



FINANCE &
MANAGEMENT
FACULTY

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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Finance and Management Faculty
Chartered Accountants' Hall
Moorgate Place
London EC2R 6EA
T +44 (0)20 7920 8508
F +44 (0)20 7920 8784
E fmfac@icaew.com
icaew.com/fmfac

Emma Riddell
Acting head of faculty
T +44 (0)20 7920 8749
E emma.riddell@icaew.com

Jennifer Chong
Technical manager
T +44 (0)20 7920 8661
E jennifer.chong@icaew.com

Rick Payne
Finance direction programme
T +44 (0)20 7920 8451
E rick.payne@icaew.com

Aude Bezler
Services manager
T +44 (0)20 7920 8508
E aude.bezler@icaew.com

The aim of this series of special reports is to provide faculty members with a review of a topical theme within the subject areas of finance and management, offering both analysis of the relevant theory and review of the practical application of appropriate management techniques.

Comments and suggestions should be addressed to Emma Riddell.

The information contained in this and previous issues of this publication is available (to faculty members only) on the faculty website at icaew.com/fmfac

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FOREWORD

KEEPING IT SIMPLE

As many members will know, the Twitter concept is, in theory, a perfect example of well-designed modern communication – a maximum of 140 characters to express a thought or a fact. This is intended to concentrate the sender's mind, to dispense with any unnecessary verbiage and transmit the core message concisely and clearly.

However, although many 'tweets' do indeed live up to this aspiration, it has become obvious that the sheer volume of tweets out there, plus the often hasty and careless use of them, has not simplified our lives. Indeed in some ways it has confused and complicated communication between us while also piling even more techno-pressure on all of us. The lesson is that to use Twitter effectively, you need to hone your tweeting skills – and think about your real communication objective.

Getting your message across is an increasingly challenging task in this information-overloaded world. Whether you are negotiating a deal, giving a presentation, writing a report or using social media, your communication skills need to be sharper than ever. Amid the many competing demands of letters, meetings, tweets, conferences, emails and documents – such as this special report – only the best communication will truly make its mark.

This challenge applies to everyone in business – but in particular to the accountant, whose core number-crunching talents need to be allied with an ability to communicate the vital financial information on which businesses depend.

In this special report, we have assembled a number of articles from experts in various aspects of communication, providing a guide to the key issues that accountants should be aware of and offering some practical tips for improving performance. These areas include interpersonal skills, public speaking, communicating information and numbers, social media and communicating across cultures and generations.

One of the traditional challenges for accountants is presenting at a range of events, both internal and external – we offer some guidance on how to achieve the best results. Likewise, we look at ways to perfect your written communications of all kinds, ensuring that the key messages are conveyed with clarity, in a manner which will influence and persuade others. In particular, there is often a need to be able to explain and present financial concepts to non-financial people – we offer some tips on ensuring that your message is not lost in technical complexity.

Another vital aspect of communication is the context, for example the way in which meetings are organised or the layout of written documents – here again, we provide some advice. At the end of this report you will also find some suggestions of further reading on these specialist topics.

I do hope that you will enjoy this report and that we have succeeded in communicating these messages well to you. If you do have any comments on it, I would be delighted to hear your feedback – please convey your thoughts clearly and use whatever medium of communication you prefer!

EMMA RIDDELL



Emma Riddell is acting head of Finance & Management Faculty, ICAEW.



COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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COMMUNICATION AND INFLUENCE

How do you get your point across in the best possible way? At a faculty event **Rick Payne** provided both model and map for becoming a better communicator. Helen Fearnley reports.

The outsourcing of many of finance’s former everyday duties means that now, more than ever, it needs excellent communication and influencing skills if it is to make the grade as a true partner in the business.

Rick Payne reinforced this point by showing that in the *Financial Times*’ ‘Appointments’ page recently all but one advert stipulated ‘communications skills’. Further, the standard of such skills had to be ‘first class’, ‘outstanding’, ‘exceptional’. So, it would seem, these abilities are *de rigueur* for anyone hoping to progress in finance.

The good news, for those doubtful of their abilities in this area, is that anyone can learn communication and influencing abilities according to Payne. However, he stressed that, as with most things in life, the learning process involves a degree of dedication.

Hence to achieve real results requires:

- motivation;
- effort;
- practice;
- guidance; and
- feedback

The last two of these, he advised, can be provided by a colleague or a coach.

The model

First, Payne introduced his audience to a model for communication (see Figure 1, below). As the diagram indicates, the knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs of each participant in a communication will act as unique filters on the visual, auditory and kinaesthetic cues received. (Kinaesthetic refers to feelings and sensations).

As he pointed out, this interpretation is a necessarily subjective activity. Not everyone will have the same abilities in interpreting these cues; a colour-blind person, for example, will have a lower ability to interpret colour-related signals, while a musician will have a greater appreciation of the nuances of sound. Even those with the same perceptual skills will be influenced by different personal histories, attitudes and cultural backgrounds into different conclusions.

So for each participant the sum of their own interpretations of these cues in a communication will provide a personal map, based on those interpretations. This map is not objectively ‘right’: it is simply that person’s ‘take’ based on the feedback they observed, but coloured by their own attitudes and standards. As Payne put it ‘the map is not the territory’.



Nevertheless, it is human nature to believe one’s own interpretation is the ‘right’ one. One experiment demonstrating this tendency involved asking people in the street to wear a sandwich board in return for a payment. While the responses of those asked to wear the board were evenly split – 50% agreeing to wear it, 50% refusing – their personal estimation was that 90% of those asked would make the same decision as they had themselves! So in any communication, it is likely that other participants believe theirs is the accurate interpretation.

The foundations of influence

The key foundation stones for building influence, said Payne, are:

- rapport;
- listening; and
- trust.

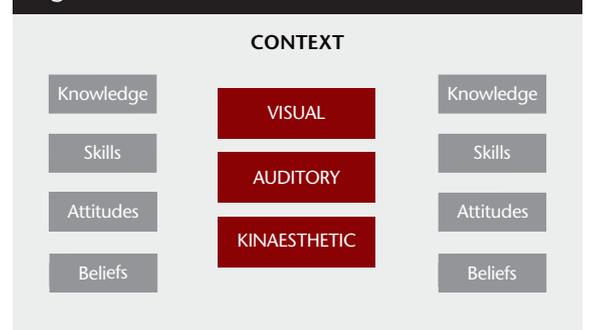
Rapport

Rapport – genuine respect and the desire to build relationships – is the basis of all successful communication. To bring some practical understanding of this subject, Payne asked that the audience carry out a two-part exercise in pairs – each member of a pair electing to be either ‘Person A’ or ‘Person B’.

In the first part of the exercise, A had to argue the case for an opinion (of their own choice) while B was required to agree with A verbally while mismatching A’s body language. In part two, it was B’s turn to argue the case for a viewpoint, while this time A disagreed verbally, while matching B’s body language. After this (surprisingly difficult) challenge, he revealed that the usual results of this experiment are that when B agrees but mismatches A’s body language, A does not believe the verbal concurrence, does not trust B, does not feel listened to, and loses his/her train of thought. Added to which, B finds it very difficult to appear to agree, without the benefit of the appropriate body language.

On the other hand when A disagrees with B verbally, but matches B’s body language, the result is altogether

Figure 1 A MODEL FOR COMMUNICATION



‘Through listening, and the creation of rapport, you develop credibility and eventually establish trust’

more acceptable for the speaker. B accepts that A does not agree, B trusts A, B feels listened to and respected, B is able to maintain focus. A, however, finds the exercise difficult to do – particularly if he/she does not, in reality, agree with B.

Hence, body language – in particular matching (or mirroring) the other person – is demonstrably very powerful. Indeed, it seems to provide more convincing feedback than language, although the provider of that feedback will always feel more comfortable if their vocal and physical behaviour are aligned.

The keys to matching involve copying the other’s:

- body language;
- energy levels;
- pace (of speaking);
- breathing; and
- choice of words.

However, Payne stressed, while these actions can accelerate rapport, they cannot, alone, produce it. It is not possible to ‘manufacture’ a non-existent rapport.

Listening

While it is tempting to regard communication and influence as being purely about what you say, in fact listening effectively is probably an even more important skill. Listening builds trust.

Some people just need to be heard and many will often develop their own solutions by articulating their issues to someone else. His top tips for doing this effectively were:

- even before the encounter, make it your intention to pay attention to the other(s);
- watch their body language, as well as what they verbalise;
- use speed of processing – ie your ability to listen and comprehend faster than the other person can speak – to listen more deeply and consider what is being said;
- empty your mind of other competing preoccupations (by writing them down if necessary);
- minimise the chances of external noise and interruption;
- use ‘minimal encouragers’ (such as ‘uh huh’, ‘tell me more’) to get the speaker to say more;
- ask additional questions;
- suspend judgement;
- be culturally aware – words, language and gestures are used differently in different cultures; and
- paraphrase the speaker’s words.

Paraphrasing is particularly useful in establishing that the other’s message has been fully understood. Additionally, substituting an apparent synonym in this paraphrasing of the speaker’s words can throw up illuminating clues as to differences in each others’ interpretation. The finance director whose proud description of his figures as ‘quite

creative’ is paraphrased by the chief executive as ‘misleading’ will probably not feel well listened to at all!

Trust

Through listening, and the creation of rapport, you develop credibility and eventually establish trust. Trust is the one feature without which, Payne stressed, you are unlikely to have influence. One of the most interesting aspects of trust, he continued, is the difficulty of repairing it once broken.

On the subject of trust repair, he described an intriguing experiment in which a fictional accountant was featured as having transgressed the professional rules either through lack of competence (failing to look up the requisite guidelines, for example) or through intent. In the first case trust was more likely to be repaired – ie those questioned would find it easier to give the culprit a second chance – if he apologised, taking full responsibility for the incompetence. However, in the case of deliberate wrongdoing, trust was more readily re-established if he spread the blame (eg claiming his boss insisted on the behaviour). (See Kim et al, 2006, *When More Blame is Better than Less in Organisational Behaviour and Human Decision Processes.*)

Influencing styles

The would-be wielder of influence needs to tailor his or her style to the objectives and context of the discussion. One way of classifying their choices is as follows:

- persuading;
- consensus building;
- visioning;
- asserting; and
- moving to process/withdrawing.

Persuasion involves using evidence, figures, facts and logical argument. This is a very effective style and one at which finance professionals are skilled. Here a useful tip is to employ only your three strongest arguments. Use too many arguments, Payne explained, and others will ‘pick off’ your weakest ones and undermine your case. Or, as he put it, ‘Make your case succinctly... and then shut up.’

If persuasion does not – or does not seem likely to – win the day, consensus building may be the key to success. This involves using the listening skills described above, discussion with an open mind, and is most appropriate when some sort of commitment is required rather than just compliance.

Visioning, by contrast, is used when no specific action is required from the other parties. It is epitomised by the ‘rah-rah’, energy-raising speech for generating enthusiasm and establishing shared values and goals. An example of this style is Martin Luther King’s ‘I have a dream’ speech. To get a handle on this style of influencing, Payne recommended thinking of a speaker you admire and copying their approach.

Box 1 COMMUNICATIONS MAP

WHAT	WHY	WHO	WHEN	WHERE	MONTH 1	MONTH 2
Newsletter	Key information Achievements Social	Communications department	Quarterly	Distributed	–	1
Team meetings	Localise key information Feedback Team objectives	Team manager	Weekly	As arranged	4	4
Intranet	Contacts Department information Policy reference	Department representatives	Ongoing	All PCs	–	–
One-to-ones	Performance Management Development	Manager	Monthly	As arranged	1	1

This article was first published in *F&M* 132, April 2006.

A recording of this event is available at www.icaew.com/fmfinfluencing

Asserting, in turn, is most appropriate when you do not require commitment, but you do need compliance to get the job done. As a style, it is about establishing rights, standards and expectations – and having sanctions to be applied for non-observance.

Finally, withdrawing or moving to process may be the way to go when no progress seems to be being made – if time is being wasted on fruitless discussion, tempers are fraying, emotions getting in the way. By pulling back, concentrating instead on what is the required outcome of the proposed course of action, more objectivity can be brought to the encounter and a better outcome reached.

Conclusion

FDs and other finance professionals know that the acquisition of communication and influencing abilities –

whether individual or corporate – is key. But where should it feature on their ‘to do’ lists?

As Payne observed, these skills have been taken seriously since Aristotle’s work on ‘Rhetoric’ – built on the skills developed by the Greeks to retrieve lands lost in battle, through argument and persuasion. And rather more recently, Margaret Thatcher underwent extensive voice-coaching, before she emerged on the national and world stage as a convincing communicator.

More pertinent for those in finance, perhaps, is the corporate sector’s obvious expectation that these skills should now be part and parcel of their professional expertise. For those expecting to succeed in the business partnering role in future, being an able communicator should come high in their list of priorities: it is not an optional extra.

MANAGING INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

Payne considered the best way to go about internal corporate communications – by concentrating on matching your business objectives to your communication objectives, assessing how you will approach the exercise and what channels to use, and accepting the inevitable ‘no-wins’ which will accompany the exercise.

Determining your objectives

Determining your objectives involves deciding:

- how your communication programme will support the business objectives;
- the target audience (all staff? Only management?) and how to tailor the information to its needs; and
- your expectations in terms of impact on knowledge, behaviours, attitudes and beliefs.

Making an assessment and deciding on an approach

The assessment and decision phase involves determining:

- the impact of current communications, probably through the use of staff surveys, focus groups etc (with the accompanying raising of expectations);
- the appropriate use of ‘push’ (insistence) or ‘pull’ (encouragement) tactics;

- the channels to be used – ie face-to-face, team or one-to-one meetings, management presentations, lunches, newsletters, memos, email, internet, chat rooms; and
- the form of your ‘communications map’ – which will convey the what, why, who, when and where of your message (see box, above).

Implementation needs to follow good project disciplines and be subject to an ongoing process of assessment to ensure that objectives are being met.

The ‘no-wins’

Despite your best efforts, you need to accept that there will inevitably be some ‘no-win’ outcomes. For instance, if you tell people the bare minimum some of them will complain about being kept in the dark; but give out a lot of information and others will feel they haven’t the time to absorb it. And if you tell people relatively late there will be some complaints of it all being too sudden; but tell people early and some will consider the plans too uncertain and underdeveloped.

However, Payne stressed that good internal communication programmes do have business benefits and the majority of people will appreciate that you are trying to keep them informed.

MAKING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS 'DO-ABLE'

Often you realise a difficult conversation could have gone much better – you just do not quite know how. Below, **Jennifer MacKay** explains what you can do in the future to make those tricky exchanges more manageable.

We have all had conversations that didn't go as we had hoped – eg having to ask a colleague not to be late again for a client meeting. If, in such circumstances, you have said to yourself 'I wish I had held my ground more', 'I wish I hadn't lost my temper', or something similarly regretful, then read on for constructive advice.

