

The Clarity Kit

Effective Communication for Municipalities



Analyzing Municipal Communications: the Clarity Audit™

Benefits of a Clarity Audit

Resources to Support Your Analysis

The Clarity Audit Tool

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Introduction

The Clarity Audit™

A Clarity Audit is a tool for gathering information about how an organization communicates, from the perspective of both management and unionized employees. It is not a test – it does not single out any one person. Instead, it gives everyone a chance to comment on the clarity and quality of the communications they encounter in the municipal workplace.

Doing the Clarity Audit helps clear language champions in municipal workplaces find out what is happening in the organization. Analyzing the results helps you plan how to move forward with a clear language initiative.

The Clarity Audit was developed by the Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators (CAMA) and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), with support from the Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program, Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC).

Seven Important Reasons to Do a Clarity Audit

1. A Clarity Audit builds support for the clear language initiative across the organization by consulting with people in a respectful way.
2. It makes the case for a clear language initiative by pointing to well-researched needs, spotting problems and identifying priorities.
3. It helps you find out what kinds of clear language projects and practices are already in place in the organization – activities that you can build on while avoiding duplication.
4. It helps you to identify champions – people you can recruit to promote the clear language initiative, build support, find resources, and act as mentors.
5. It gives you information about the 'lay of the land' – strategic information about what is going on in the organization that might help or hinder a clear language initiative.
6. It reveals how the need for clear language skills is linked to the need for other kinds of workplace training, such as literacy and foundational skills training.
7. It identifies the different interests and common concerns of management and unionized workers.

How to Carry Out a Clarity Audit

The Clarity Audit asks a series of questions that help you get a picture of what's happening in your organization around clear language. Filling out the questionnaire also helps people in your organization to become more aware of clarity issues.

There are a number of ways you can collect your information:

- Send out a broadcast email with the Clarity Audit as an attachment. Establish one central email address for collecting the results.
- Post the Clarity Audit on your intranet as an online survey.
- Pass out the Clarity Audit as a group exercise when you make clear language presentations.
- Organize focus groups throughout your organization with the Clarity Audit as the centrepiece.
- Interview key people one-on-one to make sure you get complete information for the audit.

Analyzing Your Information

Some of the information you gather from the Clarity Audit will be easy to analyze and use to build your strategy for a plain language initiative. For instance, if the

audit shows that your organization has no policy on clear language and no explicit support from the top, getting that support will be a priority.

You can summarize a lot of the information using the ranking system at the end of each section of the Audit. For instance, you can calculate how many respondents felt that your municipality is doing well at clear language training. If that percentage is low, you've identified another priority.

Some of the information can be used to help your joint clear language committee decide where to invest energy for the highest return. For instance, if most of the respondents say that report writing is a

big problem, then reports might be a good focus for a pilot project.

And finally, some of the information will help you move your initiative forward. Watch for people who put extra thought and energy into completing the Clarity Audit™. These are your potential allies and champions. Get in touch with them and find a way to get them involved!

Some Supports for Moving Forward

As you analyze the results of your audit and start setting priorities for action, here are a few links and resources to help you with specific issues.

If you need to work on ...

Try these resources

Clear language policy

View a sample clear language policy from the Ontario Literacy coalition at: www.on.literacy.ca/who/clear.htm.

Clear language style guide

View a very comprehensive clear language style guide for the U.S. Securities Exchange Commission at: www.sec.gov/pdf/handbook.pdf.

Measuring readability

Read about readability metrics on the Impact Information Web site at: www.impact-information.com.

Try the Reading Effectiveness Tool at: www.eastendliteracy.on.ca/clearlanguageanddesign/readingeffectivenesstool/

Focus group testing

Read: Goldsmith, Penny et al. *Reaching your Readers: A Fieldtesting Guide for Community Groups*. Vancouver: Legal Services Society of B.C., 1993. Available from clad@idirect.ca

Training

Take the Plain Train online tutorial at: www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/plaintrain/

View an international listing of professional clear language writers, editors and trainers at: www.plainlanguagenetwork.org/memberdirectory.html

Writing for your workplace

Read: Bailey, Edward P. *Plain English at Work*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Writing for your union

Read: *Making it Clear: Clear Language for Union Communications*, CLC, 1999

Writing email

Read: Booher, Dianna. *E-Writing*. New York: Pocket Books, 2001

Writing on the Web

Visit the Web site of usability guru Jakob Nielsen at: www.useit.com.

The Clarity Audit™ Tool: Find Out How Your Organization Communicates

Date of this audit: _____

Date set for next audit: _____

Department or division: _____

Name of respondent or coded reference: _____

Is your position:

- Labour
- Management
- Other

A. Questions About Clear Language Policy

1. The clear language approach has the explicit support of our Council. (Example: Council has passed a resolution.)

- Yes
- No

2. The clear language approach has the explicit support of our Union local. (Example: The Executive or membership has passed a resolution.)

