

# **Eroding Business Communication Skills Among B-Students: Causes, Effects, and Suggestions to Consider**

**Seth Powless  
Earlham College**

**Sarah Schafer  
University of Wisconsin Oshkosh**

*Business communication skills among new employees have devolved into informal exchanges including unprofessional writing. Current research trends suggest that employers observe this among college students as interns who then carry these habits as new employees. Increasingly, this is perpetuated by technology use for communication and pedagogical shifts. One approach to resolving this dilemma is the introduction of a business communication course administered and taught within B-schools. This paper introduces research on the decline of business students' communication skills, the inputs attributable to this decline, the emphasis on technology as an impetus to this challenge, and evaluation data from post-internship surveys.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Business communication within colleges of business (B-Schools) has long been a component of numerous classes within the soft-side majors (e.g., marketing, management), and is often briefly addressed indirectly within the hard-side majors (e.g., finance, information systems, operations). Historically, the few components of business-specific communication were addressed adequately through these courses, with the remainder of communication curriculum housed in general education departments and applied through general communication courses. In today's changing academic landscape, these general education courses have become much more flexible with respect to degree requirements, and these courses have become much more large-lecture-oriented. Addressing the reasons why these shifts have occurred is perhaps irrelevant when considering universal budget cuts and reduction of resources in academe; along with ever-evolving degree attainment requirements. What is clear, is that employers who hire B-School students report that communication skills among business students has declined (Conrad & Newberry, 2012).

Business communication skills assessment is rarely conducted beyond the evaluation step despite existing data from multiple sources including employers, recruiters, and internal institution stakeholders such as faculty and advisers. Existing research on business communication typically explores external communication between organizations (Bovee & Thill, 2004; Du-Babcock, 2006). Interdisciplinary research on student learning emphasizes general communication skills, often employing student development theory to explore communication phenomena. Business communication skills among

business students is a subset of communication and worthy of academic inquiry because of this unique integration and evolution with technology.

The variables associated with why business communication skills among business students are foundering include technology evolution within communication, dependency on technology for communication, and fewer opportunities to practice presentation and interviewing skills due to larger class sizes in the communication areas. Examining these variables along with the shifts in business students' comprehension of business communication is an integral area of focus for research in business. Business students continue to evolve as a population, due to shifting populations, the changing higher education landscape, and changing emphases within business disciplines (Lesikar, Flatley, & Rentz, 2008). Business majors that were once rather broad in scope are now being fine-tuned to reflect the modern business environment's needs and as a result, general business acumen courses are often rendered cursory at best. One of the pivotal skillsets that continues to wane is the area of business communication. This paper attempts to introduce and justify such a remedy for this growing challenge all businesses must address.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Defining Business Communication**

Business communication can be defined as “the use, adaptation, and creation of languages, symbols, and signs to conduct activities that satisfy human needs and wants by providing goods and services for private profit” (Reinsch, 1996). Business communication is the process of sending and receiving verbal and non-verbal messages within the organizational context. It is a procedure of generating, transmitting, receiving, and interpreting messages in interpersonal, group, public, and mass communication context via written and oral formats (Conrad & Newberry, 2011; Conrad & Newberry, 2012), such as writing and speaking competencies, interpersonal/collaborative competencies, international communication competencies, and technology competencies (Bennington, 2004; English, Manton, & Walker, 2007).

The most common constructs of business communication utilized include reading, writing, oral presentations, and listening. This foundation is derived from the historical core skills required to be considered an educated person (Conrad & Newberry, 2011). However, it appears that these skills alone are deficient to satisfy business employers' needs. Conrad & Newberry (2011&2012) revealed that the skills businesses most sought from their employees should be defined by communication behavior outcomes; for instance, the ability to negotiate a solution between two conflicting parties. Eventually, they developed three skills sets based on the widely accepted communication constructs of organizational, leadership, and interpersonal communication.

