

TECH comments

The newsletter of the Southeastern Michigan chapter of the Society for Technical Communication

May 1999

Volume 8, Issue 8

A Tour of the STC/SM Boardroom

By Ginny Collins-Llope

This is my penultimate president's message. I begin this way because I can't believe how quickly this past year has gone. Also, because how often do you get to use a great word like "penultimate?"

In this message, I'd like to give you a glimpse into the secret world of the STC/SM board meetings. I say "secret" only because although STC/SM board meetings are open to all members, in all the years I've been on the board, I can recall only one or two non-board member attendees. Understandable, I guess, but you just don't know the wild time you are missing! ;^)

The board meeting held Monday, May 3 was a fairly typical STC/SM board meeting and, because it is still fresh in my mind, I'll tell you about it. The meeting was held at Ruth Blough's home. Before the meeting she provided dinner for the group as has become our custom this year. (It was a help-yourself salad bar; Mexican or Oriental. Very good.)

So, on to the meeting

The meeting began with a review of the minutes from the previous board meeting. No real changes to it. Next came the Secretary's report, very often nothing to report and that was the case this time so we moved on to the Treasurer's report. (This is where the board members grip the edge of their chairs.) It was good news! We are much less over budget than we thought we would be for the fiscal year to date.

On to the ERS report. No report, but those of you who are members of the listserv have seen the number of jobs that have been posted over the last month. I'd be curious to hear from those of you who follow those leads. Any matches?

The Vice President's report was next. Mike Dailey presented his cost estimate for the STC Annual Conference. (Remember, the chapter pays for the incoming President to attend the conference.) The estimate was very reasonable and we lucked out this year; Mike's company is going to pay for part of his trip.



Ginny Collins-Llope

Our Web Manager, Renka Gesing, reported that progress is being made on our Directory of Technical Communication Expertise (remember that you can list your services here) and that we finally have a visitor counter (provided free by SiteTracker in return for a displayed logo). We had 263 hits during the month of April. Also,

Renka and Mike Dailey have been working on a chapter mission statement. Look for it soon on the web site.

Our Membership Manager, Jill Bornemeier, had no report this month, but I found this tidbit to share with the board: our chapter is tied for 2nd place in member renewal rate for our size category (300+). We had a renewal rate of 73% this year. (That's really good.)

Our Newsletter Manager, Sarah Ann Margulies, gave us the low-down on this rag ;^) In her report she mentioned that Ann Blakeslee's EMU editing class has given her many good suggestions for improvements. By the way, she's recently switched to PageMaker (from MS Publisher) for creating the newsletter.

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Director-Sponsor's Message

By Thea Teich, Region 4 Director-Sponsor



Thea Teich

Congratulations to Scholarship Winners

Two students from Region 4, one graduate and one undergraduate, won STC scholarships of \$2,500. Only 14 of these scholarships are awarded each year and in 1999, close to 130 students applied. The two winners from Region 4 are:

Helen Cornell, who is studying for her bachelor's degree with a double major of communications and chemical engineering at the University of Dayton, Dayton, OH, in the area covered by the Southwestern Ohio chapter

John Moreau, who is working on a master's degree in written communication at Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, MI, in the area covered by the Southeastern Michigan chapter

Otherwise . . .

I was asked recently why I became so deeply involved with STC, because I've been on the road for the organization a good bit this spring, and only my expenses are covered, not my time. I've visited the Kentuckiana, Southeastern Michigan, Cedarville College, Bowling Green State University, Central Ohio, Central Illinois, Western Michigan Shores, St. Joseph's Valley, and of course, Southwestern Ohio, chapters, since November. I had two obvious purposes in making these many chapter visits during my "freshman" year. First, it's one of the main jobs of any director-sponsor; we visit each chapter in our areas at least once during the three years we are in office. Second, I was helping to promote the 46th annual STC conference, taking place in Cincinnati.

