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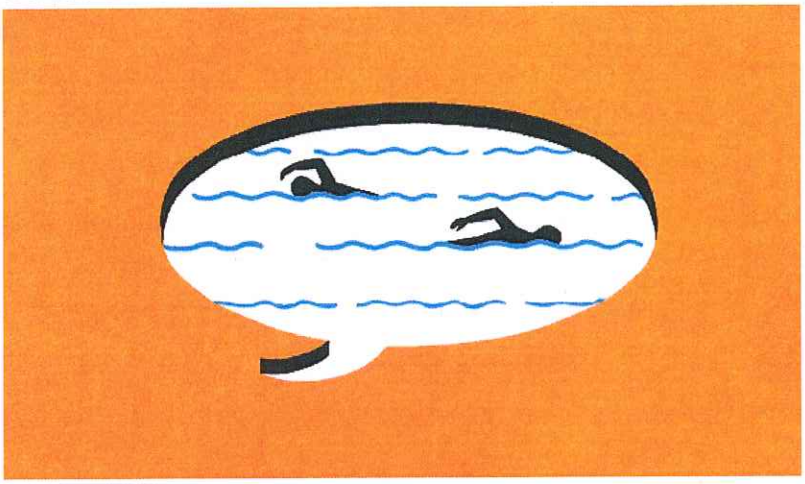
Speaking Skills Top Employer Wish Lists. But Schools Don't Teach Them



—Illustration by James Steinberg

Strong speaking skills are in high demand in the workplace

By Catherine Gewertz

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Employers say they have trouble finding new hires with good oral-communication skills. But relatively few regular public K-12 schools explicitly teach those skills, and even fewer teach them with real-world workplace scenarios.

That mismatch doesn't bode well for young people's job prospects, or for companies searching for new talent.

In survey after survey, employers say they need people who are good communicators. And they say that strong speaking skills are even more important than good reading or writing skills.

In a survey released in August, **executives and hiring managers said good oral communication is the skill they want most from job candidates**. It outranked others that get far more public attention, such as critical thinking, solving complex problems, working in teams, and writing well.

More than 80 percent of the executives and hiring managers surveyed said good verbal skills were very important, but fewer than half said recent college graduates were ready to hit that ball out of the park.

"Students haven't been given much practice with these skills," said Lynn Pasquerella, the president of

Special Report: Literacy for the Workplace

the Association of American Colleges and Universities, which conducted that survey of 500 business executives and 500 hiring managers.

"You can't find a business that doesn't involve oral communication. It shows up everywhere on lists of skills employers value but no place on the lists of skills teachers feel they need to teach," said Erik Palmer, a 20-year teacher who is now a consultant helping schools develop oral-communications programs.

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Teaching What's Not Tested

Reading and writing dominate schools' English/language arts instruction, but some schools also include speaking and listening. Typically, that instruction takes a traditional academic form, in PowerPoint presentations, debate coaching, respectful classroom discussions, or delivering a report in front of the class.

The Common Core State Standards, which guide learning in half the states, include speaking and listening. They envision students expressing themselves clearly, learning to build on one another's ideas in discussion, and posing questions that "elicit elaboration."

By 11th grade, students should be able to "ensure a hearing for a full range of positions" on a topic, resolve contradictions in conversation, and "work with peers to promote civil, democratic discussions."

But relatively few schools emphasize, or even teach, those standards, perhaps in part because they're not generally tested.

The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers and Smarter Balanced exams designed for the common core originally planned to test students' speaking and listening skills, but those plans were downsized as the tests were shortened. Seventeen states currently use those tests, but neither one measures speaking skills, and only Smarter Balanced assesses listening skills.

Is There a School-Workplace Mismatch on Speaking Skills?

Oral communication skills commonly taught in K-12 schools:

- Book report presentations
- PowerPoint presentations
- Debate/argumentation
- Discussion skills (stating an idea, listening respectfully, asking questions)

Oral communication skills employers often cite as important and rare among new hires:

- Constructing a clear, concise message and tailoring it to differing audiences
- Interacting well with a team (discussing ideas respectfully with colleagues, formulating good questions, being prepared for thorough answers)
- Public speaking (being well prepared and confident, making eye contact)
- Receiving feedback (listening and responding well to constructive criticism/guidance)
- Participating respectfully in conversations to resolve conflict

Some schools and teachers are prioritizing oral-communication skills anyway. The Nashville, Tenn., school district's literacy plan uses the **"accountable talk" model designed by the University of Pittsburgh's Institute for Learning**. It develops students' abilities to listen to one another; build on one another's ideas; speak clearly, concisely, and accurately; and support their statements with facts.

