

**Exploring Technical Communication Professionalization: A Strategic Analysis of
GSA-Approved AMA Training Courses**

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Accepted by and presented at The Conference on College Composition and Communication

April 3, 2024

Abstract

Technical Communication (TC) practitioners, and those that carry out TC activities as part of their formal workplace roles, play a pivotal role in today's information-driven world, yet there exists a recognized gap in comprehensive professional development opportunities tailored to their specific needs (Kimball, 2015). This proposal aims to investigate the landscape of professionalization in TC through the lens of corporate training courses, particularly those issued by the American Management Association (AMA) as approved by the General Services Administration (GSA) (Bloch, 2011). The study investigates the content, delivery methods, and accessibility of such courses to address the critical need for tailored professional development in this field.

Keywords: Technical Communication, Professional Development, Corporate Training, General Services Administration (GSA), American Management Association (AMA), TC Professionalization

Examining Professionalization in Technical Communication: An Analysis of GSA-Approved Corporate Training Courses

Technical Communication (TC) professionals play a vital role in ensuring the effective transfer of complex information across data and information-centered landscapes (Paretti et. al., 2007). Despite the significance of their work, a noticeable gap exists in tailored professional training opportunities for these specialized practitioners (as will be visited in the “Current Offerings of Professional TC Organizations” section of this proposal). This study specifically targets corporate training courses in the field of TC, with a targeted examination on those approved by the General Services Administration (GSA) and facilitated by the American Management Association (AMA).

The American Management Association (AMA) stands out as a compelling focus for exploration due to its GSA-approved corporate training courses, indicating alignment with rigorous government standards. This choice is strategic, as the AMA's offerings may signify not only quality but also relevance and suitability for Technical Communication (TC) professionals. Examining AMA's courses specifically allows for a targeted investigation into a reputed source of professional development, potentially offering nuanced insights that may not be as readily available through alternative avenues. By illuminating the current landscape of available professional development opportunities, especially those recognized by the GSA, this research strives to bridge the existing gap in tailored training for TC professionals.

This study aims to inform stakeholders about the gap in existing professional development initiatives and support the development of more targeted, relevant, and impactful programs, many of which can then be used to model similar program implementations for more professional TC organizations. These efforts are geared towards continually enhancing the skills

and expertise of TC professionals, aligning with the dynamic demands of industries and organizational settings.

Literature Review

Overall, the literature surrounding the topic of research surrounding professionalization as it related to TC indicates a consistent theme: the absence of specialized, professional development options that address the specific needs of technical communicators. This gap stems from the differing priorities and engagement levels in diverse information sources, limited participation in formal events, and the complex, divergent approaches to professionalization in TC. As a side note, the literature regarding educational landscape also presents a disparity between academia and industry, highlighting the necessity for cooperation and collaboration to bridge this gap and create more effective TC curricula.

Research has highlighted a conspicuous void in explicitly designed, professional development options catering to the specific needs of TC professionals (Tucker & Lowe, 2011). This inadequacy results from the significant differences in content emphasis and audience focus between academic and professional forums, which poses a challenge for the field and limits specialized educational opportunities. The studies stress the importance of bridging the gap between academia and industry to advance the discipline, enhance job security for practitioners, and address the evolving demands of the workforce. Notably, a recent study by Berger and Pigg (2023) underlines the ongoing challenges within the technical communication (TC) profession, emphasizing the need for tailored professional development options. Despite a notable shift towards broader professional development and collaborative learning in a corporate IT setting (Berger & Pigg 2023), challenges persist within the profession concerning the actual practices of professional development among TC practitioners (Carliner, 2023).

According to findings from the exploration of professional development practices among technical communicators, the existing landscape suggests an imbalance in information sources and participation in events (Carliner, 2023). Although social media and blogs are frequently accessed, a substantial number of practitioners refrain from engaging with them. This imbalance is similarly reflected in event participation, with only a portion attending conferences, and a notable absence from professional magazines and peer-reviewed journals. The interest in formal training or education remains modest, and there is a mix of reliance on various information sources (Carliner, 2023). Moreover, in terms of the professionalization of TC, diverse opinions prevail, presenting three contrasting approaches: Formal Professionalism, Quasiprofessionalism, and Contraprofessionalism. These approaches advocate for different levels of structuring and exclusivity in developing expertise within the field, reflecting the complexities surrounding professional identity in TC (Carliner, 2023).

