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ONGOING RESEARCH AND RESPONSIVE CURRICULA IN THE TWO-YEAR COLLEGE

Gary Bays

OVERVIEW

The benefits of productive collaboration between academe and industry are clear. For technical communication programs, these relationships can generate funding and new curricula. For industry, the benefits can include increased recruiting opportunities and an improved corporate reputation (Bosley 1995). Despite the inherent rewards in such partnerships, many remain sporadic and one-sided, particularly when they involve ongoing research in the workplace. This dilemma is even more pronounced in the two-year college where, historically, faculty "rarely conduct research or scholarly inquiry," yet where students are often already in the workplace and seek communication skills that will pay dividends immediately on the job (Cohen and Brawer 1989, 68).

This chapter—through a series of interviews with corporate representatives—examines a variety of issues, including how workplace research is best conducted, how industry contacts regard such research, and what corporations seek in an academic partner. At the same time, the chapter suggests that the call for increased research coincides both with a job market that increasingly demands such research and with a two-year college student population that seeks contemporary, functional skills that translate to the workplace.

THE NEED FOR RESEARCH

In a fast-paced, global economy, technical communication programs can ill afford to conduct periodic forays into corporate culture, hoping to gather information on employee practices. Yet, according to industry representatives, select academics do just that. Researchers arrive on site to observe, interview, and survey employees, but too often the results

surface only in scholarly journals far removed from the workplace—as Elizabeth Tebeaux suggests, theory that promises to "sink into a morass of verbal effluvia" with little bearing outside tenure and promotion hearings (1996, 50). Understandably, companies can grow weary of the intrusion; eventually some limit or outright deny access to their employees. As one Fortune 500 company representative who chose not to participate in this project declared, "I get a dozen requests a month to conduct research on our employees. Who am I to choose what are good projects and poor ones. It's just easier to say a blanket 'no' to you all."

Although a variety of methods for interfacing with industry have been explored at length—faculty working as consultants, as members of advisory boards, as participants in incubator centers (Powers et al. 1998; Reynolds et al. 1995; Ecker and Staples 1997)—sustained research of workplace skills merits further attention. Particularly amidst public calls for accountability in higher education, ongoing research seems a logical way to appease critics while gathering vital data to design pertinent curricula. At the same time, conducting research locally promises that curricula will reflect the needs of the companies that will hire program graduates, and documenting their abilities also plays into current assessment demands. Given the $56 billion that business and industry expend training employees annually (McCune 2000)—often on literacy issues—and polls in which companies bemoan the communication skills of new hires, ongoing research addresses a range of educational and corporate issues.

Perhaps most important, research in the workplace provides relevance to what goes on in the classroom. Research provides a measure of credibility to the classroom, particularly among students who are not technical communication majors and who too often dismiss communication courses as yet another obstacle to their chosen curriculum. Certainly, as students become increasingly critical and vocal regarding degree requirements, workplace research underscores the validity of the work done in technical communication classes. The nature and breadth of that research certainly is affected by a faculty member's available time and funding, but the act of conducting research illustrates to students that the course is immersed in the "real world"—a rallying point for the increasingly selective population in today's classrooms. Given the myriad course, program, and university selections available to students via today's technology and given the scrutiny legislators and the public

increasingly aim at what happens in our classrooms, ongoing research speaks to each constituency.

For two-year college educators, though, the benefits of conducting research runs counter to their fundamental mission: teaching. Because many community college faculty members teach four and five classes and often have strict service expectations as well, research is often ignored or, as one of my colleagues remarked, relegated to "the twenty-fifth hour in the day." Still, as Cohen and Brawer found, "instructors would willingly spend more time in scholarly pursuits, as the university professors do, if they had fewer classes to meet" (1989, 142). As this chapter will suggest, with a willingness of administrators to support such research, businesses, students, and colleges can benefit and prosper from the effort.

It's important to distinguish the term "research" as it is used here. Numerous voices have expressed concerns regarding joint research efforts and their inherent issues—licensing, propriety, confidentiality, and trade secrets (Press and Washburn 2000; Lee 1998; Phillips and Metzler 1991). Rather than commercial ventures, however, this chapter focuses on research of corporate and employee communication practices and how academic research is best suited for that task. Relevant curricula and sustained relationships between business and academe rest on these. Although one vice president interviewed for this chapter suggested that "English teachers could be a little more mercenary in seeking out projects that would pay off" for them and their corporate partners, the aim of the discussion here remains on communication skills, not product development.

