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Investigating Verbal Workplace Communication Behaviors

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Abstract

This two-part study with working adults examines which communication behaviors occur at work and how these communication behaviors are evaluated. Through an analysis of organizational communication publications (articles, organizational case studies, textbooks), the authors identified 343 communication behaviors; sorting analysis reduced this list to 163 verbal communication behaviors used in the workplace. In Study 1, using an online survey, 126 working adults identified which of these communication behaviors had been heard or observed the previous day in the workplace. Forty-four communication behaviors were identified by 50% or more of the participants, indicating their frequent use in the workplace. In Study 2, 331 working adults evaluated their effectiveness on the 44 verbal communication behaviors. Factor analysis reduced that list to 36 verbal workplace communication behaviors composed of four factors: information sharing, relational maintenance, expressing negative emotion, and organizing communication behaviors. The Workplace Communication Behavior Inventory is presented.

Keywords

workplace communication, communication effectiveness, communication competence, verbal communication behaviors

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The shift in blue-collar to white-collar employment, increases in temporary and contingent employment, globalization, and use of technology have put greater emphasis on employees' "interpersonal skills and the ability to collaborate" in teams (Barley & Kunda, 2001, p. 77). As a result, *communication* appears on lists of skills employers seek. Employers expect employees to be effective communicators and rate employees for their communicative performances. It is not surprising, then, that employers rank oral communication skills among the top three most valued applied skills; yet employers rate new graduates at all levels as largely deficient (The Conference Board, 2009). Buried within these rankings and evaluations is an overgeneralized view of communication, as large-scale surveys tend to lump all types of communication tasks into one category of *oral communication* (see, e.g., Maes, Weldy, & Icenogle, 1997). This two-part project was developed to identify what communication behaviors are routinely used at work and how employees evaluate these communication behaviors. Knowing which verbal communication behaviors are routinely used at work would allow training (see, e.g., Brown et al., 2010) and job performance evaluations to be more specifically focused and for communication planning to improve organizational effectiveness (see, e.g., Riedlinger, Gallois, McKay, & Pittam, 2004). Furthermore, knowing which communication behaviors employees use routinely and effectively could be of benefit when supervisors promote employees to take on additional communication tasks, as communication requirements of new job roles may be different (see Kramer & Noland, 1999).

To determine which verbal communication behaviors are commonly used, we first need to establish the relationship between communication skills and work tasks. Communication skills are sought and valued. Skills are what people perform as behaviors (or not); tasks are what people are paid to do. When a communication skill is enacted at work, it then becomes a work task or activity. Such activities may include creating and facilitating relationships, accomplishing work goals, and influencing organizational or unit processes. Examining communication behaviors at work is further complicated because a work activity (e.g., selling a customer a car) may comprise several communication behaviors (e.g., establishing rapport, describing the product, persuading, following up).

Defining Communication Behavior

Communication behaviors are composed of acts, interacts, and double interacts, or sets of them (Fisher, 1980). Behaviors initiate a sequence of actions (or interactions) that work together to make progress (or regress) in reaching conversational goals. Thus, we assert that communication behaviors (a) are inherently social, (b) are used to engage in relationships with other members of the organization, and (c) link micro actions of individuals to macro communication patterns and collective structures. Indeed, communication scholars (e.g., Bisel, 2010) argue that communication is necessary for the organizing of any organization to take place and that we should not assume that more communication is equated with better communication. That is,

communicating at work is an intersubjective sensemaking process (Weick, 1979) as it occurs in a context bound by formal and informal workplace relationships and societal and organizational cultures. As such, employee communication behaviors *are* work, or contribute to the accomplishment of work. For example, Gronn (1983) illustrates that managers' talk with subordinates is the administrative work with which they are charged. Likewise, King (2003) explains, "Talk in organizations drives action within organizations" (p. 1206).

To understand these processes of *communication as work*, we argue that the focus should be on behaviors or tasks, the smallest unit of communication to complete work. We believe that by focusing on communication behavior rather than attitudes about communication behavior, we can move closer to a descriptive, and potentially predictive, model of workplace communication work behavior, which can be used to develop meaningful skill-oriented training and performance evaluation.

