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Communication Skills Needed by Persons in Business Organizations

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Whether we like it or not, this is the age of subject matter relevancy and educational accountability.¹ In order for instruction to be interesting, meaningful, and practical for students, it must be essentially a microcosm of that segment of the “real world” students will be entering upon graduation. The objective of competency- or performance-based models of education suggests that educators should be held accountable for what they teach. However, before teachers can be held accountable they need to know what skills and abilities their students will require in order to be successful in their career objectives.

In addition to the issues of accountability, speech communication educators are becoming increasingly more concerned with career education training. This is evidenced by recent convention papers at the national and regional levels.² Thus, the concern for career planning and training requires a better understanding by speech communication educators of the communication skills that industry and business demand of those they hire.

One of the most popular conceptualizations of the business organization is that it is a complex communication system. The individual entering today’s business organization must function in a dynamic communication system,³ and to some extent, the ability to function effectively in that communication system may determine perceived competency and level of success.⁴ While a great deal of information has been written regarding the importance of communication in the business organization, little has been written in recent years to identify those communication skills that are important according to job responsibility or organizational position. The purpose of this study is to identify communication skills that are used and required by those entering the business organization. Hopefully,

after cataloging the necessary communication skills, speech communication educators should be better prepared to provide students with the appropriate training required by industry and business.

Procedures

In order to identify the communication skills that business organization members engage in on the job, a job analysis procedure was selected. The job analysis procedure determined to be the most appropriate for this study was developed by McCormick, Cunningham, and Thornton; and McCormick, Cunningham, and Gordon.⁵ McCormick's, *et al.*, job analysis procedure is basically behavior-centered as opposed to being job- or task-centered and is applicable to all positions in a business organization. The job analysis procedure, as it was originally developed, consisted of five components and twenty-seven dimensions. Of the five components, the communication component was used as a model to develop the questionnaire for this study. The McCormick, *et al.*, instrument was modified and tested by students in field projects prior to use in this study. In order to produce communication skills relevant to a variety of jobs and organizational positions, the questionnaire provided researchers with communication skills which represented a common denominator across job and position.

In an effort to provide insight and to determine the communication skills required of people in business organizations, 450 (1969–1973) graduates were randomly selected from the College of Business Administration at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and were sent the communication analysis procedure questionnaire. The researchers were interested in recent graduates in order to isolate communication skills that are used when entering a business organization.

The questionnaire asked respondents to rate, in terms of importance, the various kinds of communication activities they were presently engaged in while on the job. Importance was rated on a scale from zero to five as follows: (0) does not apply, (1) very minor, (2) low, (3) average, (4) high, and (5) extremely high. In addition to rating importance, each respondent was also asked to indicate the importance of the type of communication according to the direction of the communication or the communication channel being used. "Organization direction" or "communication channel" refers to people with whom the respondent communicates. These people are in one of the four possible positions: above the respondent, below the respondent, within the respondent's work unit, and outside the respondent's work unit. Communication skills were judged important or considered above average if their mean rating was above 3.00. Respondents also were asked to rank (a) the five most important communication skills they perceived for their future success, (b) what communication skills they thought they should have been trained in while in college, and (c) whether their present organizations held communication training programs for employees. After the responses were coded, a computer-assisted analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences,⁶ subprogram Crosstabs.

Results

One hundred seventy questionnaires were returned and considered for the final analysis. Of the 450 questionnaires mailed out, 50 were returned because the address was inadequate or incorrect. Therefore, the return rate of 12 percent was established and considered to be adequate for analysis.⁷ The results presented in Table 1 indicate that in terms of human communication activities the respondents rated listening (3.79), routine information exchange (3.46), and advising (3.23) as being the most important communication activities regardless of communication channel being utilized. That is, respondents indicated that it did not matter whether the communication was to someone above, below, within the work group, or outside the work group—these three communication skills were consistently rated in the top three. In this series of questions there were built-in validity checks for the responses. For example, one would think that instructing would be rated low in importance when communicating with those above one’s position in the organization. A mean of 1.60 in importance appears to support this validity check. Also, one would expect giving orders to be rated low when dealing with people in positions above the respondent and to be rated high when dealing with people below the respondent. Ratings of 0.78 and 3.19, respectively, tend to support this position. Thus, it appears that the questionnaire seems to have content validity for those who responded.

