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How can we make our research more relevant? Bridging the Gap Between Workplace Changes and Business Communication Research

HOW CAN WE MAKE OUR RESEARCH MORE RELEVANT?

Bridging the Gap Between Workplace Changes and Business Communication Research

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Some management scholars argue that academic literature is becoming less and less relevant to practicing managers. Thomas posits that the same will be true for business communication if scholars do not venture into the field and connect with those who "do" business communication. As organizations shift from manufacturing to service jobs, expand their operations overseas, manage "talent" more strategically, and alter traditional bureaucratic structures, business communication is becoming increasingly intercultural, virtual, horizontal, strategic, and change focused. Yet it is not clear that the business communication literature is keeping pace. Examples of Thomas's work in interagency collaboration, electronic mail overload, and strategic communication demonstrate possibilities for gaining access and studying communication dilemmas that face practicing managers. Bridging the academic-practitioner gap is a way to build face validity in the business world as well as help academics to develop better theories about workplace communication.

Keywords: *globalization; electronic communication; intercultural communication; horizontal communication; strategic communication; change communication; interagency collaboration*

> Significant research is an outcome of investigator involvement in the physical and social world of organizations. The implications for scholars are clear: Make contacts. Leave your office door open. Look for wide exposure and diverse experiences. Go into organizations. . . . Listen to managers. Activity and exposure are important because significant research often results from chance convergence of ideas and activities from several sources.
>
> Campbell, Daft, & Hulin (1982, p. 107)

Over the years, various academics have raised concerns about the gap between organizational research and business practice (Rynes, Bartunek, & Daft, 2001; Smeltzer, 1993; Suchan & Charles, 2006; Thomas & Tymon, 1982). In fact, several studies have shown that managers rarely

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turn to academics or research to inform their practice (Abrahamson, 1996; Mowday, 1997, Rynes, Colbert, & Brown, 2002; Smeltzer, 1993).

In 1992, Larry Smeltzer addressed the academic-practitioner gap in business communication when he gave the Association for Business Communication's (ABC) first Outstanding Researcher plenary speech. After querying practitioners and academics about their preference for research knowledge and then analyzing articles during a 15-year span from *Journal of Business Communication*, he found limited overlap in research topics. Among the three sources—practitioners, academics, and *JBC*—written communication was the only common topic. Smeltzer concluded that academics needed to become intimately aware of the needs of business people or risk becoming irrelevant.

You may wonder why this gap exists. Some say it's because managers and researchers work from very different frames of reference. Others say it's because academics and practitioners have different purposes and operate within different discourse communities (Johns, 1993; Rynes et al., 2001; Shrivastava & Mitroff, 1984). Whatever the reason, if academics talk only to themselves, they risk becoming inwardly focused and out of touch with the business world (Gergen, 1995; Zimbardo, 2002). In a world that seems increasingly volatile, it seems more important than ever that academics attempt to bridge this gap by venturing out into organizations and collaborating with practitioners. The reasons for this seem clear. First, business people can benefit from the knowledge that academics have to share. Second, academics are more likely to have a stronger impact in their classrooms if they demonstrate an understanding of the contemporary and future dilemmas in the world of work. And third, bridging this gap is likely to increase our credibility with the business community.

The purpose of this article is to provide a brief overview of forces that are shaping the environment, including the changes that are manifesting themselves in the workplace. I primarily draw from two recent sources for this overview: Friedman's (2005) *The World is Flat* and O'Toole and Lawler's (2006) *The New American Workplace*. I then demonstrate the implications of these forces for business communication research, including examples from studies I have conducted over the past years.

THREE ERAS OF GLOBALIZATION

Friedman (2005) claims that globalization has reached a tipping point and is moving to a new level. In his often-cited book, *The World is Flat*, he describes the progression of Globalization 1.0 to Globalization 3.0.

According to Friedman, Globalization 1.0 was the first era of globalization. It began in 1492, when Columbus opened trade between the Old World and the New World, and lasted until about 1800. Wind power, steam power, and brawn propelled this era. Often inspired by religion or imperialism, countries and governments crossed boundaries and globalized. As Friedman says, “it shrank the world from a size large to a size medium” (p. 9).