The other purposes in making chapter visits is less obvious and relates to the reasons I became closely involved in STC. Whenever anyone asks me whether I'm "enjoying being a director-sponsor," the first words I've said have been, "Oh, yes; I get to meet so many interesting people."

Perhaps that is one reason people get involved in running an STC chapter, too. We get to meet so many interesting people. In some cases, we can share resources; sometimes, we can provide referrals; sometimes, the people we meet refer us to new job or freelance opportunities. When asked how membership in STC has benefited people personally, more often than not referrals come up. After all, if someone knows you as a reliable chapter administrative council member, he or she may logically assume that you will be a reliable employee.

Even more than the obvious economic benefits of referrals, STC chapter leadership engenders in us a degree of familiarity and interconnection that is difficult to describe. There are feelings of camaraderie, developed as people work together to bring a project to fruition, similar to what can occur in the workplace. But there is rarely competition among STC chapter leaders, as there might be on the job, so people are more likely to trust one another. And despite the degree of effort and extra time they invest, chapter leaders basically enjoy belonging to the group that "gets things done." They take pride in their efforts — quietly, but definitely. And so they should.

One thing about the chapter leaders' "club" — it has only two requirements: a willingness to work and then, to take credit for a job well done. Those of us who have been members of this "club" for a long time always welcome newcomers. How about you?

STC Competition Winners Can be Found on the Web

The STC office has posted the 1999 international competition winners on the STC Web site to recognize the outstanding achievements of technical communicators. From the Society Web site, you can choose one of two paths to view the list of winners.

1. Go to <http://www.stc-va.org>.
 - On the side bar menu, select Professional Development.
 - From the links at the top of the page, select Competitions.
 - Scroll down to find the paragraph heading, Competitions, and select it.
 - Scroll down to find a list of topics

containing links, including Individual Achievement Competition Winners for 1999. Click on Winners.

- Select the competitions that interest you.
2. Go to <http://www.stc-va.org>.
 - On the side bar menu, select What's New.
 - Look in the paragraph titled What's New and click on Winners in the second line.
 - Select the competitions that interest you.

Technical Writer Occupation Scores Big (Reprinted from Tieline, April 1999)

The Wall Street Journal's Web site, <http://www.careers.wsj.com>, presents the 1999 *Jobs Rated Almanac*, which ranks some of the most common jobs by six core factors: environment, income, outlook, physical demands, security, and stress. Of the 250 jobs evaluated, the position of technical writer scores an impressive overall rank of 14.

In the individual categories, the occupation of technical writer performed particularly well in the outlook and security categories. The *Jobs Rated Almanac* notes that opportunities for technical writers will continue to advance briskly through the year 2005,

as the need for lucid explanation of highly technological products keeps pace with the growth of the science and technology industries.

The almanac further predicts that openings in this field will be available primarily in heavily industrialized areas such as the northwestern United States.

Job security for technical writers seems stable, with the almanac forecasting a low unemployment rate and a job growth of 105 percent through year 2005; the book also notes that opportunities for specialized writers will expand rapidly over the next ten years.

June 9, 1999

Program Meeting and Volunteer Celebration

Networking for Fun and Profit with Cynthia D'Amour

Holiday Inn, Livonia
I-276 and 6 Mile Rd.

6:30 - 7:15 Refreshments, Cash Bar
7:15 - 7:45 Volunteer Awards
7:45 - 8:30 Speaker's Presentation

Our volunteers have worked hard for STC/SM this year. Come join our Volunteer Celebration and show them how much we appreciate their time and efforts.

Learn simple, no-fail steps you can take to network with ease and to tap into the goldmine of building relationships at STC.

