

Abstract

Thematic analysis of interviews with 22 managers highlight their perspectives on exemplary and unacceptable workplace communication skills. Exemplary skills were perceived to be relatability, documentation, and audience awareness/adaptation, while unacceptable skills were verbal aggression, deception, and defensive communication behaviors. The findings contribute to closing-the-gap research by identifying highly notable skills—both positive and negative—on typical lists of business and professional communication skills. This study also enriches anticipatory socialization scholarship by its application to vocational preparation. Business and professional communication instructors can use the findings here when deciding what topics to emphasize in a course.

Keywords: exemplary communication skills, unacceptable communication skills, closing-the-gap studies, anticipatory organizational socialization, qualitative methods

Exemplary and Unacceptable Workplace Communication Skills

Employers make selections for new employees by choosing candidates who bring the greatest number of needed strengths and minimize the potential for problems. Candidates offered positions typically excelled in several facets of their interview. After employees begin working, their strengths and deficiencies become evident. Business and professional communication classes contribute one mechanism to develop and strengthen workplace communication skills.

Numerous studies have illuminated the workplace communication skills desired in recent college graduates. The meaning of communication skills from employers' perspectives shows a preference for interpersonal skills (Coffelt et al., 2016; Maes et al., 1997) and indicates processes of translating, relating, and executing are paramount regardless of the mode of delivery (Coffelt et al., 2019). Even among lists of soft skills, interpersonal communication skills tend to rank highest when measuring importance (Clokie & Fourie, 2016; Maes et al., 1997). These studies sought understanding of skills expected of college graduates, regardless of industry or occupation. As such, the skills reflect standard skills that demonstrate communication competence. Yet, employers relish the discovery of exemplary communication skills and the competitive advantage they garner. Identifying exemplary communication skills would be of interest to business and professional communication instructors so they can emphasize critical concepts or help highly motivated students develop in key areas. Employers also have an aversion to unacceptable communication skills revealed after an employee is hired. This study seeks understanding of employers' views of exemplary and unacceptable communication skills.

Literature Review

Faculty can utilize employers' perspectives while socializing students as they teach a range of communication skills. The content of business and professional communication courses

incorporates material from many sources including the annual Job Outlook report, prepared by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE). NACE ranks skills from employer survey data, where communication skills—both written and verbal—consistently appear among the top 10 (NACE, 2015, 2017). These results affirm the necessity for communication courses and the value placed upon these skills within organizations. Research on communication skill development aligns with the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of anticipatory organizational socialization (Jablin, 2001) and closing-the-gap scholarship (Brent, 2011).

Anticipatory Organizational Socialization

Organizational socialization is a lifelong process that begins in early childhood and is generally depicted in four phases: anticipatory socialization, encounter, metamorphosis and exit (Jablin, 2001). The first phase, anticipatory socialization, informs the current analysis and is divided into two parts: role anticipatory socialization and organizational anticipatory socialization (Kramer, 2010). Role anticipatory socialization facilitates an individual's development of their unique talents and interests. Organizational anticipatory socialization occurs when individuals begin to seek information about specific organizations, careers within those organizations, and the requisite skills and abilities required to obtain employment. As employers assume their part during organizational anticipatory socialization and write job descriptions, describe jobs at career fairs or network (Kramer, 2010), they include communication skills as critical aspects of employment. The emphasis employers place on exemplary and deficit communication skills further equips business and professional communication instructors with instructional insights that benefit students, particularly as job seekers partake in selection processes of resume development and interviews (Kramer, 2010).

Business and professional communication faculty, specifically, engage in anticipatory socialization (Jablin, 1985) when they educate students on communication theories, concepts, and skills. Instructors who develop memorable messages, which have been shown to be prevalent during anticipatory socialization (Cranmer & Myers, 2017), influence students' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. Indeed, memorable messages from other authority figures, such as coaches, contribute to anticipatory socialization messages (Cranmer & Myers, 2017). This evidence indicates that instructors' messages legitimately influence college students.

Employers, too, perform anticipatory socialization practices when they provide internships for college students (Dailey, 2016), while also observing students' exemplary and unacceptable skills to the potential employer. Internship opportunities, however, are limited in number, leaving countless college students to rely on college coursework, employment, and student organizations to assist in their career preparation. After the point of hire, employers may invest in in-house, sponsored training and/or pay for employees to attend seminars to strengthen proficiencies or augment deficiencies. At times, employees lose their jobs because communication skills fail to meet the organization's expectations. This study contributes to anticipatory socialization praxis by analyzing employers' perceptions of exemplary and unacceptable communication skills observed among recently hired college graduates.

Closing-the-Gap Studies

Closing-the-gap studies "seek to provide a clearer idea of what writing (and other) skills are really needed in the workplace" (Brent, 2011, p. 398). According to Brent, research surged in the 1980s to fulfill this purpose. Scholars have continued to refine or update understanding of skills that close the gap (e.g., Crosling & Ward, 2002; Gray, 2010; Keyton et al., 2013). Numerous studies have taken stock of university communication curricula and asked employers,

employees, students, or teachers which specific communication skills are desired (e.g., Crosling & Ward, 2002; Gray, 2010; Keyton et al., 2013). A notable study supported the existence of a gap, by showing that employers rank listening as the most important oral communication skill, but AACSB-accredited schools rank presentations as most important (Brink & Costigan, 2015). Students benefit from this research because the memorable messages they received from parents about work do not include communication skills specifically, although relatedness messages have some overlap (Scarduzio et al., 2018).

