

Quality SIG 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.

New Year for the STC Quality SIG

Lori Fisher

It's a new fiscal year for STC, so this is a good time to review what we've accomplished and look ahead as well. Some of the highlights of the past year include:

- *DocQment* was awarded the top honor, the Award of Distinguished Technical Communication, in the International STC Newsletter Competition.
- First-ever Quality SIG brochure was designed by Josephine Holmes; 2000 copies were printed and distributed at the annual conference.
- The Quality SIG ListServ *stcqsig-l* is alive and well.
- Our web page (<http://stc.org/pics/quality/>) was updated monthly by our web master Don Lenk.
- Regular membership reports were provided by Membership Manager Robbie Rupel.
- New "Answers to Frequently Asked Questions" section was added to the web site.

Conference Participation:

- Panel of quality topics sponsored by Quality SIG as a regular session.
- Sponsored five tables at the SIG Networking Lunch.
- Annual Meeting held Tuesday morning during the conference.

Special thanks to Richard Colvin and Jennifer Atkinson for their work this year in redesigning the newsletter. We are very proud of the STC Newsletter Competition award!!!

The Quality SIG was very visible at the STC Conference in May. We had a breakfast meeting of Quality SIG members where we recognized the efforts of the following people during the past year:

- Robbie Rupel—Membership Manager
- Ralph Robinson—Leader of the ISO subgroup
- Ted Dennison—Leader of the Metrics subgroup
- Don Lenk—Webmaster and Bibliography contact
- Richard Colvin—Newsletter production/editor

- Liz Hidalgo and Jennifer Atkinson—Editors for *DocQment*
- Mary Ann Campbell—Book Review coordinator for *DocQment*
- Steven Jong—regular columnist in *DocQment*



Lori Fisher leads the Quality SIG business meeting at the STC's 45th Annual Conference

June is the end of the STC fiscal year and the end of the terms of office, so we are now gearing up for the beginning of a new year and some new leaders in the Quality SIG. Here is the new lineup of volunteers for 1998-1999:

- Robbie Rupel—renewing as Membership Manager
- Ralph Robinson—renewing as Leader of the ISO subgroup
- Harli Rabow—new Leader of the Metrics subgroup
- Larry Arnold—new Leader of the Processes subgroup
- Don Lenk, Amber Fenner, and Liang Chen—Webmaster team (Don renewing, Amber and Liang joining)
- Matthew Bin—ListServ administrator
- Richard Colvin—renewing as Newsletter production/editor

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DocQment

DocQment Staff

Editors

Jennifer Atkinson
Lori Fisher
Liz Hidalgo
Sophia Marx

Production

Richard Colvin

Quality SIG staff

Lori Fisher, manager
Robbie Rupel, membership

To join the SIG

Contact the STC office at
Society for Technical
Communication
901 N. Stuart Street, Suite 904
Arlington, VA 22203-1854
(703) 522-4114

Publication Policies

We welcome articles for "BookQueue," "What's Hot," or "In the Trenches." 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 to request style guidelines.

Submit your articles at any time during the year to the *DocQment* editor. We prefer ASCII text via email. You can also mail us a 3 1/2" PC- or Macintosh-formatted diskette with ASCII text, Word, or RTF files (please mark format and application version number on diskette and include your phone number and name.) All articles will be edited for length, clarity, and appropriateness. Include a brief bio statement.

You may reprint original material appearing in *DocQment*, as long as you acknowledge the source and send us a copy of the publication containing the reprint.

Email or mail submissions to:

lorif@us.ibm.com
DocQment Editor
918 Nevada Avenue
San Jose, CA 95125
Daytime phone: (408) 463-3573

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- Liz Hidalgo and Jennifer Atkinson—renewing as Editors for *DocQment*
- Sophia Marx—new Editor for *DocQment*
- Mary Ann Campbell—renewing as Book Review coordinator for *DocQment*
- Steven Jong—ongoing as regular columnist in *DocQment*

This is a great lineup of talent!!! I am very excited to have the new volunteers joining us.



Ralph Robinson and Robbie Rupel discuss future direction of Quality SIG

There is always room for more volunteers though. Just think what we could accomplish as a group and what we could contribute to STC in the area of quality if each of us spent just one hour this year doing something for the Quality SIG. So, you ask, what could you do in an hour? Here are some ideas:

- Post an interesting question or a tidbit of knowledge about quality on our Quality SIG listserv.
- Send Don Lenk (SunSymID@aol.com) the title and author of a book or article that you think is a good reference about quality.
- Send Harli Rabow (rabow@ihot.com) a

paragraph describing any metric that you use to measure quality.

