

Carolina

communiqué

A quarterly publication by the Carolina Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication



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"How's business?"

President's Message by Michael Harvey

These days, I find that to be a more common greeting than "How are you?" or "Good to see you." We hear reports that the first recession since the early 1990s may be bottoming out, but we wonder whether the effects of the slowdown may persist until the end of 2002. So we nervously ask one another, "How's business," hoping to hear something more encouraging that what we have been hearing since last summer. "Budgets are tight." "We had to let folks go." "We're still not hiring." "I'm still looking."

When the economy recovers, I believe we will see a changed market for technical communicators. Don't count on getting a job where you are responsible for "a book" on a relatively long development schedule. I'm convinced that we're going to have to be just as adept at managing information as we are at developing it in the post-recession job market. Businesses will expect us to be versatile and flexible. We may need to be willing to occasionally test the products we write about. We may have to critique the usability of interfaces as expertly as we develop online help for them. Engineers may want us to help them with specifications and project planning. Our communications and organizational skills will lend themselves to these kinds of tasks, even though they may be outside of our comfort zone. It will be good work if we can get it. But things don't seem very encouraging at the moment.

So we look for encouragement wherever we can find it. I was encouraged by the turnout at the February monthly meeting, where **Ann Roberson** gave an excellent presentation about how to use graphic design principles to enhance what we write in a way that will help someone understand and move through material more effectively. But I felt badly for the folks who asked me for job leads. I've been out of work before, so I know firsthand what it's like to watch your bank balance shrink and the unpaid bills grow.

When the economy recovers, I believe we will see a changed market for technical communicators. I'm convinced that we're going to have to be just as adept at managing information as we are at developing it in the post-recession job market.

At the beginning of my term as President, I asked us to "take it all in, give it all back," because I believed there is inherent goodness in giving, and that what we give to others often comes back to us with dividends. Now, more than ever, we need to give to one another. If you're working and know of a job lead, share it with our employment manager, **Viola Suddaby**, so that she can post it on our web site. If you're out of a job or feel vulnerable in your current job, stay active in STC. It is a good way to get support; to get job leads, however scant; to get new skills; and to stay current with the business.

Come to TRIDOC 2002 to network, share ideas, and learn

by Jill Fitzgibbons, Carolina Chapter Promotions Committee Chair



Please give time to the chapter whenever you can afford it. Give some of it to our Programs committee or to our Training committee. Help our Communications Manager in some way. Giving time to STC will help you keep up contact with your peers, give you an outlet for your talent, and maybe give you a chance to learn something new. Your investment will add dividends to your résumé. As a hiring manager, I can attest that a reference such as "Jill put in an extraordinary effort to make our XML seminar a success" grabs a lot more attention than "Jill is an excellent writer."

There are many ways to stay in contact with the chapter. Let me again invite you to participate in our discussion mailing list. We provide instructions for signing up at www.stc-carolina.org/www/lists.shtml. Come to our awards banquet this March, even if you didn't win an award. It's not often you can enjoy an evening at Prestonwood Country Club for just \$10.00. Come to the Triangle Conference on Documentation. You can preview the sessions at www.stc-carolina.org/conference/program.shtml.

It will be an extraordinary opportunity to learn, to network, and to have fun.

Business has been better. But I am convinced that it will get better than it is now. I am encouraged by the talent, enthusiasm, and skills of the members of this chapter. If we stay active in STC, we will be ready for the upturn when it happens. ■

Planning is now in full swing for TRIDOC 2002, the Triangle Conference on Documentation. The two-day conference, scheduled for April 26-27, 2002, at the Holiday Inn RDU in Research Triangle Park, will provide a great opportunity for area technical writers to network, share their ideas, and learn something new.

The topic of this year's conference is "Experiences in a Knowledge Economy." As the global economy grows and knowledge replaces material goods as the currency of business, the role of the technical communicator becomes more critical to business success. The STC Carolina Chapter invites you to share in your fellow professionals' experiences at our upcoming chapter conference.

We are very fortunate to have **Mark Hanigan**, Immediate Past President of the STC, as the keynote speaker. Mark will give an overview of tech writing in the past, present, and future, with special emphasis on the current situation and how to weather it. Mark is a dynamic, entertaining speaker and this session will be a highlight of the whole conference. For more from Mark, see his open letter to technical communicators on page 3.

The conference is organized into six tracks that highlight aspects of technical communication: Indexing, Framemaker, Technical Editing, Online, and Management, as well as a General track.

