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Three Ways to Wake Up Procedures Manuals

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Procedures manuals are always with us, but their usefulness varies widely. Here are a few simple guidelines to make them more effective, and—

THREE WAYS TO WAKE UP PROCEDURES MANUALS

by William N. McNairn
Price Waterhouse & Co.

PROCEDURES manuals in many organizations are not up-to-date, are not used as much as they should be, and all too often are little more than handsome ornaments for the management bookcase. So displayed, they lend a note of "being organized" to the office decor, and, thus, symbolically at least, help to sustain organizational morale. One suspects, however, that the aura of well-ordered communication radiating from their shiny covers is often more false than real—and that closer inspection of the contents might reveal a telltale haze of dust accumulated along the upper edge.

Lyndall Urwick, long-time student of organizational behavior in Great Britain, observed some years ago that, "In a great number of undertakings . . . written instructions are neither uniform, clearly expressed, self-consistent, readily amendable, logically arranged, nor up-to-date." And John Gardner, former Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, has similarly observed in this country that, ". . . almost every well-established organization is a coral reef of procedures that were laid down to achieve some long-forgotten objective." Ineffective use of manuals thus appears to be a widespread problem both here and abroad. To paraphrase Mark Twain, "The organization that doesn't use its manuals is no better off than the organization that doesn't have manuals." And, in fact, it may be worse off, because it is paying for something and getting nothing in return.

It would not be amiss to describe the manual systems that many executives find themselves responsible for as loose-leaf frustrations. Since remedies exist for most of the problems with manuals and can easily be applied, executive dissatisfaction with them need not continue. It is the purpose of this article, therefore, to describe remedies that the responsible executive and his organization can use to put their manuals in good working order and minimize communication frustration.

In putting these remedies to work, as in taking any corrective action, the greatest assurance of success comes when the remedies are applied with a sound understanding of the underlying problems. For that reason, some of the important factors that contribute to manual failures are discussed in the following sections.

Users of manuals are essentially "receivers" of messages. As such, they are at a disadvantage, because verbal communication is in many ways more difficult for the receiver than for the sender. The sender must choose an idea and encode it in words. The receiver has to do, in reverse, basically the same things. But, in addition he must first find or select "the" message he wants from a number of competing messages that are in the communication channel. And often there is also noise, distortion, or confusion present in the communication channel, which makes the selection process more difficult.

If the problems inherent in finding a message and decoding it are substantial, most receivers will become discouraged and will not carry through the effort required to "get" the message. Thus, manual system failures are traceable in most instances directly to the difficulties that users have in trying to locate and decipher messages. As a consequence, the success of a procedures manual system is enormously influenced by the senders. Their effectiveness in clearly identifying and encoding messages for receivers usually spells the difference between a manual that is used and one that is merely displayed.

Why manuals fail

Why do manuals in so many organizations fail to live up to their promise as working communication devices? The answer appears to be rooted in the fact that communication—in any form—is a largely perplexing art. Even such an acknowledged master of the art as Samuel Butler came to the conclusion that: "Communication of all kinds . . . is a compromise with impossibilities." Certainly, most managers who have tried to write simple, clear procedures have felt the truth of Butler's words at first-hand. However, there can be both workable and unworkable compromises. And the failure of procedures manuals to achieve their goals is due in most instances to using unworkable compromises for three critically important communication functions—which must be served if the reader is to be able to use the manual without excessive difficulty. These functions are:

- Indexing manual contents sufficiently to permit users to readily find what they are looking for;
- Presenting information clearly so that users can quickly gain an

