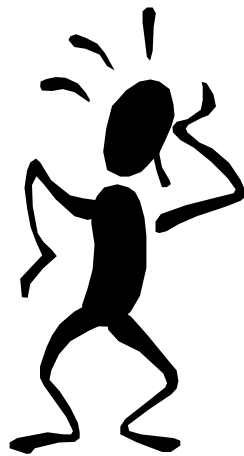


13 Common Mistakes about Communicating Policies & Procedures Information



...and How to Avoid Them

Written by and a courtesy of

Raymond E. Urgo
Policies & Procedures Communication Consultant

Urgo & Associates
Los Angeles, CA

323-957-9317
www.urgoconsulting.com

Preface

Let's face it – every organization, from the local delicatessen to the multi-national corporation, functions according to its unique operating practices, frequently referred to as policies and procedures. While not all organizations choose to document their operating practices, more and more organizations are investing in this area for such purposes as

- training
- on-going reference
- industry-required certifications
- government regulatory requirements, and
- internal and external audits.

Unfortunately, many organizations investing in policies and procedures communication are either under-, over, or mis-investing in their approaches. One study indicates that 47% of American companies seeking a quality certification failed due to inadequate policies and procedures communication.

To have policies and procedures information that is useful and of value to your organization, you must

- understand and plan for the proper role it will serve and
- develop your information using the appropriate process, standards, methods, and talents.

This guide will relieve some of the burden, confusion, and negative myths executives and managers associate with communicating policies and procedures information. The guide is based on over 20 years of research and experience in policies and procedures communication with organizations in a variety of industries.

Here are 13 common mistakes about communicating policies and procedures information...and expert advice on how to avoid them.

List of 13 Common Mistakes about Communicating Policies & Procedures Information

In this guide

The 13 common mistakes about communicating policies and procedures information are presented in this guide as follows:

| <u>Category and Common Mistake</u> | <u>See Page</u> |
|--|-----------------|
| Understanding the Use of Policies & Procedures Information | 4 |
| #1: Limited coverage of subject areas | 4 |
| #2: Having information that's not useful | 4 |
| Approaches to Developing Policies & Procedures Information | 5 |
| #3: Expecting one approach fits all | 5 |
| #4: Expecting that packaged procedures are always useful | 5 |
| #5: Not combining training and documentation | 6 |
| #6: Having multi-source documents | 6 |
| Process for Developing Policies & Procedures Information | 7 |
| #7: No process for self-development | 7 |
| #8: Misunderstanding ownership and maintenance | 7 |
| Standards for Developing Policies & Procedures Information | 8 |
| #9: Not using documentation style standards | 8 |
| #10: Not using a documentation methodology | 8 |
| Talents for Developing Policies & Procedures Information | 9 |
| #11: Expecting non-writers to write | 9 |
| #12: Expecting only good grammatical skills | 9 |
| #13: Seeking wrong kind of talent | 10 |

Understanding the Use of Policies & Procedures Information

| Common Mistake | How to Avoid the Mistake |
|--|---|
| <p><u>#1: Limited coverage of subject areas</u></p> <p>Assuming policies and procedures are about an organization’s employment practices only.</p> <p>When people speak, hear, or read the words “policies and procedures”, many think only of employment or personnel practices that address such topics as hiring, termination, vacation, and non-discrimination.</p> | <p>When referring to organizational “policies and procedures”, realize there are unlimited subject areas beyond practices about employment, personnel, and human resources. Virtually any department or function with established processes and tasks can benefit from policies and procedures information. Other subject areas that organizations usually have policies and procedures for are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • finance and accounting • purchasing • information systems, and • sales and marketing. |
| <p><u>#2: Having information that’s not useful</u></p> <p>Assuming that policies and procedures is merely paper-based information that is stored in binders collecting dust because no one ever uses the information.</p> <p>In many instances the organization is probably not developing and maintaining useful and user friendly policies and procedures information. Also, the organization’s management is not aware of the appropriate strategies and commitments necessary to invest in leading-edge approaches to policies and procedures communication.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn about ways, through this guide, to have an investment in policies and procedures communication that brings value to your organization. • Address the following, as applicable, to ensure usefulness of your organization’s policies and procedures: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Establish a plan to invest in policies and procedures information. ▪ Establish and maintain a policies and procedures development process. ▪ Adopt and apply a documentation methodology. ▪ Establish and apply documentation style standards. ▪ Develop single source, not multi-source, documents. ▪ Design your manuals for use in training and as on-going reference. ▪ Apply techniques of information design, not merely writing. ▪ Prepare your information for online use. |

