

Stimulus

Newsletter of the Society of Technical Communication - Eastern Ontario Chapter

Volume 31 Issue 1 September 2004



Programs and Events

By Barbara Jordan

Wine and Cheese Party

Our first event is the Wine and Cheese party at the Dow's Lake Pavilion, **Monday, September 27 at 6:30 pm**. This event is sponsored in part by Convivio (www.convivio.com) and G.R. Baird Financial Group (www.grbairdfinancial.com).

We extend a special invitation to Algonquin technical writing students. This event is free for STC members and students. The cost is \$10 for others.

Please RSVP on the www.stceo.org website.

Planned Events

We have a schedule of events for the fall program. Check the www.stceo.org website for further details.

Monday, September 27, 6:30pm

Wine & Cheese Party, Dow's Lake Pavilion

Wednesday, October 13, 6:30pm

"Technical Writing and Structured Writing: What's the Difference?" presented by Kim Hale
"Upstairs at Loblaws", Westboro (Richmond Road at Kirkwood)

Wednesday, November 3, 6:30pm

"Requirements", presented by Marie Grant
"Upstairs at Loblaws", Westboro (Richmond Road at Kirkwood)

November 13, 2004

Workshop: "How to Write Fact-Based Marketing Materials for Technology Firms" Presented by Gordon & Gordon

Thursday, December 9, 6:30pm

"Upstairs at Loblaws", Westboro (Richmond Road at Kirkwood)
Social Event.

If you have topic suggestions, please contact me (program@stceo.org).

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Back to School

By David Hitchcock



As we entered the room, 22 pairs of eyes turned to us, and we knew this was the moment of truth. In the next few minutes we would help mold the fresh minds of budding technical writers.

It sounds dramatic, but it's true. At the start of the first term of the Algonquin Technical Writer program, representatives from STCEO present information about who we are and what we do to a fresh class of students. This year that honour fell on Ken Kicksee, the chapter President, and myself as the Education Manager.

The technical writing Program Coordinator, Jim Catton, was very helpful in arranging our meeting and in helping us establish the backgrounds of this year's students. Having graduated from the program last year, I know you might find yourself with a PHD graduate sitting on one side of you and someone fresh out of a college program on the other side. However, what all of the students do have in common is previous post-secondary education (either a diploma or degree already). That, and they want to be technical writers.

Ken and I presented the basic information to the students--the history of the STC, events in both STC and STCEO, and what benefits students receive from the program. We highlighted the upcoming October meeting and the Wine and Cheese. A definite interest was shown in the mentorship program, and we will be looking for mentors in the near future. Overall the students were very interested in our information.

Ken described various types of technical writing and the industries that employ writers. The students hear it from their teachers but hearing it from someone working in the field makes it seem more real. "The students were keen listeners and asked great questions, especially considering they've just started the program." Ken said.

After the presentation the students had some questions for us. Peter Sturgeon, the STCEO Secretary, attended the presentation and fielded a number of questions. Peter's extensive writing experience makes him a valuable resource when discussing industry trends and working within various management structures.

The students were keen listeners and asked great questions, especially considering they've just started the program. --Ken Kicksee

The students will select a representative to the STCEO executive shortly, and are looking forward to the Wine and Cheese event on September 27.

Overall, it was a successful afternoon. "The students got a good sense of the wealth of resources the STC can offer them. I'm looking forward to forming closer ties with the STC to use these resources," said Jim. "Many of the students are looking to sign up right away!"

David Hitchcock graduated from the Algonquin Technical Writer program in 2004. He holds a diploma in Computer Engineering Technology, and has worked in high tech since 1997. Currently he is working in ITS at Algonquin College. In 2003-04 David was the student rep to the STCEO, and is currently the Education Manager.

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President's Message

By Ken Kicksee

Welcome to another year with the STCEO! We have a great new executive and administrative council that's determined to bring you high-quality program events, seminars, and social events.

Last year was a good one for the Eastern Ontario chapter, and we plan to build on that success. We'll present more of our popular Saturday seminars. We'll offer local hosting of STC phone and Web seminars. Our mentoring program will help connect new technical communicators with seasoned pros. And we'll continue to bring you current topics of local interest through our monthly program events, our newsletter, and our Website.

Our first social event this year is the annual **Wine & Cheese** party on **September 27** at Dow's Lake Pavilion. This is an opportunity to meet the new executive, catch up with old friends, and make new contacts. Our two event sponsors will be on hand to demonstrate their products and services. Convivio's BuildFire 2005 (www.BuildFire.com) is a single-sourcing tool for generating multiple outputs from FrameMaker files. G.R. Baird Financial Inc (www.grbairdfinancial.com) offers group insurance coverage for STC members. There will also be door prizes and of course, wine & cheese. We encourage you to bring along any friends or co-workers who might like to learn more about what the STC has to offer. Please see our chapter Website (www.stceo.org) to RSVP for this event.

