

VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES:

Weaving the Human

Web

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Our personal and professional communities are changing. Not only are working teams becoming broader and more global, but so are communities of practice. We need look no further than our own Society for examples of this pervasive change. The STC transformation is a recognition of this trend. In this article, I will explore virtual communities and the ways they help us define ourselves professionally.

What Is a Community?

Let's start with a definition of community. In our work for the transformation, Ginny Redish, Fred Sampson, and I defined communities this way:

A community is a group of people who share common interests, activities, and initiatives; who communicate regularly; and who derive benefit from their association.

Let's look at some of the implications of this definition. First, a community is a group of *people*, not a place or an asso-

ciation. Whether it is an informal group or one bound by structure and governance, a community is based on the people who are its members.

Communities are based on a common interest, not just common demographic descriptions. Individuals are members of a community because they choose to be, because they identify with the common interest of the other members. You might have red hair but not be a member of the Red-Headed League. You might join a community based on professional practice because it is a central part of your work, or as a way to learn more about its area of interest.

Communities are active. They are defined by what members do as a group, whether those activities are as loosely structured as online networking or are formally organized around goals, roles, and results. In his keynote speech at STC's 51st Annual Conference last May in Baltimore, Ben Shneiderman identified four activities for a community:

- Collect—activities in which the community is a magnet for ideas, information, tools, skills, and techniques

- Relate—activities in which the primary focus is communication, creating connections between people and ideas
- Create—activities that innovate, moving the focus of the community forward
- Donate—activities in which the community “gives back” to the world or disseminates its work

Finally, communities must provide value to their members. The benefit in belonging to a community may be tangible or intangible. There may be financial value such as discounts, or access to databases or journals. Or the benefit may be measured in more emotional values, such as a sense of camaraderie or professional identification.

We Are Defined by Our Communities

In her keynote speech at Usability Professionals' Association 2004 conference, Ginny Redish pointed out that we all belong to many communities—by birth and by choice, for personal reasons and for professional reasons. Some communities are geographic, or based on regular face-to-face meetings. Others are virtual, maintained through Web

sites, discussion lists, journals, phone calls, or other ways of connecting.

We can identify professional communities, as well as those based on education, family, personal interests, geographic neighbors, and religious or ethnic communities. (A generic map of these communities might look like Figure 1.) If we look at a map of Ginny's own communities, we can see her many areas of interest and how they connect and overlap (Figure 2). For example, she is a member of the STC, UPA and ACM's Computer Human Interaction (CHI) communities, which often meet together in her local Washington, D.C., area. Whatever the communities to which we belong, they help define us by revealing our interests and social networks. Of course, communities and interests will be different for every individual. We each have our personal matrix of communities as well as our specific personal communities. For example, the ethnic/religious/national community may not be important to you. Your professional communities may include STC and other communities related to your employer or your specific knowledge domain. What would your personal "community map" look like?

We Are More Multidisciplinary

Today's workers are mobile, matrixed, and interdependent. Those are just buzzwords, but they do speak to changes in how we work. Disciplines and skills are less concentrated, with fewer people doing "just one thing" for their entire career.

Members of the Mercer University STC student chapter got it when they created a T-shirt explaining technical communication. It says, "I'm a graphic designing, quality controlling, product supporting, project managing, engineer translating, software developing, technical editing, corporate branding, usability testing, document designing, website creating, manual writing major." And that's just what they know about now. Today's careers require continual growth and learning as jobs, technologies, and disciplines evolve.