These closing-the-gap studies usually present a predetermined menu of communication skills to participants, who then either select or rate valued skills. Such constraint is, of course, methodologically necessary for rigorous survey design; however, it also limits participants' freedom to respond spontaneously and fully. To enhance the intricacies of workplace communication skills data, recent studies (e.g., Coffelt et al., 2016; DeKay, 2012) have applied content analysis to email correspondence. However, even these approaches constrain rich responses, probing, and enhanced meaning that qualitative research studies evince.

Sufficient scholarship is now available to garner some sense of generally agreed upon communication skills. Studies identify training needs of their employees, such as a case study of information technology employees whose managers recommended training on interpersonal communication skills (Hynes, 2012). Additionally, employers' open-ended responses to a question about deficit skills identified use of proper English, teamwork, and interpersonal communication (Ortiz et al., 2016). However, these studies could be bolstered by additional studies identifying exemplary or unacceptable skills noted among recent college graduates. Identification of exemplary communication skills would benefit job candidates by revealing the communication skills that will get them attention and set them apart from other candidates.

Conversely, identification of unacceptable communication skills would specify the skills employers find unsatisfactory or that may lead to termination. Knowledge of exemplary and unacceptable skills would support emphasis in business and professional communication courses. In so doing, the gap between education and employers shrinks. To support this effort, this study asks:

RQ1: What business communication skills or practices of recent college graduates are exemplary from employers' perspectives?

RQ2: What business communication skills or practices do employers of recent college graduates find unacceptable?

Method

Participants

Twenty-two women ($n = 7$) and men ($n = 15$) who hire and/or supervise recent college graduates in healthcare, financial services, journalism, manufacturing, engineering/architectural consulting, accounting, agriculture, retail, or higher education participated in the study. Their ages ranged from 25 to 71 with a mean age of 42. All participants were Caucasian except one. Participants lived in several states in the United States. All participants had a bachelor's degree, nine also completed a master's degree and two completed a terminal, professional degree. Participants worked in their current occupations from 1.5 to 29 years with an average of 8 years. Some participants supervised recent college graduates only, some recruited/hired recent college graduates only, and most performed both functions. Their supervisory experience was extensive with some supervising as few as six individuals and others over 700 since taking their position.

Procedure

Approval from the Institutional Review Boards at two universities was received prior to data collection. Then, professionals over the age of 18 who hired or supervised recent college graduates were recruited by four interviewers using snowball sampling (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Informed consent and demographic forms were provided to participants via email or in person prior to conducting the interview. Interviews were conducted in offices or conference rooms at the work site of the participants, via Skype, or by telephone call. All face-to-face and telephone interviews were audio recorded for transcription. Researchers left the field when the information provided by participants was no longer interesting and when researchers were confident that the findings satisfied the research question (Snow, 1980).

The interview protocol relied on the participants to serve as informants and the interviews to follow a semi-structured interview guide (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Informant interviews were useful because the professionals have spent time both in their supervisory role and in their organizations, thereby being able to speak for their own experience within the organizational culture. Interviews lasted 31 to 60 minutes with an average of 47 minutes, and transcriptions yielded 480 pages of single-spaced data. Pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality.

Analysis and Verification

A detailed description of the data analysis can be found in (author citation). As an overview, early analysis placed interview data into broad categories. Related to this study, the categories named *exemplary*, *training*, and *unacceptable* captured the data needed to answer the research questions for this manuscript. Each of these categories were analyzed further using *in vivo* coding, which groups data according to frequent or salient words used by the participants (Saldaña, 2016). This analysis yielded six themes that appear in the results section.

Three forms of verification were used to reinforce trustworthiness of the results: persistent observation, triangulation, and rich descriptions (Creswell, 1997). First, persistent observation occurred *in situ* by listening to participants' responses and asking probing or clarifying questions when information was unclear. Second, triangulation occurred with multiple researchers to corroborate the interpretations made during analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Specifically, the first author conducted the data analysis and the second author read and critiqued the results. Third, rich, thick descriptions (Creswell, 1997) are included in the results section so readers can determine whether or not they wish to transfer the results to their circumstances.

Findings

RQ1: Exemplary Communication Skills

The first research question queried employers about the communication skills they perceive as exemplary. Themes that surfaced from the data were relatability, documentation, and audience awareness/adaptation.

Relatability

Employers noted that employees who could network, build relationships, or put others at ease were exemplary. With these skills, the employees achieved results that benefited the organization. The excerpt below from Vance's interview denotes specific communication tactics used by an exemplary employee:

What he does really is, it's effective for sales, is just very energetic. Like sometimes even almost a little over the top, very upbeat, speaks almost in a little louder, big smile, just does a really good job of relating to the person he's talking to. So finding that common ground, and just building that trust with a customer. (6:545-549)

Relatability came through in Vance's rendition by naming the tactics of volume, facial expressions, and the relational ability to build trust and find common ground. For Vance, the result of these exemplary qualities was effective sales practices. Next, Tyson described relationship building explicitly when discussing exemplary communication skills.

She just has a way of building a relationship with her candidate. She understands what they're looking for. They feel that they totally understand that she's looking out for their best interest and they respond well to her. She is almost a guide to them as far as their career path. There are people she has placed that have moved up to the managerial level at a later time and then they called her when they need to hire people. It's that ongoing relationship that she's been able to call her when they need to hire people. Like I said, it's a situation with a personal level, but you're helping people improve themselves and improve the operations with their clients. You're doing it in such a way that basically everybody wins. She's just one of those people who has a personality level that they can understand somebody, explain the details of the position in a way that people understand and she can relate to the client and she builds on her relationship with the client. She knows what they're looking for. She can make an almost friendly thing if she finds the right person for them. (3:274-289)

Tyson also indicated the long-term, organizational benefits from the employees' relationship building capabilities.

