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Developments in Practice XXXVI: How to Talk So Business Will Listen ... And Listen So Business Will Talk

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Abstract:

One of the most important skills all IT staff need to develop today is how to communicate effectively with business. Over and over, research has shown that if IT and business cannot speak the same language, focus on the same issues and communicate constructively, they cannot build a trusting relationship. And business is consistently more negative about IT's ability to communicate effectively than IT is. In fact, even while IT collaboration is improving, business's assessment of IT's communication skills is declining. While much attention has been paid to organizational alignment between IT and business (e.g., governance, structure) very little has been paid to the nature and impact of the social dimension of alignment, a big element of which involves communication. To explore the business and interpersonal competencies that IT staff will need in order to do their jobs effectively over the next five–seven years and what companies should be doing to help develop them, the authors convened a focus group of senior IT managers from a variety of different organizations. This paper documents the results of this discussion, integrating them with findings from the research and practitioner literature. It begins by characterizing the state of communication in the business–IT relationship and why “good communication” is becoming increasingly important. Then, it explores what is meant by “good communication” in this relationship and looks at some of the inhibitors of effective communication between these groups. Finally, it discusses the key communication skills that need to be developed by IT staff and makes recommendations for how organizations can improve or develop communication in the business–IT relationship. It concludes that good communication has both social and organizational dimensions, both of which need to be appropriately managed. It also shows that there is a “virtuous circle” of communication, with is associated with improved IT performance and perceptions of IT value.

Keywords: communication; business–IT relationship; IT competencies

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I. INTRODUCTION

At an IT governance meeting, attended by all our business executives, our IT Architect was asked to discuss IT security and what steps [are] needed to be taken to improve it. The Architect proceeded to bombard the executives with extremely low level details—an over-saturation of information, which they did not understand—and he lost their attention in very short order. What he did not do was deliver information in a positive manner geared to his audience. As a result, there was diminished business interest and understanding in this topic and a slowed down budget for needed upgrades, which also affected other projects.

—Senior IT manager in a global retail organization

As this true story illustrates, the ability to communicate with the business in business terms does not appear to be a current IT strength. This is a serious problem for IT managers because as IT and business grow more entwined, IT staff are going to need to be increasingly organization-savvy and possess greater business and interpersonal competencies [Mingay, 2005; Karlsen et al., 2008; Bassellier and Benbasat, 2004]. Yet, despite consistent complaints from business and IT leaders alike about how IT staff lack business and communication skills, it seems that many IT departments still hire largely for technical competencies and have little budget available for “soft skills” development [Cukier, 2007]. Problems communicating with business continue to play a significant part in today’s poor perceptions of IT in organizations and inhibit what IT is able to do for the organization [McKeen and Smith, 2009]. For example, IT managers often bemoan the fact that IT-based initiatives to implement new technologies or establish a standard infrastructure, which they believe could have significant benefits for their organizations, are not funded. Many of the reasons for this lie in IT’s inability to explain the value of such investments in terms that business will understand.

In short, one of the most important skills all IT staff need to develop today is communicating effectively with business. “Effective communication between IT ... and its stakeholders has never been so important ... so complex or so difficult to get right” [Mingay, 2005]. Over and over, research has shown that if IT and business cannot speak the same language, focus on the same issues, and communicate constructively, they cannot build a trusting relationship [Karlsen et al., 2008]. And business is consistently more negative about IT’s abilities in communicating effectively than IT is. In fact, even while IT collaboration is improving, business’s assessment of IT’s communication skills is declining [Wilcoxson and Chatham, 2004].

While much attention has been paid to organizational alignment between IT and business (e.g., governance, structure) very little has been paid to the nature and impact of the social dimension of alignment, a big element of which involves communication [Reich and Benbasat, 2000]. Therefore, to explore the business and interpersonal competencies that IT staff will need in order to do their jobs effectively over the next five–seven years and what companies should be doing to help develop them, the authors convened a focus group of senior IT managers from a variety of organizations, including banking, retail, technology, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, and food services. In preparation for this session, participants were asked to focus specifically on communication issues and to distinguish these from other aspects of IT professionalism (such as dress, behavior, and manner). To assist them in doing this, we provided a background paper on professionalism and a list of specific IT communication competencies developed by a national industry nonprofit organization (see Appendix A). We asked participants to consider several aspects of business communication in their presentations to the group. These included: the business and interpersonal communication skills they considered most important and most lacking in IT staff; ways that poor IT communication has affected their companies; and what their organizations are doing to develop these competencies. Some participants also provided written materials about communication expectations for different IT roles.

