



Techniquill

News and Information for Central Ohio Technical Communicators

What Were You Before You Became a Technical Communicator?

by Kim McConnell

One of the things I find so unique about the technical communication profession is that most technical communicators came from other professions. My introduction to technical communication came in 1994 when I decided to return to school. At the time, the company I worked for was downsizing, and the Columbus facility was expected to close within a few years. I was the training specialist and had been in that profession for ten years.



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When faced with the fact that I was going to lose my job, I decided to go back to school to make myself more marketable. Although I enjoyed the training profession, I found that I was getting burnt out with the training part of it, but I really liked creating the materials. One day, I jokingly said, "Gee... wouldn't it be great if there was a degree program in manual making?" About six months later, I discovered the technical communication program at Columbus State Community College and, by 1996, I officially crossed over into the technical communication profession. Ironically, since that crossover I have done very little "manual making." Instead, I have done research writing, CD ROM development, policy analysis, and Web development.

My introduction and crossover into technical communication seems to be the case with many other members of our chapter. Several months ago, I decided to poll our chapter members to see what they were before becoming technical communicators. The surveys were distributed to those who attended our October chapter meeting and at other STC functions. The results of the surveys are highlighted below. I would like to thank all of those who took the time to complete the survey.

- Eighty percent of the respondents were in different professions before becoming technical communicators. The majority of these people came from the teaching, training, or human resources professions.
- The most popular reason for choosing the field of technical communication was "a love for writing." Also, many had jobs that had evolved into technical communicator positions, such as an engineer who is now a technical writer for the same company.

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Editors

Cheryl Elam
Kim McConnell

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Central Ohio Chapter

www.centralohiostc.org
Chapter contact: Susan Moran
Phone: (614) 287-5453
Email: smoran@csc.edu

Region 4 Director-Sponsor

Mike Bates (440) 646-7548; e-mail: mpbates@software.rockwell.com

**Society for
Technical Communication**

901 N. Stuart Street, Suite 904
Arlington, Virginia 22203-1854
(703) 522-4114; (703) 522-2075 fax
e-mail: stc@stc.org
www.stc.org

Presidential Minute by Susan Moran

Being a chapter president reminds me a little of a space shuttle's journey. There is that initial rush of excitement as the shuttle leaves the earth, and powerful booster rockets thrust the craft beyond the forces of gravity into orbit. A period of relative calm interspersed with bursts of intense activity follows for those on board. Finally, the craft begins re-entry and returns to earth with a sudden, but welcome, jolt.

As your chapter president, I went through an initial period of excitement and eventually settled into a routine frequently interrupted by intense activity. The year is almost over now, but I am experiencing mixed emotions over my "return to earth." The idea of having more free time is appealing. The idea of saying "goodbye" to the current board is not.

The Central Ohio Chapter board is one of the best groups of people I have ever encountered. They are enthusiastic and dedicated. They are willing to step in and help out the chapter at a moment's notice. They are creative problem solvers. And they are just plain fun.

Sadly, several members of the board are not returning to their positions next year. Cynthia Parker and Mary Dysert are returning to school. Wendy Suminski will begin teaching in the fall. Kellie McGinley and Cheryl Elam are leaving the board to pursue non-STC activities. And just to keep things interesting, some of the remaining board members may be trading jobs.

The beginning of another exciting journey is near, but my journey is almost over, so thank you. Thank you all for allowing me to be your president. Thank you for making this past year so interesting. Thank you for making our chapter exceptional. It has been a great ride. **T**

Editors' Corner by Kim McConnell

After this issue, Cheryl Elam and I will be stepping down as co-editors of *Techniquill*. Cheryl has been an editor for three years while I have been an editor for the past two years. I took care of the "front end" of the newsletter duties – soliciting for submissions, writing features, editing articles, and responding to e-mail inquiries. Cheryl took care of the design and layout, as well as working with the printer and overseeing the shipment of the newsletter. Together, we spent approximately 60 hours of our own time for each issue of *Techniquill*, with Cheryl being the one who spent the majority of that time with production.

