



# CAPITAL LETTER

Washington, DC Chapter

Volume 32 / Number 3 / November 2000

## Looking Ahead

### December Networking Opportunity

**Date:** Thursday, December 14, 2000

**Topic:** Holiday Networking Dinner with Special Guest Jonetta Russell

**About the program:** Come enjoy a delicious meal at the West End Grill in Bethesda (parking is plentiful) while networking with other technical communicators. Jonetta Russell is a research coordinator for the Montgomery Blair High School Magnet Program and serves as mentor to many winners of the Austin T. Brown International High School Technical Writing Competition. Russell will speak about techniques she learned in a concise writing course she attended at the STC-funded Institute for Technical Communication in Raymond, MS.

Bring business cards for networking and books for the book drive!

**Speaker:** Jonetta Russell is a biology teacher and research coordinator for the Montgomery Blair High School Magnet Program.

**Schedule:** Registration, cash bar opens: 6:45-7:00 p.m.; Dinner and networking: 7:00-8:30 p.m.; Program: 8:30-9:00 p.m.

**Food:** The cost includes appetizers, soup or salad, choice of eight entrées with side items, nonalcoholic beverage, and dessert. Alcoholic beverages may be purchased at the cash bar.

**Cost:** \$18 for students, \$25 for members with advance reservations, \$28 for nonmembers and walk-ins.

**Reservations:** Advance reservations are requested by December 12. No-shows who reserve in advance will be billed for the event.

To reserve, complete the online reservation form at [http://www.stc.org/region2/wdc/www/mtg\\_reserve\\_dec00.shtml](http://www.stc.org/region2/wdc/www/mtg_reserve_dec00.shtml), and send check to STC Washington, DC Chapter (make check out to this name) c/o Carolyn Kelley Klinger, 18221 Paladin Drive, Olney MD 20832

**Location:** West End Grill, 7904 Woodmont Avenue, Bethesda, MD 20814; 301-951-9696.

**By metro:** Take the red line to the Bethesda station. Above ground on Route 355/Wisconsin Avenue, turn left (northwest) and start walking down Old Georgetown Road. Walk one long block and turn right onto Woodmont

## On the Agenda

### November Happy Hour Meeting

**Date:** Thursday, November 16.

**Topic:** Happy Hour with the STC Washington, DC Chapter, Washington Independent Writers (WIW), and the DC Chapter of the American Society of Business Publication Editors.

**About the program:** Get to know communicators from our chapter, the Washington Independent Writers (the country's largest regional organization of freelance writers and editors), and the DC chapter of the American Society of Business Publication Editors at the Capitol City Brewing Company at Massachusetts Avenue and First Street NE, across the street from Union Station. *Please note that this is not the same Capitol City Brewing Company location where we met in September.* The cost covers hors d'oeuvres and the whole mezzanine level (second floor) of the restaurant to stretch out in. There will be a cash bar in the room. Bring a friend and plenty of business cards for swapping! We look forward to a large turnout of communicators in all disciplines. If you are not yet a member, take this opportunity to get to know us. Drop by anytime between 5:30 and 8:00 p.m.

**Schedule:** 5:30-8:00 p.m.

**Food:** Various hors d'oeuvres.

**Cost:** \$12 students, \$15 members, \$20 nonmembers and walk-ins.

**Reservations:** Reservations are requested—but not required—for this event. Complete the online reservation form at: [http://www.stc.org/region2/wdc/www/mtg\\_reserve\\_nov16\\_00.shtml](http://www.stc.org/region2/wdc/www/mtg_reserve_nov16_00.shtml).

**Place:** Capitol City Brewing Company, 2 Massachusetts Avenue, NE (Postal Square Building), Washington, DC; 202-842-2337.

**By Metro:** Take the red line to Union Station. Walk across the street towards the right to the corner of Massachusetts Avenue and First Street NE. Capitol City Brewery is inside the historic Postal Square Building.

