

5-31-2019

Employers' Perspectives on Workplace Communication Skills: The Meaning of Communication Skills

Tina A. Coffelt
Iowa State University, tcoffelt@iastate.edu

Dale Grauman
Iowa State University, dgrauman@iastate.edu

Frances L.M. Smith
Murray State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/engl_pubs



Part of the [Language Interpretation and Translation Commons](#), [Modern Languages Commons](#), [Organizational Communication Commons](#), and the [Technical and Professional Writing Commons](#)

The complete bibliographic information for this item can be found at https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/engl_pubs/268. For information on how to cite this item, please visit <http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/howtocite.html>.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Publications by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.

Employers' Perspectives on Workplace Communication Skills: The Meaning of Communication Skills

Abstract

Employers provide their interpretation of the meaning of communication skills in this qualitative study of 22 managers. Employers understand written communication to be types of documents, a way to write, and a mode of communication. Oral communication skills mean a style of interacting, presenting, and conducting meetings. Visual communication skills were understood to be data visualization or nonverbal communication. Electronic communication was interpreted as email. The findings contribute to closing-the-gap research by highlighting areas where meaning converges for employers and instructors. Faculty members in communication disciplines can incorporate these findings into their course design and learning outcome discussions.

Keywords

communication skills, closing-the-gap, genre theory

Disciplines

Language Interpretation and Translation | Modern Languages | Organizational Communication | Technical and Professional Writing

Comments

This accepted article is published as Coffelt, T. A., Grauman, D., & Smith, F. L. M. (online release May, 2019). Employers' perspectives on workplace communication skills. *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*. doi:[10.1177/232949061985111](https://doi.org/10.1177/232949061985111). Posted with permission.

Employers' Perspectives on Workplace Communication Skills: The Meaning of *Communication Skills*

Employers provide their interpretation of the meaning of *communication skills* in this qualitative study of 22 managers. Employers understand written communication to be types of documents, a way to write, and a mode of communication. Oral communication skills mean a style of interacting, presenting, and conducting meetings. Visual communication skills were understood to be data visualization or nonverbal communication. Electronic communication was interpreted as email. The findings contribute to closing-the-gap research by highlighting areas where meaning converges for employers and instructors. Faculty members in communication disciplines can incorporate these findings into their course design and learning outcome discussions.

Key words: communication skills; closing-the-gap; genre theory

Employers' Perspectives on Workplace Communication Skills: The Meaning of *Communication Skills*

Employers consistently indicate that they prize employee communication skills. Most job descriptions list some rendition of communication skills in the job requirements section, adding such adjectives as *interpersonal*, *written*, or *oral*, and qualifiers such as *excellent*, *effective*, or *strong*. Widely circulated studies and reports regularly confirm that communication skills are a priority for employers. For example, a recent National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) *Job Outlook* report, employers rated the “[a]bility to create and/or edit written reports” fourth out of 20, and it rated verbal communication skills—the “[a]bility to verbally communicate with persons inside and outside the organization”—sixth out of 20 skills (NACE, 2017). The *Job Outlook* report conceptualizes communication as either written or verbal, using very brief and simple explanations of these skills, which leave faculty to ponder what employers mean. The meaning of *communication skills* to employers may or may not align with the meaning ascribed by professors, which could impact job seekers as they partake in selection processes of resume development and interviews (Kramer, 2010). Faculty cannot utilize the influence of employers or socialize students without a more nuanced understanding of what employers mean by the phrase *communication skills*. Thus, the purpose of this study is to understand employers’ meaning of *communication skills*.

Numerous studies have taken stock of university communication curricula and asked employers, employees, students, or teachers which specific communication skills students and employees should develop (e.g., Crosling & Ward, 2002; Gray, 2010; Keyton et al., 2013). Brent (2011) calls these “closing-the-gap” (p. 398) studies. Closing-the-gap studies usually present a predetermined menu of communication skills to participants, who then either identify which

skills employers value or rate the skills according to their value in the workplace. These predetermined menus necessarily constrain participant responses. Such constraint is methodologically necessary for rigorous survey design; however, it also limits participants' freedom to respond spontaneously to the research question. To promote more spontaneous responses, at least one study (Coffelt, Baker, & Corey, 2016) asked employers to respond in writing to an open-ended prompt. However, even this approach constrains rich responses, probing, and enhanced meaning qualitative research studies evince.

This study advances closing-the-gap scholarship (Brent, 2011) in business communication literature. We conceptualize *gap* as an interval between, rather than a deficit. Closing-the-gap studies are primarily intended to inform curricular decisions in higher education (Bertelsen & Goodboy, 2009; Brent, 2011) to help communication faculty and administrators determine which skills they should teach to prepare students for the workplace. Bertelsen and Goodboy (2009) argue that communication curricula designers are broadly receptive to this kind of input. Below, we overview numerous closing-the-gap studies and related scholarship to establish three guiding propositions for this study: (1) workplace communication skills are specific, (2) workplace communication skills are diverse, and (3) the predetermined menus of skills normally employed in closing-the-gap studies constrain participant responses.

Workplace Communication Skills are Specific

Experience teaches us that some workplace communication skills are specific to an industry, occupation, and/or organizational culture. Employees who have mastered one genre or medium of workplace communication may struggle to adapt their skills to new tasks or contexts. Some composition scholars question the efficacy of what they refer to as general writing skills instruction (GWSI), the common practice of teaching college writing in general writing courses

(Beaufort, 2007; Petraglia, 1995; Russell, 1995). Appealing to rhetorical genre theory (e.g., Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010; Campbell & Jamieson, 1978; Miller, 1984), these scholars argue that authentic writing occurs within genres, which are bound to particular activities, embedded within particular contexts and social structures. Students do not primarily learn general skills that apply well across diverse contexts. Rather, students learn genres, which they subsequently apply more or less automatically when they perceive a situation calls for a particular genre (Rounsaville, Goldberg, & Bawarshi, 2008). Infelicities abound when writers—or more broadly, communicators—overestimate the generality of their genre knowledge, applying conventions from a genre they have mastered to a communication problem embedded in an unfamiliar genre.

