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Proceedings of the Academy of Managerial Communications

**October 12-15, 1999
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Co-Editors
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Proceedings of the Academy of Managerial Communications

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WHAT HOLDS THIS COMPANY TOGETHER? A STUDY OF CORPORATE CULTURE AT BELIZE TELECOMMUNICATIONS LIMITED (BTL)

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ABSTRACT

Six foci of organizational culture (teamwork, morale, information flow, involvement, supervision, and meetings) as identified by Glaser, Zamanou, and Hacker (1987) were analyzed for the organization as a whole and also for subcultures within the organization. Subcultures were identified by gender, longevity with the company, nationality, and organizational rank.

Organizational employees identified the positive qualities of supervision as having the greatest presence in the organization. Positive qualities of meetings, teamwork, and morale were also identified among respondents as having a recognizable and solid presence in the work environment. Information flow and employee involvement, however, were of relatively weaker presence, according to the respondents.

Additionally, two types of variance (differences in employee perceptions of cultural values) were identified: Variance between groups and variance among members of the same group. Variances between groups occurred in three areas of the Organizational Culture Survey: a) Management and non-management employee groups differed on their views of supervision qualities, b) Belize nationals and non-nationals differed on their views of information flow qualities, and c) employees by years of service with the company differed on their views regarding the presence of teamwork in the organization.

Variance within groups, indicating differences in cultural perceptions among members of the same group or category, occurred in two areas: a) Employees with the company for five or fewer years showed more variance within the group, as compared to longer-term employees, on the qualities of involvement, and b) employees with the company longer than five years showed more variance within the group, as compared to employees with lesser tenure, on characteristics of supervision.

The study revealed positive qualities involving employee values and beliefs relevant to company operations. Likewise, the study revealed several cultural issues. To strengthen the company's cultural health, management will need to clearly identify the type of culture which best fits its mission, employee base, clientele, and public. Subsequently, specific strategic actions could be taken to modify the organization's culture to best meet its productivity, growth, and service requirements. The study was also helpful in better understanding a foreign corporation which seeks to build positive and productive relations with its international constituencies in the United States.

BUSINESS COMMUNICATION INSTRUCTORS' PERCEPTION OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

How important is nonverbal communication? Studies suggest that 65 to 90 percent of our communication is transmitted nonverbally. If this is true, then business communication instructors should be placing emphases on nonverbal communication. Nonverbal consists of the following- body language, tone of voice, gestures, physical appearance, space/territory, facial expressions and the clothes we wear.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to determine which nonverbal topics and methods business communication instructors used in teaching nonverbal communication. Specifically the objectives of this study are:

1. to determine the age and sex of the respondents.
2. to determine the value of nonverbal communication as perceived by business communication instructors.
3. to determine the number of assignments and materials used to teach nonverbal.
4. to determine the topics taught in nonverbal.
5. to determine the methods used in teaching nonverbal

METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire was developed and mailed to members of the Association for Business Communication in the Southwest and West Regions. A total of 298 questionnaires were mailed. One

hundred thirteen questionnaires were returned for a 38 percent return rate- However, some respondents did not teach nonverbal and some were retired; thus, there were 74 usable questionnaires.

RELATED LITERATURE

Nonverbal communication is a relatively new field of study and is defined as everything but the words used to communicate." "Nonverbal communication" is just one label. Others include "body language", "kinesics," "paralanguage", and "proxemics." Mary Ellen Guffey defines nonverbal communication as including "all written and unspoken messages, both intentional and unintentional."(Guffey, p. 50) Researchers have found that "an astonishing 93 per cent of the meaning of a message comes from nonverbal cues." (Guffey, p. 50) "Only seven per cent... of a message comes from the words spoken."(Guffey, p. 50)

A recently published book, *Nonverbal Communications, Forms and Functions* by Peter A. Anderson is based on "current theory and research in the field of nonverbal communication." Anderson states that "most researchers believe that nonverbal communication is considerably more important" (Anderson, p. 1) than verbal communication, Although researchers may disagree with the percentage of a message that is carried nonverbally "numerous studies show that all the various aspects of nonverbal communication-body movements, interpersonal distance, touch, facial expressions, and all other components ... of nonverbal communication ... are very important." (Anderson, p. 2)

Anderson defines nonverbal communication as "includes all communication other than language." (Anderson, p. 2) Nonverbal communication is a part of the broader category of communication. "Verbal communication and nonverbal communication ... exist side by side as two human processes that are part of the same system."(Anderson, p. 2)

The coverage of nonverbal communication in the business communication textbooks has increased over the past two decades.

Business Communications by Himstreet and Baty published in 1973 and used as a text in a business communication course devoted a few lines to nonverbal communication. They reported that "facial expressions, gestures and other bodily actions can tell when a person is pleased or upset." (Himstreet and Baty, p. 10) Also, listeners can recognize when "a person's speech does not convey his true intentions." (Himstreet and Baty, p. 10)

Recently published business communication books devote much more space to nonverbal communication. A recently published book *Lesikar's Basic Business Communication* by Lesikar, Pettit and Flatley (1999) devoted approximately three and one-half pages to nonverbal communication and included the nature of nonverbal communication, types of nonverbal communication which includes body language, space, time, paralanguage, and other types of nonverbal communication.(p, 434-437)

Lehman and Dufrene's book *Himstreet and Baty's Business Communication*, 1999, included nonverbal communication, metacommunication, kinesic communication, overcoming barriers created by nonverbal messages, and cultural differences in nonverbal messages in their book-(Lehman and DuFrene p. 49-52)

Even popular magazines such as *McCalls*, *Readers' Digest*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Mademoiselle*, *Tennis* and *Career World* include nonverbal communication articles.

