

Managing Skills for a Lifetime

**A Timely New Special Interest Group
to Serve Our Professional Community**

A proposal to the STCWVC Administrative Council

- PRELIMINARY DRAFT –
Not for Publication

Table of Contents

Purpose.....	1
Background.....	1
Sampling of observations.....	1
Professional challenges.....	1
Employment.....	2
The technical communication profession.....	2
Perceptions of technical communication professionals.....	3
Problem statement.....	3
Goal.....	3
Objective.....	3
Focus of a personal and professional development program.....	3
Method for program delivery.....	4
A SIG delivery vehicle.....	4
SIG development and structure.....	4
Introducing the SIG.....	6
Budget requirement.....	7
Qualifications of Institution.....	7
Experience.....	7
Professional benefit.....	7
Chapter benefit.....	7
Summary.....	8

Purpose

This proposal recommends formation of a new Special Interest Group (SIG) under the auspices of the STC Willamette Valley Chapter. The recommendation represents the culmination of a series of meetings held earlier this by a group of chapter members to examine contemporary challenges that technical communicators face in local industry. The proposed SIG could address these challenges in an educational way to help local technical communication professionals.

STC national headquarters defines a SIG as “an organized group of Society members, authorized and supported by the board of directors, that is engaged at the Society level in selected activities that promote professional growth and interests.”

Background

A group of technical communicators formed and met several times during the summer to examine the field of technical communication in the community. During the first couple of meetings, group members voiced their perceptions of the technical communication profession. What did we see going on around us? What would a look into the local profession reveal? We quickly collected some common perceptions and a large number of observations encompassing a broad range of thought, including:

- How technical communicators feel about their profession
- How technical communicators feel about themselves
- How local industry views the profession
- Challenges technical communicators face during their career lifetime

As a group, we perceived that:

- We are our jobs. Many in the high tech industry perceive themselves as their position, causing personal devastation if an employer eliminates the job function. This behavioral trait reinforces itself with worker experience and age.
- We judge others in the profession by their positions. We hold those with upper level positions in higher regard than those just entering the profession.
- The high tech environment reinforces judgmental behavior by “categorizing” us using job titles.
- There is an unhealthy degree of competitive behavior within the profession.

Sampling of observations

Our observations centered on several areas surrounding the technical communication profession.

Professional challenges

- Technical communicators face a broad range of challenges. Those just entering the profession are not aware of these challenges.
- The business of technical communication is changing. Those new to the profession are not aware of its current breadth.

- Corporate employers are typically hesitant to spend money training new technical communicators in the use of contemporary tools.
- Personal resiliency is as important as professional resiliency in attaining success. Lack of personal resiliency can result in unnecessary, excessive stress on the job and a feeling of devastation if unemployment strikes.
- As professionals, we need to continually think and talk about contemporary possibilities within our careers. The popular “Career Makers” seminars effectively focus on this career topic.

Employment

- The freshly unemployed typically look alone for help. They are initially hesitant to reach out to networks for help. Later, they may elect to do so. A support group can represent a good environment (as compared to the broader networking function) to assist these individuals.
- Those recently unemployed also typically:
 - Seek the same type of position that they lost
 - Neglect to allow themselves a time to mourn their loss
 - Neglect to allow time to reflect on the loss
 - Fail to gain insight as a result of the loss
 - Feel a loss of self worth and self confidence
 - Feel shunned by others in the profession who are not unemployed
- There is no such thing as job security. The corporate environment requires a proven return on investment for every payroll dollar.
- Unemployed technical communicators should “think out of the box” to uncover employment opportunities. Few know how to approach employment this way.

The technical communication profession

- Technical communicators seem to receive either good or poor compensation. This wage disparity widens the divide between those who are successful in the profession and those who are not.
- Increasing the level of empathy within the profession would help discourage peer competition and territorial behavior.
- Technical communication lacks definition as a profession – possibly because of the breadth of roles and responsibilities that technical communicators fill.
- Technical communicators typically categorized themselves by the tools they use and the type of work they perform.
- Professional discipline is more important to technical communicators than knowledge of tools.
- It is better to be a generalist in the profession than to be a specialist with niche skills, although generalists typically earn less than specialists. A “generalization of skills” can help to ensure professional resiliency.