Closing-the-gap studies have not consistently captured the specificity of communication skills. Like the NACE *Job Outlook* reports, these studies frequently conceptualize communication skills in general terms. For example, Conrad and Newberry (2011) identified 24 business communication skills based on a review of previous closing-the-gap studies. Survey results indicated no significant difference between managers and faculty for most skills, with four exceptions: (1) ability to use information technology, (2) ability to write business correspondence, (3) ability to create group synergy, and (4) ability to demonstrate respect. The researchers suggest business schools might consider placing a greater emphasis on these four “specific” (p. 15) skills in their courses and curricula. Examining the four skills, it becomes clear that *skills* were conceptualized in exceedingly broad terms. This finding presumes some general information technology skills exist, mastery of which would ensure competence across a full spectrum of information technology genres. But contemporary genre theory suggests different genres demand different skillsets (Anson, 2016), even for genres with surface level similarities such as a common connection to information technology. Contemporary genre theory would

have us specify genres by asking in which activities these genres participate and which tools they use (Russell, 1995). Managers may want applicants who can synchronize calendars in Microsoft Outlook, maintain a consistent brand identity, conduct a meeting with international clients using Adobe Connect, or any combination of these tasks along with others. Similar nuances could be asked of the skills identified in other closing-the-gap studies.

A promising alternative approach to the general, universal skills approach of extant closing-the-gap studies has been to investigate communication skills within a specific profession, such as accounting (Gray, 2010; Jones, 2011) or engineering (Kassim & Ali, 2010). Another approach has been to limit study participants by academic affiliation, such as business communication faculty (Wardrope & Bayless, 1999), business school students and graduates (Crosling & Ward, 2002; Lentz, 2013), business school department chairs (Wardrope, 2002), or information systems students and faculty (Alshare, Lane, & Miller, 2011). These approaches improve specificity of reference by limiting responses to a relatively specific domain. We might refer to these as closing-*a*-gap studies instead of closing-*the*-gap studies.

Closing-the-gap-studies have asked participants to identify or to rate important workplace communication skills, but these studies have not extended latitude to participants to elaborate on the meaning of these skills. The present study achieves specificity by another means. Rather than focusing on a particular field or discipline, we ask participants from a variety of occupations to define various communication skills in their own words. By allowing participants space to elaborate on their definitions through follow-up questions, we encourage greater specificity than have previous closing-the-gap studies. We therefore ask the following research question:

RQ1: What does the term *communication skills* mean to employers?

Workplace Communication Skills are Diverse

Closing-the-gap studies have shown that workplace communication skills are diverse. This section will overview some of the diverse skill sets employers indicate they value. As an organizing heuristic, these skills are divided into four modes: written, oral, visual, and electronic. We borrow this taxonomy from a Midwest research university's foundational and advanced communication program, which refers to these modes with the acronym WOVE. The WOVE modal taxonomy was developed in response to prominent scholarship on contemporary multimodal communication (e.g., Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001).

Written communication skills. Closing-the-gap studies have identified, rated, or ranked a wide variety of written communication skills. Beason (2001) found that grammatical errors tended to hurt writers' credibility where the five most bothersome errors were fragments, misspellings, word-ending errors, fused sentences, and quotation mark errors. However, the study also concluded that participants' reactions to the same error type tended to vary greatly depending on context. Most other studies examined higher order concerns alongside or in place of the minutiae of sentence or word level grammar. Jones (2011) identified 26 different writing skills for accountants, including skills as different as grammar, persuasiveness, outlining before writing, and document design. Wardrope (2002) collapsed grammar skills into a single category, but then defined other written communication skills in terms of broadly defined genres: reports, memos, letters, proposals, and questionnaires. Conrad and Newberry (2011) found managers rated the writing of business correspondence more highly than business faculty did.

Oral communication skills. In at least one sense, oral communication skills are even more diverse than are written communication skills. Most written communication skills in closing-the-gap studies are product-oriented (e.g., reports) or describe characteristics of effective writing (e.g., properly cites references). Oral communication skills, on the other hand, may be

either product-oriented or behavior-oriented. Behavior-oriented skills are those which describe behaviors performed by a communicator rather than communication products themselves. For example, Keyton et al. (2013) developed a list of 163 communication behaviors, including listening, asking questions, and discussing, among others. Reinsch and Gardner (2014) explore how both product-oriented skills (e.g., ability to deliver effective presentations) and behavior-oriented skills (e.g., building rapport) compare with other factors in promotion decisions. In an informal study of emails that advertise business communication training, DeKay (2012) noted that vendors offered numerous sessions on interpersonal skills, including behavior-oriented skills like *having difficult conversations* and *speaking as a leader*.

Visual and electronic communication skills. Business communication scholars have argued that instructors should teach visual and electronic communication (Brumberger, 2005; Jackson, 2007; Reinsch & Turner, 2006). However, closing-the-gap studies do not often highlight these skills. One exception comes from Coffelt and colleagues (2016), who found employers rarely mentioned visual communication ($n = 3$), but mentioned electronic communication ($n = 29$) slightly more often than written skills ($n = 25$). Jones (2011) also mentions visual skills (e.g., producing visual aids) and electronic skills (e.g., writing effective text messages) among its menu of ranked skills. Although there is yet little scholarship to indicate which visual or electronic skills employers value, it is clear that visual and electronic skills are potentially quite diverse, ranging in complexity from sending emojis in emails to producing animated marketing materials or interactive visual aids.

