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## The Scholarly Publishing Scene- Why They Write

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# The Scholarly Publishing Scene — Why They Write

Column Editor: **Myer Kutz** (President, Myer Kutz Associates, Inc.) <myerkutz@aol.com>

In the past three plus decades, several hundred academics and professionals in industry and government around the world have contributed chapters to the numerous engineering handbooks, many in multiple editions, that I've published with **Wiley, McGraw-Hill, and Elsevier**. Typically, toward the end of the Preface of one of these volumes, I write a few words about how it's a miracle that contributors, with their taxing professional lives, are able to produce well-written, cogently presented and useful chapters. Of course, the rewards for academics of contributing handbook chapters are quite unlike those accrued by publishing journal papers. Just ask any STM-disciplines dean or tenure committee member, or so conventional wisdom has it. The main consideration, as I see it, is this virtuous cycle: research grants beget journal articles which beget more research grants, ad infinitum providing nothing untoward or merely unfortunate, including a successful competitor for grant money, intervenes. Looking at money from another angle, any honorarium that a publisher would approve nowadays could not provide adequate monetary compensation for engineering handbook contributors. So why do they write?

I'd never actually asked contributors such a question until a few weeks before I put this column together, when I emailed a couple of dozen contributors to two of my handbooks with three questions: What motivates you to write a handbook chapter? What factors go into the decision to spend valuable time in writing a handbook chapter? How do you find the time to write it? Below, you will find, in the order received, sixteen lightly edited responses from contributors who work in industry and consulting in the U.S. and in academia in the U.S., the UK, the EU, and India. (Contributors are identified only by the segment in which each works.) I won't burden you with any commentary. After all, sixteen responses to three questions does not constitute a scientific survey with a sufficiently large number of respondents to a multiplicity of questions and a sophisticated computer-generated tabulation of those responses that would result in a definitive assessment of why busy people take the time to contribute handbook chapters. I simply don't have the wherewithal to conduct such a survey and I doubt that I could convince a sci-tech book publisher to do so. So I'll let the answers below, some of which contradict conventional wisdom, speak for themselves.

U.S. Industry: I write because it is a good way to organize one's thoughts and because it is part of my duty as a scientist to publish my work so that others can learn from it. I spend valuable time writing because it allows me the opportunity to access a wide audience. It is an investment. The time I spend writing today is the time I don't have to spend educating someone 1:1 in the future.

U.S. Industry: A handbook is either (1) a state-of-the-art "how to" manual for a specific

audience of scientists and engineers, or (2) a more general overview of various aspects of a complex subject. Contributors to a handbook of the first kind are motivated by the fact that authors are recognized experts in their field. This is what motivated me to contribute chapters to the handbooks of the **Society of Fire Protection Engineers and the National Fire Protection Association**. I use handbooks of the second kind if I have (or am part of a team that has) to solve a complex multi-faceted problem and need to quickly come up to speed on parts of the solution that I am not familiar with.

For a handbook of the first kind, peer recognition and prestige are the motivating factors to write a chapter. The decision to accept or not depends on whether the invited person has (or wants to spend) the time and other factors such as the person's employer does not allow it, copyright issues, etc. For a handbook of the second kind, the deciding factor is more the desire of the author to share his/her expertise with others who have a more general or superficial interest in the chapter topic.

In my case, although these activities are generally supported by my employer, most if not all the work is done outside normal working hours. I enjoy writing and do not mind spending the extra time.

U.S. Academia: I think that the topic of indoor air quality is very important and not well understood. Most individuals probably consider their indoor air quality to be fine, without regard to the possibility of the toxic chemicals that are present. Solving indoor air problems use the quintessential skills of an environmental engineer, so I thought it important to communicate how to solve the problems and what they are.

When I first developed my indoor air pollution class I synthesized and edited the notes from my own class taken in graduate school. So these notes were the basis for the chapter, and I had to organize, edit, update on my own time.

U.S. Academia: My motivation to write a handbook chapter allows me the opportunity to expand my knowledge in the further research of a topic that deemed in my area of expertise. I also like the opportunity to give good press to my university and to show the high level of competency of its researchers.

The factors that go into my decision involve looking at the relevant obligations I have in front of me. The time I take to write the chapter usually comes in the evenings and weekends when I do not have an important article that is due.

