

# CRITICAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS: DEVELOPING COURSE COMPETENCIES TO MEET WORKFORCE NEEDS

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## Abstract

**Problem:** Employers have consistently expressed concerns about communication skill deficits among new hires entering the workforce. This regionally-based study aimed to assess employer perceptions about communication skill deficits among new employees and compare those perceptions with those of business students and faculty. **Research Questions:** In what ways do regional employer perceptions about the importance of various communication skills in the workplace differ from those of students and instructors? Which communication skills are perceived to be most important among area employers? To what extent are area employers satisfied with the communication skills of the recent business graduates they hire? Are there skill gaps that can be filled? **Research Method:** We deployed three electronic surveys designed to measure which oral and written communication skills business students, business faculty, and local employers believe are most valued and vital to career success. **Data Collection Procedures and Analysis:** We surveyed 292 undergraduate business, economics, and accounting majors and 19 full-time faculty members and 10 lecturers in the business department at a mid-sized public university in the Midwest. Five regional business associations were enlisted to distribute the employer version of the survey to members who work with, supervise, and/or evaluate one or more employees with baccalaureate business, economics, or accounting degrees. **Findings:** We identified oral and written communication skills that regional employers most value, as well as those with which they are least satisfied. No statistically significant differences were found between the perceptions of undergraduate business students, business school faculty, and local employers regarding about which communication skills matter most. **Conclusions/Recommendations:** Specific competencies employers reported as “most important” should be integrated into business communication curriculum and assessments to best meet employer needs. In addition, skills employers express strong dissatisfaction with should be given special emphasis in class materials, lessons, and assessments to help improve student competency in those areas before entering the workforce.

The impact poor communication skills can have on a business includes a tarnished brand image, decreased employee productivity, ineffective or erroneous decision-making, misinterpretations, and mismanagement. Dialogue about the consequences of poor communication is not new (Fielden, 1982; Patterson, 1997; Quible & Griffin, 2007). For decades, surveys have sought to measure employer perceptions about new hires’ mastery of communication skills (Ingram & Frazier,

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1980; Quible, 1991). Such surveys typically measure employer satisfaction (Stevens, 2005), perceived importance (Ulinski & O’Callaghan, 2002), or both (Gray, 2010; Jones, 2011). Numerous regional (North Carolina Workforce Development Boards, 2012; St. Louis Community College and Workforce Solutions Group, 2013) and national (American Management Association, 2010; Minton-Eversole, 2012) surveys have consistently revealed employer concerns about communication and other “soft skill” deficits among the younger members of the workforce.

The costs associated with underdeveloped communication skills are a concern not only in industry, but also academia. Faculty who prepare students for careers in business have focused on business communication skills in both teaching and research literature (Lentz, 2013; Russ, 2009). Academicians have also conducted market research to ensure curriculum aligns with workforce needs (Rehman, 2010). Additionally, research has sought to identify inconsistencies between faculty, student, and employer perceptions about various skills’ importance and acquisition (Hall & Berardino, 2006; Sundberg, et al., 2011). Discrepancies found in faculty, student and employer perceptions have prompted calls for an increased dialogue about curriculum and course competencies between university faculty and employment managers.

This study is a locally-focused response to the ongoing outcry from employers about communication skills deficits among newer employees (American Management Association, 2010; Minton-Eversole, 2012; North Carolina Workforce Development Boards, 2012; St. Louis Community College and Workforce Solutions Group, 2013). This study also recognizes the need for market research to establish consistent values and priorities between the faculty who prepare students for the workforce and the employers who hire the students. In an effort to help business students maximize their value on the local job market, as well as help regional employers who hire recent business graduates minimize costly communication errors, this research study aims to accomplish three things:

- examine the consistency between undergraduate business students, business school faculty, and local employers of the perceived importance of various specific oral and written communication skills;
- identify which oral and written communication skills are most valued by employers who routinely recruit, hire, and supervise new business undergraduates; and
- examine the current level of satisfaction with new hires’ communication skills among local employers and identify skills gaps.

### **Research Questions**

By studying a variety of stakeholders (e.g., students, instructors, and local employers), common perceptions about which oral and written communication skills are most valued and vital to success among newly hired business,

economics, and accounting graduates can be identified. Furthermore, data revealing misconceptions or inconsistencies in stakeholder perceptions about employers' values and needs regarding communication skills can reveal aspects of communication course curriculum that are not meeting employer needs or expectations. To that end, the following research questions have been identified:

1. In what ways do regional employer perceptions about the importance of various communication skills in the workplace differ from those of students and instructors?
2. Which communication skills are perceived to be most important among area employers?
3. To what extent are area employers satisfied with the communication skills of the recent business graduates hired? Are there skill gaps that can be filled?

The findings of these questions will be used to accomplish the following objectives:

- identify which communication skills are in highest demand among area employers when screening undergraduate business, accounting, and economics majors for job position openings;
- update business school curriculum on the specific types of communication skills employers value and expect in new hires;
- establish learning outcomes for course curriculum, particularly in oral and written communication courses, that align with employer values and needs to optimize new graduate employability; and
- provide approaches other colleges and departments can use to align baccalaureate-level business training more closely with local workforce needs.

