Skill Development Priorities for Communications Professionals
Overview

The continued digitalization of the workplace and increased business volatility challenge communications teams to keep pace with the rapid speed of change. A key factor of the function’s success in effectively influencing perceptions and driving behaviors is the skill sets of its teams. To understand the skills that communicators prioritize and seek to grow, Gartner conducts regular research into skill development trends and initiatives in communications departments worldwide.

We based the following insights on over 2,300 responses and 1,600 manager downward responses captured throughout 2018 from more than 75 organizations. We also look at the gap between perceived importance and general level of maturity of skills across all organizations during the year.

Communications leaders reading this report will find comparisons on:

• The importance and maturity of communications skills
• The top priority areas for managers and their direct reports
• Organizational and team factors that best support the modern communicators overall skill set

Key Findings

• Across all communicator skills, managers consistently rank their direct reports lower in terms of maturity than individuals rate themselves.

• Managers and individuals are fairly well-aligned when it comes to which skills have the largest gap between importance and maturity.

• Measurement and business acumen are considered the top priorities in this regard.

• Communicators who believe their team provides support and acts as a resource for solving problems and taking on responsibilities report significantly higher maturities across all skills compared to those who don’t view their teams as positively.

Please refer to the Appendix for definitions of the various skills referred to in this report.
Importance and maturity for communicator skills

Figure 1: Mean Importance and Maturity Scores for Communicator Skills

Although managers and their direct reports are relatively aligned when it comes to assessing the importance of communicator skill sets, they have vastly different opinions about their relative maturity in these same areas.

Managers and direct reports agree on the importance of active listening, but managers generally see their teams as less mature in this skill than the teams rate themselves. Similarly, critical thinking, interpersonal influence and message creation all score significantly higher in perceived maturity among individuals compared to manager evaluations.
Figure 2: Individual and Manager Skills Priority Alignment

Figure 2 shows where overlaps and differences in skill priorities between managers and individuals exist:

- The top right corner of the figure indicates where manager and direct report priorities overlap. **Measurement** and **business acumen** are areas individuals and managers should consider top priorities.

- The figure’s top left corner indicates manager priorities — such as **critical thinking**, **message creation** and **outcomes focus** — and areas individuals consider relatively low in priority.

- The bottom right corner shows items higher in priority for individuals relative to managers. For individuals, skills like **communication coaching and teaching**, **dialogue enablement** and **audience understanding** are seen to have a higher disparity between importance and maturity and have a greater perceived priority than managers give those same skills.
Priority ranking for communicator skills

Figure 3: Communications Skills Priority Rankings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority Rankings</th>
<th>Manager</th>
<th>Individual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Measurement</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Acumen</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes Focus</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Thinking</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message Creation</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Planning</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Coaching and Teaching</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Influence</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience Understanding</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking and Presentation</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue Enablement</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active Listening</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Channel Management</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Manager Priority Significantly Higher Than Individual
Individual Priority Significantly Higher Than Manager

Number of respondents = 2,347 individual responses and 1,628 manager downward assessments
Source: Gartner

When we compare manager and individual priorities, we can see how both groups align across skill categories:

- The top skills, **measurement** and **business acumen**, are the highest priority for individuals and their managers.
- **Channel management** and **active listening** are considered low priority for both groups.
- The biggest variances in priority can be seen in **critical thinking** and **speaking and presentation**, which indicates clear divergence in the views of individuals and their managers.
Environmental team factors for improving communications skills

Figure 4 shows the average lift in perceived maturity across all skills for those communicators showing strong agreement with various team-centric environments, including:

- Having a team that is willing to put in extra effort for a co-worker
- Having a team that serves as a useful resource and enables communicators to perform better in their role
- Having a team with a clear understanding of each member’s responsibilities and roles

For example, having a team that helps one another and puts in extra effort for co-workers increases the likelihood communicators will consider themselves mature across all skills by an average of 50%.

**Figure 4: Top Factors for Improving Communications Skills — Team**

- Provides Help/Extra Effort for Co-Workers: 50%
- Team as a Useful Resource: 40%
- Clear Understanding of Responsibilities and Roles: 16%

Number of respondents = 3,104 individual responses
Source: Gartner
Elements of the team environment have a sizable impact on communicator skills. Communications staff who believe their team is willing to help one another and who view their team as a resource are more likely to rate their own skills more highly. For example:

- Communicators who have a team they believe puts in extra effort for co-workers are 50% more likely to consider themselves mature across all skills than those who view their teams more negatively.
- Likewise, communicators who have a team that serves as a useful resource are more likely to rank themselves mature or very mature in any given skill by 40%.
- Finally, communicators with a clear understanding of team roles also see about a 16% bump when rating their own skill maturity compared to those with a less clear understanding of roles within their team.

