

Vol. IV • No. 1 • January 2001

Forward is the official newsletter of the UK Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication (STC). It is published six times per year: January, March, May, July, September and November. Please send articles, letters, comments, and other items for inclusion in the newsletter to the editor by the beginning of a publication month.

In this issue

Chapter competition results	1
Chapter membership passes 100. 1	
UK Chapter – Competition awards 2000	2
Chapter meetings	2
STC News	3
STC telephone seminars	3
Preemptive project planning	3
Getting started with usability testing	3
The chapter volunteers (That's a verb!)	3
STC teaching fellowships	4
Tech writing news	4
Designing Your Web Site for the Blind	4
APEX 2001 call for entries announced	6
Conferences	6
Training courses	6

Chapter competition results

From Liz Hale, Competitions Manager

The Technical Publications Competition held by the UK Chapter was again celebrated at an awards dinner at Café Flo in London, on 18th November. The excellent meal and service contributed to a very enjoyable evening for all. The awards were kindly presented by Carolyn Hughes, whose entry COBAS Integra 400 User Manual (written for Hoffman La Roche in Switzerland) won the UK Chapter's Best of Show in 1999 - AND an Excellence Award at ITPC in Spring 2000.

For details of the competition entries, see p 3.

Chapter membership passes 100

From Mick Robinson, Membership Manager

A longer than usual list of updates this time as I didn't have time for a report last time. Now work has returned to just the normal chaos, I've been able to sort through the updates.

So it's a sometimes belated welcome to new members:

Damien Braniff of Kircubbin
 Ronald Chapman of Grasse, France
 Aine Dunphy of Farnborough
 Rhona McAdam of London
 David Odell of Brighton
 Judie Robertson-Ellington of Amsterdam
 Gill Woodstock of Eastcote

And existing members transferring into our chapter:

Mark Riley of Cardiff (sorry Mark: I don't recognize the code for your original chapter)
 Julianna Rhodes of Galway (transferred in from Puget Sound)

Currently we have 97 members with November and December's updates to go. With luck, we're on course for over 100 by the end of the year.

Particularly if you're a new member, let me know if there is a mistake in your address. The people in the US aren't familiar with European addresses and sometimes make transcription errors. I can't guarantee to get it corrected but I'll try. (We're still trying to convince them that Luxembourg is a separate country and not part of the United Kingdom.)

If you haven't already received your renewal notice for 2001, you should get one shortly. Just a reminder that you have until the end of February to renew before your membership lapses.

Stop press

According to the November update, our membership has increased to 101. Within the past 6 months, our membership has grown by over 16%, making us the second-fastest growing Chapter in our size category.

STC UK Chapter Officers

UK Chapter President
Mark Clifford
m.clifford@kudos-idd.com

First Vice President
Liz Hale
l.hale@kudos-idd.com

Second Vice President
Vacancy

Secretary
David Harrison
david.harrison5@virgin.net

Treasurer
Kim Berquist
kim@2kinformatic.lu

UK Chapter Managers

Membership
Mick Robinson
mick@xara.com

Employment
Education and academic
Caroline Jarrett
Caroline.Jarrett@Effortmark.co.uk

Competitions
Liz Hale
l.hale@kudos-idd.com

Program and meetings
Marcus Streets
marcus@ncipher.com

Legal advisor
Paul Bakker
paul@petecom.co.uk

Web site
Richard Tuft
richard.tuft@iint.co.uk

Newsletter editor
Christine Woskett
christinewoskett@email.msn.com

STC
stc@stc-va.org
<http://www.stc-va.org>
membership@stc-va.org

UK Chapter
<http://www.stc.org/region1/ukc/home.htm>
stcuk-discuss@chiark.greenend.org.uk

Advertising charges

Business card £10
1/4 page £15
1/2 page £25
Full page £40

UK Chapter – Competition awards 2000

The following entries gained awards in the STC UK Chapter’s 2000 competition:

Entry Title	Contributors	Award Level
Spectrum One Multimedia	Dean Bass, PerkinElmer and Binary Vision	Merit
CaseRunner Online Help	Bill Munn, i2 Ltd.	Merit
Rule Definer Help	Nick Creasy, The Kudos Partnership Ltd.	Merit
Netra T 1400/1405 Documentation Set	David Francis, Sun Microsystems	Merit

Thanks also to those entrants who did not gain any award this year. The judges’ written feedback has been sent to ALL entrants, whether they won an Award or not. After all, as many of us know already, it is often receiving this feedback that makes it worthwhile to enter the STC’s competitions.