## Methods

### Research Populations

**Students.** In February 2015, 292 undergraduate business, economics, and accounting majors at a mid-sized public university in the Midwest were offered 10-20 points of extra credit to participate in a voluntary and anonymous online survey. Seventy percent of survey respondents were enrolled in the department's introductory course for first-semester business majors and 30% were enrolled in its capstone course for graduating seniors. Of those students, 234 responded (80%). The sample was 62% male and 38% female, and 86% were between 18-24 years of age. Ninety-four percent indicated they are native English speakers.

**Instructors.** Nineteen full-time faculty members and 10 lecturers in the business department were invited to complete similar surveys in April 2015. Of those instructors, 16 responded (55%). The respondents, all native English

speakers, are 65% male and 35% female. Fifty-three percent have 10 or more years of non-academic work experience, while 75% have more than 10 years' experience teaching for the business school. In addition, 29% reported having experience teaching written communication skills and 24% indicated experience teaching oral/interpersonal communication skills.

**Employers.** In May 2015, five regional business associations were enlisted to distribute the employer version of the survey, including two chambers of commerce, a local workforce development board, the county business council, and the School of Business and Economics Advisory Council. Individual members of each organization were invited to participate if they work with, supervise, and/or evaluate one or more employees who recently earned some type of baccalaureate business, economics, or accounting degree. Of the 37 respondents, 36 provided data about the perceived importance of various oral and written communication skills, and 29 provided data about their current level of satisfaction with the quality of new hires.

Of the 37 respondents, approximately 32% are female and 68% male. All 37 identified themselves as native English speakers. About 84% had 10 or more years of experience in the industry, and approximately 68% had 10 or more years of experience in a supervisory role.

### **Instrument**

Each population was asked to complete a survey assessing their perceptions about identical sets of general (universal), written, and oral/interpersonal communication skills. Perceived satisfaction and importance of each individual variable was assessed using 5-point Likert response scales similar to those found in comparable surveys measuring perceptions about skill acquisition for employment. The surveys, developed and deployed using the electronic survey tool SelectSurvey.NET, took approximately 15-25 minutes to complete. Although each survey asked slightly different questions about communication skills relevant to its target population, the set of communication variables provided in each survey remained identical.

**General Communication Skills.** Universal communication skills (i.e., relevant to both oral and written communication) were grouped as a main category of variables called "General Communication Skills." These variables included

- outlining material before writing or speaking;
- employing an appropriate level of tone and formality;
- writing or speaking naturally and on the reader's level, using appropriate vocabulary;
- prioritizing and organizing material based on logic, strength of evidence, or importance to audience;

- providing smooth, logical transitions between ideas;
- giving clear and complete instructions;
- following instructions accurately, promptly, and completely; and employing persuasive techniques that are ethical, logical, and well-supported.

**Written Communication Skills.** Written communication skills were grouped in several skill categories, each of which contains a list of more specific variables measures through the survey are listed in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Written Communication Main Categories and Specific Variables*

General Written Communication Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Basic writing mechanics</li> <li>• Writing clearly and precisely</li> <li>• Organizing, developing, and composing informative, readable reports</li> <li>• Writing appropriate routine letters (e.g., requests, inquiries, adjustments, etc.)</li> <li>• Editing and revising documents conscientiously</li> </ul>
Formatting Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creating professional looking document drafts using a word processor</li> <li>• Documentation Skills</li> <li>• Formatting letters and memos properly</li> <li>• Incorporating headings and structural cues to guide the reader</li> <li>• Including well-designed, relevant illustrations, graphs, and tables</li> </ul>
Computer-mediated Communication Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using email appropriately and effectively for correspondence</li> <li>• Maintaining a professional and engaging presence on social networks</li> <li>• Using instant/text messaging appropriately and effectively</li> <li>• Narrating blog and microblog entries (e.g., tweets) using a readable style</li> </ul>

**Oral Communication Skills.** Oral/interpersonal communication skills were also grouped in a series of main categories, each of which includes more specific variables listed in Table 2.

