The Skill of Drafting Reports

Report is an important form of business communication. Generating and analysing reports is a routine task in every professional's day-to-day activities. It is in fact hard to think of an organization where, as a professional, you would not be required to write some sort of a report. Reports are thus written to analyse a situation, to offer an alternative method of operation, to study the growth rate of a company, since reports acquire such inevitability in the professional world, it is mandatory for us to understand in detail how they are written, what their structure is, and what makes them effective.

Dr. J K Behl

The word 'report' is derived from the Latin "reportare" which means to carry back (re=back+ portare =to carry). A report, therefore, is a description of an event carried back to someone who was not present on the scene. Thus in a board sense, many memorandums, letters and news items are reports. When an instructor prepares a list of absent students or an analysis of an examination result, or when a technician fills in a form the readings taken from a measurement instrument, he is writing a report. But the types of reports we are interested in are those which scientists, engineers, business executives and administrators have to write as part of their duty. These relate either to work they have done or to the activities of the organization and clear writing and they are presented in a conventional form sanctioned by long and varied experience. A report is a formal communication written for a specific purpose; it includes a description of procedures followed for collection and analysis of data, their significance, the conclusions drawn from them, and recommendations, if required. A report differs from other compositions inasmuch as it is written in a more less conventional from to meet a specific need or requirement. It is not an outburst of powerful feelings or an expression of recollected emotions, nor is it written because one feels an irresistible urge to unburden one's heart. A report writer should examine and present objectively the data collected. His conclusions and recommendations are strictly based on the facts included in the report. As shearing and christian point out, a report is like a bathing suit. " it covers everything that has to be covered but nothing more...." it does not distract attention from the content by unnecessary frills. But within these limitations there is scope for freedom regarding the choice of diction and structure, technique of presentation and style of exposition, subject to the paramount need of precise and clear communication.

Whatever profession you choose, it is almost certain that you will be asked to write and read reports. It has been estimated that an engineer, a business executive or a government offer spends about 75 per cent of his time at the desk either writing reports, letters, etc, or processing them. A large number of important decisions in business, industry or government are taken on the basis of information presented or recommendations made in reports. Whenever a problem comes to notice or a need is felt to analyze a situation or detailed information is required to take a decision, the report writer comes into the picture. A commission or a committee, a study group or a panel is required to present its findings and/or recommendations in the form of a report. It has rightly been said that for running an industry or a business efficiently the skill of report writing is as necessary as good equipment and quality raw materials. A statement like 'a business executive who cannot effective reports for his boss and gets his subordinates write good reports for himself is almost totally ineffective', is an exaggeration of a vital truth. It is an undeniable fact that a report helps an executive perform his functions of planning and evaluating men and material resources efficiently. In earlier times when business was run by small groups, all members could meet, pool their knowledge, discuss problems and arrive at decisions. Now when an industry employs thousands of workers, many of them specialists in particular fields of operation, it is not possible to keep oneself informed of what others are doing without the aid of reports. Life in the latter half of the twentieth century has become highly competitive owing to

Associate Professor, Beant College of Engineering and Technology, Gurdaspur (Punjab)

unprecedented advances in science and technology. Whether it be an individual or an organization, critical evaluation of performance is essential for mere survival, more so for growth and progress. Thus continuous efforts are required for an organization to improve its working through an analysis of its own processes of production, distribution, etc. and comparison with other similar organizations. And these tasks cannot be performed without preparation of reports on various aspects of business and research activity. Writing reports is a discipline which has an intrinsic value. It trains the writer in "planned and orderly procedures and logical presentation of idea and information...it reveals gaps in reasoning, spotlights woolly thinking, identifies digressions from the correct line in the work done, shows up faults of tactics or strategy which the smoke and confusion of day-to-day close combat comfortably conceal. One major corporation in the USA tells engineers in a technical reports manual: It (a report) is often his (an engineer's) only tangible product. It presents his investigation, his testing and experimentation. If his efforts are to count in the Judgement of his superiors, he must describe clearly what he has done. He must show the significance of his work. And often the engineer's written report is his only contact with the management. Report writing develops the power of discrimination, organization, judgement and communication. Universities offering professional programmes are beginning to take an increasing interest in introducing courses in report writing and progressive organization are specially designing intensive programmes in report writing for the benefit of their employees.

The most crucial task of the scientist or engineer is to carefully organize her/his own thoughts, and subsequently, the point that need to be presented. These must be arranged in a simple and logical manner. It is best to begin with a storyline. The storyline clearly and succinctly task the audience through the message that speaker intends to communicate. It gives a clear idea of the overall theme. This theme then needs to be placed in different compartments. The storyline, thus, act as a roadmap that guides the audience from one compartment-a significant point of the presentation-to the other. This mechanism engages the audience, as it takes them through this virtual journey. Listening to the presentation, the audience first becomes curious, then interested, and finally glued. The people in the audience then begin reacting mentally to the points made by the speaker. At the end of a good speech they are convinced, though gradually, about the argument presented by the speaker. They align with the speaker's point of view. This is how the speaker's objective is fulfilled. As is evident from this sequence, structured organization of a speech is essential to ensure effective communication. Random thoughts interpolated anywhere take away from the objective of the presentation. Speech organization has another positive advantage-it is great help to the speaker. This is because the logically arranged train of thought keeps the different ideas tightly linked-with one idea following the other in a systematic pattern. This helps the speaker to remember and recapitulate her/his thoughts easily.

Reports may be oral or written. An oral report is a piece of face-to-face communication about something seen or observed. Unless tape-recorded, it is as ephemeral as any other oral communication. Though its saves the reporter's time, it is more time-consuming for the receiver as he has listen to every word of the report. A written report is relatively more accurate and permanent. In certain cases the reader may just skim through it, or read the abstract or the conclusions or recommendations only. It can be referred to again and again and is by its very nature more formal than an oral report. There are, however, certain types of written reports also which, like oral reports, are comparatively informal. For example, the manager of a firm may write a report giving his assessment of the working of the branches he visits on a tour for the information of the proprietor. Generally, such reports are written in the form of a memorandum and range from a few lines to several pages of detailed information. Some times they are written in the letter from too. Formal reports vary a great deal according to their purpose and contents, and different organization have different ways of classifying them. Some classify them according to their source or frequency of appearance, other by their length or degree of formality or physical from. Whatever be the basis of classification, there is one thing common to them all-they follow more or less a similar pattern. Reports are the result of analysis, investigation of a problem, survey of a situation, or a piece of research. An informational report contains only the data collected or facts observed in an organized form. It presents the situation as it is and not as it should be. It does not contain any conclusions or recommendations. It is useful because it presents relevant data put together in a from in which it is required by the management to take decisions. An interpretive report, like an informational reports contains facts but it also includes an evaluation or interpretation or analysis of data and the reporter's conclusions. It may also have recommendations for action called a recommendation or recommendatory report. There are some reports which are written in a prescribed form. All that the report writer has to do is to put a tick marl against certain items listed in the form or write very brief remarks against them. These reports are written usually for recording routine matters at regular interval, e.g. confidential reports on employees, periodic reports on the progress of projects, reports on inspection of equipment, etc. though these reports are formal and contain information and sometimes recommendations also, they are called mentioned in this section. Thus report writing is a skill required by all professionals in this advanced technology world.

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