Lines & Letters

Northeast Ohio STC Newsletter

On the Front Lines

Current events and announcements for NEOSTC.

President's Notes

by Beth Williams, NEOSTC President

I am looking forward to serving as chapter president this year. Several committees have exciting projects planned, so I'd like to start the year by providing a brief overview of things to anticipate.

After a short hiatus last year, Technicom is being revived under the guidance of former NEOSTC presidents Maria Hlas and Jill McCauslin. We've traditionally held Technicom in the fall, but this time we're moving it to March so more members will have the opportunity to attend both Technicom and the annual Region 4 conference in November. The Central Ohio Chapter is hosting this year's regional conference, which will include a leadership workshop on Friday, November 8th and the Region 4 Conference on Saturday, November 9th. Check out the Central Ohio STC Web site at http://www.centralohiostc.org for information about the Region 4 conference, and continue to visit our NEOSTC Web site for updates on Technicom, and please plan to attend both events.

The May/June issue of *Lines and Letters* indicated that Jeanette Evans was stepping down from the competitions manager position, but I am happy to say she has agreed to chair that committee for another year. Doug Kepp and Lori Moreland will be helping Jeanette. The deadline for entries is October 12th, and the call for entries and call for judges is posted on the chapter Web site. Please consider not only submitting entries to be judged, but also participating as a judge for the competition. Judging not only gives you the opportunity to meet other NEOSTC members, but also to see how others are producing their publications and possibly getting new ideas for your own work.

Also in the competition area, Bege Bowers (NEOSTC's only Associate Fellow) is again managing the student competitions. Details are posted on our Web site at http://www.neostc.org/info/competitions.htm and the deadline for receiving entries is September 30th.

A project that I am really excited about is the new and improved NEOSTC Web site. Brian Baddour, Ken Rogers, and Rick Elliot are working together to redesign the look and feel, and possibly to incorporate such new elements as a skills database. This new site should be live in early September, so check it out and send comments to any member of the Web committee.

Finally, a few other events and projects are in the works, but not yet finalized. We are currently working out the details of the new Philanthropic committee headed by Vice President Lori Klepfer. I am also working with select chapter members to get an Academic Relations committee off the ground, and former President Bob Dianetti is in the planning stages of an Ex-Presidents' breakfast.

Feel free to contact me with any questions or suggestions you have concerning the chapter or STC in general, and I hope we can all work together to make this a great year!

Competition Resources

by Jeanette Evans, Competitions Committee Chair

Two great ways to expand your portfolio and show employers what kind of experience you have are to participate in the chapter publications competition or help judge the competition.

For more information including elegibility and call for entries, read the 2002 Competitions Announcement.

You can also download a complete Call for Entries or apply to be a competition judge online.

NEOSTC Chapter Members Take Home APEX Awards

by Jill McCaulsin, senior member

Maria Hlas and Laurie Harrison, consultants for RADCom, Inc., received awards for entries submitted to the 2002 APEX Awards for Publication Excellence. These awards recognize excellence in publications work by professional communicators in more than 100 sub-categories. Out of 5,900 entries, judged by a panel from Communication Concepts, 1,527 entries received Awards of Excellence. The APEX Awards for Publication Excellence is an annual international competition for writers, editors, publications staff and business and nonprofit communicators.

Maria Hlas   Laurie Harrison

Maria Hlas won an Award of Excellence for the PPG Accu-DAQ Help System. This help system was created

for the PPG Accu-DAQ software to provide overviews and step-by-step procedures for using the program.

Laurie Harrison won an Award of Excellence for the RADCom corporate newsletter, RADCom News. The in-house newsletter informs employees about issues such as current and new projects, employee accomplishments, benefit updates, and company events.

Maria Hlas, the Manager of Consulting Services, is a resident of Cuyahoga Falls and has worked for RADCom as a consultant and senior consultant for four years.

Laurie Harrison lives in Stow and has worked as an information design consultant for three years. Both consultants have previously won awards for their technical communication achievements from the Northeast Ohio Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication (STC).

The 14th annual APEX Awards is sponsored by Communications Concepts, Inc., publishers of business communication reports, including Writing That Works, a subscription monthly for professional communicators, and special reports on topics such as Writing for the Web.

