Business Communication Students' Appraisal Of Selected Communication Competencies

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine business communication students' perception of selected business communication competencies. Students enrolled in business communication classes at Texas A&M University-Commerce from the summer of 2006 until the spring 2007 were surveyed. Students were asked to evaluate each of the listed 44 competencies. The two competencies that ranked the highest were "Spells Correctly," and "Understands the Importance of Business Relationships."

Keywords: Communication, competencies, students, needed communication skills

INTRODUCTION

Communication competencies of business college graduates have always been considered to be important factors for employment. Previous studies have found that communication competencies regarding spelling, punctuation, neat appearance, organization of written communication, and focusing on the audience are important skills for the business graduate to possess. With the relatively recent financial scandals on Wall Street such as Enron and World Com, issues of timing on manager stock options, mutual fund preferential timing of purchases for certain high volume clients, and the current problems in the sub-prime mortgage industry, have other factors arisen in importance in business communication which colleges of business and business communication instructors must be aware of when considering communication curriculum matters? Are students aware of these factors? Will they view such competencies as being important to their work? Certainly ethical concerns should be considered. Integrity in communication would now be important. Also communication concerned with a firm's stakeholders would be an important consideration. Communication involved with working in teams should also be important. What are the competencies that students feel will be important when entering and working in the workforce? What impact will this all have on the core business communication course?

The purpose of this study is to analyze the business communication competencies which business students feel are important for their initial employment in industry and to be successful in the business world.

REVIEW OF LITERATUR

The importance of communication skills in business has been recognized for years. The following studies are examples of the importance placed on communication skills in today's business world.

Curtis, Stephens, and Winsor sent a questionnaire to 1000 personnel managers from a list of members of The American Society of Personnel Administrators. Written and oral communications were the skills that were most useful in helping graduating college students obtain employment. "Clearly, personnel directors are calling for graduates with strong oral and written communication skills" (p.13). As reported by Gustafson, Johnson, and Hovey a survey was conducted by West Georgia College to determine the skill, abilities, knowledge, and traits important

for business students to obtain and advance in employment. BBA and MBA alumni, business leaders, and current senior BBAs were surveyed. "All groups surveyed placed communication skills (writing and speaking) as the two most important general skills" (p. 23).

According to Murphy and Hildebrand, many surveys and articles "have confirmed the idea that effective communication is essential for success and promotion in business" (p. 8). When executive, managers and business graduates were asked "What has been the most valuable subject you studied in college?" "Business communication, business letter and report writing, and written and oral Expression were consistently among the top three responses...and executive often credit good communication skills for their advancement" (p. 8).

Lesikar emphasizes the importance of communication skills in the present business environment indicating that "business's need for employees with good communication skills is all too often not fulfilled. Most employees, even the college trained, do not communicate well" (p. 3). Angell states "Every business—whether a multibillion-dollar company...or a small family-owned grocery store—relies on the communication skills of its employees to be successful" (p. 4). DuFrene reports that "studies have shown that managers spend approximately 60 to 80 per cent of their time involved in some form of communication" (p. 4). Bovee and Thill report "Effective communication is at the center of virtually every aspect of business because it connects the company with all its stakeholders..." (p. 4).

In her article "Managing in the 90's", Patricia Buhler emphasizes the importance of communication. She reports that "communication remains a critical element of an organization's success...and the majority of managers report communication issues to be the number 1 problem they face" (p. 23). Bennington also provides some insight when she states "Employers consistently identify communication skills (written and oral) as critical for employee and business success. In addition to employer expectations, institutions must be responsive to accreditation requirement. A major accrediting organization—Association for the Advancement of Collegiate Schools of Business- International (AACSB) has identified communication abilities as important general skills for institutions to incorporate into program learning outcomes and assessment.

PROCEDURE

To obtain the data for the study, a questionnaire was developed involving the efforts of three faculty members who teach the communication course for the Texas A&M University-Commerce College of Business and Technology. This is a required core course for all business majors and is typically taken as a first semester junior. All of the students taking the course during the Summer 2006 until the Spring Semester of 2007 were included in the survey. There were 231 students enrolled in 8 sections of the course. The questionnaires were distributed to the students by the course instructors during the first week of the term. All 231 students returned the questionnaire and all were usable.

