

STC's New Direction

STC Adopts Strategic Goals— And Returns to First Principles

BY ED RUTKOWSKI, *Editor, Intercom*

In August 2007, when STC's Board of Directors and strategic planning committee began work on the Society's new strategic plan, they were building on a foundation that had been laid about two years earlier. Around 2005, according to current STC President Mark Clifford, the board experienced a seismic shift in the way it fulfilled its role. Clifford has had a ringside view of this transformation.

"This really started when Suzanna [Laurent] was president [in 2005–2006]," Clifford says. "At that point, we started realizing that what the board was doing was not strategic. It was very tactical. So the whole emphasis of the board shifted, and what you're now seeing is the culmination of three years of change."

The new set of strategic goals adopted in May 2008 identifies five areas of focus for STC: defining the profession, communicating the value of technical communication, establishing strategic partnerships, improving the practice of technical communication, and ensuring STC's long-term viability. For Executive Director Susan Burton, who joined STC in August 2006, the new goals reflect the board's willingness to follow best practices and focus on setting STC's strategic course for the foreseeable future.

Selecting large areas to focus on, Burton says, is a simplified strategic approach that doesn't require blind adherence to a rigid framework for achieving the organization's goals.

"In 2006 the board had a sense, with all the changes STC was going through—organizationally, financially, and culturally—that specifying concrete steps would be a mistake," Burton explains. "This focus on defining strategic goals allowed the board and the staff to be flexible in achieving those goals. But STC has evolved so that the board is now in the process of developing concrete action plans for each of the strategic goals, with metrics and benchmarks."

Focus on Character

In his twenty-five years of membership, Larry Kunz, chair of STC's Strategic Planning Committee, has made significant contributions to STC in a variety of leadership positions at both the chapter and Society levels.

His experience includes a term on the Board of Directors and roles on several Society committees.

Kunz has seen a number of STC strategic plans. He says that the course charted by STC's new strategic goals is very different from past plans.

"Most [previous strategic plans] were inward-directed [explaining] what we're going to do for the members," Kunz says. "And that's still important, but what we really need to do is change the minds of the people who are employing us. This is a marketing job to get the attention of business leaders, to help them understand who we are and how we bring value to them."

Kunz's assessment of previous STC strategic plans suggests that they were almost ornamental, like a wreath that brightens the mantle when someone cares to look at it, but not something around which you can organize a room.

"We've done strategic plans in the past," he says, "and they kind of look nice, and we put them on the shelf. And they don't really influence what we do very much."

This time, the board removed the furniture, pulled up the rugs, stripped the walls, and sanded the floors. And then, patiently and with much discussion, began making the room new.

"We found as we started [talking about] our strategic goals and where we want to be in five years that we kind of fell back to questions like 'Who are we as an organization?' and 'What is STC all about?'" Kunz explains. "Certainly we have a mission statement and we have articles of incorporation, but what really is the character of this organization? Because that's going to influence what we do and how we get there."

In answering those questions, the board identified several "values" and "behaviors" that together constitute the personality of STC. Burton describes the values and behaviors, listed online at www.stc.org/about/strategicPlan.asp, as "the driving force to help set priorities when we have choices to make."

According to Kunz, any organization that has undergone as much change as STC must take the time to reevaluate those basic principles. Otherwise, the

board could risk setting a direction for STC that doesn't meet the needs of both current and future members.

"We really had to go through the exercises" to define STC's core values, Kunz explains. "STC has changed in the last ten or twenty years. I don't think we can continue to be the organization we were even five years ago and handle all the challenges that are facing us."

Goal 1: Define the profession of technical communication.

STC's parent organizations were founded in the early 1950s. Today, five-plus decades of evolution have made STC the world's largest professional association of technical communicators. And yet, through it all, the organization still lacks some of the key elements that define a profession.

"The academics will tell you that a line of business isn't really a profession unless it has certain core things—a body of knowledge especially, and agreed-upon ethical standards," Kunz explains. "Technical communication doesn't have those things. But we can't really call ourselves a profession unless we do have them. And those things aren't going to come about unless somebody drives their creation."

Work on the body of knowledge for technical communication has already begun. In June, representatives of STC's Body of Knowledge task force, led by STC Fellow Hillary Hart and Senior Member David Dayton, presented two sessions at STC's Technical Communication Summit in Philadelphia, listened to attendees' suggestions, and answered questions. In the Exhibit Hall, attendees had the opportunity to offer opinions about the design of the Technical Communication Knowledge Portal, a wall-sized graphic depicting branches of knowledge related to technical communication. The portal will form the basis of the task force's work toward identifying the core body of knowledge for technical communication.

STC is also updating the STC ethical standards under the leadership of former STC board member John Hedtke, and the Society remains active in worldwide standards organizations.

Goal 2: Communicate the value of technical communication and STC.

Since 2006, STC has attempted to "tell its powerful story," a catchphrase for making the value of technical communication clear to the general public and, most important, to employers of technical communicators. The board has ensured that telling STC's story—and its members' stories—will continue to be a main focus of the Society.

According to Kunz, crafting a coherent story about the value of technical communication will have immediate benefits for members.

