

Sample written exam and evaluation guidelines

Sample written exam

This short sample examination contains the kinds of questions you will find on the actual accreditation examination. Answer the sample examination in one sitting and adhere to the suggested time guidelines at the beginning of each part. Complete the exam to the best of your ability. **Do not exceed the time limit of two hours.** When you're finished, compare your answers with the evaluation guidelines and sample answers that follow the exam. Use the guidelines to determine your weak areas and review related topics through reading, workshops, seminars, conferences or discussions with a mentor.

Part 1—General Knowledge (*budget about 50 minutes*)

Essay

1. Your company, Reliable Cleaning Services, offers janitorial and cleaning services to offices, hotels, schools and large institutions. Services include cleaning and maintenance of carpets, floors and windows, as well as other miscellaneous services. The headquarters is located in Ribbon City, and Reliable has 14 branch offices in major centers across the country. You just learned the company has won a contract from Hobnob Hotels, a large national hotel chain, to clean and refurbish its 50 hotels. Reliable is having a good year and growing fast, with 15 new major clients added this year. It now has more than 200 major clients. The contract is worth US\$3 million in revenue per year for three years. This is the largest partnership agreement your company has made in its history. Your regional manager, Oscar Stone, and your president, Eleanor Roby, will visit Hobnob's head office in Edison City next week to sign the deal with George Brooks, vice president of operations at Hobnob.
 - A. Prepare a news release for the Ribbon City media to announce the contract OR write a story about the contract for publication in your employee newsletter, *Cleaning Up*.
 - B. List three ways you would use (distribute) the news release to support the announcement, and list three other communication tactics or activities you might recommend to support the signing.
2. The local media have just announced that a senior manager at your company has been indicted for bribing local elected officials to change zoning bylaws that are restricting construction of a new manufacturing facility. The company president says he has been advised by the company attorney to "not say anything to employees." You've arranged to meet with the president to discuss the issue further. What are your talking points for the meeting and what will you recommend?

Short answer (one to two paragraphs)

3. Discuss how e-mail and the use of electronic communication has affected the workplace and the practice of organizational communication. State the pros and cons.
4. Opinion surveys and focus groups are two commonly used research tools. In what circumstances would you recommend an opinion survey? In what circumstances would you recommend a focus group? Give two examples of when (reasons or particular topics of research for which) you would use each of these tools.
5. List three principles of good media relations.
6. List the main steps in communication planning.
7. Studies show that the immediate supervisor is employees' preferred source of information in an organization. How does this affect your planning for employee communication?

Part 2—Case Study (*budget about 50 minutes*)

Read the scenario below and then answer the four essay questions.

You are the director of communication for TechWise, an electronics component manufacturer that has 3,000 employees at two locations in your city—the head office (and main location) on Piper Road and a second plant at Airdel Drive, about three miles apart. Many of your customers were victims of the downturn in the high tech industries and your sales have fallen by 35 percent over the past three years. Two major contracts have just expired and will not be renewed.

The business development group is not optimistic about growth opportunities in the near future. They predict no significant recovery in the market for at least a year from now. Your executive committee has made the unhappy decision to close the Airdel Drive facility and consolidate production in the main facility at Piper Road. This will cut 400 manufacturing jobs and 25 managerial jobs in total. It is not just people at the Airdel location who will lose jobs—the layoffs will affect people at both plants due to seniority and union bumping rights and the company's decisions regarding which managers are most required for the future. Employees have seen the downturn in production and the plants are full of rumors about layoffs.

Your company has never had a major permanent layoff—only minor periods of temporary layoffs—in its 20-year history. The workforce is represented by the National Tech Workers Union, and the relationship with the union is a bit tenuous as you are headed into collective agreement talks six months from now. TechWise is a major employer in your city, and is generally well-regarded because of its outstanding support of local activities, including the city's annual fundraising campaign for the Allied Fund, a community charity that coordinates donations to 30 local agencies. Your president, Ellie Slaser, is an engineer and a high-profile leader in the community. She is nervous dealing with the media. Later today, you are scheduled to meet with Ellie to outline how this decision should be handled.

Answer the following essay questions:

1. Analyze the situation, identifying the business problem/opportunity, stakeholders and any constraints.
2. How will you go about developing a solution? (Outline, for example, any additional information you want and how you will obtain it, the approval process you will follow and any special considerations or recommendations.)
3. Outline the communication approach you recommend. (Include such aspects as objectives, strategies, messages and tactics).
4. How will you evaluate the success of the communication program?

