UNIT 12: MANAGING YOUR ORGANIZATION'S INFORMATION NEEDS

OVERVIEW

In this unit, we will describe the role of the manager in understanding the information needs of an organization and its employees, and in providing solutions that answer those needs. We will discuss the issues of improving skills and seeking out writing opportunities for employees to improve the way business is conducted within an organization. Examples of such opportunities include: adding writing tasks to job descriptions, periodically evaluating employee writing, and offering writing incentives.

OBJECTIVES

After completing this unit, you should be able to:

- identify writing opportunities within your organization

- list three reasons for the decline of writing skills and activities among employees

- describe the ways in which employee authoring incentives and sabbaticals can generate employee interest in writing

- predict three ways in which corporate information needs will continue to grow in the next century

- discuss the emergence of voice, video, and multimedia technologies as replacements for, and enhancements to, traditional writing in organizations

DISCUSSION

A speaker in a poem by English poet T. S. Eliot asks rhetorically "Where is the knowledge?" only to be told in response that it is "lost in the information." In what is perhaps one of the earliest acknowledgments of this uniquely twentieth-century problem, Eliot's speaker laments the Information Age and its relative inability to produce knowledge and wisdom despite the ready availability of information. Managers in the Information Age might utter similar cries of

despair amid reports of declines in American productivity, lack of skills in the workplace, and inferior management processes. To be used effectively, information must be managed.

THE GROWING NEED FOR INFORMATION

Managing information in this century and the next will require that people understand not only the technology associated with it, but also its essential nature and uses to which it is put. Our need for information is growing and with it the need to manage the organizational changes that have emerged in the Information Age. An overemphasis on technology could adversely affect other important areas such as employees' abilities to understand, appreciate, evaluate, and create information. These areas must be addressed if the technology is to reach its full potential within an organization, and if the organization is to benefit from the technology.

Presentation Technologies

Much of the growth in information technologies in recent years has been in areas associated with the presentation of information. We have learned, for example, that sharing information on local area networks (LANs) allows it to be presented to many users at one time in much the same way that television presents news and entertainment to many people simultaneously. We have learned that encasing information within multimedia presentations enhances it or makes it accessible for unique audiences, such as the sight- or hearing-impaired, or those whose work depends on multimedia, rather than on text-based information.

Although we still lack much of the scientific knowledge that would indicate how such information is assimilated—both by individuals and by society as a whole—we do know that its existence poses some immediate problems. For one thing, the ready availability of information in different formats may force people into information overload where too much information in too many different formats confuses rather than informs.

Another issue associated with the Information Age is that it forces us to focus more on how people learn, how they process and store information, and whether the presentation of information changes its meaning for those who interpret it. Fundamental differences in *semiotics*, or the way we interpret meaning, can lead to varied approaches to fulfilling the information needs of employees in the modern workplace. As Don Ricks notes in *Winning the Paper Wars* (1990), differences between what he calls the "alits" (those who learn and express

themselves symbolically) and the "lits" (those who learn and express themselves verbally) pose special problems for managers and creators of information.

Creators of information might possess the technology to communicate through both words and symbols, but might lack the decision-making abilities or skills to apply the technology to best advantage within an organization. Frequently, technological solutions appear miraculous because they are consistent, reliable, and can be easily purchased. These technological solutions tangibly represent management's concern for worker productivity and well-being. The problem is that technological solutions do not always satisfy the information needs of organizations, often because the solution they provide does not mesh with more complex organizational goals. Managing the information needs of an organization requires a thorough understanding of that organization's long-term goals and objectives as well as extensive familiarity with the ways that people work within the organization.

Organizational Needs

Ricks points out that, year after year, managers return to traditional and unsuccessful approaches to managing employee writing (ibid., 129). Ricks cites three approaches— management editing, management mandating, and management delegating—that fail to yield the desired results of improving employee writing and meeting the organization's information needs. All three approaches, says Ricks, share the assumption that failed communication is the direct result of poor employee writing. Management's solution in all three approaches focuses on improving employee writing by encouraging hands-on editing, establishing rules for employees to follow, or hiring experts to provide training or implement programs for improvement (ibid., 129– 133).

Although micromanagement techniques such as these may improve some aspects of employee writing, they may fail to meet the organization's information needs. To assist writers in meeting an organization's information needs, managers must also provide employees with the organizational perspective needed to improve writing. Managers must encourage and augment the efforts of employees rather than duplicate those efforts. Often, managers can be of greatest assistance by identifying for employees writing opportunities that would help to satisfy an information need. Managers who require written agendas and minutes for meetings, and who encourage open exchanges of information as in computer conferencing and computer bulletin boards, create more knowledgeable employees.

Managers can also assist employees by eliminating redundant writing activities, or suggesting ways to combine writing efforts so that information needs are met in the most efficient manner possible. Let's look at how one manager used her managerial perspective to eliminate redundant writing while still satisfying her organization's information needs.

