

# The Executive Summary: A Key to Effective Communication

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### SUMMARY

**Presenting the correct written information to a business decision maker in the appropriate form is often critical to the success of the project. A lengthy report is not likely to be read, while a project abstract with insufficient information may not allow the decision maker to act. In these cases, the executive summary may be the writer's only opportunity to convince the decision-maker to act.**

Tichy (1966) states "some research institutes consider the summary important enough for a writer to spend months reducing a summary of years of research to a single page. . . The ability to summarize the main ideas of a report is one of the most important skills a writer in industry can acquire" (p. 26).

Burnett (1994) defines the purpose of the executive summary as identifying the main points of the document and presenting the conclusions as well as providing information necessary for decision making. The format of this summary should provide all of this information in a manner that will help the reader make that decision. She suggests that information be organized in the following order: Topic and Impact, Recommendation, Methodology, Results, Conclusion. For reasonably simple reports this format may be adequate; but for complex reports, the reader needs to understand the important information the writer was able to collect and how all the information fits together to lead to a recommendation and decision.

For the past 27 years, Bradley University's Department of Industrial Engineering has required its senior students to work with clients in the community

to help the clients solve significant operational problems. A student team spends a semester on a project during which they must define the problem, analyze the problem, develop and evaluate alternative solutions, and recommend a course of action to the client. The team must also convey to the client what the impact will be if the recommended course of action is followed.

The information developed by the students is conveyed to the client in both verbal and written form. For many years, the format of the written report has prompted ongoing discussion between the English faculty and the Industrial Engineering faculty as both groups worked to help the students produce an informative report. Since these projects generally covered multiple parameters of a single large problem, a one paragraph abstract often did not convey enough information to the client. At the other extreme, a typical "executive summary" might occupy five to six pages and still not present information to the decision maker in a form that would help them make a decision. A variety of formats for the written report and various structures of the executive

**Table 1.** General Format for Executive Summary

<b>Problem Definition</b>					
<b>Summary of Factual Information</b>					
Fact #	The team's analysis of the present system revealed the following facts. Statement of Fact	page # in report where fact is discussed	Fact #	Statement of Fact	page # in report where fact is discussed
<b>Conclusions</b>					
Conclusion #	Based on the factual information, the team reached the following conclusions.			Conclusion #	Factual basis for this conclusion
<b>Recommendations</b>					
XYZ should implement the following recommendations to solve the stated problem.					
Recommendation #	Conclusions on which Rec is based	page # in report where Rec is discussed	Recommendation #	Conclusions on which Rec is based	page # in report where Rec is discussed
<b>Cost/Benefit Summary</b>					
Costs			Benefits		
Quantitative costs involved in implementing the team's recommendations:			\$ annually		
First Year Costs \$			SUMMARY COST vs. BENEFITS		
Subsequent Years Cost \$					
Qualitative costs:					

summary have been used with modifications being made as the faculty developed and used improved ways to present the information. The executive summary concept presented in this paper is the most recent effort in this area.

Decisions are generally based on recommendations, which are based on conclusions, which are based on factual information obtained during the investigation. The chronological order for this process is facts→conclusions→recommendations→decisions.

To make a good decision the reader must not only understand the individual components, but must also the relationships and the logic involved in reaching a particular recommendation. "Why are you making this recommendation?" To answer this question the reader needs to understand what *factual information* was gathered that led you to your *conclusions*? How do these *conclusions* lead you to make that *recommendation*? What will be the *effect* if your recommendations are followed?

The following format is an attempt to organize all of this information into an easy to follow sequence of steps: Problem Definition, Summary of Factual Information, Conclusions, Recommendations, Cost-Benefit Analysis. Within each section, the information from the previous section that leads to that statement is listed. Where appropriate, the page number in the report where more detailed information may be found is also listed. The general format is summarized in Table 1.

Ideally, the executive summary should present the decision maker with all relevant information without requiring the reader to turn pages. This can be accomplished easily if the entire executive summary fits on a single page. With projects that are systems oriented and therefore are fairly complex, the entire summary may not fit on one page. If that is the case, then the summary should be printed on facing pages so the reader can go from Problem Definition to Cost and Benefit Summary without having to turn the page. Inclusion of a cover sheet with pertinent

