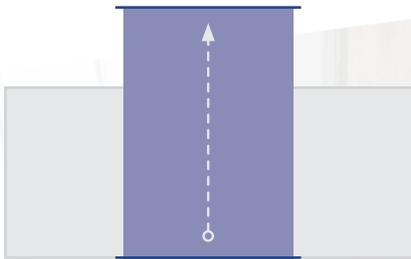


# Overcoming Workplace Communication Challenges:

Reversing Shortfalls That Affect Employee Productivity and Engagement

Companies with highly effective communications practices see 47% higher returns<sup>1</sup>.

**47%**  
higher returns



▶ **Communication in today's workplaces has made it easier and faster to share information, build strong relationships, ask questions and work toward common goals. Despite growing communication options and a swell of interactions through email, team messaging, video conferencing, face-to-face meetings and social media, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that productivity is stagnant at a low 1.2 percent.<sup>2</sup> Gallup supports this by showing an alarming 67 percent of workers are unengaged.<sup>3</sup>**

We can't blame it on too little communication, because some 205 billion emails zoom through offices every day. Even the workday has extended past traditional office hours, as workers spend part of their commutes on the phone or answering emails.

What's missing? Effective workplace communication skills.

Every interaction—from the way managers train, give feedback and clear directions, to how an employee talks to a customer or interacts with his or her boss—comes down to communication. Yet, due to our organizations' desires to keep workers moving, we don't stop long enough to consider if our communication is enhancing business success. In workplaces that are increasingly more complex with diverse teams, technology and remote workers, this is a mistake.

Inadequate communication among employees has been estimated to cost small companies of 100 employees an average of \$420,000 per year. That number is in excess of \$60 million for organizations with more than 100,000 employees.<sup>4</sup>

“For a business to thrive, meet deadlines and exceed goals, solid communication systems and relationships must be in place. When communication breaks down, so does the business.”

—Nicole Papa<sup>7</sup>

What's in those numbers? Everything from dissatisfied customers and lost sales to stressed out employees and higher turnover. In fact, leaders, middle managers and staff at U.S. companies agree that miscommunication is contributing to stress, failure to complete projects and loss of sales.<sup>5</sup>

While communicating is natural, the process itself is complex and filled with obstacles. Even busy executives, given a workplace that is in constant flux, can default to ineffective habits and shortcuts rather than purposeful communication.

When every individual on the team can effectively understand, communicate and influence those around them, then organizations win, customers are happy and loyal, sales improve, and engagement and productivity increase.

## The consequences of ineffective workplace communication

Communication binds the people and information of your organization together, helping employees succeed at their jobs, relate to each other and conduct business with customers and other businesses. When this communication is distorted or restricted, relationships and the flow of information break down.<sup>7</sup> The repercussions can be huge.

Topping the list of consequences of poor workplace communication are some that directly affect an organization's productivity and profit, identified in a report from The Economist Intelligence Unit:

- 44 percent of study respondents indicated that miscommunication caused the delay or failure to complete a project
- 18 percent said miscommunication has led to the loss of a sale, 30 percent of which were valued between \$100,000 and \$999,999<sup>8</sup>
- Customer satisfaction and loyalty are tied to how workers communicate. Friendly, non-threatening interactions help organizations stand out with repeat buyers, which is worth an estimated 10 times the value of their first purchase.<sup>9</sup>
- Stress and low morale can lead to decreased job satisfaction, pushing engagement down and employee turnover up. The top three reasons employees don't like their jobs are related to communication, including a lack of direction from management, poor communication overall, and constant change that is not well communicated.<sup>10</sup>
- Employees who work for managers who lack interpersonal skills costs American companies an estimated \$360 billion every year<sup>9</sup>

18%

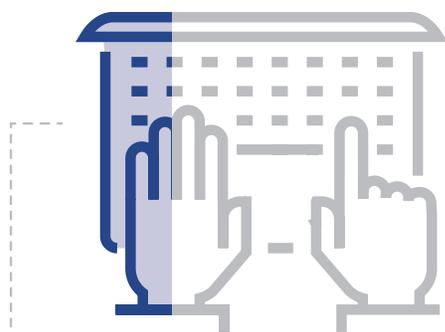
of workers said miscommunication has led to the loss of a sale, **30%** of which were valued between **\$100,000 and \$999,999.**<sup>8</sup>



\$100k +



It's not only the relationships between employees and their bosses that affect job satisfaction and success at work. Interpersonal skills facilitate productive co-worker relationships as well. Frustration and stress increase when employees struggle with conflict, are held up in unproductive meetings, are waiting for others to pass along information—and lack the communication skills that could help get what they need in a way that preserves relationships.



26%

of people feel pressured to respond to work communication outside of work hours.<sup>25</sup>

## How does poor communication happen in an age of hyper-connectivity?

With 24/7 connectivity, poor workplace communication seems implausible. Email, instant messaging, phone calls, texts and face-to-face

interactions offer plenty of opportunities to communicate. However, all that information can become white noise, and many human factors can interfere with our messages.