Table 1. Importance of Type of Communication Skill by Organizational Direction*

Type of Communication	Direction of Communication				Average
	Above	Below	Within	Outside	
Advising	3.05	3.35	3.38	3.14	3.23
Persuading	2.95	2.84	3.05	3.14	2.99
Instructing	1.60	3.38	3.06	2.67	2.67
Interviewing	1.07	2.02	1.66	2.25	1.75
Routine information exchange	3.41	3.38	3.74	3.34	3.46
Public speaking	1.44	1.51	1.58	2.19	1.68
Small group/conference leadership	2.14	2.42	2.69	2.40	2.41
Giving orders	0.78	3.19	2.51	1.55	2.00
Small group/conference problem-solving	2.72	2.81	3.16	2.52	2.80
Listening	3.90	3.46	3.82	4.00	3.79

*All responses are based upon an N of 170 and refer to mean ratings of importance.

In addition to the above results, the authors noted that there were two job or position classifications that emerged from the responses and that merited further analysis. The two classifications tended to separate into those who hold positions in finance-oriented jobs⁸ and those who hold personnel oriented jobs.⁹

An examination of the mean ratings of importance for the finance-oriented positions in Table 2 shows that the most important types of communication were listening (3.69) and routine information exchange (3.27), regardless of the communication channel being used. In addition, the finance positions indicated that when dealing with people below them,

instructing (3.04) also becomes more important. However, when the communication channel or direction of communication shifts to dealing with people within their work unit, instructing drops out in importance and small group problem-solving (3.02) and advising (3.02) become important. Finally, the results show that when the finance people are dealing with individuals outside their work unit, persuading (3.14) replaces problem-solving and advising as being important.

Table 2. Importance of Type of Communication Skill by Organizational Direction for Finance-Oriented Positions

Type of Communication	Direction of Communication			
	Above	Below	Within	Outside
Advising	2.74	2.94	3.02	2.94
Persuading	2.80	2.36	2.68	3.14
Instructing	1.64	3.04	2.76	2.68
Interviewing	0.94	2.18	1.08	1.82
Routine information exchange	3.36	3.10	3.38	3.22
Public speaking	1.00	1.12	1.00	1.80
Small group/conference leadership	2.00	2.22	2.32	2.34
Giving orders	0.80	2.70	2.20	1.86
Small group/conference problem-solving	2.84	2.74	3.02	2.58
Listening	3.88	3.26	3.70	3.92

*Note: The N for the mean ratings of importance is 50.

When examining the mean ratings in Table 3, for personnel-oriented jobs, it is difficult to identify one or two types of communication that were rated high regardless of the communication channel. It appears that for the people in personnel-oriented jobs, communication skills change depending on the direction the individual is communicating within the organization. For example, when communicating with those above them, the personnel-oriented persons indicated that listening (3.97), advising (3.78), routine information exchange (3.60), and persuading (3.42) are all important communication skills. When the direction of the communication shifted to people below them, however, they rated instructing (4.04), listening (3.78), advising (3.76), giving orders (3.66) and small group problem-solving (3.06). When the direction shifts to people within their work unit, the following seven types of communication were rated as being important: routine information exchange (3.91), advising (3.87), listening (3.87), persuading (3.48), instructing (3.40), small group problem-solving (3.20), and small group leadership (3.04). Finally, when they dealt with people outside their work unit they rated listening (4.00), small group leadership (3.38), and routine information exchange (3.19) as being important.

Table 3. Importance of Type of Communication Skill by Organizational Direction for Personnel-Oriented Positions

Type of Communication	Direction of Communication			
	Above	Below	Within	Outside
Advising	3.78	3.76	3.87	2.91
Persuading	3.42	3.34	3.48	2.93
Instructing	1.62	4.04	3.40	2.26
Interviewing	1.23	2.72	2.21	2.36
Routine information exchange	3.60	3.55	3.91	3.19
Public speaking	1.93	1.72	1.91	2.26
Small group/conference leadership	2.40	2.76	3.04	3.38
Giving orders	0.78	3.66	2.87	1.40
Small group/conference problem-solving	2.96	3.06	3.20	2.55
Listening	3.97	3.78	3.87	4.00

*Note: The *N* for the mean ratings of importance is 47.