And here are some photos of the awards dinner:



Carolyn Hughes and Mark Clifford



Christine Woskett and David Farbey



Adrian Pattison, Tina Hoffman and Jo Wooding



Adrian Pattison accepting a Merit Award for Sun Microsystems

Chapter meetings

We’re working on the program of meetings for 2001. If you have any requests for topics or suggestions for speakers, please contact Marcus Streets. See the next issue of Forward for news of future meetings.

STC News

STC telephone seminars

Preemptive project planning

See the advertisement in the December issue of Intercom for details of this telephone seminar.

Getting started with usability testing

Usability testing is one of the most talked-about issues in business today. If you want to conduct usability testing but don't know how to get started, this telephone seminar will answer your questions, including how to determine what to test, how many subjects to test, and where and when the test should occur. You will also get a toolkit of forms and examples from a usability test to help you plan and conduct a successful test and analyze the results. You can use the information to test print or online documentation, a software user interface, or Web sites.

Objectives of this seminar are as follows:

- To present an overview of the usability testing process.
- To define qualitative and quantitative goals for testing.
- To define the user profile precisely for a limited sample of participants.
- To create scenarios that match the goals of the test.
- To develop a plan to record the results of the test.
- To develop a plan to analyze the results.
- To create a plan for ranking recommendations for change.

Learning outcomes are as follows:

- Participants will learn the process.
- Participants will practice the process by planning a test.

When?

Part I: Wednesday, March 7, 2001

1:00-2:30 PM Eastern Standard Time -- Principles

Part II: Wednesday, March 14, 2001

1:00-2:30 PM Eastern Standard Time -- Practice

What Is a Telephone Seminar?

A telephone seminar is much like a large conference call--but in a more controlled, radio-like environment. You simply dial the 800 number from your phone, enter your personal identification number, and you're connected! You then sit back and listen to the presentations, follow along with the handout material, and join in the lively Q&A sessions.

Benefits

A telephone seminar offers participants these benefits:

- No travel time
- Pay per site and not per person
- Opportunity to train employees in your own offices

Cost

With a telephone seminar, the cost is per site, not per person.

U.S. sites: \$250.00

Canadian sites: \$280.00

All other sites: Please contact the STC office

An additional \$8.00 will be charged for registrations received less than five days before the seminar.

The cost of the telephone seminar is per participating site, not per person. Train as many people as your conference room can hold -- for one flat rate!

About the Speaker

Carol M. Barnum is a professor of technical communication at Southern Polytechnic State University in Marietta, Georgia. She is also an award-winning author, a presenter at STC annual conferences, a fellow of STC, and, most recently, a recipient of STC's Jay R. Gould Award for Excellence in Teaching Technical Communication. Her courses in graduate and undergraduate technical communication at Southern Polytechnic include a graduate course in usability testing; her usability consulting work includes testing hardware, computer-based training, software, and Web sites. Her book, *Usability Testing and Research*, will be released in August 2001 as part of Allyn and Bacon's Technical Communication series.

Booking for the seminar

Phone (800) 775-7654 (please have credit card ready)

Coordinating services provided by KRM Information Services, Inc. KRM will send registration confirmation, participation instructions and handout materials to all registrants.

The chapter volunteers (That's a verb!)

From Chris Benz, Region 2 Director-Sponsor, and Mike Boyd, Senior Member, Carolina Chapter

Many an STC newsletter article has focused on volunteerism: Edit the newsletter! Stuff envelopes! Be a board member!

This is all certainly for a good cause. Without volunteers, most STC chapters would cease to exist. When it comes to volunteering, however, we encourage you to think outside the box, or outside the chapter, in this case. By "the chapter volunteers," we mean that your chapter becomes a catalyst for getting

members involved in volunteer activities beyond STC, to other non-profit groups, individually or as a group, and thus volunteers as a chapter.

One way your chapter can do this is by gathering information about the professional skills the membership is able to offer to the outside world, and then publicizing that information to needy organizations. While many members volunteer for non-STC activities on a regular basis, a lot of this work tends to make little or no use of our professional skills. With your chapter's help, however, you can more easily share your *professional* talents.

How? Here are some examples to get you thinking:

- Most non-profits need help with developing newsletters, news releases, and other print publications. Do you happen to know any good writers, editors, or desktop publishers?
- Almost all non-profits depend volunteers, and often need to train those people. Many of us are quite qualified to develop training manuals or personally conduct training.
- Are you skilled in audiovisual work? One STC member, while on a trip with a church youth group, shot several hundred slides and more than 10 hours of videotape to document the experience for use in both internal and external church communications.
- Another member, experienced in instructional design, gave a seminar to church-school teachers to help them improve their teaching skills.

As with any kind of volunteering, you of course receive some benefits, as does your chapter in some cases:

- You and your chapter receive recognition and gain new exposure in the community.
- You gain personal satisfaction by contributing to something that interests you personally, and your chapter gains the opportunity to promote itself to a new audience.
- You get to work with different content. For example, if you're volunteering for an animal shelter, you might enjoy the change of pace from, say, telephony programming variables to how to welcome and new shelter residents. A nice change of pace, eh?