Closing-the-Gap Studies Usually Constrain Participant Responses

Because communication skills are specific and diverse, it may not be feasible to produce a predetermined menu of skills that captures the broad spectrum of teachable skills employers

may value. However, most closing-the-gap studies rely on predetermined menus of skills. For example, Waner (1995) mined previous studies and brainstormed with business faculty to produce a menu that reflected a business communication curriculum. Such a menu fits this study well because the overall purpose was to compare business professionals' and faculty members' perceptions of the curricular content. Rainey, Turner, and Dayton (2005) followed the same pattern, as well: first, establish what is being taught; second, assess how much stakeholders value that content. Another approach has been to simply assess how much stakeholders value workplace communication skills without determining whether those skills appear in business communication curricula. For these studies, researchers compose a menu of representative workplace communication skills by reviewing business communication literature or by simply asking experts which skills ought to appear on such a menu (Alshare et al., 2011; Conrad & Newberry, 2011; Gray, 2010; Jones, 2011; Kassim & Ali, 2010; Wardrope, 2002).

Both approaches constrain participant responses. Participants who encounter these menus can only rate the skills from the menu. This constraint is methodologically necessary for survey research. However, this constraint prevents participants from spontaneously identifying new skills or redefining skills in revealing ways. Alternatively, a few studies have prompted participants to identify workplace communication skills in brief written responses (e.g., Maes, Weldy, & Icenogle, 1997; Reinsch & Shelby, 1996, 1997). This method encourages spontaneous responses. However, brief written responses do not allow researchers to ask follow-up questions or clarify participants' statements. Therefore, the current research provides participants space to provide rich descriptions of their conceptions of workplace communication by asking:

RQ2: How do employers conceptualize written, oral, visual, and electronic communication skills?

Method

Participants

Participants included twenty-two women ($n = 7$) and men ($n = 15$) who hire and/or supervise recent college graduates (see Table 1). The counting of participants in this study serves as “credentialing counting” (Hannah & Lautsch, 2011, p. 16) to both document the count and show transparency in how the research was conducted. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 71 with a mean age of 42 and were all Caucasian except one. Participants lived in a few different states. Education levels included bachelor’s degrees for all participants, with nine holding a master’s degree and two holding a terminal, professional degree. Participants worked in their current occupations from 1.5 to 29 years with an average of 8 years. Industries represented included: healthcare, financial services, journalism, manufacturing, engineering/architectural consulting, accounting, agriculture, retail, and higher education. Some participants supervised recent college graduates only, some recruited/hired recent college graduates only, and most performed both functions. Their supervisory experience was extensive with some supervising as few as six individuals and others over 700 since taking their position.

Insert Table 1 About Here

Procedure

Data collection commenced after receiving approval from the institutional review boards of the authors. Working professionals over the age of 18 who hired or supervised recent college graduates were recruited by four interviewers who used snowball sampling (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Informed consent and demographic forms were provided to participants via email or in person prior to conducting the interview. Interviews were conducted in person at the work site of the participants in quiet conference rooms or offices, via Skype or telephone call. All interviews

were audio recorded for transcription. Skype interviews were not video recorded. Snow (1980) argues that researchers can disengage from the field when the information provided by participants is no longer interesting or when researchers are confident that the findings satisfy the research question. The median sample size in qualitative articles published in leading communication journals is 20 participants with a mode of 16 (Jensen, Christy, Gettings, & Lareau, 2013). The first researcher was persuaded by these arguments and decided it was appropriate to leave the field after completing 22 interviews.

Informants and a semi-structured interview (see Appendix A) guide comprised the interview protocol (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Informant interviews were particularly useful because the professionals have spent time both in their supervisory role and in their organizations, thereby being able to speak for their own experience within the organizational culture. Interviews lasted 31 to 60 minutes with an average of 47 minutes, and transcriptions yielded 480 pages of single-spaced data. Pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality.

Analysis and Verification

Analysis occurred in two cycles. The first cycle coding method of description (Saldaña, 2016) initiated analysis. A Word file was created for interview questions and the corresponding answers from the transcripts were copied and pasted into these files. Five of those files organized responses to questions on the topics of communication skills, written, oral, visual, and electronic communication. Second cycle coding then commenced within each file/category with focused coding, specifically *in vivo* coding, which groups data according to frequent or salient words used by the participants (Saldaña, 2016). For example, all of the participant responses in the communication skills file were closely analyzed looking for words or ideas that recurred with frequency or forcefulness.

Due to the large volume and diversity of oral skills, open and axial coding were used on these data. Open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was conducted to create and organize the oral skills into similar groups. Constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used to code the properties of 179 units, placing each unit into an existing category or creating a new category. A summary of nine categories, their properties and dimensions, and the number of units of data appear in Table 2. These categories were mentioned by a minimum of 10 participants.

Three forms of verification were used to reinforce trustworthiness of the results: persistent observation, triangulation, and rich descriptions (Creswell, 1997). First, persistent observation occurred *in situ* by listening to participants' responses and asking probing or clarifying questions when information was unclear. Second, triangulation occurred with multiple researchers to corroborate the interpretations made during analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Specifically, the first author conducted the data analysis and the third author read and critiqued the results. Third, rich, thick descriptions (Creswell, 1997) are included in the results section so readers can determine whether or not they wish to transfer the results to their circumstances.

Insert Table 2 About Here

Results

RQ1: Meaning of Communication Skills

Relating

The preponderance of answers to the broad interview question of “what does *communication skills* mean to you” centered on building and maintaining relationships with myriad others, such as prospective clients, current patrons, subcontractors, colleagues in other departments, or the managers themselves. These skills were often mentioned in direct connection with interpersonal communication, alluded to in this quote, “Can they carry on a conversation,

can they give and take in the conversation, not just answer questions, do they have questions they could ask back?” (Claire). The notion of relating was identified overall, without any reference to the mode used during interaction, as Tyson indicates, “People who can relate and understand the situation of their fellows,” as does Paul, “Most of that is going to be how you relate yourself, and how you direct that team, and how you get people feeling comfortable that you’re their leader.” Relating skills were paramount to these employers. Specific words or phrases repeated by many interviewees included carry on a conversation, one-on-one, make people feel comfortable, ask questions, social etiquette, personality, and confidence. Clearly, these employers connected the meaning of communication skills to *relating*.

