Professional and Business Communication: Personal Strategies for the Post-Digital World, Edited by Hartley et al. (2023), Routledge, ISBN 9781032268002

Farzaneh Soudkhah Mohammadi[1]*
[1]Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran

Abstract In light of the rapid technological advancements and their undeniable role in professional and business communication, Peter Hartley, Helena Knapton, and Susie Marriott took a step towards developing the third edition of 'Professional and Business Communication', encompassing 16 chapters on the complexities of professional communication with a focus on adapting to external influences in the constantly-changing business world. Its main themes revolve around communication in organizational settings, the impact of technology, different modes of communication, dealing with workplace change, and planning for professional development in the future. While the book may have minor imperfections, an analysis of its content proves how perfectly it fulfills its intended aims with regard to learning applicability and practicality for its target audience. The overall multifaceted approach towards communication, considering its dynamic nature, is the next issue highlighted in the present review.

Keywords: Business communication, Written communication, Post-digital world, Technology, Professional communication

*Corresponding Author:
Farzaneh Soudkhah Mohammadi
farzanehsoudkhah@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Communication is the key to any professional and business activity, and it is highly influenced by changes in social contexts. The ever-increasing change in organization mechanisms, as one of the legacies of the pandemic, in addition to the emergence of new technologies, makes it necessary to review and revise the previous communication principles to align with the new technological landscape. Therefore, several instructors at Edge Hill University, including Peter Hartley, a visiting Professor, Helena Knapton, a Senior Lecturer in Education, and Susie Marriott, a Senior Lecturer in Marketing, attempted to develop the third edition of 'Professional and Business Communication', in an effort to address the aforementioned modifications.

This 370-page book consists of 16 chapters, all categorized into four major thematic divisions 'How We Understand and Analyze the Ways We Communicate in Organizations', 'Presenting Information: Effective Methods and Media', 'Effective Interpersonal and Group Communication', and 'Future-gazing'. Each chapter starts with an introduction of the topic to be discussed followed by a box, except for chapter 5, outlining the objectives before the content is presented. All chapters, except for 15 and 16, end with a summary of their key points, providing a clear overview of the chapter's content and ensuring that readers grasp the fundamental concepts discussed. Finally, the book is closed with an index section.

2. Part I (Chapters 1-5)

The initial five chapters of the book, under the title of 'How We Understand and Analyze the Ways We Communicate in Organizations', provide valuable guidance on enhancing communication skills in the workplace. Chapter one, 'Developing Your Communication: Deciding Where to Start', encourages the readers to reconsider their communication goals and objectives while incorporating their colleagues' constructive feedback and technological tools in one's self-improvement process. It introduces John Kay's model as a practical guide to make sure of the attainability of their chosen goals. His framework was better illustrated, along with an example through concept mapping strategy, as a visualization tool, and *supplied with a website link that supports* readers in creating their own personalized mind maps. A detailed checklist for self-review is also included, facilitating readers through the process of evaluating their current communication approaches.

Under the title of 'How Should We Analyse Communication?', chapter two acknowledges the importance of staff-manager communication in the proper implementation of the goals within a system, using the example of Fred's problem to make the point more relatable to readers. It discusses different ways managers view communication and reviews two popular communication models, highlighting the need for a combination of process-focused and meaning-focused analysis. Nonetheless, the chapter fails to mention the names of the models discussed, which could hinder readers' further study. Finally, it ends with outlining ten communication principles; however, it would have been better if the authors had avoided overgeneration by substituting the word 'always' with more cautious language, leaving room for doubt. References to 'new media' and 'technological context' align with the book's focus on technology in the current edition.

