What Content Strategists Do and Earn

Findings from an Exploratory Survey of Content Strategy Professionals

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we analyze the results of a survey completed by more than 250 content strategy practitioners who work in various industries across the globe. We find that a bachelor's degree in a language- or communication-related discipline, among others, adequately prepares most students for well-paying careers in content strategy. The scope of the work performed by content strategists poses curricular challenges for institutions that offer programs in content strategy or technical and professional communication.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing**; • **Human computer interaction (HCI)**; • **HCI design and evaluation methods**;

KEYWORDS

content strategist salary, content strategy career, content strategy skills and competencies, content strategy job titles, technical and professional communication

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1 INTRODUCTION

The technical and professional communication (TPC) field is an open profession that touches on many related fields such as UX, marketing, and content strategy. As graduates of TPC programs seek to enter these related fields, TPC faculty are sometimes at a loss for how to guide them. In the case of content strategy, the overlap between roles like technical writer, technical editor, and content strategist are often strong, at least according to past scholarship on content strategy from TPC researchers, much of which we review below. According to this scholarship, shared skill sets between TPC and content strategy include writing, editing, oral communication, cross-functional teamwork, and the creation, publication, and distribution of various genres of documentation. Content strategy also features skills, workflows, and processes that are unique, including search engine optimization (SEO), content management, and maintaining an editorial calendar.

To better understand the skill sets, workflows, and processes that are unique to content strategy, as well as confirming areas of overlap with TPC, we, in collaboration with an industry expert, conducted an IRB-approved exploratory survey of content strategy professionals. Designed to understand the salary levels, skill sets, and work environments of content strategists globally, this survey was launched through Qualtrics and remained open for three months.

This proceedings paper presents a preliminary analysis of this survey data. The analysis explores factors that may account for variations in salary, such as gender, highest education level, work experience, and work tasks. We isolated these variables to help identify ways to support students and others new to content strategy in their education needs and career goals. This targeted analysis plus the relatively small sample size (N = 269) of our data limits the generalizability of our findings. Even so, this academically rigorous treatment of content strategy salary data has some merit.

Our research questions are as follows:

- Where do content strategy practitioners work (corporate, small business, nonprofit, higher education, etc.)?
- What job titles do content strategy practitioners hold?
- What skills do content strategy practitioners currently use?
- How much do content strategy practitioners earn?
- Are there correlations between skills, job titles, work environments, or other variables in the field of content strategy?

Our goal is to further the conversation on the intersections of TPC and content strategy by providing a snapshot of the working conditions of content strategists who responded to our survey. As an emerging field, it is still not clear where content strategy will live, academically, be it within existing fields like TPC or marketing or as a standalone field. It is unclear, for example, if TPC can successfully train future content strategists alongside more common roles like technical writers and technical editors or whether content strategy will develop as a standalone academic discipline working in tandem with TPC.

Past scholarship within TPC shows strong correlations between the two fields, and work at this intersection appears promising. Below we provide a brief literature review of the status of content strategy work within TPC. Our goal here is to explain some of the overlaps, connections, and shared strategies between content strategy and the broader TPC field. Next, we outline the methods of conducting our survey and data analysis. We then discuss our preliminary findings, which include that more than half the content strategists surveyed reported highest education levels of a bachelor's degree with average salaries in the low six figures. Most work

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as generalists who perform, on average, 12 different activities. We hope this paper extends this important conversation as the two fields evolve.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW: TECHNICAL AND PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION AND CONTENT STRATEGY

The technical and professional communication (TPC) field comprises researchers and practitioners with a common "expertise in communicating complex, technical information through various skills, media, and genres" [1]. The TPC field requires myriad skills including writing, editing, oral communication, and cross-functional teamwork [1].

