

Sichel, 40 attendees. Christel and Mindy went on to present at the STC conference in Dallas, Texas.

7. May 28, AGM, 15 attendees.

Education

Amberlee O'Connor organized a Gordon & Gordon seminar, "Good Enough Documentation" held on February 1 at the Nepean Sportsplex, that drew 30 participants.

Competition

The chapter held a competition this year, and the Awards Ceremony was April 9 at Centurion Conference and Event Centre on Colonnade Road. Barbara Jordan of DY 4 took Best of Show.

Treasurer

Ken Kicksee prepared a financial report summarizing all transactions from July 1, 2002 to April 30, 2003. Copies were provided at the AGM. As the numbers reveal, the year's activities resulted in an unsustainable deficit. Next year we need to cut expenses or increase revenue.

Starting Balance	\$10,134.06
Total Revenues	\$15,394.03
Total Expenses	\$19,963.93
Deficit	\$4,569.90
Total Assets	\$5,564.16
Estimated Liabilities	\$1,000.59
Estimated Net Assets	\$4,563.57

STCEO Website

Robin Kelsey continued excellent work on the website, and received spontaneous applause for his efforts.

Newsletter

We published three newsletters. Jackie Connors was editor and Ryszard Cimek provided lay-out and graphics design for a printed copy and PDF.

Scholarship

Harley Rubisch received a plaque and \$500 to reward his efforts as the top student in the Technical Writing program at Algonquin College.

Outgoing President's Message

by Peter Sturgeon, *Past-President*

Thanks for the opportunity to act as your President for the local chapter of STC in 2002-3.

As past-president, I'll continue to serve you on the administrative council, and continue to work on improving our channels of communication. This year saw the creation of a discussion group for local members (and non-members as well). Next year, we hope to strengthen the newsgroup with more postings from the admin council. We also intend to increase the number of issues of Stimulus we deliver.

In the two years I've been involved with STCEO, I've witnessed a lot of churn in both the profession and the industries we work for.

I'd like the chapter to make sure that those changes are addressed through meetings, articles, training, and

networking, so that we remain strong as a profession, and so that the chapter continues to deliver value to its members.

Looking forward to working with you in 2003-2004.

P.S. My email address will be past-president@stceo.org

AGM Report

by Rick Lorenz, *President*

On May 28, 2003 the Eastern Ontario Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication (STC-EO) held the annual general meeting (AGM) at Dow's Lake Pavilion. We reviewed the past year, presented the scholarship, held elections, and then discussed ideas for next year.

Past Year Program

Rick Lorenz organized the chapter's monthly following meetings, held at Dow's Lake Pavilion.

1. September 26, Wine and Cheese, 75 attendees.
2. October 24, "Be a SME" presentation by Gordon Brown, 15 attendees.
3. November 28, Indexing panel discussion by Fred Brown and Chris Hallgren, 35 attendees.
4. December 12, Christmas Party, 35 attendees.
5. March 27, Employment panel discussion by Penny Lange; Kevin Ireland and Antoinette Rodighero of Ajilon Consulting; and Shawn Mountain of Procom, 40 attendees.
6. April 24, Single Sourcing presentation by Christel Kurz and Mindy

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Membership

The current STCEO membership is at 239 as of June 30, 2003.

Election

Brian Williamson conducted elections. He received nominations until May 15, and then accepted nominations from the floor. All positions were unanimously acclaimed. Only the position of Program Manager remains unfilled.

Next Year

After the election we discussed ideas for next year. We can improve attendance by planning and scheduling monthly meetings in advance. Monthly communication to the membership will help people stay in touch with chapter events. The chapter should work more closely with other groups, like the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA). Suggested program events for next year include presentations on web-deployed documentation, localization, career transition, and overseas experiences of technical writers.

Members would like more seminars, for example on tools and employment. The Gordon & Gordon seminar was popular, and we will consider having more.

New technical writers join our community annually from Algonquin College, trained in the tools and practices of technical communication, but requiring real-world knowledge. Our chapter can help provide this, by sharing our wisdom and professional experience through mentoring. This will benefit both, the mentor and the protegee. It gives students access to real-world knowledge, and provides mentors with new contacts and perspectives.

Another idea was to provide company and industry profiles in Stimulus.

