

We Can Have a Workforce that Communicates Clearly in Writing for the Twenty-First Century

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February 2006

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"The need to write clearly and quickly has never been more important than in today's highly competitive, technology-driven global economy," remarked Joseph M. Tucci, chairman of the Business Roundtable, an association of chief executive officers from U.S. corporations with combined annual revenues of more than \$4 trillion. Concern about unsatisfactory writing skills in the workforce inspired the Roundtable to cooperate with the College Board to form a National Commission on Writing. The Commission surveyed human resource directors of 120 major American corporations employing nearly 8 million people to find out how important writing is for businesses today, and to learn how businesses view their workers' writing competence. They discovered that writing has become a critical skill for businesses. "The very clear message we received," commented Gaston Caperton, president of the College Board, "is that more employees are writing about more things more often."

Writing ability was judged to be so critical to business activities that half of the companies surveyed reported that they consider writing ability when making promotion decisions. The respondents repeatedly emphasized the importance of writing to workers' careers: "In most cases," one commented, "writing ability could be your ticket in . . . or it could be your ticket out." Another wrote, "People who cannot write and communicate clearly will not be hired, and if already working, are unlikely to last long enough to be considered for promotion." Still another asserted flatly, "You can't move up without writing skills" (*Writing: A Ticket to Work . . . Or a Ticket Out. A Survey of Business Leaders* [New York: The College Board, 2004]).

In 2005, the National Commission on Writing expanded its inquiry to the public sector, asking the human resource directors of state governments, representing 2.7 million state government employees, about the importance of writing skills for their employees. All reported that writing is an important responsibility for employees, and 75 percent said they take writing into account when hiring (*Writing: A Powerful Message from State Government* [New York: The College Board, 2005]).

In spite of the clearly felt importance of writing in both public and private sectors, the 2004 Commission study found that most respondents felt that as many as a third of their employees do not have writing skills that meet company requirements; some reported that two-thirds or more of their employees do not possess the requisite writing skills. When asked about the writing skills they see in college graduates they hire, the respondents expressed "a fair degree of dissatisfaction with the writing of recent college graduates—and also with academic styles of writing, unsuited to workplace needs."

The Commission estimated that American firms spend as much as \$3.1 billion annually in remedial training for employees to try to overcome these deficiencies (not including training for employees in the public sector or retail and wholesale trades).

Why Many Business People Do Not Communicate Clearly in Writing

The reasons many business people are unable to communicate clearly in writing today stem from the fact that writing was not developed for use as the primary method of communication in business. Into the twentieth century, people wrote laboriously using pen and ink or manual typewriters to create stories, novels, academic reports, and newspaper articles. Writing was not a prominent method of communicating in the daily affairs of business; it was used to create literature.

That changed almost overnight with the advent of the personal computer in the 1980s. Business people suddenly were able to compose and publish their own memos, letters, and reports, allowing writing to become a more prominent means of communicating about daily business activities. Then, in the late 1990s, the Internet and e-mail decisively launched written communication into the place it occupies today, as the foremost medium of business communication.

At the same time, the technological advances of the information age have changed the face of business so that business people must communicate more to keep everyone current on new technology, stay abreast of new business issues resulting from the opportunities the technology affords, and solve new problems businesses have never before faced. Business people today simply must communicate more, and the dominant mode of communication has become writing.

The revolution that thrust writing into prominence as the primary medium for business communication happened too quickly for businesses to adjust it to fit the new demands being placed on it. Although written communication is now a key infrastructure upon which businesses base all of their functions, they have not taken the responsibility to establish standards for written communication as they have for all other infrastructure, such as accounting or inventory control. As a result, businesses are tolerant of remarkable errors in communication that would not be acceptable in any other business activity.

Schools and Colleges Are Not Training People to Write for Business

Businesses still rely on schools and colleges to train workers to communicate in writing. Unfortunately, the primary guide K-12 schools have had for teaching writing is the tradition from the personal, creative, expressive writing first taught in nineteenth-century schools. "Literacy" meant reading and writing literature. English teachers, with no mandates from business to use in shaping their writing instruction, are still teaching children to write literature, not communicate to achieve business objectives, in spite of the fact that most will write in business settings and virtually none will write literature.

Colleges and universities expand the scope of writing training to include academic writing, but the scholarly words, long, complex sentences and expansive

paragraphs required for academic documents are unsuited to business's need for brevity, focus, clarity, and directness. The audience for academic communication is obscure, so college reports generally ramble; students are rewarded for length, not successful communication with a reader.

Schools and colleges teach students how to write creatively; businesses need employees who write explicitly. Literary writing is more expressive, so it is self-oriented; business writing achieves objectives, so it must be reader oriented. Academic and literary writing are like creating a watercolor of a house to give to the reader who must build the house based on impressions. Writing in business must be like creating a blueprint every reader can use to build the house with precision.

Remedial Training in the Workplace

As a result, many people entering the workforce are unable to write the clear, complete, focused documents critical to business communication. To address the problem, businesses spend \$3.1 billion a year in remedial writing training, virtually all going to consultants who present writing workshops. However, in spite of the amount of money being spent, the importance of written communication to every business's infrastructure, and the frustration managers feel about business writing inadequacies, no studies using pre- and post-writing samples have demonstrated that writing workshops have sufficient positive effects on business writing to justify their cost. In fact, comments from human resources professionals seem to indicate that writing workshops have little effect on improving employees' writing abilities.