Content strategy is a diverse field that intersects TPC but also features its own skills, workflows, and definitions. The industry literature on content strategy is extensive and is produced by consulting companies like Brain Traffic, Content Rules, and Scriptorium, or by websites like A List Apart (e.g., [2]) and the Content Wrangler (e.g., [3]). Trade publications covering the topic include *Intercom* (e.g., [4–6]), books such as *Content Strategy for the Web* [7], *Designing Connected Content* [8], *The Language of Content Strategy* [9], *Managing Enterprise Content* [10], and many others (e.g., [11–15]).

Academic literature on content strategy appears in journal special issues (e.g., [16–20]) and edited collections (e.g., [21, 22]).

Much of this work is definitional. For instance, Halvorson [2] defined content strategy as a field that "plans for the creation, publication, and governance of useful, usable content"; Bailie [23] defined it as "a repeatable process that governs the management of the content throughout the entire content lifecycle" (p. 12); and Andersen and Batova [24] defined component content strategy as "an interdisciplinary area of practice" characterized by "methodologies, processes, and technologies that rely on principles of reuse, granularity, and structure to allow communicators to create and manage information as small components," and content strategy as a "unifying approach" to "integrating organizational and user-generated content" and connecting with stakeholders. Clark [25] traced the shifts from single sourcing to content management systems to content strategy and identified industry-based definitions of content strategy.

For us, three TPC academics who occasionally work as content strategy practitioners, content strategy is about

- organizations setting realistic goals for information that is presented in a variety of formats
- organizations thinking strategically about who is reading their content and why
- organizations realizing that content strategy is a cyclical, iterative process that is never definitively solved
- organizations developing a strategic plan and vision for content [1].

Those four aims summarize the field of content strategy as it intersects with technical and professional communication. Many of the scholars cited in this paper would likely agree that those aims are important to content strategy. But what about everyday practitioners of content strategy? Much of the cited academic work was created without formal practitioner input, though many of these scholars have a wealth of anecdotal experiences with content strategy practitioners. It would benefit the TPC field to add data from practitioners to ensure that our practices and pedagogies in academia work in tandem with practitioner realities.

Likewise, the cited industry-based work, though written by practitioners, is not necessarily systematic. It doesn't take a large-scale view of the field. It was developed by industry thought leaders who largely built the field of content strategy. However, these perspectives can be very different from what rank-and-file practitioners face daily. Thus, even practitioner-written sources would be much improved through engagement with data gathered by ordinary practitioners working as content strategists.

In the next sections, we look to the survey findings to understand practitioners' perspectives.

3 METHOD

In February 2021, we conducted a mixed methods exploratory survey of content strategy professionals. This study is an effort to add to our understanding about the skills that are important to content strategy professionals, while also providing useful information to organizations helping to grow the content strategy profession.

The survey link was shared with 24 content strategy related communities. Of these, 16 were online communities. These online communities were spread across several channels, including one website group, one Facebook group, one blog, three Slack groups, ten LinkedIn groups, and Twitter. The survey was also shared with one Meetup group, five content strategy conferences and events, and one software-focused community. The goal was to ask the organizers of these groups to announce and share the survey link through emails, Twitter, LinkedIn, and on their blogs. The survey was closed on April 20, 2021.

Participants were asked questions about their experiences as content strategists, including their personal demographics, what skills they use for their work, and where they work. The purpose of this information is to inform research on best practices in content strategy both within the companies and organizations in which it is practiced as well as within the academic field of technical communication.

The data were exported to Excel and cleaned for analysis. Since this survey had an international audience, participants reported their salaries in USD and several other currencies, including AUD, CAN, GBP, EUR, NZD, and INR. To better compare the data, we converted these currencies into USD using the XE currency converter (https://www.xe.com/currencyconverter/) on May 4, 2022, between 9:30am and 10:00am. XE uses a mid-market exchange rate, which uses the midpoint between buying and selling rates between two currencies. This rate provides a more balanced exchange rate, especially in a time of fluctuating markets and geopolitical conditions.

