Adapting a Business Communication Course to Market Needs

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ABSTRACT	ARTICLE INFO
This paper will represent a practical approach to re-designing course curriculum and syllabus in order to fit the needs of the job market. The course in question "Business Communication" is taught to 3rd year students in our Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, belonging to the Babeş-Bolyai University from Cluj-Napoca, Romania. The course has been in place for many years; however, lately, we have thought that changes are necessary. These changes are determined by the changing needs of the job market as more and more multinational companies have set up offices in our city. The paper will present the basis for these changes, i.e. how we identified the market needs (qualitative research: meetings/discussions with managers/recruiters from multinationals) and what improvements we intend to bring to the syllabus of the course in order to focus more on the skills employees need in their workplace. At the same time, we would like to show the correlation between business communication skills and language skills (the course is taught in 5 different languages) as they are seen both by students and potential employers (quantitative and qualitative research: survey and focus group) and how this correlation could fit into the new course syllabus.	

1. INTRODUCTION

Once, a professor from Harvard University asked his students to define communication through a drawing. The majority drew a manager typing on his computer or speaking, others drew sheets of paper coming out of a printer. The professor's conclusion was that none of them actually caught the essence of communication. "Communication means neither to speak, nor to write. It means to share."[i] (Daft & Marcic, 2006)

Communication represents, together with motivation and professional competence, the key to excellence in an organization. All the members of the company spend the majority of their time communicating in a form or another. As nowadays the number of white collars clearly exceeds the number of blue collars, there is an increasing need for improving communication and collaboration between colleagues and hierarchical levels, not to mention the fact that the majority of jobs require teamwork abilities. Moreover, the technological changes have led to transformations in the structure and the activity of the organizations. Hence communication practices and technologies have become increasingly important for all types of companies. The role of the managers in the organizational communication process has gained more importance as they process internal and external information on one hand but also disseminate this information to the stakeholders of the company.

The study of organizational communication clearly shows that the role of communication in an organization is much more than the manager's capacity to be a good speaker and to have good interpersonal communication skills. All types of companies, regardless of size or field of activity, have communication needs and face communication challenges.

No matter what profession a student wants to pursue nowadays, the ability to communicate (in one's mother tongue as well as in English) will be an essential skill and a skill that employers expect young people to possess when they enter the workforce. Hence from, courses involving the teaching and practice of communication in general and business communication in particular need to permanently take into account the changing needs of the job market in order to prepare students for their future careers.

At the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration within the Babeş-Bolyai University from Cluj-Napoca, Romania, a Business Communication course has been taught to 3rd year students for many years in 5 languages: English, French, German, Italian and Spanish. After studying one of these languages for 4 semesters as compulsory Business English/French etc. practice course, in the third year students can choose the Business Communication course as an optional one for one or two semesters. In this way, they can use the language abilities obtained in the first 4 semesters in order to develop oral and written skills in business communication which will help them get a good job and function efficiently in the new workplace. Considering the current challenges companies face and the fact that Cluj-Napoca city has developed tremendously lately and become the "Silicon Valley" of Romania, some changes need to be done in the course syllabus, especially in the content part, in order to adapt to the new needs and requirements.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

According to Bovée and Thill (2018) "As companies around the world try to gain competitive advantages and cost efficiencies, employment patterns will vary from industry to industry and region to region". However, some general patterns may be established. So, what do employers look for in job applicants? Specialists in the field have come up with the following general skills and attributes:
- communication skills
- interpersonal and team skills
- intercultural and international awareness and sensitivity
- data collection, analysis and decision-making skills
- digital, social and mobile media skills
- time and resource management
- flexibility and adaptability
- professionalism[ii] (Bovée & Thill, 2018)

As we can see, the most important are the communication skills and as we are referring to an Eastern European country, we could also add the ability to communicate in English (or another foreign language). Another important area is represented by the ability to use technology in different forms and obviously for professional purposes, including professional communication.

Different approaches and perspectives coming from recruiters as well as consultants include among the top skills one needs to get a job the following as well: teamwork, problem solving, social media literacy, data analytics, creativity, commercial awareness, confidence etc.

Considering all these and looking at the old syllabus, we concluded that we needed to make students more aware of the importance of professional communication in their future jobs and also of the importance of technology in professional communication.

