

A marketable skill

Employees with good writing ability are lacking in workplace, survey shows

By Madlen Read

The Associated Press

NEW YORK - It's not just students who need to brush up on their writing.

A majority of U.S. employers say about one-third of workers do not meet the writing requirements of their positions, according to a survey by the College Board's National Commission on Writing.

"Businesses are really crying out -- they need to have people who write better," College Board President Gaston Caperton said.

With e-mail and PowerPoint displays often supplanting phone calls and oral presentations in the workplace, writing skills are in demand. Although writing has always held a spot in American education as one of the three R's, many say writing clearly and accurately is more important than ever -- and not all workers are up to the task.

In a fast-paced workplace, precision and brevity are essential. For e-mails, reports and presentations, the commission found that accuracy, clarity, spelling, punctuation, grammar and conciseness ranked among the most sought-after skills.

"There's no way to say that writing has gotten worse," said Susan Traiman, director of the education initiative for the Business Roundtable. Rather, "the demand has gotten greater."

The commission surveyed Business Roundtable members in six sectors: mining; construction; manufacturing; transportation and utilities; services; and finance, insurance and real estate.

Two-thirds of salaried workers in large U.S. companies have jobs that require some writing, and this includes some of the most technical occupations.

"Writing skills tend to be critical more on the salaried side of things, but even for our hourly jobs, to be able to communicate shift to shift," said Thomas Siegele, a human resources manager for paint and glass maker PPG Industries, based in Pittsburgh.

William Raney, president of the industry group West Virginia Coal Association, said writing skills are necessary for electricians, engineers and foremen, who often draft proposals for government agencies and regulatory bodies.

"There's a great need to translate the technical to the practical," Raney said.

A majority of survey respondents said about two-thirds of employees -- current workers and new hires -- meet writing requirements. However, about one-third of respondents said one-third or fewer of current and new employees met those requirements. Although lackluster

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A majority of survey respondents said about two-thirds of employees -- current workers and new hires -- meet writing requirements. However, about one-third of respondents said one-third or fewer of current and new employees met those requirements. Although lackluster writing skills do not necessarily impede success in all realms, more than half of the companies surveyed reported that they assess writing in hiring and promoting salaried employees.

The solution?

The College Board, which administers the SAT, PSAT and Advanced Placement tests, said the responsibility lies with grade schools and universities, but training represents another potential solution.

"You're never too old to learn," said Bob Kerrey, co-chairman of the writing commission and president of the New School University in New York City. "It's a skill that is acquirable."

More than 40 percent of companies already provide or require writing training for salaried employees who need it, the survey reported.

With training costing an average of \$950 per employee, the College Board estimates that the price tag for better prose may equal \$3.1 billion annually.