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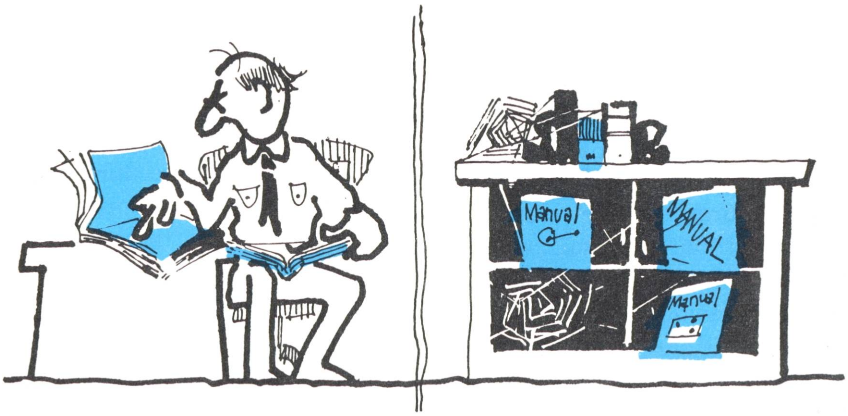

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The first rule: Prepare a complete index as well as a system for maintaining it.

understanding of its meaning; and

• Maintaining manual contents reliably so that users can trust the accuracy of the information.

What remedies are available?

The remedies that are available for strengthening manuals are not complex nor costly to apply. Nevertheless, they are powerful remedies. And, properly used, they always bring useful improvement.

The remedies are:

• Organizing and preparing a complete index and a system for maintaining it;

• Simplifying written information and using illustrations to replace words wherever possible;

• Reducing and controlling the number of manual copies to be maintained.

These are fundamentally simple remedies. As with all simple remedies, their full application requires skill and judgment. Most organizations, however, have more of these qualities available than they may realize before they take stock of their internal talents. And, fortunately, skill and judgment in these matters also develop surprisingly well from the effort and attention of making improvements to a manual. The use of these remedies is, therefore, not beyond the reach of any organization really interested in obtaining more effective manuals. If necessary, some assistance from outside specialists can be obtained if needed to get started or to deal with special problems.

Putting the remedies to work

Remedy 1—Organize and prepare a complete index as well as a system for maintaining it.

Examine the index for your financial manual. Is it a well thought out structure of main and subsidiary information? Are there numerous cross references? Are all of the commonly sought types of information separately indexed or cross-indexed? Are there, for example, an average of at least two subject indices per page of text? Does it indicate the date of issue of procedures? If the answer to these questions is "no," a more useful index can be developed. See Exhibit 1, facing page.

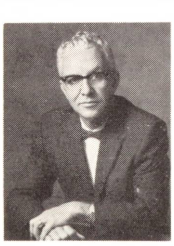
First, prepare an index plan. List all subjects that users of the manual are likely to seek information about. Solicit suggestions for subject indices from a cross section of manual users. Examine the contents of the manual for additional subjects that are not listed. If in doubt about whether to include a subject in the index, include it. It is usually better to over-index rather than to under-index. Arrange the list of subjects alphabetically. Enter on the list the reference number and issue date of each procedure for each subject. With the issue date of each procedure shown, it is possible for manual users to see from the index whether they have the latest issue of each procedure.

Type the list of subject indices. Circulate copies to manual users for final suggestions. When these are received, make any necessary changes to the index list and issue it. If a tape or card programed typewriter is available for typing the index, it will be possible to update it and revise it with maximum ease and speed.

Remedy 2—Simplify written information and use illustrations to replace words wherever possible.

Select three procedures from the existing manual: one long procedure; one short procedure; and one of medium length. Apply the following criteria to these procedures to see if they indicate a high potential for simplification:

a. Make a test of the "fog" index [i.e., the low level of clarity] for each of the three procedures. A "fog" index of



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PROBLEM

INFORMATION IS NOT INDEXED AND CROSS-INDEXED SUFFICIENTLY

THE EXISTING INDEX MAY BE MERELY A LIST OF PROCEDURE OR POLICY TITLES--POTENTIAL USERS CANNOT QUICKLY FIND THE SPECIFIC SUBJECT MATTER THEY ARE LOOKING FOR.

GUIDELINES

THE POTENTIAL FOR IMPROVEMENT IS HIGH IF

1. THE PRESENT MANUAL HAS, ON THE AVERAGE, FEWER THAN TWO SUBJECT INDICES PER PAGE OF TEXT.
2. THERE ARE NO CROSS REFERENCES IN THE PRESENT INDEX.
3. THE PRESENT INDEX DOES NOT SHOW TITLES AND REFERENCES FOR ALL INFORMATION THAT IS FREQUENTLY SOUGHT.