Although this volunteer position took up much of our "spare" time, we both consider the experience to have been a positive and rewarding one. It helped to sharpen our skills in several areas and allowed to us to meet more STC members. We were thrilled to receive the award of *Excellence* last year from the STC Newsletter Competition and are patiently waiting the results of this year's competition.

Cheryl and I would like to thank all who have helped us with the newsletter. Many of you submitted articles, helped prepare the newsletter for mailing, and came to our aid when we ran into problems. We appreciate your help and support and wish the new newsletter editors much success. **T**

“What Were You Before...?” continued from page 1

- Only 2 percent who responded are in a management position. Of those that are not in management, 47 percent desire to become a manager one day.
- The majority of respondents participate in professional development activities, such as STC events, reading, list servers, college level and on-line classes, meetings of other groups, and networking.
- Students who completed the survey reported that they chose to study technical communication because of the ability “to be practical, yet creative.” For all respondents, several reported that a friend or a family member suggested the field of technical communication to them.

Respondents had the opportunity to give their comments about their careers. Here are some of their insights.

“I feel like my flexibility and my ability to adapt are currently my biggest assets.”


“Fostering and maintaining a mentorship can make all the difference for someone who is new to the profession.”

“The job transition was easy. With my background in English and my training at Columbus State...I was prepared for my career in technical communication.”

“I have found that the single most important tool to assist you in a career transition is a positive, ‘can-do’ attitude.”

“I only regret that I didn’t make the switch to technical communication earlier.”

And finally, one of the respondents reported how she avoids job burnout.

“Have a variety of tasks or projects to do. Keep reinventing your job if you can. Have friends in your field, and compare notes every so often. It’s good for unwinding, and you get a different/better perspective on your job.” 

Selling STC to Your Manager


Having trouble selling the idea of STC membership to your manager? Get it paid through your corporate training budget. Dictionary.com defines “training” as follows: “to make proficient with specialized instruction and practice.”

- “Training” happens when a chapter workshop on XML helps you develop superior company documents – faster and more efficiently.

- “Training” happens when an STC telephone seminar teaches you and your colleagues the basics of single sourcing – and thereby streamlines your company’s production processes.
- “Training” happens when a technical session at STC’s annual conference shows you how to develop a usability plan that returns valuable feedback on your company’s product – resulting in a better product and more satisfied customers.
- “Training” happens when an article in *Intercom* or *Technical Communication* shows you how to translate a company Web site – to reach an international audience.

If an STC- or chapter-sponsored event or activity shows you how to improve your company products or processes, that’s “training.” Nonmembers often pay significantly more for STC programs, conferences, and workshops than do members. And STC membership provides training with a bonus: a vibrant professional community with numerous opportunities for networking.

If you haven’t renewed your dues, contact the STC membership department. And there’s an extra incentive for nonmembers to join: Those who pay the nonmember rate to attend STC’s 49th Annual Conference in May 2002 receive a complimentary membership in STC. See the STC conference Web site for conference registration information.

STC helps you make career opportunities happen. 

February Meeting Recap by Diana Barnum

From Paper to PDF


February's presentation by Pam Noreault of SmartPipes, Inc., discussed elements to consider when converting a document to PDF format so that it will be not only functional but also pleasing to the eye. Her three main points were to (1) understand the practical uses of PDF, (2) know what is possible and what is not possible with PDF, and (3) understand the end user's needs.

For all practical purposes, any document that is currently printed can be converted to PDF format. For example, user guides, articles, white papers, and legal documents can all be converted into PDF files.

With Adobe *Acrobat 5.0*, the following is possible:

- Security
- Digital signatures
- On-line forms
- On-line reviewing
- Links within the PDF document and to other PDF documents
- Table of contents
- Thumbnails
- Ability to convert PDF to RTF
- Option to copy Web pages for off-line use
- Ability to crop and rotate pages
- Some text editing
- Compression of graphics and PDF files

Be advised that limitations to the features of *Acrobat 5* exist. Linked PDF documents must be managed by someone who knows how to use *Acrobat*. Additionally, *Acrobat* is not a powerful text editor or a substitute for on-line information. And PDF documents are not known for multimedia capabilities, such as moving graphics or large sound and video files.