- Send Larry Arnold (arnollar@gateway.com) a brief paragraph describing how a process you have in place helps you meet or improve quality.
- Send Lori Fisher (lorif@us.ibm.com) any suggestions for the Frequently Asked Questions page on our web site (<http://stc.org/pics/quality/>).
- Send Ralph Robinson (R2innovations@myna.com) the title and author of a book or article that you think is a good reference about ISO 9000.
- Send Lori Fisher (lorif@us.ibm.com) a short article (300-500 words) for the newsletter on any topic related to quality.
- Volunteer to be the acquisitions editor of *DocQment* (soliciting articles each quarter for the newsletter). Let Lori Fisher know you're interested!
- Volunteer to be a backup production editor for *DocQment* (all you need to know is a little PageMaker!). Let Lori Fisher know you're interested!

We look forward to your participation — keep those listserv postings, articles, and emails coming! If you aren't already signed up for the discussion on our listserv, send an email to majordomo@stc.org and in the body of the message enter: **subscribe stcqsig-l youremail@address** (The character at the end of stcqsig-l is a lowercase L).

Thanks to all of you who made the last year a successful one for the Quality SIG, and let's keep the ball rolling in 1998. It will be easy if each of us does our small part. Thanks!

Quality SIG Membership Report

Robbie Rupel, Quality SIG Membership Manager

Greetings from St. Louis! As of May, the Quality SIG has 393 members. Welcome to our newest members from:

Creieic, France
Gloucester, Ontario, Canada
Montreal, Quebec, Canada
Senneville, Quebec, Canada
Boise, ID
Boulder, CO
Burlington, MA
Chantilly, VA
Charleston, SC

Holland, MI
Kingston, NH
Las Vegas, NV
Pleasanton, CA
Raleigh, NC
San Jose, CA
Seattle, WA
Temecula, CA
Troy, MI

I had the privilege of attending the STC 45th Annual Conference in Anaheim, California and was able to meet many SIG members. Talking with members about their experiences and challenges was as informative as attending the conference sessions. We may be developing documentation in many different areas,

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Documentation is not a solution for poor product design

David Dick

How often have you heard, “people don’t read documentation. So why dedicate time and money to produce quality documentation when nobody reads it anyway?” The irony is that it can be true! User documentation is often written in the final days of product design, within weeks before release to users. Time constraints mean comprising the efforts that lead to readability and usability. Many people believe that if a product has an intuitive design, the user only refers to documentation for specific information on how to accomplish specific tasks. That may be true, but not all products are intuitively designed.

Not everyone can use a mouse and a keyboard, a graphic user interface, and the latest and greatest software. Do you remember the very first time that you used a mouse? Did you know how to use a mouse simply by looking at it, or did someone show you how? Users cannot expect to use a new product effectively without training. Novices need training, occasional users need coaching, and power users challenge limitations of design. User documentation must satisfy all levels of users.

Without an understanding how the product will be used, the designer can only create it according to predefined specifications. Bridging the gap between users and products requires an understanding of both, how the product will be used, and how user documentation will serve the user. A technical writer recognizes the need for usability

testing to prevent user documentation from becoming a solution for poor product design. However, a technical writer is only effective as an integral member of the design process.

The technical writer can help the design process by writing or reviewing functional specifications while suggesting improvements that focus on the human factors of effective information systems such as the elements of effective interface design, and task analysis. When product design evolves into a prototype, the technical writer should organize or participate in usability testing. Usability testing provides a way to evaluate how the user interacts with the product and to evaluate the quality of the user documentation. The technical writer can help the usability testing process by writing or editing test scripts, testing the application, and writing the reports.

Creating a usable product is a lengthy effort—it has a beginning but no end. There is always room for improvement. However, the effort reduces the need for complex user documentation and allows the technical writer to write usable user documentation. The fact is, that people do refer to user documentation and they expect and deserve quality.

David Dick is a Senior Technical Writer for S.W.I.F.T. (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication) and President of the STC Belgium Chapter. You can reach him at David.Dick@Swift.Com

Not everyone can use a mouse and a keyboard, a graphic user interface, and the latest and greatest software.

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but we share a common interest in quality issues and common issues in the problems we face at work. To build on these experiences, I want to include as part of each membership, report profiles on SIG members who wish to share their stories. The profiles would examine how we work and could include the following topics:

- What do you do and where do you work?
- Why did you join the Quality SIG?
- What quality-related issues are you currently facing and how are you trying to resolve them?

