

2001 FTCC Sponsor

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Why Should You Belong to a Special Interest Group?

By Lou Martindale

What is a Special Interest Group (SIG)? A SIG is composed of STC members who have common interests and experiences and who want to share their knowledge and skills with others while keeping up to date with the latest trends and developments in their field. There are Society-level SIGs and chapter-level SIGs. The Suncoast chapter does not have chapter-level SIGs, but we do have several members who belong to various Society-level SIGs.

In a previous issue of *WriteUp*, I wrote about the Lone Writers SIG, which is just one of many. Did you know that there are currently 20 SIGs listed on the Society SIG Web page? The list begins with Canadian Interests and ends with Usability. In between are others such as Consulting and Independent Contractors, Emerging Technologies, Indexing, Marketing Communication, and Technical Editing.

There is a SIG for almost every technical communication interest. If you have an interest that does not have a SIG, why not start one? The information needed to form a SIG at either the chapter-level or Society-level can be found on the Society SIG Web page. To reach the Web page, go to <http://www.stc.org> and select **STC SIG Info** from the drop-down box on the left side of the page.

What can you expect from a Society-level SIG? The answer to that question is as varied as the SIGs themselves. All Society-level SIGs have a manager. Like managers everywhere, the manager oversees the operation of the SIG and any activities it might undertake. The Society SIG Web page contains a section that provides guidance for SIG managers.

Most SIGs have a Web site, which can be reached via links on the main Society SIG page. Just browsing the different SIG sites can be a source of education and inspiration. There are as many different styles and approaches to distributing information as there are SIGs. I encourage you to browse the SIG Web sites.

Some SIGs provide a list of links on their Web site to relevant Web sites for additional resources. One SIG has a list of member profiles. Some have a list of upcoming events that would be of interest to SIG members.

(Continued. See SIGs on page 3)

WriteUp Details

Co-Editors

Phyllis Hunt: (727) 593-9250

E-mail: irbeach@concentric.net

Lisa Ronso Schmeling: (813) 661-0352

E-mail: Ironso@tampabay.rr.com

WriteUp communicates Suncoast chapter and Society news six times per year for the benefit of members and friends of the Suncoast chapter of the Society for Technical Communication (STC).

Submissions

Meeting writeups, feature articles, and software/book reviews are encouraged (100-700 words). Preferred formats include MS Word e-mail attachment or text in the body of your e-mail message. All submissions are subject to editing.

Reprints

Advance permission is not needed to reprint articles from WriteUp in STC newsletters. Please credit the author and publication, and send a copy to the WriteUp editors.

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Suncoast Chapter Staff

President—Laura McGrover: mmcgrov1@gte.net

Vice President, Programs—

Colleen Adams: colleen_a2@verifone.com

Vice President, Correspondence—

Pam Tremé: pamela.treme@geac.com

Secretary—Lou Martindale: lou@pdma.com

Treasurer—Mark Lewis: malewis@hyperwriters.com

Area Program Coordinator—

Heidi Kelchner: kelchner@tampabay.rr.com

Region 3 Director-Sponsor—

Rob Houser: rob@userfirst.net

Membership Manager—

Shannon Cochran: smc@netwolves.com

Database Manager—

Dave Lewis: david_lewis@tvratings.com

Webmaster—Nancy Reach: reach@worldnet.att.net



Phyllis Hunt

From the Editors



Lisa Ronso Schmeling

Taking Part in Your Chapter

We invite you to take an active role in the chapter by contributing articles to the newsletter. Writing articles for the newsletter is an excellent way to share your knowledge with others. (And it doesn't hurt to list published articles on your resume either.)

- Attending a chapter meeting? Contact the Editors to find out if anyone is writing a meeting recap.
- Have knowledge about a topic in technical communication? Offer to write an article.
- Using a software product that you want to tell others about? Contact the Editors and write a review.
- Read a particularly relevant book recently? Write an article!

