7. Entry-Level Professional Communicators in the Workplace: What Job Ads Tell Us

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Abstract

Job ads provide entry-level job seekers key insights into professional communication workplaces; for example, ads can reveal what professional behaviors are expected, where work occurs, and how coworkers interact. Reading ads to see what they reveal offers job seekers a snapshot of the internal workings of these workplaces. This chapter provides such a snapshot through a content analysis of 176 job ads posted over two months on four internet job search websites. The findings presented in this chapter provide an overview of workplaces that employ professional communicators and insights into employers' expectations for entry-level professional communicators they intend to hire.

Keywords

entry-level jobs, entry-level skills, employer expectations, job success

Graduates of professional communication programs are frequently taught to read job ads for qualifications they should highlight when applying for their first position. These entry-level job seekers match ad keywords to their own skills to demonstrate their qualifications. Read in this way, the ads are externally directed away from the employer toward the applicant. The ads' message is clear: "Here's the employee we need; now you tell us how well you fit our needs." These same job ads, however, can be read with an internal focus, providing job seekers key insights into workplaces they'd like to join; for example, ads can reveal what professional behavior is expected, where work occurs, and how coworkers interact. Reading ads to see what they reveal can offer job seekers a snapshot of the internal workings of professional communication workplaces. This chapter reports such a study, a content analysis of 176 job ads posted over two months on four internet job search websites. In doing so, it provides further insights into the professional communication workplace, extending the work of Eva Brumberger and Clarie Lauer's (2015), Sally Henschel and Lisa Melonçon's (2014), and Melonçon and Henschel's (2013) studies.

To report our findings, our chapter is divided into three parts. In the first part, we explain how we collected and coded the job ads. In the second part, we

provide a snapshot of the applicants and qualifications these ads request. In the final part, we focus on the workplace itself and the expectations these employers have for professional communicators. With this focus, we provide advice on how to leverage academic knowledge into workplace know-how.

■ Selecting Ads for the Snapshot

We began our research collecting ads posted from July 1 to August 31, 2019, on Glassdoor, Indeed, LinkedIn, and Monster. We chose these four search engines because their search features allowed us to search by date and job title. To locate ads, we used six *position* keywords: "corporate communication," "corporate communicator," "business communication," "business communicator," "professional communication," and "professional communicator."

We chose these terms for several reasons, which are institution-specific:

- Our newly founded department is called Professional Communication, and our primary reason for conducting the research was to discover where our graduates might find entry-level positions.
- Our department's degree, also newly approved, is called Digital Media and Professional Communication.
- Our core faculty were from a business communication program, which was moved to our department at its founding.
- Our primary organizational affiliation is with the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), and corporate communication is used synonymously with business communication in its descriptions.
- Having chosen these adjectives ("professional," "business," and "corporate") for these reasons, we searched with both "communication" and "communicator" as the modified noun.

We did not include the terms "technical communication" or "technical communicator" in this list because these designations belong to another campus department with which we are not affiliated.

Within the search results, we then narrowed our focus by applying *required experience* keywords: "entry level," "bachelor's degree," "BA," or "BS." Job ads that included position and required experience keywords were added to the sample. If a job ad appeared in more than one search engine, we added it only once and recorded it as located in the search engine where it was first posted. However, if a job was listed twice with the same title and description but located in different cities, we counted both ads because two different positions were advertised. We collected a total of 176 job ads from the four search engines. We found 78 ads (44%) on LinkedIn, 58 (33%) on Indeed, 23 (13%) on Monster, and 17 (10%) on Glassdoor. Figure 7.1 provides a breakdown of the number of ads found in each search engine.
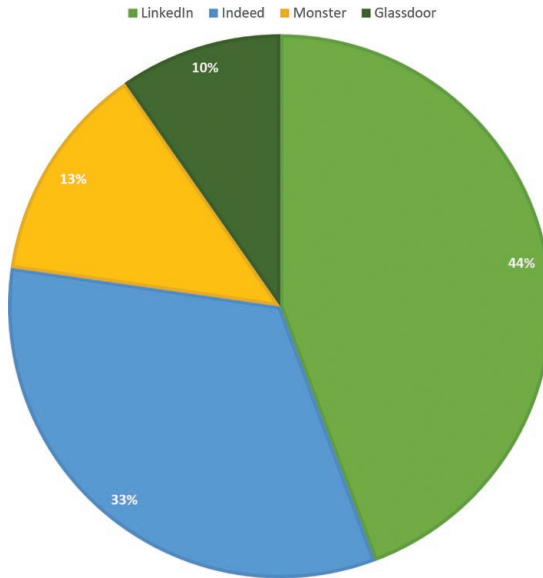
LinkedIn ■ Indeed ■ Monster ■ Glassdoor

Figure 7.1. Percentage of job ads found in each search engine.

