



## BEING LITERATE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

BY BILL BANCROFT

I recently learned that I'm illiterate in 21st-century terms, and likely, so are you. I mean no disrespect here. I know you are sophisticated in expressing yourself. But, it's no longer enough to put words to paper or computer. To remain effective, individuals, companies, organizations, and communities must become fluent in a new way of communicating—or risk being left behind.

People throughout the professional world are learning they must combine images, sounds, and words with alacrity to communicate ideas, tell stories, design products, advertise services, hold meetings, explain issues, teach concepts, and discuss direction. Computers themselves are a dimension of the new language, enabling the crafting of messages like never before. But this transformation goes well beyond technology; it's about overhauling the way we learn and run our organizations.

### The New Literacy

According to speakers at a meeting of "who's who" experts held by the New Media Consortium in early 2005, 21st-century literacy encompasses these characteristics (for a full report, go to [www.nmc.org/projects/literacy/index.shtml](http://www.nmc.org/projects/literacy/index.shtml)):

- **It's Multimodal.** The integration of different media creates layers of meaning not accessible by traditional language skills. Young people are adept at using the new literacy, even prefer it.
- **It Means Learning a New Grammar with Its Own Rules of Construction.** The grammar is intuitive to young people; the rest of us need training. "Digital natives" easily grasp how to combine all the elements to enhance communication.
- **It Lends Itself to Interactive**

**Communication.** Much more than words alone, people respond and talk through ideas and concepts.

- **It Provokes Emotional Responses.** The combination of words, pictures, and sound hooks people, often more profoundly than with traditional means.

Some organizations are zooming ahead in their use of the new literacy.

- **At Hewlett-Packard** internal consultants use elements of 21st-century literacy to design and lead virtual meetings. Believe me, these gatherings aren't your typical conference calls!
- **At Yahoo** software product designers are using quick-draw graphic techniques to design software. The images resonate all the way to top management.
- **At a training company** course developers are revamping their offerings, with the knowledge that trainees in their early 20s can no longer be reached with methods that worked only a year or two ago.
- **At a private Dallas high school** teachers are revising their lectures, using new technology to teach history, English, and other subjects.

### What Do You Need to Excel?

So, what does your organization have to be good at to claim it is 21st-century literate? It's a broader list than you might think, operating on several levels (much of this list comes from leading thinkers in this area, including David Sibbet, founder of the Grove Consultants International, and Kristina Hooper Woolsey, a consultant and former head of Apple Computer's think tank).

- **The Ability to Blend Words, Images, and Sounds to Tell a Story and Deliver a Message.** That means having quick-draw graphic capabili-

ties, writing in several dimensions, using sound creatively, and knowing when to use which elements and how to synthesize them all using a computer. Everyone has to be facile in making and understanding non-text documents.

- **The Ability to Listen Deeply and Learn with Your Whole Being, Using Multiple Senses.** This capability also includes combining learning, intelligence, and entertainment.
- **The Ability to Talk About Talking (as in Communication) and to Talk in Metaphors.**
- **The Ability to Understand That Any Kind of Media Is in and of Itself a Message.** PowerPoint pushes information. Face-to-face implies connection.

To make the most of what 21st-century literacy offers, individuals and organizations alike must value novel ideas and new perspectives, even if they do not always adopt them. Companies must gain respect for non-hierarchical interconnections. Even in a hierarchy, professionals must make connections with colleagues across power boundaries on an ad hoc basis for particular projects.

Likewise, the organization's internal structure must change often to remain fluid and responsive.

Several critical uncertainties will affect how 21st-century literacy spreads. Credit Erik Smith at the Global Business Network for helping to surface the following examples:

- **International Technology Standards.** Where will they go—if anywhere at all—and how will they impact the new literacy?
- **Intellectual Property Rights.** Will the new communication be protected and how much?
- **Intergenerational Relationships.** Will kids teach their parents and grandparents how to be literate? Or will

they ignore the old fogies and shut them out as they build their world? *Deeper Understanding of Cognitive Learning*. What about memory chip implants into our brains? A far out idea to be sure! But other advances in

the cognitive area may emerge.

In sum, 21st-century literacy is upon us, with its opportunities and drawbacks. How are you and your organization going to become fluent? ■

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