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intercom

THE MAGAZINE OF THE SOCIETY FOR TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION



PROFESSIONAL CREDENTIALS

HOW TO BUILD THE OPTIMAL SKILL SET FOR YOUR CAREER

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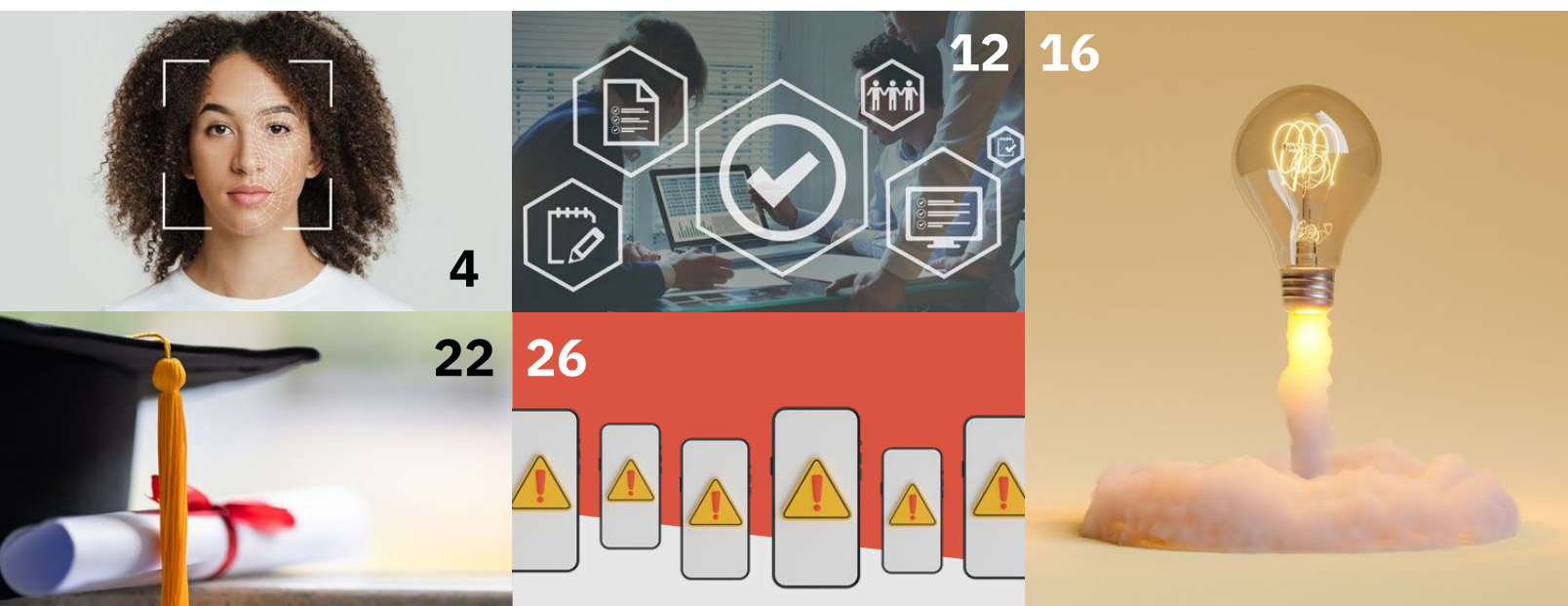
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A Note from the Editor



With the new year, I am pleased to take on the role of executive editor of *Intercom* and the magazine's mission of providing practical and applicable content for technical communicators of all skill levels and interests. Thanks to the outstanding work of outgoing executive editor Alisa Bonsignore, *Intercom* has continued to thrive and provide highly relevant and informative content for its readership.

I would also like to welcome our new editorial assistant, Paula Robertson, who joins the team this year. For 2023, we have a good breadth of topics planned for you, including issues on professional credentials, tools and technologies, technical editing, soft skills, information visualization, and project planning. Be sure to take a look at the full editorial calendar on the *Intercom* page on the STC website to learn more. I welcome your submissions and suggestions on these and other important and emerging topics in technical communication.

The January/February 2023 issue focuses on the importance of professional credentialing in technical communication and serves as a companion for our annual Tech Comm Week event. The contributions in this issue cover a wide range of credentialing options, including academic degrees, certificate programs, and professional certification, as well as some important professional development insights. Whether you're new to the field, a seasoned professional, or somewhere in between, there's something for all levels to discover about professional credentialing in technical communication.

Also included in this first issue of the new year are two of our regular columns, *Meet the Change Agents* and *Student Perspectives*, and an informative piece on Web accessibility pitfalls.

I hope these articles and columns help you learn more about professional development and technical communication as you continue your journey as a technical communicator.

If you're interested in contributing to *Intercom*, know that we're always willing to discover new voices and perspectives on technical communication. Please take a look at the editorial calendar at <https://www.stc.org/intercom/editorial-calendar/> to see what we have coming soon. While each issue has a specific topic, we're happy to feature other technical communication topics in each issue, as well.

I wish each of you a prosperous and healthy new year and look forward to hearing from you. ■

Dr. Craig Baehr intercom-editor@stc.org

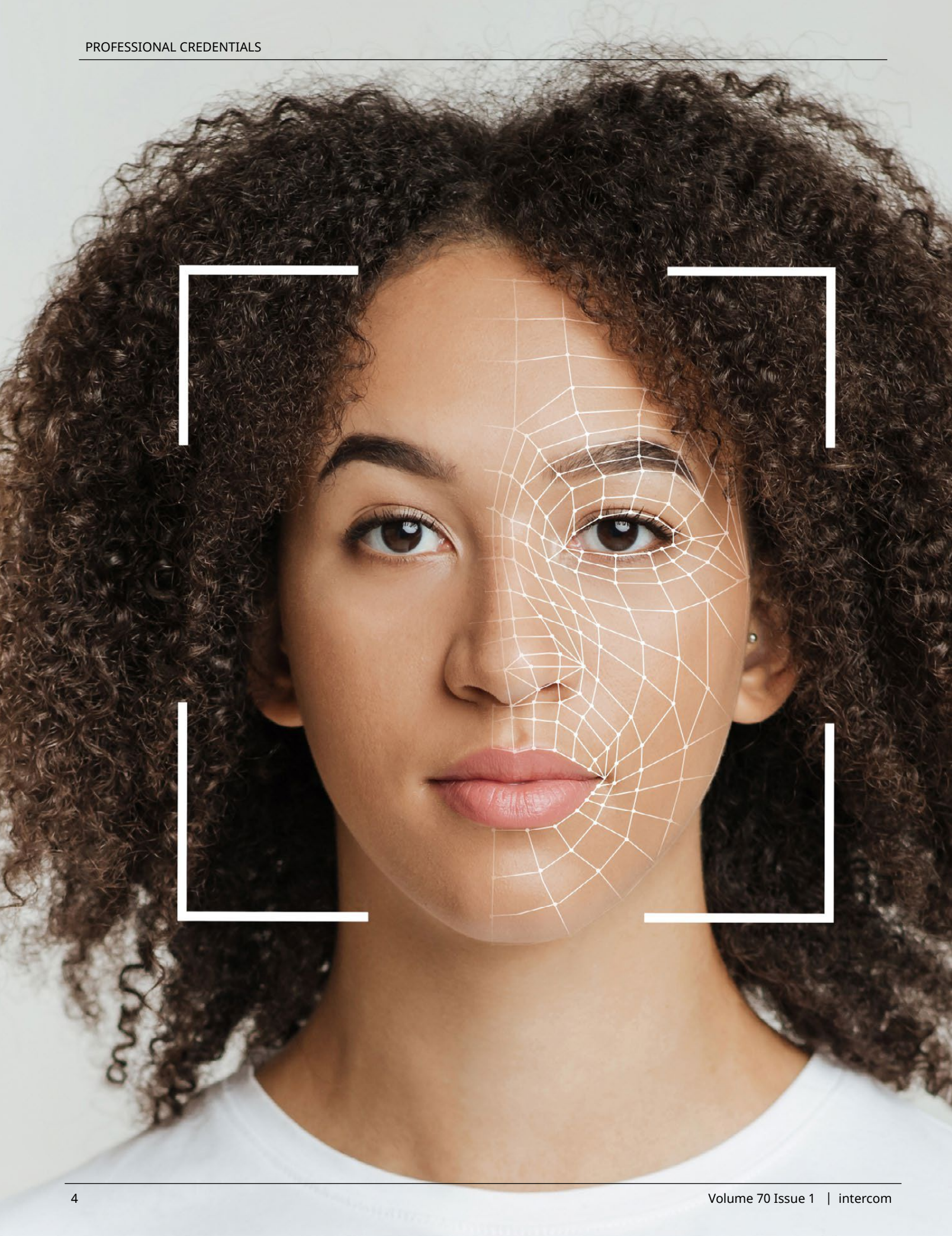
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Increasingly Flexible Options for Building Credentials

By Saul Carliner | STC Fellow

**An overview of the top credentialing
options for technical communicators.**

What can you do to become qualified for a sought-after position and to remain employable in positions similar to the one you currently hold?

Certainly, the traditional qualification—the degree—continues to be available. But alternatives to the degree have emerged, as have other types of credentials that recognize knowledge and skills gained through experience, like the experience gained in your work positions.

This article explores the top three options for gaining credentials in an emerging landscape of new credentials. The options are not unique to technical communication; they apply to most skilled work. This article starts, however, at the end: the goal for acquiring credentials.

The Goal: Demonstrate Competence

The primary goal for acquiring credentials is to become qualified for jobs of interest and to remain employable after you are hired. Maintaining employability is especially important in the current labor market, because the competencies required of workers change, even when people already hold the jobs. Competency refers to the ability to perform something successfully. To retain their jobs, workers need to maintain their competency.

According to the Competency Model Clearinghouse project of the U.S. Department of Labor, the competencies workers need fall into these categories:

- Personal effectiveness competencies, such as interpersonal skills, integrity, and initiative. These are developed from the youngest ages through a combination of experiences at home, in school, at work, and through life.
- Academic competencies, such as reading, writing, critical and analytical thinking, and basic digital skills, which are developed through K–12 education and further enhanced through higher education.
- Workplace competencies, such as teamwork, customer focus, and problem-solving and decision-making skills, which are developed through a combination of schooling, life experiences, and work experiences.
- Industry-wide technical competencies, which refer to competencies needed within an

The primary goal for acquiring credentials is to become qualified for jobs of interest and to remain employable after you are hired.

industry segment, like hospitality, information technology, and manufacturing, and are usually developed through work experiences and job-related training.

- Industry-sector technical competencies, which refer to competencies needed within a certain part of an industry—such as the aircraft segment of the transportation industry—and are developed similarly to industry-wide technical competencies.
- Management competencies, such as staffing, strategic planning, and monitoring and controlling resources, which are learned in formal education—higher education or training—and honed on the job.
- Occupation-specific competencies, which are the focus of most job-related education and credentialing, and usually developed in academic and training classrooms and honed on the job.

The Competency Model Clearinghouse created the model in Figure 1 to represent the relationships among these competencies.

Competencies are developed in different ways—some through formal education and training, others through experience. Certification and experience also provide recognition and validation of competence.

Reaching the Goal: Credentialing

You can achieve goals related to developing one or more of these competencies through credentialing efforts. This section explores three of the most common options for doing so: certificates, certification, and experience.

Option 1. Certificates

A certificate acknowledges the successful completion of educational requirements. But the nature of those requirements varies widely, from completion of one course with several sessions to completion of a sequence of courses.

