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Ripslinger, Jennifer M. ***The Career Progression of Technical Communicators***

Abstract

This article describes a pilot study conducted with three technical communicators, one technical communication manager, one human resources representative, and one top-level manager to determine the career path of a technical communicator. The study utilized personal interviews to learn about career options, advancement, training opportunities, and to determine how companies value technical communicators. Participants in the technical communication field acknowledged practitioners could plateau in their careers if they do not actively pursue adding skill sets and knowledge to their career toolboxes. Also, participants who worked at smaller companies and performed a variety of communications tasks tended to feel more valued than those who primarily worked for larger companies.

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Table of Contents

Abstract 2

Chapter I: Introduction 6

Statement of the Problem 7

Purpose of the Study 9

Research Questions 9

Assumptions of the Study 10

Definition of Terms 10

Limitations of the Study 10

Methodology 11

Chapter II: Literature Review 12

The Value and Definition of a Technical Communicator 12

Fields Related to Technical Communication Also Enhances Value 17

Career Progression for Professionals 19

Chapter III: Methodology 28

Subject Selection and Description 28

Instrumentation 31

Data Collection Procedures 31

Data Analysis 32

Limitations 33

Chapter IV: Results 34

Value and Progression 34

Secondary Roles and Career Plateau 36

Versatility....39
The Economy and Career Progression....41
Career Goals Vary....42
Reasons Technical Writers Leave Their Organizations....44
Promotions, Retention, and Development....44
Chapter V: Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendation....49
Discussion....49
Conclusions....51
Recommendations for Further Research....53
References....55
Appendix: Personal Interview Questions....60

Chapter I: Introduction

According to the United States Department of Labor, the job growth outlook for technical communication is 11% between 2016 and 2026, which is faster than the national average (U.S. Department of Labor, 2018). This statistic appealed to me when I applied to the M.S. Technical and Professional Communication (MSTPC) program at University of Wisconsin-Stout. Currently, I am a chief cryptologic technician (technical) (CTT) (E-7 paygrade) in the United States Navy. I enlisted nine years ago after my eight-year journalism career had plateaued. When the recession hit in 2008, my company completed three rounds of layoffs and position cuts in quarterly intervals. During the second-quarter cuts, my position on the sports copy desk was eliminated, and I was transferred to community publications. I was reassigned to a position I was over-qualified for. When a position on the community publications copy desk opened up, I expected a promotion. I was, but only on a part-time basis. I worked 24 hours on the copy desk, but I still had to cover my other position. Because I was covering two roles, there was not much incentive for the company to promote me. Newspapers across the country were experiencing similar cuts, so I decided the best course of action would be to learn a new trade. I chose the Navy because I did not want to add to my student loan debt. Technical communication will be my third career change.

I was drawn to technical communication because I have writing experience from my journalism background and technical acumen from my naval experience. My initial Navy training included a course on electrical theory, principles, and fundamentals in addition to a four-month-long maintenance course for the Navy's shipboard electronic warfare suite and ancillary equipment. During my first tour as an electronic warfare technician, I struggled with subpar documentation and maintenance requirement cards. Case in point: During my first maintenance

check, I destroyed a filter by following the directions. I was performing a routine check known as a filter clean and inspect. After removing the filter from the equipment, I placed it in warm water and the general-purpose cleaner that the maintenance requirement card directed me to use. Right away, the filter started to disintegrate. I notified my work center supervisor, who explained to me that previous maintenance personnel often just used low-pressure air to clean filters because it was faster and more effective. While the card called for general-purpose cleaner, my supervisor also showed me a loophole in the maintenance procedure that allowed for low-pressure air.

While my MSTPC degree will not immediately put me in a position to correct the Navy's flawed preventative maintenance system, it will allow me to make small improvements. At my current duty station, I provide training to Sailors deploying to the Indo-Pacific and Central theaters where they will likely encounter adversaries from Russia, China, and Iran. The Navy relies on instructors, like me, to provide up-to-date and accurate course materials to the fleet. As I continue my naval career, I will ensure to leave the documentation better than I found it. It is not only the right thing to do, but also it will set me up for success when I transition from servicemember to civilian technical writer.

Statement of the Problem

In my first semester in the MSTPC program, I read an article by Kimball (2015b) where a research participant said, "There is a lack of career path due to early plateau-ing in traditional roles" (p. 144). Two other managers made similar remarks about technical writers' careers "leveling off" (Kimball, 2015b, p. 143). Kimball's (2015b) research participants concluded that technical communicators, especially those serving in traditional roles, would ultimately have to leave the field to advance (p. 144). Kimball (2015b), Baehr (2015), and Dubinsky (2015)

collaborated on research for a special issue of the Society for Technical Communication (STC) journal, Technical Communication. They interviewed eight technical communication managers to gain insights on processes, professional identities, and training. Research participants told Kimball (2015b) that technical communicators can avoid a plateau by continuing to learn new skills. However, Kimball (2015b) concluded his article by saying the field was facing some difficult challenges (p. 144).

I was dismayed by Kimball's (2015b) findings questioning the progression potential for technical communicators and wondered if I had made a mistake in choosing not only a master's program but also a potential post-Navy career path. In my early days of working at The Des Moines Register, employees could advance within their positions without transitioning into a management role. Similarly, employees could take on more responsibilities without a title change or formal promotion. To attempt to answer some of my questions about the career progression and development of technical communicators, I conducted a literature review to see if Kimball's (2015b) conclusion was correct. I found some promising case studies written by technical communicators who worked in academia and were close to concluding their careers (Lay Schuster, 2015; Murphy, 2015). I also found articles that provided updated definitions and positions titles for a technical communicator (Brumberger & Lauer, 2015; Henning & Bemer, 2015; Lauer & Brumberger, 2016) but few addressed the career progression of a modern-day technical communicator. This is a critical research gap because most technical communicators enter the field as a second or third profession, according to a survey of more than 600 technical communicators, in a study conducted by Carliner and Chen (2018a). Their study, a census of the field, was published in the December 2018 issue of Intercom, the trade magazine produced by STC. Although the census provided many insights on career progression, it did not address the

notion of a career plateau, nor did it provide individual examples of career progression. Essentially, my problem is, what is my potential to advance in a technical writing career?

Purpose of the Study

There is limited formal research on the career paths of technical communicators. There is also limited research on how companies advance, develop, and retain technical communicators. I also plan to see how Kimball's (2015b) assessment of the technical communicator career path applies to other practitioners in the field and to add to the technical communication body of knowledge. Other published articles on career progression were case studies that focused on technical communicators who were involved in academia, so my research will show the progression of technical communicators who work for companies, as government contractors, and who are self-employed.

Research Questions

In order to determine career potential career progression for technical communications, I focused my research on discovering how typical companies advance, retain, and develop their employees. I focused my research on the following questions:

1. What is the career progression of a technical communicator? How does a typical company advance members of its technical writing team? What strategies are used to retain and develop these employees?
2. Do other technical communicators agree there is a likelihood of a career plateau in the field?
3. What value do technical writers add to their organizations?

Assumptions of the Study

This study makes the following assumptions about technical communicators and their career paths:

- Technical communicators seek to move forward in their career path.
- Technical communicators want to provide value to their company or organization.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are utilized frequently in this research paper. Their definitions are below:

Technical communicator. The definition can vary greatly by organization, company, and researcher; however, most describe a technical communicator as an audience advocate, tasked with translating complex information into an approachable product that is easy for customers to understand and comprehend.

Technical writer. The term technical writer is used interchangeably with technical communicator.

User experience (UX). Also referred to as human-centered design is "an approach that puts human needs, capabilities, and behavior first, then designs to accommodate those needs, capabilities and ways of behaving," according to Norman (2013), a pioneer in the UX field (p. 6).

Limitations of the Study

The study collected data from six individuals, including four technical communicators (including one who worked as a technical communication manager), so it does not holistically examine the multiple options for technical communicators' career paths. The study is also qualitative, so results may vary if replicated.

Methodology

I started researching this topic by first conducting a literature review to see what research had already been conducted on the career paths of technical communicators. After reviewing relevant literature, I learned that technical communication is an evolving field. In order to advance in their careers, technical communicators may need to adopt different job titles or learn new skills. However, I also discovered that not all job progression is vertical. Some people—in all career fields, not just technical communication—advance horizontally or even diagonally. Finally, not all workers want to advance to management level. Many people are satisfied with their careers working autonomously as subject-matter experts.