First, though, you need to recognise what does not work. Faced with a difficult conversation many of us tend to react instinctually with fight or flight. Fighters adopt an 'I'm going to sort this out once and for all' philosophy. Their 'speak first, think later' approach favours a loud voice and big gestures. 'Flight-ers', on the other hand, hope that if they do nothing the situation will miraculously disappear on its own. Yet neither option encourages dialogue or offers long lasting solutions.

Of course then there is an entire breed of us who convince ourselves that the conversation is doomed even before it starts. We ignore our past communication success preferring to cast doubt on our ability to manage the conversation. How often has your predicted disaster conversation turned out to be illuminating, productive and satisfying. You are not alone if you have ever said 'actually... it went really well'. Wherever you sit on the 'conversation comfort continuum', it is worth reviewing the following steps that will build your confidence.

A conversation is an exploration

A conversation is an exploration. It should lead to a greater understanding, but often does not. And when a difficult conversation turns disastrous, the effects can linger.

Far from being just about who is right or wrong, conversations are also about perception, interpretation and values. Is it any wonder we wake up in the night worrying about how to handle the situation?

The good news is that dealing with uncomfortable conversations is a skill you can learn like any other.

The three important steps

A constructive approach towards handling difficult conversations is based on an understanding of the following three steps:

- learning how to deliver your message;
- understanding how certain language will make your audience more receptive to your message; and
- knowing how to structure your conversation to present your side.

1. Delivering the message

Mastering eye contact, controlling your voice and managing your body language will project confidence and enhance your message.

Eye contact

If you look away when you are nervous or thinking, you are not alone – it is a hardwired reaction. Unfortunately it

'Far from being just about who is right or wrong, conversations are also about perception, interpretation and values'

does not do us any favours when we want to project confidence. You may be clearly outlining expectations, but by looking down, at the ceiling or out of the window you send out the message 'don't worry too much about the words, because I'm probably not going to "see" them through anyway'.

Fight the temptation to look away. With practice and determination, you can maintain eye contact even during uncomfortable situations, so:

- make steady eye contact when stating your points – it shows you are serious;
- maintain eye contact when someone speaks – to demonstrate that you want to be fair and listen to their opinion; and
- remember, steady eye contact does not mean you have to stare.

Voice

Under pressure, our voice can abandon us. Our mouth goes dry. We speak really fast to get the words out before we lose our nerve. Then there is the 'forgetting-to-breathe' bit.

Instead:

- speak slowly – a measured pace says you are in control. Check that your pace is purposeful and deliberate;
- remember to pause – ask the question and wait for the response. Do not be afraid of silence. Wait it out. Our urge to fill the air space often results in us backing down; and
- monitor your voice volume – tension may arise during a stressful conversation, and raising the volume will automatically raise the temperature. Stay calm and keep the volume down.

Body language

Since fidgeting signals nervousness, you need to control your gestures and focus your attention. So:

- do not be a doodler or toe-tapper; and
- turn off the mobile phone.



Jennifer MacKay is a communication expert and consultant trainer. UK based, her work has also taken her to Europe and the Middle East.
jennifer@jumpraining.co.uk

'Imagine your conversation as a dance, in which you need to lead your partner through the steps'

Box 1 MIND YOUR LANGUAGE

AVOID	SUBSTITUTE
You don't know what you are talking about.	'You' language can be antagonistic. Take ownership with 'I' language. Saying 'I don't agree with that suggestion' is still assertive and makes the discussion about the issue and not the person.
But... however	'But' and 'however' link a positive to a reprimand. Replace these words with 'and' or 'going forward'. The sentence, 'your report writing style is clear, going forward please include relevant examples' is more likely to inspire change.
Always, never	Absolutes like these make you look lazy. Be specific and give an example, ie 'on Friday at the client meeting'; 'in your last three reports'; 'at the quarterly reviews'.
Um, er, you know	Waffle words undermine your conviction: use a pause instead.
Why...?	The word 'why' can put people on the defensive: try to replace it with a 'what...?' or 'how...?' For example, change 'Why did you do that?' to 'What led you to make that decision?' or 'How did you come to that decision?'

2. Minding your language

You really do need to 'mind your language', as some words draw in the listener while others simply alienate. Box 1, left, is a list of common offenders.

3. Structuring the conversation

Following a structure sets us free to concentrate on the content of the conversation. So imagine your conversation as a dance, in which you need to lead your partner through the steps. (See Box 2, below)

Other tips

In addition to these three main steps further useful tips for handling those difficult conversations are:

- prepare beforehand by making notes;
- think 'outcome', so you know what result you want;
- remember your relationship with the other party is important; and
- if things get tense, take five minutes out to cool down.

Conclusion

We cannot escape difficult conversations, but we can get better at handling them. Controlling our physical delivery, selecting our words and 'choreographing' our 'DANCE' can make all the difference.

This article was first published in *F&M175*, March 2010. See also Jennifer MacKay's article 'Connecting with the smartphone generation' on page 30 of this report.

Box 2 DANCE-ING THROUGH DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

To make sure you do lead the difficult exchange, rather than follow someone else's lead – or lose the plot entirely – prepare by doing the following 'DANCE' analysis of the underlying issues:

Determine

Ask yourself what the problem is – a sample 'determine'-based statement is 'I have noticed that you have been spending time outside of your lunch hour surfing the internet for personal reasons...'

Acknowledge the impact

Look at how this problem affects you, others, or the organisation. An example of a resultant statement is, 'When you do this, it appears as if you don't have enough work. I am concerned about the effect it has on team motivation.'

Negotiate

Ask yourself:

- What has created this situation?
- What do you want to happen now?
- What are the options?

In the example we are using, the 'negotiate' part of the analysis could give rise to the following – 'Is there a reason that requires you to spend work time on personal issues? People look to you for leadership. I would like you to limit your personal use of the internet to lunch time.'

Commit to change

Decide on what you would like the other party to commit to changing – ie what agreed action is to be taken?

The questions arising from this 'commit to change' element of your analysis could be, 'Is there any reason why this is not possible? Is there anything I can do to help? Are we agreed?'

Evaluate

Consider how you will evaluate the progress of the outcome. This could give rise to a statement such as, 'Let's meet next Friday to see how this is working.'

INFORMALITY IN MEETINGS AS A RECIPE FOR FAILURE

Max Atkinson shows how to curb the culture of informality that can prevent meetings from achieving their objectives.

Some years ago, I was approached by a large organisation about a problem that was wasting them a great deal of time and money: 'We're having terrible trouble with our meetings. Ones scheduled for two hours are going on all day – and even then we hardly ever get any further than half way through the agenda.'

My immediate reply was to ask: 'Would you describe your organisation's culture as rather informal?' – to which he said 'Not "rather" informal; we pride ourselves as being very informal indeed.'

Research in this area suggests that 'formal' procedures become necessary whenever conversation fails to get some particular job done.

Why do we need meetings?

The short answer is that conversation doesn't work very well if you want to reach binding decisions within finite time limits. The main reasons for this are:

- there may be too many people present for conversational turn-taking to work smoothly;
- without someone in the chair to control and direct who gets to speak when, those who are most confident in selecting themselves to speak will dominate the meeting; or
- without someone in the chair to control the agenda, the meeting would be continually going off the subject.

By looking a little closer at these, we can see what the key roles of anyone in the chair should always be – and why dreams of 'greater informality' are doomed to failure.

1. Numbers and turn-taking

As the size of a group increases, the more likely it is that the self-regulating nature of conversation will start to break down. If you think about a dinner party where four people are present, it's easy enough to listen to and participate in a single conversation in which everyone takes it in turns to speak.

If there are eight people around a table, very few of us are willing to wait for a one in seven chance of getting to say something when a current speaker finishes. That's why we're likely to start up our own conversation with people sitting nearby.

However, when there are six people sitting at the table, things get much more ambiguous and uncertain: are we really supposed to wait patiently for a one in five chance of speaking next, or dare we start up a separate conversation without offending our host?

The implication of this for meetings is that it's important to make sure that, however many participants there may be, all of them will be able to focus on a single flow of talk and that the meeting doesn't degenerate into several simultaneous conversations. So, to be on the safe side, my advice is: whenever there are more than four people involved it is essential that someone should take the chair.

2. Controlling turn-taking

When we talk of people 'hogging the conversation', we usually mean that they are always selecting themselves to speak and/or that, once started, they go on for far too long. At meetings, the trouble is that these 'militant self-selectors' are not necessarily the ones with the best ideas, just as some of those who'd rather wait to be selected to speak may have useful things to say that never get heard.

In the 'failed' meetings mentioned above, this problem was very marked indeed. There were two or three individuals who completely dominated the proceedings and four or five who hardly said anything at all. What's more, the chairman let them get away with it and there were periods when 20-30 turns would pass by without him saying anything at all.

It may be an 'extremely formal' meeting where every other turn reverts to the chair and where everyone there has to address each other 'through the chair' – but such 'formalities' do at least have the advantage of curbing the garrulous and enabling the chair to make sure that the 'reluctant self-selectors' do get a turn every now and then.

Although it may not be necessary to use rules of procedure quite as 'formal' as that, my advice is that whoever is in the chair must take active steps to curb the 'militant self-selectors' and provide plenty of slots for the 'reluctant self-selectors'.

3. Keeping to the agenda

Given that it's normal in conversation for the subject matter to chop and change in different and unpredictable directions, it's hardly surprising that this also happens if the chair makes no effort to monitor and control what gets talked about.

By the time the dominant participants in the 'failed' meetings had exchanged thirty turns since the chairman had last bothered to speak, the topic had drifted so far away from the agenda that it bore no connection whatsoever to the item they were supposed to be talking about. Nor did the chair make any effort to restrain any of them from speaking for as long as they liked.

So my final piece of advice is: ensure that the chair monitors and controls the agenda. Otherwise, your meetings will degenerate into an unruly conversation that stands little chance of achieving its objectives.

See also Max Atkinson's article 'Winning with words' on page 8 of this report.



Max Atkinson is a communications consultant, blogger and author of *Lend Me Your Ears: All You Need to Know about Making Speeches and Presentations* (2004) and *Speech-making and Presentation Made Easy* (2008).
maxatkinson@speaking.co.uk

WINNING WITH WORDS

A powerful speech is as much about good structure as it is about effective delivery. Here **Max Atkinson** offers simple tips for improving your impact in speaking and arguing.

When sitting in an audience, everyone can instantly tell the difference between an effective and an ineffective speaker. But what most people don't realise is that all impressive speakers rely on the same verbal techniques for getting their messages across in a striking and persuasive way – regardless of subject matter, the occasion or the particular purpose of a speech or presentation. A small minority of people seem to do it 'naturally' without having to make much effort. But, for the majority of us who are not born with this ability, there is some encouraging news. First, anyone can use these techniques to improve their own effectiveness. Second, they are so simple that anyone can master them very quickly. And, because powerfully constructed lines are easy to deliver confidently and decisively, they can help to improve anyone's performance.

How you say it can be as important as what you say

The four main techniques summarised here are what all of us would have been taught under the heading of 'rhetoric' in the days when classics was still part of the educational curriculum.

The starting point is an obvious and basic fact about language, namely that, for any message you might ever want to get across, there is always a choice between different ways of saying the same thing. The alternatives in the two columns given in Box 1 (below) mean more or less the same, but their impact is very different.

Although most people will agree that the second of each of these sounds more impressive than the first, it's unlikely that many will have noticed that they all share a similar structure: each of the (B) versions

See also Max Atkinson's article 'Informality in meetings as a recipe for failure' on page 7 of this report.

Box 1 OPTIONS

OPTION A

I can't decide whether or not to commit suicide.

Nobody is going to make me change my economic policies.

I hope that racial discrimination in America will disappear within a generation.

OPTION B

To be, or not to be, that is the question.

You turn if you want to. The Lady's not for turning.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character.

involves the use of a simple contrast – between 'you turning' and 'the lady not turning', between 'to be' and 'not to be' and between 'the colour of their skin' and 'the content of their character'. As such, they are all examples of the first of four main rhetorical techniques that can help to get points across with greater impact.

1. Contrasts

Many famous lines that have survived beyond the immediate moment of delivery to make it into news headlines and be recorded in dictionaries of quotations have involved the use of a simple contrast:

A: 'That's one small step for man;

B: 'one giant leap for mankind.'

Neil Armstrong

A: 'Two thousand years ago, the proudest boast was "civis Romanus sum".

B: 'Today, in the world of freedom, the proudest boast is "Ich bin ein Berliner".'

John F Kennedy

Contrasts can also be just as effectively used in business presentations. When it comes to highlighting dramatic changes over time, for example, a simple contrast between two dates and two facts (as in the earlier quote from Kennedy) is an extremely adaptable way of getting a point across. Rather than spoon-feeding the audience with lots of data that they're unlikely to remember, it lets them to draw their own conclusion – as in this similar example from a famous management guru:

A: 'In 1970 it took 108 guys five days to unload a timber ship.

B: 'That same activity today takes eight people one day.'

Tom Peters

And here's a Nobel Prize-winning economist using the same technique:

A: 'Before the Iraq war the price of oil was twenty five dollars a barrel.

B: 'Now it's over a hundred and ten dollars a barrel.'

Joseph Stiglitz

Dry-sounding statements can often be improved by converting them into contrasts. In this next case, the speaker's key message was: 'In order to continue in business, the company is being forced to rationalize various aspects of its organisation'. Knowing that it sounded rather dull, he conveyed a greater sense of urgency by saying:

A: 'Rationalisation is not an option.

B: 'It's an absolute necessity for survival.'

'A simple and effective way of increasing the attention of your listeners is to get them wondering what's coming next'

Contrasts can also be used to create striking conclusions to a presentation, as in this from a speaker who wanted to leave his audience with the message: 'The various points I have outlined in this presentation point to the need for us to do even better in the future.'

A: 'The important thing is not how good we are today,
B: but how much better we need to be tomorrow.'

2. Puzzles and questions

A simple and effective way of increasing the attention of your listeners is to get them wondering what's coming next – by posing a puzzle or asking a rhetorical question – and then providing a solution to the puzzle. Here, former prime minister Harold Macmillan gets his audience wondering what wise thing President Reagan had done:

PUZZLE: 'Then President Reagan did a very wise thing.

SOLUTION: 'He dismissed all the academic economists in Washington.'

A few years earlier, Ronald Reagan himself had used exactly the same technique when announcing his candidacy for the Republican nomination for president:

PUZZLE: 'This is a moment of quite some mixed emotions for me.

SOLUTION: 'I haven't been on prime-time television for quite a while.'

In business presentations, the technique can be used in a number of important ways. One is to avoid hackneyed openings like the perennial 'In this presentation I'm going to talk about...' by attracting the audience's immediate attention by posing a puzzle.