Translating

Employers also stressed the skills of listening, adapting to audiences, and being a liaison, which we labeled as *translating*. Being a liaison, in particular, required employees to transfer information from one audience to another, when these two audiences used different terminology. Austin’s quote encompasses the essence of this theme:

Someone who needs to actually understand the audience. I think that is a big skill that we look for in recent college graduates—have you been taught to evaluate your audience? And do you know how to communicate using both oral presentation, sharing ideas as well as that written communication based on the audience? So I think that is a huge, huge piece that is growing even more important. Walking into a meeting, for example, you have a [licensed professional] that is tenured here, you have an [academic] scientist that’s published lots, you have administrative professionals, and then you have interns. Who’s your audience? What are the ideas that need to be communicated?

The label *translating* seemed admissible because many employees were expected to listen to the needs of another and then relay those needs toward the satisfaction of the need. This satisfaction may be fulfilled by the employee directly or by turning the information over to co-workers, often technical experts. Jeremy's quote highlights this aspect:

We get the information out of them [clients] but then they also have to be able to take that information and disseminate it into a technical fashion to our drafters and our designers, so they can then pull a set of plans together.

According to participants in this research, the more opportunities college students have to practice translating, the more developed they are in their communication skills for work.

Executing

This theme label depicts employers' illogical yet actual responses. Instead of defining or elaborating on their interpretation of *communication skills*, their responses included the word *communication* and added an adverb or adjective. The adverb or adjective described the qualities of communication or expectations for the effectiveness of the message, regardless of the mode or channel. Notice how James uses the adverb *effectively* four times in this quote:

The ability to speak effectively, to be able to carry a conversation with different levels of managers, to be able to write effectively, as well. That's also a critical component—the ability to actually make requests or convey results for our studies. We deal with business owners, as well as with folks that are entry level, so we need to communicate effectively with all of them, and our positions require us to effectively communicate.

James uses the simple terms *speak*, *write*, and *communicate* with no additional richness about what he means by speaking or writing. Many participants seemed more interested in how

communication was implemented, rather than focusing on types of skills. *Professional, clear,* and *concise* were three words used by employers, as Craig's excerpt illustrates:

Probably the clear communication and the concise communication. You know, we work in a pretty fast-paced industry. With families and students, you really have a short amount of time to get your information across, so I think the ability to communicate concisely and share what you're trying to say in a quick fashion without coming across as brash or, you know, not willing to communicate with that person, but just letting them know what you're trying to say in a concise fashion. I think that's important.

In the *executing* theme, participants described the ways in which communication should be enacted. They wanted to hire employees who were concise, poised, mechanically sound in their writing and oral presentation, and so on. To these employers, communication skills meant, in part, that employees could implement an unspoken expectation of how to do communication.

RQ2: Conceptualizing Written, Oral, Visual, and Electronic Communication Skills

Written

Written communication meant types of documents, how to write (convention), and a mode of communication to these employers. First, employers stipulated the types of documents employees wrote. There was no specific type repeated across the participants; rather, 24 different references to document types were made by 18 participants. Some of the document types were typical, such as handwritten or typewritten notes and reports. By contrast, other document types were specialized to the type of work, such as lesson plans, invoices, narrative blueprints, patient summaries, magazine articles, newsletters, service requests, or tax forms.

Second, participants explained the meaning of written communication using adjectives and adverbs to describe how to write. To that end, 18 participants described several ways in

which they expected recent college graduates to write. The most commonly used adverbs were effectively ($n = 7$), concisely ($n = 6$), and correctly ($n = 5$) with other words or comments made that equate to effective, concise, and correct communication. For example, employers' mentioned "no grammar errors," "say what you're trying to convey," "use complete sentences," or "be clear" to convey how to write. The following quotation uses several adjectives and adverbs to illustrate the participants' explanations as the praxis of written communication.

Umm, written communication with the employees would be following up with customers, mostly via email. Umm, so they'd have to be able, obviously, you know, be able to write well, and it's pretty basic emails as far as they're written... and no big grammatical errors. [Uh huh.] Being able to write clear, kind of. (Vance)

Third, participants referred to writing by message channel, specifically email, text messaging, and Twitter, with some employers acknowledging paper documents were still used in some circumstances. However, several participants differentiated email and written communication as two separate categories of messaging. For example, Olivia simply stated that written communication is: "The email and the texting." Interviewer 3 and Mary had more interaction in this segment of their interview:

I3: What does written communication mean to you?

Mary: Umm, well I guess a letter, or something on a piece of paper.

I3: Sure. How do your employees use written communication?

Mary: Hmm, really we don't anymore. Really, I mean, we email. Which I, even though it is written, it's electronic. So, really we don't communicate with someone bringing me a piece of paper. Just don't do it.

As shown above, the employers in this study interpreted *written communication* as types of documents, a way of writing, and a channel for sending text-based messages.

Oral

Participating employers used many different examples of what oral communication meant to them. Their answers ranged from the simple task of talking to the more complex skill of giving employees constructive feedback. The oral communication skill mentioned most frequently was categorized and labeled as *style*. James' comment about sincerity shows the property of *style*: "If you're not genuine or sincere, or know how to speak to people on a level they can understand and appreciate, really that to me is the most important." The properties of this category include comfortable, conversant, connecting, authentic, and professional. Being *comfortable* was recorded as an *in vivo* code 11 different times in the interview data. Olivia's statement describes this property: "Just the face-to-face communication, can they look me in the eye, and talk to me for 15 seconds without having to look away, or is that uncomfortable for them?" The property *conversant* was used 8 times and synthesizes the participants' terms of *carry on a conversation* or *good social skills*. The property *connection* ($n = 6$) included relationship building or connecting with others, and the *authentic* ($n = 5$) property included open, personable, and genuine. The *in-vivo* code *professionalism* was identified as a property label, as well, and included excerpts about respect and empathy. The participants mentioned these properties as stylistic elements sought after and frequently insinuated that these styles should be carried out well. The dimensions for each of these elements could range from high to low, where an employer aspires to hire someone who has a high level of the trait.