■ Coding the Ads

After collecting ads and saving copies, we uploaded all ads into NVivo to begin our open coding. To develop a provisional list of codes, two coders independently coded ten percent of the collected ads. We then compared codes and conducted a manual card sort exercise to identify commonly included information in these ads. Our card sort revealed five categories of content on these ads, which we labeled degree and experience, hard skills, soft skills, physical attributes, and other domains. We define these categories below:

- **Degree and experience:** We used this category to confirm that all jobs included a degree or entry-level designation and to quantify prior experience requirements.
- **Hard skills:** We coded skills that are measurable as hard skills. Examples include writing, reading, math, and computer program use.
- **Soft skills:** Soft skills are personal traits that cannot easily be measured. Examples of soft skills mentioned in the ads include etiquette, flexibility, leadership, teamwork, and time management.
- **Physical attributes:** We used this code to note job requirements and responsibilities that had physical implications, such as working long hours and travel.
- **Other domains:** Many job ads required specific domain knowledge, such as communication, business, and information technology. We used this category to track specific domains that job ads required or requested.

With these categories identified, we then conducted a second card sort to create subcategories to use for coding. Some categories had only a few subcategories. Table 7.1 lists each category and major subcategories we identified. Some subcategories, such as those in hard skills, were further divided into sub-subcategories.

With these codes in place, two coders divided the remaining 90 percent of the ads and coded in increments of 12-24 ads per week. Each week, coders met to discuss coding, check for agreement, and reach consensus on codes.

Table 7.1. Category and Subcategory Codes

Degree & experience	Hard skills	Soft skills	Physical attributes	Domains
Degree	Genres	Personal traits	Age	Communication
Prior experience	Project management	Teaming traits	Long hours	Business
	Grammar or language		Travel	Information technology
	Research or planning		U.S. work authorization	Healthcare
	Technology			Other
	Rhetoric			
	Promotion			
	Marketing			
	Visual design			

■ Viewing Job Requirements as a Workplace Snapshot

The content analysis we conducted revealed a snapshot of the job requirements, responsibilities, and duties of entry-level professional communicators. This snapshot tells us, in general, what employers are seeking from their applicants, ranging from years of experience to hard skills and soft skills that are required. Table 7.2 provides an overview of the major categories we considered in this section and the frequency of mentions within the ads.

The first column in Table 7.2 lists the five major categories we identified in our sample, the second column lists the number of ads that contained at least one code within the category, and the third column lists the total number of codes in the sample. For example, hard skills were listed in all 176 ads we examined; within those 176 ads, 3,379 hard skills were coded, the most of any category. The rest of this section briefly describes what these codes tell us about the professional communication workplace where our majors might find employment.

Table 7.2. Category Code Frequency in Ads

Category	Number of ads included in this category code	Number of codes within this category
Physical attributes	51	99
Domains	154	382
Degree and experience	171	341
Soft skills	171	1,233
Hard skills	176	3,379

A professional communication workplace is one where an employee may typically create content for specific, known audiences rather than unknown, mass audiences (Faber, 2002). Since this communication is tailored to the reader, the various soft and hard skills identified in this study may contribute to the success of the new graduate in this type of environment. This may differ from mass communication in terms of the skills and experience needed. Mass communication involves providing information to a large general audience. Although the mediums for providing communication may be similar, such as digital or print, professional communication in the workplace draws out specific characteristics as described in the following categories, which are discussed from least to most frequently included.

◼ Physical Attributes

Only fifty-one ads included physical requirements, the least of all categories. Twenty of these ads posted commonly found physical requirements related to sitting, standing, and lifting—all activities typically required in office settings. Two physical attributes, however, tell us more about work expectations. Nineteen ads mentioned that employees work long hours, including nights, weekends, and holidays. Even more ads (29) stated that applicants must be able to travel. Travel requirements were typically listed as 5-15 percent of the job. Travel locations were primarily within North America; only three ads mentioned international travel. While physical attributes were the least frequently discussed categories, they tell us that entry-level professional communication workplaces sometimes require overtime and may require employees to spend time away from friends and family.

◼ Domains

Eighty-eight percent (154) of all job ads mentioned specific domains (or types of knowledge) that an applicant should possess. Domains are comparable undergraduate majors and minors. Figure 7.2 provides a breakdown of the specific domains. The domains identified in the ads give us insight into the industry sectors where professional communicators are employed. Four specific domains were frequently mentioned: communication, business, information technology, and healthcare.
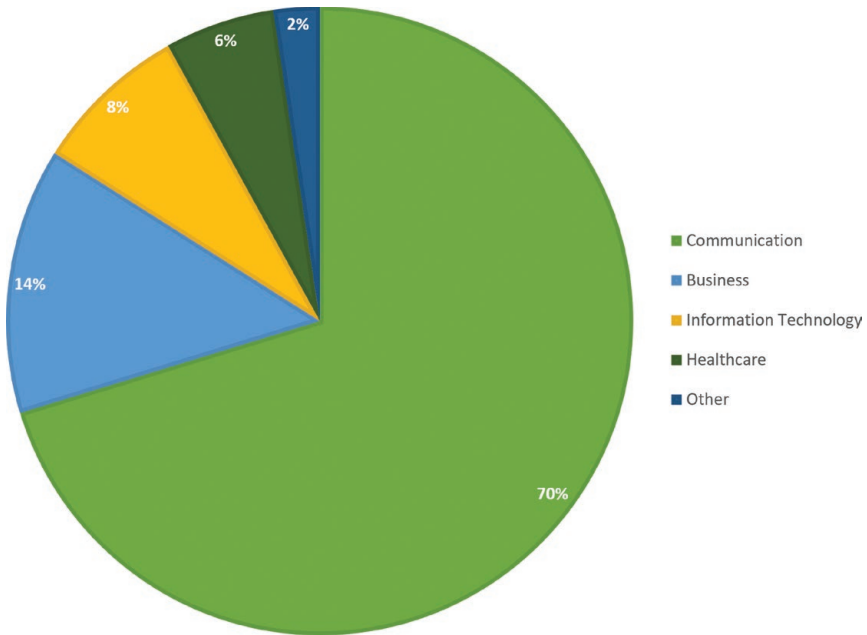
Figure 7.2. Domains mentioned in ads.