Part 3—Philosophy and Ethics of Organizational Communications (*budget about 20 minutes*)

Essay (three to six paragraphs)

1. You have been appointed manager of communication for ZRT Ltd., the first time any such position has been created at this company that manufactures and sells industrial products. The company has three manufacturing and 25 sales offices across the country. The president, appointed only six months ago, has decided the company needs a communication function. Identify and discuss three things you will do to establish credibility for yourself and the communication profession within your new organization.

Short Answer (one paragraph)

2. You are an account executive for a successful public relations firm in a major city. You receive a call from Fred Jones, vice president of marketing at Wearton Inc., a leading manufacturer of casual clothes for teenagers. He invites you to pitch on the Wearton account. You know that your agency is presently engaged by Apparel Ltd., Wearton's main competitor. How will you respond and why?
3. A reporter calls you to ask if the senior manager who left your company yesterday quit or was fired. How will you respond and why?

Evaluation guidelines for the written exam

Part 1

1.A. Whether you prepare the news release or the newsletter article, it is important to write clearly, correctly and accurately. Spelling and grammatical errors will be penalized. The information should be well-organized. Writing style should be appropriate to the option selected.

For the news release, standards of proper newswriting apply, and you should address the five W's (who, what, when, where and why). You should include a headline and dateline (city and date). The lead should state the key facts (what has happened, names of the parties, size and nature of the contract). Additional information follows in the later statements. You may include a quotation from your president, but it will be a relationship-builder if you also include a quotation from the hotel's representative – this will be a joint news release that will require approval by both parties. (Note that media are often skeptical that such quotations have been manufactured so use this device selectively. Ensure quotations have been approved by the spokesperson and that they are key messages that the spokesperson will repeat if interviewed.) Finish up with the corporate boilerplate statements about the companies.

If you choose the newsletter option, employees are your audience. Unlike the news release, there is more leeway to include positive statements about the company. The focus of the information might be more oriented to how this contract was won and how it will impact the company and its employees.

1.B. Ways to use the news release might include:

- Distribute the news release and photo to local news media in Ribbon City and the city where Hobnob is headquartered.
- Distribute the news release to trade publications related to your industry and to the hotel industry.
- Distribute release to key customers, prospects and industry associations.
- Distribute to managers at all your locations.
- Post the news release on bulletin boards in your plant/offices.
- Post the news release to your web site.

Other activities to support the signing might include:

- Make the signing into an interesting photo opportunity and arrange a photographer.
- Invite media and turn it into a news conference.
- Offer interviews to news and trade media.
- Create a celebration or recognition for the employees involved in this achievement.
- Coordinate the effort with the Hobnob communicators to avoid duplication of effort and to encourage them to use the story in their publications, on their web site and with their media contacts.

2. You should help the president understand that, regardless of the truth, the newspaper story will result in rumors, fear and even panic among employees and will erode general business confidence. As a communicator, you must be proactive

and recommend action. A failure to make a statement will generate uncertainty, and “no comment” is usually interpreted as “guilty.” You should recommend preparing a statement that should be reviewed by the company lawyer before release. It may be brief, and should state that the company is cooperating with the investigation and that the company cannot comment further as it is a legal matter. Does the president plan to step aside while this issue is unfolding? If so, you will need to quickly establish a relationship with the interim president to assist in issuing reassurance to employees that the business continues as usual.

3. The impact of e-mail and electronic communication has been both positive and negative. It has greatly improved the timeliness of communication. It has improved the ability to communicate quickly and easily with large numbers of people in multiple locations worldwide. The use of webinars (web seminars) can greatly facilitate training. On the negative side, employees are now overwhelmed with messages (spam) that take their time and make it difficult to get your messages through to them.
4. An opinion survey involves gathering answers to set questions from the target audience. The survey may be conducted by telephone, written form, through an interactive web site, or by contacting people in a shopping mall or on the street. The sample size may vary but must be large enough to be statistically reliable. Opinion surveys are often used to determine preference, for example, for one political party over another. Opinion surveys could also be used by organizations to test employee satisfaction or customer satisfaction. A focus group is a small group (6–12) assembled to gather detailed qualitative input from participants. It is often used to get reaction to a proposed new ad campaign or theme before it is finalized, or it could be used to test product concepts or prototypes.
5. Some principles of good media relations might include:
 - Recognize that reporters are people doing a high pressure job; they need to get a story and meet tight deadlines.
 - Be accessible; return calls promptly.
 - Ask what the deadline is, and get back to the reporter with lots of time to spare with whatever information is available.
 - Give clear, factual, complete information.
 - Never say “no comment.”
 - Don’t speculate.
 - Build relationships and credibility by providing story ideas, backgrounders, plant tours or other opportunities during “non-crisis” times.
 - Find interesting photo or video opportunities that help communicate the story.
 - Make sure your story pitches have news value; don’t issue news releases that are just product promotion.
 - Help your spokespeople by providing them with good media relations training; help them know and be able to deliver their key messages succinctly and well.