For example, this speaker was about to talk about the need to increase customer awareness of the high quality of his company's services:

PUZZLE: 'I'd like to start by posing a question – is there any point in being good at something if people don't know you're good at it?

SOLUTION: 'The obvious answer, in our business at least, is "no"...'

A similar opening was used by a finance director, who had consulted a dictionary of quotations and made the intriguing discovery that there were no famous quotes that included the word 'finance'. But he did find plenty that included the word 'money', so he adapted one from novelist Somerset Maugham by changing the word 'money' to 'finance':

PUZZLE: 'Finance is like a sixth sense.

SOLUTION: 'Without it, you can't make full use of the other five.'

Rhetorical questions can also work as a simple but effective way of linking from one section of a presentation to the next, for example:

- 'That's what the business looks like in the UK, but how is it shaping up in the rest of Europe?'; or
- 'So much for the problems; what about the solutions?'

3. Three-part lists

During his victory speech on winning the US presidential election, Barack Obama used 29 three-part lists – at a rate of about one every 21 seconds. No one complained that he'd used one of the most simple rhetorical techniques so repetitively and the speech was widely hailed for its brilliance. This was probably because saying things in threes not only sounds very natural but is an important weapon in the armoury of all effective speakers.

Lists of three can be made up of three identical words (eg Tony Blair's Education, education, education), three different words (eg Liberté, égalité, fraternité), three phrases (eg Abraham Lincoln's Government of the people by the people for the people), three clauses (eg Gandhi's 'Happiness is when what you think, what you say, and what you do are in harmony') or three sentences (eg Martin Luther King's 'I've been up the mountain, and I've looked over, and I've seen the promised land').

In the last of these examples, the third item was slightly longer than the first three – and this a common feature of many very famous three-part lists, such as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and the inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness (American Declaration of Independence). If, as is often the case, your third point is also the most important of the three, making it longer is an implicit way of highlighting its greater significance compared with the first two.

As almost any topic can be divided into three sections, the technique is very adaptable for use in business presentations, where it's often possible to put the longest item in third position:

'The strategy has three main purposes:

- to boost the industry's confidence;
- to enhance the credibility of the council; and
- to open the way for new initiatives in consumer promotions.'

In this case, the speaker announced in advance that the strategy has three main purposes. But whether or not you do that, audiences will assume that there are three things coming up. Nor do you have to preface each point with 'firstly', 'secondly' and 'thirdly':

'Our company has a high reputation on several fronts:

- the quality of our products and services;
- our contribution to the UK economy; and
- our determination to succeed in a rapidly changing business environment.'

'To be a truly global player, you need a truly global service provider, with *the right* expertise, *the right*

‘Repetition can add important emphasis to a speaker’s message’

knowledge and *the right* understanding to meet your needs.’

‘Customers *will gain*, the company *will gain* and every one of our employees *will gain*.’

In these (and some of the earlier examples), it’s not only perfectly acceptable to use forms of repetition that we’d never dream of using in a written report or proposal, but it can also be extremely effective. Winston Churchill repeated ‘We shall fight’ seven times in the famous sequence that, if he’d written for readers rather than listeners, might have gone like this: ‘We shall fight on the seas and oceans, in the air, on the beaches, on the landing grounds, in the fields, streets and hills.’ When spoken aloud, however, such repetition not only sounds quite natural but can also add important emphasis to a speaker’s message.

4. Combined formats

If each of the above techniques on its own is enough to strike chords with an audience, it’s hardly surprising that the fourth technique – which involves using different combinations of the first three to get your message across – is the most powerful one of all. It can be used in a range of permutations, which include posing a puzzle and solving it with a contrast, as Margaret Thatcher did at the start of the 1987 general election:

PUZZLE: ‘... from the Labour Party expect the iceberg manifesto.

SOLUTION: A: ‘One tenth of its socialism visible.

B: ‘Nine tenths of it beneath the surface.’

And, as Neil Kinnock demonstrated a few days later, a puzzle can also be solved with a three-part solution:

PUZZLE: ‘In a way she was right. It is a bit of an iceberg manifesto.

SOLUTION: 1: ‘It’s really cool,

2: ‘and it’s very tough

3: ‘and totally unsinkable.’

A list can be made up of three consecutive contrasts, as in this example from President Kennedy’s inaugural speech in 1961:

- ‘We observe today not a victory of party but a celebration of freedom,

- symbolising an end as well as a beginning,
- signifying renewal as well as change.’

As with the first three techniques, combining different techniques can work as effectively for business speakers as it does for politicians. A director of an energy company had to speak at a public meeting on the rather delicate issue of his company’s policy on disconnecting customers who fail to pay their bills. He knew that many in the audience would be thinking along the lines of ‘it’s all very well for you, but you don’t know what it’s like to be so poor that you can’t pay for the basic necessities of life’. So he confronted the issue directly by showing that he was well aware of the problems faced by those on a low income – for which he used a contrast between two lists of three:

A: 1: ‘Like many of you here tonight, I have a job,
2: ‘a good standard of living,

3: ‘and no problems in paying my utilities bill.

B: 1: ‘But some of our customers have no job,

2: ‘a very low standard of living,

3: ‘and very real problems paying their bills.’

In some cases, a three-part list can form the second part of a contrast:

A: ‘We’ll succeed not by luck,

B: 1: ‘but by listening,

2: ‘talking,

3: ‘and responding to customers.’

The building blocks of effective presentation

Many years of observing how audiences react to speech-making and presentation and how the findings can help people to become more effective speakers have left me in no doubt that contrasts, puzzles and questions, three-part lists and combined format are at the heart of what I refer to in my books as ‘the language of public speaking’. I began by noting that speakers who use such techniques quickly find that their delivery improves. This is something you can now put to an immediate test for yourself – by going back through some of the examples, reading the alternative versions aloud and reaching your own conclusion about whether the ones that used rhetoric were easier to deliver and easier on the ear.

ACQUIRING THE CLINTON FACTOR

Do your presentations lack punch? Are they adequate but uninspired? At one of our highest rated faculty events, 'The Clinton factor', **David Gillespie** revealed the secret of inspired speaking. Helen Fearnley reports.

Why is Bill Clinton a riveting speaker while George W Bush – autocue accidents apart – is not? On 14 March 2007 the Institute's Great Hall was packed to the gunnels with business people anxious to learn how to move their individual public performance abilities closer to the ex-president's end of the speaking skills spectrum. The audience was there for actor David Gillespie's talk, 'The Clinton Factor' – an analysis of good presentation/communication skills, and how to acquire them.

The fact that Clinton is tall and good-looking doesn't hurt, Gillespie allowed. But even those less fortunate in the genetic lottery can aspire to the former president's speaking skills. Gillespie's advice was that Clinton-style delivery depends on just three key elements – story, status and focus.

Story

We are told stories from the cradle onwards. Storytelling is a device for enlightenment – it helps the listener understand things; it can be used to transfer skills; it evokes feelings. The stories 'stick' and are therefore passed on. So – although Gillespie reluctantly conceded finance people's need to use PowerPoint – the story is the key 'medium' for the presenter. And the creation of a good 'story' involves:

- careful construction;
- ruthless editing;
- a 'journey'; and
- 'flow'.

Successful construction depends on first getting the right 'skeleton' story before then putting flesh on its bones. In Gillespie's view, achieving a good skeleton 'probably means starting at the "end" – the message you want them to take away – then working backwards through the "middle" to the "beginning".'

But don't overdo the detail. Edit it down. Trying to tell one's audience everything is a mistake, Gillespie said, invoking modernist architect Mies van der Rohe's famous maxim 'less is more'. Hence, 'You should always be asking yourself what you can leave out.'

Taking your audience on a 'journey' is also important: the appeal of 'Once upon a time...' is not

restricted to the very young. An adult audience also needs to travel from point A to point B in order to understand the information being imparted.

Further, that journey needs to 'flow'. Why should the listener have to work hard to understand the information? Each component should lead easily and logically to the next, making it easy to remember. Also part of the 'flow', however, is the life injected into the story in the telling – use of your voice, its inflection, volume and pace.

In short, 'a good storyteller picks us up and deposits us where we want to be'.

Status

The storyteller/presenter's status is also crucial in determining the success of a presentation or other form of communication.

According to Gillespie, there are three subconscious things we ask ourselves when meeting someone – their age, sex and status. Having the answer to those three allows us to determine the manner in which we will respond to them. And although there is little a presenter can do about the first two, adopting and conveying the right status can pay off handsomely.

Status can be partly conferred by the seniority of the job (eg the high status afforded a senior manager, the low status of the office boy), but mostly it is demonstrated physically through deportment, tone of voice and demeanour. Our own status can vary with circumstances: Margaret Thatcher's was high during her tenure as prime minister, much lower as she left Downing Street after involuntarily standing down. Tony Blair's status, Gillespie ventured, can be 'all over the place, depending on what's going on'. An actor will explore all levels of status from one to 1,000.

But Clinton's unwavering 'open, warm, approachable, receptive, strong manner' is what is needed for communication. And that, Gillespie said, is 'about a five to a seven, on a status scale of one to 10'. Clinton, he pointed out, hugged people in the wake of the 9/11 disaster, whereas George W Bush 'rushed behind a podium and jabbed his fingers at the perpetrators'.

Focus

Gillespie then went on to describe the importance of managing the audience's attention 'from the moment you step on the stage to the one that you step off'. Keeping your audience's interest is key, and can be

'Successful construction of a story depends on first getting the right 'skeleton' before then putting flesh on its bones'



David Gillespie is an actor and co-director of The Speechworks, a training company with a staff of directors, actors and writers. www.thespeechworks.co.uk

‘Tell a good story, adopt the right “status” and have some crisp “now” moments’

done by switching your own apparent concentration. He strongly recommended using the three ‘circles of concentration’ identified by Russian actor/director Stanislavski (on whose principles Lee Strasberg’s famous Method acting ideas were largely based). These work as outlined below:

- third circle of concentration – if you are directing a movie, the third circle of concentration is the ‘master’ shot, which shows everything, the whole set, all the players etc. For a presentation, it means addressing the whole audience;
- second circle of concentration – this circle of concentration is the filmic equivalent of the ‘intimate two-shot’. This is the circle you use by catching the eye of someone in the audience (for a limited time... more than three seconds, and they feel awkward), making them feel singled out; and
- first circle of concentration – this is the single ‘close-up’. It is epitomised by an introspective, thoughtful, slightly unfocused look. The speaker can use this extremely effectively by pausing, as if in thought – and using that interval as a platform for introducing a new idea.

The timing of these switches is important, too: go for quick, sharp switches between these circles, creating

what Stanislavski called ‘a series of “now” moments’. And, Gillespie added, this venture into the world of dramatic presentation is no detour: ‘When you give a presentation, you have entered into the world of show business: you have a duty to entertain and engage.’

Conclusion

In summary, he said, the keys to a good presentation are telling a good, simple, well-structured, flowing story; adopting the right confident, approachable status in telling it; and choreographing a performance which is a crisp series of ‘now’ moments, switching among all three circles of concentration to keep the audience’s attention.

This article was first published in *F&M* 144, May 2007.

VIEW THE WEBCAST



To access the webcast of this event visit icaew.com/fmfclintonfactor

FROM SLIDWARE TO MIND SHARE – USING POWERPOINT

Regarded as the obvious choice for making presentations, PowerPoint can in fact be counterproductive when trying to connect with an audience, says **Freddie Daniells**. Below he explains why and provides seven tips for using the software.

Have you ever sat in a presentation and wondered when the interminable thing will end? On and on the speaker drones, reading bullet point after bullet point straight off the slide. Why did they not just send you the slides?

As presenters, we want to motivate, influence or inform our audience. To do this we need to reach that audience, to connect with it. However, PowerPoint often acts as a barrier. Rather than the connection being between the speaker and audience, the slides become the focus of the presentation.

From the above, you may think that I hate PowerPoint. Actually, I think it is a powerful communication aid. I just believe it is also one of the most misused tools in business. However, I have a few simple tips on PowerPoint use that can make a huge difference in the effectiveness of our communications. Whether you are presenting to two people or 200, these tips will make a difference to your audience engagement.

If possible, do without PowerPoint

Just because you can use PowerPoint does not mean you should. If you have a good reason to present, the most effective way to present is 'naked', ie without the 'same-as-everyone-else' PowerPoint slides. As a presenter, you are the most powerful part of the presentation. It is your conviction and belief that the audience buys into. Why become a slave to your colourless and humourless PowerPoint deck?

If you know your topic, try using a whiteboard or flipchart to explain your more complex points. This is often a much more effective way of communicating your ideas and engaging with your audience. So the first tip is if you do not absolutely need PowerPoint slides, do not use them!

Avoid pages of bullet points

The enemy of presentations is the bullet point. So many presentations are simply page upon page of small typeface bullet points – not for the audience's benefit, but to help the speaker remember their talking points. An audience member's brain works much faster than you, as a speaker, do. They will quickly scan the slide, get the gist of your points and ask themselves what comes next, all while you are still explaining your second of five points. Their mind will then wander off, just when you need connection.

The solution to this problem is to avoid writing your presentation in PowerPoint. As soon as the bullet points start appearing on slides, I can tell you from experience that they are devilishly difficult to take out! I use my word processor, switching it to outline mode and writing my bullets there. Others successfully use mind maps, 3x5 index cards and

'Slides are a distraction of audience members' attention away from the speaker'

other methods to achieve the same goal. Use whichever alternative way is best for you, but take my second tip – do not write your presentation in PowerPoint.

Use slides only to add value

An effective audience-centred presentation is about making a connection, from speaker to individual audience member.

Slides are a distraction of audience members' attention away from the speaker. As such, we should not use them unless absolutely necessary. There are times when PowerPoint slides are useful. Often a presenter will want to show data, present complex situations or convey an emotion. All of these can be difficult to express in words, and slides can be highly effective in such circumstances.

If a slide adds something to the audience's comprehension, either from a factual or emotional perspective, then use it: if it says nothing above what comes out of your mouth, do not.

One point per slide

When faced with a slide full of data in typefaces too small to read, most audience members will start to glaze over. Too often, the point of the slide is not immediately clear. The most effective slides should cover one point only. If you have a complex series of inter-related points, remember the cost of an extra slide is precisely nothing! Break your issue into several points, with a slide (if necessary) for each one. Each slide should have just the minimum amount of information to make the point.

Note the differences between the two slides in Figure 1 (overleaf). Both are viable slides to discuss shipments falling in Q2:08. However, the second addresses the point in the headline, shows just the information needed for the point and emphasizes the point by saying in red that shipments are down 40%.



Freddie Daniells is a public speaking coach and is on the Great Britain and Ireland Executive Committee of Toastmasters International.
freddiedaniells@gmail.com

'A picture says a thousand words, so use this to your advantage'

This approach may actually lead to more slides but the points will be much clearer to your audience.