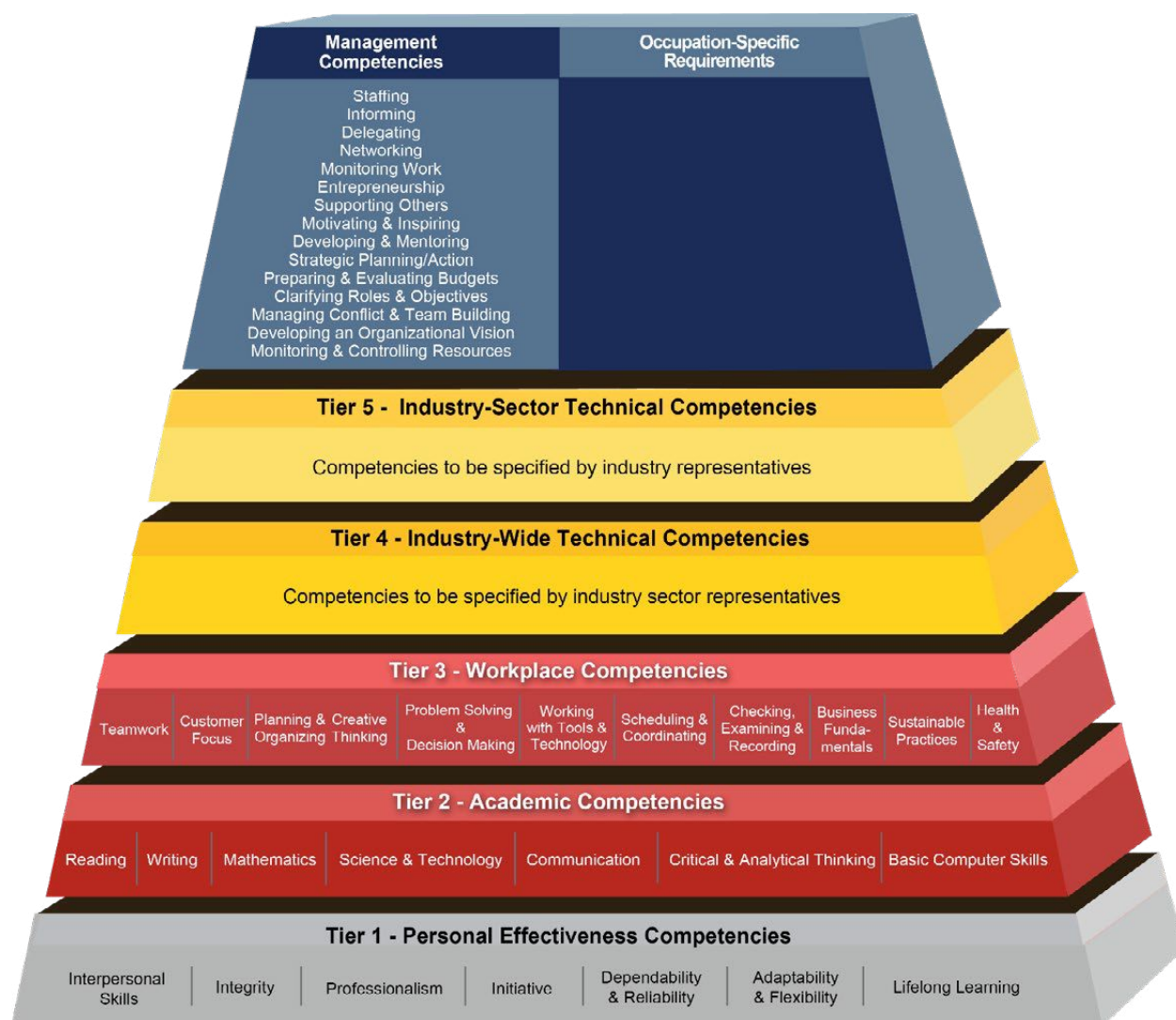


Figure 1. Broad competency areas all workers need

Building Blocks Model of the Competency Model Clearinghouse, U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration
<https://www.careeronestop.org/competencymodel/competency-models/building-blocks-model.aspx>

Table 1 summarizes the most common types of certificates available and who provides them.

Option 2: Certification

Many people and organizations call the awarding of a certificate *certification*.

But it's not.

Whereas certificates represent the completion of educational requirements, certification represents the validation of expertise by a third party. Whereas a certificate is similar to a degree, certification is more like a license. The primary

“Because they focus on demonstrating skills and knowledge, certifications provide a means of recognizing workers for competence they have developed either on their own or on the job.”

Table 1. Types of educational certificates

Provider Type	Certificate Type	Typical Requirements
University, college, or community college academic department	Undergraduate certificate (not offered in every jurisdiction — country, state, or province)	10 undergraduate courses (face-to-face, online, or mixed), each of which requires a semester of study and a passing grade (C or higher).
	Graduate certificate (offered in most jurisdictions but not by every university)	3–5 graduate courses (face-to-face, online, or mixed), each of which requires a semester of study or equivalent (some are offered over an intensive week or two of study) and a passing grade (B or higher).
University, college, or community college continuing education department	Certificate	A given number of face-to-face, online, or mixed courses (typically 10, but no standard number) of about 12–24 classroom hours and one or two assignments (that may or may not be graded closely and given either letter grades or pass/fail). Note that credits from these programs do not transfer to academic degrees.
MOOC provider, such as Coursera and Udemy	Course	A single self-paced, online course with the aid of other students and perhaps a teaching assistant — but limited or no direct interaction with instructors. Courses often involve a combination of reading, viewing online lectures, contributing to online discussion boards, and completing graded assignments — take place over the course of 4–13 weeks.
	Certificate or mini-degree	3–5 courses from the same MOOC provider. Some providers use the last course in the program as a capstone experience, in which learners apply what they have learned in previous courses to a project.
Specialized school	Certificate	An extended program of 3–12 months in which all courses focus on a specialized area, like coding (called coding schools) or film production (called film schools).
Industry or professional association	Certificate course	A face-to-face, online, or mixed course, typically with 6–24 classroom hours, which also may have graded homework assignments. Requirements can involve attendance in the entire course but might require passing a graded assignment.
	Certificate program	A sequence of courses like the certificate courses. A program might consist of 3–8 courses and may have graded homework assignments. Completion can involve attendance in the entire course but might require passing a graded assignment.
For-profit provider	Certificate course	Similar to those of professional associations.
	Certificate program	Similar to those of professional associations. What's different is that the provider might call the completion “certification,” and professional associations typically do not. Note that this is a <i>certificate</i> , not <i>certification</i> .
Employer	Certificate and “qualification” programs	A program of study — sometimes face-to-face, sometimes online — that extends from 1–6 months and develops position-specific skills in jobs in which learners have not previously worked. Sometimes the skills are sought only by the employer offering the program; sometimes the skills are sought more widely. Similarly, sometimes the employer provides the program to current employees only; in other instances, employers offer the program to prospective employees or the public as a community service (such as IBM offering its Integrated Analytics System — Data Scientist program and Coursera offering the Google IT Support Professional certificate).

difference between certification and a license is that a license is required to work legally in a field. Certification is voluntary. Although certification might be a preferred qualification, employers cannot legally require it.

Because they focus on demonstrating skills and knowledge, certifications provide a means of recognizing workers for competence they have developed either on their own or on the job. Most certifications consist of one or more of the following:

- Entry qualifications, which represent the requirements to apply for the certification and usually require completion of a stated amount of education and minimum amount of time in a type of job.
- Knowledge exam, which is a test of the key definitions and concepts underlying the area of certification and strategies for applying those definitions and concepts in practice.
- Skills demonstration, which validates that the applicant can perform the skills being certified and occurs through either a demonstration or review of a portfolio of completed work.
- Expiration date, which indicates the period that the certification is valid. Most certifications offer a path to extending the

validity, which often requires additional training or taking the certification exam again.

Table 2 describes the major types of certifications.

People who hold certifications typically earn the right to add letters after their name. Those letters represent a designation. For example, one of the co-authors of my book *Career Anxiety: Guidance Through Tough Times* is certified in project management and lists “PMP” (Project Management Professional) by their name.

Badges are handled differently. Badge holders typically include their badges in their LinkedIn profiles, on social media, or on a résumé.

Option 3. Experience (Which Matters as Much as Education)

Experience becomes increasingly important—as important as formal credentials—in maintaining employability. As British researcher Michael Eraut noted, the primary strength of formal education is developing conceptual knowledge and the basic skills needed for an occupation (2004). On-the-job experience provides insights into how to use those skills in a job setting and develops judgement regarding not-so-clear-cut

Table 2. Classes of certifications

Class of Certification	Description
Professional certification	Like industry certifications, these certifications are sponsored by professional associations and focus on certain occupational roles that cross industries. Examples of professional certifications are the Certified Performance and Learning Professional offered by the Association for Talent Development and the Project Management Professional offered by the Project Management Institute.
Industry certification	Sponsored by an industry association, these certifications verify that individuals meet the skills requirements for particular roles in the field. Examples of industry certifications are Certified Information Systems Security Professional in the cybersecurity industry, American Registry of Radiologic Technologists offered in the healthcare industry, and Certified Construction Management in the construction industry.
Private certification	Sponsored by a specific organization, these certifications often address skills with particular products. An example of a private certification is the Certified Business Architecture Specialist offered by Cisco.
Digital badge	Sponsored by an individual organization — an employer, product provider, association, or other type of organization, a digital badge acts like a merit badge and acknowledges accomplishments in work or the community. Think of it as a light form of certification. Each badge has requirements. Applicants for badges must demonstrate achievement of requirements to earn the badge. An example of a digital badge is the Google Partner badge. Educational institutions can also award digital badges upon the completion of micro-credentials (mini courses).

issues, such as how to handle problems and how to approach decisions that are not documented in textbooks or job procedures. On-the-job experience also provides insights into where practices depicted as rigid rules in textbooks are more flexible in practice. Employers value that knowledge developed on the job.

Another reason that employers value experience is that on-the-job experience exposes workers to a variety of competencies that are covered in neither academic curricula nor alternate (training) curricula. Some pertain to working with the latest technologies and work techniques, which are increasingly launched in real work settings and find their way into academic and training curricula only after reaching a critical mass in the workplace.

On-the-job experiences also provide workers the opportunity to work with a wide variety of people

under a variety of conditions. Some of this, of course, is related to coworkers of different backgrounds from that of the worker. Some of this involves learning to interact with people in different roles, such as internal and external customers, internal and external suppliers, and other employees and contractors.

On-the-job experiences provide workers, too, with opportunities to develop expertise within certain industries and organizations, experiences that most academic curricula overlook entirely. Most academic programs avoid focusing on specific industries, so their graduates have the broadest possible opportunities post-graduation. For most workers, the only way to develop expertise in an industry sector is to work in it.

