October 1997, Vol. 26, No. 2

Next meeting

"What makes a winner?"

Tuesday, October 14
7:00 pm

North York Memorial
Community Hall
5110 Yonge Street,
North York

The STC Toronto Chapter presents the 1997 International print and online publication winning entries. These entries make up the travelling road show from the annual conference last May.

International judges will also be with us to share what makes a winning international entry. We'll learn what separates the wheat from the chaff.

This is a great opportunity to see superior online and print documentation. If you attended the conference in Toronto this year and want a second look or if you didn't make it to the conference, and want to truly experience the cream of the crop, this opportunity is for you. Hope to see you there!

Technical communications: a profession?

By Ed See, Director-Sponsor Region 1

The question that continues to haunt the Society for Technical Communication is the professional status of technical communications. Is technical communications a profession? Are there people who can be called "technical communications professionals?" And, of course, the derivative discussion: should we certify technical communications professionals?

Probably, there are as many answers to these questions as there are technical communicators. Many of the answers will depend on the definition given to the term profession, the definition and goals assigned to the Society, and our own personal definition of our jobs. It's important to think about these issues as we consider the role of certification in the Society, the future of the Society, and the benefits the Society can bring to our community.

To me, technical communications is not a profession. However, there certainly are technical communications professionals. Technical communications is perhaps

Continued on page 4

Tips for effective Web searches

By Kathy Sheridan, STC Toronto Chapter Member

Searching the Web can be a frustrating and time-consuming experience. The tips below are designed to make your searches more productive.

Plan your search strategy

Before you start, figure out whether you are looking for information on a fairly broad subject or have a more specific objective in mind.

If you're looking for general information, start with a search catalogue, such as *Yahoo* (www.yahoo.com) or *Magellan* (www.mckinley.com). Search catalogues enable you to select from a hierarchy of topics. Selecting from these topics and sub-topics will lead you to a list of Web pages about a specific subject. You can also perform searches based on keywords or search terms.

Search catalogues rely on user submissions and human intervention. Webmasters submit sites to the catalogues and these sites are then assigned to appropriate categories.

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communication TIMES

55 McCaul St., Unit 4,
Toronto, ON
M5T 2W7
(416) 969-0122

Editor:
Michael Barwick

Proofreaders:
Lindsey Hartshorn
Jane Aronovitch

Advertising:
Anne Shannon

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We welcome submissions via email or diskette (call editor for email address). We reserve the right to edit copy. Deadline for submissions is the monthly meeting. Articles may be reprinted, provided the Toronto Chapter and the author are acknowledged.

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From the editor's desk…

Does size really count?

By Michael Barwick, Newsletter Editor

Indeed it does! But perhaps not quite in the way you might initially suspect…

So much of our work as technical communicators springs from our ability to gather vast amounts of raw data and distill it into a form readily digestible by an audience in need. Usually we're too involved in the job at hand to appreciate just how profound this process is.

Think about it for a moment. Often at the beginning of a project, it's typical to feel bewildered by the newness of the information. How are we going to organize it according to the requirements of the specified medium? Can we make it all fit? Our mind spins with possibilities, attempting to grasp the totality of the task before us. It's a predictable rite of passage concealed in every enterprise.

Somehow as the work proceeds, fragments of knowledge congeal into chunks and chunks in turn become sections. A logical structure emerges and it produces an undeniable sensation of righteous pleasure. Has the information shrunk enough, enabling us to hold it? Or is it is we who have enlarged, empowering our mind's eye at last to picture it? The result is the same: Understanding bridges the chaotic abyss of undifferentiated facts and shines on us from the flickering screen our word processor.

Such was my experience in arranging the articles that make up this issue. My thanks go to the contributors for providing such excellent content. This issue required a very sharp edit to make it all fit and alas, I had to leave some material out due to space considerations. My apologies to those concerned; I'll try to find a way to include your work in issues to come.

