

Organizational Collaboration: An STC Perspective

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ABSTRACT

In this proposal I submit personal qualifications for participation in the CHI 2005 Development Consortium, along with a review of some issues to be discussed and possible resolutions.

Author Keywords

Development consortium, STC, Society for Technical Communication.

ACM Classification Keywords

K.7.2 The computing profession: organizations

INTRODUCTION

The Society for Technical Communication (STC) represents nearly 20,000 professional technical communicators around the world. STC members fill a wide variety of technical communication roles in a wide range of industries, including technical writers, technical editors, technical illustrators, usability professionals, content developers, human factors engineers, information architects, information designers, instructional designers, technical trainers and instructors, visual designers, Web designers and developers, performing services for computer software and hardware development, financial and insurance, medical and biotech, government, and other industries. As such, STC members not only interact with and support user experience professionals, they often take on the role of user experience professional or project manager for user experience projects.

PERSONAL QUALIFICATIONS

As a senior member of STC, I have volunteered in leadership roles at the chapter and society levels, including a year as president of the Silicon Valley chapter, STC's largest. I have arranged presentations to chapter meetings by user experience professionals such as Jared Spool from User Interface Engineering and Steve Calde from Cooper. I have

encouraged our members to view themselves as part of the user experience development team. And I have actively engaged with other user experience organizations to promote STC and its members and to bring additional value to STC members.

For example, I initiated STC involvement in the DUX2003 conference as a cooperating society, encouraged attendance at the conference by STC members, and had the Silicon Valley chapter of STC co-sponsor the conference's closing reception. Likewise, I led STC's involvement in BayDUX, an organization that grew out of DUX2003 to promote interorganizational cooperation in the San Francisco Bay area. BayDUX subsequently became the local representative for UXnet, which also promotes cooperation between user experience organizations. I have also worked as a volunteer for CHI2004 and CHI 2005, which involvement has forged additional links between CHI and STC.

Professionally, I am an Information Developer at IBM's Silicon Valley Laboratory. In my previous position at PeopleSoft, a large enterprise software vendor, my primary role was writing developer documentation for users of the proprietary software development tool set. However, I also took the lead in promoting cooperation within the company between the information development and user experience teams. I tried to bring the perspective gained from my involvement in CHI and DUX to my work at PeopleSoft, keeping the user experience in mind while developing documentation, and will continue to do the same in my new position at IBM.

ISSUES

Following are some of the issues that I see involving STC and the topic of this CHI 2005 development consortium.

Existing Relationships

STC recognizes many related organizations, such as SIGDOC, IEEE/PCS, IABC, and UPA, but in practice has little interaction with these organizations (with the notable exception of UPA, which has a close relationship with STC). However, some STC members, recognizing the benefits of interorganizational cooperation, have actively engaged with organizations such as UXnet. And many STC

members maintain active membership and involvement in other professional organizations. Do these members promote cooperation between the organizations of which they are members? Do they find that time and resources limit their involvement in multiple organizations? Are membership dues a limiting factor? How many different sponsored conferences can a member attend in a year?

Conferences

STC sponsors an annual conference that brings together members from all its chapters and SIGs. In addition, STC's various regions have sponsored regional conferences serving more localized membership, with varying success. Even individual chapters have sponsored small local conferences. Is it possible that the regional or local model might be effective in bringing together related organizations? Is it more likely that local or regional cooperative conferences might be easier to organize? Might they make use of industry-sponsored venues to reduce costs? And could such local and regional efforts promote interorganizational cooperation and coordination more readily than larger conferences? Would local or regional DUX conferences be successful?

STC's Transformation

Recognizing the changing needs of its members in a changing world, STC has undertaken a major transformation of its organization and membership model with the goal of addressing the society's value to members. I suggest that the question of membership value impacts all user experience organizations. We can see this impact in falling conference attendance, a drop in membership numbers, and reduced sponsorship of organizations and membership by employers. How can we increase interrelationships between organizations when resources are already strained? How can we support the creation additional organizations when potential members already have difficulty justifying the cost of membership? How will it be possible to share already strained resources? I believe the answer lies in ensuring that all organization activities provide value to the organization and its members. This is the key focus of STC's transformation. I believe that STC's experience may be of use during the discussions of this DevCon.

Communities

A major focus of STC's ongoing transformation is the definition and support for various communities, based on the

existing model of geographic communities (local chapters) and virtual communities (the special interest groups, SIGs). STC recognizes that changes in how we communicate and relate to each other within STC and with other groups require changes to how we organize and support our communities. I worked with Whitney Quesenbery and Ginny Redish on the Communities Committee in the early stages of STC's transformation to help define our transformed communities, and believe that our experience can bear positively on the work of this DevCon.