In other words, the only way to build parts of the complete set of competencies needed for

Table 3. Experience-building opportunities through jobs and life

Development Opportunity	Description
Work assignment	<p>A regular work project that extends a person's base of skills with a different technology, industry, role, or business responsibility.</p> <p>Some work assignments are assigned with the express goal of challenging workers and broadening their skills. These are called <i>stretch assignments</i> because they stretch workers. (Best of all, workers continue to be paid for gaining experience.)</p>
Temporary assignment	<p>A special, short-term, paid work assignment between one week and several months, with the same employer, but in a different part of the organization, a different role, or both.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some temporary assignments are intended to address a brief shortage of workers in one area of the organization. Others are intended to develop new technical, business, and leadership skills, and provide visibility to different parts of an organization. In some organizations, workers can request a temporary assignment.
Side hustle	<p>A second job (paid or volunteer) that workers perform either regularly or from time to time that provides:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> An additional source of income, if a paid opportunity. An opportunity to pursue an interest that's important to the person — but not suitable for full-time work. An opportunity to develop skills in a new area that might qualify a person for future full-time employment. <p>Through side hustles, some workers take on assignments that are highly similar to the work they do and thereby receive many of the same advantages, such as increasing their experience, as a primary job. Because the side hustle happens outside the scope of a primary job, the benefits of the side hustle may need to be highlighted to call attention to them in cover letters, résumés, and interviews, as employers might otherwise overlook them.</p> <p>Other than for volunteer jobs, people are typically paid for side hustles. (For what it's worth, volunteering with STC provided this author with an MBA's worth of experience.)</p>

long-term employability is through on-the-job experiences. Fortunately, many options exist for developing experience through your job and life. Table 3 summarizes several of these options.

Figuring Out Your Path

Technical communicators certainly have many opportunities to acquire credentials to gain employment and remain employable. However, the question facing them is, which one(s) is/are best for me?

Issues to consider when making the decision should include:

- What is feasible given the demands of my job and outside commitments (like family responsibilities)?
- What is economically feasible? Will my employer assist me? If not, what I am willing to spend?
- Which credentials can I acquire within the context of my job? (This suggests that when choosing jobs and job assignments, do so

strategically, looking at how the assignments can strengthen your employability.)

- Which credentials will employers in my area recognize? What do the job ads say? What does my professional network say?

The rest of this special issue explores specific opportunities available to technical communicators for strengthening their credentials.

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Why Academic Certificates Will Help Transform Professional Development in Technical Communication

By Susan M. Lang | STC Member

Professional certificates can help build your specializations within technical communication.

In the academic world, what constitutes a micro-credential can differ from institution to institution. At some institutions, certificates are considered a type of micro-credential, defined usually in comparison with minors or degrees. Other institutions see certificates as occupying some middle ground between a micro-credential awarded after completing specific activities and major and minor programs that lead to degrees.

In either case, possessing one or more academic certificates indicates that an individual has attained a particular level of competence in a specific skill set. They are offered by accredited academic institutions and may be delivered via online (synchronously or asynchronously), face-to-face, or hybrid modalities. In technical communication in the United States, approximately 100 institutions offer undergraduate certificates and approximately 40 offer graduate certificates,¹ with more in development as post-secondary institutions see certificates as a way of bringing additional audiences to an institution, including alumni, business/industry partners, and non-traditional learners who want to add skills without the time commitment of a full degree. This article will describe the value of academic certificates at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, as well as pose some of the questions to consider when deciding whether an academic certificate is a good “next step” for you.

Academic Certificates and Other Micro-credentials

What constitutes a micro-credential, a certification, and an academic certification can sometimes be confusing. All three of these categories have in common the fact that their time frames to completion are less than any post-secondary degree, whether that be an associate degree (usually requiring two years of study) or a bachelor's degree (requiring two additional years). Any master's level graduate degree will require at least 18–24 months beyond a bachelor's degree to complete, while a doctoral degree will require between 3 and 6 years beyond a bachelor's.

Micro-credentials, whether offered by an academic institution for credit or as part of a continuing education program, may be

Certificates offer a more in-depth exploration of a topic to develop a level of expertise. Upon completion, students will receive a physical document from the institution that verifies the work completed.

composed of either college or professional credit courses and are usually considered as short-term training, upskilling, or re-skilling for practicing professionals in specific skill areas. Most micro-credentials are composed of two to six courses; each course may be offered with synchronous or asynchronous components and take anywhere from several weeks to several months to complete. Upon completion, students will receive a digital badge from the institution that can be added to a digital résumé or a LinkedIn profile. They may also receive continuing education units (CEUs) from the institution in lieu of college credit hours.

Certificates offer a more in-depth exploration of a topic to develop a level of expertise. Upon completion, students will receive a physical document from the institution that verifies the work completed.

Undergraduate vs. Graduate Certificates

Undergraduate certificate programs can be embedded (open to students already enrolled in a degree program at an institution) or stand-alone (open to anyone outside the university who holds a high-school diploma). They may be non-credit-bearing or credit-bearing. Credit-bearing courses offered by an accredited post-secondary institution may be applied concurrently or at a later time to another academic program, such as an undergraduate major or minor, or to a graduate degree. Most credit-bearing certificates require between 9 and 15 credits (3–5 college semester courses). The length of time to complete a certificate will vary, depending on the structure of the certificate and the length of the courses offered. Certificates that require courses to be

taken in a particular sequence may take between 9 and 18 months to complete, depending on the frequency of the course offerings and the length of each course. For example, some courses may be offered in more intensive, half-term lengths. In that case, it would be possible for a student to complete four courses in two semesters to obtain the certificate. Some institutions may also offer a post-bachelor's certificate for students who wish additional credentialing. These certificates generally offer courses that would be considered upper-level undergraduate courses and require students to hold a bachelor's degree, although not necessarily in technical communication.

Graduate certificate programs are generally credit-bearing programs that require students to meet graduate school admission requirements even if the certificate is a stand-alone one. Institutions that offer master's or doctoral degrees in technical communication often allow students who enroll and complete a certificate to apply those credit hours to an advanced degree should they choose to continue or return to the institution to pursue one. Graduate certificate programs usually require between 12 and 18 credit hours (usually 4–6 semester courses or 3–6 quarter courses), as compared to master's degrees, which require between 24 and 30 credits (between 8 and 15 courses, depending on whether they are semester-length or quarter-length). As with undergraduate certificates, some graduate-level certificates allow students more choice in courses while others have prescribed courses and/or sequences.

Value and Benefits

The value of any college or university credential has been debated frequently over the last 20 years as people weigh such factors as lifetime earning potential and reduction of overall income inequity against rising costs and increasing student debt.² Knowing that the average cost of a college degree doubled between 1989 and 2016, even after adjustment for inflation, and increased at a rate eight times faster than wages, may make most people wonder if the credential is worth the cost.³ Adding to the confusion for many is the question of whether a four-year degree prepares students for a career path that may last 30 or more years. Pursuing one or more academic certificates in technical communication may provide those wishing to

gain professional credentials with short-term worth while evaluating the potential longer-term gains of higher education.

At a baseline level, then, academic certificates enable students to acquire a credential from an accredited post-secondary institution without a 2–4-year time commitment necessary for an undergraduate degree, which makes this option particularly interesting to those who want to transition to a career in technical communication or to enhance existing skill sets. For those who wish to progress to a degree in technical communication, the certificate can provide a significant boost in terms of applying two or more certificate courses to a longer degree program. Completing a certificate may also assist students who did not have qualifications for admission to an academic program by providing them with credentials to apply for those programs. The development process of these certificates, which in many instances is comparable to the development of degree programs, ensures a level of quality underlying the credential. Academic institutions are often able to leverage internal and external resources in the development and implementation of programs to ensure quality. Institutions are also held to external accreditation standards regarding transparency of cost, financial aid, and applicability to other credentials or degrees. And record of each student's completion of certificate program(s) will be verified easily by prospective or current employers.

Academic certifications may also be of particular value to: 1) students who completed bachelor's degrees in other areas but who wish to migrate into more technical-communication-related positions; and/or 2) students who wish to test the waters before returning to a longer degree program. Completing an academic certificate will demonstrate to prospective employers that the individual possesses intellectual ability and work ethic necessary for many positions. Depending on the institution, certificate students may also have access to career services offices or other job-seeking resources. Additionally, the credibility added by possessing a credential from an accredited institution will often carry weight with employers who have hired others for various positions within their organization from that same institution. Professional networking opportunities, whether through LinkedIn or

through an institution's alumni association or other internal organizations, can also be consequences of pursuing an academic certificate.

Finally, students who begin an undergraduate or graduate certificate can determine if further professional development, at either the certifying institution or another, is an avenue worth pursuing for them.

Questions to Consider

As with any professional development activity, undertaking a certificate program poses questions of paramount importance related to financial cost, time commitment, and fit. In evaluating any academic certificate program, consider the following:

- Do I have the qualifications needed to apply to/enroll in the program?
- What is the cost of the certificate? If necessary, is financial aid available through the institution or from a current employer?
- What is the time commitment, for overall completion and for each instructional component of the certificate?
- What are the short- and mid-term career benefits to acquiring the certificate?
- How does the program fit with my professional development goals?
- What is the intersection between the coursework and applied technical communication?
- Who are the instructors, and what is their experience level in the field? Do they have academic and/or industry credentials?

Conclusion

Research consistently shows that the often-debated liberal arts education versus career-focused training is a non-starter; graduates who possess a broad education that helps them develop problem-analysis and problem-solving skills along with industry-valued skills (including the ability to write, collaborate, and present

material in nearly *all* professions) are best positioned for success. But not everyone is ready or able to dive into a first, let alone an additional, full degree commitment. Institutions that recognize this are developing other models more suited to working professionals or those seeking a career restart. Faculty at The Ohio State University are working to develop technical communication certificates that balance a refresh of writing skills with industry-specific content. These will also prepare students to take STC certification exams at the Foundation and Practitioner levels. As additional certificate programs focus on a working professional audience, more options will be available to those who wish to enter or hone their abilities as technical communicators at all levels. ■

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Certification and Professional Credentials: What to Know to Become Certified and Boost Your Professional Development

By Liz Pohland | STC Chief Executive Officer

This article is a revision of "Certification and STC's Certified Professional Technical Communicator: What You Need to Know" by Liz Pohland and Chris Lyons, first published in Intercom in January 2016.

Considering earning professional certification? This article compares certification against other types of professional development credentials; explains the purpose and significance of certification; and gives important details on how candidates can prepare, earn, and maintain a professional credential.



What Is Certification?

The terms *certification*, *licensure*, *standardization*, *accreditation*, and *certificate* are sometimes used interchangeably. Although they are used this way in the vernacular, there are important distinctions between the definitions of each type of credential.

Certification is a voluntary process by which a nongovernmental agency or association grants recognition to individuals who have met certain predetermined qualifications of professional competence specified by that agency or association upon an assessment. Such qualifications may include acceptable performance on a qualifying examination and/or completion of some specified amount or type of work experience in the field.

There are three general types of certifications with varying degrees of development and portability—corporate (internal), product- or tool-specific, and profession-wide. Examples of corporate (internal) certifications include IBM Certified Support Professional, Oracle Database Certified Professional, and Apple Certified Support Professional. These certifications are less portable to other jobs or opportunities than the other two certification types. Examples of product- or tool-specific certifications include Adobe Certified Professional/Expert/Master, AWS Cloud Practitioner, and Microsoft Office Specialist. Examples of profession-wide certifications include STC's Certified Professional Technical Communicator, the American Medical Writers Association's Certified Medical Writer, and the Project Management Institute's Project Management Professional.

Licensure is the process by which a government agency grants permission to individuals to engage in a given profession or occupation by certifying that those licensed have attained the minimal degree of competency necessary to ensure reasonable protection of the public's health, safety, and welfare. Licenses are usually justified to regulate an activity whose incompetent execution would be a threat to the public, such as performing surgery or driving motor vehicles. Examples of workers who need licenses to do their work include board certified doctors, lawyers who have been admitted to the bar, commercial driving licensed truck drivers, and airline transport pilot licensed plane captains.