The list of benefits goes on, but do remember that the chief goal of volunteering should be plain and simple: It's about doing the right thing. Let's all do the right thing by giving back to the communities that have supported our personal and professional successes!

Note: For previous articles by Chris and past Region 2 Director-Sponsors, please visit <http://www.stc.org/region2/www/chair.shtml>. You can reach Chris by e-mail at Chris.Benz@e-pubcorp.com or by telephone at 919.226.0060 (day) or 919.479.4891 (evening).

STC teaching fellowships

STC fellowship helps practicing technical communicators get a taste of teaching

Practicing technical communicators can try their hand at teaching-with a little help from STC's teaching fellowship program.

Under the program, STC will award stipends to technical communicators so that they can take on short-term teaching assignments. The goals of this program are to promote positive academe and industry connections, and to enable practitioners to help in the education and training of future technical communicators.

Fellowships last a minimum of one academic quarter or semester. Two teaching fellowships of \$2,000 each are available for award. The stipend is paid directly to the practitioner in instalments - one at the midpoint of the fellowship, and one after the fellowship has been completed and a final report submitted by the practitioner.

Deadline for applying for the fellowship is April 1 (for the fall semester).

To see more information about the fellowship program-including contact information and deadlines for applying-please visit the STC office Web site at www.stc-va.org. From the main page, select "Guides/Brochures," then scroll to "Guidelines for the Teaching Fellowship for Practicing Professionals."

Tech writing news

Designing Your Web Site for the Blind

A special article from Guy Ball, Senior Member, Orange County Chapter

You might wonder about the logic of designing a Web site for the blind and visually impaired. After all, Web designers seem to be moving toward visually rich sites that often embrace some sort of flash and dazzle to keep viewers interested — or at least to point them in the direction that they need on the site.

Yet, those of us who are fully sighted forget that as we make the Web our main information vehicle, we may be cutting out millions of customers or potential customers. And these millions (5 to 10 million in the U.S. alone, by some estimates) have every moral and legal right to have access to that information.

For instance, Unisys has support sites where we post our latest documentation. We have scores of sales and marketing sites with information on our latest products.

Are these sites accessible to an audience (blind or visually impaired) that cannot actually see the site but can only "read" it through the use of special software?

Obviously, the implication is even greater for consumer sites like Amazon.com or Buy.com. Are they ready to ignore a few hundred thousand customers who would use their site — but can't because of poor or incomplete design? If these companies would change their site design, even slightly, they may gain 50,000, maybe 100,000, new customers: all because their site design *encouraged* rather than *discouraged* viewers with impairments. And many of these impaired viewers stay loyal once they find a site that works well for them.

A recent article in *PC World* magazine (September 2000) compared two sites using screen-reader software. The first, Hewlett-Packard, did well. All links worked properly and were easily recognizable (Investor Information, Drivers, HP Store, for example). Then the writer visited the Gap Online. Many of the links sounded like programming gibberish (Link, shorts_men.asp?wdid=300, Map: wdid=301, Map:gapstore/cs_returns.asp). One would suspect that the Gap has lost a large number of potential customers who will never return to the site.

The Problems

The blind and visually impaired use what are called screen readers to navigate the Web. These software programs look at the HTML file that creates a Web page on a computer. Then they synthetically speak exactly what that file tells them. The better readers will ignore or “understand” specialized HTML codes and speak the content that a sighted Web viewer would see. The result is content as accessible to a blind person as to a fully-sighted one.

At least that is the desired result.

Some of the problems occur when the Web designer includes graphics. If the navigation bar has the text link “software downloads,” the screen reader will speak those words. But if the navigation bar uses graphic buttons with no “alt text” description, the reader will ignore it or just speak the word “graphic.” If that's the case, the visitor is now lost on the page and will not know where to go next.

In other situations, poor or incomplete HTML formatting will confuse the reading software, causing it to skip content and links. Animation will cause the screen reader to jump around within text on a page, pulling words from different parts of the page and making nonsensical sentences.

The Law

We're starting to see the impact of three laws: the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, and Section 255 of the Telecommunications Act. More on these laws and their impact can be found at the Microsoft.com site (among others), but they are important for us all - especially when we deal with the federal government (Section 508, particularly). Companies such as AOL, H&R Block, Intuit (Quicken), and Bank of America

have already been subject to government and legal action.

Are Ugly, Text-Only Sites the Answer?

No, and neither is a duplicate page with no graphics. There are some very easy things that we, as Web designers, can do to make a graphics page work for the blind. Most include using the tools we already have to add some alternate text. Others are just a change in habits, with us doing something a bit different. With a little re-training, we can produce an accessible page with little additional work.