- Yes
- No

3. Clear language and design are a part of our corporate communications policy.

- Yes
- No
- The policy is under review.
- We don't have a corporate communications policy.

Your rating for Section A:

Given your answers to the questions above, how would you rate your municipality on clear language policy?

- We are doing this well.
- We still need to work on this.
- We are not doing well at all.

B. Questions About Clear Language Practices

1. Our organization has a clear language style guide.

- Yes
- No
- We are in the process of drafting a style guide.

2. Our organization has formally adopted a tool for measuring reading difficulty, such as the Fry Readability Graph or the SMOG formula.

Yes No

If yes, what tool are you using?

3. Our organization has set guidelines to control the level of reading difficulty for different audiences.

Yes No

4. We use focus groups or field tests to test our communications with the reading audience before we publish important information.

Yes No

5. Our department has a budget for consulting with clear language experts.

Yes No

6. Our organization hires graphic and Web designers who have training and background in principles of clear design.

Yes No

7. Our organization celebrates clear language successes and honours employees who improve their communications skills.

Yes No

8. Our union locals celebrate clear language successes and honour members who improve their communications skills.

Never – clear language has not been on our agenda

Sometimes (please provide examples)

Always (please provide examples)

Your rating for Section B:

Given your answers to the questions above, how would you rate your municipality on clear language practices?

We are doing this well.

We still need to work on this.

We are not doing well at all.

C. Questions About Training

1. Clear language training is offered in our organization:
 Yearly
 Every few years
 We're still thinking about it

2. Clear language training in our organization is:
 Mandatory
 Optional
 N/A – no training offered

3. Managers and senior managers attend clear language trainings:
 Often
 Occasionally
 Only when it is mandatory
 N/A – no training offered

4. Do employees who hold leadership and communications positions in their union local attend union-sponsored clear language training?
 Yes, taking the training is part of taking on the job.
 Sometimes people get training but not always.
 We don't have the resources to send people for training.

5. If you have in-house graphic designers, do they receive any training in clear design principles?

Yes No

If yes, what form does the training take? (Please describe here.)

6. If you send your design projects out, do you look for designers who know clear design principles?

Yes No

7. Do Web designers receive specialized training on reading behaviour on the Web and its design implications?

Yes

No

We work with an outside group on our Web pages.

If yes, what form does the training take? (Please describe here.)

8. What concerns do people in your organization express about taking part in training to be better communicators? Check the common or frequent concerns.

- I do not have any concerns. I would welcome this type of training.
- I feel I would benefit from this type of training. But in my position, I feel I should already have good communication skills. I don't want to expose myself and endanger my career.
- I don't like to have my writing judged. It feels too much like school.
- I do not want to offend my co-workers by criticizing their writing.
- I do not have enough time to attend more training.
- Other (Please explain here.)

9. What training methods would work best in your organization? Check all of the methods that would be helpful.

- Lecture style.
- Workshops with exercises.
- Personal coaching and mentoring from someone trained and experienced in clear language techniques.
- Online training program.
- Supportive network of people interested in clear writing.

Your rating for Section C:

Given your answers to the questions above, how would you rate your municipality on clear language training?

- We are doing this well.
- We still need to work on this.
- We are not doing well at all.

D. Questions About Communicating With the Public

1. What concerns do you have about the clarity of communications between your department or division and the general public? Check all the concerns that you think apply. Use the blank space to express other concerns you have.

- Documents are:
 - too long
 - too wordy
 - repetitive
 - badly organized
 - too bureaucratic and formal
- Language is too difficult.
- It's hard to find the recommendations and action items.

- People use too much jargon.
- The drafting process takes too long.
- The approval process takes too long.
- Other (Please explain here.)

2. Which materials are most in need of improvement? (Examples: tax information, garbage pick-up information.) List two or three if you can.

Your rating for Section D:

Given your answers to the questions above, how would you rate your municipality on communicating with the public?

- We are doing this well.
- We still need to work on this.
- We are not doing well at all.

E. Questions About Communicating Within Your Workplace

1. What concerns do you have about the clarity of documents you read as a part of your job? Check all the concerns that you think apply. Use the blank space to express other concerns you have.
- Documents are:
 - too long
 - too wordy
 - repetitive
 - badly organized
 - too bureaucratic and formal
 - Language is too difficult.
 - It's hard to find the recommendations and action items.
 - People use too much jargon.
 - The drafting process takes too long.
 - The approval process takes too long.
 - Other (Please explain here.)

2. Which documents need more clarity? (Examples: briefing notes, reports, emails).
List two or three if you can.
-
-
-

Your rating for Section E:

Given your answers to the questions above, how would you rate your municipality on communicating within the workplace?

- We are doing this well.
 We still need to work on this.
 We are not doing well at all.

