

Byline



Bi-Monthly Newsletter for STC Chicago Members

President's message

By Linda Kelley, President

I'm going to veer off topic a bit here today. Other people in this newsletter are covering the important business of the chapter (competition, meetings, workshop, etc.) in detail, and it's not necessary for me to duplicate their efforts. This month I'm feeling more contemplative, and I wanted to share a few of those thoughts.

As some of you know, I experienced a personal tragedy a few weeks ago when my husband, without any warning, had a heart attack and passed away suddenly. He was 51 years old. (If you attended the Communities Reception at this year's Summit, you might have met him briefly; he was the guy taking photos with the Blues Brothers props out in the lobby area.)

The one bright spot to this incomprehensible event has been the outpouring of love and support from everyone who knew him or our family. I was incredibly moved by all of the people who came to his memorial service. Those who weren't able to make it in person have sent cards, e-mails, and meals. Many shared a story of how he touched their lives, whether it was teaching their child the rules of soccer or formatting a calendar for someone for a fund-raising project.

It's been heart-warming to discover how many people he influenced in his too-short life -- and I wondered if he ever realized it.

I think we go through our lives taking a lot of things for granted (I know I do), and we often forget, or don't take the time, to thank people or tell them how much they mean to us, be it our families, our friends and colleagues, or even a stranger who helps us to solve a problem. I'm not sure why this is; we certainly feel free to lodge a complaint when we're unhappy. Research has shown that we get social, psychological, and physical benefits from acknowledging the things we're grateful for. So why not focus on the positives, and also "share the wealth" with those who deserve our appreciation? Tell your friends and family you love them, and let people know when their efforts are valued. It will make them feel good, and it will make you feel good too.

With that in mind, I'd like to thank you all for giving me the opportunity to lead this wonderful group of talented professionals. I'm honored to represent you, and I truly appreciate the tireless

Continued on page 2

Check out the blog!

Did you know STC Chicago has a blog? Check it out for event recaps, new software and apps for our industry, and Tech Comm Friday - a weekly roundup of all things technical communication.

www.stc-chicago.blogspot.com

inside this issue

President's message	1
Update to bylaws	2
Competition update	3
Chapter meeting recap	4
Serial contracting	5
eLearning Showcase	7

Find us online!



President's message, continued

efforts and considerable accomplishments of our administrative council and committee managers, who volunteer their time to provide us all with the educational, professional advancement, and recognition opportunities that make our chapter an award winner year after year. Thanks, too, to those who stepped up to help me out over these past few weeks, when my attention was focused elsewhere.

(And one more thing: If you ever think there's even a possibility you might be having a heart attack, please get medical help immediately. If you wait to be certain, it might be too late.) Ω

Have you renewed?

All our events feature reduced pricing for STC Chicago members. So if you haven't renewed your STC membership, now is the time to do so!

Read about the many **benefits of membership** and join or renew online **here**. Ω

Chapter to update Bylaws

By Dan Dornbrook

STC Chicago is seeking member input for the next periodic revision of the Chapter Bylaws.

All chapter members in good standing are welcome to review the current version of the Bylaws and submit any requests for changes to the committee manager, who will compile all requests for review by the chapter's Administrative Council at a future meeting. After AC review, the revisions will be submitted to chapter members in good standing for a ratification vote.

Please review the **current Bylaws** and contact the committee manager, Dan Dornbrook, at **dornhound@gmail.com** no later than October 31, 2012. Ω

Judging for the STC Competition

By Cynthia Laughlin

Do you have a several years experience as a technical communicator? Do you want to support other technical communicators and support the chapter? The annual technical communication competition is on and we are still looking for judges.

How does judging work?

Judges are placed in three-member teams with a designated team lead. The team members receive a small number of entries from a variety of categories such as websites, instructional materials, newsletters, artwork, etc. Each judge reviews the entries using a four-page form that highlights different elements of technical communication. Responses are shared within the team and modified if necessary. Once the judging team agrees on an award level for an entry, the team lead communicates with the judging manager. Judging begins on November 3 and ends on January 5.

Why should I judge?