U.S. Academia: As I look back on my education and career, I received my three academic degrees from land grant universities. I more or less took the land grant aspects for granted, not really reflecting on how much of an impact the land grant philosophy had on me and my career. I just assimilated the land grant tradi-

tion of providing "... a broad segment of the population with a practical education that had direct relevance to their daily lives."

Sure there is the responsibility and pressure to produce cutting-edge research and to publish the results. But, more importantly, it is about making sure one's scientific findings are shared with a wider range of individuals. I have published a lot of scientific papers. I have also produced and published a lot of materials that are used by K-12 teachers in the classroom and field. I have also contributed a large number of chapters to books. At the end of the day, I think the materials that I have produced for K-12 and chapters have a much greater impact than the few scientists who scan down the table of contents of a journal and discover my article on the last page! And, maybe they flip to that page or not! Okay, let me get off my philosophical horse and answer your question (although I think the above really focused me for answering your question).

Why do I write a chapter in a book? I guess it is two-fold: a strong desire to share my knowledge to make an impact or help someone and, second, a little bit of ego. The first follows the land grant tradition of wanting to contribute. The second, ego, yes we all have it. Wow if someone is asking me to contribute a chapter is this recognition that I am acknowledged as really having something of value to offer? The ego is stroked.

Although the institution I am currently affiliated with is a land grant university, there is a very strong pressure to focus only on the publication of peer-reviewed journal articles. I do not receive much credit for doing the K-12 pieces or the book chapters, which in my mind are much more important and impactful.

The biggest factor that goes into the decision to write a handbook chapter is: if I agree to do this, I am making a commitment. How do I make sure I honor and complete that commitment. To me, this is the most important. If I give my word I am going to do something, I am committed. To me, there is nothing worse than someone who agrees and then does not follow through claiming, I got so busy. No they set other priorities. The second factor is: Do I really have the expertise and breadth of knowledge to make a quality contribution?

I always love the response when you ask someone to do something, "Oh, I am so busy. I just do not have time." We all have time. It is a matter of setting priorities on what and how we are going to spend our time. I find time by making my commitment a priority. I determine the deadline date and plan back from that date. This has worked with the exception of my last contribution, which as a result of some medical challenges caused a delay, but continually keeping my commitment in front of me, helped me to complete the promised task.

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**U.S. Academia:** I am a professor at a STEM-emphasis university and part of the reason I became a faculty member was that I enjoy helping others learn topics that they can use to their benefit, e.g., in their career or work. I also enjoy the opportunity to be creative. The article also provides a means to publish other research or experimental results in front of others. These results might not be otherwise published or shared, which allows others to gain from my experience and observations.

I am a task oriented person, so I frame the tasks needed to do the job and then scheduled the tasks for either office hours, which students rarely utilize, or fitted into lighter scheduled days. Nearly all the effort in the chapter update amounted to searching literature, Chemical Abstracts and patents to update the chapter, i.e., reading and taking notes with referencing.

**India Academia:** Handbook chapter gives lots of information in a concise manner. Handbooks are important reference books and referred by more people than text books.

I always sneak time to write book chapters and I think it is part of academic activity. Yes, you have to sometimes burn midnight oil to complete the assignment.

**U.S. Academia:** I am a user of engineering and technical handbooks, so it would be hypocritical not to contribute. Similarly, I am an editor, so I can relate to the challenge of getting competent authors to agree to contribute. My work lies at the intersection of engineering and science, measurement and modeling, theory and practice. Thus, a handbook chapter is a convenient forum for translating among different “cultures.” This is not possible in journal articles and, indeed, most other works, where the communication is within more than outside the particular community. Thus, a handbook assumes little about one’s reason for information. This means that I can explain concepts and principals more fully. It is also a great way to compare and contrast different lexicons and ontologies. It is a good way to update my own understanding of evolving topics. Something I learned 40 years ago may have evolved. It is a good excuse to ask “dumb” questions about things I “should” already know. As a bonus, it is a reality check for my other writings, including articles and books.

Will the decision to spend valuable time in writing a handbook chapter help me with other work? Do I like the editor, or at least like the editor’s previous work? Is the topic interesting? For example, I authored a measurement chapter. Environmental measurement has undergone numerous paradigm shifts. So, the extent to which this project brings me up-to-date is a factor.

I write continuously, so I simply add [the chapter] to the to-do list. My available time to write increased substantially when both of our children entered college (about 20 years ago). To me, writing is analogous to indeterminate growth. Like a goldfish, my writing will fill its container (time), if I am sufficiently interested in the topic.

