



Effective Communication as an Entry-Level Skill in the Workplace

Arlene Peltola

Department of Communications, Molloy College, Rockville Centre, NY 11570

Email: apeltola1@molloy.edu

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Abstract

This study examines workplace readiness of business and communications graduates by identifying essential skills sought by employers for entry-level work. Data derived from Public Relations Society of America Jobcenter and Indeed™ ($n=1639$) identify five skill sets essential for new hires entering the workplace. Structured interviews with industry leaders ($n=20$) further elaborate on industry-specific competencies that practitioners perceive to be lacking in new graduates. Together, data suggest that more can be done by educators to bridge the gaps between what is taught in the classroom and what is required on the job. The author emphasizes the imperative of demonstrative student competencies in the area of communication; positing that partnerships with business and curricular co-creation can be an effective, integrative strategy to advance workplace skills at the entry-level.

Keywords: written communication, oral communication, skill gaps, business partnerships, internship programs, workplace readiness, soft skills, work-integrated learning, employment outlook, COVID-19

1 Introduction

In a recent (2020) study, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that the unemployment rate for twenty to twenty-four-year-olds, the age when many graduate from university and enter the workforce, is over twice (6.4%) that of the twenty-five and over age group (2.9%). This statistic suggests, at least in part, that more can be done to better prepare undergraduates for the workplace.

This five-year, three-part qualitative study explores gaps in workplace preparation as identified by practitioners in the fields of business and communications. Data derived from both PRSA's job bank (Public Relations Society of America, 2020) and an employment-related search engine for job listings, Indeed (<https://www.indeed.com>), suggest that new graduates often lack requisite communicative skills for entry-level work. Personal interviews with industry leaders ($n= 20$) further attest to such insufficiency. Across the professional spectrum, five skills surface as most sought after by employers at the entry level: communication, interpersonal, critical thinking, time management, and digital literacy. Although this study focuses exclusively on employers, the findings are highly relevant for educators and their students; hence, implications for partnerships between academic and professional practitioners are discussed.

In an outlook published by the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2020) prior to the COVID-19 global pandemic, hiring in the United States for 2020 graduates was expected to increase nearly six percent (5.8%). The immediate (May 2020) economic impact of the public health crisis, however, has economists projecting potentially catastrophic drops in employment, with debilitating effects in hiring markets akin to those of the Great Recession in 2008. An anticipated loss of five million or more jobs, and consequent swelling of unemployment (a rate of 3.5% pre-COVID-19 to 10.6%), has workplace analysts projecting a grim future for new graduates (Cohan, 2020; Adedayo, 2020).

While declining hiring projections and swelling unemployment percentages for 2020 alumni might be attributed to a multitude of factors beyond COVID-19 (absence of traditional job fairs, hiring freezes, economic downturns, etc.), recruiting statistics historically attest to a proven advantage: that new graduates with internship experience fare better than those without. Last year, the current average full-time offer rate to graduates who had completed internships was 57.5%, as compared to 53.2% for graduates without such experience (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2019). Providing students with real-world experience and practice-based learning has gained traction in business curricula across the globe; and while there is an emerging body of literature that examines work-integrated learning (WIL) for students,

much focused effort remains. Furthermore, authentic work experiences like internships, co-ops, and WIL contribute to positive hiring outcomes and employability. What practitioners feel to be important, what industry trends demand, and what is achieved in the classroom must better align to optimally support the college graduate.

2 Literature review

In their survey analysis of new hires in business, MacDermott and Ortiz observe that “organizations with limited training budgets continue to seek workers who can ‘hit the ground running.’ Historical wisdom in job readiness research suggests that this need for the ‘ready’ employee has always existed, and despite many efforts to shrink the skills gap, it persists” (MacDermott & Ortiz, 2017, p. 19).

Skill gaps are predictable exigencies of entry-level employment. What one takes away as transportable knowledge from college or graduate school likely reflects that which is emphasized in the curriculum at the university. Syllabi, exams, rubrics, and assignments typically originate with the educator and/or educating bodies, with little or no input from practitioners. Honea et al. (2017) examined marketing competencies from the point of view of practitioners and identified specific “evidence items” as signals of employability and workplace readiness. Oral and written communication, critical thinking, interpersonal skills, and project management ranked as most important on a broad scale of workplace readiness; while competencies in communication involving real-world projects and internships ranked as essential. Assessments made in personal interviews and MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) were identified as most demonstrative for written communication, and the job interview and dialogic assessment made the top of the list for competencies in oral communication. Skill gaps and other disparities in aptitude are prompting governments to insist that higher education better align curricular offerings with employability measures, as employers continue to seek out graduates with workplace or community engagement prior to hiring. Colleges and universities responding to these calls are turning to work-integrated learning (WIL) as an approach for effectively developing and empowering work-ready graduates (McRae, 2019).

