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Assessment Criteria Applicable To Writing Business Documents

Introduction

Written communication as it relates to business, Egan (1995) states that writing is the single most widespread activity in business today. The use of computers, fax machines, e-mail, and all the other paraphernalia of the so-called paperless office has not reduced the need for effective business writing. Modern professionals now spend more time than ever wordsmithing on their Powerbooks, PC laptops, and Pentium PC - up to 70% of their day according to Fortune magazine. Writing is also one of the most expensive business activities.

The consequences of poor written communications are profound. These consequences can include: rejection of organizational proposals sent to funding organizations such as the state or federal government; increases in company costs due to employees spending more time on the job solely to decipher poorly written communication; failure of employees with poor written communication skills to earn larger salaries and/or to be promoted to higher organization levels; and accidents occurring as a result of misunderstood written communications (Egan, 1995). Poorly written communication in businesses and organizations highlight the need for colleges and universities to maximize students' business writing skills. One way of improving these skills is through assessments of students' present skills levels and any resulting increases in these skills levels following instruction.

The key question that needs to be asked with respect to such assessments is: What assessment criteria might be used to attain these objectives? The

Abstract

The purpose of this article was to review what literature stated and recommended about assessment criteria applicable to writing business documents. It states that the consequences of poor written communications are serious. Those consequences can include rejection, expenditures, and/or enhancement within company ladder. The need for faculties and universities to maximize students' business writing skills are highlighted. The data collected confirms that assessment of written business documents must include communicatory skills: reading and/or listening skills, and assessment of students' ability to team with others. The development of assessment criteria by the provider was also recommended.

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purpose of this paper is to provide an answer to this question through an examination of research related to assessment criteria used to evaluate written business communications.

Assessment Criteria

Egan (1995) has discussed several qualities that characterize good business writing, most of which can be assessed. These qualities include the basics of any writing such as good grammar and punctuation; however, he notes that the good business letter must have more than the basics. It must also have good organization, and must communicate the writer's expertise through tone, appearance and presentation. The well-written business document should be concise and to-the-point rather than lengthy.

In modern times, traditional ways of thinking, seeing, and even evaluating knowledge have been profoundly altered and this alteration has affected written business communication. In this regard, Egan (1995) states that business reports, manuals, letters and memos are now generally expected to contain a variety of characteristics that go beyond the words written in the document. Specifically, these reports, manuals, letters and memos are expected to be: (1) friendly in approach and manner, yet at the same time entirely professional; (2) error free and though grammatically correct not pedantic; and (3) relaxed and articulate but not overly colloquial. In addition, they are often expected to be subtly persuasive.

In an interesting article with assessment-related information and implications regarding the well-written business document, (Staff Writer, 1993) it was noted that the increasing globalization of business and differing legal systems throughout the world mean are making companies easy targets for costly litigation. As a result, the need for properly written documents by foreign and American companies is increasing.

The article goes on to note that the primary characteristics needed by most companies and organizations are for business documents that present accurate information rather than inaccurate or misleading information, and present information in such a way that the company is viewed in a positive rather than a negative way.

Moreover, it is recommended that employees produce documents in which they avoid writing about hypotheses, theories or opinions as though they are factual. It is further recommended that employees avoid creating personal files that contain information relating to company business.

Of course the characteristics of good business writing mentioned by Egan (1995) and the staff writer for *Risk Management* require that the employee first have a command of the core writing skills. In other words, any assessment of students' business writing skills must also include those skills that would be expected in any form of written communication.

With respect to the foregoing, McInnis (1982) has discussed the assessment of core writing skills. She states that assessment criteria should include the following; (1) clarity of focus, (2) adequate development of ideas, (3) clear and coherent sentences and paragraphs, (4) appropriate examples and evidence, (5) appropriate word choice, (6) varied sentence structure, and (7) appropriate punctuation and usage.

In a discussion of a business communication course offered at Rockland Community College, Lecker (1990) pointed out that a person's written communication skills cannot thoroughly be assessed without an assessment of his or her general language skills including the individual's reading, speaking and listening skills. To this end the college designed what they termed a "holistic assessment" of communication skills; this assessment not only measured reading, writing, speaking and listening skills but required that the assessments be conducted by the students themselves, by their peers and by their instructors.

