

TECH comments

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

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V o l u m e 2 8 , I s s u e 7



Ginny Collins-Llope
STC/SM President

Speaking with You

When I wrote in the November newsletter that I would be attempting to contact each of our chapter's members (now numbering over 370), I had a vague idea that it was a big task. I have really enjoyed the phone calls that I have made, but I must confess that I really didn't know how big a job this would be. (I am between a quarter and a third through the list.) Here are some of the results from the calls I have made.

Some of Your Suggestions

Since my phone calls have been as much a fishing expedition for ideas for the chapter as anything else, the conversations generated many ideas. Here are some of them.

- **Saturday meetings** – I've passed this suggestion to our board and we are looking into the possibility of offering a few Saturday morning meetings next year. Perhaps that will give some of you a chance to attend who aren't able to make evening meetings during the week.
- **Corporate-sponsored meetings** – Many of you work for corporations with facilities that are (at least somewhat) centrally located and large enough to hold a group of 30 to 50. Among the possibilities we are currently investigating are CompuWare (Farmington Hills), Ford (Dearborn), and EDS (Troy). If you work for a corporation that might be a potential meeting site, please call me or our Program Manager, Ruth Blough (phone numbers and e-mail are on the second page of this newsletter).
- **Local networking groups** – There is a group that meets for lunch once a month in Ann Arbor; perhaps members in other areas would like to start up similar groups. Call me if you'd like to be a part of such a group. Perhaps I can put you in touch with others near you who would like to form a network-

ing group as well. Or, feel free to use our newsletter or listserv to try to organize a group on your own. Good luck!

- **Work with local community colleges towards providing continuing education programs** – I love this suggestion, but our current volunteer staff is working at capacity and probably will not be able to add this one. If any of you are stirred to act on this suggestion, let me hear from you. I'll work with you, if you like. Perhaps we can pull together a committee to look into it.

Bi-Polar Interests are a Challenge and a Benefit

As I expected, due to the wide geographic spread of our chapter and the many industries represented by our membership, several conflicting requests were made.

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STC/SM Web Page
<http://stc.org/region4/smc>

Thoughts for June Strategy Sessions



Thea Teich
Region 4 Director-
Sponsor

Although the forsythia is barely budding and the daffodils are only a few inches high in my backyard, the STC 46th Annual STC Conference is just around the corner. We're all thawed out here in Cincinnati from our March snowstorm — finally. The Networking Lunch subcommittee of the Conference Support Committee has its table-host solicitation letter ready and the Hospitality Committee Manager has 2,000 buckeyes in her basement. No, I'm not going to explain that one. You'll have to come to the conference to figure it out. I'll give one hint: they're not for an Ohio State football game.

All right, I know, I've talked about the conference a lot. I've been living with it for close to 18 months now. However, this column deals with STC stuff AFTER the conference. I'm amazed that I can even acknowledge that such a time will ever come to pass.

Anyway, many of you have planning meetings and strategy sessions starting in June and I would like to provide you with a list of possible activities to consider. These were gleaned from reports on the activities of many chapters in STC. I've listed the names of chapters so that you can contact the chapter for more information.

- A number of chapters are sponsoring an occasional meeting in conjunction with another organization, such as Rochester (NY), Northeast Ohio, and Central Ohio. Such an event enables groups to find out more about each other and develop means of sharing information and resources. Chapters relatively close to one another are also holding joint meetings, such as chapters in the Los Angeles area.
- An "Education Day" held by the Toronto Chapter drew 160 participants, which was the maximum that could be accommodated. A number of other chapters, including Philadelphia Metro and Southwestern Ohio have organized conferences or workshops around professional development, job fairs, and career issues. These have been very popular, particularly when program offerings are aimed at both the experienced professional and the relative newcomer.
- The Northern Gulf Coast Chapter (FL) has developed a portable display on STC, tech comm, and the chapter, which is used at local college career days and similar events.

