Bad writing always leaves negative impressions

THE WRITE STUFF: FIU Professor Brian Schriner, left, shares a laugh with students Karla Perez, 25, and Jorge Santos Coy, 23, during his business writing class.

"I come across many résumés and applications that are rather shocking," Nero said. "They don't follow the proper format and have misspellings and grammar errors. [Applicants] can't even write a cover letter."

Writing matters, and many business leaders in South Florida say sending clear and concise written messages to customers and global clients is a top priority. But they also say it's not easy to find employees with good written communications skills.

"Here we have a worldwide audience, and sadly these are dying skills," said Nero.

A report published last year by the National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools and Colleges concluded that the ability to communicate and write well opens doors to professional employment and promotions in all business sectors.

The study, Writing: A Ticket to Work... Or a Ticket Out: A Survey of Business Leaders, surveyed 120 human resource directors in companies affiliated with Business Roundtable, an association of chief executive officers from U.S. corporations with a combined workforce of more than 10 million employees.

With e-mail replacing the phone for much workplace communication, being concise, clear and having good grammar are among the top requisites that employers seek in applicants.

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WRITING DEFICIENCIES

But Marcus Elosegui, a branch manager at Personally Yours Staffing, a personnel service firm with offices in Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties, sees a number of writing deficiencies among local job applicants. They include grammar problems, the use of slang in written proposals and a lack of familiarity with the terms specific to various industries.

"We screen applicants that have been working in the legal, real estate and medical sectors for years," said Elosegui. "We administer tests to check their spelling and grammar. A lot of people who apply for top-level positions can't even spell terms they use every day."

Elosegui also observed that there are a great number of executives in South Florida who claim to be bilingual but are not as fluent and proficient in their second language as they say.

"Here we have people from other countries who are really qualified to take a position but are lacking grammar and speech skills," said Elosegui in a phone interview. "We recently had two excellent candidates for a position of executive assistant at a financial firm, but their writing and speaking deficiencies — because of the language barrier — kept them from getting the job."

The firm's clients, which include Tropicana and Goya Food Products, are "very demanding when it comes to language and grammar," Elosegui said.

The problem of poor writing skills also extends to the college campus.

Kevin Hall, an editor-in-residence and associate professor of the School of Mass Communications at Florida International University, said language skills suffered after a massive influx of Hispanic immigrants in the 1980s overwhelmed the school system.

BI-ILLITERACY

Like many professionals, Hall complains the region is becoming bi-illiterate.

Schools and universities "do not teach the fundamentals of the English language properly, and people are not studying Spanish. So individuals do not have a conscious relationship with either language," he said.

"The ability to communicate ideas clearly is crucial to succeed," said Hall, a former journalist and writing consultant.

The report by the National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools and Colleges said that businesses across the United States are spending as much as $3.1 billion annually in remedial training to improve the language and writing of employees. But even more of an effort is needed, said Hall.

"Corporations try, but a two-day seminar is not going to accomplish anything. It is money being wasted. Improvement can only be achieved over long periods of time. The business community needs to demand more from schools to prepare kids."

REQUIRED CLASS

At FIU, all undergraduate students at the College of Business are required to take a three-credit course called "Business and Professional Communication," said Brian Schriner, a communications professor at the business school.

"We teach the proper formats and style," said Schriner. "Students usually write in academic style, taught to them in history and philosophy classes. But business writing is extremely practical," he said.

In the course, students learn business-writing techniques, how to prepare oral presentations, critical thinking and team thinking.

"The problem with professionals and writing is that sometimes they don't know how to get to the point... letters and e-mails are sometimes too wordy," Schriner said. "E-mails are normally used for personal purposes, so they tend to be informal. [But in a professional context,] managers have higher expectations and they expect e-mails and reports to be complete, clear and courteous."

BACK TO BASICS

Schriner said that in his course he is "reinforcing the fundamentals" students already have.

Some said, however, that they hadn't had any formal grammar education since they were in elementary school. They found the course helpful.