Five participants were excluded because they submitted blank surveys or answered only one question. With these exclusions, the number of participants dropped from 274 to 269. The number is even lower for some analyses because some participants skipped a question or did not report sensitive details such as age or salary.

It is extremely difficult to calculate the number of people who received the survey because the number of members for each content strategy community is not clear. Of these potential members, it is

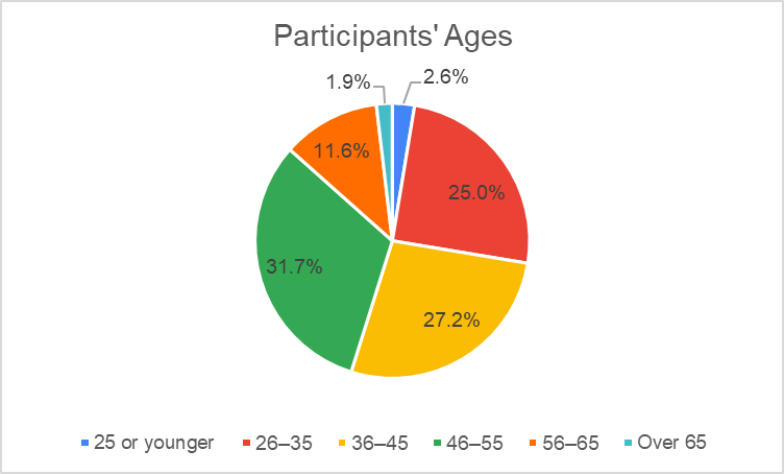

Figure 1: Survey Participants' Ages (N = 269)

also not clear how many members remain active. Nor do we know which individuals may be members of two or more content strategy communities, thus creating overlap in the distribution process. Finally, since the survey link was posted in many online channels, it is difficult to track if (or how) the survey link was shared with others. Due to these factors, it is impossible to calculate a response rate.

The survey results are reported in the next section.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

First, we summarize the survey participants' demographics. Then we discuss the findings for each research question.

4.1 Participant Demographics

The survey participants self-reported demographic information such as age, gender, ethnicity, country, education, college major, work experience, industry, and job title.

4.1.1 Age. Most of the 268 participants who reported their ages were between 26 and 55 years old, with 31.7% of them between 46 and 55, 27.2% of them between 36 and 45, and 25% between 26 and 35. Figure 1 shows the age distributions.

4.1.2 Gender. More than three quarters of the survey respondents (N = 269) self-identified as female (75.5%). Nearly one quarter of the respondents self-identified as male (23.8%) and less than one percent self-identified as nonbinary or third gender (0.7%).

4.1.3 Ethnicity. Of the 268 participants who self-reported ethnicity, most were White (85.8%). Less than 5% of the participants identified as Asian (4.9%); 3% identified as Black or African American. Some participants selected multiple categories: White and Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin (1.5%); White and Asian (1.5%); White and American Indian or Alaska Native (0.7%); Asian and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (0.4%); and Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin and Black or African American (0.4%). The remaining participants' ethnicities include Hispanic, Latino or Spanish origin (1.1%); Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (0.4%), and Other (0.4%). The combined percentages exceed 100 due to rounding.

4.1.4 Geographic Locations. The survey data came from people in 25 countries across five continents. Most of the participants (65.7%) live in North America. Of those, more than half live in the United States (58.7%), while 6.3% live in Canada and 0.7% in Mexico.

Nearly one quarter of the survey participants (24.3%) live in Europe; of those, 10.4% live in the United Kingdom; 3.3% in Austria, 2.2% in the Netherlands, 1.5% in Germany, 1.5% in Spain, and 1.1% in France. The remaining 3.6% percent living in Europe are accounted for by one person from each of these countries: Belarus, Belgium, Finland, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Norway, Sweden, and the Russian Federation. Almost 8% of the participants are from the continent of Australia, with 5.2% from Australia and 2.6% from New Zealand. Finally, 1.9% live in Asia and 0.4% live in South America. Again, the combined percentages exceed 100 due to rounding.