Whether implicitly or explicitly, communication behaviors at work are evaluated formally or informally by others and often self-evaluated. Employees are expected to communicate effectively by those they communicate with or on behalf of. After all, individuals are active agents and their behaviors are driven by motivations that are inherently efficacious (Bandura, 2008). Furthermore, social cognitive theory would posit that people acquire new behavior patterns by observing behaviors in others, using these models as guides, and self-correcting their own behavior once enacted on the basis of social feedback and outcome achievement. An important premise of Bandura's conceptualization is that behaviors can be taught, learned, and improved. Like all communication behaviors, communication in organizations is socially learned (e.g., mentoring, shadowing, vicarious learning) and often taught in organizational training programs.

Communication Competence at Work

Communication competence is communication effectiveness. The construct is often modified as relational competence and communicator competence and has attracted considerable attention within the interpersonal communication literature. Three major models of studying competence exist. The first is the trait model, which views competence as relatively enduring personality dispositions. This model presumes that socially competent behavior is largely a function of personal dispositions (e.g., Steffen, Greenwald, & Langmeyer, 1979), often expressed as communication traits, such as empathy and attentiveness (Wiemann, 1977). The second grounds competence as functional communication (see Burleson, 2007). From this perspective, communication competence is composed of message production (e.g., generating verbal messages), message processing (e.g., interpreting communication from others), interaction coordination (e.g., synchronizing communication in interaction with others), and social perception (e.g., using communication to make sense of social reality). An example of this view of competence is evidenced in Downing's (2011) study of call center agents. In this instance, communication competency focuses on *how* agents

speak (e.g., with confidence, at an appropriate volume, with emphasis) rather than what communication behaviors (e.g., listening, asking questions) are required to be competent at work. Similarly, Sharbrough, Simmons, and Cantrill (2006) operationalized communication competency "as a supplemental, related measure of a supervisor's ability to communicate" (p. 326; e.g., "My immediate supervisor has a good command of the language).

The third, and most central to this study, is the interpersonal skill model, which assumes that any communication behavior a person manifests can be carried out repeatedly as underlying motor sequences or interpersonal skills (e.g., McFall, 1982; Spitzberg, 2003). Researchers of this line investigate the development of behavioral repertoire, awareness of social norms, and ability to choose effective behaviors from alternatives (Eisler & Fredericksen, 1980). From this perspective, listening, cueing, and negotiation skills have been considered essential to effective communication (Cushman & Craig, 1976), whereas problem-solving, role-taking, and efficient information processing skills facilitate social competence (Meichehaum et al., 1981).

Arguing that "competence can be viewed as an evaluative judgment of the quality of a skill," Spitzberg (2003, p. 97) successfully shifts the focus of communication behaviors from cognitive intentions and motivation and psychological traits to a more behavioral perspective—the ability to perform as well as knowledge of how to perform (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; Spitzberg & Hurt, 1987). Two frequently cited competence measurements reflect this shift. Communicator Competence Questionnaire (CCQ; Monge, Bachman, Dillard, & Eisenberg, 1982) was one of the first to adapt communication competence to an organizational context. Monge et al. (1982) noted that communication competence involves a "performance-based perspective" and "that the fundamental proposition underlying virtually all communicator competence research is that competent communicators are those who are effective at achieving their goals" (p. 506).

The second instrument, Relational Competence Scale (RCS; Cupach & Spitzberg, 1981), is developed as a situated measure of communicative competence in interpersonal conversation. It incorporates items that measure constructs including empathy, listening, interaction management, and communication anxiety. The RCS stresses the role of contextual factors on communication behaviors, which are overlooked by Monge et al. (1982). However, RCS has other methodological pitfalls. First, the stress on the subjective and evaluative judgment of the communication effectiveness overshadows the observability and measurability of the instrument items, which we believe are two of the main features of communication behaviors. For example, the items "I was a likable person" and "My facial expressions were abnormally blank and restrained" can hardly be self-observed by the communicator in a conversation. Second, the scale only measures if certain skills/abilities exist rather than how certain communication behaviors are performed and to what degree. In short, an oversimplification exists in the operationalization of encoding the competence construct, which decreases the measurability of the items. For example, the item "I was socially skilled" seems to be overly general and could be potentially confusing to the respondents (i.e., socially skilled *at what*?).