Organizational communication skills refer to those skills an organization uses to efficiently communicate with all internal and external stakeholders, permitting collaboration among people and organized behavior, such as resolving conflict, negotiating, and using information technology. Leadership communication skills refer to those skills which allow business leadership to effectively communicate with internal employees and key external constituents employing communication methods including stories, informality, metaphors, and strategic dialogue to create trusting and supportive relationships among colleagues and employees. Interpersonal communication skills are those skills that allow both employees and employers to effectively communicate to internal and external constituents on a personal, intimate, and one-on-one basis, by exchanging thoughts in face-to-face verbal and nonverbal contexts. This is achieved by sharing information, providing feedback, or to simply maintain a social relationship, such as active listening and building rapport (Conrad & Newberry, 2011; Conrad & Newberry, 2012).

### **Importance of Business Communication**

Communication skills, written and oral, formal or informal, are crucial for employee and business success. Business communication abilities are critical to employees'/students' career success and an important contributor to organizational success. Prior studies indicated prominent agreement regarding the importance of student/employee communication skills to achieve successful job performance (Conrad

& Newberry, 2011; Conrad & Newberry, 2012; English, Manton, & Walker, 2007). Communication skills are ranked among the most important skills for business students to possess (Bennington, 2004).

For organizations, communication is seen as an integral part of every organizational activity and cannot be seen as an isolated part. Effective business communication is the pivotal issue to planning, leading, organizing, and controlling the organizational resources to achieve business objectives (Conrad & Newberry, 2011; Conrad & Newberry, 2012). Studies suggested that students with excellent communication skills will likely provide more value and more professional image to their employers and projects than those whose communication skills are considered poor (Lentz, 2013).

To see the importance of each set of communication skills, organizational communication skills will enhance the organizations' ability to store information, train employees, and maintain order within the organization; leadership communication skills will drive effective leadership including the ability to communicate openly, use a persuasive approach, and graphically describe a picture of the future; interpersonal communication skills will help all organizational members to manage emotions and control reactions to stressful situation factors (Conrad & Newberry, 2012).

### **Business Communication Trends**

The historical roots of business communication can be located in the intertwined history of business practice, vocational training, human sciences such as grammar and rhetoric, and the evolution of higher education (Reinsch, 1996). Therefore, business communication used to be a study of rhetoric in the writing of letters and memos, beginning with emphasizing the proper forms and correct use of English (Du-Babcock, 2006). Not only does technology change business practices, but also it changes the business communication field (Reinsch & Turner, 2006). With the emergence of cellphones and voice conference, the emphasis of business communication was trending toward oral skills during the 1980s. However, written business communication is again becoming the highest priority due to changing technology uses of telephone and face-to-face communications to electronic text communication (Bennington, 2004).

In the past, the communication environment was relatively homogeneous and stable, general language could be adequately used in encoding and decoding messages (Du-Babcock, 2006). Consequently, present business communication is in a transitional stage due to a more complex and globalized business environment and the multidisciplinary communication teaching environment. In this stage, the underlying communication process remains constant, but individuals are communicating via more variable communication media, such as cell phones, videoconferences, emails, memos, and face-to-face meetings. Therefore, the challenge for current instructors is to teach students how to communicate in the increasingly diverse and complex global, multidisciplinary communication environment (Du-Babcock, 2006).

### **Technology Use Among B-Students**

The new communication identified as technology mediums (e.g., cell phones, tablets) allow people to communicate and collaborate more effectively and efficiently. New technologies offer new communication channels for organizational members, eliminate geographical barriers in communication, increase the volume of message exchange, enhance a worker's efficiency, and decrease the transaction costs of exchanging messages (Decarie, 2010; Du-Babcock, 2006; Meredith, 2012; Reinsch & Turner, 2006).

Conversely, the impacts of technology on business communication are conflicted, particularly involving student use. Students often prefer to utilize impersonal, non-verbal forms of communication and current technology allows for that. What's more, social support for technology mediums of communication increases this paradigm which further contributes to a growing deficiency in personal communication skills including speaking to others, writing professionally, and presenting (Massimini & Peterson, 2009).

