

Employers' Perceptions of Recent Agricultural Communications
Graduates' Workplace Habits and Communications Skills

Research Paper

Erica Goss Irlbeck, M.S.
Graduate Student
Texas Tech University
Box 42131
Lubbock, TX 79409
(806) 742-2816
(806) 742-2880 (fax)
Erica.irlbeck@ttu.edu

Cindy Akers, Ed.D.
Texas Tech University
Box 42131
Lubbock, TX 79409
(806) 742-2816
(806) 742-2880 (fax)
Cindy.akers@ttu.edu

Abstract

Agricultural communications programs should frequently review their curriculum to ensure students receive the highest quality of education possible (Akers, 2000). This research is a nationwide look at recent agricultural communications graduates' employers and/or co-workers. The purpose of this study is to determine which workplace habits and communication skills are satisfactory and which need improvements in the opinion of co-workers or employers.

Members of several professional agricultural communications organizations were surveyed ($N = 88$) in the summer of 2008. A 34.1% response rate was received. The study found that employers and co-workers of recent agricultural communications graduates on average rated trustworthiness, easy to work with, and reliability as the top workplace habits while creativity, common sense, and organization need improvement. When asked to rate graduates communications skills, photo editing, page layout, and public relations skills received the highest mean scores while sales, Web design, and news editing were the communications skills that could use some work.

Keywords: Agricultural communications, curriculum development, student improvement, education.

Employers' Perceptions of Recent Agricultural Communications Graduates' Workplace Habits and Communications Skills

This study was inspired during an agricultural communications mega-breakout session at the 2008 national meeting of the American Association for Agricultural Education in Reno, Nevada. The session was discussion-based and included agricultural communications professors and graduate students, as well as other academics that could potentially launch an agricultural communications program at their universities. One of the topics of discussion was a general wondering if these educators of tomorrow's agricultural communications professionals were adequately preparing students for the demands of the industry.

In 2006, Doerfert and Miller studied agricultural communications professionals to determine what emerging themes will be important for the industry's future employees. They found four themes emerging in the agricultural communications industry: (1) communication needs, wants, and expectations change rapidly, (2) agricultural producers change and have differing communications wants, needs, and preferences, (3) the response time for communication is shortening, (4) the image of agriculture is of growing importance for agricultural communications professionals. These four themes present a great challenge for graduating students, and they need to be equipped with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to effectively communicate agriculture's message to its stakeholders as well as the general public.

However, the Doerfert and Miller (2006) research did not specifically look at skills and workplace attitudes of recent agricultural communications graduates. This research sought the opinions of agricultural communications practitioners to determine if graduating students are equipped with all the skills and work habits the industry needs and if graduates are well prepared in some certain areas but need improvements in others. This fits into the National Research

Agenda for Agricultural Education and Communication: Agricultural Communications Research Priority Area Four, which is to develop effective agricultural workforces for a knowledge-based society (American Association for Agricultural Education, 2007).

Doerfert and Miller (2006) claim that it is “the responsibility of higher education and agricultural communications programs to observe and keep pace with the ever-changing workplace to ensure that they can provide the preparation and skills that produce high-quality graduates” (p. 21). In addition, Akers (2000) stated that agricultural communications programs should frequently review their programs and graduates to ensure existing curriculum effectively prepare students for the communications industry.

Review of Literature

The generation of students currently enrolled in and now graduating from American colleges and universities are called the Millennial generation and are sometimes referred to as Generation Y, Generation Why, the Nexters, and the Net-Geners (Wendover, 2005). Millennials were born between 1982 and 2005 and are often seen as spoiled, too close to their parents, afraid of risk, and dependent (Howe & Strauss, 2007). Many say this generation has a “sense of entitlement” or is “cocky” (The scoop on recruiting: Generations, 2007, p. 11).

The Millennials were the first generation to be seen as “special”; their parents were extremely protective—the “Baby on Board” sign first appeared in minivan windows during this generation’s infancy (Howe & Strauss, 2007), thus creating a unique breed of students for university faculty to train for the workforce. Millennials are very careful and like to plan and prepare for major events, especially their careers; many expect their career planning to guarantee future success (Howe & Strauss, 2007). Howe and Strauss (2007) noted that employers complain about recent graduates’ need for constant feedback, problems with punctuality, and

improper dress. They are often restless employees, especially if work assignments are repetitive (Wendover, 2005). Reinforcing that point, Hastings (2008) stated that only one in five Millennials plan to stay at their current job for more than six years, and they expect higher pay, decent perks, and benefits.