In short, intention and efficacy are pivotal in communication at work where conversation among employees and with stakeholders is meant to achieve outcomes with some degree of success. As Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) point out, "It is a contradiction to speak of communication competence without reference to communicative behaviors" (p. 96).

Workplace Communication Behaviors: Foundational Assumptions

This study explores which verbal communication behaviors are used in the workplace and extends the research path of communication competency from an interpersonally focused cognitive approach to a behavioral approach and situates the construct in the work environment. Our approach is guided by five foundational assumptions.

First, verbal workplace communication behaviors should be conceptualized and operationalized as functional. To view communication as functional is to view the communication process as related to and productive of outcomes. Clark and Delia (1979) construct a tripartite schema of objectives that are served by communication. Communication affects individual goals (instrumental objective), relational status or goals (interpersonal objectives), and one's sense of self (identity objective). These objectives, in turn, especially at work, suggest functional outcomes. Second, verbal workplace communication behaviors should be goal-directed, and regarded as intentional, rather than chance or unintentional. As Whiting (1975, p. 4) pointed out, "Whatever processes may be involved in *human* skill learning and performance, the concern is with *intentional* attempts to carry out motor acts, which will bring about predetermined results" (Hargie, 2006, p. 8).

Third, verbal workplace communication behaviors should represent communication as being interactive, involving other people. Not only do we pursue our own goals but we also try to interpret the goals of the other person. Fourth, verbal workplace communication behaviors should be learnable; these behaviors are socially created and collectively agreed upon.

Fifth, verbal workplace communication behaviors should be directly observable. This criterion is in contrast to a trait model of social skills (McFall, 1982), which treats social skills as a general, underlying personality characteristic, or response predisposition that cannot be directly observed. This criterion is important if verbal workplace communication behaviors are to be evaluated. Moreover, evaluation of effectiveness should be arrayed along a continuum, as there is no "minimal condition" threshold whereupon a person or conversation "becomes" competent (Shatz, 1977, p. 33).

Thus, the objective of Study 1 is to identify which verbal workplace communication behaviors are routinely performed at work; the objective of Study 2 is to evaluate how effectively routinely used verbal workplace communication behaviors are performed. Studies of the latter often assume the former without investigating if the behaviors being evaluated are those frequently performed at work. We believe that multiple studies are required so as not to confound these two characteristics of communication at

work. Study 1 describes the methods by which we developed the candidate items and the method by which employees selected them; Study 2 describes the methods by which we examined effectiveness of routinely used verbal workplace communication behaviors.

Study 1

Methods

Procedure. A review of recently published organizational communication undergraduate textbooks and references (e.g., *Handbook of Organizational Communication*) did not result in a list of communication tasks at work for use in a survey design. To create a list of communication behaviors at work, two authors identified 343 communication activities described in the cases of four published case books developed for use in organizational communication courses (Keyton & Shockley-Zalabak, 2006; May, 2006; Peterson, 1994; Sypher, 1997). Cases were read in their entirety; each communication behavior explicitly or implicitly described was noted on a card. These communication behaviors were augmented by what was identified in the textbook and reference literature (including organizational behavior and human resource references). This set was sorted into three stacks: (a) needs further investigation ($N = 27$), (b) not communication-oriented or were obvious repeats ($N = 163$), or (c) retained as communication-oriented ($N = 156$). The stacks were reviewed and six duplicates were removed, resulting in 150 communication behaviors used at work. Next, two authors examined the 150 behaviors to identify if an opposite or reciprocal behavior needed to be added (e.g., *asking for instructions* was included as a reciprocal for *giving instructions*). This process resulted in adding 15 new behaviors and deleting 2 duplicates, resulting in a total of 163 communication tasks.

