Bad Writing Costs Businesses Billions

Updated Apr. 13, 2017 / Published Oct. 16, 2016
By Josh Bernoff

It's not just a chore to wade through the badly written memos, emails, and other lousy business communication—this inefficiency costs us insane amounts of money.

Photo Illustration by Kelly Caminero/The Daily Beast

There is a fundamental inefficiency at the heart of American business. It is right in front of all of our faces, and yet we fail to recognize it.

It's the fuzzy, terrible writing we slog through every day at work. And it's costing American businesses nearly $400 billion every year.

Think about it. You start your day wading through first-draft emails from colleagues who fail to come to the point. You consume reports that don't make clear what's happening or what your management should do about it. The websites, marketing materials, and press releases from your suppliers are filled with jargon and meaningless superlatives. This problem is as common as rust, and just as welcome; in my survey of businesspeople who write at work, 81 percent agreed with the statement: "Poorly written material wastes a lot of my time."

Poor writing creates a drag on everything you do. It functions like a tax, sapping your profits, and I can quantify it. American workers spend 22 percent of their work time reading; higher compensated workers read more. According to my analysis, America is spending 6 percent of total wages on time wasted attempting to get meaning out of poorly written material. Every company, every manager, every professional pays this tax, which consumes $396 billion of our national income. That's more than half of what we pay for Medicare—but the poor writing tax pays for nothing but waste.

We're so immersed in this stuff that we hardly notice it anymore. I'm talking about job descriptions like this one, from a health care company:

"The Area Vice President, Enterprise Customers will develop and manage a sustainable strategic relationship that transforms the current commercial model by creating joint value that results in the ongoing reduction of costs, continuous process improvement, growth and profitability for both partners with the ability to export key learnings."

How much time did the HR department and the job candidates waste trying to figure that out?

How about the lede from ++ Samsung's recent statement ++ [https://news.samsung.com/global/statement-on-galaxy-note7] about its smartphones?

"Samsung is committed to producing the highest quality products and we take every incident report from our valued customers very seriously. In response to recently reported cases of the new Galaxy Note7, we conducted a thorough investigation and found a battery cell issue."

Battery cell issue? The phones are catching on fire—but you'd never know it from the company's statement, which mentions only "incidents." *Say what you mean.*

Of all the serious problems in the American workplace, this one is the most solvable. And we can solve it one company, one culture, one worker at a time.

Source: https://www.thedailybeast.com/bad-writing-costs-businesses-billions

The first step is to adopt what I call “The Iron Imperative” in everything you write: *treat the reader’s time as more valuable than your own*. To embrace it means that every time you send an email or write a document, you must take a moment to structure it for maximum readability and meaning. We are lazy; we’d rather save our own time than someone else’s. But writers who adopt The Iron Imperative stand out in the workplace for clarity and efficiency, and are more likely to get ahead. Workplace cultures that adopt it will reduce their poor writing tax.

Recognize that everybody reads on a screen now—either a smartphone or a computer screen. That reduces attention spans and concentration, which in turn demands a radical rethink of the way you communicate in writing. In this environment, brevity must become a core value. Regardless of what you write, the title or subject line and the first two sentences must carry the payload. Unlike Samsung in its press release, you must never bury the lede.

People use jargon to impress other people—but for each person you impress, many others are just confused. Clear, plain language communicates better, is easier to consume, and is more likely to get its point across to more people.

A primary cause of incoherent writing is committeespeak—documents that become a pastiche of contradictory comments inserted based on management reviewers. In my survey, only 32 percent of writers thought that their process for collecting and combining feedback worked well. Along with clarity, brevity, and plain language, a disciplined and coherent review process goes a long way toward improving the quality of the documents we’re struggling to get meaning from.

It’s not that hard to embrace clear, pointed, and direct writing that doesn’t waste the reader’s time. Commit to do that, and to eliminate the poor writing tax at your company. You’ll get ahead. And you’ll make American business a little more efficient while you’re at it.

--

Josh Bernoff has been a professional writer for more than 30 years, including two decades as a well-known technology analyst. He is the coauthor of three books on business strategy, and his new book from HarperBusiness is Writing Without Bullshit: Boost Your Career by Saying What You Mean.

Source: https://www.thedailybeast.com/bad-writing-costs-businesses-billions