

Developing the Communication Skills Required for Sustainable Career Success

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Helping young professionals develop specific communication skills can significantly impact their careers—and the accounting profession itself.

Communication skills play an essential role in career success for accounting professionals—a fact that has been widely acknowledged.¹ Despite this long-standing awareness, recruiters indicate that accounting students continue to lack the communication skill sets that the profession requires.² Identifying the specific communication skills that are most needed and then helping students and young professionals develop those skills can have a significant impact on their careers as well as on the profession.

An issue that perhaps contributes to this lack of skills is that students who are considering whether to pursue an accounting degree and career are often unaware of the high level of importance that the profession places on these skills. In turn, the result is often a mismatch between the skills possessed by the young accounting professionals and the skills that are truly necessary for success within the profession.³ In recent years, this mismatch has extended to even the preferred mode of communication. It was found that prospective accounting professionals, more accustomed to using technology as a primary means of communication (both academically and socially), strongly favor the more indirect communication method of emailing rather than the more direct method of placing a phone call.⁴

In a previous study we conducted with R.J. Grambo, we

looked at the specific communication skills deemed essential to success within the arena of public accounting.⁵ In terms of communication skills, that study found that the public accounting profession places the highest importance—across all career levels (staff, manager, and partner)—on interpersonal communication skills (vs. leadership and organizational communication skills). For accounting students—as well as recent graduates entering the profession—awareness of these findings can play an important role in the advancement of their career. Yet are the specific communication skills deemed important in public accounting the same as, or different from, those regarded as most important within other sectors in which management accountants typically serve, like public and private corporations or governmental organizations?

Supported by a grant from IMA® (Institute of Management Accountants), we conducted a new study to identify the communication skills deemed most important across various sectors of the accounting profession. The findings are presented here along with analysis to assess whether the perceived importance of the skills change as an individual advances through his or her career and whether these perceptions are affected by demographic factors such as gender, organization size, years of professional experience, and level of educational. The results can be used by current and aspiring accounting professionals to assist in identifying and developing the specific communication skills that are associated with career success.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SPECIFIC COMMUNICATION SKILLS AT VARIOUS CAREER STAGES

The primary objective of this study was to identify the specific communication skills that are most important to management accounting professionals as they progress through their career. The survey instrument was distributed to a broad cross section of management accounting professionals. As Table 1 illustrates, the survey participants represent a broad range of demographics: 58.2% male and 41.8% female, with 64.1% of all participants having more than 10 years of professional experience. Participants with one or more professional certification total 72.8%, and 65.8% have earned a graduate degree. Those working in public accounting total 58.6%, while

26.6% are in private company accounting, 7.8% are in the arena of public company accounting, and 7.0% are in governmental (or other) accounting. The participants are also employed by companies from a wide range of annual revenue.

The survey instrument employed a seven-point Likert scale asking the participants to indicate the relative importance of 24 specific types of communication skills at various stages of an individual's career. To help ensure the validity of the study, the skills and categories used were based on the previous work of David Conrad and Robert Newberry and our earlier study.⁶ Conrad and Newberry noted that their derivation of variables was the result of an in-depth review of the business communication skills literature. These 24 specific communication skills were arranged into three broad categories: interpersonal, leadership, and organizational.

As shown in Table 2, interpersonal skills are the most important at all career levels (with means of 6.15, 6.40, and 6.47 at the levels of supervisory staff, manager, and executive, respectively). The increasing mean responses for interpersonal skills, both as a class and individually, reveal that these skills become increasingly important as an accountant advances through his or her career. This increasing importance was also observed for many leadership and organizational communication skills, but not as uniformly and consistently as the interpersonal communication skills. Accordingly, one takeaway is the need for accountants to be keenly aware of the key importance of interpersonal skills throughout their careers and to consciously work to improve these skills.