Three authors discussed each item in the following ways: (a) Is the item a communication activity (rather than cognitive activity)? (b) Does the item have a logical opposite (e.g., giving opinion, asking for opinion)? (c) Can it be stated more simply (e.g., *objecting* for *making objections*)? (d) Is the item a communication activity used at work? Of particular note was the first criterion. For example, the task of *conforming* was determined not to be necessarily communication oriented (e.g., one can conform outside the presence of others; one can conform to others without direct interaction; i.e., assume the same attitude of another without verbally acknowledging it). We found that when we asked "Is the item a communication activity" out loud, it created a conversation along the lines of "how would you communicate that?" We were also mindful to distinguish communication behaviors that required interdependence with another person and communication behaviors that were activities and not a trait. As a check to the development and phrasing of the items, all issues of *Academy of Management Journal* and *Management Communication Quarterly* (1990 to 2009) were reviewed.

In creating the communication behavior list, an effort was made to have the terms in single word form when possible; more important was to include them in the form

that they were likely to be used (e.g., "being combative" was preferred over "combating," "creating small talk" was preferred over "talking informally"). The team also decided not to include communication behaviors described as value judgments. For example, "misrepresenting" is a negative evaluation of how well one represents something and is essentially a value judgment. Differences between verb pairs, such as encouraging/motivating and persuading/influencing, were also discussed. Consulting Levin's (1993) classification of verbs, the team concurred that the first term in each pair is the verb of communication action; the second term is the effect of the verb in the other person. Thus, the first term in these and similar pairs was retained. After four separate meetings devoted to discussion and analysis of the tasks, the final list contained 166 items.

Due to difficulty in describing nonverbal in textual presentations to research participants in an online survey, nonverbal actions were discarded. Theoretically, the choice was made to focus on communication at the verbal message unit; thus, tasks such as gesturing and making eye contact were not included in the final list.

Measurement and participants. Snowball sampling and an online survey were used to reach participants who were currently employed full-time or part-time. One hundred and twenty-six respondents (female = 68.9%, $N = 87$; male = 31.1%, $N = 39$; M age = 35.74, $SD = 11.80$) completed the survey checking off the verbal workplace communication behaviors they heard or observed in the previous day of work. More than 90% of participants had college degrees, most (81.9%) worked full time; more than half (61.9%) did not supervise other employees. Respondents were nearly equally distributed among being in their current position 1 year or less (30.1%), 1 or 2 years (25.7%), 3 to 5 years (25.7%), or 6 years or more (18.6%). Respondents reported being in their current profession 1 year or less (11.5%), 1 or 2 years (20.4%), 3 to 5 years (20.4%), and 6 or more years (47.8%).

The online survey comprised the following: (a) a required institutional review board consent form, (b) 6 screen displays to present the communication behaviors, and (c) requests for personal and occupational demographic items. The stimulus statement presented on each screen of communication behaviors read: "Thinking of your previous day at work and how others communicated, use the checklist and check off all of the behaviors you heard or observed." Data were dichotomous (present or absent): a check indicated that the verbal workplace communication behavior was present.

Results

The number of verbal workplace communication behaviors participants reported as being heard or observed ranged from 5 to 158 ($M = 63.90$, $SD = 34.97$). In order of frequency, the top 10 communication behaviors reported were listening (84.13%), asking questions (81.75%), discussing (76.98%), sharing information (76.19%), agreeing (74.60%), suggesting (74.60%), getting feedback (73.81%), seeking feedback (73.81%), answering questions (71.43%), and explaining (69.84%). Table 1 displays

Table 1. Study 1: 20 Most Frequently Identified Communication Behaviors

Communication behaviors at work	*f*	%
1. Listening	106	84.13
2. Asking questions	103	81.75
3. Discussing	97	76.98
4. Sharing information	96	76.19
5. Agreeing	94	74.60
6. Suggesting	94	74.60
7. Getting feedback	93	73.81
8. Seeking feedback	93	73.81
9. Answering questions	90	71.43
10. Explaining	88	69.84
11. Cooperating	85	67.46
12. Creating small talk	84	66.67
13. Offering help	84	66.67
14. Revealing information	84	66.67
15. Making decisions	82	65.08
16. Seeking information	81	64.29
17. Showing respect	81	64.29
18. Giving feedback	80	63.49
19. Briefing others	79	62.70
20. Planning	79	62.70

the top 20 most frequently reported communication behaviors heard or observed by participants during the previous workday.

