



CAPITAL LETTER

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Quotable Quote:

“Every noble work is at first impossible.”
– Thomas Carlyle

Message from the STC President: Transformation Update...or Introduction

by Andrea Ames

Chances are you've heard of the STC transformation. Whether you have or haven't, the following few paragraphs will provide a very brief introduction to the transformation work, and the following resources will provide you with more details, updates, etc.:

- transform@stc.org – Get answers to questions or provide suggestions, comments, etc., and you will get an answer or a response within 2 business days.
- Transformation News discussion list (transform@lists.stc.org) – Opt in and receive updates and news about the transformation, status/progress updates, notifications of website updates, etc. (sign up via the transformation Web page, below, beginning Thursday, July 15).

- <http://www.stc.org/transformation> – Visit often to see the main repository of transformation information, and sign up for the Transformation News discussion list (above) for update information.

What started all this? And what's it really all about?

Frankly, the economy started all this. In short, STC income—both membership dues income and conference income that underwrites the cost of memberships (you might not realize that your dues don't cover the actual costs of your membership)—began to drop a few years ago, and the STC Board of Directors' efforts to cut costs did not solve our problem. When we dug into the cause

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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:

Kathy Bell at news@stcfdc.org

This newsletter invites writers to submit articles that they wish to be considered for publication. **Note:** By submitting an article, you implicitly grant a license to this newsletter to run the article and for other STC publications to reprint it without permission. Copyright is held by the writer. In your cover letter, please let the editor know if this article has run elsewhere, and if it has been submitted for consideration to other publications. The design and layout of this newsletter are copyright STC 2004.

Kathy's Korner: Letter from the Editor

Kathy Bell

Since moving to the area two years ago, one of the things I have noticed and often commented on is how generous people are with their time; how people readily volunteer their time (and often precious weekends) to the community, church, school, professional organization, and sometimes all of the above. I have the experience of dropping my son off at a Saturday program that is completely run by volunteers. When I pick him up my response is "wow," and then I always wonder, why people do this, what drives someone to share their free time when we all know it is such a limited commodity.

I've done a lot of thinking and searching for some (even a few) profound words to use in my first "Kathy's Korner" to encourage people to become involved in our STC Washington, DC chapter. My thoughts always return to the same question: "Why do people volunteer?" Having no obvious, believable answers (I guess wanting to make the world a better place doesn't cut it for me!), I decided to turn the discussion inward and really consider what my interests are in volunteering to work with our chapter this year.

Perhaps already known by other STCers, but a small revelation to me, I have recognized that working on the STC newsletter is really more of a self-serving exercise than a generous donation of my time and efforts. The idea that the act of volunteering is a self-serving exercise seems at first like an oxymoron, but is it really?

I have lingered around the STC website for years, first in Ottawa and now in DC. I joined the chapter for the first time last year. Yet, over the years I have relied on the job banks of the different chapters. When moving to

the area and needing to make some professional contacts (and to get out of the house), going to an STC meeting was the obvious and comfortable choice. At meetings I always met welcoming, friendly people that spoke my professional language. I made some contacts and even heard about some job opportunities.

Since moving is a good a time for making a change, I decided it was time to enhance my skills and embark on a mid-career crisis. I decided to take some editing courses to reacquaint myself with the English language. I knew quickly that I wanted to do some more work in this area, but in a competitive job market, I needed some current tangible experience. The newsletter was ready and waiting. I was, and still am, very excited to have the opportunity to practice and enhance my new skills in what I see as a known, non-threatening, and forgiving environment.

As I was considering giving up what felt like a considerable amount of my spare time, I had to go through the pros and cons. I realized that working for the chapter is an impressive addition to my resume since the city itself gives the impression of mystic and importance. I welcome the opportunity to be "published" and add to my writing and editing portfolio.

Working with the newsletter allows me to get to know people on a more personal level than I might have time for at a meeting. I find it helpful to know who works where and who to approach with questions about potential employers, information that can only add to my confidence when entering an interview. Not to be underestimated is the thrill of meeting someone you met at a meeting at the

grocery store, giving the feeling that you are making a life for yourself in a new place.

All in all, I've decided that this volunteering process is a really good game. I pretend I am being so generous with my time, but really I am allowing myself to become a more marketable employee and I think a better person, too. I know I will have some time-management issues in

the year to come, but I can already tell that this experience is worth the effort.

Many of the different chapter committees are looking for volunteers to run our programs this year. There are many ways you can expand your skills and meet new people that share your interests. I say go ahead, BE SELFISH!



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From the President

Kathy Bine



Double Your STC Salary

Our chapter's most precious resource is its members, and in particular, those members who volunteer. I've volunteered for a number of organizations. The common joke: "You did that so well, I'm going to double your salary!" I'd laugh every time I'd hear that, knowing they paid me nothing but I was the richer for the experience.

If you've volunteered, you know that riches abound in giving of yourself. Volunteering at the National Zoo for 10 years illustrated that fact for me. I got to see the first Komodo Dragons born in captivity. Who knew they would be such stunningly colorful creatures? An Asiatic wild horse greeted me by exhaling into my face as I inhaled (an experience I don't recommend). I cared for spiders, hauled water, and washed rocks, but also got to see hummingbirds grow from tiny eggs to juvenile delinquents. I continue to benefit from that volunteer experience in incalculable ways.

