



From the Executive Director

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“Technical Communicator,” Your Time Has Come

Last year, an online survey of STC members asked what the Society’s mission and purpose should be. From a dozen choices, respondents selected as their clear favorite “advocating and promoting the profession.”

But what exactly is that profession?

STC’s members don’t hold a single job title. The most common is “technical writer,” but, according to a 2003 survey, that title accounts for only 43 percent of our members. Others include “documentation manager,” “information developer,” “content provider,” “documentation specialist,” and “technical editor.”

Long-time STC members who have risen to positions of prominence in industry, government, and academe have long said that our job titles are part of the “respect” problem. Simply put: our members do much more than write, and they’re not getting credit for those other job functions. That has a negative impact on salaries as well.

The good news is that STC is working to change this situation and has already made significant progress.

What’s in a Name?

First, let’s look at how job titles define a profession. This discussion centers on the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL), but let me say up front to our non-U.S. members: This involves you as well. Business data and salary information flow across borders. For good or ill, DOL is like the proverbial 363-kilogram (800-pound) gorilla—you can’t ignore it.

DOL maintains the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) System—a list of more than 820 occupations along with descriptions of what people in those occupations do—and the *Occupational Outlook Handbook (OOH)*—a list of occu-

pations and salary data used extensively by employment agencies, career centers, and human resources departments.

If you’re in the United States, there’s a good chance that your boss looks at *OOH* when setting salaries. Because job descriptions in *OOH* are based on those in the SOC, it’s in your interest that the SOC include an accurate description of your occupation.

Misnomer

This is how SOC describes the occupation *technical writer*:

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

I shared this definition at a recent meeting of the Phoenix Chapter, and jaws dropped all over the room. “That’s completely out of date!” was the response. “That doesn’t nearly encompass what we do.”

Among many problems, this definition doesn’t reflect the interactive and dynamic nature of communication today. There’s no place in that paragraph for online help, wikis, animation, and dozens of other platforms now used by STC members.

And here’s how it affects your wallet: When DOL goes to gather salary data, it asks managers, “What do you pay someone who does this work?” Managers respond with salary numbers lower than they would if they were given your real job description. Those numbers become part of the *OOH*, which helps determine your salary.

Time for Change

STC is working to change this situation. We want DOL to recognize the

occupation of *technical communicator* with the following description:

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 multi-media knowledge and strong communication skills with technical expertise to educate across the entire spectrum of users’ abilities, technical experience, and visual and auditory capabilities.

This description represents the essence of what our people do. Also, it’s not tied to any one media or technology—it won’t go stale when the *Next Big Thing* hits the streets.

We’ve already gotten DOL to agree to this change in principle, though it remains to be seen exactly how and when the new job description will go into use. Fortunately, we’ve retained the services of economist Rick O’Sullivan, who has more than twenty years’ experience on DOL’s Business Research Advisory Council, to guide us through the process and serve as our point of contact. (For more on this, see www.stc-cdx.org/newsnotes/2007/02/a2.)

Looking Forward

This change will be good for us, and good for business as well. Future issues of *Intercom* will discuss it in more detail. We’ll also tell you how you can play a role in this change.

This is an exciting time to be part of STC. By promoting a more honest, accurate definition of ourselves, we’re taking control of our profession and our future. **❶**