

So, Why Should You Be a Member of the STC, Anyway?

by John Hedtke, Fellow

One of the most common ~~whines complaints~~ topics of discussion about membership has been that of "What am I getting for my membership?" with a corollary of "And why should I renew?" I'm rather sympathetic to this line of questioning, as I have asked this myself in the past, sometimes rather vocally.

Why should you renew? Beats the hell outa me. I don't know what floats your boat, so I'm not in a position to tell you that you absolutely should renew. But I can tell you why I renew, year after year, which may be helpful to you if you need some information about which way to jump.

The "elevator speech" version of why I've been a member for the last 30+ years is simple: during this time, **I've made an additional million dollars that I wouldn't have made if I hadn't been a member.** (Have I got your attention?)

Being a member of the STC has been very profitable. The first time I brought my resume to a meeting, I handed it to the job manager who didn't even put it in the book, but read it, asked me a few questions, and hired me for a contract on the spot. People I've known through the STC have hired me (and occasionally vice versa) for contracts and captive jobs over the years.

Things only got better when I started working with the STC job line and setting up STC job fairs for my chapter. We had vendors and clients bringing the jobs to us. For at least 15 years, 80% of the contracts and jobs I had were directly because I had heard about something through the STC.

Several people and I also felt that the freelance community within our chapter was being grossly underserved, so we started the Puget Sound Freelancers Association. I ended up running this for about 6 years and job services and identifying the state of the local market was the #1 purpose of the group. This became yet another STC venue I was able to find work in.

Showing up at chapter meetings and participating in the job line and job fairs has been really good for my personal finances. (FWIW, this has always struck me as a pre-emptive argument.) But let us assume that you're a better, nobler, loftier person than I am.... Oh, the heck with it: I know you're not as greedy as me, because you're still reading this instead of running to the STC website to sign up right now based on the last few paragraphs. Given that you aren't as crass, let me tell you what else you can get for your membership dollars.

Closely related to the previous point are the resources available to you for **learning new skills and technologies**. For example, attending chapter meetings and presentations at conferences over the years has taught me things such as self-promotion, documentation project management, portfolio preparation, how to create effective web pages, and hundreds of other specific skills that were of value to me in my own career.

I've also learned things when I was doing presentations of my own. For example, in the process of writing my presentation on how to estimate documentation projects, I've been able to describe some of the skills I had only half articulated before. Similarly, my presentation on how to break into publishing taught me a number of things when I was writing it and I've kept coming up with new ideas over the years as I do it. This, in turn, has been valuable to me for getting a better understanding of the book writing process myself. (In addition, there are now half a dozen successful authors that I'm directly responsible for having gotten started in this silly business.)

Speaking of careers, that's another thing I've gotten from my membership: **career planning and training**. Not only have I been able to talk to any number of peers to get information about career paths and choices, I've had a chance to try things out within the confines of the STC. Have you wanted to learn presentation skills? Doing presentations to STC chapters or at conferences is a safe way to experiment. You can get the feel of public speaking in front of a reasonably receptive audience. Want to try management? Taking on a leadership role is a great way to learn. You'll probably make mistakes, but your job isn't hinging on this and you can spread your wings while still in a safe venue. The opportunities to use the STC communities as a sandbox are many and varied. They've been worth a lot to me and I'm guessing they'll be worth a lot to you, too. The best thing is that this is a volunteer organization, so if you try and fail, well, it happens. You can always try again, so you've more than one chance to learn and to succeed.

Networking is something else the STC is good for. Networking keeps you in touch with trends in the profession, what skills and technologies are in demand, the state of the job market, and what other people are doing.

Still another benefit of STC membership that's tied in with all these things is that this is **layoff insurance**. If you've accumulated a lot of extra skills, you're more likely to weather layoffs because you're going to be more valuable to your employer. And even if you do get laid off, you're going to be able to get another job quicker than your compatriots. If nothing else, you'll have learned where the jobs are, how to package your portfolio and resume, and what the skills are that employers are looking for.

I've been talking a lot about accumulating bucks here, so let me switch gears and talk about the social aspects of being a member. **Many of my closest friends are people I've met through the STC**. These are people I hope to have in my life for the next 30, 40 years. These are people who know me better than anyone else and who have enriched me beyond words.

Being a member of the STC can also bring professional honors and recognition. The easiest path for this is entering your work in competitions and getting awards. Continued service to the STC will also get you things like a distinguished chapter service award. If you've been doing a lot for the profession, you may even be able to get an Associate Fellow or even a Fellow award... and that ain't chopped liver. It's a huge moment in one's career.

One of the things that's important to me at this point in my career is **payback**. I've gotten money, jobs, friends, honors, and lots and lots of good times, and all because my first technical publications manager suggested I should start going to STC meetings. I believe I owe something to the Society for all of that. I have an obligation to return what I've gotten so that other people can be successful, too.

We all have to make choices of about value and your mileage may vary considerably from mine. But if none of these reasons work for you, then consider that my final reason, perhaps the most important of all, is that this has been **fun**. Being involved with the STC has been a great ride so far. I'm looking forward to the next 15 or 20 years.

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John Hedtke runs Double Tall Consulting, a technical communications and consulting company. He's done every volunteer job you can do in the Puget Sound STC chapter. He then became chapter president of another chapter in the Midwest, followed by being on the STC Nominating Committee, the STC Board, and probably every committee at the Society level there is. He lives in Tacoma and is wildly happy to be back in the Pacific Northwest.