

Accounting Educators and Professionals: Perceptions Concerning Communication

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of accounting educators and professionals concerning definition and elements of communication in their careers. To accumulate relevant data, a questionnaire, consisting of open-ended as well as check-indicator types of questions, was mailed to accounting educators at 849 departments of accounting listed in the 2002-2003 Accounting Faculty Directory and 149 members of the Institute of Management Accountants. A total of 188 educators and 53 practitioners responded for a response rate of 22 percent and 36 percent, respectively. Most accounting educators reported occasional miscommunication. Respondents felt miscommunication occurred occasionally, especially oral communication. Compared to educators and private accountants, public accountants reported less frequent miscommunication; however, they experienced the likelihood of greater oral miscommunication than other categories of respondents. Common causes of miscommunication included vague (or confusing) messages, incomplete messages, and poor choice of words. Ways to avoid miscommunication included composing oral and written messages with care and asking for clarification.

I. Introduction

Accountants' understandings of what is necessary to have effective communication with clients will influence the approaches used when interacting with others. Furthermore, accountants' views of key elements that are present in many communicative interactions can provide insight into how likely they are to be good communicators. Therefore, it is relevant to examine how accountants view communication. It is also important to determine whether those views differ between accounting educators and practitioners. To be a skilled communicator, it is important for accountants to realize that interactions with clients may or may not produce effective communication, depending on what occurs during those interactions. The meanings given to messages are critical. Experiences of the communicators can influence how well they communicate. Inferences made during the interactions can have a similar influence. The methods used by accountants for conveying messages to clients and the skills required to make those methods effective can vary and need to be better understood, especially in terms of how they may relate to miscommunication with clients.

II. Background Perspectives

The importance of communication, an essential component for business transactions, must be recognized. A growing global economy, more uncertainty in the operating environment, and greater competitiveness in the marketplace necessitate use of effective communication practices. Students, faculty, and business practitioners encounter a need to function successfully in an ever-changing and increasingly complex world of business. Accounting students need to master foundational understanding of the profession and also a capability to communicate well with both internal and external stakeholders.

Employer expectations for hiring entry-level accountants have increased (Lau and Rans,1993). In addition to accounting skills, new recruits are expected to be capable communicators, team members, and critical thinkers. Mason (1992) noted that corporate America criticized business schools for being more reactive than proactive and for not preparing students to meet the challenges of an increasingly competitive business environment. Davis, Riley, and Fisher (2003) cited observations about skills necessary for employment success. Based upon an extensive survey of organizations, respondents to a study sponsored by the College of Business Administration at Rider University indicated that interpersonal skills and critical thinking were the top characteristics needed in today's workplace. They reported a study involving human resource directors at Fortune 500 firms concluded that listening skills, integrity/honesty, and writing skills were the most important employment capabilities.

Students and employers may have different perspectives related to job expectations. Kirsch, Leathers, and Snead (1993) surveyed recruiters at public accounting firms and accounting students. While students and recruiters tended to agree about the importance of interpersonal skills, students considered communication skills to be more important. The researchers concluded that students could be reacting to emphasis devoted to communication skills by their educators and business professionals. Siegel (2000) observed that communication skills were critical because of the need for interaction between accountants and other stakeholders. He noted that the 1995 Practice Analysis asked management accountants to indicate the most-relevant skills necessary to serve as a management accountant; the top three rankings included work ethic, analytical skills, and interpersonal skills. The 1999 Practice Analysis, which requested respondents to indicate skills and abilities necessary to be a successful employee at a leading finance organization, included top rankings for communication (oral, written, and presentation) skills, teamwork, and analytical skills.

Espiritu (2002) reported results of various surveys that included accounting professionals and educators. In summary, researchers concluded that students need to be better prepared with knowledge, skills, and abilities for entry-level accounting positions. Doost (1999) discussed missing links in accounting education and cited a list of job skills considered to be important by department chairs in the auditing area. The top-five skills were written communication, verbal communication, auditing, financial accounting, and business communication. Maupin (1993) conducted a content analysis of three business communication textbooks and surveyed both accounting professionals and business communication professors. The researcher concluded that accounting educators should take greater responsibility to assure that students were better communicators.