Perceptions of technical communication professionals

- Some in industry undervalue technical communicators. As a result, a team can discount the technical communicator's position and he or she can be more susceptible to layoff than other team members.
- Technical communicators are in a good position to improve their team value by modeling professional behavior and personal resiliency and practicing good communication skills in all association with team members.

Problem statement

During a meeting on June 3, the group moved toward condensing the observations into a problem statement and set of objectives for presentation in a proposal to the WVC Administrative Council.

Although the group's observations were broad in spectrum, many of them related to common themes of career management challenges and industry's perception of technical communicators. With this in mind, the group summarized that:

"People in our business lack the proficiency to manage their skills for a lifetime."

This statement seemed to embody the essence of our observations. It also allowed the group to use the statement as a succinct foundation on which to set goals and objectives.

Goal

The group defined a number of goals to address the problem statement. In the end, all agreed that a way to help technical communicators in their careers would represent the best goal. We summarized the goal as a way to help technical communicators:

"Develop professional resiliency for a more successful and satisfying career."

Objective

The group moved in later meetings toward ways to accomplish the goal. Discussing a number of objectives, the group worked to narrow the focus and finally settled on the concept of a program that could accomplish the goal. A program for personal and professional development could effectively discuss and work to improve the entire range of perceptions and observations that the group had earlier identified. The goal of helping those in our profession to develop professional resiliency for a more successful and satisfying career would be met.

Focus of a personal and professional development program

Specifically, the program could include the fundamental elements of a technical communicator's roles, functions, and parameters of responsibility. However, the program could offer a broader range of educational value through focus on areas like:

- Improving self-awareness
- Conducting a personal inventory of professional skills
- Exploring and developing career opportunities

- Integrating personal values into a career
- Using personality traits and personal passion to benefit your career
- Developing personal and professional resiliency
- Nurturing professional skills, knowledge, and abilities
- Personal care on and off the job
- Tips to represent yourself well
- Ways to resolve conflict effectively

Method for program delivery

The group agreed that the program would be most effective in a small group environment with a specific content focus. This sort of environment has worked effectively to serve career support groups in other industries. The support group environment can provide a safe, comfortable environment in which participants can discuss challenging issues facing them and openly work to seek solutions. Group dynamics work best in a closed, confidential environment where those with a wide variety of challenging experiences can exchange information and learn together to find their way in times of adversity.

The small group setting can also aid the process of conducting analysis of each participant to determine a personal interest hierarchy, ways to explore the world and to discover personal and professional opportunities and capabilities. The personal analysis can provide answers to questions like “What brought me to the career? What do I bring to the career? Why do I feel like I could be successful? Where will I go in the career?” A larger group structure hinders open and personal discussion of these topics.

