



# Management

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## It's Time to Play, "Who Wants to be a Stem Manager?"

by Doreen A. Mannion, Management and Professional Development Stem Manager

*(With insincere apologies to Regis Philbin, host of the American version of the television show, "Who Wants to be a Millionaire.")*

I've attended eight of the ten last STC conferences, yet until recently I had given very little thought to all the preparatory work that goes into staging a conference of this size (over 2000 attendees). After all, isn't a good conference one in which you, the attendee, are shielded from the details?

How then, did I find myself the Management and Professional Development Stem Manager for next year's conference in Chicago? And what is a Stem Manager anyway?

If you've never attended an STC conference, you should phone a friend who has because you're really missing out. At the conference, sessions are categorized into one of many stems such as Writing and Editing, Tools and Technology, and Information Design. Sessions take one of the following formats: paper, demo, workshop, progression, or panel. A conference typically has over 200 sessions, an opening speaker, an

employment area, an area where winning competition entries are displayed, a bookstore, a vendor area, and much more.

I've overheard attendees talk about what they've liked and what they haven't liked. While the fantastic programs in the past few years have spurred comments such as, "There are too many good sessions to choose from, I'll have to use a fifty-fifty," there are still comments about misrepresentation in session descriptions and those three papers that ended up together but did not seem to have anything to do with one another.

Maybe you've overheard similar comments at conferences you've attended, and perhaps you've even grouched now and then. What are your options in such situations? You can continue to complain about things over which you have little control or you can jump in with both feet to try and understand and improve the processes that help produce a great conference.

I find little to complain about at our annual conference, the best value for the conference dollar in

my estimation. A few years ago I became curious about how the conference comes together. As a frequent presenter, I started asking my stem managers how they got involved. This turned out to be a \$100 question; they got involved by asking. By asking? You mean there isn't a list a mile long of people who want to be stem managers?

A few years ago, I learned that Tony Caruso of the Baltimore chapter was going to be the technical program manager for the 2001 conference. Since I knew Tony from joint chapter meetings and STC conferences, I contacted him and let him know I was interested

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in becoming the Management and Professional Development stem manager. (I am still not sure what caused that moment of temporary insanity.) Over the next few months, Tony continued gathering names of those interested in the 2001 program committee. All interested parties were asked to

31-pound box with over 70 proposals (4 copies each) from over 180 different speakers. (There are frequently multiple presenters for one session.) Face it, even having the fastest fingers isn't going to help you in this situation. I could have selected what was behind door number three, but no, I had

als. Conference standards request that each proposal is reviewed by at least two reviewers in addition to the stem manager. With over 70 proposals, I had two options. I could recruit, coax, or blackmail a few friends and peers into reading dozens of proposals each, or I could use other means to get so many reviewers that each reviewer would only need to review two or three proposals. I chose the latter approach. This is not to say I did not recruit, coax, and blackmail a few friends.

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“The whole notion of a room full of stem managers with different colored stickies seemed, well, antiquated in this high-tech world, but as I was soon to learn, the STC office has this down to a science.”

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write a few sentences describing their interest and past involvement in STC. After Tony selected each stem manager, the names were submitted to the board for approval. I was thrilled when I got the call that said, “Let’s Play! Let’s Play ‘Who Wants to be a Stem Manager’.”

I spent last year’s conference shadowing the Management and Professional Development co-stem managers to learn what is involved during the conference. At the conclusion of the conference, the previous year’s program committee meets with the next year’s committee to formally turn over responsibilities. No one, to the best of my recollection, was wearing a shiny shirt or a shiny tie, although some fashionable blue denim was spotted.

It turns out that what goes on during the conference is the easy part. No matter how much previous stem managers and conference program committee members try to prepare you, nothing can really prepare you for receiving a

to go and pick the second largest stem. (Oops, wrong game show.)

Because Tony and the STC office had done such a good job of publishing the year’s schedule, I knew long before I received “the bundle of joy” (as I began calling the 31-pound box) that one of the most important tasks would be to find reviewers for all the propos-

By placing a request on the management SIG mailing list, and by contacting those previously mentioned friends, I recruited more than enough reviewers. A big thank you to all of you who volunteered to review, many for the first time. The next step was to assign proposals to reviewers and mail out all the review packets. Reviewers were given the option of returning their evaluations to me by email, fax, or postal mail.

## Join the Listserv!

To subscribe to the Management SIG listserv, go to the listserv website at:

<http://lists.stc.org/cgi-bin/lyris.pl?enter=stcmgmtpic-l>

Enter your email address and password.