The STC volunteer experience has led to new respect from my coworkers for my commitment to my profession. STC's leadership training showed a need for new skills—interpersonal skills, time management skills, technical skills—to meet the needs of the presidency. Our chapter has a fine

history of volunteers and leadership development. The Society has recognized that excellence by awarding STC WDC with chapter achievement awards. It also has recognized excellence in individual members of our chapter: in the past eight years, six of our members have attained the rank of Fellow. All six remain active volunteers for our chapter and the Society.

Some of us are shy about offering our help: the writer as introvert is a stereotype for a reason. I encourage you to overcome that shyness and offer your help; our chapter has various needs, many of them very simple and short-term. My own STC volunteer experience started small, by offering my company's conference rooms for chapter events. I attended as many events as I could. I wrote an article about one event, which got published. I was a judge in the competitions, then served as a lead judge and got a completely different view of the process. Every time I've volunteered, I've gotten as much or more knowledge from it as I contributed.

Now look what volunteering has given me: a chance to write a thank-you note to everyone who has volunteered and is considering volunteering. So here it is: Thank you! I don't know where we'd be without you. You, our members and volunteers, are riches beyond measure.

I think my STC salary just doubled!

Chapter Leadership

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Chapter Chatter

Calling All Members!!

September is that time of year that people begrudgingly put aside the carefree atmosphere of summer to carve in stone “the schedule” for the coming year. September always comes with many opportunities to try new things. The newsletter committee decided to devote our season’s first issue to volunteering to encourage new people to become involved in our WDC chapter. We see it as an opportunity to exchange ideas, learn new things, teach others new things, and meet new people.

Some of our members from different committees have taken a moment to introduce their committee and highlight some of the opportunities to become involved in the chapter. We hope to meet many of you in the year to come.

The Public Relations Committee

There are many opportunities for volunteering with the Public Relations (PR) Committee. You can be a one-time volunteer or undertake a project. You can help contact local press to tell them about the event (this could be via phone, email, fax, or simply entering in info at a website), or you can commit to a larger project like putting together press kits or researching editorial calendars.

This is a very good way to get yourself in the PR game or brush up on your skills. If you know nothing about PR but are interested in this kind of work, joining us on this committee is a good way to learn.

The Competition Committee

Serving on the chapter Competition Committee is a great way to learn about the various planning activities for the yearly Competition. There’s a lot to be done, but the Committee is structured in such a way that the duties are divided among the various members. As the person who

is managing and organizing the competition data, I’m responsible for categorizing the data and eliminating redundancies. While I’m in a “behind-the-scenes” position, I find that the Competition Committee—especially under Melissa Brown’s leadership—is very inclusive. I have learned a lot through reading the Yahoo posts and attending Committee meetings. The other members are always supportive and helpful.

The Events Committee

The Events Committee is always looking for volunteers to help out with our events. We have a great events schedule already in motion. WDC holds monthly chapter events held from September through June that feature guest speakers, tours of communication centers, and panel discussions on topics of interest to technical communicators. The Washington, DC Chapter provides a variety of event formats from informal social hours and discussions to complete dinner programs. Events are held in the District of Columbia, Maryland, Virginia, and occasionally on the Potomac River to accommodate members throughout the area.

Volunteers get the chance to become more involved with the chapter by learning about STC and the profession of Technical Communication, coordinating events, and networking with current and new members.

We are always looking for volunteers to help with event logistics, such as tracking registration (checking people into an event), greeting, and coordinating event logistics.

We are looking for two additional speakers for the Career Day event on March 19, 2005. This an annual event centered around the Technical Communication profession. If someone is interested in being a roundtable speaker, please contact me at events@stcwdc.org.

Letter to the Editor

Cynthia--I forgot to mention in my message that I got my job through the posting on the STC site. I actually got a few calls from potential employers who use it regularly. So--I’m really appreciating my STC membership these days! If I ever need it again I’ll be back. Thanks so much--

Milli

Upcoming Chapter Events



Event: STC WDC Open House

When: Wednesday, September 8, 2004, 6:00 p.m. - 9:00 p.m.

Where: Chef Geoff's Downtown, 1301 Pennsylvania Ave, NW,
Washington, DC 20004

Phone: 202-464-4461

Cost: \$5 per person

Info: Come to the 2nd Annual STC WDC Open House and learn more about your local STC chapter! Meet and greet the chapter officers, fellow members, and new and prospective members for a casual evening of networking at Chef Geoff's Downtown.

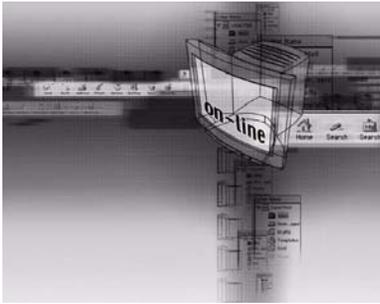
See why being a member will enhance your professional life, bring great friends, and so much more. Mingle with committee members and ask them the questions you have been thinking about all summer. Also discover the wide ranging Special Interest Groups that will be even more specific to your interests.