The following are just a few of the speakers presenting:

- As part of the Online track, **Neil Perlin** will present "Small Steps to Single Sourcing." Neil has 23 years of experience in technical documentation, with 17 years in training, consulting, and development for various types of online documentation. Neil runs the "Beyond the Bleeding Edge" sub-stem for the STC annual conference, and is a popular speaker for many professional groups.

- Another presenter in the Online category, **Char James-Tanny** will provide a Help Authoring Tools Comparison. Char is the author of *SAMS Teach Yourself RoboHELP 2000 for HTML Help in 24 Hours* and *The WebHelp Resource Guide*. Char provides consulting and development for Help and Web sites, delivers training on Help tools, and speaks frequently at Help conferences.

- From the Indexing track, **Seth Maislin** will present "Indexing without Page Numbers." Seth is an elected director of the American Society of Indexers and participates in many of its technology subgroups. His larger projects include indexing America Online, building content directories for Lycos.com and its partners, cataloguing clip art for Mattel, and indexing Microsoft's Windows 2000, Windows XP, and MSN.com Web sites.

Besides speakers, various vendors of software authoring tools and professional services will be available to meet with attendees and discuss their products.

This conference will provide an excellent opportunity for local technical communicators to network with other professionals and distinguished guests. For writers "on sabbatical," the conference can provide good networking opportunities and job leads, so be sure to bring along your résumé.

For more information on TRIDOC 2002, visit the conference Web site: www.stc-carolina.org/conference/index.shtml ■



About the keynote speaker

Since he joined Society for Technical Communication (STC) in 1980, Mark Hanigan has served the Society in various positions on the chapter, regional, and international levels. He previously served as the president of the Suncoast chapter, manager of the International Technical Publications Competition, Secretary, Director-Sponsor of Region 3, Second Vice President, First Vice President, and President. He currently serves as the Society Immediate Past President; a position that he has learned truly does deserve the reputation as the “best position to have on the board.”

Mark is a frequent speaker at chapters, regional conferences and at the STC Annual Conference. He delivered the keynote addresses at the 1996 Region 7 Conference, at the 1997 Practical Conference on Communications, at the 1998 Trends Conference, at the 1999 Spectrum Conference, the 1999 Directions Conference, and the 2000 Region 6 Student Conference.

He also delivered opening-session remarks at the 2000 tekcom Annual Conference (Germany’s technical communication society) in Wiesbaden, sessions at the FORUM 2000 Conference in London, and closing remarks at the 2000 Pan Pacific Conference in Honolulu. His STC awards include the Director-Sponsor Award, the Distinguished Chapter Service Award (both 1994), and the Chapter Achievement Award for Suncoast Chapter when he was president (1993).

Mark received a baccalaureate degree in Journalism and Engineering Sciences from the University of Florida. He has been a practicing technical communicator and trainer for over 20 years. Today, he is an independent consultant for his own company, On the Write Track. He makes his home in Palm Harbor, Florida, a suburb of Tampa.

Mark is a high-energy individual with a well-deserved reputation as a punster. Mark lives the adage “Take what you do seriously, but don’t take yourself too seriously.”

The “Plug and Play” Technical Communicator in 2002

or “Just because I am not employed does not mean that I do not have a job!”

An open letter to technical communicators from Mark Hanigan

I invite all of you to come to this conference.

About a decade ago, I felt compelled to develop and present the predecessor to this presentation, which was titled simply “The Plug and Play Technical Communicator.” Why? The buzzwords then were “upsized, downsized, right size.” Jobs were disappearing left and right; even companies that had never had a tradition of layoff were letting people go.

At the time, it appeared that our umbrella of professions as we knew it was faced with the real possibility of extinction.

You know what? Extinction turned out to be true, but a new kind of opportunity took its place. What arose from the post-Cold War ashes was a new breed of technical communicator — the “Plug and Play” Technical Communicator!

For those of you who were “there” eight years ago, you know what I am talking about. However, so many of you have entered our umbrella of professions since then, and have been riding on an unprecedented eight-year crest of economic prosperity. This time of prosperity created a supply/demand skew so tilted in favor of supply that salaries and bill rates skyrocketed, and “seniors” were made out of so many of you who had not even passed “professional puberty.”

So for you, this downturn (and make no mistake about it; it is a downturn) is also unprecedented! The good news is that it is also a cycle. Those times of economic prosperity will return.

The first question that might come to mind is “When will this happen?” That, of course, is an almost rhetorical question that none of us has the answer to, save the economists who make their living making up these questions and then making up the answers (what a job to have!)

But the real questions are “What am I going to do about it today?” and “What can I do to tip the supply/demand skew for my services in my favor?”