Although Millennials, like each generation, have their drawbacks, they are extremely upbeat and team-oriented (Howe & Strauss, 2007). They are “confident, trusting, and teachable in the workplace” (Howe & Strauss, 2007, p. 50), and many employers marvel at Millennials’ ability to perform very well on a team as long as there is a clear set of goals.

Yet Corner and Cole (2008, February) found a serious problem with the writing abilities of recent graduates/Millennials. Corner and Cole researched employers of recent public relations graduates and found a general disappointment with the inability to handle simple tasks such as memos, reports, budget requests, and e-mail. The writing skills of recent graduates are typically practiced via e-mail, text messages, and blogs, usually at a fast paces without editing (Corner & Cole, 2008, February). “They don’t know what sentences, verbs or nouns are, nor how to properly use punctuation” (Corner & Cole, 2008, February, p. 18). Corner and Cole (2008, February) blame the lack of writing skills on this generation’s lack of reading—instead, Millennials listen to music, surf the Internet, and watch television. As Wendover (2005) states “the culture wants to point and click to every answer” (p. 36).

Sprecker and Rudd (1998) determined writing was the most important skill a college graduate should have, yet Corner and Cole (2008, June) found that 72% of public relations professionals believed that entry-level employees are only ‘a little’ or ‘somewhat’ prepared for this writing role (p. 9). Their research also found that 70% of public relations veterans stated

that new employees are not well prepared to write “persuasive appeals of any kind—pitches, formal letters to clients, fund raising appeals or proposals” (Corner & Cole, 2008, June, p. 9).

Corner and Cole’s two research studies in 2008 were not specific to agricultural communications; however, a study by Sitton, Cartmell, and Sargent (2005) suggested that agricultural communications curriculum focus on writing. Editing, presentations, time management, conflict resolution, and teamwork were other recommended focus points for curriculum. Also in agricultural communications students, Telg and Irani (2005) found that communications programs should help students with critical thinking skills, citing an “inability to read critically or to read well, a lack of analytical skills, and a lack of curiosity” (p. 13). They recommended real-world projects, emphasizing research, richer writing assignments, and exposure to various viewpoints to increase critical thinking.

Purpose and Research Questions

Doerfert and Miller (2006) state that the “relationship between industry and academia is discordant at times” (p. 18), noting that each entity may have different ideas as to what skills and/or workplace habits a recent graduate should possess. Literature indicated a lack of preparedness in college graduates’ writing skills, persuasive skills, and general business communications abilities; however, most of the literature is not specific to agricultural communications graduates. The purpose of this research is to determine what the agricultural communications industry wants to see improved upon in agricultural communications graduates. The over-arching theme or question during the discussion at the AAAE conference was “are we teaching what the industry needs us to teach? Therefore, four specific research questions guided this study:

1. Which workplace habits of recent agricultural communications graduates are satisfactory and which need improvement in the eyes of their employers and/or co-workers?
2. Which communications skills of recent agricultural communications graduates are satisfactory and which need improvement in the eyes of their employers and/or co-workers?
3. Do employers of recent agricultural communications graduates think a master's degree helps their communications skills or workplace habits?
4. Are there relationships between participants' perceptions of their recently graduated employees' workplace habits and the participants' age, gender, or education level?

The operational definition of recent graduate means they graduated with a bachelor's or master's degree in the last three years. For this study, workplace habits include maturity, professionalism, self-motivation, work ethic, common sense, ease to work with, trainability, creativity, organization, reliability, and trustworthiness. Communications skills are defined as writing, news editing, photography, photo editing, graphic design, page layout, Web design, Web writing, public relations, sales, radio production, and television production.

Although existing literature indicated that communications graduates need to improve simple communications tasks as well as writing skills, this research also addressed workplace habits.

Methodology

The researchers used an online survey instrument utilizing Zoomerang.com, an online survey administrator to host the instrument. The researchers purposively selected survey participants from several national agricultural communications industry organizations: Livestock Publications Council and American Agricultural Editors Association, both have an

agricultural print journalism membership base; National Agri-Marketing Association, industry professionals that focus on marketing agricultural products; and National Association of Farm Broadcasters, a group of radio and television agricultural broadcasters. After eliminating non-working e-mail addresses, 88 individuals were targeted for the study.