This is the kickoff event of the year and we hope you will take advantage of all we are offering at STC. We hope to see you all there, so come join the fun!

Light hors-d'oeuvres will be served. Cash bar available.

For more information and to make a reservation, go to http://www.stcfdc.org/prgm_sep04.shtml.

Don't forget your business cards for networking!



Event: Single Sourcing by Design: A Gradual Approach, presented by John Hawkins

When: Wednesday, October 12, 2004, 6:00 p.m. - 9:00 p.m.

Where: ICF Consulting in Washington, DC

Cost: \$10 for Current Chapter Volunteers
 \$20 for STC members
 \$25 for Nonmember guests
 \$30 for Walk-ins

Info: Most technical writers do single sourcing at some level; some do quite a lot of it. But most do it with tools that are not designed to facilitate reuse of content. The most common approach involves creating content for one purpose, then copying or transforming it to a new purpose or format. High-end tools may make it easier to manage content at a document level, but most don't allow writers to manage small units of content and easily publish to multiple outputs. AuthorIT was designed with one purpose: to encourage reuse of content across multiple documents and formats. Creating single-source content challenges us to work in a new way; but using an application that is designed for that purpose makes the transition much easier.

This presentation will explore strategies for moving to a single-source model gradually, survey types of content that occur in technical writing projects, identify types of content that are easy candidates for reuse, and show how an application such as AuthorIT can be used to implement reuse in a way that technical writers can appreciate. John will then show how additional reuse and repurposing can be added over time, gradually moving toward a full scale model of reuse.

For more information about AuthorIT, go to <http://www.author-it.com>.

For more information and to make a reservation, go to http://www.stewdc.org/prgm_career_mar04.shtml.

Save the Date!

Mark your calendars for these upcoming STC events:

- **Wednesday, September 1:** How to Submit an Award-Winning Entry to the Competitions
- **Wednesday, September 15:** Cascading Style Sheets: Learning the Basics (Part I)
- **Wednesday, September 29:** Cascading Style Sheets: Creating Layouts without Tables (Part II)
- **Wednesday, October 6:** Communicating With Older Audiences
- **Wednesday, October 20:** A Brief, Comprehensive Indexing Primer

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

Membership News

New Members Who Joined Between June 16, 2003 and August 15, 2004

Deborah Ann Moschkin	Bryn M. Myers	Jeffrey E. Levitan
Angela Rodriguez	Sarah Miller	Frederick Shultz
David M.R. Harris	Peter Nicoll	Pamela J. Sheary
Anna Santos-Lim	Sally Schehl	Nadine Benton
Viviana Villafane	Paul E. Gagnon	Brian Gudmundsson
Mark Luncher	Jennifer Harvey	DeAnne Hines
Nancy A. Mule	Raymond Lambert	Michael Steinfeld

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.

Member Totals

Total STC Members: 17,566
Total STC WDC Members: 636

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?

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

Dave Wright accepted a position at the Environmental Protection Agency's Office of Inspector General. The main task will be to design a writing course for the entire IG staff (of 350), then teach that course. Things moved very fast after an initial consultation less than 2 months ago; he started on Monday, August 9th.

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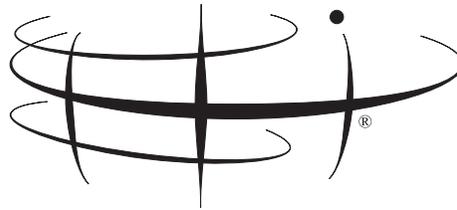
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(Continued from page 1)

of our drop in income, we found that many former members, for example, were unwilling to renew, because it meant paying for memberships that their companies had formerly covered. In short, although the economy moved the Board to act, what we found was that finances were merely a symptom of a greater problem—perceived member value. That's what the transformation is really about: Providing value that members want and need to develop professionally.

During our research, we confirmed something we already knew: Our industry and our members are incredibly diverse, with interests ranging from usability to editing, with skills and experience ranging from entry-level to senior, working in industries from financial to scientific, etc. We asked ourselves, "Can one Society really meet the needs and provide significant professional-development value in all of these areas and industries, to this entire range of people?" In answering this question, we confirmed something else we already knew: Our strength is in our "communities" what we currently call "chapters" and "SIGs." The Society does not provide direct value to members in any or all of these areas; instead, the Society provides infrastructure, mentoring, financial and administrative support, policy, etc., for those communities exist and flourish, providing member value indirectly through those communities. Unfortunately, the Society support for and representation of communities today and the members' experience across communities is inconsistent.

