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Tape Transcript by JANE TEMPLE

IN BUSINESS: POWER MAD

Presenter: Peter Day

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ANNOUNCER : It's half past nine and time for IN BUSINESS and this week Peter Day summons you to a meeting where the first thing on the agenda is the meeting itself.

(fx conference)

DAY: Testing testing is this going? Hello everybody. As you can see from my first slide, my subject this evening is -- hang on a minute, no, go back one -- yes, that's it. You probably know what it's like: every big meeting you're called to, every conference, every seminar: they're all the same. Speaker after speaker opens their laptop computer, turns it on : and the big screen behind them lights up with the highlights of the speech, paragraph by paragraph. Words glow and fade; highlights flip and fly around, diagrams, even moving pictures, bring Hollywood special effects into play. Forget about the speaker it's the computer display that bears the brunt of the presentation. In nearly every meeting this tool called "PowerPoint" is now triumphant; and I'm not sure how healthy this dominance is. Is PowerPoint now dictating the way not only meetings go but the way companies work. I'm not alone in my scepticism -- listen to one of the computer world's biggest brains, the scientist Bill Joy.

JOY: People spend their time making fancy presentations instead of concentrating on what's to be communicated. The art of rhetorical kind of discourse and so on has maybe faded. People don't know how to argue their case, they don't know how to make their points - without visual these are crutches that put the audience to sleep.

DAY: There were few doubts about PowerPoint presentations at this big financial conference in London the other day where one of the speakers and PowerPoint users was Jean Marie Barreau from Deutsche Bank.

BARREAU: I'm using it systematically for all the presentation especially on the topic where it's very technical, it's always better to have some kind of a framework so you can actually have your stuff popping up on the screen - the title or the sentence or the comment, ... so people can actually see that you're talking about this specific topic at that time. Initially when you have to do it for the first time it's a lot of work because you really have to make sure that people at different level of knowledge will be able to understand what you're talking about, so it forces you to have a very strong and clear message delivered quickly.

DAY: The chairman of the conference is John Godden from the fund managers HFR Europe. He's in a complex business that needs complex explaining from the presenters.

GODDEN: The ones that don't use PowerPoint tend to look abnormal. PowerPoint is the norm and there is an expectation amongst the audience that the screen is filled with PowerPoint pictures with the blue background and the yellow writing and some graphics that can either add or detract from the speaker. Difficult to see from the reaction of the audience how much power and how much influence the PowerPoint is having but it's certainly a focus for them, and everybody spends their time looking at the screen which, maybe, is a comfort to the speaker who doesn't have to worry about whether he's got his hands in or out of his pockets or what he's doing with his arms because people do focus on the screen a little bit more. Maybe it's the soporific affect it has like TV.

DAY: Yes there's something hypnotic about this new way to run meetings and about the way that PowerPoint has come to dominate the way business people plan their futures. But there are also experts who have big doubts about PowerPoint. Bill Joy is the influential chief scientist and a co-founder of the computer giant Sun Microsystems:

JOY: It's kind of a bad viral disease to think that you have to out compete each other with these fancy presentations. I used to do my slides -- I took foils and washable marking pens and I would just write them out by hand. You know you still have to thank about it, it's like writing stuff on paper -- there's an immediacy of it but we haven't taught the computers to understand paper. The interface between people and computers is bad -- the interface between computers and paper is bad. Probably the only interface that's good is between us and paper except we can't usually find the piece of paper we're looking for. So, there's this kind of uneasy co-existence of those three kind of objects and then certainly all of the media that are layered on top of the computers have an uneasy co-existence.

DAY: Bill Joy, chief scientist of Sun Microsystems a company which it has to be admitted is one of the sharpest rivals to the Bill Gates's software giant Microsoft, and that's the company which now owns PowerPoint and makes it available as part of its ubiquitous Windows software; it's now on more than 300-million computers world-wide. Of course where they think longer and harder about the impact that the computer is having on the way we think and communicate is Silicon Valley California, the extraordinary hotbed of computing technology along the Bay 30 miles South of San Francisco. It's the home of Sun Microsystems, where I heard from Susan Grabau; though she now works for a rival company, she used to be one of the team that first developed PowerPoint as a computer tool for presentations. She remembers what trying to do a dramatic presentation was like before this new computer tool came along.