Discussion

The focus of Study 1 was identifying communication behaviors that occur at work and then narrowing that list to routinely occurring verbal communication workplace behaviors. A wide review of the organizational literature across different types of resources resulted in more than 300 tasks to consider as verbal communication workplace behaviors; through analytical refinement the list was reduced to 166. The 10 most frequently identified verbal communication workplace behaviors were (in order): listening, asking questions, discussing, sharing information, agreeing, suggesting, getting feedback, seeking feedback, answering questions, and explaining. At least two thirds of the respondents indicated that these communication behaviors were heard or observed the previous day at their workplace. Examining frequency of occurrence by demographic characteristics of respondents, very few significant differences were found[1]; thus, these communication behaviors are not only routinely used but appear

to be commonplace across work environments. By making these identifications, we believe there will be a stronger basis for making claims about what constitutes *communication as work* and help avoid the summative category of *oral communication*.

Study 2

After developing the list of communication at work behaviors in Study 1, we sought to discover if routinely used verbal communication workplace behaviors had an internal structure, which could be used in an initial measure of communication competency at work. Our research questions were the following:

Research Question 1: Are there structural properties to the list of verbal communication workplace behaviors identified in Study 1?

Research Question 2: If so, to what degree are Monge's communicator competence and Spitzberg and Cupach's relational competence correlated with the internal structure of verbal communication workplace behaviors identified in Study 1?

Methods

Participants and procedures. The sample for Study 2 consisted of 331 participants (60.1% female, 33.2% males, 6.6% not identified); two thirds of participants (*general* subsample) were recruited by e-mail broadcast announcements and posted announcements on social networking sites and in public places. Participants recruited in this way were entered into a prize drawing in which they had a one in four chance of winning a $10 gift card to a national retailer (99 participants entered the drawing; 25 were randomly selected using a random numbers table). The remaining one third of the participants (*organizational* sample) received the survey link distributed by their organization. Both sets of participants read and agreed to a consent statement before completing an online survey composed of three scales and demographic questions. Participants reported a mean age of 37.34 years (SD = 11.34, range = 18-64). Participants reported an average of 5.73 years in work experience (SD = 6.97, range = 0.08 to 35.58) and reported working on average 42.84 hours per week (SD = 10.18, range = 4-90). Participants worked full-time (87.6%), and the jobs for which they evaluated their communication were related (76.1%) to their chosen careers. In comparing the subsamples, there were no significant differences in age or tenure; there were no statistical differences in sample proportions with regard to sex or working in their chosen profession. However, participants in the organizational sample worked significantly more hours (M = 45.12, SD = 8.04) than participants from the general sample (M = 41.75, SD = 10.91), and a significantly greater percentage (18%) of the general sample worked part-time as compared to the organizational sample, 4%; $\chi^2(1) = 9.31$, $p = .002$.

Measures. For each of three sets of self-report items, participants were given the prompt: "Thinking of your most recent day at work, use the following statements to evaluate your communication at work." Missing data were replaced with imputed mean scores.

The Communication at Work Efficacy (CWE) measure was developed based on the results of Study 1. We included the 44 communication behaviors that 50% or more Study 1 respondents identified as having observed at their workplace. We further reduced the list to 43, as the communication task revealing information was judged as redundant with sharing information. Respondents were asked to rate themselves on how well they believed they performed these 43 communication behaviors on a 5 point Likert-type scale (excellent = 5, very good = 4, good = 3, fair = 2, poor = 1). Communication Work Efficacy was reliable (alpha = .96; M = 162.68; SD = 22.45; range 86.00 to 215.00).

Monge et al.'s (1982) CCQ is a self-report measure of communicator competence at the workplace. The following adaptations were made to the original scale for the purpose of this study. The original response scale (YES! *YES yes ? no NO* NO!) was replaced with a 7-point semantic differential scale (*strongly agree* = 7, *strongly disagree* = 1). Example items include "typically gets right to the point" and "is a good listener." Two nonverbal items (#7 and #12) were dropped as the present study focuses on verbal communication. The focus of the questions was changed from *my subordinate* to *I* as the present study focuses on self-evaluation. CCQ is composed of two subscales: encoding (6 items, $\alpha = .85$; $M = 34.54$, $SD = 5.22$, range = 6-42) and decoding (4 items, $\alpha = .84$; $M = 23.63$, $SD = 3.64$, range = 4-28). The two subscales were positively and highly correlated ($r = .81$, $p < .01$).

