

The Communicator's Advantage

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If you believe strong communication skills are vitally important, you are in good company. For over fifty years studies have consistently shown that managers rank the ability to communicate effectively as the number one indicator when assessing a candidate's probability for promotion. Stephen R. Covey wrote in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, "Communication is the most important skill in life. We spend most of our waking hours communicating". A survey conducted in 1995 by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) asked 259 employers to rank the importance of a list of skills they seek when hiring. The skills identified as most important, in the following order, were: oral communication, interpersonal communication, teamwork, analytical skills, flexibility, leadership, written communication, proficiency in field of study, and computer skills. During this study, corporate leaders also stressed repeatedly (sometimes sharply) that "there is no excuse for graduates who cannot communicate effectively"

In the 1997 report *Alumni Satisfaction with Professional Preparation*, prepared by Joseph Hoey for the North Carolina State University, 3,179 alumni who graduated between December 1990 and August 1993 rated the importance of various skills and abilities relevant to professional preparation. Respondents rated how important these items were to their professional work after graduation. The overall rating for the importance of communication skills (4.68 on a scale of 1-5) was higher than for any other item.

In the spring of 2000, the *New Wall Street Journal* joined the list of business publications that rank MBA programs. The Journal based its rankings on responses from 1600 corporate recruiters. As a result of this input, *The New Wall Street Journal* highlighted the importance of communication skills education by recognizing its inclusion as a specific MBA ranking criterion.

In its 2000+ *Employability Skills Report*, the Conference Board of Canada lists communication as the first, fundamental skill set required for successful employment. Why then, if so many sources agree on the value of good communication skills, are they so often overlooked? It seems that this critical skill is being left to chance and osmosis. Perhaps because most of us learn to speak "naturally", and since fundamental literacy is taught in our school system at a very young age, the need for ongoing communication education is simply overlooked. Many students who progress to College and University lack the essential communication skills they need to be successful in their careers and interpersonal relationships. Needless to say, those who do not pursue post secondary

education have even greater hurdles to overcome in the arena of effective communication.

So what makes up good communication? True communication happens only when the intended message is received and understood as intended. Whether you are presenting to a large group, conversing one on one, or writing a letter, good communication requires transmission, decoding, reception and feedback. Telling alone is not communicating, nor is hearing. Each stage of the process has an associated skill set that can be learned and practised for increasing effectiveness. It is important to remember that communication is not an event; it is a loop of refinement and clarification that continues until the meaning of the message is clearly understood.

As long as our culture and our educational system assume automatic mastery of this ability, we will continue to struggle to understand and to be understood. Of course, we don't have to accept these limitations. One of the most valuable investments we can make in ourselves (or in our employees) is to undertake to develop the full scope of our communication skills. Many courses and organizations exist to help aspiring communicators develop a distinct advantage in the marketplace by honing these valuable skills.

Effective communication is important. Based on the evidence cited above, perhaps it is the most vital skill of all. What it comes down to is this: you may have the greatest ideas in the world, the required education, and all the experience you could want - none of it will bring you success if you can't communicate. Ideas that remain bottled up, thoughts that remain unexpressed, feelings that go unshared accomplish nothing, change nothing. And what you misunderstand cannot enrich you. Your unique perspective on the world and all that you bring to the table can only contribute; can only work to your advantage, if you communicate.