Did you miss our February STC-NA Virtual Meeting on Google Workspace (Google Suite) for Non-Profits by Arthur Berger? Check it out on YouTube.

**What:** Virtual Review of the 2020-2021 STC Salary Database and UAH Salary Survey Results

**When:** Thursday, May 5, 2022

**Presentation Start Time:** 6:00 pm Central (If possible, please log in 10 minutes prior.)

**Where:** Zoom Online/Virtual Meeting

**How:** This virtual event requires RSVP by Tuesday, May 3, 5:00 pm Central. To RSVP, send an email with your Name and Org Affiliation (STC-NA, UAH, or Friend) to STC-NA_RSVP_Speaker_Meeting@Outlook.com. You will receive a confirmation email within a day that contains information on accessing the meeting online.

Join us virtually on May 5 at 6 PM for an informal review of the 2020-2021 STC Salary Database. We will share how to find it and will review how it is organized. Dr. Ryan Weber, who leads the Technical Writing Department at UAH, will share his thoughts on the 2020-2021 STC Salary Database compared to the UAH Salary Survey performed in late 2019 by the Technical Writing Department at UAH. Then, we will have open discussion on the results for Alabama technical communicators and related roles.

This meeting will not be recorded, so don’t miss learning from and networking with your local technical communication peers.

This issue showcases four local professional technical communicators in the North Alabama area as written by four future technical communicators currently studying under Dr. Ryan Weber at the UAH Technical Writing Department.
Denise Christa, who works as a Risk and Quality Manager at NMR Consulting in Huntsville, had plenty of advice and wisdom to share about the different ways – some winding trails and others straight paths – to becoming a technical communicator. Despite not intending to work in technical communication initially, she found that her education and professional experience meshed together to provide the set of skills and methods that a technical communicator needs.

At the start of our interview, Christa wondered how helpful her insights about the field could be as she explained, “My career is more of a meander than a trajectory.” However, her perspective from a broad range of academic and professional experience provided an excellent example of the importance of life-long learning and showed just how diverse technical communicators can and should be.

Learning the Skills

Since she hadn’t intended to become a technical communicator, Christa followed an unconventional path. She worked as a highly successful real estate agent until the 2008 housing crisis stalled out business in Huntsville. Christa decided to take a break from real estate and instead pursue a graduate education at The University of Alabama. She earned a Master’s degree in Library and Information Science, which she summarizes as “the organization and preservation of digital information,” and obtained the foundational skills she needed to later begin writing and curating digital technical documentation.

Afterward, Christa re-entered her career as a real estate agent but found that she no longer enjoyed the work as much. “I didn’t really know what I wanted, but I knew what I didn’t want to do anymore,” she explained. So, she began a second Master’s program, this time focused on the business applications of information systems, and she began to pivot away from real estate.

While at UAH, Christa worked in a variety of positions using the range of research and writing skills she had gathered already – “I went from job to job just because of certain skills that I had, not because I wanted those particular jobs,” she explained. Eventually, though, Christa began working at a consulting company that used Lean Six Sigma, a method for managing professional and collaborative operations. When she was trained on using Lean and Six Sigma, everything began to fall into place. After beginning to understand why the principles of technical communication are important – “why do you want to document this information, why do you want to pass it on, what’s the purpose of it,” as she put it – the use of her skill set within technical communication became much clearer. “That’s what got me into it,” she explained about her experiences using Six Sigma. “Mapping out processes, documenting the processes, sharing the information – it all just sprang from there.”

Working as a Technical Communicator

In her current position with NMR Consulting, Christa jokingly called her job “sticking [her] nose in everybody’s business.” She manages many responsibilities as Risk and Quality Manager for the Research and Development Enterprise Collaboration Services (RECS) program, which is a contracted project with the Missile Defense Agency (MDA) to provide a range of collaboration services. Though her current position has an unusual title for a technical communicator, Christa employs the communication skills she has gathered – like using Lean Six Sigma and managing digital documents – every day at NMR.
On the Quality side of her title, Christa writes and curates thorough documentation, including textual Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and visual workflows that detail how project members and teams are fulfilling their tasks within the RECS contract and within the government’s requirements. Writing and curating documentation for the project leans heavily on Christa’s technical communication skills, as she must communicate federal and contract procedures to other project members, then document their workflows within the provided guidelines. In these workflow documents, Christa explains, “We say ‘This is how we do it and meet within the federal government guidelines.’” After the documented work is completed, Christa will check again “to see that the project managers are following the process, doing what they’re supposed to do, and documenting it.”