Making connections between college curricula and learning outcomes for marketable, essential entry-level competencies is a compelling exercise. Allen (2009) found that developing and working with a collaborative rubric agreed to by professors and practitioners had benefits: for “faculty it is the promise of a sound pedagogy. Professionals benefit by having available a pipe line of career-ready graduates. The advantage for the student is clear, fair feedback linked to the expectations of practitioners in the student’s future profession.” As employers search for demonstrative examples of workplace readiness (See Appendix A), students are distinguishing themselves in the marketplace by building electronic portfolios to highlight their accomplishments both in and out of the classroom - collecting, organizing, and showcasing key workplace skills to set before a prospective employer. The ePortfolio enables students to illustrate acquisition of employability capabilities. Ferns & Comfort (2014) assert that there is potential for employers to benefit from student ePortfolios as they provide direct evidence to ascertain the suitability of the student’s skill set for prospective recruitment. Importantly, the authors conclude that ePortfolios provide a delivery “for students to clearly demonstrate that they not only ‘know’ discipline content but that they can ‘do’ by applying the knowledge in a professional context.” With many institutions of higher learning expanding their internships, practicums and WIL offerings, e-portfolios serve to both chronicle these experiences and clearly detail proficiencies.

“For generations,” said E. B. Hinckley, president of the Babson Institute of Business Administration, “teachers have been trying to prepare young people for business success,” (Bernays, 1952, p. 335) and for generations, businessmen have been unhappy about the preparation given. To address this predicament, conferences of businessmen and educators were convened in the early 1950s in an effort to narrow the gap between boardroom and classroom, with American companies and colleges since making meaningful connections between didactic and experiential learning by honing college curricula to keep pace with rapidly evolving markets and practices (Wolfbein, 1959; Shaw, 1973; Suutari & Smale, 2008; González, 2012). Bridging the gap between what is taught in the classroom and what is practiced in the profession has, traditionally, been most readily achieved through the internship experience. Early educators responded to the caprice of business with new courses of study involving practical education and in just a generation, assumptions about the time and location of learning were turned on end (Boyer, 1987). Experientially-based curricular innovations provided students with a way to apply classroom concepts to the workplace as the word “intern” found its way into syllabi across the nation. In the field of public relations, for example, internships are the most widely recognized and frequently practiced form of experiential learning. Today, nearly 90% of undergraduate programs in public relations include a field study component (Public Relations Society of America, 2017a). However, field study sorely lacks standardization, and the nature of the experience is largely determined by the employer (Beard & Morton, 1999; Gault, Leach & Duey, 2010). Some PR internships are paid and some are not (Casanova & Bates, 2017), and this has sparked new debate about its cost and cogency. Supervised work experience, typically approved for academic credit and designed to accomplish specific learning goals, is often (and oddly enough) not integrated at the curricular level.

According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2016), most students secure an internship from a source distinctly *outside* the classroom - linking up with practitioners at career fairs, online, or through a mentor. Some universities recognize the lack of integration between internship experiences and the classroom and thus have sought educational models to foster this integration (Katula & Threnhauser, 2009). Work-integrated learning (WIL) programs maximize the educational value of both classroom and workplace by fostering conditions for transformative learning (McRae, 2019) and graduate employability (Jackson, 2015). In the case of public relations, because WIL is a more formalized program of work/study, its programs can promote consistency within the field and cultivate clearer discourse between practitioner and educator. This is vitally important in the context of an exceedingly dynamic, multinational public relations practice. While the value of internships is largely measured qualitatively by universities (Mchugh, 2017; Silva et al., 2016; Green, Graybeal & Madison, 2011; Rothman & Sisman, 2016), employers in the business fields articulate important mismatches between competencies acquired by graduates and those required in the profession in quantitative fashion (Martin & Alleyne, 2017; Smith, 2017; Hernandez-March, Martin & Leguey, 2009; Peltola, 2018).

