
December 7, 2004

What Corporate America Can't Build: A Sentence

By SAM DILLON

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. - R. Craig Hogan, a former university professor who heads an online school for business writing here, received an anguished e-mail message recently from a prospective student.

"i need help," said the message, which was devoid of punctuation. "i am writing a essay on writing i work for this company and my boss want me to help improve the workers writing skills can yall help me with some information thank you".

Hundreds of inquiries from managers and executives seeking to improve their own or their workers' writing pop into Dr. Hogan's computer in-basket each month, he says, describing a number that has surged as e-mail has replaced the phone for much workplace communication. Millions of employees must write more frequently on the job than previously. And many are making a hash of it.

"E-mail is a party to which English teachers have not been invited," Dr. Hogan said. "It has companies tearing their hair out."

A recent survey of 120 American corporations reached a similar conclusion. The study, by the National Commission on Writing, a panel established by the College Board, concluded that a third of employees in the nation's blue-chip companies wrote poorly and that businesses were spending as much as \$3.1 billion annually on remedial training.

The problem shows up not only in e-mail but also in reports and other texts, the commission said.

"It's not that companies want to hire Tolstoy," said Susan Traiman, a director at the Business Roundtable, an association of leading chief executives whose corporations were surveyed in the study. "But they need people who can write clearly, and many employees and applicants fall short of that standard."

Millions of inscrutable e-mail messages are clogging corporate computers by setting off requests for clarification, and many of the requests, in turn, are also chaotically written, resulting in whole cycles of confusion.

Here is one from a systems analyst to her supervisor at a high-tech corporation based in Palo Alto, Calif.: "I updated the Status report for the four discrepancies Lennie forward us via e-mail (they in Barry file).. to make sure my logic was correct It seems we provide Murray with incorrect information ... However after verifying controls on JBL - JBL has the indicator as B ??? - I wanted to make sure with the recent changes - I processed today - before Murray make the changes again on the mainframe to 'C'."

The incoherence of that message persuaded the analyst's employers that she needed remedial training.

"The more electronic and global we get, the less important the spoken word has become, and in e-mail clarity is critical," said Sean Phillips, recruitment director at another Silicon Valley corporation, [Applera](#), a supplier of equipment for life science research, where most employees have advanced degrees. "Considering how highly educated our people are, many can't write clearly in their day-to-day work."

Some \$2.9 billion of the \$3.1 billion the National Commission on Writing estimates that corporations spend each year on remedial training goes to help current employees, with the rest spent on new hires. The corporations surveyed were in the mining, construction, manufacturing, transportation, finance, insurance, real estate and service industries, but not in wholesale, retail, agriculture, forestry or fishing, the commission said. Nor did the estimate include spending by government agencies to improve the writing of public servants.

An entire educational industry has developed to offer remedial writing instruction to adults, with hundreds of public and private universities, for-profit schools and freelance teachers offering evening classes as well as workshops, video and online courses in business and technical writing.

Kathy Keenan, a onetime legal proofreader who teaches business writing at the University of California Extension, Santa Cruz, said she sought to dissuade students from sending business messages in the crude shorthand they learned to tap out on their pagers as teenagers.

"HI KATHY i am sending u the assignmnet again," one student wrote to her recently. "i had sent you the assignment earlier but i didnt get a respond. If u get this assgnment could u please respond . thanking u for ur cooperation."

Most of her students are midcareer professionals in high-tech industries, Ms. Keenan said.

The Sharonview Federal Credit Union in Charlotte, N.C., asked about 15 employees to take a remedial writing course. Angela Tate, a mortgage processor, said the course eventually bolstered her confidence in composing e-mail, which has replaced much work she previously did by phone, but it was a daunting experience, since she had been out of school for years. "It was a challenge all the way through," Ms. Tate said.

Even C.E.O.'s need writing help, said Roger S. Peterson, a freelance writer in Rocklin, Calif., who frequently coaches executives. "Many of these guys write in inflated language that desperately needs a laxative," Mr. Peterson said, and not a few are defensive. "They're in denial, and who's going to argue with the boss?"

But some realize their shortcomings and pay Mr. Peterson to help them improve. Don Morrison, a onetime auditor at Deloitte & Touche who has built a successful consulting business, is among them.

"I was too wordy," Mr. Morrison said. "I liked long, convoluted passages rather than simple four-word sentences. And I had a predilection for underlining words and throwing in multiple exclamation points. Finally Roger threatened to rip the exclamation key off my keyboard."

Exclamation points were an issue when Linda Landis Andrews, who teaches at the University of Illinois at Chicago, led a workshop in May for midcareer executives at an automotive corporation based in the Midwest. Their exasperated supervisor had insisted that the men improve their writing.

"I get a memo from them and cannot figure out what they're trying to say," the supervisor wrote Ms. Andrews.

When at her request the executives produced letters they had written to a supplier who had failed to deliver parts on time, she was horrified to see that tone-deaf writing had turned a minor business snarl into a corporate confrontation moving toward litigation.

"They had allowed a hostile tone to creep into the letters," she said. "They didn't seem to understand that those letters were just toxic."

"People think that throwing multiple exclamation points into a business letter will make their point forcefully," Ms. Andrews said. "I tell them they're allowed two exclamation points in their whole life."

Not everyone agrees. Kaitlin Duck Sherwood of San Francisco, author of a popular how-to manual on effective e-mail, argued in an interview that exclamation points could help convey intonation, thereby avoiding confusion in some e-mail.

"If you want to indicate stronger emphasis, use all capital letters and toss in some extra exclamation points," Ms. Sherwood advises in her guide, available at www.webfoot.com, where she offers a vivid example:

">Should I boost the power on the thrombo?

"NO!!!! If you turn it up to eleven, you'll overheat the motors, and IT MIGHT EXPLODE!!!"

Dr. Hogan, who founded his online Business Writing Center a decade ago after years of teaching composition at Illinois State University here, says that the use of multiple exclamation points and other nonstandard punctuation like the :-) symbol, are fine for personal e-mail but that companies have erred by allowing experimental writing devices to flood into business writing.

He scrolled through his computer, calling up examples of incoherent correspondence sent to him by prospective students.

"E-mails - that are received from Jim and I are not either getting open or not being responded to," the purchasing manager at a construction company in Virginia wrote in one memorandum that Dr. Hogan called to his screen. "I wanted to let everyone know that when Jim and I are sending out e-mails (example- who is to be picking up parcels) I am wanting for who ever the e-mail goes to to respond back to the e-mail. Its important that Jim and I knows that the person, intended, had read the e-mail. This gives an acknowledgment that the task is being completed. I am asking for a simple little 2 sec. Note that says "ok", "I got it", or Alright."

The construction company's human resources director forwarded the memorandum to Dr. Hogan while enrolling the purchasing manager in a writing course.

"E-mail has just erupted like a weed, and instead of considering what to say when they write, people now just let thoughts drool out onto the screen," Dr. Hogan said. "It has companies at their wits' end."