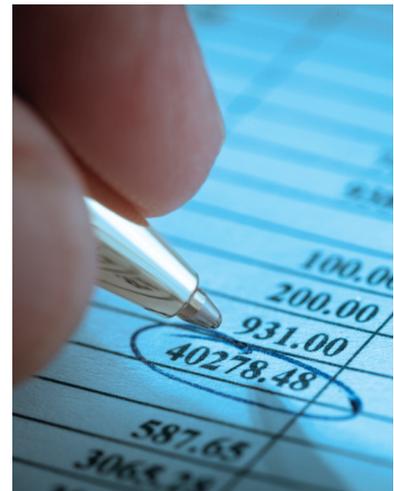# MISTAKES ARE NATURAL, BUT THEY NEEDN'T BE INEVITABLE

Catherine de Salvo of Scott Bradbury analyses the impact of mistakes on organisations and how accuracy training saves money and boosts productivity

Why do people make clerical mistakes? Have you ever received a letter which was incorrectly addressed? Or queried an amount on a statement or had the wrong item sent to you in an order? Every day people are processing information. And sometimes they get it wrong. About 3% of all manual data transactions contain an error.

we all make mistakes

People make mistakes with reading, checking and transferring information because they are human, not because they are careless. And what's more, we all make mistakes. If you've ever totalled a column of figures and got an answer which doesn't tally with the amount you're expecting you'll know how time consuming it is to go back over your work to find and correct the mistake. And you'll understand that you didn't set out to make a mistake in the first place!

Ask your operational team leaders for examples of some of the clerical errors and productivity issues they encounter every day, and you'll quickly get an idea of how much time is spent chasing and correcting errors.

The person in the telecommunications company who billed a customer £2003 instead of £20.03 and the person in the re-insurance company who paid out ten times the claim weren't deliberately setting out to make a mistake. So simply asking people to be more careful and not make mistakes isn't going to work!

There are two key underlying reasons why we all make mistakes with data. The first is to do with the way the eye works when it scans across a policy number or account reference or any other data. The eye cannot read smoothly from left to right. Instead it jerks across – and sometimes it will even jerk backwards and forwards across

the data. These jerks are called 'fixations' and can be readily observed if you ask someone to look slowly from one side of a room to the other, without moving their head.

Over millions of years the human eye has developed to serve the needs of man but it was never designed to transfer account details or references from one source to another! Where there are joins or gaps in the fixations the person processing the data is more prone to repeat or omit digits. And that's when an error can occur.

the brain 'sees' what it wants to see

The other key reason why people make mistakes with data is related to the way we are all taught to read. We read words by recognising shapes or combinations of letters. This is

essential if we are to read fluently but it's counterproductive when it comes to reading data, for example a shape like 699669 can become 699699.

So if we know people make these kinds of mistakes, why don't people check their work and spot the errors? The problem is that the eye – or rather the brain – 'sees' what it wants to see. If you're checking it's easy to miss the errors because the brain automatically corrects them for you. By changing the mindset to one of 'there's an error here somewhere and I'm going to find it' makes it much more likely that mistakes will be found. And making people more responsible for the accuracy of their original work will be more effective than adding extra tiers of checking procedures.

accuracy is a distinct skill...it can be learned

There is a tendency to believe that there is nothing you can do about people's accuracy skills. But accuracy is a distinct skill and like any other it can be learned. By teaching people techniques to overcome the natural barriers to accuracy, people who work with data can usually reduce their error rate by around 50% and increase their processing speed by around 7%.

Training people to work quickly and accurately has an immediate impact on productivity and costs. Let's look first at productivity gains: an average error rate of 3% means that 3% of the time people are inputting the wrong information. It takes another 3% of the working day to key in the correct data. So that's 6% of the working day – or to put it another way, 6% of your salary bill! But that's not all. Before you can re-key the correct information you have to locate the original error and find out what went wrong. That can double the amount of time wasted. It's not uncommon to find organisations wasting 10-12% of their administration salary costs on making, finding and correcting errors. On top of that, having to sort out mistakes and re-do work that should have already been completed is hardly motivating, so mistakes damage team morale too. If people get things right first time, every time, efficiency and productivity soar and motivation increases.

Savings are also made directly through making fewer errors. The wrong product despatch, the incorrect invoice or the incomplete address lead not only to wasted time but also to direct costs. Compensation payments, lost revenue and incorrect billing impact directly on the bottom line.

efficiency and productivity soar

Accuracy skills training enables people to learn how to overcome the natural barriers to accuracy and motivates them to get it right first time, every time. By reducing errors by 50% and increasing processing speed by 7% the training pays for itself many times over. Its proven return on investment makes it a very attractive proposition – it's a 'no brainer'!

Organisations currently using 'Developing an Eye for Accuracy' include banks, insurance companies, wealth management organisations, the NHS, local and national government, pharmaceutical companies, healthcare, transport, housing and technology companies.

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