



CAPITAL LETTER

In This Issue:

Daily's Dish: Letter from the Editor 2
From the President..... 3
Chapter Chatter..... 4

Articles:

Continuing Education Proves Valuable..... 1
STC's Annual Career Day..... 8
Chocolate for a Cause 9
Technical Standards Names Worst Manual . . . 11
Adding Value to Project Administration..... 12
Expansion and Innovation..... 12
Member Profile: Dave Wright, STC WDC
Chapter Treasurer 13
The Independent Voice..... 14
Rave Reviews..... 15
Telecommuting..... 17

Quotable Quote:

“Aim for success, not perfection.
Never give up your right to be wrong,
because then you will lose the ability
to learn new things and move
forward with your life.”

– Dr. David M. Burns

Continuing Education Proves Valuable

by STC Washington, DC Chapter Member Russell Woolard

The role continuing education plays in transforming your career and opening doors that might otherwise remain closed is something I can attest to personally. In a sense, I'm here because of it.

My first step toward a technical writing career was a certification program in business, scientific and technical communication at East Carolina University in my native North Carolina. The courses—or at least the ones I took—didn't deal much with FrameMaker or RoboHelp, or other tools used to produce technical documents, but rather emphasized the right choice of words to craft certain business messages to different

audiences. It wasn't everything I needed, but it was a good start, and combined with my journalism background, it helped me get my first job as a technical writer nearly four years ago.

Continuing education may well have been a luxury at one point, but it has increasingly become a necessity. In the aftermath of the dotcom collapse, technical communication is undergoing a transformation, and practitioners of the profession must be able to retool and diversify to stay relevant. Moreover, the Internet has made continuing education opportunities easy to find and exploit. Dozens of colleges and universities around

(Continued on page 7)

Creating and supporting a forum for communities of practice in the profession of technical communication

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The *Capital Letter* is published six times per year by the Washington, DC Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication. Its purpose is to provide articles and essays in the field of technical communication as well as inform chapter members about special functions and regular activities of the chapter and Society. Material for publication should be submitted to the editor:

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Daily's Dish: Letter from the Editor

Pam Daily



This newsletter has a wonderful assortment of noteworthy articles. Some of you may catch yourself talking

about it later, say....at the Annual Conference. This issue's theme touches on the pros and cons of continuing education. Russell Woolard has submitted our feature article, "[Continuing Education Proves Valuable](#)" on page 1.

I have always thought it would be wise to continue my education, though I thought it a hassle at the time and wondered what value it would lend at the end. And luckily I found work just out of college, albeit an internship that led to work for almost two years. I do believe that my position as Editorial Assistant for a magazine publishing company and later Listings Editor for the same company proved almost as valuable as furthering my education. However, I do not have the slot filled on my resume. Yet, I do have one more job title than I would have. So, which is more valuable and who defines to what degree?

Although it would have been more difficult to continue my education for two more years after earning my Bachelor's degree, I would do this if I could do it all over again. Continuing the student lifestyle for a while longer would have been easier for me than returning to it later.

We have all wondered:

- Am I financially prepared to take this on?

- Will it better my salary significantly?
- Will my employer reimburse me?
- How much time will it take and how much time do I have?
- Can I balance my workload both at the office and in class, in addition to my personal life responsibilities?
- Will it get me a better job later down the line?
- Which is better, work experience or a degree towards that field of work?

The questions are endless. But the bottom line remains: How badly do you want it? If we want it bad enough, we make the time. With the convenience of today's technology, we can earn degrees without leaving our home. Alternatives to the traditional classroom environment abound and include web-based degree and certificate programs. It's all about making priorities, disciplining yourself, and focusing on your goals. Focus. Focus. Focus.

I have found this great link that will give you a place to start researching.

<http://www.50states.com/college/dc.htm>

What will be your next move?

My next move will be to step to the side as Kathy Bell takes hold of this newsletter. She will be Managing Editor of the *Capital Letter* beginning with the September issue. I have asked her to introduce herself (see "[Meet the New Managing Editor](#)" on page 6). I will be among the crew, but thought it would be nice to get some fresh ideas. I have great confidence in Kathy and I look forward to working with her.

From the President

Daree Allen-Woodard



Continuing education is important! Continuing education is the key to refreshing your professional life. No matter how long you have been working in the

field, you will want and need to learn new skills, revive unused skills, or explore opportunities in a discipline that may not be related to your current position.

Many professions require a certain number of continuing education credits each year to maintain a given certification status. According to the presentation Professional Certification: Evolution, Revolution, or Status Quo, by Lawrence Kunz and Terrance Skelton, (see <http://www.stc.org/confproceed/1996/PDFs/PG144147.PDF>), certification is a form of credentialing where a nongovernmental body asserts that an individual can proficiently practice a trade or profession. Unlike many professions that have industry-standard certification or licensing procedures, the technical communication field has not yet established criteria to ascertain professional credentials.

So that means it's up to you! Budget your time (24 hours a year, minimum) for self-improvement activities each year, whether that means reading the latest books on trends in technical communication (or the field represented by your business),

attending the STC Annual Conference, seminars, or workshops (see <http://www.stc.org/relconf.shtml>), or revisiting the basics from time to time. Continuing education keeps you current with the latest trends, and validates your worth and expertise in the marketplace. These activities establish your professional credibility.

I want to congratulate the newly-elected board of officers for 2004-2005 program year:

- Kathy Bine, President
- Melissa Brown, First Vice President
- Kristen L. Sweet, Second Vice President
- Dave Wright, Treasurer
- Eddie VanArsdall, Secretary

I invite each of you to join us on June 5 for our annual Meet the Fellows and Volunteer Recognition luncheon, which is being held at Guapo's restaurant in Bethesda, Maryland. I also want to thank all the volunteers, especially the current board of officers who have worked with and mentored me in some way, to share his or her advice, suggestions, and processes. Their contributions to my professional development not only made the program year a pleasant one, but also made presidency run smoother than I might have anticipated one year ago as First Vice President.