The February, 1998 *Readers' Digest* in an article entitled "The Healing Power of Touch" records that touch is our "most intimate and most powerful form of communication." George Colt further states that "a simple touch-a hand on a shoulder, an arm around a waist-can reduce the heart rate and lower blood pressure." "Even people in deep comas may show changes in their heart rates when their hands are held. Positive, nurturing touch appears to stimulate the release of endorphins, the body's natural pain suppressors." (Colt., p. 89)

An article in *Tennis*, May, 1993, Jim Loehr discusses how nonverbal behavior on the tennis court can communicate win or lose. He says "body language may be the most underused weapon in tennis. With the right body language, you can summon the emotions that help players perform at their best, such as confidence and relaxation-" (Loehr, p. 1 18) Wouldn't it be great to become exceptionally confident right before you return your opponent's serve on break point?"(Loehr, p. 118)

An article in 1994 issue of *Career World* by Pamela Kramer says "It's true what you say in an interview has a lot to do with whether or not you land a new job. But what you don't say tells a potential employer even more." (Kramer, p, 14) No matter what you say, " the interviewer will have a hard time believing your words when your 'body language' is screaming the complete opposite." (Kramer, p. 14)

Dianne Hates' article, The Secret Language of Success in *Readers' Digest*, January, 1994 contains information about nonverbal communication in the family and on the job. The main theme of nonverbal communication on the job "centers on the theme: power." (Hates, p. 166) "...humans have their own way of signaling who is in charge."(Hales, p. 166) Ms. Hales discusses how power and lack of power is communicated on the job. Also, she discusses how to "look for discrepancies in what you are seeing and what you are hearing."(Hales, p. 166) She emphasizes the importance of working on the handshake and establishing good eye contact.(Hales, p- 165-169)

Karen Berg, CEO of New York City-based CommCore which specializes in communication training, wrote an article for *McCalls*, June 1993, entitled "How to Get What you Want." Karen writes that "the majority of interpersonal communication occurs through body language."(Berg, p. 90) She includes pictures which includes recommended body language that will get people to tell a secret, will get the job, will keep pickpockets away, and will get people to ask opinions at a board meeting. (Berg, p. 90-92)

In "How to Tell When a Person is Lying", *Good Housekeeping*, June, 1994, D. Glenn Foster and Mary Marshall teach how to read the subtle nonverbal cues. When adults can't express their real feelings "we have learned to 'behave' ourselves and how to hide our true feelings."(Foster and Marshall, p. 46) The article "goes through a set of signals that a husband sends out when the wife suspects he is being unfaithful."(Foster and Marshall, p. 46)

The July, 1995 issue of *Mademoiselle* contains an article entitled "Do you Give Good Body Language." by Alicia Rodriguez. A body language self-discovery test (a test of your visual vocabulary) is included. Photographs are shown of people at a party and at the office. Then questions concerning nonverbal communications are asked to determine the reader's nonverbal savvy. The answers and discussion are given. (Rodriguez, p. 75-77).

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of this study the following conclusions were drawn:

1. A majority of the respondents were female.
2. Most of the respondents were between the ages of 41 and 60.
3. Ninety-six percent of the respondents believed that nonverbal was "very valuable" or "valuable".
4. Fifty percent of the respondents give 1 or 2 nonverbal assignments each semester.
5. Most teachers use "teacher-made material" for teaching nonverbal.
6. A majority of respondents spend 2 or 3 class periods teaching nonverbal.
7. "Facial expressions" and "eye contact" were the topics most frequently taught.
8. Respondents indicated "lecture" and "discussion" were the methods used most frequently.
9. Respondents rated "audio/video material" and "role playing" as the most valuable methods.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The information contained in this study should be beneficial to those teaching nonverbal. The nonverbal topics that business communication instructors indicated should be taught might prove useful -to those teaching nonverbal. Those teaching nonverbal should find the value placed on various teaching methods beneficial.

Business communications instructors not teaching nonverbal might consider adding a unit on nonverbal. Respondents might consider spending additional class periods on nonverbal.

TABLES AND REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS

CRABBERS, CRANKS, AND RABBLE ROUSERS: MANAGERIAL COMMUNICATION TO SOOTH THE SAVAGE BEASTS

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ABSTRACT

Many workers and managers are ill prepared to cope with the day-to-day problems caused by difficult employees. Indeed, much of the stress that is generated in a work setting is caused by disruptive employees. This paper will describe the characteristics of disruptive employees, some of the reasons for their behavior, the costs to employers, and managerial communication technologies that managers can employ in dealing with difficult behavior in the workplace.

INTRODUCTION

Both managers and employees need to take more than skills into the workplace; they need to take with them managerial communication technologies. These technologies provide the necessary tools to cope with difficult and disruptive employees. Many workers and managers are ill prepared to cope with the day-to-day problems caused by these difficult employees. Indeed, much of the stress that is generated in a work setting is caused by disruptive employees. Yet, little attention has been given as to how good managerial communication can help in dealing with subordinates, coworkers, and bosses who exhibit poor behavior.

This paper will describe the characteristics of disruptive employees, some the reasons for their behavior, the costs to employers, employment practices liability insurance, and good managerial technologies managers can bring to bear to deal with difficult behavior and enhance workplace performance.