PARTICIPANTS AND METHODS

In establishing industry contacts for these interviews, I sought personnel who oversee research done in companies representing diverse products and cultures. The participants included here see writing generated by entry-level employees as well as by executives—a scope that permits participants unique insights into company communication skills. Eventually, I interviewed five contacts from the following four companies, representing a range of titles (director, manager, vice president) and departments (human resources, communication, research, benefits, and training).

The J. M. Smucker Company. Located in Orrville, Ohio, J. M. Smucker is known for its jams, jellies, preserves, and peanut butter. A family-run company, Smucker employs some two thousand employees worldwide and distributes products in more than sixty countries.

Russell Corporation. An international apparel company, Russell specializes in athletic wear and uniforms. The company boasts over $1 billion in annual sales and employs more than fifteen thousand worldwide.

General Motors Corporation. The perennial Fortune 500 leader General Motors employs more than 380,000 and is the world's largest automotive company, with a global presence in more than two hundred countries. The company also has more than 260 major subsidiaries, joint ventures, and affiliates around the world.

Molex Corporation. Molex is the world's second-largest manufacturer of electronic, electrical, and fiber optic interconnection products. The company employs more than sixteen thousand on six continents.[1]

The contacts responded to a series of questions exploring their impressions of academic research and business partnerships. In some instances, they did so via email; others sat down for personal interviews. In both formats, the exchanges were engaging, and the executives were gracious in devoting time and insight to the project, particularly given the time constraints they speak to in this chapter. The following questions elicited the most detailed responses.

- How do academics initiate research initiatives in your workplace?
- What are the corporate policies governing access to employees?
- Which research methods work best in corporate environments where efficiency and productivity come at a premium?
- What are the best means for sharing research findings with industry partners?
- How do you currently view academic research?
- What barriers face academics doing ongoing research in a corporate environment?
- What writing/communication issues merit research in your workplace?

Making Contact

According to those interviewed, efforts to initiate academic research in the workplace rival Baskin-Robbins for variety. These include the following strategies:

- Cold calls
- Contacts made through training and consulting
- Contacts made through advisory board memberships
- Formal proposals for on-site research
- Face-to-face meetings at professional conferences
- Requests handed down from CEOs and CFOs
- Informational interviews
- Longstanding university-business partnerships.

In the case of the last item, for example, General Motors maintains a strong working relationship with both the University of Michigan and Michigan Technological University, while Auburn University allies itself with Russell Corporation. The benefits of these relationships are invaluable because partners are already working with known quantities.

Unlike the scenario depicted earlier in this essay, none of the participants here denied my request for an interview; however, most of them emphasized the need for personal contacts as a means of initiating partnerships. As one interviewee noted, "You need to develop relationships in advance of asking for favors." Accordingly, respondents felt cold calls and unsolicited proposals offered the least promise for initiating partnerships.

The principal issues regarding access to employees, understandably, are confidentiality and privacy. Contacts admit being wary of releasing any personnel information—job titles, addresses—without a clear explanation of how that information will be used. In some instances, companies enforce stringent privacy policies that direct such activity; and human resources personnel, legal counsel, or review boards can be involved in approving research in the workplace. Clear research proposals or abstracts of the proposed research are vital to company officials who must secure approvals. Academics are well advised to work up the description of the project before seeking permission to do it. On completion of the work, companies can also make explicit demands that employee information be destroyed. Heeding these instructions certainly goes a long way toward developing a working relationship.

The corporate culture also influences how companies react to research requests. At the J. M. Smucker Company, officials admit being "very cautious to protect" employees. The company underscores its family orientation in all of its corporate literature, and fourth generation Smucker family members currently direct the company. When interviewed

as part of *Fortune*'s list of the "100 Best Companies to Work For," Chairman Timothy Smucker claimed the company continues to build on the "basic beliefs and ideals instilled in the company" a century before, among these, "the value of people" (Plauche 2000, par. 3). Without that background, a zealous researcher might unknowingly tread on values the company holds dear. The lesson seems clear: before entering the workplace to conduct research, academics must study and understand the environment in which they will be working.

