

Recruiting Volunteers

(notes from a SIG Manager's Meeting + some other thoughts)

Mike Murray

Orlando Chapter Immediate Past President

AccessAbility SIG Co-Manager

LCR People Team Manager

Candidate for Society Director

- **Build the foundation** – Don't try to add "frills" before you have solidified the basics. The basics have to do with communicating and adding value. Basic *communications* include having an active LISTSERV; a vibrant, evolving Web site; and a regular newsletter (of some form). Good communications is a huge key to SIG success. *Adding value* means finding out what the members value, not what *you* think is valuable. Find out and make it happen.
- **Set the tone for new members** – Make sure each member gets a personal e-mail welcome including easy access to SIG resources. Make sure members are comfortable and tuned in right away, which establishes a very crucial, positive first impression and will ultimately influence their attitude and willingness to volunteer. Communicate early and regularly.
- **Create a positive perception** – Hand-in-hand with communications, an ongoing positive perception is extremely important. Some SIGs have been known to go all year without providing one single communication to their members, which is an obvious problem. No greeting and no communication creates a perception that the SIG is weak and that hardly anyone is doing anything. By extension (perception), joining the SIG would mean you would be asked to do a lot of work. That scares people away. If it seems like you are begging or groveling, you won't get volunteers.
- **Call it quits when you don't have any support** – We get emotionally invested in some of our communities, which is understandable. In addition to that, it is important to have a business mindset. For example, if you are the only one who seems to want an initiative or even the SIG itself to work and not enough people are stepping forward to help, you might want to consider going inactive. The Society maintains any records you have shared with them. If a real go-getter emerges in the next year or two, the Society will share this information with the new leader(s) and help get the SIG started again. The SIG won't drop off the Society books right away. On the other hand, if a SIG doesn't want to "go under" and wants the help, they should definitely receive it.

Tommy Barker

Texas Tech University (Student Chapter Faculty Advisor)

Academic Community Manager

Former Consulting & Independent Contracting SIG Manager (5 years)

- **Tap into academe** to develop the SIG leaders of tomorrow.
- Essentials of luring academics into this kind of volunteering/leadership
- Identify academics by watching for "edu" at the end of their e-mail addresses.

- Most people who work for universities and colleges have three things that they are evaluated on: teaching, research, and service. Understanding that and using that as an opportunity for academics is a good way to get them into volunteer positions in your SIG. They have good classroom ideas that people can use for teaching. For example, one of the philosophies of teaching is to involve students in the discourse community of the workplace where they might eventually be. In one of my graduate classes this semester, I had my students subscribe to a SIG LISTSERV. They read the digests and get a sense of the discipline and the discourse, which puts their classroom learning into context.
- Academics are also very interested in knowledge building; that is, research into practices and best practices and approaching that as additions to our growing knowledge base of how we do things in technical communication.
- One of my colleagues is partnering with the editing SIG in a research project. SIGs are a great doorway to the practitioner community that is a part of the field of technical communication – a counterpart to the academics. So, as SIG managers we have access to those practitioners. Setting up productive partnerships between practitioners and academics is always something that an academic will want to do.
- In the area of professional development that will be serviced, academics have to report on their service work. Filling positions in professional organizations counts as that. So if you have a project that you would like to have an academic work on, give it a name and ask someone to be a part of it. They will want to do that because it is part of their service obligation.
- So, teaching, research, and service are the three keys to the involvement of academics in the SIG.

Kit Brown

Snake River Chapter President

International Technical Communications SIG Manager

Former Society Nominating Committee Member

Former International Pubs. Competition Mgr.

- **Chunk tasks** so they don't seem quite so overwhelming.
 - People don't want to commit to an indefinite period of time. They would rather have shorter jobs that they can get done soon.
 - When planning events or your year, you do still need people who are willing to commit for longer periods of time, but look at ways to break down a project into smaller tasks (e.g., newsletter: editing, formatting, mailing).
- **Understand the skill sets and goals** of your members so you can better gauge who will be good for a particular task (e.g., a shy Membership Manager may not be the best person for that job).
- Especially in a virtual community, you need leaders who will be proactive in communicating with other members due to the lack of face-to-face interaction.