The black slide

The single most powerful slide in a PowerPoint presentation deck is the black slide. Slides draw the audience's attention away from the speaker. Moving to a black slide will move undivided audience attention back to the speaker. This is a great way of keeping your audience listening to you, rather than watching slides.

Use images

Marketers know that a mixture of logic and emotion is the most effective way to sell products and services. As a presenter, we too can use this tip. One of the most effective 'presentations' of the past 25 years was the original Live Aid. While the voice-over gave us sobering facts (logic) about the issues in Africa, the images were harrowing (emotion). We can use these tools too in business. Is there an image that could represent product shortages, too high inventories, too many unpaid bills, or the bank manager seeking his money? I am sure there is! Your audience can readily grasp these powerful images. A picture says a thousand words, so use this to your advantage.

Create a different 'leave behind'

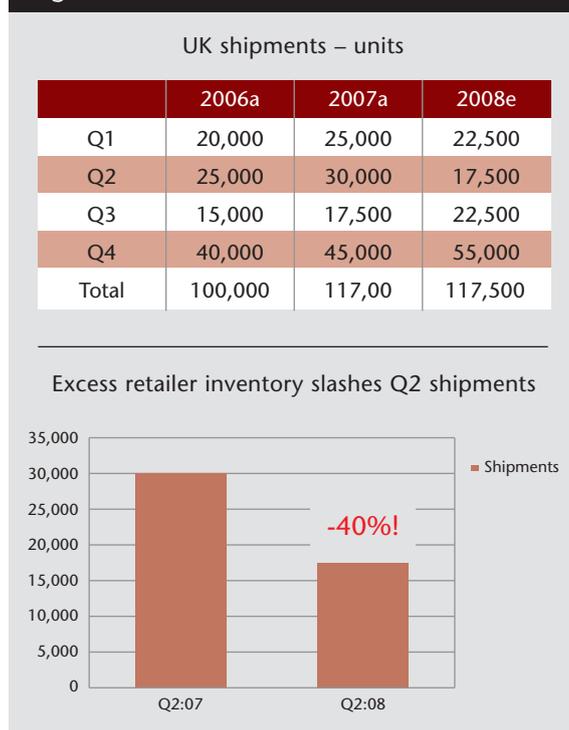
If you follow these points, then your presentation will be more audience-centred. However, it will be less able to stand on its own feet as a 'leave behind'. This is the point of the article – if it can, who needs the speaker!

Obviously a 'leave behind' is a useful calling card. To combat this, I copy my speech notes from my word processor to the notes section of the slides. At a large show, I start the presentation explaining that I have a handout that in return for a business card I will gladly email on. This makes it not only a useful chance to connect but also an excuse to follow up with (ideally) potential customers, through a pdf of my presentation.

Recently I saw a cartoon with the slogan, 'technology changes, humans do not.' Despite the advent of PowerPoint, the basics of communication have not changed. It is still about the connection between human beings. However, PowerPoint has too often become the centrepiece of presentations. I believe that using these seven tips will help put PowerPoint back in its rightful place as nothing but a useful tool for the presenter. Used correctly we employ it as an aid to connecting more fully with an audience.

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Figure 1 EXAMPLE SLIDES



HOW TO WRITE REPORTS AND INFLUENCE PEOPLE

Rob Ashton provides a kit of effective writing tools to help turn report writing from a chore to a strength.

Writing is a core skill for accountants – especially as you set about rising through the ranks. Granted, it may not appear on the ICAEW syllabus. But as advisers, your ultimate goal when you write pretty much anything is to prompt the reader to take action. In a report, you may be asking an external investor to provide funding, or asking internal management to change the way they do something. In an email, you may be trying to get colleagues to provide budgets by a certain date, or remind them about agreed financial processes.

If you confuse, bore or frustrate your reader, achieving any of the above becomes much more difficult. Yet the irony is that, despite the importance of professional writing skills, most chartered accountants have never been taught them.

Good writing takes practice. And even the best writers sometimes get bogged down in the finer details of their research. The result: they fail to deliver the main messages effectively. The secret is to have a kit of writing tools to hand to keep you on track.

If you consistently apply these techniques, you'll transform your writing and – in turn – your ability to influence the decisions and behaviour of your readers.

Report writing made simple

Many people see report writing as a chore, and as a result they tend to put it off until the last possible minute. Then, faced with a looming deadline, they hurriedly cobble together something that doesn't differentiate the key points from other information. In doing so, they'll probably focus more on the writing process than on the reader's needs, because that's what's uppermost in their mind at the time.

Doubtless you rarely – if ever – have the luxury of time to set aside for thinking and preparing. But if you can find a way to create that time, just sitting away from your PC

'Using a pen and paper not only takes you away from all of the distractions of the modern age, it keeps your mind fresh'

and planning what you want to include, and in what order, can pay dividends. In the long run, it will actually save you time.

Focus on your reader

It's vital to ascertain your readers' level of knowledge of what you're writing about, especially if not all of them have a background in finance. Ask yourself the following questions:

- who will read what I'm about to write?
- how much do they already know about the subject?
- what do they absolutely need to know?
- how important is the subject matter to them? and
- how interested are they in the subject?

Map out your ideas

Decide what you want to include before you begin writing. (Do not be tempted to use the writing process to clarify your thoughts.) For longer, more complex documents, it often helps to write your topic in the middle of the page and use a mind map to brainstorm ideas. Then group together the ideas that have things in common. Next, decide what order to put your groups in, starting with the most important first. Cross out anything that is irrelevant to your reader: never be tempted to include information simply because you have it. Earmark non-essential detail for appendices.

Don't be tempted to shortcut this process by creating lists on your computer instead. Using a pen and paper not only takes you away from all of the distractions of the modern age, it also keeps your mind fresh. It encourages the creative process, as it helps you to link ideas rather than thinking in a linear fashion. The messier you are now, the more ordered your thinking will be later. If you can complete this stage away from your desk altogether, even better.

Box 1 QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

Five questions to ask yourself before writing:

- For whom are you writing?
- How deep is their knowledge of the subject?
- What do they absolutely need to know?
- What are the most important numbers?
- Would some of the information be clearer in a graph or table?

And five to ask before sending:

- Is there any jargon that the reader may not understand?
- Is there any superfluous information?
- Are there any over-wordy sentences or paragraphs?
- Is it clear what action the reader should take?
- Is there a colleague available to proofread it?



Rob Ashton is CEO of Emphasis, which trains accountants and other professionals to write more effectively.
rob.ashton@writing-skills.com

'It's possible for your work to be both factually sound and concise – and therefore compelling'

Clarify your main message

Now that you've decided what your most important idea is, your next task is to explore this in more detail. Take another sheet of paper and write the headings: What? Where? When? How? Why? and Who? Keep writing down the answers to these questions until you get to the heart of what you're really trying to say. Then, with this main message in mind, decide on a final order for the rest of your points.

Following this process will help you avoid the temptation to cram every idea or piece of information into your report. It's more important to have a clearly defined point of view than to give the reader 'value for money' with a jam-packed document.

Craft a compelling summary

The summary should be able to stand alone and clearly explain the four Ps: Position, Problem, Possibilities and Proposal (see p17). Many people still follow the structure they were taught at school: introduction, method, results, conclusion. However, no one in the business world has the attention span of your old science teacher. They want you to get to the point quickly and efficiently.

Don't forget that your readers are suffering from information overload. If they fully digested every document sent to them, they'd find little time to do anything else. Even if your writing is impeccable, it will still compete for their attention with a mountain of other information, including emails, phone calls and Twitter updates. Keep this in mind with every sentence you write.

A streamlined style

To truly develop your writing style, you need to bid farewell to the rules of academic writing. In universities and other educational institutions, the more knowledge, information and argument you display, the better the work is received. It's also standard practice to write in the passive voice. And it's common to reach a conclusion only after a long period of argument and analysis.

But when you're trying to influence the reader to take action, you need a more streamlined approach. You're not underselling yourself by keeping the information to a minimum: you're doing your reader a favour and exhibiting good judgement at the same time. Contrary to what you may have been taught long ago, it's possible for your work to be both factually sound and concise – and therefore compelling. You can use short sentences and paragraphs and still present a rigorous case. Question your use of language and make conscious decisions about your writing.

Don't talk in numbers

Or, rather, do talk in numbers, but only the important ones. Many readers, if they don't work in finance-related fields, will find sentences packed with figures hard to read and process. Rather than risk losing their attention before

Box 2 USING BOXES

Like graphics, boxes are likely to be read before the main text, and are a vital entry point to the document.

Make sure, therefore, that the information within them can be understood without reading the main text. A different font from the main text will help the box stand out, as will surrounding it with white space. And always give boxes titles.

you even start, use your words to explain, simply and directly, what you have to say. Put your figures in tables or graphs, and then refer to them in the text – making sure they're on the same page, if possible.

Quick style tips

Applying the following tips to every document you write will help make sure your work is clear, concise and compelling.

1. Avoid the passive voice

Use the active voice, where possible. So instead of 'action should be taken to reduce spending in this area of the business', write 'we need to reduce spending in this area of the business'. Using the words 'we', 'you' and 'us' can also help you to connect with your readers. This is particularly important if you're asking your reader to do something. Don't shy away from making the request by writing 'it is necessary for a thorough review of departmental spending to be carried out', because your reader may quite understandably assume this doesn't apply to them. Instead, write 'please review your department's spending' and state when you need a response.

2. Keep your sentences short and sweet

Hold your readers' attention by using an average of 15–20 words in each sentence. Prune your sentences by going through your document and ruthlessly cutting out meaningless phrases and non-essential information. Choose simpler words over more complicated alternatives. For example, it's much better to write 'because' than 'due to the fact that', and 'implement' (or even 'do') than 'undertake the implementation of'.

3. Put only one idea in each sentence

Your reader will find it easier to understand what you're saying if you stick to one idea per sentence. If you find yourself having to add more than two or three commas or dashes, you're probably trying to squash too much into one sentence. If you notice this happening, see if you can split it into two shorter ones.

'Be kind to your readers' eyes and brains and give them some structure to guide them through'

4. Jargon is not the bogeyman

It's perfectly acceptable to use jargon if you're certain that your readers will understand it. Your fellow professionals will instantly know what 'above the line', 'below the line', 'variance analysis' and 'pro-forma' mean. But they would probably bemuse someone without a background in finance. And if that someone is the person you're hoping to influence, you're in trouble. If in doubt, underestimate your readers' level of knowledge, keep the language direct and simple, and focus on cause and effect.

5. Avoid management speak

In some workplaces, people find it almost impossible to speak without using terms such as 'going forward', 'utilise' and 'pre-prepare'. But while these words may get bandied about in boardrooms, don't be tempted to use them in documents. Instead of 'going forward', write 'in the future'. Or, leave it out altogether and simply say 'will'. Opt for 'use' instead of 'utilise' and remember that there's no such thing as pre-preparing. Ask yourself if what you're writing really makes sense, and don't be afraid to cull words and sentences if it doesn't.

6. Beware of abbreviations

Abbreviations are a great shortcut when you and your reader speak a common language. But don't forget that there may be acronyms and abbreviations that people outside your profession just wouldn't know. LIFO, GAAP and even EBITDA sound a bit like Star Wars characters if you don't know what they mean.

7. Use sub-headings

Be kind to your readers' eyes and brains and give them some structure to guide them through. Sub-headings and bullet points make it easy for them to jump to the relevant section, or return to it at a later point. Make the headings themselves useful and specific – for example '40 years in business' is better than 'Our experience'. The sub-headings alone should tell a miniature version of the whole story.

8. Find your flow

If you find it difficult to get started, try writing in short bursts. Start by writing for 30 minutes and keep increasing this time until you're comfortable writing for up to two hours. Keep referring to your plan and just aim to write very specific sections of information. No matter how long or short your final document, even squeezing in a 15-minute session can help you make progress.

9. Check your facts

It can be such a relief to finish a document that you forget to proofread it. But making simple spelling mistakes, typos and other errors can undermine the validity of your work. Print out your document (proofing on screen is unreliable) and proofread extra

Box 3 SIGNPOSTS

Signposts – such as the title, subheads, straplines and contents list (for long documents) – are critical, because they provide your reader with an immediate overview of your argument.

In fact, subheads (or crossheads) can even tell the story on their own. A word of warning though: you need to work out a system of subheads before you start writing, for consistency's sake.

slowly by stopping a pencil at each word to check that it's accurate. Ask a colleague to do the same: it's easier to spot mistakes with a fresh pair of eyes.

Influencing

Grab readers' attention, guide them through your thought process to the logical conclusion, and leave them in no doubt about what they need to do. A good way to do this is with the Four Ps formula: Position, Problem, Possibilities, Proposal. Use this format for both the summary and the main body of the report.

Position

Begin by explaining the current situation (or 'where we are now').

Problem

Introduce the idea that there are issues that need solving ('why we can't stay here').

Possibilities

State your answer – or answers – to the problem ('where we could go'). The reader will perceive you as an expert because you have a ready-made way of fixing things.

Proposal

Suggest what the preferred answer is ('where we should go'), and say what action the reader can or should take. Offer a viewpoint that is new and intriguing.

Putting it into practice

Keep this article to hand next time you sit down to write, and work through the different stages. Changing your method may seem time-consuming at first, but as it develops into a habit, your writing will become more efficient and effective. Then, sit back and observe as your persuasive prose takes effect.

WHY CLARITY IS POWER WHEN PROVIDING INFORMATION

When documents show information clearly they are more inviting for the reader, and actually get read. **Jon Moon** explains where you may be going wrong, and how to improve.

How much time do you waste staring at indecipherable information, struggling to work out what it is trying to tell to you? At impenetrable graphs or tables? At confusing organograms or flowcharts? At endless dull bullet points? Executives rely on information to make decisions, yet they are let down by the information they receive – it fails to inform them properly.

Principles

There are many benefits to showing information clearly. Your documents and analysis get read. They are more inviting for the reader. The audience understands and absorbs them faster. Time is saved. Better decisions are reached more quickly.

Many tips or changes to achieve clarity are individually quite small, yet collectively they can make a huge difference. One company made 22 changes to the format and structure of a single page of key performance indicators. The effect was dramatic. By removing pointless graphs and typographical clutter and restructuring the layout of what was left, the page was inviting to the eye and the information far easier to understand and absorb.

And clarity can produce strange results. After a company made its monthly information pack clearer, one profit-centre chief executive officer (CEO) said of his profit and loss account, 'I have never understood what it says. Could you talk me through it please?' Previously the page had been impenetrable and uninviting so he hadn't ever tried to penetrate it. Now the page was much more accessible, he had no excuse not to.

The costs

A document that shows information poorly can easily take twice as long to read and understand as a document that presents it clearly. If that document is for a 15-person board, the extra time taken to read and absorb the poor document comes at quite a cost.