In marked contrast, gaining access to more than 380,000 employees, like those at General Motors, can be an exhaustive and time-consuming process not only for researchers but also for company officials. When conducting a recent survey of employees at General Motors, I submitted the parameters of the study (college graduates, corporate environment, first or second year on the job) to corporate officials who then designed a program to identify recipients. Because the company conducts hundreds of research efforts internally each year, my request was prioritized and put in the queue for consideration. The wait was exacerbated by contract negotiations during this same period that demanded the attention of employees involved in this project.

Clearly, without the full cooperation of patient industry contacts, such information is simply unattainable, and researchers need to court their partners with this in mind. Making demands in such partnerships based on academic calendars holds little sway in the workplace. This issue promises to be less critical once academics establish a level of trust in a partnership, but in an initial project researchers must respect and abide by the constraints governing their research in the workplace.

Gathering Information

Once permitted access to employees, academics must design research tools likely to elicit both valid and timely information. On this point, interviewees had the most divergent suggestions:

> Written surveys or questionnaires (at desk, at home, proctored)
> Telephone interviews
> Focus groups
> Email questionnaires
> Workplace observation

In each case, researchers must recognize the hackneyed reality of the workplace: time is money. According to one corporate representative,

"Time is the key issue; the bigger the demands of the research, the less likely employees will take the time to complete it." Another interviewee noted that any research method requiring "more than fifteen to twenty minutes" will limit a wide response from busy employees. Given the range of methods suggested by corporate contacts here, it's worth examining the relative merits of each.

Certainly, surveys and questionnaires seek answers to specific questions—often with a specific range of responses available to respondents—and these tools are quite efficient in gathering material. If they are well designed (see Anderson 1985), surveys can easily be completed within the fifteen- to twenty-minute time frame suggested previously. Survey responses may vary depending on whether the questions are completed at work, where employees may feel obligated to complete them, but may not feel free to express critical opinions, or are done at home, where employees may express themselves more freely, particularly if their responses are guaranteed anonymity. However, without the subtle pressure exerted by the workplace, employees may completely disregard questionnaires sent to their homes.

Telephone interviews invite more elaborate responses from employees, permitting a far broader discussion than surveys offer. Like surveys, however, they come with the same drawbacks depending on whether they are conducted at home or work. Too, researchers must devote much more time to actually speaking with employees and transcribing the responses. According to one respondent, focus groups offer extensive feedback because employees can compare their comments with those of peers. The research method comes as a double-edged sword: focus groups take numerous employees away from their work simultaneously, and in corporate environments where productivity comes at a premium, companies may well avoid projects using this method of research.

Perhaps the most efficient form of feedback today comes by way of electronic mail. Given its speed and relatively painless demands for responding, email allows researchers near-immediate data; too, there are fewer issues of confidentiality involved compared to releasing home addresses.

Workplace observation is a mixed bag for both researchers and business partners. For academics, it permits a way to gather information without demanding employee time. In "shadowing" an employee,

researchers can collect accurate information on time devoted to communication acts, tools and methods of communication, and strategies for creating and revising documents. One respondent endorsed this method enthusiastically. "It's a win-win for both partners. You get information on how employees work, but you don't stop them from *doing* the work." For academics, the drawbacks include limited numbers on which to base research findings and significant time demands required in shadowing employees. The power of such observation is borne out by previous research (for example, Selzer 1983), but obviously two-year college faculty already facing time constraints may find this type of research out of the question without substantial administrative support.

Sharing Findings

As noted earlier, workplace research often serves as valuable evidence for promotion and tenure hearings, but companies may get little benefit from the academic findings. If published, the work is relegated to scholarly journals, far removed from the eyes of participants, in formats and language equally distant. Clearly, this dynamic is hard to characterize as a "relationship." At the same time, given the frenzied pace within their respective companies, contacts appear to have little time for repeated conversations with academics.

Thus, there was consensus among those interviewed about how best to share our research with them: executive summaries. Whether it was a summary attached to a "brief report" or a summary of "no more than a page and a half or two pages tops," contacts emphasized the need for brevity in reporting findings.

The working relationship, of course, is also defined by the corporate culture in which the work is conducted. For example, General Motors has its own corporate university, a trend that has seen marked growth during the past decade (Meister 2000; Michaels 2000). Research that fits the pedagogical aims of such in-house efforts may help academics make inroads with corporate partners. Indeed, these inroads may lead to "exciting and lucrative relationships for colleges" (Meister 2001, B10). In contrast, officials at smaller companies like the J. M. Smucker Company admit they react to training and research needs as they become aware of them. As a respondent from that company noted, "We are need-driven; when we hear of an issue that requires attention, we dedicate time and resources to it."

