

## **Perceptions of Business Students towards Skills and Attributes for Industry: How Important is Communication?**

David S. Waller  
School of Marketing, University of Technology, Sydney  
NSW Australia  
[david.waller@uts.edu.au](mailto:david.waller@uts.edu.au)

And

Anurag Hingorani  
School of Marketing, University of Technology, Sydney  
NSW, Australia  
[anurag.hingorani@uts.edu.au](mailto:anurag.hingorani@uts.edu.au)

### **Abstract**

As business academics try to ensure that students gain a solid understanding of the theory which is applicable to various business situations, while maintaining “academic standards”, there is criticism that Universities teach theory that is irrelevant to business practice, do not equip future employees with skills that are applicable to jobs in the marketplace, and ignore the various stakeholders. This study analyses the results of a survey of an important stakeholder, undergraduate and postgraduate business students, to determine what skills and attributes they perceive would be important for their future work. It was found that Oral Communication was perceived as the most important skill, while as a factor Communication was ranked third after Collaboration and Problem-solving skills. From these results a number of factors emerged which can assist business academics in understanding the expectations of students.

**Keywords:** Communication, education, business, skills

### **Introduction**

Changes in the tertiary education are making universities and academics more accountable to the various stakeholders. This can be difficult as there are multiple stakeholders, including other academics, employers, students, the university hierarchy, alumni, the local community and governmental bodies, with multiple objectives to achieve (Moore and Ortinau 1993; Young et al. 1994). For academics, the objectives could include ensuring that students gain a solid understanding of the theory which is applicable to various business situations, as well as maintaining appropriate “academic standards” within their subjects and discipline (Polonsky and Waller 1998). However, in the case of business-related education, this is often criticised by the business community with suggestions that Universities teach theory that is irrelevant to business practice and do not equip future employees with skills that are applicable to jobs in the marketplace (Conant 1996; Henke et al. 1988; Peters 1980). It is, then, important for academics to not ignore their stakeholders, particularly their students. One way to assist academics in this aim is for them to understand students’ expectations and assist their students to achieve them.

This study analyses the results of a survey of an important stakeholder, business students, to determine what skills and attributes they perceive would be important for their future work. Of particular interest for this paper is how the students perceive importance of communication, as previous studies from the US have indicated the importance of communication skills (Duke 2002; Gault, Redington and Schlager 2000; Tanian and James 2001), and this paper will observe an Australian sample. A total of 283 undergraduate and postgraduate business students from a metropolitan university were surveyed. Knowing their expectations towards what they feel is important for their future work can assist academics and university administrators in providing course curricular that can fulfill their expectations and assist in providing subjects that are targeted to help the students obtain a practical business education.

### **Background Business Skills**

Management education has been changing over the years from a traditional “chalk’n’talk” classroom approach to more innovative, practical approaches (Raelin 1995; Vicere 1996; Polonsky and Waller 1998). Yet there is concern that there is still a “gap” between what business practitioners want and what academics are providing (Davis, Misra, and Van Auken 2002; Levenburg 1996; Lewis and Ducharme 1990; Stern and Tseng. 2002). To bridge this gap it is suggested that there should be more emphasis on teaching particular skills, such as communication or analytical skills (Duke 2002; Malhotra, Tashchian and Jain 1989; Shipp, Lamb, and Mokwa. 1993; Tanian and James 2001; Tapper 2000), particularly for entry-level positions (Deckinger, Brink, Katzenstein and Primavera. 1990; Gault, Redington and Schlager 2000; McCorkle, Alexander, Reardon and Kling 2003).

According to Shipp, Lamb, and Mokwa (1993) a “skill” is “an underlying ability than can be refined through practice, such as communication, analysis, creativity, intuition, leadership, decision making, and planning” (p 2). There are a number of skills that various researchers have indicated are important for business students, including problem solving, analytical, and computer/work skills, but it is communication skills, like written and oral communication, that has been regularly cited as an important but underdeveloped skill.

Malhotra, Tashchian and Jain (1989), in a paper that encourages the use of projects in teaching Marketing Research, listed a number of skills that were important for business students, including: communication skills, problem solving, critical thinking, analytical skills, computer skills, ethical dimensions, interpersonal skills, managerial skills and real-world skills. Lewis and Ducharme (1990) compared samples of academics and practitioners to determine if there was a gap in academic/practitioner expectations towards a number of educational objectives for undergraduate business students. While both academics and practitioners agreed with the primary educational objectives, the main skills identified were problem-solving skills, analytical skills, and the ability to apply subjects to business, such as forecasting, personnel, report writing and statistics.

Shipp, Lamb, and Mokwa (1993) encouraged marketing educators to develop and enhance Marketing students' skills, and selected four main skill areas for discussion: communication skills, creativity skills, intuition skills, and computer usage skills. Communication was also identified by Gault, Redington and Schlager (2000) which discussed career skill preparation and grouped items into four career skill categories: Communication skills (oral presentations, proposal writing, and written communication); Academic skills (analytical skills, computer applications, creative thinking, information search, and problem solving); Leadership skills (leadership/teamwork and relationship building); and Job acquisition skills (resume writing, job interviewing, and job networking).