**By Car:** *From Maryland,* take the Beltway (I-495) to MD-185/Connecticut Avenue, exit 33, towards Chevy Chase/Kensington. Turn right to go south on Connecticut towards Chevy Chase. At Dupont Circle, make a slight left onto Massachusetts Avenue. Turn right on Ninth Street NW. Turn left on K Street NW. K Street becomes Massachusetts Avenue NW. After you cross North Capitol



society for technical communication

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

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# Looking for a Job?

If you need job listings, you may

- Visit our website at [http://www.stc.org/region2/wdc/www/jobs\\_1.shtml](http://www.stc.org/region2/wdc/www/jobs_1.shtml). If you don't have access to the web, try your local library for web access. More and more libraries are providing some type of Internet access.
- You can download a text file of the job announcement lists or get a textfile by e-mail from [http://www.stc.org/region2/wdc/www/jobs\\_listings.shtml](http://www.stc.org/region2/wdc/www/jobs_listings.shtml).

To request a list by e-mail, send mail as follows:

To: lockley@lockley.net Subject: WDC jobs list1  
To: lockley@lockley.net Subject: WDC jobs list2  
To: lockley@lockley.net Subject: WDC jobs list3

- Call Ann Ray at 301-384-1425 x342 and ask her to send you a hard copy. ✉

# Public Relations (PR) Mailing List (listserv)

The Public Relations (PR) Mailing List (listserv) is for notifying chapter members about chapter meetings, events, and related information. We use this mailing list to improve communications to our members about chapter events and also reduce the cost for mailing announcements and reminders to the nearly 700 members in our chapter. The name of the mailing list is stcwc-pr. Commands may be sent by e-mail or by using the Web page at

<http://lists.stc.org/cgi-bin/lyris.pl?enter=stcwc-pr>.

To subscribe by e-mail, send an e-mail message to [lyris@stc.org](mailto:lyris@stc.org). Put nothing or a dummy word in the subject line, and only the following words in the body of the message (anything else will confuse the program):

subscribe stcwc-pr your name

To unsubscribe by e-mail, send an e-mail message to [lyris@stc.org](mailto:lyris@stc.org). Put nothing or a dummy word in the subject line, and only the following words in the body of the message (anything else will confuse the program):

unsubscribe stcwc-pr youruserid@youraddress

To post a message: Send an e-mail message to [stcwc-pr@stc.org](mailto:stcwc-pr@stc.org). (Do Not include graphic or document attachments—these are binary items and they get converted to unreadable code.)

More details are provided for the listserv at

<http://www.stc.org/region2/wdc/www/listserv.shtml>. ✉

# Where Are You?

If you change your address or phone number, please let STC headquarters know by sending an e-mail message to [membership@stc-va.org](mailto:membership@stc-va.org). Keeping this information up to date helps keep down our mailing costs. ✉

Street, it becomes Massachusetts Avenue NE. *From Virginia*, Take I-66 east towards Washington. Take the US 50 East/Constitution Ave exit. Turn right onto Pennsylvania Avenue NW. Turn left onto Constitution Avenue NW. Turn left onto Louisiana Avenue NW. Turn slightly left onto North Capitol Street NW. Turn right onto Massachusetts Avenue NE. Park at a meter on the street (there should be plenty in the evening), or in the Union Station garage. ☞

*December Networking Opportunity, continued from page 1*

Avenue (at the Apartment Search building). Walk two blocks on the left side of the street to the West End Grill. The restaurant looks like an old European house and we will be in the party room upstairs (sorry, there is no elevator).