The quality of traditional internships represents a growing area of concern (Jackson, 2015; Maertz et al., 2014; Perlin, 2012) because subjective assessments prove difficult. Lack of documentation, program review protocols, and support structures all conspire to make it difficult for university providers to qualitatively measure the internship experience for their students. Bayerlein (2018) argues for the potential of computer-mediated internships (CMIs) in higher education, positing that the new, technologically driven, and potentially resource-minimizing, internship opportunities provide added ease for evaluative assessment on the part of

educators. Successful electronic delivery of such programs, he points out, requires a much more clearly articulated structure, focus, and documentation than traditional internship programs. Educators are able to utilize this structure for their own pre-placement program quality evaluations, as well as for the assessment of student learning outcomes against agreed upon learning goals (Bayerlein, 2018). Additionally, while traditional internships are predominantly defined by the extensive location-bound face-to-face interactions that occur between interns and their employer organization, CMIs enable a variety of flexible workplace arrangements because the intern and the employer organization may be located in different countries and time zones. It seems entirely feasible that university faculty and industry leaders can together structure computer-mediated internships with rubrics familiar to industry and learning expectations familiar to students. This collaboration has the capacity to both enhance student learning and satisfy employers' call to shore up gaps in skill.

The research of Ritter et al. (2018) uncovered the need for certain soft skills in complex work environments: communication, teamwork, problem solving, and leadership. Teamwork, they argue, is more salient than ever; and they present a results-oriented "backward design process" for curriculum which focuses on developing in students the soft skills that employers need, particularly proportionate to teamwork-related skill sets. "Backward design begins with desired results, generally in the form of learning outcomes. Hence, our faculty first considered goals, content expectations, and preexisting expectations, keeping in mind that the ultimate goal is for learning to transfer skills to other settings" (Ritter et al., 2018). With the objective of improving team workflow and outcomes, the university revised three courses in the management major to emphasize this soft skill, building assessments and instruments for measuring data before and after the changes. Standardized test scores, student exit surveys, and internship provider surveys were used to evaluate the efficacy of curricular revisions. The results suggest, albeit on a small scale, that management curricula can be changed to successfully develop in students an ability to work productively in teams to meet the needs and demands of employers (Ritter, 2018).

In a similar vein, Tanner and Balzotti (2019) formulated a reciprocal comparison of writing skills and assessments to identify where pedagogical improvements might be made by learning institutions and where practitioners in the workplace might take cues from educators to improve upon writing prompts and training in the field. The authors suggest that assessments drawn from professional practice may help standardize professional writing curriculum. Based on this study's findings, future assessments in the workplace might include clear instructional writing prompts (as commonly found in rubrics) shared in advance with students and vice versa.

On-the-spot writing samples are now commonly part of the interview process. It is logical to assert that in both writing for a job and writing for a grade, certain high-stakes are at play in which all would most certainly benefit from a shared rubric for assessment. This rubric might include measures relating to originality, targeting, accuracy, authenticity, word choice, formatting and other technical aspects of written communication, and creativity (Tanner & Balzotti, 2019). Once a general standard is achieved by students, a second phase can incorporate an industry-specific rubric. Students, exposed to specific industry standards, progress to the next level of skill, apprehending throughout the process institutional standards that guide them beyond fundamental writing skills.

While effective communication modeled by employers anecdotally establishes a template for all employees, particularly new hires, to understand and work within the culture of the organization, efforts on the

part of employers to understand their employees are prominent in today's workplace. According to a 2020 Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) study on talent trends, more employers will seek to understand both their candidates and employees on a deeper level than in previous years. Over 7,000 recruiters and hiring managers across 35 countries identified this trend, broadly referred to as "empathy," as being the most impactful in contemporary practice. Amy Rossi, Vice President of Employee Experience at the cybersecurity firm, Expel, goes so far as to say that the concept of human resources is dated, arguing that it fails to properly capture the journey of employment. Rossi employs a framework to help guide growth in scaling the employee experience utilizing the mantra, "communicate what's important" (Maurer, 2020). In her work on positive psychology, Sarah Lewis states that "communication is often misunderstood as being a technical exercise. The challenge is to find the precise form of words that will create the same sense or image in the receiver's head as in the transmitter's head" (Lewis, 2011, p. 73). What one communicates, however, in either written or verbal form, is not always interpreted as intended. This is especially true in the context of the organization. Communicating as a technical exercise in reasoning and semantics, Lewis asserts, rarely results in unqualified communication success even for very short and simple messages (Lewis, 2011). It is important to note that communication in organizations is a social ecosystem with shared meanings, beliefs, values, emotions, affinities, and missions. It is, in fact, a distinct social practice.

3 Method

This study involves three rounds of annual qualitative analyses (2016, 2017 and 2020) and two methodological approaches, content analysis and structured interviews. Sources of information include two online job banks and ten field practitioners per interview year.