Telecommuting enabled seven participants (2.6%) to work in one or more countries other than where they live. In most cases, this work spanned continents. This virtual work added an additional continent (South America) to the mix.

4.1.5 Education. More than half of the participants (56.3%) indicated that the highest degree they hold is a bachelor's degree. More than a third (35.4%) hold a master's degree, 4.1% hold a doctorate or professional degree, and 1.1% hold an associate degree. Seven people (2.6%) completed at least a year of college, and one person (0.3%) completed a GED or alternate credential.

4.1.6 College Majors. Participants reported 110 different majors, 74 of which were studied by one person each. The most common majors were English (n = 42), Journalism (n = 30), Communication (n = 20), English Literature (n = 13), History (n = 13), and Creative Writing (n = 9). Only five participants majored in Content Strategy, one of whom did not report their salary. Two participants studied Technical Communication and two studied Professional Writing—other majors one might expect as career paths for content strategists.

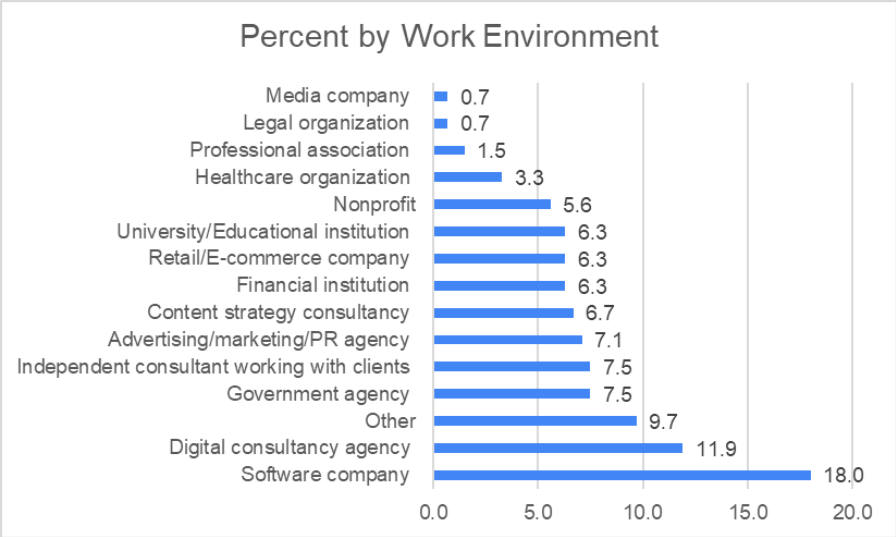

Figure 2: Type of Environment Participants Work In

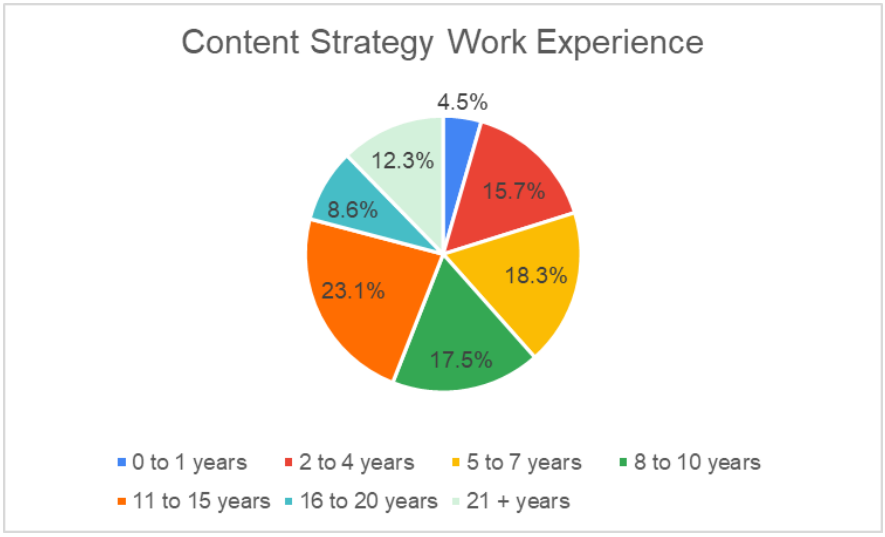

Figure 3: Number of Years Participants Worked as Content Strategists

Now that we know the participants' backgrounds, we will answer each research question.