To remove your name from the Management SIG listserv, send a blank email to

[leave-stcmgmtpic-l-15156J@lists.stc.org](mailto:leave-stcmgmtpic-l-15156J@lists.stc.org)

Note that the character after the second hyphen is a lower-case L.

Some were kind enough or worked at companies big enough that they returned their evaluations by Federal Express. It was fun to receive mail at work that wasn't yet another misrouted seminar flyer or an offer to "upgrade now for just \$2999."

After I had all the evaluations, I compared them to my evaluation, and put the proposals in one of three categories: "No, I'm sorry,"

antiquated in this high-tech world, but as I was soon to learn, the STC office has this down to a science.

The next step was to take all the paperwork to Chicago in October where the program committee met to assign sessions to rooms. After a few hours, the session grid, which seemed to take up most of one wall, was colored by all those shades of stickies and we all had to "ooh" and "ah." Since

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"Most of the proposals were excellent, but with a limited number of available sessions, I had to make some difficult decisions."

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"Maybe," and "Yes." Most of the proposals were excellent, but with a limited number of available sessions, I had to make some difficult decisions. There are all kinds of limiting factors, such as multiple proposals on the same topic, a single good paper without other papers to group it with, and so on. Every accepted proposal had to get a stem-specific sticky attached to it, along with some other paperwork. The whole notion of a room full of stem managers with different colored stickies seemed, well,

October, I've been busy answering emails from speakers who have changed co-speakers, requests from the STC office to change rooms, and so forth. Although my duties are not over, the hardest part is complete. It was a lot of work, but I was energized by the volunteers who agreed to evaluate proposals for me. I wouldn't have traded the experience for anything. And that's my final answer.

*Doreen Mannion, Senior Member  
Washington DC Chapter*

### **CHECK IT OUT!**

Visit our website for the latest in news and events. You'll find articles, links to valuable resources, and information about the SIG activities. You can even access past issues of the Management Newsletter there!

**<http://www.stc.org/pics/mgmt>**

## **Participate in Progressions!**

As we have for the past five years, the Management SIG plans to sponsor two progressions at the 48th Annual Conference, held May 13th through 16th, 2001 in Chicago, IL.

Although the deadline for submitting proposals has passed, we are still accepting volunteers to help with the SIG-sponsored progressions.

A progression consists of many round-table type discussions in a single room. Each speaker conducts his or her topic three times within the session, for approximately 25 minutes each time. The attendees then move on to another table for another topic. Its like getting in three sessions in a single time-block!

Since the tables tend to be more intimate than other session types, this is also a great way to break in as a speaker.

Our progressions will be "Managing People," and "Managing Projects." If you'd like to apply to be a speaker at one of these progressions, please contact either Kasie Snyder ([kasie.snyder@go.ecitele.com](mailto:kasie.snyder@go.ecitele.com)) or Judith Herr ([herr@home.com](mailto:herr@home.com)).

And, as always, we will hold our annual SIG business meeting at the Conference. Please attend if you can - member input is what makes our SIG as useful as it is.

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# Hot Topic: The Inconsistent Worker

*Edited by Peter Hartman*

*[Editor's note: This column provides a digest of a topic thread from the SIG listserv that deserves a more persistent form. Names and/or company references may have been omitted by request.]*

Much of the correspondence on the SIG listserv is of the "what can I do about this situation?" variety, where we offer suggestions and condolences to each other, often without hearing how the situation was resolved. In the case of this thread, not only did we did hear back, but the story had a happy ending!

In April, 2000, one correspondent (anonymous, for obvious reasons) sought advice concerning "a technical writer in my department who is a model of inconsistency:"

*He can be going through a stretch where he produces excellent work after excellent work. At other times, his work is sub par, bordering on terrible. Sometimes he is a solid, "middle of the road" worker.*

*I've tried to find some common denominator throughout these episodes, but I haven't been able to find anything. For the most part, he's a good "foot soldier" who will do the work that is required to get done [and] he does take pride in his work. And he has worked extra hours when there has been a need. As I said, a model of inconsistency.*

*We have set specific goals, and some are met while others are not [and] I am well-documented in this area.*

This provoked an interesting series of responses. Suggested causes of the inconsistent performance included: substance abuse, depression, passive resistance, diabetes or some other medical reason, chronic fatigue, and simple boredom. Peter Heikes of Electronic Data Systems, however, pointed out that, regardless of the reason, this constitutes a performance problem and needs to be dealt with accordingly. Katherine Murphy at Tapestry Communications brought up three fundamental points:

"First, it is critical that the employee know what is expected by when and how good. Be absolutely sure that the employee can express, in his own words, his assignments, the behaviors you expect from him, and what the consequences are if he fails.

