

Education researchers at Pearson teamed up with the Partnership for 21st Century Learning to conduct a review of the research literature on communication skills, including the importance of communication skills in employment and how communication skills can be taught and assessed effectively. What follows is a summary of the most significant findings and implications.

Why Is Communication Important?

Communication skills are central to success in school, work, and life. The P21 Framework for 21st Century Learning includes communication as one of the four Cs, along with collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity. Research indicates that developing strong communication skills is important for a variety of reasons:

- Communication skills are positively associated with improved interpersonal relationships and health outcomes.
- Students with stronger communication skills graduate high school and college at higher rates.
- Effective communication is linked to stronger business partnerships and business–customer relationships.
- Large majorities of business executives report that communication skills are central in growing their organizations and that they seek out employees who are good communicators.

What Communication Skills Do Learners Need?

Communication can be defined as a social process in which information is exchanged in order to convey meaning and achieve desired outcomes. Communication takes many forms, from reading a report to delivering a presentation to exchanging emails with a colleague.

Numerous theoretical frameworks of communication have been proposed. From those frameworks, we identify the following core communication skills:

- **Identifying desired outcomes:** determining desired results or consequences of the communication.
- **Crafting clear messages:** creating messages that clearly convey intended meaning, appropriately utilizing nonlinguistic cues such as body language and visual aids.
- **Modeling others' minds:** recognizing and accounting for others' knowledge, beliefs, dispositions, and emotions.
- **Adhering to conventions:** following the rules or norms of specific disciplines or communicative contexts.

- **Accounting for social and cultural differences:** identifying and accounting for variability in social and cultural norms.
- **Selecting appropriate channels:** utilizing the most appropriate communicative channel.
- **Active listening:** actively attending to communication, withholding judgment, and monitoring and clarifying understanding.
- **Deep reading:** critically analyzing text or speech, monitoring comprehension, drawing inferences, questioning, and reflecting.

Is There a Skills Gap?

While employers report a need for employees who can communicate effectively, there is evidence that graduates could be better prepared to communicate on the job. One study found that nearly three-quarters of employers reported difficulty finding job candidates who possessed requisite communication skills. Another study found that 64 percent of employers said that new graduates possess average or below-average communication skills, compared to approximately 45 percent who said the same of more experienced workers. This aligns with findings of the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress, which found that just over half of eighth- and twelfth-grade students performed at the lowest level of a standardized writing assessment. It appears that at least some students are not developing the communication skills necessary for success in the workplace.

How Can Employers Support Communication Skill Development?

For graduates to succeed in the workforce, they must practice applying their communication skills to the types of communicative tasks they will encounter on the job. Employers can help students obtain this practice by working with educators and policymakers to ensure that communication skills training aligns with the types of communication most critical to career success in their industries. Business leaders can sit on advisory boards of education organizations or partner with schools to establish industry-oriented education programs and, in doing so, can help educators and policymakers better tailor communication-skills training to the realities of the workplace. Employers can also directly engage in communication-skills training by running internship programs for current students, by teaching industry-oriented classes at local schools, or by offering stand-alone educational events for students. Such training efforts should emphasize job-oriented communication and provide opportunities for communication practice and feedback.

Employers additionally can adopt employment practices that reflect the value of communication skills. Recruitment, hiring, and compensation practices should reward candidates who demonstrate strong communication skills, thereby incentivizing the development of communication skills. Additionally, existing employees should be encouraged to develop communication skills through professional development and incentive programs.