

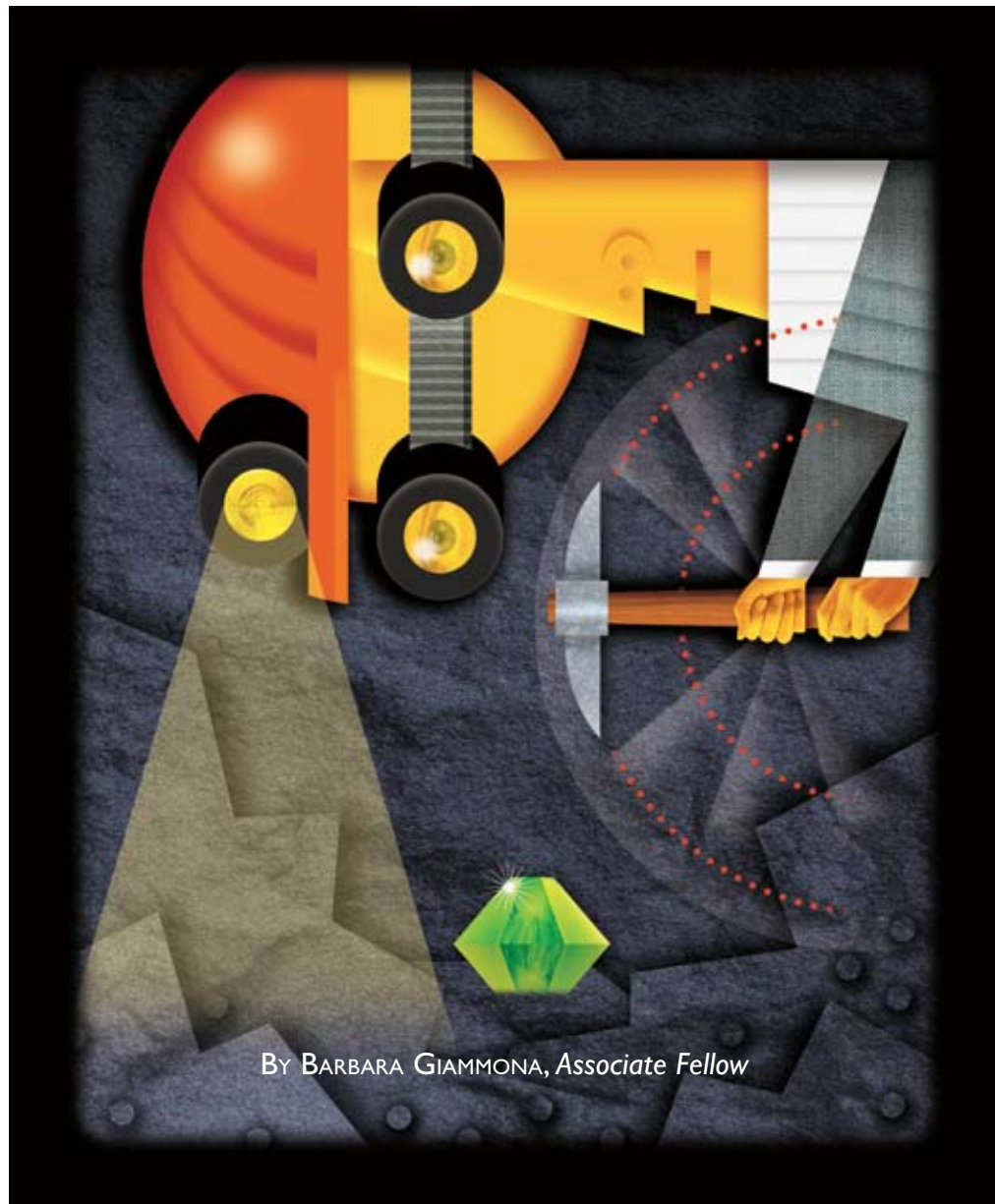
Rants to Raves:

Putting Your Best Self Forward in a Challenging Marketplace

We all do it—it's human nature. We all have something that we can't resist complaining about when it comes to our chosen profession. I'm the manager of a large global team, and even I do it. "We are the tail of the dog," I'll say when we get overlooked in the project planning process. "We're the bottom of the totem pole," I'll sigh when we get overlooked for funding for tools or conferences. What is it about the job of the technical communicator that gives us so much to gripe about all the time? Is it any wonder that we've got a reputation for being whiners?

