



# From the Executive Director

BY SUSAN BURTON, STC Executive Director

## You May Already Be a Technical Communicator!

STC is working on a major initiative that will change a lot of things about our profession, including how our profession is perceived, where we fit into the business world, and how our salaries are determined. And it all begins with a change in job titles—away from *technical writer* and toward *technical communicator*.

This is not a case where a “name is just a name.” An outdated or inaccurate job title drives down your salary and limits your career. If you haven’t already done so, please read my article “‘Technical Communicator,’ Your Time Has Come” in the April 2007 issue of *Intercom* (online at [www.stc.org/intercom/PDFs/2007/200704\\_3.pdf](http://www.stc.org/intercom/PDFs/2007/200704_3.pdf)). That article explains *why* it’s important that we get the job title *technical communicator*. This article addresses *how* we do so.

### Best Fit

So, a technical writer walks into his or her boss’s office and says, “I want to be a technical communicator.” And the boss says, “What’s the difference?”

Until recently, you wouldn’t have had an answer, because there was no “official” description of a technical communicator. The official description of the technical writer’s responsibilities, as per the United States Department of Labor (DOL), is the following:

Write technical materials, such as equipment manuals, appendices, or operating and maintenance instructions. May assist in layout work.

Personally, I haven’t met any STC members who say that that describes their job. That’s why the STC office has been working with economist Rick O’Sullivan on a description specifically

for technical communicators. DOL has agreed, in principle, to the following:

Develop and design instructional and informational tools needed to assure safe, appropriate, and effective use of science and technology, intellectual property, and manufactured products and services. Combine multimedia knowledge and strong communication skills with technical expertise to educate across the entire spectrum of users’ abilities, technical experience, and visual and auditory capabilities.

When I show that description to STC members, the reaction is, “That’s more like it!”

But your boss may hem and haw, and question whether one definition is really a better fit than the other. So let’s look more closely at some of the attributes of each.

### The Checklist

From the two descriptions, we can tease out a few distinguishing traits. For each, fill in the blank with either a “TW” (for technical writer) or “TC” (for technical communicator) according to which best fits your work.

#### Activities

According to the current DOL description, technical writers perform two activities: writing and layout. This doesn’t include tagging, markup, user interface design, hyperlinking, online help structuring, usability, needs analysis, preparing text for translating, or surveys. It doesn’t even include editing! In fact, it assumes your sole mode of communication is the written word.

If your primary function (defined as

how you spend most of your nonsupervisory, professional time) is writing and layout, write TW. If *writing* is not your primary communication method and you engage in the other activities mentioned above, or any other activities where you “develop and design instructional and information tools,” give yourself a TC: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Media

According to the DOL description, technical writers produce manuals, appendices, and instructions—that is, printed material. The description of the technical communicator isn’t limited to any specific medium. (In fact, media aren’t even mentioned. This is intentional—we don’t want this definition to become outdated as new forms of media are invented.)

If all of your work ends up in print, give yourself a TW. If your writing ends up on a computer screen, or if you work with audio or video (or any form of multimedia), write TC: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Results

The technical writing description just says that technical writers produce technical materials; it doesn’t say if those technical materials do anyone any good. Technical communicators create tools to “assure safe, appropriate, and effective use...” of a variety of things.

If you do no usability testing and solicit no user feedback, give yourself a TW. If you make any effort to see if your work really helps people, give yourself a TC: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Access

The technical writing description doesn’t say anything about accessibility. The last sentence of the technical

communication description specifically addresses accessibility. Technical communicators make sure that their work benefits those who have disabilities.


If you don't concern yourself with accessibility, give yourself a TW. If you try to address the needs of users with disabilities, give yourself a TC: \_\_\_\_

### Scoring

Now count up your TWs and TCs. Which looks like the best fit?

As I said, the technical communicator description has been approved by DOL in principle. What has yet to be determined is how and when the new job description will go into use. Details on the different options will be discussed in a future article—for now, the STC office is working to make it happen as soon as possible and in the way that will be of most use to STC members.


This effort also depends on you. If we can say, "We have X members who have the job title *technical communicator*," and X is a large number, then the points we make with DOL will carry more authority. By pushing for a change in job title to *technical communicator*, you help both yourself and the profession.

Let's make 2007 the year of the technical communicator—starting with you! 

## It may already be your job title...

According to a 2003 survey, 4 percent of STC members have "technical communicator" as their job title. Does this include you?

If so, please let the STC office know. We're trying to get a sense of which companies use the title, and how managers perceive employees with that title. Please send your name, STC member ID number, and the name of the company where you work to [intercom@stc.org](mailto:intercom@stc.org). Use the subject line, "My job title is technical communicator."

Thank you for your participation. By helping us gather more information, you provide us with what we need to promote the profession. 

## Defining a New Profession

The following is excerpted from "The Case for 'Technical Communicator'" by Intercom Editor Maurice Martin and Economist Richard O'Sullivan of *Change Management Solutions*. The entire document is available at [www.stc.org/PDFs/casetc.pdf](http://www.stc.org/PDFs/casetc.pdf).

In 1953, two professional societies were formed to serve technical writers: The Association of Technical Writers and Editors, and the Society of Technical Writers. The following year, the Technical Publishing Society was formed. Through a series of mergers, these organizations eventually became the Society of Technical Writers and Publishers (STWP).

But as early as the 1960s, discussion within STWP focused on a trend away from "just writing." The profession was evolving—it was clear to those working in it that other forms of media would be used to convey technical information in the future. This trend drove the Society to change its name from the Society of Technical Writers and Publishers to the Society for Technical Communication in 1971. Society President Mary M. Schaeffer wrote at the time that

The [new] name... is explicitly constant with the primary purpose for which our Society was formed—to advance the theory and practice of technical communication in *all* media. [emphasis by Schaeffer]

Moreover, those in the profession saw the need for interactivity—an exchange of information between themselves and those who use technical information.

The vision for technical communication was there in the 1970s. However, the infrastructure to fully support technical communication was not yet in place. That changed in the 1990s when the Internet became a force in the business world.

The Internet was built for the purpose of communication and serves as a delivery system for all media, including text, audio, still graphics and photos, video, animation, and representations of 3D models. In addition, it introduces an element of interactivity to all these media that is absent from older delivery systems.

This change in the scope of technical communication necessitates a change in practice. You need a writer to create a book; you need a communicator to create an interactive service manual deliverable via the Web. This difference underscores the characteristics that distinguish technical communication from technical writing:

- Technical writing is static and one-way.
- Technical communication is dynamic and interactive.

While one is tempted to conclude that these skills should therefore be assigned to one of the emerging Web-based occupations, it is important to note that the change from "writer" to "communicator" pre-dates the emergence of the Internet. So, *while the Internet created new channels of communication and allowed for interactivity and the near-instant distribution of all media, the job functions that define the technical communicator are NOT Internet-driven.*

Nevertheless, the Internet has irrevocably changed the expectations of consumers. The first wave of children to grow up with the Web has now reached adulthood. Soon the marketplace will be filled with adults who cannot remember a time before the Web. Having enjoyed the benefits of dynamic, interactive information, these consumers will never be satisfied with anything else.

Addressing the difference between technical writers and technical communicators, STC's Strategic Planning Committee Chairperson Larry Kunz says, "Technical writers *produce* content for users. Technical communicators *manage* content and relationships with users." 

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