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Business Communication Practices From Employers' Perspectives

Tina Coffelt

Iowa State University, tcoffelt@iastate.edu

Matthew J. Baker

Iowa State University

Robert C. Corey

Iowa State University, bccorey@iastate.edu

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Abstract

This study investigates the meaning of *communication skills* from employers' perspectives. Students enrolled in a business communication course were asked to contact potential employers in their fields of interest, requesting information about important communication skills in those fields. Using content analysis, two coders familiar with business communication analyzed 52 of the resulting open-ended responses. The analysis of 165 skills suggests employers recall oral communication more frequently than written, visual, or electronic communication skills. Of oral communication subskills, interpersonal communication was mentioned more than other workplace communication skills.

Keywords

written, oral, visual, or electronic communication

Disciplines

Organizational Communication

Comments

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Business Communication Practices from Employers' Perspectives: Situating Public Speaking within Workplace Communication

Abstract

This study inductively investigates the meaning of *communication skills* from employers' perspectives and situates public speaking within workplace communication. Students enrolled in a business communication course were asked to contact potential employers in their fields of interest, requesting information about important communication skills in those fields. Using content analysis (Krippendorf, 1980), two coders familiar with business communication analyzed 52 of the resulting open-ended responses. The analysis of 165 skills suggests public speaking is recalled by employers less frequently than written, oral, visual, or electronic communication skills. Interpersonal communication skills were mentioned more than other workplace communication skills.

Key words: public speaking; interpersonal, oral, visual or written communication

Business Communication Practices from Employers' Perspectives: Situating Public Speaking within Workplace Communication

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) invites employers to rank skills they value in recent college graduates via the Job Outlook survey. This annual survey is widely mentioned to support several initiatives in higher education, including programmatic and curricular decisions (Ober, 2009). For disciplines such as English, Speech, and Communication, the communication items hold particular importance. The survey items most directly related to communication read, "Ability to communicate verbally with people inside and outside an organization" and "Ability to create and/or edit written reports." These phrases collapse many facets of verbal and written communication skills that minimize the breadth and depth of communication practices needed in contemporary organizations. As such, business communication instructors are left with little guidance about the valence of course topics and how to best allocate time to oral, written, visual, and electronic modes of communication.

Scholars have responded by designing focused studies querying employers or recent graduates about communication skills needed within specific careers or via an appointed mode (i.e., written or oral). Subsequently, the results from these studies feature either written or oral communication skills. Examining one mode contributes to intricate awareness within a particular mode; however, a study that simultaneously evaluates the utilization of multiple modes would help business communication instructors design curricula reflective of those modes. Methodologically, these studies furnish *a priori* topics to employers or students and rarely allow employers to spontaneously recall needed communication skills or articulate what *communication* means to them. The contemporary business environment may call upon greater use of visual or electronic communication, modes which are often overlooked in academic

studies. This study investigates the prevalence of multiple modes of business communication that employers seek from college graduates and situates public speaking within these modes.

Additionally, the study design solicits open-ended responses without cuing predetermined skills.

Literature Review

This atheoretical study embeds its argument in prior studies on employment-related communication skills from the perspectives of employers or recent graduates. This literature review spotlights key studies that have amplified the NACE survey conceptualization of communication skills, which curtails communication skills to *verbal communication* and *written reports*. NACE has an established reputation among career services professionals at institutions of higher education. Its approach offers a sweeping perspective on skills and attributes employers rank in order of importance. As such, communication skills are evaluated alongside other important competencies such as decision making and problem solving, analyzing quantitative data, possessing technical knowledge related to the job, or demonstrating proficiency with computer software programs, among others (NACE, 2014). While many business communication instructors embed a medley of written, oral, visual, and electronic communication skills into business communication courses, both the NACE survey and The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) International (2015) standards emphasize verbal and written communication. Not surprisingly, scholars have investigated written and oral communication skills more than visual and electronic skills.