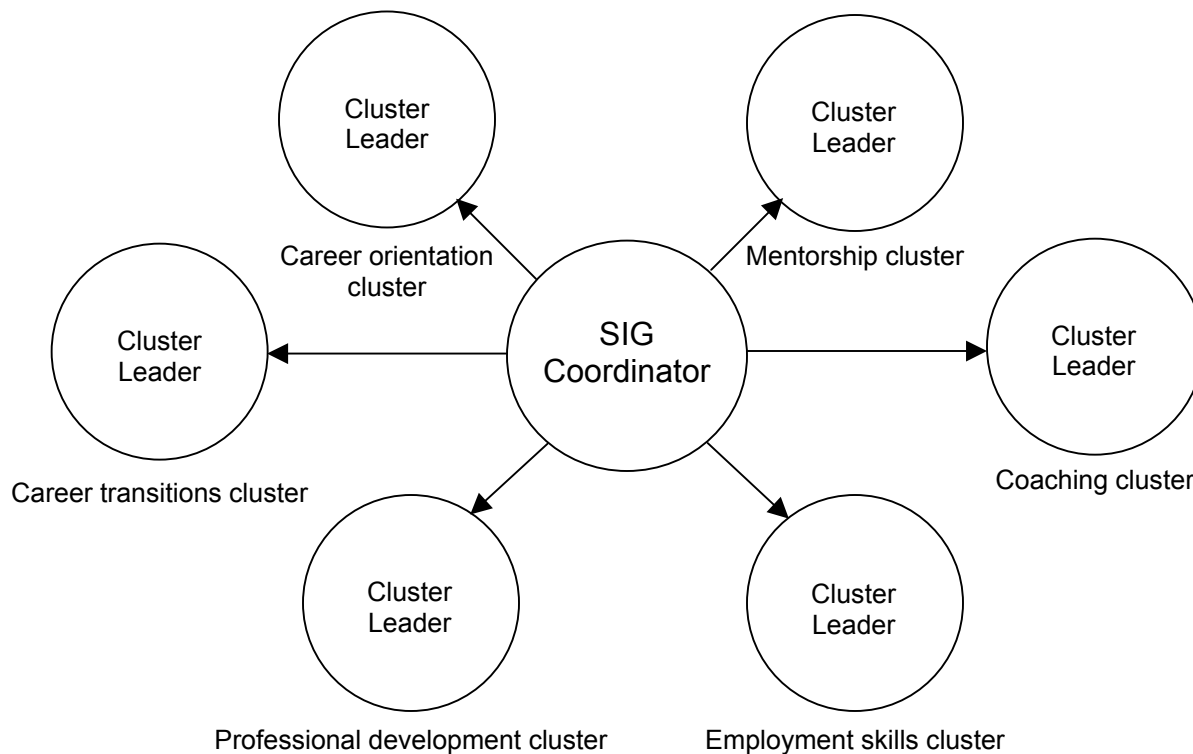
A SIG delivery vehicle

The group agreed that developing personal and professional resiliency represented the most significant and effective solution to contemporary career challenges in technical communication. We further agreed that this solution should represent the essence of our goal “to develop professional resiliency for a more successful and satisfying career.” A SIG focused at lifetime skills management represents a responsible and appropriate approach to this broad topic.

SIG development and structure

The group discussed formation and structure of the SIG. Although structuring the SIG in a fashion similar to one of the chapter’s existing SIGs would represent only a modest resource requirement, the group felt that a SIG composed of several clusters could be more effective in addressing the broad topic of personal and professional development. Adopting a cluster structure would place heavier demand on chapter resources, requiring a leader for each of the cluster activities. However, the structure also provides the intimate “support group” environment essential to encourage communication and learning. This would mean capping cluster sizes at six to eight members, possibly duplicating a popular topic across clusters if necessary to limit the number of participants in each group.

The following diagram illustrates the cluster structure and suggests possible focal objectives. The SIG could actually consist of more or fewer clusters and different focal objectives.



Clustered SIG structure showing possible focal objectives

- The cluster leader
The primary functions of the cluster leader are to deliver educational content, manage group discussion, and even to serve in additional capacities as a coach or personal development mentor, if necessary. Ideally, the cluster leader could establish a comfortable relationship with each participant, making possible an intimate learning environment while maximizing educational value.

Each cluster can operate independently to serve the needs of the participants. Combined with the advantage of simply and quickly increasing or decreasing the number of clusters to meet SIG objectives, the structure offers versatility and flexibility superior to that of a single-focus SIG.

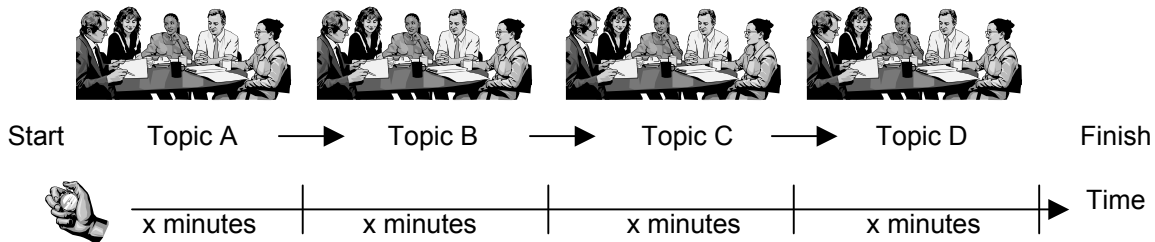
A cluster leader may select a volunteer assistant to help with material preparation, content delivery, or to help facilitate discussions in smaller groups within the cluster.

