

ACHIEVE!

A-SIG Needs New Leaders To Carry On an Important Mission

From the A-SIG Leadership Team

Fellow A-SIG Members:

The AccessAbility SIG faces a major challenge this spring as we seek to forge ahead into 2006-7 and beyond pursuing our dual mission of providing resources to technical communicators (as well as people in general) with disabilities and also helping technical communicators develop information products that are accessible to users with disabilities.

The challenge is an upcoming transition of leadership as a number of people who have put many hours and much energy into the SIG take a step back into support roles. Before we provide details on this challenge, we will briefly summarize what the A-SIG has accomplished to date and who have served as its leaders in pursuit of these achievements.

Our Successful Past

In its short history, STC's small but dynamic AccessAbility SIG (previously the Special Needs SIG and Special Needs Committee) has achieved some remarkable accomplishments:

- In 2001-2002, in the narrow space of 12 months, the SIG grew from a committee of 18 to an international disabilities advocacy organization numbering more than 200 and representing 11 nations.
- At each of the last four international STC conferences, we have published a comprehensive accessibility guide to help ensure a positive experience for attendees with special needs. The fifth in this series is presently in production for the 53rd annual conference in Las Vegas this May.
- The fully accessible A-SIG Web site has grown into an award-winning, internationally recognized resource on disabilities and accessibility, and it continues to blaze new trails.
- Our tri-annual online newsletter *Achieve!* has amassed an impressive archive of data-rich yet highly creative editions, plus hard-copy special editions at the annual conference with a roadmap to accessibility-related sessions and activities.
- We lead-edited and contributed enormously to an edition of *Technical Communication* (Feb 2006) that is thematically dedicated to accessibility and disability issues in technical communication.
- And last, but hardly least, our robust LISTSERV™ features daily exchanges that include the latest technical information on accessibility, questions and answers, and interesting leads to other online resources on accessibility. In addition, the LISTSERV serves as a medium for both informational and emotional support to people with disabilities, both within and outside STC—a tradition that harkens back to the legacy charter of the original Special Needs Committee (SNC), to which we trace our lineage.

Our Humble Beginning

Our pioneer was Judy Skinner, who, after a courageous recovery from a near-fatal auto accident, founded the SNC in 1998 to help technical communicators with disabilities in the practice of our profession. Judy put in 3 intense years as manager of the committee (for which she later earned our first Distinguished SIG Service Award). In 2000, she was forced to step down due to both the workload and the special emotional pressures involved in leading such an organization. “We can’t help everybody,” Judy said, “but we have to try.” This calls to mind the compelling story with which Judy ends her landmark paper for the *Proceedings* of STC’s 47th Annual International Conference, “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.”



Everybody counts. Boil the AccessAbility SIG down to two words, and those are the two.

Our Evolution

When Judy handed Dan Voss the reins to the SNC in 2000, she warned him about the emotional toll the position can take on its leaders.



A legacy of leadership. Special Needs Committee founder Judy Skinner accepts her Distinguished SIG Service Award at the STC conference in Dallas, flanked by the two A-SIG managers who followed her, Dan Voss (left) and Fabien Vais.

Two years of intense activity, first to convert the committee to a SIG when it was terminated by the Board and then to establish a secure financial footing despite a budgetary shortfall caused by per-capita SIG funding, gave truth to Judy’s words. In 2002, after the SIG had grown dramatically through a worldwide membership campaign (Operation Starfish) and was firmly established financially, Dan turned the managership over to Fabien Vais, who piloted the newly renamed AccessAbility SIG from then until spring 2005. Dan remained actively involved, however, assisting Fabien with the administrative aspects of the managership.