As changing job demands evolve and the accounting profession experiences greater interaction with clients, awareness of the importance of communication skills will likely increase. Messmer (2001) observed that accounting is becoming more of a

“knowledge services” profession and that interpersonal skills will be more relevant for next-generation accountants. Peterson (1997) surveyed personnel interviewers in a Midwestern city. Over 90 percent of the respondents considered communication skills to be essential for job success. However, only 60 percent believed that applicants demonstrated effective communication skills during employment interviews. The *Journal of Accountancy* (1999) reported results of a national accounting education survey, representing potential employers for accounting students that showed prospective employers wanted to employ persons who possessed both written and verbal communication capabilities.

III. Methodology

The study was based on responses to a questionnaire that was sent to 849 departments of accounting listed in the 2002-2003 *Accounting Faculty Directory* and 149 persons who belonged to the Institute of Management Accountants. Responses were received from 188 accounting educators (22 percent) and 53 practicing professionals (36 percent). Initial versions of the questionnaire were reviewed by instructional and administrative colleagues. These individuals suggested changes and recommended inclusion of additional questions. The revised questionnaire was sent to prospective respondents. The questionnaire used for the study is presented in Appendix 1.

Survey participants were asked to provide personal information, which included information about gender, academic degrees held, and work experience. Several questions involved providing definitions of communication-related terms and identifying various types of communication skills. In addition, questions sought to determine respondent perspectives toward communication and interactions with clients; also, some questions involved viewpoints about complications resulting from miscommunication.

IV. Results

Table 1 presents frequency distributions for the variables. Of the respondents, 169 (70 percent) were males and 71 (30 percent) were females; highest degrees earned included 136 (57 percent) doctorates, 71 (29 percent) with masters degrees, and 33 (14 percent) with bachelor degrees. Of those responding, 96 (41 percent) had more than 20 years of experience, 78 (33 percent) had experience between 11 and 20 years, 44 (19 percent) had experience between 5 and 10 years, and 16 (7 percent) had less than 5 years of experience.

When asked about trends concerning effective communication between accountants and their clients, 69 percent of accounting professionals and educators perceived the trend to be more effective, followed by 23 percent about the same level of effectiveness and 8 percent being less effective. As number of messages increased, 61 percent of accounting professionals and educators reported that communication effectiveness increased. Twenty percent thought it stayed the same, and 19 percent indicated the trend was to decrease. Seventy-eight percent of accounting professionals and educators reported that miscommunication occurred occasionally, 17 percent thought miscommunication seldom occurred, and 5 percent reported frequent miscommunication.

Accounting professionals and educators were asked about the definition and elements of communication. Sixty-four percent of the respondents defined communication as “exchanging information.” The most frequently used methods to send an important message were written memo / letter (43 percent) and e-mail (35 percent).

When asked about skills needed to be more proficient, respondents indicated interpersonal (53 percent) and written communication (27 percent). When asked about the elements of communication, accounting educators and professionals defined “stereotype” to indicate judgment about people (51 percent), “experience” to mean previous in-depth knowledge of a topic or issue (40 percent), and “meaning” to denote same as interpretation and understanding (59 percent). They considered “inference” to represent uncertain interpretation (56 percent), “clarity” to be more the responsibility of senders (63 percent), “understanding” to signify interpretation of a message (41 percent) or if you understand what the sender says (41 percent), and “selective perception” to designate selecting among various choices (30 percent) and other (29 percent). Those who answered “other” reported it to mean perceiving what one wants to perceive. According to the respondents, people tended to focus on what they want to hear rather than having an open mind to all the facts.

Finally, accounting educators and professionals were asked to identify the most common causes of miscommunication. They reported vague and/or confusing messages (47 percent), followed by incomplete messages (24 percent) and poor choice of words (20 percent). When asked about type of interaction in which miscommunication was more likely to occur, they identified oral communication (51 percent) and nonverbal communication (26 percent). In identifying ways to avoid miscommunication, accounting educators and professionals highlighted composing oral and written messages with care (39 percent) and asking for clarification (36 percent).