- Southwestern Ohio and the Cedarville College Student Chapter are soliciting donations to cover student registrations at the 46th Annual Conference. Students receiving these “scholarships” are required to volunteer for two hours during the conference. The scholarships are being made available to students in tech comm programs in colleges in southwestern OH, not just those with student chapters. Such a system could be used to provide scholarships for students to regional conferences as well.
 - The Kentuckiana Chapter has solved the problem of holding meetings among dispersed pockets of members through videoconferencing. Two fair-sized groups of chapter members are located 80 miles from one another. Rather than hold a sparsely attended meeting halfway between these two cities, Kentuckiana draws many more members together by holding a videoconference between the two sites.
 - Houston (TX) has increased meeting attendance by 25% by broadcasting meeting information via e-mail.
 - A number of chapters are using profits from hosting regional conferences to establish or increase scholarship funds. Chapters can also apply to STC for merit grants for this purpose, particularly when the funds will be used to match or augment locally solicited donations.
 - The Hoosier Chapter distributed to members a mousepad on which was printed the annual meeting schedule. The Lone Star Chapter (TX) provided members with a wallet-sized program schedule card, which also gives a listing of officers. Southwestern Ohio uses a business card-sized handout for officer listings and JobLine information.
 - The New Mexico Kachina Chapter holds short monthly meetings called “Skill Bites,” which focus on a specific subject. Member turnout has increased because the meetings are only 45 minutes long.
 - The Phoenix Chapter gives a discount of \$5 off the cost of a meeting to anyone who contributes an article to the chapter newsletter. Phoenix has also provided information about STC to the Phoenix Chamber of Commerce for listing in their directories and developed a volunteer database to track “who has done what and for how long” in the chapter.
- Such information is extremely useful in recognizing the services of members, both locally and through STC Distinguished Chapter Service Awards.
- In Region 6, 14 chapters cooperate in the “Heartlands Competitions,” sharing resources and volunteers and enabling chapters to participate in the publications, art, and online competitions that might otherwise be unable to do so. The awards banquet is held in conjunction with a conference held the same day in one of the major cities in the region; in 1999, this was Minneapolis.
 - The Wisconsin Chapter successfully petitioned state government to declare February 7-14, 1999, “Technical Communication Week in Wisconsin.”
 - The East Bay Chapter (CA) is working with Oakland schools on a technical literacy mentoring project.

You can reach Thea Teich at:

Phone: 513-521-8102

Fax: 513-521-8139

Email: TeichTM@aol.com

Help-Authoring Seminar

Confused about which help-authoring tool to use? Our own Paul Sisler, a senior consultant and trainer with Weisner Associates, will help you choose. In a half-day seminar, he will provide an overview of emerging help technologies and will examine several help delivery mechanisms. Paul will outline the features, limitations, and tools support for each, and lead us in a discussion of the suitability of various new help platforms to the many forms of online documentation we are now asked to produce.

The seminar will be held on Saturday, May 8 from 9:00 a.m. to noon on the third floor of the Eastern Michigan University Library in Ypsilanti. A continental breakfast will be provided. The cost is \$10 for STCSM members, \$20 for non-members, and \$2 for students. Advance registration and payment is required. The deadline for receipt is May 1. Send your reservation to Ellen Burgett, The MEDSTAT Group, Inc., 777 E. Eisenhower Parkway, Ann Arbor, MI 48108, or call 734-913-3074, or send email to ellen_burgett@medstat.com.

Welcome New Members!

*Lisa B. Alling
Jennifer K. Caldwell
David A. DeFields
Brian M. Garrett
Anthony S. Haines
George L. Hinmann*

*Hisato Ikeda
Doreen L. Kephart
Carol M. Kietzke
Cara M. Massey
Leslie M. Pratt Milligan*

*Kimberly J. Rosen
Sherry E. Rożek
Melissa A. Solomon
Jennifer R. Skovranke
James B. Thede*

And Transferring In:

Jorge L. Cerame

Elaine Winters

We look forward to seeing you at future STC/SM functions!

Going to the Annual Conference?

Attend the STC Board Meeting

All STC members are welcome to attend the STC board meeting on Saturday, May 15, 1999, in Grand Ballroom B of the Regal Hotel, in downtown Cincinnati. The meeting will start at 8:00 a.m. and end about 5:00 p.m. You are welcome to "drop in" at any time except during the executive session which will take place in the late morning. Otherwise, you can spend as long as you like attending the session. Special seating is available for visitors.

If you arrive in Cincinnati before the conference, you may find observing how STC handles its business affairs as well as overall program matters informative. Most of the reports from the assistants to the president for competitions, communications, professional development, research and academic programs, and special interest groups will probably occur on Saturday afternoon and these reports may be of particular interest to chapters' administrative councils.

Student/Faculty Welcome Reception

As the STC's 46th Annual Conference is drawing near, the Miami University STC Student Chapter is busy preparing a Student/Faculty Welcome Reception.

The reception will be held in Room 268 on the second floor at the Convention Center on Sunday, May 16, 1999 from 6:30 – 7:30 p.m. The purpose of this reception is to provide people an opportunity to meet with STC students and faculty who will be participating in the confer-

ence, to get to know STC members from other schools, and to have an opportunity to compare programs, courses, faculties and focuses for future improvement.

There will be light refreshments and amusing activities. The dress is business casual.

Chapter Hotline Being Discontinued

At the March meeting, the chapter board voted to discontinue the hotline number, 734-332-9371. It was used infrequently, so the expense of maintaining it seemed unjustified. Members and non-members can still contact the chapter through any board member, or by writing to our post office box, P.O. Box 1289, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.

