

Take charge of your career, panel urges

By Pam Livingston

Co-Editor, *Communiqué*

Technical communication is a new and evolving discipline that requires technical communicators to frequently assess and update their skills to stay marketable and perform successfully on the job, a panel of experts told attendees at the Middle Tennessee chapter's October 26 meeting.

The seven-member panel included representatives from local businesses that recruit, place, or outsource technical communicators, as well as career counselors representing the public and private sector.

"We're looking for an entirely different set of skills than we did 10 years ago," said panelist Mark Gibbs, a technical documentation manager for product information at Square D Company.

Gibbs said that 10 years ago Square D sought technical communicators with backgrounds in publishing. Now, it looks for technical communicators with experience in Lotus Notes and Web page design.

Panelist Wendy Miller, director of recruiting at the Deloitte & Touche PracticeServiceCenter in Hermitage, said her internal clients are less interested in specific technical skills than in demonstrated talent.

Miller and other panelists identified several "soft skills" that are essential to the career success of a technical communicator. These include analytical and critical

thinking, adaptability and flexibility, and a sense of business. Most important: a technical communicator should be able to write well.

"Certain things are never going to change," said panelist Jane Callahan, a D&T recruiter. A technical communicator at minimum must be able to capture technical information and produce documentation that is accurate and easy to understand, Callahan said.

D&T recruiters are developing core competencies for technical communicators and other personnel seeking positions with the firm, she said. Recruiters conduct a behavioral interview to assess competencies such as flexibility and ability to deal with ambiguity.

Callahan said D&T can teach software applications, but the soft skills "are more difficult to teach."

Gibbs said technical communicators seeking a permanent position with Square D should have both soft and hard skills. However, there is a difference between skill requirements for candidates seeking permanent employment and those seeking positions as contractors. Candidates for permanent positions at Square D must demonstrate proficiency in at least one of the main software packages the company uses. Candidates for contract positions, however, must be experts.

"They've got to hit the ground running," Gibbs said. Some of the contractors Square D hired in the past



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President's Letter

Of technology and tradition

I was thrilled recently to take my 2 ½-year-old daughter, Alexis, to Reelfoot Lake for the weekend.

I had gathered together all of my technical gear for camping and paddling, including Polar Fleece clothing, Gortex rain coat, self-inflating mattresses, self-igniting lanterns, and my competition-class canoe. The last item I loaded was the canoe, which was made by Dagger, a company in East Tennessee that layers space age materials

on a laser-designed mold to create a perfectly hydrodynamic canoe. Alexis and I headed out one Friday after work.

The morning following our arrival, we broke camp and launched into the swampy northern end of the lake. I paddled joyfully amidst cypress knees and lily pads,

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STC Conferences

Region 6

Dec. 3-4, 1999

The STC India Chapter is holding its first annual conference at Hotel Le Meridien, Bangalore, India.

For more information, visit www.stc.org/region6/india/index.htm.

Contact information: Anupama A anu_al@verifone.com

STC Annual Conference

May 21-24, 2000

STC's 47th Annual Conference

Orlando, FL. For information, visit the STC Web site at www.stc.va.org.

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SCHOLARSHIP APPLICATIONS

AVAILABLE

STC offers scholarships to full-time graduate and undergraduate students pursuing careers in technical communication.

Fourteen awards of \$2,500 each will be granted for academic year 2000-2001.

Application deadline is Feb. 12

Application forms and instructions are available from the STC office:

901 N. Stuart Street, Suite 904

Communiqué—c/o Tim Hunter, president, 1010 Airpark Center Drive, Nashville, TN 37217

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Submissions are welcome in hard copy, on disk, or via e-mail. Send hard copy or 3.5" disk submissions to Ed Gregory, c/o Deloitte & Touche LLP, 4022 Sells Drive, Hermitage, TN 37076-2903. Send email submissions to edgregory@home.com or p.livingston@home.com.

Colophon—This document was created with Microsoft Word™, Adobe Pagemaker™, and Adobe Photoshop™. It was printed at the facilities of Deloitte & Touche PracticeServiceCenter in Hermitage, TN.

A taste of teaching for practicing technical communicators

Practicing technical communicators can try their hand at teaching—with a little help from STC's new teaching fellowship program.

Under the program, STC will award stipends to technical communicators so that they can take on short-term teaching assignments. The goals of this program are to promote positive academe and industry

connections, and to enable practitioners to help in the education and training of future technical communicators.

Fellowships last a minimum of one academic quarter or semester. Two teaching fellowships of \$2,000 each are available for award. The stipend is paid directly to the practitioner in installments. The first payment comes at the midpoint of

the fellowship. The second payment comes after the fellowship has been completed and a final report is submitted by the practitioner.

To see more information about the fellowship program, including contact information and deadlines for applying, please visit the STC office Web site at www.stc-va.org.