A critical example of this is the use of Facebook as a means of communication. Facebook has emerged as the dominant social networking site with more than 600 million active users including both

individuals and industries or businesses alike. Facebook has several benefits. It serves as an interpersonal communication outlet, allows for greater personalization, and promotes cross-cultural communication by eliminating geographical barriers (Decarie, 2010; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). However, several challenges continue to plague Facebook use as a means of communication. Maintaining professionalism is a growing challenge for users, writing skills are devolving to a more informal level due to the use of Facebook or similar platforms for extended periods of time, and combined, these challenges foster overall lower communication skill thresholds (Decarie, 2010).

Current technologies are not only influencing the way businesses communicate globally, but also impacting the way instructors teach, students learn, and scholars conduct research (Du-Babcock, 2006). Students use technology to complement and extend their classroom experience. However, the use of informal writing can spill over to influence potential/current employers who also engage in technology mediums for communication. Similarly, business contacts and future colleagues may be affected by observing weak communication skills by students on technology mediums. As a result, it is becoming critical that business communication not only be included in B-school curricula, but that technology have a place in this area of study (Decarie, 2010). On a similar note, researchers have increased their technology use as a research medium to exchange research ideas and in some instances, technology itself becomes the vehicle for research (Bennington, 2004). Finally, at the instructional level, instructors have commenced engaging students through the use of technology. Technological competency has become a critical component of all B-school curricula regardless of major, and side benefits include further development of critical thinking and writing abilities (Bennington, 2004).

## **DEFICIENT BUSINESS COMMUNICATION SKILLS**

In recent years, scholars found that students' discipline-specific skills are no longer the priority emphasized by employers (Conrad & Newberry, 2001). Conversely, students' communication skills have become a critical skillset that ranks as highly important including general communication skills, technological literacy, and teamwork (Bennington, 2004). In spite of this support, at the micro-level organizations overlook business communications functions and skills including online communication, media relation, community relation, employee internal and external communication, marketing, product/brand communication, and advertising (Conrad & Newberry, 2011).

Despite the agreement in business regarding the significance of communication skills, a gap persists between desired and acquired communication skills (Conrad & Newberry, 2011; Conrad & Newberry, 2012; Lentz, 2013; Lanier, Tanner, Zhu, & Heady, 1997). Evidence exists that both long-term employees and entry-level employees still lack communication skills: writing, speaking, grammar, and vocabulary choices (Bennington, 2004; Lentz, 2013; Lanier, Tanner, Zhu, & Heady, 1997). Most employers believe students are deficient in verbal and non-verbal skills since they may not receive adequate education in these skills within their business coursework (Conrad & Newberry, 2011).

Conrad & Newberry (2011) revealed that a significant ratio of firms reported one third or fewer of their employees, both current and new, failed to see the value of writing skills. Consequently, firms spend \$3.1 billion on affording training in writing annually. This study also demonstrated the unsatisfactory oral communication skills of recent graduates, though oral communication has been viewed as one of the top three competencies required to succeed in a managerial position (Conrad & Newberry, 2011).

### **Employers' Perceptions VS Educators' Perceptions**

Despite the agreement of the importance of business communication between academia and real-world business, employers generally disagree on the order of importance of communication skills. One possible explanation of this inconsistency may be academics' emphasis on theories and models while employers' emphasis on skills and abilities that produce applied outcomes (Conrad & Newberry, 2011).

A few scholars found that skills taught in some business communication courses appropriately mirrored those deemed important in real business settings (Bennington, 2004). However, there are still some skills, such as using information technology, writing business correspondence, and creating team or

group synergy, that are drawing more attention from employers than business educators (Conrad & Newberry, 2011).