Chapter three, 'What Does Communication Mean?', attempts to define what communication is by considering its verbal and non-verbal aspects and how they interact, stressing that human language is made up of multiple overlapping codes, benefitting from a real-life dialogue and its subsequent communication code analysis for further illustration of the point. It critiques the exaggerated claims about the power of non-verbal cues and stresses the need to consider the relationship between words and non-verbal cues to avoid misunderstandings. The role of culture in communication is also highlighted. Additionally, practical strategies are offered to improve non-verbal communication decoding skills, such as looking for micro-expressions and using dictionaries of non-verbal signs. The chapter concludes by acknowledging the impact of new media and mobile contact on expanding the range of communication codes in the modern technological era.

Revolving around the topic of 'Communication Context 1: Organisational Culture and Structure', the main focus of chapter four, as the name suggests, is on the organizational culture in addition to structure, consisting of working relationships and power dynamics within the system, and the necessity of understanding them for better communication purposes as a member. It introduces Edgar Schein's classification of organizational culture levels, providing a deeper insight into the concept. Two organizational culture frameworks, Cameron and Quinn's Competing Values Framework (2011) and eight cultural styles (Groysberg et al., 2018), are presented, clarifying the mechanisms of organizational culture. Also, its impact on employees is effectively discussed through the real-life example of McDonaldization. However, there are points to be considered for improvement, such as the need for clearer explanations of the elements presented in the table 'Components of Organizational Culture' and the overall organization of ideas throughout this chapter.

Chapter five, 'Communication Context 2: The New Technology Landscape', starts with the rationalization that if COVID-19 changed how organizations functioned overnight, further developments in technology could be anticipated, especially in computing, resulting in automation and integration of processes alongside the role it plays in providing information. While the chapter effectively discusses the benefits of computer technology in automation, it falls short in illustrating the negative consequences on human operators. The introduction of Artificial Intelligence, Virtual Reality, and Augmented Reality as future advancements raises concerns about privacy and security issues that need to be addressed. The importance of developing a digital mindset and utilizing technological tools is emphasized, as many organizations fail to do so. The chapter also addresses contemporary challenges, such as the environmental impact and social implications of technology, providing detailed examples to support these discussions.

3. Part II (Chapters 6-9)

Laying the foundation of what is meant by communication and how to analyze it with regards to the workplace, the second four chapters of the book focus on how to make effective written communication, under the title of 'Presenting Information: Effective Methods and Media'.

As the readers navigate through chapter six on 'How Should We Plan and Organize Professional Written Communication?', they could benefit from its use of figures and tables added to the main body of the text for a better introduction to a variety of written communication approaches. Avoiding the common overgeneralization with regards to thinking of writing as following a rigid set of steps, this section of the book recommends the readers to set their own personalized writing moves according to the requirements of each specific case. As the chapter deeply discusses the pivotal role structuring the information plays in written communication, it outlines providing clear overall progression, meeting the text's predefined objectives, and making use of techniques in order to persuade the readers as three components contributing to writing effectiveness. Yet, only informing the readers does not fulfill the intended objectives of the book, and a degree of practicality is expected to be incorporated into the chapter. This task is perfectly handled as a number of methods, such as the Pyramid Principle, Concept and Mind Maps, sketchnoting, and outliners, are compiled as a guide to successful material organization. A noticeable positive point seen in the chapter is its suggestion of alternative word processors to Microsoft Word and their functions, taking a step toward making the readers more technology-wise.

Planning and organizing written communications matters, as discussed in chapter six; however, such communication is less likely to reach its objectives without adopting an effective style. That is what has driven chapter seven to provide an answer to the question of "what is an effective writing style?". Not only the content but also the tone of one's writing, being in line with the demands of the situation, is recommended to be taken into consideration by the chapter. In terms of understanding what type of language is appropriate for each case, the chapter puts forward a practical strategy to take, following the guidelines pertaining to "Plain language", meaning" using the simplest and clearest expression which is appropriate for the audience" (p. 152). This approach has its own critics but is advocated by the book, acknowledging its potential limitations. In a section, 'Applying Plain Language Strategies', the chapter clearly aids the readers on what aspects to pay attention to in their writings, with real-life examples available. Following the standard punctuation conventions is the next issue presented in the chapter. The other point of practicality observed is the chapter's advice to get help from readability tests and grammar checkers. Nonetheless, it has made the readers aware that the insights derived from these digital devices should be taken into account with caution as they may have ignored some critical points to consider.