The instrument was researcher-created based upon the needs of the department that conducted the study. A panel of experts in agricultural communications reviewed the instrument for content validity. The instrument was divided into four sections. Section One dealt with the participant's background in working with a recent graduate and sought to determine if the participants hired, supervised, or worked with a recent graduate(s). Section Two asked participants to rate, on a scale of one to four (with one being poor and four being excellent), their recently graduated employees' workplace habits, which included professionalism, maturity, self-motivation, work ethic, common sense, trainability, creativity, reliability, trustworthiness, and organization. Section Three asked participants to rate, on a scale of one to four, their recently graduated employees' communications skills, which included writing, news editing, photography, photo editing, graphic design, page layout, Web design, Web writing, public relations, sales, radio production and television production skills. Section Four asked demographic questions to determine what specific field of the agricultural communications industry the participants worked in, age, education level, and gender.

A pilot test was conducted for validity and reliability. Ten communications professionals participated in the pilot test; none of them were included in the sample. Following the pilot test, structural changes were implemented to make the instrument more user-friendly. A Chronbach's alpha was calculated on the pilot test for the workplace habits section and revealed a reliability coefficient of .79. The post-hoc reliability coefficient was .81.

All participants were sent an introductory e-mail informing them that they had been selected to participate in this study, and a link to the instrument would be e-mailed the following day, as suggested by Dillman (2000). The survey remained active for 30 days; non-respondents were sent two reminder e-mails.

Data were analyzed using Statistics Package for Social Sciences software Version 16.0. Data collection occurred from July 24, 2008 to August 15, 2008. The online instrument was sent to 88 agricultural communicators. The researchers collected 45 responses for a 51.1% response rate. The first question of the questionnaire asked the respondents to select all that apply: I hire(d) or help(ed) hire a recent college graduate; I supervise(d) a recent college graduate; I work(ed) with a recent college graduate; or none of the above. Of those completing the questionnaire, 15 selected “none of the above.” Since 15 participants claimed that they did not work with, hire, or supervise a recent college graduate, the researchers determined that their responses did not apply to this study and were eliminated from the data set, therefore reducing the response rate to 34.1%.

Findings

Sixty percent of the respondents ($n = 18$) were female; 30% of the respondents ($n = 9$) were in the 30-39 age range, the mean age was 36.66 ($SD = 16.25$). Sixty-three percent had a bachelor's degree ($n = 19$), 26.7% held a master's degree ($n = 8$), and 3.3% had a doctoral degree. In a check-all-that-apply format, participants were asked what type of communications business they worked in. Exactly half worked in the magazine business ($n = 15$); 10% ($n = 3$) worked for a newspaper; 10% ($n = 3$) worked for an advertising agency; 13.3% ($n = 4$) worked for a public relations agency; 6.7% ($n = 2$) worked for a radio station or network; 10% ($n = 3$) worked for a television station, show, or network; 13.3% ($n = 4$) worked for a Web site or

Internet-based communications business; and 16.7% ($n = 5$) worked for a trade or breed association; 13% ($n = 4$) selected “other.” Some of these categories could have overlapped.

In a check-all-that-apply format, 22 (73.3%) of the respondents selected that they hired or helped hire a recent graduate; 50% ($n = 15$) supervised a recent graduate; and 26 (86.7%) worked with a recent graduate. Two participants reported that recent graduates make less than \$20,000 at their organization; exactly half ($n = 15$) claimed their recently graduated employees made between \$21,000 and \$30,000 per year; and 23.3% ($n = 7$) made between \$31,000 and \$40,000 a year. Six participants chose not to answer this question because they were unfamiliar with salary information, paid their employees hourly, or had other reasons.

Workplace habits

For the most part, the participants marked that recent graduates’ workplace attitudes and attributes fell in the good to excellent range. The highest rated attribute was trustworthiness, which on a scale of one to four received a mean score of 3.43 ($SD = .57$). According to the data, graduates were easy to work with ($M = 3.29$, $SD = .53$) and exhibited satisfactory reliability ($M = 3.14$, $SD = .65$). Participants rated creativity the lowest with a mean score 2.68 ($SD = .61$) on a four point scale. The data also showed that common sense ($M = 2.86$, $SD = .69$) and organization ($M = 2.96$, $SD = .58$) could use improvement. Table 1 is a list of all means and standard deviations of workplace habits.