To gain further insights on how technical communicators advance as well as how they are trained and valued at work, I interviewed four technical communicators (including one manager), one human resources (HR) representative, and one top-level manager. I conducted a thematic analysis of their responses, which complemented my findings from the literature review. Technical communicators who wanted to advance in their careers did so by becoming managers or picking up new skill sets. I conclude this paper with recommendations for practitioners to advance within the field.

Chapter II: Literature Review

Some professions have a road map for career progression. In skilled labor trades and the military, rank structure, and the achievements needed to advance are clearly defined. However, technical communicators need off-road vehicles to find their career progression paths because they are not always delineated. In the technical communication field, the first step to determining career progression is first to determine what value technical communicators provide to their companies. After answering what a technical communicator can provide to the organization, I will look at fields related to technical communication and how they increase the overall value of the field. Finally, I will examine examples of career progression both in technical communication and related fields using the framework of the "corporate lattice" (Benko et al., 2011).

The Value and Definition of a Technical Communicator

When I tell people, I am working on my master's in technical and professional communication, the response is almost always, "What's that?" Researchers (Henning & Bemer, 2016; Martin et al., 2017; Petersen, 2017; Rice-Bailey, 2016) have found that many non-technical writers—especially subject-matter experts such as engineers—do not understand what technical communicators do and the services they provide to their organizations. Therefore, defining the role of a technical communicator is critical because it allows technical writers to advocate for themselves and the necessary services they provide.

According to the "dictionary" of jobs—also known as the Bureau of Labor's *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (2018)—technical writers are defined as:

> Technical writers, also called *technical communicators*, prepare instruction manuals, how-to guides, journal articles, and other supporting documents to

> communicate complex and technical information more easily. They also develop, gather, and disseminate technical information through an organization's communications channels ("What Technical Writers Do").

However, STC (2013, 2018) and researchers Henning and Bemer (2016) argue that the Bureau of Labor's definition is too narrow and does not encompass all the services technical communicators provide to their organization.

Henning and Bemer (2016) reviewed the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* definition and proposed a revised version of it after conducting a literature review on defining the profession using a "power and legitimacy lens" (p. 312). Although they advocated for an updated and expanded version of the definition, Henning and Bemer (2016) argued the narrow scope of the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* definition could help technical communicators in their cases for raises and promotions by comparing their performances with the criteria in the definition (p. 333). Henning and Bemer (2016) also addressed points of view that resisted creating a definition for the field because every technical communicator performs a unique role with a shared set of competencies (p. 334). In its 2013 annual report, the STC board of directors said, "*STC should stop trying to define the profession.* … [I]t is clear that technical communicators work in every industry, at every managerial level, and across product lines" (p. 4). The board of directors concluded that technical communicators share common skill sets, which ultimately define the field (STC, 2013, p. 4). In its current definition, STC describes the field as

> broad and includes any form of communication that exhibits one or more of the following characteristics:

- Communicating about technical or specialized topics, such as computer applications, medical procedures, or environmental regulations.
- Communicating *by using technology,* such as web pages, help files, or social media sites.

Providing *instructions about how to do something,* regardless of how technical the task is or even if technology is used to create or distribute that communication (STC, 2018 "Defining Technical Communication," para. 1-4). The STC definition also references value and states that technical communicators "make information more useable and accessible to those who need that information, and in doing so, they advance the goals of the companies or organizations that employ them" (STC, 2018, "Defining Technical Communication," para. 5). While the STC definition is intentionally vague, Henning and Bemer (2016) advocated for a definition of the field so technical communicators could present a united front to advocate for themselves and the value they provide to organizations (Henning & Bemer, 2016).

Research by Martin, Carrington, and Muncie (2017) concurred with Henning and Bemer (2015) and said, "Our ability to be successful in our workplaces largely depends on our ability to communicate our value to non-[technical communicators]" (p. 329). They argued it is the workers outside technical communication who will conduct hiring and influence organizational value as well as the scope of influence (Martin et al., 2017). Martin et al. (2017) wrote "Promoting User Advocacy to Shift Technical Communication Identity and Value" through an ethnographic perspective, drawing on their personal experiences to show how they demonstrated the value of technical communication in their organizations.

Value leads to progression. Value plays a significant role in career progression because employers generally do not promote individuals who do not provide meaningful contributions to

their organizations. The functions of technical communication are not as prevalent as other fields, so there is an additional obligation for technical writers to communicate their contributions to their organizations. Otherwise, if their value and work are not known, technical communicators will struggle to promote or even remain in their current positions.

To progress in their field, it is essential for technical communicators to understand and vocalize their worth, according to a study completed by Rice-Bailey (2016). Rice-Bailey (2016) surveyed technical communicators and subject-matter experts to understand better how technical communicators are utilized and understood at their workplaces. Based on her personal experience, she said,

> The working relationship between [technical communicators] and their [subject-matter experts] is very often one of the most important in enabling [technical communicators] to complete their documentation tasks. … When [technical communicators] and [subject-matter experts] are seen as effective partners, there is an increased likelihood that [technical communicators] will be regarded as valuable team members and will increasingly be called upon to assist with project work, thus raising the overall station of [technical communicators] within the organization. (p. 231)

Through her study, Rice-Bailey (2016) found that seven of eight subject-matter experts indicated that they expect technical communicators to educate them on what technical writers do. Rice-Bailey (2016) said this was "unexpected and suggests that [technical communicators] must be equipped to effectively articulate their role(s) in the workplace" (p. 237). However, she also found that technical communicators can be uncomfortable expressing their value or contributions to their workplace, which could negatively impact their working relationship with subject-matter

experts. Rice-Bailey (2016) theorized, “If [technical communicators] do not or cannot articulate their value, there is a likelihood they will be seen as a nuisance … unnecessary … or simply expendable ‘overhead’ to the department and organization” (p. 240).

Martin, Carrington, and Muncie (2016) each shared an example of how they showed their worth at their workplaces by utilizing a user advocacy approach. Carrington, who is an assistant professor and teaches professional writing, described how he assisted his department with student recruiting efforts with user advocacy methods. He wrote, “I had the confidence to volunteer to lead a major [user-centered design]/UX technical communication project” although it was outside the scope of his job description (Martin et al., 2016, p. 333). However, by doing so, he was able to “effectively [communicate] how our problem-solving approach impacts users” (Martin et al., 2016 p. 336). This approach also increases the visibility of technical communication, which is vital if technical writers are to be utilized effectively in their workplaces.

In addition to being underutilized, technical communicators who do not communicate their value to the workplace can also be utilized incorrectly, according to Petersen (2017). In her study, “Articulating Value Amid Persistent Misconceptions about Technical and Professional Communication in the Workplace,” Petersen (2017) found that female technical communicators are susceptible to being asked to perform clerical or other non-technical communication duties because their co-workers do not understand what they provide to the company. In her interviews with 39 female technical communicators, Petersen (2017) discovered several misconceptions about what technical communicators bring to the workplace. Some organizations viewed technical communication as “cosmetic” (Petersen, 2017, p. 214). One of Petersen’s (2017) research participants said, “One of my co-workers was once told to make the documentation look

pretty" (p. 214). Another research participant said she had to vocalize her presence during meetings to be utilized because the subject-matter experts were ignoring her (Petersen, 2017). Petersen (2017) said technical communicators cross boundaries, so it is essential they cross over into the right areas and make their work visible.

The literature shows that there are career and advancement opportunities for technical communicators; however, practitioners may have an easier time progressing in their careers if they are vocal about the services they provide to their organizations.

Fields Related to Technical Communication Also Enhances Value

The value technical communication provides to organizations is not only provided by those individuals whose job titles are called "technical communicators." Studies show that the work that technical communicators perform can go by many different names. It is important to recognize the value technical communicators contribute to companies, even if job titles vary.

Brumberger and Lauer (2015) found 55 job titles that could potentially be synonymous with a technical writer. The researchers analyzed approximately 3,400 job postings from Monster.com but only kept ones that "emphasized rhetorically-informed writing, communication, and design skills" in order to better define the profession (Brumberger & Lauer, 2015, p. 228). The jobs were then divided into information development and user experience categories (Brumberger & Lauer, 2015). After sorting all the jobs, Brumberger and Lauer were left with 914 jobs in information development category and analyzed them for their article, "The Evolution of Technical Communication: An Analysis of Industry Job Postings." The user experience jobs were analyzed for a separate article (Brumberger & Lauer, 2015, p. 229). To ease analysis, the jobs were divided into five categories, technical writer/editor (52%), content developer/manager (23%), social media writer (11%), grant/proposal writer (10%), and medical

writer (4%) (Brumberger & Lauer, 2015). Amongst the five categories, Brumberger and Lauer (2015) discovered many shared competencies, including written communication and editing; however, “the data emphasize that technical communications must also be project planners and visual communicators who have subject matter familiarity” (p. 239).

