



## A Project Manager, Me?

By *Ralph F. Rumpf*

All of us involved in the Technical Writing profession share a number of insider secrets. Oh, nothing that will make the headlines in the local paper or get Dan Rather to raise his eyebrows. We all know that like Superman or Superwoman, we are more than we appear.

Technical Writers are by nature, adapters. In a changing profession you must change to survive. Most of us are lifetime learners. We must keep up with current technologies to keep abreast of our specialities. We are problem solvers; there hasn't been a problem free documentation project since Moses got the Ten Commandments.

I could go on and on. We wear so many hats that it's a wonder some of us can stand up. Yet there is one unspoken title all of us seem to share to one degree or another and that is Project Manager. Think not? Let's briefly look at a project organization.

We can briefly define a project as having five phases:

### Initiation

In this phase the documentation project is defined and the key players you need to work with are identified.

### Planning

During this phase you iron out who will do what and when. You might set specific tasks and define a project timeline or schedule. You may even need to develop a budget.

### Executing

Things get rolling here. Development starts

with research and writing; preliminary graphics and illustrations are developed and you begin resolving the inevitable problems to keep the schedule on track.

### Control

I haven't seen a project yet that stays with the original plan. The product or deliverable changes and when it does, you need to make changes in assignments, adjust the schedule, and fix still more potential problems. You continue to monitor these changes to keep everything moving at a steady pace.

### Closing

I love it when a plan comes together, don't you? The manual is in the box with the product and ready to ship on schedule and in budget. You may need to do a post project review to assess your success, and adjust the process, then you are ready to go again.

Sound familiar? Well, welcome to the world of project management. Project management can take on different guises in different industries and professions. Software engineering uses a slightly different process than Hardware Engineering, some companies have a well defined, tried and true process, others

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WEBSITE: [www.stc-sjvc.org](http://www.stc-sjvc.org)

## President's Column

Forms, forms, everywhere, with not a speck of sense.

This year, enrolling my daughter in school, I was again struck by the pathetic lack of thought that the school system puts into trying to get information from me.

In one case, a two-page form asked me to rewrite my address and telephone number four times. In another case, I was asked to select one of two boxes – both of which said the exact same thing (the joy and pain of cutting and pasting!). One form I had to complete three copies of. And, hidden on page 9 of a 30-page introduction to the school system was the somewhat critical information that book rental fees were due the second day of school.

I don't even care how bad these forms look – that they're on multicolored paper, or typed (and the font just gets smaller when the content increases). What I care about is that if I have so much trouble with them, and I'm a reader, how much trouble are they having getting the rest of the parents to comply?

The lesson in this? Never forget what a contribution you're making. If you design forms, you are a thinking person behind a required function. You make it easy for the reader to know what's important and to give you what is needed.

Oh, and if you have any free time this year? Volunteer to help your local school system (or church or nonprofit organization) redesign their forms. We'll all thank you.

— Kirsten Klassen

### STC Mission Statement

*The mission of the Society for Technical Communication is to improve the quality and effectiveness of technical communication for audiences worldwide.*

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## Editor's Column

SO, what do you think? Are we a dying breed, or are we reinventing ourselves?

As you may suspect, I recently read the lead article in the August issue of *Technical Communication* written by Barbara Giammona. Her article deals with some research she conducted as part of her Master's Degree and the conclusions that it seems to point to.

I imagine all of us have wondered where we were headed at one time or another. Things are often in a state of flux in the office and we wonder where it is all headed. I recently experienced a similar situation on a short term contract.

The project called for the development of some policies and procedures, but no one seemed to have any idea what the process was they needed to document. Worse, they seemed to believe that policies and procedures could coexist in the same document (or perhaps, that they were one and the same). Worse still, they were not concerned if they were right or wrong they just wanted to present something to the company auditors.