This summer, I am relocating to the Hampton Roads area of Virginia, but I plan to continue my work with the Washington, DC chapter as the Immediate Past President in the 2004-2005 program year.

Chapter Leadership

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Chapter Chatter

Local Entrants Win International Awards

Each year the Washington, DC chapter accepts entries for its Technical Art, Technical Publications, and Online Communication competitions. Those entries that earn the chapter's highest award, Distinguished Technical Communication (DTC), go on to compete with DTC winners from around the world. The Washington, DC

chapter usually is well represented among international winners, and this year is no exception. The chapter congratulates the following local entrants who won both a DTC award at the chapter level and an international award as noted.

Technical Art

<i>International Award</i>	<i>Entry Title</i>	<i>Entrant</i>
Best of Show and DTC	Characterizations in Cell Culture Calendar	Martin-Schaffer
Excellence	A Guide to Mailing for Businesses and Organizations	Sherry Freda, U.S. Postal Service
Merit	HIV Perinatal Treatment Study Patient Diary	Edna Jamandre and Jason Davis, Westat

Technical Publications

<i>International Award</i>	<i>Entry Title</i>	<i>Entrant</i>
DTC	Helping Patients with Alcohol Problems: A Health Practitioner's Guide	Diane W. Miller, M. P. A, Maureen B. Gardner, and Margaret Brown, Eagle Design & Management, Inc.
DTC	Invitrogen/GIBCO Cell Culture Newsletters	Martin-Schaffer
Excellence	Missile Defense Agency 2003 Technology Applications Report	Patrick Hartary, Lisa Hylton, and NTTC-Washington, National Technology Transfer Center - Washington Operations
Excellence	MicroStrategy 7i Advanced Reporting Guide	Dauida Kosa, MicroStrategy, Inc.
Excellence	Report of the Columbia Accident Investigation Board	Lester A. Reingold, Christopher M. Kirchhoff, and Patricia D. Trenner, Valador, Inc.

Online Communication

<i>International Award</i>	<i>Entry Title</i>	<i>Entrant</i>
DTC	CD-ROM Safety Integrated-Hazards are only neutralized when safety networks are truly seamless	Johanna Angela Gebhardt, Sabine Stengel, and Peter Keil, Siemens AG

Save the Date!

- **May 9-12:** STC's 51st Annual Conference in Baltimore, MD
- **Saturday, June 5:** Recognition and Meet the Fellows Luncheon, Guapo's Restaurant, Bethesda, MD
- **Wednesday, June 16:** Web Page Development and Cascading Style Sheets Workshop, EEI Communications, Silver Spring, MD

Watch for more information at <http://www.stcwdc.org/calendar.shtml>.

STC's 51st Annual Conference



NAVIGATING THE FUTURE OF TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION

Baltimore, MD

May 9-12, 2004

For more information: <http://www.stc.org/51stConf/index.asp>

Membership News

New Members Who Joined Between February 16, 2004 and April 15, 2004

Marci Andrews	Mary Eaton	Carlene Mckinney
Karen Aued	Gerald Esterheld	Dorothea O'Connell-Starkey
Stephen Ayers	Sylvia Galen	Killian O'Donnell
Chris Bailey	Cherry Grassi	Judith Potter
Jane Baker	Sharon Griffin	Marc Shaffer
Theresa Barrett	Karl Groves	Heidi Siebels
Alu Bata	Marnie Grozdanich	Suraj Singh
Judy Beck	Karen Hellenbach	Nila Steinkamp
Kathy Bell	Suzanne Herin	Ioana Tzatcheva
Sally Bennett	Mark Johnson	Andrea Updegrove
Deborah Briggs	Amira Leake	Timothy Weedlun
Ken Brown	Melissa Lowery	Matthew Wolfe
Stephanie Brumbaugh	Leslie McCasker	Myrna Zelaya Quesada

Welcome to STC!

According to the STC *Bylaws*, the grade of senior member is conferred upon those who have held the grade of member in STC for five years. We congratulate the following new senior members of the Washington, DC chapter.

Senior Members as of April 15, 2004

Debra Asp	Neysa Narena
Dennis Dombkowski	Amy Rosenbery
Robert Heald	Lisa Snyder
Kathy Lineker	Anita Wright
Elizabeth Meola	

Congratulations

Member Totals

Total STC Members: 15,940
Total STC WDC Members: 553

Meet the New Managing Editor

My name is Kathy Bell and I have been acting as copy editor for the *Capital Letter* since the New Year. I moved here from Ottawa about a year and a half ago. Since a move is always a good time for a professional change, I decided to take some editing courses through the University of Virginia. When I read that there was a need for volunteers on the newsletter staff, I jumped at the opportunity to put my new skills to use. As of September, I will be taking over the responsibilities of Managing Editor. I look forward to continuing the growth of this award-winning newsletter. I am confident that my ten-year technical writing experience in telecommunications will be suitable in facing this challenge. I look forward to meeting you all at future STC events and I am excited about the opportunities that await me.

Newsletter Events

Important Newsletter Deadlines

- All Content: 10th of even numbered months
- All Edits to Production Designer: 20th of even numbered months
- Final Review of Layout: 25th of even numbered months
- Publish Online and Send to Printer: 1st of odd numbered months

Themes for Editorial Calendar 2003-2004 (six issues per year)

- September: Job Strategies, Career Moves and Transitions
- November: The Importance of Volunteerism, SIGs
- January: Working From Home, Pros and Cons, Questions and Answers
- March: Baltimore Conference News
- May: Continuing Education
- July: Technology Trends

We Want Letters to the Editor

Do you have something to say about a recently published article? Was there incorrect information we printed that you want to point out? Do you have an idea that you would like to share that may make the newsletter be a more useful and enjoyable resource?