Similarly, Carliner and Chen (2018b) found 62% of all their survey participants said writing and editing were their primary jobs, but only one-third of the participants shared their job titles, and 46% had the term “technical writer, editor, or communicator” in their job titles (pp.10, 14). In Petersen’s (2017) study, 20 of the 39 participants were called “technical writer” (p. 213). The other 19 were called “editors, analysts, developers, and copywriters” (Petersen, 2017, p. 213). This also suggests that regards of what title technical communicators have, they primarily write and edit but are expected to perform other functions as well.

Baehr (2015), who researched professional identities, reported one of his research participants was not too concerned about technical communicator titles: “We often describe [technical communicators] in two ways—the software development oriented title and a more content oriented descriptive role title. ... But they can call themselves whatever they want in their intranet profiles” (p. 111).

Lauer and Brumberger (2016) also examined UX as a related field for technical communicators because both disciplines focus on audience analysis. Lauer and Brumberger (2016) theorized that “UX is a natural extension of the work that technical communicators already do, especially in the modern technologic context of responsive design” (p. 249). To investigate this, Lauer and Brumberger (2016) reviewed 502 user experience job postings from Monster.com and conducted content analysis to see how the professional competencies overlapped with technical communication positions. They found “technical communicators are

well qualified to move into UX or claim a more central seat at the UX table" (Lauer & Brumberger, 2016, p. 251). However, like other disciplines, to be better qualified for UX, technical communicators will need additional training in HTML, [cascading style sheets], and Adobe [Creative Suite] (Lauer & Brumberger, 2016, p. 257). And like other fields related to technical communication, UX jobs tend to pay more than technical communication jobs, with salaries ranging from $76,244 to $139,857 (Lauer & Brumberger, 2016, p. 255).

The growth of the user experience field demonstrates the value of technical communication because they both provide a similar service. STC (2018) and Norman (2013) both said the purpose of their disciplines—technical communication and user experience design, respectively—is to make people's lives easier. The *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (2018) does not contain user experience designer or a similar position, but by looking at the salary ranges, it contains a skill set that many organizations are interested in utilizing.

Career Progression for Professionals

While their roles are a lot more fluid based on their organizations, technical communicators are promoted similarly to other professionals. Their roles are often designated as I, II, or III, or something similar, to indicate experience. Defining career progression as a whole will ultimately provide better insights into the advancement of technical communicators.

As workforces expand and become more mobile, the definition of career progression has evolved as well. Benko, Anderson, and Vickberg (2011) argued the corporate lattice has replaced the corporate ladder. In their article, "The Corporate Lattice: A Strategic Response to the Changing World of Work," Benko et al. (2011) argue the ladder approach "assumes employees are more alike than different" (p. 94). However, "employees are more diverse than ever —

including their very definitions of success" due to the rise in nontraditional families, flattened hierarchies, evolving generational needs, and greater connectivity (Benko et al., 2011, p. 94).

For example, Murphy (2015) made his career moves based satisfaction, not salary. In his personal case study, Murphy (2015) discussed his unlikely path into the technical communication field. He started in academia and left to become a practitioner because he enjoyed freelancing more than teaching. Lay Schuster (2015) similarly described her transition from practitioner to academia. She said she was "restless" and enrolled in graduate school (p. 45). Both Murphy (2015) and Lay Schuster (2015) held several positions within the broad technical communication discipline. While both these individuals are near the end of their careers, they both exhibited career progression through the corporate lattice. Lay Schuster (2015) studied American literature in graduate school. Murphy (2015) started his career teaching literature, and he also learned computer languages while freelancing for Microsoft.

The corporate lattice enables employees to move laterally and diagonally in addition to vertically (Benko et al., 2011). Not only does this approach allow for employees to have greater flexibility in their careers but also encourages companies to promote based on performance instead of tenure (Benko et al., 2011).

The lattice structure is also important because not all employees strive to be managers, according to Oestreich (2002). In her article, "Understanding the Career Development of Technical Communicators," Oestreich (2002) argues there are four stages of career development: apprentice, independent, mentor, and visionary. Apprentices are new employees who often assist with others' projects, performing mundane or detailed work (Oestreich, 2002). Independent workers are self-sufficient employees who can also contribute to a team, and Oestreich (2002) notes, "[m]any people make a career of being successful independent contributors" (p. 97).

Mentors focus on developing other employees, and although 60 percent of the workforce is potentially in the mentor phase, less than half of them have a management title (Oestreich, 2002). Mentors must be comfortable, allowing others to receive praises, and those who require personal reaffirmation should remain in the independent phase (Oestreich, 2002). The final phase is visionary, which is only attained by 5% of the workforce (Oestreich, 2002). Visionaries tend to be the leaders of organizations because they focus on the good of the company and make decisions that have long-term implications (Oestreich, 2002). Oestreich (2002) wrote that she worked as a visionary, but in retrospect, realized she prefers working as a mentor. Benko et al. (2011) concluded that "typical careers now zig and zag" because organizations value input from all employees, not just the executives (p. 105).

How technical communicators progress. Two recent studies have provided insights into the career progression for technical communicators. Kimball's (2015a; 2015b), Dubinsky's (2015), and Baehr's (2015) study and articles touched on the topic because they were researching other issues. Carliner and Chen's (2018) census of the field provides quantitative data that supports the notion of career progression, but it does not describe how or why practitioners advance.

Kimball (2015a; 2015b), Dubinsky (2015), and Baehr (2015) conducted a study using a modified Delphi method. The researchers interviewed eight technical communication managers who represented seven companies on STC's 2013-2014 Advisory Council (Kimball, 2015a). The managers, who were from Adobe, Boston Scientific, CA Technologies, Google, IBM, Madcap, and Oracle, contributed to four rounds of research (Kimball, 2015a). Rounds 1 and 2 were surveys, and Rounds 3 was an in-person focus group with three managers conducted at the 2014 STC Summit (Kimball, 2015a). Round 4 was conducted via a video teleconference (Kimball,

2015a). The researchers shared the results of the previous round with the participants and used the previous round's results to "shape the questions for subsequent rounds. This grounded approach helped build a deeper sense of the dynamics surrounding the issue the study addresses" (Kimball, 2015a, pp. 91-92). Specifically, the study focused on identities and relationships; products and processes; education and training; and on the horizon (Kimball, 2015a). Kimball (2015a) said, "These topics are deeply interconnected: *who we are* is related to *what we do* and *how we learn to do,* and all of these things are changing fast (p. 90). Baehr (2015) focused his article on identities and relationships, Dubinsky (2015) wrote about products and processes, and Kimball (2015b) looked at education and training (Kimball, 2015a). Kimball (2015a) also wrote "Special Issue Introduction Technical Communication: How A Few Great Companies Get It Done," which described the methodology used for the study in depth.

In the article "Training and Education: Technical Communication Managers Speak Out," A technical communication manager told Kimball (2015b) that there was a "lack of career path due to early plateau-ing in traditional roles" (p. 144). Neither Kimball nor his research participants define "tradition role," but the U.S. Bureau of Labor's definition could provide some insights. Henning and Bemer (2016) said the definition provided a "narrow scope" of what technical communicators do (p. 333). Another research participant said, "Technical Communications, as a career, has a glass ceiling" (Kimball, 2015b, p. 144). Kimball's (2015b) participants suggested promotion opportunities were either in management or "beyond the profession per se" (p. 144). None of the participants indicated whether the career plateau was an observation or if they had lost employees due to a lack of promotion opportunities.

To counter the issue of a career plateau, research participants said technical communicators need to have good writing skills and learn "how to be flexible in how to use the

resources and how to develop professionally on their own and keep the career fresh and learn those new skills that they need to learn even though they're not in school anymore" (Kimball, 2015b, p. 144). Kimball (2015b) noted that the research participants indicated discrepancies between the ideal and actual paths for technical communicators. Ideally, colleges should teach basic technical communication and professional skills, and companies will provide training specific to the organizations' goals and missions (Kimball, 2015b). However, if companies view professional development as a cost rather than an investment, then individual employees must seek training on their own to advance (Kimball, 2015b). Kimball (2015b) concluded his article: "Difficult challenges to face, indeed" (p. 144).

