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Assertiveness, perceived importance and communication skills among students and young graduates in Slovenia and FYR Macedonia

Jana Žnidaršič, Nada Zupan

ABSTRACT

Employers consider soft skills, especially ability to communicate, as an important competence, which affects employability and performance at work. At the same time they claim that these skills are insufficiently developed among young college graduates. The results of a survey among students and young graduates in two countries, Slovenia and FYR Macedonia, support this claim, even though young are aware of the importance of communication skills and assertiveness. Results also show that those who learn to communicate at work have better developed skills and therefore business communications training should be incorporated in formal education programs and in on-the-job training.

KEY WORDS

business communication, assertiveness, soft skills, developing communication skills

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1 INTRODUCTION

After finishing school and starting to look for a job, young people face the demand of employers for different knowledge and skills needed to get an employment and perform well at work. In the labour market, soft skills (including communication skills) increasingly gain in importance (Robles, 2012), as they are shown to be even more important than technical skills as most jobs involve working in teams and with customers/clients. Dominko (2011) and Javornik (2010) have largely attributed the success of organizations to good communication. Conrad and Newberry (2011) also argue that studies show that the ability to communicate between employees and superiors is of the utmost importance for achieving work performance. Conrad (2014) firmly believes that poor communication practices cause most of the work problems.

Given the fact that modern jobs can be very complex and that there is a considerable rivalry among jobseekers for the best places, well-developed communication skills have a significant impact on the employer's decision when deciding who should get a certain job. Following a review of the literature on employability factors, Andrews and Higson (2008) classified the skills of oral and written communication as the main factors that increase employability.

Nevertheless, numerous researches report that in general, employers are not satisfied with communication skills possessed by young graduates. For example, Archer and Davison (2008) report that employers consistently rank communication skills as the most important, but only on sixteenth place regarding the actual development of these skills by graduates. Many believe that educational institutions (when developing students' soft skills) do not respond adequately to employers' demands (McKinsey, 2014). It seems that education programs providers, as well as students (and other learners), do not pay enough attention to these topics, although they should be included in educational programs (Andrews & Higson, 2008). In particular, communication skills are rarely taught. The common belief is that it is enough if communication is learned spontaneously, in the process of socialization, in the family, between peers and friends, etc. Even at school, communication is a peripheral companion in the

CONTACT INFORMATION:

Jana Žnidaršič / University of Ljubljana / Slovenia / jana.znidarsic@ef.uni-lj.si

Nada Zupan / University of Ljubljana / Slovenia / nada.zupan@ef.uni-lj.si

learning process, since it is only rarely conceived as an independent subject or research field. Even within business schools programs, often too much attention is devoted to theory and abstract knowledge, while lacking of useful knowledge and skills (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002).

Based on our opinion, the first step towards improving the situation is an increase in the level of awareness of the importance of business communication for successful work and increased employability, which is also the main purpose (contribution) of this paper. We are addressing the students' and young graduates' perceived importance of communication skills, as well as their actual development. At the same time, we analyse how assertive they are, since assertiveness is one of the key communication skills (Van Bommel, 2003). We also analyse the connection between assertiveness and the perception of the importance of communication. After a brief review of the literature, we present the results of the research among students and young graduates in Slovenia and Macedonia. The results are followed by the discussion and a set of recommendations on how to: 1) increase students' awareness of the importance of mastering communication skills, 2) how to improve the communication skills of young people, especially in the educational process and at work through HR interventions.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS DEVELOPMENT

Today, young people face many challenges, including unemployment and related employability (ILO, 2013). Employability can be understood as (Hillage & Pollard, 1998): 1) the ability to find the first job, 2) the ability to preserve employment and pass successfully between jobs and roles within the same employer when the requirements for work are changed, and 3) the ability to obtain a new job, if necessary. In this sense, good communication is necessary both in finding a job and working in the organization. This is also confirmed by employers. Within a comprehensive literature review – discussing the importance of communication skills and teamwork through the lenses of different stakeholders (employers and educators) – Tymon (2013) found out that these skills appear virtually in all lists of main skills, which increase employability. This fact gained also international consensus.

Recently, Finch et al. (2016) confirmed that employers consider meta-abilities, including the ability to communicate, as an important component of personality and intelligence, which affects employability and performance at work. It seems that soft skills are becoming more important than expertise (Du-Babcock, 2006). Stevens (2005, p. 3), for example, notes that even high-tech companies from Silicon Valley are increasingly searching for people, who master communication skills, although in principle these companies focus on technological know-how.

