

PERSPECTIVES

STC-CENTRAL IOWA COMMUNITY NEWSLETTER

A Central Iowa View on the Technical Communication Industry

www.stc-centrاليowa.org

BECOME THE STAR OF A COMMUNITY MEETING

Submitted by Jessi Strawn, STC-Central Iowa Newsletter Editor

We are hoping to continue to use local experts to share their knowledge at next year's meetings. Think about what you and others in your professional network know that would help others in their careers.

Are you experienced with

- social media and it's role in technical communication
- document design on a shoestring budget
- technical communication that also serves a marketing purpose
- single-sourcing and structuring content
- use cases
- eco-friendly alternatives to managing documentation
- translation and localization
- documentation using wikis or blogs
- quick reference guides
- grant/proposal writing

Please let us know if you would like to share your expertise (or direct us to someone who might)—send a note to board@stc-centrاليowa.org.



STC-CENTRAL IOWA GRANT WINNERS

We are happy to announce that two STC-Central Iowa members were awarded up to \$1,500 to attend the STC Annual Conference.

Scott McCallum and Amy Tehan each received a grant and will soon share their experiences from the Summit with the community!

Congratulations, Scott and Amy! ●

JUNE 8 COMMUNITY MEETING

END-OF-THE-YEAR WRAP UP

Join your STC-Central Iowa friends for a casual get-together, where we'll announce the new board and hear from those who attended the STC Summit.

When: June 8, 2009, 11:30 a.m.

Where: Court Ave Brewing Co., 309 Court Ave., Des Moines, Iowa

RSVP: To Alisha Sauer at asauer@shazam.net before COB June 4.

Fee: Appetizers and non-alcoholic drinks will be provided at no charge. A cash bar will be available. ●

STC-Central Iowa is a community within the Society for Technical Communication (STC).

Visit www.stc.org for more information about STC.

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Society for
Technical
Communication

NOTES FROM THE PRESIDENT

Submitted by Alisha Sauer, STC–Central Iowa President



I attended the 2009 STC Summit in early May, and the crowd was abuzz with worries about the STC budget crisis. You may have heard about this, and wondered how it will affect your local chapter.

While we do not yet know exactly how STC–Central Iowa will be affected, it's unlikely that we will suffer a significant impact. We have been operating on a 0 budget model for the past two years, so our chapter activities will likely continue as usual.

The 2009–2010 administrative board are in a position to

provide the quality programs you've come to expect from STC–Central Iowa.

Now to the fun of the STC Summit—the opening keynote speaker was New York Times technology columnist David Pogue, who performed a stirring rendition of “I Want an iPhone” set to the tune of “I Did It My Way” (supposedly a video of a similar performance is available on youtube.com if you want to see it).

David Pogue is one of the world's bestselling how-to authors. He wrote or co-wrote seven books in the “for

Dummies” series (including Macs, Magic, Opera, and Classical Music); in 1999, he launched his own series of complete, funny computer books called the Missing Manual series, which now includes more than 100 titles.

His talk focused on the innovation of the iPhone, in that it's ingenious design focuses on having each function available with as few clicks as possible. So, keep it simple was the mantra for the day. ●

SMART VOLUNTEERING

By Guy Ball, Orange County STC Senior Member

What if I told you that you could learn new skills on someone else's dime, try out new ideas with a “client” who is just appreciative that you're helping, and maybe even network yourself into a new job or a new direction in the process?

I won't use the “dirty V” word” to taint this conversation. Let's just call it helping out, paying it forward, maybe even good karma. Works for me.

I've been loaning my technical writing skills for free to a few nonprofit organizations over the last couple of years and, besides helping them with needed skills, I've received more benefits than

I ever expected. I've learned how to adapt to new situations better, “do more with less,” and to think like a guerilla fighter in the war on providing maximum content on a minimum budget.

Let's talk about sharing communication skills that are, at times, in short supply. How many nonprofit groups could benefit from a few hours of your help in rewriting mission statements, program brochures, or instruction materials?

Do you want to grow your skill set or offer yourself some variation from the same types of material you do day in/day out? How about creating a newsletter

for your local community foundation or an informative Web site for a new cancer patient support group? Are you interested in history or science? Small museums are always in need of informative little brochures to help their visitors. They don't need to be fancy; just well written.

How about doing something that impacts not just one or two, but hundreds of people?

What sort of projects might you be able to do? I've mentioned a few. Others I've personally helped with include editing, formatting, and publishing minibooks for a local historical

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society; collaborating with graphic designers on a downtown walking tour guide; developing a video-based oral history program; and, my favorite, writing a book on local history for a mainstream publisher.