The Solution to the Problem

The solution to the problem is for businesses to accept business writing as critical infrastructure to be developed and controlled as businesses do any other infrastructure. All business writing must be held to a set of standards that differs from the standards used to evaluate literary and academic writing. Businesses cannot rely solely on K-12 schools and colleges to train business people to write.

To develop a workforce that communicates clearly in writing for the twenty-first century, businesses must accomplish these seven tasks:

1. Businesses must commit to developing a communication infrastructure composed of employees able to achieve business objectives through clear, effective writing, and they must commit to enforcing and rewarding use of the best practices that are the basis of the infrastructure. Without that commitment, employee writing likely will not improve.
2. Businesses must adopt uniform standards based on best practices in writing that result in clear communication, especially in e-mail. After decades of studying the methods that communicate most effectively in business, writing professionals have isolated the best practices. They are explained in the book, *Explicit Business Writing: Best Practices for the Twenty-First Century* (R. Craig Hogan, Ph.D. Normal, Illinois: The Business Writing Center, 2005. <http://businesswriting.com>). The book also contains standards based on the best practices that businesses can use for employee development.
3. Businesses must display intolerance for unclear, careless, poorly conceived, rambling, and incomplete documents. Conversely, quality writing and innovations that enhance the communication infrastructure should be rewarded through highly visible awards from management.
4. Employees must learn to provide feedback to their co-workers about the impact of e-mail, memos, letters, and reports on them, both positive and negative. Unclear, incomplete, rambling, and unnecessary communication should not be accepted without a frank comment from the reader. Clear, complete, focused, relevant communication should be rewarded through positive responses from readers.

What Businesses Must Do

1. Accept writing as infrastructure.
2. Adopt uniform standards for all documents, including e-mail.
3. Censure poor writing and reward quality writing.
4. Create a climate in which everyone freely shares feedback about writing.
5. Have long-term writing-training programs.
6. Certify writing competence.
7. Require that college graduates meet writing-competence requirements.

5. Writing training must be performed over time using the employees' own writing as the basis for the training. It requires
 - feedback from an instructor, administrator, or co-worker about the employee's success in demonstrating the competencies in the standards
 - training in the best practices that attain the standards
 - practice in using the writing skills on the job
 - evaluation of competence in actual on-the-job writing
 - monitoring to ensure the new skills are performed consistently

6. Business writing training must be competency based. Businesses must evaluate employee writing at the end of the training to determine whether the employees have achieved competence in the uniform standards. If they have not, the training methods should be changed and training should continue until they achieve competence. No training in writing skills should occur without certification of competence at the end of the training. (Refer to <http://explicit.businesswriting.com> for more on competency-based training.)

Workshops alone are too short to train employees in these skills.

7. Businesses should require that college graduates they consider for positions be certified by the colleges as having the writing competencies. Businesses should inform colleges, and especially the colleges of business, that within three years, they will consider for hiring only those graduates whom the colleges have certified as competent in the uniform standards for e-mails, memos, letters, and reports. They should then provide

Characteristics of Explicit Business Writing	
1.	Looks like marketing material, not an article or novel
2.	Is concise and focused
3.	Is precise and complete
4.	Uses headings when possible
5.	Provides what readers want and need, not what writers prefer
6.	Uses plain, common words
7.	Contains short, simple sentences
8.	Repeats key terms often
9.	Explains changes in thought explicitly and guides readers
10.	Breaks out lists using numbers or bullets
11.	Contains few pronouns
12.	Uses simple punctuation
13.	Has strong, active sentences
14.	Includes direct, unambiguous requests for responses
15.	Commends clear writing and points out unclear writing

the uniform standards to the colleges for them to use in developing curriculum objectives.

Businesses Must Focus on Writing Problems that Create Miscommunication

Errors in grammar, spelling, punctuation, and syntax are regrettably common in business documents today. However, while these transgressions are obvious and unsettling to readers, the writing problems that create miscommunication and cost businesses money are unclear, disorganized, poorly thought out, inaccurate, and incomplete or rambling messages. A misspelled word may reflect badly on the writer and the business, but unclear order specifications may cost the company thousands or hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Usage is difficult to teach, and focusing on it while trying to teach employees to write explicitly may dilute the training effort. Businesses must focus on developing a workforce that communicates messages so clearly they cannot be misunderstood. When all employees are able to write consistently clear business documents, then the business can begin to focus on usage problems.

Conclusion

Having a workforce that communicates with 100 percent clarity to 100 percent of the readers 100 percent of the time will require that businesses accept writing as part of their business infrastructure, adopt uniform standards all employees are required to follow, censure unclear writing, reward clear writing, create an atmosphere in which writing quality and problems are discussed freely, train the workforce in the skills, certify every employee's competence, and require colleges to certify graduates' competence in the skills. If all businesses treat writing as part of their infrastructure, we will develop a workforce that communicates clearly in writing for the twenty-first century.