By being a judge, you get to use your skills to benefit other communicators gauge their skill level and improve their work. Additionally, judges get an opportunity to view works from diverse industries and learn techniques that may benefit their own work.

Judges must sign up by October 27. Sign up **here**. Ω

North side location for Thursdays @ STC

Do you live or work on the north side or in the near north suburbs? STC Chicago member Brad Moldofsky is working to start a Thursdays @ STC gathering in this area. If you're interested, email Brad at **brad@moldofsky.com**. Ω

Competition update - our cutoff date is coming soon!

By Cheri Noble

Our deadline for submission of entries is Friday, October 19, 2012 and it's coming up fast. I know we are all busy with work, fall vacations, and enjoying the beautiful fall colors; however, you don't want to miss your chance to enter one or more entries for this year's competition.

Have you, or someone you work with, completed an online help file in the last 24 months? How about a user guide, job aid, reference document, brochure, poster, article or training material? The STC Chicago Technical Communication Competition is your opportunity to have a set of your peers review and evaluate your work. The response-form completed by each judge can provide valuable insight into how others see your work.

Awards are recommended by our judges for materials submitted that meet certain criteria for Merit, Excellence or Distinguished awards. Some entries may not receive any award. If that is the case, the evaluation form will have details for areas the judges felt need improvement. Once the set of judges review the material, they meet (online or in person) to come to a consensus on the award recommendations. Once the evaluations forms and the material are returned to the Competition managers, a smaller committee of senior judges review the evaluation forms to be sure the material was appropriately documented and the award recommended is appropriate. Whew...that is a lot of work the judges have to do but we want to be sure each entry is evaluated consistently!

If your entry receives an award, you can add it as part of your resume and professional work history. Your current or future employer(s) will see that you are acknowledged by your peers for your work. The culmination of the judging of the 2012 Technical Communication Competition is celebrated at our Annual Honors and Recognition Banquet in March 2013. Awards are presented and entries are returned on this evening.

The cost is \$50 for each entry and you can submit as many entries as you'd like. Four copies of the entries and the submission forms must be post marked by Friday, October 19, 2012. No entries received after that date can be included in the judging. Also, if you are entering the competition and plan on attending our October 17th meeting in Prospect Heights with Leigh White's "Taxonomy" presentation, I can accept your entries and forms that evening as well.

One final note, be sure to read the submission form carefully and provide as much detail as possible about the entry you are submitting. Also, verify you are sending in four copies of your entry and four copies of the submission form for review. We look forward to a great competition again this year. Ω

October meeting sponsor

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September meeting sponsor

September meeting - now that was fun!

By *MaryKay Grueneberg*

On September 20, twenty members and non-members joined us at the Ram Restaurant in Rosemont for a fantastic presentation by Andrew Thomas of SDL. Andrew gave us a very entertaining presentation titled "Do Humans Dream of Electric Sheep?" Together, we explored how the vast amount of digital information is poised to change the world and how we, as technical communicators, will have to react to that change.

In addition to the good food, camaraderie, and networking opportunities, there were two door prizes for the evening. Leigh Lillis won an STC coffee mug and Steve Napora won a free registration to the October Chapter meeting.

Thank you so much to SDL, our sponsor for the evening. You can find information about SDL at www.sdl.com Ω

October chapter meeting... "Taxonomy: your roadmap for the future"

By *MaryKay Grueneberg*

Join us on October 17 at 6:30 pm and see why Leigh White's taxonomy presentation was standing room only at the 2012 STC Summit!

A taxonomy is a valuable tool for helping you discover and organize your content. If you're going to provide your content to clients in a searchable form, a taxonomy is essential for a positive search experience. A taxonomy can be as simple or as complex as necessary, and you've probably already made a start without even knowing it.

A solid taxonomy can be the key to optimizing your content for search, indexing, and gap analysis. It can be your roadmap for the future. Join us as Leigh explains what a taxonomy is, how it can benefit you, and how to start developing one.

This meeting will be held on October 17 in a private room at Rocky Vanders Cafe & Bar (just west of Willow exit off 294). The cost for STC members is only \$15, students \$10, and not-yet-members \$20, which includes networking, a fantastic presentation, and your choice of non-alcoholic beverage and a pizza buffet, including salad. Full meals and alcoholic beverages will be available for purchase, if you prefer.