Cooperation

The Call for Participation for this DevCon acknowledges that there may already be too many conferences and meetings for those who wish to attend, and that some conflict as to time and location. Is it possible to coordinate co-located conferences on overlapping themes? Can, for instance, STC and SIGDOC combine their annual conferences? Or are the conference goals sufficiently distinct to make such a combination counterproductive? Could STC and UPA coordinate their conferences to meet in the same week in the same location, reducing travel and lodging expenses while improving the value of conference attendance? Does such cooperation require that a third organization promote such coordination, or can the two organizations make such arrangements themselves? And how useful might it be for an organization such as UXnet to publish combined calendars of related organizations to facilitate planning and coordination? In the San Francisco Bay Area, the co-chairs of Bay-DUX find it difficult to juggle conflicting schedules just in the local area. What are the chances that a more global coordination would be effective?

SUMMARY

Much of my involvement with various user experience organizations has been as an individual, and I believe that much of what can be accomplished toward organizational cooperation will develop at the interpersonal level, from bottom-up action. At the same time, we must address how existing organizations interact, and how their missions and goals can support each other.

I am keenly interested in resolving the issues presented at the CHI 2005 Development Consortium, and look forward to the opportunity to participate.

The View From the Society for Technical Communication (Supplement)

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the initiatives and services of the Society for Technical Communication as related to the goals of the CHI 2005 Development Consortium.

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INTRODUCTION

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STC SERVICES

STC provides services to its members at both the society level and through its communities, both geographic (regions and chapters) and virtual (SIGs).

The society provides the following services:

- An annual conference
- Regional and local conferences
- Several professional publications
- Community newsletters
- Awards and other recognition programs
- Community-based awards and recognition
- Technical communication competitions
- Educational programs, including seminars and support of students at various academic institutions
- Employment databases
- Networking and volunteer opportunities

STC's Annual Conference

The society conducts an annual conference, generally three days long, with keynote presentations, paper presentations, workshops, panel discussions, and other educational opportunities. An additional day is devoted to leadership training, and another day provides in-depth tutorials. Vendors display their products and services in an exhibition area, and a bookstore offers relevant publications.

Regional and Local Conferences

At their discretion, each of STC's eight regions may conduct an annual conference targeting regional audiences with timely and relevant presentations. Some local chapters (geographic communities) also choose to hold one-day conferences which may attract regional attendance.

Professional Publications

STC publishes two professional periodicals:

- *Technical Communication, The Journal of the Society for Technical Communication*, (www.techcomm-online.org/) published quarterly, provides a venue for academic and research papers, as well as book reviews.

- *Intercom, The Magazine of the Society for Technical Communication*, (www.stc.org/intercom/) published 10 times a year, provides “practical examples and applications of technical communication that will promote its readers’ professional development.” Contributors are generally STC members who share their experiences and expertise with the larger community. A recent edition of *Intercom* included articles on usability, user experience, and designing websites for older users.

Until the current transformation of STC, all members received the print editions of both publications. However, in order to address cost issues and member requests, an electronic membership option has been added, providing access to online versions of the publications. Online archives of both publications are restricted to members.

Other Publications

The Society also publishes a newsletter, *Tieline*, aimed at community leaders to provide timely information on leadership issues.

Typically, each geographic and virtual community publishes a newsletter for its members. These newsletters are increasingly published online to reduce costs.

Awards and Recognition

STC honors members and distinguished non-members for their work and contributions to the society and to technical communication with a variety of awards, including fellowships, associate fellowships, and honorary fellowships. STC also distributes awards for outstanding journal articles and contribution to technical communication education, and sponsors two honorary societies for students of technical communication.

STC also recognizes the achievements of its chapters and special interest groups and of individual chapter and SIG members. At the society President’s discretion, one or more members or organizations may be honored annually with the President’s Award.

Technical Communication Competitions

STC sponsors technical communication competitions at the international, regional, and sometimes local levels. Competition winners’ submissions can be viewed at the annual conference and in a traveling exhibit that brings examples of excellence in technical communication to all members.

Educational Programs

In addition to its support of academic programs in technical communication, STC sponsors educational programs, including its annual conference and regular web and telephone conference seminars. As part of its transformation, STC plans to expand its educational programs by recognizing and aggregating the body of knowledge existing among its members and communities.