The two oral skills of presenting and meetings were combined into one category because these participants mentioned giving presentations 14 times, participating in meetings 10 times,

and doing both 30 times, which made the two skills inseparable. Paul's quotation shows this blending: "Direct work, do presentations, so you're presenting to the team, we do a startup meeting where you are having to communicate things back and forth, so lots of communication." The properties of audience adaptation and frequency were often mentioned in connection with presenting and meetings. For example, Luis illustrates audience adaptation in this excerpt: "So you have to kind of tailor the presentations to get at the necessary information to move forward without overwhelming people." Another notable property was frequency, with meetings and presentations ranging from daily to intermittent. Mary shows this dimension:

But, you know, we have a lot of meetings here, so we do, every morning we have a morning sync where the IT department meets, and says what they did yesterday, what they plan on doing today, what was successful, any problems, and such, and so that's great for communication, and to keep in touch with everyone.

In brief, the interconnection between presenting and meetings illuminated another, salient property of oral communication skills.

The remaining six categories had more than 13 but fewer than 20 mentions each by the participants. Taken together, these skills garner attention because the employers' interpretations of oral communication differed in several ways from what typical public speaking or interpersonal communication textbooks might contain. These categories, the number of times they were mentioned, and the properties and dimensions are presented in Table 2. In sum, the participants' responses about the meaning of oral communication skills were extensive and varied. Analysis showed two salient categories of oral communication—style and presenting/meetings—while also acknowledging other categories of clear and concise, verbiage, teams/groups, simple meaning, telephone, and other than communication.

Visual

The responses to questions about visual communication followed two strands of logic. First, employers responded in ways that aligned with data visualization. They mentioned PowerPoint, charts, graphs, videos, or pictures. For example, Craig said, “It seems like we’re doing more charts and graphs and things that are visually perceived to give people an understanding.” Jeremy explained the visuals used in the architectural consulting industry:

That would be putting together a presentation. It could be taking our set of documents and walking through them with an owner or rolling out the blueprints. Probably the biggest one would be putting together a PowerPoint presentation and conveying that.

These excerpts represent quotes from participants who linked “information seen not heard” (Xander) with the phrase *visual communication*.

Second, employers responded in ways educators would likely not expect by mentioning nonverbal communication behaviors. Derek was forthright when saying, “I don’t know what you mean by that [visual communication].” Participants who were unfamiliar with this term frequently mentioned the visual appearance of an individual, specifically their attire, facial expressions, posture, or body language. Tyson captures this understanding:

I would be visually observing them as soon as they walk in the door, how they represent themselves, do they shake the hand well, do they look you in the eye, do they have a firm handshake, do they dress for the position, so you’re looking for that visual input as well.

Responses like these indicated some employers associate the phrase *visual communication* with nonverbal communication.

Electronic

Employers' immediate responses about electronic communication reflected the emphasis on email by nearly all participants. Email was overwhelmingly described as pervasive and the *modus operandi*. Upon further probing, additional considerations of electronic communication were mentioned, such as text messaging, social media, and web applications. The responses about electronic communication underscored the multimodal nature of communication. Nolan, for example, indicated, "I mean its video, and graphics, and text, and can even be really, you know, oral [Yeah.] based, you know, I mentioned just a narration that we go through on our YouTube videos, so it's, you know, anything that's transmitted digitally." Craig, similarly showed overlap among modes:

To me electronic is email, um, it's the communication through like social media, so Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, you know anything that requires technology to communicate. So we also do like Prezi presentations, PowerPoint, I think that's more like your, you know, falls within that category too.

Craig considered PowerPoint to be electronic communication, whereas other participants considered PowerPoint to be a form of visual communication. In sum, electronic communication skills were primarily equated to email and also reinforced the multimodal aspects of communication processes.

Discussion

This study was designed to understand what employers mean by *communication skills* and how they conceptualize written, oral, visual, and electronic communication. The findings show some common understandings of communication skills regardless of industry or occupation. Managers sought college graduates who could build and maintain relationships through their communication; who could listen and translate information to/from clients and

coworkers; and who could execute communication professionally, clearly, and concisely. These findings span several industries, each with its own unique vantage point on communication skills, yet collectively able to compose a harmonized rendition of communication skills. These three themes were evident regardless of the mode of transmission or type of work.

These participants also recognized communication skills in each mode that could be used on the job, regardless of the industry or type of work. This study, combined with others (e.g., Alshare et al., 2011; Bertelson & Goodboy, 2009; Conrad & Newberry, 2011; Crosling & Ward, 2002; DeKay 2012; Gray, 2010) supports professional communication faculty members by providing detailed information to close the gap between employers and instructors. Implications of the findings are discussed as they relate to genre theory and closing-the-gap studies.

Genres in Theory and Genres in Practice

Genre theory purports that writing is best taught with the activity in mind, rather than as an activity unto itself without context. In this vein, employers' perspectives on workplace communication sometimes agreed with genre theorists' perspectives. Employers often thought of written communication skills in terms of specific document types, which they understood to be situated within specific contexts of use. Like rhetorical genre theorists, employers recognize a close association between types of communication and the uses of those communication types. These employers also placed a strong emphasis on the channel used to convey written messages, noting email, text messaging and Twitter. With this finding in mind, instructors could devote attention to the writing conventions germane to these avenues, which supports genre theory.