The trend of increased importance for interpersonal skills as one's career progresses also was observed for a clear majority of the other communication skills. As a class, the importance of leadership skills steadily increases when advancing from staff member to manager to executive. The same holds true for organizational skills. The only exceptions to this trend were for a few specific skills within these classes. For leadership skills, the exceptions were for building team bonds, creating group synergy, and expressing encouragement. For organizational skills, the exceptions were for using information technology, teaching important skills, and providing performance feedback.

Table 1: Demographic Summary
n = 257

Gender:		
Female	107	41.8%
Male	<u>149</u>	<u>58.2%</u>
	256	100.0%
Years of Professional Experience:		
10 years or less	92	35.8%
More than 10 years	<u>164</u>	<u>64.1%</u>
	256	100.0%
Professionally Certified (CMA, CPA, CFA, CIA, CFE)		
Yes	187	72.8%
No	<u>70</u>	<u>27.2%</u>
	257	100.0%
Highest Academic Degree		
Undergraduate degree	88	34.2%
Masters or higher degree	<u>169</u>	<u>65.8%</u>
	257	100.0%
Industry Segment		
Public accounting	150	58.6%
Private company	68	26.6%
Public company	20	7.8%
Government and other	<u>18</u>	<u>7.0%</u>
	256	100.0%
Organization Size (annual revenue)		
\$100 million or less	127	49.4%
\$101 million to \$1 billion	38	14.8%
More than \$1 billion	<u>89</u>	<u>34.6%</u>
	254	100.0%

Accountants should be cognizant of this general expectation for improved communication skills at each successive career level. Deliberately and proactively seeking out programs and other means to develop these skills will likely enhance the prospects for promotions and a successful career.

IMPORTANT SKILLS BY CAREER LEVEL

Table 2 shows the importance of specific types of communication skills for each career level, with bolded text indicating the top 10 items of importance for a given career level. Five skills appeared in the top 10 list for every career level: demonstrating respect, actively listening, building trust, building relationships, and

demonstrating self-control. These are universally important communication skills, needed for success at every level of an accounting professional's career.

Consequently, we focused on the skills that were perceived as uniquely important for each particular level. There was only one skill that appeared more than once. The result is a list of five particular communication skills that individuals can focus on developing to improve their effectiveness and ability at each career level.

Supervisory Staff Level

The interpersonal communication skill perceived to be most important at the supervisory staff level is demon-

Table 2: Communication Categories and Skills Importance for All Career Levels in Accounting

Communication Skills	Supervisory Staff		Manager		Executive	
	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank
Demonstrating respect	6.45	1	6.52	2	6.58	1
Active listening	6.41	2	6.54	1	6.55	4
Building trust	6.31	3	6.50	3	6.57	2
Building relationships	6.14	5	6.41	5	6.52	5
Building rapport	5.98	6	6.30	11	6.32	15
Demonstrating emotional self-control	5.94	7	6.33	10	6.49	7
Relating to people of diverse backgrounds	5.84	9	6.18	16	6.24	19
Interpersonal Communication Skills	6.15		6.40		6.47	
Building team bonds	5.89	8	6.30	13	6.13	22
Creating group synergy	5.57	10	6.30	12	6.28	17
Expressing encouragement	5.54	11	6.37	8	6.29	16
Building optimism	5.48	13	6.15	17	6.36	12
Arousing enthusiasm	5.37	16	6.11	19	6.24	20
Providing motivation	5.34	18	6.35	9	6.35	13
Being persuasive	5.20	21	6.04	20	6.42	8
Being a change catalyst	4.93	23	6.03	21	6.27	18
Leadership Communication Skills	5.42		6.19		6.32	
Using information technology	6.16	4	5.97	23	5.62	24
Writing business correspondence	5.48	12	6.27	15	6.34	14
Initiating open discussion	5.48	14	6.30	14	6.41	9
Teaching important skills	5.39	15	6.40	6	6.02	23
Resolving conflict	5.36	17	6.37	7	6.40	10
Providing performance feedback	5.29	19	6.48	4	6.36	11
Creating information networks	5.27	20	6.02	22	6.20	21
Making convincing presentations	4.95	22	6.15	18	6.56	3
Negotiating	4.45	24	5.92	24	6.49	6
Organizational Communication Skills	5.31		6.21		6.27	