Upcoming Meeting Dates

STC Topic Tables Dinner - Sept. 19

Join members for dinner, networking, and discussion of STC-related topics at the Holiday Inn in Independence.

Networking Lunches

The August Networking Lunch will be held on 8/22.

The Location is Bronte at Joseph-Beth Booksellers at 2752 Van Aken Blvd, Shaker Hts.

Lunches begin at noon. Contact Angie Dianetti at adianetti@radcominc.net to RSVP.

Book Review: Scrolling Forward

by Steven Ollay, NEOSTC Newsletter Committee

The titles and author's name are digital, postcript typefaces. The word "by" is a photo of hot metal type. The centered placement of Levy's name also signifies his role as mediator between the bibliophile and the technophile, offering the reader balanced answers to questions he asks throughout his book. Questions like, "Will books go away? Is a universal library just around the corner? Will e-mail supplant or revive the letter? Will

digital technologies diminish, and perhaps abolish, paperwork and red tape?"

Every good song has its hook, and Levy snares the reader with the opening lines of his preface. "In 1981, two years after finishing a Ph.D. in computer science at Stanford University, I went to London to study calligraphy and bookbinding." It is this fascinating mix of studies at both the Xerox PARC, Palo Alto Research Center and the Digby Stuart College of Calligraphy and Bookbinding in London that gives Levy the tools and credentials for "making sense of documents in the digital age," following the book's subtitle. The rest of this section serves as a primer in history of desktop publishing over the last twenty years.

Levy's main discussion on documents does not begin with an examination of some great historical document, rather he begins with a "Meditation On a Receipt." Okay, so when was the last time you studied your take-out lunch receipt? Levy uses his lunch receipt of a tuna-fish sandwich, a bag of chips and a bottle of water as a springboard. His "meditation" takes us through the invention of paper, capital and lowercase letters, the decimal point and the logotype. You'll never look at a receipt the same again!

Next Levy addresses the heart of the matter in his chapter "What Are Documents?" Most dictionary definitions for documents have something to do with writing, paper and evidence. For Levy, documents have human qualities and are called "talking things." "Documents are exactly those artifacts to which we delegate the task of speaking for us." And they include everything from a text-only word processing file to a Java-soaked interactive web page. Their defining characteristic is their ability to "return the same answer over and over again." Also included is a discussion on the stability of documents, where paper documents are seen as fixed and digital as fluid. He feels all documents are static and changing, fixed and fluid. Although digital documents tend to hold their "sameness" for shorter periods of time, all documents strive to provide "communicative stability."

However, all is not always well in documentville. There is a dark side, namely, bureaucracy. Written records have spawned new technologies and new document genres to satisfy our desire for speed, efficiency and control. Levy provides an engaging look at three historical technologies: the typewriter, carbon paper and vertical files to show how we got to where we are now in the typical work environment.

The chapter on "Reading and Attention" opens with a demonstration Levy witnessed in the mid-1970's at Xerox PARC. An experimental window-based programming environment called D-Lisp was being shown to a group of engineers. During the scripted demo the presenter received an e-mail message. He looked away from his main programming window, answered and closed the e-mail window, then returned to the main demo. The point was to show an early form of multitasking. Most in the audience were impressed, except for one engineer who was very upset. The dissenter asked, "Why in the world would you want to be interrupted— and distracted— by e-mail while programming?" Levy feels that the question really was about how we use one of our precious resources: our attention. Levy then walks the boundary between bibliophile and technophile in an applicable discussion on reading for information and for experience.

As readers and technical communicators our collective anxiety not only comes from the struggle over attention management, but also from informational clutter. Most of us can relate to the messy-desk syndrome. This anxiety is heightened when it expands to include the really big desk of cyberspace and its messy piles of hypertext. Levy provides many helpful insights in his section "Libraries and the Anxiety of Disorder." This leads into a refresher history on how we got from metal letterpress to digital postscript typography.

David Levy sums up his scholarly and entertaining book: "We may not be able to predict the future, but in looking at documents we can perhaps see something at least as important: ourselves. For to look at our written forms is to see something of our striving for meaning and order, as well as the mechanism by which we continually create meaning and order. And it is also, potentially, to peek at that which lies beyond all formulations —"the unimaginable universe— not just as an object of fear and denial, but of wonder and celebration."