Additionally, as the Risk Manager, Christa meets with project managers to discuss potential risks to their projects. Within these meetings, she uses a copy of the RECS contract with the MDA and checks, “Are we meeting what we say we were going to do?”

Throughout her processes as Risk and Quality Manager, Christa frequently works with RECS project members – the subject matter experts for her technical communication – to document their tasks. On NMR’s RECS team, she has had generally good experiences with her SMEs, who are more than willing to provide the information she needs to complete the required documents. “If you’re a software developer, you want to be writing the code – you don’t want to be writing a ten-page paper telling how something works,” she explained.

On top of these responsibilities, Christa also organizes the central document control system in Microsoft SharePoint, where all of the documentation she produces with the RECS project teams is stored. From these SharePoint files, Christa can provide instructions, workflow diagrams, and other documents to anyone with questions about project tasks. While summarizing how she approaches document curation and sharing, she explained, “You make sure that the information is correct, that people have access to it, and that it’s in a digestible format... no one wants to read 20-page SOPs.”

Since NMR began requiring telework over a year ago, Christa’s normal work day has shifted. She begins early in the morning, around 6:30 AM, and starts her day with a list of what to do and write. “It’s easier for me to log on at 6:30 in the morning to work,” she confessed. “There’s not a lot of people around, so I can write in peace.” Then, from around 10 AM to 1 PM, she spends her time in meetings with project managers, RECS team members, and her supervisor. Finally, she spends the afternoon completing her tasks and writing for the day before logging off. When considering how teleworking has changed her day-to-day experience, Christa said, “I’m much closer to some employees now than I would’ve been, like the folks out in Colorado.” Working remotely has made her colleagues in Huntsville and across the country almost equally accessible, she explained.

A Professional’s Views and Advice

Throughout her path from real estate, graduate education, and a wandering professional track, Christa gathered an understanding of the skills a technical communicator needs to succeed. She cites three central skills – communication, interpersonal, and technical skills – as the most important for a technical communicator. As a technical communicator, she says, “you need to be able to take that information and communicate it with the outside world.” However, getting the information you need from SMEs and other individuals requires interpersonal skill, or “being able to work with their personalities,” as Christa phrases it. Lastly, communicators need to be able to use and navigate the necessary tools, such as Microsoft Word or other specialized tools – and be able to find help for these tools whenever it’s needed. “I have to realize when I don’t know how to do something, and go to somebody that does,” she explained.

For any aspiring or new technical communicators, Christa highly recommends learning the tools and methods that will help when thinking through risks and producing documentation. Her early experience with Lean Six
Sigma colored her approach to technical communication and process documentation. “A lot of it is asking, ‘What do you do next?’” she reflected. Being able to identify skipped steps, finding the missing information, and using logic to organize your documented processes are incredibly helpful tools with which to start.

Christa’s career followed a more meandering path, but her insight provides excellent guidance for budding technical communicators at any stage in their careers. Learning and practicing with the skills and tools that can help you think like a technical communicator are vital – no matter whether you’re learning in a college course or in an entirely different field.

UAH Tech Comm Profile
Jessica Hunter: Technical Communicator in a Small Business
by LJ Rhodes/UAH Technical Writing Department Student

I met with Jessica Hunter at a local coffee shop, Gold Sprint Coffee, on the first chilly Friday of the season. Iced dirty chai with oat milk in hand, Jess jokes that she should have defended her thesis here.

“I wrote my entire thesis here,” she says, “and I defended my thesis over Zoom, so I very well could have defended it from this table!”

After graduating with her Master’s degree in English from the University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAH) in 2021, Jess started at MartinFederal Consulting LLC under as a Business Development and Proposal Coordinator. MartinFederal offers other companies support in four main areas: Advanced IT, Cybersecurity, Training, and Engineering and Tech services. Since MartinFederal is a small company, Jess and her coworkers find themselves wearing multiple hats. For Jess, who works at the corporate office’s business development department, this means her day-to-day work life is almost always different. During the height of a proposal process, she could work almost exclusively as a technical writer and editor, creating and editing a proposal on a tight deadline. Now, however, Jess’ job is about 75% business development; her company works on projects they won with her proposals.

Another benefit of working at a small company is getting to work with almost everyone, regardless of their job description.

“I see the president and the secretary every day!”