"Second, you need to impose the consequences. Explain to the employee that [you assume] he is healthy, happy, competent, and willing and you will impose the consequences for even the smallest deviation from expectations. Then, do it. I often found uneven behavior came from uneven management.

"Third, if he does state he has a medical or personal problem, refer him to your EAP peo-

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ple[and] be sure you understand your company's position on disability, ADA, and so forth.”

Peter sagely reminded us that “Though we would like to think, as managers, that we can be all things to our employees, unless you have specialized training in HR-related issues, we cannot handle all situations alone! As managers, we need to recognize when we need help, and then ask for it.”

Dawn Haberlach, of Management Science Associates, and others suggested that perhaps the employee does not feel completely open with his manager and, therefore, has not been entirely forthcoming. As a way around this, Dawn suggested: “Try asking your employee to rank different aspects of his job in terms of interest. This way he doesn't have to say that he hates something; he can just put it at the

*Apparently this struck a chord in him. He took it upon himself to review the [Chicago Manual of Style], and he began writing at home even more. For the last three projects, he's been right on. This is the "connector" he needed. He has just taken on a large project, and the initial work looks just great. Somehow, he wasn't applying what he does with his personal writing to his work writing.*

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“For example, instead of discussing how the new training will make employees more knowledgeable and more productive, you might want to stress how the proposed training can cut 20 percent off the company's employee turnover rate.”

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As managers, we learn how to handle extreme situations; it comes with the territory and allows us to survive in our working environments. However, as this thread shows, it pays to remember the importance of fundamental people skills. As Beth Agnew of Avocet Media said, “It is astounding to me the number of managers who do not know how to support and encourage their staffs.”

Anita Collins at Rock-Tenn Company and Sandhya Shyam at Trillium Digital Systems both suggested trying to find a pattern to the kind of work that is of poor quality. Anita said, “Maybe he works best under pressure, or maybe he's not good at handling conflict and there's an SME or project manager he doesn't get along with. He might prefer writing from scratch rather than updating existing materials. He may be one of those people who simply cannot motivate themselves to do something they don't enjoy.” Sandhya, however, correctly pointed out that “everyone can't always work only on interesting tasks.” One technique she has used to compensate is a “Spot Award system to reward efforts that I'd like to encourage in an employee.”

bottom his list. You may be surprised that what you thought was a plum is actually a brussels sprout and vice versa.”

The thread then trailed out and other issues took the fore. Then, in November, the manager wrote again to report a breakthrough with this employee:

*About two months ago, we were having a chat and the conversation [turned] to the subject of the writing I do at home, and he mentioned that he likes to do some writing on the side as well. And that's when a light bulb went off in my head. I asked him how he goes about that process, what he likes to write about ... all kinds of things to help draw some analogies between his writing at home and his writing at work.*

*Peter Hartman, Member  
Boston Chapter  
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## Upcoming Events

*compiled by Brenda Huettner*

As you plan for next year, I am sure you have already budgeted for the STC Annual Conference in Chicago in May, 2001. As great as that conference will be, it is by no means the only event available to us and our staffs.

### February 17, 2001

Twin Cities Chapter  
FutureTense 2001  
DoubleTree Park Place Hotel in St.Louis Park.  
<http://www.stc.org/region6/tcc/futuretense.html>

### March 16-17, 2001

Atlanta Chapter  
Currents Conference  
Mercer University, Atlanta  
<http://stc.org/region3/atl/www/index.html>

### March 23, 2001

Rochester Chapter  
Spectrum 2001Conference  
Marriott Thruway, Rochester, NY  
<http://stc.org/region1/rrc/www/spec2001CFP.htm>

### October 11-13, 2001

Region 5 Conference  
Westchase Hilton Hotel, Houston  
<http://www.stc-houston.org/r5conference/>

### October 2001

Region 7 Conference  
Portland, OR  
<http://www.stcwvc.org/membership/conference.shtml>

If you know of other events that our readers may find helpful, let us know! You can send email to the editor at [bphuettner@aol.com](mailto:bphuettner@aol.com).

### Newsletter Deadlines

#### Winter Issue

December 15th

#### Spring Issue

March 15th

#### Summer Issue

June 15th

#### Fall Issue

September 15th



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### *Management*

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The staff of Management welcomes any news and information that would be of interest to members of the SIG.

Visit the STC website at <http://stc-va.org>

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