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Has PowerPoint Had Its Day?

A Bad Tool or A Misused One?

Like the comedian Rodney Dangerfield, it seems that PowerPoint "don't get no respect" these days. From academics to business executives, it seems as if no one has anything good to say about the program. Yet by one estimate there are over 30 million PowerPoint presentations being given *each day* worldwide. Surely, they can't all be a waste of time.

There are certainly some powerful advocates for eliminating PowerPoint. Both Jeff Bezos of Amazon and Jack Dorsey of Twitter have banned its use in meetings in favor of written documents. Bezos has staff read a written briefing paper at the start of a meeting while Dorsey uses a group session to edit a Google doc. Tony Robbins doesn't use PowerPoint; his presentations revolve around fill-in-the-blank workbooks.

Academics like Edward Tufte have pointed out the weaknesses of PowerPoint as a medium for conveying technical information. Tufte identifies the need to both identify the presenter's story and to determine the presenter's credibility, neither of which can be done without more data than can be conveyed in a PowerPoint Slide.

Even the military has weighed in on poor PowerPoint. Brigadier General H.R. McMaster banned PowerPoint when he led an offensive in Tal Afar, Iraq, in 2005. Said General McMaster, "It's dangerous because it can create the illusion of understanding and the illusion of control. Some problems in the world are not bullet-izable." In Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, the US and NATO force commander, when confronted with a convoluted PowerPoint slide is said to have remarked, "When we understand that slide, we'll have won the war."

With all this negativity, why are we still using PowerPoint. Is it a fad that has had its day or are we not make the best use of a potential tool?

What Do the Experts Say?

Edward Tufte's issues with PowerPoint stem from his work in the visual display of information. His concern is with content. Other researchers have focused on PowerPoint's inability to convey that content to the listener and the news is not good.

John Sweller, developer of Cognitive Load Theory demonstrated in 2007 that showing audiences the same words being spoken as is common in PowerPoint presentations reduces rather than increases comprehension.

In a 2017 Harvard study, online audiences rated PowerPoint as no better than verbal presentations with no visual aids. One Princeton study showed that students retained more when they hand wrote rather than typed notes, suggesting that the practice of handing out copies of slides reduces retention by reducing note taking. Experiments by Robert Cialdini, an expert in persuasion, suggests that PowerPoint can distort decision making.

Rethinking PowerPoint

The problem, however, may not be with PowerPoint per se but rather with its misuse. The research suggests several key points that are often overlooked:

- PowerPoint is not a decision-making tool. It oversimplifies problems, obscures vital data, and skews decision making. Tufte uses the example of the PowerPoint presentation used by NASA engineers prior to the Challenger disaster and how it led to the decision to launch.
- PowerPoint has limited use as an instructional tool. It reduces retention through cognitive overload and discouraging note taking.
- PowerPoint as used by many speakers is not an effective presentation tool. Too often it is of more use to the speaker as an outline than to the audience.

Does this mean that PowerPoint has outlived its usefulness? Not necessarily. Garr Reynolds in his book [Presentation Zen](#) pioneered a minimalist approach that stressed simplicity in slide development and in presentation. He advocates the use of key graphic design principles that avoid excessive text in favor of images. This places more work on the speaker

in terms of preparation and rehearsal but creates a memorable presentation.

Edward Tufte stresses the importance of providing technical data in handouts. This ensures that the audience has all the necessary background data about the subject under discussion. Tufte does use slides in his presentation, but they are limited to examples only and he requests the audience complete directed readings immediately prior to his presentations.

Maximizing PowerPoint

If we consider the negativity about PowerPoint as indicators not of problems but as pitfalls to avoid, PowerPoint could be a very productive tool under the right circumstances.

- Remember that your focus is the audience. What are you trying to achieve and what is the best way to engage your audience?
- Avoid using PowerPoint for meetings and as a decision-making tool. Instead, consider the use of briefing papers or group work.
- Provide handouts on background data rather than summarizing on a complicated slide.
- Forget about bullet lists. Move them and informational text to your notes page. They are useful to you but not to the audience.
- Follow the first adage of professional speakers: if they're reading your slides, they're not listening to you.
- Follow the second adage of professional speakers: if they can get all the information from your slides, why do they need you? Simplified slides trigger ideas and encourage note taking. 