



The Importance of Communication Skills at Different Career Levels

Insights from the Profession

By Douglas M. Boyle, Daniel P. Mahoney, Brian W. Carpenter, and Ronald J. Grambo

A 1989 white paper, “Perspectives on Education: Capabilities for Success in the Accounting Profession,” issued by the then-Big Eight public accounting firms, identified communication and interpersonal skills as two of the three general skill sets essential to a successful public accounting career. Although the profession’s need for communication skills has increased in the years since its issuance, studies have found that

many accounting graduates still lack these competencies. Accordingly, young CPAs might need to focus on these skills and formulate a developmental plan to ensure that their communication skills meet expectations for advancement.

This article’s study collects and analyzes the perceived need for particular communication skill sets in order to advance to each of three common public accounting ranks: senior, manager, and

partner. Results indicate that communication skills are viewed as critically important for advancement to all ranks, but that certain skills are emphasized for promotion to specific ranks. These findings should help interested professionals enhance the communication skills that are emphasized for the rank they currently hold, as well as for the rank to which they aspire. A developmental plan based on these targeted skills can enhance one's career prospects and the likelihood of advancement.

Important Findings from Prior Studies

As previously noted, the 1989 white paper called for an increased focus on the communication skills of practicing accountants. With a goal of cultivating these vital skills in accounting students, it challenged academia to make fundamental changes to curricula and teaching methods. In the 25 years since the white paper's publication, the accounting profession has continued to stress the importance of such "soft skills," and academic research has likewise continued its efforts to identify their significance. It would seem that, despite curricular changes many institutions have made in response to the profession's call for improved communication skills, there is a perception that deficiencies continue to exist. All of this raises the question as to the specific kinds of communication skills that are essential and the manner in which current deficiencies can be addressed.

In "Are Technical Skills Still Important?," Cindy Blanthorne, Sak Bhamornsiri, and Robert E. Guinn noted that their survey of recently promoted Big Five partners identified communication and interpersonal skills as two of the top three most important skill sets necessary for promotion of public accountants through the ranks of senior, manager, and partner, with interpersonal skills being ranked first for promotion from manager to partner (*The CPA Journal*, March 2005).

In "Failure to Communicate: Why Accounting Students Don't Measure Up to Professionals' Expectations," Ping Lin, Debra Grace, Sudha Krishnan, and Jeannette Gilsdorf noted that, despite years of curricular change that required "students to take courses in speaking and writing," many recruiters found that students continued to

lack the communication skills expected by the accounting profession (*The CPA Journal*, January 2010). Simply requiring general speaking and writing coursework without understanding which specific skills are important is problematic. The study, which surveyed upper-level accounting majors, can also provide insight as to why this gap in communication skills still exists. Results revealed that accounting students often undervalue the importance that communication and interpersonal skills play in the success of a practicing accountant. Furthermore, the highest-ranked reasons participating students indicated for choosing accounting as their major included "I do my best work alone," which suggests a mindset that may be incongruent with the communication and teamwork characteristics sought by the profession.

Elsie Ameen, Sharon M. Bruns, and Cynthia Jackson identified similar findings in "Communication Skills and Accounting: Do Perceptions Match Reality?" (*The CPA Journal*, July 2010). Another indication of a communication gap is a more recent study, "The Communication Methods of

Today's Students: Is the Phone Conversation Dead?," in which Clement C. Chen, Keith T. Jones, and Shawn Xu found that current accounting students "strongly favor the more indirect method of e-mailing over the more direct method of making a phone call" (*The CPA Journal*, November 2012). E-mail was cited as the most frequent method utilized by students when engaging fellow classmates for learning purposes (54%), and texting was the preferred method (35%) for socialization. In view of the importance of relationship-building within the profession, as well as the fact that the complexity of many professional issues requires face-to-face interaction, these student-preferred communication methods are likely to be deemed neither effective nor appropriate when the students later enter the workforce.

Even more recently, the AICPA, in partnership with the state CPA societies, collected and analyzed the insights of approximately 5,600 CPAs to identify current and future trends that will impact the profession over the next 15 years. Its findings,

EXHIBIT 1

Participants' Individual and Firm Demographics

Demographic	Responses
Gender	Male: 63% Female: 37%
Years of professional experience	Less than 5 years: 18% 5 to 10 years: 18% More than 10 years: 64%
Area of public accounting	Auditing: 55% Tax: 18% Consulting: 19% Other: 8%
Firm size	Local/regional: 60% National: 40%
Certifications	CPA: 75% Other (e.g., CIMA, CFA, CIA, CFE): 6%
Highest degree	Undergraduate degree: 61% Master's degree: 38% Doctoral degree: 1%

issued in *CPA Horizons 2025*, identified communication skills as being one of five core competencies—communication and leadership skills, critical thinking and problem solving, anticipating and serving evolving needs, synthesizing intelligence to insight, and integration and collaboration—needed to fulfill the expectations of the profession. (In what might be regarded as self-evident, the report defined the rather broad term “communication skills” as including interpersonal skills.) Reviewing this report with upper-level accounting students and new entrants into public accounting might prove to be most beneficial in acclimating them to the future direction of the profession.