GRABAU: Before PowerPoint think back 12 years ago -- in order to look good you had to go and worship at the feet of graphics professionals who were very expensive and who made you feel like scum and you gave them your scribbled notes and they, you know, and you worshipped and you bowed down at their feet and you

pleaded with them to meet your deadline 3 days hence with a set of 35 millimetre slides. And today you have a world where you do not have to do that. You are both the content expert and you look great too. I can still look good even though I'm not a graphics professional and I think that's very powerful and that has really I think increased the presenter's confidence that they didn't have to apologise for how it looked. And I think that is a powerful gain in our productivity and efficiency.

DAY: You can see how it happened. Speakers have always used slides, or overhead projector with acetate sheets, to grab attention visually as well as orally. But home-made slides were distracting so executives started spending more and more of their precious time on the way their presentations looked. I wondered how this thing that revolutionised the way we hold meetings actually started?

(fx concertina)

Let's ask Bob Gaskins, a man with many intensely held interests including concertinas, and books -- his snug old house in San Francisco is stuffed with them. Mr Gaskins is the man behind PowerPoint.

GASKINS: I'd grown up in the audio visual business and I had access to audio visual marketing data and I knew in the early 80s that there as many as a billion -- a thousand million presentation slides being made per year just in America and I also knew because I'd been all around the world trying to buy things that the rest of the world also used presentation slides the same way. When I went to Hemel Hempstead of Helsinki or Osaka, I saw exactly the same kind of presentations I saw in America. But they were all made by hand. And almost nobody was using computers to do so. Now the reason was easy to understand and that was that these first generation computers like the Apple 2 and the original IBM PC were completely unable to deal with graphics, so you didn't have graphic screens. They didn't have graphic printers. They didn't have the speed or the memory or anything else to deal with graphics and pictures. But it was clear to me that here was a huge application worth billions and billions of dollars

a year that could be done on computers as soon as there was a revolution in the kinds of computers that we had.

DAY: So the fact that making presentation slides using computers was very power consuming, very difficult at the time didn't faze you -- you decided there was a kernel of something there?

GASKINS: I knew that this would be where the market would be by the time we could get something done. Of course it took 4 years before PowerPoint was actually ready to ship by that time -- everybody was coming around to that point of view and became obvious. Even so, it was a hard sell at that time because here I was trying to raise money to write new software and I had to say to my investors, now this software will not run on any existing personal computers. We're going to write off the entire installed based personal computers. Anybody who wants to use our software will have to buy a new computer -- a Macintosh or a Windows based machine in order to use this software. That's a very tough sell to make compared to people who say we're making software that will run on existing machines.

DAY: Anyway, so it worked. You put it on sale and it worked?

GASKINS: It was a big hit. It was very popular. The first version was for Macintosh only because in those days Windows hadn't been delivered yet. And we would go to Mac conferences and businessmen would come up and point at the screen and say can you do that? -- if you can do that I'll buy a Macintosh -- I do that all day long. I do that every day. And our original earliest customers were just so enthusiastic about the product we won lots of awards. We had a showcase full of awards that we won from various publications and the like and, you know, it was a big hit.

DAY: How many did you sell?

GASKINS: We sold 10,000 copies on day one. That was the original first run -- it was all sold out the very first day of shipment. This was April of 87. Shortly after we shipped our first product Bill Gates came down to see us and ended up selling our product and our company to Microsoft and becoming part of Microsoft. We shipped in April and we were part of Microsoft by August of 1987.

DAY: And with the marketing heft of Microsoft behind it, PowerPoint went on to conquer the business world. It had profound effects, because it took some of the terror out of speaking in public. In fact, it turned perfectly ordinary businessmen and women into the kind of presenters you see on television. That's what they thought, anyway. It's hard now to recall the dear dead days only ten years ago when a PowerPoint was almost unheard of. Back to the inventor Bob Gaskins.

GASKINS: I do remember though the -- what's become the trademark of PowerPoint now is the video presentation where you take a laptop computer and you plug it into a video feed in the room where you are and directly feed the video to the screen and I clearly remember the first time I did that and I believe that I was maybe the first person to do it because back in -- it was in 1992 I think, it was hard to get a laptop that would do this. I remember for a trip to the -- see Microsoft France really moving heaven and earth to get this laptop and loading it up and carrying it off -- and we were at the Hotel Regina in Paris and spent the whole night setting up the video projector and trying it out and making it work and just barely getting it to work. They were tearing down a building next door which didn't make it any easier, but in the morning then I had a whole audience of all the Microsoft subsidiaries in Europe and I walked into the room very calmly with my laptop computer under my arm -- just as though it was no trouble at all, set it on the lectern and plugged in my video and turned it on and here came up the first PowerPoint slide. And this was a moment in history when electronic presentations like this took off.

