Lines & Letters

Northeast Ohio STC Newsletter

On the Front Lines

Beth Williams looks at how STC uses dues, Bege Bowers announces the Student Competition winner, and another opportunity to network and gain judging experience is available.

President's Notes

by Beth Williams, NEOSTC President

Recently I had the opportunity to meet with members of several chapters from our region, both at the Region 4 conference and leadership workshop in Columbus in November, and at the Usability LIVE! presentation in Youngstown earlier in January. At both events, the topic of membership numbers was discussed.

I understand that from an economic standpoint, it may be hard to justify spending the money to renew your membership. However, I thought you may be interested to see what you pay for your STC membership vs. what other professional communications organizations charge. An important point to take a look at is the amount of your dues that comes back to our local chapter.

Organization	Dues	Chapter Rebate
American Society for Training and Development	$180	$0*
International Association of Business Communicators	$175	$0*
International Society for Performance Improvement	$145	$0
Society for Technical Communication	$125	$33
American Medical Writer's Association	$120	$18

* Chapter dues extra

The NEOSTC board works hard to use this dues rebate in ways that give back to chapter members as much as possible. For example, meeting costs are kept low and awards are given to members to attend the annual international conference each year. Dues renewal invoices for 2003 were mailed in late November to all STC members who have not already renewed their memberships online. So we can continue to return these funds to you, please renew your membership by February 28th. Renewing your membership also enables you to vote in chapter and international elections, which will both be held in the upcoming months. Contact Kris Henige at khenige@parker.com if you are interested in volunteering for a committee position, or in running for a board position in the 2003-2004 STC year.

Kris is also coordinating the Intel International Science and Engineering Fair (ISEF) effort. The Intel ISEF (http://www.intelisef2003.org), the world's largest pre-college science fair, is coming to the Cleveland Convention Center May 11-17, and NEOSTC is looking for 15 volunteers (12 judges and 3 alternates) who can commit two weekdays (May 13-14) to the event. If you are interested, e-mail Kris and she will send you the STC judges guide.

And finally, a reminder of a few other events - on February 13th, the Tooling University program will be presented in Middleburg Heights, and the networking lunch will take place at Rockne's in Streetsboro. These gatherings will be your last chance to enter drawing for funding for the STC conference in Dallas in May. We will draw two winners at the Technicom conference on Friday March 14th. So, please attend the February events, and also attend Technicom to find out if NEOSTC will pay to send you to Dallas!

Student Competition Winner Announced

Once again, the winner of the Northeast Ohio-Manitoba, Canada, regional Student Technical Communication Competition is Mikael Vincent Tien-Doe Chan, a 12th-grade student at Westgate Mennonite Collegiate school in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Many thanks to Douglas Kepp and Patti Flanagin for helping judge. I have forwarded Mikael's entry to STC for this spring's international competition.

Thanks to all of you for your support of the regional competition.

Bege Bowers, Student Competition Manager

Judging Opportunity

by Kris Henige, Immediate Past President

The Intel International Science and Engineering Fair (Intel ISEF) is coming to the Cleveland Convention Center May 11-17. The Intel ISEF is the world's largest pre-college science fair, and according its Website at http://www.intelisef2003.org, over 1,200 young science pioneers from over 40 countries will come together for the event. Over five million students compete in regional and state fairs to reach this "Olympics of Science Fairs."

STC International is affiliated with the Intel ISEF as a special awards organization, which means the Society sponsors judges and funds awards at the competition each year. I'm glad to report that our chapter has been asked to provide judges for the special awards that focus solely on technical communication. (We will not judge the regular science fair entries, which are also called the "Grand Awards.")

I will be the local facilities coordinator assisting Competition Chairman Marian Barchilon, who is an STC Associate Fellow from the Phoenix, Arizona chapter. We're looking for 15 volunteers (12 judges and 3 alternates) who can commit two weekdays (May 13-14) to the event. If you are interested, e-mail me at khenige@parker.com, and I will send you the STC judges guide, which offers more details.

Information about the ISEF Special Awards is at http://www.intelisef2003.org/html/special_award_judges.htm.

If you know of other chapter news or volunteer opportunities, e-mail the editors at lleditors@hotmail.com.

January Meeting Wrap-Up

by Kris Henige, Immediate Past President

On January 18, the Youngstown State University student chapter hosted a joint meeting of the Northeast Ohio and Pittsburgh professional chapters

Mike Bates, Region 4 Director-Sponsor and NEO STC senior member, led a workshop on usability. The 45+ attendees formed teams and worked on exercises covering the various stages of designing the user experience, including user and task analysis, surveying, content architecture, prototyping, and testing.

