



Sound Views

The Newsletter of the Puget Sound Chapter of STC

Revealing Your Hidden Value

By Suzanna Laurent, Associate Fellow, Oklahoma Chapter

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

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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

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At The Next Chapter Meeting: September 16, 2008

- Topic: Energize Your Career (and Your Life!): A Practical Approach to Building a Career You Love
- Presenter: Curt Rosengren
- Time: 6:00-6:45 PM: Networking and Buffet
6:45-7:00 PM: Announcements
7:00-8:15: Presentation
8:15: Informal Q&A
- Location: [Coast Hotel](#) - Bellevue, Washington
- Registration: [Register online](#) or call 206-623-8632 by 10:00 AM, September 15
- Cost: \$10 for members; \$15 for non-members; \$5 for students

From the President

By Mike Brazill

As summer draws to a close, our Puget Sound Chapter year is just beginning. I'm very happy to be your president this year and excited about the plans of our diverse and enthusiastic leadership council!

Peer Review—You probably will not hear much about a competition this year. For several years, we have felt this term was misleading because our annual fall event is really more of a peer review than a competition. This year, Joe Welinske and his Peer Review team are reaching out to the Puget Sound community to increase participation in this event. If you would like to get some input from your peers on your information products, I strongly encourage you to submit them for review. You can also participate by evaluating (judging) entries. I have benefited from both types of participation. It's exciting to "put your work out there" and find what your peers think of it. And evaluating the work performed in our community can prove to be a great educational experience.

Membership—Our Membership chair, Barbara Alban, is conducting a survey to help us learn more about your needs and preferences. If you haven't already responded, please take a few moments to do so. Barbara will also lead our Shy, Inactive, and New (SIN) sessions this year before each monthly meeting. These sessions help to orient new or infrequent visitors and give them a chance to get to know a few people before the meeting starts. They also provide an informal forum for discussing diverse technical communication topics.

Scholarship—Our Scholarship program continues to have good participation in local colleges at the undergraduate and graduate level. This year, our scholarship committee, chaired by Diane Forsyth, awarded scholarships to Carina Skrobecki, who is currently in the Visual Communication Design program at the University of Washington and Natasha Jones, who is pursuing a PhD from the Department of Technical Communication at the University of Washington.

Web Services—Charlie Kyle, our new Web Services manager, and his team are working on a variety of pro-

jects. These include evaluating whether we should upgrade our Plone CMS or continue with our traditional site, redesigning our Web interface to make it easier to use our services, and exploring new ways to serve the community through the Web.

Public Relations—Our Public Relations chair, Diana Phelps-Soysal, is exploring creative ways to connect with our community, including experimenting with social media to find new opportunities for our chapter public relations. She is also forming relationships with local sister organizations that focus on usability, design, and other areas of technical communication. Diana will direct the announcements and other PR you receive this year.

Programs and Education—I'm really looking forward to a strong set of programs and educational sessions this year. Our Programs Manager, Kathy Henry, is arranging a variety of programs that are designed to meet the needs of our diverse membership. Fall programs include topics about finding passion in our work, translation management solutions, and handling terminology. Kathy is also lining up a great set of educational workshops.

Newsletter—I want to congratulate Mary Corder and her team on reviving this newsletter! In the following months, the team plans to produce a combination of print and online newsletters. Keep in mind that writing an article for our newsletter is a great way to do this. It's also a good way to "get your name out there."

Our chapter also has a strong board this year.

Treasurer—We are fortunate to have our treasurer from last year, Jeanie Fogwell, return to guide our chapter through the changes required by our international organization and the IRS. Although not highly visible to many of our members, the Treasurer is one of the most vital roles for any STC chapter. We are lucky to have Jeanie's knowledge and experience on our side this year.

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Secretary— Our Secretary, Debra Clark, has some great experience in this position with other organizations and is proving to be a real benefit to us. She is helping us to achieve better transparency and has already made some great progress in keeping us on the “straight and narrow.”

Past President—I’m very happy to be able to tap the experience of our past president, Joe Welinske. In addition to providing excellent counsel and guidance, Joe is stepping up in

many ways to help our chapter succeed this year.

As your president, my focus this year is on the people associated with our chapter. As an educational society, our best measure of success is how well we serve our members’ needs. As a volunteer society, our ability to do this depends largely on the enthusiasm of our volunteers. If you want to volunteer or just offer some suggestions, please drop me a line at president@stc-psc.org.

~ Mike

Upcoming Events

October 18, 2008

Workshop: Single-Sourcing with Flare - presented by Sharon Burton, MadCap Software

October 28, 2008

Translation Management Solution (TMS) Benefits During Localization - presented by Nabil Freij

November 18, 2008

A Microsoft View of Terminology Best Practices - Panel discussion

For more information, see: www.stc-psc.org.

Editor's Corner

By Mary Corder

Welcome to the first issue of the newly redesigned *Sound Views* newsletter! I'm excited about my new role as Managing Editor and hope the newsletter becomes an interesting and informative resource for you.

I most recently served the Arkansas Chapter of STC as secretary and newsletter editor. As a new resident of the Puget Sound region, I felt that volunteering for my new STC chapter would be a great way to meet and network with other local technical communicators. Volunteering is a great idea, whether you are new to the area, new to the field, or a longtime resident. If you are interested in one of our open volunteer positions, please contact our Volunteer Coordinator at volunteer@stc-psc.org.

The leadership council of the Puget Sound Chapter has an exciting year prepared, and I look forward to meeting many of you at the first meeting on September 16 at the Coast Hotel in Bellevue, Washington. Curt Rosen-gren's presentation, "Energize Your Career (and Your Life!): A Practical Approach to Building a Career You Love" promises to be a real treat!

The success of the newsletter depends largely on you for contributions, and I welcome any newsletter articles, suggestions, or ideas you have for making *Sound Views* even better. Some ideas for articles include career or educational experiences, a review of a software tool, or a review of a relevant book.

Feel free to send me your newsletter articles and feedback at newsletter@stc-psc.org.

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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 publica-

tions, *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. 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

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About Sound Views

Sound Views is published for members of the Puget Sound Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication.

Managing Editor

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Kassie Koledin
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Submissions

All members are welcome to submit articles, comments, and letters. Articles must address topics of interest to technical communicators, especially to those in the Puget Sound region of Washington.

Send articles in Word (doc), Rich-Text Format (RTF), or ASCII (txt) formats to the Managing Editor (newsletter@stc-psc.org).

Accompanying graphics or photos should be provided as separate files.

The editorial staff reserves the right to edit letters and articles for length and clarity.

The submission deadline for the next issue of *Sound Views* is October 15, 2008.

Reprints

You may reprint original material appearing in *Sound Views* as long as you acknowledge the source and send a copy of the reprint to the Managing Editor.

For more information about the Puget Sound Chapter of STC, visit the website at www.stc-psc.org.

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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. 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,

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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!

Peer Review

The Peer Review (also known as the Competition) is your chance to have your work reviewed by your peers in a safe and productive manner. Your online Help, tutorials, web sites, reference books, brochures, or posters will be reviewed by two or more judges who are volunteers from the technical communication community—in the Seattle area and internationally. Your work is compared against standards developed by the Society for Technical Communication (STC).

Get recognition for your whole team. There is no limit on the number of people who can be associated with a submission.

Entry forms for the Peer Review will be available September 15 through October 15 on the Puget Sound STC web site (www.stc-psc.org/peerreview.php).

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