CHARACTERISTICS OF DIFFICULT EMPLOYEES

Sometimes characteristics of difficult people are hard to identify when first encountering them in the workplace because human behavior is extremely complex. However, some warning signs of difficult employees include:

has difficulty accepting authority/criticism
holds grudges—especially against managers
sabotages company property and/or equipment
physical/verbal intimidation
argumentative/uncooperative
has difficulty controlling temper
has sense of entitlement (Johnson, Kurutz, & Kiehlbauch, 1995).

A difficult employee is viewed by his coworkers as insensitive, arrogant, abrasive and not a team player. S/he doesn't choose his/her battles, doesn't know when to quit, and ends up in numerous scrapes with peers (Marsh & Arnold, 1988). Not surprisingly, difficult employees can do a great deal of damage. Because the employee does not always complete assignments, the work is assigned to someone else. Those coworkers will directly or indirectly express their feelings in loss of respect for the supervisor, in group feelings of anger, in declining work performance and in poor morale (Sparber, 1987).

One of the most common and troublesome behavior problems is abrasiveness or lack of sensitivity to other people. Being perceived as abrasive or lacking in interpersonal skills often prevents otherwise talented employees from meeting their own career goals and fulfilling the promise of their potential (Marsh & Arnold, 1988).

REASONS FOR POOR BEHAVIOR

There are many reasons why people act out at work. Some people have become so alienated that they feel no loyalty or attachment to their organization. They love their work, but hate their jobs (Bensimon, 1997). In addition, employees hold real fears of the future. Those fears clash with the saccharin messages too many corporate communicators hold forth. The conflict is destroying trust in management (Burger, 1995).

Another reason for poor behavior is sheer work overload. Employees feel overworked and underappreciated. In fact, it has become commonplace for interpersonal difficulties, often between supervisors and workers, to interfere with productive and healthy work environments (Ajango, 1995). Not surprisingly, work overload is just one hot workplace issue surfacing on a new wave of cutting-edge employee surveys (Shellenbarger, 1998).

Finally, stress is a major factor. Too much stress makes people sick leading to mood and sleep disturbances, gastrointestinal problems, heart attacks, difficulty concentrating, short tempers, and mental breakdowns (Grimsley, 1999). In addition, difficult employees can make an individual's workday unsatisfying and unduly stressful (Arnold & Roach, 1992). To help relieve the stress, organizational psychologist Gary Namie operates a web site called the Work Doctor at www.workdoctor.com where workers discuss their job stresses (Grimsley, 1999).

For difficult and disruptive employees, as well as distressed coworkers, web sites are springing up offering employees a chance to vent about their unsatisfactory work life. One site, www.disgruntled.com, posts anecdotes sent in by readers about their bosses and coworkers. Another, www.myboss.com, offers tips on how to relax before job interviews. Such web sites are a way to communicate their pain. Among the companies whose workers have set up their own web sites to complain are Wal-Mart and Sears, Roebuck & Company (Sterba, 1997).

COSTS TO EMPLOYERS

Unresolved behavioral problems turn into financial and productivity losses, and interventions that are too narrow in scope will allow the same problems to burst out again elsewhere. If managers have only a limited understanding of where the people problems occur and how these problems siphon off financial resources, they are less likely to have insights on how to prevent or minimize their impact (Yandrick, 1996). In addition to lower productivity, a more significant cost to employers is legal fees. Angry workers are filing lawsuits against their employers in record numbers. It is a frightening and an expensive trend that is bound to get worse (Caudron, 1996).

A survey of 450 top HR executives and in-house lawyers conducted by Jackson, Lewis, Schnitzler & Krupman, one of the nation's leading employment law firms, confirms the increase in lawsuits. Three out of five human resources people responding to the firm's 1995 survey said their companies are being sued by an employee, an increase of 10 percent over the last two years. Throughout the country, plaintiffs' lawyers who once might have turned away an aggrieved employee now have powerful financial incentives to file lawsuits. For example, the cost of defending an employee lawsuit through trial, including attorneys' fees and expenses, typically ranges from \$100,000 to \$250,000. These costs, along with the fact that plaintiffs tend to prevail in jury trials, make many companies eager to settle lawsuits as soon as possible. But even settlement can be expensive (Caudron, 1996).

COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES THAT WILL HELP EMPLOYERS DEAL WITH DISRUPTIONS

Relationships are built on what people have in common; the more people have in common, the easier it is to get along with people. Conflict is built on the difference between you and the other person. Managerial communication technologies that can be employed to resolve employee disruptions include:

Choose your language carefully – Be direct and use simple language and sentence structure. Avoid using words such as: “but,” “however,” “always,” “never.”
Regulate the tone and the flow of voice – use a tone and speed that match the message.
Watch for body language – pause and mimic the other person's body language.
Pace lessens the distance between you and the other person.

Clarification – ask questions in order “who, what, where, when, how.”

“Take the cotton out of your ears, and put it in your mouth”

Listen attentively without interrupting – “Almost everyone considers themselves a good listener, and almost nobody is as good as they think.”

Make a conscious choice about your response – try not to get angry; stay focused on problem solving.

Express your point of view and explain why – present your evidence without backing them into a corner. An explanation can often take the sting out of an emotional situation.

From the company’s viewpoint, managers need to deal with the difficult employee for bottom-line financial reasons (Gerber, 1996). Individuals consume so much time and energy trying to do the impossible, namely, to change and control the action of others, that they wrongly believe that they cannot change and control their own thoughts and actions. Most of the pain that difficult people cause comes from one’s taking their criticisms or rejection too seriously. Thus, managers can try to keep some “emotional distance” from difficult employees rather than trying to improve their behavior (Arnold & Roach, 1992).