Cupach and Spitzberg's (1981) RCS is a self-report measure of communicative competence in a given conversation. We made the following changes to the original measure for the purpose of this study: Two items (#2 and #22) were dropped because the communicative behaviors they describe are not self-observable. Two items (#5 and #27) were rephrased to capture the behavioral aspect of communication, for example, the item "I was trustworthy" was reworded into "I was able to gain others' trust," as trustworthiness itself is not observable, but the result from acting in a trustworthy way could be observed. The item "I was socially skilled" (#12) was rephrased into "I was an appropriate communicator." The term "socially skilled" seemed to be overly ambiguous and could be potentially confusing to the respondents, as changing it to "appropriate" would make it clearer that the item is referring to whether the communicator is communicating according to norms within this context. Only the self-focused portion of the measure was used in this study. The scale was reliable ($\alpha = .87$; $M = 90.72$, $SD = 11.69$, range = 61-125).

Results

To answer Research Question 1, the 43 items of the Workplace Communication Behavior Inventory (WCBI; see Table 2) were subjected to an exploratory principal components analysis (PCA), as the intended factor structure was unclear (see Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure verified the

sampling adequacy for the analysis, KMO = .951; Bartlet's test of sphericity, $\chi^2(903) = 8927.49$, indicated that correlations between items were sufficiently large for PCA. Scree plots suggested a minimal two-factor solution, but allowed for a four-factor analysis. Using PCA with oblique rotation, two-, three-, and four-factor solutions were computed and analyzed for interpretation. The four-factor solution was interpretable (i.e., eigenvalues were above 1.0; items loaded above .5; if items were cross loaded primary factor loadings exceeded secondary ones by at least .20. The four-factor solution, comprising 34 items, provided the most coherent interpretation, accounting for 40.98% (eigenvalue = 17.62), 5.50% (eigenvalue = 2.36), 4.64% (eigenvalue = 1.99), and 3.59% (eigenvalue = 1.54) of the variance, respectively.

The first factor, *information sharing*, was composed of 20 items ($\alpha = .95$); marker items for this factor include *seeking information* and *answering questions*. The second factor, *relational maintenance*, was composed of 5 items ($\alpha = .78$); marker items included *creating small talk* and *joking*. The third factor, *expressing negative emotion*, was composed of 2 items ($\alpha = .55$); marker items were *expressing frustration* and *complaining*. The fourth factor, *organizing*, was composed of 6 items ($\alpha = .83$); marker items included *scheduling* and *managing others*. Nine items were deleted from further analysis due to low or double loading. The factor structure is shown in Table 2.

Working adults in this sample evaluated four information sharing items as their most effective: showing respect ($M = 4.25$), cooperating ($M = 4.07$), offering help ($M = 4.08$), and sharing information ($M = 4.07$). Participants rated themselves as being least effective on the expressing negative emotion behaviors of complaining ($M = 2.48$) and expressing frustration ($M = 2.82$) and the relational maintenance behaviors of creating small talk ($M = 3.37$), telling stories ($M = 3.38$), and seeking approval ($M = 3.49$).

To answer Research Question 2, the four factors were examined for their relationship to Monge et al.'s (1982) CCQ and Cupach and Spitzberg's (1981) RCS (see Table 3). The *information sharing* subscale was moderately and positively related to Monge et al.'s encoding ($r = .358$, $p \leq .01$) and decoding ($r = .415$, $p \leq .01$) subscales, and slightly and positively to Cupach and Spitzberg's RCS ($r = .281$, $p \leq .01$). The *relational maintenance* subscale was slightly and positively correlated to Monge et al.'s encoding ($r = .223$, $p \leq .01$) and decoding ($r = .256$, $p \leq .01$) subscales, and only slightly to Cupach and Spitzberg's RCS ($r = .164$, $p = .01$). The *expressing negative emotion* subscale was not correlated to Monge et al.'s encoding or decoding or Cupach and Spitzberg's RCS. The *organizing* factor was slightly and positively correlated to Monge et al.'s encoding ($r = .350$, $p \leq .01$) and decoding ($r = .313$, $p \leq .01$) and Cupach and Spitzberg's RCS ($r = .255$, $p \leq .05$).