The second era, Globalization 2.0, lasted roughly from 1800 to 2000 and was fueled by technological changes such as railroads, steam engines, the telegraph, PCs, satellites, and early versions of the World Wide Web. During this time, hundreds of millions of dollars were invested in hardware and infrastructure to connect institutions throughout the world. E-mail, which only became widespread in the mid-1990s, transformed the way we communicated with one another. In the late 1990s, the Internet and e-commerce took off. The core driver of change in this period was the multinational company. Goods and information were more easily transported around the globe and integration moved to a new level. In Friedman’s words, “this era shrank the world from a size medium to a size small” (p. 9).

In about the year 2000, Friedman argues, we entered a whole new era, Globalization 3.0, where individuals’ intellectual work could be delivered from anywhere. Work can now be disaggregated, delivered, distributed, produced, and put back together again. According to Friedman,

> it is now possible for more people than ever to collaborate and compete in real time with more other people on more different kinds of work from more different corners of the planet on more equal footing than at any previous time in the history of the world. (p. 8)

This shift to 3.0 gave individuals a whole new freedom for the way they work. In essence, the global economy has matured to a point where goods and information can flow quite easily throughout the world. According to Friedman, “Globalization 3.0 is shrinking the world from a size small to a size tiny and flattening the playing field at the same time” (p. 10). Friedman says that what’s different about the three eras is that 1.0 is about *countries* globalizing, 2.0 is about *companies* globalizing, and 3.0 is about *individuals* worldwide globalizing.

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This flattened playing field is causing remarkable changes in the workplace. Much of this change has been captured in O'Toole and Lawler's (2006) update to their well-known 1972 study, "Work in America." Their comprehensive study shows how American organizations have evolved in the past 30 years and the resulting shifts in the nature of work itself.

HOW ORGANIZATIONS ARE CHANGING

Lawler and O'Toole begin their argument in *The New American Workplace* by demonstrating the shift to a global economy. "The US," they claim, "has chosen a national strategy of being a leader in the fast-paced, unpredictable, and unsettling global process of economic and industrial transformation" (p. 5). In light of these shifts, organizations are moving from strategies that kept them competitive among American corporations to strategies that will keep them competitive in a more intense global competitive economy.

The first two columns in Table 1 list themes derived from the two books: *The World Is Flat* and *The New American Workplace*. The third column is my interpretation of communication-related changes that seem to be occuring in response to these global and workplace changes.

Although numerous changes have occurred in business organizations, column 1 lists five organizational changes that are frequently discussed in the management literature:

- In the past 30 years, American organizations have made a significant shift from manufacturing-related industries to service-related industries. Today, 80% of American jobs are service related. Nowhere is this more evident than in IBM. IBM, which was once known for its product businesses, has increasingly become more global and now focuses on technical services. In 2005, they exited the PC business altogether—a business it once dominated—selling it to a Chinese company. A result of

Table 1. The New World of Work in Globalization 3.0

Organizational Changes	*Changes in the Work Itself*	*Communication-Related Changes*
Manufacturing to service	Fewer hierarchies and rules	Virtual relationships
Globalization	Reduced supervision	Electronic mail
Focus on human capital (talent management)	Increased use of information technology	Intercultural communication
Complex organizational structures	Transnational work	Horizontal communication (intra- and interorganizational)
Corporate ownership and organizational performance	Integration of work across stovepipes	Strategic communication
	Constant change	Change communication

this change is a business that is more knowledge intense and a workforce that is more professional, better compensated, and engaged in more interesting work.

- More American corporations are expanding beyond the domestic, U.S. economy and entering the global economy. Companies such as Coca-Cola, Procter & Gamble, IBM, and Citibank all have global brands and do much of their business offshore. Today, almost 28% of employees of major U.S. corporations work overseas.
- Increasingly, human capital is the name of the game for high-performing companies. American corporations know that to be successful, they must attract, retain, and develop highly skilled managers, professionals, and technicians. In the field of human resources, the competition for the best employees is known as the "war for talent."
- Organizations are increasingly eliminating slow, siloed, bureaucratic command and control-type structures, replacing them with ever-increasingly complex organizations. Organization leaders are open-sourcing, outsourcing, in-sourcing, and supply chaining. They know that to be competitive in the global economy, they must experiment with new ways of organizing their businesses.
- A relentless pace of change characterizes today's workplace. O'Toole and Lawler claim that the change is fueled by the changing nature of corporate ownership, ownership that has increasingly shifted from individuals to shareholders managed by high-powered mutual and retirement funds that exert greater pressure for performance. As a relentless demand for strong profits increases, so does the turnover in CEOs. And with each change of CEOs usually comes a host of organizational changes.