**Table 2.** Detailed Example of Executive Summary.

<b>Problem Definition</b>			
<b>To improve the quality of service SuzyQ Travel Bureau provides to Wid-jets, Inc. with the condition that 80% of the calls from Wid-jets must be answered within 20 seconds.</b>			
<b>Summary of Factual Information</b>			
The team's analysis of the current travel arrangement system revealed the following facts.			
Fact #	page #	Fact #	page #
1) Wid-jets management has stipulated that 80% of the incoming calls must be answered within 20 seconds.	4	7) SuzyQ Travel Bureau management believes that agents can stay AVAILABLE during PCP.	28
2) The current system availability is 43%.	14	8) ACD 210 agents spend 18% of their time on non-booking related duties.	34
3) Wid-jets customers indicated that they do not want to wait if agents are unavailable.	19	9) SuzyQ Travel Bureau management believes PCP can be reduced from six minutes to four minutes.	41
4) Agents indicate that they have trouble prioritizing their work because they have too many duties and expectations.	22	10) ACD 210 agent lunch breaks are scheduled on split shifts from 11:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. while the number of calls decrease from 11:30 to 12:30.	47
5) Agents were trained at different times and on different computer systems.	25	11) NIOSH recommends fifteen minutes of breaks every two hours for people who look at a computer screen continually.	49
6) Agents do not feel comfortable staying on Available to finish PCP.	26		
<b>Conclusions</b>			
Based on the factual information, the team reached the following conclusions			
Conclusion #	Fact #	Conclusion #	Fact #
A) SuzyQ Travel Bureau must increase system availability from 43% to at least 80% to satisfy Wid-jets management.	1,2	F) Agent duties which are not related to booking flights must be reassigned.	8
B) Customers should not have to wait if no agent is available.	3	G) Time required for PCP needs to be reduced from six to at least five minutes.	9
C) Agents must have clear job priorities.	4	H) Agent lunch breaks should fit the daily call distribution.	10
D) Methods used by agents should be standardized.	5	I) Agents need breaks from looking at computer screens.	11
E) Agents must be trained to stay on AVAILABLE to finish PCP.	6,7		

**Table 2.** Detailed Example of Executive Summary. *continued.*

**Recommendations**

SuzyQ Travel Bureau should implement the following recommendations to improve the quality of service to Wid-jets customers.

Recommendation #	Conclusions #	pg #	Recommendation #	Conclusions #	pg #
1) Reassign agent duties that are not related to giving customers information and booking flights.	A,C,F	34	7) Allow each agent twenty minutes per day for break time	I	49
2) Eliminate unnecessary transfers and callbacks.	A,F	40	8) Set the queue size equal to one.	A	50
3) Reduce PCP time from six to five minutes.	A,G	41	9) Stop emptying the queue.	B	52
4) Assign six agents to ACD 210.	A	42	10) Develop training seminars for agents.	D	54
5) Assign callbacks to specific agents.	A,C	46	11) Train agents to finish the minimum amount of PCP after booking a flight.	A,E	54
6) Move lunch breaks to fit the daily call distribution.	A,H	48	12) Seat ACD 210 agents together.	C	55

**Cost/Benefit Summary**

Costs	Benefits
Summary of the <i>quantitative</i> costs involved in implementing the team's recommendations:	Continued Wid-jets Business
	\$886,000 annual gross profit
Initial Training Costs	
3 Agents	
Training Manager	
7,300	
4,600	
11,900	
Annual Costs	
3 Agents	
Wid-jets Education	
Training Seminars	
60,960	
1,060	
800	
62,820	
First Year Costs	
\$74,720	
Subsequent Years Costs	
\$62,820	
Summary of the <i>qualitative</i> costs:	
● Possible increase in callbacks	
● Possible increase in time until customers are called back	
● Possible resistance from the agents.	

Net Present Value  
 Assuming a 50% probability that SQTB will lose Wid-jet's business if the required quality level is not met, the present value of the net benefits for the next five years is \$1,400,000

identification information followed by the two-page executive summary will accomplish this objective.

The example presented in Table 2 is from a recent industrial engineering senior design project with the names of all organizations changed. All project reports use this general form for an executive summary. The reports must be printed in a journal style format using two columns per page and printing on both sides of the page. Although the executive summary format was developed for an industrial engineering project course, it is equally applicable to any technical project and is currently being presented in a technical writing course as an example of a good executive summary.

When these two pages are printed facing each other at the beginning of the report, the reader can view all summarized information without having to turn the page. (Obviously this arrangement will work only if the report is printed on both sides of the paper.) The reader can follow each recommendation back through the conclusions to the facts obtained, or can start at the beginning and trace how the factual information leads to a particular conclusion that, in turn, leads to a specific recommendation.

This form of the executive summary can also serve as a table of contents because the page numbers correspond to the location in the document where

that information is discussed. Therefore, the information presented in the “Factual Information” section should be in order of presentation in the report. Furthermore, the Facts, Conclusions, and Recommendations, *to the extent possible*, should be ordered in a logical sequence so that the first facts lead to the first conclusions and the first conclusions lead to the first recommendations. This structure will not only improve the readability of the executive summary, but it will also help the writer to organize the final report in a logical sequence.

This approach also identifies to the writer where the weak points are in the report. Recommendations without supporting conclusions or conclusions not based on facts should be reexamined. If no facts to support a conclusion can be found or there are no conclusions to support a recommendation, then that recommendation should not be included in the report. Using the executive summary in this manner can improve employees’ ability to communicate and may actually improve their ability to solve problems.   Ω

#### REFERENCES

- Burnett, Rebecca E. 1994. *Technical Communication*. 3rd ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co.
- Tichy, H. J. 1966. *Effective Writing for Engineers, Managers, Scientists*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.