

Technically speaking ...

STC

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Local Mission

Connecting Students to the Future of Technical Communication



STC Mission

Creating and supporting a forum for communities of practice in the profession of technical communication

Contact Information

Student chapter

Web site:

http://www.ncsu.edu/stud_orgs/stc

Carolina chapter

Web site:

<http://www.stc-carolina.org>

International STC

Web site:

<http://www.stc.org>

Offshore Outsourcing: Are Technical Communications Jobs Next?

by: Maggie VanNorman, President, STC@NCState

As corporations continue to outsource high tech jobs overseas, technical communicators may be wondering if their jobs are next.

Traditionally, contractors have played an important role in the technical writing field by providing specific expertise, thereby allowing companies to focus on their core competencies. Contractors have made it possible for companies to add temporary personnel when needed – an important benefit in a field where work output peaks periodically.

This environment has been beneficial for technical communicators; in fact, “we’ve thrived,” said JoAnn Hackos, director of the Center for Information-Development Management and a leader in our field. In her presentation on Thursday, March 18 at Matrix Resources for the STC Carolina chapter, Hackos described how the traditional relationship between companies and contractors is rapidly changing. Instead of employing contractors for reasons such as specialized knowledge or temporary peak periods, offshore outsourcing focuses on cost savings, according to Hackos.

Hackos’ presentation focused on the unique challenges that offshore outsourcing presents in terms of economic, quality and management issues. She then discussed how technical communicators can protect their jobs, the primary area of interest for many in the audience.

Hackos first discussed the most immediate fallout of offshore outsourcing: the reduction in high-paying jobs for US writers. Other economic issues include pressure for lower wages for US writers and exportation of technical expertise.

Hackos then detailed quality issues raised by non-native English writers and non-American English writers. She explained that offshore writers often lack field-specific education or training. Also, offshore writers may not understand the US customers’ needs and may have minimal contact with the developers, which, Hackos said, can result in the quality of publications suffering greatly.

Management issues can also surface with offshore outsourcing. Hackos discussed the potential development costs arising from added editing that is often required. Project and personnel management costs may increase, as these managers have additional responsibilities.

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President's Corner

by: Maggie VanNorman

As we head into the final months of the Spring semester, the time comes again to find new STC@NCState officers. Being an STC officer not only looks great on a résumé, but it also provides a low-pressure opportunity to develop your skills in leadership, time management, and collaboration.

We have the following positions open for the 2004-2005 school year:

- Newsletter editor

Our chapter has been lucky to have great people in these leadership roles this academic year. However, this May, the officers in these roles will graduate. Special thanks and congratulations to our graduating officers:

- Kathleen Angione, newsletter editor
- Chip Hartzog, membership committee manager
- Jennifer Bridgers, secretary
- Casey LoFrese, treasurer (December 2003 graduate)

Carl Nuckols will be continuing as our Vice President and Webmaster.

If you are interested in becoming an STC officer, please contact Sarah Egan Warren, our faculty advisors. Feel free to contact any of the officers if you have specific questions about what each officer position entails.

In other news, the STC national conference will be held in Baltimore May 9-12 and I encourage everyone to attend. The 2005 and 2006 conferences will be held in Seattle and Las Vegas, respectively, so this will be our most convenient (and cheapest!) national conference in the upcoming years. As students, we can register for the entire conference for just \$125 through April 23. The cost for non-student members is \$495.

There are many reasons to attend the STC conference, not the least of which is the networking the conference affords.

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STC Best of Show International appears at NC State

by: Landra Cunningham Hester

On February 12, the NC State and Carolina chapters of STC came together to view the Society's 2002-2003 international award-winning publications.

The publications in the showcase were winners of the STC-sponsored international online communication competition (IOCC), the international technical publications competition (ITPC), and the international technical art competition (ITAC). STC members submitted the projects to the competitions, and fellow STC members judged the work of their colleagues.

Sarah Egan Warren and Bill Bryan arranged the showcase event, which was open to STC members and any interested visitors. The event brought the two chapters together to view the outstanding projects and to share ideas. It also allowed attendees to view examples of winning projects to stimulate their own project ideas for submission in the future and to see what winning projects look like.

The display included the ITAC Best of Show recipient, "Family Science Night Logo Design" and the ITPC Best of Show recipient, "Department of Environmental Health 1999-2001 Biennial Report." Attendees found the distinguished publications fascinating. A Carolina chapter member commented on the biennial report, "It has a good use of graphics versus text, and it doesn't give too much information on each page. It's friendly—good for a report such as this."