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HOW WORK IS CHANGING

As managers move to adapt their organizations to global shifts, the fundamental nature of work is evolving. Here are a few of the changes in the workplace that are taking place:

- Work is becoming less hierarchical. Delayering of corporations in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s has reduced the number of managers and increased the use of self-management teams. These reforms break down functional silos and increase lateral work.
- Work requires less supervision and fewer rules. As workers take on more responsibility, more decisions are made at lower levels.
- Contributing to this horizontal focus is the increased use of technology. Through the use of the World Wide Web, e-mail, shareware, and video teleconferencing, workers are now able to coordinate their work like never before.
- More work is transcending national boundaries. As global corporate infrastructures create boundaryless organizations, work spans the globe to expedite the delivery and reduce the cost of products and services. For example, a laptop might be ordered from a Web site, the order immediately transmitted to China managed by a Taiwanese firm that supplies computers to several large manufacturers, and the final assembly completed in China, then shipped via FedEx to your home.
- Work is becoming more integrated across stovepipes. As work becomes more customer focused, teams are formed across functions to create better designs and work processes that are more efficient.
- Work is increasingly characterized by its constant level of change. Fewer jobs are considered routine and repetitive. Rather, workers are learning to be more flexible and adaptable.

HOW WORKPLACE COMMUNICATION IS AFFECTED BY THESE CHANGES

Changes in the environment and the workplace form the context for new ways of communicating. I argue that as work is transforming, so is communication transforming. Here are but a few examples:

- *Virtual relationships*. Virtual work is done by employees situated in distant locations who must collaborate using technology across space and time to accomplish organizational tasks (Lipnack & Stamps, 2000). Virtual workers may seldom or never see each other face to face, yet they are bound by the same performance measures as workers who are colocated. Most virtual workers conduct knowledge-based tasks such as new product development, organizational process improvement, or solutions to customer-based problems (Kirkman, Rosen, Tesluk, & Gibson, 2004). Some of the communication research that is being conducted about successful virtual teams includes the importance of trust (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999), managing conflict (Montoya-Weiss, Massey, & Song, 2001), and the critical role of a psychologically safe communication climate (Gibson & Gibbs, 2006). As organizational work becomes increasingly global and the pace of technology quickens, no doubt virtual relations will increase, and organizations will want to know how to make theses relationships more effective.
- *Electronic communication*. Some studies show that e-mail and instant messaging now surpass face-to-face communication. Because of e-mail's and instant messaging's relatively low cost, convenience, availability, and speed, office workers from CEOs to frontline workers increasingly use these new technologies. Turner and Reinsch (2007) show how employees not only use these new technologies but how they also "multicommunicate"—a form of multitasking that involves multiple, simultaneous conversations with coworkers. The work of Turner and Reinsch challenges traditional notions of communication competence and asks intriguing questions, such as the following: Do individuals differ in their willingness to multicommunicate? To what extent is a person able to multicommunicate effectively, and what are the consequences of multicommuticating? The adoption of new electronic media will likely be influenced by the characteristics of the new "wired" generation that is entering the workplace. What do we know about their media preferences and how their competence with electronic media will change the way we communicate at work?
- *Intercultural communication*. As work is disaggregated and shifted around the world, work teams are becoming more culturally diverse. This means that workers need to develop sensitivities about communicating with superiors, coworkers, suppliers, and customers from countries all over the world (Charles, 2007). This is one area, in particular, where researchers in our field excel. Examples include Varner's (2000) conceptual model of intercultural business communication and Nickerson's (2000) study of Dutch writers in multinational corporations. If Friedman's (2005) forecast of business practices is accurate, intercultural communication competence will be vitally important.
- *Horizontal communication*. As silos disintegrate, lateral communication is paramount to coordination and collaboration. Traditional communication