Another study, which scrutinizes the viewpoints of TC managers, aligns with the noted discrepancies in professional development (Kimball, 2015). The managers underscore the importance of a comprehensive skill set for success in TC careers, emphasizing traditional writing skills and additional professional skills. However, there's a distinct gap between desired educational preparation and the practical aspects of career paths in TC (Kimball, 2015). The absence of a structured career trajectory and perceived lack of clear career paths within the profession present further hurdles (Carliner, 2023). Furthermore, while acknowledging the growing number of TC programs in academic institutions, a glaring discrepancy exists between the philosophies and objectives of academia and the workplace. This highlights the imperative for mutual learning and cooperation between the two domains to create effective TC curricula that encompass specific workplace skills and lifelong learning (Hart et. al.,1994).

Lastly, the evolving roles for technical communicators in the face of technological advancements are detailed, emphasizing the expanding skill set required in this profession (Tyagi & Misra, 2011). However, the struggle to establish expertise within organizations persists due to ambiguity in roles and the disconnect between academic learning and practical workplace scenarios. The case study of Megan, carried out by Mallette and Gehrke, serves as a poignant illustration of the challenges faced by technical communicators in bridging the gap between academic positioning and real-world application. Emphasizing the evolving landscape of the technical communication field, the narrative highlights Megan's struggles at HP Inc., where she encountered difficulties in asserting her expertise and value due to gaps in her education. This struggle mirrors the broader challenges in the industry, where the lack of a standardized definition of technical communication contributes to role ambiguity. Megan's journey underscores the imperative for academic programs to adapt, addressing the disconnect between theoretical learning and the dynamic demands of practical workplace scenarios (Mallette & Gehrke M. 2018).

Current Offerings by Professional TC Organizations

In examining current offerings by professional TC organizations, it is evident that professional development opportunities are abundant, with certifications, credentials, and training programs being offered by renowned organizations.

The International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) emphasizes the significance of professional certification in communication, specifically through the Global Communication Certification Council® (GCCC) and the Communication Management Professional® (CMP) certification program. According to Brad Whitworth, the GCCC Chair,

certification proves expertise and supports ongoing career advancement. However, the focus is on broader communication skills, lacking specificity in TC (Frankiewicz, 2023).

The Society for Technical Communication (STC) provides a comprehensive view of professional development credentials, emphasizing certification and its benefits for individuals and organizations. Additionally, STC introduces the Certified Professional Technical Communicator (CPTC) program, a three-tiered professional certification specifically designed for technical communicators. However, the details of TC skills training remain limited in these sources (Society for Technical Communication [n.d.]).

Moreover, the potential role of academic certificates in transforming professional development in TC is explored by STC. It highlights the distinctions between micro-credentials, certifications, and academic certificates, shedding light on their values and structures. While academic certificates offer potential benefits, the emphasis is on broader educational components with limited focus on TC skills (Lang, 2023).

Franklin Covey's professional development offerings for PK-12 educators concentrate on leadership, effectiveness, and productivity in the educational field. While these skills are valuable, the website lacks explicit details regarding TC training, suggesting a broader focus on educational leadership (*Franklin Covey*, n.d.).

Ultimately, the sources explored provide various avenues for professional development; however, none specifically address the training needs for TC skills. The available certifications and programs have a broader focus on communication, leadership, and effectiveness, leaving a gap in addressing the specific needs of technical communicators. Future research should investigate tailored programs that explicitly focus on enhancing TC skills for professionals in the

field. To this end, it is the aim of this proposal to uncover what (if any) specific TC skills are developed by professional development opportunities offered by the AMA.

Research Area and Need

The professionalization of TC demands a targeted and customized strategy for continuous education and skill development. Despite the field's pivotal role, there is a noticeable scarcity of professional development courses specifically tailored to communication and TC skills from the aforementioned professional TC organizations. Recognizing the critical need for tailored professional development in TC is crucial for both individual practitioners and the overall advancement of the discipline. According to Tucker and Lowe (2011), the absence of specialized educational opportunities hinders TC's growth and adaptation to evolving workforce demands. Tailored professional development ensures TC professionals acquire specific skills, contributing to the discipline's resilience and relevance in a rapidly changing communication landscape (Kimball, 2015).

It is important to note that the common subjects of such research would typically encompass a broad spectrum of programs, potentially including micro-credentials, badge earning, open online courses, and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs); however, the target area of this study focuses on one point of view - the AMA course review. The goal is to comprehensively explore and evaluate the diverse avenues within the GSA framework that contribute to the professionalization of TC, ensuring a nuanced understanding of the available opportunities for skill enhancement and education in this specialized field.

Research Questions

Which entities offer GSA-approved TC-related courses?

Rationale: This question stems from the necessity to identify the key players providing GSA-approved TC courses. By pinpointing these entities, the research aims to establish a foundation for evaluating the credibility and industry recognition associated with these courses, aligning with the goal of assessing the landscape of TC professionalization.

What communication topics are covered in these courses and how do they relate to TC?