However, showing information poorly not only costs money, it costs lives. The world expert on information design is Edward Tufte, who famously showed that unclear graphs by engineers failed to convince decision makers to abort the doomed 1986 space shuttle launch. The engineers had identified good reasons not to launch but the evidence and graphs they presented to the launch controllers were poorly constructed. The next day, the Shuttle exploded on take-off, killing seven people. Tufte also has a justifiable hatred of pie charts and says the only thing worse than a 'dumb pie chart' is two of them.

Clear information demonstrates clear thinking, and clear thinking impresses. Almost every decision maker has a boss to answer to and needs to be able to explain to that boss why they made the choice they did. Clear simple information makes it easy for the decision maker to grasp your key points and explain them to his/her boss on your behalf and in your favour. Your proposals and client pitches are more likely to succeed.

Sadly, if CEOs think this could help their annual reports, the truth is that it won't. Much of the annual report's layout is prescribed and structurally cannot be changed. As for format, investors expect a particular style too, regardless of its rights or wrongs. And so, despite Tufte's comments, multiple pie charts prevail – a quick review of eight annual reports in insurance showed 50% had multiple pies. Also, seven out of the eight used 'legends' – those boxes alongside charts, informing the reader as to what each slice or line represents – which are another barrier to clarity. A major exception to all this is Warren Buffett – whose reports not only avoid presentational gimmicks but are also brilliantly funny. Investors give slack to those as successful as Buffett.

Box 1 A CLARITY CHECKLIST

Is your information clear? Review your monthly accounts and key performance indicators, your restructuring and investment proposals. Also review your client pitches – often they create a good first impression but the rest is poor. Check it all against the notes below:

- first impression – is it inviting? Or intimidating, with numerous long numbers, endless bullet points and dense text?
- understanding – can you digest it quickly? Or do you struggle? Do the 'authors' have to talk you through it?
- good detail – do you know the point each graph makes? Or are they just there to break up 'dull' text? Have you been told the message behind each table? Or do you have to guess it? Do you value the bullet points? Or merely endure them? and
- recalling – can you easily summarise the report? If yes, without referring back to the report, great. If yes, but only if referring back, not bad. But if it is a struggle even when referring back, there's a problem.

If your documents score badly, the analysis is probably poor too – incomplete, illogical, flawed. Flabby information is often a sign of flabby thinking. Yet if you tighten one, you tighten the other. Clear information leads to clear thinking, and clear thinking leads to clear information.



Jon Moon is a freelance trainer and author. His book *How to Make an Impact* is published by FT/Prentice Hall.
www.jmoon.co.uk
jon@jmoon.co.uk

Complex

Even when people are shown badly presented information, they rationalise their confusion. They blame the complexity of the topic, or even themselves ('I'm no good with numbers'). Also, those conveying the information say they don't have time to make it clearer.

Then there is the Emperor's New Clothes syndrome – no-one wants to admit their confusion. The two charts above (Figure 1) are drawn from the same data. The right graph shows the patterns clearly, the multiple column chart is indecipherable. When faced with something confusing, speak out and demand that those preparing reports and presentations stop wasting everyone's time.

Those that prepare information have a responsibility too. Think twice before printing off that spreadsheet or doing those bullet points or crafting that pie chart. And be harsh on yourself. Whenever you say 'This graph is meant to show...', this means your graph has not worked.

The glib cliché is 'information is power'. Given how much information is poorly constructed and presented, I say that 'clarity is power'. Information without clarity is useless while information with clarity leads to power.

Box 2 FIVE MYTHS ABOUT GRAPHS

1. Many people are bad with figures

Often people are given tables that are impenetrable, and they decide to replace it with a bad graph. But it's best to replace the bad table with a good table.

2. Graphs paint a thousand words

If a friend asks you how many points Rovers and City have, you'd say: 'Rovers have 9, City 10'. Just five words. But at work, that's not enough – we'd make an unnecessary graph of it. Resist the temptation.

3. People engage with graphs

Apparently, people are more likely to engage with graphs than with a table of numbers. This simply isn't the case. People do like tables, but don't confuse 'glancing at' and 'engaging with'.

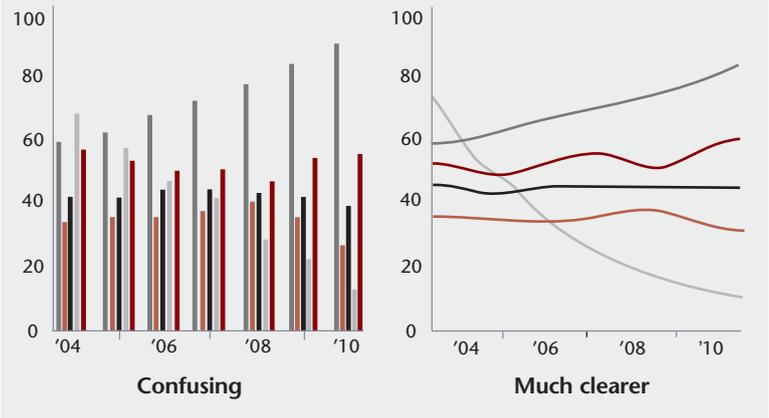
4. Graphs have impact

Some graphs are great – a U-shaped trend line has impact and is memorable. However, most graphs in business lack impact and aren't memorable.

5. Everyone does graphs

Not everyone. Study the news on television – what graphs do you see? News programmes usually avoid them. So why do we see them so often in business? It's because people use graphs to prettify colourless reports and break up dull text. But your reports should avoid them unless they really do help clarify.

Figure 1 GETTING CLARITY INTO CHARTS



This article is based on two pieces previously published in *F&M*: 'Why clarity is power when providing information' (*F&M* 32, April 2006) and 'What they don't teach in report-writing classes' (*F&M* 37, October 2006).

Jon Moon runs regular events on clarity and impact for the faculty. Go to www.icaew.com/fmevents for details or register your interest with aude.bezler@icaew.com

Box 3 TOP PRESENTATION TIPS

TIP	DETAILS
Graphs: don't assume they've got magical powers	Often, graphs confuse, not clarify. See box 2, left, for more.
Tables: give a lead-in title	Don't make readers guess what a table is trying to tell them. And don't just say: 'see below for staff numbers, 2011 and 2010'. That doesn't give any insight. Rather, comment on a trend, a curiosity, a variance, a pattern. Why are you showing the table?
Numbers: round them	Staff turnover is not 27.259%, but about 27%. Income is not £12,081,845 but £12.1m. More often that not, the extra digits don't help, they hinder.
Fonts: which to use when	Serif fonts (e.g. Times New Roman) are readable and good for continuous text. Sans serif fonts (e.g. Arial and Arial Black) are legible and good for stuff we glance at, such as slides.
Emphasising: avoid underline and upper case	<u>Underlining merges letters together, making them difficult to read. The underline also bumps into the descenders, like the letter g.</u> ALSO, AVOID UPPER CASE FOR CONTINUOUS TEXT, IT SLOWS READING SPEED BY UP TO 20%. To highlight something, use contrast instead.
Layout: strive for contrast and alignment	Study this publication for examples of strong alignment. To see contrast, compare the font size of this article's title with that of the main text – the title is much more visually arresting than the detailed text.
Bullets: use WiT instead	WiT stands for 'Words In Tables'. WiT has three times more impact than bullets. To see a bullet-riddled one-page Cabinet Meeting paper redone as a WiT – visit www.jmoon.co.uk/documents/CabinetPaperV2.pdf

GORGEOUS DASHBOARDS

The range of possible formats for data display can be bewildering. Yet it need not be. In this article, **Jonathan Teller** reviews a book* which gets to the heart of how to present the maximum information as effectively as possible.

* *Information Dashboard Design – Effective Visual Communication of Data*, by Stephen Few, published by O’Reilly, 2010, ISBN: 0-596-10016-7

The many tools now available for presenting accounting and performance data in formats other than tables of numbers give us multiple dilemmas. We may want to use graphs, but which graph type is the most appropriate? How should it be laid out? Should we use colour, 3D etc?

The decisions become even more complex when we want to create a ‘dashboard’ – something built for the purpose of presenting several pieces of information using different graphs, all on one screen, with possibly overlapping messages.

Fortunately Stephen Few’s book, *Information Dashboard Design – Effective Visual Communication of Data*, is a gorgeous but practical guide to producing dashboards that convey a lot of information quickly. (The book follows on from Few’s earlier books and from those of Edward Tufte, starting with the latter’s *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information*.)

Information Dashboard gives plenty of examples to illustrate both good and bad practice, with particular emphasis on the latter: learning from the poor examples may well be the best way! The illustrations also provide some really useful ideas on how information can be presented to maximum effect.

Dashboards defined

So what exactly is an information dashboard? The business intelligence software industry has used the term to convey the idea that it is possible to drive an organisation in the same way that it is possible to drive a car, with key performance indicators (KPIs) allowing the organisation to make the constant adjustments needed for a successful journey.

Few’s own definition is: ‘A visual display of the most important information needed to achieve one or more objectives; consolidated and arranged on a single screen so the information can be monitored at a glance.’

Thirteen common dashboard design mistakes

One particularly useful part of the book’s advice is an exploration of common dashboard design mistakes (many of which also have a more general relevance to charting). Some frequent mistakes are listed below.

1. Exceeding the boundaries of a single screen

The objective of the dashboard is to present data at a glance: if the display needs either scrolling or switching between two or more pages then that

‘The objective of the dashboard is to present data at a glance: if the display needs either scrolling or switching between pages then that objective is compromised’

objective is compromised. The viewer needs to focus on the information being provided before reaching for the mouse.

2. Supplying inadequate context for the data

Numbers need a context. For example, ‘the year to date sales’ data is much more useful if accompanied by information about targets, previous year or trends.

3. Displaying excessive detail or precision

Numbers often only need to be shown to the nearest thousand or million. Displaying a multi-million figure to two decimal places will just distract the viewer, make the number harder to absorb, and reduce the time available for considering the data’s implication.

4. Choosing a deficient measure

The viewer should not have to carry out calculations to understand the meaning of the information. The example used in the book is a graph that compares actual and budget revenues. The viewer really wants to know the variance. This can be calculated from the graph but it could be explicitly shown as, say, the budget as a base line and actual as a % variance. Thought needs to be given to the viewer’s needs.

5. Choosing inappropriate display media

Few’s message here is that it is very easy to choose the wrong format for displaying data. A pie chart might look impressive but often struggles to present information accurately and quickly. A bar chart could present the same data and allow the viewer to understand the data with one glance. Sometimes a table of text is at least as effective as a graph. (It is worth noting, here, that Few has written another book, *Show Me the Numbers: Designing Tables and Graphs to Enlighten*, which considers graph types and their appropriate purpose in more detail.)

6. Introducing meaningless variety

Striving for variety in the types of graph used can be a mistake. Such variety means the viewer then has to work hard just to understand the layout of the



Jonathan Teller is a member of the faculty committee.
jonathan.teller@jtanalytics.co.uk

'The recommendation is to limit the contents of the screen to items that have direct relevance to the data being displayed'

alternative designs, when their effort would be better directed at understanding the data being displayed. Although using the same graph type for several separate items might appear boring, the data will be more effectively displayed as a result.

7. Using poorly designed display media

This builds on the earlier common mistake of choosing inappropriate display media, ie using the wrong graph type. That particular fault is often further compounded by poor design – eg poor layout, colours that are too bright, the needless use of colours that do not convey additional information, 3D graphs that end up hiding some of the results, and the unnecessary use of grid lines. All of these and more are down to our lack of training in design. This is an issue that the book attempts to correct in subsequent chapters.

8. Encoding quantitative data inaccurately

The clearest example of this is when the base line for a chart should be zero but instead starts at a value that is nearer the lowest value being compared. This can exaggerate the relative difference between the values being displayed, giving the wrong impression.

9. Arranging data poorly

Important data ought to be prominent. Data that is to be compared needs to be arranged to encourage comparison.

The most important area on the screen is the top left hand corner. However this is frequently used for logos and messages rather than displaying the most important data. (A later chapter in the book also explains that the eye and the brain can delineate areas on the screen, so bright prominent headings are unnecessary and detract from viewing the actual data.)

10. Highlighting important data ineffectively or not at all

This is a variation on the 'poor design' mistake. Either all data is displayed with equal prominence so that the most important value has to be searched for; or peripheral aspects of the dashboard, such as control buttons, are given more prominence than the data.

11. Cluttering the display with useless decoration

Logos have already been criticised, for their tendency to occupy the important top left hand corner of the screen. Other unnecessary elements include spirals (to make the screen look like a page in a book), watermarks and other decorations. The recommendation is to limit the contents of the screen to items that have direct relevance to the data being displayed.

12. Misusing or overusing colour

Colour use must be carefully thought through. It needs to be meaningful (if it is to be used at all), while not disadvantaging those who are colour-blind.

13. Designing an unattractive visual display

Fundamentally the display needs to be attractive so that it will encourage the viewer to read it on a regular basis.

Simplify, simplify, simplify

Having highlighted what not to do, Few offers some tips for successful dashboard design. Principal among these is to keep things simple. On this score, some of his key general suggestions for dashboard design include:

- aim to minimise everything that is displayed. For example the use of Gestalt concepts* means that lines used as borders or separators can often be left out. Keep 'non-data pixels' to a minimum;
- as a rule, summarise data: only present or highlight the exceptions; and
- create dashboards for their specific audience. Viewers need only to see their relevant data. There is no gain in using sophisticated tools such as linear correlation coefficients if they do not understand them.

Sparklines and bullet graphs

A chapter on effective display media considers the many elements that can make up a dashboard (including several graph types) and how they should be used. Two less well known graph types are 'sparklines' and 'bullet graphs'.

Sparklines were introduced by Tufte and are intended to sit alongside numbers in a table providing trend information (as in 'Key metrics YTD' in Figure 1, opposite). In a spreadsheet they might appear in the cells adjacent to a column of numbers giving an instant feel for the trends for each of the numbers.