Being in charge of this course for many years, I decided that the introductory lecture should be about the foundations of business communication. The purpose of this lecture would be to make students understand what communication means and why it matters.

Starting from traditional definitions of communication and the description of the communication process, the focus would be on the idea of sharing, as this is essential in the workplace. "The essence of communication is *sharing* – providing data, information, insights and inspiration in an exchange that benefits both you and the people with whom you are communicating."[iii] (Daft, 2003)

The importance of communication must be looked upon from two angles: why communication is important to you, the employee and why communication is important to your company. At this point, future employees should understand that a lot of jobs nowadays are primarily about communicating in different forms and the changing nature of employment is putting new pressures on communication skills. Moreover, as it is already known, no great idea matters unless you express it clearly and

persuasively and if you get to an executive position you are likely to consume the majority of your time communicating. Consequently, improving communication skills can be the single most important step one can take in their career.

On the other hand, students should understand the importance of effective communication for the company. According to Bovée & Hill (2018) effective communication promotes a stronger sense of trust, closer ties with important communities, opportunities to influence conversations, perceptions and trends, increased productivity and problem solving, better financial results and higher return, earlier warning of potential problems, stronger decision making, clearer and more persuasive marketing messages, greater employee engagement with their work.

Thus, the moment you get employed, you are expected to communicate as a professional, i.e. to show that you understand why communication matters to you and to your company. This is the primary message students should get in an introductory lecture on business communication.

3. RESULTS

A syllabus is both a document about the course content, goals and elements and a guide for students for the kind of teaching and learning they can expect.

In order to adapt the content to the job market needs, I conducted three different types of research:

1. informal discussions with representatives of the business environment
2. e-mail exchange and conversations with alumni
3. a short questionnaire applied to 3rd year students after one semester of studying business communication.

3.1. The business environment

Our faculty collaborates with several companies from our city and other areas of the country. On the basis of these collaborations, I had the opportunity of discussing with two professionals who offered us a comprehensive view on what companies expect from our students in terms of language and communication skills.

One of them, holding a management position at a multinational company dealing with outsourcing financial services, made a presentation in front of my 3rd year students telling them about his experience in recruiting new employees. The main idea was that companies expect students to have very good knowledge of English (at least intermediate level), as all selection interviews are in English as well as the majority of the daily interactions with colleagues and clients, except the case when another foreign language is requested. The speaker emphasized the fact that there is a shortage of German speakers and they also look for graduates who have knowledge of Nordic languages. Fluency and grammar accuracy are highly regarded as communication is both oral and written in the company. In this particular company, they also want people to have good telephoning skills and the ability to negotiate with clients. As there are many meetings, employees should be able to participate actively and express their point of view clearly and concisely. They should also be able to deliver presentations on work-related issues whenever it is the case.

also a very good Romanian one. He mentioned a few common mistakes Romanian employees make when it comes to translating specialized business terms as well as when it comes to using the correct register and style in writing. He considers The second opinion came from the representative of a big accounting and company who holds the position of business writer. He was invited to our faculty to conduct a workshop on Business consultancy English for students and one for teachers. His major focus was on translation issues as he is a native English speaker but that students should become familiar with specialized language and with the differences between formal and informal style.

3.2. Alumni

I contacted a few graduates who used to study Business Communication and I addressed them the following questions:

1) Which of the skills/topics you learnt at the Business Communication course helps you most in your current profession?

2) Which skills/topics do you think should be taught to students in the same course in order to help them function better in their future workplace?

I got only 11 answers out of 20 e-mails I sent. The alumni in question graduated at least 3 years ago and are currently working in multinational companies in finance, HR and IT, where they use English on daily basis. All the respondents wrote that it was very helpful for them to know how to write a CV and an application letter as well as how to behave and speak in a job interview. 6 respondents consider that the most useful for them was writing e-mails, whereas 4 consider presentations as most helpful and one referred to the importance of writing reports.

As for the second question, my former students consider that oral communication skills are extremely important in the working place as well as the use of different types of technology in communication. 2 alumni mentioned that students should also be taught about ethics and ethical communication and be explained more about cultural awareness and how to function in a multicultural environment.

3.3. Students' survey

Last semester around 250 students joined the course in Business Communication which focused on oral communication as the same course in the next semester will focus on written communication and recruitment documents. At the end of the course they were supposed to deliver a presentation on a business topic preferably related to their field of study or bachelor degree thesis.

