Home · Meeting · News · Columns · Resources · Archive

Ragged Left

March-April 2004
Volume 18 No. 2

The Monthly Newsletter for the Berkeley Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication

In this issue

Next Meeting
In April, Susan Becker and Gwaltney Mountford will demonstrate strategies for developing your own professional website.

News & Reviews
Before you experience election burn-out, read about the upcoming chapter elections in President Joe Devney's monthly column.

Think Weird and Prosper. Philisophical musings from Region 7 Director-Sponsor Rachel Anne Bailie. Clown nose optional. Just in—results from the Worst Manual Contest. The winning entry is from Region 8; hopefully it doesn't look too familiar to any of our members.

The region 8 conference is local this year. Mark your calendar for July 25-27, and join us in *Charting a Bold Course* at UC Davis. Full details, including the extension on the call for papers, can be found at the conference website.

Resources
For all of your obscure questions and some interactive dialogue with other technical communicators, join the STC Berkeley chapter's brand new discussion list.

This month we offer an assortment of great resources to enhance your skills. Lots of exciting programs happening at STC Chapters around the Bay Area and other groups closer to home, so don't miss this month's networking links.

Health Insurance through STC is back! Catch up on all the details of this valuable membership benefit. Speaking of membership. If you haven't renewed for 2004, there is still time to renew and vote in this year's elections, by visiting the STC site.

President's Message

STC Berkeley chapter *update*
Executive Committee

March-April 2004
President's Letter
Joe Devney

No Attack Ads, Please

I hope you haven't sworn off election news after the primary season, because I have some more. The annual elections for STC chapter leadership positions are coming up. For this one, you may consider becoming a candidate, and not just a spectator or a voter.

If you are a member of the Berkeley chapter, you get to vote in the election. But you also can choose to run for office, and I encourage you to do so. As a chapter officer, you will have more of a voice in what happens in the chapter, and become more aware of what is happening with STC at the regional and national levels. There may also be a career benefit for you: a chapter leadership position is a good thing to add to your resume.

There are several elected positions in the chapter, including my own. You can run for any of them, but there are two in particular I would like to mention: Chapter Secretary and Vice President for Membership. The two men who currently hold these positions are moving on because of changes in their professional lives. David McCoard, our long-time secretary, is changing his focus from technical writing to other kinds of writing; Rob Peterson, our VP-Membership plans to go to Australia on a Fulbright scholarship in June. I appreciate their past contributions to the chapter and wish them both well, but I have to be concerned about replacing them on the chapter board.

In fact, we have an urgent need to find a new Secretary. I can appoint one to fill out the remainder of David's term, which goes through the end of June. If you would like to step in for a few months instead of or in addition to running for the office, please e-mail me.

Chapter elections will be held in May. You will hear shortly from Richard Mateosian, our Elections Manager, with details about the elections. The officers' terms begin July 1. I hope we have a lot of candidates: contested elections would add excitement to chapter business.

Director Sponsor

STC Berkeley *update* region 8
board of directors

Think Weird and Prosper
Rahel Anne Bailie, STC Director/Sponsor for Region 7

Think Weird and Prosper. In the driver's side pocket of my car door, I keep a red clown nose, those foam bulbs you find in joke shops. I got it from a dynamic speaker who talked about giving ourselves permission to be an oddball, to shock people out of complacency by daring to be different. I don't use the nose all the time, but in the times I have, the nose has effectively deflected road rage (who can resist a middle-aged woman in a Jaguar with a red foam nose?), helped me make traffic maneuvers requiring the cooperation of an adjacent driver, and brought smiles to the drivers around me. It's weird, but a powerful tool.

Being weird, the outsider, the oddball, has never bothered me much. So you can see why I like this quote from Tom Peters: "The only way to effect true transformation in the workplace is to enlist the outliers in your organization to your cause. Find the weirdos and the freaks, offer support for the projects they're secretly pursuing, then get them to help you with your own revolutionary change ideas."

Part of the reason I like this quote is because I—and many other technical communicators—identify with being an "outlier" in an organization. TechComm has traditionally been seen as an outlying department. Until recently, we hadn't been seen as a group poised to help an organization go through "revolutionary change." But as the importance of good user experience takes hold, we are clarifying our license to contribute, and contribute in ways that the corporation has really thought of until now.

As I've discussed in previous columns, the global economic shift is pushing us to become contributors of value. To contribute value, we have to change the way we think about business and think about our skills.

Now, more than ever, we need to "think weird." Some may call it thinking outside the box. But that expression has become trite, and the inner bureaucrat has used that concept to promote bureaucratic thinking in new and different ways. That's not what I mean here. I mean, we have to think, weird. Embrace your inner clown (my apologies to past STC president, Mary Wise, who actually went to "clown school" before becoming a technical communicator) or your inner wildbrain (as coined by Dale Douten to describe certain types of people whose creative genius often goes unrecognized, and too often punished, in the workplace). Tap into ways of working, ways of managing, ways of being that shake up the hunker-down-till-the-economy- picks-up attitude we've taken on.

What would this look like in your professional life? What could this look like? Let me counter that with

conferences   *features*
guest writer
shared information   resources

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

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."

