

Manuscript of article published in:

*Journal for Document Design, 4.1:42-47; 2003.*

Problems in the field

## **“Paying” too much?**

### **The cost of bad document design in internal communication**

In the field of document design the focus is on the document and on the wider context in which the document comes into being and is received. One the aspects of this wider context and also one of the “problems in the field”, is the question about the cost of the document, where *cost* should be seen in its literal and its metaphorical sense. This particular aspect of the so-called wider context does not always receive the attention it deserves, and quite often one is left with the impression that institutions have very little if any idea what these costs are, not realising how high the cost of a document can be, especially if it was badly designed.

In this contribution I will take a case study from the field of internal communication and its intersection with the aspect of organisational culture, to show the costs incurred by bad document design.

### **The concept *cost in document design***

When one thinks about the cost of a document, two broad categories emerge: the so-called real costs, normally measured in financial terms, and the more metaphorical “costs”, quite often referred to as the human, or more emotional costs. The real costs include

- **Hours spent in the production and reception phases** (writing, reading and implementing). In the case discussed in this contribution 24 participants estimated that they spent somewhere between 55% and 65% of their day working on documents (either producing or reading them). This is something that institutions should take rather seriously, since it would mean that they spend this percentage of their salary budget on “words on paper”.  
Added to the production costs, there are the support costs: the hours spent on customer/client support.

All these hours can be translated into financial costs.

- **The technical side.** Documents have to be printed in a paper format or reworked into website format. One therefore has to take the cost of hardware, software, printing costs, the cost of layout and other aspects of preparation into consideration.

The metaphorical “costs” are the costs that we tend to forget about, since they quite often seem to be less tangible. We therefore hardly ever see them as “real”, compared to the financial costs mentioned above. However, the price that institutions pay in these categories are quite often much higher – in the real and the metaphorical sense – than the other so-called real costs. I mention two:

- **Negative image.** A badly written, badly designed document can create a negative image of an institution, and in the world of business the repair of such a loss of image takes a lot of effort, time and money.
- **Disturbed interpersonal relationships.** Badly designed documents can very often lead to a disturbance in the relationship between client and institution, employee and management and employee and employee. Again, the repair of these relationships can be very costly.

In the literature, more often than not, the focus seems to be on the costs incurred when dealing with the relationship between institution, product and client. However, there is an important aspect of business communication that deserves more attention when dealing with the costing factor: the role of internal communication. In this contribution I will focus on the often unnecessarily high price that institutions pay for bad internal communication.

### **Internal communication and organisational culture**

The importance of internal communication and especially of good interpersonal communication within an institution is not a novel idea. As with any other vital part of the managerial machinery of an institution, it is greatly influenced, among other things, by the organisational culture of the particular institution.

The culture of an organisation can be defined at different levels (Hartley and Bruckman, 2002). They are

- the artefacts, those visible structures that people experience every day,
- the espoused values that the institution claims to follow,
- the basic underlying assumptions in the institution, forming the real source of values and actions,
- and the behaviours following from these assumptions

Sometimes people in an institution will experience a clash of forces within these parameters. To give an example (taken from Hartley and Bruckman): A company can have “the happy family” as an espoused value, but then act on an underlying assumption based on the principle of “survival of the fittest”.

Combined with our understanding of the workings of the organisational culture there are the models of interpersonal communication where important notions such as social context, social identity, social perception and the like play an important role. Between these model elements and the elements of organisational culture one often sees a number of force fields developing, force fields that often create problems if they are not managed properly. In the end the culture of the organisation becomes a force that determines how we analyse and solve problems in the institution. The case to be discussed will demonstrate this in a rather dramatic way.

**Case study: Losses created by a bad policy document on performance improvement in a well-known organisation**

In the Unit for Document Design (Stellenbosch University Language Centre) we teach workshops in document design, translation and editing, some of which are tailor-made to suite the needs of particular companies, and these workshops offer the opportunity to do contract research and case studies. The case in point was a rather controversial document on performance improvement distributed as an internal policy document by a well-known company in our area.