The array of empirical findings thus points toward a pervasive misperception

about the requisite set of skills needed for success as an accounting professional. Students who are uncomfortable with oral communication might be selecting an accounting major based on such misguided perceptions. A clearer identification of essential skills seems warranted, for the benefit of both current public accountants seeking advancement and for students who need to be better informed of the expectations that await them.

Which Specific Communication Skills Are Most Important?

This article’s authors set out to identify the specific communication skills that are deemed most important for success at each major level (staff, manager, partner) in public accounting. This study was supported by

a grant from the PricewaterhouseCoopers INQUIRES Program and included a survey of 119 public accounting professionals. As *Exhibit 1* shows, the survey participants represent a broad demographic—63% male, well educated, mostly CPAs (75%), with high levels of experience (64% with more than 10 years, 82% with more than 5 years). In addition, they represent a broad cross-section of all areas of public accounting and firms of various sizes.

The survey first asked participants to indicate their “perception of how important the competencies from *CPA Horizons 2025* are to the success of a professional pursuing a career in public accounting.” A 7-point Likert Scale was used (with 1 representing “not at all important” and 7 representing “critically important”). The results (shown in *Exhibit 2*) indicate that all of the competencies were ranked as highly important, with communication skills ranked first (mean score, 6.48). These findings not only confirm the importance of communication skills to the public accounting profession—they indicate that this soft skill ranks at the top of the critical skills set identified by the profession. This leads to the question of which specific types and categories of communication are most important to an accountant at each career level—that is, it seems intuitive that certain very specific skills might be most useful for addressing one’s responsibilities and therefore prove most useful for career advancement.

In order to gain insights into this area, the authors again utilized a 7-point Likert Scale and asked participants to indicate the relative importance of 24 specific types of communication skills. These communication skills were then grouped into three broad categories: interpersonal, leadership, and organizational. The skills and categories used in the study were obtained from “Identification and Instruction of Important Business Communication Skills for Graduate Business Education” (David Conrad and Robert Newberry, *Journal of Education for Business*, March 2012, pp. 112–120).

As shown in *Exhibit 3*, the category of interpersonal communication skills has the highest mean at all career levels (means: 6.11, 6.47, and 6.64 for staff, manager, and partner, respectively). Given this finding, it would seem prudent for public accounting professionals to focus on these skill

EXHIBIT 2

Importance of Core Competencies

Respondents were asked to indicate their perception of how important the competencies are to success in public accounting.	Mean
Communications Skills Effectively exchange reliable and meaningful information, using appropriate context and interpersonal skills	6.48
Critical Thinking and Problem Solving Skills Evaluating facts, challenging assumptions, and applying judgment to develop relevant solutions	6.45
Synthesizing Intelligence to Insight Connecting data, performing analysis, and using business acumen to provide astute guidance for better business decision making	6.20
Integration and Collaboration Building strategic alliances and working collaboratively to provide multidisciplinary solutions to complex problems	6.03
Anticipating and Serving Evolving Needs Identifying strategic directions and opportunities to meet the evolving needs of those we serve	5.90
Leadership Skills Influencing, inspiring, and motivating others to change and achieve excellence	5.83

Notes:

- A 7-Point Likert Scale was used, with 1 representing “not at all important” and 7 representing “critically important.”
- Core competencies were obtained from the AICPA’s report, *CPA Horizons 2025*.

types throughout their careers. In addition, although these skills are important at every level, they become increasingly critical as one advances; accordingly, one would be well advised to focus on the continuous improvement of these skills.

Staff level. Exhibit 3 also shows the specific types of communication skills, ranked by importance for each level (bold text indicates the top 10 for each level). For example, the top types for a staff-level public accountant include demonstrating respect (6.43), active listening (6.43), building trust (6.34), building relationships (6.17), using information technology (6.15), building rapport (5.88), demonstrating self-control (5.86), building team bonds (5.77), relating to people of diverse backgrounds (5.69), writing business correspondence (5.39), and initiating open discussion (5.20). Most of these skills are fundamental and require an accountant to be more of an open receiver, gatherer, and processor of information than a disseminator of information. Although certain leadership and organizational types of skills are important overall, they rank as less important at this stage—for example, negotiating (3.83), providing performance feedback (4.26), being a change catalyst (4.31), making convincing presentations (4.44), and teaching important skills (4.56).