Standardization is the process by which a product or service is assessed against standards and specifications, such as the UL Solutions seal on electrical fixtures or internal audits done by companies that want to show compliance to national or international standards, such as those issued by the [American National Standards Institute](#) and the [International Organization for Standardization](#) (ISO). For example, in 2019, ISO released ISO 20607, a standards document that specifies requirements for machine manufacturers to prepare the safety-relevant parts of an instruction handbook for machinery.

Accreditation is the process whereby an accrediting agency grants public recognition to a school, institute, college, university, or specialized program of study for having met certain established qualifications or standards, as determined through initial and periodic evaluations. Regional accreditors typically focus on academically oriented, state-owned, or not-for-profit institutions (like the University of Pittsburgh). National accreditation generally covers niche institutions: for example, faith-based or single-discipline colleges (like an art school). Programmatic accreditation, as its name implies, is reserved for specific degree programs, such as engineering, accounting, education, nursing, and others focused on regulated professions. The [U.S. Department of Education](#) maintains a database of accrediting agencies it recognizes.

Certificates are commonly confused with certifications, but they are very different. A certificate recognizes completion of a defined program of study (such as a certificate for a software class completion), usually involving a combination of class attendance/participation, assignments, and/or an exam. Certificates are awarded to recognize mastery of specific learning outcomes provided by instruction and training. In contrast, certifications award designations to recognize professional achievements from knowledge, skills, and competencies previously acquired. Examples of certificates include short-term programs of study—such as the certificate courses offered by STC and other private training and development organizations like [Coursera](#) and [Learning Tree International](#)—and programs of study involving completion of multiple courses—such as certificate programs in technical communication

offered by the continuing education departments of many colleges and universities.

Definitions in a Nutshell

Certifications, licensures, and certificates are for individuals.

- **Certification** is a voluntarily earned designation bestowed by a recognized organization or authority to validate an individual's qualifications to perform a job or task.
- **Licensure** is a mandatory restriction by law for a professional activity and the use of an occupational title.
- **Standardization** is directed toward products or processes.
- **Accreditation** is third-party validation of entire organizations or programs of study.
- **Certificates** confirm an individual's acceptable completion of a program of study.

Why Do Organizations Certify Individuals?

Any organization can consider creating a certification program for a particular skill or knowledge of an industry or field. Organizations may consider a certification program if: 1) they have a measurable business need to formally validate an individual's knowledge or skill with or in a particular product, tool, or content area; 2) there are no tests or credentials available from other organizations to measure performance, knowledge, or skills with or in a particular product, tool, or content area; and 3) verifying a minimum performance capability of an individual is critical to the job (e.g., for safety, health, environmental, or other risk-related concerns).

One of the tasks in designing a certification program is to find a valid driver—a problem worth solving. The first reason most organizations certify focuses on recognizing a professional's accomplishments and improving work processes. Organizations certify individuals to protect the public, confirming that practitioners have or can get the knowledge and skills required to do their jobs safely, efficiently, and effectively. They also certify to validate or

enhance the stature of a role or position, to promote continuous improvement, to increase productivity, and to maintain skills and knowledge. Hiring organizations want a certified workforce so they can attract and retain competent staff, establish uniform performance standards to rapidly deploy workers, raise the level of core competencies, create multidisciplinary jobs, and comply with local and international standards.

Since professional certification confirms or validates knowledge or performance capability, it is important that the certifying organization also be recognized as an appropriate body to determine and grant professional certification. This is often a leading or generally recognized, active organization for professionals in a field. A professional certification created by an individual, an unknown association, or a just organized group would lack credibility.

What Does Certification Mean to Organizations and Businesses?

Businesses benefit from certification because it provides them with a benchmark to compensate, measure, and evaluate employees' skills for roles within the organization. Teams are trained to consistent skills levels. Research by a variety of organizations—including Microsoft, IDC, CompTIA, and Novell—have shown that certified people are typically more productive and work to consistent standards. Certification ensures that knowledge has been retained, and it also results in greater customer satisfaction (internal and external customers) and lower staff turnover.

Why businesses should help their staff earn a professional certification

- Leads to happier employees — who stick around longer
- Encourages greater peace of mind and employee self-confidence
- Gives clients and customers greater confidence in your business
- Boosts productivity and knowledge retention

Do You Need a Certification?

Some employers require a certification in order to apply or qualify for a job. It's a key item that hiring employers look for on résumés. Many people earn specialty certifications to help them advance in their careers.

A certification may also help you get promoted or earn more money than your co-workers who do not have the specific credential at hand.

Some industries are more likely to require certifications than others. According to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the following occupations had the highest percentages of workers who held certifications but no licenses:

- Computer and mathematical (6.6%)
- Community and social services (4.6%)
- Installation, maintenance, and repair (4.1%)
- Business and financial operations (3.3%)
- Legal (3.3%)
- Health care practitioners and technical (3.1%)

The BLS's CareerOneStop Credentials Center publishes a [certification finder tool](#) where you can search by job title or certification name. You can also narrow the search by industry or occupation.

What Does Certification Mean to Professional Technical Communicators?

The chief benefit of certification is simple: a certification program creates a preference in the job market for people who have taken the time to invest in themselves—in their skills and experience. For individuals in particular, becoming certified can be invaluable because it provides portable proof of your abilities and a robust understanding of the knowledge and specialized skills that are necessary to perform with a high degree of competence in a field. In every profession, certification helps employee, employer, and the consumer.

Employees benefit from professional certification in several ways:

1. *Validation of an employee's skills and knowledge by a third party.* In the case of the Certified Professional Technical Communicator credential, STC provides that validation.

Additionally, STC is working with a third-party certification advisory group whose accreditation processes follow ISO standards. For the employee, STC's Certified Professional Technical Communicator certification with accompanying requirements for continuing education is a professional milestone that carries weight and credibility among peers, clients, and organizational leaders.

2. *Differentiation from others in the marketplace, increased employment value, and the ability to command higher pay.* Professional certification is an important credential on a résumé and provides evidence of qualifications. It denotes a level of competency and is an indicator of commitment, value, and quality performance and output. Obtaining certification may be a requirement for advancement, a means for keeping up with ever-changing technologies and processes, or a way of standing out from peers or competitors and commanding higher pay or more responsibilities.
3. *Engagement and commitment to the field.* On a personal level, the certification process and requirement for annual training forces the practitioner to stay current, work on multiple types of jobs, learn new skills, and network with peers. It provides employees with clear evidence of an engagement and commitment to technical communication.

The companies that technical communicators work for also benefit in the following ways from employees who are certified:

4. *Validation of an employee's skills and knowledge by a third party.* Professional certification provides a quality marker that helps an employer gauge the effectiveness and qualifications of a potential hire. It reduces risk and simplifies the search through validation of knowledge and by providing a hiring baseline. When professional certification is a requirement in a job posting, it greatly focuses the candidate pool. Since the employer is depending on an independent validation to verify a candidate's skill, it is important that the certification is granted by an established and credible organization, such as STC.
5. *Differentiation from others in the workforce.* Employers want their hires to stay current and continue to grow in the profession.

Professional certification programs provide milestones for employees, and after completing a certification qualification, remain a driver of continuing education and training. Employers can use achievement of professional certification as a requirement for advancement or pay increases as well.

6. *Engagement and commitment to the field and the business.* Certified professionals with proven knowledge and competency will contribute more to an organization. They may be faster or more accurate workers, and they may be more creative or insightful in solving related business problems. And certified employees provide evidence that an organization's technical communication team is more qualified than that of its competitors. Finally, businesses that support certification as an employee professional development benefit are more likely to retain employees for longer tenure with the company.

What Does Certification Mean to Consumers and Product Users?

With certified professionals in the workforce, the consumer is better off as well. Knowledgeable workers result in better products and superior communications: instructions are more easily understood, warnings are relayed properly, descriptions are complete, content can be reused, and the device used to access the content doesn't limit the user. For technical communicators, professional certification sets a standard for skills, knowledge, and performance across the

field of content work and information products. Ultimately, developing a well-thought-out certification program helps an organization's employees, customers, and members advance the organization's interests, as well as their own. It is arguably the best way to create confidence in the marketplace.

STC's Certified Professional Technical Communicator (CPTC)

The Society for Technical Communication is fulfilling one of its mandates as a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit association by sponsoring professional certification for technical communicators. STC first launched a certification program for technical communicators in 2011. The goal behind the program was to create preference in the marketplace for certified technical communicators and to validate efforts in learning core skills, best practices, and specific industry standards. STC believes that certification is a powerful tool for driving market recognition and adoption of an essential skill set.

For technical communicators, professional certification sets a standard for skills, knowledge, and performance across the field of content work and information products.

Benefits of Certification

- **Validated Experience:** Confirm your experience and competency through certification.
- **Professional Development:** Add certification to your career development plan and distinguish yourself from your peers.
- **Leadership Recognition:** Show employers and colleagues that you are committed to establishing global performance standards for the profession.
- **Professional Status:** Join an elite group of CPTC-certified professionals who have demonstrated their knowledge and proficiency.
- **Portable Career Credential:** Take your CPTC certification with you to new jobs and enhance your employability.
- **Personal Achievement:** Gain confidence in your knowledge and skill, and achieve a professional and personal goal.

Per a report written in June 2009 titled “STC Certification Drivers,” the STC Certification Task Force identified the following driving factors for a certification program for technical communicators:

- Establish uniform worldwide performance standards.
- Increase employability and salaries of certified practitioners.
- Satisfy employer expectations.
- Reduce employer risk.

[STC’s Certified Professional Technical Communicator \(CPTC\) program](#) is a three-tiered professional certification: Foundation, Practitioner, and Expert.

- The **Foundation-level Professional Certification** focuses on knowledge and comprehension of the field. To achieve the Foundation CPTC designation, applicants must demonstrate knowledge and understanding of best practices in technical communication by passing an exam based on a body of knowledge, the *Technical Communication Today* textbook. Foundation CPTCs are informed members of a technical writing or a technical communication team within their professional work or in their organization.
- The **Practitioner-level Professional Certification** validates mastery of applying best practices and leading others in their appropriate use. Practitioner CPTCs have achieved sufficient understanding of how to apply and analyze technical communication guidance in a given organizational communications situation via a scenario-based test.
- The **Expert-level Professional Certification** demonstrates the candidate’s ability to evaluate and synthesize information via an assessment and requires submission of a set of work products, interviews with subject matter experts (SMEs), and a formal presentation.

To build the CPTC certification, STC partnered with APMG International, an ISO-accredited certification body that is an independent third party that coordinates the certification process

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with STC’s appointed chief examiner. ISO-certified bodies ensure that each certifying business follows ISO standards. Visit the APMG website at <http://www.apmg-international.com/en/qualifications/CPTC/CPTC.aspx> to learn more about the program or to register for the exams. ■



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The Value of Academic Degrees as Professional Credentials for Technical Communicators

By Kylie Jacobsen | STC Member

Academic programs provide both breadth and depth of study to prepare students for professional careers.



A novice technical communicator and a new university student share a common characteristic — both likely found their professional calling later in their respective professional or collegiate career. Many technical communicators joined the profession after years of working in tangential fields. Engineers and computer scientists with a passion for technology, journalists and English educators with a love of language, and so many others have found a professional home in technical communication. Similarly, university students who declare technical writing majors as upperclassmen are considered “found” technical and professional communication (TPC) writing majors. Often, these students do not declare a writing major as freshmen or even early sophomores, but rather join the TPC department early in their junior year after a handful of semesters pursuing degrees in business, engineering, literature, art, or mathematics, to name a few. Technical communication itself is a found profession, having first been recognized by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) in 2009.¹

As the demand for well-qualified technical communicators continues to grow,² the need for TPC education is evermore present. Anyone interested in pursuing a career in technical communication can improve their workplace skills through various types of credentials, such as academic degrees, certificate programs, certification, corporate training, and micro-credentialing (e.g., digital badges or mini certifications that acknowledge the development of a singular, specific skill set). With several credentialing options, a novice technical communicator-to-be may consider pursuing an academic degree.