Table 1. Mean scores of recent graduates' workplace habits as rated by employers and co-workers ($n = 29$).

Workplace attitude or attribute	Mean	<i>SD</i>
Trustworthiness	3.43	.57
Easy to work with	3.28	.53
Reliability	3.14	.65
Trainability	3.11	.63
Self motivation	3.11	.63
Maturity	3.11	.63
Work ethic	3.10	.72
Professionalism	3.00	.68
Organization	2.96	.58
Common sense	2.86	.69
Creativity	2.68	.61

Note. On a four point Likert-type scale, 1 = poor/low, 2 = fair, 3 = good, and 4 = excellent.

One of the last questions on the instrument asked participants to list other areas of needed improvement that was not covered on the instrument; 15 participants left comments. Several themes for improvement emerged from the comments: getting along with colleagues; expectations about pay and advancement; and business etiquette. Two participants specifically mentioned that recent graduates did not seem to understand “paying dues.” Two others wrote that new employees seemed to rely excessively on e-mail rather than face-to-face communication. Negotiations were mentioned several times; however, only one participant specified salary negotiations. Other answers were working in an office environment, time management, professional ethics, and critical thinking.

Communications skills

Communications skills questions allowed the participants to mark “not applicable” if their business did not involve a particular communication skill. Almost all participants rated their recent graduates’ writing skills; however, only two participants rated television production, which was the highest rated communication skill ($M = 3.50$, $SD = .71$). The researchers suggest taking caution when generalizing these findings because of the low n . Excluding television production, photo editing ($M = 3.09$, $SD = .30$), page layout ($M = 3.09$, $SD = .54$), and public relations ($M = 3.09$, $SD = .73$) were the highest rated skills of recent graduates. Sales was the lowest rated skill ($M = 2.68$, $SD = .98$); Web design received the second-lowest score ($M = 2.77$, $SD = .60$).

Because of the variety of communications skills practitioners utilize, some of the skills listed in the instrument may not have applied to the participants. Each question allowed the participant to mark “not applicable” and thus the variety of participants answering each question. Table 2 lists the communications skills scores, and since the number of participants answering these questions varied widely from skill to skill, the number of participants per question is also listed.

Table 2. Mean scores of communications skills of recent college graduates.

Communication skill	Mean	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Television production	3.50	.71	2
Photo editing	3.09	.30	11
Page layout	3.09	.54	11
Public relations	3.09	.73	23
Graphic design	3.07	.60	15
Radio production	3.00	.71	5
Writing	2.93	.47	27
Web writing	2.89	.46	19
Photography	2.83	.71	18
News editing	2.77	.87	22
Web design	2.77	.60	13
Sales	2.67	.98	12

Note. On a four point Likert-type scale, 1 = poor, 2 = fair, 3 = good, and 5 = excellent.

In the additional comments section, four participants stated that writing skills of recent graduates needed to be improved. One participant specifically stated that Associated Press style knowledge was lacking, while another participant stated that spelling and grammar needed improvement. Other comments included a need for more education in the areas of survey design, the printing process, agency/client relations, and marketing campaigns/projects.

Master's degrees

Following the workplace attributes and attitudes and the communications skills sections, the instrument asked if the participants thought a master's degree helped the aforementioned attributes. For workplace attitudes and attributes, 26.7% thought a master's degree helped;

36.7% thought a master's degree improved communications skills. Since only 30% of the participants held a master's degree, a Pearson's Product Moment correlation test was conducted to determine if there was a relationship between level of education and answers to the questions about master's degrees. A relationship between a master's degree helping with workplace attitudes and attributes and level of education of the participant revealed an r^2 value of $-.35$ ($n = 27$); a relationship between a master's degree helping with communications skills and level of education of the participant revealed an r^2 value of $-.17$ ($n = 26$). Neither correlation is significant.

Relationship between employer demographics and workplace attitudes and attributes

There were low relationships between the overall mean score of workplace attitudes and attributes and the participants' age groups ($r^2 = .13$), level of education ($r^2 = -.29$), and gender ($r^2 = -.22$).