I applied a brief questionnaire with only 3 questions on 100 students. The questionnaire looked as follows:

1. Do you consider this course

a. very useful b. useful c. quite useful d. not useful at all e. I don't know

2. Which topic presented in the course do you consider the most relevant for your future career?

a. Oral communication – a general approach

b. Business presentations

c. Business meetings

d. Business negotiations

e. None

3. Would you recommend this course to other students?

a. Yes

b. No

c. I don't know

The results were quite satisfactory. For question 1 56% of the respondents considered the course very useful, 23% useful, 10% quite useful, 6% not useful at all and 5% said they didn't know.

The topic students considered the most relevant was Business Presentations (73%) followed by Business meetings (21%), Oral communication (5%) and one respondent chose answer e – none.

It seems that the course was successful overall as 94% said they would recommend it to other colleagues whereas only 6% said they wouldn't.

I also consulted the students' anonymous feedback which is provided online at the end of each semester on a special platform and besides the general good impression, I noticed that they made quite useful suggestions regarding the content of the course. It seems that they would like more input on the use of technologies both for internal and external communication as well more practical use of technology in the classroom such as videos or examples coming directly from social media or other electronic sources.

So, what are we talking about when we refer to technology and its use in business communication?

3.4 . Technology and Business Communication

When talking about the impact of technology on professional communication, one should refer to the impact of social media and to the mobile revolution.

Social media are changing the practice of business communication and the relationship between companies and their stakeholders. "Traditional business communication can be thought of as having a "publishing" mindset, in which a company produces carefully scripted messages and distributes them to an audience that has few options for responding to the company or interacting with one another. In contrast, the social model uses social media tools to create an interactive and participatory environment in which all parties have a chance to join the conversation. Many of the old rules and expectations, including a tight control of the content and distribution of the message, no longer apply to this new environment."[iv] (Bovee & Thill, 2018)

However, there are experts who predict that mobile communication will change the nature of business communication even more. For instance, the researcher Maribel Lopez calls mobile "the biggest technology shift since the Internet"[v] (Lopez, 2012) and companies clearly understand the value of integrating mobile technologies in their communication platforms. Mobile technologies offer multiple ways to improve communication and other business processes.

Millions of people around the world use a mobile device as their main form of communication and the primary way to access the Internet. This also goes for business executives who use the mobile phone as their main tool of communication voice or non-voice such as e-mailing or browsing. It is considered that there are actually a lot of parallels between social media and mobile communication as both of them change the nature of communication, alter the relationships between senders and receivers, create opportunities as well as challenges and force business professionals to learn new skills.

The implications are diverse, such as the need for websites to be mobile friendly; however, it is important to use technology to improve business communication not to hinder it as it might be the case with poorly designed or inappropriately used technology. Specialists recommend keeping technology in perspective that is to remember that it is just a tool and not a replacement for interpersonal communication. A frequent consequence of misusing technology is sending unnecessary messages and creating an information overload. This is why technological tools should be used productively and employees should possess at least a basic level of technical competence. Among these tools which redefine the office we can enumerate web-based meetings, videoconferencing and telepresence, shared

online workspaces, different voice technologies (speech recognition, VoIP), mobile business apps, instant messaging, collaboration platforms, data visualization, Internet of Things etc.

Nevertheless, no matter how much technology we are using, communication is still about people connecting to people. There is always a need for face to face interaction and human contact in solving tough issues in the workplace and maintaining productive relationships.

The question arising is: what exactly should we teach in a business communication course when it comes to technology? Should the teacher be a specialist in technology, in communication or in both?

I would say that in our case it is first about the language. The course is taught in English (or another foreign language), so students who choose this course are expected to have at least a B2 level. Unfortunately, it is not always the case as students underestimate the difficulty of the new course. Consequently, you need to be first and foremost a language teacher, although you do not teach language anymore; however, your students still need linguistic guidance. They still make pronunciation, spelling or grammar mistakes and it is your duty to pay attention to these mistakes and correct them.