By spring 2005, the SIG continued to accomplish great things, but both Dan and Fabien were experiencing the same “burnout” phenomenon Judy Skinner described years earlier. The solution, for the 2005-6 year we are currently in, was to “divide and conquer” the growing responsibilities of leading our highly active organization by assembling a management team consisting

of Fabien, Dan, former *Achieve!* editor and long-time active A-SIG member Mike Murray, and a relative newcomer, international “sparkplug” Karen Mardahl. Crafting a strategic workshare, the team has functioned very successfully this year. Buttressed by Web diva Cynthia Lockley and assistant Leslie Reed, newsletter editors Lisa Pappas and now Terry Smith, copy editor Kim McConnell,

membership manager Mak Pandit, research and publishing specialist Gail Lippincott (co-lead editor of the February 2006 edition of *Technical Communication*), the A-SIG steering team, and other active A-SIG members, the foursome has continued the SIG’s progress and advanced our agenda.

Our 2005-2006 Accomplishments

Among the A-SIG’s accomplishments this year are the following:

- Winning the SIG Pacesetter Award at the 2005 conference for outstanding performance in the research, writing, editing, and production of the annual accessibility guide for the conference.



A-SIG co-manager Fabien Vais displays our 2005 SIG Pacesetter Award.

- Publication of a comprehensive series of articles centering on disabilities and accessibility in the February 2006 edition of *Technical Communication*.
 - Successful rechartering under the STC Transformation initiative.
 - Development of a comprehensive five-year strategic plan to implement the new charter.
 - Publication of an online SIG directory and a calendar of events for 2005-6.
 - Continuation of our four vigorous communication media—the Web site, the LISTSERV, the newsletter, and the conference accessibility guide—and creation of an exciting new online collaborative workplace for the newsletter production team, a wiki.
- Anticipating the need to bring on some new leaders to continue this tradition in 2006-7 (as well as to prepare for SIG fiscal autonomy), we have also developed and codified procedures for future governance, including the following:
 - Succession plan
 - Transition plan
 - Election procedure
 - A-SIG officerships and job descriptions

Our New Challenges

This past October, Fabien was compelled to step down from an active management role due to economic and medical issues at home, although he is carrying the annual conference guide to completion for a fifth consecutive year and he remains active on the LISTSERV. That turn of events, in and of itself, opened up a leadership gap that must be filled next year.

On top of that, both Dan and Mike are announcing via this “e-blast” that they, too, must step back from their management positions at the end of the current STC year (June 30)—Dan due to the cumulative impact of 5 ½ years of active leadership service in the A-SIG, Mike due both to 3 years of A-SIG service on top of the presidency of the Orlando Chapter, and to major new commitments to other Society-level positions. And the co-editors of our outstanding newsletter, Kim McConnell and Terry Smith, also must dial back their level of activity next year. Kim and Karen Mardahl will continue to assist in copy editing, but we need a lead editor to plan and produce *Achieve!*



Gail Lippincott, who co-edited the February 2006 edition of Technical Communication on accessibility, and A-SIG co-manager Mike Murray enjoy the STC Honors Banquet at the Seattle conference.

Of the four co-managers, Karen alone remains available for active leadership duty in 2006-7—and then, upon the strong advice of her three “retiring” colleagues, only if a number of other SIG members step up to join her on a new management team.



A-SIG co-manager Karen Mardahl brings experience to the 2006-7 leadership team. Join her!

OK, Here's the Bottom Line.

For the A-SIG to continue to flourish, the SIG officerships, committee managerships, and media spots that must be filled for 2006-7 include the following (*=Elected position; rest are appointive):

Position	Status**	Responsibilities
SIG Manager*	Open	Administrative lead; head Steering Team; handle problem-solving, Board reports, succession/elections, SIG awards, other specific activities
Assistant SIG Manager*	Open	Workshare as assigned by the SIG Manager
Accessibility Manager	Open	Conference accessibility guide, site inspections, expert resource
Research and Publishing Manager	Open	Coordinate publishing efforts, including sessions at conference and educational outreach initiatives
Membership Manager	Filled	Contact new members each month; pursue new members
Newsletter Editor	Open	Plan issue content; solicit articles from authors; write articles and columns; coordinate copy editing cycle; and produce <i>Achieve!</i>
Copy Editors	Partial	Edit articles in <i>Achieve!</i> ; produce accessible .html version
Web Site Administrators	Filled	Maintain and expand Web site (with assistance)
LISTSERV Administrator	Open	Monitor and control LISTSERV
Secretary/Treasurer*	Open	Budget, accounting, fund-raising; assist administrative manager with record-keeping and reporting to the Board. This is a critical position since the SIGs will become fiscally autonomous, like geographical communities, on July 1, 2006.
Public Relations Manager	Open	Initiate, promote, and coordinate accessibility-related public relations activities, both within and outside STC
Mentors/Advisors	Filled	Past officers
Steering Team	Partial	All of the above plus other active SIG members