STC Membership Updates

Society as of 3/28/2002

Total Region 3 members	1,441
Suncoast chapter members	133
Total STC members	17,951
Members residing in the U.S.	15,583
Members residing in Canada	1,555
Members residing elsewhere	813
Total chapters*	151

*Includes 32 student chapters

STC Contact Details

Society for Technical Communication
901 N. Stuart St., #904
Arlington, VA 22203-1822
(703) 522-4114
E-mail: stc@stc-va.org

Society: <http://www.stc.org/>

Region 3: <http://www.stcregion.org/region3>

Suncoast: <http://www.stc-southeast.org/suncoast>



Help System Maintenance

By Jim Sands, Chicago STC

Printed vs. Online Documentation

Perhaps you've been thinking about incorporating online documentation into your deliverable strategy, but you're not really sure that you want to go there yet. How do you decide? What are the most cost-effective reasons for making the switch? Although every situation is unique, here are a few factors to consider.

How often does your printed documentation change? Documents that change frequently or that are related to software applications are prime candidates for online documentation, especially if they contain a large number of cross-references.

How many printed manuals do you produce? Users become quickly frustrated with large or multibinder documents, especially when supplements need to be added every month. If your users think that the manuals have become too cumbersome, it's probably time to switch to online.

How many locations do you have to deliver printed documentation to? Do you deliver to multiple domestic or overseas locations? Production issues relating to multiple locations can become very expensive, especially if frequent updates are necessary. Updates to online documentation can be released rapidly and electronically.

Still Undecided?

1. Do you want your documentation to be context-sensitive where the user is able to get instant information about the task that they're performing?
2. Do you want to distribute updates over the Web?
3. Do you want navigational elements that allow users to jump quickly back and forth between related pieces of information, with backward and forward capability?
4. Do you want to reuse portions of your documentation across several deliverables?

If you answered yes to any of the last four questions, this is probably the time to make the move to online documentation.

Next Month

I'll discuss some additional things to consider before you go to online documentation.

Have a Question About Help?

Jim Sands is an independent Help consultant and welcomes your questions and comments. Send questions via <http://www.help101.org>, jsands@help101.org, or call (847) 918-8761. All questions will be answered in *Help 101* rather than individually.

(SIGs. Continued from page 1)

Most of the SIGs have newsletters. The newsletters may be online or hard copy via snail mail. Contributing to a newsletter is an excellent way to gain peer recognition, polish your communication skills, add to your portfolio, and transfer your knowledge to others. Reading a SIG newsletter is a great way to find articles that are chosen for their relevance to the SIG.

Some SIGs have discussion lists, which are a valuable resource for answering a wide range of perplexing questions, distributing pertinent new information, or providing opportunities to vent frustrations to an audience that will understand. Sometimes it is just a coming together to share an event, such as September 11. For many days after September 11, the topic was not about technical communicating but about how to cope. We found out how really small our world is when our colleagues from around the world posted messages of support and sympathy. What a community!

The discussion lists also provide an international experience. For example, the Lone Writers listserv regularly has contributors from Germany, France, England, Canada, Denmark, and the Webmaster is in Australia. Occasionally, a well-known STC member will post to the listserv with advice or answers.

At the STC Annual Conference, each SIG holds a business meeting to analyze the past year and plan for the next one. At the SIG luncheon, tables are reserved for each SIG so that attendees with the same interest may sit together. Some SIG members plan to get together at a happy hour, dinner, or both. It is an excellent way to put a face with a name that you have seen in print, to build friendships, and to network.

If you are a novice technical writer, being a member of a SIG is a good way to learn about techniques, tools, and pitfalls. It is an excellent avenue for asking questions. All members were novices once and will readily answer questions, offer suggestions, and provide encouragement without making judgements.

I cannot stress enough how important membership in STC and a SIG are if you are out of work. SIG members offer moral support and provide information regarding the job market and opportunities in their area of the world. Yes, we have had requests for information on the Lone Writers listserv for people looking for work in foreign countries and people in foreign countries looking for work in the U.S.