The success of business communication depends largely on our knowledge and ability to know how to use different ways of communication, our ability to listen, observe, and the ability to adapt to our interlocutors. Among the most commonly mentioned skills are, for example, active listening, writing of written and oral messages, conducting meetings and business conversations, providing feedback, business negotiations, presentations and public speaking (Bovee & Thill, 2010). With the development of information and communication technology and digitalization, the skills associated with electronic communications and modern devices (Ferrari, 2013; Spitzberger, 2015), such as writing e-mails and short messages, the use of social networks, voice mail, teleconferencing, search and understand information on the web, etc. are becoming more and more important. Moreover, the globalization of business leads to ever-increasing demands for the management of intercultural communication and the knowledge of business etiquette with all international specifics (e.g. Chaney & Martin, 2011; Lazorchak, 2000). Because of all these changes, a set of communication skills is growing and they should be mastered at a higher level of complexity in order to be able to communicate effectively.

Although the importance of skills is increasing, recent graduates, while technologically adept, are deficient in soft skills, necessary for successful interaction with people in day-to-day life (Brody, 2017; Hartman & McCambridge, 2011; Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; Jackson & Chapman, 2012; Meyers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Navarro, 2008; Sahni, 2011). Therefore, in this article, we are interested in the level of mastering and understanding the importance of communication skills among Slovenian and Macedonian students and young graduates. Thus, we have developed the following research questions: RQ1) How do respondents perceive the importance of communication skills?; RQ2) How do respondents evaluate the development of their communication skills, including assertiveness?; RQ3) Do more assertive respondents perceive the importance of business skills and evaluate their skills differently than less assertive students? RQ4) How do demographic characteristics (gender and age) and training in acquiring communication skills influence on actual development of communication skills? RQ5) Are there any differences observed between students/graduates from Slovenia and Macedonia?

¹ Soft skills are defined as an individual's ability to communicate effectively through both written and oral skills, utilizing critical thinking and problem solving skills, and building and maintaining relationships with others (Sahni, 2011).

3 THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE

Empirical research is based on a quantitative methodology, using an online survey as an instrument of research. The survey consists of four sets of closed type of questions. In the first set, respondents evaluated the claims regarding perceived importance of communication skills with a five-level Likert scale (from 1 – Strongly disagree to 5 – Fully agree). The second part of the questionnaire was measuring the degree of assertiveness; for this part a questionnaire developed by Fritchie (1988) is used (see Appendix 1 for items in the questionnaire). The questionnaire measures how often a certain kind of assertive communication is displayed by respondents. In the third part of the questionnaire, respondents assessed the development of their own communication skills using a five-level scale (from 1 – very poorly developed to 5 – very well-developed). This set included 16 skills that are most commonly used in business communication and are also the subject of training in this field (for example: active listening, writing short messages, conducting meetings, business negotiations, intercultural communication etc., see Figure 1 for all the items). The last part of questionnaire included demographic data (gender and age) and questions about how the respondents gained the most communication skills (at school, at home, informally, or at work).

The link with anonymous questionnaire was dispatched among under- and post-graduate students and young graduates (who have already finished university education) in Slovenia and Macedonia based on in-class exercise and through personal contacts. The final sample consists of 83 respondents, 57 from Slovenia and 26 from Macedonia. There were about two thirds of female and one third of male respondents, about half were up to 25 years of age, about a third from 26 to 30, and about 10 % were 31 years or more. The Slovenian and Macedonian samples were very similar with regard to gender, but there were more respondents over 30 years old in the Slovenian sample (9 compared to only 1 in the Macedonian sample).

The obtained data were analysed using descriptive statistics, correlations, t-test and ANOVA for testing differences and calculating correlations between selected variables according to research questions.

4 RESEARCH RESULTS

With regard to our first research question, the respondents' perception of the importance of mastering communication skills was relatively high, with almost a half of responding completely agreeing with the claim that communication skills are very important for young graduates and large majority convinced that they contribute to better employability (Table 1).

