

April 1998

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Knowledge Management Presents New Opportunities

Why Technical Communicators Will Never Lack Jobs

Shannon Thurman—President

There was a time several years ago when fear struck the heart of many a technical writer. It was a time when the words "online communication" began to be bandied about.

Many dire predictions were made:

- Paper documentation will be a thing of the past.
- No one will read user guides; they'll get their answers from online help files.
- Publishing will cease to exist as we know it.
- Technical writers won't be needed; it will be cheaper to hire computer specialists.

It was an experimental time. We scanned text, worked with help system tools, dumped entire manuals online, used Acrobat and other tools to create online documents with hypertext links.

We discovered several things. Humans cannot read as well from a computer screen as they can from a book. There are many readability issues that encompass layout, colors, fonts, and chunking text. Issues that editors had been screaming about for years were now big online issues as well—such as using active voice,

getting to the point right away, writing concisely, and paying attention to consistency. It was clear that technical writing jobs were not going away. There were new skills to focus on and new areas to specialize in. We could write and edit online for this new medium. We could also perform usability tests on online documents and systems to see how to better design them for users.

M E E T I N G I N F O

What: Award Winning Publications

Where: Deloitte & Touche [directions on back]

When: Tues. Apr. 14, 6 pm

Then, of course, the Web arrived in all its glory and made conciseness in online writing an imperative (that is, if you want someone to actually read

your Web pages). And in its wake, there are more jobs for technical communicators than ever before. Documents that might have worked on paper won't work for the Web, and it takes experienced technical writers, editors, and designers to create a truly usable Website.

So now there's knowledge management.... It turns out that, with the advent of all the wonderful technology that has proliferated in the past fifteen years, companies that wish to remain successful and keep their competitive advantage must learn to leverage their knowledge base.

Who's got the knowledge? People have the knowledge, and people are the most important asset a company can have. And there are two kinds of knowledge: explicit and tacit. Explicit knowledge is recorded in documents, processes, and databases. Tacit knowledge is the information and know-how that is floating inside the heads of employees.

So, what's a technical communicator to do? If your company is interested in leveraging the benefits that are endemic to knowledge management, the answer is: strategize, interview, and capture as much of the tacit knowledge as possible so that it can be preserved in an explicit form. Naturally, this means that there's going to be gazillions of documents (both paper and online) that will need to be recorded in a concise and readable way.

It's true that modern technology changes by the millisecond, but the one thing that never changes is this: As long as there are human beings, there will be a need for good communication. From creating paper to writing online to managing knowledge, the work is still there and growing. Maybe in the twenty-first century, we'll have another fear: that there won't be enough technical communicators to do the job. ■

Come to the Competition Extravaganza!

Chapter Wins Several Awards

The theme for April's meeting will be STC competitions (see back page for directions to meeting). Many of us know that STC sponsors technical publications competitions. But there are also competitions for online, video, technical art, public relations, newsletter, journal article, and several student categories. This month, we'll focus on three categories: technical publications, online, and newsletter.

First, we'll talk about technical publications. Kathy Collins and Margie Myers, two of the managers for last year's competition, will tell us about the process that we followed. The winning entries from this competition will be displayed, including Best of Show, which was won by members of our chapter!

Then, Greg Hinkle has offered to give us a brief introduction to the world of online competitions. A copy of Deloitte & Touche's winning entry to last year's international competition will be

available for viewing.

Finally, did you know that our newsletter, *Com•mu•ni•qué*, has won an award in the international newsletter competition? Jim Giordano, *Com•mu•ni•qué*'s editor, will be on hand to tell us a

little about the competition and to show us the winning entry.

By the way, if you are interested in competitions, or any other facet of STC life, check out STC's web site at www.stc.org. There's a wealth of information!

The Job Bank

Technical Writer
Square D Company
Nashville, TN

Square D, an electrical equipment manufacturer, has an opening for a technical writer for the Product Information Organization at its Nashville facility.

