

The Human Factors of Pagination

Speech by

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A design department using pagination can be one of two things:

- A creative department using a specialized electronic tool
- A service or production department using new tools but following the

direction of the paper's editors

A design department using pagination can't be both.

This is the fundamental linchpin of any discussion about the human factors of pagination. How to manage the people doing the work.

I am not going to make arguments as to which system is best — production driven or creativity driven. Each might have advantages at your newspaper.

But let me throw out this challenge:

Why apply new machines to old methods? We need to look at the introduction of new technology as an opportunity to design new ways of creating newspapers.

As an editor and manager of a complex 'newspaper eco-system,' I've tried to be a careful steward of the human factors involving pagination.

First, however, are the "cold" statistics.

- The *Republic* produces almost a 1,000 completely paginated pages a week.
- The paper's Design Department has 13 full-time designers, 2 part-time designers, and three supervisors.

And since it's establishment in 1987, only two designers have asked for transfers to other departments at the paper and only three designers have left for other newspapers (albeit still in the design field). Of the designers who left, two went for promotions to supervisory jobs and one went to larger newspaper.

While our pay scale is excellent, I believe that one of the keys to this success in keeping our employees is how The Republic managers have defined the role of the designer.

I help create a "job statement" that is at the same time clear and cloudy:

“Design the newspaper following the content decisions of section editors.” We are a content driven newspaper. That’s a large field to play and work in and it has a large potential of overlap with other editors.

However, I’ve kept this statement purposely vague for the sake of the designers. The more tightly defined job description, the more limiting their role.

Instead, my challenge to our designers is to “do more and contribute to the overall success of the newspaper.”

Does this always work? No, sometimes it does not. That’s mainly because of human nature as much as anything else. Not everyone is comfortable with vague areas of responsibilities. Some workers (and designers are no exception) need clearly defined work areas. But for the creative designer — the newspaper staff member that I call the ‘visual journalist’ — this freedom is what makes their job exciting and gives me an opportunity to identify the paper’s future leaders.

And, as we create other visual journalists within the newsroom, their job functions can overlap that of a designer. Until we get equipment that allows for faster and easier communication for all types of jobs, this overlap of specialists will be part of the newsroom’s political landscape.

The human factors of running a paginated design department can be broken into the following topic areas:

Hiring

Motivation

Promotion

Ergonomics

Let’s look at each one through the experiences of *The Republic*. What I give you are my experiences and the experiences of the editors and managers of Arizona’s largest newspaper. Our sister newspaper —*The Phoenix Gazette* — using the same pagination system handles, some of these issues the same way as *The Republic*. Some issues they handle differently because of the difference in newsroom culture and the philosophy of its managers. I mention this to point out how unique each design/pagination department is.

HIRING

One of the most challenging aspects of managing a successful design department is hiring. Just because it sound so simple, doesn’t mean it isn’t important. The right mix of

employee and leadership is vital to the success of a department — both creatively and in producing the newspaper. However, there is one major issue that I hear about most: Where do you find the talented people to staff the department?

Any discussion about hiring will depend on how you have established the role or function of the department. Assuming that you want the most creative people you can find (and not electronic paste-up employees), then you need to look at your own staff and at the people who are doing design and layout and editing copy at other newspapers.

The most successful mix for *The Republic* has been a combination of talents: some highly skilled designers who would fit well in an artistic environment and the pragmatic style of the old-fashioned layout or makeup editor.

We have hired both types from other newspapers and have invested time and energy in training.

One requirement, however, that cuts across both types of designers is my desire that each staff member have a commitment to newspapers and a strong understanding of journalism.

That does not mean that every designer has to have been a former copy editor or reporter. However, I would rather deal with teaching a new staff member a computer system or our design style rather than instruct that person on the basics of journalism.

I've also hired part-time workers to help fill-in with some less than glamorous tasks such as flowing the type for the weekly Television book or handling the inside pages of the Sunday real estate section. These staffers are happy with their jobs and don't look at *The Republic* in the same way as a full-time designer. One has her own freelance design company and we provide her with a financial base. It is a mutually beneficially relationship.

MOTIVATION

This is a area linked so closely with how you define the department. Designers, like photographers, are highly self-motivating journalists. They like the intensity of what they do and many like the adrenaline rush from producing pages on deadline.

Motivation means making sure they have opportunities to do their job with the maximum amount of resources.

This issue of resources is also a matter of time. You need to make sure they have either one or the other. The resources designers need involve information and the elements -- the photos, logos as well as the stories -- necessary to build a page. If you don't have people who's job it is to make sure designers get these resources, you'll need to make sure you give designers time to find those elements.

At *The Republic* we have created a job — graphics coordinator — to work with the designers and editors in bringing all the elements together for page design and production. And it is worth remembering: If you don't have ALL the elements, you can't film the page. That seems very simplistic, but I don't think many section editors around the country realize how fundamentally different that is from the way they work today with composing rooms and printers. This new job is a result of looking at the needs created by new technology. We need to continue to ask ourselves how to make the best use of the people and technology and avoid the temptation of using new machines to perform outdated tasks.

PROMOTIONS

Is joining a design department a dead-end job? What promotion opportunities will your designers have within your newsroom?

The issue of promotion usually affects a more “mature” design department. There is a certain start-up grace period. However, after five years, I've noticed that the very talented start looking for other opportunities. That's to be expected. I believe it is our duty, in fact our challenge to find other jobs within our organizations for those skilled people. If not for the human resource reasons, than to avoid losing all of their special expertise.

We've lost a couple of designers to better jobs at other newspapers, one became an assistant features design director at the Detroit Free Press; another as design director at the Albuquerque Journal.

More important, have been our promotions within *The Republic*. One designer, showing managerial potential, has been promoted to a newly created supervisor job within the department; one has been promoted to graphics coordinator for features; one is now an assistant business editor. In the last two examples, these people competed with others for those jobs.

ERGONOMICS

I'll keep this simple. You can not spend too much time on this issue. You can't spend too much money on the right equipment and furniture. If you don't the cost in human suffering and lost time will be much more than any capital expense.

Things to look at include:

- Lighting
- Furniture (adjustable desks, keyboards and workspaces)
- Chairs (adjustable with good back support)
- Phones with headsets for those who talk a great deal
- Keyboards the are adjustable and have the right “touch”

- Monitors that tilt and adjust in height

Dealing with the human factors of a pagination system is like throwing bowling pins into the air. Sometimes you can juggle all of the issues involving this new form of newspaper production and creativity. Sometimes, however, pin drops right on your head. My best advice is to keep trying because it hurts more when you fail.