Table 1: The perceived importance of communication skills for young graduates

Claim	Claim					Mean	Std. Dev.
	1	2	3	4	5		
For young graduates, mastering business communication skills is very important.	3.6	6.0	4.8	37.3	48.2	4.20	1.03
Mastering business communication skills can help with employment (easier to get a job).	1.2	6.0	14.5	34.9	43.4	4.13	0.96
With the development of the modern communication technologies, the importance of possessing business communication skills fades/ decreases.	13.3	33.7	24.1	19.3	9.6	2.78	1.19
For the business success of an individual - knowledge (professional competence) is more important than communication skills.	6.0	22.9	37.4	25.3	8.4	3.07	1.03
There is higher probability of correct understanding when using electronic communication, instead of interpersonal communication (face to face communication).	14.5	34.9	20.5	24.1	6.0	2.72	1.16

Scale: 1 – I completely disagree to 5-completely agree

Source: Own research

Results regarding the impact of technology on the importance of communication skills are mixed. While about a half of respondents disagree with the statement that new technologies will decrease the importance of communication skills, about a quarter are undecided and a quarter agree. Opinion on whether expertise is more important than the skills of business communication is rather divided between respondents, with the largest group

of undecided and almost equal numbers of agreeing and disagreeing with the statement. With the last statement regarding the probability of correctly understanding of communication, more respondents seem to disagree with the statement that electronic communication would be more accurate than face to face communication.

To answer our second research question, we were first interested in how assertive our respondents are. On the assertiveness test, both Slovenian and Macedonian respondents scored on average 35 points. The distribution of assertiveness levels as they are scored by the author of the questionnaire (Fritchie, 1988) is presented in Table 2. We can see that only 7.2 % of respondents reached the highest level (when we can say that their communication is self-confident and assertive). Almost equal share fall in the second and third categories of assertiveness with 44.6 % who can act assertively in certain situations and 45.8 % of respondents are not consistent in their assertive behaviour. Only two of the respondents from our test fall in the bottom level. Among 20 items in the questionnaire, more than 60 % of respondents can often make product/service complain without being rude to the seller or not being embarrassed when complimenting something (see Appendix 1). Items with the least frequently displayed assertive response were expressing one's opinion without excusing or dominating, speaking calmly in difficult discussions, rejecting a request (e.g. permission to smoke) without bad feelings, and alerting about not being taken seriously without offense and excitement.

Table 2: Levels of assertiveness among respondents

Points	Description of the degree of assertiveness	Number of respondents	% respondents
20-25	Your communication is self-confident and assertive.	6	7.2
26-35	In certain situations, you know how to act assertively, but you need more exercises.	37	44.6
36-50	In your assertive behavior, you are not consistent, and you need to improve this with lots of practice.	38	45.8
50-80	You need a lot of exercises to develop assertiveness.	2	2.4
	Altogether	83	100

Source: Own research

Additionally, respondents also assessed their communication skills that are related to a particular method or activity of business communication (Figure 1). The most developed skills include writing using e-mail, phone communication and writing short messages and these are all skills related to information and communication technology that are in use daily with our respondents. Active listening, team and oral communication, and effective presentations were also self-assessed as rather good. The more business specific skills, such as conducting business talks, leading business meetings and business negotiations, as well as writing of reports were self-evaluated as the worst developed.

With regard to our third research question, the results of the correlation analysis show that those who are more assertive (got lower scores on the test) are more convinced that communication skills are important for young graduates ($r=-0.41$; $p=0.00$) and can help with employment ($r=-0.50$, $p=0.00$). Simultaneously, more assertive respondents also better self-assessed their knowledge regarding active listening ($r=-0.38$; $p=0.00$), oral communication ($r=-0.28$; $p=0.01$), team communication ($r=-0.40$; $p=0.00$), effective presentations ($r=-0.24$; $p=0.04$), public speaking ($r=-0.23$; $p=0.4$), phone communication ($r=-0.33$, $p=0.00$), and nonverbal communication ($r=-0.30$, $p=0.01$).

The fourth part of the analysis deals with the identification of differences in the assessments of the development of communication skills connected with gender, age and previous training in business communication. Regarding gender (t-tests) and age (ANOVA), respondents do not differ in terms of collecting total points of assertiveness or on any single item. There are also no significant differences with regard to respondents' self-evaluation of their communication skills based on gender, and only one difference with regard to age, namely older respondents evaluate cross-cultural communication skills better ($F=3.01$; $p=0.055$).