DAY: And did they clap? Did they cheer?

GASKINS: They were amazed because at that time laptops were almost a joke. They were so under powered and the idea that our new software would run on a laptop computer in those days was something that they were very cheered about and meant it wasn't a resource hog.

DAY: So you've no regrets about turning all meetings into PowerPoint presentations?

GASKINS: PowerPoint well used can improve meetings I really think. The rest of the responsibility's in the hands of the presenters who use it.

DAY: The father of PowerPoint, Bob Gaskins, proud of the way his device has revolutionised meetings. And it hasn't taken long. Listen to John Godden, the managing director of the finance firm HFR Europe who was chairing the conference at the start of this programme.

GODDEN: First started using PowerPoint back in, maybe '96, so I wasn't one of the earliest and it was on the earlier versions of PowerPoint -- very inflexible. I mean you really were stuck with one colour. I mean nobody could work out how to change a background. Nobody could work out how to do these automated sequences of the words running in from the side or down from the top. It was just a computer generated versions of an acetate. But so much easier. So much easier I can on my home PC generate my PowerPoint presentation in an evening when I have time away from the desk, I can then email it to the conference organiser. It's so, so easy to use. I'm not carrying around with acetates. I'm not getting my acetates melted and jammed in the photocopying machine. It's very clean.

DAY: It's not just presentation that's been changed though. John Godden says it can also affect the way you think.

GODDEN: PowerPoint is a very interesting way to build the proposition you're making, and the answers you're giving. When you're re-reading your slides going back you're imagining yourself in the audience and, you know, are you getting your point across? Is it simplistic enough? And bullets point which is the basis of a PowerPoint presentation is not a bad way of doing that. So, it is a very useful and efficient way, in my view, of building a presentation. I can find that I can get it done in an hour and a hour whereas I think if I were going to have to write a script the rewrites would be forever and I think I would take a day.

DAY: So in the eyes of enthusiastic users such as John Godden, PowerPoint is a wonderful productivity tool for highly paid executives who want to be hands on in creating the slides they show as well as the words they use. But some professional speakers have strong reservations. Professor Jeanette Rutherford is one; she's at the Open University Business School.

RUTHERFORD: We all tend to do the same four bullet points for the same four management jargon terms. It tends to force you into succinct phrases which encapsulate everything. You can't elaborate points in detail. It's very difficult to give numerical examples. It tends to encourage you to do pie charts and bar charts because that's what you click on in PowerPoint which isn't always appropriate. I often just ditch the PowerPoint presentation. In fact today I insisted at a rather up market firm that I was going to use old fashioned overhead projector because I said it would be much better to be able to do that.

DAY: Jeanette Rutherford, standing out from the crowd of presenters because she refuses to use PowerPoint. And I must say from personal experience that chairing a conference has become an out of control nightmare because speaker after speaker is enthralled to PowerPoint presentations and has absolutely no way of cutting short his argument when the presentation is overrunning. That's my experience, but what does conference chairman and PowerPoint user John Godden think?

GODDEN: It inspires huge levels of laziness and people are prone to using slides they've used before sometimes inappropriately. We have gone through a curve I think since mid 90s where the standard of presentation in a conference like this has got a lot better and that is due in part to PowerPoint. Maybe that's plateaued now, maybe people have used it so much it's become the norm and now their bank of files they have of PowerPoint is such that they don't need to write anything new. The danger is it plays into the -- the lazy tendencies of human beings and that's a bad discipline.

DAY: But the influence of PowerPoint may go deeper than just lazy presentations. We know it's creeping into family life; some dads use PowerPoint to present holiday options to their wives and children. And PowerPoint thinking may be creeping into the way businesses are actually managed. It's all because of something known to most computer users: a little programme called the Auto Content wizard. Don't know what to do, don't know what to say or how to say it? Don't worry. PowerPoint will prompt you all the way creating not only the slides but the ideas you're trying to express with them. Let's tap away at the keyboard and summon up some examples: Here we go.. The first slide says Our Situation -- so you type in We're Closing Down..