In addition, further studies suggest that business professors feel they already efficiently assess their students' readiness for future employment, but the reality is that professors often are not readily aware of how well their students will communicate versus what employers expect; often employers assess and report communication skills of interns and new employees at the conclusion of an experience such as an internship or work assignment. This information is often anecdotal, reported to administrators only, and is not uniform. (Conrad & Newberry, 2011). Therefore, researchers emphasized the necessity for ongoing assessment of business communication commencing with a business or workplace communication emphasis within the curriculum itself (Bennington, 2004; Conrad & Newberry, 2011; Conrad & Newberry, 2012).

### **Students' Perception**

Most students evaluate their writing as direct, logical, organized, clear, and adapted to the audience, while few students identified grammar and spelling as weaknesses (Lentz, 2013). Students did not identify competencies as a primary cause of poor writing in the workplace, instead, students stated that lack of clarity and time limitation is the primary driver of poor workplace writing (Lentz, 2013). In regards to verbal communication, most students are not aware that informal verbal communication is not an accepted norm within most organizations (Lentz, 2013).

Students' perception shows that they perceive no direct reward for writing or speaking professionally in the workplace. Other students reflected that while professional writing played a role in resolving a customer dispute, the resolution, not the communication, was what was rewarded (Lentz, 2013). Students believe their companies do not value strong professional writing and speaking and do not provide any accountability for this. In this point of view, the weakness in an organization's communication culture is another cause of poor writing and speaking. Students demonstrated that the other reason for a lack of communication professionalism is time restraints. They implied that if they had time, they would write and speak more professionally or at least attempt to develop these skills (Lentz, 2013).

### **Evidence of Decline**

In response to initial research indicating business communication is in decline (Watkins, 2014), existing data compiled in a 2009-2014 ongoing employer survey conducted at a large, Midwestern University college of business was assessed. Over 250 unique employers pointed out the areas students need to improve in terms of communication skills. The survey and in-process report was sent out via email to all employers who either employed a business student as an intern or a new employee gauging their satisfaction with these individuals. Employers were concentrated in Ohio, Michigan, and Indiana. Of the 250 employers surveyed, response rate was nearly 90%. Three specific questions address communication skills of the intern/new associate. According to the report, more than half of the students cannot articulate themselves professionally, and 24% of employers think their intern's need to work on improved non-verbal communication skills. Additionally, 18% of recruiters assert that students are not well-prepared for the internship. Another major area needing to be improved is gaining relevant experience. Employers state that students fail to see the value in gaining relevant experience, and with no experience, there is no study to tell.

The employers' responses regarding the rating of intern's communication skills indicate that they view students exhibited strong communication skills, both verbal and written. On a scale of 1 to 4, with 4 being "outstanding" and 1 being "below standards", 72 of 250(29%) employers view their interns have outstanding oral and written communication skills. And 35% of recruiters think the students' communication skills, both oral and written skills, are above the standards. Additionally, 32% and 9% of employers respectively think students' communication skills are at "just meet standards" and "below standards."

Following the question of rating intern's communication skills, employers and recruiters are asked the question "does student exhibit strong communication skills, both verbal and written?" On a scale of 1 to

4, with 1 being “strongly disagree” and 4 being “strongly agree”, 42% of employers strongly agree that students have strong verbal and written communication skills, and 18% disagree. However, compared to the 2011-2012 analysis, 49% employer strongly agree that students get proper communication skills and 14% disagree. Therefore, there is clearly evidence showing that the business communications skills of students are declining.

## **B-SCHOOL CURRICULUM CHANGES**

Business communication skills are identified as one of the key issues in the course of marketing, accounting, public relations, corporate communication, and leadership communication courses. For instance, as accounting has evolved from a bookkeeping, number-calculating activity to an analysis, reporting, and advising profession, the accounting profession has taken a special interest in communication skills. However, the deficiencies of communication skills in new accountants call for a more comprehensive approach in accounting programs. Similar situation also exist in information system and public relations programs (Conrad & Newberry, 2011).

As business communication is becoming more significant in many fields, a more cross-disciplinary uniformity is called for in contemporary business communication education (Conrad & Newberry, 2011). Business communication instructors should collaborate with other business faculties to determine which business communication competencies should receive the most emphasis.