Verbal and written communication skills typically rank very high on NACE's *a priori* list of 10 qualities. However, in 2013, *create and/or edit written reports* fell to 9th place while *verbally communicate with persons inside and outside the organization* held the 1st position. The ranking approach assists university instructors by justifying particular assignments for inclusion

in the coursework. Further, disciplines with direct ties to any of the 10 qualities can maneuver the information to recruit and retain students. However, these data are limited by a small response rate (25.2%) and a sample size ($n = 244$). This sample could be biased in myriad ways, particularly when considering the tremendous variety of organizations in the United States.

Additionally, the range between the highest and lowest average score is a slim 1.08, and there are no indicators of whether the differences among skills are significantly different from each other.

So while it seems that verbal communication skills are the most important on the NACE list, they may not be significantly more important than the second ranked skill in 2013, *ability to work in a team structure*. Further, while written and verbal communication skills are presented for ranking by employers in the NACE survey methodology, other modes of communication are not available for employers to rank (NACE, 2015). As a result, business communication instructors are less aware of how employers demand or value visual and electronic communication skills. The next sections highlight the ways scholars have examined verbal, written, visual, and electronic business communication skills.

Oral Communication Skills

Oral communication skills comprise innumerable traits, qualities, and attributes, such as public speaking, leading meetings, or negotiating a contract, to name but a few. The authors of this article distinguish public speaking as a specific context for communication, which is known for its oral emphasis. Public speaking is a specific practice relying heavily, although not entirely, on oral communication. In fact, public speaking incorporates nonverbal communication and frequently augments messages using visual communication elements. Moreover, electronic modes of delivery through webinars, for example, blend public speaking and electronic communication. Another aspect of oral communication includes interpersonal communication,

which focuses on dyadic, intentional actions oriented toward other (Bochner, 1989). These conceptualizations differentiate public speaking from interpersonal communication and facilitate shared understanding between the authors and the readers.

Scholars have undertaken the task of understanding oral communication skills necessary for business communication. For example, in one study focusing on verbal communication skills (Keyton et al., 2013), researchers extracted over 300 verbal communication behaviors from organizational communication textbooks and publications; after refining the list to 163, the researchers surveyed 126 employees to determine whether they had heard or observed those 163 at work the previous day. Of the original 163 verbal communication behaviors, 43 were observed or heard by at least 50 percent of the employees surveyed. The top 10 skills included listening, asking questions, discussing, sharing information, agreeing, suggesting, getting feedback, seeking feedback, answering questions, and explaining. The 43 communication behaviors were then analyzed into four factors: information sharing, relational maintenance, expressing negative emotion, and organizing.

Similarly, Gray (2010) administered a questionnaire with an aim on 27 oral communication skills perceived to be important in new accounting graduates. These accountants identified listening attentiveness, listening responsiveness, conveying professional attitude of respect and interest in clients, asking for clarification or feedback from management, and speaking on the telephone/making conference calls with clients as the five most important skills. In a study comparing the perceived importance of communication skills between business faculty and employers, Conrad and Newberry (2011) distilled a list of seven interpersonal skills from 217 publications that were cited by a majority of the publications' authors. These seven skills included listening actively, building rapport, exhibiting emotional self-control, building trust,

relating to those with different backgrounds, showing respect, and trust building—all skills that incorporate some degree of oral communication. Notably, no statistically significant difference was found between the perceptions of faculty and employers with one exception. Employers perceived showing respect as significantly more important than did faculty members.

Employers' interest in interpersonal communication was also noticed by DeKay (2012), whose qualitative analysis of emails from providers of business communication training showed that holding difficult conversations was the most frequently marketed training program. These studies feature the multifaceted nature of oral communication skills, which contrasts considerably from the one item on the NACE survey. These studies also evaluate interpersonal communication skills more than public speaking skills.