Depending on the project, Jess will spend her work day with a variety of departments, ranging from Human Resources to the Proposal Writing Team to Upper Management. Hearing how close and comfortable the company felt pushed me to ask my most important question:

“I’m really excited about going into the technical writing field, but I’m worried that being AFAB (assigned female at birth) and femme presenting might put me at a disadvantage. Have you ever felt this way? How did you handle that?”
Jess was passionate in her answer. She worked with UAH’s Student Government Association for years and even served as the SGA Student Body President. Serving in this role taught her that “there is a balance that female presenting people have to walk of being assertive but not being a bitch.” As a woman working with subject matter experts, Jess has to hold herself to the standard of being firm, yet not overstepping. Walking that line not only means respecting others, but also respecting the job that she herself works; Jess had stern conversations with co-workers to assert what her job was and that her co-workers needed to treat her as an equal.

Most importantly though, Jess does feel respected by her co-workers. Because Jess works at a small business, it’s easy to see the job that everyone does, even if you don’t understand their job specifications. The members of the proposal team certainly understand Jess’ job best, but even those who do not understand still see the fruits of her labor.

“That’s the perk of working in a small business; everyone does respect the work of everyone else, despite not understanding. It would be clear if someone wasn’t doing their job well, so it’s easy to see how hard everyone is working!”

As an editor, Jess has her hands directly in the proposal writing process. In fact, that’s her number one piece of advice for those looking into proposal writing:

“If you really want to get into proposal writing and go up that ladder, don’t start at the big company. If you can get on somewhere doing small business, you’ll get a lot of hands-on experience.”

When Jess says hands-on experience, she really means it; Jess noted that she often hand edits proposals before submitting them. Why? “You never know if your proposal will be read online or printed out!” Jess also finds editing by hand helps her check for the formatting requirements. Her college proposal writing class taught her a “bare bones” format, but Jess says that each proposal has different requirements, even down to the margins. As an editor, her two biggest tasks are to find those minute details and to ensure a document written by multiple people makes sense, perfecting the proposals before they are sent off to MartinFederal’s potential clients.

Proposal writing comes with many important deadlines, so Jess finds herself working late nights when there’s a big project. She remarks that her first big project was over the Fourth of July weekend, but it was worth the hard work to win the proposal. Working during the COVID era, everyone has an at-home set up and can easily complete these hard-deadline tasks from the comfort of their own home. One thing Jess didn’t expect the pandemic to bring into her work, however, was mentioning the pandemic in every proposal.

“Having to say how we can safely get you travel during travel restrictions as well as keeping labs equally staffed and equally distanced... it’s an interesting thing that wouldn’t have been in my job two years ago!”

Working long, late weeks and sometimes staying up until midnight working from home certainly sounds exhausting. I asked Jess what was most rewarding about her job, especially given the high stress of the proposal writing process, and I was encouraged to hear her answer:

“Even if it’s not always recognized, I know it would be much harder for the company to function without me. I am integral to the team. It’s really rewarding to know that you had a hand in getting the company that work, and maybe even making sure that someone keeps their job.”

Jess’ job certainly has its ups and downs, with varying degrees of stress and day-to-day tasks. Yet Jess finds her work fulfilling, even if her parents don’t understand what she does! She’s happy her team works hard together with mutual respect. As her company’s Business Development and Proposal Coordinator, her job is never dull and always rewarding.
Technical communicators are often called architects of information because they create accessible paths for information to be meaningful to end users. Historians and journalists do the same with narrative but technical communicators take the path of technical language and organization rather than emplotment and prose. It is the constant changing organization of information that makes technical communicators architects of information. They continually construct the pathways of knowledge in companies and organizations so that information becomes accessible and useful.

Ted Parker is an architect of information at ADTRAN, a successful telecommunications company headquartered in Huntsville, Alabama, but he is originally from Chicago. Although Parker is now in technical communication, he obtained his early education in journalism at the Ohio State University. His specific studies were in the segments of the news editorial and broadcast journalism. Although Parker was interested in journalism, he did not find it easy to secure employment. When he graduated, the news editorial segments of journalism (newspaper) were in decline. Parker noticed that much of the world was turning to innovative technologies, so he decided to apply skills that he already had, such as writing and organization, and then go into the technical aspects of those new industries.

According to Mr. Parker and many other technical communicators, a major skill in technical communication is related to journalism. This skill is the ability to gain information from others. Parker shared that these investigative skills are just as essential for the technical communicators as they are for journalists to gather information. Communication with people is meaningful in technical communication. Although much of the work is done around software and engineering, it is important to remember that a technical communicator must be able to communicate and create a connection with the creators of that technology to gather information. According to Ted Parker, an important skill besides writing ability for technical communicators to acquire is good interpersonal communication skills. This will enable them to extract information in different cultural and political currents in a workplace. Another important skill is having the ability to understand technology.