4.2 RQ1: Where do content strategy practitioners work?

The survey participants work in a variety of environments. In this study, software companies (18%) are the most common work environment, and legal organizations (0.7%) and media companies (0.7%) are the least common. Figure 2 shows the distribution of work environments. Some survey participants work on content for industries that differ from their employer's industry.

4.2.1 Content Strategy Work Experience. Most of the study participants have been working as content strategists for at least five years, and nearly half (44%) have worked in the profession for at least 10 years. In contrast, 20.2% have less than five years' experience. Figure 3 shows the participants' work experience.

More than a quarter of the participants (27.3%) spend their entire workday on content strategy. Table 1 shows how much time is typically spent on content strategy tasks. The data have been grouped into ranges because the open-ended question yielded numerous granular percentages (e.g., 4, 29, 38, 43, 61, 82). The total does not equal 100% due to rounding.

Table 1: Percentage of Workday Spent on Content Strategy

% of Workday Spent on Content Strategy	% of Participants
Between 4% and 25%	9.7%
Between 26% and 50%	23.6%
Between 51% and 75%	20.2%
Between 76% and 99%	19.1%
100%	27.3%

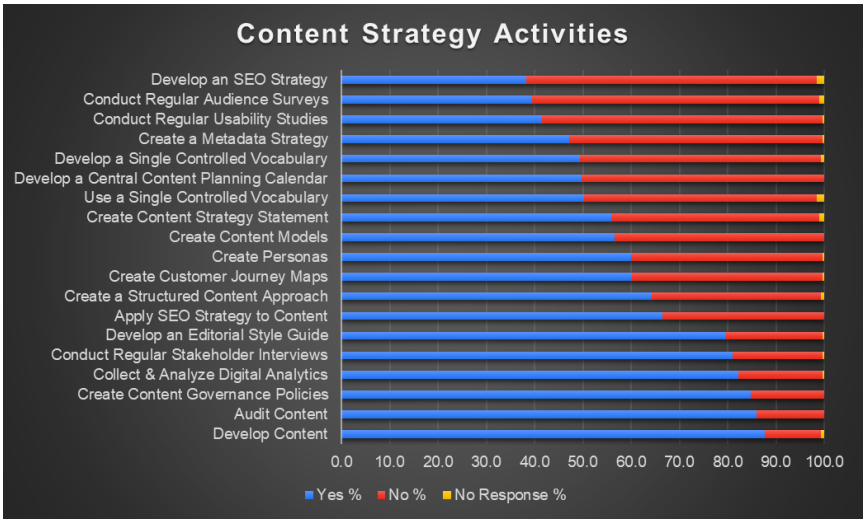

Figure 4: Percentages of Content Strategy Activities Performed

4.3 RQ2: What job titles do content strategy practitioners hold?

Participants were asked what job titles they currently hold and whether their employers have a content strategy position.

4.3.1 Content Strategy Position. Of the participants who responded (N = 261), most (54%) reported that their employers have a content strategy position in the organization. Within organizations, content strategy work happens under various job titles.

4.3.2 Job Titles. In this survey, 176 distinct content strategy related job titles were reported, most of which were variations of content strategist (e.g., Digital Content Strategist, Global Content Strategist, UX-Product Content Strategy Manager) or denoted hierarchy (e.g., Senior Content Strategist; Director, Content Strategy; Manager, Content Strategy). Most of the job titles reported were held by only one person (n = 151). The most common job title that did not include the term *content strategy* was Content Designer (n = 14), a position that also appears as hierarchical variations such as Principal Content Designer. Several people (n = 6) reported job titles involving Content Marketing. Notably, a few participants commented on overlaps between content strategy and content marketing, while others were adamant that those two roles differ.