However, employers are not rhetorical genre theorists. In fact, they often indicated they expected employees' communication to demonstrate universal traits that blanket all occupations and industries. Rhetorical genre concepts may help students discover successful communication strategies in their workplace, but students should also understand that, although genre theorists

understand these strategies to be provisional, their workplace supervisors are likely to understand them to be universal communication norms. These findings thus challenge genre theorists to consider if some aspects of communication could be consistent across genres.

Implications for Closing-the-Gap Research

This study contributes to closing-the-gap (Brent, 2011) research by applying qualitative research methods to solicit rich elaborations of the meaning of communication skills from employers' perspectives. Faculty members can enrich content in communication courses with the applicable findings from this study. These findings, while not generalizable, are nonetheless informative because of their in-depth explanations of how some employers understand communication skills.

Written. Written communication was interpreted by these employers as types of documents, a way of writing, or a mode of message dissemination. As a document type, the employers, taken together, mentioned many different types of documents. These documents were industry or job specific. There was no document type that surfaced with repetition among these participants. This finding suggests the instruction of document preparation is best suited for advanced, discipline specific communication courses.

These employers also emphasized the praxis of written communication. Specifically, they emphasized effective, concise, and correct writing skills. In this way, the participants seemed to be relying on grammar rules and the mechanics of writing to frame their understanding of written communication skills. These fundamental elements of writing are valued by employers. Written communication was also important as employers discussed the theme of *executing*, in which employees were expected to be concise, complete, and mechanically sound in their writing.

Communication professors who care about closing the gap could evaluate the presentation of students' ideas in written form with, at a minimum, properties of effective, concise, and correct.

Oral. Oral communication was conceptualized by these employers most strongly as style of communication, participating in meetings, and presenting. Oral communication style elements included comfort talking with others, ability to carry on a conversation and connect with others, authenticity in their interactions, and professionalism, elements closely affiliated with interpersonal communication. Participants in this research identified *relating* as paramount in communication skills sought after by employers. DeKay (2012) described interpersonal communication as “a largely unexplored region” (p. 449) in business communication. The current study reinforces the need to expand interpersonal communication course offerings or include interpersonal communication competencies in professional communication courses. Together with the findings from Ortiz, Region-Sebest, and MacDermott (2016), the inclusion of presenting and meetings in communication textbooks and relevant courses remains pertinent to close the gap. Similarly, working in groups and teams are student-centered learning strategies frequently utilized in communication courses. Professional technical communicators support such an inclusion, as well, when they ranked collaboration number two out of 63 workplace competencies (Rainey et al., 2005). Courses dedicated to group communication, which show a marked increase in relatively recent years (Bertelsen & Goodboy, 2009), would be ideal advanced communication courses specific disciplines could consider.

Overall, there were several attributes of oral communication mentioned by these employers, some of which constitute named courses in higher education curricula. Keyton and colleagues' (2013) findings of verbal workplace communication behaviors mesh with the findings in the current study, particularly with the oral communication skills mentioned with less

frequency, to close the gap between instruction and praxis. Previous studies (e.g., Coffelt et al., 2015; Maes et al., 1997) have emphasized the high value employers place on oral communication skills. Courses such as interpersonal communication, public speaking, or group communication would be beneficial to fulfill communication requirements. Certainly, investment in relevant courses or assignments exposes students to the competencies their employers expect.

Visual. The responses about visual communication followed two strands of thinking for these participants. First, employers translated the phrase visual communication to charts and graphs, what visual communication scholars refer to as data visualization. This type of visual communication is an important way to translate information to an audience as participants described in the *translating* theme. In this way, faculty members have closed the gap by teaching content that directly connects to employers' workplace needs. Professional communication faculty receive validation from this study that inclusion of data visualization concepts is warranted, a finding that substantiates previous arguments for visual rhetoric (e.g., Brumberger, 2005).

Second, some employers equated visual communication with nonverbal communication. In this way, the terminology holds divergent meanings between some employers and faculty with students positioned in the middle. If this term were used by a recent college graduate on a job interview, there could be immediate misunderstanding between them. Setting the terminology aside, there are implications of this divergence from at least two perspectives. First, professional communication faculty could consider an alternative term besides *visual communication* to capture the meaning of messages seen but not spoken. Such a suggestion could, however, devastate scholars and authors who have used this terminology for years. Second, employers' interpretation of this term as nonverbal communication underscores the relevance of this

communication content, which is often a dedicated course at many colleges and universities. A nonverbal communication course could be included as a suggested course to fulfill communication requirements and bridge the gap between instruction and practice.

Electronic. The primary identification of email as electronic communication coupled with the multimodal aspects of other electronic forms of communication suggest updates to professional communication pedagogy. Email is so pronounced, in fact, the heuristic used for this study could designate the E as email rather than electronic! Perhaps the participants with this understanding of electronic communication support the views of Jackson (2007), who suggests technologies “call on us to reexamine the way we see communication” (p. 10).

The participants had two ways of thinking about communication and technology. In one vein, participants denied the use of written communication skills because their organizational members no longer wrote letters or memos that were distributed on paper. In other words, the activity of writing and the medium of paper were inseparable. Instead, these participants referred to any text-based communication as electronic communication. With this application, writing courses would need to be renamed to electronic communication to close the gap, a likely absurdity to instructors. In another vein, participants saw electronic communication as a medium to deliver messages, akin to a letter or telephone, but not a distinct form of communication. As a delivery mechanism, electronic devices offer a range of capabilities with some able to simultaneously blend written, oral, and visual communication skills. Indeed, is it possible for electronic communication to exist without any of the other three? Certainly written, oral, and visual communication can transpire without technology. This second way of understanding suggests that, to close the gap, communication concepts devoted to writing, speaking, and visualizing could be foregrounded in multimodal communication or designated communication

courses. In fact, the phrase *electronic communication* may be a misnomer. Multimodal communication programs may want to teach writing, speaking, and visualizing conventions based on the delivery mechanism, including but not restricted to electronic devices.