Home   ·   Meeting   ·   News   ·   Columns   ·   Resources   ·   Archive

Resources   employment   Tools   Classes
            networking   conferences   Books

Opportunities and articles to enhance your skills and job search.

Employment
It's a tight job market out there, so make sure that your resume gives you the competitive edge. Each month we offer free resume reviews before the monthly meeting. Book your appointment with our Employment Manager. STC Berkeley also operates a free job list, which you can sign up for.

Networking
It really is all about who you know. Networking is important tool in our industry. Before you head out to visit other chapters, visit our networking links to locate the opportunities. This month we found some new online resources as well. If you're tired of driving all over the Bay Area to network, the Silicon Valley Chapter has started some new online special interest groups (SIGs).

Education
Lambs to the Slaughter: Indexing for Tech Writers
The American Society of Indexers, SoCal Chapter

Presented by Maria Coughlin, president of Coughlin Indexing Services, Inc.
Date: Saturday, March 27, 2004, 11:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.
Place: CSUN University Club, Northridge (Los Angeles) CA
Price: $20 ASI members, $25 non-ASI members
The intended audience is the tech writer or any other person not temperamentally inclined or professionally trained to be an indexer, but who is forced to index (particularly technical documents).

The course includes:

- definition of an index, including what an index is not
- why indexes are important
- what makes a good index
- what goes in the index
- the indexing process, step by step

Attendees will be given lists of tools and resources and hands-on experience, including opportunities to evaluate published indexes as well as to compile a sample index from a technical document.

Networking

resources · meetings · workshops · seminars · classes

STC Chapter Meetings and related groups in Northern California

Visiting other chapter meetings is a great way to expand your knowledge and networking circle. Click the chapter links below for more information on the program, times, and directions for each meeting.

Note: Some chapters rearrange meetings, so check the website for the latest information.

STC Sacramento Chapter meets the first Wednesday of every month at the Sacramento Chateau by A Shot of Class.

STC East Bay Chapter meets the first Thursday at the Crow Canyon Country Club in Danville.

STC San Francisco Chapter meets the third Wednesday of every month in downtown San Francisco.

STC North Bay Chapter meets the third Thursday of each month at Symmetricom, Inc. in Santa Rosa. Check the website for the most up to date information.

STC Silicon Valley Chapter Meets the fourth Thursday of every month in Sunnyvale, and a second monthly meeting in Santa Cruz. Check website for details.

Bay Area Editors' Forum Meets at the Mechanics' Institute, 57 Post Street, San Francisco. The meeting date varies, so visit their website for the most up-to-date information.

East Bay Editor's Guild

Meets at the Rockridge Branch of the Oakland Public Library, 5366 College Avenue, Oakland. Date varies. For more detailed information, contact Co-Program Director Alana Laurence Inugau.

Fuel Efficient Networking

If you're tired of driving all over the Bay Area to network, the Silicon Valley Chapter has started some new online special interest groups (SIGs).

conferences   *features*
guest writer
shared information   resources

Members-only Resource Available
One of the benefits of STC membership is access to Health Insurance.

The new health insurance program gives STC members have a number of options:

- Those who value "freedom of choice" may enroll in the Major Medical Plan (Traditional).
- Those who prefer to choose from a prepared list of doctors and facilities may enroll in a Preferred Provider Option (PPO).

STC also offers self-employed members and small businesses the following options:

- Medical Savings Account (MSA).
- Health Maintenance Organization (HMO).

To help STC members with their decision process, a website has been posted.

In addition, STC members may enjoy discounts on disability coverage, critical illness insurance, life insurance, long term care insurance and pension plans. Information about these insurance options can be found at Mutual of Omaha. If you've got questions about the insurance options and discounts offered to STC members, please email the STC office or call (703) 522-4114.

conferences
guest writer features
shared information resources

New Sigs from the Silicon Valley

Job Hunt SIG
Are you interested in topics related to job hunting? The newly formed Job Hunt SIG offers a forum for writers to discuss all aspects of the Job Hunt and allows Writing Recruiters, Hiring Managers, and Job Seekers to mingle, offer or seek jobs, and get advice from a professional writing recruiter. The Job Hunt SIG offers you a unique opportunity to network with your peers and share frustrations, achievements, experiences, and advice related to job hunting. Online Discussion Group

To join the Job Hunt SIG online discussion group, click here to enter your email address.

SVC Technical/API SIG
This group deals with all the TECHNICAL aspects of a Technical Communicator's job. It offers discussion, tips, tricks, and support for such technical areas as programming, programming languages, coding examples, scripting, APIs, Java, XML, Javascript, networking protocols, and so on. Online Discussion Group

To join the Technical/API SIG online discussion group, click here to enter your email address.

SVC Tools SIG
Are you interested in topics related to Technical Communication Tools? The newly formed Tools SIG offers a forum for writers to discuss topics related to all aspects of Technical Communication Tools and offers tips, tricks, and support for such tools as FrameMaker, RoboHelp, Web Works, and so on. The Tools SIG offers you a unique opportunity to network with your peers and share frustrations, achievements, experiences, and advice related to Technical Communication Tools. Online Discussion Group

To join the Tools SIG online discussion group, click here to enter your email address.