Communication was, by far, the most common; 70 percent of the 154 ads listed communication as a required domain. Within communication, job ads specified three specific areas: business and corporate communication, public relations, and media relations. The most frequently mentioned business subcategory was management. Domains listed in job ads offer two kinds of information: They tell us the major focus of the job being advertised, but they may also indicate the type of business the company does. For job seekers, this information suggests that communication knowledge is most valued in these jobs, but some background in a secondary field, such as business or information technology, is also considered a plus.

Degrees and Experience

All 176 job ads required some type of bachelor's degree; however, the type of degree (BA, BS, or other) was rarely stated. Only nine ads specifically requested a Bachelor of Arts degree (BA) and six, a Bachelor of Science degree (BS). Requirements for years of experience ranged more widely. One hundred and forty-seven ads listed prior experience as required. Eighty percent of the ads required applicants to have two or more years of experience, with almost one third (32%) requesting at least two years of experience. Two to three years of experience were required by over half of the ads. Table 7.3 summarizes the years of experience listed and the percentage of ads requesting this experience.

Table 7.3. Years of Experience Requested in Ads

Years of experience	Percentage of ads
1 year	18%
2 years	32%
3 years	22%
4 years	6%
5 years	18%
6+ years	2%
No experience	1%

While many employers accept a degree as two to three years of experience, 88 percent (151) ads required both a degree and experience. This combination suggests that applicants need to gain experience as early and often as possible, even while pursuing a degree. Internships, for example, can provide opportunities that allow students to gain experience and fulfill degree requirements.

Soft Skills

Soft skills were the second most frequently coded category in the job ads. Soft skills were coded into two subcategories: the ability to work well alone (personal traits) and the ability to work well with others (teaming traits). We identified 11 different personal trait categories in Table 7.4.

Table 7.4. Frequency of Personal Traits in Ads

Personal trait	Percentage of ads
Time management	70%
Relationship building	68%
Drive, motivation, or work ethic	40%
Able to work independently	38%
Flexibility	27%
Problem-solving	27%
Creative	21%
Leadership	21%
Positive attitude or enthusiasm	19%
Open to learning	13%
Handle ambiguity	9%

Table 7.5. Frequency of Teaming Traits in Ads

Teaming Trait	Percentage of ads
Working across teams	75%
Working within a team	56%
Supporting administration	44%
Supervising others	14%
Supporting staff	8%

These 11 traits appeared in 97 percent (171) of ads; many ads had multiple references, for a total of 710 personal traits. As Table 7.4 illustrates, the abilities to manage time and to build relationships were included by almost 70 percent of all ads. Several of these traits also connect easily to other categories. For example, the abilities to be flexible and manage time were frequently mentioned along with the physical requirement to work long hours. Teaming traits were mentioned in 90 percent (159) of the ads, but they appeared less frequently (522 times) than personal traits. Teaming traits were divided into five subcategories, with working across teams (75%) and working within a team (56%) being most frequently mentioned. Entry-level professional communicators often provided administrative support but only rarely provided staff support or supervised others. Table 7.5 provides a breakdown of these traits.

◼ Hard Skills

Hard skills were unquestionably the most frequently mentioned requirements for professional communicators. The 176 job ads listed hard skills 3,379 times, for an average of 20 hard skills listed per job. These skills were coded into eight categories. Table 7.6 identifies the eight categories, defines each, and lists the percentage of ads that included the category.

As Table 7.6 illustrates, almost all professional communicators are responsible for developing content and managing projects. Their soft skills prepare them to work alone on deliverables or to work with a team on larger projects. They communicate using both written and spoken language skills, and they use technology frequently in their work. They will need to have a firm understanding of workplace communication, but a secondary knowledge drawn from business, information, or health care domains is helpful for landing a job in a specific industry. A degree in communication can provide some of this knowledge, but prior experience, such as internships, is helpful and often required to enter these jobs. These entry-level jobs also require long hours occasionally and sometimes travel. These components comprise the snapshot of the professional communication workplace. In the next section, we delve more deeply into the ads to offer advice on how entry-level job seekers can turn their academic knowledge into workplace know-how.