**By car:** *From the Beltway in Virginia:* Exit at MD-190/River Road. Keep right at the fork in the ramp to go east on River Road. After two miles, turn left onto Wilson Lane. Turn right onto MD-187/Old Georgetown Road. Turn left onto Woodmont Avenue. Park in the first public parking garage on the left at the intersection of Woodmont and Cheltenham Road. Leaving the parking garage, walk left 1.5 blocks to the West End Grill on your left (if you reach St. Elmo Avenue, you have gone too far). Valet parking is also available at the restaurant for \$3. We will be in the party room upstairs (sorry, there is no elevator). *From the Beltway in Maryland:* Exit at Route 355/Rockville Pike going south towards Bethesda. After NIH, get in the right lane. Two lanes turn right onto Woodmont Avenue. West End Grill is on your right. Two public garages and one outdoor metered (until 7:00 p.m.) lot are near the restaurant. The easiest one to identify is on Woodmont at the intersection of Woodmont and Cheltenham. Leaving the parking garage, walk left 1.5 blocks to the West End Grill on your left (if you reach St. Elmo Avenue, you have gone too far). Valet parking is also available at the restaurant for \$3. We will be in the party room upstairs (sorry, there is no elevator).

**Questions?** For more information, contact Carolyn at carolyn.klinger@mindspring.com, or call 301-795-0132 (work). ☞

## Choosing Brand A . . . Brand B . . . Brand STC: The STC Integrated Branding Project

by Conni Evans

Last month's chapter meeting was our annual joint venture hosted by the Baltimore STC Chapter. The action-packed meeting served as the only opportunity for members of the STC Washington, DC and Baltimore Chapters to view the traveling exhibit of winning entries from last year's International Competition. Attendees were treated to a surprisingly tasty chicken dinner and a (not surprisingly) lively presentation by our chapter's very own Mary Wise.

Before the evening's official program began, we received an update on the plans for the 2001 STC Annual Conference in Chicago by conference program manager Tony Caruso (Baltimore Chapter). Tony and his team are planning for this to be the largest conference ever, and they are currently in the process of evaluating the record number of proposals from would-be conference speakers.

The highlight of the evening was the presentation on the STC Integrated Branding project by Mary Wise, immediate past president of the STC. Branding is not a new term, but it may be a fairly new concept to some industries, including non-profits and service organizations.

An integrated brand builds an organization's foundation. It creates a common focus and direction for all employees to follow as they make business decisions that affect the organization. STC undertook this integrated branding project to redefine its mission, values, principles, and resulting image. By building a stronger brand, the organization hopes to build a higher level of brand loyalty among its members and create an association that is attractive to new members.

The project began with an intensive study of a cross-section of the membership conducted by Parker LePla, a brand development firm. Together, the STC and Parker LePla developed a new integrated branding strategy to help accomplish the Society's goals. Mary gave the meeting attendees a brief glimpse into the branding process and resulting components. First, STC redefined its mission to be "Designing the future of technical communication." A mission states an organization's purpose or what it plans to do for the membership and the profession. Next, STC refined its values. Values, regardless of whether they are corporate or personal, should never change. Values define who you are and what you believe in. The STC believes in being **open-minded**, **member-focused**, **effective**, and **ethical**. Finally, STC retooled its "story." The story is a short, concise, and interesting profile of how the organization has developed over the years, where it is now, and where it hopes to go.

Once the mission, values, and story that make up organizational drivers were defined, Parker LePla and the STC board moved on to defining the brand drivers: STC's principle, personality, and association. The most notable of these drivers are personality and logo. As you can imagine, STC wanted to shed its perceived personality of stodgy or boring. These are not good traits for an organization that hopes to increase its membership. So the board decided to present the true traits of our members—fun, bohemian, smart, even visionary.

Finally, after all the research, refining, and retooling, the graphic artists went to work on a new logo. Yes, the long-awaited, much-anticipated logo! It is the essence of STC for this millennium. Those of us at the meeting got a sneak preview of the logo. For those of you who missed it, don't worry; the logo will be unveiled in a few short months. Here's yet another reason to attend our monthly STC meetings—as the saying goes, "I guess you had to be there!" ☞

# Salary Survey Update

Thanks to all who responded to the 2000 STC Washington, DC Chapter salary survey. As of mid-October, of the 539 who were invited to participate, 152 members had responded. Invitations were sent to all members who had registered their current email address with the STC. The survey closed on October 31.

Thanks also to all who shared constructive opinions about this first salary survey, either through their responses or directly to the survey administrator. We promise to take all comments into consideration during the design of the 2001 survey.