How to Fix it

Here are a few quick tips. I don't have the space in this article to give details or specific examples for each tip, so I recommend that you check out the sites listed under Additional Information.

- Images and animation. Use the alt text or alt attribute function to clearly describe the function of each visual.
- Image maps. Use client-side Map and use alt text for hotspots.
- Multimedia. Provide a text description of video content.
- Page organization. Use consistent structure and cascading style sheets (CSS) for layout and style when possible. This allows users to modify their browser at one time to affect their entire visit on the site.
- Formatting options. Use heading tags with font attributes rather than calling out specific fonts in each usage. This allows visually-impaired viewers to modify styles and font sizes to meet their needs.
- JavaScript, applets, and animation. Provide alternative content in case the active features are not accessible through the screen reading software.
- Check your work! Try using the validation tools, checklists, and guidelines available at sites like <http://www.w3c.org/TR/WCAG/>

Additional information

The following sites offer quite a wealth of information, as well as good examples and tips:

- IBM Accessibility Center (with downloadable trial version of their Home Page Reader), <http://www-3.ibm.com/able/overview.html/>
- SSB Technologies (Web Site Accessibility), <http://www.ssbtechnologies.com/accessibility.php/>
- Adobe Access for People with Visual Disabilities (and information on PDF accessibility), <http://access.adobe.com/>
- Microsoft Accessibility (Web Guidelines), <http://www.microsoft.com/enable/dev/web/default.htm/>

- Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) offering Bobby, a free program to check your site's HTML code, <http://www.cast.org/bobby/>
- Designing More Usable Web Sites (from the University of Wisconsin at Madison), <http://trace.wisc.edu/world/web/>
- Web Accessibility Initiative (W3C). <http://www.w3.org/WAI/EO/Drafts/WAI-homeA.html/>

Guy is a senior technical writer and information engineer with Unisys in Mission Viejo, CA. When he isn't hard at work writing Unisys hardware documentation, Guy has been writing on Web accessibility for CityLine and enablelink.com. He is working on an expanded version of this story for the STC publication, Intercom He is the webmaster for www.SantaAnaHistory.com/ which is "Bobby approved." Guy has also just completed his third book, Santa Ana in Vintage Postcards, to be published by Arcadia in January 2001. He can be reached at mrcalc@usa.net.

APEX 2001 call for entries announced

The thirteenth annual Awards for Publication Excellence offer communicators 97 award categories from newsletters and magazines to writing, graphic design, annual reports, Web sites and total publication programs. Communicators may choose from print, electronic, multimedia and Web publishing categories.

New categories this year include Customer Communications, Investment & Financial Plans, Medical Publications, and Employee & Customer Relations Materials.

The entry deadline is March 15th, 2001.

Entry fees are \$69 per entry.

APEX is sponsored by the editors of Writing That Works, a newsletter for writing, editing and communications professionals. The contest is open to corporate, non-profit, freelance and agency communicators. Entrants do not have to be Writing That Works subscribers.

For APEX entry forms and information, contact:

Belinda Zehr or Christine Turner
Communications Concepts, Inc.,
7481 Huntsman Boulevard,
#720, Springfield,
VA 22153-1648.
Phone: 703/643-2200.

Or go to: <http://www.ApexAwards.com>

e-mail: info@ApexAwards.com

Conferences

International Colloquium on Trends in Special Language and Language Technology

29 – 30 March 2001, Brussels, Belgium

Sponsored by Erasmushogeschool Brussels, De Nederlandse Taalunie and Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Topics:

- Trends in Special Language
- Trends in Language Technology
- Academic corporate collaboration
- Language Technology and Life Long Learning

Venue:

Flemish Parliament, Brussels, Belgium

Registration is open now.

Special rates for participants enrolling before 16 February 2001

Programme:

- Invited keynote speakers
- Topic speakers: language technology professionals
- Tool and technology exhibition

Surf to <http://tk.ehb.be>

For further information contact:

dr. Rita Temmerman

Coordinator Centrum voor Vaktaal en Communicatie (CVC)

Applied Linguistics
Erasmushogeschool
Trierstraat 84

B-1040 Brussels

rita.temmerman@ehb.be

Training courses

More PTC courses for 2001 . . .

During 2001, we will be running an expanded programme of open courses on the following topics:

- Editing for Emphasis
- Indexing skills
- Law for communicators
- Word advanced techniques
- RoboHELP Classic
- RoboHELP HTML
- Sevensteps
- Adobe Acrobat

For course overviews, dates and prices, please call

PTC on 01733 237037 or go to

www.petecom.co.uk/corlist. All these courses are also run "in company".