In addition, managers can reduce the time they spend resolving conflicts if they encourage employees to be as concerned with “how” they speak as they are with “what” they say. Managers also need to encourage employees to adopt “problem-solving attitudes” when discussing sensitive issues (Cole, 1997).

Finally, it is important that training be given to employees who are dealing with difficult people. These training programs can focus on increasing interpersonal sensitivity, developing team skills, and helping to manage conflict effectively and solve problems collaboratively. Past experience suggests, however, that successfully altering resistance or stubborn behavior typically takes six to 12 months (Marsh & Arnold, 1988).

CONCLUSION

The workplace isn’t just more diverse than ever before, it’s also more complex. As companies become more global, and as social values evolve, we must become more sensitive to how our own behavior and actions affect others. One encounters many fine individuals in the workplace, but unless one is prepared to employ managerial communication technologies to resolve employee disruptions, the likelihood of workplace satisfaction is diminished.

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VIRTUAL SYMBOLS: COMMUNICATING NORMS IN VIRTUAL TEAMS

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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that one of the key differences between a somewhat effective group and a significantly effective team is the culture. World-class teams have group norms that foster high productivity and high group maintenance behaviors. In addition, they establish high performance group norms if they are to achieve more than the individual members working alone. Most of the standard cues used to communicate culture are not available to teams that work in the computerized virtual environment. This paper will define virtual teams, suggest a variety of ways to communicate group norms virtually, and show how communication training in the area of virtual teams can enhance organizational change to embrace the virtual office of the 21st century.

INTRODUCTION

Today, 8.4 million U.S. workers are involved in telework from remote locations and that number is expected to exceed 14 million by year 2000. The technology is clearly available to make virtual teams possible, and the number of firms beginning to explore the potential of virtual teaming is increasing. Already, companies such as Hewlett-Packard, Price-Waterhouse, Lotus Development, Eastman Kodak, and Whirlpool have implemented some type of virtual team (Townsend & DeMarie, 1996).

Virtual teams also address new workforce demographics, where the best employees may be located anywhere in the world and where workers demand increasing technological sophistication and personal flexibility (Townsend & DeMarie, 1998). People form virtual teams for every reason under the sun; because the technology is available and because they are able to work with people at a distance. The most likely reason organizations employ virtual teams is because the expertise they need is not always all in the same place (Pape, 1997).

As Andrew S. Grove of Intel Corporation has said: "You have no choice but to operate in a world shaped by globalization and the information revolution. There are two options: adapt or die." Not surprisingly, whatever technologies companies are using to bring together human and information resources, the end result is a more effective and efficient environment that has essentially broken down traditional boundaries of the workplace (Sheffield, 1998).

DEFINITION OF VIRTUAL TEAMS

Some people say that every team that needs to work together and whose members are more than 50 feet apart is a virtual team (Pape, 1997). Virtual teams also require a group of technologies, including desktop video conferencing, collaborative software, and internet/intranet systems which converge to forge the foundation of a new workplace. This new workplace will be unrestrained by geography, time, and organizational boundaries; it will be a virtual workplace, where productivity, flexibility, and collaboration will reach unprecedented new levels (Townsend & DeMarie, 1998).

Developing community among people who work at a distance from each other is the challenge of one recent development, the intranet web site, which acts as the town square of the activity at hand (Pellecchia, 1998a). When Australia is sleeping, the project can be handed off to America. Everything is worked on around the clock. What happens with a project at each stage goes with it to the next stage (Pellecchia, 1998b).

Virtual teams rarely, if ever, meet in a face-to-face setting. They may be set up as temporary structures, existing only to accomplish a specific task, or may be more permanent structures, used to address ongoing issues such as strategic planning. Furthermore, membership is often fluid, evolving according to changing task requirements (Townsend & DeMarie, 1998).

Virtual teams, because of reduced travel time required of its members, can significantly increase the productive capacity of individual members. For this reason, virtual team members may be asked to participate in a higher number of separate team situations than was practical in traditional face-to-face teamwork. Thus, virtual team members may have multiple (and even competing) alliances outside their specific virtual team (Townsend & DeMarie, 1998). Furthermore, membership is often fluid, evolving according to changing task requirements (Townsend & DeMarie, 1998).

CULTURAL NORMS

AMS Software Corporation has assembled a project team of six highly skilled professionals whose goal is to develop enhanced software. Three of the team members are full-time employees of AMS; three are outside consultants. AMS faces an increasingly common problem: how to promote organizational culture when your team members will never meet face to face. There is widespread agreement among experts on team performance that shared cultural values support high performance (Aranda & Aranda, 1998; Katzenbach & Smith, 1993; Larson, 1996).

Formally, pay structures, policy manuals, and employment contracts begin the process of establishing norms for "how we work," "what we value" and "who we are as a group." In addition to these formal communication tools, members use many informal indicators of group norms. Some of these norms include:

- Do meetings start on time, or a little early or a little late?
- What do members wear?
- What is discussed before a meeting begins?
- Where do different group members sit?
- Does one person dominate the discussion?

These communication cues are not available to virtual teams. How, then, can teams whose members never (or rarely) meet face to face establish the sort of cultural norms which support high performance? Technology, notably, imposes a participative, egalitarian style. Members must communicate their ideas and progress regularly in order to “exist” in a virtual group. Computers, therefore, demand that all group members actively participate. Virtual teams, therefore, are more likely, by their very nature, to develop cultural norms which value shared leadership and shared problem solving.

