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Voice Mail

Glitches to Empowerment

Organizations are being compelled to empower employees in order to increase productivity and develop employee commitment. Empowerment provides employees with the opportunity to participate in decision making and governance and to shape their destinies.

Despite the hoopla, empowerment doesn't necessarily work, for a lot of reasons. One, individual empowerment lacks accountability. Committees, work groups, and work teams serve as safety nets for poor decisions. Those groups also indemnify individual employees against blame.

Two, most employees dislike work, avoid responsibility, and resist change. To perform effectively, they need to be guided and threatened with punishment. They lack ambition, creativity, and concern for organizational objectives.

Three, the 20/80 rule really means that 20 percent of the people contribute 80 percent of the work. In organizations in which employee governance exists, committees usually are made up of the 20 percent core. The other 80 percent of employees are totally disinterested, or they believe their input won't affect organizational outcomes. The silent majority would rather drop out than participate in activities they perceive as useless, nonproductive, or time-consuming.

Four, group decision making presents potential problems for the proponents of empowerment. Some of the pitfalls: One or more vocal people will dominate the group. Some group members will be reluctant to voice their opinions. And some people will promote their own agendas at the group's expense.

Last, many managers are reluctant to surrender their power and author-

ity. When employees start making and implementing decisions, managers can become corporate liabilities. In addition, many managers believe that employees at lower levels lack the necessary skills to make appropriate decisions.

Despite the barriers, empowerment can improve organizational efficiency and effectiveness. It can help abate organizational chaos and attain organizational goals. But companies that seek to empower employees should follow these guidelines:

- ▶ Clearly define empowerment.
- ▶ Phase in empowerment over time.
- ▶ Provide adequate training before implementing empowerment.
- ▶ Require employees to participate in empowerment training.

Under those guidelines, managers may be more willing to accept employee empowerment—and employees may be more likely to accept responsibility, to feel comfortable with their newly acquired power, and to learn to trust management through improved dialogue.

Only time will tell whether empowerment will prosper and drive organizations forward or whether it will fall by the wayside like so many other management fads.

—Joseph C. Santora

*Essex County College
Newark, New Jersey*

Some Words About Visuals

As a graphic designer with more than 20 years of experience, I approached the article, "Training by Design," by William L. King (January 1993), with a jaundiced eye.

We all can be a bit elitist about our professions. But I refuse to take the view that only people who attend design school and "pay their

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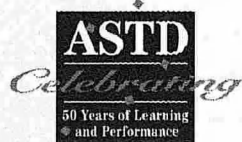
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Voice Mail

Doer's Profile



Vincent Jones
Valencia Community College

The Doer's Profile was created to give you a way to expand your networking capabilities and to let you know about the interesting and exciting things your colleagues are doing in the field. This month's profile features Vincent C. Jones. Jones is a professor at Valencia Community College, Orlando, Florida. He specializes in training people with disabilities to become computer programmers.

Most exciting new development:

"The tools. A lot of new adaptive equipment for people with disabilities helps them function normally and use computers—such as voice devices for people who can't speak and screen enlargers for people with vision impairments. And the technology changes every day."

Biggest problem: "Students being able to sustain their desire and determination. The training program lasts 10 months, five days a week, eight hours a day. It's like having an unpaid job. Students often have to depend on their families to support them financially. But the rewards are well worth the grueling effort. People come here not knowing anything about computers, stay with the program, and go on to get well-paying jobs."

Most recent accomplishment: "One

of my students, Donna Hayden, just won a state council award for the Outstanding Vocational Special Population Student of 1994, for demonstrating a high degree of competency, courage, and other qualities. You just can't tell her no—that she can't do something."

Best training tip: "In computer programming, you have to give students the content through lecture. I give them the pieces of the puzzle. Then it's time for them to put the puzzle together with hands-on training. They have to make the mistakes, so they won't make them again."

Is there anything unique about working with people with disabilities? "Well, when I wake up in the morning and feel bad, I just have to come in to work to see what the students here overcome. Then I have no more complaints or regrets."

dues" in the design world can create visuals that adequately communicate messages. That simply isn't true. People can learn the craft of design through life experiences and by mimicking the things they've found visually appealing.

I am concerned about several points that weren't addressed in the article. First, many visual images are copyrighted. Don't place your organization in an awkward position by using artwork without permission.

In addition, guard against stereotyping in your visuals. In the article, all of the graphics in figure 10, "Work Ethic," are males. Does that imply there is no female work ethic? I'm sure that wasn't the designer's

intent, but it could be the audience's interpretation.

Last, be sure that your visuals project the intent of your materials. Don't choose a graphic just to fill a space.

The article has good information for developing projected images and single-page handouts, but a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing. The rules are different for such lengthy documents as training manuals and employee publications. It has been said that proper graphic design and typography do more than make a document look good. They add readership and readability, improve comprehension, and increase memorability. In short, they can help maximize communication effectiveness.

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Voice Mail

I hope that we designers can play a vital role in providing successful training materials.

— **Gregory Lee Hricenak**

*Dragon's Teeth Design
Greensburg, Pennsylvania*

Shocking Statistics

I was shocked by the article, "Violence in the Workplace," by Helen Frank Bensimon (January 1994). I couldn't have imagined that the rate of job-related homicide in the United States is that high. I think it was very important to address the problem of work-related violence and to point out that HR managers and employers should be sensitive to



the issue when firing people. They shouldn't just "drop them like hot potatoes," as we say in Germany.

If homicide is the third leading cause of work-related deaths, what are the first two?

— **Corrinna Nitsche**

*Manager Seminare
Bonn, Germany*

Editor's note: According to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, the leading causes of work-related deaths:

- ▶ 1. motor-vehicle accidents on the job
- ▶ 2. machine-related accidents
- ▶ 3. homicide
- ▶ 4. falls
- ▶ 5. being struck by falling objects
- ▶ 6. electrocution.

"Voice Mail" is compiled and edited by **Haidee Allerton**. "Voice Mail" welcomes your views. Send your letters and comments to "Voice Mail," Training & Development, 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043; fax them to Allerton at 703/683-9203; or call them in on the "Voice Mail" line, 703/683-9590.