Noteworthy in this theme is that all of the scenarios provided by research participants referenced the communication skill in interaction with clients/customers/patients, but there were no mentions of such skills with colleagues or supervisors. Supervisors of interns perceived communication with clients, colleagues, and supervisors to be extremely important with only

slight, nonsignificant mean differences among the three groups (Schartel Dunn & Lane, 2019). MBA students identified clients/customers as one of the two most challenging groups of people to interact with in their early careers (Reinsch & Shelby, 1997), suggesting they may not be adequately prepared to interact with them. Yet, customers are necessary for businesses to exist (Charan, 2017). Perhaps the employers in this survey recognize the critical value of customers and clients when responding to questions about recently hired college graduates. Additionally, these employers may have a sense of the challenges recent college graduates experience with customers and clients, and responded accordingly during the interviews. In brief, this theme describes the exemplary quality of relatability that makes newly hired college graduates differentiate themselves from their peers.

Documentation

Documentation, as described by these participants, included useful and purposeful note taking. Participants appreciated having a written historical account of interactions recorded in one place because organizations could be responsive during subsequent interactions or when customer issues arose. Edith summarized this aspect as shown in the excerpt below.

There are so many different things, so many different ways of communication that he showed. [...] He typed up notes about the client, the situation, which a lot of times that does not happen. I go to research something before I call an advisor, or call somebody about it, a problem, or an issue, and there are no notes (5:523-527)

The participant elaborated on the situation that led to the need for notes:

We have one advisor, he's fairly new, he's only been in the role 3 and a half, 4 years.
[...] I received a client complaint today, it was written, it was addressed to our manager.
[...] So I called the financial advisor—we call them FA's—I called the FA, and just gave

him a heads up that I had to process this complaint against him, and before I did, I looked at the client's account, and it's all there—notes that the advisor had typed up, and added to the client's account. [...] I had, I guess electronic, or written notes from the, from the advisor. Then I had a conversation with the advisor about it, and then he brought me a letter that he sent to the client. So right there he had communicated several different ways, and I was really impressed that he took the initiative to send the letter to the client without getting a million other people involved before it got out of hand. And then we were able to have this calm, calm conversation about it today. And, were able to, kind of relieve the situation before it escalated. (5:482-517)

This example illustrated the importance of keeping notes regarding client transactions and how beneficial they can be for problem solving. In the next example, the context is unclear, yet the process that the employee goes through to document information is memorable and favorably regarded by the participant.

I have this one employee that's a huge fan of like, she does a lot of the visual stuff, and then, so not only will she print out the after-visit summary, but then she'll sit down with them a second time after they've just literally went over the plan, and then she'll go through, circle, or highlight, like keywords, because there's a lot of, there's a lot of words on the paper. (9:360-365)

In all mentions of documentation, participants valued employees' willingness to record transactional information in writing and then to produce that documentation when needed to solve problems or assist customers. Documenting work completely and accurately was similarly evaluated as a strong writing skill among accountants (Jones, 2011). This study shows that other

professions, likewise, see considerable value in documentation. Like relatability, this exemplary practice distinguished recent college graduates from their peers.

Audience Awareness/Adaptation

Audience awareness and adaptation were also exemplary from these employers' perspectives. The participants appreciated employees who listened well by seeking genuine understanding of another's perspective. Employees demonstrated this willingness to customers or clients appropriately. Managers knew that employees could have followed organizational scripts or remained unwilling to alter procedures or practices. However, in these cases, the exemplary employee listened with enough attentiveness that they knew how to meet the clients' needs within the organization's parameters. This theme also highlighted employees who were responsive by taking action when a need was identified. The first quote provides evidence that seeking understanding was perceived as an exemplary communication quality.

When I see good communication, I see first individuals that are going through the art of understanding and recognizing the different perspectives required in order to understand as well as there's a purpose and an intent for that communication. That there's clarity.

There's tactful honesty. We're not trying to disparage others, we're simply being tactfully honest and collaboratively productive. That's when I've seen effective communication in all forms. (21:396-402)

The next example from Derek underscores why adaptation is perceived as exemplary.

Brenna knows how to talk to different employees. She's a manager. I hired Brenna straight out of college. She knows how to talk to employees. She'll change what she's saying and how she's approaching it depending on the personality of the person. She's super tight with people who are older than her. She's clear, she's nice, she's direct. She

tells people what they need to hear. If somebody needs to be set right, she'll tell them. But she's well-liked. If you don't tell your employees what they need to hear, you're betraying them, you're not helping them, you're hurting them. So she tells them what they need to hear, tells them the truth, but they also like her. So she can pull that off.
(22:662-672)

For this group of employers, audience awareness and adaptation were impressive traits. Previous research has also shown that a you-attitude is perceived as having a positive tone in written messages, which contributes to reader commitment and satisfaction (Shelby & Reinsch, 1995). Further, listening was ranked as the soft skill used most often and initiative was perceived as the third most important soft skill by recent college graduates (MacDermott & Ortiz, 2017). Concepts such as these are encompassed into the theme of audience awareness and adaptation, terms that have not been used explicitly in frequently cited workplace communication skills publications (e.g., Crosling & Ward, 2002; DeKay, 2012; Keyton et al., 2013; Tanyel & Mitchell, 1999). The label assigned here bundles several highly related concepts into category that overlaps with chapter titles in public speaking textbooks or *goodwill* in business communication textbooks. While audience analysis and adaptation are considered important workplace communication skills, the findings from this study affirm the concept and its related ideas deserve strong attention in business and professional communication courses. In sum, the participants' accounts of exemplary employees revealed three salient qualities that emerged as themes of relatability, documentation, and audience awareness/adaptation.