How many people are still using the same tools now as when they started their

careers? We've gone from typewriter to word processor to hypertext to dynamic information delivered to our mobile phones. The basic communication skills may be the same, but the context keeps

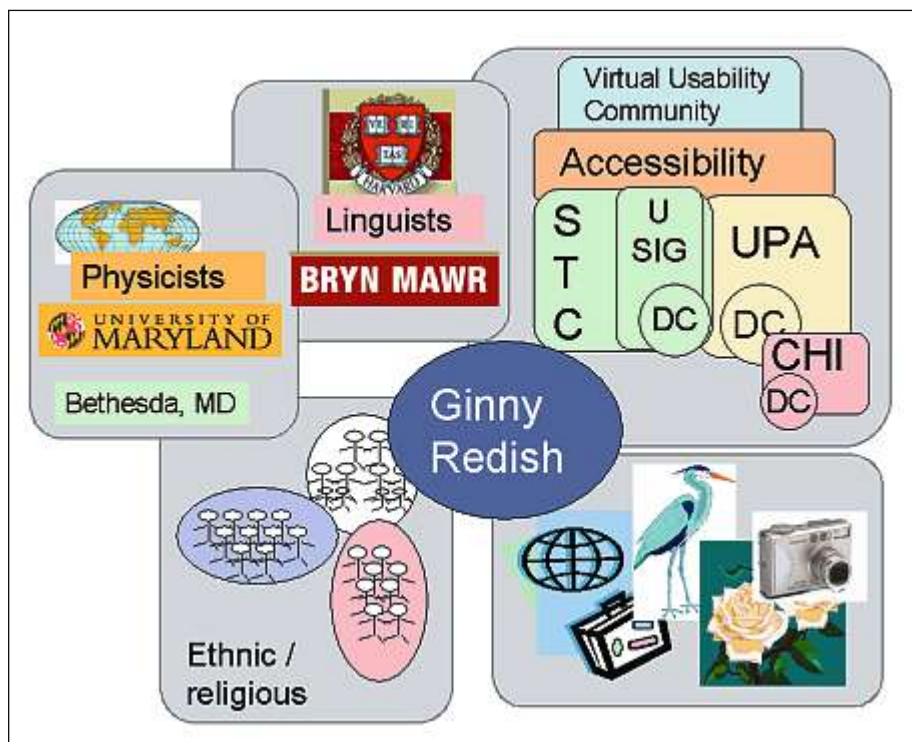
changing as we deliver the information in new languages and on new platforms.

One of the ways we keep up with the challenges of new tools, techniques, and ideas is through professional communities. As of late 2004, 43 percent of STC members belong to at least one

Figure 1. A generic community map.



Figure 2. A map of Ginny Redish's communities.



SIG, even paying extra dues for each one. Even more striking, more than 6,000 members belong to more than one SIG, reaching out to even more communities within the technical communication umbrella. Table 1 shows more information on SIG membership.

Table 1. SIG Membership Data as of May 2004

This many members...	Belong to this many SIGs...
Almost 3,000	1 SIG
More than 2,500	2 SIGs
More than 1,500	3 SIGs
Almost 900	4 SIGs
More than 500	5 SIGs
More than 750	more than 5 SIGs

Communities of Practice Are Transformative

Within large global corporations, communities of practice bring together people with related interests and skills, just as SIGs do in STC. When expertise is scattered, it takes dedicated effort to bring it together and make it available to everyone who needs it. Early knowledge management projects focused on collecting and categorizing “knowledge,” but we quickly learned that we also needed to understand the social systems—the communities of practice—that support knowledge sharing.

Communities researcher Etienne Wenger calls communities of practice “social learning systems.” He sees them as a special form of community, focused on a domain of knowledge: “They develop their shared practice by inter-

acting around problems, solutions, and insights, and building a common store of knowledge.”

There is no single model for communities of practice. They can be informal, even unrecognized, or they can be incorporated into the fabric of the organization and critical to its success. Wenger identifies five possible forms a community might take. (The complete article from which the following list was taken can be found at www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/lss.shtml.)

