



## HR-RELATED SKILL DEVELOPMENT

# Writing a formal report

No skill is as important to managers as report-writing. Managers and HR specialists have to write progress reports, proposals, accident reports and evaluation reports to name but a few. You should use a formal report format if your subject matter is important to your organization, if your findings are extensive or if your readership is large or important. Many of the assignments in the end-of-chapter case studies in this book ask you to write a formal report. Remember that a formal report, especially if it is to be sent outside the organization, is meant to reflect and maintain the organization's professional image.

In this HR-related skill module we shall be concerned only with suggestions for the writers of formal management reports. We shall not try to present a comprehensive treatment of informal reports, including information reports, recommendation reports, justification reports, and proposals. See Suggested Further Reading.

### **Formal reports**

You would be likely to use a formal report format if:

1. Your subject matter is important to your organization
2. Your findings are extensive
3. The analysis is complex
4. The report is to be used over a long period of time.

The guidelines given in this document are general. In all 'formal report' assignments it is important that you apply HRM knowledge to the question or case/problem in hand in order to produce critically informed analysis, and that you seek guidance from your lecturer on each of the following criteria:

- Length of report
- Use of headings
- Documentation format

## **What exactly is a formal report?**

The main differences between formal and informal reports are in tone, structure and length. The planning of every report begins with a statement of purpose explaining the goal, significance and limitations of the project. Reports include primary information from your own observation and experience and secondary information gained through library research. Formal reports require careful citation of information taken from secondary sources in the form of footnotes, endnotes, and a list of references in a bibliography.

The overall presentation of the report may be deductive or inductive and its individual parts may be arranged chronologically, geographically, spatially or topically. In their discussion of strategies or plans for the organization of formal reports, Guffey and Nagle (2003) define the deductive plan as one that 'presents big ideas first'. This means beginning with findings, proposals or recommendations. For example, if you were studying four possible pay and benefits programmes, you would begin by recommending to the organization's HR strategy the programme you judge to be most appropriate and follow with discussion of the other programmes. It is suggested that the deductive strategy is used when the reader is knowledgeable and supportive.

In contrast, the inductive strategy or plan presents data and discussion first, followed by conclusion and recommendations. Guffey and Nagle (2003) believe that this sequence is often most effective because 'formal reports generally seek to educate the reader' (p. 279). Following the inductive plan, a study of alternative pay and benefits programmes would begin with information regarding all proposed programmes followed by analysis of the information, conclusions and recommendation drawn from that analysis.

## **General guidelines for a formal report**

Final presentation of the formal report includes three major sections:

- 1) Prefatory parts such as the letter of transmittal, the title page, table of contents and an executive summary
- 2) The body, which includes an introduction, discussion of findings, and summary, conclusions and recommendations
- 3) Supplementary parts such as the works cited, a bibliography and the appendix.

### *Prefatory parts*

- Letter of transmittal: First impression is important; as such the letter or memo authorizing the report should be given serious consideration. The letter should:
  - (a) Deliver the report ('Here is the report requested by')
  - (b) Present an overview of the report
  - (c) Offer to meet to discuss the contents

- Title page: The first page of a report contains the title of the report, name of addressee or recipient, author's name and company, date and sometimes a report number.
- Executive summary: An abridged version of the whole report, written in non-technical terms; very short and informative; normally describes salient features of report, draws a main conclusion, and makes a recommendation; always written last, after remainder of report has been written.
- Table of contents: Shows contents and arrangement of report; always includes a list of appendices and, sometimes, a list of illustrations.