I've received more benefits than I ever expected. I've learned how to adapt to new situations better, “do more with less,” and to think like a guerilla fighter in the war on providing maximum content on a minimum budget.

Did I get paid for any of this? Outside of the miniscule book royalty, nope, nada, nothing. Did I learn new tools, have amazing control over projects, and feel like I impacted a whole bunch of people? You bet!

Let's talk about the caveats, though. If you've volunteered for anything, you know there are too few people doing it, and you will be called on for other unplanned roles. This is a great way to get burnt out on a relationship with a particular group as your workload increases.

Try very hard to limit the extra work you find yourself taking on to the tasks you really want to do. Try to suggest better ways to do existing things so that you're creating a value (and interest)

to your work—not just filling in a gap. This philosophy has kept me interested in continuing what I do (15 years with one group alone!).

Try hard not to impact your family time or the open time that's very important for you. I tend to do a lot of my work late at night once my family has gone to bed. Learn about the group and their operation before you overwhelm them with your great new ideas. Often, an organization operates a certain way because of deeper reasons—or personalities. Your new idea might be wonderful, but it could also hurt them as everyone scrambles to accommodate something you're trying to change. (On the other hand, you could also be that breath of fresh air they've needed for years!)

Don't start a project you can't finish. I've helped out several groups with web sites that the previous volunteer never completed. The group was left hanging to dry when the well-meaning webmaster got busy with something else in life.

Don't enter into a project if you can't finish or gracefully complete it in a short time. (Remember, these people will talk—and they will either relate how you “walk on water” or left a big mess that no one could fix.)

Lastly, and possibly just as important. Remember, someday, you will not be there to help. For recurring projects, try to make your work as simple to follow as possible. Try not to work in complex tools if you can. I've created newsletters in Word and web sites in FrontPage—all because I knew that whoever was going to take it on would not be using InDesign or Dreamweaver.

I purposely designed things that can be easily updated by a novice. (I made sure they had lots of copy/paste solutions.)

At the start of this article, I spoke of the new skills you would learn, the new ideas you could bring to an appreciative client, and the new career direction you might stumble upon. The more you do, the more you will gain back. It's worked for so many of us willing to give it a try. It's really not rocket science. It's smartly using your talents to help others.

Payback? Well, how about smiling faces, a very grateful organization, a successful event or project where you had serious input, and a wonderful feeling deep in your gut. All without worrying about how it was going to look on your yearly review?

And maybe, just maybe, a payback of a better, smarter you as you head off into the crazy job market. ●

Guy Ball is a senior technical writer for EADS North America Defense Test and Services in Irvine, California. He's volunteered his technical writing skills for over 20 years and swears it gave him skills that let him grow his career and discover new opportunities. He's written a couple of books, created a few organizational web sites, developed an award-winning history coloring book for kids, and works on “too many” unpaid writing projects that keep him up, happily, late at night. His web site is www.guyball.com.

LOOKING TO TOMORROW

This is the last issue of *Perspectives* until fall. Start thinking about what you can contribute to upcoming issues.

- Community membership news: We want to know about our members! Send a brief bio of who you are and what you do (and include a picture if you are willing).
- Employment news or opportunities: If your company is hiring, we can help advertise the openings.
- Letter to the editor: Do you have a comment on something from the previous newsletter or just want to hear a different opinion on a tech comm topic? Send a letter to the editor to get some feedback.
- Review of book, software, etc.: Surely you have used a software program or read a book lately related to our

industry. Why not take a couple minutes to write up your opinion on it, or if you have some tricks to using a software, let us know!

- Networking information: If there are events coming up others in the community should know about, we can help spread the word!
- Educational news or opportunities: Is there a class or workshop you know about that can help others in the field? *Perspectives* is one way to share the news.

We want to hear what you have to say about any tech comm topic, too. Please take a couple minutes to contribute to the newsletter!

Perspectives invites writers to submit articles they wish to be considered for publication.

NOTE: By submitting an article, you implicitly grant a license to this newsletter to run the article and for other STC publications to reprint it without permission.

Copyright is held by the writer. In your cover letter, please let the editor know if this article has run elsewhere, and if it has been submitted for consideration to other publications. ●

PERSPECTIVES INFO

Perspectives is a monthly publication of STC-Central Iowa.

The newsletter is published monthly, from September to May, and is produced by volunteers of the Central Iowa community.

If you are interested in volunteering as a copy editor, photographer, advertising manager, or for any other position, contact the newsletter editor, Jessi Strawn (jessi.strawn@gmail.com).

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