A series of questions requested respondents to rank the five most important communication skills necessary for success based on their past and present job experiences. These results, summarized in Table 4, indicate that the top five communication skills, based upon average rank are as follows: (1) advising, (2) listening, (3) persuading, (4) instructing, and (5) routine information exchange. In terms of those communication skills ranked as being most important to one's job success (receiving the highest percentage of number one rankings) the following five emerged: (1) listening, (2) persuading, (3) advising, (4) instructing, and (5) small group problem-solving.

Table 4. Ranking* of Communication Skills Judged Important to Job Success Based Upon Job Experience**

Skill	Importance Rank*					Ave. Rank
	1	2	3	4	5	
Advising	3	1	1	2	1	1.6
Persuading	2	4	3	4	4	3.0
Instructing	4	3	5	2	3	3.4
Interviewing	9	6	8	9	7	7.8
Routine Information Exchange	6	4	3	1	5	3.8
Public Speaking	6	10	10	10	10	9.0
Small group leadership	10	6	7	6	9	7.6
Giving orders	8	9	8	6	8	7.8
Small group/problem-solving	5	6	6	6	6	5.8
Listening	1	2	1	5	1	2.0

*Ranking is based upon the percentage of respondents ranking the communication skills one through five. Hence, the larger the percentage, the lower the rank value. In column 1, listening is ranked 1 because it had the highest percentage of respondents ranking it number 1. In column 2, advising is ranked 1 because it had the highest percentage of respondents ranking it number 2.

**All responses are based upon an *N* of 170.

When the results were analyzed according to finance and personal positions, the following ranking patterns emerge. The finance-oriented respondents indicated that the five communication skills most important for job success were: (1) listening, (2) advising, (3) routine information exchange, (4) instructing, and (5) persuading. Listening and persuading received the most number one rankings and were therefore ranked as most important for job success.

The rankings of the five most important communication skills by those in personnel-oriented positions based upon each communication skill's final average rank of importance were: (1) listening, (2) advising, (3) instructing, (4) routine information exchange, and (5) persuading. There were slight differences between the rankings of the finance and the personnel positions. As was the case with the finance positions, however, listening and persuading were viewed as the most important skills for success in the job.

The next question in the survey asked the respondents whether or not their organization had communication training programs for their employees. Sixty-nine responded they did; 101 answered that they did not.

The final question in the survey was open-ended. It asked the respondents to describe those communication skills they wish they had been taught in college. Their responses were analyzed by a content analysis method. The responses covered a broad range of communication experiences. The areas receiving the most emphasis are listed in descending order of frequency.

1. *Listening*—both to those above them and to those below them—they emphasized the feeling that listening was one of the most important communication skills.
2. *Public speaking and presentation of technical information*—the need for presentations to groups of twenty or less and the need for adequate training in the organization of material.
3. *Writing*—with an emphasis on clear, accurate, and organized writing.
4. *Small group leadership and problem-solving communication*—most of the respondents prefaced their remarks with a comment indicating a frustration with the small groups they had been a part of.
5. *Human relations*—whether stated explicitly, or implied. There was an emphasis on the ability to relate to and be sensitive to the needs of others they came in contact with in the day-to-day work environment.
6. *Persuasion and attitude theory*—a concern was expressed about how to understand what makes others behave in certain ways and about how to motivate others.

When analyzing responses to the open-ended question, it was found that persons in finance-oriented positions most frequently mentioned five communication skills they wish they had been taught while in school: (1) writing, (2) listening, (3) small group problem-solving, (4) public speaking, and (5) interviewing. On the other hand, the personnel-oriented positions responded differently; they listed the following communication skills they wish

they had been taught while in school: (1) presentation of technical information, (2) persuasion, (3) small group problem-solving and leadership, (4) listening, and (5) human relations.