What really got me thinking about this was an interview I saw on the *Today* show in 2008 with former waiter Steve Dublanica, author of a book called *Waiter Rant: Thanks for the Tip—Confessions of a Cynical Waiter*. Steve had blogged about his work experiences, highlighting outrageous happenings in the restaurant where he waited tables in Nyack, NY. And you think we technical writers have things to complain about in the workplace! A number of technical communicators blog about their jobs, offering insight into the practice and pitfalls of our profession. I looked at these blogs to see if their authors had as many negative things to say about our profession as Dublanica had to say about his.

Many of the blogs revealed skilled writers offering advice on arcane details of writing or the nitty-gritty about the latest tools in our field. Others did offer sharp-tongued harangues about



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the horrors that befall us in our line of work, often posting examples and lists of what we are subjected to: the whims of developers, the low level of respect received from other members of the technical team, being forgotten until the last minute on a project. I am still mystified by the one writer whose site, which advertises his services as a technical writing consultant, contains several wryly humorous lists of the pitfalls of our profession. Might a potential customer be put off by these negative messages, funny as they may be to us?

After years of hiring and managing technical communicators, I know that this tendency to be so keenly observant of our situation, often in a negative way, is a trait that could be holding us back professionally. What if we could take all the rants and turn them into raves?

That started me on a mission—to look for some of our biggest rants and find ways to turn them around. For research, I went into the field—starting with my own global team and working outward to several local STC chapters.

Our Favorite Rants

To rant, according to Dictionary.com, is “to speak or declaim extravagantly or violently; talk in a wild or vehement way.” I asked my team members and members of the San Gabriel Valley, Orange County, and San Diego STC chapters to rant about their work—to tell me their worst horror stories and most common complaints.

I was struck by the words of one writer who simply said, “I choose not to rant.”

“You mean,” I asked, “that you *never* complain about your position as a technical writer?”

“No, never,” she insisted. “What could it gain me?” And yet, 10 minutes into the exercise, she was ranting as loudly and passionately as the rest of us. It didn’t take long to start hearing some familiar woes being recited. Do you recognize any of these?

1. We have no budget. No one appreciates or understands what we do, especially management.
2. Everyone assumes we are experts in Microsoft Word—or that we are just here to make things “pretty.”



“I choose not to rant.”

3. We are always left out of the loop or forgotten altogether.
4. We are treated as second-class citizens—there is a lack of recognition for what we contribute.
5. “Aren’t you just a glorified administrative assistant?” or “An administrative assistant could do what you do.”
6. Our management is reluctant to provide tools, ongoing training, or professional development.

With all these things to complain about (and many more listed in “The Ranting Hall of Fame” on page 15), why do we still do this job? Probably because we like to write. We are intrigued by learning about new things. We like technology. Maybe our special gift is the ability to organize things. We like seeing projects through to completion—being able to say, “I did that” when we look at a printed document or use a product feature we helped design. Some of us are great at detail, and writing requires a kind of attention to detail not found elsewhere. We like the creativity of designing information. We like the rigor of following structures. Our colleagues tend to be fun, albeit quirky, individuals. The list goes on. Despite our rants, there are a lot of reasons to like—and keep—this job.

So how do we combat our tendency to rant? How do we turn around our negativity into positive attitudes that might advance our career? Let’s see what our colleagues had to say.

Rants to Raves

Dictionary.com says that to rave is “to talk or write with extravagant enthusiasm.” After spending a good portion of time together ranting, I asked participants to tell me how they would turn these rants into raves.