We are now analyzing survey results. To see a summary of the results online, access the following URL: [http://www.zoomerang.com/reports/public\\_report.zgi?ID=15KNAQ5A909K](http://www.zoomerang.com/reports/public_report.zgi?ID=15KNAQ5A909K).

If you have any questions or comments regarding this or any other chapter survey, please contact Carolyn at [carolyn.klinger@mindspring.com](mailto:carolyn.klinger@mindspring.com). ✉

## Usability Testing: How to Tell What's Wrong

by Bob Stahl, *The Testing Center*,  
<http://www.testingcenter.com>; reprinted with permission

Your Web site or application is going to get usability tested—by you, or by your users.

Most developers eventually decide that it's best to do the usability testing themselves. This introduces some interesting challenges. In this article, we'll explore one of them—how to tell what's going on during a test.

This is harder than it sounds because you can speak very little, if at all.

During testing, a small group of testers hovers behind an "evaluator" (sounds better than "guinea pig") while he or she tries to carry out specific tasks on the application or Web site being tested.

When the evaluator runs into trouble, there's a natural urge to ask what the problem is or to offer a "hint." This is especially true if the usability testers are the developers. It really hurts them to see someone struggling with their brainchild, and they're certain that if the evaluator was just helped over this tiny problem, they'd go on to happily experience the marvels of the system.

But such coaching and explanation invalidates the whole process, because in the real world there's no one to help. The application or Web page needs to stand on its own. So usability testers have to keep almost completely silent to get meaningful results. What little communication there is has to be very structured, and done by only one person on the team.

How can we tell what's wrong if we can't talk to the evaluator?

Here are three approaches:

1. We can talk to them after the test, in the debriefing. Again, this should be structured so as to avoid putting words in their mouths.

The obvious disadvantage is that the evaluators may not even remember the problem, let alone what they were thinking. Still, this method is useful and is part of the usability testing procedure.

2. You can encourage the evaluators to "think out loud." Some test teams put a tent card saying: "please think out loud" on top of the evaluators' terminals.

Of course, much depends on the evaluators. Some babble away, verbalizing every thought: "Okay, I'm looking for a way to reset this. I don't see it on this menu. Maybe it's under Edit. No, it's not there. I wonder where the toolbar I saw a while ago went?" If you can get someone who does that, great!

Then there are evaluators who just click on things silently while little beads of perspiration form on their foreheads. There are ways to overcome this (by using two evaluators who talk to each other, for example), but they seldom work well.

3. The final method, which is the focus of the rest of this article, is to try to understand what's going on as it's happening.

You'll notice immediately that things happen very fast, especially when the evaluators are nervous or confused. There's seldom time to take notes before they're five mouse clicks down the road.

The key is to try to understand what's going on when somebody is trying to do something on a computer. Don Norman, a usability guru, pointed out that there are four steps that the user must go through to get something done:

1. Form an intention
2. Choose an action to carry out the intention
3. Carry out the action
4. Evaluate the results

This is a loop. If the users get through it (or give up part way through), they immediately start again by forming a new intention. Getting most real-world things done requires many successful trips around this loop.

When users are having trouble, it's always because they can't do one of these four steps. Knowing which step they're having trouble with is a critical skill for usability testing.

Let's look at each step more closely:

1. Forming an intention.

There are many reasons why users might be unable to decide on the next step, big or small. Do they understand the manual process or the business procedure involved? Could they do it with a pencil, or a telephone, in real life? If not, they're going to have a lot of trouble trying to do it on the computer.

You can minimize this problem by selecting evaluators carefully and interviewing them before you start testing with them.

Clues that users are having trouble forming an intention: pausing, little activity, staring at task description, trying a few things tentatively, staring some more.

2. Selecting an action.

Here the users know exactly what they want to do, but can't figure out how to do it on this system. They may

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*Continued on page 5*

want to do the next step in the task, or do a smaller action like choosing a file to open.

The analogy I use is renting a car. You try to turn on the high beams of the headlights, but instead squirt the windshield.