Discussion

The objectives of Study 2 built on the routinely used verbal communication behaviors identified in Study 1. The extracted factors, *information sharing, relational maintenance, expressing negative emotion*, and *organizing*, were distinct and structurally sound and provide the basis for evaluating how employees communicate at work.

Table 2. Study 2 Factor Structure of Workplace Communication Behavior Inventory Items

	Factor 1: Information Sharing	Factor 2: Relational Maintenance	Factor 3: Expressing Negative Emotion	Factor 4: Organizing
1. Creating relationships		.471		
2. Scheduling				.767
3. Seeking approval				.585
4. Managing others				.672
5. Creating small talk		.698		
6. Questioning[a]				
7. Expressing frustration			.650	
8. Joking		.754		
9. Accommodating others[a]				
10. Supporting others[a]				
11. Briefing others[a]				
12. Complaining			.594	
13. Making decisions				.666
14. Resolving problems				.628
15. Greeting others[a]				
16. Giving opinions[a]				
17. Explaining	.561			
18. Planning				.610
19. Listening	.512			
20. Addressing others	.568			
21. Giving feedback	.575			
22. Problem solving	.504			
23. Asking questions	.680			
24. Getting feedback	.521			
25. Cooperating	.584			
26. Thanking[a]				
27. Giving examples	.506			
28. Creating clarity[a]				
29. Asking for opinions	.697			
30. Using humor		.676		
31. Agreeing[a]				
32. Seeking information	.699			
33. Suggesting	.661			
34. Discussing	.680			
35. Giving advice[a]				
36. Offering help	.768			
37. Answering questions	.779			
38. Telling stories		.510		
39. Following directions	.608			
40. Showing respect	.747			
41. Sharing information	.791			
42. Seeking feedback	.636			
43. Evaluating information	.646			
44. Revealing information[b]				

a. Dropped from further analysis.
b. Not included in Study 2; judged as redundant with Item 41 (sharing information).

Table 3. Study 2 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations With Workplace Communication Behavior Inventory (WCBI)

	WCBI Info Sharing	WCBI Relational Maintenance	WCBI Express Negative Emotion	WCBI Organizing	Monge Encoding	Monge Decoding	Relational Competence
Info Sharing	(.95)	.563**	.583**	.730**	.362**	.430**	.162**
Relational Maintenance		(.73)	.482**	.451**	.224**	.270**	.058
Express Negative Emotion			(.75)	.421**	.155**	.236**	-.020
Organizing				(.84)	.349**	.327**	.130*

Note. Alphas on diagonal in parentheses.
**$p \leq .01$. *$p \leq .05$.

Scale items were purposely left as short descriptive phrases rather than embedding the behaviors in attitudinal expressions (i.e., At work, I believe I am effective at giving feedback).

By specifying the work context, we expected that some type of task-related communication would emerge (i.e., information sharing communication behaviors). Likewise, we had a general expectation that a relational factor would emerge, as organizational communication scholars have long recognized the role of expressive ties. As Mumby and Stohl (1996) argue, these "develop quite naturally in organization and . . . strongly influence production standards, performance norms, goals, interpretations of managerial and employee communication, and definitions and standards of effectiveness" (p. 60). However, the communicative expression of relational maintenance is a departure from existing competence measures. The appearance of this factor in this study confirms other recent studies (Barkse, 2009; Pullin, 2010) that have demonstrated the importance of positive social-emotional communication in overcoming communication problems (especially in creating work relationships). Too frequently, relationally oriented communication at work is eschewed over task-related communication. Our findings continue to document their importance.

Emergence of the expressing negative emotion subscale and the organizing subscale suggests that the construct of workplace communication behaviors is broader in scope than existing measures. Competent communicators should be able to express displeasure and frustration in an effective manner. Admittedly, a two-item factor is not strong, but high loadings of these items and the relative inattention to expressing negativity at work in other competence measures suggest that these types of communication behaviors deserve another look. As these results suggest, competent communicators should also be able to use communication behaviors to organize their work processes. Ultimately, the subscales of the Inventory suggest greater dimensionality to competence measures.

