STC

intercom

EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES TO CONSIDER 6

9

14

March 2012

Volume 59 | Issue 3

Information Interview Service: Mentorship Lite

By KAREN REMPEL | *Member*

INFORMATION INTERVIEWS are nothing new, but in today's business world, they are as essential to career decision-making as choosing the right school. Many technical writing programs require that their students conduct information interviews with experienced writers, and many job-search skill programs also teach their students to conduct information interviews. As a senior technical writer with a top-ranking website, I found that I was receiving more requests for information interviews than I could handle. After a particularly memorable interview with an ill-prepared technical writing student, I decided enough was enough. I'd done my bit for the profession, and now someone else could take a turn.

Highly motivated to avoid conducting more interviews myself, I came up with an idea of how to channel the requests I'd been receiving into a new direction. My local STC chapter could launch an Information Interview Service (IIS) that connects new and aspiring writers with senior writers in the chapter. I knew that the STC Canada West Coast (CWC) chapter executive had been trying to get a mentorship program off the ground for many years, but somehow the idea wouldn't fly. Senior writers were not necessarily willing to commit to an ongoing relationship with a new writer, and new writers were possibly hesitant about asking for help.

At our chapter executive's 2011–2012 program year planning session, I pitched the idea of an Information Interview Service as an alternative to a mentorship program. I suggested that an information interview requires less of a time commitment from both parties and can often provide adequate information to give a new writer a good enough sense of the field of technical communication to decide whether and how to proceed. After a brief discussion about different potential benefits, the executive agreed to implement an Information Interview Service. Since its implementation, we have found that the service has been valuable to the technical writing community in our geographical area.

This article describes the STC CWC Chapter's IIS, how to develop an IIS, the benefits of the service, and the results to date. Such a service might be of interest to other chapters of STC and could benefit the technical writing profession in other geographical areas as well as STC as a whole. The CWC Chapter's service can serve as a prototype for other chapters to follow.

Prototype of an Information Interview Service

When our chapter executive kicked around the idea of the IIS, we realized it could serve multiple purposes in one neat package:

▸ Since the international economic crisis, every chapter is interested in raising additional funds, and we decided to create a fundraising opportunity with the service. Not wanting to make the service out of reach for job seekers and students who might be out of work, we decided to request an optional donation for the service. The suggested donation amount is $10.

▸ We were also interested in ways to bring new members to the chapter, so we decided to throw in free admission to a chapter program meeting as part of the service. This would give the interviewer an opportunity to find out more about the tech writing community in our area, to learn about the profession through the subject of the program offering, and to network with other technical writers.

▸ The final question was how to involve senior members of the chapter in the service. How could we reach out to members who might not come to program meetings or be actively involved in the chapter? We decided to make the interviews a manageable 30 to 60 minutes, with the option of conducting a phone interview if that was more convenient for the interviewee than meeting in person.

With the main details ironed out, we were ready to implement our new service.

How to Develop an Information Interview Service

An IIS is simple to develop. With the help of a few motivated volunteers, the CWC Chapter's IIS went from conception to release in 45 days—the gestation period of minks and squirrels. These are the steps we followed.

To set up an IIS:

1. Discuss with and get the approval of your chapter executive.
2. Define the parameters of the service (see above).
3. Send an email to senior chapter members, requesting volunteers to be interviewed.
4. Create a spreadsheet of volunteers.
5. Create a standard email letter for interview requestors and for interviewees (one for before and one for after the interview). Put the letters on your wiki.
6. Set up an email forwarder for the Information Interview Coordinator.
7. (Optional) Set up an online donation method.
8. Create a Web page describing the service. For an example, see *www.stcwestcoast.ca/index.php/site/about_archives/information_interview_service/.*
9. (Optional) Create an FAQ Web page of resources for new writers, or link to resources your chapter already has on their website.
10. (Optional) Create a coupon for free admission to a chapter program meeting.
11. Announce the service on your chapter website and via an email to chapter members.
12. (Optional) Promote the service at educational institutions that offer technical writing classes or programs.
13. (Ongoing) Match interviewees with interviewers as email requests come in, tracking progress in the volunteer spreadsheet.

The Information Interview Coordinator spent about 25 hours setting up the service. Other volunteers wrote the FAQ, assisted with posting the Web page, created the coupon, and helped with decision-making regarding the implementation.

Benefits of the Service

The IIS has proven to be beneficial in many ways. Since it is a relatively new service, the widespread benefits to the technical writing community at large remain to be determined. However, these specific local benefits are obvious.

The IIS:

▸ connects volunteer senior technical writers with people who are requesting information interviews, whether they are tech writing students who are already committed to the field of technical writing or people who are just starting to investigate entering the field of tech writing.
▸ is an exceptional opportunity for new and aspiring writers to gather information about the field of technical communication, including what skills are required, which education programs are well regarded, what the current job market is like, the lifestyle of working as a writer, and anything else the aspiring writer might want to know.
▸ gives an opportunity for chapter members to share their valuable experience and insights with people who are new to the field of technical writing.

▸ provides a mentoring service that requires a minimal time commitment from senior writers.
▸ supports tech writing students to fulfill their program requirement to conduct interviews.
▸ raises awareness of STC in general and the local chapter in particular.
▸ brings new people to program meetings.
▸ generates new members.
▸ raises money for the chapter.

Results to Date of the STC CWC Chapter's Service

We are very pleased with the results of the IIS to date. The service has received several requests every month, and the senior writers have been prompt about conducting interviews. The STC CWC implemented the service in September 2011. As of December 2011:

▸ 14 senior writers offered to be interviewed.
▸ 11 people have requested an interview. We estimated that we would receive two requests per month, so the average is a little higher than planned.
▸ We have received $50 in donations. We estimated that half the interviewers would donate $10, so the amount raised is on target.
▸ Three of five interviewers have attended a program meeting. Six will have the opportunity to attend the January 2012 program meeting.
▸ The interviewers have unanimously reported that the service was very beneficial for them. For example, one interviewer wrote:

"Thank you for connecting me with K_____ for an STC information interview. She was a wealth of knowledge and had some great insight. I found our chat very informative! I am definitely interested in attending a chapter meeting in the near future."

▸ The interviewees have also reported enjoying meeting the people who interviewed them.

Ongoing coordination of the service requires only two or three hours per month. Most importantly, I have not had to give any interviews!

P.S. In case you're wondering about the info interview that inspired this service, see my blog entry "Top 10 things not to do at an information interview!" (*http://karenrempel.com/technical-writing/top-10-things-not-to-do-at-an-information-interview*). **i**

KAREN REMPEL *(kyrempel@gmail.com or info-interview@ stcwestcoast.ca) has been involved with the STC Canada West Coast Chapter since 1996 and served as president for the 2008– 2009 program year. She teaches an annual Yoga for the Office class to chapter members to help relieve computer tension, and is a volunteer with Yoga Outreach (*http://yogaoutreach.com*), a Vancouver-based organization that brings free yoga to people who don't have access to yoga. She is president of Monkey Valley Enterprises Inc., which offers technical writing services (see* www.karenrempel.com *) and nature retreats. Visit her blog at* www.bcwildernessvisions.com.