**Table 2*****Oral Communication Main Categories and Specific Variables***

General Oral Communication Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listening actively and attentively</li> <li>• Responding and acting appropriately to messages received</li> <li>• Speaking on the telephone/participating in conference calls</li> <li>• Tactfully mediating or resolving conflicts in a manner that maximizes benefits</li> </ul>
Oral Communication with Colleagues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participating in meetings with focus and purpose</li> <li>• Successfully defending a specific viewpoint in meetings with colleagues</li> <li>• Accurately explaining a topic or idea, making it intelligible to colleagues</li> <li>• Clearly and comfortably providing feedback (positive or negative)</li> <li>• Providing effective training or coaching</li> </ul>
Oral Communication with Clients	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explaining complex concepts to clients</li> <li>• Advising clients ethically and accurately</li> <li>• Appropriately applying conversational skills with clients</li> <li>• Appropriately handling client complaints</li> <li>• Conveying a professional attitude of respect and interest in clients</li> <li>• Conveying a knowledgeable and confident demeanor</li> </ul>
Oral Communication with Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tactfully raising and clearly discussing ideas with superior(s)</li> <li>• Accurately and precisely describing situations to superior(s)</li> <li>• Engaging in performance reviews</li> <li>• Accepting constructive criticism without deflection or defensive behavior</li> <li>• Consistently and comfortably asking for clarification or feedback</li> </ul>
Negotiation Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Applying mutually accepted standards and rules in an objective and ethical way</li> <li>• Employing effective questioning techniques</li> <li>• Demonstrating a willingness to meet other parties' interests</li> <li>• Strategically integrating and prioritizing needs, concerns, and fears of each party</li> <li>• Brainstorming creative win-win solutions that bridge parties' interests</li> <li>• Minimizing dependence upon power and status to force resolution</li> <li>• Acknowledging/incorporating differing cultural values into negotiating process</li> <li>• Accurately interpreting nonverbal cues</li> </ul>

**Table 2** (continued)**Oral Communication Main Categories and Specific Variables**

Presentation Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arranging information into manageable portions</li> <li>• Speaking clearly and precisely</li> <li>• Creating presentations using presentation software</li> <li>• Including well-designed, relevant visual aids where appropriate</li> <li>• Maintaining composure in front of audience</li> <li>• Holding audience's attention and interest</li> <li>• Earning respect from audience members</li> </ul>
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The validity and reliability of survey items in each category were confirmed by comparing them to published research based on similar surveys (Gray, 2010; Jones, 2011; Russ, 2009). Feedback from business and research professionals on the items was solicited as well. A few items were modified or split into two variables to clarify ambiguous wording. A few items were replicated and revised to reflect current business communication trends in social media.

**Student survey.** The final student survey collected data about (1) participants' demographics and academic/work history, (2) participants' perceptions about communication skill coverage in course content at the associated undergraduate institution, (3) participants' perceptions about the importance of communication skills in the workplace, and (4) participants' satisfaction with opportunities to learn communication skills at the associated undergraduate institution.

**Instructor survey.** The final faculty survey collected data about (1) participants' demographics and academic/work experience, (2) communication skill coverage in the participants' course content, (3) opportunities to practice communication skills offered in the participants' courses, (4) methods used to assess student communication skills, and (5) participants' perceptions about the importance of communication skills in new hires.

**Employer survey.** The final employer survey collected data about (1) participants' demographics and work experience, (2) participants' perceptions about the importance of communication skills in the workplace, (3) participants' perceptions about the frequency with which new hires use specific methods of communication in the workplace, and (4) participants' satisfaction with recent college graduates' specific communication skills.

## Methodology

**Consistency.** For each survey, each of the individual questions in the previously mentioned general categories were averaged to give us the following variables:

- General Communication
- Writing Skills

- Formatting Skills
- Computer-mediated Communication Skills
- General Oral Communication Skills
- Oral Communication with Colleagues
- Oral Communication with Clients
- Oral Communication with Management
- Negotiation Skills
- Presentation Skills

In addition, “Basic Writing Mechanics” and “Documentation” were measured independently to explore those specific areas for potential discrepancies in perceptions between populations. The responses of each of the three groups (students, employers and instructors) were compared using two sample *t* tests to investigate inconsistencies between the groups.

**Importance.** Main categories and individual variables were rank-ordered by combining the number of “Very Important” and “Essential” ratings for each variable and category and rank ordering the totals. Variables and main categories that ranked in the top quartile are provided in the results. Given results of past studies indicating employers largely perceive communication and other “soft skills” to be critical to hiring and career success (American Management Association, 2010; Minton-Eversole, 2012; National Commission on Writing for America’s Families, Schools, and Colleges, 2004; North Carolina Workforce Development Boards, 2012), the importance scale skewed slightly to focus more heavily on degrees of importance included “not important,” “occasionally important,” “important,” “very important,” and “essential.”

**Satisfaction.** Research has ascertained the validity of importance-satisfaction discrepancies to ascertain areas of distress (Larsson, Von Essen, & Sjöden, 2007). Therefore, a 5-point satisfaction scale that included “very dissatisfied,” “dissatisfied,” “neutral,” “satisfied,” and “very satisfied” was used to collect satisfaction data. A basic Importance-Satisfaction (IS) rating used in similar studies conducted by community market research firms (ETC Institute, 2011) was then calculated to identify gaps in perceived importance and satisfaction communication skills to guide curricular priorities for business communication courses. To calculate the I-S rating, communication skills rated among respondents as “Very Important” and “Essential” in 75% or more of the responses were multiplied by 1 minus the percentage of respondents that indicated they were “Satisfied” or “Very Satisfied” with the development of that skill in new hires.