This position will write and edit instruction bulletins and product selection guides for low and medium voltage electrical equipment. The ability to manage document projects outsourced to vendors such as writers, photographers, translators, and service bureaus is required.

The successful applicant will have strong project management and analytical skills, the ability to handle multiple projects, and work closely with engineering and product management personnel.

Interested candidates must have a bachelor's degree and three or more years experience writing and editing technical documentation for hardware or equipment. Experience with FrameMaker, Illustrator, and Photoshop is desired. Lotus Notes experience is helpful.

Send your resume to:

Tom Fix
Square D Company
330 Weakley Lane
Smyrna, TN 37167

Communiqué—c/o Shannon Thurman, President, 4022 Sells Drive, Hermitage, TN 37076.

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Submissions are welcome in hard copy or as an e-mail attachment (preferred method). Send to: Jim Giordano, Square D Company, 295 Tech Park Drive, Suite 100, LaVergne, TN 37086. E-mail giordanj@squared.com.

Colophon—This document was designed by Jim Giordano and created using Adobe Pagemaker 6.5 on a Macintosh. Fonts used include Century Gothic for body copy and headlines, and Adobe Garamond for deck heads and the Communiqué nameplate.

Regional News and Views

From the Region 3 Director/Sponsor

Michelle Ratcliffe: Director/Sponsor

STC's Annual Conference, May 17-20, 1998, is in Anaheim, California. I considered making the previous sentence the whole column, but thought it best to elaborate. This event gathers more than 3000 technical communicators for four days to share, learn, and explore the trends, issues, and challenges in our profession. There are hundreds of sessions, thousands of ideas, and millions of opportunities to grow. This year, there is even a bet that we will hit the 4000 attendee mark. I am counting down the days and I really hope to see you there! Make sure to check the program for the Region 3 reception to which you are all invited. Don't miss our celebration - we have lots to celebrate. For conference registration and program information, you can contact the Society office in Arlington, VA, 703-522-4114.

In addition to marking the calendar in my countdown to the conference, I have had the opportunity to visit more Region 3 members. In February, I had to go to Nashville—the home of the Middle Tennessee chapter—on business. Although I was only able to give Chapter President Shannon Thurman two days notice, she

mobilized the network and arranged a wonderful lunch get-together with about 15 attendees. I am in awe of the last minute planning ability and the active schedule of this group. Among other things, they just launched their new web site and it is really terrific. You can find it in the Region 3 section on stc.org. Also on this visit, we found a volunteer for IOCC judging. A last minute cancellation caused the need, and Greg Hinkle stepped up to the plate. I really enjoyed the visit and greatly appreciated the flexible and enthusiastic hospitality of the Middle Tennessee chapter.

My other visit was closer to home. In January, the Suncoast chapter met at the Ringling School of Fine Arts in Sarasota. The presentation was made by the president of the school, who profiled the computer animation program. I must tell you that this was a phenomenal chance to see the results of very in depth animation development and how this technology and technique is applied to various communication platforms, including technical communication. I almost "changed my major" and had to fight off the urge to quit and become an animation student.

I happily discovered their continuing education program and plan to take a few seminars in the fall. I thought it interesting that there was also a mention of expanding those types of services, including tailoring programs to the needs of groups such as writers in the field of technical communication. For additional information, you can contact Karen Bachmann, Suncoast chapter president.

Once again, I hope to see you in Anaheim! If you plan to go, please let me know and please try to attend the STC leadership day on Sunday and the Region 3 reception (details coming to a final program near you). ■

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Deloitte & Touche
4022 SELLS DRIVE, HERMITAGE.

Directions From Downtown: East on I-40 toward Knoxville. Get off at the Old Hickory Boulevard exit, which is just past the Hermitage exit. Turn right onto Old Hickory Boulevard and take the first left, which is Sells Drive. Drive around the building to the back parking lot. Someone will let you in.

There is no charge for the meeting, and nonmembers are welcome.

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