The bottom line

Members want value, and value means something different to each of us. For the Society to rebuild and increase its membership ranks, we

need to provide (among other things):

- Consistent, equitably supported and represented communities from which members will derive their personalized professional development value (through the Communities, Finance, and Governance initiatives)
- A flexible membership model (through the Membership initiative), enabling members to opt in and out of various services and community memberships to customize their professional development experience
- Rich content—education (through the Education initiative), knowledge base, research, intellectual property of all types—that provides depth of practice in member-identified practice areas (through the Communities initiative by supporting practice-based communities) and is readily accessed (through the Technology initiative)
- Richer opportunities to network, within and beyond geographies (through the Communities initiative by supporting geographic communities and brand new kinds of communities)

And we need to communicate information (through the Communication initiative) about the transformation, its initiatives, the changes and status of those, as well as solicit feedback from members and leaders around the Society, to ensure that we all understand our options, make informed choices and decisions, and implement the appropriate changes during the transformation process.

What we're doing about it: The transformation

Some of these needs are met through today's community success stories of which there are many! In our efforts to improve consistency and equality

of support and experiences across communities, we're not losing sight of those that are working; instead, we're building on the foundation of their successes... and planning to go a step further to provide even more to those communities to enhance their successes. For communities that are struggling, the support we will provide is designed to help, not hinder, their progress toward providing as much member value as possible.

The work to meet all of these needs is complex.... As we change our community support model to be more consistent, many changes are required in the financial, governance, and technology (infrastructure) areas, as well as the expected community policy changes.

We have a high-level roadmap that we're following, outlining what we need to do at a very high level similar to the bulleted items, above. We don't have all the answers. We still need your input and your help. Contact us at transform@stc.org to contribute to the transformation.

Myths and misinformation abound!

If you have heard of the transformation, you might be concerned about some misinformation circulating. Here are a few of the most tenacious myths... debunked. For answers to frequently asked questions and more corrections to misinformation, sign up for the Transformation News discussion group (via the Transformation Web page, <http://stc.org/transformation/.Default.asp>, available to STC members) to get notification when we add the frequently asked questions to the website.

- STC is not a chapter-based organization; it is a member-based organization, according to our Bylaws.

- The transformation is not about finances; it's about member value. Although the economic environment and STC's financial situation in that environment was a symptom that alerted us to the problem, the real issue was members' perception of the value of STC membership.
- The transformation is not about marginalizing, de-emphasizing, or eliminating chapters—large or small. Chapters are communities, just as SIGs are. The goal of the transformation is to equally support and represent all communities—chapters, SIGs, and new, currently undefined communities.
- We are not taking away any chapters' money. At a Transformation question and answer session on Leadership Day at the STC conference in May, John Nardone, our Transformation Consultant, mentioned the well-known fact that STC's chapters have a greater net worth than the Society, and he suggested that chapters with large reserves might want to volunteer to donate some of those reserves to the transformation effort. (Interesting tidbit: Some chapters have contacted me to volunteer to support the transformation financially.)
- The transformation was not instigated by STC's Washington, D.C.-based organization. STC's decision-making, policy-setting body is the Board of Directors, your elected representatives, who are volunteers and live and work around the world. STC's implementation and operations body is the paid staff at the STC Office, located in northern Virginia. Your elected Board of Directors voted to engage the transformation consultant (in May 2003) and to adopt the transformation roadmap (in January 2004) that the consultant and the initial transformation team proposed. The STC Office does not determine how money is spent; they implement dispersals based on STC Board decisions.

The current dues rebates that fund chapters are not part of the transformed financial model. The new financial model has not yet been developed. Until it is, the Board of Directors will continue with the chapter dues rebate process: According to STC Bylaws, each year the Board analyzes the current financial situation including the budget, membership renewals, conference income, etc. and determines an amount to rebate to chapters.

Advertise in this Newsletter

If you would like to advertise your business in our newsletter, please send a message to Pam Daily at news@stcwc.org. Please include your phone number in the message. Advertising rates are as follows: Full page—\$140, Half page—\$75, Quarter page—\$40, Business card—\$25. Discounts are available if the same ad runs in two or more issues within 6 months.

The Joy of Entering

by STC Washington, DC Chapter Member Melissa Brown

From September through December, STC chapters around the world hold local competitions for technical communication. These include Technical Art, Technical Publications, and Online Communication competitions. You can assign your entry to any of 6 Online Communication, 18 Technical Publications, and 17 Technical Art categories. The Technical Publications competition now accepts PDF entries in the appropriate content categories,

instead of the Online Communication competition. For details, see <http://www.stcwc.org/compete.shtml>.

Experts in the local area volunteer their time and expertise to judge in the competitions. Comments are provided to assist in future improvements of your entry. The local DC Chapter receives entries from all over the Washington DC area, including Pennsylvania and West Virginia. Some entries are received from foreign countries such

as Korea and Germany. This makes the DC chapter one of the largest competitions in the Society. The number of entries remains high primarily because entrants like you have pride of accomplishment, and want professional validation and insightful peer review.

- **Pride of Accomplishment.** You are proud of what you have accomplished. After months of planning, programming, writing, editing, and illustrating, the final product is the sum of hundreds of hours of effort.

It represents the very best you and your team have to offer.

- **Professional Validation.** Your expertise as a technical communicator is different than that of colleagues in other fields. This competition provides the rare opportunity for you, as a professional, to measure yourself against the highest standards in the industry and to receive both validation and insight into your work.
- **Insightful Peer Review.** The judges are all technical communication professionals with experience in publications, art, and online communication. Their experience coupled with the knowledge of the goals, processes, and standards of excellence in these areas give you

an impartial, thoughtful, and serious critique of your entries.

