

SIGDOC Reminiscences

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In the Beginning...

In the mid 1970's, technical writers documented weapons of mass destruction for the military and its contractors. There were few computer-related jobs outside IBM and the other manufacturers. Corporate systems development managers did not know that people existed who were interested in such work.

The shortage of technical people was so great that any writer who became familiar with the systems jargon was quickly pressured to work as a systems analyst. Not all that many people even knew the jargon. Computers were still new and scary to most writer types.

The Society for Technical Communication was around, but it was focused almost completely on that military hardware. If there were any other organizations, I couldn't find them.

I was a newly independent writer in New York City, recently out of IBM and Bankers Trust Company. As far as I could tell, there was only one other person in town doing this kind of work, and our paths never crossed. It was a mighty lonely world.

A request in ACM *Communications* in September 1974 for people interested in forming a special interest committee on system documentation brought letters from Texas Christian University, Lockheed Aircraft, the Canadian government, and the New York City Fire Department, to name a few. In all there were 33 responses -- no landslide, but enough to demonstrate interest in the subject.

A typical response...

"I am interested in the results of this committee's work and would like a report (if issued.) As I am a student member of the ACM, I am not sure of my qualifications for volunteering assistance, but if there is anything I can do, just ask (except for money; I am usually broke.)

"I am especially interested in standardization for two reasons; 1.) transferability of program documentation between shops with little confusion, and 2.) possible mechanization of parts of the process."

Richard Whipple
Programming Manager
University of Scranton

Another response...

"I HAVE BEEN INTERESTED IN FINDING OUT WHAT OTHER PEOPLE ARE DOING IN MAKING COMPUTER DOCUMENTATION BETTER FOR SOME TIME. I FIND OUT BY READING

MANUALS, AND FIND MOST OF THEM PRETTY BAD.

"MY PARTICULAR INTERESTS ARE FORMATS (THE CLEAR EASY TO READ KIND), COMPUTERIZED TYPESETTING AND GRAPHICS AND, MAIS OUI, MULTI-LINGUAL DOCUMENTATION. TEXT EDITORS ARE A VERY IMPORTANT PART OF MY LIFE AS A TECHNICAL DOCUMENTOR; I WOULD BE PARTICULARLY INTERESTED IN DISCUSSING THE PROBLEMS DOCUMENTATION DEPARTMENTS HAVE WITH SUCH PROGRAMMES.

"I APOLOGIZE FOR THE COMPLETELY UPPERCASE LETTER - I OBJECT TO SUCH THINGS UNDER NORMAL CIRCUMSTANCES, BUT THIS TERMINAL WAS HANDY."

Diana Patterson
Ottawa, Ontario

I compiled excerpts from most of the letters into a 16 page publication titled "SI*DOC -- Special Interest * on System Documentation Newsletter." I added material about our current status and mailed copies to all contributors and to the ACM hierarchy.

In those days, ACM had Special Interest Committees, temporary organizations financed by ACM to gauge interest in a topic. If the committee attracted members, it could convert to a self-supporting Special Interest Group. The asterisks in our newsletter name were meant to reflect our status as none of the above since we still had no formal ACM standing.

The newsletter included the names and addresses of all 33 respondents and a request for signatures on a petition to the ACM SIG/SIC Board requesting "establishment of a Special Interest Committee in the area of computer systems documentation."

I made two presentations at the ACM '74 conference in San Diego in November. One was to the SIG/SIC Board and the other to the assembled SIG/SIC chairpersons. Both presentations were strictly informational since we had nothing formal to propose until we could present petitions.

Both audiences were encouraging. Nevertheless, there were several comments to the effect that documentation is a good thing, but who needs a separate group? Shouldn't this work be handled as part of the program of some other group?

My answer was "Probably yes, but the problem had been around for quite a while, and none of the other

groups had seriously tackled it. Perhaps some other group should be studying the issue, but while we were waiting for one of them to get around to it, a documentation group might be able to get some work done.

Meanwhile volunteers were turning up. Jack Cover of Oneida Limited in Oneida, NY, agreed to be our treasurer. Judy Ellenson of The Charles Stark Draper Laboratory in Cambridge, MA, volunteered to edit an Interactive Program Documentation section of the newsletter. Both also promised to submit material of their own.

Several people sent in signed petitions, letters, and articles for publication. The hot topics seemed to be user communications, automated documentation, and HIPO (Hierarchy Input Output) diagrams.