Clues that they are having trouble selecting an action: lots of activity, clicking on things, unrolling menus, scanning these quickly, then trying something else.

### 3. Carrying out the action.

The action may be hard to do, like trying to stop a rapidly scrolling list at the desired place, or picking out the right object with the mouse in an area of the screen that has many objects close together.

Clues that users are having trouble carrying out the action (usually obvious): repeated attempts to do the same thing, "correctly," but failing.

### 4. Evaluating the results.

This is a big one. It accounts for as much confusion as all the others put together.

Basically, this means "Did it work?" For example, when the users get a screen that just says "Thank you for visiting Books GigaWarehouse!" do they know whether the book was actually ordered or not?

You'll find that the lack of adequate feedback about what has just occurred (or not occurred) is one of the most common design flaws you'll uncover in usability testing.

Clues that users are having trouble evaluating the results: low activity level, staring at the screen (vs. the test instructions), poking things, backtracking.

As you gain experience, it will become much easier to accurately guess which problems the evaluators are having. You can make some quick notes and try to confirm your diagnosis at the debriefing. This method will lead to much more valid results, because you can observe things without interfering with the evaluators' natural behavior. ✍

## Using Paper Prototypes to Test Early Software and Documentation Design

by Scott McDaniel

The first time I used a paper prototype to test a proposed search screen, I didn't discover anything earth-shattering, but I did notice that all three people I tested made the same small mistake. For this search screen, you had to select a field on which to search, then an operator, and finally a search term. So, you might first choose to look for "Author". Next, you would select "=", and finally you would type "Jones". There were a number of operators to choose from, but when I asked the three people to find documents by Jones they all left out the operator completely, not specifying one at all.

I mentioned this to the programmer, who made a small change in his code so that the system would assume an operator if the user didn't specify one. It turned out that our client was always making that mistake with the previous version of the software, and specifically commented that she was grateful we had fixed the problem (which she had never thought to mention before, since she was the one making the mistake).

Prep time for this test was about half a day, and the time to conduct the test took another half day. Paper prototypes offer an extremely quick and cost-efficient way to perform basic usability testing on proposed designs *before* programmers spend hours and dollars on their construction. Essentially, to conduct a paper prototype test, you draw the key screens on paper (or perhaps use software to draw simplified mock-ups). You then ask users to accomplish a task using the screens, and you tell the user what happens when they "click" or "type" on the screen. As they step through the task, you can see where their concept of the work differs from the assumptions made by the software or documentation design.

In a presentation at the Usability Professional's Association conference in August 2000, Barb Kauffolf and Shawn Lawton Henry pointed out that paper prototypes that look crude and unfinished often produce better results than crisp, clean pictures of an imaginary screen. They have found that users hesitate to make comments that could result in radical design changes if the screens they see look nearly final. They prefer to hand-draw the screens. They also describe a number of other techniques, like giving users a pointing toy to represent the mouse. The user touches the paper where they would click, and they use a pen to write on the paper when they would type something in.

December's Washington, DC Chapter Usability SIG meeting will be a workshop in which you can try out the paper prototyping technique. It is an opportunity to see, in a simplified way, how this method works and how it might fit into your work. To prepare for the meeting, we ask that you spend about 30 minutes thinking about and designing a single screen that is part of an online help authoring tool. Draw out one or two screens that you think best fit the requirements. During the meeting, we will break into groups of three to test the paper prototypes.

You can also choose to attend the meeting without bringing a paper prototype. In this case, you can observe the prototypes and tests that go on. Depending on the mix of people, you may be able to fill the role of test observer and test subject.

**Date:** December 6, 2000

**Time:** 6:30 p.m.

**Location:** ICF Consulting, 9300 Lee Highway, Fairfax, VA.

**Dinner:** Yes! There will be sandwiches and snacks, courtesy of ICF Consulting.

**Directions:** ICF Consulting is located at 9300 Lee Highway (Route 29), just outside the Beltway off Route I-66, not far from Arlington Boulevard (Route 50). There is a shuttle bus from the Vienna metro until 8:00 p.m.