The challenge is to expand the newsletter from its regular 8 pages to 12. With a few more articles, it could be done. Would you like to see a larger newsletter each month? Perhaps there are dimensions of our field that you uniquely appreciate and would like to share, maybe even through a column of your own. Perhaps you would like to get more directly involved in the planning, design, or construction of this publication. I'm ready to expand if you are! Contact me at (416) 349-4645.

society for technical communi

The Society for Technical Communication (STC) is the world's largest professional organization dedicated to the advancement of the theory and practice of technical communication. The STC has more than 20,000 members worldwide.

1997-98 Toronto Chapter Leaders

Officers

President, Jane Aronovitch 545-0495
Vice-President, Carla Salvador 463-8479
Secretary, Sara Durning 461-8900
Tresurer, Anne Shannon 467-0750

Special Interest Groups (SIGs)

Online, Benjamin Keevil 730-9494
Corel-Ventura, David Gow 322-0096
Consulting/Freelancers/Contractors, Stan Wilson 444-4381
ISO 9000, Stan Wilson 444-4381

Note: Unspecified area codes are 416.

Website: www.myna.com/torontostc/

Activity Managers

Archive, Lindsey Hartshorn 340-1200
Competition, Mary-Ann Wilson (905) 476-8511
Education, Marie Tunbridge 784-2444
Employment, Robert Milkovich 588-2450
Information, Laurie Pearce 398-6596
Membership, Mona Albano 469-1384
Newsletter, Michael Barwick 349-4645
Program, Cindy Bowman 929-4085
Publicity, Hugh Graham (905) 629-1288
Volunteers, Kim Van Rooy 535-2181,x2382
Web, Alison Hartshorn 512-9100, x231

Sez the Prez...

So what's the point?

By Jane Aronovitch, STC Toronto Chapter President

Points are what it's all about when it comes to our document competitions—points for clarity in writing, points for structure, points for navigation aids, and bonus points for exceptional products.

But what's the real point? Sure, we have winners. And winning an award is, indeed, an honour. But perhaps the greatest value of the competitions is the chance to have your work evaluated by peers—people who know what to look for and can give an honest appraisal and valuable suggestions for improvement.

For several years, we have held annual paper and online competitions together with the Southwestern Ontario chapter. Each fall, the competition managers from both chapters send out a call for entries (included with theSeptember issue of the newsletter and available on our Web site). The call also goes out to other interested parties, associations, and companies.

Simultaneously, we advertise for judges. To be accepted, judges must meet a minimum from a list of criteria, such as five years' experience as a technical communicator; being a recognized expert in the field, a technical communications instructor or previous award winner; and previous experience as a competition judge. Prospective judges also list their areas of expertise and are assigned to entries in these areas to the greatest extent possible.

After a judges' orientation session, all entries are judged by three people. The judges then meet to discuss major scoring differences and adjust their individual scores if warranted.

Based on a point system, a sub-group of judges then selects the top winners in each category and the overall "best of show" entry. The top entries are sent on to the international competition. Winners of both the local and international events are announced in the spring.

While we were unable to do so last year, this year we are exchanging entries for the paper competition with another chapter—the Orange County chapter. We will judge their entries and they will judge ours. Exchanging entries with another chapter is beneficial because the judges are less likely to know the submitters. It also gives both chapters the opportunity to see work from different companies.

In keeping with the competition theme, our October meeting features the winners of the 1996 international competition. Seeing examples of excellent work is always an inspiration. Be sure to attend, and look for the strong representation from our local chapters.

Thanks go to Carolyn Watt who has made sure that we have seen this travelling exhibit for the past several years.

P.S. Congratulations to us! We now have a complete executive. Check page 2 for a full list of officers and managers.

New members

A very hearty welcome to our new members:

Paul E. Cartlidge

Kristi L. Champ

Sylvie Clamageran

Ginette Fournier

George A. Reeves

Sharon L. Weston

Transferring in:

Julia Chan

Executive Suite

Judge, lest ye be judged not!

By Lindsey Hartshorn, STC Toronto Chapter Archives Manager

When it comes to judgement, the Biblical command "judge not lest ye be judged" comes to mind. In the case of peer competitions, though, I think judging is a good thing with many benefits for the judge as well as the judged.