For example, approximately 89% of respondents indicated “employing persuasive techniques that are ethical, logical, and well-supported” was “Very Important” or “Essential.” However, only about 30% of respondents rated their satisfaction with that skill as a “Satisfied” or “Very satisfied.” Therefore, this variable’s I-S rating is calculated by multiplying its importance percentage by  $(1 - [\text{Satisfaction percentage}])$ , yielding an I-S rating of 0.6413. This rating was

the highest of all the variables, indicating it is among the top communication skill gaps that instructors should seek to address.

A maximum I-S rating is 1.00, which could only be achieved if 100% of the respondents indicated a variable was “Very Important” or “Essential”, but 0% indicated they were “Satisfied” or “Very satisfied” with the development of that skill among college graduates. If all of respondents were “Satisfied” or “Very satisfied” with a particular skill development, or if none (0%) of the respondents deemed the skill “Very Important” or “Essential,” a rating of 0.00 would be achieved.

To ensure variables with which employers are dissatisfied were not inadvertently omitted from this calculation, an I-D rating was also calculated. The I-D rating works in much the same way, only skill importance percentages were multiplied directly by dissatisfaction percentages (totals of “Dissatisfied” and “Very Dissatisfied” ratings) instead of the  $(1 - [\text{Satisfaction percentage}])$ .

## Results

### **RQ1: Consistency in beliefs about communication skills’ importance.**

This question explores and identifies possible discrepancies in perceptions about which skills students, faculty, and employers view as most important. *T*-tests revealed no statistically significant differences between what our research populations perceived as important among the main categories of communication skills.

Table 3 shows that in 32 of 36 tests, no significant difference between the responses of the students versus the instructors, the students versus the employers, or the instructors versus the employers were found. The four tests that were significant showed that students placed a higher value on Documentation than employers (3.86 versus 3.36,  $p = 0.039$ ) and instructors (3.86 versus 3.06,  $p = 0.018$ ). Students also viewed Formatting Skills as more important than employers (3.980 versus 3.693,  $p = 0.044$ ) and instructors (3.980 versus 3.536,  $p = 0.031$ ).

**Table 3**

*T-test results for perception consistency between students, faculty, and employers*

	Student/ Employer	Student/ Instructor	Instructor/ Employer
Mechanics	0.213	0.813	0.522
Documentation	0.039*	0.018*	0.428
General Communication	0.530	0.913	0.754
Writing Skills	0.787	0.920	0.952

**Table 3** (continued)

*T-test results for perception consistency between students, faculty, and employers*

	<b>Student/ Employer</b>	<b>Student/ Instructor</b>	<b>Instructor/ Employer</b>
Formatting Skills	0.044*	0.031*	0.672
Computer-mediated Communication Skills	0.083	0.097	0.546
General Oral Communication Skills	0.152	0.756	0.331
Oral Communication with Colleagues	0.781	0.611	0.545
Oral Communication with Clients	0.632	0.418	0.331
Oral Communication with Management	0.403	0.816	0.537
Negotiation Skills	0.941	0.238	0.227
Presentation Skills	0.431	0.990	0.668

\*statistically significant, p-value < 0.05

With the exception of Documentation and Formatting Skills mentioned above, the data shows these populations are currently aligned, minimizing the likelihood that students are getting “mixed messages” about what should be learned about communication in college courses. Although there are undoubtedly instances in which a student or faculty member are out of alignment with workforce values and priorities, this data suggest such misalignment should not be a significant issue.

**RQ2: Communication skills perceived to be most important among area employers.**

This question examines respondents’ perceptions about skill importance. Categories and individual variables for which more than 75% of responses were “Very Important” or “Essential” will be covered in this section.

**Main categories of communication skills.** Individual skills were grouped into main categories based on common contexts (e.g., presentation, negotiation skills) or characteristics (e.g. written, oral communication skills). Table 4 lists the overall main categories of communication skills each survey covered. Each category was rank-ordered according to the aggregate importance rating employers gave its individual items. The main category of skills with the highest overall importance score is listed first.

**Table 4****Main Communication Skill Categories: Employers' Rank Order of Importance**

Rank	Category	N	# of items	% of responses (n)		
				Very Important	Essential	Total
1	General Oral Communication Skills	36	4	31.47 (45)	58.04 (83)	89.51 (128)
2	Communication with Management	36	5	44.13 (79)	40.78 (73)	84.92 (152)
3	Communication with Clients	36	6	30.23 (65)	53.49 (115)	83.72 (180)
4	Writing Skills	36	5	36.67 (66)	44.44 (80)	81.11 (165)
5	General Communication Skills	36	8	34.84 (100)	43.55 (125)	78.40 (225)
6	Presentation Skills	36	7	34.40 (86)	40.00 (100)	74.40 (186)
7	Communication with Colleagues	36	5	35.75 (64)	37.43 (67)	73.18 (131)
8	Negotiation Skills	36	8	32.75 (94)	36.93 (106)	69.69 (200)
9	Formatting Skills	36	5	28.09 (50)	26.40 (47)	54.49 (97)
10	Computer-mediated Comm. Skills	36	4	20.83 (30)	31.94 (46)	52.78 (76)

*Note.* Total number of possible "Very Important" and "Essential" responses is calculated by  $N * (\# \text{ of items})$ . That figure serves as the denominator for the total percentage in each category.

