

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

Business leaders and academics agree that both written and oral communication skills are necessary for success in all fields of business and that recent graduates are deficient in these skills. A lack of appreciation of the importance of communication skills has been suggested as one obstacle to accounting students achieving desired skill levels. Questionnaires regarding the importance of communication skills were completed by 356 randomly selected accounting graduates of 13 universities and 287 students from 5 universities. Students generally rated the skills as more important than practitioners.

Introduction

During the past twenty years, deficiencies in communication skills of business graduates have been criticized by both business leaders and academicians. While it is generally recognized that both written and oral communication skills are necessary for success in all fields of business and educators have attempted to improve students' abilities, both employers and educators continue to perceive recent graduates as deficient in communication skills.

A number of studies have reported the results of surveys of businessmen, accounting practitioners, and educators. The authors have consistently concluded that communication skills are important in promotability, performance appraisals, and successful relationships with colleagues and clients. On the other hand, other studies have found that students may not appreciate the importance of communication skills.

The purpose of this research was to investigate the views of accounting students and accounting practitioners regarding the importance of communication skills and the adequacy of educational preparation.

Literature Review

Roy and MacNeill (1967) surveyed leading representatives from a wide variety of specialties within the accounting profession. The participants were requested to rank 53 subject cards in the order of importance to the entry-level CPA. Written and oral English was ranked first in the composite rankings. Roy and MacNeill stated:

We do not specify that the beginning CPA be able to write with literary flair--although this devoutly could be wished--but we do require that he measure up in those attributes of brevity, conciseness, and lucidity [p. 219].

Huegli and Tschirgi [1974] surveyed recent business and engineering graduates concerning communication skills. Graduates were asked about communication skills required for their entry-level jobs and their estimated proficiency with the skills. In addition, supervisors of some of the graduates were interviewed to provide data for comparison. Huegli and Tschirgi concluded, in general, that entry-level employees tend to overstate their own communication abili-

ties. The supervisors perceived the employees' communication skills as deficient, but few of the employees perceived themselves as deficient.

Penrose [1976] surveyed local businessmen regarding the importance of twelve business-related skills. He found that the businessmen ranked business speaking fifth and business writing sixth after the skills of public relations, marketing, accounting, and finance. Penrose concluded that the unexpected weak showing of communication abilities might indicate that the perceived importance to businessmen was "perhaps losing some of its value" [p. 23]. [1]

Estes [1979] surveyed professional accountants and accounting educators. He asked them to rank 57 skills and knowledge areas as to present and future importance. Estes reported that all groups, except entry-level public accountants, ranked written communications and oral communications first and second in importance for their present position. On the other hand, public juniors ranked written and oral communication skills fourth and sixth.

Andrews and Koester [1979] surveyed experienced accountants, recently-graduated accountants, accounting educators, and accounting students. The authors concluded that the results showed more concern with written than oral communications and that recently-graduated accountants "of both CPA firms and corporations perceive fewer written communication programs than do their respective employers" [p. 36]. While Andrews and Koester included accounting students in their survey, they did not discuss possible differences between student opinions of other respondents.

Ingram and Frazier [1980] surveyed accounting practitioners and accounting academicians to determine the types of communication skills needed and demonstrated by entry-level accountants. The authors concluded that all of the 20 skills identified in their study were necessary for entry-level accountants. They also concluded that junior accountants demonstrated less than adequate abilities in communication skills.

Addams [1981] investigated the importance of written communications to performance appraisals and to successful relationships with clients and colleagues. He also elicited suggestions for

employees' first-year communications training. His results indicated that young accountants have trouble with writing tasks and oral presentations.

May and Arevalo [1983] reported on a University of Georgia writing program. Students in intermediate accounting classes assigned memos and reports which resembled the technical writing required in a job setting. Papers were graded for effective writing by a full-time writing consultant employed by the accounting department. The authors stated that the accounting faculty felt students' writing was improved and that response to the program was favorable.

Andrews and Sigband [1984] attempted to identify the communication skills needed and possessed by entry-level accountants and the best instructional methodologies for developing the skills by surveying accounting academics and CPA firm managing partners. The authors reported that practitioners found new accountants were deficient in written, oral, and interpersonal communication skills. Solutions suggested by practitioners included emphasis on writing skills, use of case studies, and assignment of written reports graded by competent teachers. Those professors who did not feel their schools provided adequate preparation suggested expanding communication requirements.