### *The Body*

- Introduction: Prepares reader for discussion to come; indicates purpose and scope of report, and provides background information so that reader can read discussion intelligently. The introduction should motivate the reader. The reader should understand why the problem was researched and why the study represents a contribution to existing knowledge. Guffey and Nagle (2003) suggest the introduction contains seven items:
  1. Explanation of how the report originated and why it was authorized.
  2. Description of the problem that prompted the report and the specific research questions to be answered.
  3. Purpose of the report.
  4. Scope (boundaries) and limitations or restrictions of the research.
  5. Sources and methods of collecting information.
  6. Summary of findings, if the report is written deductively.
  7. Preview of the major sections of the report to follow, thus providing coherence and transition for the reader.
- Background: The introductory paragraph is usually followed by a review of the literature, often given the heading 'Background'. The literature review serves at least the following purposes in the presentation of the report:
  - (a) Placing the research in a historical context to show familiarity with relevant developments.
  - (b) Distinguishing what has been done from what needs to be done.
  - (c) Showing how your research builds on prior knowledge by presenting and evaluating what is already known about your research topic.
  - (d) Offering a point of reference for interpreting your own findings. Your report will show how your study expands, revises, or improves knowledge in an area.

The goal of the literature review is to demonstrate ‘the logical continuity between previous and present work’ (APA, 1994, p. 11).

- Discussion of findings: A narrative that provides all the details, evidence and data needed by the reader to understand what the author was trying to do, what he or she actually did and found out and what he or she thinks should be done next.

Formal reports often use visual aids to emphasize, summarize or clarify information.

Some general guidelines apply to the use of visuals. They must:

- Have meaningful titles and headings
  - Be identified and discussed in the text
  - Be located close to their reference in the text
  - Be vertical on the page
  - Include a credit to the source if appropriate
  - Using graphics software packages can create professional-looking visuals.
- Conclusions: A summary of the major conclusions or milestones reached in the discussion; conclusions are only opinions so can never advocate action.
  - Recommendations: If the discussion and conclusions suggest that specific action needs to be taken, the recommendations state categorically what must be done.

### *Supplementary Parts*

- References: A list of reference documents which were used to conduct the project and which the author considers will be useful to the reader; contains sufficient information for the reader to correctly identify and order the documents.

Although many methods of documenting reports are currently in practice (Guffey & Nagle, 2003) we will discuss only one: the APA method. The American Psychological Association (APA) recommends in-text citations that refer readers to a list of all references cited in the report.

For example: As Bratton and Gold (2003) explain, “there are five main HRM models that seek to demonstrate analytically the differences between traditional personnel management and HRM” (p. 18).

At the end of the report, all references are included on a page entitled ‘References’, as illustrated.

Books:

Bratton, J. & Gold, J. (2003). Human resource management: Theory and Practice (3rd ed.). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Corporate Author:

Wood Gundy Ltd. (1974). The Canadian money market, revised. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson.

American Psychological Association. (1994). *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (5th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

Periodicals:

Article in an academic journal:

Charlwood, A. (2002). Why do non-union employees want to unionize? *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 40 (3), 463 - 491.

Article in a newspaper:

Lewis, D. (2003). Women mentors on the rise. *The Globe and Mail*.

February 12, C8.

Other Sources:

Internet:

Tillman, H.N. (1998). Evaluating quality on the net. [Online]. Available:

[http:// www. hopetillman.com/findqual.html](http://www.hopetillman.com/findqual.html).

For a more comprehensive review of APA documentation go to:

[http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/research/r\\_apa.html](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/research/r_apa.html)

- Bibliography: It is recommended that a bibliography that lists all sources consulted in the research, whether actually cited or not, be included in a formal report.
- Appendices: A section at the back of the report that contains supporting data (such as charts, tables, photographs, specifications and test results) that rightly belong in the discussion but, if included with it, would disrupt and clutter the major narrative. If you find it necessary to include an Appendix you should make clear reference to it within the relevant section of the main discussion so readers know when it would be appropriate and enlightening for them to refer to it.

### **Suggested Further Reading**

Guffey, M. E. and Nagle, B. (2003). *Essentials of Business Communications* (4th Edition). Scarborough, ON: Nelson.

Hart, C. (1998). *Doing a Literature Review*. London: Sage.

Marsen S (2003) *Professional Writing: The Complete Guide for Business, Industry and IT*. Palgrave Macmillan © John