Technical communicators enjoy seeing what kind of work others in their field are doing. Therefore, you and other entrants have a chance to see the winning entries at the annual Chapter Awards Banquet in 2005. You may also find the banquet a great way to network within the community.

The Call for Entries is at <http://www.stcwdc.org/compete.shtml>. It details eligibility, submission requirements, competition categories, and entry instructions. Take the chance, submit an entry and discover the joy of entering. For additional information on

competitions, contact Melissa Brown at competitions@stcwdc.org or the links below.

Important Links

- **Competition Info:** <http://www.stcwdc.org/compete.shtml>
- **Entry Rules:** http://www.stcwdc.org/competition_entryrules.shtml

Important Dates

- **September 30, 2004:** Deadline for entries
- **January 15, 2005:** Award notification
- **February 5, 2005:** Awards Banquet
- **March 12-13, 2005:** International Competition

The Joy of Judging

by STC Washington, DC Chapter Member Melissa Brown

It's time again for the STC Washington, DC Chapter's annual Technical Art, Technical Publications, and Online Communication competitions. The area's finest examples of technical communication are submitted by STC members and non-members to these three competitions. That's right—the competitions are open to everyone, and STC membership is not a requirement. The Call for Entries is at <http://www.stcwdc.org/compete.shtml>. Entries must be submitted by September 30, 2004.

Who are the judges that evaluate the entries, where do they come from, and why do they do it? The answers to the first two questions are simple. The judges are professional communicators from the Washington DC area who have volunteered their time and talents to make these competitions possible. Why do they do it? There are probably as many

answers to that question as there are judges, but they all boil down to a single element: To take part in a gathering of professionals who share the same passion—technical communication.

On November 6, the judges assemble to receive their judging materials, evaluation packets, and instructions. Over coffee and breakfast fare, the judges introduce themselves to the other members of their judging team, take a preliminary look at the entries, and receive training from veteran judges on how to evaluate an entry. There is also the opportunity to greet old acquaintances, make new ones, and indulge in some good old-fashioned networking.

Over the next four weeks, judges peruse and examine the entries. New judges discover and experienced judges rediscover the joy of encountering excellence. This

excellence comes in many forms: the 4- and 16-color covers, posters, and brochures; bound hardcover books and magazines; training, marketing, and reference publications; and online Help systems, websites, and computer-based training systems. Nothing comes easily in both the production and judging of these materials, and this is where the hard part begins: determining the cream of the crop. This requires that the judges apply every bit of education, knowledge, and experience they have. In addition to completing the judging forms that detail their decisions to the entrants, they have to be able to support and defend their decisions at the consensus meeting.

On December 4, the judges come together for a consensus meeting. From breakfast through lunch, the judges discuss their decisions. Sometimes, entries speak for themselves and judges agree on the

ranking; however, there are times when the decision is not clear cut. This is where the judges take part in a debate of excellence. There are few opportunities when technical communicators can discuss at length and wax poetic on publication design, artistic interpretation, presentation of information, layout, and style quality. The consensus meeting is just the place for this type of discussion.

At the end of the meeting, judges have made their decisions and award levels have been determined. The Competition Committee begins the process of notifying the entrants of the award they may or may not have

received, and processing entries that will be entered into the STC International Competition. The judges leave with a definite sense of satisfaction. Not only is it a privilege to be trusted with the responsibility of judging their peers, but it is also a delightful experience to share their passion for technical communication. This is the joy that new judges learn, and the joy that keeps many experienced judges coming back year after year.

For those who are interested in learning first-hand about the joy of judging, apply to judge online at <http://www.stcfdc.org/judcall.shtml>

or contact the Judging Manager at compjudging@stcfdc.org.

Important Links

- **Judge Application:** http://www.stcfdc.org/judge_app_form.shtml
- **Judging Info:** <http://www.stcfdc.org/judcall.shtml>

Important Dates

- **September 30, 2004:** Deadline for judge applications
- **November 6, 2004:** Judges Training and Pickup competition packages
- **December 4, 2004:** Judges Consensus

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@stcfdc.org.

Speed Up Your Site: Web Site Optimization, by Andrew B. King

Reviewed by STC Washington, DC Chapter Member Eddie VanArsdall

Note: This review was published at <http://www.northeastbookreviews.com>.



Paperback: 528 pages
 Publisher: New Riders;
 1st edition
 (January 14, 2003)
 ISBN: 0735713243

The World Wide Web has undergone a significant evolution since Tim Berners-Lee proposed his “global hypertext project” in 1989. Many tools, scripting languages, design methods, and server management technologies have come and gone during the Web’s rapid rise to ubiquity. Enduring technologies continue to change at a frenetic pace.

During the Web’s novelty period users were more focused on the “wow” factor than the actual performance of the medium. We were astonished that we could so easily shop online, conduct research, entertain ourselves, and connect with other people. As more bandwidth became available, designers continued to try and dazzle us, pushing the limits of site design and adding more complexity. They served us big, beautiful (read: slow-loading) graphics, pop-up windows, gratuitous Flash movies, and other “cool” features.