Your STC chapter is an excellent career resource, and you can help make it even better. Do you have an idea for a newsletter article? Have you worked on a challenging project or with a new technology that would make a good topic for a program event presentation? Is there a particular speaker you think would be ideal for one of our Saturday seminars? We need your ideas and feedback to help keep our programming fresh and relevant. It's your chapter, so please let us know how we can serve you better.

Have you considered volunteering for the STC? It's a great way to meet new people, gain new skills, and contribute to your professional community. We are currently seeking volunteer mentors. Our mentorship program pairs technical writing students with experienced professionals who offer guidance and share their perspectives and ideas. Please contact our Education Manager, David Hitchcock (education@stceo.org),

for more information.

Did you know that the Eastern Ontario chapter is one of the oldest in the STC? For almost 50 years, technical communicators in our region have worked together to share knowledge and promote our profession. With your continued participation as an STC member, we can provide learning and networking opportunities for many years to come.

Thank you for giving me an opportunity to lead our STC chapter.

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Competition Time

By Ken Kicksee

It's time for our annual STC technical communication competition! As always, we're accepting entries in two categories – technical publications and online communication.

All entries are carefully reviewed and judged by a team of experienced technical communicators who provide constructive editorial feedback. Next Spring, everyone will be invited to attend our annual awards ceremony where we showcase the entries and announce the winners. Our best entries are then forwarded to the STC's international competition. Last year our local Best of Show winner went on to win Best of Show in the international competition! Congratulations to Ken Farr, Sandra Bernier, and Denis Rochon of Natural Resources Canada. Their winning entry, *Forests of Canada*, was profiled in the July/August edition of STC's *Intercom* magazine. The book can be purchased through Chapters.ca or Amazon.com.

The entry deadline is November 8. Competition rules, category guidelines, and entry fees are available through the Competition link on our chapter Website, www.stceo.org.

Note: We are currently seeking competition judges. If you have at least three years of experience as a technical communicator or editor and would like to review some of the best documentation in Eastern Ontario, contact me for more information about becoming an STC judge. We provide complete training and support to ensure consistency and to help you get the most out of the experience. Being involved in the competition is a valuable learning opportunity for judges as well as entrants.

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The Scoop

By Penny Lang

The eighth annual **Ottawa Independent Writers Festival** will be held on Sept. 29-Oct. 6 at the Library and Archives Canada. For more information about OIW, go to www.oiw.ca.

The next meeting of the **Wired Woman Society** (WWS) will be on Wednesday, Sept. 29, from 6:30-8:30 p.m. (location TBD). This annual volunteer kick-off meeting will offer an opportunity to get reacquainted with members old and new, and to see how you can contribute to making the WWS work for you and others.

On Wednesday, Oct. 27, from 6:30-8:30 p.m. (location TBD) the **WWS** will present *Trick or Treat? – Feedback on Your Story-Telling Skills*. A surprise and noted author and story teller will be on hand to give tips on how to tell a good story.

For more information about the Wired Woman Society, go to www.wiredwoman.com/index.shtml.

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*Do you have
seminar topic
suggestions?
Bring them to the
Wine and Cheese on
September 27th.*

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*Wish to submit an
article for
publication in a
future stimulus
issue?*

*Submit articles to:
stimulus@stceo.org*

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STCEO 2004-2005 Executive

President

Ken Kicksee
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John Calder

Algonquin Student Rep

TBD by class Sept. 2004
student-rep@stceo.org

Brand Manager

Ryszard Cimek

The Juggling Act of Life as a Freelancer

By Penny Lang

8:00-8:15 a.m.

Check two email accounts for work from a client in Germany—work that is already weeks late. Nothing yet. Send a “hurry-up” email to the client and a status report to my director on this job.

8:15-8:20 a.m.

Call another client because he sent me work but the email attachment is the wrong one.

8:20-9:00 a.m.

Exchange email and phone calls with colleagues re: a job lead to pass on, a freelancers’ get-together I’ve organized for this evening, two people interested in working for my company, someone who wants me to guest-lecture, and a new contract I just signed.

9:00-9:30 a.m.

Discover that one of my clients has been laid off—and I have two unpaid invoices with the company. Make two calls to find name and email address of the person who is probably now in charge; also send email to someone else in Finance dept. in U.S. [The invoices are eventually processed and I am paid].

Welcome to my world—the world of a freelance technical communicator.

The Juggling Act

We’ve all heard the expression, “The only constant is change”. For a successful freelancer, the only constant is juggling. The agenda entries above are typical in that, over the space of an hour and a half, I’ve been a project manager, a networker and an entrepreneur taking care of finance and human resources. I’ve done little billable work and no writing or editing, my stock in trade. But I won’t sweat it because there are weeks when I do 60+ hours of billable work and neglect most other aspects of running a business. (Did I mention that no two days are alike?)

When I talk to other freelance technical communicators, they agree that a major challenge is to allocate time—non-billable time—to the business of running a business.