### **Resolution: B-School Business Communication Curricula**

Business communication courses should be designed to teach written and oral communication skills with an emphasis on business-related content and foci including technology (Bennington, 2004). A specific business communication course offered to all business students taught by business faculty will help students develop written and oral communication skills which will assist in their career paths. Business communication textbooks generally agree on the topics to be covered in the business communication course: importance of business communication, business writing process, executive summary writing, e-mail and brief message writing, oral and online presentations, technologies used in business communication, job interviewing, and team collaboration (Lesikar, Flatley, & Rentz, 2008; Bovee & Thill, 2004).

Business communication courses need to be updated and revised accordingly; this especially applies to demographics of specific cohorts such as non-traditional students, classes comprised of students all in one major, and courses offered off-site (Reinsch & Turner, 2006). In addition, new teaching approaches should be used in teaching process while continuing to stress the fundamentals of effective business communication (Du-Babcock, 2006). In order to make sure students are capable of applying business communication skills in the future, associated application materials should be added in the business communication courses in addition to business communication theory and models (Conrad & Newberry, 2011). It is the responsibility of communication instructors to show students the applied contemporary value of mastering persuasive writing strategies including proper business grammar (Decarie, 2010).

### **Business and Workplace Communication**

In response to the decline of business communication skills, a business communication course has been set up at a large, Midwestern University in Ohio. This skills-based communication course equips students to effectively make oral presentations individually and in teams, while practicing writing concise summary reports, adopting the acceptable business conventions for correspondence, email, and voice mail. In order to learn and practice techniques for managing and reducing speech anxiety, making engaging oral presentations individually and in group situations, using visual aids correctly, and writing email, memos, reports, thank you notes, etc. without error, six modules were set up. The six modules descriptions are provided below:

(1) Overcoming Stage Fright and Performance Anxiety- This is the first assignment in an assignment sequence. Students will learn how to become an engaging communicator by audience interaction. Managing and controlling performance anxiety and stage fright are also addressed.

(2) Networking and Interpersonal Skills- a DiSC personality profile is completed in this module to help students understand themselves and their audience. The ability to know their own communication style and how others prefer to be communicated with would be enhanced by this activity. Students will learn how to connect with others using email and other written correspondence, as well as making sure to avoid embarrassing themselves. Additionally, students will learn the “art” of personal introduction and networking in this module.

(3) Planning and Organizing Presentations- Forms and structure of presentation are introduced to students. Students learn to package and deliver their message by using “Nichols Two Things”. Finally, students learn how to plan a specific type of meeting and how to keep a meeting on track during this module.

(4) Techniques for Creating Engaging Presentations- Students learn how to draw upon the senses and use vivid and descriptive language to help bring listeners into the presentation. Students learn to be confident and engaging, speaking with dynamic openings and closings. Furthermore, they learn how to tell a story that engages the audience and illustrates the point they wish to make, by using “PIP”: Premise, Illustration, and Point.

(5) Presenting Data and Information- some of the worst oral and written presentations overwhelm or confuse the audience with the data. Students learn how to use data so that it enhances their presentation or report. Additionally, students learn how to use presentation slides to enhance, rather than detract, their presentation. The second part of this module is dealing with information. In this lesson, students learn how to succinctly capture the ideas, suggestions, conclusions, and recommendations in summary sentences without spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors.

(6) Persuasive communication- In this session, students learn the stages of persuasion processes and how it applies to different persuasive situations. Additionally, students learn the basic format and process of how to write a persuasive memo. An individual persuasive presentation is required from students.

## **OTHER SUGGESTIONS**

### **Assess Business Communication Effectively**

For the purpose of staying up-to-date and responding efficiently to the needs of our students, standardized skill assessments should be sensitive to, and adopted from, real business communities (Bennington, 2004; Conrad & Newberry, 2011). Employers’ perceptions of employees’ business communication competencies can assist in assessing learning outcomes of business communication courses. Thus, the bridge of understanding between business and academia must be constructed for assessing and addressing the communication skills business employees need.