Although the AGM is the most suitable forum for brainstorming and suggesting ideas, we plan to conduct

surveys this summer. You can also tell us your ideas through email or the discussion group. Join the discussion group by going to <http://lists.stc.org/cgi-bin/lyris.pl?enter=stc-eo>



Are your documents good enough?

by Tim Scapillato

In a world full of bad documentation, yours only has to be “*good enough*” to be useful. That’s the message delivered to technical writers who attended the STCEO-sponsored Gordon and Gordon workshop on February 1 at the Nepean Sportsplex.

Manny Gordon, one of Montreal’s top technical writers, presented strategies for producing good enough documentation to support good enough software. He reminded his audience that in the chaotic world of software development, technical writers are always subordinate to the larger project. To survive, they must learn to skilfully adapt to the continuous change inherent in agile development methodologies.

Gordon offered his audience a different approach: shift the focus from producing a perfect document to delivering material that’s just good enough to ship with software that is usually in an imperfect state.

Best practices of good enough technical writing

Gordon has been a technical communicator for more than two decades. During that time, he has learned the “*five dirty secrets*” and six best practices of technical writing. The secrets won’t be revealed here but the best practices can be summarized as follows:

1. USE (*understand, simplify, explain*). Understand the product and the project thoroughly. Eliminate the developer view and explain it to yourself, your teammates, the marketing department, QA, and tech support.

2. Use plain English. Write as though you were speaking directly to someone in the room with you. Eliminate jargon and extraneous text.

3. Produce reader-centered writing. Write for your audience, not the developer, marketer or your manager.

4. Do an audience analysis. Find out who will use the document, what their attitudes are towards the product, and in what environment they’ll be using it. Each audience segment has different characteristics and will use the product to do different tasks.

5. Do a task analysis. Determine which tasks users will perform. Analyze where they start, what steps they follow, and what results they see.

6. Write minimalist instructions. Write action – and task – oriented instructions. Get to the point and avoid too much conceptual or theoretical information. Since most people learn better by doing than by reading, present lots of “*try it*” examples.

Adapting to the new environment

Technical writers often feel like they’re at the mercy of software developers and their hectic production schedules.

Development strategies have changed over the past decade, and technical writing processes must keep pace if information developers hope to survive in the new environment.

Gordon advocated the adaptation of six software development best practices to documentation produc-

tion as a way for technical writers to keep up with rapid release schedules:

- 1. Concurrent design and construction.** Plan for continuous iterative, incremental and evolutionary change.
- 2. Staged delivery.** Deliver documentation in releases that can be improved in future versions or drafts.
- 3. Prototyping.** Show a sample instead of trying to describe it.
- 4. Daily or frequent builds.** Produce a new document version daily or frequently. You'll always have something ready to ship or show *now*.
- 5. Timeboxing.** Time is the prime element in this costly, but effective, strategy.
- 6. Joint planning and development.** This strategy can produce good documentation quickly but it is expensive and requires strong leadership, a top sponsor, realistic expectations, and lots of resources.

A good enough planning process

To produce “*good enough*” documentation you need a “*good enough*” planning process.

- ◆ description of the product and project from your perspective,
- ◆ description of project context and product direction,
- ◆ audience and task analyses
- ◆ high level table of contents and draft table of contents for each deliverable,
- ◆ sources of information (people, docs),
- ◆ list of documentation deliverables at each stage,
- ◆ description of resources,
- ◆ schedules, estimates and dependencies (requirements),
- ◆ terminology guide/glossary.



Interesting Times, Interesting Measures

by Rachel Anne Bailie

STC Director/Sponsor Region 7

We've been living in “*interesting*” times, as the saying goes, and many of us feel that we've had about as much interest as we can tolerate, thank you very much.

Chapter meeting attendance has been down and the popularity of technical presentations has decreased, while the popularity of career cafes and career management days has increased. In any conversation between three technical communicators, at least one is unemployed, about to be unemployed, or thinking about a career change.

So after attending the first STC board meeting of 2003, I've returned with renewed hope about the employment scene, and have chosen to pass along a little good news to start the year off. Between meeting sessions, we (board members from the various corners of North America) greet one another with the usual gambit, “Hi, how have you been? How's business?”

We trade notes on the health of our local chapters, the chapters in our region, and the status of our own employment situations. My conclusion is that things are getting better.

My optimism is cautious. Companies tend to stay battened down and their willingness to spend on technical communication is a tenuous commitment, at best. Some companies are outsourcing their work. Others are looking for writers to work at bargain-basement salaries.

A number of companies are looking outside of North America for their technical communication needs. Yet despite these trends, I hear stories that encourage me. A writer men-

tions that her temporary contract is rolling over to regular employee status. A contractor has lined up work for the first time in months. Someone else mentions that their company is stabilizing and may add a new person during the coming year. Demand seems to be on the rise.