- When you want to gauge who's going to be good for a particular task, one idea is to **use a spread sheet as people introduce themselves**. Capture anything they mention that they like doing or are good at. Later when you are looking for a volunteer, you can refer to the spreadsheet for possible candidates.

Linda Gallagher

Rocky Mountain Chapter – numerous positions including President
Consulting and Independent Contracting SIG Manager

- We all struggle at times to find volunteers. None of us have definitive answers, just some ideas for your consideration.
- **Use your e-mail discussion list** a lot. Use it to ask for volunteers. This seems to work well for some of the smaller tasks.
- **Send e-blasts** – e-mail messages that go to all SIG members a few times each year. Not all members join e-mail discussion lists even though we invite them to do so. Highlight volunteer opportunities in these e-blasts. Responses vary with this technique.
- **Use your one face-to-face opportunity every year to ask for volunteers at your Annual Conference SIG business meeting**. When you are face-to-face with them and they can ask you questions and you can talk to people you have a better chance of getting volunteers. (The CIC SIG gets 20 or so attendees at that meeting.) There are also other opportunities to snag volunteers throughout the conference, such as the SIG networking luncheon, progressions or other sessions that you sponsor, etc.
- **A personal e-mail** directly to a specific individual can also be effective.

Jane Smith

Instructional Design & Learning SIG Manager
Region 5 Conference Co-chairman

- One of the most important things I can stress is **relationships**, relationships, relationships. I take a fairly **personal approach**. Once identified, I may give a person a call, begin to develop a personal relationship with them, and invite them into the team. I take a **three-tier approach**:
 - A **core team**, many of whom were at an early business meeting and have stayed with the SIG ever since.
 - A **leadership team** made up of volunteers who have much more specific tasks.
 - **People who are on the periphery who** I know are willing to **help out with specific, short-term tasks**.
- **Setting expectations** is very important. When trying to get volunteers, it helps to make clear the responsibilities and the time commitment and duration. This has been effective in putting together teams such as my Rechartering Team.
- **Gauge the interest and enthusiasm on your LISTSERV**. Watch for people who respond to questions with knowledge. Try to connect with them to join your team

- **Stay in touch.** Have regular leadership team meetings every month or so. The Instructional Design & Learning SIG meets every three weeks due to the amount of things we need to cover. We get together at a regular day and time, and we **have fun!** We have gotten to know each other very well over the phone in spite of the fact that many of us have never met face-to-face. When people enjoy being on the team, they are more willing to step up to the plate and stay involved.

Raymond Urgo

Policies and Procedures SIG Manager

Former Assistant to the President for SIGs

- **Look for ways to tap into a member's talents**, and find out what their interests and goals are in their own career so we can tie that into the volunteering aspect.
- It is also helpful to think about the task ahead of time and **write a short job description** and tasks that you want to be achieved. Express that to the candidate.
- Also consider developing a **transition plan for the individual**. There is a great opportunity for volunteers, especially virtual ones, to evaporate. Keep close tabs on them and let them know that somebody does care and someone is awaiting their services.
- **Make an announcement as soon as they come on board.** Get their name out there and create some excitement in your community. Let everyone know there is something happening. This sort of thing can be contagious and may actually result in people coming and looking for work as volunteers.
- **Mention volunteers in newsletters**, etc. and let folks know who is doing what.
- **Say "Thank you" in writing.**
- **Consider token gifts for volunteers at the end of the community year** along with a personalized letter expressing your appreciation for what they have contributed. This kind of thing can help keep volunteers.

Judy Herr

Management SIG Manager (4th year)

East Bay Chapter President (4 years)

Numerous non-STC volunteer activities

- Everyone is motivated by something different. **Help people get out of volunteering what they want.**
- It's important **never to panic** if there is a significant job that you can't fill. Eventually, as you begin to build a group of people who meet regularly and support each other, the help will come.
- The Management SIG has a **core team** of about 12 people who are always on our conference calls and who I consult consistently before we make any decisions as a SIG. In that sense, I don't consider myself a SIG manager, but rather as a spokesperson for a group of people, and I work for *them*.