RQ2: Unacceptable Business Communication Skills

The second research question sought understanding of unacceptable business communication skills. Deception, aggression, and defensive communication behaviors surfaced as noteworthy, unacceptable practices, frequently leading to termination of employment.

Deception

The term deception encompasses “message[s] knowingly transmitted by a sender to foster a false belief or conclusion by the receiver” (Buller & Burgoon, 1996, p. 205). Deception occurs in various forms, such as lying, equivocation, or concealment (Buller et al., 1994), among others. The findings in the deception theme encompass such an array of deceptive behaviors. Employers used words and phrases such as *honesty*, *lied*, *misrepresentation*, or *not factually correct*. Vance described the events leading up to an employee termination.

And there was a lot of details left out, and it was all off on speculation if they would still want that particular promotion, or deal. And then when confronted about it by management, he lied about it. Just based off the information on the account, his story didn't match what we can see actually happening, and it happened a few times where we had to terminate him. (6:722-745)

Vance identified lying, which is an obvious form of deception and is commonly understood as unacceptable. Other deceptive tactics foster ill will, as Tyson's example shows.

I had one, he is no longer here, I had to terminate him. But I had a recruiter of mine who was consistently misrepresenting the opportunity. Basically, he was going out of his way to discuss the position in such a way that anybody would take the job but it was unrealistic. He was just doing whatever he could to make the placement and that's just not going to win either way. (3:294-299)

The misrepresentation relayed to clients was problematic from Tyson's perspective because it generated unrealistic expectations. The information was not necessarily false, but it was transformed in such a way that left clients with inaccurate perceptions. Deception in its various forms was a pronounced, unacceptable form of communication.

Verbal Aggression

Verbally aggressive behaviors "attack the self-concepts of others, attempting to cause psychological pain" (Infante & Wigley, 1986). These behaviors can materialize as verbal expressions by attacking others, teasing, or making threats. The participants in this study equated verbal aggression to yelling, rudeness, and profanity. Gayle identified several unacceptable communication behaviors.

One that continues to threaten to quit, one that is just verbally abusive, yellers, tone...and this isn't specifically me, but there's someone that, you know, "If that's what I have to then do I'm leaving," or you kind of... questioning the way things are when it's not something that they are not associated with at all. (19:625-629)

Mary, the president of a small business with 35 employees believed rudeness, as conveyed by the tone of voice, was highly problematic:

I mean, she was rude. I mean she said, "I'm hanging up," and hung up. And so I had to go say, "Karla, come in here, we got to talk. You know, you cannot hang up on me. If you didn't understand what I was saying, or had a problem with that, you need to say, 'I can't hear you,' and, 'I'm going to come to your office.'" (18:561)

Verbal attacks are interpreted as disrespectful and incite various physiological, psychological and communicative responses in recipients. Certainly, verbal attacks are face threatening and

perceived as insubordination when directed toward a supervisor. Edith portrayed her reaction to being yelled at by an employee:

It was just really demeaning, and completely inappropriate for him to have yelled at me like that, and accuse me of things that were untrue, and especially in front of other people. It made him look bad, it made me look bad, and made, it just made the situation look awful. (5:712-721)

These examples illustrate participants' descriptions of unacceptable communication behaviors, which interpersonal communication scholars label as verbal aggression.

Defensive Communication Climate

Another aspect of unacceptable communication described by participants included a collection of expressions that constitute a defensive communication climate (Gibb, 1961). These expressions include rigidity, evaluation, and superiority, among others. James conveyed defensiveness explicitly when asked about unacceptable communication qualities among recent college graduates. James described an interaction with an employee and then transitioned to describe the employee's communication style by saying, "but then became very defensive. So again, not repentant in any way but more defensive, and the lack of accountability, so kind of helped confirm our desire to let that person go" (7:358-367). The unacceptability of defensiveness as a communication behavior is evident by the employee's dismissal. Other participants noted superiority and condescending tone as manifestations of defensive communication climates. Craig described unacceptable communication in this way:

Just had this arrogance, just very arrogant, and condescending tone, you know? If like it was you, he kind of talked down to you. When I had to talk to him, it's like okay, take a

deep breath, and just listen because that's all it's going to be is you listening, and saying okay, because he's just going to lecture you. (5:805-813)

James' and Craig's employees represented the theme of defensive communication. Other participants described sarcasm or bragging as other unacceptable styles of communication that typify defensive communication behaviors. In sum, the participants articulated accounts of noteworthy, unacceptable communication, which emerged as themes of deception, verbal aggression, and defensive communication behaviors. These behaviors resemble a previous study that showed accountability was the #1 ranked skill for business school graduates by both faculty and employers, and ethics was ranked #2 by the employers (Tanyel et al., 1999).

Discussion

This study sought to identify recent college graduates' exemplary and unacceptable communication skills, as identified by employers from various industries. The study utilized a qualitative research methodology to interrogate employers' understanding of communication skills in their words and from their experiences. The thematic analysis permitted common ideas to surface, regardless of industry or occupation, and regardless of managerial experience, sex, or other demographic characteristics. Certainly, such nuances likely exist. However, the intent in this study is to establish skills most notable as exemplary or unacceptable from a spectrum of communication skills. Cypher and colleagues (2019) likewise found that several communication skills were commonly desired by employers regardless of industry. Future studies should investigate selected managerial styles, level of management experience, or individual identity characteristics (sex, nationality, ethnicity, age, etc.) to capture a refined essence of workplace communication skills and behaviors that may be distinguishable and noteworthy in particular contexts, situations, or by groups of people.

