Meet the AccessAbility SIG!

Universal Accessibility … the "Impossible" Dream

By Dan Voss, Orlando Chapter, AccessAbility SIG Manager

The Story Of the Starfish

Sometimes the pursuit of universal accessibility seems like an impossible dream. There are so many hurdles between us and that noble vision. Can we achieve it 100%? Perhaps not. But can we try? You bet we can. It calls to mind Judy Skinner's compelling closing to her landmark article, "My Brain Works…My Legs Don't: Let's Take the 'Dis' Out of 'Disabilities'":

"I'm reminded of the story about the beach strewn with starfish and the little girl picking them up and throwing them back in the ocean.

'Little girl,' a passer-by said, 'what are you doing?'

'I'm saving starfish,' she replied.

'But there are so many! Your efforts can't possibly make a difference.'

As she picked up another starfish, the little girl said, 'It makes a difference to that one.'

We ask you to help us make a difference."

(Skinner, 2000, *Proceedings* to 47th STC Conference, pp. 217-220)

Thanks, Judy!

I'm pleased to report that Judy will be honored at the conference as the recipient of the AccessAbility SIG's first Distinguished SIG Service Award. She was our founder, she was our manager for three years, and she will be our spiritual leader forever.

When the gavel goes down on the progression on disabilities and accessibility at 4 p.m. next Tuesday in Dallas (see flip side), the name of the sponsoring Special Needs SIG will be officially changed to the AccessAbility SIG, by a nearly unanimous vote of its membership.

At the same time, our official logo will become the injured but nonetheless airborne butterfly you see on this page, sustained by our new official motto: "The Wind Beneath Your Wings."* This action was also taken by a strong consensus of the membership.

The injured butterfly is especially significant as our new symbol, not only because it represents the successful triumph of abilities over disabilities, but because it represents the metamorphosis the SIG itself has experienced over the past 5 years in its progression from an original Special Needs Committee of 20 people to the dynamic and growing organization of more than 200 members it is today.

Originally formed as a support group for technical communicators with disabilities, the Special Needs Committee realized along the way that this goal represented only part of what needed to be accomplished. The other half was to reach out to *all* technical communicators— not just those with disabilities—and help them design information products that are more accessible to *end users* with disabilities.

With that realization, our mission suddenly expanded tenfold—from the several hundred technical communicators in STC with a disability who are successfully practicing our profession to literally millions of users whose ability to access the information in the products we create depends on our ability to accommodate their special needs as we design those products.

It's vast market—that's a business reality. Being more knowledgeable about accessibility issues is becoming a valuable skill in the technical communicator's toolset, increasing the value he/she brings to the organization. But it's also a pressing need in our society—and that's an ethical imperative.

Why should a large percentage of our population be disenfranchised from its rights to basic knowledge? We no longer accept the concept the people in wheelchairs are on their own when it comes to accessing buildings. Why should we accept the concept that people with limited or no vision are on their own when it comes to accessing the most important advance in communication since the printing press—the Web? The answer is simple. We shouldn't.

And that's how this SIG metamorphosed from a small support group into a dynamic organization committed to educational and informational outreach that will help make not only the world of technical communication but the world in general a friendlier place to be for people who, through no fault of their own, do not possess one or more of the basic physical, intellectual, or emotional capabilities that the rest of us take for granted.

So our mission, simply expressed, is universal accessibility.

Problem. That's not possible, right? Well, technically, I suppose, no, it isn't. I refer you to Judy Skinner's starfish story (see box) for details. I'm not sure exactly how many starfish the Special Needs SIG has helped swim back into the mainstream of our profession and even the ocean of life, but I can tell you the list is long. I can also tell you that the list will never be long enough for the AccessAbility SIG. But that won't stop us from giving it everything we've got. We invite you to join us in our mission.

Dallas Tip: Don't Miss the AccessAbility SIG Progression!