While Kimball (2015b) expresses concern about the field, the literature allows for some optimism. Benko et al. (2011) and Oestreich (2002) both indicated that not all employees want to be promoted. Benko et al. (2011) said some workers are more concerned with a work and home-life balance than earning promotions, and Oestreich (2002) explained that some employees need to receive recognition for their work and remain in the independent phase. Finally, Kimball's (2015) research participant said career plateaus are occurring to technical communicators in "tradition roles" (p. 144). Kimball's (2015) co-researcher, Baehr (2015) looked at professional identities and had a positive outlook on the field after learning technical communicators are adopting new skill sets.

In his article "Complexities in Hybridization: Professional Identities and Relationships in Technical Communication," Baehr (2015) found that technical communicators are considered essential to companies but are "defined more broadly by a wide range of skills and disciplinary functions" (p. 108). One of Baehr's (2015) questions during Round 1 asked about advancement and career progression. While Baehr (2015) noted the responses varied by company, he also said,

"participants reported that a majority stay in the field or in technical communicator roles, although the names of those roles may change depending on organizational change" (p. 109). Baehr (2015) said technical communicators "must also be adaptable to other roles as part of their career progression" (p. 109).

Like Baehr (2015), Dubinsky (2015) also found that to be successful, technical communicators need to evolve. In "Products and Processes: Transition from 'Product Documentation to … Integrated Technical Content," Dubinsky (2015) used a farm analogy to conclude his article: "The tools we choose are important; the education we seek and advocate for will help our crop grow. Most important will be our attitude, which needs to be rooted in versatility" (p. 133). Through his lines of questioning, Dubinsky (2015) learned that documentation is the primary work product for most technical communicators; however, some managers also indicated how-to videos were "important" or "mission critical" tasks for technical communicators (pp. 123-124). In addition to creating videos instead of written documentation, Dubinsky (2015) also discussed involving technical communicators in the design of products. Dubinsky (2015) quoted a survey participant who has high hopes for the field:

> The situation is not necessarily dire. Technology and information is [stet] just so fluid right now. ... In terms of the career path, technical communicators are not doing even what they did five years ago. I think they're all being asked to do more and more to broaden their skill set. And actually, from the career perspective ... that's kind of exciting. ... They'll have opportunities for other positions. (p. 132)

Baehr (2015) and Dubinsky (2015) discovered that versatility and hybridization will help technical communicators feel valued and advance in their careers. While Kimball (2015b) also

acknowledged their findings, his article also discussed how technical communicators were going to receive training to expand their skill sets, and more importantly, if companies would pay for it. This is why he found "responses to questions about Education and Training …somewhat troubling" (p. 144).

Despite Kimball's (2015b) "troubling" findings, Carliner and Chen (2018b) discovered that 70% of 676 technical communicators who participated in a census were satisfied with their current jobs. The census data, collected by Carliner and Chen (2018), was published in the December 2018 issue of *Intercom.* Carliner and Chen (2018) surveyed 676 technical communication professionals and asked about their jobs, professional development, job satisfaction, perspectives, and demographics (Carliner, 2018). Carliner and Chen subsequently published several articles in *Intercom* about these data including, "Who Technical Communicators are: A Summary of Demographics, Backgrounds, and Employment" (2018a), "What Technical Communicators Do" (2018b), "The Professional Development of Technical Communicators" (2018c), and "Job and Career Satisfaction Among Technical Communicators" (2018d).

Abel (2018), who analyzed Carliner and Chen's (2018) survey data in a column for *Intercom*, "Survey Reveals Top Tools, Trends, and Technologies in Use in Technical Communication Teams," noted that some of the issues in the field are not unique to technical communication as other content-producing departments are being asked to do more with less in addition to incorporating new technologies into work processes. Abel (2018) concluded, "[a]s our benchmarking survey results indicate, opportunities for interesting and rewarding technical communication work are available in nearly every industry sector" (p. 38).

While Kimball (2015b) wrote that his research participants “seem to suggest that technical communication may not be a lifelong career for most professionals today” (p. 144), Carliner and Chen (2018a) discovered that more than half of their survey respondents entered the field as a second or third career. Approximately 500 of the 676 technical communicators surveyed have been in the field for more than 10 years, but about half of them have only been in their current positions for five years or less (Carliner, 2018; Carliner & Chen, 2018a). Twenty-nine percent have been in the profession for 25 years or more (Carliner & Chen, 2018a). These statistics suggest that technical communication could be either a lifelong career or at least a terminal career for those who entered the field later in life.

Although only one-third of participants shared their job titles, 25% of those who did had the term “senior” and 3% used “principal” in their job titles to show seniority (Carliner & Chen, 2018b, p. 14). Also, 14% said their primary duty was management (Carliner & Chen, 2018a). These survey results show that there are advancement opportunities for many technical communicators. The challenge for technical communicators is to keep their “skill toolboxes" up-to-date, so they can communicate using the consumers’ preferred methods, thus maintaining their roles as audience advocates.

Diversified skill sets also benefited the five research participants from Kim and Tolley’s (2004) study. The pair interviewed five graduate school graduates who had completed their schooling at least five years ago to see if their education had benefited them in their careers (Kim & Tolley, 2004). Out of the five participants, two had technical writer titles, and one had an editor title (Kim & Tolley, 2004). The other two have the titles “training media specialist” and “senior business applications analyst," but both said their positions involve much writing and communications tasks (Kim & Tolley, 2004). One of the participants, the training media

specialist, said she was initially hired for internal product documentation, but she demonstrated skill sets beyond the position she was hired for and now performs many additional tasks (Kim and Tolley, 2004). Kim and Tolley (2004) concluded that training programs that focus on critical thinking, general writing skills, and rhetorical theory best set up graduates for success because they "foster analytical agility so that practitioners can confidently approach different problems, projects, and jobs" (p. 385). While technical communication has evolved significantly since this study was published, it supports the argument that practitioners who continue to develop their skill sets will be able to advance in their careers.

Lay Schuster (2015) also advocated for technical communicators to have a wide range of skill sets, and she started a technical writing career in 1968. In her personal case study, she detailed the changes in the field by decade and concluded with advice to students to study another field, too, so they could perform interdisciplinary work. However, she added, "I caution that we must not lose our niche" (2015, p. 389).

In addition to Lay Schuster (2015), Dubinsky (2015), Baehr (2015), and Kim and Tolley (2004) have all indicated versatility is one way for technical communicators to advance within their careers. Coupling versatility and communicating value, technical communicators should be able to achieve their desired rung on the corporate lattice as well as their preferred level of career development (independent, mentor, or visionary).

Chapter III: Methodology

To add to the body of formal research about the career paths of technical communicator, I interviewed four technical communicators, including one manager. To provide further insight into how technical communicators can advance and how they are utilized, I also interviewed an HR representative to see what benefits and professional development opportunities are available to technical communicators and a top-level manager to see how companies value technical communicators.

Subject Selection and Description

I recruited participants through networking, which is also referred to as convenience sampling (Hughes & Hayhoe, 2008). I attended an STC San Diego chapter meeting and San Diego Society for Human Resources Management membership mixer to recruit participants. I also reached out to former co-workers and classmates to see if their companies employed technical writers. If they did, I asked them to solicit participants on my behalf, also known as snowball sampling (Hughes & Hayhoe, 2008). I provided my prospectus and explained that participants and their organizations would be de-identified in my research paper. My contacts provided my name and e-mail address to the participants for them to contact me. Before conducting interviews, I either e-mailed or handed the participant a consent form that explained all participants would be assigned pseudonyms, so they would feel comfortable speaking freely about their experiences. I based this decision on existing literature, particularly Kimball's (2015a) Delphi study that did not utilize the participants' names. The study included the participants' organizations but did not associate responses to specific companies to ensure participant privacy (Kimball, 2015a).

The following individuals volunteered to participate in my study and represent a convenience sampling. They were recruited solely based on their current or former functions at their jobs. They represent a variety of industries and locations, but they were not selected to generalize the career progression of a technical communicator. Their experiences demonstrate examples of career progression and share lessons learned. Their real names have been substituted with pseudonyms to protect their privacy:

Technical communication manager. Wallace Ingram is a retired information engineering manager for a large technology company in California and is an active member of his local Society for Technical Communication (STC) chapter. Before retiring in 2012, he held several management positions, starting in 1998. In 1993, he transitioned from algorithm designer to technical writer. His bachelor's and master's degrees are in applied mathematical sciences.