And the PowerPoint holds your hand as you give the bad news, slide by slide: State the Bad News it proclaims. Be clear, don't try to obscure the situation it whispers. How did this Happen? Alternatives considered ? it prods. And then Recommendation or Decision. And finally of course: Our Vision for the Future. Search the slide headings with subsidiary blob paragraphs prompting the user to do things such as Set Your Goals. Now I know that many modern managers normally sound and act as though they were cloned, but using PowerPoint to communicate the bad news (or the good news) surely intensifies the cloning process. You're Fired -- it says here. The former PowerPoint insider Susan Grabau has seen the good and the bad side of these PowerPoint Auto Content presentations.

GRABAU: I could tell you some sort of interesting stories -- I don't know whether I should, but we used to go and look at the discarded slides and stuff like that -- that people had sent in for -- for processing and they literally would not change the titles on some of those auto content slides -- literally would not change the title. But the challenge is -- is that people sometimes don't know how to get started with creating a presentation -- and they have to, and rather than be fearful and oh my God what am I going to do? -- here they have an assistance to sort of get away from that fear factor.

DAY: Genuinely a great enabler, a great empower if you like?

GRABAU: Yes it is. It is an enabler, and admittedly you can say there's a danger of ...?... looking presentations and that same template appears every time, you know, everyone gives a presentation. But I really don't think that there's any danger that the individuality and creativity of the presenter is undermined in anyway.

DAY: Now I still had the itchy feeling that PowerPoint has conquered the way meetings are done to such an extent that it's beginning to have an impact on the way business itself is actually run, seeing that meetings are such an important component of management. It's the best presentations that determine the course of action, not the best ideas. But my experience of PowerPoint was pretty much only on the receiving end until I went to the Microsoft offices in Silicon Valley

where they're still busy refining and improving this extraordinarily influential piece of software, making PowerPoint ever more powerful.

ROKKHIO: Okay, so now you want to add some content -- so you can do that a couple of different ways -- we'll really easily go up to the top of the task pane and it says new slide.

DAY: Joyleen Rokkhio sat me down at a computer keyboard and bullied me into creating a presentation.

Click to add title

ROKKHIO: Right, so this is a bulleted lay out -- like if you're going to add a title and then (fade out)

DAY: All very compelling -infectious really; I can see how this becomes an obsession with lots of speakers who want to add diagrams, pictures and then video, making their contribution to the meeting more and more and more compelling. But do executives really need auto content to get them started? The Microsoft PowerPoint team say "yes" they do.

ROKKHIO: One of the biggest problems for a presenter is getting started -- is that they're faced with a blank screen -- whether it's on paper or on their computer screen. So it's really an outline, you know, that you start from and it illustrates what you can do but we probably never really expected that people would just use those presentations. We expected that they would modify it greatly before presenting. PowerPoint's a very personal thing. I don't quite understand, I don't pretend to understand why that is. But it's very emotional, it's part of yourself. You get up, you make the presentation and people feel very connected to it, and so they want to make it their own and that's what we've done in this release, is we allow people to customise it, make it look very different, make different kinds of animations. With the tools we've put in the product they can make just about every kind of animation they can think of.

WOMAN: We think of PowerPoint really as an empowerment tool to help people be able to convey their ideas very crisply and cleanly with minimal amount of work, so when you're looking at a way to be able

to create a very professional presentation but very quickly the best way to do that is with PowerPoint.

DAY: What testing do you do of audiences of PowerPoint? -- do you test them as well?

BUSCH: Actually this most recent release we did do some really specific testing as we were adding animation features, for example, we did eye tracking studies to find out how do animations affect where the focus of the audience is? Is it focused on the presenter or on the bullet points and how does it jump around? And we found that it very much did help people focus on the point that was being discussed at the time. That's a specific example of audience testing -- it's not something we've paid the most attention to because they're not the ones paying us, so

DAY: Ah -- ah so -- so we just maybe entering a whole world of presentations because it's so nice to do presentations?

BUSCH: Again presentations existed before PowerPoint. The norm before was 35 millimetre slides of transparencies and PowerPoint was invented as a tool to make that process much easier. These are evolutions that happen with any tool that people use -- I'll use cell phones as an example. Cell phones came out and fairly quickly people adopted a lot of poor social behaviour with their cell phones and so it takes humans a while to adapt to the best uses of tools that they develop for themselves, and it's an on going process. Again you know we're just a tool to help people communicate and we add functionality that people want to better communicate with their audience.