Mike also demonstrated a portable usability testing lab used at Rockwell Software, where he manages the Information Architecture team. The lab was a kit that included digital video cameras, task-tracking software, and a picture-in-picture display that allows the tester to view the user's onscreen activity.

Calendar

When	What	Where	RSVP
Wed 8/6/2003 1:00pm - 2:30pm	Phone seminar: Adding Training Components to Your Documentation	RADCom Services 1696 Georgetown Road, Unit A Hudson	Jill McCauslin (330) 650-4777
Sat 8/9/2003 9:00am - 1:00pm	Summer planning meeting	Brecksville branch of the Cuyahoga County Library 9089 Brecksville Road Brecksville, OH	Lori Klepfer
Thu 8/14/2003 12:00pm - 1:00pm	Networking Luncheon	Mallorca 190 W. 9th St Warehouse District, Cleveland	Angie Dianetti by 8/11
Sept 9-10, 2003	Structured Writing for Single Sourcing	Columbus, OH	(Register online)
Tue 9/16/2003 12:00pm - 1:00pm	Networking Luncheon	356th Fighter Group 4919 Mt. Pleasant Rd. North Canton	Angie Dianetti by 9/15
Thu 9/18/2003 6:00pm - 9:00pm	Roundtable seminar	Location TBD	
Sept 22-24, 2003	Best Practices Conference	Seattle, WA	(Register online)
Sept 25-26, 2003	Innovator's Forum	Seattle, WA	(Register online)
Oct 6-7, 2003	Documentation & Training conference	Boston University	Register online $599 + lodging
Wed 10/15/2003 12:00pm - 1:00pm	Networking Luncheon	Fox & Hound 1479 SOM Center Rd. Mayfield Hts.	Angie Dianetti by 10/13
Thu 11/13/2003 12:00pm - 1:00pm	Networking Luncheon	Weia Teia 140 Great Northern North Olmsted	Angie Dianetti by 11/10
Fri 12/12/2003 12:00pm - 1:00pm	Networking Luncheon	Max & Erma's Rosemont Commons Shopping Center Fairlawn	Angie Dianetti by 12/8
Tue 1/13/2004 12:00pm - 1:00pm	Networking Luncheon	Pufferbelly 30 Depot St. Berea	Angie Dianetti by 1/12
Wed 2/11/2004 12:00pm - 1:00pm	Networking Luncheon	Winking Lizard 511 E. Aurora Rd. Macedonia	Angie Dianetti by 2/9
May 9-12, 2004	International conference	Baltimore, MD	
May 8-11, 2005	International conference	Seattle, WA	

Book Review: *Usability Testing and Research*

by Allan Rotz

Don't be fooled by the somewhat unmemorable cover of *Usability Testing and Research*. Carol Barnum combines research findings with practitioner experience to produce probably the most comprehensive but concise resource on usability testing now available.

> About the Book: Barnum, Carol, *Usability Testing and Research*, Part of the Allyn & Bacon Series in Technical Communication, Longman, 2001. ISBN 0205315194, 448 pages, $50.00.

This book is part of the Allyn & Bacon series in technical communication. Designed in part to fulfill the needs of students in a graduate-level class in usability, it is also a great resource for usability practitioners as a tool to update and upgrade their skills. The structure of this book should suit both neophytes and experienced professionals. Each chapter and its subsections are well-structured with a logical progression from one section to the next. The table of contents is well-organized and very readable so that a knowledgeable individual can scan to find those sections that are of most immediate interest. The index is likely to be a great reference tool, as it was created by a professional usability tester, someone who should know what a reader is likely to need.

Dr. Barnum, a usability consultant and professor to graduate usability students, draws upon nearly every prominent usability authority to build a comprehensive bible of usability testing. The author's academic background is evident in the careful footnoting of every page and the detailed listing of scores of references at the end of each chapter. If there is an issue the reader wishes to further explore, the source is cited for ready access. The findings from top usability professionals are distilled to their essence and woven into comprehensive work on usability. The reader gains the primary benefit of hundreds of books, papers, and articles without having to filter though this sea of information. There is little, if anything, of importance that is left out of this 448-page book of concentrated wisdom and knowledge.

The reader, whether a student or an experienced practitioner, gets the benefit of both analytic research and its practical application. Many examples of real-world usability test plans, data, analysis, and summary reports are reprinted. These examples are great models for the practice of usability. This book describes not just how you might generally do something, but also how it was actually done—not just theory but actual practice.

Anyone interested in the usability of hardware, software, computer games, Web sites—any product that has a user interface—will find a great wealth of information. The first chapter starts off defining usability and explaining usability testing models and theory. It also provides a methodology for cost justification and the basis to proselytize for usability.