If any college or university wishes to include reading, listening and speaking skills into its general assessment of students' written communication, it is helpful to define these skills in such a manner that assessment can be conducted adequately. In this regard, Klausmeier (1985, p. 30) offers the following skill definitions based on College Board Criteria:

Reading: The ability to identify and comprehend the main and subordinate ideas in a written work and to summarize the ideas in one's own words.

Speaking and Listening Skills: The ability to engage critically and constructively in the exchange of ideas.

One point that must be considered regarding the assessment of written business documents is that, as pointed out by Easton, Eickelmann and Flatley (1994), more and more frequently business communication documents are being produced by teams or groups of people. This means that effective instruction and thorough assessment of any student's business writing skills should probably include performance in the group writing process.

Easton, Eickelmann and Flatley (1994) provide a method for how such an assessment should be made, noting that, with respect to group written

business documents, it does not matter how well an individual might express himself or herself in writing; rather, all that matters is the final output of the group as a whole. In other words, it is group output that must be the focus of the assessment.

In their study, Easton, Eickelmann and Flatley (1994) conducted an assessment of a group writing effort and, simultaneously conducted an assessment of Electronic Meeting System's Groupwriter Tool to improve efforts. Specifically, the experiment compared the quality of policy and procedure documents written by groups in three conditions:

- (1) Groups using the EMS Groupwriter tool with a planning guide;
- (2) Groups using pen and paper with a planning guide, and
- (3) Groups using only pen and paper.

However, what is of primary interest with respect to the review of literature presented in this paper is how they went about assessing the groups' written business documents.

With respect to the foregoing, it can be noted that the authors' assessment measures included both the outcomes and the processes of the group session. The group task outcomes measured were planning quality, document length, and member satisfaction with document quality. The group process outcome measured was planning quality.

Document length was determined by the total number of words in the final text. Planning quality was measured using judges' scores of planning based on the clarity of purpose, organization, and coherence.

Document quality was measured by an overall score combining the planning, development, and mechanics of the document and assigned independently by two judges. This procedure resulted in two document quality scores for each group document.

Member satisfaction with the document quality was measured using a single-item measure. This was obtained from the post-session questionnaire administered by the facilitator at the end of the group meeting.

Judges experienced in grading business communication documents assigned scores to each document. The judges evaluated the documents on three categories: the macro or overall planning of the document, the micro or the detailed development of individual sections and their integration into the whole, and the mechanics of the writing such as grammar, spelling and punctuation.

Judges were blind as to the authorship and the method of creation of the documents. This was accomplished by having an independent typist

generate all documents with the same word processor, printer fonts and paper type.

The foregoing procedures offer a clear method for any college or university interested in the assessment of what is clearly becoming more frequent practice with respect to written business communications, namely the production of team or group documents.

Another point that can be made regarding the assessment of written business documents relates not so much to assessment criteria as to methods colleges and universities might consider in terms of developing at least some of its assessment items. According to Van Horn (1995), higher education institutions can maximize the effectiveness of both their instruction and their assessment of instructional effectiveness by working with the business community.

In other words, colleges and universities need to survey businesses and organizations and ask them what they require of their employees in terms of written documents. What characteristics are organizations looking for in their letters and memos and so forth? What knowledge, skills, and abilities do companies expect their employees to possess in order to write good business documents? Determining answers to questions such as the foregoing should be an important element of any assessment criteria developed to measure students' performance in terms of writing business documents.

Regarding the above, it is interesting to note that in Van Horn's (1995) study in which survey data on employer needs was collected from 404 New Jersey employers, written communication skills were cited as highly valued; however, Van Horn pointed out that most surveyed employers considered listening and reading skills pivotal to an employee's ability to produce well/written business documents.

Some employers felt that their employees' written communication skills were not poor but that the documents they produced were. Employers attributed this problem to the fact that too much of employees' education focused on teaching them how to write generally rather than how to write for businesses and organizations in particular.

A project was designed by Lutheran Family Services of Northern Colorado (1990) to upgrade workplace basic skills for the purpose of promoting productivity, retrainability, job retention, and/or job advancement. This project, which created a partnership among Hewlett Packard-Fort Collins Site, Lutheran Family Services, and Colorado State University's Division

of Continuing Education, has implications for assessment items and criteria that might be used in evaluating students' ability to write business documents.

