

Writing Effective Business Memos in Alawdah Company Using Action Research

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Abstract: Writing skills are essential skills in the age of technological innovations. This study aimed to improve written communication among Alawdah Company staff. The purpose of this study was to improve written communication among Alawdah Company staff, with a particular focus on more effective business memoranda. Krathwohl (2004, p. 5) offered “two contrasting but equally important methods of doing research,” generally described as either quantitative or qualitative methods. However, Creswell (2005, p. 52) explained that the two methods can be combined “to best understand and explain a research problem”. The research methodology used to conduct this study was a combined quantitative/qualitative research method with an action research design. Creswell (2005, p. 53) defined action research design as “systematic procedures by teachers (or other individuals in an educational setting) to gather quantitative and qualitative data to address improvements in their educational setting, their teaching, and the learning of their students”. Krathwohl (2004, p. 588-90) included action research in the broader context of evaluation studies and explained that, while evaluation may be identical to other forms of research in form, they differ in intent. While most other research methods and designs are aimed at discovering or validating a generalization, evaluations are aimed at making decisions, improving, expanding, or discontinuing programs. As stated earlier, the purpose of the present study was to help Alawdah employees write effective business memoranda.

Key words: writing skills; written communication; action research; Alawdah Company; memoranda

INTRODUCTION

Writing effective business memoranda is an essential skill for employees in the current business world, especially in educational agencies. A memorandum (or memo, as it is called in the vernacular) is one form of business writing, usually single spaced and normally no longer than one or two pages in length. The memorandum is generally focused on addressing company problems and recommending solutions (Perkins, and Brizee, 2010). It is a good way to distribute information to employees and to receive information from employees. Effective business memoranda often suggest new proposals, policies, or events. Perkins and Brizee (2010) noted that memoranda achieve their goals by informing the receiver about new information such as price increases, new organizational actions, or to invite participants to attend a meeting. They (2010) stated that effective business memoranda are those that connect the purpose of the sender with the interests and needs of the receiver. Also they (2010) claimed that memoranda are most effectively used when sent to a small number of employees with an intent to communicate company tasks or objectives.

Perkins and Brizee (2010) stated that the format of memoranda is usually the same as the general format of other business writing. Memos usually are a page or two long, single-spaced, and left justified. According to Perkins and Brizee (2010), effective business memoranda usually consist of eight sections. First, heading section includes TO, FROM, DATE, and SUBJECT. Second, opening section includes the purpose of a memo such as a problem or a solution. Third, context section contains the description of the purpose such as a background of the problem or the details of a new task. Fourth, task section includes the action which is taken such as a potential solution to a problem. Fifth, discussion section includes all the details about the purpose of the memoranda. Sixth, summary section is the part added when needed. For example, when the memoranda are long the sender summarizes the main points. Seventh, closing section contains the actions that the sender wants the receiver to take. Finally, necessary attachments section includes the needed documents and references.

Communicating through business memoranda in Alawdah Company is an important communication channel for many reasons. Employees convey daily problems to management personnel about problems they have experienced with their client schools each day; therefore, the top management directs other employees to stop sending students to a particular school until the problem is resolved. In addition, sometimes employees send too many students to one school, creating a strategic imbalance in enrollment; thus, management must redistribute the number of students to be sent to each school. Moreover, top management builds their negotiation techniques with schools based on the employee's daily business tasks. Furthermore, the marketing department receives offers from schools, so addressing those offers is important to let top management direct employees to deal with those particular schools. Finally, in the e-commerce business arena memoranda play a great role in connecting employees with all departments such as marketing, accounting, and top management.

Alawdah Company is an international education services company that places international students in English as a Second Language Institutes (Unknown, Alawdah Co. website, 2011). According to the Alawdah Co. website (2011), the firm was established in January 2010 and employs six workers. It operates on a business strategy based on the most modern methods of e-commerce. The employees at Alawdah Company serve customers from many countries, including: the United States, Ecuador, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco. Targeting students from the Arabian Gulf market, the company provides the best services in the American education market for international students. It offers admissions to English Language Institutes, accommodations with American host families, and airport pick up for their customers. On the Alawdah Company website (2011) it was stated that, "all categories of trade are conducted electronically, such as management, marketing, sales, customer service, and payment."

