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### Student perceptions of workplace communications during co-operative workterm experiences

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Communication and relationship building are important components of leadership. Accordingly, the Conference Board of Canada and the U.S. Secretary's Commission on Achieving

situations, and both voice and text based technologies to communicate. Additionally, we explored the expectations and subsequent effect on student perceptions of their relationship when supervisors did or did not meet their perceived communication obligations. These obligations create a psychological contract between the employee and employer, that when breached can lead to problematic employee behaviours (e.g., Paul, Niehoff, & Turnley, 2000).

Interpersonal communication is defined as "dyadic interaction in which people negotiate relationships by using communication styles and strategies that become personally meaningful as the persons attempt to reduce uncertainty" (Heath & Bryant, 1992, p. 161). In the process of communication, information is gathered and feedback provided, enabling both parties to better understand each other, build trust, and improve relationship quality (Graen, Novak, & Sommerkamp, 1982; Scandura & Graen, 1984).

Although previous researchers have concluded that face-to-face communication is consistently more productive than thinner media forms (Strauss & McGrath, 1994), mobile voice and text-based technologies have become common communication tools in the workplace (Goldman-Sachs, 2001). Often introduced as tools for customer relations and logistics management, these technologies may also change patterns of internal communications and the management of supervisor-employee relationships. This text-based communication using electronic mail is a staple in the workplace, but we have yet to understand the implications of mobile handheld devices. The mobility and ubiquity of access offered by these devices invites

## Student Perceptions of Workplace Communication during Co-operative Work Term Experiences

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### Abstract

Co-operative education gives students the opportunity to observe important interpersonal skills while applying their technical knowledge. Eighty students on their second and third co-op work terms described communication incidents in face-to-face, mobile text, and mobile voice situations perceived to have shaped relationships with their managers. Richness is provided by a qualitative analysis that asks students to express their feelings about how they are talked to by their supervisors. Results identify some apparent themes with respect to the use of message content and tone, media selection and message timing. They also show that students appear to value face-to-face communication and reveal that social extra-role relationships are important to student feelings of self-efficacy and attributions of manager effectiveness. These connections may form the basis for student development of their own communication styles. The results lead to suggestions of how to make the learning of communication skills more tangible within co-op programs.

Necessary Skills (SCANS) identify interpersonal communication skills as key to future employability (Locker, Kaczmarek, & Braun, 2005). The introduction of wireless communication has created new ways for supervisors to communicate with employees and for employees to communicate with supervisors or others inside and outside the firm. In particular, handheld devices such as cell phones and pagers supplement communication with mobile employees both on-site and off-site.

This study describes the supervisory communication practices perceived by co-op students to influence workplace relationships. Effective leaders spend more than 80% of their time communicating with others (Bass, 1990; Mintzberg, 1973; Trevino, Daft, & Lengel, 1990). Communication between supervisors and subordinates is important to role clarity, work satisfaction and the effectiveness of work groups (Klaus & Bass, 1982). By assessing the communication practices of their supervisors, students develop an understanding of how they may influence the quality of future relationships (Berger, 1977). Our research examined how co-op students perceived their supervisors used face-to-face

a supposition that they change the nature of communication. For example, students and employers may not share similar expectations regarding the appropriate use of the message content, the timing of feedback, or the impact on their availability outside of regular work hours. Although research has assessed the communication media choices of managers (Trevor, Lewis, & Daft, 1987), there is no consideration of how employees perceive these managerial communication choices.

Despite the prevalence of wireless devices in the workplace, few researchers have considered whether supervisor-employee communication patterns are different when using wireless technologies. Some studies investigate the use of electronic technologies in work groups, highlighting behavioural changes in the level of participation, consensus, conflict and leadership emergencies (e.g., McGrath & Hollingshead, 1994). There is some research on the design of wireless technologies (Dix et al., 2000) and more generally, on factors affecting employee acceptance of information systems (e.g., Taylor & Todd, 1995), but few behavioural studies of wireless technology use (e.g., Palen, Salsman, & Youngs, 2000; Schlosser, 2002). There is a cogent body of literature on the effective matching of media to message content (e.g., Daft & Lengel, 1986; Dennis & Kinney, 1998; Strauss et al., 1994; Yazici, 2002). However, the results of such studies are often conflicting, warranting continued research, especially with different communication styles across a variety of media.