Recently, participants on the Lone Writers listserv consoled a person who had been looking for a job for over a year. Advice was given to him about his resume, which he posted for all to critique; his personal Web site, which he was using in his job search as a sample of his work; his cover letter; and interviewing techniques. He received information both online, which was useful to others in the same position, and offline. When he became really despondent, people were quick to offer encouragement.

Being a member of a SIG gives you a chance to volunteer for activities, such as newsletter editor, Webmaster, or manager, that will increase your skills. Each SIG costs \$5 per year, and you must be a member of STC. Instructions and a sign-up form is on the Society SIG Web page. Regardless of your participation level, SIGs offer so much for so little investment. The return on the small membership fee is multiplied many times over.

April Chapter Meeting Recap

Combining Know-How With Know-Why: Enhancing Information Design's Value-Add in Today's Environment

By Martha Collins



Guest Speaker:
Karen Rice, President
Delphi Performance Consulting, Inc.
Offices in Tampa, FL and Atlanta, GA
Serving clients worldwide
(813) 907-6341
<http://www.delhipc.com>

Karen Rice challenged us (technical communicators and instructional designers) at the April 4 STC meeting to step out of our traditional roles and to consider thinking and acting as a consultant. We must know how decision makers think and what is important to them—bottom-line performance. We must understand how technical communication and instructional design impact bottom-line performance and then communicate this impact in terms that are meaningful to the organization's decision makers. If we do this, we enhance the value-add of our services in corporations that are focused on results and are constrained by resources.

Karen pointed out that businesses are faced with the following business drivers and constraints:

- Profitability
- Shrinking resources
- Product and service bundling
- Focus on core business

From the customer's perspective, they face:

- Choices
- Information overload
- Confusion

Therefore, organizations are turning back to proactive versus reactive behavior, making decisions based on impact to the bottom line, and delivering value propositions more efficiently and better than anyone else.

What Does This Mean to Us?

We must take a strategic/systemic approach with our products, become problem solvers instead of product developers, and understand and articulate the impact of what we do on an organization's bottom line.

Strategies for Moving to Consultant Role

Karen cited four strategies for moving to the consultant role:

1. Business knowledge
2. Knowledge of human performance technology

3. Partnering skills
4. Consulting skills

How Do We Gain Business Knowledge?

We can gain business knowledge about an organization by:

- Reading and understanding the annual report.
- Understanding what are the performance goals and what are the indicators of operational health.
- Learning what outside forces will challenge the organization's ability to meet its targets.
- Reading trade journals relevant to the organization.
- Reviewing the organization's documents that provide information about its vision, mission, goals, and performance.
- Volunteering to serve on a task force to solve a particular business issue.
- Identifying key performers in a business unit and asking permission to "shadow" them.

In addition to gaining business knowledge, use the organization's terminology.

How Do We Gain Human Performance Technology Knowledge?

Human performance is a function of many interdependent influences such as:

- Feedback
- Accountability
- Rewards and incentives
- Motivation

Operate from a systems approach each time a problem or performance challenge presents itself. Understand the organization's current system and what it must "look like" to achieve desired performance. Assume that performance is a function of a *system* and not of any one element.

How Do We Develop Partnering Skills?

Take the initiative to meet, work with, and gain the trust of managers and others within the organization. Network for mutually beneficial relationships.

How Can We Learn Consulting Skills?

Listen, question, and position yourself.

(Continued. See MEETING RECAP on page 5)

The *Write Idea*, Bridging the Gap Between Academia and Practitioners

By Mark Rentschlar, Member of the Suncoast Student Chapter at USF and Editor of The *Write Idea*, USF's Student E-Zine

When *WriteUp* invited me to contribute an article about The *Write Idea*, I was flattered. Then, I sat down to put into words what the e-zine represented and realized, like our occupation, The *Write Idea* had an identity crisis.