So the next time you look at the receipt from your auto mechanic and gasp at the total amount due, just think of it as an object of "wonder and celebration."

The Quandary of Providing Samples when Job Hunting

by Eric Olive, Four Lakes Chapter Web Master

> **What do you think?**
>
> "A technical communicator has received permission to keep confidential writing samples with the understanding that she may not distribute these samples. What should she do when a potential employer requests submission of writing samples via mail, or asks to keep the writing samples the writer brings to an interview?"
>
> E-mail the editors at lleditors@hotmail.com with answers to this scenario, or suggest some ways of demonstrating skill when you can't use proprietary samples. If we publish your message in the Sept/Oct issue, you'll get a free STC magnetic poetry set.

This article discusses the need to provide written and online samples of one's project work when job hunting. Like all writing professionals, technical communicators are expected to produce samples of their work. I have been asked to bring samples of my work to interviews, both as a potential employee, and as a contractor interviewing for temporary assignments.

A potential employer's desire to review a writer's work is understandable. The interview, while essential, may not be sufficient to determine a candidate's fitness for the position. Has the candidate demonstrated an ability to research, write, and organize information effectively? What better way to find out than to review the work itself?

In their quest to find the best candidate, some employers overlook two ethical issues surrounding samples. First, some companies forbid technical communicators to copy part or all of any document, Web page, help system, or application. These companies assert their right to retain control over their proprietary goods and services. The problem for the technical communicator is obvious; there is no sample to produce. She is, in short, stuck.

Even when technical communicators have readily available samples, a second ethical issue emerges, the potential employer's desire to keep samples for review at a later time. On its face, this request is sensible. It takes time to carefully review and assess another's work. Such a review is best conducted alone, in a quiet office, rather than while talking to the interviewee.

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However, ethics once again emerge. While several of my clients agreed to let me take samples of work I produced for them, this agreement was always with the understanding that I would not release these samples. In other words, clients were comfortable with my taking samples to interviews, but asked that I not leave them with the potential employers, nor allow anyone to photocopy these samples.

Fortunately, many companies understand this second ethical issue. For example, several years ago, I applied for a technical writing position with a local company. The ad listed several items, including a request to include samples along with the resume and cover letter. In my cover letter, I explained that I would be happy to bring samples to an interview, but that I could not release samples of my clients' proprietary documentation. Someone from Human Resources called to schedule an interview. During the interview, one writer complimented me for respecting my clients' confidentiality, and explained that the products this company produced were subject to many nondisclosure and proprietary agreements. In this case, my position on the samples issue helped me.

While many potential employers understand the ethical problems surrounding samples, a few remain recalcitrant, insisting on samples. No samples no interview. Certainly, these companies are entitled to take this stance though I personally find it petulant and offensive.

While I am not alone in feeling this way, many technical communicators do not support my position. Over the past year, informal discussions with other writers in Madison yielded a variety of responses ranging from no hesitation about submitting samples of any sort, to extreme reluctance to submit samples for fear of violating an explicit or implicit agreement with an employer or client. The results were similar when I posted this issue on the technical writer's listserv nearly two years ago.

In short, unanimity on this issue remains elusive. In an effort to clarify this delicate issue, I contacted the national STC office with the following scenario: "A technical communicator has received permission to keep confidential writing samples with the understanding that she may not distribute these samples. What should she do when a potential employer requests submission of writing samples via mail, or asks to keep the writing samples the writer brings to an interview?" I received the following reply:

STC does not have an official policy on what a candidate does with confidential samples. A local chapter could make suggestions on what a job seeker should do. However, a chapter cannot dictate what goes on between a job seeker and an employer. A chapter can only offer advice.

In this case, the job seeker should respect the proprietary/confidential nature of the samples. They were made confidential for a reason. If the job seeker wants to show the samples to another employer, he or she should be able to do so if the samples remain with the job seeker. The employer should not retain the samples. If the job seeker really wants the employer to retain the samples, the job seeker should obtain permission from the employer who classified the samples as confidential.

