



SPEECHWRITERS SPEAK

Fall Update—Speechwriting, and 2020:

What Do You Think, What Do You Feel, What Do You Need?

A Survey by the Professional Speechwriters Association

Dear Professional Speechwriter:

Last time we surveyed speechwriters was in April—or as we refer to it now, a simpler time.

We simply asked you how the coronavirus crisis was affecting your work, about two months into the pandemic.

Our conclusion then was, as I wrote in the report: “We were bolstered our belief that, though speeches and speechwriting have been as profoundly disrupted by coronavirus as any aspect of modern life, leadership communication support is more broadly and urgently needed than it’s ever been. We think speechwriters, if they can adapt their skills to meet that need, can be of great help, and in great demand.”

That was before George Floyd, and the ensuing summer of profound social unrest. It was before a thousand agonizing leadership decisions about whether to return students to school, athletes to play and employees to work. And it was before the fall election season heated to the point of melting down.

How are speechwriters and other executive communication professionals feeling half a year later?

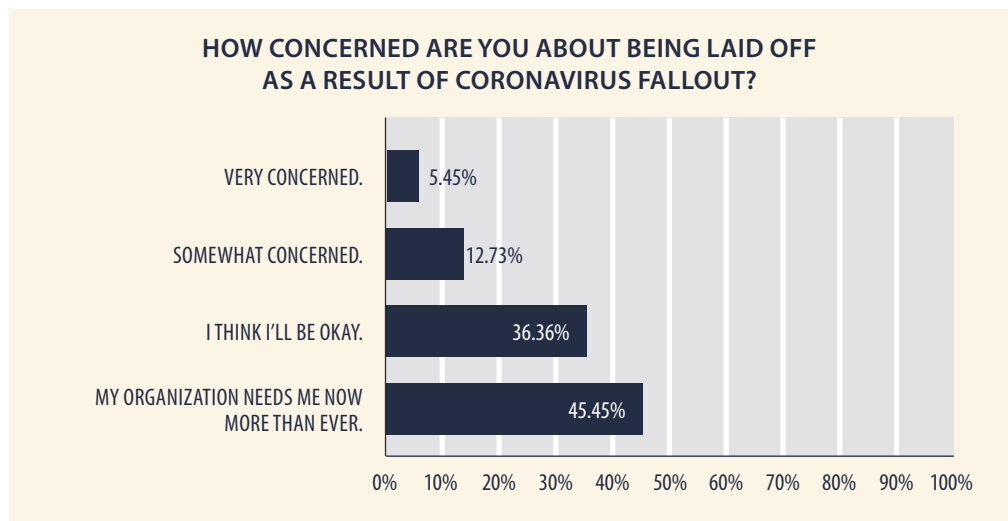
Better in some ways. Worse in others.

But ultimately, more hopeful than we might have expected.

SPEECHWRITERS' LIVELIHOOD—STILL UNSETTLED

In April, we asked in-house speechwriters straight up: “How concerned are you about being laid off as a result of coronavirus fallout?” Happily, 54% answered, “I think I’ll be okay,” and another 34% answered even more confidently, “My organization needs me now more than ever.” Only 12% said they were “very concerned” or “somewhat concerned” about a layoff.

Now? 45% say, “My organization needs me more now than ever.” But only 36% report, “I think I’ll be okay.” And 18% of speechwriters say they are very concerned or somewhat concerned about losing their job.



Even the folks who are feeling secure in their jobs are feeling overwhelmed and anxious about the work. A typical comment: “It seems like there are more speeches than usual because they are all on Zoom, and there are more speaking opps, plus all the crisis comms, and anti-racism work. It’s endless.”

As was the case in April, the story is grimmer for independent speechwriters. In April, 53% of indy scribes said they were either very concerned or somewhat concerned about the long-term viability of their speechwriting business. Over the last five months, that number rose negligibly, to 56%. The number that did change dramatically was the percentage of folks answering, “I think I’ll be okay.” That number dropped from 43% to 26%.