Relying on both explanation and evidence from psychological research, chapter eight, 'Effective Design and Visual Aids', successfully justifies the readers in terms of the critical role writing's effective design and layout plays in its readability. An appropriate design is emphasized as one that takes the purpose and audience of the document into account and is made accessible to all readers by using the full potential of word-processing features like the ones pertaining to style and template. The discussion continues to get more convincing as the authors make an example of how the accessible design of headings in a text could enable a read-aloud software to read the document in a more understandable

manner, applicable to individuals with limited vision and the ones who wish to listen to the content of the book while traveling. Paying attention to technical aspects related to font and page layout is stressed to aid in better document design that reflects the writer's professionalism. Readers are encouraged to use visual aids manifesting their document's key points in order to further engage their audience. Also, the chapter proceeds to introduce various visual aids, their usage, and the potential to mislead the audience if not used with caution. The chapter ends by addressing the fact that the emergence of new visualization methods could change the way documents are developed.

Under the title of 'Effective Documents', chapter nine functions as a useful resource for the readers, trying to ensure their writing effectiveness and providing a checklist summarizing the points mentioned in its previous three chapters with regard to the structure, style, and design of written communications. This approach not only facilitates digestion and comprehension of the issues presented in these chapters but also enhances the usability of the book while being applicable to both printed and online documents. Based on their own professional experiences, the authors have selected to present a number of document types that the readers are more likely to deal with in their careers. Email, report, letter, and fax were thoroughly examined in light of their structure, style, and design, emphasizing their need to conform the writing's style and structure to the readers' expectations and specific context. In relation to tone and design, the chapter attracts the readers' attention to the role of tone in shaping interpretation and design to reflect the organizational culture and structure. The chapter ends by discussing writing effectiveness in relation to the online world, allowing for a wider audience and more interactivity. However, it requires developing a strong professional profile. Making its advice enriched with practical guides, the chapter ends with recommending blog writing as a less risky way to enhance one's professional image. Yet, it seems to have disregarded the decline in blog usage and audience nowadays, given the popularity of other social media platforms, and therefore restricting blogs' effectiveness.

4. Part III (Chapters 10-14)

After discussing how to be effective in written communication type in part 2, the book concentrates on speaking effectiveness in part 3, chapters 10-14, under the title of 'Effective Interpersonal and Group Communication'.

Having effective communication is highly dependent on one's interpersonal skills, as suggested by research and theory. That is why chapter ten,' Effective Interpersonal Communication: Defining Interpersonal Skills in an Information Age', has concentrated on effective interpersonal communication, what it involves, the most crucial skills it demands, being nonverbal communication (NVC), listening, self-disclosure, and assertiveness, in addition to how to put those skills into practice in real scenarios. The authors of the book have been successful in portraying the fact that although techniques like Neurolinguistic programming (NLP) are suggested to be used for the sake of improving one's interpersonal communication, they have their own drawbacks, being too simple, over-mechanical, and ignoring cultural differences. Pre-planning one's interaction as another strategy has been introduced with its own restrictions due to the sophisticated nature of communication. People's feelings, goals, and feedback may vary according to the context. Therefore, one's approach towards interpersonal communication is recommended to be flexible. The chapter results in reaching the conclusion that skills and techniques are not enough and that being equipped with an ability to read the other person's mind in order to grasp their needs, as suggested by Nicholas Epley (2014), should be seriously taken into account.