Career development: Do-it-yourself or ask the boss?

Continued from page 1

oversold their software expertise, Gibbs said, which cost the company time and money. Square D now asks very specific questions of contractors to be certain they have the technical proficiency necessary to do the job.

Gibbs said that candidates seeking permanent positions with his company should have a four-year degree and at least three years of experience in technical communications. Candidates should also have the requisite soft skills.

Deloitte & Touche wants candidates with consultative as well as technical skills, Miller said. Candidates also must be able to learn quickly, take their knowledge to higher levels, and share their knowledge with colleagues, she said.

D&T uses team interviews that encourage thorough assessment by both the firm and the candidate.

Miller said technical communicators seeking to understand and improve their skill sets should seek the aid of an associate or mentor.

"Determine what it is that you are wanting to expand on and choose an expert to help you expand in that area," she said.

Panelists offered several views on the role of mentoring in a technical communications.

Callahan said mentoring offers stability to technical communicators new to the field.

Mark Marshall, the new vice president of operations at Tanner Corporate Services, said mentoring benefits

both the employer and the employee.

The new employee receives information that's going to help him or her be successful on the job, he said, and the company receives a more significant contribution from the employee.

Gibbs said mentoring requires a stable, long-term relationship between the participants that is no longer the norm in today's environment of flexible teams and careers.

Panelists agreed that taking personal responsibility in seeking out short-term on-the-job guides is important to survival and growth.

Richard Smothers, a career planner at the state-run Middle Tennessee Career Center, said self-reliance is the key to any successful career.

"You've got to have a game plan. You've got to network with people for information—to find out what's going on the field, to find out what knowledge and skills you are going to have to acquire."

Smothers and panelist Linda Bird, of the local consulting firm Career Resources, said the new field of professional career coaching is a growing alternative to traditional mentoring.

Hiring a career coach is similar to hiring a personal trainer for physical fitness and athletic skills, Bird said. Although a paid coach might not have technical expertise in a specific career field, the coach can help clients discuss other steps technical communicators can take to manage their own careers.

*"You have got to have a game plan...to find out what knowledge and skills you are going to have to acquire."
—Richard Smothers*

Sometimes, technology takes a back seat to tradition

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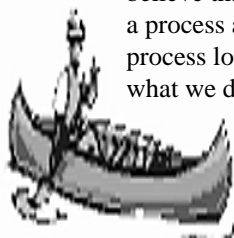
thankful that Alexis was happy. After about an hour of paddling, we found an antique, hand-made, wooden chair that had washed up and settled on a bog. The chair resembled an Adirondack chair, but was smaller and made with thinner wood. It appeared to have been made for my canoe. We confiscated it.

To my amazement, my Alexis claimed the chair as hers immediately, and insisted upon sitting in it. We paddled another hour and a half, and she sat in the chair the entire time. As we paddled, I mused that in the midst of all of this high-tech gear, this relic was not only useful, but was seemingly more comfortable and stable than the modern canoe seats. It even added a classic charm to the look and feel of my canoe.

In the same way that my canoe's modern design has added to the performance of my paddling, computers, the Internet, and all of the tools associated with them, have added new dimensions to technical writing. Writers have advanced their productivity and capability. People from diverse educational backgrounds are becoming technical writers, which, I

believe, is a result partially of the widespread availability of technical tools.

In the midst of all this high-tech equipment, where writers must develop new skills constantly, learn new software packages, and become information designers, it is natural to overlook, and possibly even neglect, the fundamentals of writing. I believe that the art of breaking down a process and disseminating that process logically is still the core of what we do as technical



communicators. We are that wooden chair in a competition-class, polymer composite canoe.

We should not neglect modernization. After all, we *are* "technical" communicators. The U.S. Postal Service has been delivering mail since before Ben Franklin was appointed Deputy Postmaster-General in 1737. Over the years, the USPS has had to keep with the times. To remain competitive, the

USPS adopted overnight service when FedEx competed for their business. Now, the USPS offers e-mail delivery. Their methods have changed, but they're still delivering mail [for more information about USPS change, see *InternetWeek*, 10/25/99, "From Snail Mail to Address Databases," by Tim Wilson].

I believe technical communicators need to brush up constantly on rudimentary writing skills, and treat them with equal importance to technical tool training (I would like to see our national STC conferences do the same). This will help us maintain an even keel of quality writing and the delivery of user/installer assistance.

The September issue of *The Editorial Eye*, which "focuses on publications standards, practices, and trends," provided some powerful Web resources for writers. Happy surfing, or should I say "paddling"?

Regards,
Tim

Writing Resources on the Web

<http://www.thescratchingpost.com/wordsmithshop/writing.html>

<http://www.useit.com/papers/webwriting>

<http://www.sharpwriter.com/>

Wanted: Newsletter competition judges

Judging in the newsletter competition is one of the most rewarding ways to participate in STC. Plus, judges for this competition will have an opportunity to evaluate some of STC's best chapter, student chapter, and SIG newsletters!

