# Let's Take the "Dis" Out of Disabilities:
## A Progression on How to Harness Technology to Meet Special Needs in Technical Communication and to Ensure User Accessibility in Communication Products

**Abstract:** In this enlightening and practical progression, members of STC's Special Needs Committee (SNC) focus on how we can leverage technology both to assist technical communicators with disabilities in the practice of our profession and also how we can make the communication products we create more accessible to end users who have disabilities. The session begins with a brief introduction of the SNC progression hosts and their topics. In the ensuing progression, the table hosts make brief presentations and then moderate discussions that provide a detailed look at accommodating specific disabilities, improving product accessibility, and addressing issues involved with special needs in technical communication. The objective is twofold: (1) explain how a particular special need (e.g., hearing impairment, visual impairment, mobility restriction) can impede the practice of technical communication and what can be done to accommodate the disability; and (2) show how we can make our products more accessible to end users with disabilities, such as visual or auditory impairment. Other areas to be addressed include the ethical and legal issues surrounding the employment of persons with disabilities and the accommodation of their special needs in the workplace and the role of telecommuting for technical communicators with special needs. Following the discussion is a brief question-and-answer session in which the presenters address the audience's concerns relating to special needs and solicit their suggestions for the SNC's future initiatives as it takes on a new identity as the Special Needs SIG.

**Preliminary Plan for Panel Discussion and Progression:**

**Introduction (5 minutes)**

• Introduction of SNC table hosts and their topics. Dan Voss, SNC manager.

**Progression (75 minutes: Attendees select three 25-minute sessions)**

• Dealing with Special Mobility Needs: A Lesson in Patience and Coping. Fabien Vais

• The Ethics of Special Needs: It's a Matter of Fairness. Dan Voss

• Writing for the Disadvantaged Reader. Andy Malcolm

• Working to 508: Web Page Text Design for Low Vision. Gloria Reece

• The Role of Telecommuting as a Career Enabler for Technical Communicators with Disabilities. Helen Marty

• What You Can't Hear *Can* Hurt You: Overcoming the Physical and Emotional Barriers of Hearing Impairment in the Practice of Technical Communication. Lori Gillen.

• The Phantom Foe: Learning to Live and Work with Fibromyalgia. Lori Allen

**Question-and-Answer and Discussion (10 minutes)**