### Method

The sample consists of eighty undergraduate students at the University of Waterloo who experienced from two to four co-operative work term placements. This sample selection permitted a focus upon communication incidents occurring early in the development of manager-employee relationships (within four to twelve months). Three open-ended questions collected information about perceptions of relationship-influencing communication incidents that occurred during cooperative education work experiences. Specifically, participants were asked:

1. Please provide an example of a face-to-face situation with your boss in which his/her behaviours affected your relationship. What specifically did (s)he do? How did it support or damage the relationship with him/her?
2. Please provide an example of a situation with your boss in which (s)he communicated orally with you via handheld mobile device and influenced your relationship (for example, using a cell phone). What

specifically did (s)he do? How did it support or damage the relationship with him/her?

3. Please provide an example of a situation with your boss in which (s)he communicated by email/chat with you via handheld mobile device and influenced your relationship (for example, using a Blackberry). What specifically did (s)he do? How did it support or damage the relationship?

Answers to these questions were intended to provide insight into the potential differences and similarities in managerial practices via face-to-face, mobile voice, and mobile text media. Written memos were not included because they are now rarely used in business situations for one-to-one correspondence between junior employees (students) and supervisors, likely because email is much more convenient as a text form.

Table 1 describes the demographic characteristics of the respondents. Although all 80 participants were asked to note experiences across all 3 media, only 30 (or 37.5%) provided examples of voice and or text, whereas 76 (or 95%) recalled face-to-face incidents. Interestingly, the proportion of males to females was relatively consistent over the three media, and generally reflected the gender split in the dominant sampling frame of science, engineering and math students. Most of the students were co-op students (approximately 75% of the sample), and the rest consisted of regular full-time or part-time students. Most students worked mainly on-site, at their employer's location, but a small percentage (approximately 10%) worked off-site, for example, at customer facilities.

### Findings

Following qualitative methods advocated by Creswell (1998) we compared ways that students assigned meaning to different experiences across the whole sample. This provided a general sense of the ways that students interpret supervisor technology-practices. Responses were coded using categories suggested by communication theory and the data, using methods generally accepted by psychologists in the phenomenological tradition, by sorting into common processes and content (Polkinghorne, 1989). A second independent researcher verified the classification, confirming the reliability of the results. This method of analysis resulted in the identification of the communication themes described in Table 2. We also identified differences between face-to-face, mobile voice and mobile text communications.

### Communication Themes

Supervisory behaviours perceived to influence relationships reflected communication-encoding skills (that is, how the message was constructed). Only three respondents reported that their supervisors did not respond at all to their inquiries. This meant that most of the analysis focused upon messages encoded by supervisors, and decoded by students. Accordingly, the information collected was grouped into perceptions of similar communication themes perceived (by participants) to be beneficial or detrimental to relationship development. These themes related to the supervisors' judgement and use of message content (extra-role - outside of assigned work duties - and in-role - task related), media, message tone, and message timing.

*Message content.* Participants discussed the influence of message content on their relationships with managers. The data was divided into categories related to in-role communication associated with completion of the employee's job task, and extra-role communication not specifically related to the completion of the task. Extra-role communication subdivided into themes of employee development and affect. Participants described either affective relationship behaviours that focused upon similarities and liking outside of the actual job performed, or behaviours conducive to employee development beyond their current work roles. For example, a conversation about hockey and women reflected shared interests (categorized as extra-role, affect) for one participant and his manager.