Now the novelty period is over. We want information, and we want it quickly. As the opening sentence of Andrew B. (Andy) King’s *Speed Up*

Your Site: Web Site Optimization states, “People hate to wait” (p. 3). The back cover of the book bears a stern warning for site owners who sell products and services: “You have only a few seconds to get compelling content onto the screen. Fail, and you can kiss your customers and profits goodbye.”

Speed Up Your Site is a well-researched, comprehensive guide to website optimization (WSO). Andy King and his contributing authors are all specialists in optimization and data compression within their respective fields.

Written primarily for “intermediate to advanced designers and developers, and to anyone who wants

a competitive website” (p. xxiv), *Speed Up Your Site* is a unique combination of research and how-to information. A brief foreword by Jakob Nielsen encourages all Web designers to “Employ the optimization techniques you will learn in this book, and any website will grow its base of loyal users and paying customers” (p. xix).

Part I, “The Psychology of Performance”

In *Speed Up Your Site*, Part I, Chapter 1, “Response Time: Eight Seconds, Plus or Minus Two” uses footnoted research examples from the field of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) to prove that a website’s speed is the key factor to attracting customers and ensuring that they return. Brian Shackel’s Acceptability Paradigm (utility, usability, and likability) is used as a model for determining which factors influence users’ impressions of a site. The research of Dr. Ben Shneiderman is the basis for discussing the relationship between response time and user satisfaction.

King recommends that Web designers and developers do whatever they can to minimize such variability. Chapter 1 lists site performance goals and recommended load times. For example, since the majority of Web users are still using dialup connections, King suggests that “high-traffic” pages should load non-incrementally displayed content in eight seconds on a 56Kbps modem, with the most useful content appearing within two seconds (p. 11).

After making the case for optimization in Part I, Parts II through VI of *Speed Up Your Site* provide detailed techniques for optimizing code, images, and data. Each section culminates with a useful case study chapter,

showcasing a website that needs optimizing and applying the techniques discussed in the previous section chapters to improve the site. This review does not describe the case study chapters, since each one essentially uses examples from the section chapters that precede it.

Part II, “Optimizing Markup: HTML and XHTML”

Part II reminds us that “HTML optimization is the key for fast page display” (p. 42). Many Web design books teach rules for coding HTML but discuss optimization only for images and streaming media. *Speed Up Your Site* encourages designers to pay more attention to streamlining their code. Part II provides a detailed, 11-step method for reducing HTML bloat; explains how to optimize HTML tables and forms, abbreviate URLs, and apply HTML compression; and covers rules and conventions for HTML’s more exacting cousin, XHTML.

Web professionals may be surprised by some of King’s recommendations. He suggests removing white space and keeping comments sparse, stating that “most users don’t have to read your markup; they just want your information fast” (p. 45). He recommends that development teams maintain easy-to-read, well-commented pages and deploy a server script to remove comments and extraneous white space, delivering optimized versions of the same pages.

Part III, “DHTML Optimization: CSS and JavaScript”

In Part III, King continues to lobby for stripped-down markup. Designers can clean up CSS and JavaScript by reducing comments and white space. While Part III recommends site-wide linking of external style sheets (.css files) and JavaScript files (.js files) to improve

site caching, it also states that short embedded style declarations and small JavaScripts may sometimes minimize HTTP requests in high-traffic pages. Server administrators will simply have to test for efficiency.

The two CSS chapters (7 and 8) offer a wealth of optimization techniques. Chapter 7 encourages designers to take advantage of inheritance, using “simple selectors that are high in the document tree to set global and element-wide styles” (p. 165). Also, where possible, selectors that share the same declaration can be grouped. For example, if the first three heading levels are to appear in blue, a one-line declaration such as the following can be used: h1, h2, h3 {color:blue;}.

Speed Up Your Site specifies two approaches for optimizing JavaScript: optimizing for *download speed* (Chapter 9) and for *execution speed* (Chapter 10). A combination of the two may be used, depending on the purpose of the scripts.

Optimizing JavaScript for download speed is useful for such features as cascading menus. Some of the same techniques used for optimizing HTML and CSS still apply: reduce white space, reduce comments, and load scripts in external files. JavaScript offers much more flexibility for optimizing code, however, because it enables developers to abbreviate variable, function, and object names. Still, manually “crunching” code can be labor-intensive, and Chapter 9 lists several automated programs for accomplishing this purpose.

Part IV, “Graphics and Multimedia Optimization”

Part IV is devoted to balancing the visual aspects of site design with fast performance. Chapter 12, “Optimizing Web Graphics,”

assumes a basic knowledge of the Web's major graphic formats (JPEG, GIF, and PNG) and their recommended usage. This chapter recommends techniques for capturing, preparing, and correcting all types of images and then recommends different techniques for optimizing each type. The covered techniques include weighted optimization, minimization of bit-depth, indexed color, dithering, interlacing, and transparency. The challenge of these techniques is to minimize image file size while preserving image quality.