Sadly, I do not think they are unique as far as American companies go. I have been contracting for over ten years now and I have to say that I am constantly surprised at how company executives view documentation. In many cases they seem to believe it is relatively unimportant. So they wait till the last possible minute to get the documentation done and they want it finished in a couple of weeks. This is unfortunate because they often assign the task to the project engineer and we all know engineers do not speak user lingo.

It is very clear that documentation does not carry much weight in many companies. In fact, I often wonder if the documentation was not required as part of a specific contract clause, would anyone bother with it at all? Clearly, many companies do not want to as the amount of documentation being outsourced to foreign countries seems to indicate.

Well, if this is some kind of a trend, as Giammona's article seems to indicate, where does that leave us? Time to change careers as my brother recommends? Time to change into another branch of this career such as medical or pharmaceutical documentation? Or do we go back to school in pursuit of that next degree level just to keep the job we have so we can retire someday?

Personally, I was never too much for the retirement idea, too boring. But I really enjoy the challenge of a good technical project. So, I think I would seriously miss writing if I had to change careers entirely. Yet, I have to confess, I have been giving the idea some very serious thought lately.

The nature of technical writing does seem to be changing. As a contractor, I guess I am fortunate in that I still manage to actually write for the majority of the projects I do. The companies I work for typically have limited resources so they do not have a documentation department, or it is small. As an independent, I do not have a regular staff so I do many parts of the development work myself. But I have friends, who work for or with large corporations, who tell a much different tale.

Yet, if you use Dice or techwr-l or even the STC jobs database, there certainly appear to be plenty of jobs. The issue, I presume, is what you are required to do as part of that job. The job descriptions I see most days are becoming quite involved, and specialized. I even read one that required the "Technical Writer" to develop the graphics for the project.

In my mind a technical writer who does not write is not a technical writer. I'm not exactly sure what they are, but they are not technical writers. Documentation Development Coordinator? Information Technologist? Something. But perhaps I am wrong.

Barbara Giammona's article reflects the opinions of several well known STC members, many of whom you may recognize. They seem to share a common philosophy that says the Technical Writer of today is not the Technical Writer of yesterday, or tomorrow; change or die.

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## September Meeting Announcement

**Topic:** “Project Management in the Real World”

Project management in the real world Barbara Ridley, training specialist for Zimmer, will share her experiences and wisdom gained from 13 years in project management. Barbara has developed her own strategies for managing projects over the years. While she has also taken a course and attended seminars on project management, she finds that no cookie-cutter approach adequately addresses the issues she’s faced. Come and learn how Barbara’s experience may help you refine and adapt your project management skills to better meet your objectives.

**When:** Thursday, Sept. 23, 2004, at 5:30 P.M., Indiana time.

**Where:** The Matterhorn Restaurant, 2041 Cassopolis Street, Elkhart, IN, (574) 262-1500. (See map.)

**RSVP:** Make your reservation by September 20. Contact Kirsten Klassen at 533-9511 or (800) 348-7468, Ext. 432, or [kirsten.klassen@mma-online.org](mailto:kirsten.klassen@mma-online.org).

## 2004 - 2005 Meeting Schedule (Updated)

As promised, here is the updated meeting list. We will update these as necessary.

