Have Modem, Won't Travel: Telecommuting as a Career Enabler for Technical Communicators with Disabilities

Helen A. Marty

The detailed Mission Plan for the Special Needs Special Interest Group (SIG) of the Society for Technical Communication (STC) has an objective to extend the availability of online technical communication resources and a strategy for achieving that objective. Specifically, Strategy 1.5, reads as follows:

> *Encourage Special Needs SIG members to research and report on the use of telecommuting in the field of technical communication and study the viability of telecommunication as a means of increasing the employability of practitioners with special needs.*

INTRODUCTION

The SNSIG, formed in 2002 as a successor to the Special Needs Committee, focuses on assisting people who have special needs, such as low vision, hearing loss, low mobility, cognitive difficulties, and other challenges by helping to accommodate their disabilities and making information more accessible to them. As of February 7, 2003, the SNSIG consisted of 180 members and was growing by leaps and bounds.

The SNSIG wants to develop a resource notebook (guide) for technical communicators with special needs who would like to start telecommunicating and who need to convince management of the feasibility and advantages of telecommunicating. To do this, the SNSIG plans to request a research grant from the STC to study the potential use of telecommuting for enhancing the employability of technical communicators with disabilities that limit travel. The STC offers merit grants for creative services that benefit chapters or STC as a whole.

GRANT REQUIREMENTS

To satisfy the requirements for a merit grant, the SNSIG must:

➢ Demonstrate initiative, effective leadership, and member support.

➢ Provide background sufficient to justify the grant.

➢ Specify purpose, amount requested, planned disbursements, and completion date of activity.

➢ Submit to director-sponsor a brief report outlining the use of the funds, and the effects and benefits derived from the activity.

Leadership

SNSIG members will provide the leadership necessary to submit this proposal and, if funding is granted, will hire a research assistant to help develop a resource guide.

Background

A literature review is necessary to establish:

1. What has been done or is know about telecommuting and the need the grant will address.

2. Where we see the gap.

Telecommuting has been widely addressed for several years. One group that has not been targeted is people with special needs. We will need to cite many sources discussing telecommuting.

One area of particular importance is the need to obtain quantifiable data concerning the gains in productivity that can be achieved via telecommunication. If we can get this data, we will have provided a significant service to potential telecommunicators who are trying to make a business case for working remotely from their place of employment or a potential place of employment.

Ideas for Convincing Clients

People who telecommute can:

➢ Save the client money by providing their own office space, supplies, and equipment, such as a computer with special adaptive equipment, voice-activated software, or an ergonomically designed office.

➢ Be more productive from their own office where there are few distractions, such as frequent interruptions or a noisy work environment.

- ➢ Be available for meetings and teleconferencing.

- ➢ Work for a trial period so that the client can evaluate their results.

Grant Amount/Completion Date

At this time, the amount to be requested has not been determined because the Society has limited funds available for grant proposals due to the impact of the recession upon membership.

Depending on the Society's budgetary standing, the SNSIG plans to submit the grant to the Society's Committee for Research Grants in the third or fourth quarter of 2003. The completion date for the resource guide is anticipated to be the second or third quarter of 2004.

Report to Director-Sponsor

Within one year after receiving the grant, the SNSIG will submit a brief report outlining the use of the funds, and the effects and benefits derived from the activity.

Note: For more information regarding the SNSIG, check out our Web site, our first newsletter, and the presentations and articles associated with our progression at the 49th conference last May. The URLs for those three are as follows:

- ➢ Web site: http://www.stcsig.org/sn/index.shtml

- ➢ Vol. 1, No. 1 of newsletter, *Achieve!* : http://www.stcsig.org/sn/PDF/achieve_jan03.pdf

- ➢ Conference materials: http://www.stc-orlando.org/prodev/49notes/SNC.asp

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Helen A. Marty
Technical Writer
Misys Healthcare Systems
4801 E. Broadway Blvd.
Tucson, AZ 85711-3609
520-745-0911 (home)

Helen Marty has 29 years' experience in the technical communication field. After retiring IBM Corporation where she was a technical editor and writer, Marty graduated from the University of Arizona with a B.A in English. She currently works for Misys Healthcare Systems, creating both hard copy and online information for software applications. Marty has been a member of STC for 11 years. She was a founding member of the Southern Arizona (SAZ) Chapter and is currently serving as chapter president. Marty was a founding member of the Special Needs SIG and is currently a steering team member and copyeditor for the newsletter, *Achieve*!. Marty received an Award of Merit as copyeditor for the SAZ chapter newsletter, *The Border Line*. She has served as a judge for PAO and newsletter competitions, and has presented at the SAZ chapter and STC's 49th Annual Conference.