Notes:

1. A seven-point Likert Scale was used, where 1 = not at all important and 7 = critically important.
2. The skills and types (interpersonal, leadership, and organizational) were obtained from "Identification and Instruction of Important Business Communication Skills for Graduate Business Education," *Journal of Education for Business*, March/April 2012. They were also used in "The Importance of Communication Skills at Different Career Levels," *The CPA Journal*, April 2014.
3. Bolded means represent a skill that was ranked in the top 10 for the related level (staff, manager, and executive).

strating respect (6.45), followed closely by active listening (6.41) and building trust (6.31). The five skills specific to the supervisory staff level are using information technology (6.16), building rapport (5.98), building team bonds (5.89), relating to people of diverse backgrounds (5.84), and creating group synergy (5.57).

Accordingly, staff accountants wishing to succeed will likely benefit from not only focusing on the five universally important interpersonal skills, but also on these five additional skills that are perceived as being particularly important for this stage of their career.

It is interesting to also consider the skills ranked as the least important for supervisory staff: negotiating (4.45), making convincing presentations (4.95), and being a change catalyst (4.93). One might intuitively expect such findings since the job responsibilities of “early career” management accounting professionals would typically not yet call for such organizational or leadership skills.

Manager Level

As individuals advance from supervisory staff to manager level, the mean for all except one of the 24 skill types increases. The exception is using information technology, for which the mean decreases from 6.16 to 5.97. This small decrease suggests that using information technology is still regarded as being important, just somewhat less so than for supervisory staff.

The five skills uniquely important to the manager level are: providing performance feedback (6.48), teaching important skills (6.40), resolving conflict (6.37), expressing encouragement (6.37), and providing motivation (6.35). These skills illustrate a relatively clear demarcation of very specific—and different—goals for the manager level compared to the supervisory staff level. The general trend is toward leadership skills and, especially, organizational skills. Only one organizational skill is included among the top 10 skills for staff accountants, while managers have three such skills.

This trend is further emphasized by the reported means for these skills, with the overall mean for leadership skills jumping from 5.42 for staff accountants to 6.19 for managers, and the overall mean for organizational skills increasing from 5.31 for supervisory staff to 6.21 for managers. The goal for accountants at the man-

agement level should be to maintain or improve the skills that they developed as staff accountants and, additionally, focus on enhancing their ability in providing feedback, teaching skills, resolving conflict, expressing encouragement, and providing motivation.

Executive Level

The means of the five universally important skills increased again at the executive level, thus showing their growing importance as accountants progress in their career: demonstrating respect (6.58), building trust (6.57), active listening (6.55), building relationships (6.52), and demonstrating emotional self-control (6.49). Clearly, interpersonal communication skills are of great importance throughout one’s accounting career.

The five other skills in the top 10 for accountants at the executive level are making convincing presentations (6.56), negotiating (6.49), being persuasive (6.42), initiating open discussion (6.41), and resolving conflict (6.40). Four of these skills are categorized as organizational communication skills, reflecting the increased organizational responsibility that is inherent to the executive stage of one’s career.

One other difference of note at the executive level is that all 24 communication skills are shown to have high means of importance. Accounting professionals who want to advance to higher levels of responsibility and authority should seek to continually enhance their communication skills in every possible respect.

THE IMPACT OF OTHER DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS

Additional insights about these results can be gained by analyzing whether participants’ responses were affected by demographic factors such as gender, years of professional experience, the specific segment of the accounting profession in which the respondent is employed, or the size of the organization at which the accounting professional is employed. We used a regression model with each of the 24 specific communication skills regressed against each of the three career levels. A number of additional interesting findings flow from these analyses.