This study aimed to help Alawdah staff collaboratively find the best way to write effective business memoranda. It had four purposes: (1) to discover the root of why Alawdah staff did not write effective business memoranda; (2) to identify ways to promote Alawdah staff to write effective business memoranda; (3) to enhance the professional communication among Alawdah Company's employees; and (4) to strengthen the relationship among Alawdah Company's staff.

Given the current pressure to improve effective written communication among Alawdah staff, as in many organizations all over the world, it is necessary to explore, identify, and implement methods to promote effective communication. Employees, supervisors, and the director of Alawdah Company noticed that employees were not sharing information in time for the organization to respond before losing customers. Some supervisors reported that some employees turn in their memoranda late. Also, some employees reported that their supervisors used to not write their memoranda in a clear manner. Alawdah employees observed the above problem had negative effects on their performance, such as a loss of supervision, communication, and also not allowing tasks to be completed in a timely matter.

Not only does this study have value for Alawdah Company, but it is also important for other organizations to offer ways to write effective business memoranda. It is also important to reduce conflicts and to improve effective communication among employees. Such research gives the staff an opportunity to express themselves and share their perspectives regarding problems arising in the workplace and gives them a chance to be part of decision making.

The remainder of this study is arranged as follows. The following segment describes the methodology of the study. This is followed by a presentation of the outcomes. Next, the conclusion summarizes the comparison of main outcome with the existing academic literature and the recommendations for employees and further studies. Finally, the last segment is about a literature review.

Method:

Because the Alawdah Company was interested in resolving a specific set of problems, improving an organizational system, and teaching participants new skills, an action research design was appropriate for this study. Stringer (2007) explained that action research as a "systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives" (Stringer, 2007, 1). Action Research was used in this study because it focuses on the improvement of an organization and its performance (Holter and Schwartz-Barcott, 1993; Stringer, 2007; Yammill and Mclean, 2010). It was used because it is a collaborative approach to build an effective solution to an investigation (Stringer, 2007; Yammill and Mclean, 2010). A problem was identified in the Alawdah Company: employees were not writing effective memoranda; therefore, Alawdah employees coordinated to investigate the problem and form potential solutions. Because of the small size of the staff, action research was the most appropriate method to conduct this study. Action research unites theory and practice by involving researchers and participants in diagnosing problems and forming the adequate solutions. (Yammill and Mclean, 2010). Stringer (2007) explained that action research is a three-step spiral routine which directs the research to: (1) look, which includes gathering the data and describing the situation; (2) think, which involves analyzing and interpreting the situation; and (3) act, which involves implementing and evaluating the results. This study used the three-step spiral routine as its research methodology.

Roles of the research team:

The participants were all Alawdah Company staff. They identified the problem and formulated the solution. Massad Alatawi, the facilitator of this study, was assigned the roles of facilitating the meetings, recording the data, directing the attention of participants, providing advice, introducing the participants to sources of knowledge, and providing them with resources (Yammill & Mclean, 2010). He also served a number of roles based on his knowledge from Stringer (2007, 74). He (1) ensured that each participant had an equal chance to participate; (2) ensured discussions related to the focus questions; (3) acted as timekeeper; (4) assisted participants in summarizing their perspectives; and (5) provided and explained focus questions.

Look phase:

The online focus group was used because it is the most adequate approach in such a study. Stringer (2007) described the focus group as a group interview which is valuable in action research because all participants can express their perspectives on the same issue. (Glesne, 2011). The focus group was used to save time, since all participants were interviewed at the same time. It was also used because of the short period of time for this study, and because it provides “comprehensive discussion of focus group research” (Glesne, 2011, 131). All participants had a chance to answer the same question in turn and had sufficient time to express their thoughts (Glesne, 2011; Stringer, 2007). Using an online focus group simplified and enabled participants to have virtual meetings since all of them were geographically separated.

Using an online focus group facilitated recoding all the phases of this action research. Besides the recording advantage, the online focus group technology offered documentation of recorded comments, and a recorded script of the discussion. Glesne (2011) stated that “internet technology has simplified recording issues for some focus group researchers who conduct “real time” focus groups online” (p.133).