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) Jobcenter (<https://jobs.prsa.org/>) is a targeted source of communications jobs connecting users to a niche market of over 80,000 professionals, including 22k professional members (PRSA) and 12k students (Public Relations Student Society of America, PRSSA). It is the go-to resource for both employers and employees in the field of communication. Indeed (<https://www.indeed.com/>) with over 250 million unique visitors each month is a second job bank source utilized in the research. Ten practitioners in the field of public relations were selected in each year: 2016 and 2020 from across the United States for interviewing, and transcription coding was completed by the author.

3.1 Content Analysis

In 2016 (January), 2017 (May), and again in 2020 (January), entry-level job postings were randomly selected from the databases of both the Public Relations Society of America's (PRSA) Jobcenter (<https://jobs.prsa.org/>) and Indeed (<https://www.indeed.com/>). Postings were deconstructed according to skill requirements. The following descriptive headers, derivative of the postings, were considered in the sampling:

- skill requirements
- key requirements
- requirements
- skills and qualifications
- requirements and qualifications
- position qualifications

- preferred skills and qualifications
- job responsibilities
- knowledge, skills and abilities
- specific skills
- desired skills and experience
- skills and talents

One hundred entry-level job descriptions were analyzed (2020) and 955 correspondent descriptive keywords harvested. Searches were filtered according to entry-level, function, industry, organizational setting, and full-time. Fielded data included all fifty states. Each skill requirement was recorded in MS Excel and arranged in a chronologically descending order. When patterns began to emerge, skills and attributes were coded according to five descriptor groups: communication, digital literacy, critical thinking, interpersonal, and time management. To keep pace with technological advances in the field, the early descriptor, “social media” (2016), was broadened and redefined to be “digital literacy” in the 2020 study. Competencies and characteristics specific to each classification or group were recorded and measured by year. These skill groups constitute the cornerstone of entry-level work.

3.2 Structured Interviews

Practitioner interviews ($n=20$) were conducted from March 2015 to January 2016, and again in March 2020. The panel of practitioners was not fixed over time; rather, the criteria for participation was modified in 2020 from earlier sets to allow a more vernal perspective on the entry-level workplace [1] *over ten years* to *two to ten years*]. Each year, ten participants from across the United States were selected according to the following criteria:

- 1) Respondents must have between two and ten years in business practice.
- 2) Respondents must have direct experience with entry-level employees, supervisory or other.
- 3) Respondents’ agency or organization need not currently participate in an internship or cooperative program.

The interview guide was developed iteratively; questions were developed, tested, and refined based on literature surveys and previous dialogue with practitioners. Interviews were conducted via telephone and averaged thirty minutes in length. A total of ten practitioners (2020), ranging in function from executive to manager, and in geography from New York to Los Angeles, were asked the same series of questions in each round:

- Q1. Name and describe three skill sets that new college graduates bring to the workplace.
- Q2. Name and describe three skills sets that new college graduates lack when entering the workplace.
- Q3. What suggestions do you have for the college educator to best prepare students for entry-level positions in the field?

While Q1 and Q2 have a limited set of response with room for variation, Q3 is open-ended to provide for adequate understanding and relevant close-ended inquiry. Ordering and phrasing of the questions were kept

consistent and produced coherent data that could be compared across the field of response. Interviews were transcribed by the author and thematically coded by skill group and keyword attribution. A practical assessment of workplace readiness is thus evident.

4 Results

Communication, both written and oral, dominates as the number one skill sought by employers as articulated in descriptions of jobs. This viable pattern over the five-year survey is dynamic, considering that certain fundamental skills, such as ghostwriting, fall out of job descriptions while new skills emerge, like multilingual and storytelling. All such descriptors are captured under the Communication umbrella (Table 1). Advanced writing (including tone, voice, and standardization) and public speaking (including influence, presentation, face-to-face, and virtual) show a marked increase, while skills such as proofreading and press releases decline. Skills classified under Communication represent a robust 28% of the top five skills in 2020, a steady increase from 26% in 2017 and 24% in 2016.

Table 1. Communication skill by type, by year

Communication: Written & Oral	2016	2017	2020
Advanced Writing	22	40	85
Content Development	1	23	11
Proofreading / Editing	17	20	12
Public Speaking	13	26	65
Press Releases	12	11	2
Communication Concepts & Strategy	0	0	14
Storytelling	0	0	6
Other	20	33	0

This table features descriptors under the Communication umbrella. Note emergent skills involving conceptual, strategic communication and storytelling.