Written Communication Skills

Written communication skills, similar to oral communication, envelop a plethora of qualities and attributes. One study (Beason, 2001) delved deeply into specific writing skills by asking 14 business professionals to report how much they are bothered by five common grammar errors. On average, the business professionals ranked the five errors (from most to least bothersome) as fragments, misspellings, word-ending errors, fused sentences, and quotation mark errors. With such a fine-grain analysis, however, variation occurred based on not only the participants' perceptions but also the individual contexts of the errors (e.g., some misspelled words were perceived as more bothersome than others). Further, an analysis of accountants' writing skills showed that organizing sentences and paragraphs was identified as an essential need (Jones, 2011). Writing skills were also parsed into logical, organized, clear, or professional (Lentz, 2013) in another study. Here, the emphasis was on the qualities of writing, rather than specific writing skills that are sought by employers.

With technology seeming to place electronic communication at the forefront of many individual's minds, traditional writing skills could be viewed as outdated or less important. However, department chairs across six business disciplines ranked writing-related skills in the top 4 most important skills out of the 34 presented to them in a questionnaire (Wardrope, 2002); the other skills, listed in order as they were ranked, related to cultural literacy, technology-mediated communication, interpersonal communication, listening skills, and group/team skills. Further, after compiling a list of 24 frequently cited communication skills, Conrad and Newberry (2011) found that business leaders placed significantly more importance on the skill of writing business correspondence than did business teachers. Jones (2011) specifically incorporated emerging technologies in one study on writing skills for accountants, presenting employers with 26 writing and technology-mediated written skills. Employers ranked traditional writing skills in the top seven spots, with the technology-mediated skill of effective email writing being ranked in the eighth position. Clearly, traditional writing skills are still valued by employers, even in a technology-focused business environment. However, the evolving use of technology facilitates rapid changes in communication processes.

Visual and Electronic Communication Skills

Although calls for business communication scholars and instructors to place more attention on visual communication and electronic communication have been made (e.g., Brumberger, 2005; Jackson, 2007; Reinsch & Turner, 2006; Wardrope & Bayless, 1999), studies focusing specifically on these communication skills appear far less common than those focusing specifically on written and verbal communication skills. This discrepancy could be explained by the value that instructors and practitioners place on these skills. For example, in their study of 24 business communication skills, Conrad and Newberry (2011) found that business leaders

perceived the ability to use information technology significantly more important to business than did business instructors. That said, while written and oral communication received the most coverage by business communication instructors, the electronically mediated skill of email communication still received fair attention by many instructors (Russ, 2009).

Alternatively, this discrepancy could be explained by the difficulty of classifying certain skills as written, oral, visual or electronic. For example, Wardrope and Bayless (1999) group the visual communication skill of “prepare graphics for presentations” into a “technology” category (p. 39). Additionally, in his review of business communication course curriculum, Russ (2009) placed “design and use visual aids” into a “public speaking” category (p. 400). These instances recognize visual communication within the business communication modes and demonstrate the difficulty of situating visual communication within a multimodal, business communication analysis. Despite these cases, visual communication skills garner little attention within the business communication research, yet may hold increasing importance among business communication instructors (Sharp & Brumberger, 2013).

Additional Perspectives

In addition to examining oral, written, visual, and electronic communication skills, a few studies concentrated on recognizing communication skills by specific occupations, which benefits professors who teach communication classes with homogeneous majors. For example, accountants need to be able to write clearly and precisely (Jones, 2011), listen, and convey respect for clients (Gray, 2010). However, business communication instructors often teach students from multiple majors, and findings for one occupation may be troublesome if generalized to other occupations. Relying on data from specific disciplines misrepresents the various communication needs of students and employers. Employers likely expect a robust set of

communication competencies that cannot be fulfilled when students are limited to one discipline's preferences for communication skills. Conducting research on a given occupation provides insight for students in a given major, but faculty members who teach business communication courses open to many majors cannot assume that the skills found to be salient in one occupation are applicable to all.

