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Challenges Facing CHI Local SIGs

During the CHI 98 Local SIGs workshop (see my October '98 column for an overview of this workshop), leaders of chartered and prospective CHI Local SIGs around the world compiled a list of challenges many of them were facing or had faced. Here is much of that list sorted into groups of related challenges and accompanied by my comments and by suggestions offered by the Local SIG leaders -- to help you understand at least some of what it takes to make a CHI Local SIG happen. (Comments and suggestions accompanying the list are greater in number for challenges not

addressed very much in previous Local SIGs columns.)

Getting Started

- Finding out who is interested
- Determining what geographical area to cover
- Identifying the first big event to kick things off
- Setting up"
- Figuring out the mechanics/logistics of meetings
- Identifying the kinds of volunteer involvement needed
- Deciding what communications methods/means (paper, electronic, web,...) to use
- Finding internet/server support
- Overcoming a shortage of money

First questions of those who express interest in starting a Local SIG always involve how to get started and how to handle some of the basics. Hence, stories of how others have done it are

often of great interest and are among stories shared during the workshop and via this column (e.g., see the January '99 column for Steven Pemberton's story about the start of SIGCHI.NL).

Most leaders of prospective chapters spend a lot of time exploring and organizing and planning, and even beginning to offer programs and services, before asking ACM to charter their chapter. Becoming chartered brings access to free webspace, multiple mailing lists, liability insurance, start-up funds, and other benefits (see my July '98 column for more on support provided to Local SIGs), but many leaders wait awhile to feel certain that they have the ingredients essential to a successful chapter.

The chartering and subsequent annual reporting process is itself rather straightforward and outlined by ACM on the web, but complications sometimes arise, particularly for Local SIGs outside of the United States. Past complications have included figuring out what geographical area to cover and figuring out how to resolve differences in countries' requirements for legal entities (see my January '97 and July '97 columns for details of examples). However, the mechanics of handling the basics will hopefully get even easier, since ACM plans to create web-based forms for the process.

Key to the start of many Local SIGs have been the boost and drive provided by an energetic leader and by CHI conference attendance. The importance of leaders and of the enthusiasm and trust they give and can harness cannot be overstated.

Meeting "Member" Needs

- Figuring out who our members/users are
- Meeting members'/users' needs
- Deciding what to focus on, given the diversity of the HCI community

- Deciding what benefits to provide solely to members (e.g., should job announcements be advertised openly or provided only to members)
- Dealing with a constituency in which it is not typical to be a member of a professional organization
- Figuring out how to fully cover a geographical area
- Overcoming the shortage of money in members'/users' pockets

Leaders of prospective chapters sometimes error a bit by believing that how some successful Local SIG does things is how they should do things. But no two situations are exactly alike (see my January '98 column for a discussion about some of this diversity), and I always urge consideration of other models of how to do things -- models that might better fit their culture and succeed given their specific resource constraints.

Ultimately, leaders need to base their programs and services on the needs and desires and patterns of those they reach or want to reach, and some leaders have conducted surveys to help formulate strategy. Several leaders advocate development of clear statements of vision/mission to help keep a chapter properly focused.

Reaching Out; Growing; Connecting

- Reaching out to those who don't know of us
- Improving attitudes toward and awareness of HCI
- Linking academia and industry
- Building an HCI community
- Achieving critical mass
- Being "recognized" in (and maybe "linked to") existing, related organizations

Outreach is an important part of what most Local SIGs are about, and how to do so effectively is among a Local SIG's biggest challenges. For a long list of ideas compiled by Local SIG leaders, see my April '98 column enti-

ted, *“Reaching Out and Being Reached.”*

Keeping Things Going

- Sustaining membership
- Making new members feel comfortable & empowered
- Providing ONGOING programming, benefits, high profile speakers, materials,...
- Not taking good things for granted
- Keeping energy/momentum

As mentioned earlier, the boost and drive provided by an energetic leader or by CHI conference attendance are usually key to a Local SIG's start. But, drive and energy do not always endure; indeed, a couple of Local SIGs have died or entered periods of dormancy when that early spark faded, such as when an initial leader left the area or ran out of steam. Plus, uncontrollable changes in the makeup of a constituency sometimes catch Local SIGs off-guard (see the July '97 column for a description of a couple of examples) and have a similar effect.

My best recommendations for keeping things going are aligned with Amy Jo Kim's seven key elements of the design of a sustained community. See my April '97 column entitled, *“The Social Design of a Local SIG”* for further information.

Securing and Providing Support

- Securing sponsors & spreading them out
- Determining what to “give back” to sponsors
- Deciding whether to advertise for commercial companies
- Sharing with other CHI Local SIGs

Sponsorship issues are among Local SIGs' stickiest challenges. For words which might help a bit, see my July '98 column entitled, *“Brought To You By...,”* a column that spans a discussion of the issues as conducted by several Local SIG leaders.

Securing and Retaining Volunteers

- Getting good, active volunteers
- Transitioning to – growing – new volunteers, officers, & sponsors
- Avoiding volunteer burnout
- Finding people who have time to participate
- Overcoming the shortage of money in volunteers' pockets

All Local SIG leaders report difficulties finding and keeping good volunteers. Because of this, I included a presentation on this topic by Kevin Schofield among our CHI 98 workshop activities. I don't have a written version of Kevin's presentation to share with other leaders, but I do have a list of recommendations generated by Local SIG leaders at the CHI 97 workshop. Here is much of that list:

- emphasizing the social benefits of volunteering and the opportunity to work with other professionals they don't yet know
- soliciting co-volunteers (i.e., having two people work on one job together)
- limiting the commitment required, providing a reasonable estimation of the amount of time needed, and offering support to the volunteer
- offering incentives such as pizza, lunch, t-shirts,...
- using a short-term, volunteer-rotation plan
- acknowledging volunteers on web pages and in newsletters
- surveying your constituency to learn of their interests, of what they'd like to volunteer to support
- letting the volunteer shape the job
- recruiting “in person” and with genuine enthusiasm
- creating an “apprentice” program to pass on volunteers' skills
- acknowledging volunteers via certificates of thanks
- advertising volunteer needs at chapter meetings or in newsletters
- appointing a volunteer chair to focus on the challenge

- making a commitment to those who volunteer (e.g., accurately tracking all volunteers)
- providing volunteer opportunities that are genuinely interesting

Securing and retaining good volunteers is a major challenge for SIGCHI as well, and at a recent SIGCHI Executive Committee (EC) meeting, I suggested that a part of the difficulty might lie in the word, “volunteer.” Like SIGCHI, Local SIGs might consider using the word “participate” instead of “volunteer” and begin to change the focus from finding members willing to do extra by volunteering to making participation in running a Local SIG a greater part of the definition of membership.

Working with ACM

- Dealing with difficulties experienced with ACM support staff
- Overcoming the disconnect between Local SIGs & SIGCHI

Many leaders report challenges dealing with ACM and with the confusion prompted by SIGCHI not being officially responsible to CHI Local SIGs. As of this writing, I am working with the SIGCHI EC and with a task force of Local SIG leaders to figure out how to eliminate the latter by making Local SIGs a more integral part of SIGCHI. Eliminating the latter will help address the former, and I am optimistic that we will do so by the time that SIGCHI becomes an ACM Society. However, several leaders have stressed that a closer relationship with SIGCHI must not cost them the ability to make their own decisions regarding meeting the needs of their constituency.

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P.S. Local SIGs are growing in number rapidly. Is there one where you live? Do you wish there was one where you live? Keep an eye on SIGCHI's Local SIGs webpage to stay abreast of this rapid expansion.