REMEDIES

1. PREPARE AN INDEX PLAN:
   - 1.1 LIST ALL SUBJECTS THAT USERS ARE LIKELY TO SEEK INFORMATION ABOUT;
   - 1.2 EXAMINE THE CONTENTS OF THE MANUAL FOR ADDITIONAL SUBJECTS THAT ARE NOT LISTED;
   - 1.3 ENTER REFERENCE NUMBERS FOR ALL LISTED SUBJECTS; CROSS REFERENCE RELATED SUBJECTS.
2. IF IN DOUBT ABOUT WHETHER TO INCLUDE A SUBJECT, INCLUDE IT; OVERINDEX RATHER THAN UNDERINDEX.
3. MAINTAIN THE INDEX, IF POSSIBLE, ON A TAPE OR CARD PROGRAMMED TYPEWRITER (OR COMPUTER) TO PROVIDE FOR UPDATING WITH MAXIMUM EASE AND SPEED.

EXHIBIT I

Examine existing manuals for "irf"—interest repellant factors

10 or higher indicates a high potential for improving communication through simplification of terminology and structure. (See *The Technique Of Clear Writing* by Robert Gunning, McGraw-Hill, 1963, page 36, for explanation of "fog" index.)

b. Examine the three procedures for pictures, diagrams, charts, matrices, or other forms of visual communication. If there are none, or if there is very little visual assistance to communication, a high potential for simplifying presentation exists.

c. Examine the three procedures for "irf" (*i*nterest *r*epellant *f*actor). If there are many pages of solid typewritten matter, with few captions, headings, paragraphs, sections, or other breaks, there is a high potential for making the information more readable by reducing the "irf" factor.

If your test of the three procedures discloses that significant improvement can be made in your manuals, a plan should be developed for making the necessary changes. This plan should identify the procedures that most need improvement, and assign available effort to accomplish the changes on a priority basis. See Exhibit 2, facing page.

For each procedure that needs improvement, the following steps should be taken:

a. Outline the procedure before beginning to prepare it in final form. Include in the outline all major elements of information to be included in the procedure. At the same time, review the elements to make sure that they belong in the outline; exclude any elements that don't belong.

b. When you are satisfied that the outline provides an orderly array of all of the information to be presented in the procedure, begin drafting the procedure. Use illustrations, examples, matrices, diagrams, and other graphic aids to understanding wherever these will reduce written material.

c. When word descriptions or instructions are needed, keep sentences short (20 words or less if possible), and use simple words in place of long or unfamiliar words.

d. Keep the procedure separated into easily understood sections. Avoid masses of words. Frequent use of captions and headings will help to preserve logic and meaning in written information.

Remedy 3—Reducing and controlling the number of manual copies to be maintained.

Obtain a copy of the control list of manuals that have been issued to the organization. Examine it to see if it has been kept up to date. There should be additions and deletions of recent date so the list will show how many copies are issued to single departments or locations. If there are several copies available within single departments or locations, it is likely that the number of copies to be maintained can be reduced to the advantage of all concerned. Ascertain what the criteria are for issuing a manual to an individual or a location. Examine the control list of manuals to see whether the criteria appear to have been followed. Based on the information discovered in these investigatory steps, make an assessment of the potential for reducing the number of manual copies issued throughout the organization. If a reduction of five per cent or more appears reasonable to accomplish, prepare a specific plan for making the reduction.

First, establish criteria for issuing copies of the manual. Consider the probable frequency of reference of a potential manual holder, as well as his ease of access to a "library" copy, in establishing the criteria. It is likely, for example, that no one who uses a manual on an average of less than once a day should be issued an individual copy. Use of "library" copies in centralized locations should be emphasized. Issuance of individual copies should be restricted only to those who have a continuing and frequent need for them. Requests for convenience copies and status copies should not be honored. These

PROBLEM

INFORMATION IS NOT PRESENTED CLEARLY AND SIMPLY

POTENTIAL USERS OF MANUAL--WHO ARE USUALLY UNDER TIME PRESSURES--ARE REPULSED BY THE MASS OF WORDS TO BE WADED THROUGH IN SEARCH OF MEANING.