About Academic Degrees in Technical and Professional Communication

According to ongoing research by Lisa Melonçon, professor of technical communication, there are approximately 600 technical and professional communication academic degrees offered in the United States with varied credit-hour requirements.³ Academic programs can include bachelor's degrees, associate degrees, certificates, minors/concentrations, and graduate degrees, such as a master's or doctoral degree.

An undergraduate student pursuing a bachelor's degree in technical communication can expect to complete approximately 120 credit hours before they can apply for graduation. That number breaks down to enrolling in about 10 courses a year for four years, assuming each course equates to the typical three credit hours. Required credit hours for academic certificates, minors (and even concentrations) vary greatly per university, but typically 15–18 credit hours are required, which averages to around six courses total.

Students pursuing master's degrees can expect to complete 40 credit hours on average (which is about two years of study), and doctoral programs typically require 60 hours in addition to required research hours, often averaging around five years of additional study beyond an undergraduate degree. But what is the value of spending several years studying TPC to a writer who is weighing their options between pursuing an academic degree or a professional certification?

When Writers Aren't Writing: The Value of an Academic Program

While both professional credentials and academic degrees are valuable, consider that a technical communicator will spend only a small fraction of their daily tasks performing the actual task of writing. A significant amount of time is spent researching, planning, designing, collaborating, reviewing, revising, editing, testing, and managing written, visual, and oral communication. In a university setting, many TPC programs prepare students to meet these workplace demands by integrating interdisciplinary learning objectives with courses in rhetoric and design theory. Academic degrees promote a more holistic approach to learning, and in contrast, professional credentials offer a deeper understanding of specific parts of the technical writing process.

Technical communication professors design assignments to provide good practices in every stage in a document's life cycle. Students enrolled in almost any writing course experience the process of research, and in a technical writing course, that could range from researching a product, audience type, competitor, client, or

Academic degrees promote a more holistic approach to learning, and in contrast, professional credentials offer a deeper understanding of specific parts of the technical writing process.

process. The research is often grounded in a research methodology and rationalized to a reader, such as a professor, peer collaborator, or community member.

From there, often in small, collaborative teams in the classroom or across the university, students develop projects, such as reports, brief presentations, or infographics, during iterative cycles. Often the development phase of a writing project culminates in a peer review session, where students learn not only how to receive and respond to critique, but also how to craft meaningful, formative feedback. An increasing number of TPC programs also implement a course or unit on usability testing within the writing course to expose students to user-centered approaches and post-production document management. Careful course planning ensures TPC students are exposed to a breadth of technical communication theory and application.

Additionally, a TPC student will hone their skills in all types of interpersonal communication, including conflict management (to coordinate unmotivated peers during group work, for example), negotiating project timelines with clients and communicating cordially with subject matter experts, and collaborating with interdisciplinary majors on multi-authored papers. The written, oral, and visual communication required to navigate these classroom interactions are consistently ranked as essential skills for potential employees.⁴ Even the BLS highlights teamwork, or the ability to “work well with other writers, designers, editors, illustrators, and the technical workers whose procedure or product they are explaining” as a vital employment skill.¹ The classroom provides the space and time for developing and improving

these skills because of the innate culture of collaboration among fellow students, in opposition to professional credentials, which are often completed online, in an isolated and self-paced environment.

Students studying under the direction of an academic program may also benefit from programmatic recognition. The network a university program reaches can transcend national borders and provide students added layers of credibility and opportunity because of that network. While various bootcamps or professional credentials can strengthen a particular area of the résumé of a novice technical communicator, writers may find that workplaces do not value micro-credentials, especially if they are not from an accredited program or reputable organization within the industry.

Academic Students Benefit from Time

Night classes, part-time status, online courses, and accelerated degrees are designed to meet the needs of nontraditional students or those who cannot commit the time required for a traditional program of academic study. However, students in academic settings benefit from weeks-long, structured semesters spent with course material, like-minded individuals, and field experts. A majority of part-time and 40 percent of full-time students hold jobs during their collegiate careers,⁵ so a 16-week-long writing course may prove to be more manageable to complete than a self-paced professional credential. The length of a semester allows a student to study a range of topics that will give them a fuller context for the research, planning, and writing they are expected to perform as a technical communicator.

During semester-long projects, students also benefit from curating strong portfolios with documents that have undergone many rounds of peer review, received feedback from several professors, and gained input from professional community partners. The documents they create for these classes often receive permission to be used for career opportunities, as opposed to a career’s worth of documents that cannot be used as potential writing samples because of company ownership over proprietary information.

Degrees Provide Benefits for Long-Term Careers

Apart from providing a comprehensive education grounded in rhetoric, research methods, and a plethora of collaborative writing opportunities, an academic degree in TPC can provide the graduate logistical benefits. Specifically, a technical communicator desiring a promotion or raise at work may reasonably be expected to earn a professional degree to qualify for the promotion.

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A strong candidate for a master's degree, sometimes referred to as a professional degree, is someone who can successfully apply to a graduate program. One of the common minimum requirements for this application is a four-year degree. Though a bachelor's degree in technical communication is very helpful for securing admittance into a TPC graduate program, applicants from any background can successfully enter a TPC graduate program with the right argument in their letter of intent (sometimes referred to as a letter of application) and previous academic achievement. An already-completed bachelor's degree can streamline the promotion process because a promotion or a raise may be awarded to an employee upon completion of a master's degree. An employee will be eligible for a promotion or raise once a four-year degree is awarded and then a two-year graduate degree is completed.

Conclusion

Any of the educational paths described in this article are viable and beneficial options for a technical communicator. Writers who find technical communication at any point in their professional lives can only improve upon their specific skill sets by completing any array of professional credentialing. Though this article is not a comprehensive exploration of all university degrees and other forms of professional credentials, there is value in pursuing academic degrees. Those who do may not see the fruits of their labor for upwards of four years, but what a writer learns in addition to effective writing skills while pursuing an academic degree can provide a technical communicator with a long, fulfilling career. ■

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Top Six Mistakes to Avoid When Designing Accessible Websites

By Sushil K. Oswal | STC Member

Improve web accessibility for your sites by avoiding some of the most common pitfalls.

Web accessibility instruction is still not common in technical communication courses. Technical communication and web design professionals interested in accessibility do not always have financial resources, time, or energy to take accessible design courses to pursue this interest. This quick tutorial will help you get started. If you pay attention to some of the most common web accessibility mistakes made by designers and discussed below, you are already on the path to designing accessible websites.

1. Let us design and develop our website and then we'll check it for accessibility when we conduct usability testing.

Building accessibility on top of a website structure designed for nondisabled users is like garnishing a fruitcake with pickles. Disabled users navigate websites both like and unlike nondisabled users, but the interfaces on their end can be as varied as a regular keyboard, for someone requiring non-mouse access due to a hand-motor disability, or someone using a screen reader for navigating pages non-visually. Screen readers are textual browsers, and their users cannot always point to an object with a mouse due to a visual disability.

So, accounting for the presence of a variety of user interfaces by designers is central to building accessibility from the bottom up. This realization about users accessing our websites through these varied interfaces has to happen as early as the beginning of design activity. Besides depicting our users' general aptitude for technology, backgrounds, and interests, do our personas also represent the difference in human bodies and the way they function? Do the journeys we imagine on behalf of our users reflect how they will carry their diverse bodies?

2. Disabled users don't know anything about web design, so they have no business meddling in my design until I have a prototype to test.

You might be right that disabled users, like all other users, don't know a lot about designing and developing web pages, but they are flesh-and-blood beings who interact with websites, and they know a lot more than we do about how their bodies apply themselves to use our designs in these web interactions. They also know a lot more about how their adaptive technology will interact with your website even if you are familiar with adaptive technologies. We must realize that they live with their adaptive user interfaces 24/7.

Including a disabled person with some good user knowledge of adaptive technology on your team before your planning gets going will help you conceptualize the whole project as an accessible enterprise. The coolest of design ideas imagined by a human body inexperienced with a disability can be disabling. We might all recall the hype for those splash pages with little keyboard access and no textual content. Instead of being a gala welcome

to the user, they were, and still are, concrete barriers for most disabled users entering your website with a nonvisual adaptive interface, such as a screen reader or a braille array. So are most of the uses of Accessible Rich Internet Applications (ARIA) roles, because developers fail to test their pages with disabled testers who have a better understanding of adaptive interfaces because they use them regularly.

So, let a disabled team member, or at least a consultant, be the tester of your web design ideas from the get-go before the ideas solidify into unexpected and unwarranted accessibility barriers. As you choose a disabled consultant on your team, make sure that they have some good web browsing history and they also use adaptive technologies that affect web design most — screen readers, braille displays, and closed captions.

3. The internet has no boundaries; therefore, why should I not design as vast a website as I like?

Yes, all businesses, nonprofits, and other customers have their website needs. They might also have a desire to put out all the content they like online, since they own the domain, and they are paying you to design it. At the same time, as an expert, it is your responsibility to convince them that sometimes less is more, as long as this less is well designed. And this advice stands true for the structure of the web pages, their design features, and the content itself. Even a well-designed and -executed website requires some effort on behalf of your users — disabled or nondisabled. Persuading the customer that the users have limited attention spans, limited time to spend on the customer's site, and at times, limited energy to expend to achieve their intended goals during their visit, is an aspect of our job we often neglect. Educating the customer

that the internet is not necessarily a medium for going overboard with content can help us move toward reducing the information overload on users. For users with disabilities, feature overload on websites is also a problem, which only web designers and developers, as well as content developers, strategists, and managers, can solve.

So simple designs with elegant features within the limits of our users' aptitude and capabilities can serve them as well or better than most of the elaborate designs that shut out a large segment of our user population, ranging from 15 to 20 percent, according to U.S. Census and World Health Organization estimates. I believe that no one among us would like to perpetuate such an exclusion consciously.

4. We are dedicated to accessibility because we use Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) in our web design.

While we cannot function without web standards — if we want to design and develop accessible pages for diverse bodies employing a variety of user interfaces, browsers, and adaptive devices — following the guidelines alone does not necessarily result in accessible websites.

Accessibility mindset, which I characterize as “accessible design orientation,” requires an embodied understanding and acceptance of physical and neurological differences among human beings. Such an orientation can help us as designers and developers move from the thinking that “I also have to accommodate this different user” to “My users are all different, and my web designs need to walk the tight rope where I could cater to the diverse needs of these users.”

Adopting this orientation can, at times, mean that we might not always have the design space to pamper our nondisabled users with the extravaganza they might find entertaining, but we might remind ourselves that a meaningful web design is that which assists our users to achieve their practical purposes.

So, if we could help all our users with the tasks they want to accomplish on our website with a simple design, they will not go away disappointed, and our job is well done. Of course, we should never forget that “guidelines are only half the story.” The other half is our orientation toward becoming disability-centered designers and developers.

5. I’m implementing every WCAG standard perfectly and I have tested my prototype with adaptive technology to the best of my capability; therefore, I don’t have to conduct additional testing with disabled users.

Elimination of frustrating troubleshooting to solve the accessibility problems reported by users once the site is up and running, but just not running that well for some users, is not only time-consuming but also costly. Imagine any of those occasions when you had to tell a client that their website would require significant revamping to address their customers’ accessibility complaints, because the designer/developer who originally built the website did not pay attention to accessibility.