Both new and long-term members are invited to submit their stories (or let me interview you and create the profile for you). If you want to contribute, contact me at rupel@inlink.com.

In the trenches

Overcoming inflation: the benefits of minimalist design

William DuBay

Technical writers are great inflators. We can take a simple half-page describing a computer interface and in a few hours transform it into a 35-page document—complete with glossaries, type conventions, overviews, introductions, mission statements, charts, clip art, and copyright pages full of disclaimers, trademark acknowledgments, and credits. The results will make marketing and sales simply glow. The problem is that very few people will ever read it.

Our teachers and editors have told us repeatedly how too many words get in the way of communication, especially when it comes to instructing someone performing a task. Many of them promote a minimalist approach to document design and management.

In technical communication, “minimalism” is the self-described label that is applied to an action- and task-oriented approach. If you don’t have the reader doing something in the first page or two, you miss a critical educational opportunity.

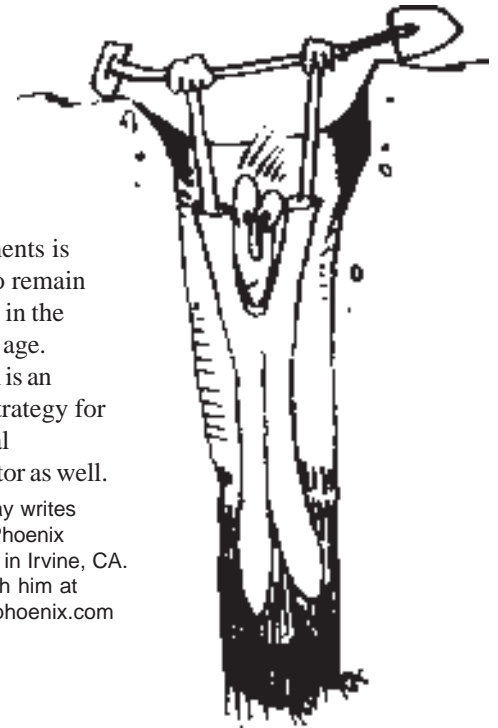
Minimalism’s chief theorist is John M. Carroll, formerly of the IBM Thomas J. Watson Research Laboratory, now head of the Computer Sciences Dept. at Virginia Polytechnic Institute. In 1990, Carroll published a series of essays in *The Nurnberg Funnel: Designing Minimalist Instruction for Practical Computer Skill* (MIT Press). His basic message was, “Get out of the way of the learner as much as possible.” The key to the minimalist approach is to present the least amount of obstacles to the efforts of the learner. The goal is to let the learner get more out of the training experience by providing a less overt training structure.

Carroll explained that “new users are not inclined to read training material. As one person we observed put it while flipping pages in a manual: ‘This is just information.’ People seem to be more interested in action, in working on real tasks, than in reading.”

In January of this year, MIT Press published a follow-up book edited by Carroll, *Minimalism Beyond the Nurnberg Funnel*. This work shows how technical communicators have embraced minimalism and reports on specific innovations and investigations. The contributors include STC luminaries JoAnn Hackos, Janice (Ginny) Redish, Stephanie Rosenbaum, Tricia Anson, John Brockmann, David K. Farkas, and Barbara Mirel.

In her previous work, *Managing your Documentation Projects* (Wiley), JoAnn Hackos applied minimalism to the process of document management. She writes: “Remember that the less information you produce, the less it will cost to publish and maintain. In general, we produce too much information for our customers because we lack detailed information about the characteristics of the audience and the tasks they need to perform... Investigate the possibility of developing the least possible information to satisfy audience needs.”

Successful companies know that reducing the size and number of their documents is necessary to remain competitive in the information age. Minimalism is an important strategy for the technical communicator as well. William DuBay writes minimally at Phoenix Technologies in Irvine, CA. You can reach him at bill_dubay@phoenix.com



The key to the minimalist approach is to present the least amount of obstacles to the efforts of the learner.

Musing on metrics

Getting documentation right the first time

Steven Jong

To do your best and fastest work, you must get things right the first time.

“There’s never enough time to do it right, but there’s always time to do it over.” Does this sound familiar? Are you always writing in crisis mode? We instinctively know that’s a bad situation, but what can we do about it? How do you get your head above water in the middle of a wipeout?