Registration Deadline, June 3d
RSVP: Ruth Blough
P.O. Box 883
Novi, MI 48376-0883
248.305.9362

April Program Meeting Enlivened by Mark Hannigan's 6-6-6 Rules For Fertilizing Web Pages

Mark Hannigan, who will be installed as STC's First Vice President this month, was the featured speaker at the April program meeting. Mark fervently believes that technical communicators are the people most qualified to create business Web pages. He pointed out that the Web has benefitted from and grown as a result of the enthusiasm and creativity of people who imagine what this new medium might do, then find ways to do it, and from the people who are eager to try each new capability that is devised. As a result, the Web has the potential to, and often does, bombard the user with too much of everything—too many different colors, type faces, graphics, animation, sounds, and too many sources of information, often with too little organization. But technical communicators know how to organize material logically, know how to communicate to a global market, know how to choose words to facilitate translation, and know how to use graphics appropriately. In short, technical communicators understand the end user, the person for whom Web pages are created.

Mark feels that we, as technical communicators, have both the opportunity and the responsibility to balance the sensual bombardments available through the tools and toys of Web page creation with the synaptic sensibilities of our Web readers. To guide us in this task, Mark has provided what he calls his "6-6-6" rules for fertilizing Web pages.

Six Rules for Web Page Mechanics

1. Focus your Web design on the "mainstream" browser platforms of the day.
2. Practice good design and coding housekeeping. (Provide alternate labels for graphics and alternate font selections.)
3. A Web page must download relatively quickly.
4. Avoid having too many links on a given page.
5. Be careful when using "proprietary" HTML editors. (Codes used by one editor as shortcuts for page creation may not be recognizable by all mainstream browsers.)
6. Don't forget to populate your Meta Content attribute with useful, meaningful keywords. (Help search engines find your site in an appropriate context.)

Six Rules for Web Page Design

1. Keep your Home Page focused and to the main point.
2. White space is still an acceptable, and useful, design tool.
3. Make sure any wallpaper you use does not compete with the text.
4. Use a writing style that is active, conversational, and inviting for the reader to investigate further.
5. Use easy-to-recognize navigational tools.
6. Minimize scroll bars.

Six Rules for Web Page Multimedia Enhancements

1. Use fonts that are easy to read. (Arial or Verdana are good choices.)
2. Do not use more than one or two "animated gifs" on a page.
3. Control the speed and number of cycles of your animations, and the number of cycles of any sounds you have added.
4. Be judicious in your selection of graphics. (Do not use graphics for graphics sake, and remember that each graphic takes time to load.)
5. Consider using "thumbnails" when appropriate. (The viewer can choose which to click and view; download time is also shortened.)
6. Make all of those "neato" files (sound, movie, etc.) optional downloads.

As an added treat, Mark has put together a table of Web sites. To receive a copy, send him an email to omwritetrk@aol.com. In the subject area, write Southeast Michigan Handout. With his reply, Mark will include a cnet article called "10 Ways to Improve Internet Speed."

Current Job Postings

Permanent Full Time

Technical Writer/Software Analyst to evaluate software codes written in C/C++ and used for mechanical calibration of engines. Will translate the codes for automotive dealership technicians so that they can calibrate car engines. Prefer BS in Electrical Engineering or Computer Science. Location, Brighton, MI
 Manager, Corporate Recruiting
 Management Technologies Inc.
 3331 W. Big Beaver, Suite 105
 Troy MI 48084
 Phone: 248.643.1915, ext. 131
 Fax: 248.643.4934
 Mtroy@aol.com

Contract

Daimler Chrysler needs a Proving Grounds Test Information System Technical Writer to program online technical support documentation for a variety of users of a locally developed database.
 Requires two years experience using Robohelp and Microsoft Word. Web help background preferred.
 Long term contract.
 Location, Chelsea, MI.
 Contact Anne Siebesma
 Phone: 248.585.4750, ext 373
 Fax: 248.585.7157
 ASiebesma@rtc-employment.com

Technical Writer to create documentation and training materials to implement new software system.
 Full time contract on site through the end of the year.
 Location, Dearborn, MI.
 Contact Toni Pollock
 Jawood Management Associates
 Phone: 248.269.9988
 Tpoll14901@aol.com

Technical writer to create highly technical material for a large development group.
 Requires online help experience, experience working with developers, Visio 5.0, Word 97, and FrontPage 98.
 Length of contract is three to six months or longer.
 Location, on site in Kalamazoo, MI area.
 Becky Hall
 Rebecca C. Hall Consulting
 212 Fulton St.
 West Chicago, IL 60185
 Phone: 630.231.0562
 beckyh@ix.netcom.com

Michigan Works

Michigan Works is the name of a state program which has a Web site database of available jobs, including technical writing positions. The URL for the site is <http://www.michworks.org>.