Insert Table 1 about here

Key variables examined included gender, highest degree earned, years of experience, and professional career experiences. While females and males agreed “stereotyping” represents a judgment about people, males were more likely than females to identify “stereotyping” with a technique to categorize people. A majority of respondents identified interpersonal skills to be most proficient followed by written communication skills; next was public speaking, and finally nonverbal communication. The greatest percentage of respondents with masters’ degrees defined “experience” as previous in-depth knowledge of a topic. Most persons with doctorates identified “experience” with ability to learn from past occurrences. Finally, approximately a third of the individuals with bachelor degrees defined “experience” as familiarity with a topic.

The majority of respondents defined “meaning” as the same as interpretation and understanding. Those with doctorates were more likely than professionals with master and bachelor degrees to identify “meaning” with messages have meaning. While respondents with bachelor and masters degrees reported the definition of “understanding” was grasping what the sender says, individuals with doctorates defined “understanding” as interpretation of a message.

When asked about the method most used to send an important message, public accountants specifically identified written memo letter (50 percent) and telephone (40 percent). Private accountants, on the other hand, specified e-mail (54 percent), written memo letter (28 percent), and telephone (13 percent). Educators used written memo letter (45 percent), e-mail (34 percent), and telephone (19 percent) to send an important message. In terms of skills that need to be most proficient, public and private accountants chose interpersonal (70 and 72 percent, respectively), followed by written communication (30 and 26 percent, respectively). Educators agreed with 48 percent selecting interpersonal, followed by 27 percent written and 21 percent public speaking.

A majority of public accountants defined “meaning” to be the same as interpretation and understanding. Most respondents agreed that the trend in dealing with

clients was toward more effective communication. Thirty percent of public accountants indicated the trend was toward less effective communication with their clients. Finally, 34 percent of private accountants, 22 percent of educators, and 10 percent of public accountants felt the trend was about the same level of effectiveness.

When asked about the frequency of “miscommunication,” 60 percent of public accountants reported it occurred occasionally and 30 percent frequently. Educators and private accountants felt “miscommunication” occurred occasionally (79 percent and 74 percent, respectively). The last noteworthy result dealt with the type of interaction where miscommunication was expected to occur. All of the public accountants (compared to 50 percent of educators and 44 percent of private accountants) reported oral communication, followed by nonverbal communication (27 percent of educators and 28 percent of private accountants) and written communication (28 percent of private accountants and 22 percent of educators).

V. Summary and Conclusions

This study surveyed the views of accounting educators and professionals on relevant communication issues. In general, gender and years of job experience did not influence perceptions concerning the various communication factors. Both educators and professionals felt effective communication was a relevant issue. Therefore, miscommunication was a common concern for both educators and business professionals. As the number of messages increased, they felt that communication effectiveness increased. Respondents felt miscommunication occurred occasionally, especially oral communication. Compared to educators and private accountants, public accountants reported less frequent miscommunication; however, they experienced the likelihood of greater oral miscommunication than other categories of respondents. Common causes of miscommunication included vague (or confusing) messages, incomplete messages, and poor choice of words. Ways to avoid miscommunication included composing oral and written messages with care and asking for clarification.

When asked about the most frequent method used to send an important message, respondents differed in their choice of medium. While public accountants and educators chose written memos or letters, private accountants utilized e-mail messages to a greater extent. Accounting professionals and educators reported that they would like to become more proficient with interpersonal skills and written communication skills. Educators and practicing accountants believed that improved interpersonal communication skills were key factors needed to enhance communication effectiveness.

Accounting professionals and educators were asked about the definition and elements of communication. Most professionals and educators who responded to the questionnaire defined communication as “exchanging information.” When asked about the elements of communication, accounting educators and professionals defined “stereotype” to indicate a judgment about people, “experience” to mean previous in-depth knowledge of a topic or issue, and “meaning” to denote same as interpretation and understanding. They considered “inference” to represent an uncertain interpretation, “clarity” to be more the responsibility of senders, “understanding” to signify interpretation of a message or understanding of what a sender says, and “selective perception” to designate selecting among various choices.