When you judge a competition of your peers, you get a good idea of what other people are doing and what they consider to be good work. After all, most people enter a competition because they think they have done a good job. As a result, you can use the competition entries as a benchmark for your own work.

Additionally, your efforts at judging improve the quality of work produced by the whole community. When you are a judge, you provide insight to how their work succeeded and where it can be improved. Judges and entrants both have the opportunity to see new approaches to old ideas or solutions for new problems. This benefit is particularly useful for lone writers or writers in small groups.

Finally, the last, best reason for judging a competion is that without judges, the competition cannot be objective or fair. Therefore, I say, "judge, lest you be judged not!"

SIGnals...

"Avoiding eye stress from continuous computer use"

By Stan Wilson, STC Toronto Chapter Member

The first meeting of the Consulting / Freelancing / Contracting SIG for the 97–98 year will take place on Tuesday, October 28 in the auditorium of the North York Central Public Library, 5110 Yonge Street. Please note that the auditorium is on the second floor of the library, *not* in Memorial Hall where we have our regular monthly meetings. The meeting starts at 6:30 pm.

As technical writers, we often spend many hours in front of our computer monitors. Is there the possibility we are putting undue stress on our eyes? Should we be taking steps to avoid these stresses?

Dr. Brian Feldman, from Solutions In Sight by Eye 2 Eye Inc., will describe some possible eye problems associated with continued computer use and provide exercises and other actions we can take to avoid these problems.

Any STC member or guest is welcome to attend this meeting.

For more information, call Stan Wilson at (416) 444-4381

Technical communications: a profession?, *cont. from page 1*

well defined as a field, a sort of umbrella "profession," akin in many respects to the health care field.

In many ways, this analogy works quite well. When we examine the health care field, we see many professions, each with unique training, requirements, and contributions. We see the easily recognizable core professions: the nurses and physicians. If we expand our scope a little, we can recognize the professions focused on physical therapy, psychology, and other forms of recuperative and therapeutic specialties. Broadening slightly more, we can certainly include the administrators who specialize in health care organizations. We also find chiropractic, osteopathic, and even podiatry. Each of these is a recognized profession on its own, requiring specialized training. The medical field is clearly a rich and diverse family of professions, all engaged in health care. It's very unlikely that anyone would debate that there is such a thing as a health care professional.

Taking this sort of view of technical communications, a parallel is clear: our traditional core professions are technical writers and editors. These folks probably make up the majority of the Society. However, we also can see other professions involved; usability professionals, librarians, programmers, scientists, graphic designers, illustrators, video producers, and indexing professionals. Each of these, and the ones I've managed to neglect to mention, contribute to the richness and effectiveness of the Society. All of these people are engaged in technical communications but come from a broad family of professions.

Which brings us to the key issue: is it possible for the Society to attempt to define technical communications tightly enough so that it would be possible to certify a person as a technical communicator? I think the answer will depend on the definition of technical communication. If we define the term to mean technical writer and editor, it is possible to create criteria that can be certified. The skills and underlying education required are clearly understood and can be evaluated.

However, if we expand technical communicator to include visual design, usability, information management, or indexing, is it still possible to create something that evaluates these skills? Quite possibly, but would a technical communicator need to be proficient at all of these? Or at some percentage of them? Do we make the evaluation criteria so general that we perhaps dilute the goal of certification, which is to distinguish those certified from those who are not? Perhaps the Society should explore offering different forms of certification specialties.

I'm not sure that there is a single, clear answer to this. In some sense, it is a core issue for the Society. If the Society views itself as a professional organization of technical writers and editors, the value of offering certification in those areas is clear. If the Society views itself as a family of professions engaged in the field of technical communication, the question becomes much more involved.

Right now, this is an issue that is before the Board. I would like your thoughts on this topic, and on certification in particular. Contact me via email at edsee@us.ibm.com.

Editor's Note: I would appreciate receiving a copy of any correspondence sent to Ed See so that it can appear in the newsletter.