This paper provides the results of this focus group and integrates them with findings from the research and practitioner literature. It begins by characterizing the state of communication in the business–IT relationship and why “good communication” is becoming increasingly important. Then it explores what is meant by “good communication” in this relationship and looks at some of the inhibitors of effective communication between these groups. Finally, it discusses the key communication skills that need to be developed by IT staff and makes recommendations for how organizations can improve or develop communication in the business–IT relationship.

II. COMMUNICATION IN THE BUSINESS–IT RELATIONSHIP

“Poor communication is a constant source of irritation, confusion and animosity,” said one focus group manager. Another agreed, “So many of our IT staff don’t understand organizational dynamics. They say and do things that would be completely inappropriate anywhere else in our company.” There is general agreement between practitioners and researchers that poor business–IT communication is the source of poor relationships and alignment between these groups [Bittler, 2008; Reich and Benbasat, 2000]. One study noted:

Many IT people have “turned off” their business peers with too much technical jargon. This is one reason why the number of IT people that are “allowed” to speak with business people has been deliberately limited in many organizations [Bittler, 2008].

Communication is both an enabler and an inhibitor of a good business–IT relationship. One study found that it consistently made both “top ten” lists of managers over a number of years [Luftman and Brier, 1999]. On one hand, poor communication tends to be persistent and of lasting concern to practitioners [Coughlan, Lycett, and Macredie, 2005]. Often IT personnel are perceived to live in an “ivory tower,” disengaged from the needs of the business [Burton, Weiss, and Allega, 2008]. Typically, these problems are described as a communication or a cultural “gap” between the two groups [Reich and Benbasat, 2000; Coughlan, Lycett and Macredie, 2005] and are considered a major cause of systems development failures [Taylor-Cummings, 1998]. “We struggle with communication gaps and challenges,” said a focus group manager. “There’s a lot of IT arrogance we need to deal with.” Another commented, “IT doesn’t listen and doesn’t talk the talk.”

On the other hand, there is broad recognition that good communication is essential for many reasons. First, it is fundamental to building a strong, positive business–IT relationship. “When business people believe IT people ‘get it,’ the relationships are always improved” [Bittler, 2008]. Second, it helps set sensible expectations of IT and helps IT to manage how it is perceived in business [Day, 2007]. Third, it is an essential element of building trust and partnership, which in turn help drive the delivery of business value [McKeen and Smith, 2009]. Fourth, it is essential to conveying the business value of IT [Hunter, 2007]. And finally, it is critical to understanding the priorities and pressures of the business. Focus group managers spoke of the need for staff who would listen and look for new opportunities to deliver business value. In short, good communication is widely seen as being critical for delivering successful projects, effective IT performance, and delivering value [Benbasat and Reich, 2000; Karlsen et al., 2008; Willcoxson and Chatham, 2004].

As a result, improving communication is increasingly recommended as a top priority for IT managers [Burton, Weiss, Allega, 2005; Mingay 2005]. Several of the focus group managers stated that they are working on building communication into their annual goals and into their expectations of staff. What is missing, however, is a better understanding of the nature of good business–IT communication and some of the obstacles IT managers face in improving it [Coughlan, Lycett, and Macredie, 2005]. As a result, poor communication continues to be the norm in most organizations [Pawlowski and Robey, 2004].

III. WHAT IS “GOOD” COMMUNICATION?

Unfortunately, there is no magic formula for defining and teaching “good” communication, since it is a complex concept that has many dimensions. There are, however, some principles that are recognized as important elements of effective communication which can be used as guidelines for those who wish to assess their communication performance.