Secondly, you should be a specialist in communication. In my case, it is maybe easier as I hold a PhD in management and communication. Other colleagues have different areas of expertise this is why they are not so willing to teach this course unless it is really necessary. From my personal experience, I could say that it is not enough to tell students which language structures and functions they can use in different business situations, you also need to have a background in organizational communication in order to be able to explain students what expects them in the workplace. This is even more necessary as they do not have any other communication course in their curriculum whatsoever. One of the most important things they need to understand is the importance of context in business communication, one of the ideas I wrote about in my PhD thesis being inspired by Pamela Shockley-Zalabak's model of organizational communication[vi] (Zelter, 2011). One cannot refer to the communication process in the professional environment without considering the context of communication. Whatever you say or write for a business purpose needs to be adapted to the context and hence from to the interlocutor, to your relationship with them, leading to the use of correct style, intonation or even attitude. It is difficult for a student to understand the idea of communication context as long as they have never been in one. Nevertheless, as I also teach distance learning students, I could notice the differences. Distance-learning students already have a job and they are usually older than full-time students. They understand better the organizational context as they are integrated in such a context. They also understand the need for adaptation as well as the ethical and cultural implications of communicating effectively in the workplace. In the case of full-time students, the use of case studies has proven to be a good tool in helping them understand the essence of organizational communication in an organizational context.

Finally, when teaching Business Communication, you also need to be familiar with communication technologies. This depends a lot on your ability of dealing with novelty and being permanently updated with the technological progress. I noticed that younger colleagues (those in their 20's and 30's) are more interested and therefore more familiar with the use of technology in different areas of teaching and researching, which is absolutely normal as they grew up with computers and mobile phones. Things are more complicated for the older generation who still finds it difficult to keep the pace with the tremendous technological development in the last years. The new generations of students are more and more demanding in this area and they expect their professors to know at least as much as they do, no matter their age. Personally, I have to admit that I am not a "genius" of technology and I still need to learn a lot about it in order to improve my teaching methods and provide better input for my students. At the same time, I am aware that students are my collaborators so there should not be any problem if I ask them for help, Students are more than happy to share their experience and to make contributions to courses and seminars. As part of their exam, they had to make a presentation on a business topic or a topic related to their field of study or bachelor degree thesis. It

was amazing to see how much students know about the use of technology in business and communication, especially those who study IT (Business Information Systems). They develop applications which facilitate the communication between the company and their clients, accounting software, platforms which would improve distance learning and training in companies as well as integrated technologies for specific areas of business. Just by listening to these presentations, both me and the other students had a lot to learn and we could practically understand how technology improves business communication and business processes.

Taking into account the three roles mentioned above, the changing needs of the job market and the importance of technology in all business areas, we can summarize the employers' expectations (which a business communication course should help students fulfil) as follows:

- recognizing information needs and using efficient search techniques to locate reliable sources of information – digital information fluency;

- organizing ideas and information logically and completely;

- expressing ideas and information coherently, persuasively and concisely;

- actively listening to others;

- communicating effectively with people from different backgrounds;

- using communication technologies effectively and efficiently;

- following accepted standards of grammar, spelling and register;

- communicating in a civilized manner;

- communicating ethically;

- managing time and resources efficiently;

- using critical thinking[vii] (Bovée &Thill, 2018)

I consider that these elements should be the guidelines to be followed in preparing and teaching a Business Communication course. All communication topics and activities should aim at helping students organize ideas and information logically, express ideas and information coherently and follow accepted standards of grammar, spelling and register. At the same time special emphasis should go to teaching and practicing active listening and for each topic, the use of technology should be pointed out. Moreover, cultural awareness and ethical communication norms should be present in lectures as well as case studies and other types of drills. Critical thinking (the ability to evaluate evidence completely and objectively in order to form logical conclusions and make sound recommendations) needs to be cultivated when dealing with case studies so that students would be able to use the same ability when solving real life work issues.

4. DISCUSSION

As mentioned earlier, the course in Business Communication covers two semesters in the third year. One of the semesters is dedicated to the study of oral communication and the second to the study of written communication and recruitment documents. The schedule goes with a 2 hour-lecture every second week and a corresponding 2 hour-seminar in the other week.

For the first semester, given the feedback and recommendations we got from current and former students, no major changes would be necessary in the list of topics. However, the introductory lecture should strengthen the importance of communication skills for the future employee and for the

companies in terms of what employers expect from the graduates and what effective professional communication means. Students should also be given a brief input into the communication of a company and types of communication which are used inside the company. The role of technology in business communication should also be mentioned from the very beginning. Regarding the introduction to oral communication, advantages and disadvantages of using oral communication at work will be presented and special emphasis will be placed on the value of active listening. The seminar will deal with practical situations of oral communication in professional life such as socializing, telephoning or handling interpersonal situations and conflicts.