Extracting information comes down to two things for Ted Parker: interpersonal skills and company culture. Interpersonal skills involve the exchange of ideas and information in verbal, written, and other forms. Interpersonal skills allow for information and ideas to be exchanged with less tension among technical communicators and subject matter experts. A company’s culture also affects the way technical communicators can get information. Some companies have a culture that supports technical communicators, which facilitates the process of obtaining the correct information about a product. Parker says, “one of the hardest aspects is working for a company that wants customer documentation but doesn’t have a good company culture to support it.” Parker believes ADTRAN supplies great support to its technical communicators. Speaking on ADTRAN’s company culture, he said:

...we have “buy-in” from these organizations to provide information, to review what we produce, and to approve the final deliverables. To achieve this goal, we operate in a Safe Agile environment, in which technical publications and the engineering teams collaborate to determine the deliverables during 10-week planning and development cycles... It is a collaboration in which commitments are made and every attempt is made to meet those commitments by all stakeholders.
For Ted Parker, since ADTRAN is set up as an Agile company, being a technical communicator means being responsible for multiple projects and deadlines. For him being a technical communicator at ADTRAN and in general means, “being able to architect information in a usable format...you can’t just slap it on a piece of paper and call it a document... it needs to be usable to the consumer.” Early in his education in Technical Communication, usability was not stressed or linked to the industry as much as it is today. Now, Parker has seen the necessity for usability in Technical Communication because high tech companies must make their complex products usable. According to him, technical communicators are architects of information, but they can also be considered architects of usability.

When asked what aspects of Technical Communication he emphasizes the most, his response was that technical communicators must have proficient writing, an ability to understand different levels of technologies, project/time management, and an ability to extract information. It is the aspect of understanding technology that is evident in his earlier switch from journalism to technical communication. Parker went back to school to learn the engineering and more technical side of communication. To him, this meant learning and understanding new technologies and merging that with the writing skills he already had obtained in his journalism training.

According to Parker, understanding new technologies is a common struggle for most technical communicators. He noted that learning and understanding technologies is just as important as having proficient writing skills. He went on to say, “To write to it, you have to understand it.” I asked him what his advice was on learning new technology. He recommended looking at what training information is available at a company. For example, at ADTRAN, he mentioned that the company has an educational department that provides classes for many technologies. Another thing he advises is to try to interact with a product from the customer’s perspective. Any question that a user may have about a product, those are the questions to ask subject matter experts. Parker circled this back to the ability of technical communicators to extract information from subject matter experts. By learning and asking genuine questions about a technology or a product, the technical communicator facilitates the exchange of information because, according to Parker, subject matter experts are more willing to provide information when someone shows genuine interest.

Change is a word that can summarize much of my interview with Ted Parker in regard to his career. Although Parker is no longer in the industry of providing information through journalism in a newspaper setting in Chicago or Ohio, he is still in the industry of extracting and providing information, that is, he is still in communication. He has successfully repositioned himself within the writing and the electronics of communication here in the South. Ted Parker has seen a change in careers early on, and he has also seen a change in Technical Communication itself, the old-style documentation of printing and stapling has disappeared, throughout the country. Architect of information is a great way to describe a technical communicator, but, in Ted Parker’s case, it also is precise to underscore an ability to adapt to constant changes of information pathways in technical communication.
Young and driven, Claire Mitchel Penton has taken on the technical communication world in Huntsville, Alabama. She is a recent graduate of the University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAH) and a current employee at Hexagon PPM. Penton has an inspiring story of personal growth that began many years ago while she was still in high school and has flourished as she has emerged as a technical communicator.

**Discovering Technical Communication**

As most younger siblings do, Penton looked up to her older sister as she attempted to find a career to fall in love with. Penton’s sister went into college with many aspirations but did not choose a path until the end of her first year of school. Determined to figure out exactly what to study before stepping foot onto the UAH campus, young Penton began researching possible careers while still in high school.

The English major is a broad subject with many possible career pathways. Penton began researching different jobs for English graduates and happened to discover the field of technical communication. As soon as she found this, she said, “Okay, sounds good,” and has never looked back. Now she has a BA in English, a minor in Technical Communication, and a Masters degree with a Technical Communication certificate. Her journey hasn’t always been easy, but throughout her time spent at UAH her doubts faded as her plans solidified into something tangible.