up and down the chain of command is insufficient in today's economy. In knowledge-based companies, employees are increasingly responsible for integrating and sharing information and knowledge to increase effectiveness and efficiency (Brafman & Beckstrom, 2006; Gerzon, 2006). An example of effective lateral communication can be found in Jack Welch's "boundaryless organization." Throughout the years, Welch was able to reduce bureaucratic red tape at General Electric, to increase cycle time, and to foster innovation by forcing employees to interact in new ways across traditional organizational boundaries. Working across vertical boundaries allowed decisions to be made at the lowest level. Working across horizontal boundaries allowed products and services to get to market in record time. Working across external boundaries allowed employees to anticipate customers' needs. And finally, working across geographic boundaries allowed business units to operate more effectively across countries (Ashkenas, Ulrich, Jick, & Kerr, 1995). Working across boundaries offers many challenges for workers. How will workers translate specialized languages across boundaries? Will a new language be developed as functions integrate? How will organizations learn to share information that was previously kept close? When should information not be shared? The integration of work across boundaries will certainly increase organizational complexity and create challenges as well as opportunities for those in the workplace. Business communication scholars are positioned well to understand these complexities and develop ways to better handle the workplace of the future.

As silos disintegrate, lateral communication is paramount to coordination and collaboration. Traditional communication up and down the chain of command is insufficient in today's economy.

- *Strategic communication*. As CEOs and top executives have become more focused on performance, all functions—including communication—must demonstrate their value added to the bottom line. With less reliance on static rules and hierarchies, leaders will need to continually evolve their corporate strategy and find ways to communicate vision, reframe organizational purpose, and create meaning for internal and external stakeholders (Thomas, 2007). Likewise, executives must learn to shape an organization's communication system to fit new corporate strategies. Strategic communication forces top management to take a strategic, big picture view of communication as it relates to an organization's mission and purpose, then consider processes, plans, messages, and, finally tactics that are aligned with the CEO's direction.

- *Change communication*. Rapid change is viewed as an imperative in the global, competitive marketplace. Change experts who offer advice about the successful design and implementation of organizational change frequently mention the importance of well-thought-out communication strategies (e.g., Kotter, 1996). Nevertheless, few studies have targeted communication as it relates to large-scale change (Lewis, Schmisseur, Stephens, & Weir, 2006).

These are a few of the emerging areas related to marketplace shifts that call for a new perspective on business communication research and have inspired my own research over the past several years.

EXAMPLES FROM MY RESEARCH

This article began with a quote from Campbell et al. (1982) advising researchers to improve the relevance of their work by getting involved in practitioners' everyday phenomena. During the course of my career as a reseacher, I have followed that advice by going into organizations and interacting with practicing managers. This approach has allowed me some successes in helping to bridge the academic-practitioner gap. I offer these examples as illustrations of a possible approach for those who do research in business communication.

In the following section, I outline three of my most recent projects that demonstrate this research strategy. This first project, a study on interagency collaboration, was conducted on organizations involved with homeland security. The second study, on e-mail overload, was conducted with program managers in an Army acquisition unit. And the third ongoing study involves the use of strategic communication in the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD). Each of these projects was inspired by current dilemmas that managers are facing as they struggle to adapt to the shifting global environment and workplace changes. For each project, I'll briefly explain the impetus for the project, my collaborators, research methods, and results.

Interagency Collaboration

In the face of increased environmental complexity, organizations adapt by becoming more interdependent (Galbraith, 2002). To work well under these conditions, organizations must make intraorganizational and

Collaborative capacity, we argue, must be developed for effective response to natural disasters and terrorist threats.

