



NY Metro

News

<http://stc.org/>

New York Metro Chapter

March Program – Documentation in Agile Development

By John Posada

If you are from one of the 400 of the Fortune 500 where software is being developed, your company is either practicing or investigating Agile Development. If you've looked into this methodology, one of the first things you were exposed to was the tenet of "Working software over comprehensive documentation" as mandated by the Manifesto for Agile Software Development.

What does that mean? Does it mean the end of software documentation as we know it today?

For our March meeting we will have Stacia Broderick, an Agile Coach with AgileEvolution, Inc. She has worked as a project manager for 13 years, the last seven in software development. Stacia is a Certified ScrumTrainer and has been a practicing Scrum since 2003. She also holds a PMP certification.

Stacia has helped teams all over the world embrace the principles of and transition to agile (Scrum in particular). Along with co-author Michele Slinger, their forthcoming book "A Project Manager's Bridge to Agility" will focus on helping PMI-trained project managers make the transition.

Stacia will be addressing our chapter on the topic of "Agile Development and Scrums from the Documentation Perspective." Through this discussion, you can learn how to be involved in this process from the inside rather than watching the process from the outside looking in.

Stacia will discuss the Agile experiences of technical writers from two companies. In both cases, the writers had to integrate themselves into medium-sized Agile development projects. However, the writing teams differed in their approaches during the necessary transition and integration to the Agile methodology. Writers assigned to these Agile projects found themselves adapting to new team dynamics in ways that were quite agile, including creative time-slicing, scaling across multiple teams, and finding ways to save time while focusing on business value. She found that, even though writers can be uncomfortable while adapting the documentation process to conform to Agile practices, they can rise to the challenges and assist their product teams in becoming more proficient and efficient in an Agile world.

Please join us in March for what should be a very informative and instructive presentation.

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Publication Policies

The *NY Metro News* is published six times a year.

Submissions

We encourage letters, articles, and other items for publication. Please note that by submitting such content to the *NY Metro News* you implicitly grant a license to this newsletter to run the article.

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From the President's Desk

By Donna Timpone

New Year - New Beginnings!

The NY METRO STC Chapter is off to a great start this year! Our new council met in both January and February for several hours of brainstorming new ideas and programs. Highlights of what you can expect this year:

- Top notch speakers on relevant technical topics on the 4th Thursday of every month at Arno's restaurant. Podcasts of these meetings will be accessible from our websites.
- Online registration and credit card payment for these meetings using a new service called Cvent.
- Online Chapter newsletter covering past and upcoming events, member news, book reviews and more...
- Surveys to better understand what topics and programs are relevant to you this year, including getting feedback on the optimum locations for the chapter.
- Networking opportunities! An important part of any professional organization is the connections you make with other professionals in the industry. We will be setting up opportunities to network with fellow technical writers and other related associations. These sessions will range from specific themes to just getting to know one another.

I'm looking forward to having you join us at one of the upcoming events. This is going to be one of the best years yet for our chapter!

Thanks!

Thanks to Etya Novik and Microsoft for providing meeting space for the Flare workshop on Saturday, February 24.

No meetings scheduled in NJ for 2007!

By Donna Timpone

Some of you have been wondering why there have been no meetings scheduled in NJ recently. The reason is that we do not have a volunteer to run the NJ meetings! We have a very active Program Director for NYC, John Posada, who is booking monthly meetings with hot topics for 2007. John freely admits that his reason for volunteering was self serving. He wanted sessions and workshops that were relevant to him.

Please consider volunteering for this position so that you and your fellow NJ members can benefit from excellent speakers. The council will gladly provide the necessary support and mentoring for you to be successful in this position. If you are interested, please contact Donna at timpone@useredge.com.

Agile Development and Scrums

By Aileen MacGahan

What are Agile Development and Scrums? How do they affect Technical Communicators? These questions come to mind in the context of our March meeting. For myself and others who are unfamiliar with these concepts, here are the results of my initial research.

According to Wikipedia, there are several Agile software development methods such as Agile Alliance that seek to minimize risk by developing software in short iterations of one to four weeks. These methods emphasize real-time communication, preferably face-to-face over written communication.

Scrum is an agile method for project management, intended for management of software development projects.