Technical communicators are not just Web designers, they are not just documentation specialists, and they absolutely are not typists. Fortunately, and sometimes unfortunately, they are all of these and much more. That's what I love about this profession. Like it or not, we are Jacks and Jills of all trades. Given the right tools and enough time, technical writers can solve most problems, including designing various products in multimedia and managing any project on time and under budget.

This versatility can be a double-edged sword when it comes to academia. Take a look at ten different technical writing programs, and you'll find ten different curricula. Why? The industry is constantly redefining the role of technical communicators, and educational institutions often can't keep up with the changes. These are exciting times for our industry, and we, as technical communicators, are all hanging ten inside the tube of the technology wave while we frantically acquire the latest skills. Technical communicators will do for the industry what Led Zeppelin did for rock 'n' roll. Okay, maybe going from Jimmy Page to Microsoft® FrontPage® is a stretch, but you get my point.

It has been said that necessity is the mother of all invention, and certainly The *Write Idea* was born of necessity. We needed to

define exactly what a technical writer does and evoke the changes needed to maintain the viability of the degree here at the University South Florida. As Heidi Kelchner so eloquently said, we need to "show literature and composition students that an English degree might actually, God forbid, be able to earn a respectable salary." But, The *Write Idea* was also created to give other technical writers a venue for their creativities, expressions, and ideas.

As founder and editor, my wish is for The *Write Idea* to continue long after I stop haunting the computer labs of USF. It must continue as a forum to give future technical writing students a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. It should also persevere as a record of valuable skills and proficiencies. Moreover, it should serve as a challenge to future technical writing students, inspiring them to exceed the accomplishments of their predecessors. Most importantly, it should provide enjoyable, stimulating education. After all, isn't that the right idea?

About the Author:

Mark is currently in his senior year at the University of South Florida in the Technical Writing program. In addition to being Editor of The *Write Idea* (<http://www.toolsforwriters.com/writeidea/default.htm>), Mark was a Sr. Web Designer on USF's Tools for Writers Web site, an interactive site offering tutorials in software skills for writers of all levels. He is a member of Golden Key International Honour Society, Treasurer of the Suncoast Student Chapter at USF, and recipient of the STC National Scholarship Award 2002 – 2003. Mark resides in Tampa with his son and daughter.

Congratulations to Mark Rentschlar, a USF student and recipient of the
2002 – 2003 STC National Scholarship Award!

(MEETING RECAP. Continued from page 4)

Implications for the Future

Karen recommended the following:

- Develop collaborative working relationships with key managers and other partners
- Clearly understand the vision and strategies that management is striving to achieve
- Identify the performance required if the organization is to thrive
- Determine the conditions in the work environment that must be modified for the performance to take root
- Work with people in and out of management to determine *all* the required interventions

Tips for Writers

By Diana Moran

Did you know that ...

- **Back-up is *not* a word.**

According to Merriam-Webster (<http://www.m-w.com>), the word is "backup" and is a noun. It is properly used for "backup plan" or "a traffic backup."

- **End-user is *not* the correct term.**

The term is "end user." This is according to both Merriam-Webster and Random House/Webster's Computer & Internet Dictionary.

STC Telephone Seminars: Dial-Up Knowledge

By Karen Bachmann

STC started offering telephone seminars last year. These seminars offer informative and timely presentations that support nearly unlimited attendance at a relatively low cost with a high return on investment. I have attended two of these seminars.

- “Getting Started With Usability Testing,” presented by Carol Barnum, Professor of Technical Communication at Southern Polytechnic State University and an STC Fellow.
- “From World-Weary to World-Ready: Usability for International Users,” presented by Hans Fenstermacher, president of Architext.

Rather than review the content of a specific seminar, I want to share an overview of how a telephone seminar is conducted and what to expect if you decide to attend one in the future.