4.4 RQ3: What skills do content strategy practitioners currently use?

Participants were asked to indicate which of the following 19 activities they engaged in during their current work as content strategists (see Figure 4).

4.4.1 Types of Content Strategy Activities. All but two of the 19 activities (develop an SEO strategy, conduct regular audience surveys) are performed by at least 40% of the participants (see Figure 4). More than half of the activities are performed by 60% of the participants, and nearly one-third by 80%. The survey did not include an open-ended "other" option, which might have revealed additional content strategy activities that participants perform.

4.4.2 Number of Content Strategy Activities. On average, each participant performs 11.8 activities in their job as a content strategist (see Figure 5). At the extremes, one person performs only 2 of the listed tasks and five people perform all 19 of the listed tasks. Most of the participants perform between 7 and 15 different activities. Knowing what activities content strategists perform during their workdays can help academics decide which skills to prioritize teaching in the classroom.

Next, we examine compensation rates for content strategy work.

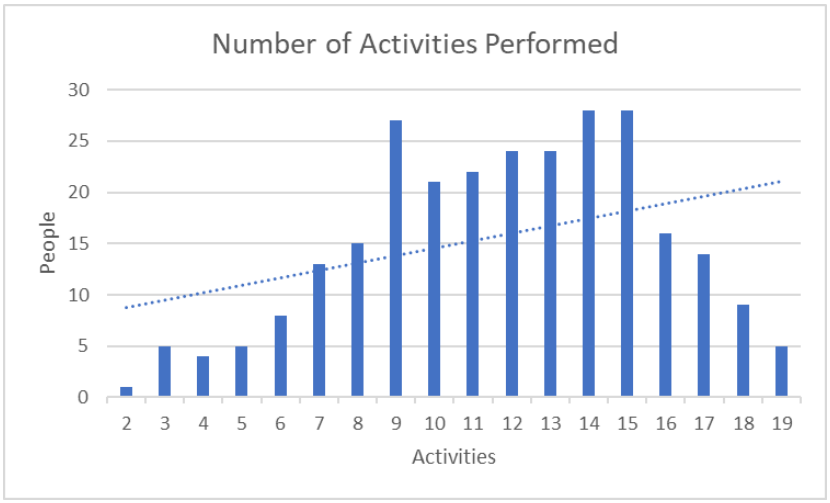

Figure 5: Number of Content Strategy Activities Participants Perform

Table 2: Average Base Salaries in U.S. Dollars by Gender and Highest Education

	Male (n = 53)	**Female** (n = 174)	**Nonbinary** (n = 2)	**Averages** (N = 229)
GED/Alternate Credential (n = 1)	–	52,000	–	52,000
Some College Credit (n = 6)	87,000	72,931	–	75,276
Associates Degree (n = 3)	62,786	40,571	–	56,857
Bachelor's Degree (n = 125)	119,583	105,470	–	108,406
Master's Degree (n = 86)	109,678	98,044	162,000	102,372
Ph.D. (n = 5)	106,920	85,859	–	98,495
Professional Degree (n = 2)	–	85,695	–	85,695
Unknown (n = 1)	–	57,000	–	57,000
Overall Averages	112,267	100,435	162,000	103,711

4.5 RQ4: How much do content strategy practitioners earn?

As noted in the Methods section, the practitioners' salaries were annualized and converted to U.S. dollars as needed. Excluded from the salary analysis are 35 people who did not report salaries, 2 freelancers or consultants who did not provide rates, and 1 person from a startup who does not yet take a salary.

The average base salary for the surveyed content strategy professionals was $104,320 with a median salary of $100,000 (N = 231). The lowest reported salary was by a participant working in India ($8,192); the highest salary was in the United States ($340,000). If these outliers (i.e., the highest and lowest salaries) are excluded, the average base salary drops to $103,711 and the median remains $100,000 (N = 229). The difference between the highest and lowest salaries is significant ($331,808 or $232,000 without the outliers).