For directions, see <http://www.icfconsulting.com/icfconsulting/home.nsf/pages/directions.htm>.

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*Continued on page 6*

We can accommodate a maximum of 30 people. We will begin the meeting with a 10-15 minute introduction to the paper prototyping method and its strengths and weaknesses. After that, we will begin the testing. I will develop three tasks that concentrate on the requirements with (\*) below.

When taking reservations, we will give preference to people who bring a paper prototype over those who do not. Please let me know if you would like to attend, and whether or not you plan to bring a paper prototype to test. E-mail [scott\\_mcd@hotmail.com](mailto:scott_mcd@hotmail.com).

### Online help topic editor: requirements

The topic editor window should be WYSIWIG (What You See Is What You Get). That is, text and graphics entered in the window appear as they will in the final help topic windows.

- Users should be able to use bold, italics, fonts, bullets, numbered steps, and basic paragraph and style formatting.
- Users should be able to insert graphics and determine their position and size.
- Users should be able to create a non-scrolling header region for each topic.
- Users should be able to create hyperlinks to other help topics. (\*)
- Users should be able to create hyperlinks to Web pages.
- Users should be able to create links that bring up a pop-up window for quick definitions or notes. (\*)
- Users should be able to assign, see, and change primary and secondary index terms for each topic. (\*)
- Users should be able to look at the full set of existing help topics as well as their structure.
- Users should be able to set the default size and position of the help topic window.

### Directions

Create one or two drawings of a window (or windows) that meet these requirements. Not all requirements need to be visible in the interface, but you should know how they'd be done. For example, if you decide to include a menu option for text formatting, decide on the name of the option and the name of the menu under which it appears. Also, feel free to invent additional requirements. The structure of the overall help authoring application is up to you.

Make from three to five photocopies of the screen drawings so we can write or draw on them during the tests. At the meeting, we will test each other's designs in groups of three. For the first test, one person will be the tester, one person will be the test subject, and the third person will be the silent note-taker. For the second and third tests, we will switch roles so that each person experiences each role. During the tests, we will practice the speak-aloud protocol for eliciting feedback on the prototypes.

Each test will look at whether or not the test subject can complete the given task with the design provided. After the task is completed (or not), the tester and subject will

discuss the overall design with the goal of improving it. The note taker will record the recommendations that emerge from this discussion.

I will bring the three tasks to the meeting, where you will have a chance to look over them and ask questions. The tasks will concentrate on the three requirements above that are marked with a (\*). ✍

## Competition Judging Is Under Way

*by David Kindle*

On October 28, I felt extremely proud to be a part of the Society for Technical Communication. On that Saturday, the competition team displayed the type of maturity necessary to guarantee that the Washington, DC Chapter remains a continued success. The judges came to pick up their entries to begin judging in the weeks ahead. A repeat guest, Tracey Chiricosta, offered her expertise to the judges, explaining the qualities that make for a good judge. Her expertise was well received by the guests, and we were thankful to have her speak again. Melissa Brown, online competition manager, walked through an example of judging an online help system to give everyone an idea of the type of things to look for when judging. This was an extra effort on Melissa's part and was much appreciated. Special thanks goes to Kerry Ogata for organizing the event and ensuring that the entries were ready to distribute.

I must stress that the help that I had on Saturday was from the efforts of volunteers. These people dedicated their Friday nights, Saturday mornings, and countless e-mail messages to this project. Without them, none of this would be possible. Without compensation and without request, these people sacrificed their personal time for a worthy cause without ever complaining. Everyone is excited, enthusiastic, and proud to work in an organization with passionate people making it a continued success.

Where do we go from here? Once we implement technology into our approach, we will realize an increase in productivity. Online database entries, credit cards entries, and the like will enable us to increase our capabilities to accept more entries and focus more on promoting the competition. Technology has already enhanced this year's process. Online discussion forums have enabled us to have a history of our communication, enabling us to maintain member e-mail addresses more efficiently. As we all know, version control can be a nightmare when files get emailed back and forth. An FTP site now enables us to keep all files in one common place, eliminating version control issues.