At a divisional meeting, Juanita Bailey discovered that much of the status reporting that she and her peers required of their employees was not necessary. Juanita and the five other technical engineering managers required that each of their employees provide weekly status reports on individual milestones and achievements which could then be used to evaluate the employees' performance at the end of an evaluation period. Because each engineer also worked on many separate projects at one time, their achievements were also tracked on project status reports, although the engineers themselves were not always identified by name on these forms. By recommending that each of the project status reports include the names of employees who actually achieved project milestones, Juanita was able to do away with the individual status reports that her employees had previously been required to write. Other managers also implemented Juanita's suggestion for doing away with the reports, at a considerable cost savings to the company.

MANAGEMENT GUIDANCE AND INFORMATION NEEDS

Many organizations can meet their own information needs effectively with proper management guidance. By identifying writing opportunities, providing writing incentives, and seeing employee writing projects to completion, managers can establish a knowledge base that will improve employee performance, satisfaction, and morale. Writing opportunities abound within most organizations, but not all opportunities are of equal value to the organization. Managers can assist employees by identifying those opportunities that will provide added value to the organization as a whole. In most organizations, such opportunities exist in the areas of process control, quality assessment, and industry-related issues examination.

Documentation of Processes and Decisions

The oral tradition in many companies is so strong that it completely eclipses any written documentation of how people do things. "Just ask Bill; he is the only one who really knows how to do that," is heard all too frequently in the halls of many organizations. The lack of process documentation is a major problem for most companies, a problem compounded by

high worker turnover in some industries and the increasing costs associated with training new or transferred employees.

Process documentation—or writing that records procedures and methods for use in the workplace—is often viewed as a thankless job with few tangible rewards. Although managers derive obvious benefits from it, employees frequently view it as "make work" or extra work not directly related to performing their jobs. Policy and procedures manuals—generally overstuffed manuals containing inaccessible information—continue to grace secretarial bays. Occasionally, they are resurrected by some well-meaning manager for "updating" by the same secretaries who stare at them every day. Often, they are "updated" only with operational information about day-to-day procedures, and they lack the kinds of information that would actually assist people in doing their jobs.

Nonetheless, process documentation provides an excellent writing opportunity for all employees. It crystallizes their understanding of what they do, and it allows them to expand their understanding of other areas of responsibility. For professional employees, process documentation provides avenues for exploring many possible routes for accomplishing a task, and it can paint a clear picture of the way their skills might be used elsewhere within the organization. As processes evolve and change, writing about the change can help employees perceive organizational progress, and it can also help them to detect flaws in a process before it becomes widely accepted.

To be effective, however, process documentation should be specific, easily accessible to any employee who needs it, evolutionary, and reviewed on a regular basis. In addition, every process should be "owned" by both a writer and someone who practices the process (if that person is not the writer). Every process should also have a manager associated with it to ensure that it conforms to the goals of the organization as a whole.

The sample below shows some of the processes that have been documented within a sample engineering company. Notice that each process has an owner and a period of regular review, as well as a manager associated with it.

PROCESS	OWNER	REVIEW PERIOD	MANAGER
Product Design	Engineering team leaders	Per product	Project manager
Request for Proposal	Finance Organization—Horace Davis	Annually	Don Cirrone
Proposal Response	Writing team—Sally Jennings	With each new type of proposal	Sandra Salis
Quality Certification	Quality Assurance team—Dan Temple	Per product	Phil Johnson

Writing for Professional Perspective

The information needs of an organization can be served through professional exchange when information about industry trends, recent research, and findings is needed. One of the best ways to encourage such exchange is by encouraging employees to participate in professional organizations, and, particularly, to write in their field. The incentive and skills associated with professional writing are often not learned during the college preparation that most professionals receive. Despite the existence of such programs as Writing Across the Curriculum, or technical and business writing requirements in colleges and universities, many college students graduate without the experience of writing professionally (as opposed to academically) in their major field of study. (Unfortunately, some never cultivate the habit of professional reading either.)

All the same, professional writing opportunities in most professions exist in both formal and informal settings. Conference papers, journal articles, even computer conferencing can lead to exchanges of information that may perfect a process, unearth recent findings or new techniques, teach a lesson, or simply share an experience. Managers can encourage such professional exchanges through incentive programs and through employee job descriptions or assignments as well as by personal example.

Other Writing Opportunities

Many of the writing opportunities that exist within organizations are not recognized as such. In the last twenty years, opportunities for writing may seem to have diminished due to automation; the use of word processing for document storage, retrieval, and reuse; and an increasing tendency toward verbal communication. The number of meetings attended by employees in large organizations affirms that the amount of information conveyed verbally is growing. The opportunity exists to create writing opportunities while, at the same time, reducing the number of meetings required or improving their quality. Written meeting agendas,

preparatory reports, minutes, and summaries are all known to improve the effectiveness of meetings—and they can also provide writing opportunities for employees. Such written records provide focal points for meetings as well as documentation of decisions and agreements. These records force more thoughtful, fuller evaluation of topics than mere discussion might generate.