Table 7.6. Frequency of Hard Skills in Ads

Category	Definition	Percentage of ads including this category
Genres	Creating specific deliverables or types of professional communication the job requires. Includes print, electronic, and oral deliverables.	97%
Project management	Organizing, tracking, reviewing, scheduling projects	94%
Grammar or language	Demonstrating effective writing and speaking skills (often generic). Includes style guide knowledge and foreign language fluency.	85%
Technology	Knowing and using information technologies, including specific software, media applications, and hardware, such as digital cameras and video equipment.	78%
Research or planning	Supporting or conducting research. Includes research methods, such as interviews and data analytics.	71%
Promotion/ marketing	Promoting services, products, and organizations	57%
Rhetoric	Analyzing audiences, adapting content for different audiences, and developing strategies	56%
Visual design	Knowing and applying graphic design, layout, and design principles	12%

Leveraging Academic Knowledge into Workplace Know-How

Using job ads to read the professional communication workplace offers the opportunity to see what communicators do, but how can entry-level job seekers spin what they've learned in classrooms into workplace gold? This section looks more closely at the specific words and phrases employers use in these ads to describe workplace activities: how and where work is performed, who does it, and who works with who. This section also connects these activities to work professional communication students have completed. It is divided into two subsections: First, we focus on hard skills described in the ads; second, we discuss soft skills.

Hard skills, as we noted earlier, are activities that can be seen, counted, or measured. Included in this group are six categories: communicating content, managing projects, using grammar and language, learning and using technologies, researching and planning, and persuading and promoting. Soft skills are

less easily measured; they are personal traits that one exhibits through actions. Included in this group are four subcategories: working well with others, working independently, being flexible, and being creative. We discuss these skill sets from most frequently to least frequently identified in the job ads.

■ Communicating Content

Approximately 97 percent of the job ads identified specific content, or genres, a professional communicator must create on the job. Table 7.7 presents a summary of many of the genres included in these job ads.

As Table 7.7 illustrates, workplace writing genres in these jobs are multiple and varied. Business or corporate communication genres were the most noted, appearing in 76 percent (134) of the job ads. Within business and corporate communication genres, internal communication genres were mentioned in 64 ads. Internal communication genres include announcements, employee messaging, and reports. For example, a communication coordinator job ad for a job placement company listed "research and prepare proposals to help identify and prioritize goals/situations" as an internal communication responsibility. Another ad for a communication specialist for a finance company noted that "planning, developing, executing internal communication strategies across the enterprise" was expected. External communications, such as "press releases, marketing materials, executive backgrounders, scripts and award submissions," were also commonly identified. The previously mentioned job placement company ad included "write and assemble business proposals"—the same genre but directed to an external audience. Many ads stated that professional communicators were required to write both internal and external communications, such as one from a medical organization, which required professional communicators to "develop content for corporate announcements and member communications, including newsletters and social media posts, and tailor for distribution across internal and external channels while ensuring consistency of message and editorial quality." As these examples illustrate, communicating content is a critical responsibility of professional communicators. While students may not have had experience writing all genres required by a job, they may have had experiences throughout their college career that can show a potential employer their abilities to learn and use different genres. For example, have they prepared a proposal or created an outline for a paper or project for a class? Have they taken a creative writing class or any upper-level writing course where they had to write a short story or create a podcast?

Some entry-level jobs required genres that are more journalistically focused, as seen from 82 of the job ads. Although press releases (45%) or video or multimedia (43%) accounted for the top genres, an interesting third was storytelling (30%). Storytelling has become an important part of organizational communication strategies as the workforce became more diverse (Barker & Gower, 2010).

Table 7.7. Genres Mentioned in Ads

Genre	Percentage of ads including this genre	Examples
Advertising	33%	Graphics, ads, promotions and signs
Business or corporate communication	76%	Internal communication, communication calendar or schedule, and reports
Correspondence	44%	Newsletters, emails, and e-blasts
Journalism	47%	Press release, video or multimedia, storytelling and photography
Digital social media	40%	Social media content, engagement, channels, and campaigns
Digital web content	47%	Web content, blogs, and training documents
Plans	38%	Communication, marketing, crisis
Public relations	23%	PR campaigns, award submissions, and announcements
Presentations	35%	Presentations, speeches, and talking points

One senior communications coordinator job at an R1 university listed "use storytelling techniques in an effort to effectively reach diverse audiences and further promote key messages and deliverable outcomes in support of . . . priorities." Storytelling can help employees engage more in the workplace (Gustomo et al., 2019). Another ad for a communications and outreach specialist for an insurance company listed one responsibility as "recommending and creating impactful storytelling content for ongoing communications that align with the social impact strategy." To help remember how to tell an impactful story, remember PLOT: plain, light, obvious, and tight (Guiliano, 2000). Keep it simple, easy to understand, relevant to the topic, and short. Most importantly, practice. Entering the job market, job seekers may have a short window of opportunity to talk about their story. They may only have a few hundred words in a press release to convey a message. To practice this skill, students should think of how to tell an impactful story in a short amount of time and practice retelling and refining that story. Finally, as they begin to tell their own story, entry-level job seekers should be sure to discuss genres produced and to describe experiences learning new genres. These details could be keys to entering a new workplace. Another sought-after skill set in any entry-level communication job is project management (PM) skills. Of the 176 job ads reviewed, 94 percent (167) listed some type of project management skill as a duty or responsibility. Although initially associated with construction projects, PM as a field has found its way into businesses because of the benefits, such as the ability for organizations to be more efficient and effective (Pinto, 2002). PM "is the application of knowledge, skills, tools, and