Correlations among the extracted WCBI factors were generally moderately and positively correlated. The only relationship approaching a stronger connection was that between information sharing and organizing, suggesting the centrality of

task-oriented communication behaviors (e.g., asking questions and opinions) to other types of communication behaviors that direct work activities (e.g., planning, managing others). Correlations among the WCBI factors and Monge et al.'s encoding and decoding were positive and weak to moderate. Correlations with decoding were slightly higher than those of encoding. This is not surprising given that Monge et al.'s (1982) original conceptualization of decoding included the more directive actions of, for example, listening and responding, whereas the conceptualization of encoding was conceptualized as performance quality (e.g., expressing clearly). Correlations among the WCBI factors and relational competence were positive and weak or null. These results likely occurred as the RCS was developed for the interpersonal context; Spitzberg (1983) argues that what is competence in one context may not be in another.

Interestingly, across person (sex, age) and workplace (employment status, job relatedness to preferred career, hours worked per week, job tenure) demographics, only a few statistically significant differences were found, suggesting that features of the interaction context may bear responsibility for variability for the performance and evaluation of frequently used verbal communication workplace behaviors. This finding deserves further exploration with studies comparing samples in professions as well as organizations.

The WCBI is beneficial because the focus is on communication behavior at work (e.g., asking for opinions, asking for questions) rather than attitudes about communication at work; furthermore, the items were developed and refined with two samples of working adults. The WCBI was developed specifically for the work context, which is an improvement over Cupach and Spitzberg's (1981) RCS (intended for interpersonal interactions). Furthermore, the Inventory specifies which communication behaviors are to be evaluated. Knowing that an employee is skilled at using small talk and creating relationships with other employees is more precise than knowing an employee "is easy to talk to" (Monge et al., 1982). The items comprising the Inventory are observable communication behaviors. Thus, the use of the Inventory could heighten the effectiveness of employee coaching or training as well as performance evaluation.

Limitations and Future Research

Three avenues of future research stem from the limitations of these studies. First, to make the compelling argument about the importance of communication in work environments, our efforts would be strengthened by examining the relationship between the Inventory and work performance measures. These types of employee evaluations are difficult to obtain but possible (see Payne, 2005). Second, we recommend that the Inventory be tested in employee-employee and employee-client communication contexts. Ideally, communication competence at work should not differ in these two contexts but may based on an organization's cultural values and norms. Third, frequency and effectiveness data should be captured from the same sample. As demonstrated by results from our two studies, frequently used communication behaviors may not be employees' most effective (see Table 4). We hope that the WCBI, which is not restricted by level (i.e., supervisor, subordinate) or job type, will

Table 4. Comparisons of Most Important to Most Effective Communication Behaviors at Work

Communication Behavior	Importance Ranking Study 1	Effectiveness Ranking Study 2
Listening	1st	19th
Asking questions	2nd	15th
Discussing	3rd	16th
Sharing information	4th	8th
Agreeing	5th	34th
Suggesting	6th	20th
Getting feedback	7th	33rd
Seeking feedback	8th	37th
Answering questions	9th	6th
Explaining	10th	13th
Communication Behavior	**Effectiveness Ranking Study 2**	**Importance Ranking Study 1**
Thanking	1st tie	23rd
Showing respect	1st tie	17th
Cooperating	3rd	11th
Greeting others	4th	33rd
Offering help	5th	13th
Answering questions	6th	9th
Following directions	7th	26th
Sharing information	8th	4th
Supporting others	9th	32nd
Evaluating information	10th	45th

be viewed as a grounded and efficient way for operationalizing communication competency at work. Retaining a focus on verbal communication behaviors routinely used at work situates the WCBI apart from other operationalizations of workplace communication competence.

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Note

1. Few demographic differences were found. Differences due to respondents' self-reported sex were observed on 4 of the 166 communication behaviors. Differences between full-time and

part-time employment were observed on 5, and differences due to respondent education level were observed on 8 of the 166 communication behaviors. No differences were found on any of the 166 between those participants who had supervisory responsibilities and those who did not.

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