The user's needs dictate whether PDF should be used, and how. The user's knowledge level and ability to connect to the Internet, for instance, determine whether a large file should be created that requires *Acrobat Reader* for navigation. If the end user is a traveler, perhaps documents need to be downloaded from a location rather than e-mailed. Other hints from Pam included avoiding italics, since they are difficult to read in PDF, and being careful with font size, color, capitalization, and consistency for a professional-looking end result that is pleasing to the eye. 

*Congratulations to the Central Ohio Chapter
for receiving the
Distinguished Chapter Service Award for 2002!*

Memories Wanted!


In preparation for our May 2003 celebration of STC's 50th Anniversary, the 50th Anniversary Committee needs humorous and inspirational anecdotes that we can collect in an STC archive. We want to publish some of your most sparkling or inspirational stories in a brochure to be distributed to all members.

Those stories will be most useful to us if they are succinct (250 words or less on any given topic) and entertaining. Whenever you think of a story you'd like to include, send an e-mail or snail mail to Liz Babcock (lizbab@iwvisp.com or 401 N. Warner, Ridgecrest, CA 93555). Liz is the committee member who has volunteered to serve as the initial collection point for your stories.

You can communicate with other members of the committee, as follows: Georgina Cantoni, committee chair, gcantoni@techcomm-solutions.com; Ken Cook, kenc@kencook.com; Marguerite Krupp, mkrupp@cisco.com; Bill Leavitt, skibill@aol.com; Ernie Mazzatenta, Jande@a-o.com; and Bill Stolgitis, bill@stc.org. We look forward to your messages! 

Welcome!

We would like to welcome the following members who are new to the Central Ohio Chapter:

William Davis
Oren J. Iny
Dina L. Mairoana
Kaye M. Puthoff 

Chapter Meetings

May: Ice Cream Social, Awards, and Officer Installation

Come celebrate the end of another STC year with an ice cream sundae bar! In addition to the ice cream, there will be an awards presentation and the installation of the new chapter officers for the 2002-03 year. This is the last monthly chapter meeting until September.

When May 15, 2002
 6:00-6:30 p.m. Registration/networking
 6:30-7:15 p.m. Ice cream sundae bar
 7:15 p.m. Program


Where University Plaza Hotel
 3110 Olentangy River Road
 Columbus, OH

Cost \$ 8 Members
 \$ 8 Nonmembers
 \$ 5 Meeting only

Menu Ice cream sundae bar –
 Chocolate, vanilla, or strawberry ice cream
 Choice of various toppings

To register for the chapter meeting, contact Kellie McGinley before 12:00 p.m., May 13, 2002, at (614) 327-3597, or make reservations on our Web site, www.centralohiostc.org/mtgreg.htm.


You can use Paypal to pay by credit card when you register for most chapter events and meetings on our Web site.

Registering for a meeting is a financial commitment. If you do not cancel your reservation, using the same methods available for registering, and you do not attend, you are obligated to pay the balance owed. 

Out of This World!!

The Central Ohio Chapter STC is on the move again ... we agreed to host the Region 4 Conference this year. The conference will be held at Columbus State Community College on Friday, November 8, and Saturday, November 9, 2002. Watch your newsletter for announcements as we near the conference date.

Anyone interested in volunteering to help with the conference should contact Sue Wolford at sue.wolford@chase.com or (614) 422-7166, or Brenda McGuire at mcguireb@battelle.org or (614) 424-5505.

Plan now to attend! 

Local SIGs

Idea Watch



Idea Watch is a monthly book discussion special interest group (SIG) for technical writers

and other professionals who, through ideas and intellectual debate, want to revolutionize the products they create and the organizations they are in. Upcoming meetings are listed below and are held in Columbus, Ohio, at Starbucks on Lane Avenue, next to Half Price Books. For more information, see www.ideawatch.org.