The answers to these questions are as individual as each one of you. The challenge for each of you, whether you find yourself without employment, or perhaps just hanging on to something that is less than desirable, is to embrace these times as opportunity!

Thus, today’s corollary to the Plug and Play Technical Communicator is “Just because I am not employed does not mean that I do not have a job!”

In the abstract of my original Plug and Play presentation, I opened with the following statements:

“The adage ‘reality is personal’ probably has in it a corollary that our personal reality is the processed sum of our personal experiences. A subset of this corollary is that our individual educational and professional experiences in the technical communications arena are as different from each other’s as our very thumbprints.”

“Take what you do seriously, but don’t take yourself too seriously.”

Yet, there are enough commonalities that allow for generalizations that can be construed as fairly accurate. If I took a photograph of every person’s thumb, any one of us could identify any photo as a thumb (unless, of course, I got my thumb in the way of the lens!) The differences would range from the obvious — size, shape, and manicure of the thumb (still thumbs, mind you!) — to the subtle variations of print patterns.”

Updates and predictions

by Meredith Blackwelder, Carolina Chapter Programs Manager and Vice President

I repeat this in case you are thinking, “What would he know; he has a good network and is doing well!” For me, this is true right now. But believe me when I tell you, I am affected by these changing times the same as you! Not too many months ago, the cushy “permanent” position that I held disappeared. The fact is I spent almost half of my STC presidency year without a regular paycheck!

It was “gut check time” time to find out whether I could “practice what I preached” all of these past years.

In this presentation, I want to review the history of our professions, with particular focus on where we are today and how we got here. While I believe this is valuable information, I think we can also have a little fun with it along the way. Then, I want to share with you some ideas, personal experiences and strategic approaches — all designed to help you not just cope with today’s times, but to embrace them in preparation for a prosperous tomorrow.

For me, following these ideas and strategic approaches helped me to endure difficult times and “to land on my feet” in an area where I found new opportunity! There is nothing magical to my approach; in fact, the approach itself embraces the very tenets of what being a technical communicator is in the first place. The magic is in that it worked for me, and that your own personal variation of it can work for you too!

Through the roller-coaster ride of the past 18 months, one thing has been reaffirmed for me. What I believed in 1993, I still believe in 2002; we must be “Plug and Play” Technical Communicators!

I look forward to sharing this time with all of you!

Kind regards,

Mark Hanigan
STC Immediate Past President

“So what’s new?” Tony asked, as we met for lunch one brisk day last month. “Well, there’s a lot going on in our local STC chapter, and I seem to have landed in the midst of it,” I said with a grin on my face.

“But I thought you considered yourself an STC lurker,” he remarked. So I started on my long explanation: “Well, yes, I admit I’ve been an STC lurker for years. But I came out of my shell and I’m serving as Programs Manager and Vice President. Without the shell, it was kinda chilly and intimidating at first, but with the help of fellow STCers, I felt at home and comfortable quickly. Next year I will be President from June 2002 to June 2003, and that shell will be long gone. Shed like snakeskin.” And we moved on to the next topic.

So went my lunch conversation. After lunch was over, I thought that I should take some time to write this article and give those whom I haven’t had lunch with the update on how our monthly programs are going and what I foresee happening next year as I become president.

First, let me say that being Programs Manager is fun. No, really, it is! I had the opportunity to listen to what other technical communicators were interested in. I spent a lot of time investigating the types of membership meeting topics the membership body wants to have and how the format of those meetings should go.

You wanted more interaction, more discussion. You wanted more topics on software applications and graphics. So, we’re implementing these suggestions, and so far, the membership has responded positively. January and February’s meetings on software tools and graphic design produced wonderful turnouts, and I hope to keep that up with more program topics that were asked for: translations, usability, and balancing life, work, and STC.



By having one — or two or three or even sometimes five — of our members share their experiences through our monthly meetings, these meetings have contributed our the 2001-2002 theme of “Take it all in, give it all back.”

As president in 2002-2003, I want this theme to become second nature in our chapter, with members not thinking twice about “taking it all in” by attending our local events and “giving it all back” by presenting at meetings, volunteering for committees, and sharing professional experiences.

On a similar note, I’m excited to be able to offer everything I can next year to help “design the future of technical communication.” And I want to ask you to do the same. Designing the future of technical communication — in case you hadn’t read it on the national home page lately — is part of the STC mission statement.

I’m excited to be able to offer everything I can next year to help “design the future of technical communication.”