"We are now driving the development of technical communication as a profession," Kunz explains, "and we're not doing that just for the sake of doing it. We're doing that because we realize that our members can't really benefit fully from saying 'We're professionals,' because the people who employ us say, 'Well, okay, if you're professionals, tell us about your profession. Why do we need to hire someone professional? How does it benefit my bottom line?'" Our members need to be able to articulate why you want to hire a technical communication professional, someone who is acquainted with the body of knowledge, someone who has a core set of skills and values and is guided by a certain set of ethics.

"We need to be able to go to my company or the company that employs me as a freelancer and say, 'These are the things I bring to you and this is how it benefits your bottom line.' We don't have a good story that way."

STC's first step toward creating that story, a new section of stc.org called "The Value of Technical Communication," was unveiled in June. While still a work in progress, the new section addresses both the general public and hiring managers who are looking to learn more about what technical communicators do. The section contains links to relevant *Intercom* articles as well as a testimonial from member Karen Flam about how she saved her company \$60,000 in 2007. STC members are welcome to provide feedback on the site by writing to Erin Heinhold, STC's marketing manager, at erin.heinhold@stc.org.

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STC's Strategic Planning Committee

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Goal 3: Establish and expand strategic partnerships.

Partnerships are a relatively new emphasis for STC. While the Society exists to benefit members, the public, and the profession of technical communication, it is first and foremost a professional association, one of several that serve members similar to STC's. Partnering with some of these associations may help STC provide additional benefits to members at a reasonable cost. In 2006–2007, under STC President Paula Berger, the board recognized that developing partnerships was a critical step in STC's development.

"There are other organizations that do things similar to what we do," Kunz explains. "Some of them have learned things we don't know yet. By partnering with them, by benchmarking, and even by saying, 'Here's a specific that STC provides that maybe another organization provides better'—we'll just sort of cede that to them.

"STC doesn't have unlimited resources. We can't do everything, so we have to make strategic decisions about how best to direct the resources we have, and one way to do that is through partnerships."

Goal 4: Globally improve the practice of technical communication.

Member education has long been STC's main focus. STC's publications and annual conference are devoted to professional development, and both have undergone significant changes in recent years to better meet member needs and the demands of the profession.

The annual conference, reborn in 2007 as the Technical Communication Summit, now features two-day preconference sessions known as Institutes that offer in-depth training in key subject areas.

STC has already undertaken steps to improve its publications based on recommendations from an outside consultant and a member panel. This year saw the formation of *Intercom's* first editorial advisory panel. Led by panel chair and Senior Member Anne Gentle, the five-member panel helped create STC's editorial calendar for 2009 and will continue to recommend potential topics and authors to *Intercom's* editor.

Following are the members of STC's Strategic Planning Committee:

Larry Kunz (manager)
Paula Berger
Kit Brown
Jamie Conklin
Suzanne Guess
John Hedtke
Linda King
Sarah O'Keefe

All members of STC's Board of Directors, listed below, are ex-officio members of the Strategic Planning Committee:

Mark H. Clifford, President
Cynthia Currie, First Vice President
Michael A. Hughes, Second Vice President
William C. Wiese, Treasurer
Linda L. Oestreich, Immediate Past President
Char James-Tanny, Secretary
Nicoletta (Nicky) Bleiel, Director
Leah Guren, Director
Rob Hanna, Director
Hillary Hart, Director
Judith M. Herr, Director
Steve Jong, Director
Rich Maggiani, Director
Lisa R. Pappas, Director

In May, the board also appointed Menno de Jong of the Netherlands as editor-in-chief of STC's journal, *Technical Communication*. De Jong is the first European to be editor and will bring a global perspective to the journal. A prolific author with more than 100 published papers, de Jong intends to strengthen the journal's identity as an outlet for high quality research articles and to be an intermediary between academics and practitioners.

Another Society objective related to improving the practice of technical communication is to further develop the relationship between industry and academia. "I think there needs to be greater awareness in both directions," Kunz says of practitioners and teachers. "Certainly if I'm a university faculty member, I would ask the question, 'How can I best prepare my students so that they will deliver value when they go out into the business world?'"

Goal 5: Ensure the long-term viability of the organization.

After the August 2007 board meeting, the Strategic Planning Committee maintained its dialogue with the board through the remainder of 2007, then presented a draft of the strategic goals at the January 2008 meeting. The board accepted the committee's draft but added an additional goal to keep STC healthy and strong.

"We were looking in terms of 'this is the grand plan of where we want to go,'" Kunz explains, "and we kind of overlooked that we need to make sure the organization is strong now and the next year and the year after that, or we won't get to do any of these things."

A New Charter

The board understands that, although STC's strategic course has been set, much work remains. Agreeing on goals is one thing; accomplishing those goals is something else entirely, and requires constant vigilance to make sure STC stays on track. That's one reason why the Strategic Planning Committee will hold weekly conference calls for initial stages of the plan.

"We realize that it's not enough to just put up a bullet point," Kunz says. "That's the kind of thing we did in the past. We have a detailed action plan that's actually a very crowded Excel workbook with a sheet for each of the five major goals. [The Strategic Planning Committee's] major charter is to manage that action plan and make sure the people who are charged with certain tasks are getting the information and resources they need."

Such a charter indicates that the old strategic plans Kunz remembers, the ones that gather dust on the shelf, are a thing of the past. From now on, the board plans to keep a close eye on STC's strategic direction—and, if necessary, shift course to adapt to changing times.

"The strategic plan is a living document," Clifford says. "And while the main goals may not change in two years, the goals underneath them that are driving the plan will be added to and refined." 