

# Why Bad Slides Hurt Careers

## Idea In Short

A poorly built slide deck rarely gets blamed directly for a stalled career, yet it does real damage anyway. A presentation is not the venue for artistic flair or personal style; it exists to distill a message, respect an audience's time and drive a specific decision. Executives who treat slide-writing as a minor formatting task, rather than a disciplined communication skill, consistently undersell work that may otherwise be excellent.

## A skill mistaken for decoration

Some clients, and even some consultants, treat a slide deck as little more than a cosmetic exercise: pick a template, add a logo and move on. That framing misses the point entirely. A well-built presentation is not an artistic expression or a stylistic preference. It follows dozens of specific, testable reasons for doing things a certain way: distilling a message clearly, understanding exactly who is in the room and delivering that message so it actually lands.

## The math behind a wasted room

Consider a meeting with 200 people in the room, each valued at a reasonable hourly billing rate for their time. Multiply the headcount by the hours spent and by a representative rate, and the total cost of that single conversation runs into tens of thousands of dollars. A presentation that fails to justify that expense, through vague framing or a buried recommendation, is not a minor inconvenience. It is a real cost that a sharper deck would have avoided.

## The slide should assist the message, not be the message

Good business communication starts from the audience's perspective rather than the presenter's own. The goal of a deck is never to showcase how much work went into it; it is to make a genuine connection with the people receiving it. A common complaint among

executives captures this well:

We groan when we have to attend a meeting with the slide deck as the star.

That reaction is a signal worth taking seriously rather than dismissing as an audience being difficult.

## **Do not clobber the slide with text**

An audience will either read a slide or listen to the presenter, not both at once. Overloading a slide with paragraphs of text forces a choice neither option should require. A frequently cited piece of advice makes the underlying point sharply:

If all you want to do is create a file of facts and figures, then cancel the meeting and send in a report.

Most meetings already run long past their useful value, and a slide dense with text only compounds the disrespect shown to everyone's calendar.

## **Good slides require rigorous thinking, not decoration**

Meaningful communication, not merely the software used to produce it, is the actual goal. Anyone working in storytelling and persuasion for a living, whether in consulting, sales, marketing or executive decision-making, needs genuine command of written, verbal and visual communication together. That command takes deliberate practice, not a single afternoon spent picking fonts.<sup>1</sup>

## **The real cost of preparation**

Serious presentations are not built quickly. A widely cited rule of thumb estimates that a

single hour of presenting requires somewhere between 30 and 90 hours of preparation, scaling with how much is riding on the outcome.<sup>2</sup> That ratio surprises people who assume slide-building is a same-day task squeezed in before a meeting. It rarely is, if the goal is genuinely to move a room rather than simply to fill the time slot.

## **Building the habit deliberately**

None of this requires natural artistic talent. It requires treating slide-writing as a skill with its own rules: know the audience before opening a blank template, lead with the recommendation rather than burying it on the final page, and cut anything that does not directly support the argument being made.<sup>3</sup> Executives who build that habit early tend to be remembered for the clarity of their thinking rather than for how many slides they produced.

- 1Presentation
- 2Public speaking
- 3Business communication

## **Summary**

A slide deck is a tool for persuasion, not decoration, and treating it otherwise costs careers quietly over time. The audience should leave remembering the message, not the slide. Distilling a clear point of view, respecting an audience's time and building genuine command of written, verbal and visual communication together are what separate a deck that gets ignored from one that changes a decision.