VI. Recommendations

Improved communication practices can help to alleviate much miscommunication and/or lack of communication that impedes development of successful relationships with clients and attainment of objectives. Whether oral or written, taking time for composition of messages and seeking to clarify relevant components of messages are most-important aspects for improved communication. As a primary method of communication, a focus on improvement of oral communication is a most-important consideration. Thus, educators should include more emphasis on teaching and allowing opportunities for their students to practice oral communication, including public speaking. Accounting professionals should highlight the importance of oral communication, while making presentations to student organizations as well as during the interview process for prospective employees.

Sharing of meaning, rather than a focus on sharing of words, can be valuable in reducing miscommunication and ultimately saving time and organizational funds. Considering gender, highest degree earned, and years of experience, views toward causes of miscommunication and ways to avoid miscommunication did not differ significantly. Additionally, regardless of gender and years of experience, survey participants held relatively similar views about the definition of communication and meanings for "selective perception," "inference," and "clarity" of communication.

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Table 1
Frequency Distributions for Key Variables

Variable	# of Resp.	Percent
Factors represent the most common causes of miscommunication:		
Poor choice of words	47	20
Incomplete messages	58	24
Vague and/or confusing messages	114	47
Reliance upon rumors and/or the grapevine	4	2
Cultural differences	5	2
Other	13	5
Type of interaction in which miscommunication is more likely to occur:		
Oral communication	122	51
Written communication	52	22
Nonverbal communication	62	26
Other	3	1
Ways to avoid miscommunication:		
Ask for clarification	87	36
Compose oral and written messages with care	93	39
Consider the parties to the communication	23	10
Listen attentively	25	11
Watch your body language	3	1
Other	8	3
Definition of "communication"		
Talking or writing with words	20	8
Exchanging information	152	64
Sharing of meaning	63	26
Sending signals	2	1
Other	3	1
Methods most frequently used to send an important message:		
E-mail	85	35
Written memo / letter	102	43
Telephone	46	19
Other	8	3
Skills need to be more proficient?		
Interpersonal	127	53
Written	66	27
Public speaking	39	16
Non-verbal communication	5	2
Other	4	2

Variable	# of Resp.	Percent
Definition of “stereotyping” as it relates to communication:		
Represents a judgment about people	123	51
Serves as a technique for categorizing people	92	39
Reduces the difficulty of getting to know others	13	5
Other	12	5
Definition of “selective perception” as it relates to communication:		
Perceiving insights and meaning	61	26
Selecting among various choices	70	30
Understanding of key aspects of events and/or issues	35	15
Other	69	29
Definition of “experience” as it relates to communication:		
Some familiarity with a topic, concept, or issue	48	20
Previous in-depth knowledge of a topic, concept, or issue	96	40
The ability to learn from past occurrences	84	35
Other	11	5
Definition of “meaning” as it relates to communication:		
You can send meaning to others	18	8
Messages have meaning	61	25
Meaning is the same as interpretation and understanding	142	59
Other	19	8
Definition of “inference” as it relates to communication:		
Similar to a summary	10	4
Correct interpretation	54	23
Uncertain interpretation	135	56
Other	41	17
Definition of “clarity” as it relates to communication:		
Deals with levels of specificity	65	27
More the responsibility of senders	152	63
More the responsibility of receivers	4	2
Other	20	8
How “understanding” relates to communication:		
If you understand what the sender says	99	41
Your interpretation of a message	99	41
Understanding and communication are the same	25	11
Other	16	7

Exhibit 1

Key Perspectives

- Effective communication was a relevant issue for both educators and business professionals.
- Miscommunication was a common concern for both educators and business professionals.
- In general, gender and years of job experience did not influence perceptions concerning the various communication factors.
- For educators as well as business professionals, memos, letters, and e-mail messages were the most-commonly used methods of written communication.
- Educators and practicing accountants believed that improved interpersonal communication skills were key factors needed to enhance communication effectiveness.
- Compared to educators and private accountants, public accountants reported less frequent miscommunication; however, they experienced the likelihood of greater oral miscommunication than other categories of respondents.
- Regardless of gender and years of experience, survey participants held relatively similar views toward the definition of communication and meanings of "selective perception," "inference," and "clarity" of communication.
- Respondents differed in their choice of most-utilized medium to communicate an important message. While public accountants and educators chose written memos or letters, private accountants utilized e-mail messages to a greater extent.
- Even though the number of years of job experience varied, survey participants held relatively similar views toward communication factors included in the study.
- Considering gender, highest degree earned, and years of experience, views toward causes of miscommunication and ways to avoid miscommunication did not differ significantly.

