

Investing for the Best in Procedures Documentation

by Raymond E. Urgo

Editor's Note: This article was written for people who oversee policies and procedures documentation rather than for those persons who write and edit such material. The information it presents, however, should be of interest to both groups.

Every business—from the local delicatessen to the multinational corporation—functions according to standard operating practices, which frequently are referred to as policies and procedures, processes or standards.

While not all companies choose to document their busi-

The challenge is to communicate complex information in ways suitable for the information age.

ness or technical operating practices, they are increasingly investing in this arena. Why? Because documented policies and procedures (P & Ps) are being used in response to the increasing needs for training and other performance-improvement strategies within the organization.

Two factors driving these needs are changes in technology and changes in organizations (e.g., downsizing, reengineer-

ing, Total Quality Management, ISO 9000).

Unfortunately many companies investing in documented P&Ps are either under-, over- or misinvesting in their approaches. Many first-time efforts are so short-sighted that some industry experts see a new market for P&P documentation: "re-dos."

During 1992, for example, 47 percent of American companies failed ISO certification because of inadequate P&P documentation. The following are two key problems with procedures documentation investments:

- Top management's lack of commitment to enforcing P&P efforts appropriately
- Organizations continued use of 17th century principles of rhetoric to communicate information in the industrial era

The challenge, then, is to communicate complex business practices effectively but in simplistic ways suitable for the information era. Consider the following six pointers for getting the most from your investment in procedures documentation.

Implement a P&P Development Process. To successfully launch and maintain a P&P effort, your organization **must** have a P&P development process in place. Too often, organizations invest in initial development without concern for future maintenance. Information

not maintained loses integrity, and employees avoid using it (for good reason).

The P&P development process should identify the roles and responsibilities for initiating, owning, communicating, revising and approving procedures as practices **and** documentation.

Maximize P&P Talents. Be sure your P&P talent is working with the latest methods, techniques and tools. The role of your P&P talent should not be that of scribes passively writing what others say happens. Instead the role should be that of information architect and information developer.

Allow your talent to "learn the business" by being part of work improvement efforts. A growing trend is to consolidate P&P efforts with training. Done properly, companies can save time and money with **reference-based** training.

Document for Online Communication Media. Even if your organization has no plans

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to communicate its procedures online, now may be the perfect time to begin. Why? First, research shows that what we have learned about communicating effectively online can be applied to paper-based documents while making the latter even more useful to readers.


Second, your organization eventually may want to communicate online and will need to prepare its information for the transition.

Many organizations simply "dump" their procedures documentation (which had been developed exclusively for hard-copy purposes) into an online system and then announce that they have online communication. But they are wrong. What they have is hardcopy communication that is only **stored** and **accessible** online. The information was not designed for the new media nor for such technological features as hypertext,

which allows for interactive reading.

Use Structured and Analytical Writing Approaches. A **structured** writing approach develops information into modular units. It allows more than one person simultaneously to develop a document, which accelerates the development process, and allows users to access the information faster. With an **analytical** writing approach, writers replace prose-based information with lists, tables, scripts and flow diagrams to **preinterpret** information for the user. Preinterpreted information reduces the amount of reading, increases comprehension and reduces the chance of user errors.

Document the User's Job. Document information to be **task** oriented according to business **processes**. By comparison, traditional approaches are **subject** oriented according to business **functions**, leaving users to assemble information on how to perform their job.

Focus on the Purpose of P&Ps. The **primary** purpose of **documented** P&Ps is to provide the curriculum for organizational **training** and future **consistent reference** for users. By focusing effectively, procedures communication will significantly improve performance for the individual and the organization. 

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Member Profile: David K. Farkas

by Bonnie Zepka

Where are policies and procedures documents headed in the future? Online, says **David K. Farkas**, associate professor in the University of Washington's Department of Technical Communication College of Engineering.

Farkas bases his prediction on the fast-changing nature of P&P documents. Policies and procedures change so fast, Farkas notes, that keeping them current in hardcopy form is almost impossible. He adds that it's not uncommon for the information to be outdated before the pages come back from the printer. Online information, by contrast, can be updated and

retrieved easily to reflect the latest content changes.

Going online offers other benefits as well, says Farkas. These include "superior" user access to information, elimination of printing costs, easy distribution over computer networks, more design options than with printed documents and a greater sense of fulfillment for writers.

"What is impossible in print," Farkas noted, "can be done electronically. In my experience, few writers who have become comfortable writing online in-

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P&P Briefs

New PR Team Leader . . . Moderators Needed . . . Mid-FY Budget Summary . . . Survey Update . . . Member Info Request . . . P&P Sessions

PIC Public Relations Team Gets New Leader

Nancy Ford Demeter was named by P&P PIC Manager **Raymond E. Urgo** as the PIC's new Public Relations team leader.