STC/SM Senior Members

We proudly present our newest senior members:

Kay Z. Berrens

Caryl L. Burke

John G. Hardwick

Daniel J. Thornton

David W. Wilson

A senior member must belong to STC for five years. Our senior members bring valuable experience to our chapter.

Current Job Postings

Permanent Full Time

Technical Writer to create and update on-line help for software designed and developed by IPD, and to create customer training materials and train-the-trainer materials. May include a small amount of travel.

Required Skills: Word, Excel, Powerpoint, Doc-To-Help, Paint Shop Pro, HTML, HTML Help Workshop.

Gail F. Oliver, Support Services Manager

Image Process Design

6905 Telegraph Road, Suite 250

Bloomfield Hills, MI 48301

248-723-9733

goliver@ipdsolution.com

Senior Technical Writer to produce product documentation and marketing collateral in PDF, web, online help, and printed formats for enterprise level applications used mostly by IT professionals.

May work out of your home.

Chris White

Care Data Systems, Ann Arbor

cwhite@ic.net

Fax: 734-930-1844

Technical Writer to write new and maintain existing produce documentation for networking software.

Requires BA or BS in related field.

Prefer two years of experience writing including software documentation or programming.

Beth Apple

ONE (Open Networks Engineering)

2725 South Industrial, Suite 100

Ann Arbor, MI 48104

Fax: 734-975-6940

baa@one.com

Two positions at Kmart Corporation

Instructional Designer to design and develop role-based training. Requires at least five years of experience in training/instructional design.

Curriculum Writer to assist in developing training and documenting business processes and procedures. Requires three years of experience.

Contact hireme@kmart.com

Senior Technical Writer to design and produce documentation for new FAME technologies, and to enhance and maintain the FAME Online Document Library.

Requires BA or BS in relevant area, at least 5 years writing experience including documenting object-oriented programming languages.

Publications Manager

FAME Information Services, Inc.

325 E. Eisenhower Parkway, Suite 301

Ann Arbor, MI 48104

734-332-4400

stw@fame.com

Contract or Part-Time

Technical writer to document software written in the ALGOL language. Six month contract in the Lansing, MI area.

Tom Walsh

Essential Data Corp.

45 Church Street

Stamford, CT 06906

Phone: 800-221-0093

Fax: 203-352-2809

wales@essentialdata.com

Technical writer with strong communication and engineering background to develop business operating procedures for major Tier One supplier in Plymouth area. Part time assignment. Most work can be performed off-site.

Toni Pollock

Fax: 248-269-9644

tpoll 14901@aol.com

Experienced project manager for technical writing projects. Three month assignment. Location, northern Indiana, may require some travel.

Requires experience with MS Word, Excel, and Power Point.

Doreen Kephart

Phone: 810-765-1181

Fax: 810-765-1182

send resumes by email at attached .doc or .rtf files to dkephart@prausa.com

Penny for Your Thoughts

by Stephen Fraiberg

Technical Writer for I. C. COM

Testing documentation is becoming standard at companies such as IBM and Microsoft. These companies have built usability laboratories in order to observe users in action. Most labs are equipped with video cameras and one-way glass. But you don't need a usability lab to begin effectively testing your documents. All you need is a willing participant and a place to sit.

Thinking Aloud

One of the tools that is used in a usability test is a "think aloud" protocol. In a "think aloud" protocol you ask your user to complete a task. During the task your user says out loud everything that they are thinking. The purpose is to make your reader's thought process visible so that you can learn what is happening to them as they work. The following transcript is a "think aloud" protocol that was conducted on an early word processor called EMACS. The user's comments are in bold, while the plain text is taken from the manual.

Edit files of text in a human language... **human language? Boy that sounds strange, what could they be distinguishing here? Maybe computer language or machine language from human language...** using Text mode rather than Fundamental mode. **Well, I don't know what text mode or fundamental mode is, so how will I know which I'm in? Let's see...** Invoke M-X Text Mode to enter Text mode. **I won't do that because I do not have time to see the other section. That's terrible to tell me to...** See section 20.1 [Major Modes], p. 85 M-X Text Mode causes Tab to run the function ^R Tab to Tab Stop. **Now wait a minute, what is all this stuff? Sounds important, but I have not idea what it could mean.**¹

Making Thinking Visible

The "think aloud" protocol will not tell you everything that is happening to your users. It is only a partial account. Consider a dolphin leaping through the water. By following the dolphin's path above the surface, you can predict its path underneath² The same with a "think aloud" protocol. You can use the "think aloud" to infer your user's underlying mental processes. The "think aloud" protocol helps you to make an educated guess.

Things to Keep in Mind

The following guidelines are intended to assist you with conducting a "think aloud" protocol:

Tell your users to perform their assigned task as if they were in a room alone. Explain that you are testing the document and not the user and therefore will remain silent except to prompt them to "please think aloud" if they stop speaking for more than three to five seconds.