Exemplary Communication Skills

Relatability for these participants referenced employees' abilities to network and connect with others—primarily clients/customers—in positive ways. This finding aligns with recent work ranking relationship and interpersonal skills as the highest among contemporary business communication skills (Waldek et al., 2012). A similar concept, relating, was a communication skill found by Coffelt and colleagues (2019) as one that employers sought from recent college graduates. Interpersonal skills and oral communication skills were also ranked among the top 10 soft skills that executives evaluate for promotion decisions (Reinsch & Gardner, 2014). It seems clear, then, that devoting instructional time, creating learning opportunities, and/or developing high stakes assignments for communication skill-building that focuses on relating in workplace relationships would benefit students throughout their careers. Teaching strategies might include client-provider role-play exercises or analysis of media clips. Business communication scholars address this skill in other publications, as well (e.g., Sigmar et al., 2012).

Documentation was found to be an exemplary communication skill because information was available to support clients, regardless of the contact point the customer had with the organization. These detailed notes were critical to employers because they provided sufficient background information to support those helping clients in the moment. The notes further portrayed initiative, patience, and care on the part of the employee. Note-taking is an established tool to enhance learning (Al-Musalli, 2015) and to facilitate translation (Wang, 2018). The current study shows another application for note-taking. Business and professional communication instructors can apply this finding with assignments that document team meetings or through activities that compare and contrast two scenarios when notes are available and when they are not. Managers who work in call centers would make superb guest speakers because they

could describe or show the software used to store and keep customer notes. Instructors can also ask students to take notes on lectures or student speeches, and then have students trade notes with each other to test for usability of the documented information.

Audience awareness/analysis is a longstanding core emphasis in public speaking, composition, and rhetoric classes, among others (e.g., Behan, 1964; Lee Forsberg, 1987; Schieber & Robles, 2019). The related skill, listening, ranks above conversing and presenting among managers (Brink & Costigan, 2015). The exemplary quality of listening and adapting to others validates the efforts of instructors of these and similar courses while also establishing the importance of the skill. Role playing scenarios and case studies allowing students to practice audience adaptation techniques in workplace conversations would further enhance this practice. The findings from this study elevate the importance of these skills in business communication courses. Such information aids instructors when creating and/or weighting assignments.

Unacceptable Communication Skills

The participants in this study would likely label deception, verbal aggression, and defensive communication behaviors as uncivil. Professional civility offers “general guidelines for task and social interpersonal interaction in organizational contexts” (Arnett, 2009, p. 234). These guidelines create a public space to “give those who do not like one another guidelines for contributing to the organization” (Arnett, 2009, p. 233). Sypher (2004) illustrated a range of behaviors that constitute workplace incivility, including profanity, rudeness, and verbal aggression, qualities mentioned by the participants in this study. The three unacceptable communication themes supply a few guidelines for inappropriate social interaction.

It is not surprising that deceptive communication behaviors were identified as unacceptable. Deception typically detracts from credibility, despite the occasional good

intentions of deceptive practices (e.g., DePaulo et al., 1996). Individuals expect others to be truthful during interaction, and deviations from this expectation limit the freedom of the deceived to have full information. In the case of these participants, deception by employees resulted in termination of employment. This study reinforces the importance of ethics and credibility as topics in business and professional communication courses. It also identifies various forms of deceptive messages, serving as an important reminder that lying is not the only form of deception. Deceptive behaviors in any form can be highly problematic and result in reprimand or termination with one infraction. Alerting students to forms of deception and their consequences contributes to their anticipatory socialization. Case study assignments provide students with examples. While an unfortunate example, analyzing politicians' statements would highlight the array of deception communication behaviors, as well.

Verbally aggressive behaviors, like deception, are not surprising unacceptable communication skills. Verbal aggression by supervisors has been shown to lead employees to job dissatisfaction (Madlock & Dillow, 2012) and perceptions of incompetence (Lybarger et al., 2017). The finding from this study shows the effects of subordinate verbal aggression. Verbally aggressive communication behaviors similarly lead to problematic interactions in the workplace. Yelling, being rude, using profanity, and diminishing the self-concept of others create hostile work environments and contribute to broken client relationships, lost business, or low morale, among other outcomes. Such behaviors are exceptionally problematic when they are intentional. Students benefit from verbal aggressive topics in business and professional communication classes so that they are clear that professional communication tactics are the standard expectation. Stereotypes of business professionals from mediated sources, such as movies or song lyrics, occasionally depict verbally aggressive behaviors. In the main, however, these

practices are viewed unfavorably, as this group of employers indicated. As students separate fact from fiction during their anticipatory socialization, instructors can relay evidence to students about real employers' expectations. In-class, role play activities permit students to enact verbally aggressive behaviors and then re-play the scenario using professional communication tactics.

Defensive communication climates are highly authoritarian, where control, certainty, superiority, and manipulation are prevalent qualities (Forward et al., 2011). Where previous studies have analyzed defensive communication behaviors during performance appraisals (Becker et al., 2005), the current analysis identifies the immediate identification of defensive communication behaviors and the subsequent negative evaluation that quickly attaches to these behaviors. Similar to deception, defensive communication behaviors include a variety of communication tactics that lower the perceived worth of employees, as the employers in this study report. Different from deception, however, defensive behaviors in isolation rarely result in severe consequences but do contribute to workplace dissatisfaction (Bradley & Campbell, 2016). Defensive behaviors are often tolerated in the workplace, but with repetition, may contribute to bullying, ostracizing, or dissatisfaction, as well as stagnant professional growth or opportunities. Emphasizing defensive communication behaviors in business and professional communication courses gives students a refined vocabulary of communication behaviors. From this point, students can identify specific defensive tactics viewed in mediated clips or written in correspondence as an in-class activity.