Technical communicator. Peter Pike is a communications principal for a large technology company and serves as a government contractor. He has also worked as a freelance technical writer. After he retired from the Navy as a CTT in 1998, he found a job as a technical writer and completed his bachelor's degree in information technology. Pike's primary job in the Navy was collecting, processing, analyzing, and disseminating non-communications intelligence data (ELINT) from airborne platforms. Pike completed his master's in engineering management in 2010.

Technical communicator. Martha Belt is a senior research associate at a biotechnology company in the Midwest and has worked for the organization for approximately seven years. Before that, she was a features writer for a mid-sized Midwestern newspaper for 24 years. She has bachelor's degrees in journalism and biochemistry, cell, and molecular biology.

Technical communicator. Samuel Roberts is a freelance technical communicator and adjunct professor for technical communication and English composition. He started his career in media as a news writer for radio, television, and film. Roberts changed careers in the late 1980s and worked in information technology (IT), providing technical support. While he performed technical writing at his job, he did not become a full-time technical communicator until the late 2000s. As a technical writer, Roberts worked on a variety of projects, including government contracts, software development, and other business communications. He has a bachelor's degree in communications theory and journalism, and a master's degree in technical communications.

Top-level manager. Jimmie Howard is the chief operating officer (COO) at a software company based in the Midwest. As the COO, he is responsible for all the day-to-day operations of the company. Before working in management, Howard worked both in the government sector and the corporate sector performing pre-employment selection, a service that allows organizations to hire the right employees for their needs. Howard also has experience with customer experience strategy and market research. Howard has a bachelor's degree in psychology, and master's and a doctorate in organizational psychology.

HR professional. James Stockdale is a vice president of human resources at a large privately owned aerospace company. He oversees 150 HR professionals and 12,000 employees. Stockdale has nearly 40 years of experience in the field and started in the manufacturing field as an HR professional focusing on compensation and benefits. As he advanced in his career, he moved into labor relations and also into the aerospace industry. Stockdale has been an executive for the last 15 years. He has a bachelor's degree in business administration with a concentration in human resources.

Instrumentation

I used a list of 20 questions to conduct semi-structured interviews with the six participants. Regardless of job title, all participants were asked the same questions from the interview sheet, if the question was applicable. The questions asked about the participants educational and career backgrounds, current positions, career goals, as well as promotion and training opportunities at their companies. (See Appendix for the full list of questions.)

Data Collection Procedures

I submitted this study for Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, and the board granted this study exemption status for five years. I submitted to the IRB that my preference was to conduct interviews in person but included that they may be conducted via phone or Skype based on participant availability. I collected data through personal interviews. I asked each participant about their career, their company, and how their company values technical communicators using the list of 20 questions (see Appendix) I drafted for this study, but I asked additional questions if I needed clarification or additional information. I conducted all the interviews one-on-one. I met with two local participants in person and conducted four interviews with participants not local to my area via telephone conversation. All participants, regardless of position, were asked the same questions, in a semi-structured interview. Questions that did not apply—such as asking how the participant planned to achieve his career goal if he previously stated that he had accomplished his career goal—were not asked. I recorded interviews conducted in person with a cell phone application. I conducted the other four interviews via telephone and recorded them using Microsoft OneNote. Interviews lasted between 20 and 45 minutes. I transcribed the interviews by listening to the audio track and recording the

participants' answers into Word documents. Their answers were organized by the questions asked, and the files only contained their assigned pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

This study was initially intended to be a case study and focus on the career progression of a single technical communicator ideally focus on one organization. I planned to model my research paper off Murphy's (2015) and Lay Schuster's (2015) personal case studies. When I was recruiting participants, multiple technical communicators from different organizations volunteered to assist me, so instead, I adopted methodology and analysis that was similar to Kim and Tolley (2004)'s study of technical communication career paths. Kim and Tolley (2004) interviewed five technical communication master's program graduates to see how their academic training prepared them for their careers. Kim and Tolley (2004) transcribed their interviews, made observations, and compared them to current thinking.

However, I did not feel narratives would be appropriate for this study because the career history and educational backgrounds of the top-level manager and the HR representative was not germane to the career progression of a technical communicator. I transcribed the responses and summarized the participant's answers on an Excel spreadsheet in an attempt to code the responses; however, participant answers were too varied for coding to be effective because only the demographic questions, such as educational background and career history, could be condensed into a set range of responses. Instead, I reviewed the responses and identified how they answered my research questions. I then conducted a second review of the responses and identified themes and concepts that most of the participants found helped them with their career progression. These themes are addressed in Chapter V's Discussion section.

Limitations

This study researched the career path of four technical communicators who were recruited via convenience sampling and is qualitative in nature. The study does not attempt to generalize the career progression of technical communicators or represent any population. It merely provides insights for career progression. It also does not provide equal representation to employee types. To complement the qualitative work conducted here, a survey of many technical communicators, workplace subject-matter experts, and top-level managers could be conducted, and the scope could be limited to a geographic area or industry.

Chapter IV: Results

The study utilized data from interviews from six individuals with various positions, backgrounds, and experiences, which yielded qualitative results and the following themes:

1. Value and Progression
2. Supporting Roles and Career Plateaus
3. Versatility
4. The Economy and Career Progression
5. Career Goals Vary
6. Reasons Technical Communicators Leave Their Organizations
7. Promotions, Retention, and Development

Value and Progression

Similar to the conclusions made by Rice-Bailey (2016), Martin et al. (2016), and Petersen (2017), research participants who felt valued by their employers were not concerned about their advancement prospects. Out of the four participants who worked or are working as technical communicators, Pike was the most confident in the value he provides to his organization. He has been employed there since 2004, and in addition to writing and editing, Pike works with an integrating modeling environment to develop new technology for the Navy. He said, “It took me a long time to figure out what my worth was.” For Pike, that confidence in his worth not only resulted in a six-figure salary but also provides job security. Technical communicators need to know their value, so they can educate their co-workers on the services they provide to their organizations. Petersen (2017), Martin et al. (2017), and Rice-Bailey (2016) also found that many workplaces do not fully understand what technical communicators can provide. Petersen

(2017) noted, “Companies are driven by profit motives, and if writers cannot quantify their work, they occupy a precarious position depending on the company” (p. 219).

Although Roberts is self-employed, he said he felt valued by previous employers, especially when he worked for a small business as the only staff writer. Roberts said he was greatly utilized across all office workplace genres, including software development, internal communications, and marketing communications. As a COO, Howard said he values all 40 of his employees because they each play a pivotal role in maintaining the company’s culture, which contributes to its overall success. Howard’s company produces software for businesses and employs one technical writer. He said if his technical writer wanted to advance, she could work with her supervisor to develop a position. Because of the company’s size, there are not preset ranks that can be found at larger companies. Sometimes, Howard explained, “We’re promoting them into roles that no one has ever filled.” Therefore, it is up to the employee and the manager to develop expectations of what the new role will entail, and if the employee meets the requirements. Howard also said, “It’s individualized. I don’t want to say we make it up as we go, but sometimes we make it up as we go.”

While all four technical communicators worked in supporting roles at their companies, Belt and Ingram felt less valued at their organizations. They said that the engineers or the scientists at their companies tended to be more valued by leadership. Belt said one of the cons of her position was “that we’re support staff, and sometimes we are second-class citizens in a way.” Belt added that there are levels of progression built in for scientific writers, the path is not as clear cut for the personnel who work in the laboratory. Scientists join the company with bachelor’s degrees, and when they hit certain milestones, the company will send them back to

school for advanced degrees and reward them with promotions after they complete their schooling.

Stockdale, the HR manager, primarily talked about the career progression of engineers, who provide the primary service at his aerospace engineering firm. It is hard to fault him for primarily discussing engineers because he oversees a staff of 150 who provide HR services to 12,000 employees. However, Stockdale's tendency to discuss engineers reiterates the fact that technical communicators must communicate their value, especially when they are in secondary roles in their organizations. If technical writers do not advocate for themselves, then the company's key decision-makers, like the vice president for HR, will not know what services they provide. Stockdale indicated that his company also rewards employees that it values, although it has made changes in the last 10 years in order to promote better managers. His company primarily produces equipment for the military, and therefore attracts a lot of military retirees and veterans. Stockdale explained that promotions at the company often rewarded by seniority, which was "a military hangover." He added that usually the best engineer would be promoted "and in many cases, that was very bad because they were not great managers. So, then you got a bad manager, and you lost your best engineer." Now Stockdale's company uses dual career paths, which allows employees to advance in the company without having to transition to management positions.