General Oral Communication Skills, which ranked first in both "Essential" and combined total ratings, and Communication with Clients were the only two main categories more than half of respondents regarded as "Essential."

**General communication skills.** Six of the eight variables for this category received a combined score of 75% or higher for importance and are listed in Table 5. However, the only two regarded as "Essential" by a majority of respondents were "Giving clear and complete instructions" (67%) and "Following instructions accurately, promptly, and completely" (64%).

**Table 5****General Communication Skills: Employers' Rank Order of Importance**

Rank	General Communication Skill	N	V. Important/ Essential
1	Communication and vocabulary appropriate for the readers	36	88.89%
2	Ethical, logical, and well-supported persuasive techniques	36	88.57%
3	Ability to follow instructions accurately, promptly, and completely	36	86.11%

**Table 5** (continued)  
**General Communication Skills: Employers’ Rank Order of Importance**

Rank	General Communication Skill	N	V. Important/ Essential
4	Material organized according to logic, evidence strength, or importance to audience	36	86.11%
5	Clear and complete instructions	36	80.56%
6	Writing or speaking naturally and on the reader’s level, using appropriate vocabulary	36	80.56%

The only variables in this category whose combined importance score was not higher than a 75% were “Providing smooth, logical transitions between ideas” (69.44%) and “Outlining material before writing or speaking” (47.22%).

**Written communication skills.** Although there were fewer written communication skills items in this instrument, *T*-tests shown in Table 6 indicate that employers seem to care more about them.

**Table 6**  
*T*-test results for importance of written versus oral/interpersonal communication skills

	N	Mean	StDev	SE Mean
Written	35	3.231	0.730	0.730
Oral/Interpersonal	35	2.781	0.784	0.784

Difference =  $\mu$  (written) –  $\mu$  (oral)  
 Estimate for difference: 0.450  
 95% CI for difference: (0.089, 0.812)  
 T-Test of difference = 0 (vs not =): T-Value = 2.49 P-Value = 0.015 DF = 67

Table 7 shows only 5 variables of the 14 specifically related to written communication attained an importance score higher than 75%. In particular, respondents placed a premium on basic writing mechanics.

**Table 7**  
**Written Communication Skill Categories: Employers’ Rank Order of Importance**

Rank	Writing Skills	N	V. Important/ Essential
1	Basic writing mechanics	37	94.59%
2	Using email appropriately and effectively (Computer-mediated Communication Skills)	36	91.67%
3	Clear and precise writing	36	88.89%
4	Informative, readable reports	35	80.00%
e	Conscientiously edited documents	36	75.00%

The combined importance score for “Writing routine letters (e.g., requests, inquiries, adjustments, etc.) appropriate to the situation” was 66.67%. “Documentation” scored only a 51%, and all items in the “Formatting” category scored between 45% – 62%. Three of the four Computer-mediated Communication variables scored only 25% - 53%.

**Oral communication skills.** Of the 35 individual variables within the 6 Oral/ Interpersonal categories, the 23 that scored 75% or higher in importance appear in Table 8.

**Table 8**

***Written Communication Skill Categories: Employers’ Rank Order of Importance***

Rank	General Oral Communication Skills	N	V. Important/ Essential
1	Listening actively and attentively	36	97.22%
2	Responding and acting appropriately to messages received	36	91.67%
3	Speaking on the telephone/participating in conference calls	36	86.11%
4	Tactfully mediating or resolving conflicts in a manner that maximizes benefits	35	82.86%
	<b>Oral Communication with Managers</b>		
1	Accurately and precisely describing situations to superior(s)	36	100%
2	Accepting constructive criticism without deflection or defensive behavior	36	91.67%
3	Tactfully raising and clearly discussing ideas with superior(s)	36	86.11%
4	Consistently and comfortably asking for clarification or feedback	36	80.56%
	<b>Oral Communication with Clients</b>		
1	Conveying a professional attitude of respect and interest in clients	36	94.44%
2	Appropriately handling client complaints	35	88.57%
3	Conveying a knowledgeable and confident demeanor	36	86.11%
4	Advising clients ethically and accurately	36	83.33%
5	Appropriately applying conversational skills with clients	36	83.33%
	<b>Oral Communication with Colleagues</b>		
1	Clearly and comfortably providing feedback (positive or negative)	36	83.33%
2	Accurately explaining a topic or idea, making it intelligible to colleagues	35	82.86%
3	Participating in meetings with focus and purpose	36	80.56%
	<b>Negotiation Skills</b>		
1	Strategically integrating/prioritizing needs, concerns, and fears of each party	36	80.56%

**Table 8** (continued)**Written Communication Skill Categories: Employers' Rank Order of Importance**

Rank	General Oral Communication Skills	N	V. Important/ Essential
2	Brainstorming creative win-win solutions that bridge parties' interests	36	77.78%
3	Employing effective questioning techniques	36	75.00%
	<b>Presentation Skills</b>		
1	Speaking clearly and precisely	36	94.44%
2	Holding audience's attention and interest	36	88.89%
3	Maintaining composure in front of audience	36	88.89%
4	Earning respect from audience members	34	79.41%

Aside from General Communication Skills, for which all four variables achieved scores higher than 80%, each main category included at least one or two skills for which the combined importance score fell below 75%. Presentation Skills had three variables that scored below 65%, and Negotiation Skills had five variables with scores that ranged from 52%-72%.