This statement seems clear. The Four Lakes Chapter may not impose a policy on its members nor require anything of employers. Perhaps, however, our members can devise a short list of suggestions about how to handle samples. Ideas include:

- Omitting logos and other information that would identify the company for which the document was written. This might satisfy some proprietary agreements.

- Making up samples loosely based on real technical documents. The ethical/legal implications of this option might require additional investigation.

- Writing a "fake" technical document from scratch alleviates ethical concerns but poses another problem. The ability to meet the challenges associated with a real project give the writer a chance to demonstrate her talent and creativity. It is difficult to anticipate such challenges when developing a "mock" document. This difficulty means that the writer's talents may not shine through in a "fake" sample.

This list is short, and may not fully address the samples issue. If this issue interests you, please e-mail me with ideas about how to handle employer requests for samples.

To contact Eric Olive, send e-mail to eolive_99@yahoo.com.

Print Plus Online Delivers Synergies

by Geoff Hart

"Combining two or more media can produce a synergy far greater than the sum of the parts by letting one medium's strengths compensate for another's weaknesses."

The print-based model of interaction with customers had worked so well and so predictably that we simply moved it online, largely unmodified. That was by no means wrong, but as Web technology and our own comprehension of that technology both evolved, the traditional approach soon proved limiting.

Our improving understanding of the Web's potential, combined with better tools for meeting that potential, has begun to reveal many new possibilities. For example, where Web pages once relied exclusively on primitive HTML-only coding, we can now create pages as elaborate as anything possible with conventional print technology; moreover, we can now link with databases to generate dynamically-updated Web pages, customize sites to fit client-established profiles, and include dynamic media such as sound and video — both to entertain and to provide information that we can't communicate in any other medium.

These options are expensive or entirely unavailable in print, but the Web makes them economical and relatively easy to implement. As a result, we can now achieve more than we ever could in print, faster and for less money. This permits an entirely new possibility that reverses the traditional paradigm: Provide our content on the Web and use print to lead people to that content.

The technical writer's mantra of choosing the correct medium for the message's content and audience shows how to do this. Good communicators recognize that every medium has unique strengths and weaknesses, and that well-designed communication strategies take advantage of the strengths while minimizing the weaknesses. Combining two or more media can produce a synergy far greater than the sum of the parts by letting one medium's strengths compensate for another's weaknesses.

Online material has no production costs other than those of creation (paying writers and designers) and distribution (administration and download costs), and eliminates the cost difference between full-color and black-and-white publishing. In contrast, printed materials have similar creation costs but add high mailing costs and a nearly four-fold cost increase to obtain full-color printing. And, of course, sound and video offer benefits impossible to attain in print.

But despite these advantages for the online medium, paper has its own advantages. For example, printed materials are more familiar (many people remain uncomfortable with online information), more accessible (many of us lack full-time access to an Internet connection), more portable (nobody reads online information in the bathroom), more exchangeable (you can pass a magazine to colleagues without violating copyright), and more legible (print remains easier to read).

The fact that both media have compelling advantages suggests a solution that has only recently become popular: Rather than choosing a single medium and sacrificing some of the other medium's advantages, use both media together to leverage their different strengths. Consider, for example, the approach adopted by Cisco Systems, a cutting-edge Internet company that might have been expected to dispense with legacy technologies such as print. Instead, the company's iQ Magazine is now available both online, with supplemental content, and in print, as a 100-page magazine that provides less detail. This design choice arose from an audience analysis that recognized that many prospective clients were managers who spent relatively little time online, and who consequently preferred printed information.

Yet keeping the print version short also made it attractive to busy managers, who lack the time to read longer articles that compete for their attention with reams of other printed matter and who are often satisfied with a summary of the topic. But when that summary piques their interest, the Web version of the magazine is readily available to serve those who need more detail. The combination provides flexibility and a focus on audience needs that would be difficult to achieve with either medium alone.

Count on seeing other companies take advantage of these synergies as awareness of this approach's potential grows. Of course, not everyone reads this column, so it may take some time for the message to spread by itself. As a technical communicator, you've almost certainly spent time deciding on the best mix of online help and printed documentation for the products you document, and your experience in this area uniquely equips you to help your company make the leap to an appropriate mix of online and printed materials. Take the time to work with your managers to identify areas in

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which your employer could obtain the synergies I've described, and start working on solutions.

