
More than Just Pieces of Paper: The Role of Genres in Professional Employee/Employer Relationships

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Overview

As a college student, I can already say that I have worked not only one, but multiple part-time jobs. No matter the employer or business, there was always the similar routine upon starting employment: filling out the tedious paperwork, meeting your new co-workers, and becoming familiar with the expectations of the workplace and employers. There are millions of workers everywhere on the hierarchy scale from part-time employees to CEO's. The question is how exactly are those employee/employer relationships formed through the various handbooks, reports, and revenue sheets? There are many components that go into forming committed professional relationships that are not only expressed verbally, but also through various written texts.

When it comes to the number of employees being hired on the weekly, daily, and even hourly basis among various companies, there is a great reliance on the contracts, agreements, reports, and similar documents. These texts form a category of genres that are exchanged between the numerous levels of the workers' hierarchy, from employees to the main employers and heads of companies. In *Writing Genres*, Amy Devitt "return[s] to [John] Swales' basic insight, that genres function within groups to fulfill their communicative goals"(50), mainly explaining that texts aid in communication and exchanging information. These physical papers or electronic communications, along with agreements, statements and understandings, are the types of genres common in many workplaces. As Devitt states, "these genres construct a group of people and [form] one of the primary components of a discourse community to further its aim" (*Writing Genres* 37). This

statement explains the function of these genres, and defines that the members share a common goal, which is the main aspect of a discourse community. Some are convinced that genres are specific to certain occupations, agreements are implied in documents and contracts in various company positions, and obligations and demands are expected not only from the workers but also

from the company (Devitt; Karlsson; Tekleab and Taylor; Shore and Shapiro). There is already a wealth of information on genre theory and the understanding of terms and obligations in contracts as well as employee-organization relationships. I propose to highlight the dependence on these genres in terms of their importance in professional relationships among workers.

Review of Literature

The central idea is that genres are necessary and beneficial to a community, particularly occupations (Devitt; Devitt, Bawarshi, and Reiff; Karlsson). Devitt talks about the technical language that partially defines who is and isn't part of a community. Language use reflects members' knowledge of specific words and phrases. In *Writing Genres*, Devitt highlights the importance of these texts in accordance to grouping members together towards the community's overall objectives. She states that the genres "help people achieve their goals, and to encourage people to act in certain ways" (49). This means that these texts set standards and expectations for the members that incorporate them into their job. Devitt also considers how genres are not only tools, but also a somewhat social instrument, writing, "People construct genres, but genres construct people"(49). These texts that get exchanged both affect and reflect how people react and respond to them. Karlsson also incorporates this social aspect by mentioning how in various occupations there are genres created by upper-level members and then passed down to employees. She provides an example of a carpenter filling out forms daily and providing documentation that wasn't deemed useful for the intended work. One of the workers Karlsson interviewed saw this as being somewhat unnecessary, stating, "Carpenter and his colleagues had not thought much about why and for whom they were filling the details in, other than to get paid" (Karlsson 70). This reflects a misunderstanding and lack of communication between the two sides and the overall relationship that exists. In large workplaces, keeping everyone informed is a key to success. It also backs up the claim that genres are not just tools that members use, but more integrated into the social aspects that define the particular group. The amount of communication and information exchanged is the cause of the level of success in professional relationships.

Another key concept introduced by Gillan, Hartzell, and Parrino as well as Tekleab and Taylor is the idea that terms and contracts represent obligations both the employee has to the organization and also the organization has to the employee. When an employee enters a workplace and becomes part of the community, there are documents that must be signed and terms to agree on. Gillan, Hartzell, and Parrino present the example of a CEO entering a firm and depending on the contracts that are presented to her. The authors describe how she needs to perform and the expectations for her overall job performance. They further note the different advantages of implicit (verbally agreed upon) and explicit (written) contracts and the consequences of each. The advantages of explicit contracts include being more dependable than simply verbally agreeing on things. Further, the evidence provided by Gillan, Hartzell, and Parrino of the number of firms using explicit documents as opposed to implicit documents is surprisingly few:

In 2000 less than half of the firms in the S&P 500 had a comprehensive written (explicit) employment agreement (EA) with their CEOs. The other firms had either no written agreement at all or agreements that covered only limited aspects of their relationship with the CEO. (1629)

Having documentation of contracts and written agreements is necessary for important positions in a company such as the CEO. When there are only verbal agreements, there isn't full documentation, which can lead to future misunderstandings and major consequences. Most of us have experienced times when someone tells us something important and it's still difficult to remember each word that was said. This all relates to the company's level of management and confirmation of a worker's responsibilities. This reflects how necessary and beneficial written texts are to a workplace.

Tekleab and Taylor build on Gillan, Hartzell, and Parrino by discussing the primary points of the levels of agreement that are implied in contracts and agreements. The significance of any misunderstanding may lead to conflict or violations, whether from the employee's or the organization's side. It is important that both sides understand the responsibilities stated in contracts and agreements. The higher authority, especially, should take the employee's perspective into consideration and guarantee that new and existing members understand and comprehend the use and importance of the genre in question. Also, the more information exchanged and shared between manager and employee, as stated by Tekleab and Taylor, "should enhance their agreement on reciprocal obligations within the employment relationship" (588), meaning there is a level of dependence on each side of the relationship. The more successful these relationships, the more successful the workplace and company is.

The last major theme to consider is the importance of the integration of the employee-organization relationship into the workplace (Masterson and Stamper; Sturges et al.; Shore and Shapiro). Masterson and Stamper emphasize that how the worker is treated and respected stems from the amount of communication in the workplace. More communication produces positive and successful bonds between the employee and other workers. Also, employees have certain demands of the company, and, as Masterson and Stamper write, "are entitled to basic rights (e.g. pay, safety protections and owe basic obligations back to the organization" (474). These rights are agreed upon when becoming part of a company. This ties into Sturges et al.'s stance on how a company's management works and its relationship with the overall treatment of its workers. If there is ample dedication, communication, and information exchanged regularly, the relationship among employees and employers is enhanced. Shore and Shapiro discuss the psychological aspects of the effect of the company on the employee, stating, "[T]he type of employment relationship adopted by organizations has an effect on the firm performance—an organization-focused approach yields the highest performance levels" (446). So not only do these relationships benefit the employee, but the company as well. When there are workers communicating alongside the frequent and constant exchange of information, this in turn creates a productive and flourishing company.

While genre theory, agreements and understandings in contracts, and employee-organization relationships have been the topics of previous research, there is still not much known about how the integration of these specific genres in workplaces among hierarchies of workers form these employee relationships. Genres are mandatory and necessary to all discourse communities that share a common goal and aim. Workplaces that include employees and employers as well as superiors are examples of this type of community. The texts, such as contracts and agreements, include the specific terms and conditions that hired workers need to adhere to. These genres are social tools and are integrated in workers' tasks, reflecting the amount of information exchanged and resulting in increased communication. Based on my findings of necessary incorporation of written texts in the workplace, I would like to emphasize how influential the exchange and use of these genres is in shaping workers' professional relationships. Genres are truly vital and important in the workplace, and I believe their usage should be seen as a positive aspect in a community. In the specific instance of workers, the exchange of genres is beneficial to the overall performance of a workplace. In my future research, I will further my findings of how genres affect and form the relationships within workers in a company.

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