May 30, 2002, 7 p.m.

Book: *Content Management for Dynamic Web Delivery*, JoAnn Hackos

June 27, 2002, 7 p.m.

Book: *Maslow on Management*, Abraham Maslow


July 25, 2002, 7 p.m.

Book: *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World*, Margaret J. Wheatley

August 29, 2002, 7 p.m.

Book: *Flow*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

Lone Writers


The Lone Writers SIG is for those who are the only technical communicators within their organizations, or those who are freelance or contract communicators. The group meets on the fourth Wednesday of each month, from 12 noon-1:00 p.m., at Donatos Pizza on Polaris Parkway. The group will have its last meeting on May 22. Meetings will resume on September 25. No registration is required. E-mail Dan Wiltshire at dwiltshire@pnmt.com for more information. 

Employment Opportunities

The Central Ohio Chapter STC has established the following four methods in which members can receive updated job postings:

1. Employment handouts available at chapter meetings.
2. Web site Job Bank available at www.centralohiostc.org/stcjobs.htm.
3. Employment postal mailings available in *Techniquill*, the chapter newsletter.

4. Employment updates via e-mail available by sending an e-mail request to centralohiostcjobbank@hotmail.com.

As an STC member, these employment services are available to you free of charge. If your organization wishes to post a technical communication position using these services, please send the job information in an e-mail message to centralohiostcjobbank@hotmail.com. 

For complete job listing information, see the Central Ohio Chapter STC Web site at www.centralohiostc.org/stcjobs.htm.

Starting Instructional Design with a Six-Pack by Janet Belding

Book Review: *The New Mager Six-Pack* by Robert Mager, The Center for Effective Performance, Inc., 1997

The New Mager Six-Pack consists of six "how-to" handbooks:

- "Analyzing Performance Problems," 187 pp.
- "Preparing Instructional Objectives," 193 pp.
- "Measuring Instructional Results," 186 pp.
- "How to Turn Learners On...without turning them off," 152 pp.
- "Goal Analysis," 159 pp.
- "Making Instruction Work," 286 pp.

Information design and instructional design are converging, giving writers the opportunity to broaden our field. We know how to present information clearly, concisely, and completely, which is a strong foundation from which to learn to design training. Adding instructional design skills to our repertoires gives writers greater versatility and employability.


A writer venturing into instructional design needs to become conversant with the prevailing theories and methodologies of adult instruction. The resource that was the greatest help to me in beginning this transition was a paperbound set, *The New Mager Six-Pack*.

Robert Mager is one of the best known names in organizational training, and his method (criterion-referenced instruction) is widely accepted. His approach is that of a practitioner, not an academician, and his writing is brisk and blessedly sparing of jargon. One of Mager's maxims that is particularly useful for writers is "Telling is not training." Writers do "tell" – it is what we do best. When we make the jump to training, we have to be highly conscious of the need to "show."

Criterion-referenced instructional design enforces a tight discipline: learners are to be taught what they need to know, and only what they need to know, in order to perform the task for which they are being trained. Because the author is faithful to his own teaching, the series is a focused guide to the training design process. If you are tossed into a project where you need to learn instructional design on the fly, Mager's

concise directions are life saving. The current trend is toward a shorter training cycle: courses have a short lead time and shorter period of use than formerly. This trend is pressing instructional designers to streamline their models. While you may be asked to simplify some steps of the criterion-referenced design process, it is helpful to know the complete method. You may be asked to do less in the design process than Mager describes, but you will not be asked to do more.

One of the benefits of learning instructional design is that its focus can help you to strengthen your writing. Training is driven by the need to achieve a measurable outcome with the least possible expenditure of resources. This insistence on efficiency carries over well into all forms of communication.

