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STC Efforts Realized as U.S. Government Acknowledges Technical Writers as Distinct Profession

The US Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) released its newest *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (OOH) in December and, as STC announced in April, "Technical Writer" has its own chapter for the very first time.

The change acknowledges that the requirements of technical writing are sufficiently distinct from all other writing professions to warrant according technical writers their own chapter in the 2010 edition.

"This is a breakthrough achievement for STC and for the profession of technical communication," said STC President Cynthia C. Currie. "It is the result of a long-standing relationship with economist Richard O'Sullivan and our vision that technical writers (and all technical communicators) be recognized as the special breed of communicator they are."

O'Sullivan, principal of Change Management Solutions, is an association economist who has been advising BLS for 25 years and assisted STC in this endeavor. "To go from where we were in late 2006 when STC approached OMB to having a new category of technical writer in 2010 is amazing," said O'Sullivan. "Usually, putting through changes like this can take up to a decade. But our argument was compelling and the differences STC focused on were clearly apparent and hard for OMB to argue against. We had our proof in the marketplace."

STC responded to a request from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to update the Standard Occupational Classifications (SOCs), the classification system used by all US and state government agencies when collecting and publishing information on employment, wages, and salaries. The *Occupational Outlook Handbook* is one of the Department of Labor's most popular programs and an essential tool for the human resource management profession. The reference details the latest changes in the 820 different occupations tracked by the BLS each year.

“Having the US Bureau of Labor Statistics recognize technical writers as a profession distinct from all other writing professions independently confirms STC’s claim that not all writers can do technical writing,” explained STC Immediate Past President Mark Clifford, who was STC President at the time of the initial announcement. “We’re very pleased to have this distinction made in an important reference tool that is so well respected by the human resource community.”

The OOH presents some good news in its inaugural Technical Writer chapter as well. It states that technical writers held close to 50,000 jobs in 2008, and more importantly, employment is expected to grow 18 percent—“faster than average,” and nearly twice the rate projected for the nation’s workforce in total—from 2008 to 2018. The chapter also calculates a median salary of \$61,620 as of May 2008, with further breakdowns for specific industries. (For a comparison, “Writers and Authors” had a median salary of \$53,070 at the same time, while “Editors” checked in at \$49,990. And job growth for the positions is expected to be over two percentages *below* the rate for the entire workforce from 2008 to 2018.)

The OOH description of the position clearly differentiates it from similar jobs. As significant points, it lists the following:

“Most jobs in this occupation require a college degree—preferably in communications, journalism, or English—but a degree in a technical subject may be useful.

Job prospects for most technical writing jobs are expected to be good, particularly for those with Web or multimedia experience.

Excellent communications skills, curiosity, and attention to detail are highly desired traits.”

Overall, the inclusion of the position and the information provided are good news for STC members and the profession. “The OOH is the most important reference tool used by HR professionals,” said O’Sullivan. “To have this distinction being made by the DOL in this document is important for the profession. It supports STC’s position before employers and HR departments and provides an unbiased and respected voice backing what STC has been saying for years.”

To access the new section of OOH for technical writers, visit <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos319.htm>. To read the *Handbook* in its entirety, go to <http://www.bls.gov/oco/home.htm>.

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