Rebele [1985] gathered opinions from accounting majors at Indiana University regarding the importance of communication skills leading to success in public accounting. He reported:

The results of the study show that accounting students considered oral communication skills to be a moderately important determinant of promotability in a public accounting firm, while written communication skills were perceived as a relatively unimportant determinant of promotability from the staff to senior level [p.49].

Thus, there appeared to be some discrepancy between the views of practitioners, as reported in earlier research, and the views of students, as reported by Rebele. Rebele recommended:

Future research studies concerning this issue should use identical test instruments to examine the opinions of practitioners and students [p 50].

If, in fact, a discrepancy exists between the per-

ceptions of practitioners and students, Rebele suggested that techniques be investigated for reducing the discrepancy.

Research Methodology

The purpose of this research was to determine if a difference existed between the perceptions of accounting practitioners and accounting students concerning the importance of communication skills. Through a survey, the subjects were asked to rate 20 skills for both importance and preparation as follows:[2]

1-----	2-----	3-----	4-----	5
Not	Somewhat	Very		
Important	Important	Important		
Not	Somewhat	Well		
Prepared	Prepared	Prepared		

Practitioners were asked how prepared they were at graduation, while students were asked how prepared they expected to be at graduation.

Practitioners Surveyed

Previous researchers have contacted accounting practitioners through CPA firms, large corporations, or governmental agencies. Others (such as those employed by small business and small accounting firms) have not been surveyed. In order to obtain a variety of opinions, universities were asked to provide names and current addresses of their accounting graduates. It was not possible to obtain a random sample from all universities, because some institutions were unable or unwilling to provide a list of graduates. In selecting the universities whose graduates were included in the sample, an attempt was made to include a cross section of schools by geographical area and type of student body.

Thirteen universities provided names and current addresses of accounting graduates. Twelve of the 13 universities were accredited by the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business [AACSB, 1986]; four of the 13 were Ph.D. granting institutions; and 12 of the 13 had master's programs (accounting or M.B.A.).

Questionnaires were mailed early in the fall of 1986 to 1,000 randomly selected accounting

graduates of the 13 universities. The mailings were to 42 states and two foreign countries, thus achieving a wide geographical distribution.

Replies were received from 370 individuals. Six respondents indicated that they felt unable to answer the questionnaire because, although they were accounting graduates, they were not employed in accounting. Eight other questionnaires were incomplete and were not included in the data analysis. The 356 usable responses (35.6 percent response rate) had some incomplete demographic data, but included the requested ratings. The respondents appeared to be concerned about communication skills; over 80 percent of the respondents furnished additional comments.

Forty-one percent of the respondents reported they were presently employed in public accounting, 31 percent in private accounting, 21 percent in government and education, and 7 percent in non-accounting positions. The total number of years of work experience reported ranged from 1 to 44 years (mean = 5.5 years). Sixty-one percent (214) of the respondents were CPA's (ten of the CPA's held an additional professional designation) and ten (3 percent) held a professional designation other than CPA.

Sixty-seven percent reported their highest degree was received within the last five years; 27 percent, more than five years ago; and 6 percent did not respond to the question. Reported ages ranged from 22 to 66 years (mean = 30 years). Of those reporting their age, 6 percent were under 25 years, 6 percent were 45 or older, and the remaining 88 percent were 25 through 44 years old. One third (116) of the respondents did not report their age. Fifty-eight percent of the usable responses were from males and 42 percent were from females. Nineteen percent reported they were employed in cities of less than 100,000 population; 49 percent in cities of 100,000 to one million; and the remaining 32 percent in cities larger than one million.

Students Surveyed

In November 1986, accounting professors (at five of the universities whose graduates were surveyed) were contacted and asked to administer the questionnaire to students in undergraduate accounting classes. One of the five universities

was a Ph.D. granting institution; all five had master's programs. Two hundred eighty-eight completed questionnaires were returned from students at the five universities. One questionnaire had incomplete data and was not used; thus there were 287 usable responses.

Twenty-five percent of the students indicated that they had completed less than nine semester hours of accounting courses; 35 percent had completed 9 through 17 hours; and 40 percent had completed 18 hours or more. Seventy-one percent of the students were under 23 years of age; 19 percent were 23 to 30 years of age; and 10 percent were over 30 years of age; only one respondent did not report an age. Forty-seven percent of the responses were from males and 53 percent were from females.