It's not technology that will design the future of our field, but the people in it. STC members are the ones who design the future of technical communication. STC gives us a platform on which we can design our future by learning from each other, sharing our knowledge, supporting ongoing learning, and providing professional networking. In our local chapter, I see members designing for the future by:

- Presenting at and attending sessions of the STC Carolina Triangle Conference on Documentation (TRIDOC 2002) April 26-27, 2002
- Networking and introducing one colleague to another at STC events
- Learning from each other on projects such as the competition judging
- Sharing ideas at monthly meetings in discussion groups and Q & A sessions
- Participating in SIGs, where those sitting beside you share similar on-the-job situations and may have suggestions for problems you're encountering

I'm psyched to wrap up this year with exciting monthly programs and start next year on a quest to help design the future of technical communication. As someone newly out of her shell, I'm open to all sorts of suggestions and advice, so if you have any to share, please don't hesitate to call or e-mail me. We could even do lunch. ■

Region 2 realigns; welcome Europe!

Message by Chris Benz, Region 2 Director-Sponsor

As some of you are aware, effective January 1, 2002, STC realigned its eight regions to enable the eight regional Director-Sponsors (D-Ss) to help chapters more efficiently. Overall, 14 chapters were directly affected.

As a result of this realignment, the seven STC chapters in Europe all became part of Region 2. Prior to this, these chapters had been spread across four regions:

- France, Sweden (now Nordic), and the United Kingdom had been in Region 1.
- Belgium and Israel had been in Region 2.
- Transalpine (covering Austria, Germany, Italy, Slovenia, and Switzerland) had been in Region 3.
- The Netherlands had been in Region 4.

In turn, three chapters that had been in Region 2 moved to other regions:

- New Jersey and Philadelphia Metro joined Region 1.
- Pittsburgh joined Region 4.

To those of you joining Region 2: Bienvenue! Willkommen! Benvenuto! Welkom! Dobrodosli! Välkommen! Welcome! (My apologies if I mangled any of these.)

To those of you leaving the region: Goodbye, friends. We wish you well in your new homes.

Why is this a good thing?

As Region 2's D-S, I am very excited to have all of Europe within one STC region, while still retaining most of the region's U.S.-based chapters. Europe is operating more and more as a single economic and geographic force — interestingly, January 2002 was also the official introduction of the Euro as hard currency — and with all the European chapters working together, the opportunities are ours to create. Add into that mix many of STC's oldest, largest, and most successful, dynamic, and innovative U.S.-based

chapters, and we have a great recipe for success, bolstering my longstanding opinion that "Region 2 is #1!"

The realities of a global economy affect each of us more and more every day. By joining hands with our friends and colleagues around the world, we each gain more knowledge, strength, and wisdom than we could ever have realized on our own.

Why this change? Why now?

A major responsibility of STC's Second Vice President (Thea Teich has the honor this year) is to review how STC's regions are organized, and to realign as necessary so that D-Ss can serve the chapters better. Officially, this review can happen at any time. In reality, however, it has happened only periodically, and there was a fairly long gap since the last time the regions were reviewed. During that gap, a significant number of chapters had formed, including several in Europe. Thus, Thea had a fairly large task, not only for Europe, but for the western US and Pacific Rim as well.

As I touched upon earlier, the primary purpose of these realignments is to improve D-S efficiency. The realignments strive to balance the workload equitably among D-Ss, and to improve communications between each region's chapters and their D-Ss, as well as among a region's chapters. Maybe a little travel money gets saved along the way, but the primary purpose is to have each chapter receive more assistance and attention from its D-S while avoiding overworking any one D-S. Also, chapters within a specific geographic area tend to share certain common concerns, and each D-S can better specialize in addressing those regional concerns. For example, the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, area is the gateway to the Ohio River Valley, so there is a logic in having Pittsburgh in Region 4, which includes several other Ohio River Valley chapters.

GUIs and messages provoke lively SIG session

What does this change mean to you?

In the short term, this change will not mean much. I have been working with your chapter's leaders, my fellow D-Ss, and other regional resources for several months to make sure the transition is a smooth one, and efforts in that area have gone well.

In the medium term, you will see changes to the European (stc-europe.org) and Region 2 (stcregion.org/region2) Web sites. For those of you in the chapters joining Region 2, you will start seeing more newsletter and Web articles by me instead of your former D-S. (Because D-Ss exchange newsletter articles and pass them along to chapter newsletter editors and Webmasters, you will still likely see articles from other D-Ss from time to time.) I will also replace your former D-S as your official advocate on the STC Board of Directors.

In the longer term, expect to see closer cooperation among STC's European chapters, and between European and U.S. chapters.