Optimizing the size and speed of multimedia files for the Web is an even greater challenge. CPU and connection speed determine how well a user's computer can handle streaming media, and many Web users have older equipment and slower connections.

In Chapter 13, "Minimizing Multimedia," author Jason Wolf introduces all of the major audio, video, and animation data types used on the Web, briefly describing the pros and cons of each. Wolf structures the chapter as both a multimedia primer and a tutorial for optimizing multimedia on the Web, with emphasis in the following areas:

- planning a multimedia project, including a project plan, audience analysis, limiting factors, and any potential copyright issues;
- using Codecs to compress and decompress video and audio files;
- using three delivery methods for video playback: streaming, progressive downloading, and "just plain" downloading (p. 296);

- shooting, optimizing, and compressing video; and
- optimizing Flash code and content.

Part V, "Search Engine Optimization"

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is a method of "raising search engine relevance to acquire relevant visitors" (p. 333). SEO is its own book-length topic, but it is presented here as a subset of WSO; optimizing keywords is an integral part of optimizing a website. In Chapter 15, "Keyword Optimization," King recommends that developers research keywords before developing a site and then structure the site around the keywords—even building keywords into the site's domain name.

Part VI, "Advanced Optimization Techniques"

Although most of the sections in *Speed Up Your Site* emphasize client-side techniques for site optimization, Part VI, "Advanced Optimization Techniques," covers server-side optimization and data compression.

Chapter 17, "Server-Side Techniques," encourages developers and administrators to "let the server do more of the work." Some of the featured optimization techniques use technologies that are pre-installed on servers, while others require administrator installation. Chapter 17 covers the following topics:

- using Server-Side Includes (SSIs) to add optimized dynamic content and minimize HTTP requests;
- creating browser-independent pages by using JSP, PHP, and eXtended Server-Side Includes

(XSSI) for browser detection techniques that use environment variables and conditional logic;

- using Apache's *mod_rewrite* module and other techniques for URL abbreviation and expansion; and
- optimizing forms and CGI scripts.

In Chapter 18, "Compressing the Web," Konstantin Balashov begins with a discussion of the major text compression algorithms used on the Web. A table on page 409 rates the efficiency ratio of each algorithm in bits per character (bpc).

The opening section on Content Compression explains how servers deliver compressed content to browsers and how browsers use content encoding to decompress the data. The following sections approach content compression from both the client side (HTML, CSS, and JavaScript) and the server side (static and dynamic compression techniques).

Summary

Speed Up Your Site is an essential reference book for all Web design and development teams. The book is packed with plenty of meaty content, code samples, effective case studies, lists of relevant websites, and lists of recommended reading material. Web teams may want to buy several copies; the book appeals to so many related disciplines that team members may hide it—or even fight over it.

For more information, visit Andy King's companion website at <http://www.websiteoptimization.com/speed/>.



SIGs Revealed

This column explores selected Special Interest Groups (SIGs) and discusses how you can benefit from joining one. If you have feedback or would like to write an article for this column, contact Jennifer Reed at jlreed4@aol.com.

JENNIFER REED, *Column Editor*

Disability Issues in Technical Communication

by STC Washington, DC Chapter Member Jennifer Reed

Maureen Hogg, Sr. Technical Editor, Communications Services, Ball Aerospace & Technologies Corporation

Maureen, who has been legally blind and deaf since the age of 14, is a senior technical editor with 23 years of experience in writing and editing materials for internal communications, marketing, and media relations. At the STC meeting, she demonstrated all the assistive technologies that have allowed her to communicate and perform her job since she started working for Ball Aerospace & Technologies Corporation.

According to Maureen, even though medical advances to aid her were only a few years beyond her reach, electronics took a quantum leap exactly when she needed it, with the development of integrated circuitry. Her basic means of communication with written material is with a device called the OPTACON, which converts visual images of print into tactile images of print. She sees tactilely exactly what any sighted person sees on the screen or on

printed material. Maureen's OPTACON has a small scanning camera with different lenses and settings for various materials. One of the problems was that Maureen can read Braille at 300 wpm (average reading speed for a sighted person), but the OPTACON had a maximum speed of 120 wpm.

The next breakthrough was refreshable Braille, an addition to the OPTACON technology called Super Braille. Maureen uses a standard laptop computer with an attached 40-character Braille pad, and special navigation bars. Instead of having to scan the screen with a small lens, which can be tedious, Maureen now commands the software to read the screen and display it in Braille. Different screen readers are available for different applications. Maureen uses JAWS for Internet Explorer, HAL for WORD and Window Eyes 4.11 for Adobe Acrobat.

Maureen topped off her presentation with her demonstration of "TC", her telephone communicator. Touch-tone electronics made the development of this device possible. It contains a

single Braille character pad at the front of a touch-tone phone. The combination of the *, 0, and # keys with one of the numbers 2 through 9 translates to a letter that transmits to the Braille pad. She demonstrated the system by making a phone call. The phone has a transmittal device similar to a pager that can act as a phone ring, fire alarm, and doorbell.

New technologies coming out for Braille readers are Palm Pilots with book readers and Internet access.