Think phase:

This study used the concept of cause and effect for analyzing and interpreting, suggested by Stringer (2007). The facilitator coordinated with each participant to identify the following elements: (1) the core of the problem; (2) major causes to the problem; and (3) major negative effects (Stringer, 2007). This approach was used because when finding the root of the problem, it simplifies finding the adequate solution. It is also used because each of the participants had his or her own preferred sense of the cause of the problem. Finally, the approach was used because it can “help participants identify significant elements of their analysis and visualize aspects of the situation that require action.” (Stringer, 2007, 115)

Act phase:

This study used the brainstorming technique in order to generate possible solutions to the problem suggested by Whitworth, Kimsy-House, H., Kimsy-House, K., and Sandahl (2009). Whitworth *et. al*, (2009) defined brainstorming as “a creative collaboration between [participants] and [researchers] with the sole purpose of generating ideas, possibilities, and [solutions]” (p. 97). Generating many solutions consumes time and money; thus, the solutions were reduced into a two-activity solution by using a multi-voting method.

Tague (2005) suggested that after brainstorming is used to create a long list of solutions, a multi-voting method might be used to accomplish a final decision. Tague (2005) identified multi-voting as a method that “narrows a large list of possibilities to a smaller list of the top priorities or to a final selection” (p.359). Because each participant had his or her own cause and solution for the problem this study used the multi-voting method in order to determine its finding.

Limitation:

Time played a barrier role in this study. Four months was a short period of time to track the results of this study, since the participants have not yet completed their writing skills improvement program. Furthermore, members living in different time zones was a very important factor that served as a challenge. To have meetings was another limitation, because the participants lived in different places all over the world. However, their keenness and sacrifices helped overcome this limitation.

Rigor and Ethical Issues:

Participants were assured that their personal information would not be revealed and confidentiality would be firmly maintained. They were clearly asked not to state their names when participating in virtual meetings and the video recording was disabled. They had the right to decline replying to any question that they felt might disclose their identity and to withdraw from the study at any time.

The small size of the Alawdah staff, the selected meetings times, and ensuring equal participation ensured that the study achieved credibility, validity, and dependability. All the voices were heard and ideas were understood by giving all participants sufficient time to express their perspectives, feelings, and suggestions. Participants had adequate time to reflect on meetings, agendas, and the study process, and to realize the causes and solutions before voting. Each virtual meeting lasted for more than three hours and human needs were considered since there was a ten-minute break at every hour of each meeting. Participants had real power because each one of them equally participated, and had an opportunity to fully identify the problem, determine the causes, discuss the effects, and generate the solutions.

This study used a range of sources including virtual focus group interviews, participation in group meetings, observations, emails, Alawdah memoranda, and literature review. The conformability of the data was maintained, since all the electronic meetings minutes, emails, and other documents have been filed and saved.

Outcome:

The result of this study indicated that improving Alawdah employees' writing skills helped them to write effective business memoranda; therefore, the hypothesis was supported. This study was conducted through three meetings in about four months. In the first meeting, the participants agreed that the problem existed. In the second meeting, they identified the causes and effects of the problem and formed the potential solutions. In the last meeting, they voted on the best solutions for the problem.

First meeting:

In the first meeting the facilitator recited the norms of this project, the participants' rights, and the ethical issues. He also introduced the purpose of writing more effective memoranda at Alawdah Company. In addition, he stated the purpose of this study and its benefits for all Alawdah staff. The facilitator explained the significance of writing effective business memoranda, especially in e-commerce organizations.

The main purpose of the first meeting was to obtain the participants' agreements that the problem existed and it had negative effects on Alawdah Company performance; therefore, it resulted in minimizing profits. They recognized the problem and they agreed that before they did not turn in effective business memoranda. They identified the problem and determined its negative impacts on Alawdah Company and staff. One employee said, "Sometimes I cannot perform my tasks because my job depends on others. I do not get others' memos on time." Each participant had an opportunity to discuss their viewpoints and perspectives regarding conducting their memoranda.

At the end of the first meeting the facilitator observed the participants' keen willingness to solve the problem. They were active in participating and everyone expressed his or her thought. They were willing to coordinate with each other for overcoming the conflict of not turning in effective business memoranda on time. In order to be prepared for the next meeting, he encouraged them to exchange emails regarding the causes of the problem and cc them to him as well in order to record them. They were excited to know what they will do for the next step; thus, he promised to send an agenda for each meeting ahead of time.