Chapter eleven,' How Do Interpersonal Skills Work in Practice?', serves as a practical guide for learning purposes, clarifying the issues presented in its previous chapter and applying them to real-life organizational situations. First, it does an in-depth analysis of a case study in which the poor communication and coordination between three office members resulted in a conflict. Being confronted with a tangible, engaging scenario and identifying the mistakes the people involved have made in their interactions, the readers would grasp the need to be careful about the communications made within the workplace unless it could lead to a breakdown of trust and, therefore, less team efficiency. Setting the context on defensive conversations between the members of the case study, the chapter pinpoints the significance of supportive communication to resolve such problems. Addressing such conflicts, the chapter presents the approach taken by the Harvard Negotiation Project, suggesting taking what has

happened in addition to the people's feelings and identity into consideration. The second real-life scenario presented is the selection and appraisal interview mechanisms, further highlighting the value of effective communication. Another point discussed in the chapter pertains to the use of scripted communication and its drawbacks, for instance, not paying attention to individual differences in interpretations. Finally, the chapter wraps up by discussing the importance of feedback to be specific, solution-offering, face-to-face, and provided in a good manner, based on the guidelines of Harry Levinson. It offers a complete exploration of the topic, discussing the reception of feedback.

As a case in which effective communication highly matters, meetings are focused on by chapter twelve, 'How Can We Organise Effective Meetings?'. It begins by highlighting the fact that only half of the time spent in organizational meetings is productive, leading to a discussion on the differences between two meetings, A and B, in terms of structure, rules, and decision-making processes. It suggests that meeting styles should be tailored to the specific purpose and context each time. The chapter also introduces seven principles for smart meeting management, pinpointing the importance of managing time and meeting agendas effectively. One positive and engaging element used by the chapter is adding some sense of humor to the discussion by referencing the English Parish Council meeting conducted over Zoom and the satirical tips offered by Sarah Cooper on how to appear smart in meetings. As for some guidelines to follow for the purpose of smart meeting management, the seven principles yielded by Tropman's (2014) Meeting Masters Research Project are introduced. The role of the meeting chair is highlighted as crucial in ensuring a successful meeting, with a focus on managing conflicts, feedback, and member participation. Last but not least, the chapter wraps up by introducing Zoom and Teams as two useful tools for holding online meetings in the present era of technology., addressing both their limitations and key features.

Chapter thirteen, 'Effective Presentations', focuses on the art of presentation in workplace meetings, with its significance not being limited to organizational settings. The chapter emphasizes the need for confidence, organization, and personal style, as well as controlling anxiety while presenting. When it comes to the characteristics of an impressive presentation, the chapter accentuates having a clear objective and presentation structure, with powerful opening and closing, in addition to taking an appropriate presenting style while giving its effective implementation a high priority. In this vein, the authors introduce five main presentation skills to take into account, which are related to clarity, emphasis, organization, feedback, and using examples. It discusses the importance of utilizing presentation tools like PowerPoint effectively and introduces alternative options such as Prezi and Keynote. The chapter also encourages flexibility in presentation style and interaction with the audience through surveys, backchanneling, and online content-sharing platforms. As a post-pandemic growing trend, virtual presentation is the last topic being discussed in the chapter, requiring its own unique skills and preparation, such as considering one's digital body language, effective presence on screen, and use of chat box features. The chapter clearly depicted the current orientation toward establishing one's professional image online through recording podcasts and vlogs uploaded to platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Spotify.

Pertaining to group communication and being considered as a key to organizational success, teamwork effectiveness is the central topic of chapter fourteen, with its title being 'Effective teams'. The chapter widens the readers' horizons by differentiating between groups simply working together and the ones being high-achieving, mentioning the key elements of skills, size, purpose, goals, mutual accountability, and working approach to contribute to their success. While real team fellows may be highly committed and supportive, simple working group members may be more into blaming the other when faced with challenges. Therefore, the chapter moves toward how to make a high-performing team, delving into the factors that have the potential to affect team productivity, such as group development, member roles, leadership, decision-making, problem-solving, and inter-group links and behaviors. As for the stages of group development, various models have been proposed, such as Tuckman's (1965) and Wheelan's (1996), resulting in the indication of the fact that group members should know which stage they are in and then plan to move forward while not being dependent on their leader upon operation. Their plan, as chapter one has also notified, should be constantly reviewed. Drawing from various models of team roles, the chapter puts emphasis on the fact that team function is highly connected to its role combination. Sensitivity to the issues within the group could contribute to better management of