Principle 1: The effectiveness of communication is measured by its outcomes. Communication is successful when it achieves the outcomes we desire [Gilberg, 2006]. However, all too often, we measure communication by our intentions rather than its outcomes. The problem with this is that “communication is in the ear of the beholder” and even the most direct, clear, understandable, and, therefore, a consistent message can get distorted but such filters as politics, culture, and personal points of view. As messages get passed along to others, they get further distorted, much like the children’s game of “telephone.” One study showed that, while 97 percent of managers believed their own communication was clear, only 25 percent of the same people believed that the communication they received from their direct superior was clear and effective [Martin, 2006]. Another study showed that IT managers feel their communication is more effective than business managers feel it is [Willcoxson and Chatham, 2004].

Principle 2: Communication is social behavior. Communication not only transmits ideas, it negotiates relationships. Thus, *how* you say what you mean is just as important as *what* you say [Tannen, 1995]. This is an especially important principle for IT staff to learn because, as teams become increasingly diverse and virtual, many of the traditional nonverbal signals that we instinctively rely on to provide meaning are lost. There are a host of factors that act as a social subtext to our communication: tone of voice, rate of speed, degree of loudness, and

spacing and pausing. These are all culturally-learned signals that affect how we evaluate each other as people [Tannen, 1995]. Gender and culture are key social filters that all of us use. For example, the degree of directness and indirectness in communication has often been a source of significant misunderstandings. Women learn to be more indirect when telling others what to do so as not to be perceived as “bossy”; men are indirect when admitting to fault or weakness. In short, there is no one “right” way to speak, but speakers and listeners need to become more aware of the power of different linguistic styles, and managers must learn to use and take advantage of these styles in different communication situations [Tannen, 1995].

Principle 3: Shared knowledge improves communication. It is all too well-known that many IT people don’t “speak the language of the business.” As one focus group manager stated, “Many IT staff think they’ve ‘communicated’ by explaining a technology need or a technology decision, instead of ensuring that everyone understands the *business* implications of what’s involved.” Studies show that the more IT staff learns about the business, the better communication becomes [Reich and Benbasat, 2000]. This is true not only because IT people understand business better but also because shared knowledge leads to increased *frequency* of communication and greater *mutual understanding*, both of which lead to more success in implementation, which in turn leads to more communication and improved relationships [Reich and Benbasat, 2000]. Thus, the creation of shared knowledge can be the beginning of a “virtuous circle” of continuously improving communication (see Figure 1).

Principle 4: Mature organizations have better communication. While communication is a social process, it is also embedded within and fundamental to organizational processes [Coughlan, Lycett, and Macreadie, 2005].