**October 4, 2004**

**Topic:** “E-marketing”

**When:** Monday, Oct. 4, 2004.

**Where:** Perry Ballard Incorporated, 526 Upton Drive East, St. Joseph, Michigan 49085.

**March 2, 2005**

**Topic:** “Best of the Best—View the traveling STC Publication competition winners exhibit”

**When:** Wednesday, March 2, 2005.

**Where:** Exchange Bakery, 109 W. Lexington, Elkhart, IN 46516.

**April 14, 2005**

**Topic:** “So You Want to be Independent—a look at the pros and cons of the independent tech writer”

**When:** Thursday, April 14, 2005.

**Where:** TBD.



**Directions:** 1 mile south of the Indiana Toll Road, Exit 92 on State Road 19, Cassopolis St.

## MEET A MEMBER

**Name:** Ann Linley

**Member since:** 2003 (student member in the dark ages)

**Member Status:** Active Member

**Why Technical Writing?** I began my college career with the intent of being in the first vanguard of women engineers. Being a hands on, I got to see it to understand it, type of student I steered clear of the black magic field of electrical engineering and that new one, computer science. I chose the earthy realm of metallurgical engineering and one of the few schools that offered a degree, Michigan Technological University. Little did I know, or care at that time, that Tech was an early developer and proponent of technical writing from the engineering side. When, three years later, Tech and I decided that my parents had been right and pure engineering was not my field, the scientific and technical writing program became my salvation. I loved it! I had found a place where you could play with cool, technical stuff, share your excitement with others through teaching documents and get paid!

**The Real World:** My early work was in technical sales in the plasma and welding

powder industry. My work increasingly required more instructional design components which resulted in my returning to school. In 1993 I received my Masters in Instructional Design from Wayne State University. I then joined a business consulting firm (with whom I had been a part-time employee) and for two years worked on a variety of projects in a number of industries. The past 9 years have been occupied with lots of interesting independent free-lance projects for a variety of clients, renovation on an old house and 2 children. In October of last year I joined KMC controls as a technical writer.

**Future:** My passion is sharing knowledge in the most effective manner so that the student attains their personal best. Perhaps because I have listened to one too many sibling squabbles, or perhaps because I really did internalize the systems theories in my classes, or perhaps because I become bored easily, I have decided to avoid the ever present territorial debates between technical writing, instructional design and training. My goal is to become a certified Human Performance Technologist while simultaneously helping KMC set the standard for training and documentation in our industry.

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still are shooting from the hip. Some industries must follow specific Federal guidelines, so they usually follow a very precise format. Others are governed by standard practices, the list goes on and on. But once you are familiar with the basics, you recognize the pattern.

So, how are your Project Management skills? Are they up to the challenges that you face with each new project? Since most of us are lifetime learners, we all need an opportunity to brush up on our skills. New insights and ideas can turn on a bunch of lights in the old gray matter.

So why not join us for the first meeting of the 2004 - 2005 chapter year? Hear a different

perspective on project management and see if you can apply it to your situation. Don't think so? Give it a try, you might be surprised.

And I hear the food at the Matterhorn is quite good. You at least gain the benefit of good food and good conversation. The weather is good and there is no snow in the forecast, so now is the time to get out and take a break from your normal day-to-day routine.

The Matterhorn Restaurant is easy to find. Just use the map and follow the directions. We also have the phone number so you can call if you get lost.

## STC Membership Changes

*As you may or may not be aware, the STC is reorganizing membership categories to offer a wider range of options for STC members. The following article is reprinted for your information. Ed*

The STC board of directors recently approved the cost of member dues for four of the new categories. The board also decided how many STC communities members may select. The new categories will appear on dues renewal forms (to be mailed in November) and on new member applications for 2005. The board will establish the amount of community rebates for fiscal year 2006 at its annual meeting in May. (For those who have not yet filed for the 2005 rebate, the deadline is September 30th.)

Descriptions of the new membership categories follow. All dollar amounts are in USD. A table showing the costs and benefits of these categories has been posted to the STC Web site at [www.stc.org/transformation/](http://www.stc.org/transformation/)

### “Classic” Membership

The classic membership entitles members to the paper versions of Intercom and Technical Communication and access to the online versions; full access to the members-only area of the STC Web site; and a choice between the following options for membership in STC communities:

- \* one chapter and one SIG, or
- \* three SIGs.

The costs of classic membership for U.S. members: \$145

Members who choose classic membership may join additional SIGs at a cost of \$5 per SIG and additional chapters at a cost of \$10 per chapter. To be eligible for the retired member rate, an individual must be retired and have been an STC member for ten years. As in the past, retired members will not be counted in the calculation of chapter rebate amounts.