In addition, all organizations communicate culture by the stories and myths which get told. Carl Jung (1964) in *Man and His Symbols* and Joseph Campbell (1959) in *The Masks of God* address the historically recurring symbols humankind has used to communicate meaningful values. Across cultures, across language groups, and across centuries, symbolism has remained remarkably consistent. As a result, stories or myths about the organization which use historically meaningful themes or symbols can rapidly transmit entire patterns of interrelated values and group norms.

Rather than being a time waster, the jokes, stories, and quotes which group members e-mail to one another can be a critical element in establishing their values. If the stories are about success in spite of challenges and the quotes remind readers to put people first, those ideas will get incorporated into the group’s culture. Virtual team leaders can consciously choose to circulate stories or humor which support high performance values. Web sites which offer a variety of choices include daily comics at www.unitedmedia.com/comics/ and The Joseph Campbell Foundation, with stories and poems from around the world, at www.jcf.org/pub.

Effective groups share a behavior of celebrating both group and personal achievements. When a project milestone is reached, traditional teams go out for a meal together to celebrate. When a group member has a birthday, a high performance team will acknowledge that member, perhaps with a present or a cake. Virtual teams need to acknowledge achievement as well. The Internet offers a variety of tools for celebrating virtually. A “bouquet of flowers” can be sent by using www.virtualflorist.com. In addition, postcards can easily be personalized and sent from www.maxracks.com. If a virtual cake would be the appropriate celebratory acknowledgement, www.mailameal.com provides many choices. And at www.virtualpresents.com a team member can arrange to send an impressive virtual gift.

Virtual teams are limited in the ways they can develop group norms. However within that limitation, many options exist for developing a team spirit and a culture of achievement. Because shared culture is essential to high output, team leaders need to use all the tools available to them.

COMMUNICATION TRAINING

In addition to using cultural norms, virtual team members must be taught how to maintain effective communication within the constraints of the virtual environment. This may require training team members to use considerably more linguistic precision in their communication, since they will be unable to modify their speech with shoulder shrugs or descriptive gesture (Townsend, & DeMarie, 1996).

Virtual team members must also be trained to quickly assimilate into new virtual teams. Companies must ensure that changes in team personnel occur with seamless continuity. If members

expect team composition to change frequently, they will not be offended by being removed from a team, nor will they resent the introduction of new team members (Townsend & DeMarie, 1996).

In addition, virtual team members need extensive training in the area of communications technology. Although an increasing percentage of the workforce is computer-literate, a significant number of valuable employees are uncomfortable with computers and other telecommunications technologies. One of the greatest challenges in the introduction of virtual teams is the successful incorporation of valuable, technophobic personnel into the virtual team environment.

Another area of training that virtual team members need is in the area of stress management. Because of the virtual environment, people are efficiently connected and thus greater levels of productivity are required. This may result in employees being assigned to more teams, creating a more complex and potentially stressful work environment. Organizations must be careful not to overextend virtual team members and saddle them with levels of responsibility that they cannot reasonably satisfy.

CONCLUSION

Virtual teams allow organizations to hire and retain the best people, regardless of the location of the people. Also, virtual connections allow organizations to expand their potential labor market to include skilled individuals who, for one reason or another, would not otherwise be available to work. Not surprisingly, traditional ways of establishing group norms does not work in the virtual setting. Thus, through the use of the internet, virtual team members can establish trust, build rapport, and perform at an outstanding level.

The world of the virtual team is far from static; continuing changes in technology and competitive environments will present new opportunities and new imperatives for virtual teamwork.

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ASSESSING ORAL COMMUNICATION ASSIGNMENTS OF ENGLISH AS SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL) STUDENTS IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION CLASSES

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ABSTRACT

As the U.S. population becomes more diverse, the enrollment of English as Second Language (ESL) students in colleges and universities continues to expand. This diversity may sometimes lead to problems for business communication teachers who must assess the oral communication skills of students who may not be fluent in English.

In April 1999 a nationwide survey of business communication teachers was conducted soliciting input on how ESL students' oral communication skills were being assessed. The survey consisted of statements answered on a Likert-type scale along with several demographic questions. Respondents were asked to identify areas where their assessments of ESL students might differ from their assessments of students whose first language was English. Comparisons were made based upon teachers' gender, age, number of years of teaching experience, and geographic region where they teach. The Wilcoxon Signed Rank statistic was used to test aspects of the hypothesis "business communication teachers are indifferent in their assessment of ESL students and students whose native language is English."

INTRODUCTION

Global expansion of businesses has resulted in an increase in the movement of people from one country to another. This is true, perhaps, more for the United States than any other country. As the U.S. population becomes more diverse, the enrollment of English as Second Language (ESL) students in colleges and universities continues to expand. This diversity may sometimes lead to problems for business communication teachers when they must assess the oral communication skills of students who may not be fluent in English.

METHODOLOGY

In April 1999 a nationwide survey of business communication teachers was conducted soliciting input on how ESL students' oral communication skills were being assessed. The survey consisted of statements answered on a Likert-type scale along with several demographic questions. A scale of 1-7, with 1 representing Strongly Agree and 7 representing Strongly Disagree, was used. The questionnaire was mailed to 994 members of The Association for Business Communication. A total of 195 questionnaires were returned, of which 169 were usable. This represented a 17 percent usable return.

Respondents were asked to identify areas where their assessments of ESL students might differ from their assessments of students whose first language was English. To determine whether teachers were more lenient with ESL students, the following statement was used to introduce particular oral communication problems that teachers of ESL students might encounter.

