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Speed-Reading: the Sequel

Overloaded Professionals Revive 1960s Consumer Fad; Evelyn Wood Rides the Wave

BY SHIVANI VORA

EVERY DAY, Curtis Arledge, the global managing director of fixed income at Wachovia Corp., reads through some 350 emails, stacks of trading records, strategy memos and back-office paperwork. Buried by work, he decided that he needed a better way to get through the deluge. "I was looking for a way to read faster and take away more from my reading," he said. "You have to stay on top of everything."

So, in January, Mr. Arledge took a weekend course at ExecuRead, a Charlotte, N.C., company that teaches professionals how to speed-read. Now, he says, "I'm getting through my reading five times faster."

Speed-reading, which enjoyed a surge of popularity during the 1960s and '70s, is making a comeback. Back then, it was mainly promoted to consumers anxious to catch up on classics they had never got around to reading. Today, however, speed-reading is catching on with busy executives like Mr. Arledge trying to cope with information overload.

At least three new speed-reading companies have sprung up in the U.S. over the past five years, mainly catering to financial-services firms and other businesses that offer the classes to employees. The companies generally charge between \$150 and \$700 per student for one to two days of instruction.

Speed-reading was first popularized in the late 1950s by Evelyn Wood, a schoolteacher in Salt Lake City who was inspired to begin offering classes after seeing one of her graduate-school professors speed-read through a paper. While the company she went on to form, Evelyn Wood Reading Dynamics, was the most prominent speed-reading program during its heyday -- it claims to have taught more than two million people world-wide -- rival schools quickly

emerged. (Evelyn Wood died in 1995, at age 86.)

Her company, meanwhile, has changed owners numerous times in the past two decades and currently is operated by a nonprofit arm of Park University in Parkville, Mo. Executives at the company say the renewed interest in speed-reading is driving sales of its products, now its primary business. Sales of materials have more than quadrupled in the past couple of years, reaching \$3 million in 2005.

A number of Evelyn Wood's former employees have gone on to form companies of their own. Bruce Stewart launched ExecuRead in 2001 after teaching speed-reading at Evelyn Wood in his native South Africa for 25 years. He says business was slow when he started, but in the past few years, companies including Credit Suisse, Capital One Financial Corp., Visa and Citigroup Inc.'s Smith Barney have hired him to teach their employees. He says about 500 people have taken his courses in the past year.

Speed-reading proponents say its practitioners learn to assimilate text on a page, or on a computer screen, by absorbing groups of words, generally between two and four, in a single glance. Readers are taught to move across a page using a finger or laser pen, relying on peripheral vision to absorb words and phrases quickly. With training and practice, speed-readers can process from 500 to 1,000 words a minute, its proponents say; in contrast, an average reader takes in around 250 to 350 words, or about one page of a book, per minute.

Programs claim it is possible to increase one's reading speed anywhere from three to five times without sacrificing comprehension, although some educators say they are skeptical. "The average reader regresses [rereads] at least 20 times a page," says Joel Flax, presi-

dent of the New York branch of Speed-Learning, a speed-reading company formed in 2002. "Speed-reading is about retraining your brain to look at words a different way."

For example, it would take a typical reader 7.5 hours to get through the 454-page hardcover edition of "The Da Vinci Code." Tripling that speed to 1,050 words a minute would cut the reading time to 2 1/2 hours. Mr. Flax, who says he reads 2,500 words a minute, says he could read a book such as "Code" in an hour.

While some recent students say speed-reading courses have had a lasting impact on their reading capability, the technique still carries the stigma left by its first wave of popularity, when it was best-known for advertisements touting overly voracious reading consumption. Robert Thompson, who teaches courses in television and popular culture at Syracuse University, recalls that marketing for speed-reading programs was ubiquitous in the 1960s and '70s. "You couldn't turn on the TV without seeing low-budget ads showing Evelyn Wood students reading as fast as they could flip the pages," he said.

By the 1980s, the speed-reading craze had died down. "People took these courses expecting to read in the exaggerated way the commercials showed," Mr. Thompson says. "Obviously, that didn't happen, and the speed-reading boom faded."

Now, speed-reading instructors no longer claim that clients will be able to zip through "War and Peace." Instead, classes emphasize synthesizing professional material.

Linda Sollars, a JetBlue Airways pilot who took a SpeedLearning class in New York late last year, speed-reads only some of the time. "When I read for pleasure, I do it as a way to relax," she says. "I want to inhabit the author's imagination and pick up the nuances in

the text. I wouldn't be able to do that if I were speed-reading."

Some educators who have studied reading habits are skeptical of speed-reading companies' claims. Anne Cunningham, a professor of cognition and development at the University of California, Berkeley, says that in general, people can read no more than 300 words a minute before comprehension suffers. "Speed-reading courses are teaching skimming. This is a reasonable strategy for some purposes, but, as a general practice, it is an incomplete strategy to promote," she says.

Instructors stress that speed-reading isn't a quick fix, and that practice is the key to picking up the skill. "Speed-reading is not a miracle, and the people who think that it's a scam don't realize how much work goes into learning it. It's like learning a new language," Mr. Flax says. Hal Bernard Wechsler, a top executive at the original Evelyn Wood for 16 years, also is back. He started Speed-Learning in 2002 with one New York location and now has 38 franchises in the U.S., including the New York branch run by Mr. Flax. Mr. Wechsler, 73, says he has updated the original speed-reading technique with new methods to adapt to computer screens. Achieving high reading speeds is even more difficult on a screen, instructors say, in part because scrolling prevents a completely fluid movement. Some courses recommend that students print out documents when possible.

But speed-reading isn't a cure-all for overscheduled professionals. Wachovia's Mr. Arledge says he hasn't cut back his 12-hour workdays, but he finds he is better able to cope with the huge amount of information he needs to process every day. "I'm not working less," he says. "I'm doing more in the time I do work."

Online Today: WSJ.com subscribers can see a 1975 Tonight Show segment featuring Johnny Carson's interview with a 13-year-old speed-reading whiz, at WSJ.com/OnlineToday.

Learning to Speed-Read

Even if you can't take a class, here are some tips from the experts:

- Always use a pen, pencil or finger to track words as you read.
- Utilize peripheral vision to try to read at least two words at a time, a technique known as "chunking."
- While reading, ask questions about the material. Think who, what, when, where, why and how.
- Practice "silent reading" by trying to avoid hearing individual words in your mind as you read.