Second meeting:

In the second meeting, the participants aimed to analyze the causes and effects of the problem and form potential solutions. Since each participant had his or her causes for the problem, they voted on the main cause that prevented them from writing effective business memoranda. One of the employee said "I spend too much time when writing my memos". Another said, "I do not like to write. I would rather call the management and discuss my tasks." "I do not know what I should write in my memos. Actually, before our first meeting, I did not see the point of writing memos" an employee said.

In the current study, the mean ($M=0.66$; $SD= 0.52$) of those who voted on a lack of writing skills as the barrier for conducting effective business memoranda was (0.66) 67%. The mode indicated that most of the participants agreed that the lack of writing skills prevented them of writing their memoranda. The median showed that half of them voted on the above cause, as well. The standard deviation (0.52) also supported the above measures of central tendency. The participants were satisfied about the voting process because it seemed to be the adequate action to identify the main and common cause of the problem.

After identifying the main cause of the problem and discussing its effects, brainstorming has been used to generate possible solutions. One employee suggested solving the problem by creating a template, and another suggested attending a writing skills improvement program. However, some of the participants suggested doing both. Thus, Mr. Alatawi called for voting to narrow down the solutions and the results were as follows: 16 % for creating the memo template, 33 % for attending the program, and 50% for doing both. Therefore, the participants decided to solve the problem by: (1) creating the memo template, (2) and attending a Writing Skills Improvement Program (WSIP).

At the end of the second meeting, Mr. Alatawi asked each staff member to voluntarily create a template. He also asked them to search for WSIPs and bring details about the programs with them for the next meeting. They agreed to exchange emails about their findings prior to the last meeting and cc their emails to him as usual. He also told them the next meeting was going to be about voting on one of the suggested templates and one of the recommended WSIPs. The participants agreed on the voting method, which they seemed to enjoy, in order to choose the template and the program.

Last meeting:

In the last meeting, three employees created templates and all participants voted on the one attached in appendix A. One employee said, "Wow this is what I need. This template is going to enable me to do my memos." On the other hand, all participants suggested different WSIPs, but they voted on only one. Because it was cheaper to register as a group in a WSIP, voting on only one program was sufficient for both the employees and Alawdah Company. The program was online and a three-month course. It offered a series of weekly online writing workshops. It consisted of distinguished components such as individual tutorials, business writing

tutorials, and professional writing development tutorials. The director of Alawdah applied for them and Alawdah Company paid the costs. The participants were enthusiastic to start their WSIP.

Reflection on activities:

Participants' reflections. The two-activity solution enabled the participants to gain valuable information about how to write more effective business memoranda. After practicing these activities, Alawdah employees started to improve their business memoranda writing skills within a short period of time. Although their writing skills program is still on-going, there was already evidence of improved memoranda writing skills at the time this paper was written.

Through the project, participants learned a great deal about the importance of business memoranda, and how to write one effectively. They also learned from direct experience in the meetings such as the importance of meetings' agendas and participating in decision-making. They found that a factor for success and growing in their jobs was to improve their communication skills.

The main obstacle employees faced was the range of time zones that made it difficult to hold meetings. However, the participants were eager to engage in the process, as some of them were required to make significant sacrifices of personal time to be involved. For instance, some of them attended meetings when it was very early at their local time and others attended when it was very late. In general, they found the results to be satisfying.

Facilitator's reflections. The researcher found that action research is one of the best approaches to conduct mixed research studies. It focuses on the participants who have the ability, background, and knowledge to develop appropriate solutions to a problem. It keeps the researcher from being biased, since the participants have the power to discover the adequate solutions for themselves. The researcher's pre-conceived ideas and experiences may be inappropriate for the specific conditions surrounding the particular problem. The researcher noticed that all the phases of action research were intertwined: look, think, and act.

In the current study, the researcher observed an extraordinary wholeheartedness of the participants to find the solutions by themselves. Although it was the first time that all Alawdah staff met in a meeting, he noticed they were so close to each other and willing to collaboratively work on this study. He noticed their high loyalty to Alawdah Company, and observed that there were not any dysfunctional conflicts, but that there were some functional conflicts as employees defended their suggestions or perspectives. In general, the researcher was delighted about the study, the process of the study, and the result.