(Continued from page 1)

the world offer certification and post-graduate programs in technical writing, many of which can be done at your own computer at home. And the STC Washington, DC chapter lists several of these programs (without endorsing one over others) on its website (<http://www.stcfdc.org/scholarships.shtml>).

Yet the overwhelming variety of choices available presents its own dilemma. Is a full-fledged degree program necessary, or would a targeted certification program be more in your interest? Are there workshops or seminars you can take that would serve the same purpose—upgrading your skills and enhancing your marketability—without investing the time and money required to complete degree or certification programs?

Over the long term, a degree program can improve your chances of moving ahead in your current job, or getting a better one. A number of employers prefer employees with Master's degrees, so having one gives a job candidate a competitive edge over others. And your employer may be more willing to buy into a degree program rather than a certificate, as STC member Janet Scharp discovered. She has taken a number of continuing education courses over the years, and “found all of them to be enjoyable and useful.” But she remembers the observation of one of her former bosses, who “wondered why anyone would take courses that did not lead to a degree.”

Actually, those words led Scharp to return to school a few years ago to earn an M.A. in English—a path that she says has produced a number of benefits.

“I don't know if that program was the most useful one I could have taken from a career standpoint,” she said. “But I enjoyed the courses and found that the degree is much more valuable to me, even in terms of personal satisfaction, than the many job-related courses I took that were not degree related.”

Another alternative for continuing education is the professional development programs that the STCWDC chapter offers. The chapter offers a number of workshops and seminars that help prepare technical communicators for changes in the field. Most of these

events last a half-day or a day, in contrast to programs with colleges and universities that take weeks (with certificate programs) or years (with degrees). And the knowledge gained from them can be applied in a number of practical ways.

“The many programs that STC has offered have been invaluable in providing information about new developments in technical communication,” said Scharp. “They also don't require as much time as taking a course for a full term.”

A good example of this in my case was the first event I reviewed for the *Capital Letter*, a seminar sponsored by the DC Web Women on effective writing for the web two years ago. I had done very little writing for the web up to that point, but because my company publishes articles about its activities on its website, I knew that would soon change. The program included tips on effective web design—which I'm not involved in—as well as tips for organizing and presenting information in a reader-friendly way. These lessons served me well when I was asked to contribute articles for my employer's redesigned web news magazine, which was honored with an award from the International Association of Business Communicators last year.

Similarly, the STC's annual award program in technical communication has provided me with valuable insight into the trends prevailing in the field. The most recent competition featured technical materials and instruction manuals, as well as publications designed to help employees adjust to a new company or deal with issues that may come up in their workplaces.

With continuing education in a changing workplace now imperative, technical communicators should carefully evaluate the many choices available. The extent to which each alternative can help and can fit into a current work schedule is up to the individual. In the meantime, the STC's many professional development programs offer opportunities for networking and skill enhancement that can help you understand your needs, narrow your choices, and increase your marketability.



STC's Annual Career Day

by STC Washington, DC Chapter Member Susan Steen

Fifty-one people attended STC's Annual Career Day, which took place on Saturday, March 20 at Booz Allen Hamilton in McLean, Virginia. This event featured a progression of four round-table discussions and a résumé-critique session. Topics focused on career development advice in the technical communication field, ranging from mastering your Microsoft Word skills to creating first-class portfolios to bring to your next interview.

Round-table discussions lasted one hour and were led by experienced STC practitioners. The topics and speakers were as follows:

- Fine-Tuning Your Microsoft Word Skills So You Can Get a Better Job, presented by Eddie VanArsdall
- Interviewing Techniques from a Manager's Perspective, presented by Ann Ray

- Personal Branding, presented by Marissa Levin
- Online and Print Portfolios, presented by Melissa Brown
- Resume-Critique Session, led by Daree Allen-Woodard

Fine-Tuning Your Microsoft Word Skills So You Can Get a Better Job

Eddie VanArsdall pointed out that employers focus on our knowledge of industry-standard tools. However, technical communicators still need to have a strong foundation in word processing and print production. VanArsdall presented the following Microsoft Word features that every technical communicator needs to know in order to land a better job:

- Templates
- Styles
- Autotext

- Fields
- Macros

VanArsdall shared many creative ways to use these features as well as a list of additional resources.

Interviewing Techniques from a Manager's Perspective

Ann Ray encouraged participants to openly share their previous interviewing experiences. The group discussed the following questions:

- How can I tell if the current position will be a good fit and match my skill set?
- The interviews went well and my contacts say that this is a great company, but my instincts tell me not to take the job. Do I take the job or keep looking?

Accepting a position at a company is a risk, because we never really know

what the future holds in any job. Ann Ray advises researching the company before going on any interviews. At the interview, listen attentively and then ask questions at the appropriate time. Interview your contacts at the prospective company, ask to meet with team members, and ask to see writing samples of the work they produce. Above all, close the interview tactfully! For interviewing advice and tips, Ann Ray recommends *What Color is Your Parachute* by Richard Nelson Bolles.

Personal Branding

Marissa Levin discussed the meaning of personal branding—differentiating your skills and abilities from your competition and communicating these differences in a meaningful context. Levin says that “personal branding is not a logo and it is not a tag line.”

To develop a successful personal brand, you need to review these key elements:

- Vision
- Purpose
- Goals
- Personal Attributes
- Values
- Passions
- Target Audience

To communicate your personal brand, use media and tools from personalized stationary and thank-you notes to emails and web sites. For personal branding to succeed, you need to have a system to market and promote yourself. Levin says that promoting your brand is a work in progress, which requires constant fine tuning as your visions and goals change.

Online and Print Portfolios

Melissa Brown explained why technical communicators need to have a portfolio. Especially at an interview, a portfolio is a means to present your writing samples, to support your résumé, and to prove your skills and abilities.