4.1 Job Descriptions

It is interesting to note that interpersonal skills, while sliding out of first place in 2017, strongly repopulate in the descriptions of 2020. Unit descriptors such as, “resourceful,” “self-starter,” “forming relationships,” “team player,” “collaborative,” and “ethical” outrank formerly coveted skills like, “salesmanship.” Positive relationships at work are associated with high levels of energy, learning and cooperation, resource utilization, cost reductions and time saving (Cameron, 2008). One might argue that the top two skills, communication and interpersonal, are closely connected to positive outcomes specific to the context of work. High-quality communication and interpersonal relationships create connectivity in the workplace. Connectivity is the state of trust, of sharing information, of sense-making, of being adept at change. People see value both in their own and others’ contributions. Together, communicative and interpersonal skills represent 51% of the top five skills that 2020 employers are seeking (Figure 1).

Critical thinking, or the ability to objectively analyze a problem or issue, typically presents itself as a rubric in college courses and assignments. In the job market, this skill is often articulated as, “analysis,”

“reports,” and “attention to detail.” New to this umbrella skill in 2020 is “understanding communication concepts and strategy.” Similarly, time management - a necessary skill college students must practice and refine again and again over each term - has shown year-over-year growth in importance and continues to find expressive emphases with practitioners. Business deadlines can be much shorter than those in a college student’s planner, and descriptions are replete with words like “urgent” and “time sensitive.” Finally, the term cluster previously labelled as “social media” in 2016 gives way to a broader term of “digital literacy,” as employers are seeking a range of competencies involving technological skill. These manifest in the descriptions as, “software integration” and “Internet management” along with “social media,” and has taken a back seat to the skill of time management, ranking five of five in 2020. All skills classified by group are displayed by frequency of mention and year in Appendix B.

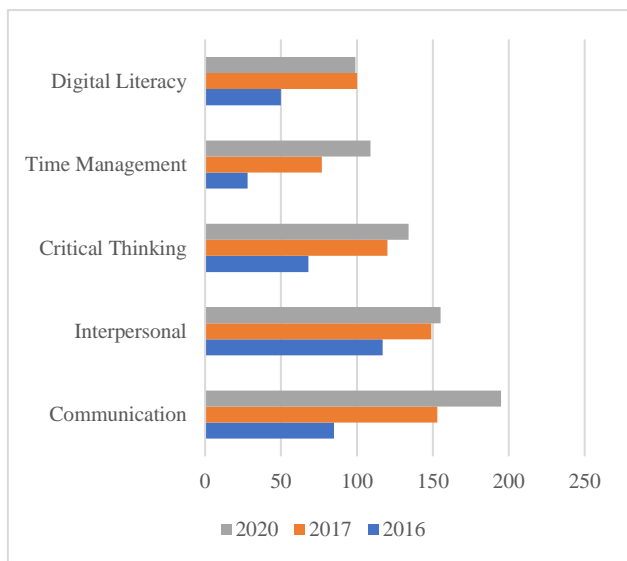


Fig. 1. Top five skills by year. Communication continues to surpass all other soft skills in 2020.

4.2 Practitioner Interviews

The utility of structured interviews in this study is predicated on the fact that forecasts from an arranged group of experts are more reliable than those from unstructured groups. This technique, also known as a standardized interview or researcher-administrated survey, is a research method often used to ensure that each question is posed in the same order and at the same pace (Levashina et al., 2014). Structured interviews are essentially quick to conduct and in accord with specific criteria, providing qualitative findings that are often insightful, but not projectable.

Data derived from interview transcriptions (Table 2) show respondents’ answers to Q1 and Q2. Attributes and deficiencies are coded according to skill group.

Practitioners place technological know-how as a skill new college graduates bring to the workplace. Along with digital literacy, new jobbers **Table 2.** Practitioner assessments of workplace readiness of newly minted college graduates.

This table features perceived attributes and deficiencies of new graduates, coded by skill group: C = Communication; D = Digital

Interview Group	Attributes	Skill Group	Deficiencies	Skill
Practitioner 1	Technological literacy	D	Oral presentation	C
	Interest in field	CT	Organizing thoughts	CT
	Project management	T	Problem solving	CT
Practitioner 2	Passion	I	E-mail communication	C
	Willingness to learn	I	Rapport with others	I
	Drive	I	Oral communication	C
Practitioner 3	Digital literacy	D	Problem solving	CT
	Fresh perspective	I	Excuse driven	I
	High energy	I	Storytelling	C
Practitioner 4	Listening	C	Formal communication	C
	Project management	T	Social communication	C
	Teamwork	I	Confidence	I
Practitioner 5	Digital literacy	D	Business communication	C
	Cultural awareness	I	Patience	I
	Virtual work	D	Long-form communication	C
Practitioner 6	Eagerness to help	I	Business culture	I
	Social media	D	Budget models	CT
	Creativity	I	Find a voice	C
Practitioner 7	Listening	C	Disorganized	T
	Tech skills	D	Lazy	I
	Simple writing	C	Adapting	I
Practitioner 8	Social Media	D	Teamwork	I
	Cultural awareness	I	Full-scope communication	C
	New ideas	I	Leadership	I
Practitioner 9	Creativity	I	Time management	T
	Tech savvy	D	Detail orientation	CT
	Dedication	I	Surface thinking	CT
Practitioner 10	Wide digital mindset	D	Presentation skills	C
	Openness to learn	I	Work ethic	I
	Tech savvy	D	Negotiation	CT