Don't forget to write!

If you have any questions about this realignment — or anything else having to do with STC, for that matter — please let me or one of your chapter leaders know. Plus, if your chapter has had some successful programs that you feel other chapters might be interested in trying, please let me know. Let's all keep on helping each other.

Have a great 2002! ■

Note: For previous Director-Sponsor articles by Chris, please visit www.stcregion.org/region2/chair.shtml

You can reach Chris by e-mail at cjbenz@unforgettable.com

In a lively roundtable session of the Carolina Chapter Technical Editing SIG, held at EMC on January 17, **Sue Kocher** and **David Heath** took SIG members on a guided tour of unhelpful error messages and confusing, illogical, and time-wasting graphical user interfaces. The meeting served as a call to action for editors to get more involved in contributing their skills to these key areas of technical communication.

Among the examples discussed by the group were error messages that provided no explanation of the error or the actions required, dialog boxes with command buttons that were unrelated to the dialog, redundant information such as explanations that merely repeated the text of the error message, and vague, inconsistent terminology.

Poor design is costly

Rick Taliaferro explained some of the time-consuming problems involved in becoming proficient using writing tools when the user interface is poorly organized and unintuitive. And as **Michelle Corbin** pointed out, the cost of user education is also substantially higher for such user interfaces. Anne Tice summed up the situation by stressing that poorly designed and written GUIs and error messages come with a substantial price tag for everything from expensive user education and low productivity to high technical support costs. Technical editors have the right skills to identify and resolve many of these problems, and it's important that they get involved.

On February 21, the topic was "Tools and Tips for Online Editing," led by **Anne Tice**. Anne shared her experiences using Microsoft Word, Adobe Acrobat, e-mail, and other electronic means to edit content for local and remote writers. She included her own recommendations for communicating changes and comments clearly and appropriately.



On March 21, the topic will be "Technical Editing as Quality Assurance," presented by **Mike Boyd, Michelle Corbin, and Pat Moell**. This will be a dry run of the upcoming STC conference presentation. After considering the traditional levels-of-edit systems, the presenters will discuss the trend toward content editing as a quality assurance process. They will compare technical editing processes to software testing processes, after providing a brief overview of those software testing processes. They will describe several different content editing activities in the context of three traditional types of editing: comprehensive editing, usability editing, and copy editing. Finally, they will issue a call to arms to technical editors to become quality assurance professionals, similar to software testing professionals.

Meetings of the Carolina Chapter Technical Editing SIG are held on the third Thursday of every month at EMC Corporation, 62 T. W. Alexander Drive, Research Triangle Park.

Whether you are a technical editor, a writer who edits, or someone who is simply interested, this group is for you. If you cannot attend the meetings, you are invited to join the *techedit* listserv or to take advantage of any resources that the SIG has to offer. ■

Another Carolina Chapter Fellow!

by Emily Toone, STC Carolina Chapter Immediate Past President

For the second year in a row, a member of the Carolina Chapter has been recognized as an STC Fellow. **Mary Cantando**, a Senior Member of the chapter, joins last year's honoree, **Larry Kunz**, in an exclusive group of STC members who have "attained such eminence in the field of technical communication that the board, by a two-thirds vote of all members, deems them worthy of being singled out as one of the select few who have distinguished the Society and the profession."

Mary served the Carolina Chapter well as Vice President (1992-93), President (1993-94) and initiator and chair of chapter Management SIG (1992-95). She has also served as a publications competition judge (1994-96), and has spoken numerous times at chapter conferences. Mary received Distinguished Chapter Service Award, 1995, and was elected Associate Fellow in 2000.

At the Society level, Mary initiated and chaired the Multimedia SIG. She also chaired the chapter and regional conferences committee, which developed the Chapter and Regional Conferences Handbook. Mary has served as a speaker for ten STC international conferences, as well as Forum 2000 in London and Pan-Pacific Conference in 2000. She is currently serving as chair of management STEM for 2002 International Conference.

Professionally, Mary has excelled in many aspects of technical communication. She received her BA in corporate communication and management from Christian Brothers University in Memphis, TN. In 1984 she worked as a software trainer, and from there evolved into a technical communicator.

By 1989, Mary had become an executive in a privately held documentation services company, PDR. During her twelve years with the company, she opened five geographic locations, including establishing a Canadian entity. She created employment for over 1000 technical communicators and managers,

and served as mentor to many of these individuals. During this time, she also developed and taught graduate-level technical documentation and electronic marketing programs with current Carolina Chapter President, **Michael Harvey**.