problems through better negotiation. The importance of communication and proper planning is effectively stressed by the chapter presenting a tale of transformation failure in a British factory. Communication is also underlined as influential in decision-making. The chapter underscores the significance of team-building strategies and interventions in their effectiveness, pinpointing context as a critical issue to consider when choosing one. Finally, incorporating the new technology is discussed to have a dual function of facilitating or hindering team effectiveness.

5. Part IV (Chapters 15-16)

The last part of the book, consisting of two relatively shorter chapters than the previous ones, is allocated to envisioning the future ahead in terms of changes and planning under the title of 'Future-gazing'.

Laying the foundation of discussion on the past failed predictions, chapter fifteen convinces the readership to avoid making detailed predictions about the future and instead continuously reflect upon the key trends in a corporation's cultural, social, economic, and technological environment while scanning the behavior of competitors. The chapter develops the presented idea, exemplifying the British motorcycle industry's failure as a result of not perceiving the new Japanese machines as a threat. Also, the chapter recommended that the organizational cultures move towards the communication of bad news to their senior manager, as they could help in the process of anticipating and controlling for unexpected changes ahead. Various types of organizational transformations have been identified by the chapter, originating from their environment, being either temporal, external, or internal. Upon their implementation, some critical factors are highlighted to be taken care of, such as the type, scale, and pace of change, in addition to how to communicate it to the staff and consult with the right people. The chapter wraps up by discussing the different models related to the stages of change an organization goes through and the need to take these stages into account along with the context.

Chapter sixteen attempts to guide the readers towards how to plan future steps, given the uncertainty about advancements and directions of careers. The key priorities emphasized by the chapter include actively planning for one's professional development, managing one's digital identity while being careful about the blurred boundaries between work and private life, and focusing on networking and collaboration. Starting with professional development in this ever-changing world, the chapter addresses various learning opportunities such as "learn while you earn" approaches that employees could take and accessible Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). The chapter then discusses personalized learning and the factors that have led to more collaborative and experiential learning programs, in addition to the crucial role of a coach or mentor in one's learning journey. With regard to managing one's digital presence, the chapter has used detailed yet effective examples that are easy to follow. For instance, in the exploration of the case pertaining to Peter or the one related to Susie, the readers could practically get involved with the benefits and mechanisms underlying the selective use of the web and social media. Alternatively, the use of a high-profile example, in the case of Fernando Aguirre's use of Twitter, could add to the power of the chapter in the successful presentation of the points. The readers are also notified of how employers can trace people's digital footprint online before the hiring step. Sharing the intricacies of their own case while dealing with writing this book, the authors familiarized the readers with the challenges they faced in the process, underscoring the importance of enough planning, open discussion, and taking members' various styles in collaborative communication into account. Overall, this chapter is where the readers realize the logic behind the content chosen for each part of the book, all being the information needed for navigation of one's unpredictable future career path ahead. As the final remark, the chapter suggests, "rather than focusing on predicting the future, instead focus on *inventing the future*" (p. 359).

6. Concluding Remarks

Enabling the readers to increase their chances of success in improving their professional and business communication, the present book pinpoints focusing on one's goals and objectives as the initial step in chapter one, providing the readers with a comprehensive and practical goal reflection guide. Its next two chapters then proceed to define what communication is, diving into a number of communication models, principles, and codes. While chapter four examines communication within the confines of organizational settings, chapter five exclusively focuses on the new opportunities and changes made to

these contexts with the advent of technology. Going through different modes, Chapters six to nine of the book are designated to written and ten to fourteen to spoken communication modes. In chapter fifteen, the book addresses the issue of change and how to deal with it in the workplace. Finally, it wraps up the discussion in chapter sixteen, which offers suggestions on how to plan for one's professional development considering the uncertain future ahead. Employing such a systematic approach, it could be concluded that the book has successfully covered the areas it intended to, as mentioned in its introduction section, and serves as a great resource for those in search of improving their professional and business communication skills.