F. Questions About Employer/Employee Communications

1. Do you think your municipality could improve the quality of its communications with employees?
 Yes No

If yes, which messages need improvement the most? (Examples: health and safety notices, human resources policies, information about benefits, corporate training materials.) List two or three if you can.

2. Do members of your union local feel that the collective agreement is hard to understand?

- Yes No

3. Is your collective agreement negotiated in clear language?

- Yes

- No

- We have a letter of understanding to do this work over time.

4. Does your union local publish tip sheets and short articles that explain parts of the collective agreement in clear language?

- Yes No

5. Do you have a companion document that clarifies the collective agreement?

- Yes No

6. If you have a companion document, how was it made?

- Union project

- Joint union-management project

Your rating for Section F:

Given your answers to the questions above, how would you rate your municipality on communicating with its employees?

- We are doing this well.
- We still need to work on this.
- We are not doing well at all.

G. Questions About Your Organization's Use of Email

1. What concerns do you have about the way people use email in your workplace? Check all the concerns that you think apply to your workplace. Use the blank space to express other concerns you have.

- Emails are:
 - too long
 - too wordy
 - repetitive
 - badly organized
 - too informal
- It's hard to tell from the subject line what the email is about.
- People do not take enough time to check them over before sending.
- Sometimes important information is 'buried' and easily missed.
- Other (Please explain here.)

Your rating for Section G:

Given your answers to the questions above, how would you rate the quality of email communication within your workplace?

- We are doing this well.
- We still need to work on this.
- We are not doing well at all.

H. Questions About Your Organization's Intranet (Internal Web Site)

1. When people in your organization create documents, do they think about how the document will look online? For example, do they think about writing headings that would make logical links?

- Most think about this.
- Few think about this.

2. How many of the policies and procedures your department generates get uploaded to the intranet in PDF format? How many get revised and redesigned for online reading?

- Most of our policies and procedures are converted to PDF format and posted on the intranet.
- We redesign most of our policies and procedures for online reading.
- Most of our policies and procedures are still paper-based.

3. Does your organization regularly test the intranet for usability?

- Yes
- No

4. If yes, are actual employees involved as test subjects?

- Yes
- No

5. Is there a mechanism for inviting employee feedback on the intranet?

- Yes
- No

If yes, what happens to this feedback? (Please describe here):

6. From your point of view, what are the strengths and weaknesses of your organization's intranet?

Your rating for Section H:

Given your answers to the questions above, how would you rate the quality of your organization's intranet communications?

- We are doing this well.
- We still need to work on this.
- We are not doing well at all.

I. Questions About Your Organization's Web Site

1. Does your organization regularly test your Web site for usability?

- Yes
- No

2. If yes, are actual members of the public involved as test subjects?

- Yes
- No

3. Is there a mechanism for inviting public and employee feedback on your Web site?

Yes No

If yes, what happens to this feedback? (Please describe here):

4. Has your Web site been reviewed and certified for accessibility to those with physical and visual impairments?

Yes No

5. Does your site prominently display messages on how to obtain essential information:

- in translation?
- by voice rather than print?
- by TTY or video rather than voice?

6. From your point of view, what are the strengths and weaknesses of your organization's Web site?

Your rating for Section I:

Given your answers to the questions above, how would you rate the quality of your organization's Web site?

- We are doing this well.
- We still need to work on this.
- We are not doing well at all.

J. Questions About People's Concerns

1. What concerns do people in your organization express about using clear language in your workplace? Check the common or frequent concerns.

- Writing in clear language takes too long.
- My manager or supervisor will just send it back as 'unprofessional' writing.
- Simplifying my language may insult the reader's intelligence.
- I write about specialized subjects and I have to use technical terms.
- I work with legal documents. If I change the language, it might not stand up in court.
- This is not the way we were taught to write in school.
- It will take too much time and resources for everyone to learn this skill.
- Our municipality has a skilled communications department. Why do we need to learn about clear language?
- Other (Please explain here.)

K. Would You Like to be Involved?

1. If our organization undertakes a clear language initiative, would you be interested in taking additional training as a clear language leader or 'champion'? We are looking for people at all levels of the organization who are enthusiastic about clear language.

Yes No

If you answered yes, please give us your contact information:

Name

Position

Department

Email

Phone

2. What skills, experience, and interests do you feel you could bring to a clear language initiative in your workplace?
-
-

Thank you for doing the Clarity Audit! Stay tuned for the results.

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- Alberta Association for Adult Literacy, Literacy Audit Tool, developed with support from the National Literacy Secretariat, 1998
 - Canadian Union of Public Employees, *Spreading the Word: A Literacy Advocate's Kit*, March 2005.
 - Folinsbee, Sue, *A Guide for Planning and Conducting an Organizational Needs Assessment for Municipal Workplace Literacy Programs*, CAMA, 2002.

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