As with the exemplary skills, the unacceptable skills provide business and professional communication instructors with research-based evidence to support course content. The behaviors of deception, verbal aggression, and defensive communication were glaring for this group of employers, some to the extent that dismissal from work was warranted. These skills and

behaviors should not be surprising to anyone who teaches business or professional communication, although they differ from previous research that found writing, functioning in an organizational context, interpersonal skills, and self-management needed improvement (Clokie & Fourie, 2016). What is new here is the clear identification of them as exemplary or unacceptable by employers who largely come from the for-profit business sector in the United States. In this historical time period where capitalism, and business more specifically, is criticized for unethical practices (Morgan et al., 2011), this study shows that business practitioners value and expect ethical and professional communication practices. Emphasizing these concepts to students and their corresponding communication tactics would guide students toward self and other awareness, both necessary for effective professionals.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The study augments anticipatory socialization research, specifically research on education as a source of organizational socialization (Kramer, 2010). Educational resources, such as business communication textbooks and curricula, contain vast amounts of information. This study indicates topics to emphasize as instructors sort through myriad concepts. The skills and behaviors identified as exemplary or unacceptable by employers in this study appear intermittently as identifiable concepts in business communication textbooks. These concepts appear regularly in other courses, such as interpersonal communication or organizational communication, courses required less frequently than courses with written communication or public speaking emphases. Brink and Costigan (2015) found a disconnect among AACSB accredited programs, such that their learning outcomes emphasized presentation skills as the most important oral communication skill, despite employers' higher ranking for listening and conversing skills.

The results found here and by others (e.g., Clokie & Fourie, 2016; Keyton et al., 2013) underscore employers' desire for specific interpersonal communication competencies among their employees. Further, they update previous findings (e.g., Maes et al., 1997) on interpersonal communication skills by identifying specific skills and behaviors that are both exemplary and unacceptable. Based on a scan of the table of contents in business communication textbooks, courses often privilege written communication. Certainly, written communication skills are critical in the workplace and necessary for students' anticipatory socialization. However, the application of interpersonal skills at work also holds merit for course content. Business and professional communication textbook authors and instructors would add value to texts, lectures, activities, and assignments by integrating some of the findings identified in this research study and elsewhere (e.g., Coffelt et al., 2019; Keaton et al., 2013). Interpersonal communication or related oral communication courses would also augment degree requirements.

This study also contributes to organizational anticipatory socialization (Kramer, 2010) by providing business practitioners who write job descriptions with refined terms to use on job postings or during interviews. Job descriptions and career fair recruiters often use broad terminology when describing communication expectations by using some combination of *excellent verbal and written communication skills*. Such breadth fails to specify the communication competencies that are most beneficial for job candidates to possess for a given position. Indeed, different careers require different combinations of communication skills and competencies. However, the skills identified in the current study surfaced from employers in myriad industries, thereby showing that some communication skills may be expected in the workplace regardless of occupation.

Similarly, students can borrow or adapt this terminology for their resumes as they participate in anticipatory socialization (Kramer, 2010). Utilizing specific and precise communication competencies distinguishes job candidates from those who use broad terms such as *excellent interpersonal communication skills*. Compatibility between employers and job seekers is enhanced when their terminology describes attributes with precision.

Within this vein of precision, a notable remark about the findings is the preponderance of verbal interactions participants provided during their interviews. MBA students reported that face-to-face interactions were skills they felt most deficient in during their early careers (Reinsch & Shelby, 1996). The employers in this study noted both exemplary skills and unacceptable behaviors that were expressed face-to-face. However, the skills in this study—with the exception of documentation—are communication skills that can be expressed in multiple modes, which supports prior research (Coffelt et al., 2019). While several studies have shown the importance of interpersonal communication (e.g., DeKay, 2012; Maes et al., 1997), studies such as this one focus on skills rather than the mode. In this way, business and professional communication instructors—regardless of disciplinary focus—have precise skills to emphasize in their courses. Lucas and Rawlins (2015) pivot toward this approach in their argument for competency-based curricular revisions. Shrivistava's (2012) conceptual framework for business communication includes building relationships, building rapport, and listening, among others, as skills that coalesce around interpersonal, organizational, and leadership communication.

This study contributes to closing-the-gap (Brent, 2011) research by illuminating the communication skills and behaviors on the margins—the exemplary and unacceptable. In this way, stakeholders in this line of research obtain fuller understanding of where gaps are closed, where gaps are closing and where gaps remain. A synthesis of closing-the-gap research could

include the findings from this study as boundary markers on a spectrum of communication skills identified as typical expectations, regardless of occupation or industry. Instructors and employers alike can use the findings from this study during evaluations and performance reviews. The exemplary skills and unacceptable behaviors punctuate a host of communication skills identified across several closing-the-gap studies (e.g., Coffelt et al., 2016; Cypher et al., 2019; Reinsch & Shelby, 1996). Employers and instructors receive insight from this study by identifying, naming, and explaining typical from atypical performance when evaluating classroom or workplace communication behaviors. This work is important considering that the weakest relationships between interns' perceptions of skills emphasized in their internships and those taught in business communication were found with interpersonal skills (Schartel Dunn & Lane, 2019). Further, writing skills were shown to exhibit gaps between employers' expectations and new hires' abilities (Jones, 2011). Educational institutions report that they teach a combination of skills in their business communication courses, but this combination is still measured as mode of delivery (e.g, writing, oral) rather than specific skills (Sharp & Brumberger, 2013). The skills emphasized in these respective courses need refinement to narrow the gap.

Concluding Remarks

This study's limitations include the predominantly White sample; multiple interviewers may have altered the responses from participants; the interpersonal and organizational communication bias of the authors; and the inability to statistically generalize findings from a qualitative research study. Thus, future research would benefit from purposive recruitment strategies to diversify the participants, enhanced interviewer training for consistency; participant recruitment until theoretical saturation is achieved; and quantitative research designs.