As part of the project, skills needed for representative jobs were assessed through interviews, observations, and review of printed materials needed for that job. A curriculum that focused on oral and written communication, with components of learning how to learn, was designed.

However, in both instruction and in terms of evaluation of instructional efficacy, students were presented with exercises and examples of every day problems and challenges encountered on the manufacturing floor. In other words, an important component of assessing students' ability to write business documents would be to have them write documents that are actually required by various companies and organizations.

Developing such items might be done by utilizing the recommendation previously made; that is, it can be done by working with companies and organizations to determine their written document needs and requirements. Companies could provide examples of the kind of documents their employees are currently writing, and assessment items could be developed on the basis of the review of these examples.

Assessments of written business documents can be done both formally and informally. Welch and Link (1992) as well as Minner (1989) have discussed informal assessment procedures for written expressions generally. These authors note that, essentially, the informal assessment of written expression of any form, including business documents, requires teachers to analyze student writing for fluency, sentence types, vocabulary, structure and ideation. Often the assessments teachers are required to make require that, to at least some extent, they utilize assessment criteria found in criterion-referenced tests.

An interesting approach to the writing of business documents (as well as number of other job tasks) has been discussed by Schofield (1993). In this regard, Schofield discusses the development of innovative techniques for the accurate and objective assessment of job-related abilities of all sorts. He states that the best assessment criteria come from a thorough and professional analysis of the work content of the job, an analysis that focuses on the identification of the type and level of skills, aptitudes, and other qualities needed to adequately carry out the task.

Forman (1993) has discussed business communications as they relate to composition. In particular, Forman argues that English composition is a

solid foundation for instruction in business writing. The point is made that the study of individual writing processes emphasizes the investigation of how writers make choices as they compose and how these choices—about writing goals, plans, and everything from the organization of a text to word choice—guide the production of text and the final text. In other words, choice is a large element of written expression; and, conceivably could be assessed by providing students with various ideas and even words and determining whether their choices are maximal given that which they are told the business document wishes to convey.

Forman (1993) claims that business writing is essentially a social act that takes place in a structure of authority, changes constantly as society changes, has consequences in the economic and political realms, and shapes the writer as much as it is shaped by the writer. As a social act, Forman (1993) reports that in order to adequately instruct or assess students' or employees' ability to write business documents, there are certain questions which must be posed and answered. These questions are:

- (1) What are the organizational expectations about writing, and how do they influence writers' practices (e.g., collaborative practices, sense of receiver, decisions about when to write)? What is the role of group processes and organizational and social constraints in the production of written documents?
- (2) How do writers' discourse communities influence their writing processes and products?
- (3) What are the "fortunes" of a text as it is interpreted by various readers within an organization?
- (4) How does writing shape the social reality of an organization?

Summary and Conclusions

The purpose of the review of literature presented here was to examine the literature for a variety of assessment criteria related to writing business documents. It can be concluded here that this literature indicated that several characteristics could and should be considered in any assessment of students' ability to write business documents.

The recommended assessment criteria included testing for good grammar and punctuation; good organization, expertise in tone, appearance and presentation; conciseness, lack of errors, a non-pedantic tone, a relaxed and articulate communication that is not overlay colloquial, a subtle

persuasiveness; the presentation of information that is accurate and that is worded in such a way as to place the company in the best possible light; the presentation of hypothetical information as non-factual rather than factual; clarity of focus, adequacy of the development of ideas; clear and coherent sentences and paragraphs; appropriate examples and evidence; appropriate word choice; varied sentence structure; degree of fluency, sentence types, vocabulary, structure and ideation; and appropriate punctuation and usage.

It was also found that assessment of written business documents may wish to include assessments of related communicator skills such as reading and/or listening skills. In addition, the assessment of the students' ability to write in collaboration with others might also be assessed given the increasing use of team writing in many organizations; several methods for assessing the output and processes of team writing were provided in the review.

The reviewed literature also recommended the development of assessment criteria based on: (1) interviews with companies and organizations that determined their needs and requirements regarding business documents; (2) a job analysis of a variety of companies actual business documents; and (3) having students write a number of actual business documents to particular companies.

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