### **RQ3: Area employers' level of satisfaction with business graduate communication skills.**

This section calculates employer satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the development of communication skills seen in recent business graduates and examines it in the context of employer perceptions about skills' importance. In all main categories and the variable "Basic Writing Mechanics," two-tailed *t*-tests revealed a statistically significant correlation between importance and satisfaction.

An obvious way of viewing employer satisfaction is by comparing the reported level of satisfaction with their reported level of importance for each of the measured variables. With the exception of the variable "Documentation Skills" and the main category Formatting Skills mentioned above, satisfaction levels are overwhelmingly below reported importance. Nine of 10 remaining categories report *p*-values that are 0 to 3 decimal places. The remaining category, Computer-mediated Communication Skills, reports a *p*-value of 0.029. This provides evidence that while employers value 10 of our 12 measured communication skills at comparable levels to both students and instructors, they are at least relatively unsatisfied with students' performance in all 10 areas.

**Table 9**

*Respondents' Reported Level of Importance Versus Reported Level of Satisfaction*

	<b>Employer Importance</b>	<b>Employer Satisfaction</b>	<b>p-value</b>
Mechanics	4.667	2.790	0.000*
Documentation	3.360	3.207	0.591
General Communication	4.162	3.078	0.000*
Writing Skills	4.102	3.138	0.000*
Formatting Skills	3.639	3.362	0.177
Computer-mediated Comm. Skills	3.438	2.948	0.029*
General Oral Communication Skills	4.468	3.155	0.000*
Oral Communication with Colleagues	4.089	3.029	0.000*
Oral Communication with Clients	4.324	3.089	0.000*
Oral Communication with Management	4.242	3.124	0.000*
Negotiation Skills	3.999	3.268	0.000*
Presentation Skills	4.066	3.305	0.000*

\*statistically significant, p-value < 0.05

Furthermore, no single main category in the survey achieved an overall satisfaction score higher than 50%. All dissatisfaction scores were below 20% (see Table 10).

**Table 10**

*Main Communication Skill Categories: Employers' Satisfaction Index*

<b>Main Category</b>	<b>Item total</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Sat/ V. Sat</b>	<b>S. Rank</b>	<b>Diss./ V. Diss</b>	<b>D. Rank</b>
General Oral Communication Skills	4	29	50.00%	1	18.97%	3
Formatting Skills	4	29	44.83%	2	8.28%	9
Presentation Skills	7	29	43.56%	3	10.40%	8
Communication with Management	5	29	42.66%	4	18.88%	4
Writing Skills	6	29	41.67%	5	19.44%	2
General Communication Skills	8	29	38.36%	6	17.67%	5
Negotiation Skills	8	29	35.22%	7	6.52%	10
Communication with Clients	6	29	35.12%	8	15.48%	7
Communication with Colleagues	5	29	31.94%	9	16.67%	6
Computer-mediated Comm. Skills	4	29	29.31%	10	19.83%	1

Disparity between rankings can be accounted for by neutral ratings. For example, General Oral Communication Skills ranked highest in overall satisfaction, and concurrently ranked second highest for dissatisfaction. Although these results might appear to be conflicting, what they indicate is that variables in that particular category likely received fewer “neutral” ratings. In contrast, Computer-Mediated-communication skills ranked 10<sup>th</sup> overall for Satisfaction and 1 for Dissatisfaction, which appears to be more consistent; however, because it ranked 10<sup>th</sup> in importance, ranking last in respondent satisfaction carried less weight and its I-S Ranking was relatively low.

**General communication skills.** Table 11 lists the overall levels of employer satisfaction (and dissatisfaction) that were calculated within each category, as well as the I-S rating used to identify gaps between the respondents’ reported value for a skill (importance) and level of satisfaction with new hires’ mastery of it. All variables were rank-ordered according to their I-S Rating, revealing where the largest skill gaps exist according to respondents.

**Table 11**

***General Communication Skills: Employers’ Satisfaction & Dissatisfaction Indexes***

<b>High Priority Skills (I-S Rating &gt; 0.50)</b>	<b>Very Important/ Essential</b>	<b>Satisfied/ Very Satisfied</b>	<b>I-S Rating</b>
Employing persuasive techniques that are ethical, logical, and well-supported	88.57%	27.59%	0.6414
Giving clear and complete instructions	80.56%	27.59%	0.5833
Writing or speaking naturally and on the reader’s level, using appropriate vocabulary	88.89%	37.93%	0.5517
Following instructions accurately, promptly, and completely	86.11%	37.93%	0.5345

Consistent with findings related to which variables respondents identified as “Essential,” I-S Ratings for general communication skills underscore the importance of giving and following instructions well. Using ethically and logically sound persuasive techniques yielded the highest I-S rating of all variables. Communicating with audience-appropriate language and style round out the four largest gaps between respondents’ perceived importance of general communication skills and their level of satisfaction.