RANT 1: We have no budget. No one appreciates or understands what we do, especially management.

RAVE: Remember, we are part of the details of most projects, and management likes to look at the big picture; when they see how we fit into that, we might be better understood and appreciated.

- Investigate within your own organization how the work done by the technical communicators has helped the organization. Where have you affected the bottom line (perhaps your colleagues in support or sales can provide data on that front)? How have you introduced innovations in your information delivery? Are print costs down? Are customers more satisfied because of the improvements you have made? Prepare a presentation for the appropriate members of management to show these results, and rehearse it so that you show your best selves.
- If a lack of a budget has kept your organization from achieving the kinds of valuable innovations that are described above, research how other companies are succeeding and benefiting in these areas and present a business case to gain a budget for similar activities in your company. Remember that budget planning cycles have long lead times. If you want something to happen next fiscal year, start asking for it at least six months before that year starts.
- Get out of your cubicle and make new friends. You should definitely know your SMEs and developers better than you already do. Plus, to make a presentation to management, you may need an advocate in management to get you in front of the proper people. Only through networking in the organization can you form these relationships.

RANT 2: Everyone assumes we are experts in Microsoft Word—or that we are just here to make things “pretty.”

RAVE: Accept the compliment on your expertise and find ways to demonstrate the wider value of that work.

- If this “prettifying” is an activity for which you are gaining praise, accept it—any praise is good.
- If you are perceived as an expert at something, then you have at least some value to the company that you can point to! It’s a start.
- Put together a working session with key players in your organization that demonstrates how the “prettiness” you added to the document is actually serving a functional value—adding ease-of-use and clarity to your information. Point out how the writing itself, and not just its format, adds value. Ask for additional feedback and respond to suggestions from the audience.

RANT 3: We are always left out of the loop or forgotten altogether.

RAVE: Get yourself pulled into the loop—no one will do it for you if it hasn’t been part of your company’s culture in the past.

- Force yourself to be proactive and persistent.
- Find out who owns the product development process and see if the technical communication activities are part of your company’s delivery checklist at all phases. If they aren’t, lobby with management to gain deliberate milestones in the project development life-cycle for your tasks and deliverables.
- Once again, get out of your cubicle and make new friends. Who are the project managers? Do the project leads and technical managers know you personally? Have you repeated your mantra, “Don’t forget documentation at the project kick-off” every day to everyone? Poke your head into meetings when you see members of your project team in a conference room and ask if there is anything on the meeting agenda that’s pertinent to documentation.



- If you are being forgotten too often, your organization probably doesn’t understand your value. Go back to Rant #1.

RANT 4: We are treated as second-class citizens—there is a lack of recognition for what we contribute.

RAVE: Don’t behave like a second-class citizen. Rise to the occasion and earn that respect and recognition if you (truly) don’t have it.

- Technical communicators are often very creative people. Where is there a hole in your organization that a person with great communication, research, and analytical skills can fill? Raising awareness for you as a professional with many skills to contribute can indirectly raise awareness for the value of the work you routinely do each day.
- Self-promote. This you can do through hosting brown-bag lunches, helping with related communications tasks (e.g., newsletters), or entering (and winning) STC award competitions. Look for corporate award programs that recognize key contributions and see how your group could be honored and spotlighted—what could be better at gaining recognition?
- Make yourself the “go to” person for information. Volunteer to organize the document repository for your project team, or offer to edit project documents produced by related areas of

the company where your technical expertise can add value (e.g., marketing, training, or support materials), if those are not already your responsibility.

RANT 5: “Aren’t you just a glorified administrative assistant?” or “An administrative assistant could do what you do.”

RAVE: Well, just let ’em go ahead and try.

- If there is an administrative assistant who is often pointed to as having strong writing skills and technical aptitude, suggest that you allow that person to take on a simple technical writing assignment. In parallel, have a member of the technical communications team do the same assignment. Compare the results. The administrative person will either prove to possess the raw material of a technical writer ready to join your team and be trained, or the comparison will underscore that there is a difference between having good business communications skills and being a professional technical writer. If you can’t tell the difference between the two versions, then you may have a bigger issue on your hands...but that’s a matter for a separate article.

