

COMMUNICATION SKILLS: WHAT DO EMPLOYERS' EXPECT?
(WORKPLACE COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR ENGINEERING GRADUATES)

LALITHAMBIGAI A/P SIVANGANAM
GT 010234

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My Family, My Soul Mate, My Guru

I Lay Before You The Fruits Of Your Love, Blessing And Guidance.

Om Sai Ram



PTTA UTHM
PERPUSTAKAAN TUNKU TUN AMINAH

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ABSTRACT

A brilliant engineer who cannot communicate is a matter to be taken seriously. What will happen to Malaysia if we keep churning out thousands of brilliant engineers but when it comes to employability skills, they are retarded? Malaysian engineering graduates especially are handicapped when it comes to communicating in English. English language is the international language used for education, business and technology. Therefore, it is crucial that an engineer masters the art of communicating in English as well as engineering knowledge. Thus, this research is conducted to find out what communication skills that the employers in the industry deem that their employees should have? However, this research only focuses on engineering graduates and the manufacturing industry. The researcher intends to learn the importance that is given to communication skills by the industry and whether it helps an engineering graduate to be promoted and be successful in their jobs. After obtaining the results from the employers, the researcher will suggest recommendation to improve the course content of KUiTTHO's Communication Skills course to be parallel with the demands of the industry.

ABSTRAK

Harapan Malaysia adalah untuk mencapai taraf negara maju menjelang tahun 2020. Antara profesion utama yang menyumbang ke arah pembangunan negara adalah profesion kejuruteraan. Terdapat pelbagai insituti yang mencernakan jurutera yang arif dan bijak dalam bidang kejuruteraan masing-masing. Akan tetapi, kuantiti jurutera yang keluar tidak mempunyai kemahiran yang cukup untuk menangani situasi alam pekerjaan. Antara kemahiran yang penting yang diperlukan oleh seorang jurutera adalah kemahiran untuk berkomunikasi menggunakan bahasa antarabangsa, iaitu Bahasa Inggeris. Keupayaan untuk berkomunikasi dalam bahasa Inggeris dianggap penting kerana semua maklumat, ilmu dan transaksi perniagaan dilakukan menggunakan Bahasa Inggeris. Ramai graduan kejuruteraan tempatan yang lulus dengan cemerlang gagal memperolehi pekerjaan yang baik dan tidak mempunyai persembahan sosial yang cemerlang di pejabat. Masalah utama mereka adalah penguasaan Bahasa Inggeris dan taktik komunikasi yang lemah dan tidak teratur. Oleh itu, kajian yang dijalankan oleh penyelidik adalah berkenaan dengan kemahiran berkomunikasi di tempat kerja bagi graduan kejuruteraan. Penyelidik akan menyelidik majikan – majikan daripada syarikat pembuatan yang besar dan mengetahui kehendak mereka dalam kemahiran berkomunikasi yang harus di kuasai oleh seorang jurutera. Seterusnya, penyelidik akan memberikan cadangan baru berdasarkan hasil penyelidikan untuk memperbaharui rangka kursus Kemahiran Berkomunikasi di KUiTTHO.

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CHAPTER 1

PREFACE

1.0 Background

Judith Dwyer (1997) defined communications as any behavior, verbal or non-verbal, that is perceived by another. Knowledge, feelings or thoughts are encoded and sent from at least one person and received and decoded by another. Meaning is given to this message as the receiver interprets the message. A connection is made between people communicating. Thus, the definition of communication can be meant as, Cielens Marty (1999) says communication is the means by which people share words, ideas and feelings. Sharing ideas helps people to relate to each other more effectively, to work together more happily and to get jobs done faster.

Communication within the workplace occurs for a number of direct and indirect reasons. As defined above communication is a direct way of passing message to another person. Leaders for evaluating performance, directing or instructing staff and motivating others, also use an indirect way of communication.

People working as part of a team or department with an effective communicator as its leader are generally more confident and competent because they understand what they are doing and what is required from them. They are able to work together in a purposeful, supportive and flexible manner.