I offer the document in the format that it was presented: a typed version on ordinary A4-paper distributed to all members of staff (I have changed the document to some extent, primarily to protect the identity of the particular company).

**Performance Improvement Program**

In order to complete the company’s disciplinary process a Performance Improvement Program is announced that will be implemented immediately.

This program will form an integral part of the company’s Staff Manual, and the following guidelines must therefore be added to the section *Disciplinary Procedure*, par. 5.1.1 on page 21:

“The PIP has two main goals:

- (a) to assure that the employee understands that his or her performance has important shortcomings and that substantial improvement is essential; and
- (b) to create a fair and realistic situation which should help the employee to achieve this improvement in performance.”

If this performance improvement cannot be achieved and if no other alternative can be found, the procedure will help to terminate the services of the employee in a fair and dignified way. When a manager notices a lack of performance over an extended period of time, it is his or her responsibility to implement this procedure.

To implement the procedure, the manager must first complete sections 1-4 of the PIP report. The most recent performance assessment must be added to the report, combined with any other relevant documents. If no performance assessment is available, it should be explained in section 2 of the PIP report.

Apart from this report, the manager must provide the employee with a letter stating the following:

- (a) that the employee's performance is not up to standard,
- (b) that the employee will be accommodated in the PIP for a set period, and
- (c) that, if the employee does not show evidence of reasonable performance improvement the Company will unfortunately have to terminate the services of the employee

After completion of the documents, the manager must have a formal interview with the employee and take the opportunity to discuss the contents of the report in detail. The manager and the employee then have to decide on a plan of action in order to address the shortcomings in the performance of the employee. The success of the PIP is the joint responsibility of the employee and his or her manager.

We were asked to do a functional text analysis of the document, followed by a focus group discussion on the results of the analysis and the effects of the document within the institutional context.

Without going into too much detail, the following design features or clusters of features proved to be of some concern, creating what I would like to call the flash points in the text.

### *Topic*

The text addresses the topical field of *performance*, *performance assessment* and *performance improvement*. In any institution this would constitute a highly controversial and highly emotional topic, which, by its very nature, creates a flash point in itself.

### *Target audience*

The document was sent to all members of staff. It was the first and the only document on this particular topic. The text itself does not give a clear indication of the intended

audience, but an analysis of the text suggests that it was written for managers. This can be deduced from the fact that the document focuses on the role of the manager in the PIP and that it contains a number of instructive content elements directed at this particular group. The divide between the intended audience (all staff members) and the audience signified by the text (managers) was another rather problematic flash point in the life of this particular text.

### *Goals of the document*

According to the communications manager and other staff members this document had the following goals (I will refer to them as the intended goals):

- An informative goal: to inform staff members of the existence of the program
- An instructive goal: to instruct staff members on the workings of the program
- A persuasive goal: to persuade staff members of the value the program, so that they see it as a positive rather than a negative initiative on the side of management
- An emotive/affective goal: to set staff members' minds at ease concerning the intimidating character of the program

If one analyses the document, however, you find that these goals are not clearly realised in the text itself, so that – again – there seems to be a divide between the intended goals and the goals deduced from the text itself. The text does have a clear informative aspect to it and it does contain a number of instructions, especially addressed to the managers. However, it is not clear to what extent, if at all, the intended persuasive and emotive/affective goals are realised.

### *Context/circumstances*

This was the first and the only document sent to staff members on this particular issue. It reached them in a period where there seemed to be a lot of uncertainty regarding staff issues and new policies regarding personnel management.

### *Contents*

The schematic organisation of the text provides us with another problem area. In short order the text contains the following elements of content:

- Announcement of program and implementation
- Situating the program within the larger policy framework
- End-goal of the program
- Instructions for implementing the program

The following, rather obvious, schematic elements are missing:

- What are the contents of the program (e.g. course components, tests, tasks, etc.)?
- Who will run the program?
- When will the program run?