### E-Membership

E-membership entitles members to the same benefits as classic membership, except that e-members will not receive paper copies of Intercom and Technical Communication. E-members may join additional SIGs at a cost of \$5 per SIG and additional chapters at a cost of \$10 per chapter. E-membership costs \$135.

### “Limited” Membership

This category includes subscriptions to the paper versions of Intercom and Technical Communication and full access to the members-only area of the STC Web site. Limited memberships do not include membership in communities (chapters or SIGs). The costs of limited membership is: \$125

### Student Membership

Student members receive the same benefits as e-members, but have no voting rights. Student members may join additional SIGs at a cost of \$5 per SIG and additional chapters at a cost of \$10 per chapter. Student memberships cost \$50.

### Corporate Membership

To allow for further study, the board has postponed a vote on the costs and benefits of this category.

### Prorated Dues for New Members

As in the past, new members who join STC in 2004 receive prorated credits on their first renewal. The amount of credit new members receive does not depend on the membership category they select.

A member's credit is based on 2004 dues (\$140 for regular members, \$56 for students) and the month he or she joined the Society, as shown in the table below. These credits will appear on new members' renewal invoices. New members who join the Society in November and December 2004 are considered paid in full for 2005.

## Renewal Credits for New STC Members (in USD)

Month Joined	Credit Applied (2005 Dues)
January '04	0 (Member) 0 (Student)
February '04	14.00 5.60
March '04	28.00 11.20
April '04	42.00 16.80
May '04	56.00 22.40
June '04	70.00 28.00
July '04	84.00 33.60
August '04	98.00 39.20
September '04	112.00 44.80
October '04	126.00 50.40
November '04	n/a n/a
December '04	n/a n/a

Members (2004 dues = \$140)  
Student Members (2004 dues = \$56)

For example, members who join in September pay \$140 dues (plus a \$15 enrollment fee) for a membership that extends until December 31, 2004. According to the prorating schedule, these members will each receive a \$112 credit toward 2005 dues. Therefore, those who select E-Membership on their 2005 renewal invoice will pay \$23 (\$135 minus \$112). A U.S. member who joins in September and selects "limited" membership at renewal will pay \$13 (\$125 minus \$112), while an overseas member who joins in September and selects limited membership at renewal will pay \$48 (\$125 plus \$35 postage minus \$112).

If you have questions regarding prorated credits, please contact the STC membership department at [membership@stc.org](mailto:membership@stc.org).

## Editor (continued from page 3)

Yet I am confused by this. In 18 years in the technical writing field I have witnessed a steady erosion of the value of documentation in the manufacturing environment. More and more companies seem to do documentation not because they want to provide their customers a complete package, or to provide added value to the product, but because they have too. If any of you remember the first Microsoft software manuals, everything you needed to make the most of the package was there, not today. My Windows XP Professional manual is less than 1/8 inch thick. There is hardly enough information to scratch the surface.

As a consequence, it seems that the American consumer is being trained to accept less for their money rather than what they deserve. Amazingly, the consumer seems to be buying into this idea this is the best they can expect. Yet companies do not seem to appreciate the relationship between the quality of the documentation and the number of calls on the company help line. In an effort to control the problem, they employ large, expensive and absolutely frustrating automated answering systems. I would love to be able to compare the costs.

Perhaps we need to take a different approach. Maybe if we write after market documentation for products (as Microsoft has done for their software products) we can provide consumers with what they need and make a living. We might even cause the consumers to see that companies can do a better job, if they want too. Or, do we embark on a campaign to educate American businesses on the value of documentation to their bottom line? What do you think?

*I would like to personally thank Ann Linley for taking up the challenge and contributing a member introduction piece.*

**THANKS, ANN!**

*I hope that more of you will step up to the plate and do a piece. I appreciate the space it adds (less writing for me) and I am sure other members would enjoy hearing about how you practice your career.*

*ED*