- The SIG coordinator
 - The primary function of the SIG coordinator is to assist each cluster leader in delivering value to the participants, guiding each leader as necessary to fulfill SIG objectives. Further, the SIG coordinator would:
 - Regularly report the activity and status of each cluster to the chapter Administrative Council
 - Make recommendations to the Administrative Council on new cluster topics based upon input from SIG participants
 - Work with the chapter publicity manager to publish announcements about SIG activities and topics
 - Work with the chapter volunteer manager to maintain adequate resources to meet demand within the clusters

The coordinator could also assist with cluster content research and development, leader coaching, venue selection, course material selection or preparation, speaker selection, and solving logistics issues.

Introducing the SIG

The group considered ways to measure topical interest as part of a successful SIG implementation effort. In addition to launching a wide-reaching publicity campaign about the SIG, introducing it using a topical progression method at a chapter meeting can quickly indicate areas of highest interest. With the introductory results in hand, the SIG would stand the best chance of immediate success in terms of attendance and delivery of appropriate educational content. The diagram below shows a possible structure for SIG introduction using topical progression.



SIG introduction using topical progression

Topical progression represents a round-robin approach. A table and speaker representing each cluster topic receives an initial group of potentially interested members. The members gather a summary of information about the cluster’s educational focus around the topic, asking questions and offering suggestions if any. After a predetermined time, each group progresses to the next table until the each group has completed a stop at each table.

A member poll to rank topical interest quickly identifies areas of primary interest.

Budget requirement

Historically, the WVC has not suffered significant budgetary demand from any of the SIGs it now operates. In considering a clustered SIG, operational expense would be higher than that of any of the existing SIGs.

Higher costs would be due to multiple:

- Venue and catering expenses for cluster meetings/courses
- Sets of course materials for SIG topics
- Honorariums for guest speakers

A clustered SIG structure would also require a larger volunteer investment than the typical single-focus SIG that the chapter now operates. Single volunteers to fulfill the positions of SIG coordinator and cluster leaders would represent the minimum human resource demand. A more realistic picture of demand would include volunteers to assist some or all of the cluster leaders and the SIG coordinator.

Qualifications of Institution

There are several reasons the Administrative Council should consider instituting a clustered SIG dedicated to personal and professional development of local technical communicators.

Experience

The WVC has good experience in SIG institution. The chapter has successfully started, operated, and nurtured one of the largest number of SIGs of any chapter its size in the country. Leveraging the chapter's knowledge and practice to institute a new SIG would help its chance for success.

Professional benefit

The clustered SIG can benefit chapter membership and technical communication professionals at large through its provision of broad educational value. Depending on the number of clusters in the SIG, it could deliver to participants many times the knowledge of a single-focus SIG. A flexible, modular topic structure ensures timely, contemporary topical focus in each cluster. Membership preferences can drive cluster topics and even dictate the number of clusters necessary to accommodate popular subjects.

Chapter benefit

The structure and varied content focus of the clustered SIG offer several potential benefits to the chapter. Representing a fresh approach to the single-focus SIG, the clustered SIG can renew member and non-member interest in SIG participation while leveraging the best of chapter experience. Certainly, the SIG can represent accurate fulfillment of the chapter mission:

“The STC Willamette Valley Chapter advances and promotes technical communication and responds to member needs while fostering professional inspiration, growth, enjoyment, and visibility in the local community.”

The clustered SIG offers good potential for chapter growth through a broad offering of topical content. Keeping fresh educational opportunities visible to local professionals can loudly demonstrate the value of chapter membership, encourage those in the chapter to renew their membership, and favorably promote the chapter in local industry.

An obvious benefit of chapter growth is a financial one. If the clustered SIG can encourage growth, the chapter can benefit through a larger membership dues refund from the STC national office. The clustered SIG can also generate multiple, independent sources of chapter revenue through its various activities.

Summary

Integrating a clustered SIG into the chapter might be more difficult if not for the fact that recent reports to the WVC Administrative Council indicate declining attendance in some of the current chapter SIGs. Offering educational value using a clustered SIG structure could bolster attendance at chapter functions and renew educational interest in the professional community. This proposal does not suggest the clustered SIG as a substitute to existing single-focus SIGs, but rather an alternative that addresses the contemporary educational interests of a wide range of communication professionals. Maintaining this perspective during the initiation effort would help to minimize the impact to current SIGs.

The clustered SIG represents a fresh approach to delivering educational value. The group recommends that the Administrative Council consider this proposal. If the proposal is accepted, the chapter will need to follow the guidelines set forth by national headquarters for forming Special Interest Groups, document #AD-70-93.