Currently, Mary continues her involvement in technical communication by serving in board positions in publications organizations and as a consultant to multimedia and technical communications companies.

I recently interviewed Mary about her opinions on a whole range of topics related not only to her background but also to the technical communication profession in general. Here are her answers to my questions:

Q. What does it mean to you to be recognized as a Fellow?

A. This is a huge deal to me. This year only six individuals out a membership of 25,000 are being recognized as STC Fellows. I figured out that's 0.00024% of the membership.

But this isn't just a number to me; this is something that I've worked toward. I set the following goal for myself three years ago: "I will become world renowned in my profession." And, when I received notification of my Fellowship, I achieved that goal.

Q. What attracted you to the field of technical communications?

A. When Michael Harvey and I developed and taught the Durham Tech Software Technical Writing program back in the early 90s, I remember saying to the participants, "If you don't like to learn, you can't be a tech writer. What technical writers do for a living is learn about things and then explain them in very plain language to others."



I think there's a real power in that ability to take complex things and make them simple, understandable. That's what I love about technical communication and what first drew me to the field.

Q. How did you first get involved in STC?

A. I joined STC to recruit a top-notch documentation department to start PDR Information Services (the company I built in RTP). I soon learned not to even interview people who didn't have STC listed on their résumés.

Q. What did being an STC volunteer at the chapter level bring to you?

A. In a word, "friendship." I've met amazing people through STC over the years. I already mentioned my good buddy, Michael Harvey. Then there are people like Diane Feldman, Emily Toone, Lottie Applewhite, Carol Linden, Andy Lewis, Carol Ryner, Charles Goode... I could go on and on. I had great fun working with these folks and we achieved some spectacular results together.

Q. One of the criteria for being recognized as a Fellow is to have “made significant contributions to the field of technical communication.” How do you feel that you have done this?

A. I think I've done two things that have made a difference.

First, I believe I've elevated technical communication in the eyes of business executives. As an executive myself, I've promoted the value of technical communication by demonstrating the return on investment gained by employing professional technical writers. As a result of this, I was able to create employment for over 1000 technical communicators in the past twelve years. I smile when I think of that!

Second — and this may be the more important of the two — I believe I've enhanced technical communicators' perception of themselves. As a mentor and as a speaker at conferences, I've always delighted in teaching others how to analyze, understand, and express their business value. Over the years, people have told me that they received promotions, salary increases, and enhanced job satisfaction by following my advice. I think that's pretty cool.

Q. What have been some of your most rewarding moments of as a technical communicator?

A. I've always loved being able to help new writers start out. I think that's why I loved our Durham Tech program so much. We took a group of individuals who didn't even know what technical documentation was, and launched some of the superstars of the RTP tech writing community.

Q. What have been some of your most rewarding moments of as a leader within STC?

A. Here's a great story: In 1991, Andy Lewis, Neal Keene, and I made a pitch to the STC board about the need to use multimedia at the STC conference. During the presentation, a Silicon Valley representative, who shall remain nameless, made the comment, “Why would something like that come out of North Carolina?” Well, I took that as a personal challenge, and immediately began to establish the Society's Multimedia Professional Interest Committee (today, SIG). I set up this group and chaired it for three years, probably just to show folks that not only do we wear shoes, but we also have a pretty good handle on technology in Ol' North Carolineway!

Q. What has been your biggest challenge as a leader of STC?

A. I've always been frustrated that many technical communicators don't have a high opinion of themselves and their profession. I'm a firm believer in the concept of self-fulfilling prophecy. Here's how I see it: If I truly believe what I'm doing is important and will have great results, then that seems to happen. And, if I think my work is less important than that of engineers and programmers, it becomes so. Getting others to buy into this way of thinking is my never-ending challenge.

Q. What changes have you seen in the field of technical communications?

A. My first computer job was back in 1965, while I was still in high school. Huge roaring boxes filled the room and all they could do was print out mortgage bills.

Advance to 1990. I was part of a national Hypertext seminar that my company did. We amazed people with the stuff we showed them. That same year I heard an Apple exec speak at an STC conference about how we'd soon be getting up in the morning and printing out individually customized newspapers. He got that right, except for the printing part.

From a management perspective, anticipating the technology has been a wild ride. We made some good decisions pushing into hypertext and multimedia in the early 90s, but I made some dumb mistakes as well. I blanch when I think of what I paid for a touch-screen monitor, just so we could show clients that we had one.

Q. Who is your favorite author?

A. I focus a lot on management and motivational reading, and my favorite author changes based on the book I'm reading. But, if I could will everyone in the world to read one book it would be *The Art of Possibility: Transforming Professional and Personal Life* by Rosamund & Benjamin Zander. Please read this book.