The deadline for the next issue of *communication Times* is:

Tuesday, October 14, 1997

Submissions can be given to editor Michael Barwick at the Toronto Chapter meeting or they can be emailed to:

mbarwick@echo-on.net

Michael can also be contacted at (416) 349-4645, 9 to 5, Monday to Friday.

***Searching the Web**, cont. from Page 1*

For narrow searches, it's a good idea to try starting with a search engine like
AltaVista (www.altavista.com),
Excite (www.excite.com),
Lycos (www.lycos.com),
WebCrawler (webcrawler.com),
Infoseek (www.infoseek.com),
HotBot (www.hotbot.com), or
Open Text (index.opentext.net). Search engines use software programs to continually scan the Web and store information about every Web page they find. Because these software programs run automatically and index millions of Web pages, they often find information that is not listed in search catalogues. The indexes keep a database of Web sites that you can search by using keywords or search terms.

Get the FAQs

Search catalogues and engines provide instructions on how to use them. You should read these instructions because not all search engines and catalogues provide the same search options. When you're familiar with their abilities, you can optimize your searches and save yourself time.

Choose your words carefully

When entering a query, use words that specifically describe the subject for which you wish to search. Replace generic or commonly used words with search terms that are unique to the subject.

Capitalize names and titles

If you capitalize adjacent names in a query, search engines and catalogues treat them as proper names or titles. For example, if you want to find information on the actor named River Phoenix and you don't capitalize the actor's name, you would find websites relating to rivers, Phoenix Arizona, rivers in Phoenix Arizona, and the actor named River Phoenix.

Use quotation marks

When searching for a phrase, or words that must appear next to each other in a specific order, enclose the phrase or words in quotation marks. For example, a search on Toronto Blue Jays returns documents that contain any or all of these words in any order while a search on "Toronto Blue Jays" returns only those documents containing this exact phrase.

Use plus and minus signs

Most of the major search engines and catalogues (*Excite, AltaVista, Lycos, Infoseek, HotBot,Yahoo, Magellan*) enable you to narrow your search using the plus(+) sign or the minus(-) sign.

A quick way to specify words that must appear in the results is to put a plus (+) sign directly in front of them. Say you wanted to find information on hotels in Fiji for a dream vacation. In this case you could search for +hotels +Fiji. If you typed hotels +Fiji, all of the documents returned will have information on Fiji but not necessarily about hotels.

To specify words that should not appear in results, put a minus (-) sign directly in front of them. Say you were interested in searching for information on inexpensive cars. You could search for cars -Lamborgini -Jaguar -BMW -Porsche. Sites with these car names would be omitted from your search.

Use Boolean operators

To narrow your search requests, use Boolean operators. Major search engines like *Excite, AltaVista, HotBot, Lycos, Open Text,* and *WebCrawler* commonly support searching using the AND, OR, and NOT Boolean operators.

The AND operator enables you to find only documents that contain all of the specified words or phrases. For example, if you want to locate Web pages concerning both of the comedians named Laurel and Hardy you would enter Laurel AND Hardy.

The OR operator enables you to retrieve documents that contain at least one of your specified search terms. Be careful when you use this operator. For example, a search for beer OR wine would return documents containing either beer or wine. It would also return documents containing both beer and wine. You may find yourself overloaded with results. Instead, use the OR operator for very narrow searches when one of your search terms could appear in two different ways, such as an acronym. For example, to find documents containing information on IBM you could search for IBM OR "International Business Machines".

The NOT operator is very useful for focusing a search because it allows you to find documents that contain one search term but not another that is commonly related. For example, if you searched for documents containing the words "Java Bean", you would find documents relating to both Java Beans and coffee beans. To narrow the search to just Java Bean, you could search for "Java Bean" NOT coffee. However, be aware that certain search engines, for example *AltaVista,* do not accept NOT and use AND NOT instead. *Open Text* uses the BUT NOT operator.

You can use parentheses to group portions of Boolean queries together. For example, to find documents that contain the word "Mars" and either the word "Rover" or "Sojourner" you would enter Mars AND (Rover OR Sojourner).