The quality of the information in the seminars was excellent. In each seminar, I learned valuable skills and gained useful tools that I could apply immediately to my work. From the usability testing seminar, I gained useful worksheets and a stronger understanding of the whole process required for successful usability testing. From the international communication seminar, I learned what globalization entails and how to approach my writing with a new perspective after a compelling case was made for redefining certain long-held writing conventions that do not support reaching an increasingly international audience. All presenters are senior technical communicators and experts in their specialty within the profession.

In both seminars, I was impressed with not only the knowledge of the speakers, which I expected, but also their presentation skills. Presenters speak without the benefit of the regular

audience feedback usually available in seminars. The teleconference is set up so that communication is only from the speaker to the audience while the main presentation is taking place. Of course, audience members do get a chance to ask questions. At regular intervals, the moderator takes calls from participants and also reads questions that have been faxed in during the presentation.

Presentation materials are provided electronically before the seminar so that participants can follow the visuals as well as work on any workshop projects provided. Clear instructions for participating in the conference call are sent by e-mail as well.

Seminar sessions are scheduled from 1:00 p.m. – 2:30 p.m. EST. Longer seminars, such as the usability testing seminar, are split into two sessions with an opportunity for “homework” between sessions. Again, the support for interaction with the presenter is excellent even though it is controlled.

The cost of each session has been \$125 *per site*. Each site can have as many participants as desired. This makes seminars a significant training bargain for companies where multiple employees can attend. When comparing the cost to the many half-day professional seminars that cost \$600 – \$1000 (without travel expenses), the cost is still very reasonable even for individuals.

As you consider your personal and perhaps corporate training goals, consider including STC telephone seminars in your personal training plan (see “Create Your Personal Training Plan” by Rob E. Houser published in *Intercom* Volume 45, Issue 10 [1998]). They offer a great way to stretch scarce professional development time and money.

The State of STC’s Membership

By Chris Ruck, STC Society Membership Director

A few facts will help put some of this membership information into perspective. STC membership actually follows a yearly cycle. In March, we purge from our membership system all members who have not renewed for the year.

Thus, in February, our membership counts appear artificially high because they include the nonrenewers who have not yet been deleted. Then, in March, after the nonrenewers have been deleted, it appears that our membership has dropped dramatically. However, both the peak and drop are artifacts.

The best way to measure changes in membership is to compare similar dates from two consecutive years (for example, comparing April 1, 2001, to April 1, 2002).

Q: *Nationwide, what is the net change in membership of the STC [over the last year]?*

A: We anticipate a decline in STC membership for this fiscal year (which ends June 3). This would be the first decline in 21 years. Note: our membership numbers depend on both new members and renewals. New membership is down

significantly (about 25 percent) while renewals are down slightly.

Q: *Which regions have largely contributed to this change?*

A: STC’s Region 8 has probably suffered the most, due to the concentration of tech companies in Silicon Valley. (Note that the Silicon Valley chapter is also STC’s largest.)

Q: *What events in these regions do you feel were responsible (e.g., company closures, layoffs, bankruptcy filings, expansion, mergers)?*

A: We attribute this drop to the dot-com crash, corporate reductions in their technical communication staff, less corporate support for participation in professional societies, and the effects of September 11.

Q: *If we are experiencing a nationwide membership decrease, what are your thoughts about whether and when there will be a rebound in membership? What*

(Continued. See MEMBERSHIP on page 7)

UPA Explores “Humanizing Design” July 8-12 in Orlando, Florida



If technology is meant to improve the human experience, it must respect human expectations and tendencies. But how do we create such technology?

Shaping technology to meet human needs is as much of a science as it is an art, and the exploration of both in the effort toward “Humanizing Design” is the topic of the 11th Annual Usability Professionals’ Association (UPA) Conference to be held July 8 – 12 in Orlando, Florida.

The week of “Humanizing Design” is marked by participative learning at 25 tutorials and workshops the first two days and the practical application of information in three days of discussion panels, presentations, invited speakers, and special interest groups. New to the conference this year are Advanced Topic Seminars such as “Usability for the 50+ Population” and “Authentic Consulting.”