Employment Databases

STC endeavors to improve the employment prospects of its members by providing a database of job opportunities. Local chapters also provide their own job listings. For example, the Silicon Valley chapter posts job listings that are accessed by members of the six Bay Area STC chapters as well as by members interested in learning about opportunities in the area.

STC also conducts and publishes an annual salary survey covering the United States and Canada that is referenced by both employees and employers to learn appropriate compensation and to see how compensation varies by region, industry, and experience.

Other Organizations

While STC acknowledges and maintains relationships with other related organizations (www.stc.org/related_orgs.asp), there is little formal interaction between STC and these other organizations. Informal interactions take place when STC members – especially those who are members of other organizations – take the initiative to engage with related organizations. For example, members of the Silicon Valley chapter of STC have cooperatively engaged with members of BayCHI (www.baychi.org) and others to form BayDUX (www.baydux.org), and to subsequently use BayDUX as the local incarnation of UXnet (www.uxnet.org).

STC more actively associates with various educational institutions through student chapters, student award and recognition programs, scholarships, and research grants.

Networking and Volunteer Opportunities

STC is a member-run volunteer organization assisted by a small paid administrative staff. As such, the society offers numerous opportunities for experienced and aspiring leaders to help run the organization at the local and international levels.

STC members find that networking with others – at chapter and local SIG meetings, at regional and society conferences, online and in person – is an activity that provides tremendous value. Many members cite the networking opportunities as the primary reason for maintaining their membership.

Many members of STC are also members of other professional organizations, finding value in the expanded networks and cross-organizational communities of practice available by such involvement. For example, STC members are also involved in the Usability Professionals’ Association (UPA); the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) and its special interest groups, such as those for Computer-Human Interaction (SIGCHI) and for Design of Communication (SIGDOC); IEEE Professional Communication Society; the Asilomar Institute for Information Architecture (AIfIA); the Interaction Design Group (IxDG); and the User Experience Network (UXnet). STC members have presented papers and otherwise participated in the conferences of all these other organizations, and participate

as founders, officers, and leaders of many of the same organizations.

STC'S TRANSFORMATION

For nearly two years, STC has been actively engaged in transforming itself into an organization that better addresses its members' needs. The primary focus has been to ensure that the society provides value to its members. The transformation effort includes changes in society governance, its publications, its finances, and particularly in its communities and how they are organized and how they interact with each other and the society as a whole. I believe that STC's new community focus has relevance to the current discussion.

Communities of Practice

STC recognizes that its members communicate and interact with a wide variety of communities in both their professional and personal lives. Communities of practice associated with a technical communicator's professional interactions include a range and variety that often extends beyond the historical limits of technical communication.

As defined by the STC Transformation Communities Committee (Whitney Quesenbery, Ginny Redish, and Fred Sampson):

A community is a group of people who share common interests, activities, and initiatives; who communicate regularly; and who derive benefit from their association.

STC's communities include geographic communities (chapters), which are defined by their location, and virtual communities (SIGs), which are defined by their common interests. While in many cases a geographic community can be further defined by the industries served by its members (for example, the computer software industry served by a majority of Silicon Valley chapter members), not all geographic communities are so neatly united. Conversely, STC's virtual communities are more well-defined in terms of their common interests, such as information design, technical editing, and usability. A goal of STC's transformation is to

encourage and nurture formation of additional communities of practice.

Indeed, participation in STC's virtual communities indicates a wide appeal to STC members. Each of the four largest SIGs has more than double the membership of STC's largest chapters (for example, 1,827 members of the Information Design community versus 816 members in the Silicon Valley chapter). More than 40% of STC members belong to at least one virtual community, and many belong to more than one.

But STC's virtual communities also recognize that their members have a variety of interests even within each community. Hence, for example, the former Usability SIG has, as part of the transformation, become the Usability and User Experience Community. And this particular community's members participate actively in other organizations, such as SIGCHI and UPA.

CONCLUSION

STC's newly reorganized and energized communities of practice have existing and potential relationships with other user experience communities, which offer the opportunity to reinforce existing relationships and to forge new relationships. Membership in an STC community of practice does not exclude participation in other related organizations; in fact, such cross-organizational memberships can reinforce our relationships and energize common activities.

STC doesn't claim ownership of user experience, but its members are actively involved in user experience practice at all levels and in cooperation with members of many other organizations. STC welcomes further cooperative involvement with other user experience organizations.

REFERENCES

1. STC website: <http://www.stc.org>
2. STC Transformation website: <http://www.stc.org/transformation>