Communication
in the Workplace

BADEN EUNSON

➪ organisational communication
➪ networking
➪ knowledge management
➪ managing the grapevine

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Communication

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Preface

Why bother with communication? Sure, communication is a 'soft skill' that everyone talks about, but — after all — can communication really be that important when you need to be upgrading your skills and knowledge as you develop your career?

Well, actually, it is. All varieties of communication are among the best business tools you can have in your career toolkit.

A 2006 survey by Graduate Careers Australia — *Graduate Outlook 2006* — found that when employers were looking for graduates to hire, the technical competence of the graduates in their chosen field ran a poor second to the communication skills the employers were primarily looking for.

Figure 1: 2006 survey by Graduate Careers Australia — factors favoured most by graduate employers

a	Interpersonal and communication skills (written and oral)
b	Academic qualifications
c	Work experience
d	Leadership skills
e	Passion/knowledge of industry/drive/commitment/attitude
f	Teamwork skills
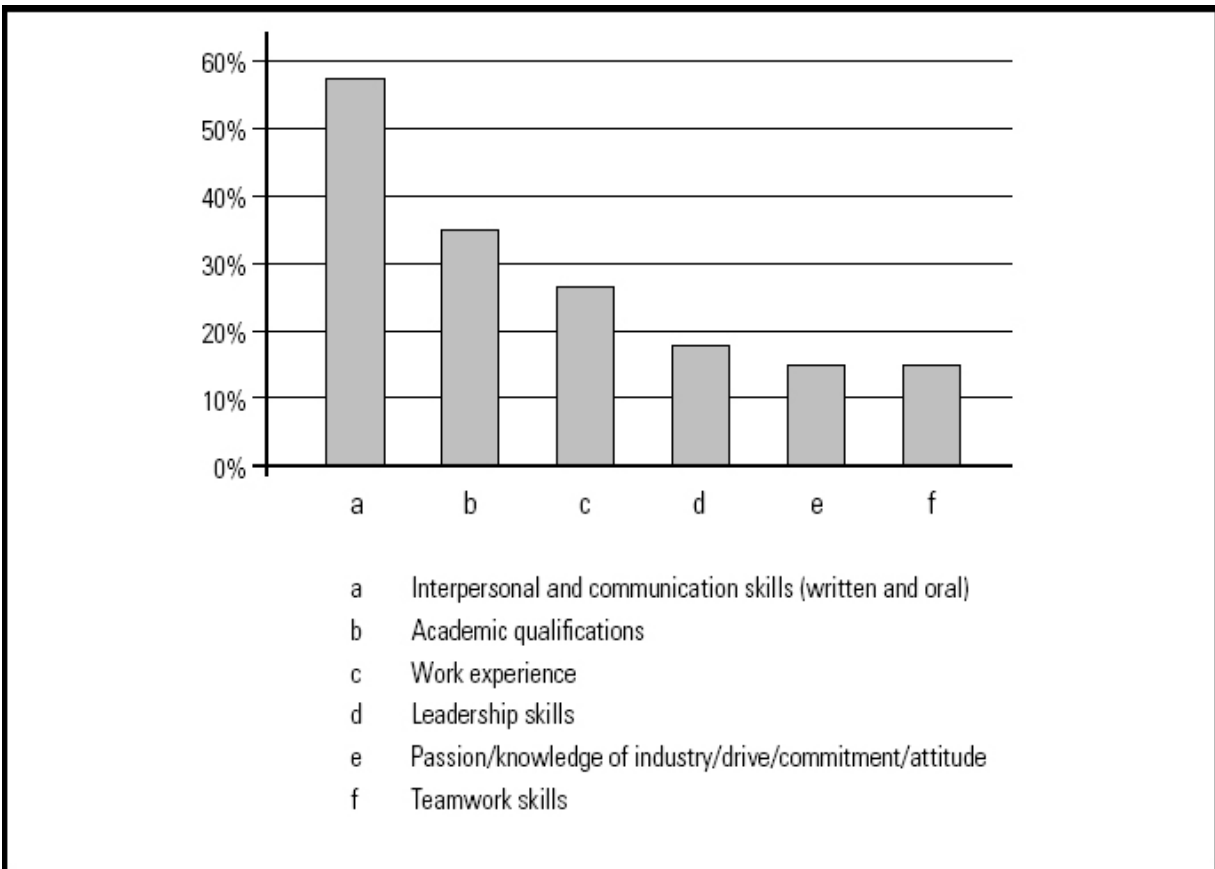
Much the same considerations apply even if you don't have a degree, or are already in your first or second career: time and again, those with good or great communication skills seem to have an advantage over those who don't.

