

SuperScript

March 2000



society for technical communication



Are STC's Special Interest Groups a worthwhile investment? The debate over paying for SIG membership continues

- by George F. Hayhoe, STC Fellow, South Carolina

In a recent discussion on TECHWR-L, an e-mail discussion list for technical communicators that is not affiliated with STC, several posters debated whether STC SIGs are worth the \$5 per SIG assessment that the Society instituted a few years ago for SIG membership. Some writers noted that they didn't see any value returned from the SIGs they belonged to, while others observed that their experience had been quite different.

I belong to seven STC SIGs. Admittedly, some provide more value for the dollar than others (at least in terms of tangible benefits such as newsletters and listserv activity), but they've all been well worth the investment.



Are SIG dollars going down the drain? No, says George Hayhoe.

I'd like to offer a few observations based on my experience as a SIG member as well as four years on STC's board of directors and two years on the SIG advisory committee in the early 90s:

- As with chapters, each SIG's level of activity is entirely a result of volunteer effort. None of the \$5 SIG dues is paid

to volunteers, who donate their time. The larger, more enthusiastic, and giving the membership, the more bang the members get for their bucks.

- The most tangible SIG products are their newsletters. Paper, production, printing, and postage are incredibly expensive, and those costs continue to rise.
- As with most professional organizations, the cost of delivering SIG services exceeds the fee the organization charges its members. The SIG membership surcharge recovers only a portion of the cost per member for the services provided.
- STC's board of directors debated charging for SIG membership for at least 4-5 years before instituting the additional fee a few years ago. The argument for SIG dues was to shift part of the expense of SIGs directly to those who use SIG services. The board delayed implementing the surcharge for several years to allow the SIGs to grow sufficiently so that the additional fee wouldn't have an adverse effect on

membership. Despite the additional cost, SIG membership has grown each year, not declined.

- The thoughtful and informative Annual Conference sessions offered by many SIGs (amounting essentially to SIG stems in a couple of cases) have added significant value to the conference,

which was an extraordinary value to begin with.

- The ID SIG is about to become the first SIG to sponsor a special section in an issue of STC's journal, *Technical Communication*. The May 2000 issue will feature an introduction, three commentaries, a bibliography, and three articles on information design.

Would I prefer that there was no additional fee for STC SIG membership? Of course I would, but I know that it isn't a realistic expectation, and I'm quite satisfied with the return on my investment in the seven SIGs I'm a member of. But if I belonged to a SIG that was not returning adequate value for my financial investment, I'd have two alternatives. I could volunteer to help solve the problem by taking an active role in the SIG, or I could "vote with my feet" and not renew my SIG membership next year. 📌

Attendees learn basics at Introduction to RoboHelp workshop

- By Caroline Alton

My last contribution to SuperScript was to comment on the STC-hosted FrameMaker class – my first step in learning the tools of the technical writing trade. My second step was Warren Clendining's RoboHelp workshop held Feb. 19 at Mount Royal College.

Before the class I didn't have a clear idea what RoboHelp was used for. It's nothing like any program I have ever used and, not having done any real technical writing work, I must admit I was a bit at sea for a while. We covered the pros and cons of online documentation vs. manuals before moving on to the technical basics. These

(Continued on page 4)



A Word from our President

- by Leila Meyer

We are now recruiting our 2000-2001 STC Alberta Executive Council. There is a wide variety of positions available. Whether you want to apply your existing expertise or try out something new, we have an executive position to suit you.

STC Alberta is run entirely by volunteers. Many of these volunteers are members of the executive council, but some are volunteers at large, and others are volunteers of various committees. The executive council term runs from July 1, 2000 to June 30, 2001. However, our 20/20 Conference and Annual General Meeting takes place on June 24, 2000, and incoming members of the executive are encouraged to attend.

There are many benefits to working on the STC executive. You will expand your base of experience and skill, develop a strong network with other professional technical communicators, and contribute to your professional society. You might even have a little fun along the way.

If you're wondering what positions there are and what they will require of you, you can find detailed information on our chapter web site at <http://stc.org/region7/alb>. You may also contact the current executive for more information about each position.