Firms or businesses that aim to provide a product or service to others must interact and operate with other people. This interaction with clients, customers, staffs and members of other organization requires communication and will succeed where the communication is effective. Observing these people who are good in their relationships at work with other answers that these people actually have the means, the capacity and will to communicate. Communication theory provides the means; their motivation provides the willingness and their skills in communication presents the capacity.

Good communication skills depend first but not entirely on language. In the professional world of English speaking modern world, a mastery of English is essential both to advancement of individual career and to the fulfillment of professional duties. However the mastery of English as a linguistic option brings out a flawless writer or speaker but not necessarily a good communicator. The mastery of communication skills can actually compensate the lack of language fluency.

Communication skills is given a lot of preference in employments as most employers want their employees' to have more than a good academic records because academic excellence would not secure a hundred million contract but good communication skills can actually help the client to trust the companies. In order to do so, the Malaysian government in an understanding with the London Chambers of Commerce and Industry Examination Board has an English Language Skills Assessment (ELSA). ELSA is an assessment that is conducted by employers' for their staffs or employees to check level of proficiency in English for the purpose of effective job function and career advancements. The four language skills that are assessed are speaking, writing, listening and reading.

In a statement from an article titled “ State Of The World Industry And Outlook For The Post 2000” by Mayer (2000) it has been said that the developing countries in global manufacturing value added will reach 25% by the year 2000 and suggests that a 30% share is attainable by 2005, when their, the developing countries share could have risen to beyond 35%. Therefore by the year 2015 advanced developing countries will be marching into the ranks of developed economics and narrows the “GDP per capita gap” between developed and developing countries.

This statement predicts an avalanche of employment prospects for Malaysians, as Malaysia is an advanced developing country. In realization with this, the Malaysian government has allocated RM10.7 billion for the education sector through it's 8th Malaysia Plan because the country needs a competent workforce especially in the engineering education as manufacturing industries needs abundance of technical and vocational workforce.

So, engineering will be a profession with tremendous employment possibilities. Therefore to produce world class engineers Malaysian universities and professional engineering bodies need to implement communication skills into the curriculum while maintaining the fundamental knowledge of engineering processes so that the graduates are not only competent in terms of job specific but also can think creatively, analytically, good communicators, good team workers and adaptable life long learners.

As Ove Arup said in his famous engineering quotation;

*Engineering problems are under defined,
There are many solutions, good, bad and indifferent,
The art is to arrive at a good solution,
This is a creative activity, involving imagination,
Intuition and deliberated choice.*

1.1 Problem

Johor Menteri Besar, Abdul Ghani Othman (Business Times, 15/11/1995) stated, “Malaysia needs a versatile workforce proficient in English because of the pragmatic purposes that the language can serve. English, as an international language is important in Malaysia’s plan for modernization.”

M.Osman (News Straits Times, 17/11/1995) states, “When we talk about communication technology, what comes to my mind is the ability to communicate in a language understood internationally like English. There is no doubt that English is one of the most important languages and those who are not able to communicate well in it will have some problem. This because English is the main medium of instruction and dominates the world technology”

The conclusion of these two statements is that English is the main medium of communication internationally in all fields. The only way for Malaysian to be able to penetrate into the international market is to have a workforce, which has good communication skills in English along with sound qualifications.

With the aim of helping Malaysian graduates especially, engineering graduates because engineers are known for their intellectual ability and communication disability. Therefore in accordance with Ir. Rocky Wong Hon Thang, Managing Director of JS Mahir Sdn. Bhd speech entitled Beginning of an Engineering Profession, “one of the requisites of engineers of the next millennium will be to develop and master interpersonal skills, the ability to project ideas across and equip themselves with integrity, creativity and innovative thinking in order to carry out their work more efficiently”

In fact Bellingger (2000), comments that the 1999 salary survey suggests that the engineers of today have to be able to communicate, he or she has to speak well,

write forcefully and nail business skills early in life if the individual wants to advance. Therefore the researcher strongly feels that having communication skills to an engineer is essential as their engineering knowledge. They cannot advance without either one.