Focus groups can be used for usability testing

The author should be commended for taking a holistic view of usability in Chapter 2, and discussing the roles that heuristics, surveys, and focus groups play in the design of a usable product. Chapters 3 through 7 explain user and task analysis as a precursor to designing, planning, preparing, and conducting the test. Chapter 8 details not just the analyses of the collected data but also different methods of reporting the findings to obtain the best result. The final chapter builds on everything before and discusses those issues specific to Web usability. Nearly every chapter has an appendix with real-world examples specific to that chapter. The end-of-the-book appendix discusses how to make usability testers work as a well-functioning team.

Some books are chock full of scholarly research and empirical data and great for academia. This book has a solid base in research, but was written for the real-world practitioners of usability. It's this steady focus on practical real-world application that most impresses me about this book.

Still not convinced this book is for you? Check out the companion Web site, http://www.ablongman.com/barnum. Download material from the book's appendices and sidebars. Peruse the many usability tools and links to other usability resources on the Web.

Usability Testing and Research is not only of great value as a resource of practical information to usability professionals but also as a tool to explain the benefits of usability design and testing to skeptical management. Carol Barnum should be congratulated for a great job in bringing together in one book such a complete, well-organized compilation of usability theory and practicality.

This article originally appeared in the October 2002 issue (Vol 9, No. 2) of the Usability Interface*. Republished with permission.*

Guerilla WriteFare™: Nice Work If You Can Get it -- Here's How

by Michael Knowles

I got a great letter this week from Gary F., who made the observation that the contract jobs listed in my weekly technical writing jobs list are all on-site positions. He asked, "Where are all the jobs which permit freelance business writers to work from home? I thought companies liked to hire home-based freelancers."

My experience in the corporate environment has been that larger companies don't go out of their way to hire home-based freelancers. That's not to say that they never do -- it simply hasn't been my experience with them. I run into this problem all the time. Finding off-site work is a challenge. I scour the top 20 or so job search engines and other places for work and, while there really are quite a few contract positions out there, nearly all of them require on-site work.

That's the bad news That's the bad news.

Here's the good news: I have figured this thing out, believe it or not. In fact, I'm working on a book and a seminar about it. To locate good work that allows you to work out of the home office, you must know three things:

- How to look.
- Where to look.
- How to build trusting relationships with your customers.

How to Look

The secret to finding off-site work is to change the way you think about work. You must first and foremost be doing a type of writing that lends itself well to off-site work. It's an easy thing to say that all writing can be done off-site.

But you'd be wrong if you said it.

There are some pieces that require a tremendous amount of personal interaction. Some of that can, in fact, be done by telephone. I have one client on the opposite coast for whom I am doing a brochure and a sales letter. I'm obviously not going to be able to meet with him face-to-face, nor do I need to. We've talked a lot about his business and his needs. I communicate with him until we both agree that I understand what he needs. I work very hard to make sure that there's no ambiguity -- I tell him what I'm going to do, I have regular checkpoints for working the piece through drafts, and I deliver the goods on time.

But there are just as many pieces that demand face-to-face interaction. For instance, right now I'm working on a project for which I need to be on site a couple of days a week. There are some tasks, such as interviewing engineers about complex material, for which only face-to-face communication will do.

I never turn down an interesting job just because it means that I have to work on-site for a bit. But I am careful about what I choose -- there either has to be something special about the job, or my bank account has to be running pretty low before I go for a job that requires my full-time presence on site.

Where to Look

Start with job lists. Work your way through them. But also get out into your community and look for work there. In person. Networking is about stepping out into environments that allow you to meet people. In the course of meeting people, you listen. A lot. Because by listening, you identify opportunities to take somebody's pain away.

I always think of it that way: I'm in the business of doing what needs to be done. Pain is the number one symptom. Sure, I can identify things that I *think* need to be done. But what matters is where someone else is experiencing pain, usually manifesting as money going down somebody's drain. If that pain has to do with information or promotion, I sell my services. I sell softly, because that seems to work best in the beginning. But I'm also not afraid to ask for the work, to go for the close, as sales people say.

Being able to do that makes the difference between being able to do what I love and having to do something I don't.

I like to keep my work pipeline loaded up. While I'm working with the clients I have now, I'm sowing the seeds for a new crop of customers. Job number one for a freelance business or technical writer is self-promotion and marketing. If you don't learn that, all you'll get are the scraps that the writers who do promote wouldn't take on a bet.

How to Build Trusting Relationships

The primary issue with employers is one of trust. They don't know you, so how can they trust you? I start off with the assumption that I can always work myself into an off-site situation. Once I establish good relationships -- and that's what this is really all about -- it's usually easy to move the work off site. In fact, with the client that I'd consider to be my main squeeze at the moment, I developed a solid enough relationship with them that my working off site is part of my contract.

If a company isn't amenable to off-site work under any circumstances, then I don't work for them.