Use specialized search engines

For a more focused search, you can harness the power of Web search engines dedicated to specific subjects. For example, you could use the *OneLook Dictionaries* Web site (www.onelook.com) to look up a word from more than 140 dictionaries. This site features computer / Internet, business, sports, medical, science, religion, slang, and general dictionaries.

The TECHWR-Ler buzz

And the standards shall set you free…

By Laurie Pearce, STC Toronto Chapter Information Officer

This column is a commentary inspired by topics discussed on the technical writers' newsgroup TECHWR-L (pronounced "techwhirl" by its participants).

A number of recent postings have dealt with the issue of creativity in technical writing. One of the more interesting issue, in part because of its overtones of Web-based espionage and a conspiracy theory, inspired this column.

Early in August, a Jack Bonney from Vancouver (with one of those impossible-to-link-to-the-real-world email addresses) put forth a sloppily written post describing the surprising results of a survey that showed that "most" of the technical writers who responded claimed that, in essence, standardization of documents within an organization was unnecessary and infringed on the artistry of the technical writing profession.

A number of people naturally disagreed and in turn responded with cogent arguments for the importance of standardization. Things started to get political when, instead of responding to the issue raised, other respondents began to raise issues about the survey itself. Requests for statistics from the survey, such as sample size, were followed by requests for the survey questions themselves.

Finally, it was implied that the survey was not only flawed in its design, but that its imperfections were intentional. Some felt the survey was a deliberate attempt to troll the newsgroup for useful information to be used by Mr. Bonney for his own benefit. A corresponding situation would be if someone at an STC meeting loudly proclaimed that moving a printed document online was simply a matter of choosing a tool to handle the conversion, and then used the collected wisdom of those who dissented from their view to educate themselves and then claimed all that knowledge as their own and sold it to their clients. (There's an idea!)

The issue raised is an interesting one. Some respondents noted, quite rightly, that rigid adherence can lead to poor quality and that no amount of standardization can address all individual situations.

Personally, as someone who undertakes projects for multiple clients, I live and die by the standards my clients require, and document them religiously for fear that I'll use one client's conventions for another client's manuals, with embarrassing results. I also find such standards vital for projects that require multiple writers or that have a lot of delay built into them, during which time the original choices may be forgotten.

Above all, however, I'd argue that standards actually free us to do the truly creative work of technical writing. Although I'm happy to argue the one-space-or-two-following-a-period issue, posit the only logical way of punctuating a bulleted list and ruminate over the merits of Arial Narrow, I don't confuse any of that with my real work of trying to communicate a complex topic in a readable and unambiguous way. Even a standard I don't agree with is better than no standard at all.

The truly creative acts in technical writing include wrestling information from an unwilling subject matter expert, putting two and two together and getting at least six, and writing a description of a function so spectacular in its logic that the developer changes the code so it matches the description. You can always write that novel in your spare time!

To subscribe to the newsgroup, a signon command for TECHWR-L should be sent to listserv@listserv.okstate.edu. Archives can be found at www.documentation.com/ or listserv.okstate.edu/archives/techwr-l.html.

Meeting Summary

Lessons learned

By Ian Hartshorn, STC Toronto Chapter Member

The September 9th meeting featured a panel of seasoned Toronto chapter members: Jane Aronovitch, Stephanie Copp, Roy Hartshorn, Michelle Hutchinson, Ben Keevil, Leanne Logan, Ralph Robertson, Anne Rockley, and Carolyn Watt. They shared "war stories" from their careers. Lessons learned:

- Unknown factors accompany every job, but there is always something that can be done about it.
- It's hazardous to use a cheap font that doesn't include the necessary characters needed for French translation.
- Write your own material rather than using previously written material.
- Don't look for solutions when under pressure.
- Always have a backup plan.
- Analyze for too much or too little process and correct the problem.
- Get written legal opinions on anything involving copyrights and trademarks.
- Only accept the amount of work you can manage.
- Document as much as possible and keep detailed records all communication.
- A new career can appear out of nowhere.

Panel members stressed the importance of being committed to ongoing learning.