Concluding Remarks

Instructors of communication courses who blend employers' perspectives into their communication courses benefit from the results of this study. Employers may use different communication terminology from their counterparts in higher education, but much of what employers understand about communication skills matches what communication professors teach. In this way, the gap in awareness between employers and instructors is not as wide as some may believe. Rather than a gap in meaning, a gap may exist between matching the appropriate courses with students. Further, a gap may not reside between employers and instructors, but could be perceived because of students' application or transfer (Brent, 2011; Perkins & Salomon, 1992) from courses to employment situations. These alternative hypotheses beg for future examination.

The current study does not purport to reflect an inclusive set of communication skills that are generalizable to representative organizations or employers. Rather, the findings take an ideographic approach common in qualitative research (see Bryman, 1999) and penetrate into deeper meanings of communication skills than survey methods allow. Employers are given voice so they can describe their point of view on *communication skills* and can elaborate on their application of the phrase based on their employment experiences through thick, rich descriptions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The criteria commonly used to evaluate qualitative research—credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Jackson, Drummond, & Camara, 2007)—were addressed when describing the research procedures and presenting results.

Future studies on workplace communication skills would benefit from a critical analysis of why some skills are privileged and who benefits from these skills. Research participants who are predominantly White report on preferred communication norms indicative of White cultural expectations. As such, employers from marginalized groups do not have voice in conveying communication expectations for the recent college graduates they hire. Likewise, students are deprived of learning communication skills necessary when interacting with diverse others.

Educators will persist in their educational efforts and employers will expect communication competence from college graduates. The intent is not to suggest that all communication pedagogy should be driven by employers' perspectives. Indeed, the results of the current study are limited because they stem from a small number of individuals who were recruited by referral. Rather, the intent of this discussion is twofold. First, these results contribute to a larger conversation about differences between employers and instructors on the meaning of communication skills. Disciplines should continue to select communication course requirements that most closely align with their industry, a practice that aligns with genre theory. Second, faculty members in communication disciplines can incorporate these, and other closing-the-gap findings, into their course design and learning outcome discussions. Communication disciplines rely on an array of resources to compose their individual courses and daily activities. The results here highlight perspectives from employers, voices that also have a stake in the communication praxis of college graduates.

References

- Alshare, K. A., Lane, P. L., & Miller, D. (2011). Business communication skills in information systems (IS) curricula: Perspectives of IS educators and students. *Journal of Education for Business, 86*, 186–194. doi:10.1080/08832323.2010.497819
- Anson, C. M. (2016). The Pop Warner Chronicles: A case study in contextual adaptation and the transfer of writing ability. *College Composition and Communication, 67*, 518–549.
Retrieved from www.ncte.org
- Bawarshi, A. S., & Reiff, M. J. (2010). *Genre: An introduction to history, theory, research, and pedagogy*. West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press and The WAC Clearinghouse.
- Beason, L. (2001). Ethos and error: How business people react to errors. *College Composition and Communication, 53*, 33–64. Retrieved from www.ncte.org
- Beaufort, A. (2007). *College writing and beyond: A new framework for university writing instruction*. Logan, UT: Utah State University.
- Bertelsen, D. A., & Goodboy, A. K. (2009). Curriculum planning: Trends in communication studies, workplace competencies, and current programs at 4-year colleges and universities. *Communication Education, 58*, 262–275. doi:10.1080/03634520902755458
- Brent, D. (2011). Transfer, transformation, and rhetorical knowledge: Insights from transfer theory. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication, 25*, 396–420.
doi:10.1177/1050651911410951
- Brumberger, E. R. (2005). Visual rhetoric in the curriculum: Pedagogy for a multimodal workplace. *Business Communication Quarterly, 68*, 318–333.
doi:10.1177/1080569905278863

- Bryman, A. (1999). The debate about quantitative and qualitative research. In A. Bryman & R. G. Burgess (Eds.), *Qualitative research: Vol. 1* (pp. 35-69). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Campbell, K. K., & Jamieson, K. H. (1978). Form and genre in rhetorical criticism: An introduction. In K. K. Campbell & K. H. Jamieson (Eds.), *Form and genre: Shaping rhetorical action* (pp. 9–32). Falls Church, VA: The Speech Communication Association.
- Coffelt, T. A., Baker, M. J., & Corey, R. C. (2016). Business communication practices from employers' perspectives. *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, 79, 300–316. doi:10.1177/2329490616644014
- Conrad, D., & Newberry, R. (2011). 24 business communication skills: Attitudes of human resource managers versus business educators. *American Communication Journal*, 13, 4–23. Retrieved from ac-journal.org
- Creswell, J. W. (1997). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Crosling, G., & Ward, I. (2002). Oral communication: The workplace needs and uses of business graduate employees. *English for Specific Purposes*, 21, 41–57.
doi:10.1016/S08894906(00)00031-4
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2000). The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 1-29). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- DeKay, S. H. (2012). Interpersonal communication in the workplace: A largely unexplored region. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 75, 449–452.
doi:10.1177/1080569912458966

- Gray, F. E. (2010). Specific oral communication skills desired in new accountancy graduates. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 73, 40–67. doi:10.1177/1080569909356350
- Hannah, D. R., & Lautsch, B. A. (2011). Counting in qualitative research: Why to conduct it, when to avoid it, and when to closet it. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 20, 14-22. doi:10.1177/1056492610375988
- Jackson, M. H. (2007). Should emerging technologies change business communication scholarship? *Journal of Business Communication*, 44, 3–12. doi:10.1177/0021943606295781
- Jackson, R. L., Drummond, D. K., & Camara, S. (2007). What is qualitative research? *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, 8, 21-28. doi:10.1080/17459430701617879
- Jensen, R. E., Christy, K., Gettings, P. E., & Lareau, L. (2013). Interview and focus group research: A content analysis of scholarship published in ranked journals. *Communication Methods and Measures*, 7, 126-133. doi:10.1080/19312458.2013.789838
- Jones, C. G. (2011). Written and computer-mediated accounting communication skills: An employer perspective. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 74, 247–271. doi:10.1177/1080569911413808
- Kassim, H., & Ali, F. (2010). English communicative events and skills needed at the workplace: Feedback from the industry. *English for Specific Purposes*, 29, 168–182. doi:10.1016/j.esp.2009.10.002
- Keyton, J., Caputo, J., Ford, E., Fu, R., Leibowitz, S., Liu, T., Polasik, S., Ghosh, P., & Wu, C. (2013). Investigating verbal workplace communication behaviors. *Journal of Business Communication*, 50, 152-169. doi:10.1177/0021943612474990