Entrepreneurship

As a freelancer, you are an entrepreneur with a business. This holds equally true whether you have an incorporated company and sub-contract work, as I do, or if you are a sole proprietor who does not sub-contract. You need to actively run your business. And that means doing much more than whatever technical communication tasks a contract requires.

You have a lot in common with other self-employed people: accountants, hair stylists, taxi drivers. Talk to all of them for ideas and tips. From accountants, I’ve learned about higher write-offs for marketing activities. Hair stylists and taxi drivers have stressed the importance of customer service and billable time.

Networking/Business Development

One of the most neglected areas—and one of the most important, is networking/business development. You need to keep in touch with colleagues and clients regularly—not just when you’re looking for work. This way, you’ll stay plugged in.

Take time to get out to industry events: STC meetings, conferences and seminars. Also take time for informal get-togethers: coffee, lunch or drinks with colleagues; phone chats and emails. The more people you know, the more interesting news and tips you’ll hear. You’ll also make some wonderful friends.

Think about where you want to be and what you want to be doing in a year, two years, five years. Which industries? Which niche? Once you’ve figured out these things, take the steps you need to take and make the contacts you need to make, to take your business in the direction you want it to go.

It’s very easy to get caught up in the day-to-day work of your contracts and not plan for the future. But if you don’t plan, and are just carried along by events, you have less control. And that’s not only unwise, it can be ironic because more control is one of the reasons many people like freelancing instead of being an employee.

Marketing

Do it. You don’t need to spend thousands of dollars on flashy advertising. But some kind of giveaway other than your business card (a mug, a pen, etc.) is worthwhile. A website is becoming a necessity if you want to be taken seriously. And a lot of what falls under networking is also informal marketing.

Allocating Time

How much time should you allocate to business development, networking and marketing? At least a half-day each week. A day is better: that’s 20 percent of your time. And whether you put in that time during regular work hours or save it for evenings or weekends, it’s essential to do it. This is an investment in your business.

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Juggling Act cont...

I have heard of freelance technical communicators who systematically block out a certain number of hours during the work-week for these activities—but I've never met one. Most are more like me. When I have more billable work than I can handle, pretty much everything else goes on hold (Exceptions: Billing clients and paying sub-contractors. These tasks are too important to ignore). But when there's a lull, such as this week, much of which I've spent in wait mode for jobs, I catch up on everything else. BTW, I do recommend a more systematic approach. Do as I say, not as I do.

Conclusions

Being a freelancer automatically makes you a business person, and you need to actively manage the business. That's a juggling act involving business development, networking and marketing. You need to keep all the balls in the air at the same time. So maybe the real moral of this story is, if you don't like juggling, don't become a freelancer.

Penny has been a freelance juggler for nine years—and wouldn't have it any other way.

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Considering the Technical Writing Education Options

By Kerri Brennan

If you're looking for a cost-effective introduction to the world that is technical writing, online-learning.com may offer you exactly what you need.

online-learning.com takes several of the aspects of technical writing and combines them in to one course. The 12-week Professional Technical Writing course includes four assignments and focuses both on the process of writing technical documents and on writing in XML.

Not all technical writing programs include this, but online-learning.com begins by reviewing resumé and cover letter essentials. This helps students pull their education, experience, and career objectives into a presentable and professional document.

The XML component covers the basics of what XML is and why it is a beneficial skill to have if you're working in E-commerce or E-publishing. Students learn the XML

document components, language, and wrap up the section with authoring and publishing in XML.

The course then progresses with several typical technical writing themes:

- Audience analysis
- Document creation (creating the documentation plan, task matrix, outline, style guide)
- Graphic inclusion (types, format, size)
- Writing tips (plain language, headings, tone, spelling, grammar)
- Editing tips
- Usability testing
- Documentation design

When considering whether a program or course is right for you, determine its strengths and weakness.

Benefits:

- Completing the course online allows students to work on their own schedule, at home or at the office.
- The course offers students a great opportunity to decide whether a career in technical writing is for them.
- At only \$749 CAD (\$499 US), the course is cost-effective.
- XML is not included in all technical writing programs, but is a useful skill set to have in the industry.
- The course is accredited through Carleton University's Sprott School of Business:
www.carleton.ca/ppd/

Things to consider:

- One course for all topics over 12-weeks means you can't possibly concentrate on one section for very long. As opposed to a certificate program that offers an entire course on say, analysis and design or project management, or the basics of writing (grammar and style).
- While the instructor is available for consultation and assistance throughout the course, it doesn't appear that there is a real opportunity to work with and learn from your peers. Technical writers do spend a lot of time in consultations with others (programmers, marketing teams, technical support...).

Courses begin regularly each month:
— October 11th
— November 8th
— December 6th

For more information about the online-learning.com technical writing course, see:
www.online-learning.com.

Mission Statement

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



STCEO Website:

<http://www.stceo.org>

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