**Building Foundational Skills**

Penton’s time at UAH was instrumental to her career as she took many courses and built up a plethora of skills. Penton believes that, in addition to writing, being able to efficiently communicate through different mediums, like computer programming, graphic design, video design, and multimedia presentations, is invaluable to a technical communicator. Many jobs she saw while job searching also requested XML/HTML knowledge. While mastering one program or skill can be beneficial, Penton emphasized the value of building skillsets with a variety of programs over focusing on one specific software product. Recruiters want to see that you are able to pick up and learn new skills quickly.

One way to practically demonstrate the ability to learn new skills is to build up a portfolio of different sample products. Penton’s experience at UAH and specifically Dr. Ryan Weber’s technical communication course helped her build up hard skills in a variety of mediums, such as Madcap Flare and XML. Additionally, Penton advised prospective technical communicators to find online volunteer writing opportunities and learn specifics about the culture of the location they want to work in. Here in Huntsville, the subculture of technical writing tends to be government contract work; each area has a unique writing culture.

Another way that Penton gained experience while in school was through being a graduate teaching assistant in the English Department. The skills she learned while teaching are transferring to her current job as she more fully steps into her secondary role at Hexagon serving as an Instructional Designer. Penton says that “everything is [beginning to mesh] under a broad technical writing branch” as teaching is being combined with technical writing. This is unsurprising since technical communication’s purpose is to “bridge the gap between products and their intended audience.”
Working at Hexagon

Penton began working at Hexagon back in June of this year. Due to the nature of reality during COVID, she has been working remotely for most of her time there. On an ideal day, she works from 7:30am to 3pm, splitting her time equally between her Writing Team and Software Development Team. However, realistically, her workload is dictated by each team’s specific needs for the day. Hexagon uses an Agile team-based development methodology in its work structure.

An Agile structure is in nature team-focused; communication is extremely important at Hexagon. As an extrovert, Penton loves this aspect of Hexagon’s community. She is always in constant communication with coworkers, team members, and her boss. The only downside to this structure is maintaining stamina without a break, which could be even more difficult for an introverted individual in her same position.

Penton’s job is flexible and allows her to design a personalized schedule around what works best for her lifestyle. Even [re-COVID, she was only going into the office twice a week. In the future, Penton sees more flexibility for technical writers. When job searching before working at Hexagon, Penton saw many companies looking for 9-5 candidates, but she believes that this will most likely shift now that more people have adjusted to working from home.

One hard thing with COVID and the Agile structure at Hexagon has been the lack of inperson interaction Penton has had with her coworkers. Just a couple weeks ago, Penton saw some of her coworkers (whom she had been working with for months) for the first time on a conference call with a new employee. Not being in the office, just one cubicle away from her boss, has been challenging, but it is a part of the new reality that is starting to take shape in society today.

Growing in Self-Confidence

Through Penton’s time at Hexagon, she has been able to grow in many ways. She came into her job as a User Assistance Consultant/Instructional Designer with no previous job experience outside of course work at UAH. Penton is the youngest employee in her office. This age difference has been challenging, but equally rewarding as she has been able to disprove her insecurities by becoming successful in her career.

Penton feels confident in her skills and understands what she brings to the table. She is able to genuinely help customers while having fun. Penton says that she “loves Hexagon” and that it has “a great work environment.” She likes her coworkers, boss, teams, and work community. She loves the flexibility of being able to listen to music and podcasts while working, and she truly enjoys what she does.

Offering some final advice, Penton emphasizes the importance of being confident in the skills that you have. If she were talking to her younger self, she would say that “there is a place for you and your specific skills.” It is so important that technical communicators see the need that companies have for them. Penton explains that while some of their work may seem unnecessary, like warning customers not to “put the toaster in the sink when you plug it in,” the need for technical communicators is dire as they serve as a translator that “provides a bridge that people can walk on if they so choose.
Consider becoming a Member of the Society for Technical Communication (STC) and the STC-Huntsville/North Alabama (NA) Chapter.

Take action now by **joining or renewing your membership** to receive STC resources and discounts.

Learn more about STC Membership here: [Membership Levels and Benefits | Society for Technical Communication (stc.org)](https://www.stc.org).

**About STC-NA**

**About the Society for Technical Communication (STC) Huntsville/North Alabama (NA) Chapter**

The Huntsville/North Alabama Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication (STC) has been a leading professional resource for area technical communicators since 1959. We hold Fall, Winter and Spring meetings to help technical communicators and other professionals network. **We hope you can join us!**

**2022 STC-NA Volunteer Officers**

We strive to serve the North Alabama technical communication community by providing opportunities for learning, networking, and volunteering. If you have an interest in STC-NA and/or in building your community by volunteering, then please respond to this email. **We look forward to hearing from you...**