From the Editors' Desks

By Steve Kilcoyne

Aileen, Ilana, and everyone who contributed to the last edition did a great job and I can only hope that with my involvement, the newsletter can live up to, and maybe exceed, all of our expectations.

This issue includes articles on my experiences with Microsoft Office 2007, and the program John's planned for March. We've also included biographical information on some of the Council members, and a message from Donna. In coming months, we'll be including book reviews and a grammar and usage column.

Our goals for the newsletter include making it both reflect and benefit the membership. In other words, we don't want it to be all about us. So, if you have any ideas or information that you'd like to see included in this newsletter, or if you'd like to contribute an article of your own, please feel free to contact me (check the side bar).

Using Microsoft Office 2007

By Steve Kilcoyne

Windows Vista has been getting an awful lot of press lately. Apparently, it's a geek's playground (and I use the term geek with the utmost affection). I haven't made the transition yet, and I don't have any immediate plans to. But I did make the switch to Microsoft's other recent release, which does not seem to be getting as much press – Office 2007.

Office has had a fairly consistent look and feel since Office 95. The 97 and 2003 releases added some new features and enhanced existing features, but the upgrades were simple transitions. With Office 2007, Microsoft has changed the entire interface and the default file formats, making this upgrade both more exciting and more challenging.

The Ribbon

If you've read anything about the new version of Office, you probably know about the ribbon. The menus and toolbars that have been part of the standard Windows interface for years have been replaced by a context-sensitive tabbed toolbar at the top of the screen. Tools are grouped and stacked in boxes that resemble the old floating toolbars. The new interface is supposed to be more intuitive, more reflective of how people actually create documents. I didn't believe that when I first read about it, but after using it for a few weeks, I'm convinced.

Familiar keyboard shortcuts, such as Ctrl-S and Ctrl-C, still work in the new interface, as I expected they would. Familiar keyboard sequences that corresponded to menu selections in previous versions (such as Alt-O-F for fonts), also still work. For those of us who prefer to keep our hands on the keyboard and fly through menu selections without pausing to see if the menus actually appear, this is a very nice feature.

Another great feature is live formatting previews. When you move your mouse over formatting tools on the ribbon, the selected text in your document (or spreadsheet or presentation) automatically updates to reflect the selection, so you see what it will look like before you make the selection.

XML

The new file format is XML, which, among other things, supports a building blocks approach to document creation in Word. The various building blocks include title pages, headers and footers, and tables of contents. Creating my own building blocks will reduce the number of templates I maintain and make it easier to include document sections as needed. Of course, to take full advantage of this, I will now have to learn XML.

You can save files in the old formats to share with users who have not made the transition, and you can even make the old formats the default. Of course, some new features are not supported in the old file formats. The XML files have different file extensions, so it's easy to see which format the files are saved in.

Porting old templates

So far, Excel and PowerPoint templates only needed to have macros enabled to work properly, but Word templates have been more of a challenge. At my company, we have over forty Word templates for various technical documents, with about a dozen in heavy rotation. They share common styles, page layouts, custom toolbars, and a fair amount of VBA code, some of which didn't work in the new version. The Word Object Model has changed, so one key sequence needed to be rewritten to function properly. And because I have users on both versions, the code has to work in both versions. (In case you were wondering, Word 2007 is officially version 12.)

As in previous versions, you have to tell Word where the templates are, and the File locations dialog was a little difficult to find. In the new version, template files have to be installed in a trusted location, which is on a different screen, also a little difficult to find. All of this, by the way, can be accomplished using AD Group Policies.

A common feature in all of our Word templates is a custom toolbar, with buttons for various defined styles and a few macros. The toolbar still works, but now it's been relegated to the Add-ins tab on the ribbon, so it's not always visible, and therefore not all that useful. The ribbon is not customizable as toolbars were in previous versions. There is a Quick Access toolbar that you can add functions to, but I imagine super users who are used to rearranging things for their own convenience will find this lack of customization as frustrating as I do.

Save as PDF

One of the most useful new features for me has been the Save as PDF function, available as a free Add-in that you can download from Microsoft's Web site.