Much of my framework for documentation quality comes from the work of Philip Crosby, who developed his Zero Defects system at ITT and in over ten years reduced their costs by \$530 million a year by finding and eliminating scrap, rework, and error. The Crosby Quality System has four main points:

1. Quality is conformance to requirements (the quality definition I use).
2. The cost of quality is the expense of doing things wrong (scrap and rework).
3. The goal is zero defects (that is, there is no acceptable level of error).
4. The motto is “Do it right the first time.”

This system offers a way out of the crisis. But in a world of constant change, how can you consistently get documentation right the first time? Only by developing and sticking to a good process.

In his 1979 book *Quality is Free*, Crosby described five stages of quality enlightenment in corporate management. (Crosby says that quality is a management problem, not a worker problem. I will quote a much more forceful advocate of that point in a future column.) Another model of enlightenment appears in the Software Engineering Institute’s five-stage Capability Maturity Model for Software, developed by Watts Humphrey and described in his 1989 book *Managing the Software*

Process. In turn, that model was translated into publications-group terms by Dr. JoAnn Hackos in her excellent 1994 book *Managing Your Documentation Projects*. Here is Dr. Hackos’ formulation. Where does your company fit in?

- Level 0: Oblivious. Unaware of the need for professionally produced publications. Publications are produced by anyone who is available and has time.
- Level 1: Ad hoc. Technical communicators act independently to produce publications with little or no coordination.
- Level 2: Rudimentary. The beginning pieces of a process are getting into place. Some coordination occurs among the technical communicators to assure consistency, but enforcement is not strong.
- Level 3: Organized and Repeatable. A sound development process is in place and being refined. People are being trained in the process.
- Level 4: Managed and Sustainable. Strong project management is in place to ensure that the publications-development process works.

How can a good process speed the work? By assuring best practices, cutting rework, and bringing predictability. In fact, the chaos of Level 0 is really the ABSENCE of process. To do your best and fastest work, you must get things right the first time. To do that, you must know what you’re doing, and you must keep doing it that way.

Next time: Ed Deming—the patron saint of quality. Steven Jong is Documentation Group Leader at Lightbridge, Inc. in Waltham, MA. You can reach him at SJong@lightbridge.com.

SIGNificant news

If you aren’t already signed up for the discussion on our listserv, send an email to majordomo@stc.org and in the body of the message enter: **subscribe stcqsig-l youremail@address** (The character at the end of stcqsig-l is a lowercase L). To post a message for others on the listserv to see, send an email to stcqsig-l@stc.org.

Visit the STC Quality SIG web site at <http://stc.org/pics/quality/>

DocQment won the STC Award of Distinguished Technical Communication in the International Newsletter Competition! Submit your article to this award winning forum!

Four quality subgroup areas need your contributions

Larry W. Arnold, Don Lenk, Ralph Robinson, and Harli Rabow

Our subgroup areas are off and running for the new year! If you are interested in working with one of the groups below, please contact the group leader or Lori Fisher. We always need more volunteers! Also, if you would like to start a new interest area, just let Lori know and she will work with you to get a subgroup started.

ISO 9000 Subgroup

In the ISO 9000 subgroup, leader Ralph Robinson is looking for contributions to a listing of resources that members have found useful in ISO documentation efforts. This listing could contain information from the following categories:

1. Books
2. Magazines (complete)
3. Articles with sources identified
4. Other (website, listservs, mailing lists, etc.)

He is also interested in developing a listing of members who work for companies who are ISO – certified, or who have consulted for companies working on certification. This could then become a networking list for others with questions about the registration process. Anyone with an interest in ISO should contact Ralph Robinson at r2innovations@myna.com to contribute to these efforts.

Process Subgroup

For the Process subgroup, leader Larry Arnold is considering creating a bibliography specific to process on the web. Maybe the bibliography will help someone who has just discovered the term process but needs to know more about it now, or someone who thinks process is a four-letter word, or someone who has been continually improving processes for 20 years or more, aiming to achieve the highest quality product imaginable. Not an easy task given the scope. But we have a good start in the general bibliography from the Quality SIG and Larry is confident that when the rest of us share the process wealth we are hoarding, we can produce it. Anyone with an interest in quality processes should contact Larry Arnold at arnollar@gateway.com to contribute to these efforts.

Web Page and Bibliography Subgroups

The annual conference and the chance to meet with fellow Quality SIG members inspired me to restart my efforts in keeping up and improving the SIG's web pages and the Quality bibliography. This year I am pleased to welcome two SIG members who have volunteered to help. They are Liang Chen and Amber Fenner. We are all eager to give you our best effort.