6. Main steps in communication planning:
 - Define the need/opportunity; establish business objectives.
 - Establish communication objectives that are directly linked to the business objectives.
 - Conduct research, gather information.
 - Define audiences, stakeholders.
 - Develop strategy and tactics to reach audiences.
 - Establish budget and timelines.
 - Implement.
 - Evaluate use feedback for continuous improvement.

7. Because employees look to immediate supervisors for information, it is important to empower the supervisors and managers in your organization with the information they need. Communicators can support this by raising awareness of this fact among managers/supervisors and by encouraging or providing training for them in effective communication, with emphasis on face-to-face communication being the most effective. You may want to provide information first to managers before general announcements are made. For major announcements or new programs, managers should be equipped in advance with additional background and a list of anticipated questions and answers so they can be prepared to answer employee questions. Also, senior executives can meet regularly with managers/supervisors to provide information and insight that helps them communicate those messages to employees. At the same time, senior management should ensure that managers and supervisors know it is their responsibility to provide the appropriate information to employees.

Part 2

1. Several business factors require that the company take action to protect its future. Sales have declined 35 percent over the past three years, major contracts will not be renewed and the outlook for recovery does not look good in the near future. The company has decided to close the Airdel Drive facility and consolidate production in the main facility at Piper Road. The move will result in the loss of 400 manufacturing and 25 managerial jobs. The company's objective is to announce and implement this move as smoothly as possible, minimizing the impact on affected employees, retaining the commitment of remaining employees and maintaining support in the community. Key audiences are employees, union officials, local city officials and media, but this kind of announcement also affects suppliers and customers. If this is a public company, shareholders must be advised and there are strict legal requirements about how this should be done.

2. I will work with management and human resources to determine the facts and develop a program to communicate with the various audiences. If we announce a layoff and it takes weeks or months to implement, the entire workforce goes

through a period of uncertainty that affects productivity. We will lose good people who might readily find jobs elsewhere. If this approach must be taken, affected employees must be identified and told as quickly as possible. Ideally, we can have complete information at the time of the layoffs announcement so that affected individuals can be informed that day and know the details of their severance. The company should be as generous as possible toward affected employees, offering early retirements, the best severance arrangements it can afford and adjustment programs such as relocation counseling to help employees find new jobs. Preparing these packages for 425 people is a massive task, but it needs to be done as quickly as possible—this is the key element of the layoff announcement. As the employee packages are prepared, I will work on a plan to ensure all audiences are informed in sequence. I will draft letters and announcements. Legal counsel should review the plan and materials to ensure we are meeting all legal requirements. Timing of the announcement is important—do not choose a Friday afternoon or a day near a holiday. As a courtesy, it is wise to inform the union officials immediately before employees receive the information. Local government officials (Department of Labor, for example) also should receive notice so that they are prepared for calls from media or constituents.

3. Plan Outline:

Objectives:

- Communicate the announcement to target audiences to facilitate a smooth, quick transition.
- Following the announcement, employees and other stakeholders will feel they have been dealt with fairly and honestly.

Strategies:

- Inform managers, supervisors and employees first before external audiences.
- Attribute the layoff to business conditions; never blame employees or customers (aim for understanding, don't expect employees to like the bad news).
- Communicate honestly about the situation.
- Proactively provide the announcement and explanation to the media immediately after informing employees so the media have the facts and rationale.
- Inform suppliers and customers to reassure them.

Messages:

- Consolidating our operations at Piper Road is a business decision based on economics.

- We are helping affected employees with early retirements, severance packages and job search counseling to help them find new jobs.
- Our business is currently in a downturn, but this consolidation will keep us viable until there is a market recovery down the road.