Task content generally focused upon the assignment and clarification of employee job duties. Supervisors were expected to spend time directing students. For example, three participants noted negative effects on their relationships when supervisors seemed to prioritize their own goals above those of the employees. One student commented:

*I asked him a question in his office while he was at the computer and he answered without turning around. Damaged the relationship by pleasing himself ahead of my concerns. I asked few questions before and after the incident.*

Performance evaluations, whether impromptu or formal, were perceived as incidents that shaped relationships for ten participants. The evaluations usually occurred in face-to-face situations. Extra-role communication was almost exclusively face-to-face, while mobile text was reserved for task related content. Face-to-face was perceived by students as the most appropriate mode of performance evaluations. One of these students noted:

*My boss called me at work to discuss my performance at work. She was honest in terms of the feedback she had received. This improved our relationship as I appreciated her honesty and also knew that she was properly fulfilling her roles as my counsellor / mentor. I would, however, have preferred a face to face conversation.*

*Media choice.* Managers used different media to convey different types of messages. Students judged whether this media choice was appropriate in shaping the decoding process. This perception of media appropriateness also appeared related to the supervisor-employee relationship. References to the appropriateness of the medium surfaced mainly with text-based communication. Seven participants (five unfavourably compared their managers' use of text and two compared the use of voice) noted their preferences for face-to-face communication, although nine noted their satisfaction with the efficiencies related to the use of text when their managers were off-site. One individual noted that previous face-to-face communication provided a base for better communication through other media. In his words,

*I had to look for a particular wire for the project. Couldn't find what we were looking for so I had to call office. The engineer on the team (the guy who does my co-op rating) was who I was speaking to. We have a good face-to-face relationship. On the phone, this eased the understanding of what he was expecting.*

*Message tone.* The tone of the message could emphasize or alter the employee's perception of the message and the sender. This study identified three themes with respect to message tone: professional respect, performance evaluations, and affect. Relationships were perceived as strengthened when participants believed that their supervisors communicated professionally, provided evaluations positively (or delivered negative evaluations constructively), and infused their conversations with enthusiasm and the sharing of personal information. As one student noted,

*Boss called when he was out of town to communicate some instructions. His enthusiasm over the phone helped motivate me to get the work done.*

A different individual also went beyond the incident's effect on their relationship, noting this outcome:

*The manager that I would often work for as always very snappy and impatient in her tone of voice. She would even yell at me when she thought I did something wrong or if I didn't know what to do. She was never*

*patient enough to listen to what I would say to explain why things would go wrong or that I didn't even do anything wrong. She made me break out into tears twice at the office. I am not going back to that firm for my co-op term because I cannot work with her. She scares me and makes me feel stupid.*

Similarly, another student observed her manager's communication tone in a secondary meeting:

*My boss got into an argument with one of her superiors that I respected. It was a heated argument where she approached him and I felt she was in the wrong. This damaged my relationship with her as I lost some respect in her leadership abilities, and the ability to control her emotions.*

Positive perceptions of supervisory communication were demonstrated when managers were able to change the tone on a more broad basis. To illustrate, this participant believed that tone-setting behaviour was conducive to a good supervisor-employee relationship.

*She [the supervisor] often asked about personal things. One day she brought in her children to meet the co-ops. We worked in a big open room and this encouraged conversation between the co-ops and with her. She had a big bowl of mints on her desk and people from all departments and senior management would come and all talk to her and eat mints.*

Participants demanded a collaborative and empathic tone from their supervisors. For example, *I was in school working part-time and got a message from my boss via my blackberry that I was needed right away to help them with something at work. It was sent as a message like "I need you to work an extra night right away" and that was it. This negatively damaged our relationship because I was in school at the time and unable to run over to work and drop class. The message itself didn't sound nice and was like they expected me to drop everything without acknowledging I was doing so.*

This example demonstrates that students desired a true integration of personal and work goals by insisting upon a collaborative strategy. When managers were able to identify similar interests with employees, they established a collaborative tone and, as suggested by Bandura (1986), were able to attract and model more effectively.

*Message timing.* Participants noted a lack of communication, negatively affecting their relationships, or poor timing of responses. Poor

timing included delays in responding to employee inquiries, or initiating a workplace communiqué when the employee had other priorities. For example, one participant wrote,

*My boss was always very busy and did not reply to emails. This meant that you always felt worried about a particular situation because he didn't reply.*

### **Participant Level of Analysis**

The analysis in the previous section focused upon the basic statement level where all face-to-face comments were grouped together, similarly all voice were together, and all text together. This was useful in gaining a feel for each communication medium. However, it did not allow comparison of different media at the level of individual participants. Discrepancies in the number of responses for each medium also created bias. For example, 76 participants provided examples of face-to-face situations, but only 30 participants were able to give examples related to mobile voice and 30 to mobile text. The disparity between the number of face-to-face responses and voice or text may have indicated that students strongly connect face-to-face communication and relationship development opportunities. Alternatively, this may have simply been a reflection of mainly on-site work, or the relative newness of handhelds in the workplace. The student employees may not have used handhelds in their job or reported to managers with handhelds.