literacy; CT = Critical thinking; I = Interpersonal; T = Time management as reported by ten practitioners.

enter with an array of soft skills: passion, willingness to learn, drive, fresh perspective, eagerness to help, creativity, and cultural awareness. On the deficit side, new hires often lack communication skills and critical thinking, the two most important skills which employers seek.

Most state that they recruit for general competencies rather than subjective expertise specific to their industry. Many responded with degrees of emotion and elated satisfaction of just being asked the question.

Q3 solicited suggestions for university educators to better prepare their students. Practitioners were eager to share their thoughts on how students can better prepare for entry-level work. In general, they report that they want their job candidates to be excited and curious, ready to learn, and eager to contribute.

Table 3. Practitioners’ suggestions to educators for best preparing students for the workplace.

- (1) Emphasize presentation skills, Power point, telephone, face to face meetings.
- (2) Emphasize written communication: content, accuracy, voice.
- (3) Insert a large complex problem that captures their interest in the capstone course.
- (4) Add communication skills to every syllabus.
- (5) Work on professionalism, leadership, communication and confidence.
- (6) Open up communication courses to include cross-generational, crisis management and cultural communication, even how to write an email.

- (7) Higher education would do well to communicate with department heads of industries.
- (8) Work on authentic issues business is facing.
- (9) Caliber up the student's ability to learn, i.e., learn how to learn.
- (10) Increase experiential education and internships throughout the college experience.
- (11) Relate coursework to real-world situations.
- (12) Do more group projects.
- (13) Relate education to cutting edge trends in business.
- (14) Prepare students to be open to change.
- (15) Learn fundamental software by heart.
- (16) Educators should research the skills needed by industry.
- (17) Motivate students to do their very best work.
- (18) We're using the written word more than ever, we're all writing reams of content, and students need to be prepared to develop quality content.
- (19) Learn to have organized thinking behind their words.
- (20) To learn to be fluid in global greetings and content.
- (21) To respect formality in communicating.
- (22) To be able to write business documents with clearly articulated objectives, recommendations, proposals, and point of view.

These are excerpts from the transcribed interviews.

Effective communication is the prized skill employers seek as newly minted college graduates enter the workplace. According to these interviews, however, entry-level college graduates do not possess it to the degree expected and needed. Furthermore, most workplaces are not equipped with the resources necessary for remedial education. An early survey of MBA corporate recruiters revealed that good communication skills and the ability to work with others fell into a quadrant entitled, "high need for strengthening and high attractiveness" (Graduate Management Admissions Council, 2006). A decade later, a study with undergraduates (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2016) admitted similar findings. When asked to assess candidate skills and/or qualities, employers rated verbal communication skills the most important (4.63 on a 5.0 scale), just above teamwork (4.62). NACE defines communicative skill as the ability to "articulate thoughts and ideas clearly and effectively in written and oral forms to persons inside and outside of the organization" (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2020). This necessarily involves public speaking, the ability to express ideas to others, and write and edit memoranda, letters, and complex technical reports clearly and effectively. The quality of communication within an organization can affect the way people feel about their jobs, their coworkers, and the profession. "Giving praise, raising difficult issues and offering and responding to criticism are important communication concepts in the workplace" (Adler, 2019).

Conclusion

This paper presents top skills employers are seeking from newly minted college graduates in 2020, as compared over three data sets spanning five years. In so doing, the most sought-after requisite competencies, as expressed in job postings and by industry practitioners, are identified. This qualitative research allows for examining viable patterns over time, such as the consistency of the top skills featured in job descriptions (communication, interpersonal skills, critical thinking, time management and digital literacy), as well as emergent and incidental skills that come and go as professional environments, and the needs they seek to serve, change. Developmental trends or nascent clusters of skills can also be identified as the singular skills move in and out under its umbrella skill. One can further consider the differences in temporal order as a phenomenon; a highly marketable skill in 2016 to be supplanted by another in 2017 or completely demoted only four years later.