Bottom line

The new features will, in the long run, make it easier to produce higher quality documents, spreadsheets, and presentations. The transition so far has been reasonably easy, but it will probably be a few months before I discover all the new things I can do. The new interface takes a little getting used to, and I wonder how easy it will be for more casual users. Like any new software, there are positives and negatives. In my opinion, so far, the positives are ahead.

NY Metro Chapter

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Society For Technical Communication

Mission

Creating and supporting a forum for communities of practice in the profession of technical communication.

STC is an individual membership organization dedicated to advancing the arts and sciences of technical communication. It is the largest organization of its type in the world. Its 18,000 members include technical writers and editors, content developers, documentation specialists, technical illustrators, instructional designers, academics, information architects, usability and human factors professionals, visual designers, Web designers and developers, and translators - anyone whose work makes technical information available to those who need it.

Society membership provides opportunities for ongoing learning and professional networking. Through the efforts of a small, full-time staff and a large network of volunteers, STC promotes the public welfare by educating its members and industry about issues concerning technical communication.

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Council Bios

Donna Timpone

Donna has been the President of the NY METRO STC Chapter since 2000. She is the owner of UserEdge Technical Personnel, Inc., one of the leading technical communications staffing firms in the NYMETRO area. Donna has over 20 years of hands-on experience in the technical communication and usability field. She holds a Masters Degree in Applied Psychology/Human Factors from Stevens Institute of Technology.

Donna started her career at Bell Labs as a Usability Engineer, then went on to teach documentation and usability seminars for AT&T. In 1984, Donna began her consulting career. Her 12 years of consulting experience covered several disciplines including system analysis and design, user-interface design, paper and online documentation, and usability testing of software products. Donna also helped technical writers throughout North America develop online documentation through her highly regarded seminars. Donna now uses her 20+ years of expertise to help clients meet their staffing needs. She also works closely with candidates in finding jobs that meet both their personal and business needs.

Donna lives in Clinton, NJ and is married with one teenage son, Alex, and his dog Orbi, an English Cocker Spaniel.

Christina Bottomley

Christina is technical with seven years experience writing and managing technical documentation for software companies. In 2005, she finished an M.S. in Technical Communication at the University of Washington. Her master's project was a survey of practices and knowledge used to create documentation for software engineers, which she presented at the IEEE's IPCC 2005.

Currently, Christina is a technical writer and usability specialist for company that makes Web and mobile applications. She is also the editor for the STC's Information Architecture and Information Design SIG. Before moving to NYC last year, she worked for Microsoft, Amazon.com, and RealNetworks. Christina says she really likes New York, but misses hills, evergreen trees, and good coffee.

John Posada

John Posada is currently a technical writer with EMC Corporation in White Plains, NY. John has over 18 years technical writing experience, having worked as both employee and contractor at Barnes&Noble.com, Ernst&Young LLP, Western Union, Avaya Communication, Merck Pharm., among others. John currently lives in Highlands NJ with his girlfriend of nine years, Pat, and a spoiled pug named Otis.

As Program Coordinator, John's approach to selecting topics is to find subjects that members can use immediately to increase their value as a technical writer to their employer or client and that immediately justify the time and expense to attend the monthly meetings.

Member News

Barbara Giamonna, a long-time member of the chapter before relocating to California was selected as an Associate Fellow in the Society for Technical Communications. The rank of associate fellow "is conferred only upon a senior member who has attained distinction in the field of technical communication."

Please send us any personal or professional news and we'll print it in the next issue.

Upcoming Meetings and Programs

Check the calendar on the chapter Web site for current schedule and details on upcoming events: <http://www.stcnymetro.org/events/events.htm>.

MADCAP Flare Workshop with Neil Perrin – Saturday, February 24 – 8:30 – 4:30 – 1290 Avenue of the Americas (contact Donna for details)

Implementing XML and DITA Across a Fortune 500 Enterprise with Paul Masalsky of EMC Corporation - May, 2007

Paul Masalsky is an information architect and program manager at EMC Corporation. He is responsible for implementing a corporate-wide XML authoring environment at EMC. He has 17 years experience in software as a developer, technical writer, trainer, and manager.

Paul will address real-life processes, problems, and solutions he is encountering while implementing XML and DITA across a Fortune 500 enterprise."