Supervisory Staff Level

The importance of initiating open discussion was found to be statistically more important among staff-level

employees in industry (private and public entities) and government compared to their staff-level counterparts in public accounting. The same finding was observed for a number of other communication skills, including resolving conflict, creating information networks, teaching important skills, providing performance feedback, negotiating, making convincing presentations, arousing enthusiasm, being a change catalyst, creating group synergy, expressing encouragement, providing motivation, being persuasive, and building optimism. For these communication skills, expectations for staff-level employees in industry and government are greater than the expectations for their public accounting peers.

The expectations for being a change catalyst correlate with organization size. More specifically, the expectations for employees at the supervisory staff level at small organizations with respect to be a change catalyst are lowest, compared to the expectations for employees at the same level in midsize and large organizations. The same finding is also observed for building optimism—the expectations for employees at the supervisory staff level of small organizations are lowest, while those of midsize and large organizations are greater.

Manager Level

Interesting cross-sectional findings are seen for the communication skills deemed most important at the manager level. For example, the ability to create information networks is regarded as most important for employees at the manager level of governmental organizations. This particular skill is also regarded as more important by all nonpublic accounting employees (governmental, private entity, public entity) than by public accounting employees.

The ability to use information technology was found to be of greatest importance among manager-level respondents of smaller organizations (\$100 million or less in annual revenues) and of lesser importance among manager-level employees in larger organizations. The opposite finding was observed for being a change catalyst—in other words, this communication skill is found to be of lesser significance among manager-level employees of small organizations, but its importance increases among manager-level employees as the orga-

nization size increases.

Providing performance feedback, negotiating, building team bonds, and providing motivation were judged as being of higher importance by manager-level employees who do not have a professional certification relative to those who hold one or more professional certifications.

An additional finding of interest is that female manager-level employees regard building team bonds as being more important than their male counterparts. Similarly, the interpersonal communication skills of building trust and the ability to engage in active listening were also both regarded as more important by female manager-level employees than their male counterparts.

Manager-level employees with more than 10 years of professional experience view building trust as being more important than their less-experienced peers. Additionally, the ability to build relationships is of greater importance among manager-level employees of public accounting firms compared to their manager-level counterparts not in public accounting. Finally, the importance of this specific communication skill is regarded by managers who hold a graduate degree as being more important than their peers who do not hold a graduate degree.

Executive Level

Similar findings are seen at the executive level. A number of specific communication skills are of statistically greater importance among executive-level respondents of small organizations than among their counterparts in larger organizations, including several organizational communication skills: resolving conflict, creating information networks, teaching important skills, using information technology, and providing performance feedback. The same finding occurred for certain skills within the leadership communication skills category—relative to their peers at larger organizations, executive-level employees of small organizations perceive building team bonds and providing motivation as being of greater importance. There was a similar finding for just one of the interpersonal communication skills: active listening.

Also similar to the findings observed for manager-

level employees are specific communication skills that are perceived by female executive-level employees as being of greater relative importance than their male counterparts. These include two of the leadership communication skills—arousing enthusiasm and being a change catalyst—and two of the interpersonal communication skills—active listening and building trust.

The perceived importance of certain communication skills is found to be dependent on still other demographic attributes. For example, level of professional experience is associated with the perceived importance of certain communication skills. Providing performance feedback, arousing enthusiasm, building team bonds, active listening, and demonstrating respect are all perceived by executive-level employees having considerable professional experience (typically more than 10 years) as being of greater importance than their less-experienced executive-level counterparts. Also, the respondents' level of formal education is associated with the perceived significance of teaching important skills. Respondents who possess a graduate degree place greater importance on this specific communication skill compared to those who do not hold a graduate degree.

As was noted for both the supervisory staff level and manager level, the perceived importance of certain communication skills seems to likewise depend on the specific sector of the accounting profession in which executive-level employees are employed. Executive-level employees of public accounting firms regard teaching important skills, building rapport, and building relationships as being of greater importance than do their counterparts in other sectors. Building team bonds was also considered more important by public accounting firm respondents, but this time they were joined by public company respondents, who viewed the skill with equal importance.

IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Regardless of the particular sector of the profession in which they are employed, accounting professionals across all phases of their careers can find important implications in the results of this study. Perhaps the

broadest implication is that such historically important matters as the knowledge of accounting standards, obtainment of professional certifications, and development of pure technical skills on which accounting professionals so often focus their energies—even from the beginning of their college education—are by no means the only matters on which they should be concentrating. Rather, communication skills may be as important to the success of an accounting professional as the “hard” skills. And as was found in a 2014 study, the particular skills deemed as most important vary as one advances through the ranks.⁷

The results of these studies suggest that all accounting professionals would benefit from developing skills that are deemed most important for the rank to which they aspire. Individual accountants can use this knowledge to further their advancement, and institutions can use this knowledge to develop programs that can help foster and nurture such skills. Additionally, accounting educators should make concerted efforts to focus their schools' curricula not just on the technical knowledge that is so essential to a solid accounting education, but also on the often-ignored communication skills that their students need to become fully competent members of the profession.

While the study finds that certain communication skills are correlated with particular stages of one's career or with certain demographics (such as gender, years of professional experience, and so forth), a significant finding is the importance of interpersonal communication skills across all phases of an individual's accounting career, regardless of a specific demographic. These specific career-long skills are the ability to demonstrate respect, build trust, build relationships, listen actively, and demonstrate emotional self-control. Individual members of the profession should make deliberate efforts to acquire and nurture such skills over time.

In view of the study's finding that these skills take on higher levels of importance as one advances to higher levels of authority and responsibility, the need for a program of continuous improvement becomes obvious. In order to navigate a successful accounting career, the possession of—and ongoing fostering of—such skills is an absolute necessity.

Other communication skills are found to be of spe-

cific significance with respect to particular demographics and thus offer their own unique implications. Indeed, it might behoove accounting professionals across all sectors to give careful consideration as to why the survey participants responded so differently in terms of such matters as gender, industry segment, and other demographic factors. For example, why are specific skills like initiating open discussion deemed of greater importance for supervisory staff in industry and government compared to those in other sectors of the profession? Similarly, why do manager-level professionals of governmental and not-for-profit entities place greater importance on the ability to create information networks in comparison with their manager-level counterparts from private industry and public accounting? Or why do executive-level employees of small organizations deem active listening to be of statistically greater significance than do their peers of midsize and large organizations? These observations are offered as areas that are ripe for future research. The answers to these questions will allow for the development of more specific communication skill sets that are most suited to particular career sectors.

With respect to the specific implications of this study to accounting educators, the unequivocal importance of interpersonal skills to staff-level employees is clear: College graduates will enter the profession as staff-level employees. Many of these individuals will soon advance to a supervisory staff level; thus, accounting programs should perhaps place greatest emphasis on the requisite communication skills at this level. With a solid foundation in these specific skills, individuals could more easily develop the additional communication skills that are needed at other levels as they advance in their career. In other words, obtaining a proper foundation of communication skills is likely the most important focal point for college educators, and this study reveals that interpersonal skills do indeed form part of that foundation.

Demonstrating respect, active listening, and building trust are specific skills that educators can focus on through carefully developed curricula to help ensure that their students are better equipped to enter the profession. Educators should no longer take the perspective that some students are just naturally more capable

of showing due respect, listening attentively, and so on any more than they might accept the fact that some students can or cannot meet requisite standards of technical proficiency. Instead, they should do their best, via both formal curricula and their own personal efforts, to instill proper levels of communication proficiency in their students. Similarly, employers may find the need to modify their new staff training methodologies in order to foster not just the kinds of “how-to” skills that are unique to their organization but also the foundational communication skills that are identified by this study as being of universal importance to entry-level accounting professionals.

What may be most helpful is for all accountants to be cognizant of three findings:

1. Communication skills in general become more important as one rises to higher positions.
2. There are five skills that remain critically important throughout one’s career: demonstrating respect, active listening, building trust, building relationships, and demonstrating emotional self-control.
3. There are unique skills that take on a relatively greater importance at particular stages of one’s career. ■

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ENDNOTES

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