In addition to recognizing skills within distinct occupations, some studies have examined important business communication skills using samples of specific users or audiences, such as employees (Lentz, 2013; Reinsch & Shelby, 1996), business faculty (Waner, 1995), business department chairs (Wardrope, 2002), or students (Alshare, Lane, & Miller, 2011). For example, one study asked MBA students to describe difficult communication challenges from their work experience (Reinsch & Shelby, 1996). Many of the students' workplace communication challenges hinged on oral communication, mostly face-to-face or telephone communication. Certainly, "management communication classes should not overlook oral communication" (Reinsch & Shelby, 1996, p. 48).

Yet higher education institutions cannot carry the entire burden for communication competence. Consequently, for-profit companies offer communication skills training in several areas. The demand for skills training sessions from these companies contributes to understanding pervasive, rather than discipline-specific needs because they serve clients in many industries. Business communication training companies were found to market interpersonal communication training on the skills of (in descending order of frequency) having difficult conversations, speaking as a leader, giving presentations, coaching/motivational speaking, communicating with customers, and facilitating meetings (DeKay, 2012). These rankings can be beneficial if an assumption is made that supply meets demand. If that assumption is followed, the finding from

training companies demonstrates high demand for oral communication skills training, such as interpersonal skills and public speaking.

In sum, several studies provide business communication instructors insight about oral and written communication skills. However, these studies have their limitations. First, the NACE survey does not expound on the multiple dimensions of communication because its emphasis is on a vast skill set. Second, the academic research privileges oral or written communication, and other modes of communication—such as electronic or visual—receive less attention. Third, the term *communication skills* blankets multiple modes, yet studies tend to emphasize one at a time. This isolation allows for refined understandings of a given mode, yet limits the gestalt of communication needs from employers. Fourth, *a priori* lists of communication skills are provided from which employers are expected to rank order preferences or measure importance on Likert-type scales. Consequently, employers are rarely given the freedom to spontaneously identify necessary business communication skills. These limitations could be overcome by inductively soliciting information from employers about business communication skills broadly. Thus, this analysis answers the research question:

RQ: What communication skills do employers identify as important for college graduates?

Method

The researchers in the current study employ content analysis to uncover the communication skills employers identify as important for new college graduates, similar to other studies that examine communication skills (Lentz, 2013; Reinsch & Shelby, 1996; Stevens, 2005). Content analysis offers several approaches to analyze the frequency of an occurrence in a given medium. While the methods of analysis vary, their approaches are unified by objectivity,

systematization, and quantification (Kassarjian, 1977). Analysis of content (Berelson, 1952)—specific words or phrases—is of greatest import in the current study.

Sample

Students in two business communication courses completed an assignment, which generated e-mail responses from potential employers in the students' prospective career fields. The students were evaluated on their e-mail message, which asked about the types of communication skills needed for an internship or entry-level position. Specifically, the assignment sheet directed:

Your task is to compose a professionally written email to the contact person requesting information about the type, frequency, and manner of communication an intern or new hire (entry-level) would use during the course of a normal business day.

Students who received a response were instructed to share the information with the course instructor. To that end, 52 employers responded to the students' inquiries, and their professions reflected the diversity of majors present in the course.

Unit of Analysis

Each e-mail message from an employer was printed, and personally identifying information (names, e-mail addresses) was removed by one of the authors. In this way, no message content was connected to an identifiable student or professional. These messages were content analyzed following Krippendorff's (1980) approach by identifying communication skills and counting the frequency of instances that these skills were referenced. The unit of measure was one e-mail message. The unit of observation, or recording unit (Krippendorff, 1980), includes single words or brief phrases that state or describe a specific communication skill, attribute, or quality. One author selected these words or phrases and asked another author to critique the

selections. After discussion, 165 agreed upon words or phrases were highlighted so coders could clearly identify the recording unit.