In addition to meeting-related writing opportunities, any business activity related to self-scrutiny—for example, internal audits or evaluations—can provide writing opportunities. Periodic evaluations of processes, experiences, work phases, or managerial performance give employees the chance to explore and express ideas in writing that may benefit an organization.

Technology itself can also provide writing opportunities, particularly in documenting how it is implemented, what problems are associated with its use, or how benefits can best be derived from its use within an organization. As Thomas Trzyna and Margaret Batschelet note in *Writing for the Technical Professions* (1987), college-educated persons in technical and professional fields currently spend an estimated 20 percent to 30 percent of their time writing, with an additional 30 percent of work time devoted to other forms of communication "such as telephone conversations, committee and staff meetings, design conferences, and formal oral reports" (ibid., xv). For such technical managers in particular, the opportunity to improve writing skills and provide valuable organizational information is inherent in the work of their employees.

Opportunities for writing and sending information online exist in many organizations, and managers should encourage employee participation. In addition, university and private projects for office automation and online information sharing provide opportunities for employees to learn about and use newer technologies. Multimedia such as text/voice and text/video applications expand the nature and means of writing and suggest radical changes in the ways writers will work in the future.

Outside Information

In addition to working within an organization, managers and employees must occasionally go outside of an organization to satisfy information needs. An organization's need to acquire information from external sources is prevalent where goods, services, resources, or responsibilities are shared with another organization or group. Companies that do business with government agencies, for example, must frequently rely on agency sources for needed information. Large companies that contract with smaller companies to perform work have

similar information needs. Individuals who seek to change the way an organization operates must likewise look to other organizations for needed information.

Managers can best assist employees in gathering information from outside by making sure that areas such as the following are addressed:

- what the relationship is between the organization and the outside source, including any legal restrictions or obligations associated with giving or receiving information

- how valuable the information is in relation to the difficulty of acquiring it

- what the long-term and immediate value is to the organization of receiving the sought-after information

- whether or not the organization is equipped to handle large transfers of information electronically

- whether or not the timing of the request is appropriate

- how to explore alternative sources of information, both within and outside of the organization

MEASURING PROGRESS

To determine if the information needs of an organization have been met, managers can look in two very different directions. Managers can measure improvement informally by comparing the written work of employees "before" and "after" writing programs have been implemented or significant writing opportunities provided. They can also assess the reaction to what their employees have written—either through perceived improvements in the eyes of peers or company customers or through surveys or other quantifiable means.

Managers can devise customer surveys, meet informally with customers, and discuss the effectiveness of employee writing with employees informally to provide feedback. They can solicit the opinion of employees about the level of information available to them in areas such as job performance, benefits, and company policies. Many professional writing organizations have devised formal programs and some automated ways for assessing the writing of their employees.

Preparing for the future is implicit in the work of every manager. Visionary managers distinguish themselves, however, by experimenting with newer business techniques and by

adapting quickly to changes in the workplace. Managers who can entertain the notion of future writers as media consultants or molders of style, or who can envision highly skilled writers in paperless offices will have an advantage in helping to shape these aspects of the future as they become more common. Managers who lag behind in accepting new ideas may impede their company's progress. An old adage in business says that those who are not part of the solution are part of the problem.

REFERENCES

Ricks, Don. *Winning the Paper Wars*. Homewood, Ill.: Dow-Jones Irwin, 1990.

Trzyna, Thomas, and Margaret Batschelet. *Writing for the Technical Professions*. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1987.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Describe three currently unrealized writing opportunities that may exist for employees at your workplace.

2. In what ways can face-to-face meetings be enhanced through written agendas or follow-up memos?

3. Identify three changes in the workplace that have diminished employee opportunities for writing.

4. Describe how you might integrate writing opportunities into an employee's performance plan.

5. List some advantages and disadvantages of authorship incentives.

6. Describe ways in which technology can be used to create writing opportunities for employees a) with similar jobs and b) with a variety of jobs.

7. Briefly describe two major trends in information processing that promise to affect on-the-job writing into the twenty-first century.

INTEGRATING QUESTIONS

1.   Research suggests a correlation between writing skills, writing opportunities, and writing improvement. In what ways can managers measure improvement in writing after they implement specific writing improvement objectives?

2.   Identify two university-based programs designed to improve writing skills in the workplace. Do you think improved educational programs and methods will do away with the need for management-based intervention to improve writing skills?

3.   What changes need to be made in information processing technologies to avert information overload?