**Written communication skills.** Table 12 reveals only one written communication variable that ranked above .5 on the I-S Rating scale; however, three variables, including (1) basic writing mechanics, (2) editing and revising documents conscientiously, and (3) organizing, developing, and composing informative, readable reports, all received scores that could ultimately be rounded up to .5 (.469-.4893).

**Table 12****Written Communication Skills: Employers' Satisfaction & Dissatisfaction Indexes**

<b>High Priority Skill (IS Rating &gt; 0.50)</b>	<b>Very Important/ Essential</b>	<b>Satisfied/ Very Satisfied</b>	<b>I-S Rating</b>
Writing clearly and precisely (Writing)	88.89%	34.48%	0.5824
<b>High Priority Skills (ID Rating &gt; 0.20)</b>	<b>Very Important/ Essential</b>	<b>Very Diss/ Dissatisfied</b>	<b>I-D Rating</b>
Basic writing mechanics (main category)	94.59%	34.48%	0.3262
Writing clearly and precisely (writing)	88.89%	31.03%	0.2758

D-S Ratings shown in Table 9 indicate that respondents' concerns about basic writing skills are consistent with survey findings that show similar trends among business professionals nationwide. The 34.48% dissatisfaction score for "Basic writing mechanics" was the highest of any variable or main category.

The fact that only one written communication variable ranked above 0.5 on the I-S rating scale is particularly problematic because the *t*-test discussed above (Contribute Written 3.231 versus Contribute Oral 2.781, *p*-value 0.015) indicates that it is written communication skills take priority among respondents.

**Oral/interpersonal communication skills.** I-S Ratings in oral/interpersonal skill categories reveal a higher quantity of gaps. Table 13 itemizes variables irrespective of Oral/Interpersonal main category, instead simply ranking those with I-S Ratings above .50 from highest to lowest.

**Table 13****Oral/Interpersonal Communication Skills: Employers' Satisfaction Index**

<b>High Priority Skills (IS Rating &gt; 0.50)</b>	<b>Skill Category</b>	<b>Very Imp/ Essential</b>	<b>Sat./ V. Sat.</b>	<b>I-S Rating</b>
Providing effective training or coaching	Colleagues	69.44%	13.79%	0.5987
Advising clients ethically and accurately	Clients	83.33%	28.57%	0.5952
Earning respect from audience members	Presentation	79.41%	27.59%	0.5751
Accurately explaining a topic or idea, making it intelligible to colleagues	Colleagues	82.86%	31.03%	0.5714
Holding audience's attention and interest	Presentation	88.89%	35.71%	0.5714
Explaining complex concepts to clients	Clients	66.67%	14.29%	0.5714
Appropriately handling client complaints	Clients	88.57%	35.71%	0.5694
Accurately and precisely describing situations to superior(s)	Management	100.00%	44.83%	0.5517

**Table 13** (continued)**Oral/Interpersonal Communication Skills: Employers' Satisfaction Index**

<b>High Priority Skills (IS Rating &gt; 0.50)</b>	<b>Skill Category</b>	<b>Very Imp/ Essential</b>	<b>Sat./ V. Sat.</b>	<b>I-S Rating</b>
Tactfully mediating or resolving conflicts in a manner that maximizes benefits	General	82.86%	34.48%	0.5429
Accepting constructive criticism without deflection or defensive behavior	Management	91.67%	42.86%	0.5238
Maintaining composure in front of audience	Presentation	88.89%	41.38%	0.5211
Strategically integrating and prioritizing needs, concerns, and fears of each party	Negotiation	80.56%	35.71%	0.5179
Employing effective questioning techniques	Negotiation	75.00%	31.03%	0.5173
Clearly and comfortably providing feedback (positive or negative)	Colleagues	83.33%	37.93%	0.5172
Conveying a professional attitude of respect and interest in clients	Clients	94.44%	46.43%	0.5060
<b>High Priority Skills (ID Rating &gt; 0.20)</b>		<b>V. Imp/ Essential</b>	<b>V. Diss/ Dissatisfied</b>	<b>I-D Rating</b>
Accepting constructive criticism without deflection or defensive behavior	Management	91.67%	32.14%	0.2946
Appropriately handling client complaints	Clients	88.57%	28.57%	0.2530
Consistently and comfortably asking for clarification or feedback	Management	80.56%	24.14%	0.1945

Table 13 also identifies three additional variables that achieved high I-D Ratings. Of those three, one (consistently and comfortably asking for clarification or feedback) does not appear in the I-S Scale rankings.

## Discussion

Results of the employer survey are intended to directly inform faculty decisions about curriculum and competencies related to building business students' communication skills. Ongoing market research of regional employers will be critical to maintaining current curriculum and produces graduates with skills that directly respond to local workforce needs. A number of potential benefits can come from customizing communication curriculum for regional employers, the most important of which is better job placement and improved career success among graduates. Successful graduates are an excellent resource for department vitality, not only because their stories can directly and indirectly attract new students to

the program, but also because their support as alumni donors can expand the resources a department has to support student learning. The local economy also benefits when graduates stay in the area.