Conclusions

Those participating in this research indicated that recent graduates tend to be trustworthy, easy to work with, and reliable. These are positive workplace habits that are difficult to teach. This shows that the participants imply that the recent agricultural communications graduates they work with somewhat defy the literature that is written about their generation. Howe and Strauss (2007) discussed problems with punctuality, yet these data indicated that agricultural communications students are reliable. Howe and Strauss (2007) also state that Millennials are trusting and teachable; these data confirm that statement.

However, some of the negative aspects about Millennials were consistent with the data gathered from this research. When looking specifically at agricultural communications students, Telg and Irani (2005) found students lacking curiosity, critical thinking, and analytical skills;

likewise, creativity and common sense were the lowest-ranked workplace habits in this study. Granted, graduates' creativity received a mean score of 2.68 ($SD = .61$) and common sense received a mean score of 2.86 ($SD = .69$), both on a four point scale, which was not horrible; however, improvements could still be made. In the additional comments box, one of the respondents stated that universities should be teaching critical thinking skills. There are some methods to adjust college courses to increase critical thinking and creativity skills. Telg and Irani (2005) recommended practical projects, richer writing assignments, and utilizing various points of view to help improve critical thinking skills.

Some of the additional comments left by participants also aligned with literature. Several participants commented that recent graduates have unrealistic expectations about pay and promotions. Literature said that Millennials often have false senses of entitlement (The scoop on recruiting: Generations, 2007) and they expect higher pay and better benefits (Hastings, 2008). Howe and Strauss (2007) stated that some co-workers complained about Millennials lack of punctuality and proper dress, and Sitton et al. (2005) stated that more lessons should be dedicated to teamwork and conflict resolution. This could fall in the business etiquette category that several participants wrote in their comments. One participant stated that graduates needed better training in mealtime etiquette and dealing with alcohol in a professional setting, while another said that e-mail skills need improvement. Several comments fit into the theme of office behavior, interaction with co-workers, and working with colleagues of different generations. The Sitton et al. (2005) research found that agricultural communications students need improvement in time management—one survey participant echoed this finding.

In the construct of communications skills, based on the data collected in this research, it appears that recent graduates entered the workforce with many skills that are satisfactory to

employers: photo editing, page layout, public relations, graphic design, and radio production all had mean scores above a 3.00 on a four-point scale. However, some core communications skills—writing, photography, news editing, and Web design—had mean scores below 3.00. According to the data, an emphasis on basic communications skills is needed. This connects with Cole and Corner's (2008) research that found communications professionals' strong dissatisfaction with writing skills of recent college graduates. Sitton et al. (2005) also argued that agricultural communications faculty should focus on writing.

Additional comments left by participants confirmed the literature. Of the 15 participants who left comments, four listed comments about poor writing exhibited by recent college graduates. One specifically mentioned that a course dedicated to Associated Press style was needed, while another stated that basic knowledge of grammar and spelling was lacking. Another person left a strongly worded statement: "somewhere, students who want to go into 'communications'—PR, marketing and related fields, but not 'hard news' journalism—erroneously concluded that they don't need excellent writing skills."

Recommendations

For faculty

The researchers recommend that agricultural communications faculty incorporate more activities or assignments that promote critical thinking and creativity. Professional development lessons that teach about salary and benefits negotiations, business etiquette, general business communications, proper office behavior, and time management could also be incorporated throughout the agricultural communications curriculum, based upon the responses and comments of the participants.

During the discussion at AAAE, several faculty wondered if agricultural communications programs needed to add classes to address emerging technologies and other needs from the agriculture or communications industries. According to this research, a re-focus on the basic communications skills—writing, news editing, photography, and Web design—is needed. Again, Sprecker and Rudd (1998) stated that good writing is one of the most important skills a college graduate should have, and the industry expects agricultural communications graduates to be good writers.

For future research

Akers (2000) stated that agricultural communications programs should frequently review programs and graduates to ensure existing curriculum effectively prepare students for the work force. Each agricultural communications program is different and each has its own strengths and weaknesses. The researchers recommend that each agricultural communications program conduct a study focused its own students to determine which workplace habits and communications skills are strong and which need improvement.

In addition, these researchers intend to conduct further research on their program's graduates to determine what they would have liked to have learned and what lessons they would like to have had expanded upon.

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