More detailed salary analyses are provided in the next section.

4.6 RQ5: Are there correlations between skills, job titles, work environment, or other variables in the field of content strategy?

We investigated variables that may impact salaries. Table 2 shows how salaries differ by gender and education. Table 3 looks at the relationship between gender and years of work experience, and Table 4 compares salaries by industry.

Participants who reported their highest education level as a bachelor's degree earned, on average, more than participants with all other levels of education. An examination of the data by gender shows that this finding holds true for both males and females. No conclusions can be drawn for those who identify as nonbinary because the data set includes only two nonbinary participants, and both reported their highest education level as a master's degree. It is unclear what impact, if any, intersectionality had on the salary data [26]. Without controlling for experience, industry, and other variables, the data seems to show a diminishing return on investment for participants with advanced degrees.

On average, the two nonbinary participants out-earned male and female participants at both data points (one early career and one

Table 3: Average Base Salaries in U.S. Dollars by Years of Work Experience

Years of Work Experience	Male	Female	Nonbinary	Average Base Salary
0–1 year (n = 8)	–	43,323	–	43,323
2–4 years (n = 40)	61,350	86,502	–	83,987
5–7 years (n = 41)	86,984	96,288	154,000	94,972
8–10 years (n = 38)	99,314	109,997	–	107,185
11-15 years (n = 54)	132,778	96,480	–	107,235
16–20 years (n = 21)	161,729	121,220	–	132,794
21+ years (n = 27)	114,600	131,166	170,000	129,536
Overall Averages	112,267	100,435	162,000	103,711

Table 4: Average Base Salaries in U.S. Dollars by Industry

Industry (N = 228)	Average Salary
Software company (n = 40)	121,774
Content strategy consultancy (n = 12)	120,064
Government agency (n = 17)	108,605
Financial institution (n = 15)	107,364
Other (n = 22)	107,347
Professional association (n = 4)	107,250
Retail/E-commerce company (n = 16)	106,994
Healthcare organization (n = 9)	102,389
Digital consultancy agency (n = 29)	101,008
Independent consultant working with clients (n = 16)	95,284
Advertising/marketing/PR agency (n = 15)	91,128
Nonprofit (n = 14)	88,207
Legal organization (n = 2)	77,500
Media company (n = 1)	75,000
University/Educational institution (n = 16)	71,357
Overall Average	**103,596**

late career). However, the number of nonbinary participants is too small to make any generalizations from these data.

Across time, the overall average salary of female participants is about $12,000 lower than the average salary of participants who identify as male or nonbinary. Table 3 shows salary leapfrogging between male and female genders over their careers. Early and late in their careers, female participants earned more than male participants, whereas mid-to-late career male participants earned substantially more than their female counterparts.

The average salary drops slightly (about $3,000) for participants with more than 20 years of experience; the drop is more significant (about $46,000) for male participants. The reason for this decrease is unclear, and it is unknown whether the participants' base salaries are supplemented with bonuses. Coincidentally, that $46,000 decrease is nearly the same as the average salary difference (about $40,000) between males and females with 16 to 20 years' experience.

In contrast, the average salary for females shows an unexpected decrease for those with 11 to 15 years of experience followed by gradual increases in subsequent years. On average, male content strategists with 11 to 20 years of experience out-earned female content strategists with the same experience.

Across industries, the average salary for content strategists ranged from just over $70,000 to just over $120,000—a $50,000 difference between those working for educational institutions and those working for software companies (see Table 4).

Finally, we consider the variable of college major and its possible impact on salaries as well as curricular implications.

4.6.1 Field of Study. Any of the 110 majors that participants studied are viable pathways to content strategy careers. In this study, the most common career pathways involved language-, media-, or communication-related majors rather than degrees in content strategy. The data suggests that studying language or communication can lead to well-paying careers as content strategists. Among the participants earning $200,000 or more, more than half majored in language-related fields.