From *Dis*abled to *En*abled: Meeting Special Needs to Ensure Accessibility

This enlightening and practical progression is not just for technical communicators with disabilities. It can enable any of us to create communication products that are more accessible to people with disabilities by heightening our awareness of the barriers to accessibility so that we can build solutions into the product design process. Members of STC's AccessAbility SIG focus on both

the technical and philosophical aspects of brief presentations and then moderate to accommodate specific disabilities and is twofold: (1) explain how a particular visual impairment, mobility restriction, accompany aging) can impede the practice can be done to accommodate the special products more accessible to end users with impairment. Other topics include the role

meeting this challenge. Table hosts make discussions on how to harness technology improve product accessibility. The objective disability (e.g., hearing impairment, fibromyalgia, the natural deficits that of technical communication and what need; and (2) show how we can make our disabilities, such as visual or auditory of telecommuting as a career enabler for

technical communicators with disabilities, using online resources to help meet special needs, and dealing with the philosophical burdens of sustained advocacy for the cause of universal enablement.

Topics (participants choose three 25-minute round-table presentations/discussions)

- "The 'Dead-End Syndrome': Applying the Principles of Usability and Technical Communication to Improve Accessibility at Major Hotel/Conference Facilities." Fabien Vais, Montreal Chapter
- "The 'Starfish Chamber': Working for a World Where Everyone Counts." Dan Voss, Orlando Chapter
- "What's Wrong with Being 70?" Andy Malcolm, Rochester Chapter*
- "Traveling 'Route 508': A One-Way Street to Universal Accessibility." Gloria Reece, Atlanta Chapter, and Kathy Bine, Washington, D.C., Chapter
- "Have Modem, *Won't* Travel: Telecommuting for Technical Communicators with Disabilities." Helen Marty, So. Arizona Chapter
- "Taming the Disability Beast: Job Accommodations for Employees with Hearing Loss." Lori Gillen, Boston Chapter, and Judy Vinegar, New Mexico Kachina Chapter.
- "Acquiring Reasonable Accommodations: Learning to Live and Work with Fibromyalgia." Pauline Horn, SW Ontario Chapter
- "But I Don't *Have* a Disability! Strategies for Preparing Writers to Research and Design Accessible Documents." Gail Lippincott, Lone Star Chapter
- "Our SIG's 'e-Lifelines': Tapping Online Resources to Help Meet Special Needs." Cynthia Lockley, Washington, D.C., Chapter, and Mike Murray, Orlando Chapter
- "508 in Plain English: An Author's Survival Guide." Representative(s) of eHelp Corporation, San Diego, CA.

* Presenter, who is on the STC Board, has a conflict with an STC Forum but has provided a "self-service" table-top demo on his topic.

Other Cool Places to Visit on the Road to AccessAbility

- Check out the AccessAbility SIG's dynamic and ever-growing Web site. It already represents one of the best available online sources of information on special needs and disabilities, both as they pertain to technical communication and in general … and it grows every day!   http://www.stcsig.org/sn/index.shtml

- Check out the inaugural edition of this newsletter … 18 data-rich yet aesthetically pleasing pages chock full of substantive information on disabilities and accessibility, yet with a creative flair that will keep you reading from cover to cover. Not to mention literally hundreds of valuable links to Web-based resources.   http://www.stcsig.org/sn/PDF/achieve_jan03.pdf

- Check out the joint edition of *Achieve!* and the U-SIG's *Usability Interface,* which is just about to hit the streets. You can find an online version of the basic newsletter at http://www.stcsig.org/sn/PDF/achieve_apr03.pdf, and you can find a dozen more articles on related subjects in an extensive online annex to that edition, at http://www.stcsig.org/usability/newsletter/. The articles in the annex will also be appearing in Volume 1, Number 3, of *Achieve!* this summer, along with all the regular features and a remarkable in-depth autobiographical odyssey from a vision problem that dates to early childhood all the way to a Ph.D.

- Check out our informative, data-rich, and user-friendly *Conference Guide for People with Special Needs*, published online and on paper to help Dallas conference attendees with disabilities and special needs to have the best possible experience. You can find it at http://www.stcsig.org/sn/PDF/sn_conference_guide_may03.pdf.

Want to Join Us?

Simplest way is to grab (well, make that accost) one of the AccessAbility SIG members sporting the waycool butterfly badges. We'll give you a badge, we'll give you some business cards, we'll give you a lollipop, and we'll set you up with a turnkey SIG sign-up form. We'll probably also fill your ear with excitement and enthusiasm. We tend to do that.

If you somehow miss us, you can simply download the SIG sign-up form from http://www.stc.org/PDF_Files/sigform.pdf.

Trust me, an affiliation with this deeply committed and wonderful bunch of people will enrich your professional life in a way that you cannot possibly imagine. OK, don't trust me—try it!