The genesis for a codebook was the curriculum model at “University,” which employs a WOVE acronym to indicate coverage of written, oral, visual, and electronic communication in foundation and advanced communication courses offered through the English department. Earlier studies included skills in the written, oral, and electronic categories (i.e., DeKay, 2012; Jones, 2011; Robles, 2012), and the visual communication category introduces an emerging perspective on communication. These earlier studies also included skills of listening, nonverbal, and small group/team communication skills, which do not intuitively align with written, oral, electronic, or verbal communication, although they are commonly taught through Communication departments. Therefore, these communication skills were added as subcategories of oral communication. One category called *multimodal* provided an option to record terms or phrases applicable to all modes of delivery, such as *precision*, *accuracy*, or *correct grammar*. In sum, categories were labeled *multimodal*, *written*, *oral*, *visual*, *electronic*, and *nonverbal*. The oral grouping had subcategories of general, presenting, interpersonal, listening, and team/group (see Table 1). Examples of words or phrases from the messages were included with the category labels to facilitate coding.

Coder Training

Two undergraduate student coders who were completing an independent study in communication research were trained to code the data. They attended four training and coding sessions where the categories were defined and refined. At each session, coders calibrated their coding of five messages in the presence of two of the authors. The coders worked through two additional messages and calibrated again. After consultation, the coders were released with a

codesheet and given one week to code the messages. This same procedure was repeated until intercoder reliability reached an acceptable level.

Results

The research question asked what communication skills employers identify as important for new college graduates. Of the 165 communication skills identified, coders achieved strong intercoder reliability as indicated by Cohen's kappa ($\kappa = .816$). The 139 skills agreed upon were organized into their categories (Table 2), and then these categories were ranked from greatest to least (Table 3).

Descriptions of the skills in each category further highlight the specific aspects of communication employers identified. The multimodal words or phrases employers used were broad, such as *good communication*, *professional*, or *communicates effectively*. The aspects of writing deemed noteworthy by employers included *spelling*, *grammar*, *being concise*, or a generic *strong* or *effective writing skills*. Visual elements included *display boards*, *photos*, and *communicating graphically* as specific attributes. Electronic skills were overwhelmingly listed as *e-mail* or *phone* where some employers commented on etiquette and others on the composition of written or oral messages. The oral skills were collapsed into one category, then subdivided for further clarification. Oral messages were overwhelmingly the communication skill employers most recognized. Nearly one-third ($n = 54$) of the skills identified by these employers incorporated oral communication skills as those that are relevant for new college graduates. There is considerable breadth to the term *oral communication*, and these employers provided specific examples to differentiate their oral communication preferences. General oral communication included words or phrases such as *effectively communicate orally*, *correct grammar*, or *strong verbal skills*. Interpersonal skills connect with employers' use of the terms

face-to-face communication, greeting, or asking questions, among others. *Listening, presenting,* and *team/group* were explicit words employers used that confirmed the addition of these categories. Nonverbal communication often allies with interpersonal communication, while relying on a symbol system different from spoken language. This category was therefore left by itself to which few employers mentioned nonverbal aspects of communication.

Discussion

Colleges and universities rely on information from NACE, among other sources, to justify the inclusion of communication into the curriculum. For instructors who teach business communication courses, it may be difficult to ascertain the specific communication competencies that will most benefit students if consulting NACE's simplified operationalizations of written and oral communication. Of course, including communication competencies and courses can be justified without the reliance on these sources, but the information they yield holds merit. Further, employers' interpretations of communication skills could be different from business communication instructors. To that end, the purpose of this project was to burrow into the meaning of communication skills from the perspective of employers without a preference for mode of communication or *a priori* prompts. This inductive approach uniquely contributes to the business communication skills literature as nearly all extant research utilizes deductive reasoning. Additionally, shared meaning of communication skills between instructors and employers benefits students during their collegiate development.