Analysis

Importance

The results of practitioner and student ratings form importance are presented in Table 1.[3] Included are means, standard deviations, and Chi-Square values. Both practitioners and students agreed that all of the communication skills were important. As shown in Table 1, a large majority of the respondents rated all 20 skills from somewhat to very important (means range from 3.24 to 4.69). In fact, over 50 percent of the students gave a "4" or "5" importance rating to every skill. With the exception of "reading speed" and "use of visual aids," over 50 percent of the practitioners rated each skill as a "4" or "5".

Differences existed, however, between practitioner and student ratings. The students rated 18 of the 20 skills more important than the practitioners. For 12 of the 18 skills the differences were significant as measured by Chi-Square tests ($\alpha = .10$). Only "correspondence writing" and "memos and informal reports" were rated higher by practitioners, but these differences were not statistically significant.

The importance of communication skills was emphasized in comments by many practitioners. The following were typical:

I did not realize the importance of communication skills until I began my career. Employers

and clients are quick to make judgmental decisions about character, ability, worth, and integrity based on oral and written communications.

Without excellent communication skills, promotions will be slow and upper management levels will become unobtainable.

Although students commented about the importance of communication skills, they were less emphatic about the effect of poor skills on future careers. One statement, typical of many students, was:

The importance of communications cannot be stressed enough. If you are unable to communicate, you are, in reality, useless. The business school does not emphasize communications enough.

The results of the importance ratings are consistent with the results reported by Ingram and Frazier [1980]. The questionnaire used in this study was based on their questionnaire; both the Ingram and Frazier study and the present study found that all of the 20 skills were perceived to be important by all groups surveyed.

On the other hand, the results of the present study differ somewhat from those reported by Penrose [1976] and by Estes [1979]. Penrose concluded that the perceived importance of communication skills was "perhaps losing some of its value." Estes found that public juniors rated the importance of written and oral communication skills lower than those with more experience.

Preparation

The results of practitioner and student ratings for preparation are presented in Table 2. Included are means, standard deviations, and Chi-Square values. Both practitioners and students were asked about communications education. Practitioners were asked how prepared they were at graduation, while students were asked how prepared they expected to be at graduation. For all of the skills, students' ratings for preparation were higher than practitioners' ratings; the differences were statistically significant for 14 of the 20 ratings.

While it is comfortable to believe that stu-

Table 1
 Respondents' Importance Ratings
 (Practitioners n=356; Students n=287)

	Practitioners		Students		Chi Square
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	
Forms of Communication					
Correspondence writing	4.33	0.858	4.27	0.888	1.900
Memos and informal reports	4.27	0.819	4.17	0.861	4.394
Formal report writing	3.96	1.098	4.20	0.910	21.030*
Reading speed	3.44	1.015	3.47	1.063	6.687
Reading comprehension	4.52	0.672	4.56	0.634	1.552
Informal oral presentation	4.17	0.794	4.32	0.754	8.771*
Formal oral presentation	3.83	1.068	4.38	0.776	51.575*
Listening attentiveness	4.43	0.713	4.69	0.551	27.874*
Listening responsiveness	4.32	0.760	4.47	0.663	7.494
Mechanical Communication Skills					
Correct grammar	4.40	0.689	4.67	0.596	32.647*
Correct punctuation	4.20	0.834	4.52	0.714	29.876*
Correct spelling	4.37	0.797	4.63	0.657	23.600*
Logic and Organization Skills					
Outline development	3.89	0.937	3.94	0.858	2.348
Inductive reasoning	4.32	0.759	4.32	0.717	1.645
Deductive reasoning	4.36	0.752	4.36	0.731	1.212
Stylistic Communication Skills					
Verbal coherence	4.43	0.647	4.55	0.618	7.938*
Verbal clarity	4.47	0.633	4.65	0.584	16.896*
Verbal conciseness	4.37	0.697	4.56	0.611	14.132*
Paragraph development	3.91	0.901	4.19	0.790	17.720*
Use of visual aids	3.24	1.089	3.79	1.027	40.028*

*Significant at alpha = .10

Table 2
 Respondents' Preparation Ratings
 (Practitioners n=356; Students n=287)