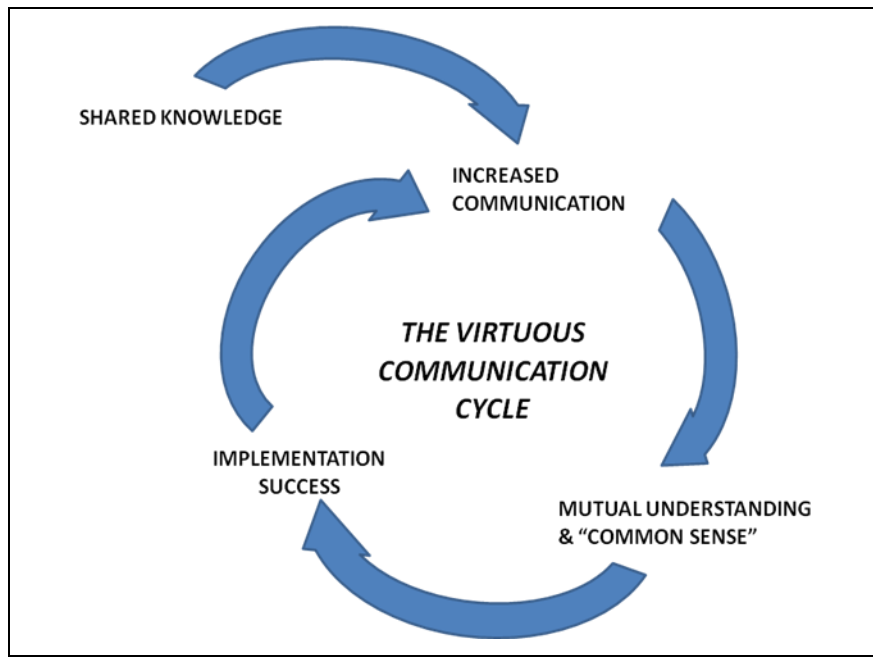


Figure 1. Shared Knowledge Leads to Improved

Organizational maturity plays a significant part in the effectiveness of business–IT communication because effective practices support and reinforce good interpersonal communication. “You can’t be a partner unless you’re a mature IT organization,” explained one focus group manager. The research supports this contention, showing that high performing IT functions have a strong foundation of communication [Peppard and Ward, 1999; Reich and Benbasat, 2000]. Thus, successful IT organizations embed appropriate communication in their processes and consider this to be a significant component of IT’s work [Mingay, 2005]. This work is even more important in times of organization transformation. “We are quite good about communicating operationally,” said one focus group manager, “but we need to improve when talking with our business

executives about strategy.” Another commented, “we need better skills to move up the ‘run, change, innovate’ curve and we need the organizational maturity to do this.” The focus group identified some of the areas where improved maturity could help communication as: developing business cases; risk assessments; integrating with the ‘big picture’; and communicating across business silos. In short, while communication is often seen as an individual competency, it should also be viewed and managed as an IT functional competency at all levels.

IV. OBSTACLES TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Why is it so difficult to achieve effective business–IT communication? The principles haven’t changed much over time, but they have often not been applied, or have been forgotten or ignored as busy IT managers focus on tight timelines and major deliverables [Mingay, 2005]. However, in addition to these considerations, there are some other obstacles to effective communication that can hinder or prevent communication from occurring. These include:

- **The changing nature of IT work.** There is no question that IT work has become more complex over time. Increasingly, IT staff are intermediaries between third party contract staff, global staff, or external stakeholders and vendors as well as traditional business users. When multiple cultures, different political contexts, diverse time zones, and virtual relationships are added into the mix, communication simply becomes more multi-faceted and challenging. Furthermore, organizations are expecting IT to do more for them. Transformation, innovation,

or simply bigger and more visible projects all require *more* communication than the norm and, therefore, more management attention [Mingay, 2005]. “We must take a broader view of communication,” stated an IT manager. “And we need conversations at many levels.” Thus, while IT may have adopted communication solutions that meet the needs of the past, these are not adequate for present and future needs.

- **Hiring practices.** “IT organizations can no longer support smart, super-talented, but socially-disruptive people who cannot work well with a team or with the business,” said one manager. The group concurred that IT skills are changing to become more consultative and collaborative. Yet, frequently, their organizations still hire for technology skills, rather than the “softer” skills, such as communication, which are essential for success these days. One study found that there is serious misalignment in hiring between “the skills needed for a job (which heavily emphasize communication and general business skills...) [and] the job requirements that are... advertised (which tend to emphasize formal technical training)” [Cukier, 2007].