Specifically, for oral communication assignments I might overlook. . .

poor organization
incorrect pronunciation
poor enunciation
poor voice quality (volume, clarity, etc.)
unusual gestures
inadequate eye contact
lack of self-confidence
lack of enthusiasm
inability to answer questions

Comparisons were made based upon teachers' gender, age, number of years of teaching experience, and geographic region where they teach. The Wilcoxon Signed Rank statistic was used to test aspects of the following hypothesis: "Business communication teachers are indifferent in their assessment of ESL students and students whose native language is English." A response of 4 was used as the point of indifference. The Kruskal-Wallis Test was used to analyze relationships among various demographic items.

DATA ANALYSIS

The hypothesis of indifference was rejected for six of the nine statements. The estimated median for "poor organization" was 6.0, which had a P-VALUE of 0.000. This item resulted in the greatest level of disagreement among the nine statements that were analyzed. Respondents disagreed that they would overlook poor organization in evaluating an ESL student's oral communication. In fact, a total of 109 out of 158 teachers who responded to this item marked either a six (N = 41) or

seven (N = 68), indicating strong disagreement. This disagreement is shown graphically in Figure 1 at the end of the document.

The statement showing the second-most disagreement among respondents dealt with a speaker's "inability to answer questions." An overwhelming majority of the respondents (100 of 156) disagreed with the idea that they were more lenient with ESL students regarding their ability to answer questions. A median response of 5.5 yielded a P-VALUE of 0.000, hence the hypothesis was rejected with 99 percent confidence.

Teachers appeared more likely to overlook "incorrect pronunciation" than any other weakness ESL students might experience. Approximately 58 percent (90 respondents) indicated some level of agreement that incorrect pronunciation was overlooked where ESL students were concerned. Thus, with a P-VALUE of 0.000, the hypothesis of indifference was rejected for this category as well.

"Poor voice quality" apparently is appraised no differently for ESL students versus native English speaking students. More than half (80) of the instructors disagreed to some degree that they were more lenient with ESL students where voice quality was measured. A P-VALUE of 0.000 permitted rejection of the hypothesis for poor voice quality.

The P-VALUE for "inadequate eye contact" when speaking was 0.007, thus the hypothesis was rejected. This finding was somewhat surprising considering that in some cultures looking a listener in the eye while speaking may be considered disrespectful. Seventy-two of 156 respondents indicated some level of disagreement with the statement that they showed any favoritism to ESL students when eye contact was the criterion for judgment.

The hypothesis of indifference was also rejected for "lack of enthusiasm," which had a P-VALUE of 0.000. A median response of 5.0 revealed a high level of disagreement that ESL students were treated any differently when speaker enthusiasm was measured. In fact, ninety of 159 teachers who responded said they disagree to some extent that they are more lenient in assessing speaker enthusiasm with students whose first language is not English.

Hypotheses of indifference could not be rejected for "poor enunciation," "unusual gestures," or "lack of self-confidence." Median responses of 4.0, 4.5, and 4.0, respectively (7-point scale), showed respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the notion that they were more lenient with ESL students where these particulars were evaluated. Responses varied more for "lack of self-confidence" than for any other factor considered, indicating there was much disagreement among teachers as to whether any leniency should be shown to ESL students with this particular problem. Figure 2 depicts graphically the wide range of opinions among teachers on this specific issue.

The Kruskal-Wallis Test was used to analyze various demographic data. Gender, age, number of years of teaching experience, and geographic region of the U.S. were investigated. The following four hypotheses were tested: There are no significant differences in the assessment standards applied to ESL students and native English speaking students where gender, age, years of teaching experience, and geographic location of instructors are independently taken into account.

Teacher responses revealed significant differences in only one area: "incorrect pronunciation" by gender. Age, number of years of teaching experience, and geographic location appeared to have no impact on the way ESL students were evaluated as compared to other students. The following table shows the statistics for evaluation of incorrect pronunciation by gender of instructors.

Gender	Number of Observations	Z VALUE
Female	105	-1.98
Male	46	1.98
H = 3.91	d.f. = 1	p = 0.048

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

In addition to identifying the six statements with which respondents were not indifferent, the three statements where indifference could not be rejected an analysis of the demographic data indicated no difference among respondents. This was surprising, particularly for geographic location, since different geographic regions have varying concentrations of ESL students. The uniformity of response across the varying demographic characteristics was surprising as well.

Many participants provided statements supporting the rationale for their responses. Excerpts of such statements include:

“Leniency handicaps my students.”

“Don’t lower your standards.”

“I try to grade all students on the same standards.”

“I don’t make exceptions for poorly prepared U.S. citizens nor internationals.”

“It seems like it’s only natural to be more lenient—it would take a pretty hard-nosed person to hold non-native speakers to the same standard as native speakers.”

“You don’t help a student by being lenient.”

“All of my students are evaluated in the same way.”

“If you’re in a U.S. school, you have to abide/be judged by U.S. standard English.”

“In most cases, if I didn’t ‘lighten up,’ they would fail.”