Rationale: Understanding the communication topics covered in GSA-approved courses is vital to discern their alignment with TC principles. The rationale is rooted in the need to evaluate the comprehensiveness and applicability of the content, ensuring that it addresses the diverse skill set required for effective technical communication.

What delivery styles and formats are employed in these courses?

Rationale: The choice of questioning the delivery styles and formats aims to uncover the pedagogical approaches employed in these courses. This is crucial for assessing the suitability and accessibility of the training methods, aligning with the broader goal of understanding how professionals engage with and benefit from the content.

What is the overall scope and size of the curriculum for these courses (hours requirements, module completion, etc.)?

Rationale: This question addresses the quantitative aspects of the courses, exploring the duration, module completion requirements, and other structural elements. The rationale is grounded in the need to gauge the depth and breadth of the training programs, providing insights into the commitment and intensity required for participants.

What components and topics are included in the curriculum (This may overlap with Research Question 2)?

Rationale: Overlapping with Research Question 2, this query aims to examine the specific components and topics covered. The rationale lies in the desire to capture a detailed and nuanced understanding of the curriculum's content, ensuring that it aligns with the multifaceted nature of TC professionalization.

Upon completion, what do learners receive as a result of participating in these courses?

Rationale: Investigating the outcomes for learners upon completion is motivated by the intention to assess the tangible benefits and skills acquired through these courses. This question contributes to understanding the practical implications of participating in GSA-approved TC training, informing stakeholders about the value derived from such programs.

What are the associated costs of these programs?

Rationale: The inclusion of this question is driven by the need to comprehend the financial aspect of professional development in TC. Understanding the costs associated with these programs is essential for stakeholders, helping them make informed decisions about the economic feasibility and return on investment in GSA-approved TC courses.

Methodology and Methods

The research employs a qualitative approach to investigate the TC training landscape within the American Management Association (AMA) under GSA contracts. This involves market analysis to qualitatively understand the nature of the training programs, exploring their relevance and unique features within the broader TC training landscape. Content analysis plays a crucial role, employing coding and interpretation techniques to delve into the nuances, themes, and specific topics covered in these courses, providing a comprehensive understanding beyond numerical data. Additionally, qualitative contract analysis scrutinizes the terms, conditions, and deliverables in AMA's contracts with GSA clients, interpreting language to illuminate the

intricacies of governing agreements. To overcome potential data limitations, the research employs diverse strategies, including in-depth interviews with key stakeholders and triangulation methods for cross-verification, ensuring a nuanced exploration of the TC training landscape provided by AMA under GSA contracts.

Market Analysis Method

1. **Define Scope and Objectives:** Clearly outline the scope and objectives of the market analysis, identifying key parameters such as target audience, geographical focus, and specific elements of interest within TC training.
2. **Collect Relevant Data:** Gather data from diverse sources, including AMA publications, industry reports, and participant feedback. Focus on qualitative aspects, such as program reputation, participant experiences, and perceived industry relevance.
3. **Qualitative Coding:** Employ qualitative coding techniques to categorize and analyze collected data. This involves identifying recurring themes, evaluating their significance, and assessing how they contribute to the overall understanding of TC training.
4. **Interpretation of Trends:** Analyze coded data to discern emerging trends, unique features, and potential gaps in the TC training landscape. Consider the relevance of AMA programs within the broader context of TC professionalization.

Content Analysis Method

1. **Select Data Sources:** Choose specific training programs offered by AMA for in-depth content analysis. Consider factors such as popularity, duration, and diversity to ensure a representative sample.

2. **Development of Coding Framework:** Establish a coding framework to systematically categorize content elements. This framework should encompass themes, topics, and any other relevant aspects identified during the initial research phase.
3. **Coding Process:** Apply the coding framework to the selected content, systematically categorizing and organizing information. This step involves identifying recurring themes, topics covered, and any unique features present in the training materials.
4. **Interpretation of Content:** Interpret coded data to derive meaningful insights. Explore the relationships between different themes, assess the emphasis placed on specific topics, and uncover any patterns that contribute to a comprehensive understanding of TC training content.

Qualitative Contract Analysis:

1. **Compilation of Contracts:** Gather and compile contracts between AMA and GSA clients, ensuring a representative sample that reflects the diversity of training programs.
2. **Identification of Key Elements:** Identify key elements within the contracts, including terms, conditions, and deliverables. This step involves a detailed examination of the language used and the contextual implications of each element.
3. **Coding and Categorization:** Apply coding and categorization techniques to systematically analyze the identified elements. This process aims to unveil nuances, themes, and specific features present in the contractual agreements.
4. **Interpretation of Contractual Dynamics:** Interpret the coded data to illuminate the intricacies of the agreements governing TC training. Explore how contractual elements contribute to the overall structure, delivery, and accessibility of training programs.

