



Doing More With Less

Maximize the potential of all employees, give them a voice and don't forget to train

By HANK GLAMANN

Few of us are adding full-time equivalents these days, so we are continually confronted with the question of how to do more with less.

How do we bolster the credibility of our product without adding staff?

One solution within our reach is fuller utilization of the people we have.

You can create a climate in your newsroom in which any member of the staff can ask any question about any story and expect to be heeded. To restrict who can ask about what is inefficient -- and a real waste of talent.

It is worthy of note, for example, that a copy editor at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution raised concerns about the content of a column that compared Olympic Park bombing suspect Richard Jewell to serial murderer Wayne Williams. The changes suggested by that editor were not made, and the column became a centerpiece of Jewell's libel lawsuit against the paper.

Some years ago, while working as the copy chief of a major metropolitan daily, I arrived at the office one Saturday afternoon and began proofing a big investigative piece that was set to run as Sunday's banner story. I marked some 100 proposed changes on the proofs and took them to the Sunday editor. His reaction: That there was no way those changes were going to be made. The story had been approved at the highest levels, he said, and the lawyers had gone over it with a fine-toothed comb. My job, I was told, was to make sure there were no typos. That is not acceptable, I said, and took the issue to a senior editor. The result: I sat down with the writer and went over the proposed changes, the vast majority of which were incorporated into the story. The result for the reader: A more polished story.

One good way to promote the collegiality that is necessary to foster an egalitarian newsroom environment is cross-training. If there are tensions between the city desk and the copy desk, for example, pick a person from each of those desks and have them switch jobs for a couple of weeks. Then do it again with two more people. Such programs can really work wonders. Empathy is a wonderful thing. And

don't forget that when people are cross-trained, you can plug them in to more places in your schedule, giving you greater flexibility.

Your people have to know that they are valued – by you, their senior editors – if they are to feel a sense of investment. So, make sure your people aren't pigeonholed. Your reward will be greater productivity and a greater product.

Another solution within our reach is better training within staffers' individual disciplines.

We expect changes in technology to render our operations more efficient, but we frequently fail to give our machines' operators the full knowledge they need to utilize the equipment at maximum efficiency. Sure, it's tough to cut people loose for extended training sessions when the paper still has to get out every day. But taking the quick-fix approach in the short term can lead to a long-term reduction in productivity.

One of the most basic tools you can give your people is the time to do their jobs.

When you paginated, did you add personnel on your copy desks? Pagination transfers all the functions of the back shop to the copy desk. But people are still performing those functions, not machines. Different people, to be sure, and different machines, but the same functions. If an editor's time is largely occupied with the demands of story coding, that editor has little time to be a journalist. The result can be a chronically demoralized staff -- and a product rife with error.

To be sure, we can and we should address many of these issues with measures that do not involve an increase in staff. But strategic increases are appropriate.

Such efforts to bolster credibility will indeed cut into our margins today. But what about tomorrow?

Hank Glamann is a co-founder of ACES, a journalism educator and newspaper consultant. E-mail him at hank.glamann@copydesk.org.

This article was originally written for The American Editor, magazine of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, and was published in July, 1999.