- While awards and recognition are certainly important, the challenge for us is figuring out what reward each individual needs or wants. You need to be able to **assess each volunteer’s motivation**.
- The only difference between being a volunteer and a paid professional is that volunteers are not paid.
- Finding a solid core team can be slow. **A lot of face-to-face contact at the Annual Conference is important.**

Questions and Answers

Q1: Diane from the Technical Editing SIG – *I need to hear some more about **motivation**. What have you found that people respond to?*

A1: Judy Herr – I think a lot of technical communicators are broadly interested in many things. I think sometimes they would just like to try something new. They can do it with less risk as a volunteer than they can at work.

A1: Mike Murray – One of the important things you need to do is **make sure that a task or position is mutually beneficial for both the volunteer and the community**. You’re not just filling spots to fill spots; you want to make sure it’s good for the person who is filling it. This is a little tougher to do in a virtual community, so regular electronic communication becomes even more important.

A1: Jane Smith – I also use the motivation of **getting to know some great people, what we’ll learn from each other, having fun** – that sort of thing. Let them know that **“I think you could add something to the team.”**

A1: Judy Herr – Sometimes you have to do the “dirty work for awhile” – the things nobody else wants to do – until you find an appropriate volunteer. Over time, **as people become more comfortable in a position, they are more likely to volunteer for additional tasks.**

Dana Chisnell – It also **makes a difference as to who asks**. My mentor asked me to help with what turned out to be one of my first volunteer activities – the reception at the Annual Conference. It’s hard to refuse that. It’s also how I ended up being the AP for Virtual Communities.

Judy Herr – You have to **do some marketing**. You have to convince your members that you are or will soon be very successful. Never be negative around your members. Also, let people know you are there. Perception is important. Give the credit, take the blame, and be a cheerleader.

Q2: Cathy from the Scientific Communication SIG – *Are there any guidelines for sending e-blasts to your entire membership? Obviously, you don’t want to overdo it.*

A2: Linda Gallagher – I’m not aware of any existing guidelines. My own guideline is to send an e-blast approximately **quarterly or when I have something big to announce** – perhaps 4 to 6 times a year. I have used e-blasts to organize our rechartering efforts, announce a survey, and announce the survey results including links.

A2: Judy Herr – We do it about **once a month**. We discussed how many complaints we should get before we stop sending the e-blasts. We send them to every single member, including those who said they didn't want their e-mail addresses listed by STC in the directory. We have *never* received a complaint.

Other suggestions for uses included newsletters, Webinars, scholarship offerings, and pre-conference communications.

A2: Kit Brown – In the International SIG, we send **monthly** announcements. With a virtual community, it's not like you're having meetings or events every month that people can come to. So I think it's really important to stay in contact with your members, especially if you don't have an active LISTSERV. Last month, we told members about our LISTSERV in the first paragraph and told them to just reply if they wanted to subscribe. Subsequently, we *tripled* our subscriptions in the last week. I probably wouldn't do that more than once a quarter. You may want to "warn" current subscribers to set their profile to "digest" for the next week while people are introducing themselves.

A3: Judy Herr – It's **important that we have some kind of "push."** We can't actively communicate with Web sites, forums, or discussion lists. We have to be able to communicate at least 4 times a year with a "push" or members think we're invisible.

A4: Jane Smith – We also do one **hard-copy mailing a year**, including a SIG fact sheet, a letter from the SIG manager, a promotional piece on our Webinar, and an index of all the articles in our past newsletters. This is usually handled by our Membership person along with our Secretary.

A5: Linda Gallagher – I'm hoping to do a hard-copy mailing this year. One of the things I'm considering including is a brief summary of Annual Conference sessions related to working as an independent. I also have a short SIG fact sheet and maybe one other piece.

* * * * * END * * * * *