Of course, this need should motivate colleges and universities to maintain an ongoing relationship with local business and industry; understanding and tailoring research to the "needs" of their partners is one way to maintain that relationship in addition to more traditional means (conducting training workshops, consulting, and so forth). When academics fail to sustain such relationships, the risk is twofold: (1) researchers will miss vital opportunities to work collaboratively through company needs, and (2) our graduates will miss out on valuable opportunities to develop skills that address those needs. Although advisory boards and committees drawn from local business and industry can lend anecdotal evidence to college programs, first-hand research provides far better evidence on which to build those programs. Given that many two-year college students are already in the workforce or likely to enter the job market within the year, providing a relevant *and* current curriculum is an issue of immediacy. It is fair neither to the companies that hire our graduates nor to the graduates themselves when academics remain unmindful of workplace skills and deficiencies.

Pitfalls and Perceptions

Academics also need to enter research partnerships with a keen understanding of the barriers they are likely to face in the workplace, and respondents to this survey described those barriers in detail. The first is simply getting in the door. As illustrated earlier, companies are inundated with requests for research—and often they simply deny all requests. Respondents expressed concerns about legal and organizational practices publicized by academic research. For example, one industry representative noted her company would be far more inclined to okay research about communication practices companywide than research of management or executive skills, particularly if the latter put the company in a bad light. Respondents noted that depending on the findings and the way in which they are publicized (journal article, conference presentations), as a matter of professional courtesy, the company should get a copy of the work. Most agreed potentially critical research might come under much closer scrutiny by those responsible for approving the work. Finding the niche between genuine academic inquiry and corporate agendas might be the most difficult task in initiating workplace research, and it is an issue that merits further discussion among technical communication professionals and business representatives alike.

It's no surprise that interviewees agreed on one barrier to employee research: time. According to one respondent, academics must design "research that will not be a drain on people's limited time or the limited human resources" available. The relevance of the research also plays a vital role in gaining access to employees. As one respondent noted, "the more germane the research, the more likely the cooperation from the company and the employees themselves. Those involved need to know 'What's in it for me?'" This becomes increasingly important as companies, in the name of efficiency, downsize and assign more responsibilities to those remaining on the job.

Although the "disconnections between industry and higher education" have diminished through increased interchange (Ecker and Staples 1997, 380), the disconnections nonetheless remain. Though politic in their comments, it is obvious that select members of business and industry still see a schism in the relationship. One respondent didn't "feel academics look beyond their rarified air—they're not forced to stay abreast of the world outside the Ivory Towers." Another admitted there is "probably a communication gap between industry and academia in making that [research] translation," while another, using the language of the issue, asserted, "There is a disconnect between what businesses need to solve as problems and nebulous research studies that can't be easily translated to solving business issues." As Rehling (1998) argues, the notion of the "one-way exchange" in which business shares privileged information with academics remains, and academic researchers and corporate partners must consider how they can develop truly collaborative exchanges.

Continuing Research

Respondents suggested and agreed on a number of communication issues deserving attention from workplace researchers in the future.

- Grammar issues
- Brevity and succinctness
- Presentation skills
- Analysis of written materials
- Electronic communication
- Corporate politics and ethics

Although admittedly a condensed research agenda, nonetheless it provides academics with ideas for continued study of workplace practices.

By sharing ongoing research needs and subsequent findings, college and industry partners can work collaboratively and build what can be characterized as "relationships."

The Road to Tenure

Although the merits of research are relevant to the classroom and to the community, faculty must increasingly look to research for their professional survival. As a recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Wilson 2001) explained, "The bar for tenure is rising at major research universities and teaching institutions alike. Most departments demand more published research—either articles or books, or both." In higher education today, faculty recognize the role research plays in securing a position and in eventually seeking tenure and promotion. According to Wilson, the trend is not solely for those teaching at research institutions: "research is now a key factor at many institutions that previously focused almost entirely on teaching and service (A12). Two-year colleges are benefiting from the new wave of scholarly colleagues entering its ranks, but without ample administrative support (released time, research funds) few of those colleagues will likely sustain their research in light of heavy teaching and service expectations.