Other types of writing -- press releases and newsletters are great examples -- really don't require much of my presence on site. Again, though, this is a matter of trusted relationships and reputation. I always underpromise and overdeliver. And I never miss deadlines. Ever. The first part of building trust is doing what you say you're going to do, when you say you're going to do it.

The second part of building trust is demonstrating your competence through the quality of your work. Always give your customers your best work, and they'll become repeat customers. As any good business person will tell you, repeat customers comprise more than 50% of a successful business.

The third part? Simply being nice to the people you work with.

Being There

I should add, too, that I don't go out of my way to take on corporate work. I did that for years while my sons were little, and I hated it. I am definitely a guerilla writefare kind of guy -- I seek out small to mid-size companies, and prefer working for startups. They often don't have the extra space anyway, so they're happy to accommodate my desire to work elsewhere.

I find work through a variety of places. Referrals make up a good part of that (there's the results of trust for you) and I absolutely believe in the practice of relentless promotion and marketing. That includes things like my newsletter, local chamber of commerce networking meetings, and my latest thing, which is joining Toastmasters. Sounds like a hassle, right? It's all about attitude. I go in with the attitude that there's somebody out there who needs my help, and who is willing to pay for it.

Most writers don't really practice marketing and self-promotion. They see it as a necessary evil. But I don't. I'm looking for things that need to be done, for people who have a pain that I can take away. They're out there. All I have to do is get out, raise my hand, and say, "I can help." It can be a lot of work. But it also makes the difference between catch-as-catch-can living and having a full and rewarding life.

Michael Knowles is a technical business writer and e-business coach who helps small businesses and professionals improve their businesses and their writing. He writes and publishes WriteThinking*, a weekly ezine for business and technical writers. http://www.writethinking.net*

This article originally published in WriteThinking *(http://www.writethinking.net). Republished with permission.*

Dealing with Difficult Employees in the Technical Communication Workplace

by Geoff Hart

Some of the more intractable problems we face on the job are the human ones. But cranky though Microsoft Word often seems, most of its blowups are at least predictable; humans are anything but. The worst problems can arise when you find yourself in a situation where power relationships come into play, which is often the case when you're managing another employee and responsible for their work and their on-the-job behavior.

For a variety of reasons, technical communicators are often seen as "difficult" or "problem" employees--this means that co-workers tend to complain about us and insist that our managers correct our behavior. Unfortunately, we often work in high-stress environments that make it difficult for us to work calmly and difficult for colleagues to work with us peacefully.

Many communicators complain that developers and other subject matter experts (SMEs) don't bother to understand what we do and thus, don't respect our work. As a result, they often consider meeting their own deadlines far more important than helping us do our work, and when we must ask them to provide the information we need to complete our documentation or to review draft documents, we don't get what we need.

The result? We're forced to nag, and that can get us labeled as problems, not colleagues. When, as is often the case, the documentation phase comes late in an increasingly rushed development schedule, and when deadlines begin tightening like a noose, everyone grows impatient and frustrated. Even when these stresses are largely absent, some employees won't be able to live up to the standards you set, or need reminders that SMEs have their own problems and that tact and patience are important tools in working with them. The situation becomes particularly tricky when another manager has tolerated poor work or unacceptable behavior for long enough that it's become a habit--and the situation can become nightmarish if they've tried unsuccessfully to correct the problem and despairingly passed the problem and a scared or angry employee on to you.

What can you do in this situation? Start by recognizing that you have ethical and legal responsibilities, both to the employee and to your mutual employer. You owe the employee a chance to explain themselves and prove that they can solve the problem and continue working, yet you can't afford to let someone completely unsuited for the job continue working for your employer in that role. These responsibilities may conflict dramatically, and reconciling them may not always be possible. But even when you find yourself in a no-win situation, you can at least try to be fair to everyone concerned, including yourself. The process is simple to describe:

- Sit down with the employee and explain the problem.
- Work with the employee to correct the problem.
- Document everything you do.
- Resolve the problem--one way or another.

Unfortunately, the devil's hiding in the details.

Before You Begin

As simple as this approach seems, it's rarely this simple in practice. Solving the problem may be a long and painful process even in a good situation. I've written the remainder of this article on the assumption that you've been handed a problem created by someone else, but the same advice applies equally well if the problem arises on your watch and you detect it in time to try to solve it.

Please note: Each jurisdiction has different regulations that define the various legalities of dealing with unacceptable employee behavior. If the situation appears to be difficult to resolve amicably, make sure you obtain good legal advice from a lawyer with expertise in employment law so that you can protect yourself and your employer. Your Personnel or Human Resources (HR) department can often fill this role, but don't assume this is the case.