Can such skills be learnt? Of course they can. The book you hold in your hands is part of the Business Tools series, a series that can help you use aspects of communication as tools to further your career, and possibly your own personal development.

Soft skills such as communication — in contrast to hard skills, such as number crunching and physical labour — are sometimes also known as generic, employability or transferable skills. This means that:

- while the technical knowledge you currently have may well be obsolete in five years' time, your soft skills will still be relevant in twenty or thirty years' time

- the transferable nature of soft skills will help you progress within your organisation out of your current area of specialisation, and will help you move on to other organisations when the time is right for those types of moves.

   Some workplaces are like palaces, some are like villages and some are like jungles. In *Communication in the Workplace,* I have created maps, plans and insights that I hope will help you to understand different types of workplaces (and perhaps throughout your career, you will work in all of them). You can become more adept and successful, and survive and flourish, by learning how communication takes place in organisations, and equally, how it breaks down. Learning about networks, structures, channels and cultures can help you communicate more effectively both inside and outside of your workplace.

   I hope you find the book easy to read, and also hope that you can return to it as a tool and resource in your career as a communicator.

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Introduction

Communication in the workplace is not simply a matter of computer cables, emails and notices pinned on boards. It is all of those physical things, and more, but it is also about vast, intricate and often invisible networks of human interaction.

Communication in the Workplace examines the differences between *communication* (the transfer of meaning) and *communications* (the transfer of data). I will set out a model of communication, and analyse the strengths and weaknesses of various communication channels in workplaces. I will consider the ways in which communication can break down, and also pose the question: if communication is a good thing, can we have too much of a good thing?

The tricky questions associated with ethics in workplace communication are answered. I then reflect on the formal structures of organisations, or what can be deduced, to a certain extent, from an organisation chart; for example, in an annual general report or on a website information page. I look at communication coming from and going in differing directions — upward, downward, horizontally and diagonally. The focus then shifts to the ways in which organisations can be tall or flat, centralised or decentralised, and organic or mechanistic, and how these features can affect communication flows. I discuss network and virtual organisations, and consider the philosophies and techniques of networking.

The informal organisation is explored — the organisation that will not show up on an organisation chart but that nevertheless does exist. The main feature of this informal or shadow organisation is the grapevine or rumour mill, which

can be influenced but can never be destroyed — it is the only plant known to flourish in a vacuum.

Finally, the question of organisational culture is considered, and two 'bad' types of organisational culture — silos and silence — are discussed along with what can be done about them. *Communication in the Workplace* concludes with a discussion of how approaches to knowledge management can help or hinder workplace communication.

Chapter 1

Communication or communications?

To understand a specific situation or problem, such as communication in the workplace, people need to get to grips with the broader picture. Just what is meant by communication, anyway? Communication is often defined so broadly that it might become meaningless — but if it is everything, perhaps it is nothing.

Given that communication is probably not nothing, here are some definitions of the key terms surrounding this thing called 'communication'.

One communication, two communications . . .

Just what is communication? Look it up in a library catalogue or an online bookstore and you could easily become confused. For example, you might be interested in finding out about public speaking or body language or journalism but find that your search is impeded by numerous entries for books on electronics. Or you might be researching the physics of the internet or telephones but find instead countless entries for books on negotiation, public relations and writing skills. So what's going on?

Right from the very beginning — ironically enough — there is confusing communication about communication. The first
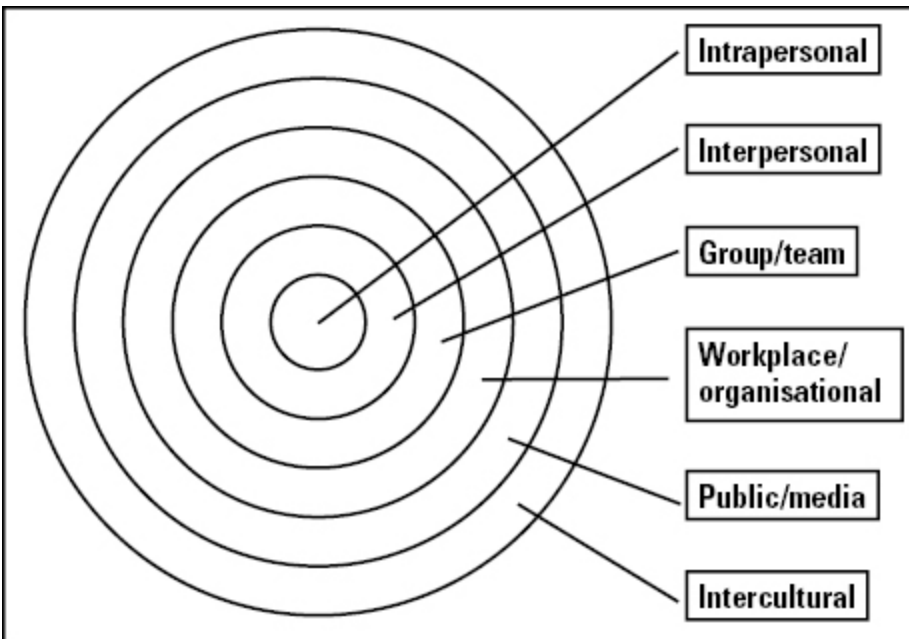
task, then, is to establish the differences between these two concepts.

