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From the President

Russell Willerton, STC Snake River Chapter President



As 2009 gets underway, we can see among our friends, family, and colleagues a lot of mixed feelings. The economic situation of the past few months continues to affect many businesses, large and small, and forecasts for many may not be favorable.

As technical communicators, we are reminded yet again of the continual need to show the value we add to our employers and to keep our workplace skills and knowledge current.

This is where the STC comes in. At the international level as well as in local chapters and SIGs, the STC is dedicated to promoting our profession in good times and bad. Our most recent chapter meetings have featured presentations on hot topics in our industry—writing for localization and working with virtual teams. It has been rewarding for me to see a variety of new and returning members at these meetings.

By joining or renewing your membership in STC, you are investing in your professional life. Intercom magazine always has practical articles on current trends affecting our field. Technical Communication features in-depth research and also provides helpful reviews of current books affecting our field. STC dues (less \$30 if you receive printed copies of the magazine and journal) are tax deductible.

STC has a page on its website with some short articles on getting through tough economic times. These may be useful to you as a reference.

It's password-protected, but those who have paid 2008 dues should have access to it through February; those who paid for 2009 should have no problems getting it.

I wish you a happy and prosperous 2009.

~Russell

January Schedule

New Year's Kick-off Meeting

This month we have a few events going on. Please join us this month for the "New Year kick-off" meeting. We are going to meet and brainstorm ideas for the upcoming spring months. We can discuss dues, meeting times, speakers, collaborative efforts, etc.

Date: Tuesday, January 20th

Time: 6:30pm

Location: Borders Bookstore in the Cafe (right next to the mall)
350 N. Milwaukee St. in Boise
Phone: 208-322-6668

Cost: Free

*If you are a member, you should receive an email from our programs manager, Amaya Berriochoa, a few days before the meeting to let you know the details. If you are not on the list and would like to attend, please e-mail her at programs@stc-src.org for information.

Indexing Luncheon

This lunch was rescheduled for January 31st, 2009. We'll be talking with Cheryl Landes, the president of the Pacific Northwest Chapter of the STC. If you would like to join us on Saturday, January 31st, please RSVP to Cheryl at clandes407@aol.com and Amaya at programs@stc-src.org. We look forward to seeing you!

Date: Saturday, January 31st

Time: 1:30pm

Location: Here are the directions to the Golden Corral:

1. From Interstate 84, take Interstate I-184 toward Boise City Center.
2. Drive 0.3 mile, then take exit 1A to Franklin Blvd.
3. Drive 0.9 mile, then turn left left at W. Franklin Road.
4. Drive 0.2 mile, and turn right at N. Milwaukee Street.
5. Drive 1/2 mile, then turn left on W. Emerald Street.
The Golden Corral is 0.2 mile away on the right.
The phone number is 208-373-7118.

Cost: Lunch (Dutch treat)

Again, please RSVP to clandes407@aol.com and by January 29th.

Suggestions and Contributions

If you would like to be a speaker or would like to suggest one for one of our chapter meetings, please get in touch with Amaya Berriochoa at programs@stc-src.org. Also, if you have any ideas, suggestions, or profound announcements to make on the subject of meetings, feel free to make them known to Amaya.

We want to make meetings worth your time by providing knowledgeable speakers who will discuss important topics of technical communication with chapter members.

Revealing Your Hidden Value

by Suzanna Laurent, Associate Fellow, Oklahoma Chapter



Suzanna Laurent

Have you ever felt as though technical communicators don't get the proper respect and credit for the work we do? Although many sources tell us that we are important to the success and the bottom line of organizations, few of us actually feel crucial where we work. If we did, we would feel more respected for our work, and we wouldn't have to worry that we might be the first ones laid off when the economy slows down. We wouldn't have to be concerned that businesses hire people whom we don't think are qualified to handle the responsibilities or do the work that we call technical communication.

The technical communication profession enjoyed sustained economic growth for the last eight years of the twentieth century, so we entered this new millennium with high expectations for continued success. Our hopes were crushed as an uncertain economy took its toll. We have learned that this is going to be a lean year and that many companies will have fewer people to do the work. In most organizations, technical communicators, whether employees or contractors, still struggle for recognition and appropriate funding. We are under heavy pressure to justify our roles and activities. Too many product managers and subject-matter experts still think that "anyone can write" and "documentation isn't very important." To meet this challenge, it's up to us to change that mindset. We must seek ways to demonstrate the value we add, show how to measure that value, and strive to add even more value.

How do we add value?