techniques to project activities to meet the project requirements" (Project Management Institute, 2012). PM activities are typically categorized into five groups: "initiating, planning, executing, monitoring and controlling, and closing" (Project Management Institute, 2012). When it comes to entry-level communication jobs, PM is a key skill set employers desire in successful candidates. Managing is less about managing other people and more about managing multiple priorities and deadlines. Many of the job ads examined included duties and responsibilities such as managing "complex projects to meet goals," "multiple projects simultaneously," and "competing priorities." Another ad from the food and beverage industry required "careful management of files to ensure edited and final files are saved accurately." PM requires an understanding of processes as well; an ad from a philanthropic division of a manufacturing company required knowledge of "design processes to maintain communications assets and documents, and ensure compliance from team."

Entry-level applicants may think they don't have any PM skills, but they don't need any special training or certification to possess skills that could be useful in the workplace. They have likely already managed many different projects during their college career. Managing multiple items is complicated when transitioning between tasks. Sophie Leroy (2009) found a negative impact when transitioning from one task to the next, depending on the amount of time required to complete the previous task. However, experience and practice ease the transition. Extending the definition of a project to include college experiences allows entry-level job seekers to talk about projects completed in an interview. A project could simply be a semester of classes. For registration, students may have reviewed which courses were available. They planned their schedules around those courses, along with any jobs or internships for the semester. An applicant could also discuss tools and skills used to keep track of everything to make the schedule work. A project could also be a group paper they've had to write. For example, many students can recall taking an online course over the summer, not knowing anyone in the class, and having to write a group paper with complete strangers. In a very short time, they get to know each other, learn each other's strengths and opportunities, and work together to write a cohesive paper. These could be examples of "competing priorities" and "gather[ing] resources for projects" as listed in the job ads. In a professional setting, the same skills would apply. Students often find themselves prioritizing work based on a number of factors, including when the work is due, who they engage or consult with, and which other tasks need to be completed at the same time.

Delivering Messages with Correct Grammar and Language Skills

Being able to manage projects and communicate in multiple genres requires strong language skills. Possessing strong grammar and language skills may seem obvious requirements for professional communicators. In fact, this skill set was

third most frequent in the ads we examined, with 85 percent (149) mentioning them. Although seemingly obvious, entry-level job seekers should understand specifically what employers look for when job ads request either written communication skills (141) or verbal communication skills (114) in their ads. One ad for a corporate communications specialist wanted someone who could "cultivate a consistent voice . . . across multiple platforms." Another ad for a human rights campaign communications coordinator asked for a candidate who "possess[es] solid writing skills as well as communication skills necessary to elicit the right information from a variety of sources." A third ad for a communications coordinator searched for "highly developed written, verbal, and interpersonal skills with the ability to work effectively in a large culturally diverse environment." Many ads identified offered more general descriptions, such as one requesting "superior ability to communicate effectively with others at all levels, orally and in writing," while others were more specific about situations that require language skills, such as one from a recruiting agency that requested the "ability to communicate complex situations clearly and simply by listening actively and conveying difficult messages in a positive manner." Whatever the situation, knowing how to speak and write clearly in a variety of workplace settings is another key expectation. Professional communication students likely have had many occasions where they have practiced writing and speaking skills in classes. Whether they were creating deliverables in multiple genres, delivering a speech, or engaging in a mock job interview, they were building grammar and language skills that will be important in the professional communication workplace.

Learning and Using Technology

Technology is a broad category, and 78 percent of the job ads looked for a variety of different technology experiences and skills. Managing and engaging through social media (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, X [Twitter], YouTube) may be part of an entry-level job's responsibilities. Even if the job seeker doesn't have a presence on these platforms, they may be asked to manage their new company's social media presence. If their job involved PM as we described previously, they may find PM software, such as Asana, Basecamp, and Workamijig, mentioned in job ads. Many ads also included familiar programs or applications like Microsoft Office, Google, and Adobe Creative Cloud software suites. Industry-specific tools, such as Cision and PR Newswire/Businesswire, or business management software tools like NetSuite are common in the ads. The key with technology is not necessarily having experience with different platforms, but rather being able to learn how to use the different technologies to get the job done. While entry-level job seekers may not be proficient in every technology mentioned, they can describe what technologies they know as well as how they learn technologies to demonstrate that acquiring technology skills is something they know how to do.