In sum, the study sought identification of exemplary and unacceptable workplace communication skills and behaviors to support business and professional communication instructors and students during anticipatory socialization processes. Students, instructors, and employers benefit when students are taught information, skills, and behaviors that are relevant to their workplace expectations, regardless of the mode in which they are delivered. Students further benefit when instructors emphasize material that is highly relevant and when employers hire students with precise communication expectations. Anticipatory socialization research is extended in this study by showing the role business and professional communication courses have in preparing students to meet organizational expectations.

References

- Aguinis, H., Gottfredson, R. K., & Joo, H. (2013). Best-practice recommendations for defining, identifying, and handling outliers. *Organizational Research Methods, 16*(2), 270-301. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428112470848>
- Al-Musalli, A. M. (2015). Taxonomy of lecture note-taking skills and subskills. *International Journal of Listening, 29*(3), 134–147. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10904018.2015.1011643>
- Arnett, R. C. (2009). Professional civility: Reclaiming organizational limits. In J. M. Harden Fritz & B. L. Omdahl (Eds.), *Problematic relationships in the workplace* (pp. 233-246). Peter Lang Publishing.
- Becker, J. A. H., Halbesleben, J. R. B., & O’Hair, H. D. (2005). Defensive communication and burnout in the workplace: The mediating role of leader-member exchange. *Communication Research Reports, 22*(2), 143-150. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00036810500130653>
- Behan, D. F. (1964). A technique for teaching audience awareness and audience response to high school students. *Speech Teacher, 13*(1), 52-54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03634526409377340>
- Bradley, G. L., & Campbell, A. C. (2016). Managing difficult workplace conversations: Goals, strategies, and outcomes. *International Journal of Business Communication, 53*(4), 443–464. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2329488414525468>
- Brent, D. (2011). Transfer, transformation, and rhetorical knowledge: Insights from transfer theory. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication, 25*(4), 396–420. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1050651911410951>

- Brink, K. E., & Costigan, R. D. (2015). Oral communication skills: Are the priorities of the workplace and AACSB-accredited business programs aligned? *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 14(2), 205-221. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2013.0044>
- Buller, D. B., & Burgoon, J. K. (1996). Interpersonal deception theory. *Communication Theory*, 6(3), 203-242. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.1996.tb00127.x>
- Buller, D. B., Burgoon, J. K., White, C. H., & Ebesu, A. S. (1994). Interpersonal deception VII. Behavioral profiles of falsification, equivocation, and concealment. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 13(4), 366-395. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X94134002>
- Charan, R. (2017). *What the CEO wants you to know: How your company really works*. Currency.
- Clokie, T. L., & Fourie, E. (2016). Graduate employability and communication competence: Are undergraduates taught relevant skills? *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, 79(4), 442-463. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2329490616657635>
- Coffelt, T. A., Baker, M. J., & Corey, R. C. (2016). Business communication practices from employers' perspectives. *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, 79(3), 300-316. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2329490616644014>
- Coffelt, T. A., Grauman, D., & Smith, F. L. M. (2019). Employers' perspectives on workplace communication skills: The meaning of communication skills. *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, 82(4), 418-439. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2329490619851119>
- Cranmer, G. A., & Myers, S. A. (2017). Exploring division-1 student-athletes' memorable messages from their anticipatory socialization. *Communication Quarterly*, 65(2), 125-143. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2016.1197292>

- Creswell, J. W. (1997). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Sage Publications.
- Crosling, G., & Ward, I. (2002). Oral communication: The workplace needs and uses of business graduate employees. *English for Specific Purposes*, 21(1), 41–57.
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0889-4906\(00\)00031-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0889-4906(00)00031-4)
- Cyphert, D., Holke-Farnam, C., Dodge, E. N., Lee, W. E., & Rosol, S. (2019). Communication activities in the 21st century business environment. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 82(2), 169-201. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2329490619831279>
- Dailey, S. L. (2016). What happens before full-time employment? Internships as a mechanism of anticipatory socialization. *Western Journal of Communication*, 80(4), 453-480.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2016.1159727>
- DeKay, S. H. (2012). Interpersonal communication in the workplace: A largely unexplored region. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 75(4), 449–452.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1080569912458966>
- DePaulo, B. M., Kashy, D. A., Kirkendol, S. E., Wyer, M. M., & Epstein, J. A. (1996). Lying in everyday life. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70(5), 979–995.
<https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0022-3514.70.5.979>
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2013). Case study. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Strategies of qualitative inquiry* (4th ed., pp. 169-204). Sage Publications.
- Forward, G. L., Czech, K., & Lee, C. M. (2011). Assessing Gibb’s supportive and defensive communication climate: An examination of measurement and construct validity. *Communication Research Reports*, 28(1), 1-15.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08824096.2011.541360>

Gray, F. E. (2010). Specific oral communication skills desired in new accountancy graduates.

Business Communication Quarterly, 73(1), 40–67.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1080569909356350>

Hynes, G. E. (2012). Improving employees' interpersonal communication competencies: A qualitative study. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 75(4), 466-475.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1080569912458965>

Infante, D. A., & Wigley, C. J., III (1986). Verbal aggressiveness: An interpersonal model and measure. *Communication Monographs*, 53(1), 61-69.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03637758609376126>

Jablin, F. M. (1985). An exploratory study of vocational organizational communication socialization. *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, 50(3), 261-282.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10417948509372635>

Jablin, F. M. (2001). Organizational entry, assimilation, and disengagement/exit. In F. M. Jablin & L. L. Putnam (Eds.), *The new handbook of organizational communication: Advances in theory, research, and methods* (pp. 732-818). Sage Publications.