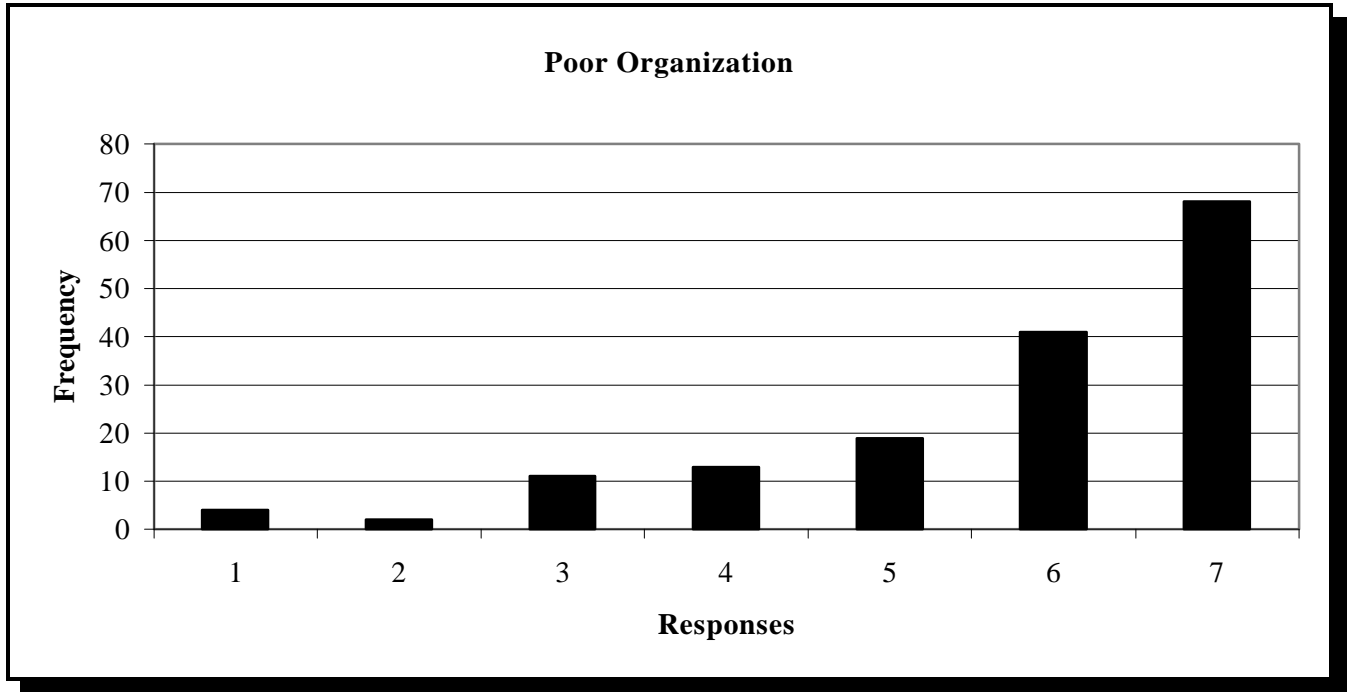
“International students compete and enter the job market here. They are graded the same.”

“I strongly believe that we should not grade ESL students any differently than native speakers.”

“Generally my foreign students have better grammar skills than my American students.”

“Grading them differently can be considered discriminatory.”

These responses are indicative of the spectrum of responses generated by the survey. In the majority of the cases, teachers disagreed with the concept of leniency for ESL students.



DOES COMPLETION OF THE BUSINESS COMMUNICATION COURSE ALTER STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE COURSE AND THE DAILY COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES OF AN EXECUTIVE?

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to compare the responses of students before and after completing the business communication course. Students were surveyed on 15 topic areas most often identified in business communication syllabi. With regard to the importance of the topic areas to the business communication course, 11 of the 15 topic areas means increased with four areas having significant differences from pre-test to post-test measurements; four areas decreased. With regard to the importance of the topic areas to the daily activities of a business executive 12 of the 15 topic area means increased, with five of the areas having significant differences from pre-test to post-test measurements; three areas decreased. Conclusions and recommendations for the significant differences and on presentation style for the areas that decreased are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The concept investigated in this paper concerns students' perceptions of their business communication experience and the relevance of this experience to their business careers. Does completing a business communication course alter the perceptions of students concerning the importance of the business communication course to the curriculum? Does completing the course alter their perceptions of the importance of business communication topic areas to the daily activities of a business executive?

RELATED LITERATURE

The related literature addresses the topics of the importance of business communication and assessing perceptions of the target population.

Business communication skills are necessary for a successful business career. The ability to communicate effectively in business is consistently ranked in the top five of necessary job skills (Chandler, 1995; Harcourt, Krizan, & Merrier, 1995; Locker, 1995). Although communication skills are necessary for a successful job experience, getting students to take the business communication course seriously is difficult (McPherson, 1998).

Although many schools and colleges of business require business communication as part of the program, few assess the effectiveness of the course (Varner and Pomerence, 1998). If assessment is designed to measure the performance of students, it should be used only to assess that performance and to provide guidance in changing the curriculum and pedagogy (Varner and Pomerence, 1998).

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to compare the responses of students before and after completing the business communication course. The survey method was chosen for this study because (a) a relatively large population is used, (b) the utility of a questionnaire for collecting descriptive data is recognized, and (c) the need for perceptions of respondents from a large population.

Selection of Business Communication Topic Areas

A review of syllabi used by the business communication faculty of a large, Midwestern university yielded a list of business communication topic areas. The 15 topic areas which were most often identified in the syllabi are the following: grammar and usage skills, business letter parts and appearance, good-news and neutral messages, bad-news messages, persuasive messages, memorandums, short reports and proposals, formal reports, graphic aids, business presentations, small group communication, listening, international business communication, resume and application letter, and legal and ethical considerations for communication.

Development of the Questionnaire

Two different questionnaires were designed: one instrument was developed for distribution to the students on the first day of class and the other was created for distribution after the completion of the final exam. A 5-point Likert-type scale to differentiate the perceptions of the respondents concerning the importance of the business communication topic areas to the daily job activities of a business executive and to the business communication course was used in the questionnaire (5=crucial topic, 1= not important topic).