Both the job descriptions and practitioner interviews highlight important skills expected at the entry-level for college graduates. Although the effect of experiential learning on skill achievement is not considered in the primary research of this study, the skills honed by having had internships or work-integrated learning experiences can be seen as an advantage in the labor market, both in terms of job offers and starting salary (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2016). Insights from this study suggest a framework for educators in the fields of business and communications for future experiential activities and guided academic assignments; that is, from which professors can build in-class and out-of-class experiential programmatic goals to foster the key skills identified in this study. In order for students to prepare for the rigor and requirements necessarily for entry-level work, there must be greater synergy between programmatic learning outcomes in higher education and the practical competencies required by employers.

Effective communication and the path toward solution

This paper examines the competencies acquired in college by recent business and communications graduates and identifies effective communication as the most important skill for the workplace. However, based on the outcomes of this research and other secondary sources, effective communication is the one skill that college graduates lack.

One practitioner in an award-winning public relations agency uses a practice writing test at the interview in attempts to calibrate writing skills and instructional editing with new hires and interns in daily business. "We're using the written word more than ever, we're all writing reams of content." The ability to write effectively, cogently, and creatively is vital when the stakes are high. He uses clear instruction and encouragement to each employee to "do their best work." An agency cannot release a document with a factual, typographical or any other error without severe negative implication to its reputation. "Are the stakes high enough in college?" asks another practitioner. "Is a grade of C acceptable on a writing assignment? Is there an editing/redraft protocol so that the students can benchmark excellence on a familiar page of content? Is peer-editing incorporated in lecture?" The question as to whether internships better prepare students for written and oral presentation is still on the table. Can a computer-mediated internship co-created by higher education and industry shore up the readiness gaps? Computer-mediated and virtual internships and cooperatives may well work to produce these outcomes since there is much practical applications inside the intern experience.

Creating partnerships to help bridge competency gaps in communication is a path historically proven and recommended. The path to solution optimally includes all three constituents: the student, the employer, and the educator working in tandem to cross the finish line. Education providers and employers should actively step into one another's

cultures. Employers might help to design curricula and educators might embed professional, instructional rubrics into course requirements. Computer-mediated or virtual internships might serve as requisites for students prior to accepting a real-world internship, co-op or WIL opportunity. An online internship designed by both educators and industry holds great potential for technological advancement and geographically diverse experiences. The increasing trend to work virtually and the globalization of talent only edifies such an initiative. While the COVID-19 pandemic is a specific, extreme example of why employers benefit from these skills, computer-mediated or virtual internships are efficient from a curricular point of view. Finally, partnerships enable employers to benefit from university experience in developing and implementing effective learning programs, which is thus likely to strengthen the relationship between employers and higher education, increase one's reception to computer-mediated discourse, and maximize the success and societal standing of their own internship programs (Bayerlein, 2018).

The student experience

In order to achieve foundational, if not advanced, communication skills and carry these forward, students should be staunchly encouraged to grow and learn, to seek out challenges, and caliber up their performance while in college. Students must enter college motivated and ready to learn. Armed with the knowledge that employers reiterate every year the scarcity of qualified candidates with communications skills, undergraduates might laser focus upon that skill and check off that box.

The employer experience

In her article, "Why hiring managers' expectations for new college graduates may be unrealistic," career counselor Arlene S. Hirsh asserts that the relationship between performance and potential is similar to the relationship between skills and talent (Hirsh, 2019). Employers are consistently asking for effective communicators as an entry-level skill. Talent inside, they maintain, the industry can flow from there. Employers will often contract hire subject matter writing experts in order to "clean up" inadequacies in writing, but there exists a solid trend toward having learning and development professionals on staff. This team represents an organizational strategy that supports workforce capabilities, skills, and competencies that are required, and considers how these can be developed to ensure a sustainable, successful organization. Employers may want to specifically calibrate internships to include practical and instructional guidance in written and oral presentation.

The educator experience

This research posits a question to practitioners on what they would like to see educators do to better prepare their students for entry-level positions in the field. Practitioners agreed that an improved emphasis on communication skills, both verbal and written, is warranted. They welcomed entry-level proficiencies in writing e-mails, presenting using PowerPoint, effective phone and in-person conversation, small group communication, ability to lead meetings, incorporate storytelling, have organized thinking behind their words, be fluid in global greetings and content and adept at cross-generational communication, respectful of formalities in communicating, and to be able to write business documents

with clearly articulated objectives, recommendations, proposals and point of view. Educators will need to do more experiential work on and off campus using authentic business scenarios, as well as align learning outcomes with industry in conceptual and theoretical prescripts.

