

## Certification - Why We Need to Begin

By Nad Rosenberg

Certification – it's an issue that has been dogging the STC for over 30 years – and, in my opinion, it's time to move ahead.

If you had asked me 30 years ago for my opinion on certification, I would have undoubtedly responded, "Never."

But times have changed – and my opinion along with them. My suspicion is that I'm not the only one who has had a change of heart about this volatile issue. And what has prompted this change? Well, for starters, just look around at similar professions – they're all doing it. Specifically, the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD), the Project Management Institute (PMI), the Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM), the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing (ATTW), etc. – all offer certification programs. Then there are the major software companies, all of which offer certifications, and of course, the universities.

In terms of technical communications certification, there are other professional organizations throughout the world currently offering certification programs (Germany, Switzerland, Sweden), with more being added to the list each year. To further fill the void in technical communications certification, commercial ventures throughout the world are jumping in, presumably because they see an unfulfilled need in the marketplace. In India alone, there are approximately 20 private companies offering certification programs (as recently reported by Gururaj B.S., former president, STC India).

I believe certification of technical communicators is unavoidable, given the current status of related professions and our technological environment. Either the STC develops a certification program, or someone else will do it (make that – *is* already doing it). Do we, as members of the STC, want to leave it up to commercial ventures or other organizations to define the criteria for our profession?

But, as my mother once said, "Just because everyone else is doing it, doesn't mean..." And that's somewhat true here as well. The best reason for implementing a certification program doesn't have to do with other organizations – it has to do with our clients. Judith Hale, author of *Performance-Based Certification* emphasizes this point when she states, "The driver behind most certifications is economic, whether this fact is stated or not." She goes on to say that businesses and other organizations are using certification programs to "help them establish uniform performance standards so they can rapidly deploy workers."

The uniform standards point is singularly resonant among technical communicators. We've all seen substandard work produced by unemployed or underemployed people who claim to be technical communicators. As stated by the late Ken Rainey, STC Fellow, and certification advocate, "People are performing technical communication tasks for good money without having the necessary training or education or skills to do that work. This weakens the work that qualified technical communicators perform and brings into question the legitimacy of the profession." But even more significant than the effect on our collective professional pride, substandard work has a significant effect on our employers, because it costs them money in terms of rework or additional calls to customer support. This is where certification becomes a key

issue, because certification would provide evidence of competency when hiring or evaluating existing technical communicators.

The competency issue is particularly important as employers increasingly depend upon contractors or outsource the role of technical communications completely to third-party organizations. In our global economy, many employers want assurance that the people or the companies they hire can do the job.

In addition to proving competency, certification says something else about the individuals who achieve it. Certification manifests that people care enough about their work to make a significant investment in time, effort, and financial resources. This fact alone makes them stand out from the competition in situations involving hiring or advancement.

Given these facts, certification should provide a competitive advantage for technical communicators. Look at the number of management jobs that require or prefer the Project Management Professional (PMP) certification. Further, according to the PMI Project Management Salary Survey, Fourth Edition, certified project managers earn approximately 13% to 17% more than their non-credentialed colleagues (depending on experience and number of years certified).

To find out with certainty whether certification will translate into a financial advantage for technical communicators may not be possible until certification is implemented. This leads to the chicken-and-the egg scenario: certification can't be financially quantified until it's implemented and it won't be implemented until we know there's a financial advantage. So the best we can do is make an informed decision regarding the value of certification. To do this, the STC should follow the suggestion in the recent STC Board-commissioned study, *What Makes a Profession Professional*, and immediately involve employers and corporate experts in its study of certification and related issues.

In addition to these core concerns, there are also numerous complex, contentious subjects regarding the implementation of a certification program. For starters, there's the complicated issue of the Body of Knowledge (BoK) – what should a competent technical communicator know? Then there's the thorny issue of levels of certification. Should everyone have to take the same certification test? Should people with 20 years of experience be exempt from the test but be required to provide a body of work for review?

There are no quick and easy answers to these questions, but the good news is that we are not the first professional organization to agonize over them. Other professional organizations have gone through this entire process and have resolved similar issues. So while the obstacles are daunting, we have actual evidence that they can, indeed, be overcome.

The STC has taken some positive steps in terms of grappling with these topics. For the last two years, the STC has empowered the Certification Task Force to collect information needed to make a decision regarding certification. Additionally, the Board has recently created the Technical Communication Body of Knowledge Task Force to begin work on this fundamental task.

But the time has come to put this all on the fast track. If we drag our feet on certification for another 20 years (or even 5 years), others will seize the day, and it's

likely that some members will turn to related organizations to meet their professional needs. If our membership dwindles significantly, the STC could lose the clout and resources it currently has to influence employers about the value of our work. The STC needs to seriously engage the certification issue now – to ensure its strength as an organization working in our behalf, and to provide members with the full range of professional opportunities required in today's competitive economy.

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