We plan to update the web pages and bibliography to make them easier to navigate and more appealing. We also need to add content, and that's where you come in. Please send us any ideas you have for new or improved content in our web pages, and for new entries in the bibliography. They exist for your benefit, so please let us know what you need. If you have any ideas on how the bibliography should be organized, we'd be glad to hear them.

Visit the Quality SIG web pages at <http://www.stc.org/pics/quality/>. Then send your suggestions to Don Lenk at SunSymID@aol.com, or by mail to 8650 Bannerwood Drive, Manassas, VA 20109-3736.

Metrics

The topic of metrics is one of the hottest and most debatable areas of quality in the Quality SIG. Everyone has an opinion, yet as a profession we have not collected a lot of facts about what to measure that reflects the true quality of our work. So here is your chance to contribute to advancing the state of our profession! Harli Rabow, the new Metric subgroup leader, is collecting metrics. Send her metrics that you (or your company) have used to measure the quality of technical communication. If you have any data that helps evaluate how good the metric is, send that along too (but just the metric will be enough to get started!) Eventually, Harli would like to collect these and add them to the SIG web site. You can reach Harli at rabow@ihot.com

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People

by Stephen R. Covey, 1989 Fireside: New York 340 pages

Reviewed by Amber Fenner

I reread this book every January and although it is not strictly about quality, it helps me to lead what I believe is a high-quality life and to produce what I (and my clients) consider high-quality work. I have never been a self-help book enthusiast, but this book contains so much practical wisdom that it always helps me to focus on the new year after the chaos of the holiday season. If you haven't read it, I highly recommend it; and if you have read it, but it's been a while, I think it is one book that deserves another look.

There is no “quick fix” for becoming an effective person. According to Covey, many of the self-help books published in the 80s focused solely on what he calls the “personality ethic.” The personality ethic means wearing the right clothes, saying the right things, changing your voice and your body language...in other words, changing the outer person. The personality ethic can make you more popular and likeable, but it cannot help you to make consistent decisions that are in harmony with your own beliefs and values. Much more important is the “character ethic.” The character ethic means leading a life based on principles and deeply-held values—having an unchangeable inner core from which all of your decisions are based. Improving yourself using the character ethic requires more introspection and more effort because it can produce lasting change in your entire life, not just in your image.

The first three habits help you to achieve independence. You must learn to be a proactive, not a reactive individual. You must learn that the choices you make have consequences, and that your life is a result of those choices and their consequences (not what other people or circumstances have done to you). Habit 1 is to consciously make the choices that affect your life (be proactive) and not simply to react to your circumstances. Your mother doesn't make you angry, you allow yourself to become angry.

The next two habits deal with helping you not just to choose your actions, but to choose the right actions based on your own values (what is most important to you). You must always focus on your long-term goals, on the final product, not on short-term success. Covey makes a distinction between “P” (production) and “PC” production capability. P

is the golden eggs and PC is the goose that lays them. To be effective you must make investments in PC even if it means sacrificing P in the short-term. To use a business example, you must shut down your machinery once in a while for preventive maintenance even if that means sacrificing immediate production. If you choose to ignore the preventive maintenance (neglect the goose) you are probably going to make some gains in the short-term, but you may lose your capacity to produce at all (if the machine breaks down). If PC is truly important in the long run (as it is to most people) then make that your goal, no matter how tempting it is to achieve immediate production.

The third habit helps you to distinguish what is important from what is simply urgent. You can be an extremely efficient person (an excellent time manager who excels at handling the urgent) and still not be an effective person because in handling the urgent you have neglected what was important (but not urgent). Covey's solution is more effective prioritization. He says that in order to allocate your time more effectively, instead of just focusing on the immediate, urgent concerns of the day, decide what is important to you and schedule time for it. “Don't prioritize your schedule; schedule your priorities.”

The first three habits result in private victory (or independence). The next three result in public victory (or interdependence). The highest level of effectiveness is interdependence. Consequently the habits must be learned in order; they build upon each other. You cannot be interdependent until you are truly independent. You cannot depend on others until you can depend on yourself. Habits four through seven teach you how to be interdependent. When practiced, they improve your interpersonal relationships. For me, the most important lesson was contained Habit 5, “listen to understand...not to reply.” As Covey points out, this simple rule involves much more than personality-ethic reflexive listening techniques. Habit 7 is “Sharpen the Saw.” Do not be satisfied with your past achievements, but continuously work on self-improvement.

Amber Fenner is a free-lance technical writer working in Albuquerque, NM. She specializes in documentation for the electric industry.

There is no “quick fix” for becoming an effective person.



DocQment

Quality SIG Newsletter

What's Inside?

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