Limitations & implications

Although several important pedagogical implications can be made from this study, there are some limitations. Qualitative research, in general, is about finding patterns and themes to help foster understanding, but it is not projectable. Also, a potential for researcher bias exists in this study since coding was done by one coder only. Further investigation might involve critical curricular analyses, evaluating program curriculum guides and comparing them against the identified skill groups. This study might be replicated in other fields, partnered and segmented by industry, other requisite skill sets, or by country. Finally, what employers feel to be lacking in new college graduates may very well have nothing to do with curricula; namely, a failure to learn, transfer knowledge, or to teach. Other factors beyond the college experience may interfere with knowledge transference and skill attainment.

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Appendix A. NACE 2020 Definition of Workplace Readiness

Career readiness is the attainment and demonstration of requisite competencies that broadly prepare college graduates for a successful transition into the workplace.

These competencies are:

1) Critical Thinking/Problem Solving

Exercise sound reasoning to analyze issues, make decisions, and overcome problems. The individual is able to obtain, interpret, and use knowledge, facts, and data in this process, and may demonstrate originality and inventiveness.

2) Oral/Written Communications

Articulate thoughts and ideas clearly and effectively in written and oral forms to persons inside and outside of the organization. The individual has public speaking skills; is able to express ideas to others; and can write/edit memos, letters, and complex technical reports clearly and effectively.

3) Teamwork/Collaboration

Build collaborative relationships with colleagues and customers representing diverse cultures, races, ages, genders, religions, lifestyles, and viewpoints. The individual is able to work within a team structure, and can negotiate and manage conflict.

4) Digital Technology

Leverage existing digital technologies ethically and efficiently to solve problems, complete tasks, and accomplish goals. The individual demonstrates effective adaptability to new and emerging technologies.

5) Leadership

Leverage the strengths of others to achieve common goals, and use interpersonal skills to coach and develop others. The individual is able to assess and manage his/her emotions and those of others; use empathetic skills to guide and motivate; and organize, prioritize, and delegate work.

6) Professionalism/Work Ethic

Demonstrate personal accountability and effective work habits, e.g., punctuality, working productively with others, and time workload management, and understand the impact of non-verbal communication on professional work image. The individual demonstrates integrity and ethical behavior, acts responsibly with the interests of the larger community in mind, and is able to learn from his/her mistakes.

7) Career Management

Identify and articulate one's skills, strengths, knowledge, and experiences relevant to the position desired and career goals, and identify areas necessary for professional growth. The individual is able to navigate and explore job options, understands and can take the steps necessary to pursue opportunities, and understands how to self-advocate for opportunities in the workplace.

8) Global/Intercultural Fluency

Value, respect, and learn from diverse cultures, races, ages, genders, sexual orientations, and religions. The individual demonstrates, openness, inclusiveness, sensitivity, and the ability to interact respectfully with all people and understand individuals' differences.

Appendix B. Skill group by frequency and year

				<i>Interpersonal</i>			
YEAR	2016	2017	2020				
<i>Communication: Written & Oral</i>				Interpersonal Skills	22	13	14
Advanced Writing	22	40	85	Forming Relationships	18	26	12
Content Development	1	23	11	Growth Mindset / Passionate / Motivated	30	25	17
Proofreading / Editing	17	20	12	Resourceful / Self-Starter	3	26	31
Public Speaking	13	26	65	Workplace Ethics / Professionalism	1	7	23
Press Releases	12	11	2	Collaborative			58
Communication Concepts & Strategy			14	Other	43	52	
Storytelling			6	TOTALS	117	149	155
Other				<i>Time Management</i>			
TOTALS	85	153	195	Work under Pressure	10	15	11
<i>Digital Literacy</i>				Project Management	3	21	37
Social Media	15	23	29	Time Management	11	10	21
Digital Marketing	17	44	11	Event Management	1	16	6
Web Development	8	14	7	Organized		12	34
Graphic Design		10	11	Other	3	3	
Video Production	1	4	5	TOTALS	28	77	109
Software integration			36				
Other	9	5					
TOTALS	50	100	99				
<i>Critical Thinking</i>							
Critical Thinking	24	26	2				
Media Strategy Development	18	27	12				
Market Analysis	10	2	23				
Trend Identification	8	21	14				
Attention to Detail	1	11	42				
Analytic Reports / Measurement			27				
Communication Concepts & Strategy			14				
Other	7	33					
TOTALS	68	120	134				