Here are eight top obstacles to effective workplace communication:

1. **The increasing volume and pace of communication**—Emails, phone calls, meetings and impromptu conversations consume a large portion of the average worker's or leader's time. For roughly half of all employees, the communication onslaught begins on their commute as they check email and make calls.<sup>11</sup> In an expanding world of humans and technology, we receive more information than we can absorb, cutting the time we spend with each communication and making the fundamentals of good communication of increasing importance.
2. **Complexity of communicating**—All the components of communication can be misconstrued—words, body language, voice and listening. (And some communication modes don't include all these clarifying components.)
  - The words we choose can confuse people. Disconnects happen easily when we use jargon or unknowingly select words that mean different things to different people.
  - Tone, inflection and body language can complicate a message. Since most people are only aware of 5 to 15 percent of the communication signals they're sending, they don't know they're confusing a listener.<sup>12</sup> (Text-based communication has an even higher chance of being

misinterpreted since there are no visual cues to begin with.)

- Most people are poor listeners. We jump ahead, interrupt, make assumptions, give unsolicited suggestions and don't ask clarifying questions. Poor listening is credited with a long list of workplace consequences, including low employee morale and productivity, missed sales, unhappy customers and billions of dollars of increased costs and lost profits.<sup>14</sup>

3. **Emotional and physiological disconnects—** Our human brains and bodies can interfere with the transmission and reception of information. Emotions can easily create barriers. Anger, pride, anxiety, fear, jealousy and a host of other emotions can keep us from communicating respectfully, collaborating effectively and being open to what someone is telling us (or that we might be wrong). If we are sleepy, hungry, in pain or depressed, it can easily affect our communication.<sup>15</sup> Only self-awareness can help us move beyond these disconnects.

“The most frequently cited cause of communication barriers is fundamentally human: different communication styles.”<sup>8</sup>

4. **Subjective filters cloud our perception—** Each person has different communication styles, such as personal, analytical, functional or intuitive,<sup>8</sup> as well as underlying desires and

motives that can cause message filtering. For example, a person might withhold information to manage another person's reactions, or a manager who doesn't trust his or her team might guard information rather than being transparent. Many people are unaware of their biases, so overcoming them and learning to be sensitive to the interpretation of others takes intentional effort.

5. **Distraction—**Getting someone's attention can be challenging in a hyper-connected world where people are multitasking.<sup>15</sup> To make matters worse, the order of the emails received can determine what a person works on first. In haste, the messages we send are also often scattered or incomplete, requiring multiple messages and long strings of emails. How can organizations help make workplace communication more focused?
6. **Diversity—**Based on upbringing, culture and belief system, words mean different things to different people. Gender, age, education and cultural background influence how a person interprets language.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, preferences for communication modes vary. Nearly a third of millennials and Generation Xers say they have used instant messaging every day in the past year to communicate with colleagues or clients, while only 12 percent of baby boomers report this level of usage.<sup>5</sup> Bringing all this diversity together in a positive, effective way doesn't happen by accident. Skilled communication is needed to avoid conflict and misunderstanding.

65%

of employees across all generations find face-to-face meetings to be the most effective way to share information.<sup>5</sup>



7. **Evolving communication methods—**

Technology allows us to have fewer meetings, phone calls and face-to-face interactions, but is that helping with the flow of information? Sixty-five percent of employees indicated that face-to-face meetings were the most effective way to share information. That number didn't change across generations, which means employees may feel they're missing out on important information when organizations rely too heavily on text-based communication.<sup>5</sup> It also eliminates the visual and verbal cues that aid understanding. Organizations must continually and carefully consider new methods of communication and determine how to use them well to enhance the flow of information, rather than just add to the noise.

8. **A growing contingent labor pool—**Job flexibility, remote workers, temps, contractors and freelancers complicate workplace communication. A Deloitte survey shows that 37 percent of the global workforce is now mobile, 30 percent of full-time employees now do most

of their work outside their employers' location, and 20 percent of the workforce is made up of contingent labor.<sup>16</sup> These nonstandard, untethered employment arrangements help keep workers happy and give employers access to a larger pool of talent. However, it creates growing challenges for communication and collaboration when your colleagues aren't easily accessible within the building.

Roughly 40 percent of our daily behavior is based on habit.<sup>17</sup> Good or bad, our behaviors (including the way we communicate) are etched into our neural pathways. Only with self-awareness and education can we make a more conscious choice about how we're communicating.