- **IT and business organization structures.** A few years ago, many IT functions attempted to deal with their communication problems by creating relationship managers. These were skilled IT individuals whose job was to bridge the business and IT organizations and thus act as a communication conduit between the two groups. Unfortunately, relationship managers have become a mixed blessing at best and an obstacle at worst, restricting contact between the two groups and thereby limiting the development of shared knowledge and mutual understanding. “Relationship managers appear to do more to exacerbate rather than ameliorate,” found one study [Coughlan, Lycett, and Macreadie, 2005]. A focus group manager agreed, “You can’t partner if your only contact is through a relationship manager.” Furthermore, business silos can make communication about enterprise issues extremely challenging for IT staff, who can be expected to play a “knowledge broker” role, not only between IT and business but also between business units [Pawlowski and Robey, 2004].
- **Nature and Frequency of Communication.** It’s a bit of a chicken and egg situation: more frequent contact with business leads to improved communication but IT’s communication is often so full of jargon, techno-centric and inappropriate, that many organizations have sought ways to limit the amount and nature of communication between the two groups. One study found that about one-third of IT staff simply didn’t speak to the business at all [Basselier and Benbasat, 2004]. However, even when they are not restricted, IT staff often have trouble getting business to take the time to sit with them, some of the focus group stated. Researchers have pointed out that it is the sharing of tacit and unstructured knowledge, which takes place in low risk, informal settings, that contributes most to effective communication and mutual understanding [Kitzis and Gomolski, 2006; Dunne, 2002; Basillier and Benbasat, 2004]. Limiting one’s focus to formal interactions, e.g., through IT governance processes, has been shown to be the *least* effective way of communicating successfully [Dunne, 2002].
- **Attitude.** Finally, IT’s attitude can be a huge obstacle to good communication. It was surprising to hear this complaint from so many in the focus group. “Our IT staff think their work is about IT. They don’t understand that we’re here to deliver business value with technology,” one manager stated. One manager described IT staff as “crotchety”; another as “obtuse”; several stated IT staff are “defensive.” It is not surprising that, if this is the case, a negative attitude on the part of an IT worker toward his/her work, the business, or employer ends up being reflected in their communication and how it is perceived [McKeen and Smith, 2009]. In turn, this can color how the communication is received [Martin, 2006; Anonymous, 2005]. Unfortunately as well, many IT staff are motivated by the desire to be right rather than a desire to communicate effectively [Gilberg, 2006]. “We definitely need a “we” attitude in IT,” said a focus group manager, “not an ‘us-them’ attitude.”