The results of this study show that employers perceive oral communication skills to be the predominant mode of communication needed for job performance. These oral communication skills include interpersonal, presenting, listening, and team/group. However, when oral communication skills are dissected into individual categories, then employers recall

electronic skills, multimodal communication acts, written communication, and interpersonal communication skills with near equal frequency. Other communication skills, such as groupwork and nonverbal communication were not as prevalent as the other skills among these employers. The discussion of these findings centers on the role of public speaking in workplace communication, additional modes of business communication, and the role of university administrators and employers.

The Role of Public Speaking in Business Communication

The results indicate a strong need for oral communication skills, such as interpersonal, listening, and presenting. In fact, interpersonal and oral communication skills were identified with greater frequency than written skills from this nonprobability sample. This finding aligns with previous research of CEOs who did not consider writing skills to be a top concern for promoting employees to the executive level, but rather valued interpersonal communication skills (Reinsch & Gardner, 2014). Similarly, this finding aligns with responses of managers who ranked oral communication competency as most important for new college graduates (Maes, Weldy, & Icenogle, 1997). To be clear, this assertion does not say that other modes of communication are not important. Indeed, professionals estimate they spend 25% of their time, on average, engaged in writing endeavors (Faigley & Miller, 1982). Rather, the data in this study highlight the foremost skills this sample of employers recollected. This finding substantiates the need for instrumental support of oral communication courses from university administrators.

The oral communication skill of public speaking received negligible mention from these employers. This finding could stem from the sample of employers who participated in this sample. It is possible the occupations represented by this sample rely on other modes of communication more heavily than public speaking. Another possible explanation is that, when

considered among all communication skills, these employers did not consider public speaking as a communication skill, but rather, thought of it as a unique skill independent from communication. Public speaking may be a skill that is not prevalent among some occupations, but may be a highly valued skill when needed. Thus, the frequency of public speaking situations may not be as high as day-to-day oral communication practices at work and was therefore not thought of by the employers in this sample. If asked directly, these employers could argue that public speaking is an important communication skill, but it doesn't happen regularly.

The oral skill with the most frequent mention was interpersonal communication, which has been identified as an area lacking in business communication preparation (DeKay, 2012; Reinsch & Shelby, 1996). Perhaps university requirements should include interpersonal communication as a required course. Many universities adopt a hybrid oral communication course, which includes public speaking and interpersonal communication topics. Yet some universities rely on six hours of English composition to provide sufficient communication training for students. Even if these composition courses teach a well-developed multimodal model, they still may not provide sufficient public speaking or interpersonal communication preparation for the college graduate, which seems to be salient to this sample of employers.

Written, Electronic, and Visual Business Communication

Instructors of written communication courses may be somewhat disheartened by the ranking in this analysis. Writing skills may be recalled less frequently than interpersonal communication, not because they are less important, but because they are less pervasive in organizational settings. Perhaps oral skills are highly valued in all industries and occupations, and writing skills are necessary within certain industries, occupations, or at organizational levels. Employers may also interpret written communication and e-mail as synonymous, whereas the

current study separated writing from electronic modes of communicating. This explanation supports the need for multimodal education, illustrates the intricacies of communication, and challenges the practice of delineating communication modes.

Those who teach writing may be further disenfranchised by the interpretation of writing that these employers offer. Many employers wrote *good* or *effective* writing, which are nebulous descriptors. The detailed contributions referenced *good grammar* or *spelling*, which may challenge English educators at a time when pedagogical shifts to analysis and critical thinking skills trump fundamental skill development or reinforcement. Possessing good grammar and writing skills may be a taken-for-granted assumption by instructors and employers of anyone with a high school or college degree. As such, when students are hired and these skills are lacking, employers become frustrated and note this deficiency. However, if correct grammar and spelling remain expectations of college graduates, college instructors may need to revisit their stance on teaching and evaluating these fundamental skills.