Maureen can be reached at mhogg@ball.com, although she stated that she is not an expert in the field of accessibility and just knows what works for her. She is also very busy at Ball and may not be able to get back to you immediately.

Although not a site with which Maureen is familiar, someone mentioned an Internet site concerning web accessibility issues: <http://www.w3.org>. Although this deals with many issues of web communications, user accessibility is one of the topics.



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 Handle the Psychological and Emotional Stress of Telecommuting

by STC Washington, DC Chapter Member Patricia Srinath

You convinced your boss or client that telecommuting is the way to go. Your office is decorated just the way you like it. You have a high-speed Internet connection, a VPN account, and email. You have achieved the perfect portrayal of the modern American writer. You may be writing an installation guide rather than *Gone with the Wind*, but who cares? This is as close to perfection as you are going to get in the 21st century. All you need is a sleeping dog at your feet, a pensive look on your face, or perhaps a view of an ocean or forest to make the picture complete.

After working for a few weeks from home, you start to feel sad and depressed. Instead of feeling like the Ernest Hemingway of technical writing, you are starting to exhibit characteristics similar to those of Jack Torrance in *The Shining*. Irritability replaces your initial enthusiasm. You feel angry when the doorbell or phone rings. Your spouse and kids are making you crazy with their interruptions. You can't write a cohesive sentence even if your life depended on it. Welcome to the world of telecommuting!

Although there are several advantages to telecommuting, working from home can be

psychologically stressful for several reasons. First of all, the absence of regular social interaction with friends and colleagues can be detrimental to our sense of well-being. Human beings, by nature, are social creatures. Taking away regular social interaction translates into feelings of loneliness and isolation. At the same time, the social interactions with the exterminator, nosy neighbor, telemarketer, and even our loved ones are unwelcome interruptions that distract us and decrease our productivity.

The blurring of the home and office environments is another cause of stress. You're in your office with the door closed, but it's virtually impossible to tune out the kids fighting in the other room. Can you overcome your feelings of guilt and keep working in spite of the clamor in the background?

Now that you have saved a couple of hours from not having to commute to work, you end up tied to the computer during that time and working more at home than you would in the office. While your colleagues are chatting at the water cooler, you are plugging away. You may be typing, "ALL WORK AND NO PLAY MAKES JACK A DULL BOY," over and over again on your

computer screen, but it is effort nonetheless.

In addition, your spouse may assume that your "extra" time will be used to run errands and do household chores. If the kids are sick, you are the obvious choice for watching them. You are home, right? These are all unfair assumptions. Your work is not less important than those who work in the office. Working from the home shouldn't automatically elect you the person responsible for everything. Juggling everything is not only overwhelming, it can burn you out quickly and make you a very angry and resentful person.

Can you battle the psychological stresses associated with telecommuting without having to fork over money for intense psychotherapy? There are several small steps you can take to become a happier, healthier telecommuter.

1. Clearly define the household roles and responsibilities.

To avoid confusion and potential arguments, sit down with your family to discuss what is expected of each and every family member. Make it clear that you cannot and will not do everything.

2. Communicate with your colleagues.

Call or email your colleagues regularly to keep the lines of communication open and foster a sense of sociability. It may not be the same as fact-to-face interaction, but it is better than nothing.

3. Visit or work at the office more regularly.

If five days a week at home is just more than you can take, make it a point to work in the office one to two days a week. This type of schedule will give you the social interaction you crave and, at the same time, keep you in the loop at work.

4. Use a cell phone or a separate phone line for your work activities.

If your goal is to separate your work life from your home life, a cell phone or a separate phone line used for work activities will ensure that only those people who really need to get a hold of you

will be calling you and allow you to ignore your home phone during the day.

5. Exercise.

Exercise is important for everyone, especially for the telecommuter. You sit like a blob in front of the computer screen for hours. Now, you don't even have to walk to and from your car, through the office building, to the public restroom, or the cafeteria. Exercise is not only good for your health; it is good for your mind. Exercise causes the release of endorphins, the body's natural painkillers, in your brain which have been shown to reduce stress, depression, and anxiety.

6. Vary your location or surroundings.

Sometimes, if your job permits, take your work to the local coffee shop or restaurant. A change of scenery and having people around may spark your creativity and actually increase your productivity.

7. Take a break.

Just because you work at home, doesn't mean that you are not entitled to an occasional break. Office workers take breaks all the time. You'll notice them chatting in the hallways or smoking cigarettes outside. Go for a 15-minute walk. Sit and do nothing. Call a friend. A break is just what you may need to approach your work with a fresh perspective.

8. Join a club.

Socializing with people who have similar interests or backgrounds may be just what the doctor ordered for the loneliness and isolation often felt by those who work at home.

There is no such thing as a perfect place to work, even if it is from your home. Addressing the drawbacks of telecommuting and trying to improve your working environment are the first steps in making it a worthwhile and rewarding endeavor.

Carolyn Kelley Klinger accepted a staff job with EMC/ Documentum. Documentum is a large content management company that EMC acquired earlier this year. Carolyn has been consulting to them since May 2003.