Conclusions

A general pattern emerged in terms of specific communication skills used in daily organizational activities now as well as those skills necessary for job success. The pattern included: listening, advising, routine information exchange, persuading, small group problem-solving, and instructing. The most stable aspect of the pattern was with the first three—listening, advising, and routine information exchange. People in finance-oriented positions generally held to the above-mentioned pattern, while the personnel-oriented positions demonstrated a need for a greater variety of communication skills with the skills being tied to the communication channel being used. Only one real paradox emerged from the data. It centered around public speaking. On questions one and two, public speaking was consistently rated and ranked near the bottom of the list while on the open-ended question it appeared as one of the most frequently mentioned topics. It appears that the respondents are saying they do not use public speaking but wish they had had it in college.

If we, as teachers, accept the notion of being held accountable for what we teach, we must determine which communication skills are needed by those we teach to help them be successful in their chosen careers. We also feel it is important to continue surveying those who have graduated, in order to continuously update ourselves, our subject matter, and our priorities for the subject matter taught in our classrooms. For now, it appears the following skills are necessary for students who are entering organizations and businesses: listening, advising, persuading, routine information exchange, small group problem-solving, writing, and technical presentations. It is now our responsibility to take the idea of accountability seriously in order to ensure that students are trained in, and competent in, the communication skills suggested by those currently occupying positions in organizations and businesses.¹⁰

Notes

1. For representative articles dealing with course accountability see: Jay Chronister, "Instructional Accountability in Higher Education," *Instructional Records*, 52 (Spring, 1971), 171–175; Leon Lesinger, "Accountability for Results: A Basic Challenge for America's Schools," *American Education*, 5 (June–July, 1969), 2–4; "Teachers in an Age of Accountability," *Instructor*, 70 (June–July, 1971), 19–20; Jack Stenner, "Accountability By Public Demand," *American Vocational Journal*, 46 (February, 1971), 30–37.
2. See: Patrick C. Kennicott and L. David Schuelke (eds.), *Career Communications: Direction for the Seventies*. Proceedings of the Speech Communication Association Summer Conference VIII, New York, Speech Communication Association, 1972. Darrell T. Piersol, "Non-Academic Careers for Speech Communication Majors," *Bulletin of the ADASC*, 1 (1972), 3–6. Ruth Witkin, "SCA and Career Communication: A Status Report," Paper presented to the Speech Communication Association Convention, New York, 1973. Phillip Taylor and Raymond Buchanan, "Vocational

- Marketability of Communication Competencies," *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, 38 (1973), 285–291.
3. See: Charles W. Redding, *Communication Within the Organization: An Interpretive Review of Theory and Research*. Industrial Communication Council, Inc. (New York, Industrial Communication Council, 1972), p. 19; Daniel Katz and Robert Kahn, *The Social Psychology of Organizations* (New York, Wiley 1966), pp. 16–18.
 4. See: James A. Belohlov, Paul O. Popp, and Michael S. Porte, "Communication: A View from Inside of Business," *Journal of Business Communication*, 11:4 (Summer, 1974), 53–59. J. C. South, "Early Career Performance of Engineers—Its Composition and Measurement," *Personnel Psychology*, 27 (1974), 225–243.
 5. E. McCormick, J. Cunningham, and G. Thornton, "The Prediction of Job Requirements by a Structured Job Analysis Procedure," *Personnel Psychology*, 20 (1967), 431–440. E. McCormick, J. Cunningham, and G. Gordon, "Job Dimensions Based on Factorial Analyses of Worker-Oriented Job Variables," *Personnel Psychology*, 20 (1967), 417–430.
 6. Norman Nie, Dale Bent, and C. H. Hall, *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (New York, McGraw-Hill, 1970).
 7. Although the questionnaires were sent to graduates from the same university, an analysis of the returned questionnaires indicated that all states in the Midwest were represented with five or more responses. Also, states outside the Midwest, such as New York and California, were represented strongly.
 8. People holding finance-oriented positions had the following job titles: comptroller, accountant, auditor, C. P. A., purchasing agents. There were 50 respondents in this classification.
 9. People holding personnel-oriented positions had the following job titles: personnel administrator, sales manager, foreman, supervisor. There were 47 respondents in this classification.
 10. Readers interested in finding out more about the Business and Industrial Communications course at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln should write to Vincent Di Salvo, Ph.D., Department of Speech, 318 Burnett Hall, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Lincoln, Nebraska 68588.