For complete details, see the [STC Chicago website](#) or go [here](#) to directly register. Ω

Readers write in

By *Kim Sikora*

Submit a 2-3 sentence response to the following question and your name and response could be published in a future issue.

This issue's question: **Caramel apples, pumpkin pie, Halloween candy... what's your favorite fall dessert?**

Submit responses to byline@stc-chicago.com to be featured in an upcoming issue! Ω

Is Contracting for You? Advice from a Serial Contractor

By Maralee Sautter, WVC Vice President and Web Manager

Editor's note: This article was reprinted with the author's permission from the October-December 2011 issue of The Willamette Galley. View the original [here](#).

Today's American workers are expected to have at least seven different jobs through the course of their careers.[1] Over the course of my technical writing career, I have had a variety of staff and contract positions. With many different jobs under my belt, I have become part of the new statistics, due mainly to my contracting roles.

Along with downsizing and reorganization, which are common occurrences these days, some companies I have worked for no longer exist or have been swallowed up by other corporations. While staff positions may seem permanent, the quicksands of business may have other objectives in mind. In a moment's notice, a job can evaporate into thin air.

Of late, my positions have been contracts, due to the state of the economy and lack of permanent positions. While I have enjoyed permanent work in the past, I have learned that contracting has its advantages, and my objective here is to impart some advice to would-be contractors.

Flexibility

If lifestyle dictates the need for time off and less need for consistent income, then the flexibility of a contract position may be the right option. Contracting is a great solution for those who want to visit the far corners of the world, take spontaneous time off, or plan for a little downtime between jobs. Since many staff positions only offer two-week vacations—and often, the employer asks for vacation schedules a year in advance—the ability to take spontaneous or additional time off can be a major coup for contractors as contracts are not as confining as permanent employment.

Contractors need to be astutely aware of their finances, though, and most contractors I know are avid savers. This allows them to have a financial cushion to fall back on between jobs. Contractors also need self-confidence in their ability to “hit the ground running” when they take on a new contract. While not all contracts call for the seasoned professional—some entry-level contracts do appear—most contracting positions do require a strong background in the industry.

A word of advice when signing a new contract: If you have planned time off, be prepared to tell your agency in advance, as you will be asked about vacation plans before you sign a contract.

For those candidates who are interested in permanent employment, a contract may be the ideal stepping stone to a temporary-to-permanent job. Candidates can acclimate to the company culture and examine whether the relationship is amenable. If the company and individual are a good mix, when a position becomes available, employers will make the offer for permanent employment.

Exposure to Technology and Tools

One of the greatest advantages of contracting is the opportunity to explore companies with diverse technologies. Experience shows that exposure to certain technologies will invite callbacks from the same company or acceptance with similar types of organizations, and learning about a specific technology or industry can turn contractors into subject-matter experts. In the greater Portland area, for example, there is a rich plethora of jobs in high tech with chip makers, solar and wind power companies, networking and medical industries, business and banking solutions, integrated circuitry and software, aviation companies, and the list goes on.

Continued on page 6

Is Contracting for You? continued

With technology comes the use of cool tools (software applications), which the technical writer, information architect, or content strategist may not have the opportunity to employ in a static work environment. While some companies still insist on the cheap thrill of the Microsoft toolset, others are using Adobe and MadCap products as staples. And, if lucky enough, contractors may be exposed to content management systems, XML-DITA, or web-based software.

The value of learning a myriad of tools allows contractors to diversify and build an arsenal, which can be helpful in exposing them to a wider base of contracting opportunities at more companies. For some, the joy of learning new tools staves off boredom. When relegated to using the same software tools day in and day out, staff employees may stagnate and even diehard writers may weep after years of exposure to same bland diet of one tool.