Approaches to Developing Policies & Procedures Information

| Common Mistake | How to Avoid the Mistake |
|---|---|
| <p><u>#3: Expecting one approach fits all</u></p> <p>Assuming there is only one right way to invest in policies and procedures communication.</p> <p>Since organizations differ in their characteristics and their needs for policies and procedures information, the type of investment will differ.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Realize that the type of investment in policies and procedures communication will vary according to your organization’s unique situation, such as <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ size ▪ age ▪ location ▪ information technology ▪ organizational structure ▪ business and industry, and ▪ regulatory mandates. • Realize that because policies and procedures information needs to change as your organization changes, your investment in policies and procedures development must be on-going. • Determine the type and scope of investment you are committed and able to afford and maintain. • Seek the advice of a specialist in policies and procedures communication to assess your organization’s investment needs and recommend ways to improve it. |
| <p><u>#4: Expecting that packaged procedures are always useful</u></p> <p>An organization purchases packaged policies and procedures from a vendor to be used “as is” or modified “as needed”.</p> <p>Some executives and managers expect that purchasing packaged policies and procedures will be a short cut from and a cure-all to a documentation burden.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid purchasing packaged procedures unless your organization is <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ small (less than 250 members) ▪ young ▪ seeking to establish new practices, and ▪ closely following a standard practice or using a product common in your industry. • If you do purchase packaged procedures, be prepared to <u>modify and</u> maintain them over time to fit your organization’s unique and evolving needs. |

Continued on next page

Approaches to Developing Policies & Procedures Information, Continued

| Common Mistake | How to Avoid the Mistake |
|---|---|
| <p><u>#5: Not combining training and documentation</u></p> <p>An organization maintains two sets of policies and procedures information: one for training and another for on-going reference.</p> <p>Many organizations tend to view the purpose of policies and procedures as information solely for auditors or protection against lawsuits. As a result, such organizations tend to communicate policies and procedures in a manner unsuitable for training purposes. In addition, an organization may have another set of information for training purposes.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus your organization’s purpose for having policies and procedures information to being an investment in the organization’s training curriculum. • Develop your policies and procedures information by applying principles of instructional design and performance-based communication so the information is learner oriented for use as <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ training material (in or out of a classroom) and ▪ on-going reference for the trained user. <p><u>Anticipated benefits</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your users will prefer having one set of information to learn and work from. • Your organization will avoid the likely occurrence of conflicting information from more than one set. • Your organization will have less information to develop, store, keep current, and access. |
| <p><u>#6: Having multi-source documents</u></p> <p>An organization develops its policies and procedures information in a short document (one to several pages) on a given topic or standard as needed, assigns a number to it, and then files it in a binder.</p> <p>The traditional approach of developing and publishing your policies and procedures information in <i>topic-by-topic</i> documents (multi-source) is easy to do, yet sometimes difficult to maintain. Worse yet, users often find it difficult to understand the full context of how topics relate. This approach is often designed according to standards or specifications, not how users learn to perform.</p> | <p>Develop and publish your policies and procedures information as manuals, handbooks, or guidebooks (single source documents) designed to be comprehensive, integrated, and unified on one major subject (such as a major business process or function) with many topics.</p> <p><u>Anticipated benefits</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your organization will avoid redundant and conflicting information. • Your information will be more learner centered and easier to maintain. • Your information will be easier to access; thereby increasing usability and investment value. |

Process for Developing Policies & Procedures Information

| Common Mistake | How to Avoid the Mistake |
|---|--|
| <p><u>#7: No process for self-development</u></p> <p>An organization does not have a standard, authorized process in place for <i>self</i> developing and maintaining its policies and procedures information.</p> <p>Without a process on policies and procedures for developing and maintaining policies and procedures, chaos and a waste of resources may result. And many organizations having such a process do not follow it. The consequences typically are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no project planning • missed or unknown deadlines • uncertainty of roles and responsibilities for developing and distributing information, and • outdated information due to lack of plans for maintaining the information. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assign a position or department to be responsible for designing, developing, enforcing, and maintaining a policies and procedures development process. • If your development process will affect two or more departments, obtain buy-in from the department heads. • Design the process with at least the following stages: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ initiating requests for development ▪ planning development ▪ gathering information ▪ writing and reviewing drafts, and ▪ publishing and distributing information. • Within each stage of the process, identify the position titles, with roles and responsibilities, for working together. • To provide further details within the process, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ obtain a reference book on managing documentation development or ▪ contract a documentation specialist. |
| <p><u>#8: Misunderstanding ownership and maintenance</u></p> <p>An organization’s members assume that policies and procedures information is owned and maintained by the person or group writing and publishing the information.</p> <p>For policies and procedures information to be maintained and enforced, someone must be held accountable. The policies and procedures writer merely provides a communication service to the owner (or author) of the information.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For each policies and procedures subject area, manual, or document, assign the head of the department or the function who most closely oversees the given subject as the owner. • If your organization has a documented policies and procedures development process, be sure the process states the responsibilities of the policies and procedures information owner, such as approval, maintenance, enforcement, and negotiation between affected departments. • Communicate the responsibilities stated in the development process to the organization’s members. |