RANT 6: Our management is reluctant to provide tools, ongoing training, or professional development.

RAVE: The keyword here is “professional,” so you need to underscore that your work is a unique discipline with skills, aptitudes, tools, and a growth path of its own and that you are a professional overall—not just a writer, or a techie, but someone whose unique perspective and complete portfolio of skills adds value to the business overall; in other words, make yourself investment worthy!

- Learn to build a business case that shows the financial benefit of any tool or training you are requesting. How much does it cost and how does it pay the company back? Management wants everything expressed in terms of dollars. Find mentors, advocates, and experts to help you learn to do this if you do not already possess the skills.



The Ranting Hall of Fame

- We are always the first eliminated when cuts are made.
- No one reads my work.
- No one reviews my work.
- There is inadequate project planning—documentation was overlooked by marketing, project management, and development and not included until the last minute, so there is inadequate time to do our job right.
- Hurry up and wait... hurry up and wait...
- I don't get the same pay and respect as other technical professionals.
- There's no advancement in this profession.
- "Everything" takes priority over us.
- It's hard to show our value—we are a cost center, not a profit center.
- We are often managed by people who don't know what we do or how we do it; we are often stuck reporting to strange parts of the organization (led by even stranger people).
- The technical staff expects me to complete their research and finish their unfinished work.
- There is an expectation that we will pick up the pieces in a project—be heroes! That we'll work with no spec, no cooperation, and no support, and will somehow make a miracle happen.
- Management doesn't understand what's involved with doing our jobs well—both the time and the skills needed.
- The engineers or SMEs write the manuals, despite their poor language skills, and it's considered "good enough."
- The engineers or SMEs are not available to us, and when they are, they can't communicate well enough to tell me what I need to know.
- The engineers or SMEs know what I need and choose *not* to share it with me.
- The engineers question my unique professional skills, especially my knowledge of language, grammar, and usage.
- The documents created by our company don't look like they came from one company; no one enforces use of styles, branding, or templates.

- Use formal structures in place in the company to advance your professional development. Use your annual development plan to document a request for particular training or conference attendance, pointing back to areas in your performance evaluation where your own manager is asking you to improve.
- Consider avenues for developing


yourself outside the workplace—seminars, community college courses, or anything available through STC that can expose you to professional concepts that you may not practice today. How are your presentation skills? Your understanding of finance? Your understanding of your company's industry, products, or related technologies? Look for avenues to sharpen

your overall professional skill set so you are not seen as "just a tech writer," but as a valuable professional.

The Manager's Rant

I'd like to add one more rant to the list and challenge you to turn this one around for yourself. It's called "The Manager's Rant." As a manager, I have found that the "rant-ier" the employee, the more likely that person will be a problem employee overall. Yes, we all have our common day-to-day gripes about the job. But those who dwell too much on them, and appear too hopeless about them, are often unable to rise above them. The manager's rant says that the "rant-ier" the technical communicator, the tougher it is for the manager to make headway in turning around the culture of the company in the realm of technical communication. In other words, the more you rant, the less power I have as your manager to remove or repair the issues you are ranting about in the first place.

And consider this—how many of the rants shown in "The Ranting Hall of Fame" are really just the routine challenges of our job? How many similar items do you suppose appear on the "Hall of Fame" list for QA technicians, project managers, or support desk personnel? Sometimes it's hard—that's why they call it work. So challenge yourself the next time you are tempted to rant to look for how you can get that rant rectified. Step up and become an "anti-ranter"!

By the way, those blogs on technical communication are not *all* negative. On the contrary—there's plenty of positive material to be found. We are, after all, a profession that attracts clever, creative, intelligent, and witty individuals. Who knows, maybe you can start an anti-ranting blog of your own: "Confessions of a *Not-so-Cynical* Writer." 

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