Accepting the fact that designers and developers are not always the best testers who can predict the challenges the users might face with our web designs requires humility, but the accessible design orientation bodes well with this mindset. Designer humility shows respect for the users of our products, and it can only grow mutual respect and appreciation for our products. Cultivating this mutual respect among users,

designers, and developers is again one of our responsibilities, if we want to put out web products that our intended audiences can use without jumping hoops, can appreciate, and can also enjoy thankfully. How many times do we find ourselves smiling when we can accomplish our task with a design that delivers its promise, and the visitor has a great user experience?

Preventing large costs involved in retrofitting accessibility to an existing website design conceptualized for an average human body is possible if we conceptualize our web designs with all users in mind but also invite them to test our products before making these products public.

Investing in manual testing with disabled users is worth the additional cost. To convince our customer of this manual testing’s value is our job, and these costs should be calculated like other usability and user experience testing costs in the budgets for our project proposals to the client.

6. Our team of designers and developers is well-versed in accessibility, and we can design a really accessible website. We also know that we can build all the structure necessary for an inclusive user experience in our web pages for all our visitors. Do we now also need content developers and strategists who have been trained in accessible design?

Yes, designing an accessible foundation and technical structure for our websites is undeniably central to attaining the aim of accessibility and inclusivity. However, access is just as central to designing simple, functional, and inclusive content. What value is your textual content if a large percentage of your users have to gloss over half the words because the content does not speak to their vocabulary or its syntax addles their mind? Up to 11 percent of our users have invisible disabilities, such as dyslexia or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) — also known as attention deficit disorder (ADD), and more than any other users, these users desire texts that are easy to read and easy to process. Reading a wall of lengthy text with a linear device, such as a screen reader, is taxing on ears and mind. Most likely, the users of such adaptive technology will try to escape from such a web environment as quickly as they can. No doubt, nimble and audience-focused content is less taxing for all other users when they are reading in distracting environments.

Small chunks of text requiring the reader to click links to go to the next page are equally problematic. They can be a literal pain point for users with hand-motor disabilities. Moreover,

people using text-to-speech (TTS) readers — sighted or blind — find such short snippets of text frustrating because they cannot benefit from the automatic reading features of their TTS software while they multitask. Often these short pages are full of bare space with color, panorama, or other visual artifacts that do not cater to the visitor's purpose. Inflating such short chunks of text to the level of web design is not convincing because visitors can easily see that the choice is not the outcome of a complex or strategic design decision.

Likewise, we can't expect our users to complete complicated forms on our pages if they are dysgraphic — a disability that poses challenges in writing complicated language. Images and videos are not exempt from accessibility issues, and content creators need to remember that many of their users might have visual disorders that keep them from processing complicated images.

So, while forming our web design teams, we must pay attention to selecting content creators who are inclusive of all users in their orientation, have enough background in Plain Language theory and practice, and can develop images and videos with these users' needs in mind. ■

FURTHER RESOURCES

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STC Is Going Platinum

STC is turning 70! To celebrate, the Society will offer webinars and archival *Intercom* articles, host special events, and have an anniversary celebration at the 2023 STC Summit in Atlanta, GA in May 2023!

A Brief History

In the United States, two organizations concerned with improving the practice of technical communication were

founded on the East Coast in 1953: the Society of Technical Writers and the Association of Technical Writers and Editors. These organizations merged in 1957 to form the Society of Technical Writers and Editors (STWE).

STWE merged with the Technical Publishing Society in 1960 in an effort to extend the organization's size and reach. It was via this merger that the Society of Technical Writers and Publishers was born. Over the next 11 years,

the organization flourished, continuing to grow and expand its membership. In 1971, the organization changed its name to the Society for Technical Communication. ■

For more information, visit:
<https://www.stc.org/about-stc/stc-70th-anniversary>



Miss Tech Comm Week? No Worries

2023's Tech Comm week ran from 30 January–3 February 2023, with a litany of presentations and options available for attendees.

If you were unable to attend, don't fret! You can receive access to both 2023's and 2022's Tech Comm week, as well as special access to *Intercom* and *Technical Communication*.

At a Glance

Some 2023 presentations include:

- CPTC Certification Open House with Dr. Craig Baehr and CEO Liz Pohland.

- Live presentation overview of the certification program and participant Q&A session.
- Certificates, Certification, and Academic Degrees Panel Discussion
 - STC shows the recording of last year's panel discussion, and welcomes back Craig Baehr and Susan Lang for a new, live Q&A discussion about this important topic!
- Language Matters: A 35-Year Pogue Rant
 - Tech writer (*New York Times*, *Missing Manual*), TV Host (CBS *Sunday Morning*, *NOVA*), podcaster (*Unsung Science*), TED speaker, novelist, and

climate-change expert David Pogue recounts his evolution, learnings, and tips as an explainer.

Additional resources include

- Complimentary issue of *Intercom*: "Maximize Your Career Potential"
- Complimentary issue of *Technical Communication*: "Storytelling in Technical Communication"
- Access to 2022's Tech Comm week

Visit <https://www.stc.org/membership/tech-comm-week-2023/> to access the week's events and contents.

STC Election Season Is Underway

The 2022-2023 STC Nominating Committee is pleased to announce the preliminary slate of candidates for the 2023 STC election! The Committee received many nominations this year from members despite a challenging year, and one in which many nominees found it difficult to accept the opportunity due to a number of professional and personal factors. However, throughout this vetted process, and from the applications received, a strong core of candidates was interviewed and put forth for consideration for the upcoming 2023 STC Election.

Congratulations to the candidates, and thanks to all STC members who expressed interest in running for office.

President (Automatically succeeds from the office of Vice President)

- Timothy Esposito

Vice President (one candidate for one position; three-year commitment)

- Elizabeth (Liz) Herman

Treasurer (Two-year term)

- Roberta (Bobbi) Werner

Director (four candidates for two positions; two-year term)

- Guiseppe Getto
- Jennifer Goode
- Sree Pattabiraman
- Jamye Sagan

Nominating Committee (three candidates for two positions; two-year term)

- Rachel Houghton
- Zohra Mutabanna
- Sean Stevenson

Additional candidates for the Nominating Committee and the positions of Director, Treasurer, and Vice President may be nominated by petition of five percent of the voting members of the total membership as of 31 August 2022. Candidates

who seek nomination by petition must identify themselves to the Nominating Committee by 28 February 2023. Please review STC's current Society bylaws for full information about nominations by petition.

The 2023 STC election is scheduled to open in March. To be eligible to vote, members must have paid their dues by 31 January of the election year. Renew now to vote! All eligible members will receive an email from a third-party vendor to vote.

Note that the preliminary slate was prepared in accordance with the current Society bylaws. The final slate for the 2023 election will include candidates appearing on the preliminary slate as well as any qualified individuals who are properly nominated by petition and approved by the Board of Directors.

Visit <https://www.stc.org/elections/> for more information on the election.

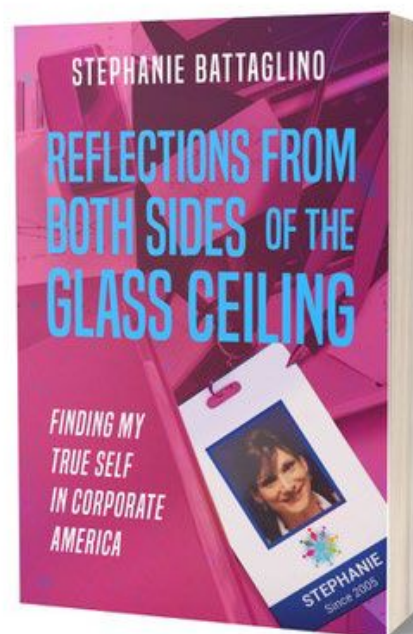
Meet the Change Agents

The Role of Word Choice:

An Interview with Stephanie Battaglini

BY SCOTT ABEL | STC Fellow

In this installment of “Meet the Change Agents,” I chat with internationally recognized, transgender motivational speaker and workplace diversity, equity, and inclusion consultant Stephanie Battaglini. We discuss the role of word choice when communicating with, to, or about transgender and gender nonconforming individuals. Battaglini’s honest and vulnerable storytelling will help you better understand the need for, confusion about, and impact of adopting inclusive language that recognizes and respects the identity of others.



Stephanie Battaglini

This interview has been edited for clarity.

Scott Abel: Stephanie, can you tell our audience a little about yourself to set the stage for this interview?

Stephanie Battaglini: I am the founder and owner of [Follow Your Heart](#), a consulting firm founded to help organizations educate, inform, and inspire by changing hearts and minds by sharing real-world personal stories of self-discovery.

I founded the company as my side hustle nearly a decade ago while working as a vice president at [New York Life](#) in Manhattan. I was the first person in the company’s history to come out and identify myself to my employer as transgender. I thought my decision would cause the company, a conservative, traditional-minded, brick-and-mortar firm, to run me out of town on a rail. But they didn’t do that. They didn’t fire me, which can be a typical outcome for many trans people in similar situations.

Surprisingly, the firm’s leaders asked me, “How can we make this transition as comfortable as possible for you?”

I used that opportunity to lead them by the hand, and we walked through it all, and it went very well. I remember saying to them, “Hey, look, I might be the first trans person to come out at this

company, but I won’t be the last.” That’s when I realized a huge need for someone like me to help corporate leaders understand how their organizations can address diversity, equity, and inclusion issues. It was out of that experience that my side hustle, Follow Your Heart, started.

Abel: Your personal coming out experience led you to a new career focus. You share your lessons with us in your memoir, *Reflections from Both Sides of the Glass Ceiling: Finding My Authentic Self in Corporate America*. Can you talk to us about the book and how it came to be?

Battaglini: While the book is a memoir, it also includes stories from others. By focusing on effectively communicating what I learned — valuable lessons from the road — I’m hoping readers will discover my story and learn critical concepts and strategies I encountered along my journey.

Abel: Your stories make it easy for readers of all stripes to understand situations in which few will find themselves. Why did you write the book, and who were you hoping to reach? What were you hoping to achieve?

Battaglini: I started writing the book immediately after the [Pulse nightclub massacre](#) in Orlando. That domestic terrorism attack touched me, and the senseless loss of life pushed me to write the book. The massacre motivated me to reach out to people of all sorts, to touch their hearts, and to share stories about others so they might become more empathetic about people who are different.

Abel: What messages do you hope your book conveys to corporate leadership today?

Battaglini: One of the most significant value propositions my book offers corporate leaders is *moving from policy to practice*. Increasingly, [companies are instituting](#) diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives; equal opportunity policies; and anti-discrimination protections that include trans and nonbinary people.

The policy stuff's easy, but the challenge is getting the details right. My book offers corporate leaders guidance on how to influence the adoption of equity-focused policies that address corporate culture issues, including language usage, and a host of other business challenges and opportunities.

Abel: Authoring a book is a surefire way to discover new ways of viewing things. What did you learn from writing the book?

Battaglini: I realized I have a bigger story to tell. My account includes the chronicles of my origin and my revelations after coming out. The notion of *reflections from both sides of the glass ceiling* is my revelation that I no longer enjoyed the benefits of male privilege once I transitioned from male to female.

Abel: That's an excellent segue to my next question. I had never thought about the glass ceiling issue post-transition. How could someone *have* privilege and then have it slip away? Wow! I didn't even think that was a thing.

Talk to us about the title of the book. What does it mean?