“Effective leadership is a direct result of effective communication. The higher the title or rank, the greater the expectation for effective, influential communication.”<sup>19</sup>

## Strong workplace communication begins with C-level executives

Busy leaders can and should lead the charge to ongoing organization-wide communication training, beginning with an examination of their own communication techniques. Many of the top complaints from employees involve their leaders' communication skills.<sup>18</sup>

At any level, it's hard to make time for reflecting on and improving communication skills. Among top-level professionals, executives largely believe in the benefits of coaching communication skills for their organizations, but they don't take time to improve their own communication. Partly because they don't want to appear vulnerable, but also because they assume their existing skills must be strong because they've secured high ranks and titles.<sup>19</sup>

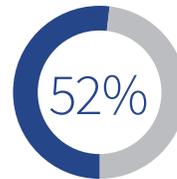
## Top eight complaints about a leader's communication skills<sup>18</sup>



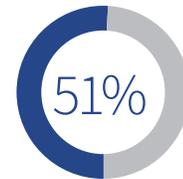
not recognizing employee achievements in a meaningful way



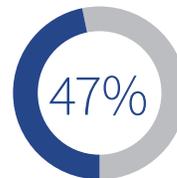
not giving clear directions



not having time to meet with employees



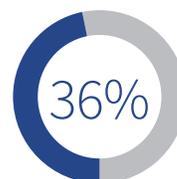
refusing to talk to subordinates



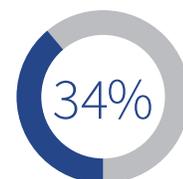
taking credit for other's ideas



not offering constructive criticism



not knowing employees' names



refusing to talk to employees on the phone/in person

“Employees whose managers hold regular meetings with them are almost three times as likely to be engaged as employees whose managers do not hold regular meetings with them.”<sup>21</sup>

## Mid-level managers are in the best position to re-engage employees through more effective communication

Planning, organizing, staffing, leading and controlling—the five functions of management—are all dependent on communication. In fact, successful managers across the United States report the ability to communicate well was identified as the most important management skill. Yet, many employees believe their managers are poor communicators, and managers feel the same way about their employees. Even when messages are understandable, precise and clear, they’re not well received because of the way they were said.<sup>20</sup>

Consistent communication, whether it occurs in person, over the phone or electronically, is connected to higher employee engagement. In fact, employees whose managers hold regular meetings with them are almost three times as likely to be engaged as employees whose managers do not hold regular meetings with them.<sup>21</sup>

Employees also should know whether their performance is where it should be, but 57 percent say they never, rarely or only occasionally know.<sup>22</sup> Continuous communication and feedback not only help with employee engagement and turnover rates—they also help managers seize opportunities, reduce mistakes, streamline meetings, give better instructions, build better relationships and ultimately bring more to their organization’s bottom line.

Like everyone else, managers can easily get into the habit of reacting, which makes their communication with workers less effective. Communication training specifically for managers addresses unique management challenges, helping them interact with workers in the best possible ways.



**57%**  
of employees say they never, rarely or only occasionally know if their performance is where it should be.<sup>22</sup>

## Individual employees with strong communication skills are the backbone of successful businesses

We're often quick to identify customer service and sales occupations as needing strong communication skills, but almost every aspect of business depends on communication.

If communication skills are lacking, interactions between colleagues and leaders can negatively impact productivity and emotions. Employees report their top three most stressful work situations are too many unproductive meetings, tight deadlines and waiting for others to pass along information so they can continue working. Without strong communication skills, they feel powerless to move past these obstacles.<sup>5</sup>

While we could lay the blame for unengaged workers at the feet of managers who communicate poorly, another communication gap leading to stress, frustration, and the loss of morale is caused when an employee is ill-equipped to speak assertively.

## Ongoing communication training is the answer

When workplace communication is functioning well, employees get information in a timely manner, ask the right questions, and understand it completely. Leaders and workers make informed decisions, customers are happy and loyal, and HR professionals skillfully interview and recruit top talent. Employees are engaged and productive, and businesses thrive.

Communication is the thread that connects every interaction within your organization and the cornerstone of business success. Training encourages each person on your team to explore and keep learning.



## About the Author



**Brenda Smyth** is a content creator in the Thought Leadership Department at SkillPath. Drawing from 20-plus years of business and management experience, she flavors her blog posts, eNewsletters and articles with real people and experiences. She combats relaxation by always having at least one side gig and, as a business writer, is drawn to behavior science topics. Her writings have appeared on *Forbes.com* and *Entrepreneur.com*. In 2018, she co-authored *Top Career Tips*, a SkillPath publication.

## About SkillPath

**A leader in learning and development since 1989, SkillPath provides professionals worldwide with strategic and innovative training solutions.**

Our mission is to provide the highest quality training for companies and businesspeople around the world, so they can benefit personally and professionally from the experience.

As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, our revenue funds scholarships for students at Graceland University. We have a long history of partnering with programs that develop individuals' leadership and innovation skills, and our mission aligns with companies that share a goal to invest in mentoring and scholarship opportunities for students and young professionals.

To learn more about this topic or other workplace challenges, download additional free resources at **[es.skillpath.com/resources](https://es.skillpath.com/resources)**.

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