Manager level. As one advances from the staff to manager level, the mean for each of the 24 skill types increases, except for using technology (decreases to 5.88). Many of the top 10 noted at the staff level remain the same, with using technology, building rapport (6.37), and relating to people of diverse backgrounds (6.27) remaining important but no longer ranked in the top 10. Skills in the categories of leadership and organizational categories become more predominant. At this level, teaching important skills (6.61), providing performance feedback (6.53), providing motivation (6.46), creating group synergy (6.43), expressing encouragement (6.40), and resolving conflict (6.40) all move into the top 10 areas of importance. These skills might reflect a manager's expanding leadership and organizational role in managing engagements and staff. These results suggest that it is important for a staff level accountant to maintain and advance the types of skills found to be important at that level, while also developing the additional skills that are important at the manager level.

Partner level. As one progresses from the manager to partner level, most of the means for the 24 skill types again show an increase, with the exception of using information technology (5.60), building team bonds (6.35), creating group synergy (6.42), and teaching important skills (6.42). Though the importance ratings for all of these skills remain high, the change may

reflect the need for partners to focus less on the specific details of engagement and staff and more on the development of the advanced leadership and organizational skills expected of a firm leader. The skills in the top 10 that did not appear at the management level include making convincing presentations (6.67), negotiating (6.64), building rapport (6.58), and being persua-



Tuesday, September 23, 2014
 FAE Learning Center
 New York City
(also available via Live Webcast)

Health Care Conference

Navigating Health Reform—State Initiatives, Managed Care, and IT Concerns for Accounting Professionals

Keynote Speaker



William E. Allison, CPA,
 Vice President, Fiscal Policy,
 Healthcare Association of
 New York State

Checkup for health care accounting and auditing

- Health reform initiatives—practical implications
- How is the transition to managed care affecting your operations?
- Auditing and accounting updates, including leases, A-133 audits, and COSO revisions
- Legal issues—litigation, reimbursement, and more

FAE VP

Visit nysscpa.org/healthcare14 or call 800-537-3635 to register!

EXHIBIT 3

Ranking of Communication Categories and Skills: Importance for All Career Levels in Public Accounting

Communication Skills	Staff		Manager		Partner	
	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank
Demonstrating respect	6.43	1	6.49	5	6.70	2
Active listening	6.43	1	6.58	3	6.67	4
Building trust	6.34	2	6.59	2	6.69	3
Building relationships	6.17	3	6.58	3	6.79	1
Building rapport	5.88	5	6.37	11	6.58	6
Demonstrating emotional self-control	5.86	6	6.43	7	6.58	6
Relating to people of diverse backgrounds	5.69	8	6.27	12	6.47	11
Interpersonal Communication Skills	6.11		6.47		6.64	
Building team bonds	5.77	7	6.41	8	6.35	15
Creating group synergy	5.16	11	6.43	7	6.42	13
Building optimism	5.09	12	6.22	14	6.47	11
Expressing encouragement	4.96	13	6.40	9	6.43	12
Arousing enthusiasm	4.94	14	6.23	13	6.36	14
Being persuasive	4.70	17	5.99	16	6.53	8
Providing motivation	4.60	18	6.46	6	6.49	10
Being a change catalyst	4.31	21	5.94	17	6.36	14
Leadership Communication Skills	4.94		6.26		6.43	
Using information technology	6.15	4	5.88	18	5.60	17
Writing business correspondence	5.39	9	6.38	10	6.51	9
Initiating open discussion	5.20	10	6.38	10	6.56	7
Resolving conflict	4.82	15	6.40	9	6.53	8
Creating information networks	4.79	16	5.84	20	6.27	16
Teaching important skills	4.56	19	6.61	1	6.42	13
Making convincing presentations	4.44	20	6.18	15	6.67	4
Proving performance feedback	4.26	22	6.53	4	6.56	7
Negotiating	3.83	23	5.87	19	6.64	5
Organizational Communication Skills	4.83		6.23		6.42	

Notes:

- A 7-Point Likert Scale was used, with 1 representing "not at all important" and 7 representing "critically important."
- The skills and types (interpersonal, leadership, and organizational) were obtained from David Conrad and Robert Newberry, "Identification and Instruction of Important Business Communication Skills for Graduate Business Education," *Journal of Education for Business*, March 2012, pp. 112-120.
- Bolded means represent a skill that was ranked in the top 10 for the related level (staff, manager, partner).

sive (6.53). It is also important to note that, at the partner level, every one of the 24 types of skills (with the exception of using information technology) has a mean in excess of 6.00. This finding demonstrates a critical need for public accounting professionals to develop advanced communication skills in all areas if they aspire to reach the highest levels of the profession.