The executive council consists of the following positions:

Elected Positions:

President
Vice President
Secretary
Treasurer

Coordinators:

Archivist
Coffee Night Coordinator
Competitions Coordinator
Education Coordinator
Email Discussion List Coordinator
Jobline Coordinator
Membership Coordinator
Membership Directory Coordinator
Mentorship Coordinator
Newsletter Editor(s)
Programs Coordinator
Public Relations Coordinator
Registration and Hospitality Coordinator
Special Events Coordinator
Volunteer Coordinator
Webmaster

Liaisons:

Edmonton Liaison
Red Deer Liaison
Mount Royal College Liaison

Check the web site to find out which positions are still available. I look forward to working with you next year. 📧

Pan-Pacific Conference Update: Martha Baer, of *Wired*, to Keynote

The keynote speaker for October's Region 7/Region 8 Pan-Pacific conference in Hawaii is Martha Baer, former managing editor at *Wired* magazine. Ms. Baer will set the tone and define issues for this three-day gathering of technical communicators from throughout the western United States, western Canada, and the Pacific Rim. (For more information about the conference, scheduled for October 19-21, visit the conference Web site, www.pan-pacific.org.)

Ms. Baer draws on a range of experiences, but her primary interest is her connection with technical journalism at *Wired*. She has served as a writer, editor, consultant, producer, and research chief for the publication, guiding it to its edgy, pre-eminent voice while covering technology and Silicon Valley. She also helped launch the website for *HotWired*, the daily digital companion to the monthly magazine.

Some of the issues she'll address are quite familiar for technical communicators, such as the old "format vs. content" battle. Baer promises to speak to those. "Launching *Wired News* we had questions about doing 'extravagant vs. efficient.' There were five updates a day - we were posting new stories even when we weren't in the office."

Another issue she still deals with is the area of writing styles. In short, technical journalists are allowed to have one! "At *Wired*, there was no governing voice," Baer says. "It was very eclectic, very respectful of writers' styles. So I have plenty of experience at finding voices that work for the reader. Interestingly, some conventions of prose can destroy clarity. It turns out that using slang and the vernacular is ok for our readers."

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The Future of Information: A Digital Renaissance

Part III—The Changing Roles of Technical Communicators

- by Robin Etherington

This article is Part III of a three-part article. Please refer to the December/January issue of SuperScript for Part I, and the February issue for Part II.

People want information, and want to access information when they want to! People want to access information simultaneously! People want to seek out information pertinent to their current questions and projects and tasks at hand!

They do not necessarily want our interpretations and judgment of the information. This may be one of the hardest aspects of the information age for us, as communication professionals. We are accustomed to interpreting information and judging what people need or want.

Via the Internet, etc., people are seeking out, finding and applying information to their own needs and making their own interpretations. They no longer adhere to traditional business hours because they access information at 3 am on the Internet or tape a program and watch it when they want to watch it, or plug in a CD into their computer when they want to.

There are hundreds of Internet community college and university level courses available - allowing people to access the information and share their research 'at their own pace and in their own time line.'

People access information, create new information, and change the information flow (add, subtract, and manipulate words/visuals/oral/sound). It is a continuous creation-access-re-creation of the information flow. What we write is ours for only a brief moment, for once it is on-line, it is subject to the access and use by countless people—for their own projects, research, writing and sharing. The user is writer and author along with professional communicators.

If we want to be a relevant active part of today's means of information access and use, then we have to put aside our traditional hours and protection of information. People want and require our expertise, but they will be asking their own line of questioning, in their own time line. I reiterate—this is probably incredulous for us and one of the hardest aspects of the information age in terms of how it practically affects our profession and our perspective on writing and

information. Our concept of time-space has changed. People who approach us for our expertise and skills are doing so with an information age concept of time and space, rather than a text or book-oriented concept of time and space.

We are sitting on a gold mine of information. We are on the verge of being one of the most important and relevant institutions and professions of the 21st century (digital scribes), if we start thinking about, planning, and creating information in terms of the cur-

“If we do not re-think our approach to technical communication and our role, people will bypass us and find the information they require by seeking elsewhere and from a multitude of sources.”

rent information age parameters and expectations and requirements for information access, for example multimedia CDs, the Internet, virtual reality courses. We need to stop thinking in terms of us distributing data and information, and commence thinking in terms of ensuring access to data, information and knowledge. There is a major difference between these two views of obtaining information and the change requires us to re-think our roles, values and perspectives. One has us distributing, the other has people accessing and creating and sharing.