Two types of portfolios were discussed: print and online. For print portfolios, choose a neat format and customize your portfolio for each client or interview. Online portfolios are used to support, but not replace, your print portfolios, where you can display websites, graphics, and PDFs.

“Whatever you do,” Brown advises, “don’t leave your portfolio at the interview!” Be sure to have extra hard copy samples of your writing

that you can leave with the interviewer if needed.

Résumé-Critique Session

Attendees also had the option of signing up for a 15-minute résumé-critique session. Daree Allen-Woodard offered her advice on the current do’s and don’ts of resume writing, which includes the following.

- *Do* list cost- and time-saving results, since managers are interested in what you can do for their company. Market your value through metrics and provide specific examples, such as how you saved your company \$\$ last quarter.
- *Don’t* go into great detail about your responsibilities held at previous positions. It’s all about business—how you can help a company achieve its financial goals.

To review the presentations given at Career Day, including that by Conni Evans, “Salary Negotiation in a Tough Economy,” see http://www.stcfdc.org/program_handouts.shtml. To view pictures taken at Career Day, see http://www.stcfdc.org/photo_prgm_career_mar04.shtml.

Chocolate for a Cause

by STC Washington, DC Chapter Member Carolyn Kelley Klinger

Steaming mugs of homemade hot chocolate with dollops of whipped cream got us started. Gillian Caron, pastry chef at Chef Geoff’s downtown restaurant and graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, was in charge of the evening, and we were helpless to do anything but sit back and enjoy.

Although the twenty-one of us gathered at Chef Geoff’s on March 11 were ostensibly raising money for the STC Washington, DC chapter’s scholarship fund, what we were really doing was indulging our passion for chocolate. After all, this wasn’t just any scholarship fundraiser, but a *chocolate tasting* scholarship fundraiser. The chapter’s

scholarship program has been latent for several years, due both to a lack of volunteers and funds to keep it going (learn more about the chapter’s two scholarships at <http://www.stcfdc.org/scholarships.shtml>). While we gobbled down appetizers such as fresh fruit, cheese, and grilled pizzas in the half hour or so before the cooking demonstration

began, Daree Allen-Woodard, chapter president, presented our stellar webmaster, Leslie Reed, with the Distinguished Chapter Service Award (read her citation at <http://www.stcfdc.org/history.shtml#DCSA>).

As we drank down the last of the hot chocolate, Gillian called for volunteers to begin the tricky work of making Cranberry Chocolate Chunk Cookies. Student and prospective STC member Andrea Dinar answered the call, demonstrating Gillian's secrets for making the perfect cookie. For example, the smart cook waits until all ingredients are at room temperature before creaming them. When cold eggs are added to room temperature butter, the eggs harden the butter, making it difficult and time-consuming to create the light and airy consistency that is so important to the melt-in-the-mouth cookie. Who knew?

After also finding tasks for attendees Ruth Frost and Jane Baker in the production of these delicious morsels, Gillian directed her boss, Geoff Tracey (yes, *the* Geoff), to take our cookies to the kitchen to bake. Several excited volunteers, including Mike Cleary, accompanied Geoff to the restaurant's kitchen, an adventure in itself. Gillian then moved on to our next course and my favorite, Chocolate Toffee Bread Pudding. Creating this dish taught us many new baking techniques. After mixing together cocoa powder, sugar, salt, milk, eggs, and vanilla, Gillian strained the resulting custard through a chinois, a type of strainer. This filtered out every possible lump that might have threatened the finished product. Gillian and her volunteer, Kippi Fagerlund, then poured the hot custard over two loaves of cubed brioche, a thick, egg-

based bread, and mixed it with their hands to completely soak the bread. They then layered this concoction with toffee in a sprayed and sugared mold, which they placed inside another pan of water. Baking delicate items like this in a water bath ensures even and measured cooking.

Somewhere in the middle of all this professional technique, the cookies were served. By the time the bread pudding was also brought to our tables, we were on a first-name basis with Gillian and Geoff, and any shyness we might have had at the beginning of the event was completely overcome by their personal warmth and excitement about food.

We mostly watched and listened as Gillian prepared the White Chocolate Truffles, our next course. The truffles were the exception to the otherwise pure chocolate menu. We learned that because white chocolate has no cocoa solids from chocolate liquor, the FDA doesn't classify it as chocolate. No matter. We were equal opportunity chocolate eaters. Gillian wisely prepared for the possibility that we would run out of time by freezing balls of the truffle mixture of white chocolate, heavy cream, and rum before we arrived. She then had to work very quickly because the heat in the room was quickly transforming the balls into amorphous blobs. Attendees Robert Williamson and Caryn McNeilly helped get the truffles from Gillian's table to ours by rolling them in toasted coconut and serving them to the now not-so-starving masses.

Decadence only begins to hint at the pièce de résistance that was the final course. Chocolate Decadence, a sinful and over-the-top concoction of semisweet chocolate, butter, chambord liqueur, eggs, sugar, and

cake flour cooked for only 8 minutes and then chilled, tests the chocolate tolerance of even the most diehard chocoholic. It had such an intense and pure chocolate taste that most of us struggled to take even one bite, but ever the over-achievers, we persisted to the best of our abilities. Gillian's tricks for creating this treat were to whip the eggs and sugar until they were very light and fluffy, and to cool the chocolate down before adding it to the eggs and sugar mixture. Hot chocolate can actually cook the eggs. Chocolate enhances many things, but fried eggs would not likely be among them.

As a group of us walked the one block to Metro Center to begin our trip home, we rationalized our evening of excess. We enumerated chocolate's many nutritional benefits. For example, dark chocolate is rich in magnesium, which is good for lowering blood pressure and for the cardiovascular system. It is an antioxidant, which means it helps in the destruction of free radicals that can cause major health problems. Chocolate also contains potassium, calcium, and even fiber.

Tell that to our scales.

