherwise, but the scope for ethical and practical use in science and medicine is immense. The financial, legal and education sectors are grappling with implications for their respective interests. However this unfolds, the scientific and technical communicator community must be front and centre of developments – the essential human element in the proceedings.

### ISTC News

#### *New features of the conference*

When you read this, TCUK23 will have taken place (on 26-27 September 2023, at voco® St. John's Hotel, Solihull).

One of the new features of this conference is the networking event and 'sponsor clinic'. This is an opportunity for delegates to share findings and to speak with our vendors, sponsors, recruiters and ISTC representatives in depth. Here we hope to discuss ideas and options for the next steps for professional development.

In the Winter issue of *Communicator*, we will report on this and other aspects of TCUK23.

#### *ISTC Meets monthly online meetings*

ISTC Meets is taking a break for the summer. Sessions were due to resume in September. Details of previous ISTC Meets sessions are available on the ISTC website at [istc.org.uk/events](http://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.

### UK Technical Communication Awards

#### *UKTC Awards*

At the time of writing, judging of the UKTC Awards 2023 is complete. The winners are due to be announced and the Awards presented at the TCUK23 celebration dinner.

### ISTC Mentoring scheme – a reminder

The ISTC offers a voluntary mentoring scheme for Entry-level Members. The scheme matches up Entry-level Members who are just starting out in the profession of scientific and technical communication with experienced technical communicators for advice and guidance. The goal of the scheme is to provide a framework for the professional development of ISTC Entry-level Members, and gives them a considerable advantage over other new starters in the profession who may have nowhere to turn to for practical help. The scheme is designed to help Entry-level Members progress to the full Member grade.

Our volunteer mentors are all Fellows or Members of the ISTC who are keen to share their knowledge and experience with new entrants to the profession.

If you are an Entry-level Member of the ISTC and would like to take part in the scheme, or if you are a Member (MISTC) or Fellow (FISTC) who would like to volunteer as a Mentor, please contact the Mentoring Scheme coordinator on [mentoring@istc.org.uk](mailto:mentoring@istc.org.uk) ■

### References

1. Tim Harford, The FT Magazine (FT.com) 5/6 August 2023
2. New Scientist 'Living with AI' (No. 3449, 29 July 2023)

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