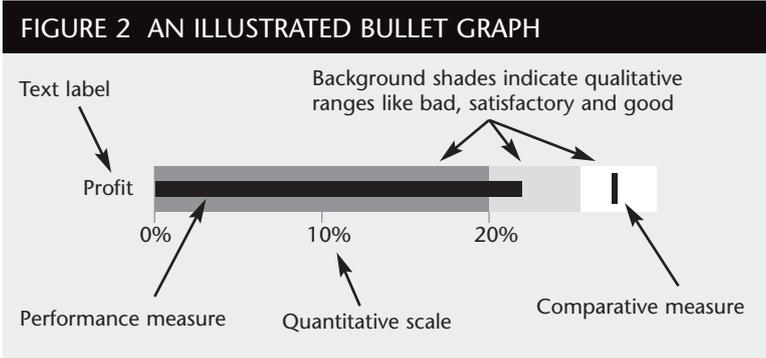
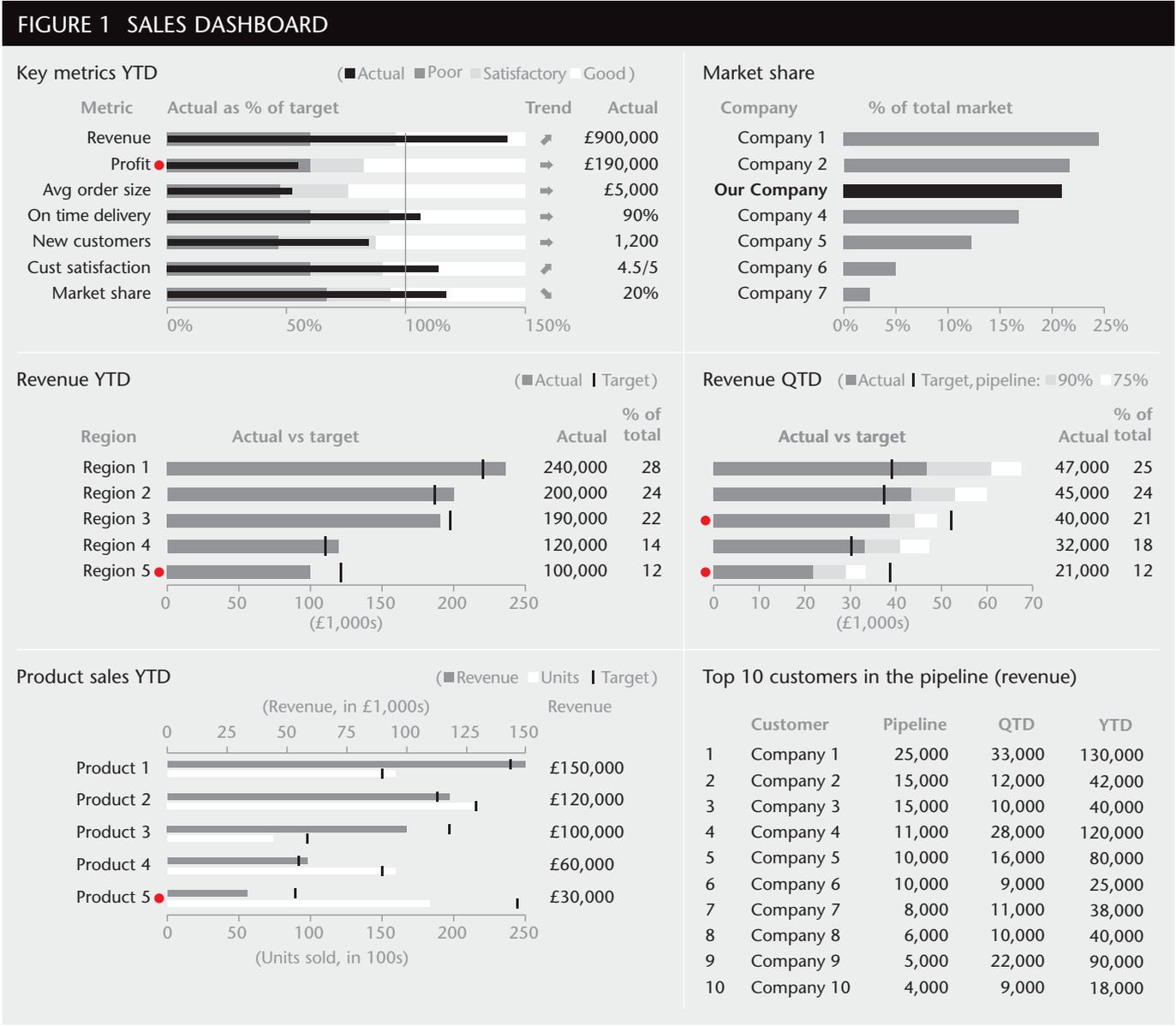
Bullet graphs are Few's own invention and are intended to encapsulate a number of pieces of information about a measure in a neat package that starts as a sophisticated bar. See Figure 2, overleaf.

Finally – the good and the bad

In the last chapter Few brings much of the book together by presenting several examples and critiquing them. One such example is a sales dashboard designed by him and similar to the one we have created in Figure 1, overleaf.

* These relate to our innate tendency to simplify multiple inputs into a whole that is more meaningful than the sum of its parts.

'Multiple bullet graphs allow the display of a great deal of information in a condensed form'



Note the following points about the design of the dashboard:

- minimal use of colour;
- most important information shown in the most prominent area, ie the upper left quadrant;
- multiple bullet graphs allow the display of a great deal of information in a condensed form;
- text in a table is legitimate;
- white space used to delineate and group data; and
- hardly any unnecessary clutter such as instructions and descriptions that will not be needed for regular users.

This article was first published in *F&M*178, June 2010.

LIMIT THE TIME SPENT ON BOARD REPORTING

Efficient time management is crucial to all parts of a business, particularly to the boardroom. **David Parmenter** outlines the best way to reduce time spent reporting to the board.

It must be one of the classic *Catch 22* situations; boards complain about getting too much information too late, and management complains that too much of its time is tied up in the board reporting process. Boards obviously need to ascertain whether management is steering the ship correctly and understand the state of the crew and customers before they can relax and 'strategise' about future initiatives. The board reporting process needs to occur more efficiently and effectively for both the board and management.

Board papers can reach mammoth proportions, tying up vast amounts of management time in preparation. I have seen organisations where one week a month is written-off by the senior management team (SMT) on this process. The results of these excesses are often late board meetings with the papers being sent to the directors only a day or two before the meeting. The meetings themselves can then be side-tracked by details, with the strategic overview inadequately addressed.

Selling the change to the board

Firstly, we need to examine why the carefully thought out recommendations we as accountants make, seldom catch the imagination of the chief executive officer (CEO) or board. As accountants, in Myers Briggs terms, we are commonly categorised as 'thinking and judgemental' people. We thus assume that as logic is our foundation stone so it is for others, and as such we use logic to sell change. Yet the majority of sales are 'closed' by appealing to the emotional drivers of the buyer and not by logic. Think of your last car purchase!

In order to sell the changes recommended in this article, you will need to work with one of the influential members of the board. You will need to:

- show them the costs involved;
- show them the proposed format changes seeking their input and support;
- absorb their suggested changes;
- prepare a presentation to sell the new board reporting regime that meets their approval and support; and
- ask the member to be the first to support your presentation after you have delivered it to the board.

Costing board papers

Directors themselves are often guilty of requesting changes to board report formats or additional analysis without first finding out what the exercise will involve, and of giving staff guidelines as to how much detail is required.

What amount of senior management time is absorbed by the board reporting process? It is important to cost this out and report it to the board as the directors will probably be horrified. I estimate that, for a company with 500 full-time employees (FTEs), the annual cost of preparing monthly board papers is between £0.3m to £0.5m (see Box 1, overleaf). So you go to the board and

say 'We will incur between £3m-£5m of personnel costs on board paper preparation in the next ten years'. We have the following suggestions to save much of this expenditure.

Scoping of information requests

A request for information from the board can often take on a life of its own. A simple request soon adopts 'charge of the light brigade' characteristics as the request is passed down the management tree. Often the director who asked the question had visualised a 30-minute job and now someone has to embark on a massive exercise. How often is a lengthy report, on arrival at the board, briefly passed over after a cursory glance, when more than £20,000 has been spent?

There needs to be more direct communication between the directors and the staff who are going to research the request. The board should issue a set of instructions about size and examples of their ideal paper.

Each paper request should come with a half page form stating:

- suggested length (eg less than five pages, five to 10, 10-20, 20-30, up to 50);
- indication of time;
- maximum level of investment on paper;
- the board member to liaise with during the project; and
- whether a draft should be sighted before further work is invested on the report.

Failing that, all directors should be asked by the chairman to scope their request. 'I would like to know about xxxxxx, I would suggest we invest no more than x days and £x,xxx on this.'

Avoiding re-writes of board reports

Some organisations have made a major cultural change to report writing, committing the board, CEO and senior management team to avoid rewrites at all costs. The board no longer considers the quality of the board papers as a reflection of the CEO's performance. Organisations have learnt to delegate and empower their staff so that the report and board papers are being written with limited input from senior managers and are being tabled with few amendments, provided that the SMT agree with the recommendations. The CEO can choose to put a caveat on each report.

The board understands that the report is not written in senior management team 'speak'. Board members are encouraged to comment directly to the writer about strengths and areas for improvement with report



David Parmenter is an international presenter and writer.
parmenter@waymark.co.nz
www.davidparmenter.com

‘Many of the procedures that support a board meeting have changed little since Charles Dickens’ time’

writing. The writers may also be in the dual role of both presenter and writer, where necessary. Thus the SMT will have a much more relaxed week leading up to the board meeting having largely delegated the report writing and the associated stress. The rewards include motivated and more competent staff and general managers being free to spend more time contributing to the bottom line.

Tabling board papers electronically

Many of the procedures that support a board meeting have changed little since Charles Dickens’ time. Board members still receive large board papers that they have difficulty finding the time or inclination to read. In the 21st century we should be using technology in this important area.

The financial report should be made available as soon as it has been finished via a secure area of the organisation’s intranet. Other board papers likewise can then be read as and when they are ready, instead of the last paper determining when all the papers are sent to the board.

There are organisations that specialise in electronic board paper systems. These have led to paperless meetings where the board members have a screen in front of them and the chairperson simply says ‘Let’s turn to page 50 and discuss the purchase of XYZ.’

Immediately the first page of the paper is on the screen, and board members can access the notes they made when they read the paper. These systems offer many features including:

- access to papers from anywhere, anytime, as soon as they are available;
- intuitive and simple to use;
- notes easily attached to pages;
- instantaneous edits, page numbering, etc; and
- absolute security of board papers.

Replace the monthly budget with a monthly target set more recently

Board members frequently find that the variance commentary is not very useful. The setting of monthly budgets before the year commences is a futile task and completely undermines the credibility of the reporting process. How often do your variance reports start with, ‘it is a timing difference?’ I can write this type of commentary for you from my office in Wellington!

The solution is for your organisation to set the monthly targets only quarterly in advance. The main focus should be on the month and full year with year-to-date (YTD) progress reporting taking a secondary role. The progress YTD should be monitored against the full year forecast or against actual YTD from last year. We all know that proportioning the annual plan into a YTD target is just as futile as setting monthly budgets.

Do not give management information to the board

It is far too common for the finance team to give the management financial report to the board and then wonder why the board are asking stupid questions – ‘Why was £10,000 spent on uniforms this month?’ We need to give a more summarised reporting pack, see Box 2, opposite, for my suggestions.

The general rule for materiality should be to have a separate reporting line if the category is over 20% of total revenue or expenditure for the profit and loss and the forecast of profit and loss. For example, show the revenue line if the revenue category is over 20% of the total revenue. If the category is between 15% and 20%, assess whether a separate reporting line is merited.

Set up an icon system to highlight variances – a suggested way is to ignore all variances less than a certain amount. For all variances over this amount, allow a tolerance of, say, plus or minus 10% and show an icon

Box 1 COSTING OF BOARD PAPERS, PREPARED MONTHLY

500 FTE organisation with monthly board reporting

SMT team accounts	Accounting team	Budget holders	Direct reports	SMT
Board paper preparation (in working days)				
Preparing board financial report from management reports	2 to 3			
Review reports before they go to board				1 to 1.5
Preparing business unit progress reports to the board				4 to 6
Review by CEO				0.5 to 1
Preparing one-off board reports		10 to 20	5 to 10	6 to 10
Working days per month	2 to 3	10 to 20	5 to 10	11.5 to 18.5
Average salary cost	£60,000	£45,000	£45,000	£150,000
Average productive weeks	42	42	42	32
	Low	High		
Average personnel costs	£200,000	£300,000		
Consultants reports	£100,000	£200,000		
Estimated annual cost of monthly reporting to the board	£300,000	£500,000		

Box 2 REPORTING PACK SUGGESTIONS

- Page 1 – A dashboard on progress in the organisation's critical success factors (we should not give them the balanced scorecard).
- Page 2 – Detail on problems with the organisation's critical success factors.
- Page 3 – Consolidated P/L (showing categories that are greater than 20% of total).
- Page 4 – Balance sheet rounded to nearest one, 10, 50 million, whatever is appropriate.
- Page 5 – Forecast of year-end P/L (given once every quarter after an update).
- Page 6 – Forecast cash flow (including high/low range at any point in time during the next six months).
- Page 7 – Status of major capital projects.

for this, and then show as a positive or negative any variance over 10%. For example if the threshold is £10,000, then an £8,000 negative variance would not have an icon, if the variance is £15,000 overspent but it is only 6% of total expected then it is flagged with a 'within tolerance' icon, if the variance is £15,000 overspent and is 12% of the total expected, it is flagged with a 'negative' icon.

Tell the board that debtors are £10m rather than £10,267,234; I can assure you they will remember £10m but will forget the other number. The graphs should focus on main balance sheet issues such as debtors ageing, stock levels and cash. The notes should cover the main highlights and action to take. There should be no other commentary on the balance sheet; every line added to a balance sheet serves to confuse the board and benefits only the accountants. The detailed balance sheet (balanced to the penny) should be left to our working papers!

Training session for all writers of board papers

A logical step to lock in efficiency of board writing is to hold a training workshop, with all staff who are likely to be involved in writing board reports requested to attend by the CEO. The outcome would be that writers in the organisation know what the board wants, have practised what makes a good board paper and also have heard from one of the directors who would discuss what they like in a board paper. This workshop would be no more than half a day, and facilitated by an external expert covering best practice.

Set timely board meetings less frequently

Look to restructure the operations of the board, setting bi-monthly meetings, with the saved board members' time being invested elsewhere, such as:

- sitting on sub committees which are looking at improvements in key areas of the business;
- assisting the organisation with specialist know-how by presenting on topics to management and staff; and
- helping the company by opening doors to new markets.

Since board meetings are to be strategic, there is no need for monthly meetings and enlightened companies now have bi-monthly meetings or at the most, eight board meetings a year.

Holding board meetings within 10 days of the month in question will aid efficiency. The longer you have to complete a paper to send to the board, the longer it will take. Save everybody time by limiting the number of days they can spend on these papers.

In some cases management is meeting with the board six weeks after month-end. There is of course another month-end in between so they have to be careful to talk about the correct month. This situation is ridiculous.

Reporting key result indicators in a 'dashboard'

There is a major conflict in most organisations as to what information is appropriate for the board. Since their role is clearly one of governance and not of management it is, I believe, inappropriate to be providing the board with KPIs unless the company is in trouble and the board need to take a more active role. To me, KPIs are the very heart of management. Used properly many of them are monitored 24/7, daily, or at least weekly. Certainly not measures to be reported monthly or bi-monthly to the board. (For an example of a dashboard, see 'Gorgeous Dashboards' on page 22 of this report.)

