

# Certifying Technical Communicators

BY GARY MICHAEL SMITH

Professional certification implies that an individual has passed a test and met criteria established by a committee of experienced authorities and endorsed by an internationally recognized professional society or association. Obtaining certification could be construed as getting a stamp of approval from the best in the field.

One of the most highly regarded organizations for technical writers and editors—the Society for Technical Communication—does not sponsor a certification program for its members or the wider technical publishing community. One reason is that constructing a universal examination would be impractical, because STC itself has 21 special interest groups, and many similar STM (sci-tech-med) groups exist.

Since 1975, the STC Certification Issues Committee has surveyed the society's 18,000 members periodically about their interest in certification. Some people have said they are in favor of a full certification program, but there is not enough interest to make a program economically viable. A finding of the surveys is that employers seem more interested in hiring writers and editors from accredited academic programs in technical communication than those with postgraduate certification; thus, the value of certification is to some extent subjective and anecdotal.

Not everyone thinks certification is the key to professional success. The argument has been made that certifying technical writers and editors would unfairly imply that those who don't pursue certification are less competent. In fact, certification is a one-time standardized audit of an individual's professional knowledge and does not predict performance. Technical communicators tackle a broad range of tasks and contribute creativity and other intangible qualities that cannot be evaluated by such an audit, says Peggy Jacobson, who weighs the benefits in her article "Certification for Technical Communicators: The Time Is Now" (*Sound Off!*, a Puget Sound STC chapter publication, 2004).

*Certification Magazine's* annual salary survey for 2003, which queried more than 19,000 information technology professionals, found that those with certification earned an average 15.1 percent more. That would seem to make the case. But what kind of program, offered by whom, makes the most sense?

## Terms of endorsement

Four basic credentialing options are sponsored by various entities. The following definitions are paraphrased and expanded from those offered by Lawrence Kunz

## 'Creds' Programs Do Exist

- **Brainbench** ([www.brainbench.com](http://www.brainbench.com)) offers Job Role Certification for technical writing, which requires candidates to pass a minimum of eight separate job skill assessments in 45 to 60 minutes.
- **Chauncey Group International** ([www.chauncey.com](http://www.chauncey.com)), a subsidiary of the Educational Testing Service of Princeton, NJ, offers the Associate Technology Specialist program. Developed in partnership with the

Northwest Center for Emerging Technologies in Bellevue, WA, the program measures fundamental competencies in the information technology field. The exam measures basic IT skills and offers certification in eight aligned career specialties or job clusters, one of which is technical writing.

- **ITC2** (International Technical Certification Consortium, [www.itc2.org](http://www.itc2.org)) offers the Experience Certified Technical Communications Professional

certification, which validates experience and skills necessary to competently design and develop print and online information products.

- **Speechwriter Certification**, a division of the JER Group, Inc. ([www.jergroup.com](http://www.jergroup.com)), offers more than 600 online courses in 30 subject areas. One of the certification programs includes two certificates—basic and master's levels—in technical writing in an online training format.

and Terrance M. Skelton in their paper "Professional Certification: Evolution, Revolution, or Status Quo?" (Society for Technical Communication, 2001 *Conference Proceedings*).

- **Certification.** Private or nonprofit organizations develop a set of guidelines that those actively engaged in a profession (e.g., medical editing and writing) voluntarily agree to follow. Knowledge testing leads to certification.
- **Accreditation.** An evaluative body formally assesses the ability of academic programs to adequately educate and train their students for professional achievement.
- **Licensing.** A government entity (state or federal) mandates and issues credentials to practitioners who have completed a course of study and passed an examination. Licenses usually must be renewed periodically.
- **Credentialing.** A nongovernmental body (presumably impartial and presumably qualified to render a judgment) uses standardized criteria to determine that an individual is able to practice a trade or a profession at some level of proficiency.

The following organizations have instituted certification, accreditation, or credentialing programs that require testing, documented work experience, and professional development activities. (Licensing programs recognize subject matter mastery, in disciplines such as nursing or engineering, rather than communication skills.)

Organization	Certification/Designation
American Medical Writers Association www.amwa.org	Core Curriculum, Advanced Curriculum certificates
American Society for Training and Development www.astd.org	Certified Performance Technologist, E-Learning Courseware Certification, Human Performance Improvement designations
Journalism Education Association www.jea.org	Certified Journalism Educator, Master Journalism Educator designations
Project Management Institute www.pmi.org	Quality Management Systems certification

Organization	Accreditation/Designation
International Association of Business Communicators (www.iabc.com)	Accredited Business Communicator (ABC) designation
Public Relations Society of America (www.prsa.org)	Accredited in Public Relations (APR) designation

Organization	Credentialing/Designation
Board of Editors in the Life Sciences (www.bels.org)	Editor in the Life Sciences, ELS; Diplomate Editor in the Life Sciences, ELS(D); Honored Editor in the Life Sciences, ELS(H)

For technical communicators, a certifying examination may test technical writing and editing skills, including a thorough command of the English language; well-developed skills in organization, composition, and communication; an up-to-date working knowledge of current technologies; and proof of membership in at least one recognized trade organization.

The National Organization for Competency Assurance monitors trends in professional certification policy and helps employers make informed hiring decisions. NOCA has published research studies on competency assurance; in 1989 it formed the National Commission for Certifying Agencies ( [www.noca.org/ncca/ncca.htm](http://www.noca.org/ncca/ncca.htm)) to set criteria and standards for organizations that administer certification programs and to accredit organizations that meet the standards.

Currently, it's up to individual technical communicators to convince potential employers that they have the skills and expertise to do the job. Once hired, the technical communicator may be able to convince his or her company to subsidize the certification process. The pursuit of a course leading to objective skills endorsement can be pitched as enhancing staff capabilities statements and making resumes submitted with client proposals more impressive. ♦

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