Standards for Developing Policies & Procedures Information

| Common Mistake | How to Avoid the Mistake |
|--|--|
| <p><u>#9: Not using documentation style standards</u></p> <p>An organization does not have documentation style standards for presenting policies and procedures information.</p> <p>Documentation style standards means a set of rules and guidelines designed to achieve consistency in use of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • language • mechanics (font styles), and • formatting (page layout). <p>Style standards assist writers in developing information that is consistent so users can more easily concentrate on the content of the information, increasing its accessibility and use.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obtain and make available for quick reference formal style guides suitable within your industry. • Develop a style guide for your organization to include rules and guidelines that uniquely affect your organization’s communication of policies and procedures information. • Purchase or design word processing formatting templates with styles suitable for policies and procedures reference information based on principles of professional technical communication – don’t make the mistake of creating style based on the whims of what someone likes. • Seek an expert in locating style guidebooks suitable to your business and industry as a basis for reference and forming your own. |
| <p><u>#10: Not using a documentation methodology</u></p> <p>Assuming that a standard style guide and a formatting template will ensure adequate quality for developing policies and procedures information.</p> <p>Many executives and managers are unaware of formal documentation methodologies available for developing leading-edge policies and procedures information.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adopt and follow a formal documentation development methodology that provides principles of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ information design ▪ how information functions ▪ performance-oriented communication, and ▪ cognitive science and human factors. <p><u>Benefits:</u> Using an appropriate methodology allows an organization to readily develop leading-edge policies and procedures documentation in a standard way, with little or no development of templates and style guides.</p> • Have a specialist on policies and procedures communication or documentation advise you on <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the methodologies available ▪ trends in the market, and ▪ which vendor’s methodology will best meet your organization’s situation. |

Talents for Developing Policies & Procedures Information

| Common Mistake | How to Avoid the Mistake |
|--|--|
| <p><u>#11: Expecting non-writers to write</u></p> <p>Top management informs managers and staff they are responsible for writing and publishing their own policies and procedures.</p> <p>People who are not documentation specialists tend to write from their perspective, not the user's perspective. People who supposedly know their job or field (sometimes referred to as subject experts) do not necessarily make the best communicators. Often managers and subject experts are not even interested nor expert enough in documentation development for simplifying complex information for print and online use.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have someone with the interest and leading-edge training in policies & procedures or technical communication be the principal writer. This may be an employee or contractor. • Have managers, staff, or subject experts be involved in contributing and reviewing information to and from the writer or principal information design expert. • Position the subject expert's role as author and the communicator as "ghost writer". |
| <p><u>#12: Expecting only good grammatical skills</u></p> <p>Management assigns a secretary, administrative assistant, or someone with a degree in English to write policies and procedures.</p> <p>Effective policies and procedures communication for today's business requires more than a thorough knowledge in language arts (spelling, punctuation, grammar) and word processing. Most people in today's business world have been taught to write using 17th century principles of rhetoric for academic compositions, essays, reports, letters, and memos.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Either contract, hire, or develop talent of someone who has an interest in policies and procedures or technical communication. • Be sure your selected talent is prepared for communicating for the user in the Information Age. (Today's user of policies and procedures needs information designed and written based on principles of cognitive science, human factors, display technology, performance, and language arts.) • Contact professional associations concerned with technical communication and instructional design for talent, conferences, seminars, college programs, reference materials, and trends. |

Continued on next page

Talents for Developing Policies & Procedures Information, Continued

| Common Mistake | How to Avoid the Mistake |
|--|--|
| <p><u>#13: Seeking wrong kind of talent</u></p> <p>Management seeks policies and procedures talent from the outside by either hiring someone familiar primarily with the subject (not documentation), or contracting a writer when really a consultant is needed.</p> <p>Contracting for the right talents in policies and procedures communication requires a clear understanding of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • what you need (even if it is to help you get clear what you need) • the type of expertise needed, and • the role you want the talented party to serve. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine which type(s) of policies and procedures expertise you need – someone who <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ develops information (interviews, writes, edits, or indexes) ▪ can convey knowledge about a given subject matter (including best operating practices), or ▪ advises on policies and procedures investments (best practices, trends, and resources). • Realize that given the choice when hiring or contracting for a policies and procedures information developer, it is usually better to hire or contract someone with expertise in documentation than in a given subject matter. Obviously someone with talents in both documentation and subject matter knowledge is preferred. • Determine which of the following three roles you want outside assistance to provide to your organization: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>extra pair of hands</i> (contract temporary help performs under client’s supervision) ▪ <i>expert</i> (contractor/consultant performs and manages project for client), or ▪ <i>collaborative</i> (consultant advises, mentors, or coaches client on resolving policies and procedures documentation problems). |