Battaglini: I was in corporate America for 25 years before coming out, navigating the corporate space as a white guy. I was fortunate to have opportunities to move up the corporate ladder, which I did, stepping on the heads, toes, and shoulders of the women with whom I worked along the way. I was blind to all that. Moving forward and up the rungs of the corporate ladder was my focus. I didn't realize it then, but my white male privilege made much of my success possible.

Of course, I didn't know I had male privilege until I lost it. After transitioning, the way my co-workers treated me changed. They started questioning my ideas and decisions, even though my management style — and our corporate policies — hadn't changed. Staff began calling me to task on all sorts of things.

I think my presence was disconcerting for some of the men in the room. It turns out I

was working with some [transphobic people](#). Caught off guard because my co-workers were generally accepting of my transition, it dawned on me that how people treated me had little to do with me being trans. It had everything to do with me being a woman in the workplace — a woman coming from a very different place than my [cisgender](#) female colleagues.

Abel: That discovery no doubt informs how you coach leaders looking to design more equitable workplaces. Our readers are information developers and technical communication pros responsible for developing clear, concise, and relevant product information. Adopting inclusive language is increasingly part of their purview. What is your perspective on inclusive language?

Battaglini: As organizations develop the capabilities to build more satisfying workplaces for an ever-diversifying talent pool, inclusive language plays an essential role.

Culture varies from company to company. Successful diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts are about people, their differences, their similarities, corporate culture, and how we communicate. Adopting inclusive language allows us to create a big tent for the ever-diversifying pool of talent out there looking to be hired by your company.

I think language choices are dependent on corporate culture. For organizations to become truly inclusive, [cultural acuity](#) is needed. It's the ability to develop compelling insights in cross-cultural situations, even when the target culture is highly

unfamiliar. Moving from diversity, equity, and inclusion *policy* to *practice* involves considering inclusive language adoption and working to eliminate non-inclusive terminology.

Inclusive language initiatives aim to meet people where they are. And these may be people like myself, like my trans and nonbinary siblings, that you may not have encountered before. You must have meaningful exchanges with us. We'll go somewhere else if you can't meet us where we are. Culture is where it all happens. The key components are communication and language.

Abel: Speaking of language, we used a term that might be unfamiliar to some of our readers earlier in this interview: *cisgender*. What does that word mean, and where did it come from?

Battaglini: We needed a word to describe people who are not transgender. *Cis* is Latin for same, and *trans* is Latin for across. So that's where we come up with cisgender and transgender.

A person whose gender identity aligns with their birth sex — or the sex determined at birth — is cisgender. As a transgender woman, my gender identity is female, but my birth sex is male. Because there was an incongruity between my gender identity and my birth sex, I am considered transgender. We use the term *cis* in the vernacular, just like we use the word *trans* instead of transgender.

Abel: Focusing on pronoun usage is getting significant attention in organizations of all shapes and sizes around the globe. It's a hot,

and often contested, topic in business, education, government, and beyond. There's significant movement in the conversation about respecting preferred pronouns. What should we know about using preferred pronouns, and why does this matter?

Battaglini: It matters because many people in the LGBTQI+ community desire to be heard, identified, and seen. A great, and relatively easy, way to do that is to respect the pronoun choices of others. For the uninitiated, that can be disquieting, and asking people to change how they use words introduces confusion and anxiety.

Connecting with someone is nearly impossible if we ignore their preferred pronouns. When talking about trans and nonbinary people, because they present themselves in a certain way, their gender expression may be difficult to ascertain or different than what an individual expects. And sometimes, especially amongst younger folks, they're not in a place where they might necessarily know yet what pronouns they'd like you to use.

It's not as complicated as some make it out to be. I've identified an easy-to-implement approach that will help you tackle this challenge head-on.

Let's look at a practical example. Scott, if you and I were meeting for the first time, and you aren't quite sure about who I am and what my gender is, the best way to approach that would be to use my name to address me, which avoids us having to worry about pronouns.

When the time comes, and you need pronouns, it's best not to guess. The best practice is to ask. It's as simple as "Stephanie, what pronouns do you prefer?"

Some folks like to take a proactive approach and declare their pronouns when they first meet you. Some workers have even taken to including their pronouns on their workplace name badge, just below their names.

When introducing yourself, feel free to share your preferred pronouns. You're creating the space to have a meaningful conversation, and doing so tells the person on the receiving end of that communication that you see and respect them.

You might think, well, that's no big deal, but it is a big deal. When you speak to someone like me and ask me about, and use, my preferred pronouns, I see you as respectful of me, and it shows me that you value our interaction.

Abel: Let's talk about authentic intent. I bring this up because [people struggle to adjust to changes](#) for many reasons, especially when adopting more inclusive language.

Battaglini: Authenticity is an essential element in successful communication. People pay attention and hear you when you're honest and straightforward, engendering confidence.

Intent, too, is central to effective communication. When people attempt to adjust their usage of certain words to become more inclusive communicators, they will slip up, accidentally reverting to less inclusive terms

or unknowingly misgendering someone. It happens. But, it's intent that matters.

We must demonstrate patience with people as they learn new word usage patterns and adjust to the quick-changing inclusive language landscape. They'll make mistakes they never intended to make, and we should deal with them realistically and without hyperbole, as it's a natural part of our culture and language evolution.

Abel: What suggestions can you share to help our readers better communicate with others while honoring individual differences?

Battaglini: One quick and easy thing you can do today is to communicate your pronouns to others. Put preferred pronouns on your signature line and do the same in your social media profiles and professional biographies. LinkedIn recently began including preferred pronouns as part of public profiles.

One company I work with starts out every meeting with introductions that include preferred pronouns. These are visible signs to individuals inside and outside the organization that a company's culture leans toward being more inclusive.

Abel: It's challenging for people to change how their brains think about language, especially when it's habitual, like writing. For people who already know and understand how their native language works today, do you find that breaking those patterns may be easier for some people than others?

“One quick and easy thing you can do today is to communicate your pronouns to others. Put preferred pronouns on your signature line and do the same in your social media profiles and professional biographies.”

Battaglini: Yes. It's more of a struggle for some folks than for others. It may sometimes be a generational thing, you know? I'm a [baby boomer](#) who thinks some of those ingrained patterns are perhaps more prevalent in my generation. The word transgender didn't even exist when I was growing up during the '70s and '80s. Back then, we were referred to by others as [transvestites](#).

But for younger generations, this evolution is happening in their workplaces, and cultural and social circles. Intergenerational differences aside, it's essential to recognize that the proverbial train has left the station on this issue. Either you're on the train, or you're running after it. It would be best if you got on board to be relevant and capable of effective communication.

Abel: How do you distinguish between organizations that *talk the talk* but don't *walk the walk*? Are there specific questions you can ask — or research available — to help us determine a company's culture?

Battaglini: I host a video podcast called *Walk the Walk, Talk the Talk*, which I urge your readers to watch. Additionally, you can learn about corporate culture by

reading a publication from the [Human Rights Campaign](#) called the *Corporate Equality Index*, which is considered the diversity, equity, and inclusion barometer for companies, particularly those listed in the Fortune 500.

Abel: Can you recall workplace situations where language impacted negatively or positively and a story that would help illustrate your points?

Battaglini: Here's one involving me. I worked at the company for five years as my former self, Michael, before I came out as Stephanie. During that process, many people — well, many white males of a particular generation — would misgender me.

There was one instance where I got *dead-named* by a co-worker. For those who don't know, being *dead-named* happens when someone refers to a transgender person by their birth name after changing their name as part of their gender transition.

I was born Michael, so for 25 years of my corporate career, I was Michael Batina. During one of my first meetings after transitioning, I was having a heated exchange with a white male colleague who was very accepting of me but, in the heat

of the moment, called me by my birth name, Mike, and I was like, hold it, you know?

The poor guy regretted it as soon as he said it. He was noticeably embarrassed and ashamed of his choice of utterances, and he immediately apologized. I knew he didn't intend to use my dead name because we had a good and long history of working together. In his brain, I was Michael. He had worked closely with Michael for years and, as such, identified me as a man. In the heat of debate, he unintentionally used my dead name.

I cut him some slack because he wasn't trying to be malicious. We can use stories like mine as teaching moments to explain to people what's happening so that they understand and that we move forward toward creating a more equitable world for us all.

Transgender folks must be sensitive to the fact that cisgender folks will make mistakes adjusting to these new pronoun guidelines and our desire for improvements in overarching terminology use. Mistakes are going to happen, and that's fine. You don't need to fall over yourself when you make an inclusive language *faux pas*. Apologize. You'll do better over time. And we'll all move on to more pressing issues, and that's the key to moving things forward.

Abel: Thank you for sharing that. Your co-worker reacted reflexively — not trying to misgender or misidentify you intentionally. They acted passionately and in the moment. That's why we must understand how other people use words in the context in which they're using them.

Battaglino: You're right about that. What I think is vital to notice in that interaction is that my co-worker was trying to wrap his head around what was happening to me. During a separate conversation, he asked me if I was "still like Mike on the inside?" I replied, "Of course I am. I'm just happier and more content. I am who I am, but my essence is still the same."

The changes required to make our content more inclusive also involve adjusting more than our preferred terms list and writers' style guides.

Abel: How are inclusive language initiatives impacting organizations attempting to improve their communication efforts?

Battaglino: You might think adopting more inclusive language involves simple adjustments to our terminology. While that's true, the changes required to make our content more inclusive also involve adjusting more than our preferred terms list and writers' style guides.

There are computer system considerations — back-end database fields and system logic issues, deprecated terms in error messages, field name labels. Graphic user interfaces also introduce considerations. Forms

are notorious for providing no way for people to identify themselves as they see fit. Medical and healthcare instructions often contain cumbersome, problematic terminology and gendered language.

Using nonjudgmental, non-stigmatizing, facts-based information and personal characteristics as descriptors, only when medically relevant, can improve the accessibility of medical content. Replacing male and female pronouns with the singular "they" is an excellent first step in the right direction.

Abel: This has been an educational and informative interview, Stephanie. Thank you for sharing your personal experiences, advice, and lessons learned with our audience. I appreciate it.

Battaglino: Thanks, Scott. It's been my pleasure. ■



In the digital age, change happens quickly. This column features interviews with the movers and shakers — the folks behind new ideas, standards, methods,

products, and amazing technologies that are changing the way we live and interact in our modern world. Got questions, suggestions, or feedback? Email them to scottabel@mac.com.



Technically College, Technically Writing

Why High School Dual-Credit Instructors Should Teach Technical Writing Basics

BY JENNIFER WILHITE with Aalyna Gonzales, Cavan Nicolas Christie, Genesis Romero, Mariana Cuanalo Martinez, Marie Hall, Ellette Mendez, and Mark Dexter-Quinn

Technically College

“I love the bold way technical writing is visually, very professional and straightforward. Though overwhelming at times, it causes a good first impression. Both technical writing and literary writing hold their beauty, but if there is one thing I learned from Dual Credit English it’s that they are not the same.”—
Mariana Cuanalo Martinez

While technically juniors in high school, the students in dual-credit English classes are also

ID-carrying students of our local community college. High school students who take on dual-credit English classes need a foundation in technical writing, which includes proposals, research papers, and formal reports. Research projects that mandate technical writing experiences in dual-credit classes not only introduce students to rigorous genres, but also give them a chance to develop writing skills their future degrees and professions will mandate.

