

Employers' Rankings of Communication Skills Needed for a Certificate in Corporate Communication

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Businesses in the 21st Century face many challenges and opportunities including, but not limited to, attracting and retaining the most talented workforce possible to remain competitive. As organizations restructure to become more proactive and innovative, they find it necessary to push decision-making authority to lower-levels, use cross-functional teams, and encourage lifelong learning. This restructuring results in the interrelationships of communication, culture, and strategy becoming more visible as organizations change their business practices in response to changing challenges and opportunities.

Cornelissen (2014) discussed corporate communication as an integrated approach to managing communication as it transcends the specialists of individual boundaries of practitioners within organizations as well as multinationally to strategic interests of organizations at large. Many more disciplines are involved in corporate communication by design, advertising, internal (employee) communication, crisis communication, investor relations, media, and change communication. An important aspect of this new function is that it focuses on the organization as a whole and how communication imparts to all key internal and external stakeholders, regardless of discipline, hence corporate communication (Cornelissen, 2014).

After knowing that the relationships among communication, culture, and strategy are critical to organizational competitiveness, the following question arises: What roles do leadership communication, interculturalism, and professionalism play in supporting organizational goals? A research study that provides the practice of different companies would help to create a better overview of what companies think about the importance of these relationships.

Business educators have been criticized for not adequately developing students' relevant, real-world skills emphasizing problem solving and leadership communication skills (Conrad & Newberry, 2012; Hult Labs, 2014). Van Huss and Schmohe (2014) called for re-energizing business education to emphasize those skills identified by Hult Labs (2014) including: communication, self-awareness, cross-cultural competency, team skills, collaboration, the ability to persuade others, and problem solving.

To bridge the gap between real-world practice and classroom instruction, the purpose of this study was to identify perceptions of selected top-level business executives in Midwest and Southeast states regarding specific communication skill sets employees need in the three categories: leadership communication, interculturalism, and professionalism. The results of the research will be used to inform curriculum decisions leading to the development of a Certificate in Corporate Communication.

Methodology, Demographics, and Survey

To assess business executives' ratings regarding communication skills needed in the workplace, the primary data for this research were collected from surveying selected top-level business executives in the Midwest and Southeast Regions of the United States including members of the School of Business Advisory Council who provide curriculum advice. Each participant was sent an invitation email and survey link to rate his/her perceptions on the specific skill sets of (a) leadership communication, (b) interculturalism, and (c) professionalism. The research instrument in this study included 20 questions on a Likert scale that ranged from strongly agree (SA) to strongly disagree (SD). All respondents also had the opportunity to provide additional comments to further enhance their responses to the item ratings. The survey covered the three dimensions of workplace skills. In total, 78 questionnaires were completed.

Of the 78 respondents, 54 were male (69%) and 24, female (31%). The positions held by the executives included: Director/General Manager, 28 (36%); Vice President, 14 (18%); CEO/Owner/President, 11 (14%); Human Resources Manager, 11 (14%); Communication Officer/Trainer, 5 (6%); Administrator/Office Manager, 4 (5%); Controller, 4 (5%); and Global Head of Research, 1 (1%) for a total of 99% due to rounding.

Items executives rated in the survey are shown below.

Leadership Communication

1. Recognize communication skills necessary to organizations' internal and external communication situations.
2. Interact as a team member in solving organizational communication problems.
3. Analyze the communication skills used daily by organizational leaders.
4. Recognize training and development needs of a global workforce.
5. Use appropriate crisis communication approaches in dealing with unexpected internal and external threats.
6. Consider alternatives, ethical issues, implications, and consequences in the business decision-making process.
7. Other (Please specify) _____.

Interculturalism

1. Recognize communication styles and problem-solving strategies for a culture, identify potential for misunderstandings, compare expectations of self and others.
2. Be aware of how judgments of value and reality are made by self and others, become sensitive to different ways of speaking and listening, develop readiness for making encounters and dialogue.
3. Develop language skills, research skills, analytic, interpretive, and rhetorical skills; language-learning, and cross-cultural skills.
4. Avoid idioms and jargon; avoid long, complex sentences; use active voice; avoid referring to readers by nationality.
5. Stress collaboration, use cross-functional teams, and experiment with different forms of organizational structure and leadership.
6. Demonstrate respect in various cultural contexts; being open to the idea of changing cultural attitudes.
7. Other (Please specify) _____.