Copyright 2001, Geoff Hart.

To contact Geoff Hart, send e-mail to usersadvocate@raycomm.com.

Educational Opportunities for FrameMaker Users

by Sharon Ambro, NEOSTC Newsletter Co-editor

FrameUsers.com is a large network of FrameMaker users who pool their resources together. This site hosts the Framer's e-mail list where users can both post and answer questions. FrameUsers.com is free, all you have to do is sign up.

In addition, FrameUsers is holding their 4th annual FrameUsers Workshop in Durham, North Carolina on September 25-27. This workshop will include sessions on:

- The basics of FrameMaker and XML
- An overview of FrameScript, the scripting language for FrameMaker
- A case study about military standard technical manuals
- Successfully crossing the language translation divide
- The many benefits of Adobe Certified Expert (ACE) certification
- An introduction to automating FrameMaker with FrameScript

Go to http://www.FrameUsers.com to learn more about this workshop as well as to take advantage of the FrameMaker support system it offers.

The Esoteric Editor

by Karla Caldwell, Esoteric Co-Editor

The end of summer brings us to a new STC year and some new faces on the Lines & Letters staff. Steve Ollay, graphic designer and technical communications student, has joined the team, and Brian Baddour has offered to act as a Lines & Letters liason to the Web committee. We look forward to hearing from both of them in upcoming issues.

I'd also like to announce the winner of last issue's trivia contest. Joanne Sutton of Sandusky hit the nail on the head with her guess that Andy Richter was our mystery technical writer. Joanne won a fun STC magnetic poetry set complete with words like cubicle, proofread, stressed, and Oh No!

Speaking of words, this month's trivia question is all about them. There are several six-letter words in the English language whose letters are in alphabetical order. ACCOST is one of them. Can you name five more?

Send responses to Sharon and me via e-mail at lleditors@hotmail.com. Remember to include an article topic you'd like to see in an upcoming Lines & Letters and your mailing address (so we can send your goodies if you win). By the way, this month's winner will receive a nifty magnetic poetry set too.

Please send letters to the editors to lleditors@hotmail.com.

Membership News

New NEOSTC members, membership status changes, and more.

Welcome New Members!

We'd like to personally welcome the following new members to the Northeast Ohio Chapter of the STC. If you see them at our meetings, be sure to introduce yourself and welcome them to the chapter. We're all in the same boat!

- Suzan L. Justice
- Gregory T. Herlevi

We'd also like to welcome members Sarah E. Wilson, transferring in from the Central Ohio Chapter, Stephen W. Steiniger from the Bowling Green State University Student Chapter, and Mark T. Sakuta, formerly of the Niagra Frontier Chapter.

Uh-Oh! We Goofed!

In the May/June issue of Lines and Letters, we welcomed Steven Olay to the chapter, but we made a mistake. Please extend NEOSTC greetings to Steven Ollay.

Chapter Membership Count

As of June 30, 2002 the NEOSTC had 180 members. The entire STC had 19,834 members.

For July, we added two new members to make the total count 182. Total for the society is 20,086.

If you know a new member that we've missed or if you have some membership news, please let us know. Send messages for the editors to lleditors@hotmail.com.

Regional Opportunities

Workshops, conferences, and events in and around Ohio.

Microsoft Word Basics I, II, and III

Learn the basics of using Microsoft Word, from formatting to keystrokes and views.

- Dates: Aug. 14, 21, and 28, 2002 at 3:00 PM
- Location: Cleveland Public Library Eastman Branch, 11602 Lorain Avenue, Cleveland, OH 44111

Details

Microsoft Word Basics I - Learn to format and save documents, correct spelling and grammar, and print.

> Date: Aug. 14, 2002 at 3:00 PM

Microsoft Word Word Basics II - Learn basic keystrokes, the File menu, and how to create bookmarks.

> Date: Aug. 21, 2002 at 3:00 PM

Microsoft Word Basics III - Learn to open and display files in different views.

> Date: Aug. 28, 2002 at 10:00 AM

Creating Tables in Word

Learn to resize, format, add and merge columns and rows, and apply borders and shading.