A list of 44 competencies was prepared by the three faculty members based on their experience, their knowledge of the literature, and their perceptions of what is currently happening in business. The students were asked to evaluate each competency as follows:

- 4 = Extremely Essential - **VITAL** for initial employment
- 3 = Highly Essential – **QUITE ESSENTIAL** for initial employment
- 2 = Essential - **NEEDED**, but could be learned on the job
- 1 = Not Essential – **NOT ESSENTIAL** for initial employment

The means of the student responses for each competency were recorded and were listed from high to low.

RESULTS

The first question asked about the importance of good communication skills in the business world. Two-hundred and six or 89% of the respondents indicated that these skills are "very valuable." (See Table 1) . The

remaining 11% indicated that the skills are "valuable." Clearly the business students feel that effective communication skills are essential in the business world.

Table 1
How valuable are good communication skills in the business world?

Response	Number	Percent
Very Valuable	206	89
Valuable	25	11
Little Value	0	0
No Value	0	0
Total	231	100

Then the students were queried as to how well they believed college graduates are prepared in communication skills. Ninety-five or 41% indicated that they felt that college students were well prepared, while 62 (27%) indicated that they did not feel that the business student is well prepared in business communication (See Table 2) . Thirty- two percent were undecided on the question

Table 2
Do you believe that business college graduates are well prepared in communication skills?

Response	Number	Percent
Yes	95	41
No	62	27
Undecided	74	32
Total	231	100

Table 3 presents the order of the evaluation of the 44 competencies by the business students. They have been placed in descending order from the most essential competency - "spells correctly" with an average of 3.527 to the lowest - "knowledge of distance communication technologies" with a mean of 2.834. Note that 36 of the 44 competencies were scored above 3.00 indicating that they are all "highly essential" or "extremely essential". And the remaining 8 competencies are very close to a 3.00 average. Thus, all of the competencies reviewed are important to the business graduate.

Considering the 14 communication competencies with the highest averages, it would appear that they can, for the most part, be classified into two main categories. One dealing with the traditional problem areas cited in student communication abilities – spelling, punctuation, grammar, and organization and the other category focusing on certain specific aspects of effective communication in dealing with others - confidentiality, integrity in communication, team communication, understanding organizational relationships, and being courteous..

Within the the top 14 competencies, it appears that the competencies ranked 1, 3, 6 b, 11, 12a, and 12b deal with spelling, grammar, and organization, while competencies 2, 5, 6a, 8a, 8b 10, and 14 deal with specific aspects of communicating with others. Competencies 1, 3 and 6b deal with spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Competencies 11,12a, and 12b identify focusing on the main idea of the message, using the principles of effective writing, and producing neat, attractive and well organized documents. These competencies are the traditional factors which business communication courses have primarily focused upon in the past and the business students recognize the need to have these skills.

The remaining communication competencies are more recent considerations in the business curriculum and are probably addressed by more business core courses than just the core communication course. However, they should also be addressed by the communication course as a basis for use in the upper division business core courses. Competency 2 deals with understanding the importance of relationships within the business - superiors, co-workers, customers, vendors, etc. Competency 5 deals with interacting in a positive, thoughtful, and productive manner.

Competency 6a indicates the importance of maintaining appropriate confidentiality. Competencies 8a and 8b focus on teamwork communication and being aware of diversity when dealing with people. Competency 10 deals with integrity in communication while number 14 emphasizes social courtesy and etiquette in communication. It is interesting that students recognized the second group of competencies as generally equally important factors to those traditionally considered important in obtaining work in today's business environment.

In considering the competencies ranked lowest by the students, it must first be recognized that even the lowest scored factors received high scores on the 4 point scale. The fact that they received the lowest scores does not mean that these competencies were not considered to be important.

Considering the 8 competencies which received an average score lower than 3.00, it appears that they could be placed into two categories - preparing effective reports and dealing with intercultural communication. It would seem that these would be important factors, but not necessarily to all business graduates. And further, it would seem that these competencies could be provided by company training resources. Perhaps this is why the competencies received the lower scores than the other competencies.

Competencies 37 and 40 deal with preparing reports, competency 39 calls for writing concisely and 42 calls for effectively evaluating an audience. Competency 43 calls for the use and interpretation of tables and graphs and competency 44 identifies the use of distance communication. These factors seem to deal with and relate to writing and preparation of reports.

Competencies 38 and 41 deal with understanding the importance of intercultural business practices and customs and demonstrating intercultural communication competence. These would be important factors to some graduates, but not necessarily for all.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Students enrolled in the College of Business communication course at Texas A&M University -Commerce from Summer 2006 until the Spring Semester 2007 were surveyed to determine their views on the importance of business communication competencies to the business world. It was felt that recent business conditions may have caused important changes in the traditional views of the communication competencies needed by the business school graduate in today's working environment.