The other topics will stay as they were, i.e. business presentations, business meetings and business negotiations. However, new input on the use of technology in presentations and meetings will be added. Thus, in the lecture dedicated to presentations, besides referring to the structure, preparation and delivery of an effective business presentation, we are also going to refer to incorporating technology in the presentation. The new elements will be represented by the use of the backchannel (which is a line of communication created by people in an audience to connect with others inside or outside the room, with or without the knowledge of the speaker) and integrating social media in the presentation process in order to monitor, ask for and review feedback. Another element will be the online delivery of presentations and the challenges this process involves. Finally, more emphasis will be placed on selecting the most appropriate type of visuals and creating effective slides by using not only Power Point, but also Prezi. Practical examples with effective presentations in video format will be shown to students and discussed in detail in order to see the advantages and disadvantages of using different types of visuals and delivery techniques.

When it comes to the topic "Meetings" we are also going to add a chapter on the use of technology in business meetings. Reference will be made to the advantages of virtual meeting technologies and to their practical uses under the forms of: instant messaging, teleconferencing, videoconferencing, telepresence, virtual whiteboards, webinars, online brainstorming etc.

More changes should be made to the content of the course in the second semester. This semester should be dedicated to written communication and recruitment. It is very important for students to get familiar with internal communication issues in companies and to understand the importance of written/electronic communication in their professional life. The process of writing business messages should be taken very seriously with emphasis on formal and informal e-mails as these are mostly used nowadays.

The recruitment chapter is also essential for future graduates. They need to know how to write a CV in English (or another foreign language), a good letter of application and how to behave and answer questions in a job interview. Students will prepare their own portfolio comprising all the recruitment documents for their final evaluation. At the same time, they will work more on case studies during seminars and will have to deal with one for their evaluation.

The novelty will be represented by the lectures and seminars dedicated to the use of digital, social and visual media for business communication and the choice you have according to the business context you are in. A few points will refer to: major digital media for business messages (e-mail, messaging, web content, podcasting, social networks, media sharing sites, blogging, online videos etc.), the role of the e-mail, the advantages and disadvantages of business messaging systems, organizing website content or using podcasting.

As social media has changed so much business communication lately, it is necessary to include writing strategies for social media as well as strategies for business communication on social networks. Last, but not least, students should understand what visual communication means and how powerful images are. They will get acquainted with the visual evolution in business communication, the ethics of visual communication and the best ways to select visuals for presenting data.

Going back to the feedback provided by the business environment, students and alumni, we intend to include chapters on communication ethics and cultural awareness, however not to a great extent as students have a mandatory course in Intercultural Business Communication (in English or another foreign language) in the master programme curriculum.

Authors should discuss the results and how they can be interpreted in perspective of previous studies and of the working hypotheses. The findings and their implications should be discussed in the broadest context possible. Future research directions may also be highlighted.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The world is changing at an incredible pace and this is mainly due to the tremendous development of technology. Thanks to this development communication has become easier both in professional and personal life but, at the same time, it has become more complicated and new barriers have emerged. Under the circumstances, what is a teacher's mission?

I would say that our primary mission is to prepare students to cope with these incredible changes, to help them understand today's dynamic workplace and what is expected from them as future graduates. We need to show them the steps they can take in order to adapt to the job market and the importance of creating an employment portfolio and building one's personal brand. Everything we teach them should become a useful tool in finding a good job and progressing in one's career.

At the same time we should make them aware of the advantages and disadvantages of using communication technologies and of the choices they have, choices which depend on whom their interlocutor is and on the business context itself. The wrong choice may affect a relationship, a business process or even one's career.

No matter how many e-mails you sent or how many video conferences you attend, there will always be a need for human interaction and for face-to-face discussions. Technology cannot solve all the problems, it cannot think for us, it cannot replace our judgment and more important our feelings. Staying human in a technology-dominated environment could be the key to a healthy professional life and to becoming a better communicator.

This section is not mandatory, but can be added to the manuscript if the discussion is unusually long or complex.

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[vii] Bovée & Thill, 2018)