Overcoming these obstacles will require a combination of management attention to all dimensions of business–IT communication and the development of critical communication skills in IT staff. The next two sections of this paper will address these issues.

V. “T-LEVEL” COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR IT STAFF

While IT workers’ communication skills need upgrading, there is no “one-size fits all” strategy for doing this [Kalin, 2006]. Nor do lists of communication competencies move us much further forward in clarifying exactly what IT workers are doing wrong and what needs to change in their communication style. It has been suggested that as business becomes more complex, it really needs more T-shaped professionals, who are deep problem solvers in their home discipline but also capable of interacting with and understanding others from a wide range of disciplines and functional areas [Ding, 2008]. People possessing these skills are able to shape their knowledge to fit problems and apply synergistic thinking [Leonard-Barton, 1995]. Unfortunately, most IT organizations encourage I-shaped skills, that is, deep functional expertise. As a result, the individual is driven ever-deeper into his or her specialized set of skills [Leonard-Barton, 1995].

Developing T-shaped IT staff, addresses the concern that some in the focus group expressed that emphasizing the development of “soft skills” could come at the expense of the excellent technology skills still needed by the

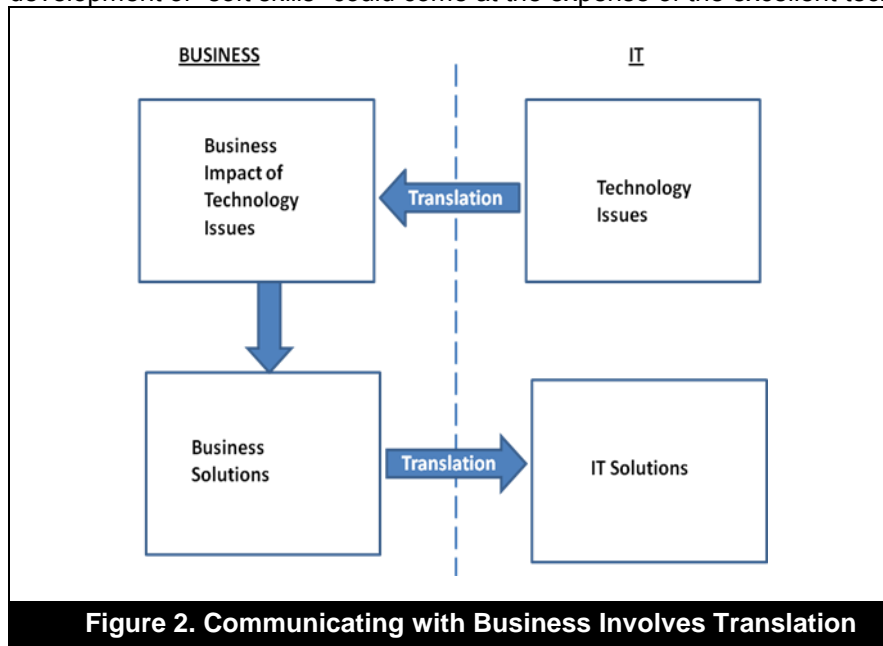


Figure 2. Communicating with Business Involves Translation

organization. “You don’t want your staff becoming disconnected from their technological capabilities,” said one. “Connecting the dots” between the focus group’s comments and the research on communication shows that there are four communication skills that form the horizontal bar of the “T” for IT professionals (the vertical one being their technology skills and knowledge):

1. **Translation.** IT staff typically fail miserably at translating IT issues and concerns into business impacts—as illustrated by the story at the beginning of this paper. Eliminating jargon is the first step. “Too often our IT population speaks in nano-words and gigabits, instead of using the English language,” said a focus

group manager. However, translation requires more than this because it requires the ability to understand *how* IT initiatives will affect the business or deliver value to it. To communicate effectively about IT’s value, IT managers “must translate IT’s operational performance into business performance ... and drive home the message that all IT initiatives are business initiative.” [Hunter, 2007]. That IT staff are effectively knowledge brokers and translation is a critical part of their work is often not recognized [Pawlowski and Robey, 2004]. As a result, bridging and translation skills are still rare in IT, agreed the focus group.

The work involved in translation can be characterized as a four-step process where IT staff move from the world of technology into the world of business to discuss problems in terms of business impact and possible business solutions and then *back* into IT to translate these solutions into technological reality (see Figure 2). “In the end,” said a manager, “we must be able to translate what the business knows and wants into actionable IT proposals.”

2. **Tailoring.** IT staff also need to adapt their communication to the needs of their audience. This involves two skills. First, IT workers need to know their audience, understanding *their* needs, *their* agendas, and *their* politics so that they communicate in ways the business needs and wants to hear [Burton, Weiss, and Allega, 2008]. Second, all IT personnel need to know how to choose communication methods appropriately. For example, bad news is best delivered in face-to-face meetings, not in reports or e-mails (as some in the focus group reported); and presentations to executives are not the place to expound on one’s technology expertise [Martin, 2006].
3. **Transparency.** Transparency is a cornerstone of trust in the business–IT relationship [Smith and McKeen, 2008] and IT managers should not assume that success speaks for itself. The business needs to see what is being done in IT and what it costs. In fact, it has been suggested that transparency is the key to changing the business’s perception of IT’s value [Levinson and Pastore, 2005]. At an individual level, one member of the focus group defined transparency as communication which is: “honest, accurate, ethical, and respectful.” “We need honesty and openness,” stated another. Transparency also means involving the right people in making decisions and recognizing that the goal is to get the communication process flowing both ways [Burton, Weiss, and Allega, 2008; Dunne, 2002]. Other ways to promote transparent communication include checking assumptions; clarifying goals; stating intentions up front; and asking for feedback on understanding [Dunne, 2002; Gilberg, 2006].
4. **Thinking, Talking and Listening.** An important communication skill that is increasingly valued by business is the ability to “think outside the box” and to challenge the status quo, albeit diplomatically and responsibly. Focus group managers suggested that IT staff need to think “horizontally” across the enterprise in order to do what is best for the business. Communicating innovative ideas effectively involves “getting inside the head of the business,” they explained. In the future, the ideal IT manager will “think and talk like a business person with a strong background in technology” [Kitzis and Gomolski, 2006]. Thinking, however, does not mean simply blurting out ideas; it means understanding how and where to speak and how to listen to others. Learning to listen can be

a challenge for IT staff who tend to be impatient with politics and the process of coming to a solution that everyone can live with [Dunne, 2002]. Similarly, IT staff can underestimate the importance of listening to non-verbal communication or the “noise” of the context in which communication takes place [Anonymous, 2005; Coughlan, Lycett, and Macredie, 2005]. In short, this skill involves more than simply “talking and waiting to talk,” but incorporates a more sophisticated and nuanced awareness of the *process* of communication, recognizing that *how* one reaches a decision is as important to the success of communication as the actual decision itself.