Figure 1: Development of communication skills (self-assessment)



Source: Own research

We also asked respondents how they mostly learn and develop business communication skills. They had four choices: at school, at home, informally, and at workplace. Most of them responded that they have learned at home (63.1 %), followed by at work (56.1), and about half of them said that they learned business communication in school and through non-formal trainings. The difference between the way communication is learned and assertiveness is only with a few items. Those who learn at school are more often communicating bad news without fear ($r=-0.26$; $p=0.02$) and accept critique constructively ($r=-0.23$; $p=0.03$); those who learn at home are less often asking for help when unsure ($r=-0.24$; $p=0.03$). With regard to communication skills, there are also only a few correlations. Those who learn at work, are better with cross-cultural communication ($r=0.32$, $p=0.00$); writing business letters ($r=0.30$; $p=0.01$), effective presentations ($r=0.30$; $p=0.01$), non-verbal communication ($r=0.29$; $p=0.01$), communicating in a team ($r=0.24$; $p=0.02$), and writing short messages ($r=0.22$; $p=0.04$). Learning business communication at school seems to help learn how to write business letters ($r=0.25$; $p=0.2$).

5 DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEVELOPING ASSERTIVENESS AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

The results of our research on the importance of communication skills for young graduates confirm what many previous studies have shown. Our results speak in favor of the claim that communication is of utmost importance for success in the work environment and that students/young graduates are aware of this. It is encouraging that almost 80 % of respondents expressed complete agreement with the assertion that communication skills are very important for young graduates are also agree that communication skills contribute to better employability.

On the other hand, opinions on the comparison of the importance of expertise and soft skills are quite dispersed and in contrast to the findings of numerous research that give soft skills more important role in comparison with expertise. Klaus (2010), for example, notes that as much as 75% of the long-term success of the individual is based on interpersonal skills and only 25% on technical or expert knowledge. Perhaps the great importance of professional knowledge among our respondents is also recognized as a result of the school system, which is very knowledge-intensive and much less oriented towards skills development.

Based on the self-evaluation of assertiveness and communication skills, our research confirms that there are indeed many possibilities for improvements. It turned out that young people are not sufficiently assertive; only 7.2 % of respondents reached the highest level when we can say that their communication is confident and assertive. Others can act assertively in certain situations or are not consistent in their assertive behavior. Our respondents somewhat better evaluated their communication skills, especially when communication is connected with using information-communication technology, which is part of everyday communication of young people. Skills associated with inter-personal business specific communication (e. g. conducting business talks, meetings and business

negotiations), were assessed significantly lower. Cross-cultural communication also got a relatively low score, especially if we consider that both Slovenian and Macedonian markets are small and companies have to prove themselves in foreign markets.

Of course, positive assessment of one's own skills raises the question of: a) a gap between the self-esteem of possessing communication skills and employers' assessment of the communication skills of their employees, and b) a gap between the actual knowledge of graduates and the necessary/desired knowledge of communication skills – expressed by employers. For example, Oxenbridge and Evesson survey (2012) suggests that employers consider that young employees do not have all the necessary communication skills they would like. A similarly worse assessment of the actual communication skills of young people are also confirmed by Archer and Davison (2008). Even when it comes to the use of technology where young people have undoubted advantage over the elderly, there still exist gaps in the skills that employers expect (Gibson & Sodeman, 2014).

All facts mentioned above draw attention to two challenges, especially for the educational sphere, namely: 1) it is necessary to bridge the gap between the actual knowledge of business communication and the necessary/desired knowledge expected by employers, 2) it is necessary to improve the general level of communication skills, especially assertiveness and those that require interpersonal interaction (meetings, negotiations), because these communication skills are less developed among young people. At the same time, these activities of business communication are most closely related to certain work experience, which means that even after completing formal education, employers should constantly improve the communication skills of their employees. This is also confirmed by our results as those who learn at work evaluate several skills better than others without at work learning.

Our results also point to the fact that business communication skills are not sufficiently taught in schools, both in terms of content (when such content is not sufficiently complex in study programs), as well as in terms of the percentage of students who participate in communication education at all. For example, Business Communication is mostly offered in business schools and faculties only on certain programs or as an optional subject. In designing syllabus (content and teaching), the recommendation of Conrad and Newberry (2012) should be taken into account in order that less attention should be paid to theory and models, and more to the practical skills and skills that employers appreciate. These skills can be successfully developed primarily through training and exercises, such as role playing, simulation and training of specific skills.