If we do not re-think our approach to technical communication and our role, people will bypass us and find the information they require by seeking elsewhere and from a multitude of sources. As communication professionals we can provide the foundation, however, we need to place it in the medium that people are accessing the other data and information. Separately positioned information results in a non-access or 'out-of-context' phenomenon. That is, if the data and information we navigate and manage is not accessed along side other forms of information, it is de facto 'non-existent.'

The paradigm shift to the Information Age, involves not just new information technologies, but rather the use and result of the new technologies. The rapid and immense access to data and information allows for seeing new patterns in the information, which in turn creates new knowledge. We are on the threshold of a dynamic and quantum jump in knowledge and theoretical constructs, which in turn will be self-perpetuating. We are looking ahead to a digital Renaissance!

Communication and communication professionals have an incredible role to play because of the immense amount of data and information being created today, and the understanding held in professionals' heads. People want to access information when they want to and for their own reasons.

However, they also want our expertise to assist them in access, navigation and management of that information. Our expertise affords us an exciting and strong future—it just won't be the way we have been writing and communicating in the past. It entails

placing information in an electronic database and sharing, with shared questions and direction that will create new knowledge. Synergy among information sources, professionals and people/users!

There is an excitement in the air. There is an intense crystallized sense and inherent knowledge that we are about to fly much as Arthur flew with Merlin. The societal change has occurred. We now contribute to its unfolding, to our flight paths, or we don't contribute.

The choice is ours! 🗳️

Robin Etherington currently works as an Information Developer for Nortel Networks, in the Training and Documentation Department of the Wireless Division. Before moving from Winnipeg a year ago, she worked for BNI and then Nortel Networks, and was an active member of STC Manitoba.

Over the course of her career, Robin took multimedia classes and has worked in Mexico. She is thrilled to be in Calgary and a member of STC Alberta.

Register now for Advanced RoboHelp workshop at MRC

Registration is now open for the Advanced RoboHelp workshop being offered on Saturday, May 13, from 9:00 am to 4:00 pm at the main campus of Mount Royal College, in lab E141.

Advance registration is required (see Page 6 for more information) and seating is limited, so please register early if you want to attend.

Before you register, be sure to check the list of course prerequisites on the STC Alberta Chapter website.



Attention All Members! Join Us For This Special Event!



20/20 Conference

The end of the 20th century marks a milestone for the STC Alberta chapter as we celebrate our 20th anniversary. You're invited to join in the celebration with other technical communication professionals at the 20/20 Conference at The Village Park Inn in Calgary, Alberta.

The 20/20 Conference will include professional development workshops on a variety of topics, including "Getting Ready for Competition," multi-media scripting, and single-sourcing. Cocktails and dinner will be served following the workshops. There will be fabulous door prizes and Ellen Fenwick, the STC Region 7 Director-Sponsor, will deliver the keynote address. The Annual General Meeting will be held following dinner.

Date: Saturday, June 24, 2000

Venue: Best Western Village Park Inn, Calgary, Alberta

Time: 1:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m.

The Conference is open to all STC members, STC student members, and the general public. Look for the 20/20 Conference registration package in the mail in April. It will include detailed information about prices, the day's schedule, and workshop topics and presenters.

For more information, call the STC Alberta Chapter message line (403-230-6072) or visit the chapter web site: <http://www.stc.org/region7/alb/>

STC program offers helpful insights on index construction

- By Rosemary Reed

The Calgary STC's February program, *Indexing Tips*, was presented at the MacDougall Centre on Thursday, February 17, by Fena Maucieri, one of our members. Fena is an animated and audible presenter, who never has to say, "Can you all hear me?" and knows how to set up the laptop for her PowerPoint foils without getting up a gum tree.