The group reassembled to observe the IOCC winner, "X-ray Safety: An Interactive Guide." The interactive guide was an online tutorial produced for Kodak employees who may be exposed to x-ray while at work. Sarah Egan Warren facilitated the tutorial walk-through and the discussion that followed. The discussion involved various points of view held by the attendees concerning the visual elements of the tutorial, cultural sensitivity in tutorials, and the parts of the tutorial that could have been done differently. The dialogue also addressed the notion of "slick" documentation, or documentation that has a lot of aural and visual wow-appeal. A question raised by the discussion that remained for consideration: Is 'slicker' documentation always better?

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Hackos (continued from page 1)

And Hackos also said that it is hard to hire and keep an offshore staff due to the rapid turnover. All told, she estimated management costs for an offshore staff to be about double the cost of local management.

According to Hackos, this adds up to a total cost savings of 0-20% for offshore outsourcing. Because some companies advertise savings of around 60-80%, she advised the attendees at the presentation to track the actual costs of contractors. Otherwise, “someone could use fiction to say it’s less expensive,” she warned.

Therefore, Hackos believes that in order to combat the shift to offshore outsourcing, technical communicators need to focus on making changes that will allow them to save their companies 15-20%. The main areas for these cost-saving measures are increased efficiency, reduced costs, and improved quality.

In terms of increased efficiency, Hackos offered the following advice:

- Minimalism: reduce the information sent to customers.
- Single-source: reuse content modules in your deliverables.
- Project management: estimate and track projects to control costs.

To reduce costs, Hackos said to focus on the following areas:

- Editing: standardize language to reduce translation costs.
- Productivity: welcome an increased workload.
- Content management: keep a storehouse of unique content.

Improving quality is equally important to efficiency and cost concerns. Specifically, technical communicators should work on the following:

- Intellectual capital: become experts on the customers and the content area.
- Focus on goals and task-oriented information: work on the more difficult areas to show your value.
- Toot your own horn: advertise your and your group’s successes.

For more information on offshore outsourcing, visit Hackos’ site at <http://www.infomanagementcenter.com/index.shtml>.

Best In Show (continued from page 2)

The event was a wonderful opportunity for the two chapters to engage in valuable discourse, which may one day help a member win one of these prestigious awards. “It was intriguing to hear the different comments, critiques, and discussion between the STC chapters,” remarked Jennifer Bridgers, NC State chapter secretary. “Everyone provided input—it was enriching discussion that allowed both chapters to learn from each other.”

For a complete list of these excellent publications, go to the STC website. The STC website also contains information on submitting projects to the competitions.

President’s Corner (continued from page 2)

Technical communicators from all over the world come to the conference and there is also an employment booth where you can post your résumé and browse for a new job. The conference offers great workshops on technical issues as well as opportunities to explore new career paths.

You can find out what specific sessions are being offered and which speakers will be at the conference at <http://www.stc.org/51stConf/>. You can also register for the conference on the site. Remember to register by April 23 for the reduced rate.

Editor’s Column

by: *Kathleen Angione*

Hello STC members! As the semester starts coming to a close, I invite all students and alumni to attend the English 675 defenses (April 27 & 29, 5:30 p.m.-7:15 p.m., and May 4, 6:00 p.m.-9:00 p.m.) It will be an excellent opportunity to see the variety of capstone projects presented by the graduating class, as well as a chance for returning students get ideas for their own future projects. Please come and support your fellow students!

I also encourage all of you who are returning to the program next year to consider an officer position with STC@NC State. The newsletter editor position is open, so please take this opportunity to become involved in the only student organization exclusively devoted to MS students!

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Upcoming Events

SIG Meetings

For complete details, visit <http://www.stc-carolina.org/calendar/index.shtml>

New RoboHelp for FrameMaker

Saturday, March 20 (9:00 a.m.-12:30 p.m.) Hosted by STC Carolina. Cost is \$45. For more information, contact Jim Reid (919) 557-3887 / jreid2@nc.rr.com

Technical Editing: Secrets of the Red Pencil

Saturday, April 26 (9:00 a.m.-12:30 p.m.) Hosted by STC Carolina. Cost is \$35. For more information, contact Terry Smith, (919) 564-2359 / terry.smith@per-se.com

ENG 675 Defenses

Come support your fellow MS students as they defend their capstone projects to the faculty on April 27 & 29 (5:30-7:15 p.m.) and May 4 (6:00 p.m.-9:00 p.m.)

STC Conference in Baltimore, MD

May 9-12. For more information, visit: <http://www.stc.org/conference.asp>

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Reprint Policy

You may reprint original material from this newsletter as long as you acknowledge the author and the source.

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The next meeting of STC@NC State will be held on April 21 & 22 from 5-6p.m. at Brueggers Bagel Bakery on Hillsborough Street. Please join us!