**U.S. Academia:** Writing and education are part of my job so it is a great opportunity. Also, I am assessed on these types of contributions.

The primary motivations for me are (a) to share knowledge in a more accessible way and (b) to help me clarify and refine my thoughts on a field and to motivate me to read more widely.

I just put it on the list of things to do, develop an aggressive writing schedule, and then when I don’t achieve that I still hit my deadline. Obviously, not all my co-authors take that approach.

**U.S. Academia:** Writing a handbook chapter is a great way to synthesize my views on the topic, formed over many years of research, into a coherent document for the dissemination to a wider readership — not only other researchers but also stakeholders (in applications, policy making, etc.).

My position allows me to devote a certain fraction of my time to research and outreach (in addition to teaching, which is my main activity during the semesters). In the case of the chapter in the environmental handbook, I used a month in summer and a winter break to complete the manuscript.

**U.S. Academia:** The motivation is a combination of pedagogical and career aspirational. Contributed chapters help round out the publication resume. I also can use it for reading material in class to help with a section on aerosols and measuring aerosols properties. I also enjoy writing and putting together something of this nature. I basically found time outside normal working hours to focus on it: evenings, weekends, particularly academic break times. My decision had to be based on my committee chair’s response to the benefits for my tenure case.

**UK Academia:** These days, I don’t write many (any) chapters as I don’t have time. Only occasionally do I get persuaded, either as a favour to a friend-editor or by the topic of the book, although the latter is rarely sufficient.

I don’t think this answer will be particularly useful for your purposes, but it reflects the reality in my (and suspect many other) case(s).

**EU Academia:** The motivation springs from the wish of the contributor to present to students, engineers, practitioners, etc., an updated and in-depth work in respect to the selected topic of the chapter. The target from the side of the author is to contribute a valuable tool and guidance that will assist the aforementioned persons.

I don’t agree that it is spent time. It is time devoted for a special purpose. And, this spent time will return to the benefit of the contributor because one has to be “pressed” in searching for published material, elaboration of the material, selection of the best-fitted to the target, and opening of new routes in the scientific horizons of the contributor. This is a key-factor. In turn, the collected material will possibly be useful for future work (e.g., lectures, publications).

First of all, I have to point out that finding time to write is a major problem, especially for review chapter, because the author has to merge his own knowledge and experience with the work and findings of other workers,

in such a way that the outcome will be updated and comprehensive. The time is found at the expense of the author’s free time and by shifting some non-urgent tasks for later. Of course, this is not always successful, and, for this reason time extension to deliver the work is many times required.

**U.S. Academia:** Sustainability is a very important parameter in Geoenvironmental engineering and it is very important to summarize the research findings into one single environmental handbook to reach out and transfer this knowledge to other professionals, practitioners and students in this field.

**U.S. Industry:** Generally, I write chapters and/or papers for three main reasons. First, to convey some information or results that I think are important for those who might be interested to know. This is to help those who are new to the area and are looking for useful info and guidance or those who need the info in order to make a decision on how to move forward (e.g., do I need to replace this equipment, do I need to repair this equipment, can I live with things as they are and manage my risk of failure by taking some actions, what do I need to build the equipment out of and how should I do this).

The second reason is to broaden my horizons. I tend to learn quite a bit when I am researching and writing. I am building and expanding my technical foundation which allows me to leverage an ever broader and deeper base of understanding (I hope).

The third reason is that it builds my resume.

The primary factor for me in deciding to spend the time is interest in the subject. If I am interested in it and I feel I have something I can competently contribute to, the decision is pretty easy. If I don’t feel excited about the subject and don’t feel I have something to contribute, then I won’t work on it.

Finding writing time can be tricky. I try to find time wherever I can. I typically am able to get some of the work done during my day job. But typically, I work on these during nights and weekends or in hotel rooms and airplanes while traveling.

**U.S. Academia:** Having a good editor like yourself helps build the trust and motivation to do this. I had a collection of past work which I thought would be helpful to practitioners and researchers alike to draw from to start their own practical applications or seed their original research.

**India Academia:** I think the challenge is to produce a concise document in the form of a chapter for a book to teach readers, provide a state-of-the-art of the field on a particular theme, and hence is something different from writing a research article. I feel free to be more expressive and, therefore, can exercise creativity in presenting the material.

Like clarity and organized thoughts improve writing, writing improves clarity of thoughts.

It is hard to find a time. One has to create it for writing a chapter or book. I did it after office hours on working days and on weekend days. 🐾