- Date: Aug. 14, 2002 at 10:00 AM
- Location: Cleveland Public Library Main Branch

Details

This class is an introduction to creating tables in Microsoft Word. With Word's table features, participants will learn how to resize, format, add and merge columns and rows, and apply borders and shading to a table. You MUST have experience with Word to follow the class. Space is limited - call to confirm.

Location: Cleveland Public Library Main Branch, Computer Lab (room 217) Louis Stokes Wing, Location: 325 Superior Ave., N.E., Cleveland, OH 44114

Microsoft Publisher

Learn to create your own publications, from greeting cards to flyers.

- Date: Aug. 20, 2002 at 6:00 PM
- Location: Cleveland Public Library South Brooklyn Branch, 4303 Pearl Road, Cleveland, OH 44109

Details

Learn to create your own publications, from greeting cards to flyers. Space is limited - call to confirm.

User & Task Analysis for Information Design by Bill Hackos

This seminar focuses on practical techniques to learn about your users, their goals, and their work, and create a model that will serve as a decision-making tool throughout the life-cycle of your project or product.

- Deadline: Sept. 25-26, 2002
- Location: Arlington, VA

Details

User & Task Analysis for Information Design - Before we can develop effective user-goal-oriented procedures, we need to understand who our users are, what their goals are, and what tasks they need to perform to reach those goals. Without this understanding, the procedures we develop often tell users how the products or systems work but not how to use them to get their work done.

This seminar focuses on practical techniques to learn about your users, their goals, and their work, and create a model that will serve as a decision-making tool throughout the life-cycle of your project or product. You'll learn how to make the most of your user information resources, whether based on site visits and contacts, in-house subject matter experts, or even, when you must, on your own guesstimates. A guided sequence of exercises will step you through the process of modeling users and their tasks and deciding on the methods that are most appropriate to your situation.

Plan to attend "User and Task Analysis for Information Design," an exceptional two-day seminar conducted by Bill Hackos, Vice-President of Comtech Services and an expert on information design and human productivity.

- Date: Sept. 25-26, 2002 8:30 AM to 4:30 PM
- Location: Arlington, VA (American Red Cross)

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♦ Instructor: Bill Hackos (see his full bio at http://www.usabledesign.com/02leaders/02leaders.htm)

Excel Basics

Learn to store, manipulate, and record numeric data.

♦ Date: Aug. 16, 2002 at 4:00 PM

♦ Location: Cleveland Public Library Main Branch

Summertime Computer Festival

Introductory classes for the Cleveland Pulbic Library Woodland Branch new software: Microsoft Publisher and Encarta.

♦ Dates: Aug. 7 and Aug. 21, 2002 at 4:30 PM

♦ Location: Cleveland Public Library Woodland Branch

XML for Writers, Editors, and Publishers

Two-day course created for people who write, edit, and publish print and online documents.

♦ Deadline: Sept. 9, 2002

♦ Location: Pittsburgh, PA

Society-Level Offices Open For Nomination

by STC Nominating Committee

This year's elective offices include:

♦ Second Vice President

♦ Director-Sponsor, Region 2

♦ Director-Sponsor, Region 3

♦ Nominating Committee (two positions)

We are looking for prospects who have a history of successful STC leadership and contributions at the chapter, regional, or Society level. For information about each office, please refer to the attached STC Elective Offices Chart 2003.

If you, or someone you know, are a prospect for one of these offices, please complete the attached Nomination Form 2003 and return it to the Society office by August 23, 2002 at stc@stc.org. The STC Nominating Committee will contact prospects to confirm interest and to request additional biographical information. Please note that prospects do not automatically become candidates. The committee carefully reviews the qualifications of all prospects to select candidates.

It is through the help of leaders such as you that the Nominating Committee can provide a slate of excellent candidates for each office.

Thank you for your help.

Sincerely,

STC Nominating Committee: Kit Brown, Snake River chapter, Nan Fritz, Boston chapter, Deirdre A. Murr, San Fernando Valley chapter, John V. Hedtke, Puget Sound chapter, Michelle Ratcliffe, Suncoast chapter

Lines & Letters Editors

♦ Sharon Ambro (sharon.ambro@grc.nasa.gov)

♦ Karla Caldwell (kcaldwell@parker.com)