(MEMBERSHIP. Continued from page 6)

indication(s) do you have that signal a positive change in membership numbers?

A: We expect a rebound in membership. Our membership’s rise and fall closely tracks the economy in general and the tech sector in particular. As you know from newspapers and broadcast news, the economy is already recovering from the recession. Anecdotally, we’ve already heard about increases in job announcements on STC employment Web sites. STC’s membership department has also been hearing from ex-members who had been unemployed but who have now been rehired and are rejoining STC.

Q: *What trend do you predict for the STC membership in the future? Which regions will play a key role in that trend?*

A: We expect that, after this interruption, STC membership will continue to increase. Tech-rich areas like Silicon Valley will no doubt play a key role in this—especially when the tech sector fully recovers (as the media is predicting).

Q: *What do you think about the failure to renew membership and its contribution to total membership?*

A: Actually, renewals are only off slightly. See the beginning of this article for an explanation of our annual membership cycle.

Q: *When has the STC experienced a significant decrease in membership in the past? How long was it until there was a rebound in membership?*

A: The last time was 21 years ago. It took one year to rebound. Earlier than that, membership was often up and down. (Remember, STC is 49 years old this year.)

Topical conference tracks have been chosen for their value in crosstraining, continuing education, and networking. Throughout the conference, participants will find opportunities for out-of-box thinking, networking, and exchanging of ideas.

- **“The Domestication of Computers,”** presented by Dr. Joel Birnbaum, Special Technical Assistant to the Chairman and CEO of Hewlett-Packard.
- **“Context-Aware Computing,”** presented by Ted Selker, a research scientist at MIT Media Laboratory.
- **“Users in the Mist: Ethnographic Approaches to Usability,”** presented by Bonnie Nardi, anthropologist and Principal Research Scientist at Agilent Laboratories.
- **“The Usability of Voting Interfaces,”** presented by Dr. Rebecca Mercuri, Assistant Professor of Computer Science at Bryn Mawr College.
- **“Usability Factors of Computer Workstation Design Features: How They Influence Human Performance and Well-Being,”** presented by Dr. Michelle Robertson, Senior Researcher at the Liberty Mutual Research Center for Safety and Health.
- **“Bringing Clinicians Online,”** presented by Dr. Thomas M. Jones, Vice President and Chief Medical Officer of Oracle Corporation.
- **“Promoting Yourself and Usability,”** presented by Ilise Benun, nationally-recognized expert on self-promotion and marketing for creative professionals and small business owners.
- **“Simple Interfaces to Complex Stuff,”** presented by Dr. Henry Leiberman, Software Agents Research Scientist at MIT’s Media Laboratory.
- **“Intellectual Property Law, Software, and the Internet,”** presented by David Bender, Intellectual Property and Information Technology lawyer at White & Case in New York City.
- **“The Brain’s Images: Co-Constructing Reality and Self,”** presented by Dr. Paul Grobstein, Professor of Biology and Director of the Center for Science and Society at Bryn Mawr College.

About the UPA

Formed in 1991, the UPA provides a means for usability professionals to share information and exchange ideas about usability methods and methodologies, tools and technology, skills and skill development, and organizational issues that may impact the success of usability evaluation.

The UPA conference provides practitioners with the opportunity to network and exchange information with usability professionals from throughout the world. The conference is oriented toward the practical so attendees can take ideas back to their offices and put them to work immediately to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the usability practices.

For the most up-to-date information about the conference or for information on the UPA, please visit <http://www.upassoc.org>.

WriteUp

Suncoast Newsletter

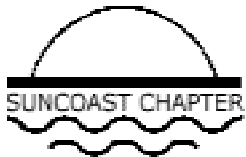
6465 142nd Ave. N.

Apt. J-101

Clearwater, FL 33760-2714

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**WriteUp copy deadline
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May 25, 2002**



**Mission Statement:
Designing the future of
technical communication.**

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Subject to Change

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