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The Colossal Mistakes of a PowerPoint Implementation: An Insider's Story

By Cliff Atkinson

What happens when good PowerPoint intentions go bad? A major professional services firm found out the hard way when they attempted to implement new PowerPoint branding standards following a merger. Although the reader who submitted the following anecdote asked that their name and organization remain anonymous, the story contains some powerful lessons that every organization should take into account when they implement PowerPoint change:

The story

"When Big Firm merged with Large Firm to create ColossalFirm a fortune was paid to branding consultants to design a new graphic identity and culture. I think they did a great job and on day one huge books of photos arrived in the office - one for every employee. The general reaction was 'What a waste of money', 'Look at this photo of a woman holding a leaf - what's the point?!'

"Pretty soon there was a website on the intranet with dozens of guidance documents on every aspect of graphics for the new firm. The guidelines on 'electronic communications' (i.e. PowerPoint) gave many examples of good slides and ideas for putting them together in ways that varied pace. Among other things it advised using high quality photographs from the corporate photo library (i.e. not corny clip art). It was all very good stuff.

"All of this was endorsed and supported by accompanying letters and emails from leaders of the firm, and cascaded through local leaders (albeit reluctantly in some cases). We were told how thousands of partners and staff all round the world had been interviewed to create a new identity.

The PowerPoint Problem

"The one thing that was missing was a PowerPoint template to at least get people using the right colors and logos. That took over a year to arrive, which was a huge mistake. When it did arrive it continued to be ignored. Appalling designs were rife throughout the firm, even those produced by the specialist graphics teams in some of the larger offices. People make presentations out of other presentations rather than starting from scratch, so old formats lingered on.

"Although the guidance on PowerPoint was excellent, and the corporate graphic identity was also superb, the vast majority of PowerPoint presentations did not improve as a result. Furthermore, the newly merged firm's expensive identity was not applied to the PowerPoint output even though this was probably the most important medium in use by the firm, easily eclipsing the impact of advertising and brochure designs.

The Reasons

"Why didn't we think getting PowerPoint right was important? It's like air. It's all around so much we don't notice it. For ColossalFirm I would speculate that if the question of PowerPoint impact had been put to senior partners they would have been very keen to get it right but (1) I doubt if it was put to them, and (2) even if it had been they wouldn't have had a clue about how to influence behavior like this. It's an ingrained habit reinforced by unhelpful beliefs and locked in place by the fact that most people are so time-starved they fear doing anything differently.

"One thing that's striking about this story is how excellent design work and huge expenditure were derailed by something as simple as failing to consider the way people use PowerPoint. In this case, some excellent guidance on designing presentations was provided to employees but it was almost

completely ignored."

Learning from Colossal Mistakes

How can your organization successfully implement a new PowerPoint system? Keep in mind five common mistakes organizations can make:

1. Deliver a new PowerPoint template a year after the re-branding has taken place, in order to lose momentum.
2. Launch it quietly, and don't provide follow up.
3. Create guidelines that are difficult to apply, so people end up ignoring them.
4. Do not establish measures of quality improvement.
5. Ignore the need for ongoing communication skills development and training.

As the Colossal story described, senior leadership needs to understand the strategic importance of getting PowerPoint right, and has to fully support the initiative every step of the way. Some boards of directors and CEO's are beginning to recognize the strategic importance of PowerPoint in the light of growing criticism and withering analysis.

If your organization is not quite there yet, you can start an educational campaign to prepare the way for successful change. Gather articles related to PowerPoint that point out the need for change -- there are quite a few in the media recently. Interview other executives who have implemented change, and find out what they have to say. Or consult with experienced agencies or management consultants to help you assess your situation, and map out a plan for the future.

In any case, the road to PowerPoint change is becoming better-traveled these days, and the more you're aware of the twists and turns along the way, the more successful your own change will be.

Cliff Atkinson is an independent management consultant who helps organizations solve problems related to PowerPoint. Visit his website at www.sociablemedia.com, read more articles and interviews [here](#), or email him [here](#).

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