Starting with its learning applicability, the book's clear and cohesive language is enriched with an abundance of tangible, real-life examples, the use of a fair number of tables and figures for better categorization and presentation of information, in addition to resources and references for further reading and learning, make it a great learning tool, and therefore appropriate for the audience it targeted. However, there is a point that could be addressed to enhance its effectiveness for learning purposes. For instance, in chapter two, the book reviewed two popular communication models, one focusing on the process of communication and the other on the interpretation of the meaning exchanged. Nevertheless, although the models were clearly presented and discussed, there is no mention of the names of the models, Shannon and Weaver (1949) and Osgood-Schramm Model of Communication (1954), in the text or the references of the chapter. Indeed, not acknowledging the original source and failing to give due credit to the original creators of the models could create problems for the readers who may wish to study the context and background of the introduced frameworks.

In terms of the practicality of the book, the authors have claimed that "we show how communication can 'work' not just by analysing what happens when people communicate within organisations but also by suggesting techniques and strategies which can make communication more effective" (p. 9). This is evident throughout the book and is successfully taken care of, providing real-life examples in addition to personal steps and strategies to take based on the situation. What makes this book a different piece of work is the fact that it not solely relied on the presentation of techniques and suggestions but has supplied the readers with the road map towards putting them into practice. The case of presenting John Kay's (2011) model in chapter one, giving the readers a framework to distinguish goals, objectives, and activities or providing the readers with a self-review checklist, could serve as perfect examples in this regard.

Concerning the book's outlook, one noticeable strength pertains to the consideration of two important factors about the mechanism of this world, which are necessary to be taken into account when it comes to improving one's professional: First, it is constantly evolving; therefore, one needs to regularly review their objectives, goals, and actions to see whether they are still relevant or not. Second, the future of one's job is under the influence of some forces, such as technology, globalization, demography, societal changes, and energy resources, as highlighted by Professor Lynda Gratton (2014). This demonstrates how the authors have approached communication in professional and business contexts as a fluid concept, interconnected with external influences, rather than viewing it as a static, isolated notion. Also, analyzing profession across various temporal lenses, being past, present, and future, is another positive point observed with regard to the book's approach, adding more depth and multidimensionality to its overall progression.

Disclosure Statement

The authors claim no conflict of interest.

Funding

References

Cameron, K. S., & Quinn, R. E. (2011). *Diagnosing and changing organizational culture: Based on the competing values framework* (3rd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Epley, N. (2014). *Mindwise: How we understand what others think, believe, feel and want*. Allen Lane.

Gratton, L. (2014). *The shift: The future of work is already here*. Williams Collins.

Groysberg, B., Lee, J., Price, J., & Yo-Jud Cheng, J. (2018). The leader's guide to corporate culture: How to manage the eight critical elements of organizational life. *Harvard Business Review, 96*(1), 44–52.

Kay, J. (2011). *Obliquity: Why our goals are best achieved indirectly*. Profile.

Schein, E. H. (2009). *The corporate culture survival guide* (Rev. ed.). John Wiley.

Schein, E. H. (2010). *Organizational culture and leadership* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Schramm, W. (1954). How communication works. In W. Schramm & D. F. Roberts (Eds.), *The process and effects of mass communication* (pp. 111–133). University of Illinois Press.

Shannon, C. E., & Weaver, W. (1949). *The mathematical theory of communication*. University of Illinois Press.

Tropman, J. E. (2014). *Effective meetings: Improving group decision making* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Tuckman, B. W. (1965). Developmental sequences in small groups. *Psychological Bulletin, 63*(6), 384–389.

Wheelan, S. A. (1996). *Group processes: A developmental perspective*. Allyn and Bacon.