Appendix 1

Survey of Accounting Educators and Professionals

Please check the appropriate answers for the following questions.

Gender: Male Professional job classification: Public accounting
 Private accounting
 Female Educator
 Student

If you are a student, your classification is: Freshman Sophomore
 Junior Senior Graduate

Highest degree earned: High school Bachelors Masters
 Doctorate

If you are a practicing accountant, how many years of full-time employment in accounting have you completed?

Less than 5 years 5 to 10 years 11 to 20 years Greater than 20 years

1. Which phrase most accurately defines the word "communication?" (check one choice)
 Talking or writing with words Exchanging information
 Sharing of meaning Sending signals
 Other: (please indicate)
2. What method do you most frequently use to send an important message? (check one choice)
 E-mail Written memo / letter
 Telephone Other (please indicate)
3. At which one of the following skills do you need to be most proficient? (check one choice)
 Interpersonal Written
 Public speaking Nonverbal communication
 Other (please indicate)
4. Which phrase best represents how "stereotyping" relates to communication? (check one choice)
 Represents a judgment about people
 Serves as a technique for categorizing people
 Reduces the difficulty of getting to know others
 Other (please indicate)
5. As it relates to communication, how do you define the term "selective perception?" (check one choice)
 Perceiving insights and meanings
 Selecting among various choices
 Understanding of key aspects of events and/or issues
 Other: (please indicate)
6. As it relates to communication, which one of the following responses best indicates how you define the word "experience?" (check one choice)
 Some familiarity with a topic, concept, or issue
 Previous in-depth knowledge of a topic, concept, or issue
 The ability to learn from past occurrences
 Other: (please indicate)

7. Which phrase best represents how "meaning" relates to communication? (check one choice)
- You can send meaning to others
 - Messages have meaning
 - Meaning is the same as interpretation and understanding
 - Other (please indicate)
8. Which best represents how "inference" relates to communication? (check one choice)
- An inference is similar to a summary
 - An inference is a correct interpretation
 - An inference is an uncertain interpretation
 - Other (please indicate)
9. Which phrase best represents how "clarity" relates to communication? (check one choice)
- Clarity deals with levels of specificity
 - Clarity is more the responsibility of senders
 - Clarity is more the responsibility of receivers
 - Other (please indicate)
10. Which phrase best represents how "understanding" relates to communication? (check one choice)
- If you understand what the sender says, then communication has occurred
 - Understanding is your interpretation of a message
 - Understanding and communication are the same
 - Other (please indicate)
11. As you perceive accountants dealing with clients, is the trend toward (1) more, (2) less, or (3) about the same amount of effective communication?
- More Less About the same
12. As the number of messages you send to another person increases, does your communication effectiveness tend to:
- Increase Stay the same Decrease
13. When you interact with others, how often, through no fault of yours, do you experience miscommunication? (check one choice)
- Seldom Occasionally Frequently
14. Which factor represents the most common cause of miscommunication? (check one choice)
- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Poor choice of words | <input type="checkbox"/> Incomplete messages |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Vague and/or confusing messages | <input type="checkbox"/> Reliance upon rumors and/or the grapevine |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cultural differences | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: (please indicate) |
15. In which type of interaction do you most likely expect miscommunication to occur? (check one choice)
- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Oral communication | <input type="checkbox"/> Written communication |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Nonverbal communication | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: (please indicate) |

16. Which one of the following ways to avoid miscommunication do you use the most?
(check one choice)

- Ask for clarification
- Compose oral and written messages with care
- Consider the parties to the communication
- Listen attentively
- Watch your body language
- Other ((please indicate)