### **Emphasizing communication skills in highest demand among area employers.**

Literature has established that I-S and D-S ratings related to employer values and satisfaction reveals the gaps in college business graduates' skill development that could be diminishing their value on the job market and impeding success in the workplace. For example, D-S Ratings for "Basic Writing Mechanics" indicate that a continued emphasis on the fundamental principles of conventional English in college classrooms is warranted, even though the I-S ratings for that variable did not achieve a .5 rating without rounding up.

### **Updating learning outcomes and curriculum for oral and written communication courses.**

The primary determinant in adopting or retaining core competencies for communication curriculum was derived from variable I-S ratings. In order to address areas of strong dissatisfaction, variables with large positive differentials between the I-S and D-S ratings were also incorporated. In several cases, skills that did not rank among the top 10 I-S ratings but either scored a high D-S rating or a substantial positive differential between the I-S and D-S ratings (e.g., an item ranked 15 for I-S but a 1 for D. S.) were incorporated either as course competencies or will be viewed as assessment "areas of emphasis."

**Written Communication for Business Curriculum.** Based on I-S and I-D ratings, the following competencies should be adopted or retained into business communication curriculum to adequately meet workforce needs:

- Employing persuasive techniques that are ethical, logical, and well-supported
- Giving clear and complete instructions
- Writing clearly and precisely
- Writing or speaking naturally and on the reader's level, using appropriate vocabulary
- Following instructions accurately, promptly, and completely
- Editing and revising documents conscientiously
- Organizing, developing, and composing informative, readable reports
- Prioritizing and organizing material based on logic, strength of evidence, or importance to audience
- Writing with basic mechanics

In addition, the following skills should become or remain areas of emphasis:

- Providing smooth, logical transitions between ideas
- Employing an appropriate level of tone and formality
- Using email appropriately and effectively for external and internal correspondence
- Including well-designed, relevant illustrations, graphs, and tables where appropriate
- Incorporating headings and structural cues to guide the reader
- Ensuring documentation Skills

**Oral Communication for Business Curriculum.** Based on I-S and I-D ratings, the following competencies should be adopted or retained into business communication curriculum to adequately meet regional workforce needs:

- Employing persuasive techniques that are ethical, logical, and well-supported
- Providing effective training or coaching
- Advising clients ethically and accurately
- Giving clear and complete instructions
- Earning respect from audience members
- Holding audience's attention and interest
- Describing situations to superior(s) accurately and precisely
- Mediating or resolving conflicts in a tactful manner that maximizes benefits
- Accepting constructive criticism without deflection or defensive behavior

In addition, the following skills should become or remain areas of emphasis:

- Maintaining composure in front of audience
- Integrating and prioritizing needs, concerns, and fears of each party involved in a strategic manner
- Providing feedback (positive or negative) clearly and comfortably
- Employing effective questioning techniques
- Asking for clarification or feedback in a consistent and comfortable manner
- Listening actively and attentively

Selected competencies and areas of emphasis should in some way permeate all aspects of curriculum, including supplemental materials (textbooks and readings), learning objectives for class activities and assessments, course assessment techniques and grading criteria, course objectives, and the business school mission.

### **Using a methodological model to align academic outcomes with local workforce needs.**

Building a database of local hiring managers and employment executives who hire business graduates is a critical first step in aligning business communication curriculum with local workforce needs. A major limitation of the employer survey in particular is the sampling method through which respondents were chosen. Disseminating a survey instrument through a gate-keeper (in this case, Chambers of Commerce and business councils) runs the risk of sampling bias. Therefore, results from this employer survey are intended to serve as a starting point for immediate curriculum development concerns (fall of 2015), with the idea that additional research employing a more comprehensive, scientific approach to market research will yield a more representative sample, higher response rate, and more robust data with stronger external validity.

For this study, the fact that there were no significant differences between perceptions of the employer respondents and perceptions of students and faculty reduces the risk that the I-S ratings from this study will not take current curriculum adjustments in the wrong direction. Once the business department has a more comprehensive database of regional employment managers, better data may be collected to provide a more substantial foundation for curriculum design in the long-term (2016-2017 school year and beyond).

Another consideration is the incorporation of additional communication principals related to purpose, diversity, and culture. Particularly in markets with lower levels of cultural diversity, employers may recognize a deficiency in cultural range and versatility resulting from limited experiences among students who attend a local university based in a region that is more culturally homogeneous than more metropolitan areas.

Overall, however, a commitment to marketing program learning objectives to local workforce needs is a sound strategy for business schools, particularly smaller programs that serve regional rather than national student populations. The focused, regional market research initiated by this study will be developed into a broader strategic, scientific approach to preparing graduates that appeal to local employers, in an effort to retain more graduates and cultivate a more robust economy in the region where the university is based.

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