Business and industry professionals should be included in the curricula process and be able to express the specific communication skills they require. Organizations should develop a communication strategy for the overall organization (Conrad & Newberry, 2011). In addition to demonstrating guidelines for curricula, communication strategies also promotes positive public image and a strong, transparent communication culture (Lentz, 2013). At the same time, educators must explore and understand the

specific communication skills real businesses need (Conrad & Newberry, 2011; Du-Babcock, 2006). Therefore, instructors can keep business communication teaching relevant and related to the ever changing and evolving global environment.

### **Using Technology Intelligently**

Before deciding to adopt communication technologies for classroom use, either as a measure of instruction or as components of learning activities, business communication instructors need to consider three foundational questions routinely.

First, does the emphasis on social media technologies in the classroom match the use of these technologies in the workplace? As a means of Web 1.0, email still dominates other communication channels in the workplace today, and is expected to be the primary business communication tool for at least the next 5 years (Cardon & Okoro, 2010). Researchers and consultants also predict that social networking will replace email and become the main communication tool in the future in about 20% of companies (Cardon & Okoro, 2010). From this point of view, instructors should introduce these emerging communication technologies such as blogs, wikis, and social networking sites; however, the importance of some Web 1.0 technologies such as email cannot be ignored.

The second question should be whether the technologies instructors adopt in the classroom are best classified as tools for business communication across all majors (Cardon & Okoro, 2010). For example, Facebook and Twitter are widely used marketing tools; while blogs are successful leadership communication tools.

The last question should address whether the use of social media in the classroom complements and supports traditional face-to-face communication (Cardon & Okoro, 2010). To sufficiently prepare students for the workplace, the utilization of social media in the classroom should complement and encourage face-to-face communication and help to develop interpersonal communication skills. Technologies should be adopted in a measured way and the above-mentioned questions will help instructors determine what kind and to what degree newer media should be utilized in business communication curricula.

### **Involving Students**

Instructors should facilitate student involvement and engagement by engaging in the following activities: student-faculty communication, student-student communication for team projects, active learning, providing quick feedback, consistently set high instructor expectations for students, and demonstrate respect for diverse talents and learning styles (Bennington, 2004; Hunt, 2003).

In terms of student-faculty contact, instructors should foster student contact both within and outside the classroom by establishing a supportive learning environment and provide office hours or use social media. Students will feel comfortable to contribute to on-going discussions, debate competing points of view, and ask questions by those efforts. Advocating cooperation among students require students provide support and feedback on peers' speeches during formal or informal group work. Active learning strategies include structured debates, games, and simulations which make the course content and assignments relevant to students' lives. Prompt feedback from instructors require instructors avoid competitive grading and to use several diverse forms of grading activities. Instructors need to set high expectations for students; at the same time, it is necessary to communicate their expectations to the students and involve them in certain classroom decision making processes when possible. Finally, educators need to show respect to diverse learning styles, as suggested by Hunt (2003).

## **CONCLUSION**

There is little argument that college students' business communication skills are critical tools for career and general success in business. In recent years it has been established that skillsets including teamwork, presentation, business writing, and technological literacy are critical components for career success. Employers cite these skills as in decline among interns and new employees, and further cite these

same skills as evaluator components for hiring and promotion decisions. Employers turn to faculty in B-schools through the completion of post-internship evaluations and recommend a greater emphasis on these skills in the classroom. As a result, B-schools are better served by offering their own business communication course with curricula that addresses not only the broad-based business skills but also industry- or major-specific communication skills. Technology integration is a critical factor in this paradigm shift in business communication largely due to the role technology plays in both general business applications as well as serving as a communication medium.

Future research should include a more thorough assessment of B-school's response to this skillset decline including assessing existing curricula, creating business communication courses in consultation with peer industries, and routinely assessing the value of this type of course. Examining students' business acumen annual to gauge if the trend is reversing is the final step in the assessment feedback loop.

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