We need indicators of overall performance that need only be reviewed on a monthly or bi-monthly basis that show progress in the organisation's critical success factors. These measures need to tell the story as to whether the organisation is being steered in the right direction at the right speed; whether the customers and staff are happy; whether the organisation is acting in a responsible and environmentally friendly way.

I call these measures key result indicators (KRIs). These KRIs help the board focus on strategic, rather than management issues.

I recommend a dashboard which has between 9 to 12 graphs, some brief notes as to what is note worthy, and a summarised P/L and balance sheet. All trend graphs should go back 15 months so you are showing comparative analysis of the last few months of activity.

A dashboard with the KRIs going in the right direction will give confidence to the board members that the management knows what it is doing and the 'ship' is being steered in the right direction. They can then concentrate on what they do best – focusing on the horizon looking for icebergs or searching for new ports of call and coaching the CEO, as required. This is instead of parking themselves on the 'bridge' and thus getting in the way of the captain who is trying to perform important day-to-day duties.

FURTHER READING AND FACULTY WEB LINKS

- David Parmenter, *Winning CFOs – Implementing and Applying Better Practices*, J Wiley & Sons, 2011.
- 'The new thinking on key performance indicators' – *F&M133*, icaew.com/index.cfm/route/135351
- 'Using templates to standardise reporting' – *F&M158*, icaew.com/index.cfm/route/160103

This is an updated version of the original article published in *F&M162*, January 2009.

THE REAL BUSINESS BENEFITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Elaine Clark discusses the value of social media to a business's communications strategy, and provides tips on how to make it work for you.

Can social media really work for business, and in particular for finance professionals?

Two distinct camps have formed on this issue – a camp of 'naysayers' who believe that social media is just hype and holds no place or value in the world of finance; and an opposing camp who believe that social media is a superb marketing tool and, used well, can help businesses enormously.

Who is right?

Maybe each side is correct, but as an accountant in practice who uses social media extensively, I can only comment on how it has worked and is working for me.

In just four years, my franchised accounting business has developed into a recognised national brand. Client numbers have doubled in the last year alone, and are set to do the same next year.

All of this through the use of social media – so I guess you can work out which of the two camps I fit into.

What is this Twitter hype all about?

Maybe the rise in the use of social media is just an opportunity for social media experts to sell their services. There seem to be lots of seminars and webinars available on the subject, but surely it is too early for anyone to be an expert? Social media hasn't been around that long. It is constantly changing and evolving.

Take Google+ for example. Launched only a couple of months ago, can anyone be an expert on it already? Maybe it's the case that we are all learning at the same time and that those who are prepared to experiment without fear of failure will win. Yes, it is a high risk strategy, and one feared by many accountants who tend to be a little risk averse.

Do any of these webinar/seminar sessions and experts have anything useful to offer accountants? As with anything in life, caveat emptor. It pays to research the provider before you engage with them. Get references and recommendations, just as you would for any other service purchase.

Tip – do your homework before you spend on a course, webinar or expert.

Social media or social networking?

Social media allows social interaction. Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, Google+ and the rest are just social media marketing tools and social networking is the task. All have

little quirks like hash tags, direct messages etc. Just learn the language – the rest is easy. The internet is a great place for free articles and primers on all of the social media terms.

You don't have to be proficient from day one. Don't be afraid to ask for help – the social networks are generally very friendly places with many people available to offer advice, tips and aid your journey into the social media world. Asking a question is a great way to interact anyway.

Tip – start off small. Learn a bit, practice and the rest will come later.

Making it work for you

There are many social media tools out there to use. Set your social media strategy and stick to it, balancing the investment of time and cost against the results that you want to achieve.

Setting a social media strategy is essential. Unless you know what your strategy is, how will you know if your social media efforts are reaping rewards? You need to measure the results against something.

Choose your tools and use them well. Do not try to use them all – there are just far too many. Doing one thing well is much better than failing at many things!

Tip – do one thing well rather than many things poorly.

Be organised

Set out a plan. For example, set out a calendar for blog posts, making sure that you are consistent about when you post, so that followers get used to what to expect and when.

Set 'time slots' for social networking during the day. Be extremely disciplined in this, as social media can become a little addictive and use up all of your time. Before you know it you will have been tweeting all day without achieving anything else.

You can of course schedule blog posts and tweets, but these actually work much better when you are around to interact about them. So my advice would be to use scheduling sparingly.

Social networking is ongoing and continuous, while campaigns have a finite life. Plan campaigns in the same way that you would do for any marketing campaign.

Each campaign has objectives/goals. The target audience is identified, and ideas are generated. The message is delivered with the delivery being tested and improved throughout the campaign. The results of the campaign are measured to assess success.

Being informative, helpful, engaging and social is very time consuming. Many fail because they do not have the time to devote to it.

Tip – don't even start using social media if you are not fully committed to it.



Elaine Clark is managing director of Cheap Accounting.
 elaine.clark@CheapAccounting.co.uk
 Twitter: @cheapaccounting
 www.CheapAccounting.co.uk

'Your social media network is your "shop window" to the world'

The five 'P's to success

There is no reason why social media cannot work for any business including accountancy. It just takes five key things, or the five 'P's to success, as follows.

1. Planning

The old adage 'failing to plan is planning to fail' applies to social media. So you need to ask yourself:

- who is your audience?
- where are they? eg LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, forums, etc;
- what message do you want to get across to them?
- what tool (social media platform) are you going to use?
- how are you going to use it?

Your social media plan is just an extension or supplement to your marketing plan. If you don't have one of those, then the reason why social media doesn't work may be evident.

2. Patience

Many expect results to come immediately and they don't! It will take at several months of hard work to start to build up your social media reputation and network. Thousands of Twitter followers will not appear on day one. Your network will need time to develop.

3. Persistence

Things may not work first time. You need to keep trying. Look at what others are doing.

See what works. Eliminate what doesn't work for you. Experiment and vary your format, content, timing or interaction.

Many do seem to do so and then complain that social media doesn't work for them. Persist with it and it will reap rewards.

Tip – whatever you do, do not give up.

4. Pleasure

If you do not enjoy doing something then you will find it very hard to persist with it. Why do it, if you are not enjoying it? Maybe some other method of marketing and networking would be better for you. Or perhaps you could get someone else to help you with social media marketing?

The benefits are there to be had with social media marketing, but in order to be patient and persist with it, there needs to be pleasure in abundance!

5. Professionalism

Your social media network is your 'shop window' to the world. What you say on that network will be shared by those that you are directly connected to, plus their connections, and their connections and so on.

So mind your Ps and Qs in all of your social media dialogue and remain professional at all times!

Pet hates

A few things can be very annoying on Twitter. The five top things that I find annoying are:

- people who shout – 'buy me!' I'm sure we have all seen them. Their Twitter stream is full of things like 'get a quote from me', or 'we can sell you this'. They just broadcast out without any social interaction with their followers. This reminds me of a market where the stall holders are trying to encourage the shoppers to buy from their stalls. Users of Twitter seem to forget that Twitter is a social network tool. There is no social interaction when someone shouts 'buy me!'
- those that hide their tweets – if you don't want anyone to see your tweets, why on earth would you use Twitter – use email! It is social networking after all;
- rudeness, unfounded criticism and negativity – they are just a complete turn off. Would you walk into a room full of strangers, go up to someone and start to criticise them? I think not. So why do some seem to think it is perfectly acceptable to be critical, offensive and downright rude in the social media world?
- receiving an automated welcome Direct Message when you follow someone – this is like walking into a networking meeting and having a flyer shoved under your nose from someone that you have yet to have a conversation with; and
- those who say that social media doesn't work for accountants – I can't think why anyone would read this article if that were the case!

Social media does work exceedingly well. The results, whilst not instant, will come to those who are prepared to succeed at using these fabulous marketing tools.

This article was published in *Chartech*, the magazine of ICAEW's IT faculty, issue 176, November/December 2011.

More on using social media in your business

If you are interested in learning more on this topic, ICAEW's IT Faculty has produced a practical guide 'Making the most of social media'. Aspects covered include: advantages of using social media in business, pitfalls, principal types, devising a strategy, measuring and monitoring performance, and legal aspects.

This report is available to IT faculty members www.icaew.com/itfac

The report can also be purchased via www.icaew.com/shop

BUILDING PROFICIENCY IN CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATIONS

Many organisations have experienced problems when bringing culturally diverse people together in the workplace. **Annette Sinclair and Alex Swarbrick** offer five ways to counteract these issues.

The globalisation of business, continued immigration and the rising necessity for team-based working across geography and time zones means that increasingly, people of diverse cultures must work together. Managed well, a culturally diverse workforce can enhance business performance and profitability. In practice, however, many organisations have found that bringing culturally diverse people together can be problematic. The challenges US and European senior executives say they face when working across different countries typically have far more to do with cultural differences than, for instance, accounting and tax difficulties. Cross-cultural teams can experience increased conflict, communication challenges and fragmentation and they frequently fail to reach their potential.

Roffey Park research suggests that many organisations struggle with promoting effective communication across cultures, a critical starting point for successful cross-cultural working.^{1,2} Whether due to language differences or different styles of verbal or non-verbal communication, communicating across cultures can be a major challenge. Two elements of the challenge are differences in preferred 'level of directness' and 'level of emotional expression'. In other words, different cultures have preferences in communication for facts only, concise and focused, or facts plus feelings, the full story.

Even among speakers of the same language, the meanings attached to words can be quite different. In some cultures, 'maybe' means 'Yes. I will do it, I just don't want to promise because I'm not sure', and in other countries it means 'forget about it, I just don't want to say no to your face'. In Latin American cultures, 'maybe' often means 'no'. In Scandinavia or Germany 'maybe', can already mean a high level of commitment.

The same applies to non-verbal communications, which play an important role in any communication process. For example, eye contact is an important part of the communication process in Western cultures to infer attentive listening, affirmation of what is said or as a cue to signify turn-taking. In some Asian cultures, however, maintaining eye contact is not always acceptable.³

Cultural differences regarding roles and expectations of managers may also contribute to miscommunication.



Annette Sinclair is a senior researcher at Roffey Park Institute.
annette.sinclair@roffeypark.com



Alex Swarbrick is a senior consultant at Roffey Park Institute.
alex.swarbrick@roffeypark.com

One manager gave examples of where a team member had misinformed him about a particular situation 'because he wanted to please me, to give the right answer'.

Facilitating and promoting effective communications across cultures is clearly a complex challenge. Roffey Park explored how managers and organisations attempt to do this as part of a wider research project examining the effective management of cross-cultural teams.⁴ Here we offer five tips to promote effective communication across cultures.

1. Be sensitive to differing levels of language ability

Misinterpreting the message in a communication exchange is especially likely when communicating in a second language, as it can be harder for people to express and explain themselves when they are not speaking in their mother tongue. Managers themselves need to be explicit, use specific examples where possible, express themselves clearly and avoid too many colloquialisms. As one manager we interviewed said: 'If you are coming from the same background you don't have to use so many words, it's easier to speak your mind, or more often have the same mind... When talking with different colleagues you have to say more, express yourself more, so they really understand what you mean.'

2. Establish processes to check understanding

Because the potential for misunderstanding is much greater when communicating across cultures it is essential to constantly check assumptions and understanding. Managers need to double-check that the intended message, conveyed in verbal, written or non-verbal communication, is the same as the message that is received. Asking for feedback on what has been said is a useful means of checking understanding.

3. Make use of a range of methods of communication

When communicating across cultures and across distance, to help reduce the risk of misunderstandings a useful rule of thumb is to use a communication method one step higher up the list below than you would otherwise use:

- face-to-face;
- video conference/Skype;
- telephone;
- email; and
- text message.

Often the best method of communication in any team, but especially in cross-cultural teams, is regular face-to-face contact, whether the manager and team are co-located or geographically separated.

This may be particularly important for people from cultures that are particularly attuned to non-verbal elements of communication where much meaning is taken from the speaker's facial expressions and body

'While some cultures prefer to participate in discussions and decision-making, others are happy, and expect, to be directed by their manager'

language.⁵ In Japan, for example, where harmony is valued, people have difficulty saying 'no' so particular attention must be paid to non-verbal cues and gestures, such as frowning, inhaling through clenched teeth, tilting the head, scratching the back of the head, and scratching the eyebrow. Face-to-face interactions can help ensure messages are being received and understood.

In group meetings other issues arise. People who are not proficient in the language used may be reluctant or slow to contribute if there is an over-reliance on verbal communication. Alternative methods such as the use of writing ideas on post-its or using pictures or drawings may be useful.

There are also cultural differences in attitudes towards participation. While some cultures prefer to participate in team discussions and decision-making processes, others are happy, and expect, to be directed by their manager.⁶ Some people may be quick to offer their views while others may not say anything unless specifically asked. Different techniques such as requesting ideas or responses by email prior to a meeting or inviting people to discuss in pairs before feeding back to the group can be valuable ways of encouraging members to contribute.

Of course face-to-face meetings are not always possible in teams that are not co-located. Technologies such as video conferencing are seen to be a useful 'second best' alternative but when operating across different time-zones other methods such as email may often be more convenient. Emails can, however, be a source of confusion and misinterpretation so it is particularly important to check and clarify understanding of important information sent via emails, so that the message is not lost.

4. Be flexible and open to different communication styles

Cultures can differ in their preferred patterns of verbal communication. For instance Brewster, Sparrow and Vernon⁷ claim that people in Anglo-Saxon countries tend not to interrupt each other in a communication exchange, but rather commence speaking immediately after the other person has finished talking, whilst in Oriental cultures, gaps in conversation are frequent.

However in Middle Eastern and Mediterranean cultures there is a tendency to prefer a 'relay race' pattern of turn taking, ie whoever wants to speak next just starts talking and there are frequent interruptions and overlapping of speakers. Establishing a group contract, to which all agree, detailing how the team will respect other's contributions ie by listening, not interrupting and acknowledging all ideas from the start can be helpful.

Written communication styles also vary across cultures. Through talking to team members, managers can develop an understanding of how individuals prefer to communicate. A manager we interviewed gave the

following example: 'I was writing an email yesterday to a Dutchman based in The Hague. I have a British email style, use padding, but [he is] writing in bullet points, no pleasantries. I find it strange but it's what he wants. More effective for me to do that, otherwise he might lose the message in it.'

5. Implement intercultural communication training

Finally, organisations should offer intercultural communication training for employees who work in or manage cross-cultural teams. Such training should focus on developing knowledge of different styles of communication across cultures and understanding how to adapt to these. They might also include some development of generic communication skills such as active listening and reflection.

What works in one place might not in another

And let's not fall into the trap of simply making 'culture' a catch all. Don't forget when working with culturally diverse teams, different preferences in communication are only partially explained by societal culture; the rest may arise from organisational culture and personal style.