In a study observing the communication skills of marketing students, Tanian and James (2001) identify the importance of "*oral, written, organisational and employment communication skills*", including "*practical workplace skills such as critical and creative thinking, working in a team, reasoning and problem solving*". Finally, Duke (2002) analysed student perceptions of learning outcomes, and presented nine learning outcomes: Leadership Skills, Communication Skills, Interpersonal Skills, Analytical Skills, Decision-Making Skills, Technology Skills, Global Economy, Ethics, and Business Practices, each having a number of items defining the category. It suggested that an analysis of student perceptions of learning outcomes will assist in the implementation of a learning outcomes approach to curricular design (p 215).

### **Business Attributes**

Compared to business skills that have been studied by several researchers, business attributes that might be important for employment has been under research. In this study "business attributes" are the characteristics or qualities that are associated with work. Deckinger, Brink, Katzenstein and Primavera (1990) looked at ways to better prepare students for entry-level advertising agency jobs by comparing teachers' and agency practitioners' views regarding the importance of various attributes. While the two groups held similar views, there were some perceived differences which indicated that there was a gap in expectations. The attributes presented included: can defend a point of view, team player, strategic thinker, leader, punctual, interviewability, neat appearance, personable, well-spoken, persuasive, ambitious/striver, keeps big picture in mind, qualitative, detail demon, hard worker, creative, informed on my company, informed on my industry, understand advertising, problem solver, wants job very much, "street smarts"/savvy, organised, will stay with us, fits in, persuasive, sense of humor, good references, school projects, experience, writes well, dependable, mature, and right chemistry. These attributes were used to create the list of attributes in this study.

Levenburg (1996) also compared samples of academics and practitioners to observe the importance of various general management skills. The study increased the items offered to the respondents to present eighteen "Skills and Abilities", which included oral communication, written communication, presentation skills, multimedia presentation skills, teamwork, diversity or multicultural appreciation, problem analysis skills, statistical

analysis skills, computer skills, decision-making skills, leaderships skills, self-initiative, honesty and integrity, reliability (taking responsibility), project management, technical report writing, research/library skills, global awareness. The idea of connecting skills and abilities, or attributes, is a valuable development as it can give more insight into what items are perceived to be important for working in business.

This study presents the results of a survey of business students to determine which skills and attributes are perceived to be important for working in business. From the responses a number of new categories were generated that will be of interest to business academics.

### **Methodology**

To determine business students' perceptions of the importance of various skills and attributes required for working in business, a questionnaire was distributed to a sample of undergraduate and postgraduate students at a large urban university. While other studies have surveyed teachers and practitioners, the rationale for using university students as subjects follows studies from Tanian and James (2001) and Duke (2002) which have emphasised the importance of students as a stakeholder for business academics, and indicated that it will assist in the understanding of student expectations and help in developing a student-based learning outcomes approach to business education.

The questionnaire was distributed in a classroom setting and took approximately 10 minutes to complete. A total of 283 students were sampled (95 male and 188 female; 215 undergraduate and 68 postgraduate). The average age of the total sample was 23.2 years and ranged from 19 to 42 years. The sample was made up of primarily second and third year undergraduate and second year postgraduate students studying marketing as part of their business qualification.

The respondents were presented with a list of skills and attributes that have been suggested as being important in previous studies (Davis, Misra, and Van Auken. 2002; Deckinger, Brink, Katzenstein and Primavera. 1990; Duke 2002; McCorkle, Alexander, Reardon and Kling 2003). A five point Likert type scale was used to gauge students' perceptions of business skills and attributes. They were asked:

*"To what extent do you believe that these skills & attributes are important to **your** future work? Where **1** means that you believe it is not at all important to your future work and **5** means that you believe it is extremely important to your future work."*

### **Results**

#### **Business Skills**

A factor analysis, using varimax rotation, was used to analyze the items relating to business skills, and then business attributes. As shown in Table 1, the business skills analysis resulted in five factors, which were labelled as Collaboration, Research, Communication, Problem-solving, and Technical. In relation to the sixteen individual items chosen for the final analysis, all the skills were perceived to be important, as they obtained a mean score above the midpoint value of "3", with the top five skills being: Oral Communication (4.55

mean score), Teamwork skills (4.50), Relationship Building (4.46), Decision-making (4.42) and Problem solving (4.36). Based on the category mean scores, the most important skills category as chosen by the students was Collaboration (4.36), followed by Problem-solving (4.33), Communication (4.27), Technical (3.80) and Research (3.64).

