

The Importance Of Reviewing Documents

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Flatter hierarchies have resulted in more and more employees being involved in the business writing process. Electronic communication has enabled written material to be produced faster and more efficiently. But why is it that more and more documents that are badly structured, unclear and inaccurate are going out of companies and what can be done to halt this worrying trend? Gina Cuciniello explains.

The recent surge in the use of electronic communication has led to a rise in the amount of written material in the workplace. The time once taken to write a report has now been greatly reduced and writers are increasingly under pressure to produce great quantities of written work to tight deadlines. What is more, the flatter hierarchical structures of organisations today lead to a greater number of employees having to write reports and proposals, often with no formal training. As a result, instead of the writing standards of professionals improving, it seems they may well be slipping.

Before the onset of electronic communication, with the resulting faster turnover of written material, more time was available for drafting and re-drafting of documents. Business writing was seen by many to be a well-nurtured skill, possessed by a talented few.

Of course, today, no one should feel they have to be a brilliant writer to produce effective business documents. In today's fast-moving business environments it is ideas that people are interested in and not brilliantly crafted sentences. You should write to inform and not write to impress.

However, carelessness can have serious repercussions for the company. The writer's credibility is thrown into doubt. How can they be seen as professional and focused if their writing is full of inconsistencies and grammatical errors? And how can their company be seen as one of the best if it employs people capable of such sloppy workmanship?

So what can be done to assist today's professionals to continuously develop their business writing skills in the company? One time-saving and effective solution to this is to encourage employees to take a more active role in reviewing and editing documents.

Three steps to reviewing

Initially a reviewer should follow these three steps:

Read through the document to check it makes sense

Structured thoughts occur in the brain faster than fingers can type and, as a consequence, words and phrases can frequently be omitted. Check that points are made clearly with an adequate explanation. There is nothing worse than an idea that is merely introduced and not followed through to a logical conclusion.

Examine the structure of the document

Check that the sections are placed appropriately. Is there a section that would be better placed in a more prominent position?

The headings should be specific enough to provide a clear indication as to what follows. A reader should be able to glance at the headings used and get a good idea of the argument the writer has put forward.

Check for inconsistent details

Inconsistencies in the following areas are particularly irritating to readers:

- Paragraph numbering
- Disjointed system of headings
- Repetition of words and phrases
- Use of initial capital letters for job titles, report titles, and so on
- Use of spelling, for example, American or British spelling
- Discipline of bullet-points, italics, bold, and so on.

Many contributors, many errors?

Ideally, documents put together by several people should appear seamless. In reality this is nearly impossible to achieve, due to the different styles of writing among the authors. Obvious signs of a varied authorship, however, could distract the reader with small irrelevancies.

Whether the work is your own, that of a junior member of staff or the work of many contributors the focus and the attention to detail should be the same.

Reviewing the work of junior staff

We all learn by doing, making mistakes and then getting it right. Providing guidance to junior members of staff on their written material will provide both them and the organisation with an invaluable service. They will benefit from precise and relevant advice in the workplace and the organisation will be spared the inconvenience of sending key staff away for off-the-job training.

An abundance of comments and changes made to the work of junior staff can have a detrimental effect on their morale. It is also time-consuming to all concerned. Any changes should therefore be limited to things that are important. So what changes, if any, should a reviewer make to the work of junior staff?

As writing style varies from one writer to another, reviewers should avoid changing aspects of style to make the document more in line with their own. A great deal of damage can be done by an over-concentration on small changes, too petty to mention in detail, that flatten a writer's style and can ruin the rhythm of a sentence, the flow of the argument or the liveliness of the tone.

Style is a result of background, age and education. There is no good or bad style of writing - only one that is appropriate to the reader and the situation.

What should be changed?

Of course, certain things have to be corrected. For example, the technical details must be accurate. The meaning must be clear and free from ambiguity. Is the sentence structure easy to understand and the sentence length not too long?

Have the words been chosen carefully? Not only sentence structure must be checked but also the choice of words. Are they precise enough to convey the exact meaning that the writer intended? If the meaning is unclear, a reader may have to read a report again. Not many people enjoy reading reports and they certainly don't want to read them twice.

Is the writer too chummy and informal? A reader will be offended by an inappropriate intimacy in a letter. Whereas an over-formal tone can strike a reader as stilted and even intimidating. You only have to look at the disheartening effect many older style legal documents have on some readers.

To be wholly effective, comments made should be specific, positive and supported by an explanation, preferably face to face. Feedback conducted face to face will make the writer feel more comfortable, less resentful and also provide an opportunity for the employee to ask questions and seek clarification. Employees must be made to feel encouraged to develop professionally and not feel that they are being reprimanded.

Internal documents?

Of course, everyone agrees that the standard of written work that goes outside a company must be high. But it is often argued that a low standard in documents circulated within a company, such as in memos and e-mails, can be tolerated due to the constraints of time.

It should be remembered that the speed with which electronic mail moves enables documents to be whisked off and arrive with a mere touch of a button. A badly written document can be copied and turn up in unexpected places within seconds of posting.

Writing for a colleague known for their tolerance of errors is no excuse for carelessness. Those copies may end up on the desk of the Chief Executive, who is probably less likely to be so easy-going.

Even if errors and a lack of attention to detail are more acceptable to an internal reader, they will certainly not be so for readers of important external documents such as proposals.

Future Perfect?

With the threat of recession looming, companies cannot afford to take a laid-back attitude towards the standard of written products in a company. Electronic communication, in all its permutations, is expected to spread throughout every organisation on a global basis. There will be even more written material in circulation and produced by an increasing number of, possibly, inexperienced employees. Today, more than ever, staff need to be encouraged and trained to review documents well and pass on their knowledge to other staff.

Only by doing this will personal professional standards be kept high and in line with that of the organisation.