DAY: Brendan Busch, Joyleen Rokkhio, Roz Ho, and Lisa Gurnee -- PowerPoint enthusiasts, of course, at Microsoft in Silicon Valley. And the world is so full of enthusiastic PowerPoint users that it's hard to get an objective view of this extraordinarily successful computerised tool. I turned to a keen student of the way office life works; Richard Harper is director of the Digital World Research Centre at the University of Surrey.

HARPER: One of the consequences you get with people using PowerPoint is that they spend so much time creating the PowerPoint

presentations that they forget the importance of the content. And it can be effective but you can misuse it. If you start using the opportunities to deliver, if you like, more than text you can forget the importance of, as it were, as I said the spoken word. And actually one of the things that's interesting about the studies of organisational life these days -- the past 10/15 years is the discovery of talk as it were -- it's a funny thing to say, but researchers have suddenly realised that talk's important in the workplace, not just for chit chat, not just for the gossip, but that's how an organisation understands itself, how people in an organisation understand themselves. They talk, they talk to each other about the work, and when they present to each other they're talking. You need to supplement the talking, you mustn't replace the talking, and the trouble with things like multi-media presentations is that they can do away with the talk. And it's analogous the kind of, if you like, some of the complaints about contemporary and TV broadcasting, say, news and documentaries. There's less content in terms of word and more in terms of image and the image -- to understand an image you need to know what it's saying. And to get the right balance between what needs to be spoken and what needs to be seen is difficult. And the trouble with PowerPoint is that people are given the technology without guidance as to know how to make those judicious decisions as to balance.

DAY: Richard Harper of the Digital World Research Centre at the University of Surrey, co-author of an intriguing new book called "The Myth of the Paperless Office". And in San Francisco, PowerPoint's unabashed creator Bob Gaskins agrees that one size does not fit all in the office world of meetings and presentations. For example sometimes it pays not to be slick.

GASKINS: As you start out with making a presentation in a large company say, trying to enlist the support of your co-workers, at first you have to have a presentations that look very unfinished, in part because you don't want to be imposing your ideas, and so you just have some sketchy things here, not worked out very nicely at all. Then as you move up through the middle management ranks of the company, then you start having very slick PowerPoint shows with video clips in them and synchronised sound and all this elaborate colour shaded backgrounds and transitions because you're trying to

present as it as a fait a complit, fall into line with, this is the direction of the corporation. By the time you get up the board of directors, actually to get the money to execute the product the board of directors don't want to feel like they're being dictated to and so you're back to the PowerPoint slides you started with that seemed very tentative and have lots of room for input from the board and don't seem nearly as highly finished.

DAY: But the tentative ones are actually quite difficult to do aren't they compared with the polished ones?

GASKINS: The tentative ones are just as difficult to do and require even a finer pitch in deciding what to say and how to say it.

DAY: Why do we need visual stimulus? -- why can't we just put the onus on the speaker to communicate very succinctly his or her point?

GASKINS: I don't really know the answer to that question.

DAY: I mean have we kind of got into a world of redundancy where people go on making longer presentations because they have the ability to try and grapple with peoples' attention using visuals in a way that a few years ago wasn't -- wasn't possible?

GASKINS: I don't think it's that. You can make presentations as short as you like. I have a very good friend who always says when the sale is made shut up and -- when you've made your point it's always possible to shut up. It's a very good question. If I just think of the times when I've heard people speak without any visuals, without any accompanying visuals and with, it seems to be like the talks are much more interesting with the visuals, for most speakers. Maybe it's that simple. Maybe most speakers are not as adept at communicating the structure of what they're saying because they don't prepare it carefully enough or they don't know how to prepare it carefully enough, and that having the potentially redundant channel of the summary of the points and sub points up on the screen overcomes those short comings while still leaving the live presenter they're able to answer objections, respond to questions, amplify points for the particular audience -- that sort of thing.

DAY: 'Cos you see we're doing a radio programme, so we can't ... can we?

GASKINS: The irony of this situation is not lost on me! -- I understand that.

DAY: Oh, time's up -- that's all. Thank you all for being such a nice audience. Good evening.

BACK ANNO: That was Peter Day. IN BUSINESS was produced by Neil Koenig.