

Document

Quality PIC Newsletter



Volume 4, Number 3
Summer, 1996

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Quality PIC Mission:

To help members learn more about quality processes and quality assessment to improve their technical communication and to share knowledge of these improved processes with other technical communicators worldwide.

Fill us in!
This issue includes a special insert to gather your opinion about the PIC. Please take a moment to mail it back.

1996 Annual Conference brings quality PIC together

Lori Fisher

The 1996 Annual Conference in Seattle was a great success in many ways for STC. But it was also a great success for the Quality PIC. The progression session sponsored by the Quality PIC attracted about 30 attendees who discussed 9 topics in small groups during 3 rounds. The Quality PIC filled 5 tables at the PIC Networking luncheon, with heated discussion on various quality topics between mouthfuls.

The Annual Conference is often the only time that PIC members can meet each other face-to-face. Such contact can be the beginning of long-term interactions and exchanges as members call on each other to brainstorm on solving quality issues, network for jobs, or exchange reference materials about quality topics.

In addition to providing forums for members to meet and exchange ideas about quality, the PIC also accomplished three other key goals during the conference:

First, we distributed 100 copies of the initial edition of the Quality PIC Bibliography at the conference. From here on, distribution will be done via the PIC website, soon to be operational.

The Bibliography contains 6 sections: Getting Started, General Works on Quality, Periodicals on Quality, Technical Communication Works on Quality, TechComm Journal Articles on Quality, and Conferences Papers & Presentations on Quality. Our thanks to Don Lenk for completing this tremendous piece of work. Don is still looking for volunteers to help edit the bibliography and put it on the web. Also, please continue to send your contributions of references to Don for inclusion in future updates.

Second, new workgroup managers were appointed for the ISO, Processes and Techniques, and Quality Metrics workgroups. The ISO workgroup is now being led by Ralph Robinson of Toronto. See his article on page 3 about his plans for the coming year. The Processes workgroup is now being led by Don Lenk, who will combine this work with his Bibliography task. The Metrics workgroup is now being led by Ted Dennison of Salt

see "Conference" on page 2



Don Lenk and C.J. Bibus discuss the first issue of Don's quality bibliography

Musing on Metrics

A column by Steve Jong

You can't measure quality...can you?

I can hear our colleagues now: "Writing is an art, and you can't measure art, so you can't measure writing quality." Our profession has never agreed on a definition of document quality. Some possibilities: "Well-written?" No, everyone has a different style. "Accurate and complete?" That says nothing about usability. "Usable?" That begs the question. "How do I make mine usable?" Inevitably someone says, "Good, fast, cheap — pick two." But is quality work always a liability? Does quality always take longer? Is information quality really indefinable?

After spending two years studying how to define, measure, and improve document quality, I may have found an answer; one that applies to your documents as well. This series of columns is intended to present useful information and provocative ideas. I hope that you will keep an open mind and consider whether the ideas make sense for you.

We writers and illustrators tend to think of ourselves as artists (or at least artisans) turning out individual and unique books. From that point of see "Musing" on page 3

"Conference," continued from page 1

Lake City, Utah. During the coming year, Ted is compiling a list of useful metrics for technical communication, and of reference materials about metrics. He is looking for additional team members to research this area and create reference materials for use by other STC members.

Third, we now have two liaisons in place: Bonni Graham has volunteered to be a liaison to the Online PIC, and Karl Smart remains our liaison to TechComm and InterCom. If you belong to any other PIC, please volunteer to be our liaison—send me a note and I can let you know what this entails (less than 20 minutes a month!).

There are other exciting opportunities still

available within the PIC. We would welcome a volunteer to be our book review coordinator to solicit book reviews for quarterly publication in the newsletter. We could also use the services of an editor to edit our



Don Lenk and Richard Colvin review books on quality during the Quality PIC Progression.



Tom Vallar leads a progression session about quality on the Web.

year ahead. If you haven't volunteered to write an article or book review or help out with a workgroup, send us a note today! The more you put into our PIC, the more you will get out of it! **Q**

Bibliography entries. Another opportunity is writing articles about quality for Intercom or Technical Communication.