CONCLUSIONS

Research that leads to relevant curricula has been an ongoing theme in technical communication literature (Tebeaux 1996; Ecker and Staples 1997; Rehling 1998). In this chapter, I suggest how that research might be initiated and best conducted, based on feedback from corporate representatives. The relevance of workplace research speaks for itself: it appeases critics who call for "real world" curricula; it promises to assess the outcomes of what educators do in the classroom; and it brings credibility to classroom instruction in perhaps the most competitive era of student recruitment.

　　Academics who undertake a research initiative also face a fundamental issue that merits further professional dialogue: How can industry and colleges support academics facing daunting teaching loads and funding issues as they undertake workplace research? Even on a small scale, research is labor intensive, particularly when it includes comprehensive research of a corporation and its culture, as suggested here. Some institutions are seeking a humane balance in their quest for heavier research productivity. The University of Richmond, while making greater

research demands on its new hires, also offers a progressive approach to helping them produce research. Teaching loads have been reduced in recent years, and the School of Arts and Sciences just instituted semester-long leaves to support research efforts among junior faculty (Wilson, 2001). This idea and others merit attention; it is incumbent upon administrators and industry to support faculty, who now face higher research demands.

The means to do workplace research may well decide the success of the research itself. As Hayhoe (1998) suggests,

> Technical communicators in the academy and industry need to explore a new model of education for the next millenium, one that fosters, promotes, and actively pursues learning—and learning to learn. Only by discovering our own limitations and collaborating effectively with those whose strengths complement our own will we truly enrich ourselves, our students, and our audiences. (20)

The call for ongoing research may also make us reevaluate what constitutes meaningful research. Sullivan and Porter (1997) note the schism between traditional or empirical researchers and those working from newer perspectives. The work described in this chapter draws on a relatively small number of participants, yet the findings offer means of closing the gap between academe and business. Combined with other studies of comparable aims, the work adds to a growing body of workplace research that can enrich lives as Hayhoe suggests. As I note in this chapter, establishing a true relationship with a business partner demands that academics work within the constraints of those partners; that in turn promises to change the nature of how research is conducted.

My experience collecting work for this project speaks to the enrichment Hayhoe describes. A number of students from my college find employment with the J. M. Smucker Company upon graduation each year; so, I sought out my institution's director of workforce development for a contact within the company. As a result of one hour-long interview and a subsequent survey of their first-year employees, I eventually revamped elements of my technical communication course. The survey suggested that employees felt particularly vulnerable writing summaries, and yet summaries ranked high among the types of writing they were required to do each day. Thus, I introduced additional summary writing into my course, as well as more public-speaking opportunities, another

skill employees noted among their daily demands and deficiencies. I also found that most of the first-year employees learned about the company and its writing practices from their immediate supervisors. Thus, my next project with the J. M. Smucker Company will involve a survey of supervisors and their impressions of the writing they encounter daily in the workplace.

The time involved in this work—including survey design, mailing, analysis, completion of an executive summary, and the initial interview—reached thirty to forty hours spread out over a series of months, and the findings became part of a panel presentation at the Conference on College Composition and Communication. The research led to a subsequent interview with an influential senior executive, and we plan to meet on an annual basis to discuss workplace communication issues and, potentially, courses and programs that will serve the needs of students and the company's employees.

Still, I was able to maintain close contact with only two of the five contacts I made at the outset of this work—a result that speaks to the limitations imposed by a full teaching load and the service expectations of my college. Certainly, working with a local company proved far easier than those at a distance and, ultimately, far more relevant to students. The concept of "taming the hydra," that is, balancing teaching and scholarship, has been addressed before (Andrews Knodt 1988). However, it is time that two-year colleges both recognize the importance of research to their futures and, in turn, support faculty undertaking such work. It is work that must not be relegated to the "twenty-fifth hour" of our days.

Ultimately, the parallels between academic and business partners are striking. Both hope to be productive; both put a premium on time; and both must spend their respective resources judiciously. Given the speed at which communication practices change in business and industry, technical communication programs can ill afford to ignore the vital role of ongoing workplace research. Those efforts, while goaded by increasingly rigorous tenure guidelines nationwide, must be tempered by realistic expectations of faculty productivity. Ongoing research remains vital to the future of technical communication programs. As we attempt to design relevant courses for students in our classes, we must do so with equally relevant research that builds on truly collaborative efforts between colleges and industry.