Carolyn Kelley Klinger is the Immediate Past President of the STC Washington, DC chapter. Recipes for all of the items on Chef Geoff's chocolate tasting menu are at http://www.stcfdc.org/program_handouts.shtml. If you would like to get involved in future efforts to revive the chapter's scholarship program, contact Daree at president@stcfdc.org or complete a volunteer sign-up form at http://www.stcfdc.org/volunteer_form.shtml.

Technical Standards Names Worst Manual

Press Release

Annual Contest Taps into Universal Frustration Caused by Poor Documentation and Underscores the Importance of Clear Technical Writing

Escondido – Technical Standards, Southern California's source for specialized documentation staffing and technical writing, today announced the winning entry in its fourth annual Worst Manual Contest. This year's \$100.00 prize went to Rhonda Bracey of Western Australia for her submission of a two-page Safety Section from her friend's air-conditioning unit.

"The frustration that's caused by a poorly written manual is almost a universal experience. Poor documentation can cause more confusion than comprehension and could lead to liability issues and hidden costs for companies," said Michelle Wier of Technical Standards. "On the other hand, good product documentation results in satisfied repeat customers, reduced costs, and limited liability exposure for companies."

With entries solicited from the 25,000+ membership of the Society for Technical Communication, Technical Standards' Worst Manual Contest is designed to underscore the importance of clear technical writing for everything from consumer products, computer hardware and software, to employee handbooks.

This Year's Winner: The Safety Section of a Commercial Air Conditioner User's Guide

This year's worst manual, submitted by Rhonda Bracey of South Perth, Western Australia, is a section of a

User's Guide for a commercial product marketed to the general public. Rhonda's entry only consisted of the two-page Safety Section, but that was enough! As Rhonda Bracey puts it, "translator beware!" If the phrase, "...to have the observance without fail to prevent the damage to harm and the property beforehand to the person who use this product and other persons" doesn't scare you, then some of the other text will!

The symbol key alone provided much material for the staff at Technical Standards to question. For example, the symbol key contained a symbol (twice) that wasn't referenced in the text, but didn't contain a symbol that was referenced. In another instance, the same symbol was used for both Warning and Caution, but each represented very different consequences. The difference between possible death compared to minor injury or material damage seems worth having its own distinction. There were also some amusing symbol descriptions such as, "Attention rousing," "Prohibition" and "Compulsion."

A few excerpts:

"Please do not put the one embarrassed because it gets wet under the air conditioner."

"To apply the cold wind to the body for a longtime and so as to not exist about cooling too much"

"Do not blow the wind to animals and plants directly. It occasionally causes a bad influence for animals and platns to be exerted."

Often, poorly written manuals for consumer products can be attributed to translation problems. Clear, accurate translations are extremely important when communicating health and safety warnings associated with operating or assembling a product.

"For many end users, bad documentation amounts to nothing more than an inconvenience and possibly a poor impression of the company," said Wier. "But for companies, the results can affect the bottom line in terms of overloaded help lines, reduced revenues from dissatisfied customers who won't come back, and increased liability."

To view the top entries and more information about Technical Standards' fourth annual Worst Manual Contest, go to their web site at <http://www.tecstandards.com>.

About Technical Standards

Technical Standards provides documentation writing and staffing services to Southern California companies in a wide range of industries. Carefully assessing the specific needs of its clients, Technical Standards provides a customized fit for each job by handpicking candidates from its pool of writers. When handling outsourced projects, Technical Standards produces clear, accurate, and understandable documentation to help ensure end-user satisfaction and reduced liability.



Adding Value to Project Administration

by STC Washington, DC Chapter Member David Dick

Every year, the Society for Technical Communication publishes articles about how technical writers can add value to an organization. Many technical writers have the competency to be involved with information design, usability testing, and marketing communication. Too often we categorize ourselves as wordsmiths because our title includes the word “writer” and overlook our transferable skills. I have found a niche where I am thriving—project administration.

I used to cringe at the thought of administrative work and was disappointed that my real talents were overlooked. I learned that a savvy project manager cannot overlook *administration*, a task significant to any project. The typical project manager is overwhelmed with budgets, deadlines, and development issues. Administration is not given the full attention that it deserves, and I recognized how my skills and talents can add value. I have been involved with project administration since 2003 and I assure you that it’s not a menial task.

The following is a list of project administration activities that will earn you gratitude from any project manager:

- Create and maintain a project directory on your content management system to archive documentation related to the project. Send the link to every member of the project team.
- Compile the project management plan for the project manager to finalize. A project management plan describes the scope, goals and objectives, deliverables, and milestones.
- Identify all members of the project team and their primary roles. Create a RACI (Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, Informed). A RACI is a matrix of tasks and project stakeholders and when they are responsible, accountable, consulted, and informed.
- Facilitate meetings. Prior to every meeting, propose an agenda of issues/concerns, deadlines, milestones, and constraints. Verify the list with project stakeholders to ensure that no topic is overlooked. The agenda is the framework for

the meeting and the basis for the meeting report that you will write.

- Write meeting reports. A meeting report is the only evidence of what was discussed, what was agreed upon, and deadlines.
- Provide stakeholders and users a timely status of change requests, design reviews, and updates to documentation.
- Ensure that the project adheres to a process and tasks adhere to a procedure. By doing so, you assure the likelihood that everything is performed as required and nothing is overlooked.

Unfortunately, many organizations see project administration as expensive overhead. The technical writer is in a good position to pick up the slack, get involved, and add value. Project administration is not a menial task; it’s a critical aspect of project management. No project is finished until the paperwork is done. If you want to break into project management, project administration is the best place to view the project from the ground up.

Expansion and Innovation

by Victoria (Vici) Koster-Lenhardt (vici@vkosterlenhardt.com), Region 2 Director-Sponsor

It’s hard to believe that nearly one year ago I learned that I had become the Region 2 Director-Sponsor. I was full of excitement about the potential of Region 2 because of its unique diversity. And I still am. In fact, I am more than ever, because the region is growing. During the year, the STC received inquiries from people wanting to start new chapters in

Armenia; Blacksburg, Virginia; and Russia. As they succeed, the borders of Region 2 will span from the banks of the Susquehanna River to the Kremlin. Could we be a more diverse STC region?