**TABLE 1: Business Skills**

SKILLS		Mean	I	II	III	IV	V
<b>COLLABORATION</b> Mean=4.36	Leadership skills	4.30	.762				
	Project management	4.19	.756				
	Teamwork skills	4.50	.723				
	Relationship building	4.46	.666				
<b>RESEARCH</b> Mean=3.64	Information search	3.73		.811			
	Research skills	3.79		.811			
	Understanding theoretical concepts	3.52		.595			
	Technical report writing	3.53		.532			
<b>COMMUNICATION</b> Mean=4.27	Presentation skills	4.29			.852		
	Oral communication	4.55			.737		
	Written communication	3.97			.606		
<b>PROBLEM-SOLVING</b> Mean=4.33	Decision-making skills	4.42				.675	
	Creative thinking	4.22				.661	
	Problem solving	4.36				.601	
<b>TECHNICAL</b> Mean=3.8	Analytical skills	4.28					.806
	Statistical analysis skills	3.32					.651

### **Business Attributes**

Similar to the analysis of the business skills, the sixteen business attributes items presented were factor analysed, using varimax rotation. The analysis resulted in four factors (Table 2). The business attributes factors were labelled as Self-focused, Work-orientated, Management-orientated, and World-focused. Of the sixteen individual items analysed, all the skills were perceived to be important, as they obtained a mean score above the midpoint value of "3". The top five attributes were: Reliability (4.50), Being Hardworking (4.42), Honesty & Integrity (4.41), Showing initiative (4.36) and Strategic thinking (4.30). Based on the category mean scores, the most important attribute category was Self-focused (4.30), followed by Management-orientated (4.18), World-focused (4.06), and Work-orientated (4.05).

**TABLE 2: Business Attributes**

ATTRIBUTES						
		Mean	I	II	III	IV
<b>SELF-FOCUSED</b> Mean=4.30	Showing initiative	4.36	.786			
	Nice Personality	4.28	.703			
	Honesty & Integrity	4.41	.665			
	Reliability	4.50	.622			
	Ethical understanding	3.94	.616			
<b>WORK-ORIENTATED</b> Mean=4.05	Fitting in with the company	4.00		.697		
	Commitment to stay with the company	3.36		.678		
	Attention to detail	4.13		.649		
	Dependable	4.22		.599		
	Industry knowledge	4.17		.580		
	Being hardworking	4.42		.540		
<b>MANAGEMENT-ORIENTATED</b> Mean=4.18	Ambitious	4.18			.789	
	Keeping big picture in mind	4.06			.719	
	Strategic thinking	4.30			.571	
<b>WORLD-FOCUSED</b> Mean=4.06	Diversity or multicultural appreciation	4.09				.727
	Global awareness	4.02				.665

### Discussion

In relation to skills, all the items were perceived to be important, with the top five skills being: Oral Communication, Teamwork skills, Relationship Building, Decision-making and Problem solving; and the items formed five factors which were ranked by importance as Collaboration, Problem-solving, Communication, Technical and Research. For attributes, again all the skills were perceived to be important, with the main attributes being: Reliability, Being Hardworking, Honesty & Integrity, Showing initiative and Strategic thinking; and the items formed four factors which were ranked by importance as Self-focused, Management-orientated, World-focused, and Work-orientated.

In relation to communication, this was seen as an important skill, which confirms previous studies, including Duke (2002), Gault, Redington and Schlager (2000), Lewis and Ducharme (1990), Malhotra, Tashchian and Jain (1989), Shipp, Lamb, and Mokwa (1993), and Tanian and James (2001). The items that represented communication were: Oral communication, Presentation skills, and Written communication. As individual items, oral communication was ranked as the most important skill for their future work, with presentation skills ranked seventh, and written communication ranked twelfth. Therefore, although oral communication was perceived as very important, presentation and written communication skills were not perceived to be as important in the workplace. Also based on the skill factors, it appears that communication was ranked third, after Collaboration and Problem-solving skills.

These results can be of concern to those who teach in the business and communication disciplines, as well as employers. It can be a problem if students assume that oral communication is the primary communication skill in the workplace, and that presentation and particularly written skills, are of much lesser importance. How then are those in a workplace able to communicate? Are students indicating that they assume that oral communication is the main way to send messages in the workplace? At a time when the importance of email as a method of communication is growing, it seems incongruent that students do not perceive written communication to be of particular importance. Possibly this may indicate an emphasis on management skills in the business degree, with courses highlighting skills like Teamwork, Relationship Building, Decision-making and Problem solving.

### **Conclusion**

The objective of this study was to determine what skills and attributes business students perceive would be important for their future work, with a particular interest in communication skills. While it is important to know the students' expectations towards what they feel is important in the workplace, it is also important to match this with what employers perceive as the importance of various skills and attributes on new employee. There should, therefore, be further research where employers are surveyed. Although this has been done in the US, as discussed in the literature review, a similar study based on employers' responses has not been undertaken in Australia. Research could also ask academics, or review degree program outlines to determine which skills are mentioned in subject descriptions. This would help determine if these skills, especially communication skills, are explicitly part of the curriculum. Clearly, it is important to research attitudes towards skills and attributes vital for the workplace to assist in providing universities with information that can help them fulfill the expectations of both students and employers.

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