Researching and Planning Strategically

In the job ads, we categorized activities that required supporting or conducting research as research and planning. We found these activities mentioned in 71 percent (126) of ads. Like the genres category, research and planning included a broad range of activities. For example, some ads identified specific research methods that the professional communicator should know, such as surveys, interviews, and data analytics. An ad from a technology company was quite specific about the kinds of research activities required: "target audience research . . . [through] eMails, surveys, video, blogs, virtual events, events/campaigns." A data analytics firm required interview skills to create articles on "industry professionals (internally as well as externally)." In other ads, research was used internally for strategic planning. These ads required applicants to be able to conduct "communication audits" and "research business trends." A financial company searched for someone who could "translate marketing/business plans, competitive research and information into effective, efficient and innovative communication strategies that support business unit goals." Similarly, a medical insurance company looked for research skills, such as "evaluat[ing] communications programs and processes; identify[ing] lessons learned and recommend[ing] changes for future campaigns based on results (e.g., apply metrics to determine success of the process)." While job seekers may have experience with some of these research methods, like interviewing, the more strategic research requirements—communication audits, metrics, and program evaluations—may seem unfamiliar. These particular research activities are commonly discussed online and in business trade magazines, like *Forbes* and *Fortune*. When job seekers encounter the unfamiliar in ads, they can apply the information-gathering research skills they have to learn more. A communication audit, for example, is a study that looks at how communication occurs within a communication organization in order to recommend change: How do managers communicate with their employees, what channels are used, and under what circumstances are they conveyed? When job seekers understand what research the task requires, they will discover that they already know how to ask questions and get answers. These skills are, to put it simply, more focused on specific types of research that students in professional communication classes already learned to do.

Using Messages to Persuade and Promote

A final hard skill we consider in this section includes information we categorized as "rhetoric" and "promotion." Rhetoric relates to how communication impacts the audience. Specifically, we coded responsibilities as rhetoric if they involved analyzing, adapting content, and developing strategies for specific audiences. Similarly, promotion responsibilities involved marketing services, products, and organizations to specific audiences. While it may seem odd to connect an ancient practice like rhetoric to promoting or marketing, both categories

referenced "persuasion" and "audiences," so we felt they were suitably combined into a single discussion here. Of the 57 percent (100) of ads that listed rhetoric as a hard skill, the audience was a frequently identified component, appearing in 44 of the ads. Job duties and responsibilities included examples of both, such as "communications experience with proven experience simplifying concepts and convey them to audiences," "creative storytelling across a variety of formats and channels," or "ability to tell a story that appeals to different audiences". Other skills could include "translating business strategies to comprehensive corporate communication strategies," having a "comprehensive understanding of marketing and communication channels including digital, print, direct, email, social media and more," and supporting "strategic employee communications." Ads that focused on promotion often involved public relations and community engagement, such as this ad from a digital security firm, which required the applicant to be able to "generate, curate and publish daily content that extends our reach, builds meaningful connections and encourages followers to take action." Media relations was another common aspect of promotional activities. These activities were sometimes as simple as "maintain[ing] lists of media contacts" or as complicated as working in a team to "increase the average number of press hits by 15% per quarter by building and maintaining monthly communications with reporters with press pitches, drafting and sending press releases, and managing the logistics of media requests." Whatever the activity's complexity, entry-level job seekers will need to draw on lessons they have learned about audiences, situations, and strategies for persuasion to exhibit these skills. One way that they could translate their experience is to think back to a time when they had to explain a concept or a topic to a class or in a paper. Oftentimes this requires the skills to comprehend the details of a paper, journal article, or book chapter and then summarize it for a broad audience. The audience may have been familiar with the topic, but the student had to find a way to clearly and concisely explain it.

▪ Teaming or Working Well with Others

With this section, we transition from hard skills that are measurable to soft skills that are more personal. Teaming or working well with others was the most frequent soft skill we found in the job ads, appearing in 90 percent (159) of the ads. Students have likely worked with others during coursework, but if not, now is the time to learn to work in teams.

As seen in Table 7.8, for this category, we included three sub-nodes—working across teams, working within teams, and relationship building—because they all apply to working well with others. Forty-eight percent of the ads include skills for working across teams. Twenty-four percent of the ads mention skills for working within teams. Another 24 percent of the ads ask for relationship-building skills. Therefore, 96 percent of the ads include skills related to teaming or working well with others.

Table 7.8. Percentage of Teaming or Working
Well with Others Soft Skills in Ads

Sub-nodes in the Teaming or Working Well with Others category	Percentage
Working across teams	48%
Working within a team	24%
Relationship building	24%

Clearly, applicants must be skilled at teamwork. As for working within teams, one ad for a communications coordinator notes that applicants must have "the ability to collaborate and work effectively with individuals." The same ad explains that applicants must "support project coordination and daily workflows by engaging with cross functional teams." These cross functional teams may be within or outside of the professional communicator's organization. As for relationship building, the job ads note that professional communicators must "possess strong interpersonal skills at all levels" and have a "proven ability to build relationships with diverse groups."

Similarly, building relationships with a departmental team, other cross-departmental teams, external teams, clients, and members of the community is essential. For example, one job ad for a public relations and communications coordinator explains that applicants must "develop and maintain successful relationships with key reporters." Building positive relationships with reporters makes it easier to plan press conferences, field reporters' questions, and maintain a positive image for the organization. Another ad for a communications coordinator job mentions how applicants should "maintain contracts and relationships with consultants and external entities providing services to the Communications Department." Building positive relationships with consultants leads to smoother project management.