Information Management Newsletter Announced

The Center for Information-Development Management, whose director is former STC president Dr. JoAnn Hackos, is now publishing a bi-monthly newsletter, *Best Practices*. Included in the inaugural issue are a description of the Center and Center activities, a tools and technology review on Hynet's Directive 2.0, a review of Geoffrey Moore's seminal book, *Crossing the Chasm*, a benchmarking update, and much more. For a complimentary copy of this first issue, send an email request to best.practices@infomanagementcenter.com.

Quote of the Month

The human mind likes a strange idea as little as the body likes a strange protein and resists it with a similar energy.

---W. I. Beveridge

STC to Send High School Teachers to Summer Institute Deadline Extended to May 25

Recently the STC board of directors authorized \$10,000 to send public high school teachers to a summer institute to learn how to teach technical communications to their students. The practical communication committee is managing this program.

The committee is accepting applications from public high school teachers to attend the 19th annual Institute in Technical Communication (ITC) to be held June 20-25, 1999 at Hinds Community College in Raymond, Mississippi. Applications may be downloaded from the committee Web

site, <http://www2.stc.org/pics/pcc/pcmain.htm> Or, email the committee at stc_prac_comm@hotmail.com for more information.

After the committee has reviewed the applications, it will select 10 teachers to attend the ITC (the committee will also select five alternates). Those teachers selected will have to pay for transportation to the ITC (the closest airport is in Jackson, Mississippi if they choose to fly), but after they arrive, registration and housing are covered (\$425 for registration and \$300 for housing during the 6-day institute). The deadline for receiving applications from teachers is May 25, 1999.

A Tour of the STC/SM Boardroom

Continued from Page 1

It just keeps getting better

Karen Gilbert then gave the Competitions report. It looks like we are on our way to re-introducing our chapter's competition. For those of you who have been members of our chapter for over five or six years, this may mean something. As I was recently reminded, our chapter was the *first* to hold such a competition and it will be a great thing to be able to start it up again. The plan is to hold an online-only competition this year and try to expand it in the years to come.

Karen gave more good news when she gave the Nominations report. It looks like we will have a full slate of elected positions this year. The slate presents a really talented, energetic, and competent executive board. Look for your ballots soon.

Next, our Programs Manager, Ruth Blough reported on the progress of the May seminar and the June program meeting. Also, she has located a number of companies willing to host meetings next year, so be ready for a change of pace and location starting next fall.

Our Publicity Manager, Jennifer Regal, reports that she's been sending press releases to our usual local media. We are curious, does anyone see mention of our chapter in the local papers? Please let us know if you do.

After the last report, we discussed Old Business, then New Business, and had some "off the record" discussion. So, that concludes my tour of the STC/SM boardroom. I hope it makes our chapter's behind-the-scenes action a little more tangible for you. Remember that you are welcome to attend. Just contact any of the board members to arrange it.

Los Angeles Chapter Announces Region 8 Conference

"Driving Forces in Technical Communication," the 1999 STC Region 8 Annual Conference, is to be held November 11-14 in Long Beach, California. The conference will feature full- and half-day hands-on workshops and three days of seminars. An active social program includes tours to local attractions, a Friday evening dinner/dance, Saturday networking lunch, and Saturday evening awards banquet.

The deadline for submitting proposals for presentation at the conference is May 31, 1999. Submit your proposals to sarablee@contentmanage.com.