Checklist for 1999-2000 STC Newsletter Competition

Judges:

- ✓ Have you earned an award in an STC Newsletter Competition?
- ✓ Are you interested in evaluating the design and editorial quality of STC newsletters?

- ✓ Are you available for judging during the month of February?

If you answered "yes" to these questions, the national newsletter competition manager would like to hear from you. The deadline for submitting applications is January 5, 2000.

Contact:
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STC Newsletter Competition
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(314) 514-7347

Information sharing critical to survival, expert says

By Pam Livingston
Co-Editor, *Communiqué*

The 23rd Annual Practical Conference on Communication, held Oct. 15-16 in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, provided a wealth of information to technical communicators seeking to stay current with industry standards.

Judith Glick-Smith, STC second vice president and president/CEO of Integrated Documentation, Inc., of Dallas, Texas, told the audience of about 50 participants that technical communicators, whether they know it or not, are involved in knowledge management.

The information that technical communicators capture in documentation codifies tacit knowledge, allowing it to be shared throughout an organization, Glick-Smith said. Sharing knowledge is critical to an organization's adaptation, survival, and competence, she said. It ensures that timely, accurate information is available to those who need it. More important, it helps organizations to unlearn as fast as they relearn, allowing them to turn on a dime.

Technical communicators can help manage knowledge more effectively, she said, by taking a systematic approach to knowledge capture. This approach includes the following steps:

- * Identify and acquire
- * Organize and codify
- * Disseminate
- * Absorb and create new knowledge
- * Measure performance

Other presenters focused on the technology used in delivering high-tech methods for disseminating information.

Lisa Pappas, senior technical writer for VERITAS Software of Durham, North Carolina, and Karie Cook, senior technical consultant for Interleaf e-Publishing of Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, said XML will have big impact on online documentation and will help busi-

nesses stay competitive.

XML offers a key advantage over HTML, they said, in that it allows for quick adaptation to business needs. XML allows information to be changed quickly and to be reused in stored, indexed content modules. Businesses can update price listings on their Web pages on the day of the change, and can save time and money in document preparation by reusing existing content.

Donna McLean, of CSC Global PeopleSoft Practice in Madison, Alabama, discussed the advantages of computer-based training and online documentation over traditional methods. CBT and online documentation allow trainees to remain on the job and learn at their own pace, minimizing disruption to trainees and costs to the businesses paying for training.

Members in the news

Marianne Broyles, a technical writer at Deloitte & Touche recently joined the ranks of the STC Middle Tennessee chapter.

She joined Deloitte & Touche in June. She previously worked as a proofreader for Archer/Malmo Advertising in Memphis and as a freelance medical writer for Methodist Healthcare.



Marianne, a published poet, received her B.A. in creative writing from Emory University in 1992 and an M.A. in technical and creative writing from the University of Memphis in 1997.

* * *

Ed Gregory, co-editor of the *Communiqué*, is now a full-time member of the writing team at Deloitte & Touche. He was a contract writer at D&T, under the auspices of Tanner Corporate Services, for the past year. Most of his professional career was spent writing about business and technology for *The Tennessean*.

Editor's Note: If you have news about any member or friend of STC, contact a board member or the editors of *Communiqué*.

Indexing seminar to be delivered globally via telephone

In January, 2000, STC will offer a two-part telephone seminar on indexing technical documentation. Telephone seminars are conducted like conference calls or talk radio programs.

Part one of the seminar will be held Wednesday, January 12, from 12-1:30 p.m. (CST). Part two will be held Wednesday, January 26, from 12-1:30 p.m. (CST).

Part one of the seminar will cover the basics of indexing, such as reasons for indexing, what to index, and index entry and embedded indexing. Part two will focus on indexing with Word and FrameMaker.

The seminar will be hosted

by Peg Mauer, manager of STC's Indexing SIG, and the past president of the western NY state chapter of the American Society of Indexers (ASI.) Mauer has served on the ASI board of directors. She has received eight awards from STC for technical manuals she has written or indexed, and an STC award for her Web site: www.communication-link.com.

Telephone seminars are a cost-effective way to train groups of technical communicators. There are no travel costs, arrangements, or hassles.

The cost of the telephone seminar is per participating site, not per person. So, you can train as many people as your

conference room can hold for one flat rate. The cost, which covers both parts of this seminar, is \$250 for US sites, \$280 for Canadian sites, and \$394 for sites outside North America.

Participants connect via an 800 number. However, an additional \$8 will be charged for registrations received less than five days before the first part of the seminar.

For more information about STC's telephone seminar on indexing technical documentation, see the December 1999 issue of *Intercom*, or visit the STC office Web site at www.stc-va.org.

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