Q. What is your favorite quotation?

A. I currently have a remark by Joan Lunden in a prominent place in my office. She reminds me that “Happiness and enthusiasm are powerfully attractive; they draw people to you and make you successful.”

Q. What closing thoughts would you like to share with us?

A. My personal mission in life is to “Help others experience abundance.”

This can be material abundance... nothing wrong with money!... spiritual abundance, an abundance of friends, an abundance of choices, an abundance of love, an abundance of nature...It goes on and on.

I have a bumper sticker on my car that says, “Absolute abundance constantly circulates in my life.” And it does.

Below is a list of the other 2002 STC Fellows:

Steven M. Gerson

Jay J. Goldberg

Patricia J. McClelland

Dierdre A. Murr

John O. Shipman

Joyce F. Woods



Why we switched to a Web-only newsletter

by G. David Heath, Managing Editor, Carolina Communiqué

As all of our chapter members know, we used to distribute the Carolina Communiqué by mailing a printed version and posting a PDF version on the chapter Web site. Eventually, we found that budget and scheduling issues were making the printed version impractical, so we sat down in July 2001 to reconsider the newsletter. What should its focus be? There was a lot of overlap between the information in the newsletter and that on the chapter Web site. Could we develop a more eye-catching design? To keep down printing costs, we maintained a plain, black-and-white look. If we distributed it entirely online, should the newsletter be in PDF or HTML format? There were a lot of issues to consider before making such a big move.

Where we were

We had been mailing the printed newsletter because we assumed that not all members of the chapter had access to the Internet. We also felt that a printed newsletter that arrived in members' mailboxes was a tangible benefit of chapter membership, unlike a Web-based newsletter that would be available to members and nonmembers alike. We provided current and past PDF versions on the Web site both as an archive and as a way to promote the benefits of STC membership to nonmembers.

Michael Harvey, President of the Carolina chapter, supported the idea of an exclusively online newsletter because it would let us “reduce costs and be more creative at the same time. Going [entirely] online would let us publish longer, more thoughtful articles and use color more generously without worrying about rising printing costs.”

The newsletter contained a mix of informative articles and news of upcoming meetings and events – information that was also posted on the chapter Web site. Because this information was time-sensitive, it was essential to get the newsletter into members' mailboxes on time, but the busy volunteer staff was having a hard time meeting the rigid schedule. In addition, the bimonthly schedule, introduced in 2000 to hold down printing and mailing costs, made it difficult to include information on meetings and events late in the two-month period. And there was some duplicated effort and cost, because we also mailed a monthly postcard to all members announcing upcoming meetings and events.

Our most important concern, however, was that printing and mailing costs were a significant item in a tight budget, despite the simple design and the bimonthly schedule. Reducing or eliminating those costs would make a considerable amount of money available for other, much-needed member services. **Michael Harvey**, President of the Carolina chapter, supported the idea of an exclusively online newsletter because it would let us “reduce costs and be more creative at the same time. Going [entirely] online would let us publish longer, more thoughtful articles and use color more generously without worrying about rising printing costs.” And the Web version would be especially useful because we could link from the newsletter directly to references.

Some research showed that several other professional societies were switching from printed newsletters to Web-based ones, mainly for cost-containment reasons. So we knew that others had been successful. We decided that if we discontinued the printed newsletter, but included more information in the monthly postcard, we could provide the required news of upcoming events to members who had no access to the Internet (a situation that seemed improbable in 2001).



We held an open meeting in August 2001 to debate the pros and cons of Web-only delivery, and ultimately voted to eliminate the printed newsletter and fully explore the opportunities offered by Web delivery, beginning with the November-December 2001 issue.

Focus and design

Now that the chapter had decided to go ahead with the Web-only newsletter, the newsletter staff took the opportunity to rethink the focus and design of the publication. Because information on upcoming meetings and events was already on the Web site, we chose not to duplicate this information. This decision made us think carefully about the purpose of the newsletter. What material would be most useful to our members?

We decided the newsletter should focus on thought-provoking articles of interest to Carolina chapter technical communication professionals. We wanted these articles to be the kind that members would want to take time reading, thinking about, and possibly responding to.

The switch to Web delivery meant that we no longer had to restrict the newsletter to black and white, and we were no longer limited to four pages (a folio) or a multiple of four pages. An end to the cost constraints imposed by printing also allowed more creative formatting and the use of color.