You should keep a few general principles in mind as you work through the procedure I've outlined:

- Recognize that you can't succeed if you don't develop a trusting relationship with the employee.
- Recognize that your own emotions will interfere with your judgment, and that you'll occasionally have to work to remain calm and objective. Moreover, by focusing narrowly on a problem, it's easy to see only the negative and fail to observe the good things the employee is doing.
- Devote your greatest efforts to the big problems, since solving them produces the biggest payback; once they're out of the way, the little problems often become much less noticeable. However, starting with one or two easy problems can let you establish credibility, and successes can help motivate the employee to tackle more complex problems.
- Recognize that every problem has two sides, and even where the employee is mostly the one at fault, other employees may be contributing to or exacerbating the problem. Expect to work with more than the problem employee to solve problems.
- Work with the employee to develop a plan for how to solve the problem and how to monitor the employee's progress; try to avoid imposing a plan or a solution.
- Actively collect feedback rather than waiting passively for information to filter back to you.
- Don't expect changes to happen overnight.

Sit Down and Explain the Problem

As you begin, realize that by the time the problem arrives on your desk, it's probably existed for a considerable time, and everyone involved is going to be stressed out and working with a short temper: Approach them the wrong way and they may explode, making it very difficult to put things back together afterwards.

To defuse this particular bomb, you need to be seen as a credible ally for the employee, and you can start obtaining this credibility by taking the employee aside and explaining the problem. If you're not the one who raised the supposed problem, make it clear that you're going to form your own judgment (starting today, as if the employee had no history with the company) and that you're going to work with the employee to ensure the problem is either disproved (if it's not a real problem) or that it goes away.

Adopt this approach only if you're sincere about your efforts to help. Insincerity is easy to detect, and a bad first impression may be impossible to correct once it's been created. Explain the problem as you see it, and try to convince the employee that it's a real problem. Give them a chance to justify their behavior, and try to set aside your own annoyance long enough to judge their response fairly. Sometimes they will have good reasons for what they're doing, and you might be perceiving a problem where none exists or blaming an employee for something that's simply not their fault. But no matter how reasonable the employee's justification, it's still your responsibility to decide how to handle the problem.

This initial conversation serves a crucial purpose: It establishes a collaborative relationship of the form "I'm going to do my best to help you solve this problem," rather than an antagonistic relationship that could be parodied as "you're a bad, immature person and I'm going to do my superior, more mature best to get you fired." If the person is trainable, wants to improve, and is worth keeping on, you can often work with them to solve the problem--maybe not quickly, but eventually.

Work to Correct the Problem

Once you've agreed that you're going to work together, you must jointly establish two things: An objective and measurable way of identifying whether there is a problem, and an objective plan with measurable outcomes for correcting the problem. Unfortunately, as is the case for most of the work we do, it can be very difficult to establish criteria that aren't subjective. But if you and the employee can reach a consensus on the perceived problem and how to measure the results of the steps you take to address the problem, then you have a sound basis for proceeding. That basis must give rise to a plan that includes regular communication, actively obtaining feedback, and carefully monitoring the results.

If the problem is relatively simple, such as an inability to write as well as the job requires, you can identify the most important areas of improvement and spend some time teaching a better approach to the employee or directing them to other training resources. Don't necessarily worry about small things at this point; you need to fix the most serious writing problems first, and you can't expect to solve all the problems at once. Choose problems that offer the greatest payback, both for the employer and the employee, since helping the employee to succeed greatly increases the chances that they'll continue working with you rather than giving up in despair.

If the problem is more complex, as is often the case for interpersonal relationships and inappropriate on-the-job behavior, quantifying things becomes much more difficult. Every problem has two sides, and even a truly problematic employee may be innocent in some situations; even when they're not, another person may be contributing to or exacerbating the problem, and the problem may be insoluble without their cooperation. In such cases, you may need to work with the other employee as well to define the problem, get both people working together, specify steps both should take to resolve any problems, and specify when they should come to you. Sometimes, arranging a meeting between the employee and the person who considers them a problem can work wonders, particularly if you act as an arbitrator to ensure that both have a chance to explain their side of the problem and listen to the other person. Work through these disagreements and aim for consensus, but when you can't achieve consensus, remember that you're the manager and that if you've been diligent in assessing and understanding the situation, your opinion is the one that must prevail in the end.

Finally, especially for difficult or complex problems, involve the company's HR department. Although we wage slaves love to complain about the HR department, these people can be your strongest allies in solving workplace problems. Their staff have often received specialized training in these matters and may have expertise you can bring to bear on the problem. Even when that's not the case, they can still serve as an impartial third party to help you arbitrate any disputes that arise. If nothing else, they can provide an additional opinion that confirms for the employee--and for you--that the problem isn't just your subjective opinion.