The high ranking of electronic skills is not surprising given the current pervasive technological environment. A recent study shows that electronic skills are indeed receiving attention in business communication courses (Sharp & Brumberger, 2013). However, there are two noteworthy discussion points regarding the placement of electronic communication skills among the others in this study. First, electronic skills were ranked second after the total oral communication category. At the present time, then, electronic skills may not be needed to the extent that human interaction skills are needed. A longitudinal analysis would show how needs for modes of communication shift over time. Thus, the current analysis is limited by a cross-sectional snapshot of employers' current perspectives. Second, the two striking electronic skills noted by these employers were e-mail and use of the phone. A few honorable mentions went to

social media platforms, but by and large, electronic communication skills mentioned were the use of e-mail or phone. E-mail, while often deemed an electronic mode of communication, relies on written text, which at times is written with an interpersonal tone and at others with a formal tone. Thus, classifying e-mail as an electronic communication skill may be problematic.

Regardless, instructors of oral and written communication skills find backing in this finding to devote classroom instruction to e-mail and its intricacies, a finding similarly supported by Jones (2011). Further, the phone may not be perceived as an electronic communication skill. However, many references were made to *phone skills* as a distinct communication attribute. The truncated use of phone instead of telephone warrants further investigation to understand employers' meaning. For example, they could be referring to telephone etiquette skills such as courteously answering the phone or being polite during a call. Or, employers could seek etiquette about when and when not to use cell phones during meetings or presentations.

It seems clear that business communication instructors may need to devote some attention to phone skills in myriad ways, if they do not already include it. Albeit, something seems sophomoric about teaching "telephone skills" in a college course; however, telephone etiquette, which may have been a basic skill at one point in time, may have lost its status with the advent of e-mail and text messaging. This "lost art" seems to hold value among some employers, as it has historically (Waner, 1995). Instructors who do not include telephone skills may want to consider its implementation or re-introduction.

Communication skills deemed visual were mentioned with little frequency from this sample of employers. The critical questions for instructors of business communication courses rest on three possible approaches. First, visual communication may be viewed as a support to other communication skills, such as incorporating graphics into a written report or designing

slides to accompany an oral presentation. In such a supporting role, visual communication may have been overlooked by employers in this study. Second, perhaps visual communication is an emerging trend and higher education is on the cutting edge of including this aspect as a communication competency. In this vein, instructors who are trained in oral and written communication may need professional development to teach visual communication. However, incorporating visual communication into existing classes may derogate the more salient oral or written communication learning objectives. Third, employers may not perceive visual communication as being a communication skill, but rather, as an aspect of marketing or graphic design. If this possibility were tested and supported, then business instructors could argue for some relief from teaching visual communication and defer this competency to specialized disciplines. Fourth, visual communication may be a priority in particular occupations, such as professional writing (Brumberger, 2007), but hold less prominence among a swath of employers in various disciplines. These discussion points should be carefully considered within individual multimodal communication programs as faculty evaluate their resources and curriculum for business communication.

In sum, the findings from this study suggest that oral communication skills, in their myriad forms, are in high demand from employers. Written and electronic skills are highly valued by employers as well, but in different ways from what instructors in higher education institutions may perceive. Visual communication skills seem to have little value as communication skills from this set of employers. These findings can support instructors of business communication courses when making curricular decisions. Of course, employers' preferences are not the only driver of curriculum decisions. However, if an instructor relies on data from organizations like NACE to validate the importance of communication skills, then the

employer-based audience of NACE deserves to be listened to when they offer their understanding of communication skills. Indeed, many factors play into curricular decisions, and the next section briefly discusses the influence of university administrators and employers.

University Administrators and Employers

Universities affirm the value of communication by requiring relevant coursework within the general education requirements. Additionally, many majors augment their curriculum with discipline-specific communication courses. The findings from this study assist decision makers by interpreting employers' meaning of communication skills. Two English courses seem to be the universal and time-honored norm for undergraduate preparation in communication with business communication courses supplementing this coursework for several majors. University administrators recognize the universal student presence in English courses and many English departments embrace the imperative to develop multimodal communication skills while also enhancing critical thinking. Simultaneously, university administrators place a tremendous burden on one department to confront all modes of communication. Rarely does a faculty member possess the breadth and depth of knowledge in all modes of communication as faculty preparation in graduate school continues to produce experts in specialized areas.