Professionalism

1. Write clear, accurate, concise, and purposeful documents that have strategic impact and produce effective results.
2. Demonstrate excellent oral communication skills, expressing ideas clearly and precisely, speaking effectively, and presenting professionally.
3. Show the ability to listen effectively; create rapport during a conversation.
4. Practice effective interpersonal skills, including eye contact, body language, voice inflection, and firm handshake.
5. Portray business and/or personal skills of self-confidence, poise, preparation, business attire, appearance.
6. Other (Please specify) _____.

Executives' Survey Responses

The survey responses and supporting literature will be discussed in three areas: Leadership Communication, Interculturalism, and Professionalism.

Leadership Communication

In the area of Leadership Communication, executives responded that the most important skill was to recognize communication skills necessary to an organization's internal and external communication situations. Teamwork was the second most valued skill. Highlighting recent business problems related to ethics and crisis communication, executives rated considering alternatives, ethical issues, implications, and consequences in business decision making and communicating through crises as the third and fourth most important skills as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1.
Leadership Communication

	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA	Rating Average
Recognize communication skills necessary to organizations' internal and external communication situations.	57	21	0	0	0	0	5.73
Interact as a team member in solving organizational communication problems.	50	25	3	0	0	0	5.60
Consider alternatives, ethical issues, implications, and consequences in the business decision-making process.	42	30	5	0	1	0	5.44
Use appropriate crisis communication approaches in dealing with unexpected internal and external threats.	38	34	6	0	0	0	5.41
Analyze the communication skills used daily by organizational leaders.	27	29	18	4	0	0	5.01
Recognize training and development needs of a global workforce.	23	26	23	6	0	0	4.85

Two executives also pointed out that not all employees are in leadership roles; however, daily communication regarding the status of engagements, problems, obstacles, and other workplace issues is

critical. Care should be taken in analyzing the communication skills of leaders as this could lead to a negative attitude and frustration if the leader's skills do not meet the employee's preconceived notions. The executives suggested that a proactive and direct communication strategy with the leader could help to avoid this problem.

Three other skills were mentioned by executives as being important for leadership communication: conflict resolution, problem solving, and specific corporate communication for international issues. An overall important comment was made by one executive who emphasized that employees should recognize the goal for the company is more important than a personal immediate goal.

In his research, Men (2014) noted that strong internal communication channels are more prevalent in organizations with transformational leaders and that the best way to communicate internally is with information-centric face-to-face dialogues because employees respect leaders who take the time to have a conversation. Mayfield, Mayfield, and Sharbrough (2015) also found that internal motivational communication that conveyed top-down strategic information was a factor that leads to success in leadership communication.

Interculturalism

Another element that business executives desire in their employees is a strong sense of interculturalism, which focuses on their ability to draw similarities and differences between various cultures, geographic locations, and people. In examining research on how to work in and manage culturally diverse workplaces, rather than how to utilize different perspectives; Guo, Cockburn-Wooten, and Munshi (2014) found that exploiting the different viewpoints, instead of managing diverse perceptions leads to unique perspective and creative outcomes.

Likewise, survey respondents rated the awareness, sensitivity, and preparedness for international dialogues and interactions as the top skill in this category as shown in Table 2. Executives second highest rating concerned the ability to demonstrate respect in various cultural contexts and being open to changing cultural attitudes.

Additional advice the executives offered included: use open-ended questions for clarification; give constructive criticism of ideas, but avoid criticism of people and their presentations; control your attitude, and don't try to control others; use questions effectively.

Tupas (2014) stressed that in order for employees to be more experienced with interculturalism is for it to be included in their education, as well as everyday practice. Exposure to different cultures on a daily basis is the best way to become acclimated to conversing and conducting business. While the best way is to immerse oneself in diverse experiences, Fall, Kelly, MacDonald, Primm, and Holmes (2013) examined new ways to integrate interculturalism into education. Their study concluded that by using emotional intelligence in case studies students are better able to interpret intercultural situations. Ladegaard and Jenks (2015) discussed the importance of multicultural experiences within a business because interculturalism leads to a more professional, adaptable business.