Tactics:

- Critical path of coordinated announcements in sequence.
- Meeting with all managers to outline plan, provide announcement and Q&A.
- Letter and meeting with union officials.
- General announcement to employees.
- Letter delivered by courier to local government (Department of Labor) officials.
- Announcement to employees. (This may be one all-employee meeting with an announcement by the president. If it is a series of separate, smaller meetings, Airdel facility employees should be informed first. The president should make the announcement at Airdel with video linkup to the other facility.)
- Media training/coaching to prepare president.
- News release to local media, trade media contacts; president should expect to be in demand for media calls or interviews immediately following.
- Notice to suppliers and customers to reassure them.
- Phone line or e-mail address to answer questions.
- Regular updates for employees (e-mails, posted bulletins, newsletter articles, or town hall meetings).

4. Evaluation:

Success of this program will be determined by management's assessment of a smooth transition that minimizes any disruption to the business. Other indicators might include:

- Number of calls to hotline, type of comments received.
- Feedback from managers about employee reaction.
- Affected employees do not complain to media/government.
- High retention rate of remaining employees with no deterioration of performance or attendance.
- Post-event employee survey among remaining employees indicates they feel they have been dealt with fairly and honestly, and it indicates that management maintained credibility.
- Continuing stable or positive relationship with union.
- Media coverage. (Expect it to be negative the day of the announcement, but successful implementation helps the story)

disappear quickly.) Are management's key messages included in the story so that the community can understand the situation?

Part 3

1. As the first manager of communications for ZRT Ltd., I realize that the organization has no experience with the communication function. First, it will be important to define the role and responsibilities for communication. This needs to be done together with the president. Because he has created this position, he obviously is very supportive of and interested in communication. He is also new in his position and that may present some challenges, as he may still be learning and gaining acceptance. I will discuss his objectives for the organization and together we will determine where communication can best add value. I will ensure that communication planning is aligned with the business objectives. What challenges do my president face in the organization? Does he have a change agenda? What are the most pressing communication needs? What resources are available? What are his expectations? I will ask for a regular meeting to ensure we are tracking positively on these objectives.

This is a new company for me, and I will need to make a concerted effort to learn the business quickly. I will be proactive in organizing meetings or lunches with other senior executives to learn about their areas of responsibility. I will demonstrate interest and strive to understand as many aspects of the business as possible. A newcomer needs to learn the terminology and the culture of the organization. I will take every opportunity to tour the various facilities and meet the management and employees. I will attend any upcoming sales meetings, employee meetings or management meetings where I can learn about issues in the business and meet the staff. I will ask for the president's advice on how best to proceed and which area is the highest priority. If possible, I would like to accompany a salesperson on some sales calls to understand that process and meet some customers.

I will review any existing information—news clippings, promotional materials, employee newsletters, etc.—and assess the current situation. I will identify other information I need to develop communication programming. For example, do we need to conduct an employee survey or customer survey to take stock of the current situation and set baseline marks for future improvement?

I will build credibility internally by setting realistic expectations and achieving success on my initial projects. Sound evaluation of these projects will provide me with a tool to make others aware of my capabilities and the power of the communication function to add value to the organization.

2. When I receive a call from Wearton to pitch on their account, I will thank Mr. Jones for inviting us to participate and suggest that the head of our agency would be the best person to discuss this with him. I will promise to have the agency head call him back promptly. Knowing that our agency currently represents Apparel Inc.,

Wearnton's main competitor, representing Wearnton would be a direct conflict of interest. I will inform the senior manager of the agency that I received this call and determine what further action to take. If our agency has a separate arm or subsidiary (many large agencies have formed subsidiaries to handle this type of situation), perhaps that group can pitch on the account. If not, the agency cannot represent both companies and we would need to turn down this pitch opportunity. Alternatively, we can inform both parties and, with their written agreement, represent both clients. In practice, such an arrangement is unlikely to be accepted unless the assignments are for completely different product lines or a special project.

3. Releasing confidential personal information about an employee is a breach of the IABC Code of Ethics. It is also against most organizational policies and, in some jurisdictions, it is a violation of privacy laws. If a reporter calls seeking information about any employee, my response will be, "As a matter of policy, we will not provide information about any employee." I will make human resources (and perhaps the switchboard also) aware that I received this inquiry because a diligent reporter will most likely call that department next.
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