In order to compare across participants, further analysis compared 43 responses that used more than one mode of communication. None of the students who used handhelds for voice or text communication worked remotely. Instead, they provided technical support for their managers, who were often off-site or in a distant location in the building.

To compare responses between participants, we divided responses into categories reflecting the types of communication incidents, the adverbs or adjectives describing the managers' behaviours, if these behaviours were beneficial or detrimental to relationships, the outcomes associated with the incidents, and if these outcomes involved the employees or their supervisors. Even when comparing media at an individual participant unit of analysis, face-to-face incidents were much richer in content (encompassing aspects of friendship, evaluations, employee development, and inspiration as a change agent), whereas situations experienced by text media involved more logistical correspondence and task assignment. Voice-based situations included both types of situations, and seemed to have the most diversity in the types of incident influencing relationships. The adverbs and adjectives used to

describe managers included enthusiasm, politeness, and professionalism. Enthusiasm, helping and trusting were noted for voice and face-to-face situations, for example,

*Her behaviour was really enthusiastic, looking for change. Always had a "to-do" list and looked to tackle each job one at a time. It supported our relationship, as I was eager to jump on board to create change as well.*

Different students noted,

*He was always supportive and optimistic. He went out of his way to find a common ground between us and build on it. We both referee soccer so we had soccer chats which would brighten up our days and we would also talk about women and good times. All of these supported our relationship.*

*She gave me feedback in front of my co-workers. This damaged the relationship with the other coworkers cause they feel that my boss was more interested in my work than in their work. Otherwise, the relationship with my boss was better because I realize that she trust me.*

In contrast, politeness, clarity (or lack thereof), and professionalism were more frequently noted for text-based communication, as evident in these four views,

*Supported relationship by keeping things very polite and professiona.*

*She email me and assign jobs for me. She always type thank you at the end of email.*

*Sometimes emails from my boss were more formal/curt than face to face conversations. Often they seem less friendly. This hurt the relationship a bit.*

*email - poor spelling is bad!*

The attribution of positive or negative associations varied greatly between participants. There was no dominant pattern of positive or negative views of any specific communication medium - although there were less relationship-influencing incidents noted for text based communication which might indicate that students did not perceive text-based communication to build relationships. A similar lack of pattern surfaced in the outcome, that is, whether the incident influenced the student's perception of himself or of his/her supervisor. This implies that students recognized that relationships involve obligations of both employee and supervisor.

Many participants described indirect, relationship-mediated outcomes of managerial communication practices. Often respondents described similar outcomes from different experiences and different media. These outcomes were supervisor-referenced (reflecting the supervisor's effectiveness or caring), and employee-referenced (reflecting self-perceptions of effectiveness and trust). This provided valuable causal insights about the consequences of leader behaviours. For example, the wording is very clear in these examples:

*When giving end of term evaluation, under the "strength" area, he joked and put down "good hair" and irrelevant items and then later actually marking in what he put down. It made me feel that none of my contributions mattered and made me feel I had no good qualities even as a person. (Lack of self-efficacy)*

*Boss was on business trip to the States. He phoned to check to make sure everything's running smoothly. Employees appreciate the gesture and all of us highly respect our boss. (Supervisor effectiveness)*

### Perceptions of supervisor communication practices

In summary, students identified elements of message content, media choice, message tone, and message timing as important influences on relationship development. Coding of the data highlighted incidents noted by participants included communication practices that most frequently led to positive relationships. These are included in Table 2, with supporting examples.

### Discussion

The results noted in Table 2 suggest a wide variety of activities managers should undertake to develop good relationships. The communication behaviour identified by students as influencing relationships builds upon extant research in media choice, relationships, work expectations and leadership.