Analysis. In addition to analyzing the means of the 24 types of skills and three communication categories (interpersonal, leadership, and organizational) at the various levels of one's career in public accounting, the authors performed a regression analysis to identify whether any of the individual or firm demographics (gender, years of professional experience, areas of public accounting, and firm size) noted in *Exhibit 1* were significant variables in explaining a portion of the deviation in the overall means for the three communication categories for each level. The results of the regression model found only one statistically significant demographic variable: professional experience was correlated with the perceived importance of interpersonal and leadership skills for partners. Participants with more professional experience (more than 15 years) believed that these skills were of more importance to partners than participants with less professional experience (fewer than 15 years). Specifically, the more experienced participants' responses had a mean of 6.77 for perceived importance of interpersonal skills for partners, whereas the less experienced participants had a mean response of 6.46. Similarly, the more experienced participants' responses had a mean of 6.65 for perceived importance of leadership skills for partners, whereas the less experienced participants had a mean response of 6.14. This finding suggests that, although both groups view these skills as important to fulfilling the responsibilities associated with the partner level, the perceived importance of these skills increases as one becomes more experienced. This result seemingly underscores the importance of interpersonal and leadership skills for partners, and it likely meshes with common expectations of the requirements and responsibilities associated with being a partner.

Implications for Public Accounting Professionals, Firms, and Educators

There are several implications for individuals pursuing a career in public accounting and the firms where they work. First, it is critically important to understand that the continuous development of soft skills, such as communication and interpersonal skills, is essential to a smooth career progression. Individuals and firms both have an obligation to engage in training and career planning activities to achieve success.

Second, new entrants into the profession might not appreciate the importance of such skills and might come from an environment where e-mail and texting are the

**Firms should also invest
in programs to develop
softer skills in those
having the potential to
become partners.**

preferred modes of communication, both professionally and socially. Such individuals should be aware that these modes of communication might be deemed inappropriate or inadequate for a staff-level accountant. Firms and supervising staff-level accountants need to be cognizant of these communication preferences and inform and develop their staff accordingly.

Third, interpersonal skills are important at all levels of public accounting. One must be sure to identify any deficiencies in this category and create a plan of personal development. It might help to talk with an immediate supervisor about perceived deficiencies and the kinds of exercises or work assignments that could help foster such skills. It would be beneficial for firms to have development programs that target and support such activity.

Fourth, all of the types of skills increase in importance as one advances through career levels; however, certain specific types of skills emerge as being more important at each succeeding level. One

must make the effort to understand these changing skill requirements and engage in professional and developmental activities that help to meet the communication needs of the next level to which one aspires. Firms may use these insights as part of a targeted development program.

Lastly, virtually all types of communication skills are highly important at the partner level; thus, along with acquiring the many and varied technical skills that are essential to promotion to partner, public accounting professionals who hold such aspirations must make it a point to identify, develop, and continuously improve their communication skills. Along with technical training, firms should also invest in programs to develop these softer skills in those they identify as having the potential to become partners.

In addition, this study reveals useful implications for accounting educators to consider. They should understand the critical importance that communication skills play within the accounting profession and recognize that accounting students might have significant misperceptions about this matter. Studies indicate that many students may select accounting as a major due to a misperception that communication skills are not critical to success in the accounting profession. Educators should provide information to students at the earliest opportunity—the freshman level, if possible—to dispel this potential misperception. Such action could serve as a means to attract students who have a preference and comfort level for engaging in the types of communication expected by the profession. Educators should also challenge curricula that simply require basic writing and speaking components and should focus on incorporating elements of the specific types of communication skills valued by the profession. □

Douglas M. Boyle, DBA, CPA, CMA, is an assistant professor and director of the accounting department, Daniel P. Mahoney, PhD, CPA, CFE, is a professor of accounting, Brian W. Carpenter, PhD, MBA, is a professor of accounting, and Ronald J. Grambo, PhD, CPA (Pa., inactive), is an associate professor of accounting, all at the University of Scranton, Scranton, Pa.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.