And yet, as I spoke with many chapter leaders this year, I learned that there are more similarities

among Region 2 chapters than differences. Most leaders I spoke with were concerned about recruiting volunteers, attracting good program speakers, and running successful chapter events for members who have to travel a long distance. These concerns are at the top of the list followed by trying to understand the STC transformation (<http://>

www.stc.org/transformation.asp) and what the impact of the changes is to chapters and members. Nevertheless, the commitment by professional and student members to run their chapters successfully is impressively high. What follows are the highlights of Region 2 chapter accomplishments in the 2003-2004 year.

- The Belgium chapter conducted the first survey to find out about the state of technical communication in Belgium.
- The Carolina chapter established a new career SIG.
- The France chapter worked on fostering cross-cultural exchanges between students in the United States and France.
- The James River, Israel, Metro Baltimore, Susquehanna, TransAlpine, and Washington, D.C. chapters ran low-cost, day-long seminars and workshops in Austria, Germany, Israel, Italy, and the United States (Maryland, Virginia, and Washington, D.C.).
- The chapters in Europe organized the first Trans-European Technical Communications Competition in four languages.
- The Carolina, Metro Baltimore, and Washington, D.C. chapters successfully ran regular monthly meetings and events throughout the year. (Check out their web sites at <http://www.stcregion.org/region2/chapters.shtml>.)

Only a few Region 2 chapters will be publicly recognized at the May annual conference for their innovative activities and programs this year. But, I know how hard all chapters have worked. Regardless of whether your chapter receives an award, you're all winners to me.

See you in Baltimore!

Member Profile: Dave Wright, STC WDC Chapter Treasurer

For those of you worrying about what career you will choose for the rest of your life, take heart. People change careers an average of four to five times in their lives and can then volunteer in an area totally different from their "regular" job. Such has been my case.

My primary area of expertise—writing and teaching technical writing in the Federal Government—did not evolve until I was in my mid-30s; it sort of fell in my lap. I was working as a writer/editor for the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) for about 5 years when I noticed that their training manuals needed work—both in content and appearance. So, I started moonlighting, for free, for some of the trainers. I was eventually hired full-time to manage the writing courses. Most of the instructors were college professors, and I was able to sit in the classrooms and watch them teach. That gave me the courage to start my own teaching career.

Colleagues assumed I had the requisite English degree, or

Education degree, but I didn't. My Bachelor's degree was in Botany, followed by a Master's degree in Old Testament Theology and Biblical Hebrew 4 years later. Needing a job desperately, I joined a medical consulting firm as a typist (!), soon moved into editing, and then went to work for the Government.

Part of GAO's mission was to share its knowledge with other Government agencies, so I began to teach writing to other Federal agencies. One in particular, the Inspector General's Office of Health and Human Services, was interested in developing a writing program, and they ended up hiring me away from GAO. I developed *Write to the Point*®, a 2-day class that uses a writing model of plan-draft-revise as its base. Now, the course is in its 15th year, I am the sole instructor, and I am again teaching it to other Federal agencies.

For years I had intended to do more networking with other colleagues, and so finally last fall, having heard about the Society for Technical

Communication for years, I joined. (I also joined the Training Officers' Institute.) The first STC event I attended was the one profiling the National Cancer Institute's *Research-Based Web Design & Usability Guidelines*, and I was sold on STC. Then, about 2 months later, I heard that the Washington chapter needed a treasurer, so I volunteered.

While I lack a financial background, I have been treasurer of several organizations, so I guess experience counts. I've learned the most from being treasurer of my condominium board of directors for over 5 years.

And when I'm not volunteering for financial jobs, I keep busy running a support group for those with Klinefelter's Syndrome, a genetic disorder. During the summer, I volunteer for 2 weeks to run the evening programs at a camp for families on Mount Desert Island, Maine. Hobbies include Lundberg glass, mountain bicycling, reading (last book read: *Angels and Demons*), and trying to shake the addiction of cruising eBay!



The Independent Voice

This column explores issues and trends encountered by independent technical communicators in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. If you have feedback or would like to write an article for this column, contact Carolyn Kelley Klinger at pastpres@stcfdc.org.

CAROLYN KELLEY KLINGER, *Column Editor*

Somehow Work Comes to Me. . . Harrumph!

by STC Washington, DC Chapter Member Renée Barnow

Shortly after finalizing my last article for this column, “A Day in the Life. . . Becomes Years” for Vol. 36, No. 2, did I have to eat the following words... “Somehow work comes to me.” On January 14, 2004, I learned that January 16 was to be my last day on a contract that I had been supporting since August 2000. Because I was leaving for California early January 15, the phone call was the end of my long streak of good luck. Or, so I thought.

Eating Words is not a Sustainable Diet

Words are my business. Getting paid for writing is how I sustain myself. Although in my years as a consultant I never engaged in marketing campaigns and barely networked, I knew from having had to eat my words that this approach was not a good long-term strategy. Yet, I let the bad taste in my mouth linger, chewing on the abruptness of my unemployment as I worked out a new plan.

In the Vol. 36, No.2 Independent Voice column I mentioned updating goals and commitments every January 1. Each year has a different theme, and the one I chose for 2004 was “Movement.” If I didn’t want the bank or utilities companies to move me for lack of payment, I

needed to move from the eating of words to using them proactively. I gave myself two days. Being in California helped ease the pain.

Being in Transition

While life always involves being in transition, most of us don’t think in those terms. Because much of my work on the long-term contract that ended was facilitating organizational change for business units, and because I coach individuals on professional transitions (I gave a workshop at 45th International Technical Communication Conference, “Finessing Professional Transitions: Fail-safe Methods for Managing Difficult Changes”), I had the tools available to develop a complete transition plan.