Students should practice teamwork and relationship-building skills before searching for their first entry-level position. To practice teamwork, they might volunteer for group projects at work, school, or a local charity. Even playing a small role will help them gain more experience. They can practice relationship building by actively adding new people to their network. A good place to begin this work is getting to know their instructors. Chances are their instructors will be willing to introduce them to other working professionals. Second, they can use tools like LinkedIn to reach out to communication professionals and ask if they have time to talk about their professional lives. Third, students can ask communication professionals at their jobs if they have time to talk about their work. However students grow their network, they should remember to express thanks to a person who is willing to take time to meet with them—a handwritten thank-you note shows appreciation and increases the likelihood of being remembered when applying for a job with a new contact's company after graduation.

■ Working Independently

Although this category may seem contradictory, given that the first soft skill is teaming, it is equally important to be able to work well independently. Like several other categories, this one is broad. It includes personal traits that students possess, like good time management, a strong work ethic, and a positive attitude, but it also includes how well students can make decisions as a leader of a group or as a supervisor. Although these last two activities do include working with others, they often require an individual to make independent decisions about teams and their work. The frequency of these traits in the job ads is illustrated in Table 7.9.

When discussing time management, the ads explain applicants should be "a master juggler of multiple projects" with a "demonstrated ability to work well under pressure." Furthermore, applicants will be asked to manage and prioritize "competing deadlines" in a "fast paced environment" while creating high-quality work. Successfully managing multiple projects may help new employees to move up the corporate ladder. Employers also seek driven professional communicators who are able to work alone. For example, one ad for a communications specialist explains applicants should "be assertive, and take ownership" when working on projects. A different ad for a communications coordinator notes applicants should be able to "work independently with little day to day guidance."

Companies also seek applicants who show strong leadership and who are, according to one ad for a corporate communications coordinator, "tactfully relentless to get what is needed to make progress." Possessing this quality creates the momentum to sustain long-term projects. One example of leadership comes from an ad for a communications specialist who works with mergers and acquisitions (M&A) integration. The ad explains how the person in this position must "be the M&A integration and change management communications subject matter expert in the Integration Management Office, ensuring industry best practices are being deployed through all integration projects." On the job, entry-level professional communicators may be asked to lead a team because of their expertise in a specific area, whether in communication or a different domain. Having a positive attitude is also key. One ad for a corporate communications specialist notes that applicants must "bring passion and enthusiasm to every project, every interaction, every day." An ad for a communications and engagement specialist explains that applicants should be "energetic, positive and outgoing, while able to maintain a professional demeanor." Having a positive attitude may not always be easy, but it helps to build stronger relationships with coworkers and clients. Last, new employees may be asked to supervise others in a leadership role. Specifically, they may be supervising an internship program. Or they might be coaching an administrative assistant. Other possibilities include supervising student interns, content managers, web consultants, contractors, faculty, or volunteers. While the group being supervised depends on the company and the position, leadership always requires supporting others, not just telling others what to do.

Table 7.9. Percentage of Working Independently Soft Skills in Ads

Sub-nodes in the Working Independently category	Percentage
Time management	24%
Drive, motivation, or work ethic	10%
Able to work independently	10%
Leadership	6%
Positive attitude or enthusiasm	5%
Supervising others	5%

Working independently is also a skill students can practice. First, they might take opportunities to lead in group projects for class or for projects in their current job. Second, they should consider volunteering for a local non-profit whose mission they believe in. Volunteering will give them an opportunity to add more people to their network and allow them more chances to take on leadership roles, even if it is something as simple as teaching incoming volunteers how they can help.

Being Flexible

A third category that appeared in our analysis of the job ads was the importance of being flexible. In this category, we combined sub-nodes on flexibility, openness to learning, and handling ambiguity because they all related to flexibility. As Table 7.10 indicates, six percent of the ads mention flexibility. An openness to learning is included in three percent of the ads, and two percent of the ads note applicants' ability to handle ambiguity.

When discussing flexibility, job ads described the ideal applicant as one who can "shift gears and acclimate quickly" to accommodate changes in schedules, project plans, and corporate environments. For example, one job ad for a communications specialist explains applicants must have "the ability to shift across multiple mediums in a fast-paced environment." One minute, they might find themselves working on an email to a client. The next minute, they are finishing a call for proposals for contract work. They'll likely be asked to switch between writing in a variety of genres, which may include emails, podcasts, and communication plans, to name a few.

Table 7.10. Percentage of Flexibility Soft Skills in Ads

Sub-nodes in the Being Flexible category	Percentage
Flexibility	6%
Open to learning	3%
Handle ambiguity	2%

This flexibility also applies to acquiring new knowledge on the job. Many of the job ads mentioned how applicants should be open to learning. Examples include learning new technology and professional development. No matter where they work, entry-level professional communicators should keep in mind that there is always something new to learn. They can practice this openness by teaching themselves how to use a technology that's new to them. For example, they could learn a new software like Adobe InDesign using books, YouTube videos, and online classes. Learning new technologies will also strengthen future job applications in the long run.