The job market won't be the same as the heyday of the 90s. In fact, the job market may never look the same again. It may get better, but in a different way, a changed way. How we cope with those changes will indicate our success in responding to the new marketplace. Are we willing to look beyond our core skills to our extended skill sets?

Can we look at the trends and determine how we can fit? If we've let our skills fall behind, are we ready to do what it takes to catch up? Can we make the switch to being free agents?

Do we have a personal “*brand*” that identifies us?

Are we broadening our horizons in what we read, in where we look for contacts, with whom we network? In other words, do we know how to re-invent ourselves for this new market?

Are we willing to learn?

This column is far too short to be helpful in setting out a roadmap for participating in the recovering economy. Besides, there are a vast number of existing resources available for the taking: Fast Company, www.fastcompany.com, Career Lab, www.careerlab.com, and Career Intelligence, www.career-intelligence.com are just a few of the online resources that turned up as the result of a simple Google search.

The idea is to actually have a roadmap, to study the new landscape, and to determine where you want to go and how you're going to get there. The rest, they say, is a matter of interest.



executive

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Algonquin Student Rep

(To be Determined)

Just-in-time (JIT) philosophy improves quality in user documentation

by Tina K. Walsh

Founder of Read Pen Inc.

Just-in-time or JIT is a management philosophy originating in the 1970s. Taiichi Ohno is credited with developing and perfecting it for Toyota's manufacturing plants in Japan.

Applied properly, the JIT philosophy can reduce and eliminate waste by establishing or improving flow between processes, and linking work centers to balance or level the load. Reduction in waste leads to improvements in product quality, shortens lead times, and offers a competitive edge in any environment.

Enter software (or hardware) development processes. Waterfall or spiral, they strive to repeat themselves yet demand continuous improvement, and a seasoned technical writer can navigate any number of variations like Captain Cook on the high seas. Technical documentation has not always been an integral part of the development process, but try and ship a software or hardware product today without any supporting documentation and it probably won't get very far.

The JIT philosophy relies on a flexible work force, and improved coordination and cooperation between processes. It gives workers responsibility for the quality of their work. JIT workers have authority to stop production or at least put it on hold, empowering them to eliminate defects at the source. JIT workers require and demonstrate exceptional problem solving skills. The JIT philosophy strives for zero defects.

An HRDC website www.worksearch.gc.ca notes that companies who can't afford full-time employees may choose to take advantage of the just-in-time work force. It highlights pros and cons of such a work

force. Some of the pros include flexible schedule, freedom, and a strong network, while the cons may include no security, pension, paid sick leave, or insurance benefits. Local technical writers may be interested to know that the STCEO group benefits plan directly addresses some of the cons for its collective national membership.

In June 2002, Margaret Webb Pressler of the Washington Post wrote of the JIT work force: "It's been a long time coming. At the beginning of the 1990s, most temps were still filling clerical and administrative positions, as well as some manufacturing needs. By the end of the decade, about a fifth of the industry's revenue came from professional positions. The use of temp workers in Silicon Valley is three times the national average."

Peter Weddle of the Wall Street Journal once noted that "The top performers, who make up about ... 16% of the work force, are employed and almost never look for a job. You won't find them reading the postings at job boards or archiving a resume in a database." Not true today in Ottawa. Recent cutbacks and layoffs challenge this statistic, at least at a local level. It is hard to imagine a better time to draw on a more dynamic pool of talent.

As a technical writer, you may be wondering if a "zero defects" document is truly achievable in a dynamic software or hardware development environment. Do carefully verify everything you write, but also take the point of view that quality equals customer satisfaction. Measure twice and cut once. Listen carefully to your customer's requirements and fully document them. Have your customer review them, before you start to write and listen carefully throughout the process for changes to requirements that might occur. Does your finished document measure up to all its requirements? Then you know that you are done and can hand it to the customer with confidence.

Young companies who want slow controlled growth can benefit from hiring just-in-time help. Other more established companies, who may have been overzealous in their cutbacks in response to substantial pressure to cut costs and cut them now, may be struggling to get a product out the door and their corporate survival may ultimately depend on the JIT work force. Under current local economic conditions it is feasible for two non-competing companies to share a technical writer.



SOCIETY FOR
TECHNICAL
COMMUNICATION

Mission Statement

Our chapter's mission is to work together in a spirit of community to promote and develop professional technical communication.

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