After reviewing the course content framework of Communication Skills that is being used in Kolej Universiti Tun Hussein Onn, the researcher finds that all students of the Engineering Faculty is and are being taught the same content.

The research will be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the communication skill course that is being taught in Kolej Universiti Teknologi Tun Hussein Onn by making a survey of employers in the engineering field. The results of the employer's survey will be used as a basis to suggest recommendations to upgrade the current Communication Skills course content.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Is KUiTTHO's Communication Skills course content really producing workforce, which is the graduates of the Engineering and Engineering Technology Faculty that meet the employer's expectation and demand of communication skills.

1.3 Research Questions

- 1.3.1 What are the expectations of the employer on the communication skills of the engineering graduates?
- 1.3.2 Does this syllabus of communication skills meet the employer's expectation?
- 1.3.3 What can be done to improve the communication skill course in KUiTTHO?
- 1.3.4 Does the Communication and Language Department of KUiTTHO need to revise their Communication Skills course content to produce more industry friendly engineers?

1.4 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to determine whether KUiTTHO's Communication Skills course content has been able to produce, workforce that meet the current demand of communication skills. Specifically, this study intends to:

- 1.4.1 Understand the employer's expectation on the communication skills of the engineering graduates in general.
- 1.4.2 To make a suggestion to review the communication skills curriculum to meet employer's expectations

1.5 Objectives

- 1.5.1 The researcher intends to determine what is the employer's expectation on engineering graduates communication skills.
- 1.5.2 The researcher intends to find out what is the whether KUiTTHO is providing sufficient training in communication skills to equip engineering graduates in the work place by making comparison of the current Communication Skills course content and the employers' expectation.
- 1.5.3 The researcher intends to find out whether there is a relationship between the level of communication skills and career advancement.

1.6 Importance of Studies

The mere mention of presenting in English can make a student breakout in cold sweat. To imagine that they are going to converse and write in English when they work is the greatest nightmare of our Malaysian graduates. Why do our students have this fear for a language that actually has international acclamation and usage? This question needs to be answered! Our students' capability in their work is no doubt implacable but when it comes to conversing and writing in English our students are brain dead or they stutter like a child learning to talk.

Thus, lay the importance of this study. This study is going to shed some light on a matter that is crucial to students that is to increase the standard of communicating in English among students. This study is also going to take the employer's point of view on what is necessary for a student to know when he or she comes to work.

The result of this study will be a guideline that will be used by employer's as well as respective higher learning institutions to fit their curriculum so that the demands of the work market is met and at the same time the standard of English among our graduates increases.

1.7 Scope of Study

The researcher will only focus on employers' in the industry. The researcher would emphasis here that the industry defined here are large manufacturing corporation. This is because these companies employ thousands of employees from various backgrounds with engineering graduates included.

Therefore, the importance for workplace communication skills will be included in this research. The researcher will also research the communication skills that are expected of engineering graduates by the employers. The research will find out whether good command of communication skills will increase the employability of engineering graduates as well be plus point in promotions and job success. Finally, the researcher will give recommendations for a new Communication Skills course content to the Communication and Language Department of KUiTTHO.

1.8 Limitation

The major limitation that will be faced by the researcher is that the research will only deal with employers from the industry and therefore the perception of students

who have graduated or that are still in university is not taken into account. Since communication skills is a wide topic only verbal communication and interpersonal skills necessary in workplace situation will be accounted for in this study.

1.9 Assumption

The researcher assumes that the questionnaire distributed will be answered with honesty. As a result the data that will be collected will assumed correct and true in describing the scenario

1.10 Definition

“Communication is any behavior, verbal or nonverbal, that is perceived by another. Knowledge, feelings or thoughts are encoded and sent from at least one person and received and decoded by another. Meaning is given to this message as the receiver interprets the message. A connection is made between the people communicating” (Judith Dwyer, 1997).