Table 2.
Interculturalism

	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA	Rating Average
Be aware of how judgments of value and reality are made by self and others, become sensitive to different ways of speaking and listening, develop readiness for making encounters and dialogue.	45	29	4	0	0	0	5.53
Demonstrate respect in various cultural contexts; being open to the idea of changing cultural attitudes and needs.	40	33	5	0	0	0	5.45
Stress collaboration, use cross-functional teams, experiment with different forms of organizational structure and leadership.	36	36	5	0	0	0	5.40
Recognize communication styles and problem-solving strategies for a culture, identify potential for misunderstandings, compare expectations of self and others.	36	37	4	1	0	0	5.38
Avoid idioms and jargon; avoid long, complex sentences; use active voice; avoid referring to readers by nationality.	36	35	6	1	0	0	5.36
Develop language skills, research skills, analytic, interpretive, and rhetorical skills; language-learning, and cross-cultural skills.	36	26	13	2	0	0	5.25

Professionalism

The area of Professionalism drew the highest ratings of the three categories, indicating the importance executives place on these skills. Employees' ability to express ideas clearly and precisely in written and oral communication were critically important to the organization. Additionally, the ability to listen effectively and create rapport during a conversation was highly valued by the executives as shown in Table 3. As one executive stated, "Walk, Talk, and Look the Part!" Another respondent indicated that being able to present and sell ideas, persuade, effectively collaborate, and build consensus are the keys to success.

Other advice from the executives included the following: work to gain confidence in communicating as no one can do this for you, it must come from within; recognize that developing professionalism is a life-long course that must be continuously refined in the classroom and workplace.

Perhaps one of the most important elements business executives look for in employees and recent graduates is the level of professionalism of the job candidate (Kouchaki, 2015). Evetts (2011) stated that professionalism can be considered an occupational value, meaning that it is a role that adds value to the organization.

Defining professionalism or what a professional is can be very challenging, especially within the scope of business. Parkan (2008) examined the different definitions, such as the concept that professionalism is a

type of lifestyle or that professionalism is a virtue. Ultimately, professionalism in an employee results in a better, more efficient and effective way of doing business.

Table 3.
Professionalism

	SA	A	N	D	SD	NA	Rating Average
Demonstrate excellent oral communication skills, expressing ideas clearly and precisely, speaking effectively, and presenting professionally.	72	6	0	0	0	0	5.92
Show the ability to listen effectively; create rapport during a conversation.	71	7	0	0	0	0	5.91
Write clear, accurate, concise, and purposeful documents that have strategic impact and produce effective results.	62	15	0	0	0	0	5.81
Practice effective interpersonal skills, including eye contact, body language, voice inflection, and firm handshake.	62	16	0	0	0	0	5.79
Portray business and/or personal skills of self-confidence, poise, preparation, business attire, appearance.	58	16	3	0	0	0	5.71

Corporate Communication Certificate Developed Based on Executives' Responses and Literature

Sigmar, Hynes, and Hill (2012) stated that learning these skills while in school is essential to developing future employees who are able to deal with extensive networks, intercultural issues, diverse teams, and business etiquette and professionalism. Business students also need proficient writing, speaking, and listening skills.

Based on the results of this research, executives find the three areas of skills defined in this study to be important to the success of their organizations and employees in the workplace. To help students develop these three skills areas, a Certificate in Corporate Communication has been developed to emphasize the highly valued items in this survey. The Certificate will be offered to any undergraduate major, including business majors, to help prepare them for employers' expectations in the workplace.

A nine-hour Corporate Communication Certificate was created by the Department of Management, Marketing, and International Business. Students earn the certificate after successfully completing three courses: Professional Communication (CCT 201) or Managerial Reports (CCT 300W), International Business Communication (CCT 310), and Integrated Corporate Communication (CCT 550). The CCT 201 class is for any major; the CCT 300W is for business majors only. CCT 310 and CCT 550 can be taken by either business or non-business majors. These courses emphasize the three areas included in the survey. The course descriptions are shown below:

- Professional Communication. Principles and practices of modern professional communication; various types of professional letters and reports are studied; emphasis on writing letters and reports.