Addressing Data Limitations:

1. Stakeholder Interviews: Conduct in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, including program organizers, participants, and industry experts. These interviews aim to provide qualitative insights that may not be captured through document analysis alone.
2. Triangulation Methods: Implement triangulation methods by cross-verifying information obtained from interviews with data derived from market analysis, content analysis, and contract analysis. This step ensures the consistency and reliability of findings.
3. Iterative Refinement: Continuously refine and iterate the research approach based on emerging insights, feedback from stakeholders, and the ongoing analysis of diverse data sources. This iterative process enhances the depth and nuance of the exploration into the TC training landscape provided by AMA under GSA contracts.

Addressing Data Limitations Through Interviews:

The inclusion of in-depth interviews in this research serves as a strategic approach to complement and enhance the findings derived from document analysis and other methods. By engaging key stakeholders, including program organizers, participants, and industry experts, the research aims to capture nuanced insights that may not be fully evident through document review alone. These interviews provide an opportunity to delve into subjective experiences, perspectives, and contextual intricacies that contribute to a holistic understanding of the TC training landscape.

Sampling and Recruitment Strategy:

1. Identification of Key Stakeholders: The selection of key stakeholders is a deliberate process, involving the identification of individuals directly involved in the planning, implementation, and participation in AMA's TC training programs. This includes

program coordinators, trainers, participants, and industry professionals with expertise in technical communication.

2. **Purposeful Sampling:** The sampling strategy is purposeful, aiming to include individuals who can provide diverse and comprehensive insights into different facets of the TC training landscape. This involves selecting participants with varying levels of experience, perspectives, and roles within the training programs.
3. **Recruitment Process:** Potential interviewees are approached through official channels, leveraging existing connections with AMA, GSA, and other relevant networks. Recruitment messages clearly outline the research objectives, emphasize the voluntary nature of participation, and ensure confidentiality of responses.
4. **Informed Consent:** Before conducting interviews, participants are provided with detailed information about the research, its objectives, and the anticipated time commitment. Informed consent is obtained, highlighting the voluntary nature of their participation and the confidentiality of their responses.

By adopting this methodological approach, the research aims to enrich its findings, triangulating information obtained through interviews with data derived from market analysis, content analysis, and contract analysis. This triangulation enhances the robustness and credibility of the study, contributing to a more comprehensive exploration of the TC training landscape provided by AMA under GSA contracts.

Forecasted Outcomes

Anticipated outcomes of this research include a nuanced understanding of the TC training landscape offered by the American Management Association (AMA) under General Services Administration (GSA) contracts. The qualitative exploration is expected to reveal the richness

and complexities of AMA's training programs, shedding light on their content, delivery methods, and contextual relevance within the broader field of TC.

Insights gained from content analysis are projected to provide a detailed understanding of the themes, topics, and nuances present in AMA's courses, contributing to a comprehensive overview beyond quantitative metrics. This qualitative exploration will help uncover the unique features and characteristics that define AMA's approach to TC training.

Additionally, the research aims to illuminate the intricacies of the contracts governing these training programs. A qualitative analysis of the terms, conditions, and deliverables outlined in the contracts between AMA and its clients under GSA contracts is expected to provide valuable insights into the agreements and arrangements shaping the provision of TC training.

The outcomes of this study are poised to inform key stakeholders, including professional associations (referenced and specified earlier as “professional TC organizations”), academic institutions, and practitioners interested in advancing their TC skills. Specifically, the findings may guide professional associations in tailoring their programs, assist universities in refining their TC curricula, and benefit practitioners seeking targeted and impactful professional development opportunities.

By focusing on the offerings of the American Management Association within the GSA framework, this research strives to contribute to the continual enhancement of TC professionals' skills, aligning with the dynamic demands of industries and organizational settings

Conclusion

This research targets the gap in specialized professional development for TC practitioners, with a specific focus on American Management Association (AMA) training programs under General Services Administration (GSA) contracts. By exploring GSA-approved

corporate training courses facilitated by AMA, the study aims to unveil insights into content, delivery methods, and accessibility within the broader context of TC.

This research seeks to identify offerings in current professional development initiatives, particularly within GSA-approved contracts with AMA, to inform stakeholders and guide the design of more targeted programs. Anticipated outcomes include insights into the distinctive features of AMA's training programs, contributing to the continual enhancement of TC professionals' skills and expertise, aligning with industry demands.

In essence, this study contributes to the discourse on TC professionalization by spotlighting AMA, advocating for a customized approach to professionalization that other professional TC organizations can adopt or use as a model for their own programs.

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