REPORT OF
The National Commission on Writing
FOR AMERICA’S FAMILIES, SCHOOLS, AND COLLEGES

Writing:
A Ticket to Work...
Or a Ticket Out
A Survey of Business Leaders

S E P T E M B E R 2 0 0 4
A survey of 120 major American corporations employing nearly 8 million people concludes that in today’s workplace writing is a “threshold skill” for hiring and promotion among salaried (i.e., professional) employees. Survey results indicate that writing is a ticket to professional opportunity, while poorly written job applications are a figurative kiss of death. Estimates based on the survey returns reveal that employers spend billions annually correcting writing deficiencies. The survey, mailed to 120 human resource directors in corporations associated with Business Roundtable, produced responses from 64 companies, a 53.3 percent response rate.

Among the survey findings:

- Writing is a “threshold skill” for both employment and promotion, particularly for salaried employees. Half the responding companies report that they take writing into consideration when hiring professional employees. “In most cases, writing ability could be your ticket in . . . or it could be your ticket out,” said one respondent.

- People who cannot write and communicate clearly will not be hired and are unlikely to last long enough to be considered for promotion. “Poorly written application materials would be extremely prejudicial,” said one respondent. “Such applicants would not be considered for any position.”

- Two-thirds of salaried employees in large American companies have some writing responsibility. “All employees must have writing ability . . . Manufacturing documentation, operating procedures, reporting problems, lab safety, waste-disposal operations—all have to be crystal clear,” said one human resource director.

- Eighty percent or more of the companies in the service and finance, insurance, and real estate (FIRE) sectors, the corporations with the greatest employment-growth potential, assess writing during hiring. “Applicants who provide poorly written letters wouldn’t likely get an interview,” commented one insurance executive.

- A similar dynamic is at work during promotions. Half of all companies take writing into account when making promotion decisions. One succinct comment: “You can’t move up without writing skills.”
• More than half of all responding companies report that they “frequently” or “almost always” produce technical reports (59 percent), formal reports (62 percent), and memos and correspondence (70 percent). Communication through e-mail and PowerPoint presentations is almost universal. “Because of e-mail, more employees have to write more often. Also, a lot more has to be documented,” said one respondent.

• More than 40 percent of responding firms offer or require training for salaried employees with writing deficiencies. Based on the survey responses, it appears that remediying deficiencies in writing may cost American firms as much as $3.1 billion annually. “We’re likely to send out 200–300 people annually for skills-upgrade courses like ‘business writing’ or ‘technical writing,’” said one respondent.

Business Roundtable (www.businessroundtable.org) is an association of the chief executive officers of some of the leading U.S. corporations. The chief executives are committed to advocating public policies that foster vigorous economic growth and a dynamic global economy. The Roundtable’s members represent corporate leaders in manufacturing, finance, services, and high technology. The Roundtable encouraged its members to participate in the survey, which was developed and administered by the National Commission on Writing for America’s Families, Schools, and Colleges.