Now that the judges have their entries, it is time to see what the DC area has produced in the past year. Not only do many entries look worthy of the international level, I believe we may have some international award winners on our hands. The judges' comments strive to help people improve their product, and each year the entries get better. I'm sure the judges will do an excellent job with their current assignment, and I will share with you their triumphs in my next announcement. ✍

## Toot Your Own Horn

Wouldn't you love to get some publicity and help your chapter at the same time? Why don't you consider advertising in the *Capital Letter*? You can place an ad for your company or you can take out an ad featuring your own special skills and talents.

Please send e-mail to Doreen Mannion at [doreenm520@aol.com](mailto:doreenm520@aol.com).

Rates are

Full page:	\$140
Half page:	\$75
Quarter page:	\$40
Business card:	\$25

We give discounts if you run an ad in 2 or more issues within 6 months. ✍

## Technical Literacy Web Site

by Rosalind Rogoff, President, East Bay STC

I am proud to announce that the new Technical Literacy Web site is up and online. Congratulations to Lenore Weiss, the driving force behind this project, for getting it up and running so quickly. The Technical Literacy project, funded by a grant from STC, is a joint effort of our East Bay Chapter and Oakland, CA schools. Two eighth grade students from Montera Middle School helped design the new Web site. Please visit our chapter Web site, <http://stc.org/region8/ebc/www/>, and click *Community Outreach* for more information on Technical Literacy and a link to the Web site. ✍

## Editor's Soapbox

### It's Time to Play "Who Wants to Be a Stem Manager!" (Part 1 of 2)

by Doreen A. Mannion

(With insincere apologies to Regis Philbin)

I've attended eight of the ten last STC conferences, yet until recently I had given very little thought to all the preparatory work that goes into staging a conference of this size (over 2000 attendees). After all, isn't a good conference one in which you, the attendee, are shielded from the details?

How then, did I find myself serving as the Management and Professional Development Stem Manager for next year's conference in Chicago? And what is a stem manager anyway?

If you've never attended an STC conference, you should phone a friend who has because you're really missing out. At the conference, sessions are categorized into one of many stems such as Writing and Editing, Tools and Technology, and Information Design. Sessions take one of the following formats: paper, demo, workshop, progression, or panel. A conference typically has over 200 sessions, an opening speaker, an employment area, an area where winning competition entries are displayed, a bookstore, a vendor booth area, and much more.

I've overheard attendees talk about what they've liked and what they haven't liked. While the fantastic programs in the past few years have spurred comments such as, "There are too many good sessions to choose from, I'll have to use a fifty-fifty," there are still comments about misrepresentation in session descriptions and those three papers that ended up together but did not seem to have anything to do with one another. Maybe you've overheard similar comments while at conferences, and perhaps you've even groused now and again. What are your options in such situations? You can continue to complain about things over which you have little control, or you can jump in with both feet to try and understand and improve the processes that help produce a great conference.

I find little to complain about at our annual conference, the best value for the conference dollar in my estimation. A few years ago I became curious about how the conference comes together. As a frequent presenter, I started asking my stem managers how they got involved. This turned out to be a \$100 question; they got involved by asking. By asking? You mean there isn't a list a mile long of people who want to be stem managers? ✍



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CAPITAL LETTER

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## *In This Issue*

Looking Ahead: December Networking Opportunity 1

On the Agenda: November Happy Hour Meeting 1

Looking for a Job? 2

Public Relations (PR) Mailing List (listserv) 2

Where Are You? 2

Choosing Brand A . . . Brand B . . . Brand STC: The STC Integrated Branding Project 3

Salary Survey Update 4

Usability Testing: How to Tell What's Wrong 4

Using Paper Prototypes to Test Early Software and Documentation Design 5

Competition Judging Is Under Way 6

Technical Literacy Web Site 7

Toot Your Own Horn 7

Editor's Soapbox 7