Jones, C. G. (2011). Written and computer-mediated accounting communication skills: An employer perspective. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 74(3), 247–271.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1080569911413808>

Keyton, J., Caputo, J. M., Ford, E. A., Fu, R., Leibowitz, S. A., Liu, T., Polasik, S. S., Ghosh, P., & Wu, C. (2013). Investigating verbal workplace communication behaviors. *Journal of Business Communication*, 50(2), 152-169. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021943612474990>

Kramer, M. W. (2010). *Organizational socialization: Joining and leaving organizations*. Polity Press.

- Lee Forsberg, L. (1987). Who's out there anyway? Bringing awareness of multiple audiences into the business-writing class. *Journal of Business & Technical Communication*, 1(2), 45–69. <https://doi.org/10.1177/105065198700100205>
- Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2011). *Qualitative communication research methods* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Lucas, K., & Rawlins, J. D. (2015). The competency pivot: Introducing a revised approach to the business communication curriculum. *Business & Professional Communication Quarterly*, 78(2), 167–193. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2329490615576071>
- Lybarger, J. E., Rancer, A. S., & Lin, Y. (2017). Superior-subordinate communication in the workplace: Verbal aggression, nonverbal immediacy, and their joint effects on perceived superior credibility. *Communication Research Reports*, 34(2), 124-133. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08824096.2016.1252909>
- Madlock, P. E., & Dillow, M. R. (2012). The consequences of verbal aggression in the workplace: An application of the investment model. *Communication Studies*, 63(5), 593-607. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2011.642456>
- MacDermott, C. & Ortiz, L. (2017). Beyond the business communication course: A historical perspective of the where, why, and how of soft skills development and job readiness for business graduates. *The IUP Journal of Soft Skills*, 11(2), 7-24.
- Maes, J. D., Weldy, T. G., & Icenogle, M. L. (1997). A managerial perspective: Oral communication competency is most important for business students in the workplace. *Journal of Business Communication*, 34(1), 67-80. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002194369703400104>

- Miao Wang, S. (2018). Note-taking in consecutive interpreting: A comparative study of professional and novice interpreters. *Translation Quarterly*, 88, 45–83.
- Morgan, G., Froud, J., Quack, S., & Schneiberg, M. (2011). Capitalism in crisis: Organizational perspectives. *Organization*, 18(2), 147-152. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508410392397>
- Morse, J. M. (2015). Critical analysis of strategies for determining rigor in qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Health Research*, 25(9), 1212-1222.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315588501>
- National Association of Colleges and Employers. (2017). *Job outlook 2017*.
<https://www.naceweb.org/research/reports/>
- Ortiz, L., Region-Sebest, M., & MacDermott, C. (2016). Employer perceptions of oral communication competencies most valued in new hires as a factor in company success. *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, 79(3), 317-330.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2329490615624108>
- Reinsch, N. L., Jr., & Gardner, J. A. (2014). Do communication abilities affect promotion decisions? Some data from the c-suite. *Journal of Business & Technical Communication*, 28(1), 31–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1050651913502357>
- Reinsch, N. L., Jr., & Shelby, A. N. (1996). Communication challenges and needs: Perceptions of MBA students. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 59(1), 36-53.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/108056999605900104>
- Reinsch, N. L., Jr., & Shelby, A. N. (1997). What communication abilities do practitioners need? Evidence from MBA students. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 60(4), 7-29.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/108056999706000401>
- Saladaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.

- Scarduzio, J. A., Real, K., Slone, A., & Henning, Z. (2018). Vocational anticipatory socialization, self-determination theory, and meaningful work: Parents' and children's recollection of memorable messages about work. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 32(3), 431-461. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318918768711>
- Schartel Dunn, S. G., & Lane, P. L. (2019). Do interns know what they think they know? Assessing business communication skills in interns and recent graduates. *Business & Professional Communication Quarterly*, 82(2), 202–213. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2329490619826258>
- Schieber, D. L., & Robles, V. D. (2019). Using reflections to gauge audience awareness in business and professional communication courses. *Business & Professional Communication Quarterly*, 82(3), 297–316. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2329490619851120>
- Sharp, M. R., & Brumberger, E. R. (2013). Business communication curricula today: Revisiting the top 50 undergraduate business schools. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 76(1), 5–27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1080569912471187>
- Shelby, A. N., & Reinsch, N. L., Jr. (1995). Positive emphasis and you-attitude: An empirical study. *Journal of Business Communication*, 32(4), 303–327. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002194369503200401>
- Shrivastava, S. (2012). Identifying the major components of business communication and their relevance: A conceptual framework. *IUP Journal of Soft Skills*, 6(4), 51–66.
- Sigmar, L. S., Hynes, G. E., & Hill, K. L. (2012). Strategies for teaching social and emotional intelligence in business communication. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 75(3), 301–317. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1080569912450312>

- Snow, D. A. (1980). The disengagement process: A neglected problem in participant observation research. *Qualitative Sociology*, 3, 100-122. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00987266>
- Sypher, B. D. (2004). Reclaiming civil discourse in the workplace. *Southern Journal of Communication*, 69(3), 257-269. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10417940409373296>
- Tanyel, F., & Mitchell, M. A. (1999). The skill set for success of new business school graduates: Do prospective employers and university faculty agree? *Journal of Education for Business*, 75(1), 33-37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08832329909598987>
- Waldeck, J., Durante, C., Helmuth, B., & Marcia, B. (2012). Communication in a changing world: Contemporary perspectives on business communication competence. *Journal of Education for Business*, 87(4), 230–240. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08832323.2011.608388>