More important than actually engaging in marketing and networking activities is having a plan, which helps one stabilize. A transition plan is essential, especially when change is sudden, as it was with less than 24 hours notice of the contract ending. A copy of the plan I developed is provided to give a sense of activities to include (for example, exercise) and the need for unscheduled time (Friday). I followed the plan, although not slavishly, until the first week of February.

Rethinking Marketing

Being a member of the stcfdc_cicsig@yahoogroups.com discussion list was a boon to moving forward. In fact, posting my new status and asking for members to share their experiences as well as any opportunities was the first step I took to navigate the world of the newly available. Within a day or two, I learned about a short-term possibility for someone with my skills. After a few weeks of fragile connections, I had an interview and by the end of that week, the first week of February, I began working. The contract was through the first week of April and was renewed to extend through the first week of June. In reality, I was only without work for about 3 weeks.

In addition to posting my availability, and upon returning to DC from California, I began apprising many of my past clients about my new and immediate availability for work. While none had work at the time, by the end of February one client did have a short-term assignment requiring travel to Orlando, FL. March in Orlando sounded good given our harsh winter in DC and the unsavory aftertaste I still perceived from eating my words.

Short-Lived Harrumph

Before writing this column, I completed a matrix of seven opportunities to evaluate and will need to make decisions about them in the next several weeks.

Renée Barnow is a Senior Member of the Washington, DC Chapter. She has held every chapter leadership position and served on the international board of directors. Services and selected clients are available at <http://www.writelineunlimited.com>.

Transition-Period-Schedule					
	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
7-8	News/Breakfast				
8-9	Consulting				
9-10	assignment-pursuit				
10-11	ABC—write-and	ABC	ABC—write-and	ABC—write-and	
11-12	research	Adams-School	research	research	Adams-School
12-1	Lunch	Adams-School	Lunch	Lunch	Adams-School
1-2	Tax-Prep				
2-3	Administrivia/Rental				
3-4	Curves				
4-5	Shower				
5-6					

→ Use food in freezer

Rave Reviews

This column provides reviews on books, software, programs, or other topics of interest to technical communicators. These reviews are the opinions of the reviewer and not necessarily the opinion of the STC WDC chapter or STC. If you are interested in submitting a review, contact the Capital Letter at news@stcwdc.org.

Designing Websites for Every Audience, by Ilise Benun

Reviewed by STC Washington, DC Chapter Member Eddie VanArsdall

Hardcover: 145 pages
 Publisher: Haworth Press; (April 1998)
 ISBN: 0789003724
 Genre: Science & Technology

Trying to sift through the web design books at your local bookstore can leave you overwhelmed. “Where do I begin?” you wonder. “HTML? Flash? JavaScript? Graphic design... hmmm... maybe I should focus on that...”

Or better yet, you should start by studying your customers before you code that first tag—before you aim for creating that multimedia masterpiece. That’s the premise of Ilise Benun’s *Designing Websites for Every*

Audience. This colorful, engaging book focuses on a singular mantra: Know your audience.

The book describes Benun as a “recognized expert on marketing for creative professionals,” and her insightful advice reflects a combination of business savvy and creative instincts. Where some marketing professionals might be overly concerned with pizzazz and punch, and where some designers might simply create in a vacuum, Benun suggests that truly usable sites are designed with “a little mind-twisting and some actual research.” The book’s purpose is to “give you the basics of usability from a visual design perspective.” And it delivers on that promise.

I often address usability issues in my daily work, and I have read a number of well-known books on the subject. So I'll admit to having wondered what this book might have to say that others haven't said. I found that, even though the book may sometimes reinforce ideas from other works (Nielsen and Krug come to mind), its people-driven approach and warm, engaging style made it a standout. As Benun points out, the web is no longer new; people aren't, as a rule, curious. Your site won't be everything to everyone, so you must target your users and design for them. Chapter One expands on this philosophy of user-centered design by using personas, psychology, and the importance of an experiential interface that marries content with design. Simply trying to be efficient and navigable isn't enough, says Benun.

Designing with the goal of creating a user experience means that you should really know your users. After delivering the healthy dose of good design advice in the first chapter, *Designing Websites for Every Audience* zeroes in on six types of users: Learners, Shoppers, Connection Seekers, Transactors, Business Browsers, and Fun Seekers. Each of the remaining six chapters is named for a user category and begins with a profile of a typical user belonging to that category. Rather than simply inventing personas, Benun uses real people profiles. For example, John Fix III is a typical Business Browser. A retail store owner, John often browses on behalf of his customers. Megan Lane, profiled as a Fun Seeker, goes online "just to see something cool [she's] never seen before." Users' profiles describe their personality traits, online behaviors, web usage history, favorite sites, usability pet peeves, search habits, and typical online goals.

After introducing a typical user, the remainder of each chapter is devoted to case studies involving websites that appeal to the featured user type. Each case study profiles a site using a then-and-now approach, explaining how site owners learned valuable lessons by listening to their users and giving their sites a "makeover" to maintain and expand their audience. Some sites were retrofitted, and others were redesigned from scratch. Featured sites range from BreastCancer.org and H&R Block to Bambino's Curse (a Boston Red Sox blog) and Zoog Disney.

My biggest complaint about *Designing Websites for Every Audience* is that, ironically, it slights the over-50 user population. The oldest profiled user is 49, and most of the stylish-looking people in the cover photos are definitely under 30. Ironically, the oldest user pictured on the cover (a 44-year-old woman named Leslie, profiled in the book as a Shopper) is out of focus, so the photo doesn't really reveal her age. I perceived the cover as contradictory to the message conveyed in the title: ...for Every Audience. I hope that in future editions, the author will give more coverage to design considerations for older users and for disabled users.

