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Interview with Diana Nguyen

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Diana Nguyen

INTERVIEW WITH DIANA NGUYEN

Hilary Schuler-Jones

Consumers who have ever purchased a technological device know that in order to operate the delicate piece of machinery, they will have to wade through an ocean of jargon, methodological directives, and operational slang. Over the past few decades, these consumers have become increasingly deluged with complex terminology as they strive to keep up with the ever changing field of technology. And as the technology has evolved, so too, has the challenge of effectively communicating its various processes. So how will the modern person keep afloat amid the constant surge? The answer lies in the growing field of technical communication.

The Web site for the Society for Technical Communication, the largest professional association for technical communicators, defines the career as “the process of gathering information from experts and presenting it to an audience in a clear, easily understandable form.” These “experts” can belong to any area of specialized study. The role of technical communicators is to take whatever information they have compiled and redistribute it in a more consumer-friendly format. This redistribution creates positions within the field ranging from technical writers and editors to Web developers to translators, and it opens the field up to people from a variety of backgrounds.

Diana Nguyen, President of the Cal Poly chapter of the Society for Technical Communication, is one such person who aspires to work in the field. As a fourth year English major who will graduate in June, she is well aware of the importance of a career in today’s society. “Technical Communication will always have a place in the future. Companies are realizing the asset of having employees who can convey messages effectively,” says Nguyen.

Indeed, technical communication is playing an increasingly important role in society as we become more dependent on technology. *U.S. News and World Report* estimates a shortage of over 30,000 technical communicators. This serves as evidence of its increasing presence as a career field of the future. The field itself has been shaped by a long history of scientific advancement, but it was the creation of the Society for Technical Communication (STC) in 1971 that provided the cohesion necessary to create a global network for the field. Today, the STC has 150 chapters and over 25,000 members worldwide.

In contrast to its parent organization, the Cal Poly chapter of the STC has only been operating since 1994. The chapter’s inception was stimulated by the already established Technical Communication Certification program within the English Department. Students enrolled in that program take approximately 30 units of technical communication electives depending upon their

major field of study and can graduate with a certification in technical writing displayed on their transcripts. The program Web site states that “the Technical Communication Certificate Program has been established to prepare Cal Poly students for careers in professional communication.” The Web site also emphasizes that the certification can be earned by students in most degree programs and that “most students only need take a few additional classes in addition to their major-field requirements.”

Nguyen is an adamant proponent of the certification program. “It not only offers students another set of valuable skills, but also opens them up to other fields they may not have been interested in,” says Nguyen. She has seen firsthand the value of the certification; the Vice President of the STC, Jeffrey Wong, recently obtained a job co-op when employers discovered that he was certified under the program. And Wong is only one example, according to Dr. Matthew Novak, an English professor and Director of the certification program. “All the students who have been certified in the program, and who want to work in technical communication, have been able to find jobs in the field,” says Novak.

In addition to the technical certification program, Nguyen emphasizes the importance of membership in the Cal Poly chapter of the STC in preparing students for the job market. “The STC is an international organization. We are linked with chapters all over the world, and we have access to technology as it evolves,” says Nguyen. “We can network, find jobs, and most of all have fun together.”

Perhaps most importantly, the Cal Poly STC stresses the need for their members to gain hands-on experience. “Companies want experience,” says Nguyen. “They want students who are ready to enter the workforce.” The Cal Poly chapter has already established a newsletter which is written, edited, and designed entirely by STC members. It is distributed to students and faculty alike. The newsletter provides valuable experience to its creators as well as insight into technical communication from professional perspectives, says Nguyen. The STC has also offered its services to community members. Providing actual jobs for students will help them to gain the skills they need prior to being hired, says Nguyen.

Further plans for the Cal Poly STC include expanding the audience of the newsletter, creating a chapter Web site, and holding informal “Professor Information Nights” for members. Information nights “are a great way to get to know the professors on a personal level but also to have them tell us things we wouldn’t otherwise know about the field,” says Nguyen.

As the society continues to weather the waves of technological advances, the role of the technical communicator will only become more important. We have just begun to explore the way in which the art of language is adapting to the world of machines. We can only hope that people like Diana Nguyen and the members of the STC will continue to devote themselves to our comprehension of all things technical. [For more information on the Technical Certification Program or the STC, please contact Dr. Matthew Novak at 756-1612] 

Hillary Schuler-Jones is a double-major in Journalism and Political Science. After graduation she would like to work for a global PR firm.