GUIDELINES

THE POTENTIAL FOR IMPROVEMENT IS HIGH IF

1. TESTS OF THE MANUAL CONTENT INDICAT A "FOG" INDEX OF 10 OR HIGHER. (S THE TECHNIQUE OF CLEAR WRITING BY ROBERT GUNNING, PAGE 36, FOR EXPL ATION OF "FOG" INDEX.)
2. THERE ARE FEW, IF ANY, ILLUSTRATED FORMS SHOWING TYPICAL ENTRIES.
3. THERE ARE MANY PAGES OF SOLID TYPE-WRITTEN MATTER WITH FEW CAPTIONS, HEADINGS, PARAGRAPHS, SECTIONS, O OTHER BREAKS.

REMEDIES

1. OUTLINE EACH SECTION OR PROCEDURE BEFORE PREPARING IT IN FINAL FORM. THIS WILL GIVE ORDER TO THE INFORMATION AND MINIMIZE RAMBLING OR DUPLICATION.
2. IN PREPARING INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIAL, AVOID LENGTHY WORD DESCRIPTIONS; WHEREVER POSSIBLE USE ILLUSTRATIONS, EXAMPLES, MATRICES, OR OTHER GRAPHIC FORMS.
3. IN PREPARING DEFINITIONS, POLICY STATEMENTS, OR BACKGROUND INFORMATION, KEEP SENTENCES SHORT (20 WORDS OR LESS, IF POSSIBLE); CHOOSE SIMPLE WORDS IN PLACE OF MANY-SYLLABLE WORDS.
4. IN GENERAL AVOID WORD MASSES--BREAK THE MATERIAL INTO SHORT PARAGRAPHS AND SECTIONS--USE CAPTIONS AND HEADINGS TO GUIDE COMPREHENSION.

EXHIBIT 2

PROBLEM

INFORMATION IS NOT RELIABLE

POTENTIAL USERS HAVE NO ASSURANCE THAT INFORMATION IS CURRENT IN THE COPY OF THE MANUAL THEY ARE LOOKING AT.

GUIDELINES

THE POTENTIAL FOR IMPROVEMENT IS HIGH IF

1. THERE ARE NO ESTABLISHED CRITERIA FOR ISSUING MANUAL COPIES.
2. MANY EMPLOYEES IN THE SAME GENERAL AREAS HAVE INDIVIDUAL COPIES OF THE MANUAL.
3. THE CONTROL LIST OF ISSUED COPIES OF THE MANUAL IS OUT OF DATE.

REMEDIES

1. ESTABLISH CRITERIA FOR ISSUING COPIES OF THE MANUAL. CONSIDER FREQUENCY OF REFERENCE AND EASE OF ACCESS TO A "LIBRARY" COPY AS FACTORS. EMPHASIZE USE OF "LIBRARY" COPIES AND RESTRICT ISSUANCE OF INDIVIDUAL COPIES. FOR EXAMPLE, NO ONE WHO USES A MANUAL LESS THAN ONCE A DAY SHOULD BE ISSUED AN INDIVIDUAL COPY.

2. PROVIDE A CURRENT LIST OF THE DATES OF ISSUE FOR ALL ACTIVE CONTENT MATERIAL IN THE MANUAL. THIS CAN BE DONE BY SHOWING ON THE MANUAL INDEX THE ISSUE DATE FOR EACH REFERENCED ITEM. IF THE INDEX IS UPDATED FREQUENTLY, IT CAN SERVE AS A CHECK ON THE CURRENCY OF THE MANUAL CONTENTS.