Our recommendation is to consciously develop more skilful communication – suspending assumptions, taking time to listen, to understand and be understood, something just as relevant within any culture as between them. As one manager replied when asked what helps, 'communicate, communicate, communicate'.

Further practical guidance on managing teams across cultures is available in 'Managing teams across cultures' available from www.roffeypark.com/research

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CONNECTING WITH THE SMARTPHONE GENERATION

Today's workplace can be a rich mix of cultural background, gender and age, yet the different elements need to work together well. **Jennifer MacKay** looks at ways to improve communication in the multi-generational workplace.

As we all now appear destined for longer working lives, the multigenerational workplace seems set to stay. But how can we make it operate optimally? This article examines some of the differences among those in a multigenerational working environment, their impact, and how we can use these differences to our advantage.

What do we mean by a multigenerational workplace?

A multigenerational workplace today usually means a mixture of three age bands: Baby Boomers, Generation X (Gen X) and Generation Y (Gen Y). These words in themselves have become shortcuts for the characteristics they embrace. These can be roughly defined as follows.

Baby Boomers

Born between 1946 and 1964. They:

- have a strong work ethic and are driven to achieve;
- like face-to-face interaction;
- understand hierarchy; and
- are not afraid to challenge others.

Gen X

Born between 1965 and 1978. They:

- prefer efficient, straightforward communication;
- have an independent streak and like to be left to 'get on with it';
- embrace change and risk; and
- value flexibility, so that they can balance other aspects of their lives.

Gen Y

Born between 1979 and 1999. They tend to:

- be great with technology and multitasking;
- like working in teams;
- expect to progress up the ranks quickly and are comfortable questioning hierarchy; and
- have active social lives.

'How we perceive information, the right to it and what we can do with it can impact our approach to communication'

See also Jennifer MacKay's article 'Making difficult conversations 'do-able'' on page 5 of this report.

Upsides and downsides

With these different skills and values all in one place, we can expect a little friction from time to time. Leading accountancy recruitment firm Robert Half researched how these three generations were getting on in the workplace. Its study, 'Workplace redefined: shifting generational attitudes during economic change', reveals that our current tough financial times have actually helped to bring people together.

When asked specifically what the benefits of a multigenerational workplace were, the different groups all cited 'varying experience, diversity and opportunity for mentoring' as plus points.

In terms of their differences, again the groups saw eye to eye. They all felt that work ethics, approach to work/life balance and reaching consensus posed challenges. Although an American survey, most of us here can probably see similar patterns in our own workplace.

On the list of differences there was one more obstacle. One in five people surveyed said that conflicting communication styles was the biggest challenge they faced.

Do conflicting communication styles exist?

There is a lot of truth in the adage 'there is more difference among us than between us.' Certainly we have all witnessed fantastic communication between people of different eras and misinterpretations between contemporaries. To say that Baby Boomers and Gen Ys are fated to misunderstand each other is missing the point.

But there may be some generalisations that can help us understand where communication conflict is coming from.

Let's consider:

1. how we view information;
2. how we communicate;
3. life online; and
4. informal v formal.

1. How we view information

Imagine the world of a Gen Y. They know how to access information at the touch of a button, they believe in their right to information and their entitlement to a say about it. Information is still power. And they've got the means to get the information.

Contrast this with older generations, where information was held by fewer people and we were told things on a need to know basis. For some, this more traditional approach of information dissemination may feel familiar and even comforting. A Gen Y may find that this top-down style jangles with their 'right to know' constitution.

How we perceive information, the right to it and what we can do with it can impact our approach to communication.

'With technology being used for both "work" and "play" it begs the question of whether, when we log off at work, we are really logged off'

2. How we communicate

A Baby Boomer friend is always saying to me, 'just call them'. My natural instinct is to email. Meanwhile, I haven't spoken on the phone to my Gen Y cousin in months. Texting is our mode.

Email, texts, tweets and social media have added to the way we communicate. In order to engage different people across the age spectrum we need to think about our methods. Okay, so Baby Boomers may favour face-to-face or phone communication; Gen X straightforward email; Gen Y texts or instant messaging. But this is not to say that once comfortable with the tools we can't flip between them.

We are all, though, likely to have a preferred medium. So tailoring our approach may produce the best outcomes. Let's consider the different communication modes.

3. Life online

No longer just the domains of the young, businesses too now apply social media across marketing, communications, sales, IT, operations and recruitment functions.

With technology being used for both 'work' and 'play' it begs the question of whether, when we log off at work, we are really logged off. Do our 'free time' communications on social networking sites, blogs etc impact the office?

Younger people may seem more comfortable with less privacy online and more open to what they communicate to the world at large. Clive Davis, director with Robert Half, reminds us that 'managing one's digital footprint is essential for anyone working in the professional world. While some good natured photos and comments may seem innocuous, they may not convey a professional image. This could possibly hurt your career should current or potential employers perform an online search.' Davis recommends enabling privacy settings to manage who sees your profile, and suggests regularly reviewing the available information about yourself.

Older generations may be less interested in joining some social networking sites. Even so, Davis suggests that despite this innate lack of enthusiasm they should consider professional networking sites as a way to make business contacts and raise their professional profile.

4. Informal v formal

We'd probably agree that the workplace has become more informal. This may be evident from how we dress, our use of first names rather than 'Mr' and 'Ms', and that the semicolon has been replaced by the dash.

Some aspects of informality are good and even healthy. It is important, though, that formal communication situations like interviews and appraisals maintain their standards.

There is the risk too that we can get sloppy about giving regular feedback. Setting aside time to offer meaningful feedback is one of the best way to develop our people.

We have a responsibility to our younger workers to see that they can perform in different communication situations whether they be formal or informal.

Making differences advantages

By putting into place some of these tips we can create a multigenerational workplace with thriving communication. So:

1. value communication across the business. Provide an excellent standard to generate ideas, discussion and community;
2. keep the communication rules clear. Decide and agree:
 - whether it is OK to pull out your Blackberry during a meeting to send an email;
 - whether you can use social networking sites at work; and
 - whether texting a client is ever acceptable;
3. remember that different people respond better to different forms of communication. Value and build on the different communication strengths in the business;
4. let people know if a mode or style of communication is inappropriate to the situation; and
5. encourage multigenerational mentoring. Gen Ys can mentor older workers as well as vice versa.

Speaking more than one language is seen as an asset. This also applies to adopting different generations' communication styles. What on the surface may appear as conflicting perhaps is really more complementary. Our challenge and responsibility is to harness it.

This article was first published in *F&M*188, May 2011.

BOOKS, JOURNAL ARTICLES AND MORE

The following resources are available to ICAEW members from the Library and Information Service at icaew.com/library

In this list, access to publications is indicated at the end of each entry as follows:

- LOAN – available for loan from the ICAEW library
- EBOOK – available for download via the A-Z list at icaew.com/en/library/guide-to-services/collection/books/ebooks/a-z
- EBSCO – available online via Ebsco at <http://search.ebscohost.com>

OVERVIEW

Personal impact: what it takes to make a difference

by A Vickers, Pearson Education, 2009, xv, 259pp
ISBN: 9780273720324 (EBOOK)

Communicate to win

by R Denny, Kogan Page, 2006, viii, 131pp
ISBN: 0749444355 (LOAN)

How to make an impact: inform and impress with your reports, presentations and business documents

by J Moon, FT Prentice Hall, 2008, xx, 283pp
ISBN: 9780273713326 (LOAN)

Develop your NLP skills

by A Bradbury, Kogan Page, 2006, vi, 151pp
ISBN: 0749445580 (LOAN)

Effective internal communication (LOAN)

by L Smith and P Mounter, Kogan Page, 2005, xiv, 226pp
ISBN: 0749439483 (LOAN)

Negotiate successfully: how to get your way and find win-win situations

Bloomsbury Publishing, 2004, vi, 90pp
ISBN: 0713678755 (EBOOK)

VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Running board meetings: how to get the most from them

by P Dunne, Kogan Page, 2005, xi, 164pp
ISBN: 0749443472 (LOAN/EBOOK)

The complete presentation skills handbook: how to understand and reach your audience for maximum impact and success

by S Siddons, Kogan Page, 2008, viii, 223pp
ISBN: 9780749450373 (EBOOK)

The concise Adair on communication and presentation skills

by J Adair, edited by N Thomas, Thorogood Publishing, 2003, ix, 128pp
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Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005, vi, 90pp
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by A Bradbury, 2006, vii, 149pp
ISBN: 0749445602 (LOAN/EBOOK)

‘Louder than words’

by L Talley, *Training and Development*, November 2009, Vol.63 Issue 11, pp.30-33 (EBSCO)

‘Speaking up: 10 tips for making a C-Level presentation’

by C Reiffenstein, *Training and Development*, May 2010, Vol.64 Issue 5, pp.33-35 (EBSCO)

‘The seven deadly sins’

by Y Rob, *accountancy*, December 2007, Vol.140 Issue 1372, pp.56-57 (EBSCO/journal available to view in library)

‘How to become an authentic speaker’

by N Morgan, *Harvard Business Review*, November 2008, Vol.86 Issue 11, pp.115-119 (EBSCO/journal available to view in library)

WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

Effective business writing

by P Forsyth, Kogan Page, 2009, xiv, 129pp
ISBN: 9780749454531 (EBOOK)

Effective writing: a handbook for accountants

by C B May, Pearson Education, 2011, xvii, 269pp
ISBN: 9780132842990 (LOAN)

The Minto pyramid principle: logic in writing, thinking and problem solving

by B Minto, Minto International, 2010, 254pp
ISBN: 0960191038 (LOAN)

Better business writing

by T R V Foster, Kogan Page, 2002, 168pp
ISBN: 0749438010 (LOAN)

Good writing for business

by S Callis, Chandos Publishing, 2001, xv, 237pp
ISBN: 1902375742 (LOAN)

‘Five quick ways to trim – and improve – business writing’

by J Clayton, *Harvard Management Update*, September 2008, Vol.13 Issue 9, pp.3-5 (EBSCO)

‘Write stuff’

by N. Parker, *Director*, May 2010, Vol.63 Issue 9, p.18 (EBSCO)

‘Writing for leaders’

by A Jacques, *Public Relations Strategist*, Spring 2011, Vol.17 Issue 1, pp.28-29 (EBSCO)

‘Business writing: presenting ideas with force and clarity’

by D Tindal, *CMA Management*, March 2011, Vol. 85 Issue 1, pp.18-19, 38 (EBSCO/journal available to view in library)

NEW MEDIA

Social media strategies for professionals and their firms: the guide to establishing credibility and accelerating relationships

by M Golden, Wiley, 2011, 348pp
ISBN: 9780470633106 (LOAN)

PREVIOUS SPECIAL REPORTS

The faculty special reports summarised here were published over the past 13 months and, along with many others, are available to members at icaew.com/specialreports. They comprise a range of in-depth reports on a single topic, sometimes by a single author, sometimes by a range of experts. They are a vital source of expertise on a variety of subjects.

Balanced scorecard October 2011 (SR34)



BALANCED SCORECARD

Poorly thought-out measures can cause dysfunctional behaviours and limit business performance. This is where the balanced scorecard (BSc) can prove to be a valuable management tool. This report discusses how to ensure success in using this tool, the technology available to support it and how to incorporate your business's strategic objectives into your BSc. In addition it includes an in-depth case study on implementation and an insightful interview with Lawrence Churchill CBE.

Personal development March 2011 (SR32)



PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR ACCOUNTANTS IN BUSINESS

Experience and technical excellence can only take you so far as a chartered accountant in business. Once these are established, we become managers, then directors and leaders. This report pulls together our best articles on developing the 'softer' skills necessary in such roles. It covers the areas of leadership, networking, planning, delegating and negotiating to provide a practical guide to improving yourself and, as a result, your career.

Project management June 2011 (SR33)



PROJECT MANAGEMENT

There are myriad roles that you may perform in a project, such as sponsor, champion, steering group member, project lead, project member or project accountant. This report is an overview of the key aspects of project management and should provide a great starting point for any professional accountant about to perform any of these functions. The report also contains details of recent developments, current issues and suggestions for further reading.

Outsourcing December 2010 (SR31)



FINANCE TRANSFORMATION – THE OUTSOURCING PERSPECTIVE

This report offers a full overview of finance and accounting outsourcing solutions in line with the most recent trends in pricing, location and the level of outsourcing that businesses currently benefit from. A comprehensive guide to all matters surrounding outsourcing, this special report provides clear guidance on the subtleties and the practicalities faced by a business planning to engage in any level of finance and accounting outsourcing.

Throwing sheep in the boardroom: how online social networking will transform your life, work and world
by M Fraser and S Dutta, Wiley, 2008, xi, 332pp
ISBN: 9780470740149 (LOAN)

Face up to Facebook
by J Parsons, March 2010, Vol. 145 Issue, pp.62-63 (EBSCO/journal available to view in library)

'Avoid bad impressions in social networking'
by D Wagenaar, *Accounting Today*, 16 August 2010, Vol.24 Issue 10, pp.30-31 (EBSCO/journal available to view in library)

'Taming the social networking beast'
by A.E. Buttell, *Journal of Financial Planning*, May/June 2010 Practice Management, pp.6-7 (EBSCO)

'Make your mark with your social media status'
by R. Vikram, *Journal of Accountancy*, Vol.211 Issue 3, p.20 (EBSCO/journal available to view in library)

'Social media and accounting'
by W. Gibbins, *International Accountant*, July/August 2011, No. 59, pp.12-13 (journal available to view in library)

PRESENTING INFORMATION AND NUMBERS

Report writing in business – the effective communication of information
by T. Bentley, CIMA, 2002, xv, 114pp
ISBN: 1859715168 (LOAN)

Performance dashboards: measuring, monitoring, and managing your business
by W W Eckerson, Wiley, 2006, xviii, 301pp
ISBN: 0471724173 (LOAN/EBOOK)

Performance dashboards and analysis for value creation
by J Alexander, Wiley, 2007, xvi, 301pp
ISBN: 9780470047972 (LOAN/EBOOK)

'Make numbers come alive'
by R Grimshaw, *Harvard Management Update*, March 2008, Vol.13 Issue 3, pp.3-4 (EBSCO)

'When good information goes bad'
by J Moon, *accountancy*, January 2006, pp.62-64 (EBSCO/journal available to view in library)

ACROSS CULTURES

Bridging the culture gap: a practical guide to international business communication
by P Carte and C Fox, Kogan Page, 2004, xii, 180pp
ISBN: 0749441704 (EBOOK)

Kiss, bow or shake hands: the best selling guide to doing business in more than 60 countries
by T Morrison and W A Conaway, Adams Media, 2006, xiii, 593pp
ISBN: 1593373686 (LOAN)

Global business etiquette: a guide to international communication and customs
by J S Martin and L H Chaney, Praeger, 2006, 178pp
ISBN: 0275988155 (LOAN)



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