Fena began by enumerating her formal qualifications for giving the talk, including a session at the STC International Conference in 1998 and the Indexing SIG's recent telephone seminar. She directed us toward some useful resources, among them the newsletters of the STC Indexing SIG and the Indexing and Abstracting Society of Canada online, Larry Bonura's *The Art of Indexing* and JoAnn Hackos' *Managing Your Documentation Project* in print.

Fena is the only technical writer at a firm of engineers. She told us about an indexing "Lunch-and-Learn" she gave, to show them what index markers look like in Word and how to turn on "show markers." As for actually installing the markers, they decided "Let Fena do it."

The actual slides (also reproduced as printouts distributed at the door), with Fena's

commentary, stepped us through the process of index construction. The strategy for choosing topics is one technical communicators are familiar with: analyze your audience and try to anticipate their needs. The hardest part is estimating the time needed to make the index. Nearly as hard is getting that time at the end of a project. Fena said that she has time to put in the index markers, but never to edit the index.

There is software for creating stand-alone indexes. Word-processing and desktop publishing applications generally provide facilities for creating embedded (part of the document) indexes. Fena also touched briefly on single-sourcing, which will be the subject of a session at the upcoming 20/20 Conference.

A practical exercise—part of the one used at the STC International session—followed, to see if we'd been paying attention. We had, and quite a lot of questions were asked and discussed.

Door prizes were awarded; the muffins, doughnuts, and sweet fruit punch consumed. I moaned on the evaluation questionnaire about the lack of coffee. And another interesting STC Alberta evening was done. 🍷

RoboHelp Workshop (continued from Page 1)

included creating and editing topics, creating links to other topics, various aspects of placing and using images in topics, and editing footnote codes. All that plus some interesting observations on colour blindness and human behaviour. The things you learn with the STC!

The section I enjoyed the most was learning how to create a segmented hot-spot graphic – a large image with different areas linked to separate topics. I also found it very helpful to learn how to do each action in various ways.

The downside was that the class was based on the most recent version of RoboHelp, while MRC's version is significantly older. Warren worked around that, but commented that RoboHelp 2000 has really made the product worth using, which made me wonder if it wouldn't have been worth waiting until MRC had updated its program.

This was not a comprehensive class. Warren told us that there is so much to learn about RoboHelp that we couldn't possibly cover it all in a day. We dealt with the very basics of how to use the program, not how to design things with it. I guess that'll have to wait until the Advanced RoboHelp class in May, which I look forward to attending. 🍷

STC's Branding Project well under way

- by Mary Wise, STC President

The Society for Technical Communication. STC. Who are we? What do we do?

We are many. We do lots.

I'd like a better definition.

Last May, I explained that one of my goals as President of STC was to better define who STC is and what STC does as a professional society of technical communicators. Now, I'd like to fill you in on our progress in that area: the STC Branding Project.

No, we're not burning the STC logo into our hides with a hot iron! We are going through a process to discover and develop the STC brand.

"So, Mary," I hear you cry, "what's a brand? Isn't it the logo?"

Actually, integrated branding is much more than just a logo, or mission statement, or public relations plan. According to *Integrated Branding*, by F. Joseph LePla and Lynn M. Parker: "integrated branding is an organizational strategy used to drive company and product direction – where all actions and messages are based on the value the company brings to its line of business." To put it more succinctly, integrated brand-

ing is the promise you keep.

So how do we go about figuring out this so-called brand?

First, I realized that this process was not going to be quick and easy. To do this right, we had to involve the board and the membership during the whole process. Second, I knew that we could not do it by ourselves; we needed professional assistance. Finally, I decided that we needed to take this year to define the brand, and leave the rest of the work until next year. Believe me, that's hard for an STC president to do!

So what have we been doing?

Last summer, our Corporate Identity committee, headed by Donna Sakson, developed and released a Request for Proposals to several firms that we knew were experts at integrated branding. We were very pleased to receive a proposal from Parker LePla, and we selected them to help us uncover the STC brand.

Uncover the brand?

Believe it or not, our brand already exists. This process helps us discover that brand and explicitly define it. When we do that,

we can then make decisions for the Society based on the brand.