- Unrecognized—invisible to the organization and sometimes even to members themselves
- Bootlegged—visible only informally to a circle of the people in the know
- Legitimized—officially sanctioned as a valuable entity
- Strategic—widely recognized as central to the organization’s success

Table 2. STC SIGs and Largest Chapters as of May 2004

All STC SIGs		Chapters with more than 200 members	
Name	Members	Name	Members
Information Design	1,827	Silicon Valley	816
Technical Editing	1,746	Boston	792
Usability	1,674	Puget Sound	616
Online Information	1,670	Washington, DC	574
Consulting & Independent Contracting	1,475	Twin Cities	557
Instructional Design & Learning	1,320	Chicago	458
Single Sourcing	1,114	Atlanta	452
Management	1,088	Rocky Mountain	447
Emerging Technologies	1,027	Toronto	443
Marketing Communication	816	New York Metro	404
International Technical Communication	770	Houston	389
Lone Writer	764	Lone Star	375
Policies & Procedures	657	Philadelphia Metro	344
Scientific Communication	625	Orange County	309
Illustrators and Visual Designers	521	Willamette Valley	306
Education & Research	488	San Diego	297
Quality	487	Carolina	283
Indexing	476	Southeastern Michigan	251
Environmental, Safety & Health Communication	243	Canada West Coast	242
Canadian Issues	236	Austin	215
AccessAbility	227	Phoenix	201
TOTAL	19,251		8,771

- Transformative—capable of redefining its environment and the direction of the organization

In this context, the idea of transforming STC through its communities makes sense. This transformation has already begun. We already have many kinds of communities within STC, from our local chapters to the many different SIGs. Just reading the list of SIGs (Table 2) is a good way to get a sense of the breadth of interests within technical communication. By acknowledging the many types of communities, we allow them to answer many different needs for STC members.

Going Virtual

One of today’s challenges—and trends—is that many of our communities are virtual and must be sustained without the support of regular face-to-face meetings.

In our corporations, mergers and reorganizations and new ways of thinking about project teams have created distributed teams that can span the globe. It’s no longer unusual to have people in many different locations all working together. These virtual teams expand our community, connecting us to others in

our field or our projects. Outsourcing has created a lot of dislocation and anxiety, but it is also an opportunity to welcome new people into our community of technical communication.

Sometimes virtual teams are formed because a team member moves, decides to work from home, or has some other flexible work arrangement. Virtual teams have the same needs as those located in a single building, even if they meet those needs differently.

With busy lives and prohibitive traffic, virtual communities can help people keep in touch. In a membership survey that STC conducted in 2002, 42.4 percent of the respondents said that they had not attended a single chapter meeting in the previous twelve months. We therefore need to think of new ways to keep members in contact—and the STC transformation is an initiative to do that.

Change Demands Tools and Tools Create Change

Are we creating tools to meet the needs of our busy lives, or are new tools creating new possibilities for long-distance communities? From blogs to instant messaging to listservs to webinars, professionals, including technical com-

municators, are doing more and more of their networking and professional development virtually, across time and space.

Even families are using online tools to stay in touch. New Web sites and services cater to families online with e-cards, family calendars, and photo albums.

We’ve come a long way since 1991, when I worked on a team separated by 2,500 miles. We had a BBS to let us share files (no e-mail yet), used the fax to send sketches back and forth, and talked a lot on the phone. Now shared work spaces allow real-time collaboration.

To help our new communities thrive, we need to find the tools to help them create a virtual world as rich and responsive as the real world.

New Communities Meet New Needs

We form communities for many reasons and around many types of shared interests. Some communities might be based on “where I live,” but others connect members based on a shared industry, types of products they create, their business relationships or career status, their tools, and their approach to work or other specialties. (Figure 3 shows different aspects of one’s professional life and how they place a person in different communities.)

Our new communities can meet many different needs for networking, for learning and knowledge sharing, and for developing the profession. New communities will emerge over time, broadening and deepening the STC community and transforming technical communication as well as STC in the process. ❶

SUGGESTED READING

Redish, Janice. “Yours, Mine and Ours—Connecting Ourselves and the Communities We Belong To.” Usability Professionals Association, June 2004. www.usabilityprofessionals.org/usability_resources/conference/2004/yours-mine-ours-redish.pdf.

Wenger, Etienne. “Supporting Communities of Practice.” March 2001. www.ewenger.com/tech/index.htm.

Figure 3. One person may be drawn to multiple communities.