Our goals for the 1996-97 STC year include additional entries in the bibliography, creation of resources on metrics, and increased interaction with other PICs. With increased member participation, we have an exciting

Membership report

Mickie Ryan

Our Quality PIC membership total is gaining momentum. Over the last 3 years, membership in our PIC has increased 37%, from 527 on Dec 31, 1994 to our current membership total in 1996 of 722.

114 new members joined our PIC in 1995, bringing last year's membership to a total of 641. This year's new members hail from 28 states in the U.S., 2 Canadian provinces, and the countries of Belgium, France, India, and Israel. Welcome to all new members! **Q**

Let's Get to Know Each Other

New ISO9000 workgroup leader sets goals for 1996-97

Ralph Robinson

I would like to introduce myself. I work for AlliedSignal Aerospace Canada (ASACa), in Etobicoke, Ontario. Lori Fisher asked me at the Annual Conference to take on leadership of the ISO 9000 workgroup of the Quality PIC. I enthusiastically accepted.

My experience with the ISO 9000 series of quality standards began in 1993 when I became a member of the ISO 9000 Implementation Team at ASACa, where I now head the Document Management group. Since then I have worked exclusively with ISO 9000 documentation issues. I have presented full-day workshops on documenting ISO 9000 at STC conferences in Toronto and Washington D.C. and at a community college as part of an ISO 9000 Specialist course.

I have set the following objectives for the 1996 ISO 9000 workgroup:

1. Establish and maintain a resource list of PIC members involved in ISO 9000 for newcomers to the challenge. This list will include the member's level of involvement in implementing ISO and the person's area of expertise.
2. Establish a bibliography of ISO 9000 implementation-oriented texts with an emphasis on documentation issues. The first release of this listing will appear in the next PIC newsletter, so let me know your favorites.
3. Establish a list of software available to assist in the implementation of ISO 9000. Any comments from people who have used the software can be included as advice to newcomers, so please send me any contributions you have.

I hope that the ISO 9000 workgroup will be an active and interactive part of the Quality PIC. So let's have two-way communication. Now I pass the responsibility to you, the members of the Quality PIC, to contribute to the 1996 objectives. If interested in ISO 9000 issues, please contact me at one of the following addresses:

Address: Ralph E. Robinson 5050 Willowood Drive Mississauga, ON L5R 3R6 Canada

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Watch for the notice of a web presence for this workgroup. (It may happen this year!) **Q**

"The ISO 9000 workgroup will be an active and interactive part of the Quality PIC."

"Musing," continued from page 2
view it is impossible to agree on a definition of quality, because the quality of art is tied to originality. To develop a theory of documentation quality, then, we must change the documentation quality framework.

Consider an alternative view: we are factory workers, turning out documentation products that are more alike than different. Most of us didn't believe our colleague Phil Levy when he first proposed this crucial point, but let's assume it's true. It means we can usefully concentrate on areas where documents are similar—mechanicals, format, layout, level, front matter, and so forth. Is Phil correct? I've come to believe he is. I once asked a technical writing class to break into two teams and brainstorm on how documents are different and how they are similar. The teams developed identical lists!

Genre theory says that readers expect certain parallels in similar documents, such as a common "look and feel," approach, and organization. We instinctively know that consistency is good. We create style sheets, format templates, and boilerplate text because we know it's easier for us and our readers.

So we can conclude that consistency is good since our products are more alike than different. And we can define and measure quality in the areas of similarity.

Next time: Why measure quality? **Q**

Steven Jong is Documentation Group Leader at Lightbridge, Inc., in Waltham, Massachusetts.

Reminder

Proposals for the 1997 Annual Conference in Toronto are due by August 1st. Come join us in Toronto!

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DocQment

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We welcome articles or features for "BookQueue," "What's Hot," or "In the Trenches." Feature contributions should be 250 words or less. Articles should be 400 words or less. Email or phone the *DocQment* editor, Lori Fisher, if you want to review your topic before submitting an article or request style guidelines.

Submit your contributions at any time during the year to the *DocQment* editor. We prefer ASCII text via email. You can also mail us a 3½" PC- or Macintosh-formatted diskette with ASCII text, Word or RTF files (please mark format and application version number clearly on diskette, and include your phone number and name.) If you want the diskette returned, include a self-addressed, stamped envelope. All submissions will be edited for length, clarity, and appropriateness. Include the word count with your submission.

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