VI. IMPROVING BUSINESS–IT COMMUNICATION

The focus group managers were the first to admit that much more needs to be done in their own organizations to improve communication between IT and the business at all levels. However, they were also implementing a number of practices that they believed would promote the development of good communication skills among their staff and also as an IT function. Their recommendations included:

- **Make the importance of effective communication visible.** It is well-accepted that if you want people to pay attention to something, you need to measure and incent for it. Several companies in the focus group felt that good communication skills should be expected of every IT staff member. “These are now baseline expectations for us,” said one. A key way to get staff to pay attention is to incorporate communication skills into performance appraisals. One company makes it clear that specialized “niche” skills are more likely to be outsourced and that those who understand and can work with the business are more likely to have a long-term career in its organization.
- **Work with HR to develop new skills expectations and roles.** Several firms are incorporating specific communication competencies into staff role descriptions. One is even trying to create jobs that have titles which reflect the types of competencies needed, such as “senior business consultant,” “technology relationship manager,” and “business technology specialist.” Another is trying to make it easier for IT staff to transfer laterally into the business for a period of time.
- **Develop communication skills both formally and informally.** To support these new expectations, some firms offer formal training in communication skills in areas such as making presentations, communication styles, and negotiations. Incorporating communication skills into personal development plans is a way a few managers tailor formal skills development for personal needs. However, the effectiveness of formal training is “mixed,” said many managers, and some firms don’t offer it at all or only as part of management development. More informal approaches include mentoring, lunch and learn sessions, and self-assessment tools.
- **Increase the nature and frequency of communication.** While not an initiative of any of the focus group, the research is clear that creating a “virtuous communication cycle” starts with creating shared knowledge between the two groups at all levels. While there are few “quick fixes” to the communication problem, the importance of regular communication between IT and business at all levels cannot be over-emphasized [Reich and Benbasat, 2000]. Wherever possible, priority should be made for informal communication and social interaction, as these are the best ways to build up shared language and understanding [Dunne, 2002; Burton, Weiss, and Allega, 2008]. These types of interactions are particularly important when face-to-face communication is irregular or impossible [Greenberg, Greenberg, and Antonucci, 2007]. Recognizing this, one company that makes extensive use of global, virtual teams, encourages socialization and even virtual parties, through its social networking technologies.
- **Spend more time on communication.** Most important of all, IT leaders at all levels need to spend more time on communication—not only in what and how they communicate personally—but in learning how their staff and organizations communicate. They need to seek out and remove obstacles to communication, coach their staff, become sensitized to the communication processes (both formal and informal) in their organizations, and do whatever it takes to develop a shared understanding and language with the business. While the initial investment of time may be high, there is no question that it will pay off in terms of an improved relationship with business and greater perceptions of IT value.

VII. CONCLUSION

“What we have here is a failure to communicate” is a famous (and sarcastic) movie quote that is, nevertheless, an extraordinarily accurate description of the business–IT relationship. While there may be many words and documents flowing between the two groups, it is fair to say that there is often little true communication occurring. This has resulted in misunderstandings, dysfunctional behavior, and above all, a failure to deliver value to the organization. This paper has examined the difficult and complex challenges facing IT leaders as they attempt to improve their function’s communication with the business. It demonstrated that good communication has both social and

organizational dimensions, both of which need to be appropriately managed. It also showed that there is a “virtuous circle” of communication which is associated with improved IT performance and perceptions of IT value. In short, good communication is important to the successful implementation of IT in business and developing it is, therefore, worth more time and attention than most managers currently pay to it. This paper has focused on the IT side of the communication equation—since it is usually held to be the culprit in the sometimes nasty war of words that ranges back and forth between the two groups. While there is much that can be done within IT to improve communication skills—without losing technology capabilities—it nevertheless behooves business managers to explore ways in which they can assist IT in doing this. Most importantly, they can make the time and effort to ensure that IT staff are well-educated in how their business works. If they do, business leaders just might find that many of IT’s “communication problems” disappear.