Last, applicants must "deal with ambiguity" and "unexpected changes" on the job. For example, one ad for a marketing communications project coordinator noted applicants must show they "can effectively cope with change; can shift gears comfortably; can decide and act without having the total picture." Furthermore, the company needs someone who "isn't upset when things are up in the air; doesn't have to finish things before moving on" and "can comfortably handle risk and uncertainty." The key to operating in ambiguity is to remain calm. Find a healthy coping mechanism that is useful in uncertain situations. What these final responsibilities suggest is that, in the moment, flexibility isn't always easy. But with the rapidly evolving nature of a professional communicator's environment, it's a necessary skill.

■ Being Creative

A final soft skill worth noting is creativity. As seen in Table 7.11, for this category, we combined the problem-solving and creativity sub-nodes of the soft skills section because they both apply to creativity. Six percent of the ads mention problem-solving skills. Creativity is included in five percent of the ads.

The first form of creativity to consider is problem-solving creativity, and the second is design creativity. Problem-solving creativity, or creativity in motion, focuses on "creativity and initiative in solving problems." Design creativity includes tasks like generating new ideas and storytelling in ways that engage audiences. The ideal candidate has the "ability to use innovative and creative techniques that drive effective organizational communications." Two examples help illustrate this point. As for problem-solving creativity, one ad for a communications and engagement specialist notes applicants must be able to "continuously look for ways to improve." Chances are students have already been problem-solving creatively in their current jobs, but don't realize it. Are there ways in which coworkers could be communicating more effectively? Is there a process that could be running more efficiently? When's the last time someone claimed "this is the way we've always done it" when asked why an inefficient process is done a certain way? That would be an excellent place to make change. Students should not wait until their first professional communication job to start practicing these skills. Professional communication training helps a student look at problems and processes from a different angle.

Table 7.11. Percentage of Creative Soft Skills in Ads

Sub-nodes in the Being Creative category	Percentage
Problem-solving	6%
Creativity	5%

As for design creativity, one ad for a senior specialist in corporate communication notes applicants should be a "highly creative writer experienced in crafting compelling messaging, stories and narratives." Often, part of an entry-level job is translating complex technical information into accessible formats for a diverse range of audiences. The power of narrative can help. Practicing these two types of creativity as a student is possible. For problem-solving creativity, or creativity in motion, students who work should consider solving problems in their current workplace. For design creativity, they can practice explaining what they are working on for a class or work project to a friend or family member who doesn't know the topic. Books and online classes can also assist when learning design principles. Two excellent books on design include *The Non-Designer's Design Book* by Robin Williams (2015) and *100 Things Every Designer Needs to Know About People* by Susan Weinschenk (2011). *The Non-Designer's Design Book* provides an easy-to-follow guide for the basic design principles of contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity. *100 Things Every Designer Needs to Know About People* explains why people react to design the way they do. Websites like LinkedIn Learning and MasterClass offer online classes for a variety of new skills. Creativity is essential to finding solutions for design and practical problems.

Knowing these soft skills can assist entry-level professional communicators. Working well with others, working independently, being flexible, and engaging their creativity will help them grow these skills. While their first professional communication job may seem like it is many years away from now, practicing these skills as a student provides the foundation for getting and succeeding in an entry-level position.

■ What We See and What We Don't See in Job Ads

The job ads we've discussed in this chapter have allowed us to see commonalities of the professional communication workplace. It is a fast-paced, exciting environment where professional communicators will work closely with others, whether they are planning a project or managing a team. Professional communication jobs are located across multiple industries, but their focus is almost always on communicating with both internal and external audiences. This communication may take many forms, but the organization's story will be a constant touchstone that professional communicators will tell and retell in multiple media and genres.

Yet these ads cannot tell us what is going on behind the scenes. Once hired, professional communicators may find that their entry-level position is not as

glamorous as they had hoped. They may also find that jobs with the same title are not created equal. This is where reading through the responsibilities listed in each job ad will provide a better understanding of whether the job may include administrative or even clerical duties. One communications coordinator job ad was straightforward and stated, "administrative duties include answering phones, scheduling meetings, travel and appointments, managing department meetings, reporting expenses, and filling out check requests." In another communications coordinator job, administrative tasks included "assisting the SVP, Corporate Communications, with scheduling, managing budgets and invoices, scheduling meetings, answering phones, leading brainstorm sessions, creating agendas and meeting recaps, and other activities."

Supporting senior administrators can be beneficial in the long run even if it's not an ideal job to start. Assisting and getting to know these administrators may help the professional communicator move up the ranks in their company when a new opening surfaces. Making phone calls and schedules may not be fun, but it gives new employees the chance to demonstrate their work ethic, which administrators notice. New employees should also keep in mind that while they are providing support and assisting senior leaders within an organization, this work can prove beneficial depending on their long-term career goals.

Finally, professional communicators unquestionably find themselves in workplaces full of energy and sometimes pressure. These workplaces demand people skills and emotional labor that can wear employees down, whether they are working alone or with others. Such workplaces, we believe, require another important kind of attention not found in any job ads we examined: making time for self-care. In a fast-paced environment, it can be easy to move forward to the next item on the to-do list instead of taking a break after hours of screen time. For this reason, our last advice, wherever professional communication students find that entry-level position, is to take care of themselves as much as they help take care of everyone else.

▌ Acknowledgments

▌ References

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