Higher Pay Rate

Generally speaking, contractors receive a higher hourly rate for not receiving benefits and have a greater amount of expertise. Many agencies do provide benefits, but most often, benefits are paid entirely by the employee, though there are always exceptions to the rule. When a contractor's spouse or partner can cover medical, dental, and other insurance, the contractor enjoys the greatest advantage since there is no need to pay out-of-pocket for benefits. The contractor's pay rate coupled with out-of-pocket expenses for medical benefits do have a way of averaging out to that of a staff writer's income, so to realize a higher pay rate, develop a relationship with one agency and do good work for them. It is easier to ask for higher hourly rates the next time a contract comes from the same agency. Incidentally, before a contract is over, I ask the agency to start looking for my next position. Not only does this build trust, but it gives me the ability to have someone else look ahead for me.

Most contracts these days come through an agency, so wages are paid through W-2 withholding. If an agency offers an hourly wage, it may be lower because they are also paying a portion of benefits and tax fees. If a contract is offered through a 1099, be sure to ask for more per hour, as withholding is paid by the contractor/consultant.

Conclusions

For many folks like me, contracting is a great way to maintain an approach that is not available to everyone in a permanent position. For some, contracting may not be a good option because it lacks stability and benefits; but, for me, the stability is outweighed by the excitement of exploring and learning new technologies, taking random time off, and gaining exposure to new tools in many corporate environments. My breadth of skills makes me a valuable asset to companies looking for the confident contractor who can "hit the ground running." So, if you have perspectives similar to mine, contracting may be a good option for you. Ω

Maralee Sautter has been a technical communicator for 12 years. She has worked as a contractor, consultant, and staff writer for many high-tech and Fortune 500 firms in the greater Portland area. She also teaches technical writing classes at Portland State University as a part-time adjunct faculty member.

Reference

[1] Askville by Amazon. "What is the average number of occupations one will have in their lifetime?" Accessed on December 1, 2011, <http://askville.amazon.com/average-number-occupationslifetime/AnswerViewer>.

Each Summer, The eLearning Showcase is the Place to Be

By Linda Jansak

In 2012, STC Chicago and our fellow host organizations — **CISPI** and **CCASTD** — celebrated the fifth anniversary of the Chicago eLearning & Technology Showcase. If you attended the event this year, you know why the Showcase continues to be so popular. Veteran attendees have identified the event as a place to gather, spark interesting conversations with colleagues, and participate in a cutting-edge exploration of emerging technologies. If you create or deliver elearning in Chicago, the Showcase is the place to be. On the day of the event, the air of excitement was palpable.

In addition to attracting veteran attendees, the Showcase draws many first-time attendees each year. This year was no exception. Conference organizers sold all available tickets to the event, which took place at the Hilton Chicago on August 16. More than 335 attendees had access to a morning keynote and over 30 speakers, with 24 breakout sessions in 7 different tracks. Speakers covered a wide range of topics from instructional design to development tools, media resources, virtual classrooms, social and interactive applications, mobile learning, and rapid elearning.

If you didn't get a chance to attend, consider joining us next year. Until then, check out conference materials, presentation slides, photos and videos from the 2012 Showcase. Links are available [here](#). Then, consider joining our LinkedIn Group to stay connected to the elearning community throughout the year. Access is available [here](#).

Finally, we would like to thank our sponsors. Due to their generous support, we were able to offer new products and features this year, including real-time audience feedback, "man-on-the-street" videos and valuable product and service giveaways. For more information about sponsorship and links to sponsor websites, see the [Sponsor page](#) at the Showcase website. Ω

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STC Chicago Membership at a Glance

Total Affiliated Members: 146
Members: 39
Senior Members: 79
Student Members: 17 Ω

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Preferred format is a MS Word® document file via email. We reserve the right to edit for style and space.

Advertising: We encourage advertising that follows STC guidelines and promotes services to STC Chicago members.

Half page (7.5"x4.5"): \$300 (1 issue)

Whole page (7.5"x9"): \$500 (1 issue).

Discounts for multiple issues.

The advertisement and payment must be received by the 20th of the month before the next published issue of the newsletter (Byline is published in February, April, June, August, October, and December). We will not run your ad until payment is received. Submit ad files in electronic copy only in .tif, .gif, or .jpg format to byline@stc-chicago.com.

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