While writing this article, I taught at a low-income, early college high school on the Texas-Mexico border. Sixty percent of that student body identifies as English as a second language learners and 100 percent are eligible for free lunch programs. In order to synthesize the experiences of the college-hybrid students, I asked volunteers from my fall 2021 and spring 2022 1302 English Composition classes to answer reflective questions about their dual-credit writing experiences (see Figure 1 for student list).

When applying for universities, dual-credit students know “admissions boards may be impressed that students have already shown the ability to succeed at college-level course work.”¹ Cavan was parentally coerced into the program, but along with Ellette, Marie, Mariana, and Mark, he agrees that early college not only prepares students for the rigors of advanced academic study, but also gives them a head start into post-high-school life. Genesis and Mark specifically appreciate the financial stresses alleviated by early college, which is free for students. Many of our students, like Aalyna, will be the first in their families to graduate from any level of post-secondary education.

Technically Writers

Enrollment in dual-credit programs is on the rise in the United States. Studies indicate that students who take dual-credit classes are more likely to persist and complete post-secondary degrees.² However, often students entering dual-credit programs are not ready for the rigors of college writing.

The most salient challenge dual-credit writing students face is that although they are still high school students, their professors expect them to perform at college levels.

Many students begin their dual-credit classes “without the basic content knowledge, skills, or habits of mind they need to succeed.”³ Cavan reflects, “Prior to me leaving middle school, I thought I was a good writer. Little did I know I was far from it.” When Aalyna started dual-credit writing classes, she says all she knew about academic writing was “how to avoid plagiarism, write a basic (non-impressive) thesis statement, and that a paragraph should be about four sentences.”

Teaching technical writing skills in dual-credit classes also builds the confidence of young students. Genesis was apprehensive at first, but soon found her writing self-efficacy growing as she “experience[d] lots of recoding and interpreting data.” Mariana also expressed a lack of self-confidence in her technical writing skills, which was overcome as she found that the skills she learned in our first-year composition class did transfer to her other classes.

Technically Professors

Because we work on and are part of a high school campus, dual-credit professors are often more involved in the lives of their students. Dual-credit professors can be, according to Genesis, “more accessible and friendly” and available for students

academically as well as personally. Dual-credit students are technically college students and their teachers are technically professors; however, the dual-credit program allows for interactions not always supported by a college or university environment. We can give high school support while maintaining rigorous college standards. For instance, on a college campus, professors do not always directly supervise students while they write. The dual-credit model provides a space where professors can model writing expectations. As students write in class, they are able to ask questions and respond to answers immediately. Professors can monitor real-time writing and provide instant feedback that corrects writing errors before they become writing habits.

In order to prepare students for technical writing in their academic disciplines, I assign a semester-long writing project. Students select topics from their current or intended discipline or other technical-writing topics of high interest. They have written papers about topics including how to counterfeit money, what it takes to become a neurosurgeon, and how negative home lives adversely affect academic achievement. Encouraging students to select their own topics enables them to practice conducting research in

Dual-Credit Student	Demographics	Background
Aalyna Gonzales	Hispanic, female	First-generation graduate of both high school and college
Genesis Romero	Hispanic, female	Strong family tradition of post-secondary education in Mexican universities
Mariana Cuanalo Martinez	Hispanic, female	Family tradition of post-secondary education
Ellette Mendez	Hispanic, female	Family tradition of post-secondary education
Marie Hall	African American, female	Minimal family support, some tradition of post-secondary education
Cavan Nicolas Christie	African American, male	Immigrant family, tradition of post-secondary education
Mark Dexter-Quinn	African American, male	Strong family tradition of post-secondary education

Figure 1. Contributing student writers

the disciplines that interest them. Sometimes these projects reinforce a student's desire to pursue a particular career; other times, these projects help students realize they are not as enamored with the discipline or topic as they thought.

After completing a series of reflective free writes, students write a formal proposal that presents their topic for approval. Once their topics are approved, students begin their research process with databases like EBSCO and JSTOR but are encouraged to listen to podcasts, watch TED Talks, and seek a variety of valid sources. As they learn, they craft questions that will become their formal research questions. When they have a solid set of research questions, students design surveys and interviews that target appropriate research participants. Although not a popular part of the project, this effort helps students learn how to analyze survey results and transcribe interviews. The project culminates with a research paper and a formal presentation of what they have learned on their research journey.

Throughout this process, dual-credit composition professors can support their emerging college writers in a variety of ways:

1. Allowing self-selected topics and encouraging students to explore high-interest topics and potential career fields.⁴
2. Supporting students with direct in-class technical writing instruction like teacher-modeling, examples

of finished products, and focused individual instruction.¹

3. Challenging students to use the technical writing process to “develop both deeper knowledge of the content and the more general logical and analytical thinking skills valued at the postsecondary level.”³
4. Working with professors at their supporting college and local universities to remain current with professional and technical writing expectations.¹

Technically Prepared

As the students reflected on their dual-credit writing experiences, they realized that these projects taught them to use writing to let readers “see a piece of our mind” (Genesis). Marie knows that “these classes are not the easiest, but they are worth it in the end” and can help with academically preparing for further university, which, as Mark says, enables students to “enjoy [their] college years with less stress.” Ellette learned that “being able to write in different ways can open doors to new opportunities” both academically and professionally.

Dual-credit classes can alleviate some of the costs of college, but also help students become more academically mature. Mariana writes, “Because of dual credit, I learned to trust myself, and that the world doesn’t owe you anything.” Cavan shared some family wisdom, “My grandma always told me that a good education can never be taken

away. So that would be my greatest reward out of the program. I now have something that no one can touch, and best of all I earned it.” Teaching dual-credit students technical writing skills in first-year composition gives them authentic college experiences like these, and prepares them for the technical writing projects that await them at the university and in their professions. ■

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Since 2006, **Jennifer Wilhite** has taught all levels of high school English and currently teaches dual-credit English at Friona High School in Friona,

Texas. She also tutors graduate students. Her research focuses on teaching pedagogies at the secondary and college levels.



Reflections and Resolutions

BY AIESSA MOYNA, STC PRESIDENT

Happy New Year! As I mentioned in my last column, 2023 marks the 70th platinum anniversary of the Society for Technical Communication, which traces its history back to 1953, when the Society of Technical Writers and the Association of Technical Writers and Editors were founded independently, later merged to form the Society of Technical Writers and Editors, and ultimately became the STC we know today. Our mission is to *advance technical communication as the discipline of transforming complex information into usable content for products, processes, and services*. We do this by offering:

- Top-notch education, from one-hour webinars to multi-day conferences to multi-week courses;
- A certification program with credentials at the Foundation and Practitioner level, and an Expert-level credential coming online soon;
- Information — and opportunities to publish — in our award-winning publications, website, and Body of Knowledge;
- A range of honors and awards recognizing achievements in the field of technical communication;

- A scholarship program and other opportunities for students, to help prepare the next generation to step into roles as technical communicators and educators;
- Networking opportunities to help those who are new to the field learn about the career options available and benefit from the experience of colleagues already working in tech comm;
- Programs, conferences, competitions, and communications driven by our chapters and special interest groups;
- And training and support for community leaders.

As President, I am responsible for working with the Board of Directors, staff, and members to ensure the ongoing financial viability of our organization. The pandemic has taken a heavy financial toll on many organizations, and the Society is no different. You may know that our top two sources of revenue traditionally have been membership dues and the annual Summit conference and expo. More than two years of lockdown and extended virtual working have permanently changed the way business gets done and forced

STC to reconsider how we operate going forward.

As a result — and based on member input — the Board has formed an ad-hoc working group to examine our membership dues model, community structure, and annual conference. We expect to recommend changes that ensure we're delivering what members and other technical communicators need and want, while securing the ongoing financial strength of our organization. You'll hear more about these efforts over time, and as STC looks to the future, you'll have opportunities to share your opinions. Why not get started today? Please send your suggestions to the Board of Directors at board@stc.org — we want to know how STC can support you and what you want from STC going forward. ■



AIESSA MOYNA
(amoyna.stc@gmail.com) is the 2022-2023 President of STC. Her recurring column provides updates and insights on Board activities

and solicits member feedback to guide ongoing decision-making.

Colors and Textures

BY PAULA ROBERTSON, STC ASSOCIATE FELLOW

STC members may know me as the person behind a Summit name tag.



I have been in technical communication officially since 1995. That's when I started my technical writing and editing career after professional pursuits of different but complementary colors.

I became a member of STC in 2000. Since then, I have contributed to the Society locally and internationally. Currently, I facilitate the Solo Technical Communicator SIG. My motivation is to affirm how interwoven we are, for those of us who might not feel a part of the greater fabric of the profession. I also recently published a series of articles called *Eye for Editing* in *Corrigo*, the newsletter of the STC Technical Editing SIG.

My tech comm practice has been in industries as diverse as transportation, telecommunications, civil

engineering, pharmaceuticals, defense, and primary and secondary education in STEM.

What you don't know about me is that my off-hours activities are as variegated as my on-hours career has been. Indeed, my formal education (Bachelor of Fine Arts in Fabric Design — weaving and screen printing) set me on a creative path into which I've woven not only tech comm expertise, but also volunteer commitments that enrich the quality of this patchwork called life.

In 1981, I was accepted into an auditioned community chorus. I tell people that it's a semi-pro choir, and I'm the "semi" part. I don't have a formal education in music, but I have many years' experience in reading and singing difficult choral music. I cannot imagine life without the rich colors of interweaving voices. I have enjoyed being one small thread in this group (with a "break" now and then) ever since.

I served on the choir board of directors several times, including two stints producing printed concert programs and brochures. Writing, editing, layout, and design skills are not just for tech comm!

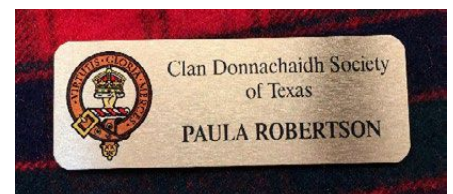


I was excited to make my first trip overseas with this group to participate in the first International Choral Festival, in Warwick, England in 1988.

When the tour ended in London, I boarded a train to experience my "homeland" Scotland, where I made a lifelong friend of a native Scot. Subsequently, I accepted the opportunity to live in Scotland. From there, I added European textures to my new-found wanderlust, including Denmark, Holland, Ireland, and France.

Upon returning to the United States several months later, I found myself homeless, unemployed, and somewhat unraveled. But the master quiltmaker had a pattern in mind. Eventually, I was hired by a major airline, with which I enjoyed air travel benefits.

My wanderlust had only just begun. I took full advantage, including trips to Puerto Rico, Canada, Peru, and Brazil. And since back singing with my choral group, I've toured Austria, Italy, Mexico, and Spain.



In 1994, I joined my Scottish clan society in both Scotland and Texas. In the fabric of my soul, the rich hues of the Robertson Red wool tartan embody our shared sense of home. Later, I became involved in the Clan Donnachaidh

Society of Texas as newsletter editor of the *Tejas Journal*.

For many years, I have supported Habitat for Humanity International with my money and time, participating in builds in Alaska and my local community.



In 2017, I expanded my creative bent by completing Cornerstone College to become a volunteer leader with our local Trinity Habitat for Humanity. As a supervisor of volunteers on construction sites, I proudly wear the signature green shirt and hard hat, never mind that I look terrible in that color!

Altogether, I have practiced my craft of delivering quality in a wide variety of sizes, shapes, colors, and places. Now I am thrilled to use my editing talents to work with Dr. Craig Baehr on *Intercom*. ■



Paula Robertson is an STC Associate Fellow and Editorial Assistant for *Intercom*. She can be reached at finelinesdba@gmail.com.

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