#### *External structure/Lay-out*

The document has a very burocratic image created by a conservative layout associated with scientific or policy documents. In itself this does not create too much problems, but when one combines it with the other flash points it helps to create an unsympathetic, alienating image that does not support some of the goals the it purports to have.

#### *Style*

Given the intended goals of the document, the style leaves much to be desired. Without any discussion I mention a few aspects of style that have flash point potential:

- The use of the passive voice, creating a very formal and distancing effect in the text (*If this performance improvement cannot be achieved and if no other alternative can be found*)
- Not addressing the reader, and in doing so missing the opportunity to make the text more reader-focused, a feature that is of vital importance if persuasion is one of your goals
- Using the third person reference to refer to the reader (be it the manager or the employee) (... *(a) to assure that the employee understands that his or her performance has important shortcomings and that substantial improvement is essential; and (b) to create a fair and realistic situation which should help the employee to achieve this improvement in performance; When a manager notices a lack of performance over an extended period of time, it is his or her responsibility to implement this procedure*)
- Use of a distinctly burocratic style, adding to the alienation of the reader (*This program will form an integral part of the company's Staff Manual, and the following guidelines must therefore be added to the section Disciplinary Procedure*)
- A choice of words that does not soften the blow (*that the employee's performance is not up to standard; if the employee does not show evidence of*

*reasonable performance improvement the Company will unfortunately have to terminate the services of the employee)*

During the focus group session the following are typical examples of the criticism that was raised:

- “There were a lot of problems with the information.”
- “A highly complex and highly emotional issue was addressed in a rather unsympathetic, very formal, distancing style. It scares me.”
- “The tone was not persuasive enough.”
- “It scared us to bits!”
- “We (the employees – LGDS) do not seem to be important to them (management – LGDS)”

#### *The cost of the text*

The question now is: What was the cost for the company? First the real costs:

- Approximately 20 meetings ranging in numbers from four to twenty people
- Duration of meetings on average one hour
- A large number of calls between staff members, between management and between staff and management
- A number of meetings by management with staff trying to explain the actual meaning of the document
- The production costs of the document were not taken into consideration

In the workshop three accountants made a *very conservative* estimate totalling the real costs at approximately R350 000 (approx. \$35 000; loss of working hours, etc.).

Measured in Southern African terms, that is quite a substantial amount of money – for one A4 page.

However, the real costs were only the beginning. It is rather difficult to translate the loss of face, the lowering of morale, the fears of at least certain staff members, the tension between junior and midlevel management and staff, to name but a few issues, into something as tangible as money. Quite a number of participants in the focus group commented on the fact that it will take quite some time to make up for the losses, both financially and emotionally.

#### **A few final comments**

It is clear that this particular institution created a lot of problems for itself by not considering the following question about the culture of internal communication and its

implications for document design: Are we managing products and systems or managing people?

In our highly competitive, highly individualistic world institutions quite often end up in the trap of managing products instead of managing people. In this particular case there is a give-away phrase: “The success of the PIP is the joint responsibility of the employee and his or her manager.” By placing the phrase the success of the PIP in the topical position of the sentence, the institution quite clearly shows its colours.

The problem then? We, that is both document design researchers and professionals in the public and private sectors, quite often take communication for granted, hardly ever considering the costs (real or metaphorical) of the communication. And especially in the case of written communication, these costs can be rather high, given the fact that it takes more energy to produce the written communication, but also given the fact that the written communication with its “finality” hardly ever provides us with enough opportunity to explain, rectify, consider feedback, etc. before it is too late. We need more research on the cost effects, first of all because for us, the researchers, this becomes one of our main bargaining chips when “selling” our field, but also for the professionals, because we need to create higher levels of understanding concerning the losses an institution can incur when a document does not do the trick.

## **Reference**

Hartley, Peter & Clive G. Bruckmann. 2002. *Business Communication*. London & New York: Routledge.

Leon G. de Stadler  
Stellenbosch, September 2002