Reviews

Marian Barchilon, guest editor from Arizona State University, sets the stage in the *Journal of the Society for Technical Communication* for a special section of three articles related to downsizing. Barchilon says that a July 1992 issue of *Time* reported that 375,000 American jobs were lost in one year. *Workplace Trends* reported that the post-World War II boom era has ended and that corporate bureaucracies are being permanently dismantled.

Corporations are abandoning their no-layoff traditions and downsizing because they are now competing in a global business environment. Fringe benefits of permanent, full-time employees constitute 28 percent of a company's payroll costs; therefore, corporations are changing the employment picture in three ways:

1. By substituting temporary employees for full-time ones.
2. By retiring employees earlier.
3. By laying off employees when moving to countries that offer reduced labor costs.

All of the articles in the special section have an economic focus because economics is at the heart of the downsizing trend. The common thread is the author's urging of all communicators to better understand and reassess their contributions. The authors raise such questions as: (1) How does management view our work? (2) Are We justifying our jobs? and (3) Are we doing the right type of job given the situation? The articles are upbeat and proactive, and they portray communicators as empowered employees who can cope with bottom-line issues before they occur rather than after.

In "Coping with Downsizing as a Writing and Editing Group," Mike Steve and Tom Bigelow point out that writers and editors (W/Es) are likely candidates for downsizing. Steve and Bigelow classify employees in three ways:

1. **Management**—They decide what the goal is and what is needed to reach it.
2. **Technical staff**—Those with specific technical information, including engineers, researchers, and technicians.

3. **Support Staff**—Service oriented staff, including internal accountants, contract specialists, and publishing personnel (W/E group).

How writers and editors respond to the question: "What have you contributed to the bottom line?" affects management's perception of the group's contribution to company goals.

Steve and Bigelow argue that the W/E group performs tasks at a lower cost than if one of the technical staff (specialists), project managers, or management were to perform such tasks. W/E decrease the burden on technical personnel by providing this service more cost effectively because management and technical staff usually command higher salaries than W/E.

The authors also present five self-assessment scenarios to help W/E prepare for situations that frequently precede downsizing. These scenarios often parallel those in academia.

In "Let's Do Away with Manuals...Before They Do Away With Us," William Horton urges communicators to plan ahead. He believes that unless communicators view their jobs in new ways, they may become victims of downsizing. He urges communicators to build upon their current skills and to develop new ones that prepare them for the future.

In "Downsizing Technical Communication Staff: What's at Risk for Corporate Success," Peter M. Smudde writes that feeling helpless is reactive rather than proactive. Communicators should adopt a new perspective and help decision-makers realize the economic impact of downsizing, writing, and editorial positions. Smudde says that communicators are empowered by management to: (1) Help personnel and customers understand what the company offers, (2) Uphold the company image, and (3) Express the company's values, mission, and position in society. To compete effectively, companies will be doing more with less. Smudde maintains that there is still time to be proactive.

Lest we think all these threats toward technical communicators do not apply to agricultural communicators, we should recall that by definition part of our job responsibilities are those of a technical communicator. We take technical information from a hard science and present it to the general public and specialized publics in a way that it can easily be understood and used.

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