Document Everything

Every decision you make and every statistic you collect must be carefully documented and must be known to the employee. If you've developed a firm plan on how to proceed (as I suggested in the previous section), this plan should also specify what kinds of documentation you'll collect and how you'll collect it.

Good documentation should be objective to the greatest extent possible, and should be something that can be independently confirmed. If you can document the problem, with confirmation from others, you're on reasonably secure ground. The HR department is a great source for this confirmation, since they can again serve the role of an objective outsider and can witness the fact that you've met with the employee, discussed the problem fairly and openly, and exercised due diligence in trying to correct the problem. They can also provide specific advice on the legal requirements for what you're doing; I can't do that because I'm not a lawyer, and more importantly, the requirements vary between jurisdictions.

Good documentation should include a clear statement of the problem and solution. Again, the problem should be clearly defined and supported. Objectives should be measurable, and the plan should be a contract of sorts between you and the employee (and others, as necessary), with details of what each person is expected to do in working together to solve the problem.

Good documentation should document your conversations. Make notes before scheduled conversations about what you plan to talk about, and make notes throughout the conversation, as needed. Then, immediately after the meeting, summarize your notes into a "minutes of the meeting" document, and distribute copies to everyone involved in solving the problem.

Good documentation should include regular progress reports on each objective, supported by data from other people. Supporting information could take the form of "before and after" copies of projects, with these copies including the dates, your comments, and the employee's response to proposed changes. Supporting information could also include letters from those affected by the person's behavior--reporting progress, continued problems, or even compliments. Documenting both the negative and the positive provides a more balanced assessment of the situation, and will help you overcome the natural negative bias you'll develop by focusing on the negative aspects of the situation while working through a problem.

Worth noting is that you should plan to actively collect information on the employee's progress rather than simply waiting passively for the information to come to you. For example, set up a time to regularly meet with the employee, and then keep those appointments! As needed, actively work with others who are affected by the employee's behavior to obtain the supporting information you need.

Good documentation should include signatures--yours, the employee's, and any other participating or witnessing parties'--and dates, at every step of the process. Where obtaining a signature would be too confrontational or where the employee refuses to sign, make sure you have a witness from HR to confirm the objectives, the plan, the progress reports, and any supporting information you've provided.

Gathering such documentation will gradually produce a clear record of improvement--or of failure to improve. Unfortunately, some employees can't be "saved" through such a process because they simply can't do the job or aren't willing to work to save themselves. In that case, you may eventually have to resort to firing the person outright or recommending a transfer to another job that they are more capable of doing. In this situation, the documentation that you've gathered provides justification for your decision and protects you to a considerable extent from legal action initiated by a disgruntled employee.

If you're worried about unethical behavior on the part of the employee--justifiably or otherwise--store copies of the documentation with the HR department or at home so the employee can't break into your file cabinet and dispose of the evidence if it becomes obvious that you're going to have to fire them. Of course, if things work out well and you succeed in saving the situation, you can ceremonially burn the evidence together--kind of like burning your mortgage document once the house is paid off. If you do that, be sure to create a summary document for the employee's permanent personnel file that describes the problem and states that it was resolved satisfactorily. Give a copy to the employee too.

Resolve the Problem

Thus far, you've established your objectives, demonstrated what things are unacceptable and why, and given the person a chance to correct the situation. Now it's time to judge the results and take action. The rule "three strikes and you're out" is often cited, but this rule comes from baseball and has no objective basis in human psychology--and thus has no place in the process of correcting a problem. Sometimes it's going to take a lot more than three strikes before a person corrects a problem, even if they're a willing and active participant. This is less true with things like writing skills, which are easier to master if you're a good teacher and have a willing, trainable student. Interpersonal problems may require considerably more time and effort, up to and including professional psychological counseling (often paid for by the employer's health plan). If that's the case, you'll have to bring the counselor into the team devoted to fixing the problem, and you'll have to be even more patient than you'd be with purely technical problems.

As you're working to resolve the problem, don't "spank" the person when they've failed; explain the problem patiently and calmly, without attacking the person and in a manner that suggests you're still willing to work with them. Clearly communicate what you expect them to do about the problem in moving forward, and as described in the previous section, put your instructions in writing so they can't claim they didn't see them. I've already mentioned that it may take a long time to fix the situation, but that message bears repeating; writing and other habits, which have often been acquired over the course of decades, won't change overnight.

How much time and effort should you put into trying to solve the problem? That's a judgment call, and only you can answer the question based on a level-headed assessment of your own workload, the employee's potential for improvement, and your manager's guidance. At some point, you'll have enough evidence to tell you whether the situation will continue to improve at an acceptable rate--or whether it won't ever improve, and the only solution will be to fire the employee or move them elsewhere.