- Kramer, M. W. (2010). *Organizational socialization: Joining and leaving organizations*. Malden, MA: Polity.
- Kress, G., & Van Leeuwen, T. (2001). *Multimodal discourse: The modes and media of contemporary communication*. London, UK: Edward Arnold.
- Lentz, P. (2013). MBA students' workplace writing: Implications for business writing pedagogy and workplace practice. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 76, 474–490.
doi:10.1177/1080569913507479
- Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2011). *Qualitative communication research methods* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Maes, J. D., Weldy, T. G., & Icenogle, M. L. (1997). A managerial perspective: Oral communication competency is most important for business students in the workplace. *Journal of Business Communication*, 34, 67–80. doi:10.1177/002194369703400104
- Miller, C. R. (1984). Genre as social action. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 70, 151–167.
doi:10.1080/00335638409383686
- National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE; 2017). *Job Outlook 2017*. Retrieved from NACE website www.naceweb.org
- Ortiz, L. A., Region-Sebest, M., & MacDermott, C. (2016). Employer perceptions of oral communication competencies most valued in new hires as a factor in company success. *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, 79, 317-330.
doi:10.1177/2329490615624108
- Perkins, D., & Salomon, G. (1992). The science and art of transfer. In A. L. Costa, J. Bellanca, & R. Fogarty (Eds.), *If minds matter: A forward to the future* (pp. 201–209). Palatine, IL: IRI/Skylight Publishing, Inc.

- Petraglia, J. (1995). Introduction: General writing skills instruction and its discontents. In J. Petraglia (Ed.), *Reconceiving writing, rethinking writing instruction* (pp. xi–xvii). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Rainey, K. T., Turner, R. K., & Dayton, D. (2005). Do curricula correspond to core competencies for technical communicators. *Technical Communication*, 52, 323–352. Retrieved from www.stc.org
- Reinsch, N. L., & Gardner, J. A. (2014). Do communication abilities affect promotion decisions? Some data from the C-Suite. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 28, 31–57. doi:10.1177/1050651913502357
- Reinsch, L., & Shelby, A. N. (1996). Communication challenges and needs: Perceptions of MBA students. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 59, 36–53. doi:10.1177/108056999605900104
- Reinsch, N. L., & Shelby, A. N. (1997). What communication abilities do practitioners need? Evidence from MBA students. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 60, 7–29. doi:10.1177/108056999706000401
- Reinsch, N. L., & Turner, J. W. (2006). Ari, R U there? Reorienting business communication for a technological era. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 20, 339–356. doi:10.1177/1050651906287257
- Rounsaville, A., Goldberg, R., & Bawarshi, A. (2008). From incomes to outcomes: FYW students' prior genre knowledge, meta-cognition, and the question of transfer. *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, 32, 97–112. Retrieved from wpacouncil.org

- Russell, D. R. (1995). Activity theory and its implications for writing instruction. In J. Petraglia (Ed.), *Reconceiving writing, rethinking writing instruction* (pp. 51–78). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Saladaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Snow, D. A. (1980). The disengagement process: A neglected problem in participant observation research. *Qualitative Sociology*, 3, 100-122. doi:10.1007/BF00987266
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Waner, K. K. (1995). Competencies needed by employees as perceived by business faculty and business professionals. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 58, 51–57.
doi:10.1177/108056999505800410
- Wardrope, W. J. (2002). Department chairs' perceptions of the importance of business communication skills. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 65, 60–72.
doi:10.1177/108056990206500406
- Wardrope, W. J., & Bayless, M. L. (1999). Content of the business communication course: An analysis of coverage. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 62, 33–40.
doi:10.1177/108056999906200404

Appendix A

Interview Guide

OPENER TO GET THEM RELAXED/TALKING

- Tell me about the kind of work this company/organization does.
- Tell me what kind of work you do. And what do the employees you supervise/manage do?
- What qualities, attributes, and skills make for a good employee?

As you know, our study aims to understand the meaning of the term ‘communication skills’ to employers. When I ask, what communication skills do you seek in a recent college graduate, what comes to mind? Why are these important? Do you value any more than another?

Some universities use a WOVE approach to communication – written, oral, visual, and electronic. What does “_____” communication mean to you? Tell me about the ways your employees use _____ communication. (insert each mode) What do you think about one or two classes teaching these communication attributes?

What communication skills are you willing to coach/develop on your own? Why is that? What skills are you willing to pay for training? Why is that?

Tell me about a situation when an employee communicated in a way you identified as exemplary. Another? Why did this situation stand out to you? Probe until you are satisfied with the variety of experiences or the participant demonstrates fatigue.

Tell me about a great communicator you have or currently supervise. What does he/she do well?

Tell me about a situation when an employee communicated in a way you identified as problematic. Another? What was the issue with this approach? Probe until you are satisfied with the variety of experiences or the participant demonstrates fatigue.

Tell me about a former or current employee who has questionable communication skills. What does he/she struggle with?

Have you ever dismissed an employee because of a communication issue? What were the circumstances, as much as you can share without revealing confidential information? Our focus with this question is on the communication skills deemed most egregious.

What communication deficiencies do you observe and you think, ‘why didn’t they learn that before they got on the job?’

What else do you believe educators need to know about communication skills?

What didn’t I ask you that you thought I would?