The pre-course questionnaire contained 40 questions with instructions at the bottom of each page indicating how the respondents should proceed. The post-course differed only in the addition of questions 41 and 42. Question 41 was added to ensure that the student had completed the first-day questionnaire. Question 42 was added to determine if the completion of the business communication course had changed the students' perceptions concerning the importance of business communication to the business curriculum.

Selection and Collection of the Sample Data

The sample population for this study consisted of 200 students enrolled in a large, Midwestern university's business communication classes. They received the pre-course questionnaires during the

first week of classes, before any discussion of the course outline or requirements. The post-course questionnaire was distributed after the final exam or last assignment (in lieu of a final exam) was completed. The process resulted in 149 sets (one pre-course and one post-course questionnaire) of responses from the students (74.5 percent).

Statistical Data Analysis

Analysis of the data collected from the survey resulted in quantitative comparisons of the first day and last day responses for all variables as well as the identification of relationships among the variables. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSSX) was used for this analysis. In order to investigate relationships among the variables, cross tabulations and the chi-square statistic were used. A .05 confidence level was used to measure significance. Cross tabulations were only performed on the data collected from the last-day questionnaire.

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

The results of this research are presented under demographic data and perceptions.

Demographic Data

The first research area examined was the demographic characteristics of the students. Eighty of the respondents were female (56%), and sixty-nine were male (44%). Almost half (42.9 percent) of the students identified the "other" as their area of expertise. The "other" category included Engineering, English, History, and combination or double majors. Only five of the students (3%) had previously completed a course in business communication.

Perceptions

The second major area investigated in this study was the perceptions of the students before and after completing the course concerning the importance of business communication topic areas.

Significant differences occurred between the means of four of the topic areas of the 15 topic areas with regards to the importance of the topic area to the business communication course: business letter parts and appearance, good news messages, bad news messages, and persuasive messages. Four of the fifteen topic area means decreased, though not significantly, from the pretest to the post-test score: short reports/proposals, formal reports, graphic aids, and international business communication.

Significant differences also occurred between the pre- and post-test scores in the following topic areas regarding the means of the 15 topic areas with regard to the importance of the topic area to the daily activities of a business executive: grammar and usage skills, good news messages, bad news messages, persuasive messages, and memorandums. Three of the fifteen topic area means decreased, though not significantly, from the pretest to the post-test score: formal reports, graphic aids, and international business communication.

The students were asked to rate the overall importance of the business communication course to the business curriculum. The mean for the pre-course was 4.456, and the post-course mean was 4.562. The significance of F statistic was .158, therefore, no significant difference exists between the two groups.

Finally, the students were asked if the completion of the business communication course had changed their perception concerning the importance of business communication to the business curriculum. Over three-fourths of the students (84%) responded that their perception had changed and they believed the course was more important than before, 2% of the students' perceptions changed but they believed the course was less important than before. Twenty-six students (14%) stated that their perception had not changed.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the data collected from these two groups, the following statements appear warranted:

1. Both groups, pre- and post-course, acknowledge the importance of the business communication course to the business curriculum, as evidenced by the fact that no mean in any topic areas for both measures was below 3.0.

2. Over three-fourths of the students in this study stated that they perceived the business communication course as being more important to the business curriculum after completing the business communication course. Although improvement is always a goal for the business communication course, this response statistic indicates that the business communication course is helping students to understand the importance of communication skills in business.

3. With regard to the business communication course, there were increases in 11 of the 15 topic area means, and four areas had significantly different scores from pre-test to post-test measurements. Having four areas decrease may indicate that the presentation of these topic areas should be re-evaluated.

4. With regard to the daily activities of business executives, there were increases in 12 of the 15 topic area means, and five areas had significantly different scores from pre-test to post-test measurements. Having three areas decrease may indicate that the presentation of these topic areas should be re-evaluated.

5. Suggested delivery techniques for those topic areas that decreased regarding the course and daily activities of an executive follows:

a. For reports, teachers must show the various degrees of research and report generation that will be used in business. Since findings in this study show that students felt more negative toward report formats that would have the most strict rules and the least freedom of expression, students need to master the topics that would make them more comfortable with these areas—grammar, editing. Also, students need to be reminded that expressing themselves too freely can have repercussions, using correct grammar is never out of style, and adopting consistency in format enhances readability (Merrier and Dirks, 1997).

b. For international communication, students need better preparation for handling international business (Devet, 1998; Sturges, 1992; Waner, 1995). Teachers must tell

students of the demands of international communication in the current workplace environment, since students didn't understand that this topic is a daily occurrence in the workplace. Students can also use persuasive principles to begin to feel more positive about international communication (Devet, 1998) as well as the other topics that students felt more negative about after the class.

c. Course integration in addition to formal communication requirements are offered at a number of schools, including the University of South Carolina (Knight, 1999).

d. Using techniques used in MBA programs may work with undergraduates as well. (Williams, 1996) Techniques such as: outside speakers and communication experts, projects that analyze specific companies corporate communication, corporate representatives to evaluate students, Lotus Notes to stimulate a virtual learning community, short workshops or seminars that focus on specific areas of communication, and a cross-functional approach by teaching students how to effectively communicate in all directions within and outside an organization.

e. Using Web sties can help with written communication. They can have multiple communication challenges (Driskill, 1997).

6. Similar studies should be conducted at other institutions to ensure that the business communication courses continue to be a critical part of the College of Business curriculum.

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