** The areas we have covered for 2006-7 are shaded in blue . The areas we have partially covered for 2006-7 are shaded in yellow . To ensure accessibility for those using screen readers, the textual information on the current status in column 2 duplicates what is denoted by the shading, as follows:

- Filled = Office is covered for 2006-7 (same as blue)
- Partial = Office is partially covered for 2006-7 but more volunteers are needed (same as yellow)
- Open = Office must be filled for 2006-7 via election (*) or appointment.

As you can see, we have eight positions to fill. Any position for which we cannot find at least one candidate will become vacant on June 30, 2006. These should be easily filled with all the talent we have in the A-SIG.

Current leaders who have “re-upped” for 2006-7 include co-manager Karen Mardahl (not yet aligned with a position beyond copy editing), membership manager Mak Pandit, and Web administrators Cynthia Lockley and Leslie Reed.

Fabien, Dan, and Mike have all agreed to serve as senior mentors/advisors to the new A-SIG leaders who step into the positions they are vacating, and Kim and Terry have agreed to guide the new editor for the newsletter, including assistance on the first issue and production of the accessible .html version. Fabien will coach the new accessibility manager on the conference guide and other matters pertaining to accessibility, Mike will share his extensive administrative expertise with the new SIG manager, and Dan will draw upon his “cradle-to-tomb” knowledge of the SIG’s publishing initiatives to guide the new research and publishing manager as well as ensure a smooth transition of the budget and finances to the new secretary/treasurer. In addition, all five will remain a phone call or e-mail away for advice when any thorny issues arise.

Our Challenge to You

So if you like what our SIG has accomplished over the past several years and you would like to see it continue, please consider accepting a position of leadership responsibility in 2006-7. The more people who step up, the better the workshare can be divided, lessening the amount of time required from each member of the leadership team.

This newsletter is the call to action on the election or appointment of eight new AccessAbility SIG officers for 2006-7. The procedures governing the elections, along with the job descriptions and our formal succession and transition plans, are posted to the Web site (see <http://www.stcsig.org/sn/aboutsig.shtml>). Also posted to the Web site are our five-year strategic plan and our SIG recharter, which contains our goals and objectives, our strategies for achieving them, and the specific activities designed to execute those strategies. Note that the first three columns of the five-year plan are keyed to the goals, strategies, and activities in the recharter.

This year, due to the extremely tight timeframe between now and the conference where a major management transition needs to begin, we are stressing the self-nomination path for this year's elections and appointments, although we will obviously also accept nominations on behalf of a colleague.

Between now and April 5, Dan Voss (daniel.w.voss@lmco.com) and Mike Murray (davoice@fastmail.fm) will be accepting nominations for the following three elective positions:

- SIG Manager
- Assistant SIG Manager
- Secretary/Treasurer

They are also seeking volunteers for five key appointive positions:

- LISTSERV Administrator
- Newsletter Editor
- Public Relations Manager
- Accessibility Manager
- Research and Publishing Manager

If we have two people who are strongly interested in the same elective position, we will have a competitive election. Otherwise, we will match people to positions and float a single ballot to confirm the new slate of officers.

Having served the SIG long and—we hope!—well, we can assure you that while the commitment involves both intellectual and emotional energy as well as time, the payoff in terms of personal growth and satisfaction is unquestionably commensurate with the effort. This organization truly is unlike any other we have ever been involved with. The mission—universal accessibility—is daunting, but the camaraderie, the spirit, and the achievements have been incredible. And we won't fall off your radar screen, we promise—we'll be there to guide you if you need us. 

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