

Visit **Benefits and Pensions Monitor** magazine online at: <http://www.bpmmagazine.com>

-----

## **What We Have Here Is A Failure To Communicate**

By: Jim Purdy

Since my father died two years ago, my 81-year-old mother has received correspondence from the Department of Veterans' Affairs. Every time she gets a letter from the DVA, I get an anxious phone call. She can't make head nor tails of what the letter is saying and is frightened that they're taking away her **pension**.

She reads the letter to me over the phone, but I can't make head nor tails of it either. So, to allay my mother's growing hysteria, I hurry over to her living room. There, I attempt to isolate some semblance of decipherable meaning. Yet, even though I'm a professional writer with a BA in English, I still cannot make head nor tails of it.

The best I can do is compile a list of questions for my mother to ask the DVA when she phones them. And sure enough, on the phone the next day, the DVA spokesperson calmly and clearly explains what the letter is about.

My question is 'Why couldn't the letter she received achieve what the phone call did?'

This means that the letters that go out are not really the communication. They are simply the prelude – a kind of cue – for the recipient to phone so they can receive the real lowdown on what it's about.

Then, last month, I met a communications officer from the DVA. I told her about my mother's experiences and the DVA woman smiled and said "I know exactly what you mean. I can't make head nor tails of them either."

She went on to describe how she's pushing for clearer communications at the DVA, trying to make the letters actually serve the needs of the recipients. To do so, she's begun teaching courses to the DVA on Plain Language.

Plain Language is about communicating with readers – be they the widows of veterans or members of a **Defined Contribution pension plan** – so that they understand the message in the same sense as it is meant to be understood.

### **Live And Die On Communications**

But any and all organizations live and die on communications, both internally and externally, to function efficiently and productively. Vast libraries worth of information are generated and distributed via eMail, websites, Blackberries, and paper documentation.

That information literally runs businesses. As Tony Comper, then president and CEO of the BMO Financial Group, put it: "We aren't in the business of managing money. We are in the business of managing information about money."

Unfortunately, a lot of this information is greeted in the same way as my mother greeted the letter from the DVA. It's very difficult to make head or tails of it. Such failure to communicate causes performance mistakes, poor decision-making, inefficient operations, and loss of productivity and profitability.

Thus, Plain Language is needed in communications so everyone can do their jobs better and improve bottom-line performance. This goes for – indeed, especially for – highly educated and literate professionals.

Reducing the complexity of the language and focusing on the needs of the reader goes a long way towards effectively communicating. It's not the information that gets simplified, but rather the message, so that complex information can be more readily understood and put to work.

Beyond Plain Language principles, there are the principles of usability. This takes us beyond grammar and vocabulary and into cognitive psychology and information typing.

Cognitive psychology helps us understand how the brain actually processes information. Presenting information according to cognitive principles means we're presenting information in the way that the brain naturally prefers it and can readily process it.

Information typing categorizes all information based on its purpose for the user. Defining how the user is going to use this information means that we're presenting the information in the way the user needs it.

### **Made Comprehensible**

The benefits of this approach to communication are unassailable. Even the most complex, difficult, and impenetrable topics can be made comprehensible using Plain Language and usability principles. Indeed, any organization that is not addressing its communications in this way is failing to maximize its key resource – its knowledge. Failing to maximize knowledge in a knowledge economy means failure.

Subject matter experts on veterans' affairs, on pension plans, or on any other topic need to stop writing and start communicating. They need to stop focusing on the content in isolation from the people who need to use the content. Subject matter experts, who once learned how to write, must now learn how to communicate. Getting clear, usable communications directly from the horse's mouth can only benefit everyone.

Jim Purdy is vice-president, training, for Information Mapping Canada.