Nancy is director of administrative and technical services for Commonwealth Cultural Resources Group, a cultural resources management firm in Jackson, Michigan. She also is a supplemental instructor at Jackson Community College, where she teaches business communications and technical writing.

One of her first tasks as team leader will be to create and produce an informational brochure for distribution in May at the STC conference in Seattle. Next will be the development of long-range plans for the team.

If you have any suggestions for P&P PIC public relations activities, you can reach her by phone at 517/788-3550 (office) or E-mail her at nfdemeter@aol.com.

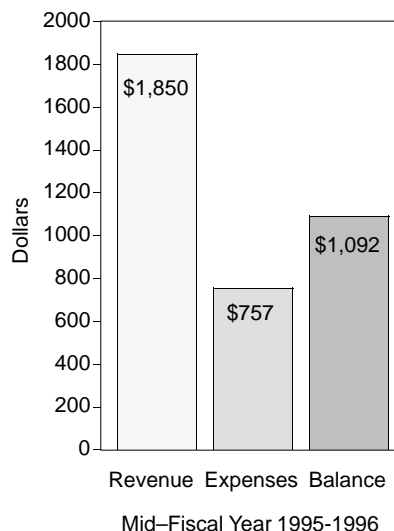
P&P Moderators Needed for STC Conference

If you are interested in moderating a discussion on policies and procedures or the P&P PIC at the STC conference luncheons in Seattle, Washington, this year, contact **Diane Whitmer** at 816/482-5292.



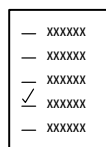
PIC Mid-FY 1995-1996 Budget and Expenses Summarized

The financial health of the P&P PIC for mid-fiscal year 1995-1996 has been diagnosed as "good." Revenue of \$1,850 and expenses of \$757 yielded a balance of \$1,092.



Publication of Member Survey Results Delayed

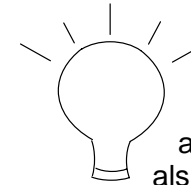
Fifty percent of the PIC's members have returned the membership survey forms mailed to them several months ago. Because of a delay in publishing the directory, you still can return your completed form.



If you did not receive one or need a new one, send a self-addressed stamped envelope to **Jerry Laing** at 11244 LaRosa Drive, Arcadia, California 91006-5928. Deadline for the receipt of survey forms has not been set.

Member Seeks Info on Teaching and Use of Online P&Ps

Member **Gail Lippincott** is looking for information from other PIC members about online P&Ps for an undergraduate course, "Procedures and Policy Manuals," she will be teaching at the University of Minnesota as a teaching assistant. Gail also is interested in talking with members who have taught P&P courses. If you can help, call Gail at 612/624-9729.



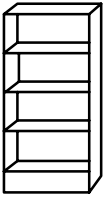
P&P Sessions Slated for STC Conference

Five P&P sessions are scheduled for during the STC conference in Seattle, Washington; the last item listed is a postconference session:

- Developing Internal Procedures Online (Monday)
- Networking luncheons (Monday and Tuesday)
- Video: A New Approach to Writing Procedures (Monday)
- P&P PIC meeting (Wednesday)
- Topics in P&Ps (Wednesday)
- Flowcharting Performance-Based Processes and Procedures (Thursday)

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The P&P Bookshelf . . .



A compendium of books and articles of interest to P&P practitioners

☐ Horn, R.E., and Kelly, J.N. *Structured Writing: An Approach to the Documentation of Computer Software*. Waltham, MA: Information Mapping, 1981.

☐ Waller, R. Text as dia-

gram: Using typography to improve access and understanding. In D.H. Jonassen (ed.), *The Technology of Text* (pp. 137-166). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications, 1982.

possible to encourage users to explore the information. According to minimalist theory, says Farkas, users like to figure things out for themselves and experiment while learning.

Even so, employees sometimes are reluctant to use online P&P manuals. To remedy the situation, Farkas recommends preparing a special short-term release of the online manual with numerical codes scattered throughout the material. The first employee to find a code wins a prize.

“Within three days,” says Farkas, “everyone will know how to navigate the online manual and will be familiar with its contents.”

Bonnie Zepka is a freelance writer in Louisville, Kentucky, and a member of the Kentucky chapter of STC.

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formation ever want to go back to print.”

In his role as a professor, Farkas teaches computer documentation, technical editing and information design. He also has helped companies convert their P&P manuals into Windows help and coauthored a book (published this year) for persons who design help systems and

write help information. The 550-page book also contains a vast amount of information about the technical aspects of Windows help.

To help writers prepare P&P documents for hardcopy or online media, Farkas advocates an approach called minimalist documentation developed by John M. Carroll of IBM. The minimalist approach, says Farkas, calls for keeping the material as brief as

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The mission of the Policies and Procedures professional interest committee is to assist STC members in developing, implementing and managing policies and procedures communication through educational and networking opportunities, STC conference sessions and publications, and communication with other STC PICs and professional organizations in areas of common interest.