For more information on the conference, contact Christine Stevens, Conference Chair, at cnk@iname.com, or visit the Los Angeles chapter web site at <http://stc.org/region8/lac/www/labome.htm>.

Knowledge Management and the Technical Communicator

By Judy Glick-Smith

Editor's note: Judy Glick-Smith is STC's 2d Vice President Elect. She has been Region 5 Director-Sponsor and wrote this article earlier this spring as one of her Director-Sponsor messages.

I recently told my riding instructor, Laura, that I wanted to learn how to do a “flying lead change” this year. Those of you who ride understand what this is. For those of you who don't, a “flying lead change” means that when you change directions while cantering, the horse knows to change the way its feet hit the ground so that it doesn't lose its balance. Laura said what she always says: “You have to ride more often.” (Sigh) However, she has stepped up the amount of cantering that I'm doing.

When you ask a horse to canter, there are cues you must give the horse. You press (not kick) your heel just behind the saddle with your leg that is on the outside of the circle you are making. You should be relaxed and centered on the horse (I have a tendency to lean, which confuses the signals).

Learning the subtleties of the canter has been an exercise in knowledge acquisition and management for me. Laura gives me the information and the rules associated with that information, but until I actually do it and feel the movement of the horse, I don't really know. Each time seems to be different and yet, over time, I'm becoming more and more consistent.

People who work for years in an organization understand subtleties about that organization, which are very hard for a new person to pick up. When they leave an organization, they take all their knowledge with them.

On Sunday, March 28, I attended an Executive Retreat at the International Knowledge Management Summit in San Diego. The keynote speaker that day was management guru

Dr. Peter Drucker. During his presentation, he gave a metric—proven in management studies—that just astounded me:

“When a person leaves an organization, it costs the organization 25 to 35 times that person's salary to recover that person's knowledge.”

In his book *Corporate Instinct*, Tom Koulopoulos says that all tacit knowledge can be codified, just like the cues for asking a horse to canter. The challenge lies in how fast we can codify so that the information and rules associated with that information are effective.

As technical communicators we gather information, design and write the communication, and publish it. In the knowledge management world, the process is the same; we just use different terminology: we acquire knowledge, codify knowl-

edge, and disseminate that knowledge. From a core-competency standpoint, there is no profession better equipped to perform this work than technical communicators.

Knowledge acquisition is the process of identifying the appropriate information and identifying the rules about that information. It is the process of asking “Why?” and “How?”

Is there a knowledge management initiative taking place in your organization? Are you involved in this initiative? You need to be; no one can acquire, codify, and disseminate knowledge better than YOU.

Many of you have asked me “How can we raise the status of technical communicators?” Well here it is folks. Get involved in knowledge management in your company. You can be instrumental in helping your company move to a new level.

From a core-competency standpoint, there is no profession better equipped to perform this work [of knowledge management] than technical communicators.

Calendar of Events

May 16 - 19
STC 46th Annual Conference
Cincinnati, Ohio

June 7 (Monday)
Board of Directors Meeting
Catherine Titta's office
7:00 p.m.

All members are welcome to attend board meetings. If you would like to attend a meeting, please call a member of the executive council (see page 2) to make arrangements.

June 9 (Wednesday)
Program Meeting
Networking for Fun and Profit
and
Volunteer Celebration
Holiday Inn, Livonia West
I-275 at 6 Mile Rd.
6:30 - 8:30
Appetizers provided

June 24 (Thursday)
Ann Arbor Networking Luncheon
Watercress Restaurant
Stadium and Liberty
Begins between 11:30 and noon
Contact Kathy Carter
734.475.5865
bluehoo@provide.net

Publication and Reprint Policies

TECH comments is published monthly September through June for members and friends of the Southeast Michigan chapter of the Society for Technical Communication. We welcome feature articles; letters to the editor; and information about meetings, courses, and workshops. We accept manuscripts in both hardcopy and electronic format with MS Word or ASCII text. Submissions will be edited.

Reprints from TECH comments are permitted if credit is given and a copy is sent to the managing editor.

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