"It doesn't matter to us that speaking skills aren't assessed. Being able to communicate clearly in speech, to a variety of audiences, is a 21st century demand on workers, and our students need to be ready," said Monique T. Felder, Nashville's chief academic officer.

Teacher Kelly Gallagher is well known for his teacher-coaching books about reading and writing. But he weaves speaking skills into his instruction at Magnolia High School in Anaheim, Calif. Working a lot in small groups, his students practice responding to one another's comments in ways that elicit more discussion.

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"It's not just, 'Oh, that's nice,' but 'I like what you just said. I also wonder if you've thought about. ...' It's a response that indicates you've listened carefully and it teaches them how to deepen discussion," Gallagher said.

Learning the Hard Way

After 33 years at Magnolia High, Gallagher thinks teaching oral-communication skills is more important than ever. Career preparation is less on his mind, though, than his students' technology-saturated lives.

"A lot of them live in such entertainment bubbles, and they speak to one another digitally, but their face-to-face communication is not as developed as it used to be," he said.

Career preparation is front and center for Melanie Dever as she teaches math and science at Mill Creek Middle School in Dexter, Mich. She infuses oral-communication skills into her classes by requiring students to design a solar-energy product and pitch it to a panel of community members in the style of the "Shark Tank" television show.

The students watch episodes of the show, analyzing what their grown-up counterparts did well—and not so well. They adapt the most effective tactics to their own presentations.

Working as an automotive engineer before switching to teaching, Dever learned the hard way that employers often want different kinds of communication skills than high schools and colleges teach. Her boss wanted shorter, more powerful presentations, for instance. And until she went to business school, no one ever taught her oral skills in a workplace context, such as how to explain weak quarterly results to a board of directors, she said.

When he coaches teachers, Palmer breaks oral-communication instruction into two phases: before you speak and while you speak.

In the first phase, teachers help students learn how to analyze their intended audience, build and organize content tailored to that audience, and add visual aids. In the second, they focus on what he calls the "PVLEGS" of delivery: pose, voice, life, eye contact, gestures, and speed.

Teachers who include oral-communication skills in their instruction typically do so in a context that has nothing to do with work, arguing that the skills are transferable to nonclassroom settings.

The workplace connections are more explicit in adult education or private-sector programs specifically geared to work.

But it's rare for students in high school to learn verbal-communication skills in real-world, workplace-oriented ways. A large Detroit utility company, however, has taken on that task in its internships for high school students.

A Private-Sector Approach

DTE Energy hires about 90 interns every summer as part of its push to cultivate a new generation of talent. Some students shadow construction and line workers in the field, while others are posted in the company's offices.

All interns get training in skills such as résumé writing and PowerPoint. But they also build their spoken-communication chops by training with the public-speaking organization Toastmasters and by learning how to give an "elevator speech," said Tracy DiSanto, the company's senior manager for workforce planning.

Students devise a powerful, short pitch to sell themselves to potential employers, and then they ride up and down in DTE elevators with their company mentor, giving the speech to anyone who happens to join them.

"In real life, you need that 60-second elevator speech to explain who you are," DiSanto said. "That skill is good for later on, when they're networking, or interviewing, to be able to be clear, concise, and confident."

But that kind of instruction is rare in public schools. Verbal communication is often categorized as a "soft skill," which can convey less urgency and importance.

Schools could also be uncertain about which verbal skills employers want most. Should they teach debate-type skills to buttress argumentation skills? What about responding to constructive feedback? Or learning how talking with colleagues on a team is different from talking with a boss?

Company surveys rarely identify or define the specific, concrete communication skills employers need. Matthew T. Hora thinks that's a problem.

"Those lists aren't detailed enough. They don't break it out by mode: oral, digital, nonverbal, written. And they don't break it out by discipline, either," said Hora, a cultural anthropologist who has studied different types of oral communication as an assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Traveling around Wisconsin to study the kinds of verbal interactions that are most important for nurses and petroleum engineers, Hora found differences and commonalities.

Nurses told him that it's crucial for them to know how to listen attentively to patients and families and speak with warmth and empathy, he said. The engineers and nurses both needed to master the skill of translating technical jargon into accessible language, to convey ideas to lay people or to train newcomers, Hora said.

To build the skilled workforce they want, **employers might have to do a better job of "signaling" what they need from job candidates**, a 2017 report by Burning Glass Technologies and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation says.

But schools also need to reach out to businesses.

"Schools can't understand the skills employers need without having a conversation with employers," said Caitlin Codella, the senior director of the foundation's Center for Education and Workforce.

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