In order to introduce a "think aloud" protocol you should demonstrate a "think aloud" yourself and afterwards give your users practice by having them think aloud while completing a task such as loading a stapler or solving an easy math problem. Most users grow accustomed to thinking aloud after only a few minutes.

Take notes that you can review at a later time. You may also tape record your users and transcribe the protocols for a more detailed analysis.

During the test, pay attention to body language. Watch for signs of surprise, confusion, or frustration. After the test you may wish to follow up with questions.

Remain silent and observe. You are trying to capture the experience of users who must perform their task alone without any assistance except the documentation they are provided. Resist the temptation to argue with your reader and explain "this is what I meant."

Understanding Readers

Typically we think of the reading as a black box process. Reading is something that "just happens" without effort and in silence. But there is much about the reading process that can be understood. The "think aloud" protocol is one tool that we can use to hear our readers think.

Do not neglect one of the most important aspects of designing good documentation—testing it on real readers. If we truly understand how people read, then our writing will fall into place.

Notes

1. Karen A. Schriver, *Dynamics in Document Design*, 2nd ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997), 478.
2. John R. Hayes, *The Complete Problem Solver* (1989), cited in Schriver, 421.

Structuring Data for the Web Topic of March Meeting

Louis Rosenfeld, president of Ann Arbor based Argus and Associates, was the speaker at the March program meeting. He shared with us his ideas of how to structure information on a site on the World Wide Web or on a company intranet so that users can find the information easily, and so that the information itself can be maintained and updated easily.

Louis believes that the basic task is to organize, label and index data and provide a navigation system for it that will support both searching—using some form of search engine—and browsing—following links. He pointed out that these two kinds of activities require different interfaces, both of which need to be provided.

Louis described two complimentary approaches to organizing data. The *top-down* approach produces structures based on hierarchies or predictable relationships. The *bottom-up* approach focuses on content and its attributes. It looks for patterns, relationships between data, and standardizes vocabularies.

When designing navigation systems, we need to be sure they provide context and flexibility, make sense, and avoid competing with the data. Louis described four types of navigation systems: *global*, or site-wide; *local*, within a limited area of the site; *contextual*, the hyperlinks; and *supplementary*, tables of contents, indices, guided tours of the site. He reminded us that a navigation system needs to support iterative, integrated searching and browsing, and that it should have no dead ends.

We need to focus on the needs of the majority of users of the site. The more narrowly we can define who the users are and what content they need, the better we can make a site work.

You can learn more about Louis's ideas in the book he has co-authored with his associate, Peter Morville, *Information Architecture for the World Wide Web*, published by O'Reilly & Associates of Sebastopol, California.

Speaking with You

Continued from page 1

- More leading-edge technology topics (web development, XML, HTML, etc.)
- Less technology, more topics on skills development (writing, editing, document design, etc.)
- More meeting topics aimed at the self-employed
- Less meeting topics aimed at the self-employed
- Many requests to hold meetings closer to (you-name-it)

All I can say is, "We hear you." The volunteers who make up the board and various committees take the varied interests of our chapter into consideration as we make our plans. These problems have plagued our chapter for a very long time, but I think that the varied interests represented make our chapter rich with resources and contacts in all the facets of technical communications. I'm going to venture a guess that not every chapter can claim such a richly varied membership. It's a great opportunity for our members; you may meet someone at a chapter function who works in the industry you've been curious about.

Thank You

In conclusion, many thanks to those of you who took the time to speak with me. If I haven't yet spoken with you (or left a message), I will try to do so before the end of my term. Otherwise, I hope you will contact me to help me better understand the ways that our chapter can help meet the professional needs of our members.

In the meantime, I have a request. Many of the phone numbers in the list contained out-of-date area codes (and a few out-of-date phone numbers). Please check your dues notification, if you still have it, or the latest STC membership listing. If you have chosen to list your phone number, make certain that the area code is correct. Don't do it for me, do it for the potential employer who may be trying to contact you. :^) Thanks again.

Quote of the Month

The ability to simplify means to eliminate the unnecessary so that the necessary may speak.

--Hans Hoffman

Calendar of Events

May 3 (Monday)**Board of Directors Meeting**

Ruth Blough's home

6:30 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 committee (see page 2) to make arrangements.

May 8 (Saturday)**Help-Authoring Seminar**

Halle Library

Eastern Michigan University

Ypsilanti

9:00 a.m. - Noon

May 16 - 19**STC 46th Annual Conference**

Cincinnati, Ohio

May 27 (Thursday)**Ann Arbor Networking****Luncheon**

Chili's Grill & Bar

US 23 & Washtenaw

Begins between 11:30 and noon

Publication And Reprint Policies

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

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