Message content plays an important role in leader communication competencies and involves meeting employee needs from both relationship (also referred to as consideration) and task-oriented (also referred to as instrumental) perspectives. Most leadership theorists support the existence of these two orthogonal dimensions of leadership (Chemers, 1997; Katz & Kahn, 1951). This study referred to these dimensions as "extra-role" and "in-role" content. For example, relationship development occurs outside of the basic job requirements and is therefore "extra-role". Extra-role subdivided into employee development and affect themes. Participants

described affective relationship behaviours that focused upon similarities and liking outside of the actual job performed, or behaviours conducive to employee development beyond their current work roles. This focus on socialization outside of work requires that both parties be willing to integrate their personal and work “spaces”.

Additionally, the process of communicating expectations was also important. Findings indicated that feedback and evaluation are important to the formation of relationships, and that these processes should take place in a face-to-face, confidential manner.

Although employees expressed such preferences for message delivery and media match, the students also noted employer media preferences for conveying different types of messages. For example, one student noted,

*My boss would occasionally give me instruction via email about projects and tasks to be completed. This would sometimes have a negative affect on my attitude toward him. I felt he should speak to me face to face when requesting work done for him.*

The results support earlier studies that consider media richness and message “equivocality”, that is, a rational choice of media based on the complexity of the task (e.g., Daft et al., 1986; Webster & Trevino, 1995). Although using text messaging for job task instructions is efficient, many participants indicated a preference for face-to-face contact as a way to develop relationships. This indicates that complexity inherent in relationship development is better-addressed face-to-face. A preference for face-to-face contact highlights future issues faced by a workforce that is increasingly dependent upon mobile wireless communication media.

This research has several implications for co-operative education. The work-term experience provides students with the opportunity to evaluate and develop effective interpersonal behaviors through managerial modeling. In developing work placements, we recommend that administrators focus on the supervisor as well as the work role. Interaction with this supervisor is critical to shaping student ideas about appropriate interpersonal communication. This can be facilitated through mentoring and coaching focused on understanding organizational culture and behavior.

The study provides a snapshot of what co-operative work-term students view as important to the development of workplace relationships. Students were able to provide examples of effective and ineffective communication perceived during their work-term experiences. This exercise prompted them to consider good communication skills instead of

emphasizing technical applied skills. Interpersonal skills may be challenging to disseminate, but are important parts of the cooperative learning process. Administrators should encourage students to make this knowledge tangible by including its coverage on work term reports. Students can use examples to describe and analyze their experiences. Debriefing provides students with increased opportunity to reflect upon and understand their own attitudes. Program and course design can provide opportunities for students to strengthen areas of weakness in communication skills through complementary course curriculum.

Students underscored the importance of socialization as they begin their learning experiences at the university and in business organizations. Program administrators and work-term supervisors should discuss the importance of social acceptance to student self-efficacy in the workplace. Further, by emphasizing this point to supervisors, educators can increase the likelihood of a fulfilling work-term experience for students.

Finally, the research provides contextual information for program administrators on preferred communication styles. In order to engage and retain work term students, work term positions must include the opportunity for students to interact regularly with supervisors on a face-to-face basis. Ideally, a placement should include the opportunity for students to communicate using multiple media. This will help them to frame their own judgements regarding preferred organizational culture and work relationship styles.

### **Conclusions and Future Research**

This study investigated how students perceive communication styles modeled by work-term managers. The results add richness to our understanding of how supervisory communication practices shape relationships and student self-perceptions. More specifically, through practices such as feedback delivered individually and in person, face-to-face communication, the creation of a common bond through identification of similar interests, socialization outside of the workplace, personal information sharing, task assignment using text-based communication for clarity and efficiency, empathic humor, and collaborative strategies. With few exceptions, these were cited as incidents in the face-to-face condition. This indicates the importance of face-to-face contact in the development of workplace relationships, but also suggests a basis for designing new interactions using other media.

Although the results of this preliminary study inform our knowledge of the interpersonal nature of engineering co-operative work-term placements,

findings may not be generalizable to other disciplines that require work-terms or internships. Most of the work term placements in this study took place in the high technology sector. Such firms may foster a different culture and attitude toward technology. Additionally, specific job expectations and the technical interests of these students may create differences with other, less technical placements. The qualitative nature of the study also limits its generalizability. Future research can contribute by using a quantitative methods and a cross-section of different types of placements in different industries. Increased knowledge of how student perceptions change and mature over the course of a work-term, or over multiple work-terms would help administrators in designing work-term debriefing methods to maximize student understanding of their experiences.