Communication (singular), as applied to human interaction, includes:

- body language or non-verbal communication
- public speaking and presentation skills
- journalism or writing for the mass media
- graphic communication
- leadership, power and managing skills
- debate, logic, persuading and influencing skills
- negotiation and conflict resolution skills
- interpersonal skills (such as listening, assertiveness, questioning and giving feedback)
- intrapersonal communication (self-talk, affirmations, distorted thinking)
- organisational communication skills
- intercultural communication
- writing skills (grammar, punctuation, spelling)
- document writing (memos, emails, reports)
- website text and design
- communicating with customers
- public relations communication
- communicating in teams and meetings
- job-seeking communication (job application letters, résumés, interview skills).

The list is endless. Virtually all these areas of skill and knowledge relate to the humanities or social sciences, although increasingly they are being classified as transferable skills, soft skills or generic skills, recognised as essential by employers in all sectors. These different types of communication can be visualised interconnecting in a systematic way, as shown in figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1: a concentric model of fields of communication

Figure showing concentric circles labelled from the centre outward: Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, Group/team, Workplace/organisational, Public/media, Intercultural

These fields or spheres of communication are:

- *intrapersonal* — communication that takes place within one person (thoughts, behaviour patterns, perceptions, accurate/distorted thinking, conscious/unconscious thinking, self-talk, affirmations)
- *interpersonal* — communication that takes place between two people
- *group/team* — communication that takes place between members of a work group, team or department, involving more than two people
- *workplace/organisational* — communication that takes place among the group of groups that is an organisation or workplace
- *public/media* — communication from inside the organisation to the outside world using public communication or public relations methods, and — coming back the other way — the attention paid to the organisation by the media

- *intercultural* — communication that takes place between people from different cultural/ethnic/religious/racial/national groups.

All of these different fields, or spheres, can interconnect, sometimes in routine and sometimes in unexpected ways:

- A private email correspondence between two people may be made public and published in the media and on the internet.
- An inter-departmental committee on work safety may produce a draft report on health hazards that is discussed throughout the organisation.
- An individual may leak the contents of a controversial document to the media.
- A department may be highly valued by the rest of the workplace because of the outstanding technical support it provides and the superb interpersonal skills of its staff.
- A department may be loathed and feared by the rest of the workplace because, even though the technical services it offers are vital, it often provides them badly and late, and its staff take an arrogant and hostile attitude to everyone else.
- An individual negotiator visiting another country may conclude a less-than-satisfactory agreement because of unconscious hostility towards members of the other culture.

This, then, is communication — a singular word — which applies to human interaction. A general definition of this type of communication might be *the study of the transfer of meaning.*

> *It is by universal misunderstanding that all agree. For if, by ill luck, people understood each other, they would never agree.*
>
> *Charles Baudelaire*

Communications (plural), as distinct from communication, usually relates to the physics and mechanics of telecommunications systems such as telephone networks, satellites and the internet. These areas of skill and knowledge fall into the fields of engineering and the sciences. A general definition for these types of communications might be *the study of the transfer of data.*

These are not absolute distinctions — you will encounter cases of 'communications' clearly referring to the transfer of knowledge and you may encounter instances of 'communication' relating to the engineering application. The confusion can be annoying but perhaps it is understandable in an age in which so much human communication is technologically mediated — that is, uses mechanical or electronic means or media to transfer meanings. Such means, or media, can also be referred to as *channels of communication.*

A useful way of conceiving the difference between the singular and the plural usages of communication is to think of the plural encompassing the singular — that is, mechanical transmission enables the transfer of meaning or content. Such a relationship is shown in <u>figure 1.2</u>.

<u>Figure 1.2</u>: communication within communications