



From the Executive Director

BY SUSAN BURTON, STC Executive Director

Confronting Change

In my June article, I reported that STC is working to influence the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) to replace the outdated definition of *technical writer* in the Standard Occupational Classification System (SOC) with a new definition for *technical communicator*. (To read these definitions, see www.stc.org/intercom/PDFs/2007/200706_4-5.pdf.) The SOC definitions are used in the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) salary survey that is sent to 1.25 million business establishments. The BLS also governs what is published in the *Occupational Handbook*, the prime reference source for career counselors, educators, and guidance counselors nationwide. If the SOC definition changes, so will the labor market measures and the advice that the DOL gives job seekers.

On July 19 we were informed that the BLS will keep the technical writer definition and will not recommend that technical communicator be added to the SOC *at this time*.

The good news is that the BLS *will* consider adding “technical communicator” to a separate list of *emerging professions* in both the *Occupational Handbook* and O*NET, the BLS’s online occupation and career data source. If the BLS adds this term, it will start collecting separate data on technical communicators. After a period of time, it will review the data to determine whether the growth in the profession meets its criteria for “emerging” and whether the SOC and all government statistics should be changed to recognize the new profession.

Correcting the Record

To facilitate discussion of this important issue, STC started a thread on the STC Forum (stcforum.org/viewtopic.php?id=820). Some posters raised concerns about the new definition of *technical communicator*.

I’d like to clear up a few issues. One poster made it sound as if I woke up one day and just decided to change the definition. *Let’s be clear*: This definition was the result of many months of effort by leaders in the field, including STC’s Board of Directors and Strategic Planning Committee, past Society presidents, and prominent nonmembers. A prominent economist, Rick O’Sullivan, spearheaded the research, which included discussions with European practitioners and European Union officials who are also struggling with how to best redefine the profession. The new definition has met with overwhelming support from the great majority of STC members who approached me at the STC Technical Communication Summit

in May and from those at the various chapters I have visited.

Another poster claimed that the definition applies only to those who work in software, multimedia, and Web design, and that STC was no longer interested in those who see writing as their primary skill. *Nothing could be further from the truth*. Nothing in the new definition limits its application to a specific industry, type of product, or technology. A writer of car repair manuals is as welcome in STC as a usability specialist, help author, Web site designer, or any number of other common titles that our members hold.

The new definition clarifies that technical communicators assure the “safe, easy, proper and complete use” of products and services and refers to increased usability and accessibility. In other words, it focuses on the timeless value we provide, not the medium we are using. And it is the value we provide—not how we convey it—that makes the work valuable to the user, the employer, and governments around the world.

Another poster preferred the title “technical writer” to “technical communicator” because he felt it more accurately describes what he does. But this approach is not “customer-centric.” Titles are meant to serve the buyer of the service, not the title holder. Employers and the marketplace—not employees—assign the value of a title. If employers do not value writing, it does not make sense to keep a title that emphasizes that function.

Focus on Value

By no means is STC trying to devalue the work of members whose primary task is writing. We are simply recognizing that, in the multimedia world of the twenty-first century, the word *writer* doesn’t have a consistent meaning for employers. STC is responding to evidence that “technical writers” are being sidestepped when the communication task at hand does not primarily involve writing. The written word, while still very important, is not the sole form of communication that it was as recently as fifteen years ago. STC is *not* driving this change; employers and the market are driving it. We’re simply trying to better position our members to succeed.

One thing is certain: change will happen whether we want it to or not. Nearly one out of every three jobs created in this decade is in an occupation or profession that did not exist prior to 1990. How could anyone think that existing professions would remain the same? 