During the fall, Parker LePla conducted a series of interviews with board members, STC members, non-renewing members, prospective members, and office. We also formed the brand team, a group of 12 STC members who are charged with defining our brand. At the winter board meeting, the board participated in a workshop so that we could learn what branding was about and to learn some of the early results of the interviews.

What's next?

In mid-March, the brand team will meet to analyze the data and define the brand: our mission, our values, our associations, and our personality. I'm confident that the result will be a stronger, more visible STC – a Society with a promise to its members; a Society that will keep that promise.

I welcome your comments and questions on this important project. Please feel free to write me; my email address is: mwise@manu.com

Believe me, it's some serious fun! ✍



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Please call the Centre for Communication Studies, (403) 240-6909, for more information or visit Mount Royal's website at www.mtroyal.ab.ca.



Mark Your Calendars!

Executive Meeting

Mon., March 20, 6 pm
#1400, 505 - 3 St SW

All members are welcome.

| | |

Programs

MacDougall Centre
455 - 6 Street SW

Thursday, March 16, 7 pm

Scoping a Project

Presented by Laura Harvie

The Design & Analysis phase is the cornerstone of any project. During this phase, you'll define the needs of the project and make the guiding decisions about the project.

Thursday, April 20, 7 pm

Graphic Design

Presented by Catherine Saxby
and Kenneth Dove

Kenneth is a graphic designer and Catherine is a technical writer. They have collaborated on many successful projects. Join them to learn the ins and outs of graphic design.

| | |

Coffee Nights

Annie's Books

912 - 16 Ave. NW. Free.

Tuesday, April 11th, 7 pm

"Is e-mail helpful or
hazardous to modern
communication?"

No registration necessary.

| | |

Wine & Cheese

STC members welcome

Meet the technical
communicators of tomorrow!

Hosted by MRC Technical Writers Society. Early April. Date, time and place will be posted on TWS web site (www.geocities.com/tws_mrc).

STC Alberta's Year-At-A-Glance

(Dates and locations subject to change)

March 14	(Tues)	Coffee night *
March 16	(Thurs)	Program (Project Management) ***
March 20	(Mon)	Executive meeting **
April 11	(Tues)	Coffee night *
April 17	(Mon)	Executive meeting **
April 20	(Thurs)	Program (Graphic Design) ***
May 9	(Tues)	Coffee night *
May 13	(Sat)	Advanced RoboHelp course at MRC
May 15	(Mon)	Executive meeting **
May 18	(Thurs)	Program (Plain Language) ***
June 13	(Tues)	Coffee night *
June 19	(Mon)	Executive meeting **
June 24	(Sat)	20/20 Conference and AGM

Locations and details

* 7 pm at Annie's Books, 912 - 16 Avenue NW in the literary salon. Parking behind Tim Horton's. No registration required.

** 6 pm at 1400, 505 - 3 Street SW. Parking available on the street and is free after 6 pm

*** 7 pm at MacDougall Center, 455 - 6 Street SW. Register in advance.

**** 9 am to 4 pm at Mount Royal College main campus, lab E141, with coffee and lunch provided. **Advance registration is required.** Note: Bring change for the coin machines in visitor parking.

NOTICE:
Program Fees
Advance Registration
\$5 students
\$7 members
\$10 non-members
Drop-In Fees
\$8 students
\$10 members
\$13 non-members

Advance Registration

How to RSVP to the STC message line

1. Read the newsletter.
2. Think to yourself "I'd like to know more about topic XYZ."
3. Check your calendar for conflicts.
4. Grab a coffee and think about how nice it'll be to get away from work and kids.
5. Mentally plan a solo vacation to Aruba.
6. After reality sets in, decide that an evening for yourself is in order.
7. Go to the phone. Dial **230-6072**.
8. After the recorded message, press **2**.
9. Leave a message for our congenial hospitality coordinator stating:
 - your name,
 - your phone number, and
 - the Program you'd like to attend.
10. Mark the day and time in your DayTimer.
11. Return to your coffee and dream about Aruba some more.

SuperScript

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Rates: Full page \$160.00 Quarter page \$50.00
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To place an advertisement: Send your cheque, payable in advance to Society of Technical Communication, Alberta Chapter, Attn: Treasurer, at:

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