THE STATE OF SALARIES FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATORS
A Brief Analysis of a Recent Jobs Posting

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Houston Chapter

Each year I look forward to the announcement that the latest STC Salary Survey is available, if only to discover what we *should* be making for our expertise as technical editors and writers. Unfortunately, reality has diminished the validity of this useful and inspiring research to a bunch of numbers that many employers seemingly choose to ignore.

A recent posting of positions from the Houston chapter shows at first glance a depressing array of salaries ranging from an insulting $10 an hour to a dismal high of $18 an hour (although one employer did offer $35.31 per hour for a scientific editor and $40.62 per hour for a senior communications specialist). Granted, some of these positions appeared to be entry level, requiring only 2-3 years of experience. But two factors don't add up: First, these positions call for technology bases in some of the following areas:

Accounting	Engineering	Quality Control
AutoCAD	Environmental	RoboHelp
Biostatistics	Flash Action	SAP
Business Analysis	Grants/Proposals	Scripting
Communications	Marketing	Systems Analysis
Contracts	Multilingual Writing	Telecommunications
Courseware Development	Oil/Chemical	Training
Desktop Publishing	Oncology	UNIX Administration
Document Control	Oracle9i	XML

Second, and possibly more disturbing, is those searching for staff include such well-known and established companies as follows:

Baylor ($33,900 - $50,900)
Ernst & Young (not listed)
Kitba (not listed)
MD Anderson ($33,900 - $50,900; $45,200 - $67,800)
Microsoft (not listed)
NASA ($11/hour)
Rice University (not listed)
Schlumberger (not listed)

This, all when the 2003 Salary Survey shows the mean salary nationwide for technical editors and writers with 2 to 5 years experience to be $53,550—or in hourly terms: $27.89 per hour based on a 1,920-hour year. In all fairness, I've listed the actual salaries for the positions offered by those companies mentioned above (those that actually did list salaries). But keep in mind that new staff are rarely offered the top range; most companies start at the bottom, or occasionally the middle after extensive negotiation.

Granted, other issues do factor in such as demographics and the economy. But those with technical backgrounds and writing expertise in vocations with economic, social, and technical importance need to earn wages commensurate with other professionals instead of salaries equaling the pay of administrative assistants. One recent posting actually combined two incongruous positions for a listing of "Administrative Assistant/Technical Writer w/ Degree." Are there really any technical writers who a) also serve as administrative staff or b) who are not degreed? Unfortunately, this posting did not list a salary, but one can probably guess the range.

Another disturbing trend is the use of technical editors and writers as meeting minutes takers. At my current job this was attempted for about a year before management realized that this is a labor-intensive and costly use of resources. It simply does not make good business sense to use trained professionals to take notes or audio record a meeting, transcribe into a template, and distribute within a certain timeframe to everyone who attended. On one level, this work should be performed by clerical staff, which does not include technical editors and writers. On another level, as George Carlin put it when addressing the concept of one-hour photoprocessing, "You were just there! Why do you need to see it again so soon!"

Yet another alarming development is the inclination for companies to offer such paltry pay for short-term contracts—those averaging several weeks to a few months. Such contracts in the past paid two to three times the average salary because of the very nature of the work: little or no medical or retirement benefits and temporary status.

Also damaging to our profession is the lack of professional credentials some employers are requesting. More than one recent posting for Document and Documentation Specialists required applicants to have only a high school diploma, at a time when more and more of us are acquiring academic documentation credentials from universities with bona fide technical writing degree tracks. Unfortunately, an increasing number of classifieds are requesting these high school educated documentation specialists.

It's bad enough that we've not been able to acquire certification since STC was formed in 1957. But many of us have dedicated our professional lives to specializing in a variety of scientific and technical writing and editing industries and should be paid according to industry standards as researched by the Society for Technical Communication.

Although my company does actually appreciate the vision and skills offered by trained technical communicators, I don't know the answer to changing this lack of understanding, among such companies as listed in the recent post, of the value added for our services. One tactic perhaps is to ensure that employers have access to STC's most current research, and that they understand how employment level, education, and experience are factored in.

Maybe another approach is to encourage more employment agencies to become involved in our field and to be more proactive in placing documentation specialists. When I was president of my chapter, I held one of our monthly meetings at the local Aerotek (now Onsite Companies) office to give placement specialists and opportunity to meet and interact with our local technical writers and editors.

In any event, as professionals it is our duty to be educated and informed with regard to our vocation. If you're reading this, you're already a member of STC. If you know other editors and writers who are not members, strongly encourage them to join—either by company sponsorship or out of their own pocket. Even requesting that membership be subsidized can show a company of your interest to be current within your field.

We can only hope that industry, one day, comes to recognize the importance of our profession. Business leaders must realize that those willing to work for clerical wages often don't possess the background, experience, education, or ability to analyze, conceptualize, and implement practices, processes, and procedures for creating useful and usable technical documentation, marketing materials, and Web content for the 21st century.

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