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

Our word “engineer” can be traced back to the Latin word *ingenium*, meaning cleverness, or natural ability (John Davies, 1996). The main business of professional engineers is to be ingenious; to come up with good ideas and to make them work in practice. No engineer works in complete isolation; there is no point in having a good idea if you are unable to communicate it. Poor communication can create ambiguity even cause disasters. At the very least, it gives a bad impression. If people think you communicate badly, they will not trust you as an engineer. These people could be your prospective employers, bosses, colleagues, clients, the public or the media. There is a great deal at stake. Your career as an engineer, the quality of achievements, the benefit to the society of engineering projects in general, the status and the reputation of the whole profession, all these things depends on good communication skills.

Yet, graduate engineers are notoriously poor at communicating. Some engineers’ maybe an exception, but employers widely believe that there is a problem.

They also feel that things are getting worse. As young engineers no matter how good, they are in their field but if there are no good communication skills, then the future is bleak.

Why do graduate engineers tend to be poor at communicating? Engineering courses are usually very concentrated because there is plenty to learn. There will probably be communication classes within your course, but time constraints are such that compared to technical subjects communication is not significant. When engineers write or speak they should have something specific, factual and precise, to say. It should be possible to separate what is being communicated from how is being communicated.

A characteristic of communication by engineers is that words are by no means the only medium. Numbers, tables, mathematical expression, graphs, diagrams and drawings can all enhance communication.

One of the goals in every country is to prepare young people to participate in paid work, as employees or self-employed. Employers faced enormous changes in a highly competitive global marketplace because the new economy demanded new ways of thinking, new ways of managing and new ways of working. As the nature and look of jobs changed, the level of education and skills also changed. Many educators faced the challenge of preparing young people to participate in the increasingly complex and changing world of work by calling on employers to articulate and communicate their needs better

Concurrently and perhaps in part in response to this workplace requirement, universities perceive effective communication skills as one of the generic skills, which "should represent the central achievements of higher education as a process. Bellingger (2000), comments that the 1999 salary survey suggests that the engineers of today have to be able to communicate, he or she has to speak well, write forcefully and nail business skills early in life if the individual wants to advance.

The concern with engineering graduates communication skills is not limited to Malaysia. A survey of employers in New Jersey in the United States reported that communication is one of the skills perceived by employers as vital and for which graduates lack preparation. The recent DEETYA (Australia) report on research undertaken into employer satisfaction with graduate skills supports this in listing oral communication third out of the seven skills sought in new graduates new graduate students. In Canada, when the Conference Board of Canada's Corporate Council on Education published "Employability Skills Profile" 25 of Canada's major employer's stated that employer's in Canada are looking for "people who can communicate, think, continue to learn throughout their lives, demonstrate positive attitudes and behaviors, responsibility and adaptability when working with others.

2.1 What Is Communication?

Communication is any behavior, verbal or nonverbal, that is perceived by another. Knowledge, feelings or thoughts are encoded and sent from at least one person and received and decoded by another. Meaning is given to this message as the receiver interprets the message. A connection is made between the people communicating (Judith Dwyer, 1997).

Each channels of communication requires effective skills suited to the form of communication used to send the message. The three forms of communication is classified as *verbal communication (spoken and written)*, *nonverbal and graphic*. Communication skills are communication that is sent by any means other than words or graphics.

Verbal communication can take the form of spoken words between two or more people, or written words in written communication. *Non-verbal communication* is communication sent by any means other than words or graphics. Non-verbal components exist in oral, written and graphic communication. Facial expression, body movement, posture and dress are some non-verbal components of written and graphic communication. *Graphic communication* represents ideas, relationship or connections visually with shapes diagrams and lines. Graphic communication can have both verbal and non-verbal components (Judith Dwyer, 1997).

2.2 Types Of Communication

A person working in an organization uses four types of communication, which is intrapersonal communication, interpersonal communication, group and team communication, presentational communication and mediated communication (Gay Lumsden/ Donald Lumsden, 1995).

2.2.1 Intrapersonal Communication

Intrapersonal communication is communication within the individual, through the process of thinking and feeling. It enables you to communicate with yourself. This style of communication creates a person's self concept and processes information. (Judith Dwyer, 1997)

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