English departments do not have to carry this burden alone. Visual, electronic, and oral modes of communication are areas of expertise for Graphic Design, Speech Communication, or Communication Studies faculty. Recognition of the specialized army of faculty who could support students in their communication skills would benefit the enterprise on all fronts. For example, faculty from key communication disciplines could rally together and bring their strengths to develop a business communication curriculum from the perspectives of those with the expertise. Cross training of instructors with communication expertise from multimodal areas

would augment the quality of instruction. With differences already observed in business communication courses taught in either business or communication disciplines (Laster & Russ, 2010), this cross training could help ensure that similar courses are taught consistently across departments. Students would also benefit from the best possible formula of a business communication classroom experience, and employers would benefit by having students who have been exposed to high quality instruction with a multimodal communication approach.

The voice of employers may be recognized during curricular and instructional decision-making, and the translator for this perspective comes from faculty members who may or may not have valid, reliable evidence of what employers mean by communication skills. The research-to-date surveys employers, yet these studies have exhibited a modal bias (e.g., Keyton et al., 2014; Schneider, 2005). The current study attempted to overcome this limitation by using the phrase “communication skills” and enabling employers to convey their understanding. To be fair, employers may not have the anatomized understanding of communication skills or practices that academics assign. They may say “good communication skills” and conjure a prototype of a good communicator, yet not have the vocabulary to dissect their prototype into individual parts. Continued research with employers in this vein will refine their expectations.

Employers may be sending mixed messages to the academic community about their needs and the importance of communication skills. For example, recent MBA graduates noted they received no tangible reward for good writing, other than informal praise from a boss (Lentz, 2013). The findings from this study show considerable variation among employers. Perhaps employers want new hires to come to their companies with skills in place so they do not have to invest company resources in training business communication skills. However, the disconnect between employers and higher education becomes salient at this juncture because higher

education emphasizes knowledge, theory, and critical thinking over job skills. Further, the myriad communication needs of industries and careers makes skill development even more challenging. Perhaps employers should focus on the salient communication qualities necessary for their industry and specific jobs. Certainly, many companies invest resources in training.

When employers rank communication skills highly but do not reinforce their importance through sanctions, college students receive messages that some aspects of communication skills are not as important as college instructors impart. Thus, support from organizations via donor support or advisory board membership would signal the value that organizations place on strong communication competencies.

Limitations

This study is not without its limitations. First, considerable variability existed in the ways the students crafted their messages when completing the assignment. Some students contacted a member of the human resources department of a company while other students reached out to a personal contact. As a result, the responses were highly varied from formal job descriptions to informal conversations about communication. Future research can overcome this limitation by accessing databases of employers across industries and applying probability sampling methods. Sending a uniform message to a designated company employee would reduce variability, as well. Qualitative interviews would enrich this conversation to probe deeply into the skills and expectations employers hold and how these skills and expectations vary among job categories.

Second, there were challenges of looking at emergent data. Some responses included how to communicate, some identified the key audience employees interact with, some discussed quality of communication, and some intermingled these qualities in myriad configurations.

Future studies would benefit from open-ended questions that include audiences, styles, communication behaviors, channel of communication, and quality of interaction.

In sum, *communication* is a broad and complex term, encompassing many facets of interaction. Industry standards are so unique and distinct that it may be impossible for one or two service courses coupled with an advanced business communication course to prepare students for the breadth and depth of communication skills expected in the workplace. Employers can reinforce the education of communication by explaining their interpretations of communication skills and supporting the development of these skills among students. Instructors should continue to consider their student audience and integrate workplace expectations when developing business communication courses.

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