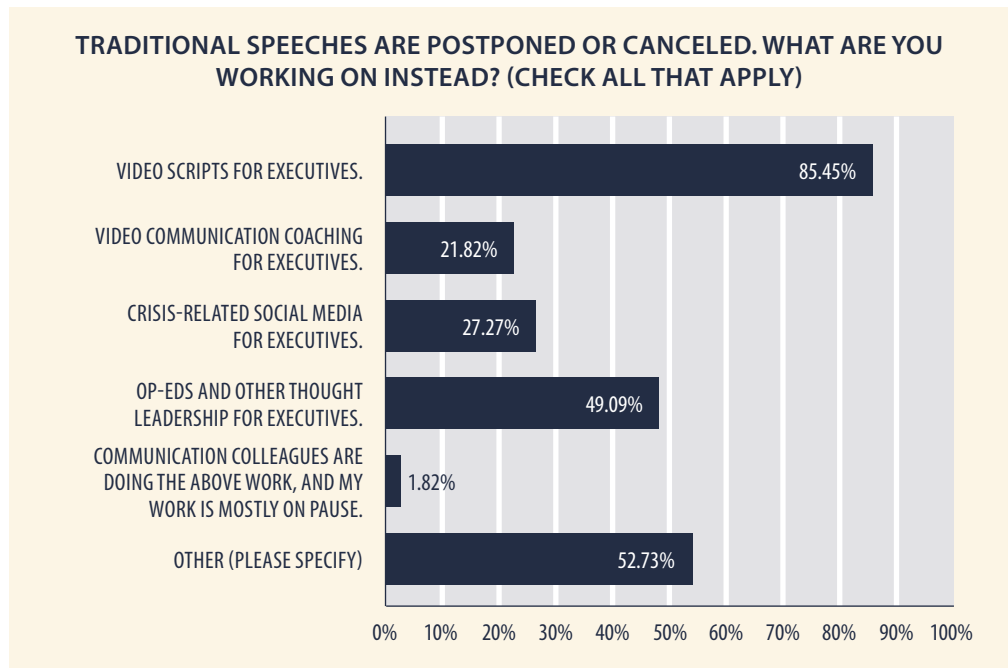
One green shoot? The number of folks answering “my clients need me more than ever” was up from 2% to 17%. If we’ll cheer that result for some independent speechwriters, then we must also continue to worry about the rest, and if we have a chance to shoot some work their way—or to bring them in-house—we should take it.

WORKLOADS (STILL) CHANGING, SPEECHWRITERS (CONTINUOUSLY) ADAPTING

Speechwriters who are working, are working harder than ever. So we reported in April, so we report today.

What on? Everything, was the answer in April.

Now? Video, video, video—and everything, in addition.



Speech work has been replaced by video scripts, said fully 85% of speechwriters.

And the second most popular category of work speechwriters are now doing? “Other.”

“Emails, emails, emails ... regarding health, social unrest, budget problems, etc.”

“Blogs and social media content for executives.”

“In-house broadcasts to workforce.”

For in-house speechwriters, there’s more work in general—worthy work, as one speechwriter reported: “We are doubling down on communications to remind and reinforce our people about key priorities, including their health and well-being; describing a future where our leaders must take us; sharing insights with clients on the road ahead; and contributing ideas to policymakers on how best to exit this crisis in stronger shape. We want to be more than visible, we want to be present.”

HOW HAS GEORGE FLOYD AND ITS AFTERMATH AFFECTED SPEECHWRITING?

Not every speechwriter reported that George Floyd has affected their work profoundly. In fact, roughly equal numbers answered “yes” to each number on a scale of one to five—one being least affected, five being most.

But some say George Floyd and the social justice movement and related issues has outstripped coronavirus as the central issue of 2020.

One executive communicator called for a “complete reboot business communication karma,” in order to respond to “the numerous overlapping crises in American society right now (pandemic / public health, collapse of effectual government, racial tension, white supremacists / civil war atmosphere, economic depression, climate emergency, mass anxiety and mental health problems, an upcoming election whose outcome many will reject).”

The communicator added, “I am working on products to introduce in the public square that meet that need.”

Hurry!

WHAT’S THE BOTTOM LINE?

For all the trouble they reported and pain they expressed through this survey, speechwriters are increasingly sanguine when they take the long view.

In fact, the most dramatic change from April to September in this survey is the answer to the survey’s ultimate question, about how the events of 2020 will affect the need for leadership communication in the long run:

In April, 43% said that demand would be lowered or unchanged, and 41% said it would be increased. As bleak as things looked then, we saw those numbers as encouraging.

Now?

Only 32% say the demand for leadership communication will be lowered or unchanged by this year’s events, while 66% say it will be increased.

And the truth is, many speechwriters and exec comms people have gotten, during this terrible year, many of the things for which they’ve been pining or lobbying for years: more vital roles in the organization, more direct access to the principal and a chance to help their leaders communicate on the very

most important issues in our society.

And as we prepare ourselves for another year of facing these challenges and new ones too, we can only hope that the increased demand for leadership communication will come with extra resources in time to help tide over some of our struggling independent speechwriters, and to relieve the unsustainable strain on our overworked in-house colleagues.

Because leadership communication is now more important than it's ever been—and leadership communicators are essential workers too.

The PSA will check in on you again with another survey at a sensible interval next year.

But in the meantime, please stay in close touch—with ideas or observations, wishes or needs.

We're (still) here (just like you).

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Murray". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

David Murray, Executive Director
Professional Speechwriters Association