EXHIBIT 3

EXHIBIT 4
DRAFTING PROCEDURES

Viewpoint:
In writing procedural instructions, you should have in mind a person to whom you are directing the instructions. For this purpose, mentally select one of the employees in the organization who will be using the instructions. Then, choose your words, your examples, and your orientation or frame of reference to suit easy understanding by that individual. Do not write procedures with no one in mind; this approach tends to produce generalized, difficult-to-understand instructions. Wherever possible, use diagrams and illustrations to eliminate wordy explanations.

* * *

The following separate sections or elements of a procedural instruction should be considered for inclusion in each procedure. Some of these sections are mandatory, others (indicated by an asterisk) should be used only where they add to ease of understanding and conciseness.

Title:
A brief but accurate and clear title for the procedure should be selected. It should in a few words describe the subject matter of the procedure. It need not describe the purpose of the procedure which is covered below in another section.

Purpose:
The purpose of the procedure should be described simply and in language that makes clear why the procedure has been prepared. This section can easily degenerate into a broad description of the obvious. Therefore, every attempt should be made to describe the purpose briefly and meaningfully.

***Policy:**
The general policy under which the procedure is being written is frequently stated in a separate policy section. However, this section should probably not be included in most procedures. Establishing policies, if they have not previously been defined, is a separate work assignment, which frequently requires extensive discussion and approval phases. If existing policies have been defined, they should be identified in the "Reference" section.

***Definitions:**
Words that have several meanings in general usage, but which have specific meanings in the procedure should be defined in this section. Similarly any words coined as part of the procedure, or words which are not commonly used, should be defined so that the user of the procedure knows exactly what is meant when these terms are used.

***References:**
The numbers and titles of other procedures which are related to the procedure being prepared should be listed in this section. In addition, if there are books or publications which are significant in providing a background or knowledge necessary to carry out the procedure these should be also cross-referenced.

***Forms:**
The titles and numbers, if any, of all forms required for the execution of the procedural instructions should be listed in this section. In addition, copies of the forms should normally be provided as exhibits to the procedure to permit the procedure user to become familiar with the forms. In most cases, examples of the forms, filled out with typical entries, should be included as part of the exhibits or instructions themselves.

***Background:**
A background section is not required in every procedure, but is frequently convenient for providing general explanations and miscellaneous material that is important to proper understanding of the procedure. The information included in the background section should clearly increase the ability of the procedure reader to understand and make use of the procedural instructions. If it does not do this, it should be omitted.

Procedures:
In the procedure section the specific instructions to be followed should be described. They should be described in simple steps, which proceed in a logical fashion, and which are practical to carry out in the order in which presented. In general, it is desirable to use a "playscript" type of writing, in which the title of the person carrying out the steps is indicated (under a heading "Responsibility") and the action which he takes is specified alongside his title (under the caption "Action").

copies can quickly multiply into a hard core of maintenance cost that is hard to eliminate once in existence.

Second, establish a system for maintaining the currency of information in the manuals. If the date of issue for each procedure is entered on the index, it will be possible for manual holders to see whether or not they have the latest issue of each procedure. A list of authorized holders of manuals should be established. This list will provide the names of departmental addresses needed for issuing new or revised procedures. It will also permit periodic inventory taking of manuals, say once a year, to review the possibly changing needs of holders, and permit trimming the number of copies to be maintained. See Exhibit 3, facing page.

When vigorously pursued, the above remedies can infuse an amazing amount of new usefulness into procedures manuals that have previously fallen short of meeting expectations. See Exhibit 4, above.

Will Rogers, the cowboy sage, used to begin one of his monologues by saying: "All I know is just what I read in the papers." From an information viewpoint, Will was fortunate. He had many excellent newspapers to call upon for his knowledge of current affairs. The modern seeker of information in a procedures manual, however, has only one source of information to call upon—all he knows is "just what he reads in the manual." To the extent that he can be helped, through changes in the manual, to more quickly find (and understand) what he is looking for, the payout from manual dollars can be multiplied enormously. For this reason, the corrective steps discussed above and in the accompanying exhibits offer a real (and for many organizations, perhaps, unnoticed) opportunity to increase effectiveness.