Secondary Roles and Career Plateau

One research participant, Ingram, directly associated working in a supporting role with experiencing a career plateau. He said a career plateau is "absolutely true" in product-oriented companies because technical communicators will never get the respect or exposure of product designers or salespeople. However, Ingram also said, "It also depends a lot on the culture of the

company. If good design ideas are only allowed to come from designers, then you're stuck." Ingram noted this could be an inadvisable business practice because technical writers, through the course of their work, can discover design flaws. He cited an example of discovering circuit boards were designed too close to one another because when he reached in to remove one, he scraped his knuckles. Ingram added, "If the success of the company is related to the services provided by technical communicators, then I don't think there's a glass ceiling."

Belt, who works in a supporting role at her company, agreed with Ingram about a career plateau. She said scientific writers at her company who do not perform additional duties outside their typical job descriptions usually are passed over for promotions. She also noticed that there is a level most scientific writers will not go beyond unless they cross over into another position, such as project manager. She added that she believes her company values experienced scientific writers because their reports are the culmination of millions of dollars and several years of research. If their products have errors, the company runs the risk of their products not being approved by the federal government.

It is also important to note that Kimball (2015a; 2015b), Dubinsky (2015), and Baehr's (2015) research participants primarily represented large companies where technical writers perform support services (Kimball, 2015a). Only MadCap's primary business is technical communication and content development. Although, only one-third of the research participants made the correlation amongst large companies, performing support services, and career plateaus, I believe that technical communicators would be more likely to experience a career plateau at a larger organization versus a smaller one. Three research participants (two technical writers and one COO) did not believe technical communication+-/9n career progression eventually plateaued, but two of them also primarily worked for smaller organizations.

Howard disagreed with the notion of a career plateau based on his current company and prior work experience. His company employs one technical communicator, and he said the technical writer would not have to leave the company to advance in her career. If the technical writer wanted to advance to a senior technical writer or into a management position, Howard said the writer and her boss would define the position, knowledge, and skill requirements needed and determine whether she met those requirements. Howard said, "Having worked at other organizations with technical writers as well, I'm not sure where that observation would come from." He added that his sister-in-law was a technical writer who was enjoying a successful career at a much larger organization.

Roberts and Pike both said career plateaus are self-inflicted. Pike said, "I think the only reason there's a glass ceiling in the field is because people don't break through it. I say that carefully because it's broader than just the technical communication industry." Pike said most career plateaus happen to individuals who may not be working hard enough or taking enough risks to crack the ceiling. Although he admitted he is not an active member with his local STC chapter, he is pleased with the development of the current members. In the past, Pike said he would go to meetings and attendees would complain about a lack of jobs. Pike said these members were also frustrated that technical communication did not have a clear-cut career path similar to fields such as HR or skilled labor trades. Communication is a service, Pike said, "and it's very difficult to move up unless you're willing to learn new things that allow you to move up and leverage writing skills.

Like Pike, Roberts said a career plateau was employee dependent. Roberts said he only thinks there is a career plateau if technical communicators "define themselves as' these tools can do these communication tasks, pure and simple.' But, at some point, those tools will be obsolete.

Those tasks will be obsolete. Then you will have a glass ceiling." Roberts encouraged technical communicators to get involved with multiple forms of corporate communications, such as marketing, internal, and executive, in order to continue to progress in their careers.

While skills development is important for technical communicators (Baehr, 2015; Brumberger & Lauer, 2015; Kimball, 2015b; Kim & Tolley, 2005), it is important to note Roberts' and Pike's career paths are different from Belt's and Ingram's. Roberts worked as a government contractor performing project-based work. He also worked for a small company and is now self-employed. Pike currently works for a defense contractor and is cross utilized both for communications and requirements engineering.

Versatility

Dubinsky (2015) said technical communicators' attitudes need to be rooted in versatility. All four of the technical communicators have skill sets in addition to writing. All four of them also entered the field as a second or third profession. Roberts and Belt both started their careers as journalists. Belt was able to find work at a biotechnology company as a technical communicator because she had obtained a second bachelor's degree in biochemistry, cell, and molecular biology. She has continued to advance at her current job because she took on additional duties such as writing and editing the company newsletters. Roberts used his experience in digital journalism to transfer to information technology and then got involved with technical communication. His key to progression was to get involved with multiple forms of business communications. In addition to being a technical communications consultant, Roberts also works as an adjunct English and composition college professor. Pike entered the technical communication field after retiring from the Navy after 20 years. Although he took one technical writing course during his naval career, his primary duty was to conduct intelligence, surveillance,

and reconnaissance aboard aircraft. After he retired from the Navy, he earned degrees in information technology and engineering management. Ingram, who transitioned from a technical writer to a management position, started his career as an algorithm designer.

Other practitioners advocated for versatility, including Lay Schuster (2015) and Murphy (2015). Lay Schuster studied American literature in graduate school, while Murphy (2015) started his career teaching literature, and he also learned computer languages while freelancing for Microsoft. Versatility is also closely related to the definition of a technical communicator because Brumberger and Lauer (2015) found that many perform the core competencies of a technical communicator without the title. None of the research participants had official titles that included technical writer or technical communicator. Belt is a senior research associate and is referred to as a scientific writer. She said, “We were formally called technical writers, but that sounds like someone who prepares manuals. Scientific writer isn’t exactly right, either, but we can’t really come up with the correct term.” As a scientific writer, Belt’s job is to prepare reports for agriculture federal agency regulatory groups such as the Environmental Protection Agency. The reports are based on scientific research of the regulatory group and are required by the federal government, so the company can plant and sell its products. Brumberger and Lauer (2015) did not include scientific writer into their list of jobs that they associated with technical communication. However, they included medical writer, which is a similar field, according to Sharma (2010). Medical writers are responsible for presenting medical information in a manner that patients or the general public can understand (Sharma, 2010).

Toward the latter part of his career, Ingram worked as an information architect and an information engineering manager. As a manager, he supervised workers performing a technical writing function in addition to hiring, conducting performance reviews, developing employees,

training, and serving as a liaison amongst the other departments. Pike's title is communications principal, but he stressed that it is only his company's title, and writes and edits daily for his job. As a freelancer, Stockdale does not limit himself to one type of writing. He will prepare technical communication or business and marketing material as well. Baehr (2015), Dubinsky (2015), and Carliner and Chen (2018) also discussed technical communicators using different names in the workplace.

The Economy and Career Progression

Career progression for technical communicators is also determined by external factors like the economy. Belt had been working as a features writer for the last 24 years when she was laid off. She said she survived five rounds of layoffs at her Midwestern-based newspaper before she was cut during the sixth. Belt added, "I wouldn't have left, but I think it's a good thing I did." Belt said she was able to advance to her current position because she took on additional duties such as writing and editing the company newsletters. Economics also played a role in Ingram's career, but unlike Belt, communications were not his primary role. However, Ingram recognized, "I had a fair amount of background of the discipline of writing precisely." At one of his previous jobs, he recognized, "business was going south," and he was eventually laid off. Instead of looking for another job that involved algorithms, Ingram said, "I knew I was in effect doing technical writing without the title, so I said, let me see if I can make a job out of this." After networking with former colleagues, Ingram joined their firm as a technical writer and manager of technical writers.

Roberts transitioned to working as a freelancer and adjunct professor because he is winding down his career and wanted more flexibility. Pike always knew he enjoyed writing, so took a writing position at a training company after his retirement. While working as a civilian, he

said he "found out I was very good with computers. Not just computer specific, I already knew that, but networking computers, fighting viruses, and stuff like that," so he went back to school to complete his bachelors of science in information technology. While in the Navy, he took courses with an interesting subject matter, such as Soviet foreign policy and terrorism, but he "just couldn't go to college to get the check in the box." After earning his bachelor's degree, Pike said he worked for a variety of companies on different projects all while doing a lot of technical writing.

Career Goals Vary

While not all of the research participants had met their career goals, most of them were close to meeting their goals, or they had intangible goals. For example, Pike said his career goal was to learn new things. He also said that as a government contractor, it is hard to have a clear path or goal. He said the situation would be different if he worked for a company who hired technical communicators for its own use because there would be a more evident advancement track like "tech writer 25." However, Pike said his next career milestone would be to transition to a remote position within the next five years so that he can travel to national parks with his wife.