Technical communication is a diverse profession with a bright and exciting future. Our members develop more diversified products and services than ever before with experience, skills, and talents that vary as widely as the fields in which we work. Because the fields of technical communication and the work we do are so diverse, the ways we add value vary widely too.

These are some of the ways technical communicators add value. I'm sure you can add many others to this list by giving it some careful thought. We contribute value by:

- Bringing a customer's or user's perspective to bear on issues
- Writing clear, concise specifications, requirements, and proposals
- Improving user interfaces
- Serving as an integral part of the team from the beginning by offering advice and helping to solve problems
- Portraying a consistent image
- Streamlining the development process
- Reducing legal liability
- Improving the organization's return on investment (ROI)
- Reducing help desk and technical support costs when fewer questions are asked
- Selling more of the product because it has better documentation
- Reducing the cost of producing documentation and substantiating the expenses we save

How can we measure the value we add?

Experts have studied this complex issue and written numerous articles. One of the many benefits of STC membership is that we can read articles and studies online from 1993 to the present about this and other important topics. Access both of the Society's award-winning publications, *Intercom* and *Technical Communication*, on the Society's Web site at www.stc.org to search for pertinent information about measuring value added. For a good foundation, you might start with the February 1995 Special Section of *Technical Communication*. It contains seven reports about a study funded with part of our STC membership dues.

Hidden Values, Cont'd...

There are other more recent articles as well. Once I'd read some of these articles, I was able to demonstrate to my company's management that I can add value even with limited time, resources, and control over a project. Now, I'd like to give you an example of how I took the initiative and used a very easy process to show my own management one way that I add value.

Our company recently purchased another company, along with its software application and code. We updated the application with more features and prepared it for release to our customers. An online user's guide came with the system. I was assigned the task of updating the online guide. The vice president told me, "I know you have another big project coming up right away, but this is only a small application. All you have to do is change the old company's names and logos to ours, and document the new features because the user guide is excellent. It shouldn't take you very long." I've been a technical communicator for many years, and usually this kind of statement means there's a challenge coming my way.

After my initial review of the online documentation, I knew that I had a problem. My biggest concern was that the table of contents was so limited— all it did was link to the titles of the documents included in the guide. Since some of the documents exceeded 90 pages, this meant there was no way for the users to find answers for their questions without reading the entire document (assuming the topic was covered at all in the online guide). I know my users well enough to know that they would give up long before then. Other issues were that all of the procedures were carefully documented in paragraph format, using passive voice and future tense, which caused the readability statistics to be quite high. This "small application" consisted of 48 Word files that totaled almost 1,300 pages placed online as a single .pdf file. My challenge was to spend as little time as possible improving the usability of this document, updating it with the new features, and making it something the users might actually be able to use. I immediately shifted into my "super writer" mode.

The results I achieved to meet that challenge really made a difference. All I did was compare the "before and after" documents using Word's Readability Statistics, and then I wrote a short report to my manager. I explained what I did, how I did it, and the results I achieved. They were quite impressed that although I didn't spend a lot of time, I was able to raise the overall readability of the document by more than 28% and reduce the passive sentences by 23%. The Flesch-Kincaid reading level went down from the 12th to the 9th grade level. I knew my users needed more though, so I also made a few suggestions for future revisions.

My suggestions included a searchable, online help facility that would better satisfy my users' needs. I explained how frustrating it is for users when they can't find the answers to their questions. Basically, I performed a "miniature case study" and reported the results to management. As a result, my managers learned more about the depth of my knowledge, and they found that I could "make a big difference for users" even though my time was limited.

How can we add even more value?

Try to read as much as possible about how to add more value. I've found that you can never learn enough. One other thing I learned is that we, as technical communicators, often don't do a good enough job of "tooting our own horns." Each time I complete a major project now, I release the same type of project completion report. These reports have made a huge difference in the perception others have of my work—especially in other departments. I keep the reports short and simple and send them to everyone on the team.

As you plan new projects, think about how you can show the value you add. Perhaps you can collect data on the old product or process now so you have benchmarks.

Hidden Values, Cont'd...

Certainly, you can plan data collection efforts that focus on your issues and collect data in real time rather than from old records. You may even be able to use more sophisticated techniques for assuring the validity and reliability of your findings.

Once you have a system in place for measuring value added, you can use the data for continuous improvement. You can monitor the success of information products by sampling at regular intervals (monthly or quarterly). If you notice a trend upward in, for example, support calls about a specific topic or product, you can arrange for more resources to improve the information on that topic or product.