Figure 5 shows the average lift in perceived maturity across all skills for communicators, showing strong agreement with various manager-centric environments, including:

- Having a manager who is open to new ideas
- Having a manager who gives fair and accurate informal feedback
- Having a manager who gives fair and accurate formal feedback

For example, having a manager who is consistently open to new ideas increases the likelihood communicators will consider themselves mature across all skills by an average of 34%.

Figure 5: Top Factors for Improving Communications Skills — Manager

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Lift in Perceived Maturity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manager Open to New Ideas</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager Provides Fair/Accurate Informal Feedback</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager Provides Fair/Accurate Formal Feedback</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Number of respondents = 3,104 individual responses
Source: Gartner
Some elements of the managerial relationship greatly increase communicators’ perception of their skill maturity.

Communicators who believe their manager is open to new ideas and provides fair and accurate informal and formal feedback are about 30% more likely to consider themselves mature or very mature across all skills compared to those who do not.

**Figure 6: Percentage of Communicators Indicating Agreement With Environmental Factors**

- **Team Provides Help/Extra Effort for Co-Workers**: 58%
- **Team as a Useful Resource**: 53%
- **Clear Understanding of Responsibilities and Roles**: 42%
- **Manager Open to New Ideas**: 53%
- **Manager Provides Fair/Accurate Informal Feedback**: 51%
- **Manager Provides Fair/Accurate Formal Feedback**: 50%

Number of respondents = 3,104 individual responses  
Source: Gartner
As the previous section shows, having a team that helps one another and puts in the extra effort increases the likelihood communicators will consider themselves mature across all skills, but only around 50% of communicators agree their teams and managers fit the following descriptions:

- Having a team that is willing to put in extra effort for a co-worker
- Having a team that serves as a useful resource and enables communicators to perform better in their role
- Having a team with a clear understanding of each member’s responsibilities and roles
- Having a manager who is open to new ideas
- Having a manager who gives fair and accurate informal feedback
- Having a manager who gives fair and accurate formal feedback

Clearing up team responsibilities and roles is the top improvement opportunity, as only 42% of communicators indicated they have a clear understanding of their team’s responsibilities.
Conclusion

For communicators, we see various skills take on different priorities depending on whom you are asking. Managers and their direct reports often share different ideas on which skills they most need to improve and which skills to make their top priority. Both groups share some trends, however. **Measurement** and **business acumen** come in as top skills for both groups. Additionally, aggregate analysis shows communicators perform best when they feel their work environment provides them with a conducive team structure and an attentive manager. Both environments vastly improve communicators’ perception of their own skill maturity.

About This Research

The communications skills diagnostic measures individual self-assessments and manager downward assessments to assess skill gaps and priority areas for communications staff. The responses are graded on a seven-point scale across 13 different skills developed and informed by Gartner’s best-in-class research.

We based most of this report on responses from 2,347 individuals and 1,628 manager responses gathered from 77 companies during 2018.

For the environmental team factors, data was based on responses from 3,104 individuals and 1,923 manager responses gathered from 107 companies between the beginning of 2017 and late 2018.
Appendix

Skills definitions as used throughout the report:

**Active Listening**: I listen with empathy and seek to understand the intent of and assumptions behind others’ communication.

**Audience Understanding**: I seek and interpret quantitative and qualitative inputs to understand stakeholder motivations and preferences, altering my content and tactics accordingly.

**Business Acumen**: I have an understanding of my company’s “ecosystem,” including the industry, global trends, macroeconomic changes and regulatory changes.

**Channel Management**: I understand channel benefits and options, including emerging media, and select the most beneficial channel mix depending on audience and desired outcome.

**Communication Coaching and Teaching**: I provide superior communications counsel to managers and senior leaders and enable them to lead dialogue with their respective stakeholders.

**Critical Thinking**: I pause to surface the root causes and key obstacles behind clients’ needs and anticipate likely stakeholder reactions, enabling me to offer high-value communication solutions.

**Dialogue Enablement**: I enable dialogue and facilitate peer-to-peer interactions in my communication strategy where appropriate.

**Interpersonal Influence**: I lead business partners, even when I do not have positional authority, to effective communications solutions. I build relationships within and outside of my organization to help me achieve business outcomes.

**Measurement**: I set up quantitative and qualitative metrics at the onset of an initiative. I continuously improve efforts by monitoring behaviors and outcomes that matter to the business.

**Message Creation**: I construct memorable messages that emotionally connect with my audience, and select my style based on the desired stakeholder reaction.

**Outcomes Focus**: I deconstruct desired outcomes to find potential focus areas for communications. I can then prioritize plans/projects and draw principled boundaries about what I will and will not do.

**Project Planning**: I develop schedules and budgets and effectively task people. I can agilely handle complexities in my queue among multiple channels, content creators or agencies.

**Speaking and Presentation**: I deliver compelling verbal communication — even on contentious topics — with confidence and sensitivity.
About Gartner

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