Like Pike, Ingram's career goal was to stay on top of new technology and to see what he was capable of. He offered this advice, "When in doubt, work on the projects where you're going to learn something new." Other researchers, through their studies, also recommended technical communicators continue to acquire new skills and hone their core ones. Baehr (2015) and Dubinsky (2015) discussed technical communicators being "hybrids" (p. 105) and versatile (p. 133), respectively. Dubinsky (2015) also advised technical communicators to get "more involved in gaining (or teaching) video, social media, and interview skills (p. 132). Kimball (2015), after concluding that organizations were mixed on providing professional development training,

conceded that technical communicators had to rely on their "own motivations to learn and rise throughout their careers" (p. 144).

Ingram also noted that he worked with many technical communicators who were not interested in management positions. He said there were many subject matter experts who were being paid decently, their commutes were reasonable, and the delivery schedule was predictable. He described it as "a cushy job." Therefore, when management positions opened up, many of the employees were not interested because their individual needs were already being met.

Belt said she enjoys her job as a scientific writer because she gets to use a different part of her brain than she did as a newspaper reporter; however, her career goal is to find a position where she can marry scientific writing and journalism. At her current job, she volunteered to write an article for an academic journal about bring farming technologies to third-world countries. She described the position as a science advocate and said, "That would be the optimal career for me."

Howard and Stockdale, who are executive-level leaders, both said they met their career goals, although Stockdale said he did not have to be a vice president to achieve it. Stockdale said his career goal "has always been to make an organization better," especially regarding talent development and acquisition. Howard's career goal was to be in a leadership role "at an organization whose values align with my values," and he felt he achieved his goal at his current organization. Participants were also asked how long most employees stay with their organization. Belt, Pike, and Howard all guessed between seven and 10 years. Stockdale noted that his company "is considered a prime employer for a lot of people" and that there were many people over the age of 65. Roberts is self-employed.

Reasons Technical Writers Leave Their Organizations

Only Ingram could comment on technical writers departing his organization. He said some people left because the requirements of the company were too rigid. Those individuals went to work for smaller or younger companies where they had more creative freedom. One or two employees left because they disliked Ingram as a boss. As for Ingram's career, many of his job moves were caused by his position being eliminated by his employer. None of the other technical communicators interviewed said they changed jobs because they felt their career had stalled at their current location. While Carliner and Chen (2018) addressed that 39% of technical communicators that plan to change jobs in the five years also intend to leave the field, they did not discuss the factors that contribute to these individuals' desires to depart the profession.

Promotions, Retention, and Development

Promotions, retention, and development play a large role in the career progression for technical communicators. Participants reported greater job satisfaction from organizations who actively sought to advance, retain, and develop their employees.

Promotions. Roberts said he noticed longevity played a role in promotions. Companies he worked for conducted cyclical layoffs, so it seems the employees who survived the cuts were the ones who were promoted. He also noted that supervisors also looked for employees who were willing to take on new responsibilities and adapt to the changing demands of the business.

Other participants said individual managers could decide when it was appropriate to promote employees. Ingram said one thing managers considered at his company was, "would other managers recognize the performance of the individual?" Progression ranged from Information Engineer I to Senior Information Engineer and the main benefit was a pay raise, although there was about an 80% overlap of the pay scale between the old and new rank.

Performance is also crucial at Belt's company. She said employees are promoted when they display that they are performing the work of the next level. However, seniority also plays a role because Belt said some of her co-workers have advanced because of their institutional knowledge. As a government contractor, Pike said being promoted can be difficult because many of the contracts are thin margined. Personally, Pike said he had been rewarded with pay raises for great performance in the last few years, but he has also received bonuses and promotions.

Retention. For Howard's small company, employee retention is critical with one caveat, "We want to retain the right people. We won't hold on to people who aren't a good fit for us, or we're not a good fit for them." Howard's company takes extreme pride in creating a culture where people want to come to work. He said they have a casual environment where people can wear jeans, T-shirts, or shorts to work, and employees are encouraged to have fun. Sometimes employees have Nerf gun battles. Howard said, "You name it, it happens at our work. The people there genuinely care about each other. They care about our customers. They're really dedicated themselves to helping the company."

Other companies recognize years of service. Pike and Ingram said their companies acknowledged employees for their service every five years. Pike said sometimes employees would receive a plaque to commemorate their length of time with the company, but he has also noticed a decline in the perks received. Ten to 20 years ago, companies would also provide an in-house currency that could be exchanged for company merchandise. Pike said, "There's less of that nowadays, but I can only speak for the company I work for." For Wallace's company, hitting a five-year anniversary resulted in additional vacation time.

Both Belt and Roberts noticed that companies they have worked for only gave lip service to employee retention. Roberts said, in his experience, he noticed that larger companies would

not perform the necessary actions to retain valued employees regardless of their disciplines. Roberts added this is especially true during an economic downturn. Roberts advised that employees have to look after themselves. Belt's company recently merged with another company, and the new owners have a "bare to the bone" mentality when it comes to employees. Belt said her company's leadership talks about the importance of employee retention, "but it sends a different message when they've had all these layoffs." Belt said she was witnessed five rounds of layoffs in her seven years with the company.

Ingram and Stockdale also said their companies valued employee retention but primarily referred to engineers. Stockdale said he noticed an aging workforce when he arrived at his company and ordered a demographics survey. Stockdale said, "The numbers of people who were 60 and older really surprised me." However, when he told the company leadership that a third of its workforce could retire in the next five years, the leadership shrugged it off. Stockdale said the leaders take pride in retaining an aging workforce because many of the employees could retire if they chose to. Ingram said retention among engineers was valued at his organization because the leadership wanted to ensure the institutional knowledge was being passed from retiring employees to newcomers because "it's not something you pick up in three months." Ingram said his company started valuing the retention of information engineers when they started using more advanced tools, such as XML and content development tools.

Pike also said his company has been putting policies and programs in place to retain younger employees because he noted millennials are more mobile in their careers than previous generations. In the last three to five years, Pike's company has promoted community involvement, volunteerism and also offers special interest groups, such as a women's business group, a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer group, and a millennials business resource

group. Pike is a member of the millennials group because he can share ideas on how to communicate between generations. Pike also said he noticed another company in his industry that is doing a lot to engage millennials.

Development. Multiple participants also noted that training opportunities and employee development were also dependent on the economy. Ingram said when times were good, his company would reimburse him for his STC membership dues or pay for him to attend conferences, "but it just depends on the company and what their financial situation is." Ingram also noted he recently scrolled through his local STC chapter's membership list and "I'm 99% sure I can tell you exactly which companies are reimbursing memberships by the people from those companies." STC offers four membership tiers, gold, professional and academic, new professional and student. The annual costs, respectively, are $395, $202.50, $162.50, and $67.50 (STC, 2019, "Membership Levels & Benefits"). STC also offers a corporate value program that provides discounted rates to companies who pay for five or more memberships (STC, 2019, "Corporate Value Program"). Pike also said "sometimes" his company will pay for an STC membership or college classes if there is money available. Concerning training and professional development, Pike said, "It depends on the needs of the company." Pike earned a master's degree on his company's dime because his organization needed employees to be knowledgeable in cybersecurity.

However, Stockdale and Howard, who noted that employee retention is important at their companies, said their organization's training and professional development programs were not dependent on the economy. Stockdale said managers work with their employees to develop personalized professional development plans. Employees are also encouraged to attend seminars and join their professional organizations because the company will reimburse the cost. Stockdale

added that the company would bring in a training team when many employees need to learn a new software program. Stockdale's company also pays $5,250 annually for college tuition, which is the amount that is tax-exempt by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). Amounts paid above $5,250 are considered taxable wages by the IRS (IRS, 2019, "Tax Benefits for Education: Information Center," Benefits over $5,250). Howard's company will pay all costs for professional development training that directly affects the company, such as an employee needs a course before fulfilling a new role. The company will also pay for college tuition, but there is a limit. Howard's company has an in-house training department to support clients who purchase their software, but the training team also teaches all employees the basics of the company's software. Finally, Howard said the company would bring in training teams to boost performance. He said last year the company hired customer service specialists to help the tech support team up its game.

Roberts noted that employer-funded professional development training has dropped off considerably since he started his career. He said in the late 1980s, he took two to three dozen in-house training courses, but in the last decade, training has been scarcer and more focused on company business. Kimball (2015b) also commented on how there was a disconnect between the need for employee development and available funding (p. 144). However, Roberts was able to benefit from employer tuition reimbursement and earned a master's degree in technical communication paid for because it was related to the role he was performing at his company. Like other companies, his organization paid for school with an annual cap, but availability varied year to year based on how well the company was performing.