Two-hundred and thirty-one students were included in the survey. One hundred percent of the respondents indicated that good communication skills are valuable in the business world. Only 41% indicated that business school graduates are well prepared in communication skills upon entering the workplace.

The students were asked to rate 44 communication competencies as to their level of being essential for entering the workforce. The competencies reported by the students to be the most essential seemed to fall into two major categories of communication skills. One deals with the traditional basic communication skills of spelling, punctuation, and grammar, while the second category deals with certain specific communication skills dealing with relationships - communicating with honesty and integrity, maintaining necessary confidentiality, effectively conducting team communication, and understanding the importance of business relationships in communicating among all of a firm's stakeholders.

It is encouraging to see that students are aware of the communication skills necessary to perform in the business environment and their relative importance. The business curriculum must reflect these competencies. One thing that is clear is that it is not possible for a single business communication course to adequately provide coverage for all of the important communication competencies. Only 41% of the students reported feeling well prepared in business communication competencies. The deans of colleges of business, persons in charge of business majors, and college curriculum committees must see to it that the entire business curriculum addresses and provides coverage for the communication skills necessary for the business graduate to enter the work force and function effectively.

Table 3
Business student evaluation of communication competencies

Communication Competencies		Weighted Average
1.	Spells correctly.	3.527
2.	Understands the importance of business relationships with superiors, coworkers, subordinates, customers, vendors, and other business associates.	3.503
3.	Punctuates and uses correct grammatical written communication.	3.473
4.	Writes effective résumés and letters of application.	3.450
5.	Interacts in a positive, productive, and thoughtful way.	3.396
6a.	Maintains appropriate confidentiality.	3.373
6b.	Effectively proofreads, edits, and revises written communication.	3.373
8a.	Avoids stereotyping people from other cultures, and understands their norms and values.	3.320
8b.	Collaborates effectively in groups and on teams.	3.320
10.	Uses personal integrity in all communication (includes all relevant information, and does not present any deceptive information).	3.314
11.	Effectively focuses on the main idea in the message.	3.308
12a.	Knowledge of general principles of writing effective business communication	3.302
12b.	Recognizes the importance of neat, organized, and attractive written documents.	3.302
14.	Demonstrates appropriate social courtesy and etiquette.	3.290
15.	Uses eye contact effectively.	3.249
16.	Uses appropriate nonverbal behavior (kinesics, personal appearance, paralanguage, and proxemics, etc.).	3.231
17.	Demonstrates leadership abilities.	3.213
18.	Uses a clear, distinct, and pleasant speaking style.	3.183
19.	Effectively delivers an oral presentation.	3.172
20.	Writes effective letters.	3.167
21.	Writes well-organized paragraphs (words, strong language, abbreviations etc).	3.148
22.	Proficient research and data collection, analytical, and interpretation skills.	3.142
23.	Understands and exercises conflict resolution strategies and techniques.	3.124
24a.	Writes effective business e-mail messages without emotions and cyber speak abbreviations.	3.107
24b.	Possesses sensitivity to the language values and behaviors of other cultures.	3.107
26.	Writes strong messages (with active verbs and concrete words).	3.089
27.	Effectively uses persuasion and builds strong arguments.	3.083
28a.	Knowledge of grammatical, semantical, and interaction speaking rules.	3.065
28b.	Organizes and develops effective speeches.	3.065
30.	Possesses skills in informal business and social conversation.	3.059
31.	Learns appropriate professional and social behaviors of the culture with which he or she is communicating.	3.041
32.	Writes from the standpoint of the reader's interests and benefits.	3.036
33a.	Knowledge of general principles of writing effective business communication.	3.302
33b.	Exercises empathy by understanding how readers may interpret written messages.	3.302
33c.	Uses appropriate communication skills to share messages with someone whose first language is not English.	3.302
33d.	Uses varied and appropriate vocabulary.	3.302
37.	Writes effective short reports.	2.988
38.	Understands the importance of intercultural business practices and customs.	2.982
39.	Writes concisely (leaves out unnecessary words and phrases).	2.970
40.	Writes effective long reports.	2.953
41.	Demonstrates intercultural communication competence.	2.941
42.	Effectively evaluates audiences.	2.930
43.	Knows how to use and interpret tabular and graphic data.	2.911
44.	Knowledge of distance communication technologies.	2.834

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NOTES