Despite uncovering some interesting results regarding assertiveness and business communication skills development among students and young graduates, there are some limitations to our study which may affect the results and ask for further research. The first limitation is the small sample which possibly affected that we could not find significant differences due to demographics. Especially, Macedonian sample was much smaller than Slovenian. We can thus consider our study as a pilot one and a good exercise leading to a broader scale research. It would be interesting to observe differences between students and graduates as the age as a control variable suggests that there might be some differences. Also, it would be important to know how business/social sciences students differ from engineering/science students. In addition, the questionnaire could include variables related to experiences with seeking a job or work experiences. Finally, it would be interesting to observe the problem of managing communication skills through a longitudinal study (also qualitatively) and also include the view of employers, since self-assessment is certainly not reliable enough. Our latest recommendation refers to the possibility of broader international research, where the sample would include more foreigners, from many countries and thus obtaining a nationally varied sample of respondents.

6 CONCLUSIONS

Successful communication between people does not take place automatically, but it is a skill that we must learn to a great extent. Business people also feel that they often communicate "by feel" and they make mistakes. In many cases – just due to bad communication – they achieve the opposite effect, not the one as they wanted and expected. Due to the great importance of mastering communication skills, our research draws attention to the fact that, in terms of developing these skills in the academic environment, much more could be done. It would be sensible to include these topics into the formal school system and include the contents of business communication into different subjects, and not only specific subjects of business communication. It has been shown that the important business communication skills (see our "self-assessment" results), which are less used in everyday life, are less developed. Here, our education systems and on-the-job training programs have a lot of space for improvement.

At the same time, research shows that older people are more skilled in communication skills such as negotiation, business meetings, etc., which points to the importance of experiential knowledge and the importance of on-the-job training. Given the great importance that managers (employers) attach to the management of communication skills, it makes sense, therefore, that companies in their educational programs more and more often include communication topics, even in the introduction programs for new employees.

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Appendix 1: Assertiveness questionnaire results

Assertion	Frequencies in %				Mean	St. Dev.	Mode
	Often	Some times	Rarely	Never			
I speak calmly in difficult discussions.	27.7	41.0	26.5	4.8	2.08	0.858	2
When I am uncertain I ask for help.	43.4	41.0	14.5	1.2	1.73	0.750	1
Although an aggressive person is in the group, I can manage the situation in a peaceful way.	39.8	37.3	20.5	2.4	1.86	0.828	1
In a case of offered exceptional opportunity, I know how to implement my wishes.	34.9	49.4	15.7	0.0	1.81	0.689	2
Even if others disagree with me, I can argue my opinion peacefully.	44.6	41.0	14.5	0.0	1.70	0.711	1
If I believe, that I am not taken seriously, I alert about it without offense and excitement.	22.9	50.6	24.1	2.4	3.60	0.997	2
If someone asks me for permission (e.g. May I smoke?), but I prefer to reject him/her, I do it without bad feeling.	26.5	33.7	34.9	4.8	2.18	0.885	3
I tell my opinion even when I know that it won't be approved.	32.5	42.2	22.9	2.4	1.95	0.810	2
I can regulate cases efficiently and without embarrassment with someone older than me.	41.0	44.6	14.5	0.0	1.73	0.700	2
I can make product/service complain without being rude to the seller.	65.1	21.7	12.0	1.2	1.49	0.755	1
If someone is rude to me or to others I tell him honestly.	33.7	50.6	14.5	1.2	1.78	0.766	2
When I notice a problem, I start solving it immediately, before a major problem happens.	50.6	36.1	12.0	1.2	1.64	0.742	1
If I have to communicate a bad news, I do it calmly and without fear.	28.9	53.0	13.3	4.8	1.94	0.786	2
If I want something, I ask directly.	42.2	44.6	10.8	1.2	1.67	0.767	2
If someone doesn't understand me, I don't feel guilt and I don't degrade him/her.	41.0	43.4	13.3	2.4	1.78	0.812	2
If I don't agree with the opinion of the majority, I anyway tell my standpoint and I don't apologize myself because of this.	38.6	32.5	25.3	3.6	1.95	0.923	1
I accept criticism in good faith.	32.5	51.8	13.3	2.4	1.86	0.735	2
I am not embarrassed when I compliment something.	62.6	22.9	7.2	7.2	1.57	0.952	1
If I am angry I express my opinion without excusing or dominating.	21.7	53.0	22.9	2.4	2.07	0.777	2
If someone doesn't listen to me during my talk, I finish my speech without feeling sorry for myself.	33.7	36.1	24.1	6.0	2.02	0.910	2