In summary, findings are generally supportive of previous research in communication and relationship development, and contribute to our understanding of the associations between managerial actions and employee attitudes. This research indicates that students prefer face-to-face communication, and that social, extra-role relationships are important to a variety of work outcomes including student feelings of effectiveness.

Co-operative education gives students the opportunity to develop important interpersonal skills while applying their technical knowledge. Soft skills such as communication develop through modeling and practice. Provided with an array of media choice, students must make decisions and judgements to find the best way of communicating. They do this by assessing the actions of supervisors and co-workers through their own perceptual lenses. In an era where many students have their own wireless devices for social use, the work-term experience can shape student understanding of the appropriate use of wireless communication technologies in the workplace.

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**TABLE 1**  
**Participant Demographics and Frequencies**

<b>Media</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Nature of Work (Frequencies)</b>	<b>Gender (Frequencies)</b>	<b>Relationship status (Frequencies)</b>	<b>Student Faculty (Frequencies)</b>	<b>On-site / Off-site Work (Frequencies)</b>
Voice (telephone)	30	Co-op (22) Part time (4) Full time (4)	Male (13) Female (17)	Good or Satisfactory (24) Mediocre or Poor (6)	Science, Engineering and Math (24) Other (6)	Off-site (5) On-site (25)
Text (e-mail or messaging)	30	Co-op (23) Part time (5) Full time (2)	Male (16) Female (14)	Good or Satisfactory (28) Mediocre or Poor (2)	Science, Engineering and Math (26) Other (4)	Off-site (2) On-site (28)
Face-to-Face	76	Co-op (56) Part time (13) Full time (7)	Male (46) Female (30)	Good or Satisfactory (65) Mediocre or Poor (11)	Science, Engineering and Math (63) Other (13)	Off-site (8) On-site (68)

**TABLE 2**  
**Communication Themes**

Communication Themes	Good Communication Practices	Supporting Quotations
<p>Media Choice Message Timing</p>	<p>Feedback delivered individually and in person</p> <p>Face-to-face communication</p> <p>Task assignment using text-based communication for clarity and efficiency</p>	<p>“Many of my tasks did not involve me directly talking to my boss as I would mostly work with the coworkers. However, he would come in and speak to me regularly just to know how I am doing and how my work is going on - as an informal meeting.”</p> <p>“Boss helped with project. He always had an open door policy and never thought any questions were stupid. He always had the floor open to listen to everyone's suggestions. This greatly supported the relationship with him. I wasn't afraid to approach him with anything.”</p> <p>“During my (formerly) long commute, she would regularly email my Blackberry with company info to keep me up to date, which helped our relationship”</p>
<p>Message Content</p>	<p>Socialization outside of the workplace</p> <p>Personal information sharing</p>	<p>“We often had meeting and discussion about works during our free time. I.e. in the mall or restaurant. This affected our relationship because we get to know each other eventually and we can give our opinions freely and more relaxed.”</p> <p>“My boss was able to positively affect our relationship by opening up on talking to me as an equal. By sharing some of her personal experiences and developing a friendship outside of work we were more effective when doing tasks in the workplace. She also was very good at giving feedback as to how I was doing so I knew whether I was working up to her expectations”</p>
<p>Message Tone Message Content</p>	<p>Use of empathic humor</p> <p>Use of a collaborative strategy, aiming for satisfaction of their personal goals as well as the organization’s goals</p> <p>Creation of a common bond through identification of similar interests</p>	<p>“My boss would always make fun of me and I would do the same. He made me feel like a friend.”</p> <p>“Come over to my office and offer help on a specific task. Sit down beside me and start going over the work together. Write down things on the white board and give me explanation on my question. Support the relationship by offering adequate level of help and open up new possibilities and ideas to the problem.”</p> <p>“Boss offered to loan me some motorcycle safety gear. A common bond with boss supported our relationship and made me more relaxed at work.”</p>