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APPENDIX A

IT COMMUNICATION COMPETENCIES¹

(after the Information and Communications Technology Council, 2008)

Level 1
Listens and clearly presents information
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Listens/pays attention* actively and objectively. (Persons with hearing impairments may lip read.) Presents information and facts in a logical manner, using appropriate phrasing and vocabulary. Shares information willingly and on a timely basis. Communicates with others honestly, respectfully, and sensitively. Recognizes and uses non-verbal communications.
Level 2
Fosters two-way communication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recalls others' main points and takes them into account in own communication. Checks own understanding of others' communication (e.g., paraphrases, asks questions). Elicits comments or feedback on what has been said. Maintains continuous, open, and consistent communication with others considering nonverbal messaging as required.
Level 3
Adapts communication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tailors communication (e.g., content, style and medium) to diverse audiences. Reads cues from diverse listeners to assess when and how to change planned communication approach to effectively deliver message. Communicates equally effectively with all organizational levels and sells ideas and concepts. Understands others' complex or underlying needs, motivations, emotions or concerns and communicates effectively despite the sensitivity of the situation.

¹ Used with permission.

Level 4
Communicates complex messages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicates complex issues clearly and credibly with widely varied audiences. • Handles difficult on-the-spot questions (e.g., from senior executives, public officials, interest groups, or the media). • Reads nonverbal communications signs and adapts materials and approach as required. • Overcomes resistance and secures support for ideas or initiatives through high-impact communication.
Level 5
Communicates strategically
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scans the environment for key information and messages to form the development of communication strategies. • Communicates strategically to achieve specific objectives (e.g., considers optimal "messaging" and timing of communication). • Uses varied communication vehicles and opportunities to promote dialogue and develop shared understanding and consensus.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Heather A. Smith (hsmith@business.queensu.ca) has been named North America’s most published researcher on IT and knowledge management issues. A senior research associate with Queen’s University School of Business at Kingston, Canada, she is the co-author of four books: *IT Strategy in Action*; *Management Challenges in IS: Successful Strategies and Appropriate Action*; *Making IT Happen: Critical Issues in IT Management*; and *Information Technology and Organizational Transformation: Solving the Management Puzzle*. A former senior IT manager, she is currently co-director of the IT Management Forum and the CIO Brief, which facilitate inter-organizational learning among senior IT executives. She is also a senior research associate with the Society for Information Management’s Advanced Practices Council. In addition, she consults, presents, and collaborates with organizations worldwide, including British Petroleum, TD Bank, Canada Post, Ecole des Hautes Etudes Commerciales, the OPP, and Boston University. Her research is published in a variety of journals and books including *MIT Sloan Management Review*, *Communications of the Association of Information Systems*, *Knowledge Management Research and Practice*, *Journal of Information Systems and Technology*, *Journal of Information Technology Management*, *Information and Management*, *Database*, *CIO Canada*, and the *CIO Governments Review*. She is also a member of the editorial board of *MISQ-E*.

James D. McKeen is a professor of IT Strategy and Distinguished Research Fellow in MIS at the School of Business, Queen’s University at Kingston, Canada. Jim received his Ph.D. in Business Administration from the University of Minnesota. He has been working in the IT field for many years as a practitioner, researcher, and consultant and is a frequent speaker at business and academic conferences. Dr. McKeen co-facilitates the networking of senior executives in the IT sector through two well-known industry forums: the IT Management Forum and the CIO Brief. He also has extensive international experience, having taught at universities in the U.K., France, Germany, and the U.S. His research has been widely published in various journals including the *MIS Quarterly*, *Knowledge Management Research and Practice*, the *Journal of Information Technology Management*, the *Communications of the Association of Information Systems*, *MIS Quarterly Executive*, the *Journal of Systems and Software*, the *International Journal of Management Reviews*, *Information and Management*, *Communications of the ACM*, *Computers and Education*, *OMEGA*, *Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences*, *Journal of MIS*, *KM Review*, *Journal of Information Science and Technology* and *Database*. Jim is a co-author of three books on IT management with Heather Smith, the most recent being *IT Strategy in Action* (Pearson Prentice Hall, 2008). He currently serves on a number of editorial boards.

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