- **Managerial Reports.** A writing intensive study of applications of communication theory, research methods, and information technology to communication within organizations. Includes common communication tasks faced by managers; communication task and audience analysis; collecting, organizing, analyzing, and interpreting data. Emphasizes written and oral reporting.
- **International Business Communication.** Characteristics of cultural differences that alter communication symbols and meanings for international business activity. Topics include culture profiles and conducting business, business protocol, international documents/U. S. documents, negotiation strategies, and oral presentations to intercultural business audiences.
- **Integrated Corporate Communication.** Examines effective integrated communication skills to achieve organizational objectives. Emphasizes analysis and application of communication process and strategies for managerial decision-making. Examines change process, corporate culture, and negotiation issues. Provides corporate training component.

The certificate helps students develop in the areas of leadership (e.g., crisis communication, stakeholder communication, corporate training); interculturalism (e.g., international business communication, diversity skills); and professionalism (e.g., written reports, oral presentation, interpersonal skills).

This Certificate in Corporate Communication is applicable to students in any major, including nursing, psychology, teaching, social work, police studies, education, aviation, physical and occupational therapy, among others. Flyers were created and distributed to Advising Offices across campus, to support staff in Administrative Offices, and to Recruitment Offices as shown in Table 1. Flyers were also posted on Bulletin Boards throughout campus buildings and displayed on electronic monitors.

Upon completion of the three required classes, students will receive a certificate signed by the Department Chair and the Corporate Communication and Technology Coordinator in recognition of their accomplishment as shown in Figure 2.

Conclusions

Students, advisors, alumni, campus administrators, and business executives have responded favorably to the certificate. In fact, executives have asked that we expand the offerings to non-credit classes for workplace employees who need to develop their communication skills, refine their professionalism, and build their confidence.

Although student success is the primary goal for the certificate, a secondary benefit is the opportunity to showcase the communication courses to all programs on campus. Business communication educators must promote their programs, classes, and quality of instruction. A Certificate in Corporate Communication will help achieve these goals.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made for business communication educators who are considering creating a Certificate in Corporate Communication:

1. Incorporate elements of professionalism in communication courses included in the certificate program while stressing to students the importance of life-long learning. Include as many real-world exercises and cases as possible.
2. Encourage and practice active listening in all communication courses. Consider creating classroom etiquette rules that promote active listening skills.
3. Stress the importance of focused conversations with colleagues and supervisors in the workplace. Encourage students to disengage from social media and electronic devices while engaging in face-to-face conversations in the classroom and beyond.
4. Consider creating extra-curricular professional development opportunities to enhance students' communication, leadership, intercultural, and professional skills. Such activities might include workshops, seminars, lecture series, case competitions, student organizations, etc.
5. Seek buy-in from administrators who are decision makers for your discipline area.
6. Consider how to maximize the resources you have and minimize the need for additional classes or faculty.
7. Involve business executives in your planning; they will provide advocacy for your cause.
8. Communicate with advisors throughout campus to encourage support for the Certificate.
9. Encourage faculty to help promote the Certificate in their classes and in advising sessions with students.
10. Visit area high schools and freshmen summer orientation classes to inform students about the opportunity to complete the certificate.

Figure 1. Flyer for Certificate in Corporate Communication

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For any Undergraduate Major, including Business Majors!

Beginning Fall 2015, Students can earn a 9-hour Certificate upon the successful completion of the following:

- **CCT 201: Professional Communication OR CCT 300W: Managerial Reports**
- **CCT 310: International Business Communication**
- **CCT 550: Integrated Corporate Communication**

The Certificate in Corporate Communication will help you develop these areas:

<u>Leadership</u>	<u>Interculturalism</u>	<u>Professionalism</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Crisis Communication• Stakeholder Communication• Corporate Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• International Business Communication• Diversity Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Written Reports• Oral Presentations• Interpersonal Skills

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For more Information, please contact:

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Figure 2. Certificate for Corporate Communication

*Certificate of
Recognition*



Justin L. Bell
For the successful
completion of

Certificate in Corporate Communication

Department of Management, Marketing, and International Business

May 10, 2016

Dr. Faridah Awang, CCT Coordinator
Chair

Dr. Lana Carnes,

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