Whether you move into instructional design full-time, or simply carry its insights into your writing, you will find that instructional design is worth learning. Robert Mager's *Six-Pack* is a good introduction to a useful field of study. 

Addressing Special Needs

At the February board meeting, Kim McConnell asked the board to approve the creation of a new board-level position for a special needs chairperson. The board unanimously accepted her proposal, and Kim volunteered to be the chairperson.

What Are Special Needs?

For the purposes of this position, special needs are defined as physical or mental disabilities that impair a technical communicator's ability to practice his or her profession, or that impair an end user's ability to receive the information in technical communication products. Kim will provide information and resources to support technical communicators with special needs and to educate all technical communicators about the necessity of creating accessible products. Some of the activities to accomplish these goals include:

- Write a regular article for *Techniquill*.
- Provide special needs information on our chapter Web site.
- Schedule at least one meeting per year featuring a special needs topic (e.g., the challenges of being a technical communicator with a disability, developing accessible Web sites, interacting with coworkers with special needs).
- Create an outreach effort to chapter members with special needs.
- Establish relationships with area disability organizations.


STC's Commitment to Special Needs

The issue of special needs was first recognized several years ago by the Society for Technical Communication when the Society established a Special Needs Committee. The committee consisted of 18 Society members throughout the world who either had a disability or who were interested in disability issues. The committee met its initial purpose and was disbanded by the Society this past March. Their work included establishing a Web site at www.stcregion.org/special_needs/index.shtml. Presently, the former committee members are in the process of creating a Special Needs Special Interest Group (SIG).

How Can You Be Involved?

There are several ways that you can be involved.

- Become one of the founding members of the Special Needs SIG.
- Help at the chapter level by participating in the activities of the Central Ohio Chapter's special needs initiatives.
- Contact Kim if you are a technical communicator with a disability for ways you can be involved or to participate in a brief interview. All personal information about you and your disability will be kept confidential.

If you would like to participate, or if you have questions, contact Kim at kimmccconnell@earthlink.net or (614) 870-2781. 



49th Annual Conference

Join technical communicators from around the world at STC's 49th Annual Conference in **Nashville, Tennessee, May 5-8, 2002.**

The conference theme, "Leading the Technical Communication Revolution," addresses ways of rethinking industry paradigms to remain competitive in the new workplace.


See www.stc.org/49thConf/index.html for more information.



50th Annual Conference

May 18-21, 2003: Dallas, TX

Call for Proposals

Share your technical communication techniques, research, ideas, and experiences – both good and bad – at STC's 50th Annual Conference. Deadline for proposals is August 1, 2002. Visit www.stc.org/conferences.html for more information. 



Techniquill

Central Ohio Chapter STC
c/o Cheryl Elam
505 King Avenue
Columbus, Ohio 43201-2693

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Central Ohio Chapter STC
Web Site: www.centralohiostc.org

Contact Your Board Members

President

Susan Moran
smoran@csc.edu

Programs

Frankie Hale
fhale@csc.edu

Membership

Sunday Zidonis
szidonis@csc.edu

Newsletter Editors

Cheryl Elam
celam@columbus.rr.com

Vice President

Jennifer Giordano
sabine74@earthlink.net

Hospitality

Kellie McGinley
kmcginle@csc.com

Publicity

Mary Dysert
m_dysert@yahoo.com

Kim McConnell
kimmccconnell@earthlink.net

Secretary

Sherri Lehman
sherri_lehman@stercomm.com

Corporate Sponsorship

Paula Jordan
pjordan@technicallywrite.com

Education

Wendy Suminski
wssumins@worthingtonindustries.com

Webmaster

Michael Starr
mes@techwriter.net

Treasurer

Mike Bickford
Michael.Bickford@frontstep.com

Professional Development

Brenda McGuire
m McGuire@battelle.org

Employment

Cynthia Parker
cparker1@gte.net

Lisa Williams
l-willi5@cougarmail.com

ErinBeth Dower Charron
dievher@hotmail.com

STC Mission Statement

*Designing
the
future of
technical
communication*