Make sure you get credit when you add value. It isn't enough to do studies of value added, we have to make sure our managers and executives know about the value we add. After all, part of a manager's job is to make judgments about the value of the contributions that different people make. Without hard data, managers make those judgments subjectively. Without data, managers must draw their own conclusions, which may be incomplete or inaccurate. You must consider it part of your role as a technical communicator to show the value that you add.

Always remember that each of us must strive to improve the perception and value of technical communicators worldwide. When you think about it, there are many people who could not do their jobs without the varied information, procedures, and instructions written by good technical communicators. So, make it your goal to remind yourself and others how important our work is and what value we provide. If we all work together to improve the perception of technical communication worldwide, then we will see the difference in how we are respected because when a collection of minds, hearts, and talents work together, great things can happen!

This article was published in the Sept/Oct 2008 edition of Sound Views, the Puget Sound Chapter newsletter.

A Love of the Arts Can Help Sharpen Technical Communication Skills

by Monique Cobb, Carolina Chapter Secretary

I love singing, acting, writing, and art. It recently occurred to me: a strong background in and a love of the arts can help us excel as technical communicators.

Lessons Learned in Anthropology

At one point during my education, I turned my focus to studying anthropology. "How can anthropology help a technical communicator?" you may ask. Yes, it may be a struggle to figure out how to tie together anthropology and writing. My father told me, "You can always write for the National Geographic." That is true. However, anthropology, like many of my other subjects, brings new perspectives to writing. Studying anthropology, you learn that you can write about topics that you have never heard of until you research them. I brought this lesson with me in my first job as a technical writer and graphic designer for a sensors company.

Bringing Creativity to Technical Design and Writing

From a creative standpoint, technical communicators who have a background in the arts are able to bring knowledge of color to projects. For example, I assisted in creating a non-profit brochure for a drug rehabilitation program. I chose the paper, a recycled green stock. My choice was based on the thought of a non-profit helping with the environment, just as they are helping their cause. I chose green for emphasis on a "new, fresh, and clean" approach.

The ultimate tie-in to technical communication from the arts in general is creative writing. Creative writing might involve sitting in circles in poetry groups or classes, working on your inner expression with rhyming words and iambic pentameter. This work may pay off when writing technically. Rather than writing blandly, you bring a creative approach to the wording and pay special attention to how words sound together and flow as a group. Also, you learn to be comfortable writing from your heart, instead of just your brain, and in doing so bring a creative approach to writing.

Theatre and Technical Communication

Theatre teaches you to learn from others and to work both individually and as a team. These traits are also essential in technical communication. Though some may think that writing is a lonely job, those who have a theatrical background can appreciate working individually and collaboratively. You must strengthen your individual skills — need they be acting, singing, writing, software, or graphic skills. These skills are brought as a whole to the group atmosphere and are a requirement in reaching goals.

Improv theatre, in particular, teaches us to be resourceful and creative. Technical writing and graphic design projects need such skills. Sometimes clients only have specific software programs; we have to be creative and/or technical with what we have available. We often must think out of the box. With a new perspective, we can bring a new way of looking at a project, but keeping it consistent in the look and feel of the branding.

Art School: Design Techniques and Software

Art school not only teaches you the basics of drawing and painting, it teaches the software programs that the marketing industry requires: QuarkXpress, Adobe Photoshop, and Adobe Illustrator. It also teaches skills for layout, such as typography, fonts, the grid, picas, and points.

As a technical communicator trained in graphic design and desktop publishing, you can bring such skills, plus knowledge of Microsoft PowerPoint and writing, to local companies. You can successfully design and lay out presentations, especially within e-Learning environments. Layout capabilities, creativity, consistency, and eye for details will open doors of opportunity beyond brochures, specification, and installation sheet layouts.

Conclusion

By education and trade, I am a writer and graphic designer. I've created from as early as I can remember. My father, who was also an artist, gave me a kid-friendly drafting table in our in-house studio. We spent Sunday afternoons working on projects at each of our tables. Saturday afternoons I spent time with Mom in reading circles at a local library. I would sit with her and listen to the daily reading. These small efforts were the introduction to the arts by both my parents.

Though I grew my love of the theater, writing, and designing throughout the years, I wanted a career that I could enjoy, and technical communication lets me combine all of these interests. I've been able to cross over much of my love of the arts to technical communication. It is funny how what we really have a passion for always seems to find its way into every aspect of our lives. We find that we are comfortable in the "familiar," although the "familiar" may come in different forms, and those forms for me are both the arts and technical communication.

This article was originally published in the Q4 2008 edition of Carolina Communique, the Carolina Chapter newsletter. Monique can be reached at monique_stcjobs@yahoo.com.

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ABOUT THE SIDEBAR NEWSLETTER



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