	Preparation Practitioners		Students		Chi Square
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	
Forms of Communication					
Correspondence writing	3.34	0.988	3.50	0.906	08.571*
Memos and informal reports	3.19	1.054	3.58	0.910	33.275*
Formal report writing	3.09	1.080	3.38	0.987	17.924*
Reading speed	3.19	1.141	3.27	1.157	14.373*
Reading comprehension	3.81	0.865	3.86	0.823	02.477
Informal oral presentation	3.15	0.958	3.54	0.990	27.391*
Formal oral presentation	2.87	1.024	3.17	1.032	14.649*
Listening attentiveness	3.55	1.021	3.98	0.805	38.389*
Listening responsiveness	3.47	0.974	3.80	0.840	22.024*
Mechanical Communication Skills					
Correct grammar	3.92	0.940	4.07	0.855	5.492
Correct punctuation	3.88	0.930	3.99	0.896	5.007
Correct spelling	3.99	1.027	4.09	0.925	3.722
Logic and Organization Skills					
Outline development	3.56	0.882	3.73	0.857	05.299
Inductive reasoning	3.62	0.889	3.69	0.738	10.502*
Deductive reasoning	3.61	0.894	3.70	0.781	06.093
Stylistic Communication Skills					
Verbal coherence	3.24	0.874	3.56	0.809	22.230*
Verbal clarity	3.19	0.889	3.63	0.805	41.566*
Verbal conciseness	3.14	0.914	3.59	0.797	44.509*
Paragraph development	3.45	0.914	3.70	0.818	14.332*
Use of visual aids	2.64	1.055	3.24	1.106	46.907*

*Significant at alpha = .10

dents are now better prepared in communication skills than they used to be, it may be that students simply were not able to assess their degree of preparation. Although the following student comment was not typical, it may reflect the thoughts of some students who felt well prepared in basic communication skills:

Most communications for accountants will consist of accounting analysis. The accountant should be knowledgeable about his subject matter which will facilitate more effective communication. Basic skills are all that seem necessary.

The results of the preparation ratings cannot be compared with other published studies. Ingram and Frazier [1980] asked practitioners to evaluate demonstrated communication skills of entry-level accountants (rather than to evaluate their own skills), while the present research asked respondents to evaluate their own preparation. "Demonstrated abilities" and "adequacy of preparation" are not necessarily the same factors. In addition, as pointed out by Huegeli and Tschirgi [1974], individuals may rate themselves differently than others rate them.

Limitations

Interpretation of the research findings must be qualified on a number of counts. The universities whose graduates were included in the sample were not randomly selected, but rather consisted of universities fitting the demographical criteria that were willing to provide a list of names and addresses of accounting graduates.

The results may be biased because the analysis is based on the responses received. Oppenheim [1966, pp. 34-36] suggests that to assess non-response bias, late responses be compared to early responses (this procedure assumes that late respondents are similar to non-respondents). Chi-Square tests revealed no significant differences between respondents who replied early and those who replied late. However, those individuals who have strong feelings about communication skills may be more apt to respond than those not possessing strong feelings.

Conclusions

Ingram and Frazier [1980] identified 20 communication skills and found that practitioners felt

that all 20 were necessary for the entry-level accountant. Using a test instrument similar to Ingram and Frazier's, this research surveyed both accounting practitioners and accounting students. The results of this study were consistent with Ingram and Frazier's conclusions. The majority of both practitioners and students rated all 20 of the skills as somewhat to very important. Ingram and Frazier concluded that practitioners viewed entry-level accountants as deficient in all communication skills. In this study practitioners and students were asked to rate their own preparation. The majority of both groups rated their own preparation as "3" (somewhat prepared) or higher for all 20 skills.

Previous researchers have concluded that strong communication skills are important for business and accounting graduates. Rebele [1985] examined the attitudes of students regarding the factors important to success in public accounting. He reported that students perceived oral communication skills as moderately important and written communication skills as relatively unimportant to promotability. Rebele suggested that there might be a discrepancy between the perceptions of students and the perceptions of practitioners and that if there was a discrepancy, it might account for the low communication skills of graduates. The results of this study show that students perceive communication skills to be more, not less, important than practitioners. It may be that universities are emphasizing the importance of communication skills, or it may be that such a discrepancy never existed.

This study has added to the research effort in business communications by sampling a diverse group of accounting practitioners and accounting students and comparing the results to previous studies. Since the suggested discrepancy between perceptions of students and practitioners was not confirmed, the solution to improvement of communication skills does not lie in increasing student awareness. Methods must be introduced to increase the skills, rather than simply emphasizing the importance of the skills.

Continued on Page 32