

Employers want college grads to have strong oral skills, study finds

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Tina Coffelt stresses the importance of effective communication to her students. Her latest study shows employers put a strong emphasis on oral skills. Credit: Christopher Gannon, Iowa State University

Many college graduates are starting their careers and applying what

they've learned to a position in their field. Regardless of their chosen professions, there are certain skills every student needs to be a successful employee, and those include communication skills - specifically, oral and interpersonal communication.

According to a new Iowa State study published in *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly*, employers recalled oral communication [skills](#) more than others for new college graduates. Tina Coffelt, lead author and an assistant professor of communication studies and English, says one-third of employers surveyed identified strong verbal skills more than written, visual or electronic communication skills. The results do not diminish the need for these other skills, but more likely reflect usage.

"We talk a lot more than we write and we talk almost subconsciously; it's just something we have to do to get work done," Coffelt said. "The other forms of communication are more focused, more strategic. Certainly, some of oral communication is strategic as well, but the day-to-day work of talking on the telephone, with a co-worker down the hall or a customer who walks into a store - there's just more oral communication."

Electronic skills, while growing in importance, ranked second in the study. Visual communication skills were rarely mentioned. Coffelt says there are several possible explanations as to why. Some employers may view visual skills as a support to other forms of communication, or as less of a priority in some occupations. Electronic skills - primarily email and phone - may be less important to some employers than human interaction, Coffelt said.

The data is based on responses from 52 employers in engineering, business, health sciences and social work. Each employer was asked about the type, frequency and manner of communication an intern or new, entry-level hire would use through the course of the workday. The

employers identified 165 different [communication skills](#).

How to best prepare students?

Collecting data that universities and colleges can use to shape curriculum motivated Coffelt to take a different approach. She and co-authors Matt Baker, a doctoral candidate in English; and Robert Corey, a lecturer in English, designed the study so that employers could list the types of communication they required, rather than ranking a set of skills predetermined by the researcher. Oral skills included interpersonal communication, presenting and listening skills, as well as team or group work, Coffelt said.

To better prepare students in these areas, Iowa State and several other universities have shifted to a multimodal teaching approach blending all forms of communication - written, oral, visual and electronic - into one course. This is an important step, because it reflects how we simultaneously use these skills at work, Coffelt said.

"Previously, students would take an English class to write, a speech class for public speaking or an interpersonal class and that's all you focus on," Coffelt said. "As we develop curricular assignments and focus on teaching, we need to recognize that teaching a separate class for each mode does not help students synthesize how different modes of communication weave together."

Coffelt says there also needs to be a stronger emphasis on communication curriculum before students even step foot on campus to make sure they're prepared for their courses. Technology is one way college instructors can help those students struggling with grammar rules or sentence structure. For example, offering online quizzes or additional assignments to complete outside of class will help students enhance their skills. It also gives instructors the ability to focus on more advanced

skills and critical thinking in class, Coffelt said.

There are some limitations to research that Coffelt wants to examine in the future. This study looked only at prevalence of skills mentioned, based on employer recall. Coffelt says it would be beneficial to have data on the importance of these skills for employers. Still, employer responses indicate they value effective communication.

"When an employee is hired, that person is expected to have a blend of [communication](#) skills. Some positions are going to be more technical and may require a greater emphasis on writing skills, but there are hundreds of jobs in which students are going to be expected to have a combination of all skills," Coffelt said.

More information: T. A. Coffelt et al. Business Communication Practices From Employers Perspectives, *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly* (2016). [DOI: 10.1177/2329490616644014](https://doi.org/10.1177/2329490616644014)

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