interorganizational boundaries more permeable. An example of failed interorganizational interdependence (collaboration) resulted in tragic losses when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in the United States. For this reason, the U.S. government has become increasingly interested in understanding ways to make government agencies more "boundaryless." This interest has translated into research grants—one of which I received to fund a study on interagency collaboration. The purpose of the project was to investigate ways that managers from multiple agencies work together to achieve a common goal. Although I was particularly interested in the communication aspects of the dilemma, I knew that a richer view of the problem space would come from collaborating with colleagues outside my disciplinary expertise. In a partnership with two colleagues, whose expertise is organizational theory and organizational behavior, we developed a workshop with senior homeland security managers—police departments, fire departments, the Center for Disease Control, the Coast Guard, and other such organizations—where we collected stories about successful and unsuccessful attempts at interagency collaboration. After analyzing the data from the workshop, we developed a conceptual model of interagency collaboration capacity (Hocevar, Thomas, & Jansen, 2006). Collaborative capacity, we argue, must be developed for effective response to natural disasters and terrorist threats. Our model identifies key factors that enable or thwart an organization's capacity to collaborate. Some of the enablers include having a "felt need" to collaborate, establishing a common goal, developing social capital, building mechanisms for effective communication and information exchange, and creating strong leadership support and commitment. Barriers include a lack of familiarity with the participating organizations, an inability to communicate across organizational boundaries, competition for resources, and territoriality. The second phase of our work has allowed us to develop a diagnostic tool for measuring an organization's collaborative capacity. Although the tool can be used for measurement, more importantly, it provides a framework, language, and way of thinking about collaboration among various agencies. Thus, it serves as a developmental tool for organizations that want to enhance their collaborative capabilitites (Thomas, Hocevar, & Jansen, 2006).

E-mail Overload

The second study was inspired by the increasing frustration I hear from practicing managers and graduate students about e-mail overload. Again, globalization and increased organizational interpendence are increasing the flow of e-mail and other electronic media. As a result, managers often talk about the staggering amount of e-mails they receive. As a result of this frustration, some of my management communication students decided to study e-mail overload. These students logged and analyzed more than 2,000 electronic mail messages over a week's time. With the organization's permission, a collegue and I took the study a step further. We explored social processes associated with e-mail overload, drawing on Sproull and Kiesler's (1991) first- and second-order effects of communication technologies and Boden's (1994) theory of lamination. Using discourse analysis, we analyzed a representative e-mail string and found how social processes were interwoven to create perceptions of e-mail overload (Thomas & King, 2006). In particular, we found three characteristics that contribute to perceptions of e-mail overload: unstable requests, pressures to respond, and delegation of tasks and shifting interactants. The results suggest that e-mail "talk," as social interaction, may both create and affect overload.

Strategic Communication

Last is my current project on strategic communication. This project has been inspired by work I've done with practitioners in the DoD as they adapt their organizations to changes in the global environment. In the DoD context, "strategic communication" takes a national focus attempting to investigate communication as it relates to the United State's national strategy. This national strategy becomes input to individual organizations' strategies (e.g., U.S. Navy, U.S. Coast Guard, and the U.S. State Department) and becomes the foundation for interorganizational linkages in support of national security (Thomas, 2007). Packer (2006) argues that the social sciences—including communication—are in a good position to make significant contributions to the "war on terror"—including the ability to shape or even redefine the direction.

This work is in its early stages. The approach I've taken thus far is to immerse myself in the field to understand the dilemmas that these practitioners face. I've done this by relying on current communication and management theory to teach strategic communication to government executives. We generally begin with an organization's strategic planning process or change process and integrate a strategic communication planning process. Key to this process is audience, media, source, and message analysis. Analysis should be derived from data that may come from focus groups, surveys, participant observation, interviews, or print sources such as newspaper content analysis. Ideally, strategic communication plans are developed with a cross-disciplinary team. The goal is to develop processes, plans, themes, messages, and individual communication products that will allow an organization to execute its strategy. Oftentimes, the planning requires an interagency focus that allows me to draw on the research that my colleagues and I have conducted on interagency collaboration (Hocevar et al., 2006).

CONCLUSION

In a comprehensive study comparing significant and not-so-significant research, Campbell et al. (1982) found that significant research centered on an applied problem that had a "real world flavor to it" and "was tangible, useful, and pertinent to ongoing organizational activities." Insignificant problems, they said, "were elaborations of abstract, academic ideas unrelated to real organizations" (p. 108). Parallelling these sentiments about business communication, ABC member and communication scholar Dorothy Winsor once said that our most important contributions to research help us "better understand what actually happens with communication in the business workplace" (Suchan & Charles, 2006, p. 391).

As global forces shape a new workplace, people are engaging with one another in new ways—sometimes via new techologies, across organizational functions, or across national boundaries. Workers (our students) will require new knowledge to flourish in tomorrow's organizations. They will depend on us to understand their dilemmas and develop new ideas that will help them cope in Globalization 3.0. In this way, our research can help to build face validity in the business world as well as help us better theorize communication that goes on in the workplace.

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