No inferences can be made from this salary data regarding the benefits of majoring in content strategy versus language-, media-, or communication-related disciplines. The four participants in this study who majored in content strategy have worked as content strategists for different industries in Europe for 2 to 4 years and all have master's degrees. The average salary for those four participants ($59,088) is nearly equal to the range between their salaries ($60,000). That average is lower than the average salary ($83,987)

for all participants with 2 to 4 years of content strategy work experience (n = 40). In terms of salary, the value of a content strategy degree may be more evident as more institutions offer content strategy degrees rather than teach the requisite skills across courses in the TPC curriculum.

4.6.2 Required Skills. Of the 19 activities that these content strategists performed, none stands out as an unimportant skill to teach because the less commonly performed ones are closely related to more common ones (e.g., develop an SEO strategy versus collect and analyze digital analytics). The survey findings suggest that must-have content strategy skills include the ability to

- develop an editorial style guide
- conduct stakeholder interviews
- collect and analyze digital analytics
- create content governance policies
- audit content
- develop content.

Eighty percent or more of the survey participants used these six skills in their jobs.

Next, we identify the limitations of the study.

5 LIMITATIONS

We cannot calculate how many people received the survey for several reasons. First, it is impossible to calculate the number of members in each content strategy related community. Additionally, it is impossible to determine how many members of each community are still active and to what extent there is member overlap between the different communities. Finally, since the survey link was posted in many online channels, it is difficult to track if (or how) the survey link was shared with others outside of those channels. Due to these factors, it is impossible to calculate a response rate as well.

Because the salary question was open-ended, we received a variety of responses including annual salaries, monthly salaries, bi-monthly salaries, hourly rates, and uncategorized amounts. In addition to USD, we also had salaries reported in AUD, CAN, GBP, EUR, NZD, and INR. To better compare salaries, we converted all salaries into USD. We also converted all salary responses into annual salaries. Although this allowed for better comparisons between salaries, we should note that freelance content strategists and those who posted an hourly rate may not work a full-time schedule. Additionally, we are comparing salaries in USD and not accounting for the variations in cost of living between regions and countries. In the cases of uncategorized amounts, we made our best educated guesses as to what category of salary it was and made conversions as needed.

The respondents include those who responded to the survey during the three-month period in which it was active and may not be an accurate representation of the field. We are also assuming that the respondents are accurately reporting their salaries.

Future research should examine issues of diversity and intersectionality within the field of content strategy, particularly in terms of representation, salary parity, and the associated values of practitioner communities.

6 CONCLUSION

This exploratory survey provides insight on content strategists' salaries, skills, and work conditions. Our goal was to provide useful demographic and career information to professional organizations and educational institutions who are involved with content strategy education. This limited study of content strategy professionals shows that content strategy is a well-paid profession with specialized skill sets that require versatile professionals who can work collaboratively on myriad tasks, much like those who work in the more familiar role of technical communicator.

The scope of the work performed by content strategists poses curricular challenges for institutions that offer programs in content strategy or technical and professional communication. We hope this paper sparks new conversations about content strategy and technical and professional communication pedagogy, particularly regarding the training of emerging content strategy professionals. Though a full review of pedagogical practices in content strategy is beyond the scope of this article, as this is the first large-scale survey of content strategy practitioners published as academic research, it is expected that there will be key differences between these findings and what we do in our classrooms. In particular, the tasks performed in Figure 4 might provide a benchmark for what we teach in content strategy assignments and courses.

Thus, if this data is representative of what most content strategy professionals do in the workplace, then we may need to reconsider how we train students in technical and professional communication programs to work with content. According to this survey, content strategists work at a more strategic role to manage content across channels instead of working solely on documentation, which may be an important new skill set for TPC programs looking to keep abreast of industry trends.

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