Conclusion:

The main purpose of this study was to determine the best ways to help Alawdah Company staff write more effective business memoranda. This was done by using action research and involving all Alawdah employees as the target audience of this study. The participants identified that the main cause of the problem was Alawdah employees possessed poor writing skills. Also, this study found that both subordinators and supervisors may possess poor writing skills which have negative impacts on job performance. The finding of this study supports the findings of Hal (2005), Henricks (2007), Lussier and Achua (2001), Stevens (2005), and Wayne (2010), which indicate that not being able to write well blocks the written communication and is a serious problem for employees and organizations.

The conclusion of this study supports the findings of Henricks (2007) in which he recommended that organizations provide writing-deficient employees with writing improvement workshops. Not only was attending WSIP a significant part of the solution to the problem, but also creating a memo template helped participants to write more effective business memoranda. In order for this study to achieve its purpose the following recommendations may be followed:

Recommendations for employees:

- (1) Maintain a commitment to writing effective business memoranda.
- (2) Turn in business memoranda on time because coworkers depend on them.
- (3) Do not miss any writing sessions of the WSIP.
- (4) Complete WSIP assignments, obtain feedback from WSIP instructors, and rewrite assignments if needed.
- (5) Write daily journals in order to improve writing skills in general.

Recommendations for further studies:

- (1) This study suggests using action research to solve community problems and business conflicts.
- (2) It also advocates using focus groups as an information acquisition tool because it enables researchers to interview many participants at the same time; thus, it saves time for all participants.

(3) Although this study shows attending WSIP helps employees improve their written communication skills, further studies should examine the impacts after taking these kinds of programs on the employees' performance.

Literature Review:

Communication skills are important proficiencies in the workplace. Previous research reported that successful careers require the ability to communicate effectively and quickly (Lussier and Achua, 2001; Stevens, 2005; Wayne, 2010). Stevens (2005) argued "High-tech companies [...] value strong communication skills despite the emphasis on skills in technology" (p. 3). Lin, Grace, Krishnan, and Gilsdorf, (2010) also believed communication skills are essential to succeed in a career. Locker and Kaczmarek (2001) argued that communication skills are vital organizational tools for the business world. Business graduates have classified communication courses as significant courses that guided them to promotions in their careers (Gustafson, Johnson, & Hovey, 1993; Murphy & Hildebrandt, 1988; Stevens, 2005).

Employers prefer to hire people with exceptional communication skills. Lussier and Achua (2001) reported that organizations hire employees based on their good communication skills. Wayne (2010) proposed employees must be able to get their ideas and thoughts across succinctly and effectively. Research showed that employees hired in business require strong communication skills to deal with this rapidly changing world (North & Worth, 1998). Global organizations seek to employ only strong communication-skills employees.

Employees must communicate effectively and efficiently to prosper and survive in the workplace. Wayne (2010) emphasized that employees have to communicate well in order to keep their jobs. Lussier and Achua (2001) noted that communication skills are more important than ever in the workplace. Previous research reported that employers rate communication skills as number one for both securing and maintaining employment (North & Worth, 1998; Stevens, 2005; Wayne 2010).

Most organizations suffer from their new employees' weak communication skills and try to improve it. Stevens (2005) stated that employers are not satisfied with communication skills of their new employees. He recommended that students receive more training in communication skills before applying for jobs. Previous research showed that organizations offer communication-training programs because they believe in the impact on the outcomes (Lussier & Achua, 2001; Stevens, 2005).

Written communication is the most important form of communication process. Hal (2005) wrote, "If you don't believe the written word is the most vital element in human communication, think of the Bible and Koran. Those two books shared powerful messages that have influenced billions of people over the past 2,000 years" (p. 41). In Henricks's survey (2007), ninety-three percent of the surveyed employers revealed written communication was essential for business students. Laff (2010) stated that in the survey of 1,400 chief financial officers, 43 percent of the participants said that written communication is more important in the current technological environment than in the past. Mitchell, Mitchell, Koen, and Clifford, (2007) claimed "The difference between winning and losing a lawsuit often rests on the quantity and quality of the company's documentations of discipline" (p. 5).