Reflections after my first year as a technical writer... The adventure continues

by David King, Carolina Chapter Hospitality Coordinator

Ann Roberson, the Carolina Communiqué graphic designer, expressed her objectives this way: "Through the newsletter redesign, I was trying to create a professional yet innovative look and feel. The field of technical communication is advancing rapidly, and we would like to portray our technical society in the same forward-thinking manner. Having the newsletter distributed online gives us the opportunity to take advantage of bright, bold color and photography. We want to engage the readers visually, enticing them into the substantial and informative material. The design will continue to evolve in upcoming issues. I'm delighted to have the opportunity to work with [an STC chapter] newsletter."

Delivery

We examined the advantages and disadvantages of various file formats, in particular PDF, which we had always used, and HTML. We rejected HTML because we thought more HTML pages would get lost on the Web site. We considered it essential for the newsletter to remain a discrete, downloadable, and printable publication, distinctly separate from the Web site.

Removing the news of upcoming meetings and events enabled us to change from a bimonthly schedule to a quarterly one, which we felt was more appropriate to the new, more thought-inspiring focus of the newsletter. It takes time to develop the sort of articles we wanted for our newsletter.

In the end, it all comes down to priorities. As chapter leaders, we must provide the maximum benefit to members within the limits of our budget and our volunteers' time. ■

By all accounts, finding the right company to work for is like finding the right person to marry. You must be thorough in your search. You must know yourself and know what you are looking for and be able to communicate information about both. You must also be in the right place at the right time. Fate will also play a big part in finding your first job as a technical writer. And you must be ready.

Fundamentally, the reason I was hired by my present company was because we were a good match. The persons with whom I interviewed liked my portfolio and they appreciated what I was looking for. The Professional Writing Certificate that I had obtained at NC State had provided several excellent portfolio pieces that matched the type of work that I would be doing for this company. Frankly, I'd say that it got me the job, although my B.A. in English was also an important factor.

Courtship first

Before we "tied the knot," my company and I "courted" for several weeks. As an office assistant working for Robert Half and Associates (a Durham-based temporary agency), I seized this opportunity to introduce myself and get acquainted with persons who would be responsible for hiring me to a full-time position. This strategy worked.

Never assume

On the job, I learned the hard way to never make assumptions about my new employer. Always ask them how they want something done. And err on the side of excellence. It is just as important for internal documentation to look as nice as the documentation going outside.

Relax, stay flexible

Because the corporate environment is always changing, priorities and workloads will shift as personnel and resources become available and innovations take place. Go with the flow. I've made it very easy on myself this year by just listening to managers.

This job is fun

I never expected this job would be so much fun. There are a lot of young people working for my company. There are also those who have been on the job longer and who have taught me to move around. Diversity in culture, experience and age are all hallmarks of the company that I work for. That's exactly what I wanted and communicated in my job interview. All of the stereotypes that I had ever heard of about "stiff corporate atmospheres" were shattered. I have witnessed senior-level managers working side-by-side with hourly workers. This has been one of the most dynamic, fluid, and stimulating places that I have ever worked. I feel honored to be here.

David King is a technical writer for Analytical Sciences, Inc., a medium-sized contract research organization (CRO) in Durham. ■

An invitation to the Awards Banquet

You are cordially invited to the chapter's Annual Awards Banquet. Join us for dinner and dessert while we congratulate our fellow professionals and winners of the STC-Carolina Technical Publications, Online Communication, and Technical Art Competitions. We will also announce the new Fellow and Distinguished Chapter Service Award winners. Don't miss this unique opportunity to see, up close, some of our industry's best work. It is also a fantastic way to support our peers.

Wednesday, March 13, 2002

Prestonwood Country Club,
Main Clubhouse

300 Prestonwood Parkway, Cary

6:00 - 6:30 pm. Cash bar

6:30 - 8:00 pm. Dinner and awards ceremony

Directions

From Raleigh

Take US 1 South towards Sanford.
Take the Cary Parkway Exit.
Turn right off ramp and go 6 miles.
Take a left onto High House Rd.
Turn right onto Prestonwood Parkway.
Follow straight to Club House.

From RTP:

Take Hwy 54 to Hwy 55 towards Apex.
Travel 8 miles on Hwy 55.
Make a left onto High House Rd.
Turn left onto Prestonwood Parkway.
Follow straight to Club House.

From Chapel Hill/Airport:

Take I40 East to Cary/Harrison Ave.
exit #287.
Go right onto Harrison.
Turn right onto Cary Parkway.
Turn right onto High House Rd.
Turn right onto Prestonwood Parkway.
Follow straight to Club house.

See you there!

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