Chapter V: Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendation

The career paths of technical communicators vary significantly based on experience, education level, as well as personal interests and goals. However, some common factors indicate that technical communication is a diverse and broad field that is not necessarily limited by a career plateau.

Discussion

The following discussion topics are takeaways for current practitioners that could help them in their career progression.

Learn new skills. While Pike enjoys writing and editing, his degrees are in information technology and engineering management. He plays a crucial role in his company's projects not only as someone who can prepare documentation for new products but also can assist with modeling and requirements engineering. Belt was able to obtain her job because she had a bachelor's degree in biology. Although Roberts' bachelor's degree was in English, he got involved in technical writing after working as an IT help desk professional. However, education does not have to be limited to college degrees. Ingram also discussed the importance of keeping current on new developments within the field. He used an example of attending a one-hour workshop at an STC conference to learn about a new product. He was able to secure a job because he had this training because no one at the company knew anything about it, making him the default subject-matter expert.

Dubinsky (2015) and Baehr (2015) all came to similar conclusions. Dubinsky (2015) said technical communicators need to remain versatile. Baehr (2015) noted, "It's also important for technical communicators to learn a breadth of specialized skills and to understand how to translate them into a product environments and varied user contexts" (p. 115). In her article, "Do

Technical/Professional Writing (TPW) Programs Offer What Students Need for Their Start in the Workplace? A Comparison of Requirements in Program Curricula and Job Ads in Industry," Stanton (2017) found that employers look soft skills more often than other skills. Stanton (2017) interviewed recruiters and hiring managers, reviewed technical writer job postings and compared them to academic program requirements in the U.S. Stanton (2017) theorized that self-motivated students will have an advantage in the workplace because they can train themselves instead of having to rely on a busy co-worker for training.

Branch out. Ingram credits his success as a technical communication manager to interacting with the "complete gamut of organizations. I dealt with marketing. I dealt with sales. I dealt with service, the warehouse, finance. Being familiar with the language of other organizations was absolutely key to moving beyond managing technical communications." In order to achieve this, Ingram advised technical communicators to talk to their co-workers. He said,

> Certainly, technical writers have a reputation of being introverts. From what I've seen and who I am, I would say that's probably more true than not. Putting yourself in situations where you can get past that and expand your social skills helps.

Belt and Roberts also got involved with other forms of communication at their companies. For Belt, it helped her earn a promotion because she drafted and edited internal communications as well as prepared reports for federal regulatory agencies. Although Roberts started his career working on an IT help desk, he expanded his resume to include all forms of business communication, which helped him toward the end of his career because "the field is changing so much. Technical communicators can hardly afford to specialize for too long and too

deeply in one thing." Pike echoed Roberts' remarks: "Communications is a service, and as such, it's very difficult to move up unless you're willing to learn new things that allow you to move up and leverage your tech writing skills."

Network. Two members of this study were recruited through STC. Ingram is an active member who has attended multiple conferences, and Pike, who admitted he is not an active member. Stockdale, the HR profession, was recruited through contacts made at a Society of Human Resource Management mixer. Ingram said he had reaped multiple benefits through his STC membership. Ingram said that attending the annual STC conferences always makes him feel more energized when he returns to work. He also said attending one of the workshops helped him get a job. Being involved in STC has also helped him find jobs. Finally, he said STC contacts are important because "I've never met a technical communicator who wasn't willing to help another one."

Write. Both Ingram and Pike said that technical communicators need to write in order to become better writers. Ingram pointed out that there are lots of opportunities to build a portfolio. For example, he said, "If you want to work at the ACME Corporation, maker of fine Wile E. Coyote-endorsed products, get one of their products, and write a review." This tip can be helpful, especially for those who primarily draft classified documentation.

Conclusions

Technical communication is a broad field. Practitioners take on many names and roles, but most write and edit for their jobs. Therefore, it is difficult to define the typical career progression of a technical communicator because there are so many additional factors that are not present in other career paths. A few aspects are company size, industry, and the employee's additional skill sets or training. Based on this study of six individuals, the two that had

experience working for small companies, one technical communicator and the COO, reported the most job satisfaction in terms of feeling valued as an employee. Two individuals, both technical communicators, who worked for larger companies providing support services, reported feeling like second-class citizens at times. Two participants, one technical communicator, and the COO, also emphasized that the company's culture played a significant role in progression and job satisfaction.

For current practitioners and students planning to enter the field, one of the most significant takeaways from this study is to be proactive, especially regarding training and certifications. The technical writers interviewed for this project all had training or experience in other fields in addition to their communications expertise. The participants also noted that availability of employer-sponsored funding for professional development or college tuition is often based on economic factors, so it is vital for practitioners to take advantage of money when it is being offered. Finally, it is crucial for technical communicators to advocate for themselves and the services they provide for their organization. Otherwise, technical writers could be under-utilized or utilized incorrectly at their organizations. Advocacy also plays a role in compensation packages and promotions, demotions, or layoffs.

Kimball (2015a; 2015b) arrived at his conclusion after interviewing eight participants from seven large companies: Adobe, Boston Scientific, CA Technologies, Google, IBM, Madcap, and Oracle. Only Madcap's primary business is technical communication. The technical communicators are likely in supporting roles at other six companies, so it is not surprising that the managers who participated in the study were pessimistic about advancement opportunities in their organizations. Two of the participants for this study who worked for large companies in supporting roles also noted that promotions could be challenging to obtain. However, both the

literature and the participants noted that not everyone wants to promote into leadership positions. Out of the six participants, only one respondent, the COO, said his career goal was to be in a leadership role. While there are some challenges to working at an organization fulfilling a secondary role, it is still possible to advance within the organization and enjoy a satisfying career.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study provided insight on the career paths of technical communicators based on the input from four practitioners, one HR representative, and one COO from a variety of backgrounds and industries. However, there are still many variations of the career paths of technical communicators that were not revealed by this study. Some suggestions to provide further answers include increasing the sample size, focusing on one industry or company size, or a blended method.

Increase the sample size. Adding more technical communicators, managers, HR personnel, top-level managers would naturally provide more insights into the potential career paths of technical communicators, especially if those practitioners represented different industries. None of the technical communicators, except for the self-employed writer, worked for a company whose primary business was technical communication.

Limiting the scope of the study. Focusing the study on one company, industry, or examining career paths by organization size could yield more definitive results on what a technical communicator can expect for a career path based on the results of the study.

Blended method. Kimball's, Dubinsky's, and Baehr's studies that utilized the modified Delphi method produced many insights for the field because they were able to work with

quantities and qualitative results. It also allowed the researchers to refine their line of questioning after the rounds, which ultimately resulted in high-quality results.

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Appendix: Personal Interview Questions

Good (morning/afternoon). My name is Jennifer Ripslinger, and I am a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin at Stout. I am enrolled in the Master of Science in Technical and Professional Communication distance learning program. I am conducting research related to the career progression of technical communicators. As a (technical communicator/supervisor/human resources representative/top-level manager), I believe you have some insights that would be useful to my research. I only plan to use your answers in my thesis. Your name and the company name will not be used or shared with anyone. I also plan to record this interview and transcribe your answers to assist me in writing my paper.

1. Please describe your educational background.

2. Please describe your job history.

3. Please describe your current position.

4. What are the pros of your position?

5. What are the cons of your position?

6. How does your company award promotions?

7. What is your career goal?

8. How do you plan to achieve this goal?

9. Do you feel you can achieve this goal with your current company?

10. I proposed my research question after reading an academic article where one of the research participants said there was a glass ceiling in the technical and professional communication field. What do you think about the notion of a glass ceiling in the field?

11. How many years, on average, do most employees stay with the company? If you don't know, please make your best guess, and this guess can just be within your division/department.

12. Do you know of any technical writers who left the company?

12. If so, why did he or she leave?

13. What company/educational institution does he or she work for/attend now?

14. Do you think employee retention is important to your company? Why or why not?

15. What educational benefits does the company offer?

15. What training opportunities does the company provide?

16. What other benefits does the company offer?

17. What training or educational opportunities or other benefits would you like your company to provide?

18. If you weren't working in your current position, what kind of job would you like to have?

19. Is there something you'd like to discuss that I did not talk about?

20. May I contact you again if I have additional questions?