Even though I felt that the cover sent mixed signals, I found the design of the book's inner pages inviting and consistent. Design balance is achieved using ample white space, thematic color, and repeating design patterns. For example, the color theme for Learners is red, and the color theme for Connection Seekers is green. On the first page of each chapter, color covers a larger page area and extends to the margin. This effect facilitates ease in thumbing through the book and finding the beginning of each chapter.

Web page reproductions offer views of sites before and after a makeover. Useful callouts and arrows direct the reader's attention to specific design features. Occasionally, the reproductions are simply too small and have little visual value. For example, three out of four sample images of the Wall Street Journal pages were so small that I could barely distinguish the page elements, even though callout arrows directed my eyes toward them.

Benun uses sidebar discussions to provide a wealth of design topics and to encourage readers to dig deeper. Topics include the geographic distribution of web users ("The Digital Divide. Who's Online?"), tips on usability testing, the use of Cascading Style Sheets, and a section on "Usable Flash." *Designing Websites for Every Audience* is a book that will appeal to a broad audience, including web designers and developers, usability specialists, information designers, information architects, and marketing professionals.

So when you're in the bookstore, wondering whether to buy a book on Photoshop Power Effects or Dreamweaver Magic, stop and repeat to yourself: "Know your audience, Know your audience."



Telecommuting

This column examines the challenges and rewards of working from home and the ways in which telecommuting changes the way we work, play, and do business.

If you have comments or questions, please contact Patricia Srinath at srinath1@earthlink.net.

PATRICIA SRINATH, Column Editor

How To Find Legitimate Telecommuting Opportunities

by STC Washington, DC Chapter Member Patricia Srinath

After pouring your heart and soul into your telecommuting proposal and finally getting up the nerve to approach your boss, you are given the opportunity to present your idea. Your performance is brilliant. You make a convincing argument that clearly shows how telecommuting will decrease operating expenses, increase productivity, enhance retention and recruitment, and improve the company's corporate image. It's a win-win offer that no employer can refuse. Right? Wrong! Your boss denies your request. Many companies do not accept telecommuting as a viable work alternative for a number of reasons: corporate culture, office politics, information security concerns, and fear of logistical headaches to name a few. So, do you throw your dream of telecommuting out the window?

If you are committed to a telecommuting work arrangement not supported by your employer, then you are faced with the decision to seriously pursue opportunities outside of your company. Where are these opportunities? That depends on your approach. There are three different approaches you can follow to pursue telecommuting jobs: (1) search for employers that support telecommuting. (2) become an independent contractor, or (3) start your own business.

Telecommuting-friendly Employers

There are several telecommuting-friendly companies out there. For example, Small Office Home Office Jobs (SOHOJobs) provides an abbreviated list of such companies from Aetna Life Insurance to Xerox at <http://www.sohojobs.org/employers.html>. Another listing can be

found at: <http://www.langhoff.com/companies.html>. But keep in mind: employers are not going to have a flashing neon sign inviting telecommuters to knock down their doors and rarely will you find job listings that advertise telecommuting as an option. Telecommuting requires a lot of trust on the part of the employer. Therefore, use a traditional approach when trying to secure a telecommuting position by concentrating your search to those companies that offer telecommuting opportunities, applying to those jobs for which you qualify, and making a great impression when undergoing the interview process. Negotiate a telecommuting arrangement either during the interview or after you have been offered the job. The best time to bring up a telecommuting arrangement will depend on how well you are able to establish a good rapport and establish a sense of trust with your potential boss through your resume, experience, and personal qualities. Be clear on what type of telecommuting arrangement you are looking for. For example, what will your hours be? Will you be working onsite or exclusively from your home office?

Independent Contracting

If you do not want to rely on the goodwill of Corporate America to make your telecommuting dream a reality or you just can't find the right opportunity through a traditional employer/employee relationship, becoming an independent contractor is an excellent way to find telecommuting opportunities. There are several good places on the Internet where you can start your search, a few of which are listed in the following table:

Articles

May/June 2004, Vol. 39, No. 1

The Society for Technical Communication's job database	http://www.stc.org/members_only/login_reminder.asp
Yahoo Group for the Society for Technical Communication, Washington, DC Chapter, Consulting and Independent Contracting Special Interest Group (or STC WDC CIC SIG).	http://groups.yahoo.com/group/stcfdc_cicsig
Guru.com	http://www.guru.com
Sologig.com	http://www.sologig.com
Freelance Writers.com	http://www.freelancewriters.com
Monster's Contract and Temporary Opportunities	http://ct.monster.com
Elance Online	http://www.elance.com/c/static/main/displayhtml.pl?file=eol.html&module=home

Although most of the resources listed above require membership and a fee to join, they are all legitimate and have real job postings. Unfortunately, because a lot of people want to jump on the telecommuting wave, every day there are more and more scam artists out there posing as legitimate companies wanting to help you make lots of money from the comfort of your home (for money of course). Do your homework before signing on the dotted line. Check the Better Business Bureau (<http://www.bbb.org>) and keep in the mind that if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

Starting a Business

Another way to find telecommuting opportunities is to start your own business. You will probably look for these opportunities in the same places you would as an employee or independent contractor. However, instead of searching for opportunities as a potential employee or freelancer, you would be a service provider searching for

prospective clients. Although your business may only have one employee (you), to the outside world you are a business. Those employers who were not interested in hiring you as a telecommuter may opt to do business with your company. Fostering a business-to-business rather than business-to-telecommuter relationship seems to be a more legitimate choice because of the credibility and accountability often associated with a business. The Small Business Administration (http://www.sba.gov/starting_business/index.html) is a great place to get started if you are considering this option.

Telecommuting is a great way to work and there are a lot of opportunities out there, but it takes effort, perseverance, and ingenuity to find them. If you have questions or would like to share your telecommuting trials and tribulations, please e-mail Patricia at srinath1@earthlink.net.