The Bottom Line

As the manager of a problem employee, it's always best to start with a clean slate. You owe that person at least a fighting chance to clean up their act, and you shouldn't be unduly prejudiced by what's gone before; many problems result from simple or serious interpersonal incompatibilities rather than the employee's incompetence or intentional malice, and other problems stem from simple misunderstandings that have never been identified and corrected. For example, a former manager who gave up on the employee, never tried to explain and correct the problem, and never indicated a willingness to force them to work on solving the problem undoubtedly provided no incentive to improve.

On a human scale, saving someone else's job and giving them the tools they need to succeed in the workplace is an immensely satisfying accomplishment. But thinking selfishly for a moment, turning an unproductive problem into a productive worker also represents a large feather in your cap when it comes time for your own performance evaluation. If you fail--and success is by no means guaranteed--at least you can console yourself with the knowledge that you tried to make things better for someone, and can sleep easier knowing that you've exercised due diligence and protected yourself from a wrongful dismissal lawsuit.

Is all this just theory and sentiment? Some of it. But I can also tell you that I've participated in exactly this approach to help a problem colleague on several occasions, and the approach has worked wonders. In each case, the problems weren't all solved, but we at least lowered the tension level enough to have good prospects for continuing to improve the situation. It takes patience and persistence, but what could be more important than making that effort on behalf of another person?

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Doug Isenberg, TECHWR-L's "Ask the Lawyer" columnist and publisher of GigaLaw.com, for providing a quick reality check on the contents of this article.

This article was originally appeared on the TECHWR-L Web site. (http://www.raycomm.com/techwhirl/). Reprinted with permission.

The Esoteric Editor

by Karla Caldwell, Esoteric Co-Editor

Competition Time Is Here Again

This year, I took a chance and submitted a project for the STC Online Competition (hosted by the Pittsburgh chapter). And, as I excitedly anticipate the results, I also find myself thinking about the rewards for participating in one of STC's comptitions.

Anyone who has submitted an entry to one or more of the STC competitions (either online, art, or publications) knows that above all, it's not cheap! The entry fee itself is about $70, and depending on the project, you have the cost of creating copies and mailing entries. By the time you're finished, you could rack up expenses of $100 or more.

With costs like that, the question is "why do we do it?" Why put in all the leg work and why scrape together nearly enough cash to renew your membershp? For me, it's the feedback. I'm lucky enough to have peers in my department that can review my work, but sometimes getting another viewpoint is just what you need to take your documentation product from good to spectacular. And as a communicator, making that jump is worth its wieght in gold.

Don't get me wrong; if Pittsburgh likes my work and decides that I deserve an award, I'll be pretty darn happy too. But more than any certificate or awards luncheon, I'm looking forward to that brown envelope with a few pages of comments.

What do you think? Have you participated in STC competitions before? What kind of feedback did you get? Was it worth the expense?

Send your response to the editors at lleditors@hotmail.com.

Membership News

Welcome New Members

For December, the NEOSTC welcomes transfer member Michelle Benson, formerly of the Niagra Frontier Chapter. Please help us in welcoming her to our chapter.

December Happy Hour a Success!

By Tricia Oleksy, Membership committee

I am happy to report that our group donated 100 pounds of food plus $20 in cash to the Cleveland Foodbank Inc.

On behalf of the Foodbank, THANK YOU to all who donated, especially to all those who went above & beyond the requested donation. This food & money will be used to feed many hungry people throughout Northeast Ohio.

I believe our happy hour was a success, and lots of fun!

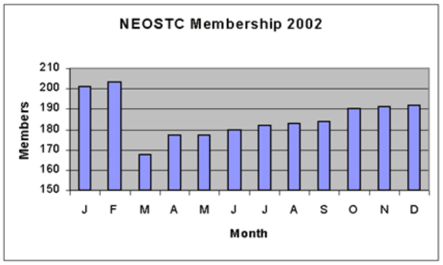
Chapter Vice President Quoted in *Plain Dealer*

Kudos to NEOSTC Vice President Lori Klepfer who was quoted in the Careerscape column in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. In the article, Klepfer talks about the transition from technical writer to instructional designer.

For complete article text, see the Classifieds/Employment section from the 1/5/2003 *Cleveland Plain Dealer*.

Chapter Membership Counts

The membership count as of December 31, 2002 was 192 for the NEOSTC.



Total membership for STC International reached 21736.

If you or someone you know in the chapter has good news to share, e-mail the editors at lleditors@hotmail.com.