Effective written communication is a necessary skill in the age of technological innovations. Research showed that written communication ranks number one on a list of skills required in several jobs (Henricks, 2007). Theriault (2010) affirmed effective written communication is an important skill. Wayne (2010) stated employees must master the written communication concisely and effectively. He (2010) argued that written communication skills would enable employees to progress in their careers. He (2010) suggested being able to master written communication would help employees to succeed in performing their obligations. Employees have to express their ideas and thoughts to each other by written communication (Wayne, 2010). Written communication is important to perform the tasks required on the job.

Written communication in the workplace can take many forms. Stevens (2005) divided written communication into e-mail, letters, reports, and memorandums. Lussier and Achua (2001) expand written communication into email, memoranda, reports, newsletters, posters, bulletin boards, and letters. Although memoranda are one of the most common forms of written communication (Julie, Stuart, & Randall, 2010), few studies have investigated memoranda among written communication. There are many traditional and untraditional ways that companies communicate with their employees.

Poor writing skills complicate the written communication process in the workplace. Research has shown that lack of writing skills is the number one written communication problem (Lussier & Achua, 2001). In Henricks' survey (2007), managers said that new hires fell short in basic grammar and advanced writing skills such as writing business memoranda. Stevens (2005) conveyed that new employees' writing skills are not always sufficient to do the tasks required on the job. Hal (2005) asked, "If you can't write clearly, concisely and interestingly, how can you communicate the message you want your public to grasp and understand?" (p. 42). Wayne (2010) emphasized that employees who cannot write effectively may face barriers in the way of organizational and personal success. Not being able to write well obscures the written communication and is a serious problem for employees.

Having proficient writing skills facilitates communication in fast-paced, high-tech organizations. Hal (2005) argued excellent ideas require good writing to express them. Stevens (2005) stated "Electronic communication calls for high levels of writing skills." Mitchell *et. al.* (2007) argued that being able to write complex business ideas is the only way to ensure accuracy and precision in workplace. Wayne (2010) stated employees must be able to write in a way that is readable and grammatically correct. He also reported that although writing is only one phase of communication, it is the one that leaves an enduring record. Workers who have variety of vocabulary and self-expression can easily communicate among each other.

Employees with excellent writing skills without doubt find employment. Research and reports showed writing skills ranked number one for employment (North & Worth, 1998; Stevens, 2005). Wayne (2010) argued that having good writing skills would pay substantial benefits. He also claimed that employers are hiring people who can write well. He argued that having good writing skills is a significant asset. Henricks (2007) stated writing skills are important for employees. Employees who excel in business writing have many career opportunities.

Writing skills are critical for securing and maintaining careers. Research identified writing skills as being fundamental to employees' employment success (Ashbaugh *et. al.*, 2002). Hal (2005) conveyed a successful worker must be a good writer. Wayne (2010) included writing as a vital survival skill in the workplace. Wayne (2010) stated employees who cannot write, cannot save their jobs. He (2010) also stated that employees who have good writing skills make themselves more visible to the top management. Employees with good writing skills are more valuable to their organizations than those with poor writing skills.

The importance of writing-skills and the need for employees to improve deficient skills is supported in the present literature. For instance, Stevens (2005) proposed that new employees need stronger writing skills by training them on professional business writing. Ashbaugh *et. al.* (2002) emphasized the significant role of business schools in developing students' writing skills. Ashbaugh *et. al.* (2002) suggested providing business students with business writing courses to provide training on writing memoranda and reports, as they are more likely to improve students' writing skills.

Hal (2005) argued that it is important for employees to learn the rules of writing. Henricks (2007) suggested that organizations can help workers be better writers, but it consumes time, effort, and money. Henricks (2007) recommended that organizations teach writing-deficient employees. Companies can provide their employees with writing workshops or encourage them to take college-level writing courses and later, reimburse the cost of tuition (Henricks, 2007).

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Appendix A

ALAWDHA COMPANY MEMO	
From	
To	
Date	
Subject	
Problem/Solution	1) 2) 3)
Suggested Solution/ Notes	1) 2) 3)
Accomplished/Planned Tasks Actions to Take	1) 2) 3) 4) 5)
Attachments	