So I published another issue of the SI*DOC newsletter. This one brought a response from Jean Sammet, president of ACM.

"I had thought that after the first newsletter you issued to help get SICDOC started that perhaps there would not be another until the matter was settled...Now having received the second I think I better write to you before the problem I see occurs again...

I must - with some regret - ask you to please use a completely different heading and to refrain from using SI*DOC. I am sure you are doing your best to convey the meaning and spirit of what you intend - namely an ACM SIC - without violating ACM policies by claiming you are something you are not yet... However, I have been given some very informal advice that doing this is just as bad as actually using names when one does not have a right to. As someone said to me, there are specific precedents against someone publishing a daily newspaper in New York and calling it the New York Fimes.

"I would request that you do the following:

"a) Remove from the masthead any reference to ACM, with or without asterisks.

"b) Use the phrase "Systems Documentation Newsletter" or something similar for the top, without any reference to either SICDOC (with or without the asterisk) or ACM.

"c) Don't use SI*DOC at all, but rather where it is necessary to refer to this concept, then use "proposed SICDOC" including the quotes...

"d) Since I can't spell out all cases, please use your common sense to comply with the spirit of what I am requesting."

Naturally Jean's letter was the lead item in the third issue of our now monthly newsletter, which was

renamed "*" (without the quote marks) and subtitled the "Systems Documentation Newsletter."

This issue, dated January 1975, was the first with real technical content, a report on "Automated Record Layouts" by Jack Cover and shorter essays by Lucy Wu Person of the Argonne National Laboratory, Richard Whipple, and F.W. Fleischhauer of Grumman Aerospace Corp.

At this point, we had 70 petition signatures for organization as a Special Interest Committee. Fifty were required, but we had been strongly encouraged to submit more than 100 since experience for other groups showed that 50% tended to be invalid for one reason or another.

Later in January, I submitted petitions with 120 signatures to ACM Headquarters along with a formal request for recognition. The ACM staff reported that 80 were valid by all criteria, so the next step was up to the SIG/SIC Board to act on our application and, hopefully, pass it on the Executive Committee.

There were 138 people on our mailing list, up from 76 in December and 52 at the end of November. Each issue of the newsletter warned them that they had to do something - anything - for the group or be dropped from the list. I don't think we ever actually dropped anyone, but the possibility kept them sending in material for publication.

Our hierarchy was also growing nicely. Diana Patterson become editor of a regular "Technical Writing" section that was the backbone of the newsletter, T.D.C. Kuch of the Bureau of Biomedical Science contributed a regular "Foundations of Documentation" Section, and Coralie Montgomery of the Twin Cities ACM Chapter signed on as our membership chairman.

The SIG/SIC Board approved our application in March and the ACM Executive Committee gave its blessing shortly thereafter. The April * was our first official SICDOC publication. It noted some of the ben-

efits of being approved. "We... get listed in the ACM literature. ACM members can join us just by checking a little box on their membership forms. The headquarters staff will be polite when you phone for information. And other good things."

The organization had new activists, Vice Chairman Tom D'Auria of Columbia University, and Education Chairman Julia Van Duyn of Santa Clara, CA. Julia also volunteered to organize a SICDOC technical session for the ACM '75 conference in Minneapolis in October. Her subject; HIPO diagrams, attracted 182 people.

We also had a meeting at the National Computer Conference at the Disneyland Hotel in Anaheim, CA in May. Tom D'Auria reported on activities in IBM's Share Publications Project. Jon Meads of Tektronix, a member of the ACM SIG/SIC Board, discussed SICDOC's role in ACM.

These were our first conference sessions. The monthly newsletter and our conference sessions continued to attract members.

By January 1977, we had:

- Almost 2,000 members in 42 states, 8 Canadian provinces, and 11 other countries, including Sweden, Switzerland, Brazil, Hong Kong, and Australia.
- Local chapters in New York, Washington DC, Minneapolis, Toronto, and Dusseldorf, West Germany.
- Regular sessions at the twice yearly National Computer Conference and the annual ACM meeting.

Clearly our trial run as a Special Interest Committee was a success. The January, 1977 issue of * announced our conversion to Special Interest Group, SIGDOC. Tom D'Auria took over as chairman while I continued as newsletter editor.

My thanks to all those who participated in our first three years, especially Diana Patterson for her constant support and unfailing good humor.

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