Regional Opportunities

FrameMaker 7 XML QuickStart: Intensive Class with Expert Trainer

You can learn from Adobe Certified Expert Kay Ethier in an intensive 2-day QuickStart training class. This unique workshop is being offered only in Rochester, NY on Feb. 28-Mar.1,2003. The QuickStart format is packing much of what Kay normally covers in a 5-day course* into two very full, hands-on days. She will make sure you understand what you need to work successfully with FrameMaker 7 and XML, and you'll get workbooks and support after training to keep your knowledge fresh.

- Date: 2/28/2003 - 3/1/2003
- Location: Rochester, NY
- Cost: $475 for current STC members

More information:

Have you worked with FrameMaker, but not SGML or XML? Are you starting to look into creating XML from your technical manuals, books, catalogs and other documents? You may have found that there's a lot to learn about setting up structured applications in FrameMaker, before you even get into importing and exporting XML.

You can learn from Adobe Certified Expert Kay Ethier in an intensive 2-day QuickStart training class. This unique workshop is being offered only in Rochester, NY on Feb. 28-Mar.1,2003. The QuickStart format is packing much of what Kay normally covers in a 5-day course* into two very full, hands-on days. She will make sure you understand what you need to work successfully with FrameMaker 7 and XML, and you'll get workbooks and support after training to keep your knowledge fresh. Plus, the price is $475 for current STC members, far less than the regular price ($720) for 2 days of her training, offering a significant saving for you.

Topics and preliminary schedule:

Friday, Feb. 28th (morning)

Authoring in structure: starting work with structured documents in FrameMaker, the structured view window

Friday, Feb. 28th (afternoon)

The power of EDDs and DTDs: where structure comes from, how to work with DTDs and EDDs, how to modify structure.

Saturday, Mar. 1st (morning)

Deeper into EDDs; also overview of conversion tables for adding structure to existing, unstructured FM files

Saturday, Mar. 1st (afternoon)

XML in and out: working with a FrameMaker structured application, how to set up the actual application file for round-trip XML.

Registration will be limited to 12 people to ensure that you get the personal attention you need. Current STC members can register for $475; non-STC members pay $600. To register, contact Dorothy Hoskins at Textenergy LLC, get the form at http://www.resourx.com/, email us at info@textenergy.com or call (585) 750-3118. For course agenda questions, contact Kay Ethier at Bright Path Solutions, kethier@travelthepath.com or call (919)244-8559.

The Intel International Science and Engineering Fair (Intel ISEF)

The Intel ISEF is the world's largest pre-college science fair, and according its Website at http://www.intelisef2003.org, over 1,200 young science pioneers from over 40 countries will come together for the event. Over five million students compete in regional and state fairs to reach this "Olympics of Science Fairs."

- Date: 5/11/2003 - 5/17/2003
- Location: Cleveland Convention Center

eHelp Help Authoring Seminar 2003

This exciting seminar will cover existing technologies relevant to Help authoring today, as well as emerging technologies that promise to influence it tomorrow, including .NET and XML. STC members can register for only $99!

- Date: 3/28/2003
- Location: Chicago, IL
- Cost: $99

For more information: http://www.ehelp.com/seminar/

If you know of other regional opportunities, e-mail the editors at lleditors@hotmail.com.

Taking the 'Dis' out of 'Disabilities': Special Needs SIG Seeks Support

Just a reminder as the STC membership renewal process creeps up on its February 28 deadline … the Society's newest SIG, the Special Needs SIG, is still looking for new members to support them in their twin mission to assist technical communicators with disabilities in the practice of our profession and to provide all technical communicators with information that will help them make our communication products more accessible to users with disabilities. A detailed mission statement is available at the Web site.

The SNSIG has already made significant progress: a comprehensive Web site (see http://www.stcsig.org/sn/index.shtml); an online newsletter (first edition is posted at http://www.stcsig.org/sn/newsletter.shtml); and extensive support to the 49th STC Conference, including publication of Guidelines for Persons with Special Needs and an addendum, a successful progression, and several articles in the Proceedings (conference materials available at http://www.stc-orlando.org/prodev/49notes/SNC.asp).

But there is much yet to do, and to accomplish it, the SNSIG needs more people. It is looking both for Active members to join their initiatives; and Patrons, whose affiliation will help the SIG secure the budget it needs to fulfill its objectives.

If you wish to support the Special Needs SIG, you have two options: (1) If you have not yet submitted your STC membership renewal, simply check the SNSIG box when you do. (2) If you have already submitted your STC membership renewal, download the SIG sign-up form from http://www.stc.org/PDF_Files/sigform.pdf and submit it directly to the Society Office. In either case, in order to be added to the SNSIG's newsletter and/or listserv without delay, contact daniel.w.voss@lmco.com or jvinegar@myranch.com.

Lines & Letters Editors

- Sharon Ambro (sharon.ambro@grc.nasa.gov)
- Karla Caldwell (kcaldwell@parker.com)