

Social/Interpersonal Skills in Business: In Field, Curriculum and Student Perspectives

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Abstract

This study addresses the need for curriculum aimed at educating current Bachelor of Business Administration students regarding social/interpersonal skills required within the field of business administration. Social/Interpersonal skills will be operationally defined and include behaviors related to etiquette, professional introductions, conversing, etc. Although current Bachelor of Business Administration may offer appropriate coverage of the specific areas of study within the traditional field of business administration, graduates may lack the social/interpersonal skills needed to enhance their effectiveness.



Introduction

In today's global and competitive business environment, business organizations are striving to stand out from their competitors in an attempt to garner an additional segment of clientele. One approach businesses are using is providing consistent and reliable customer service in the differentiation strategies of companies (Bennett, 1990). However, if a business organization is to implement effective customer service programs, they must have their employees acquire a set of skills that collectively encompass the business social/interpersonal area. (Watkin, 1986). Schaffer and Kelley (1993) indicated there is increasing evidence that recent graduates of business schools do not possess the basic etiquette skills that are necessary to succeed in today's business world and that preparedness in college graduates is relatively lacking. In 1990, Dibsie conducted a study of business organizations to see what percentages of social/interpersonal skills current management held. The study showed that 88% of senior-level managers had flawless manners. For middle-level managers, the percentage fell to 40% and 1990 MBA graduates had only 12%. Other studies also showed a similar decline in business manners.

Although business social/interpersonal skills cover many dimensions of business, some common business mistakes take place every day. Among the most frequent are unacceptable handshakes, inappropriate manners at business meals, improper introductions, and unsuitable lunch behavior as well as some general office errors. In 1992, Kelley recommended that business students be taught the art of social/interpersonal skills as part of the business curriculum. Marketing students, more than any other major, need to acquire these skills as their careers most directly involve their customers (Kelley, 1992).

Research Questions

This study explores and evaluates three related topics: the value of social/interpersonal skills in the business administration field; the coverage of social/interpersonal skills within current Bachelor of Business Administration curricula; and the current mastery/awareness of social/interpersonal skills among current Bachelor of Business Administration students

This study takes place at The University of Texas at Brownsville within the School of Business. The University of Texas at Brownsville in partnership with Texas Southmost College is located in the southernmost region of Texas in Cameron County. This region has higher unemployment, birthrates, population growth, and poverty levels than most other counties in the state of Texas but is also one of the fastest growing regions in the State. Brownsville grew 41% in the last decade from 98,962 to 139,772 people. Across the border, Matamoros, Mexico, grew 38% during the same decade from 303,293 to 418,141 people or three times as large as Brownsville. The Lower Rio Grande Valley also has lower per capita income, annual pay, and annual pay growth (UTB-CBIRD, 2002). Cameron County is one of the poorest counties in the state of Texas with 33% of the population below poverty level as compared to 15% in the State and with the median income of \$26K vs. \$40K in the state (UTB/TSC, 2004). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 85% of Cameron County's population was of Hispanic

origin, 14% was White non-Hispanic; 1% was Asian; less than 0.5% was Black or African American; and less than 0.5% was American Indian or Alaska Native. Forty-two percent of the population 25 years of age and older have less than a high school diploma whereas only 5% have a graduate or professional degree; 11% have a bachelor's degree with 22% having a high school diploma or equivalency (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). The university student characteristics reflect the demographics of the region.

The Value of Social/Interpersonal Skills in the Business Administration Field

The value of social/interpersonal skills in the business administration field has been well demonstrated. Mausehund, Dortch, Brown and Bridges (1995) reports that the large number and variety of business publications related to social/interpersonal skills, including etiquette in the workplace, indicate a definite interest in the topic by employers. Pearse (2005) identified three fundamental co-words as cornerstones to business success: Consideration, Cooperation, and Communication. As a result, the need for required innovative courses in business administration curricula designed to build various social/interpersonal skills from email etiquette to effective team-building skills is indicated. The importance of the specific social/interpersonal skill, etiquette, is indicated by the fact that nearly 50% of all business transactions are finalized during a meal (Wright, 2005). Casperson (2000) recommends the need to practice power etiquette in order to increase one's chances for job promotions within the business administration field. Power etiquette, according to Casperson, is the ability to learn and use social skills to transact business with thoughtful consideration. Specific skills emphasized include courtesy, politeness, and good manners. Furthermore, Casperson (2000) demonstrates the importance that business etiquette plays in gaining and satisfying new clients. Introductions, appearance, business card usage, and conversing are examples of social/interpersonal skills identified as critical to success in business. Ditlea (1992) demonstrates the emerging important role of manners and business etiquette by identifying the large number of updated business etiquette guides and the increased presence of business etiquette consultants. Solis (2005) reports on the importance of using good manners in relationship to the increasingly technical business administration field environment. Cell phone and e-mail etiquette, for example, are new emerging areas required for success. In summary, the value of social/interpersonal skills in the business administration field has been well demonstrated.

The Coverage of Social/Interpersonal Skills with Current Bachelor of Business Administration Curricula

A survey of Bachelor of Business Administration programs offered by the nine universities making up the University of Texas System indicated that all institutions require courses that indirectly relate to building social/interpersonal skills in business. These courses include largely undergraduate courses such as Communication Studies, Speech, and various behavioral science courses such as psychology and sociology. Directly related courses were identified in only two of the nine universities surveyed:

Table 1: U.T. System Schools	
Name of University	Courses
University of Texas at Austin	none identified
University of Texas at Brownsville	none identified
University of Texas at El Paso	none identified
University of Texas-Pan American	none identified
University of Texas of the Permian Basin	none identified
University of Texas at Tyler	none identified
University of Texas at Arlington	none identified
University of Texas at San Antonio	two identified
University of Texas at Dallas	two identified

University of Texas at San Antonio lists the following two courses in their catalog as current course offerings:

1. MGT 3003: Business Communications and Professional Development (for management majors). This course examines basic interpersonal communication processes within written and oral channels, with practical applications for the business environment. Issues regarding cross-cultural communications and ethical considerations in business communication are discussed. The course emphasizes three areas: 1) planning, researching, organizing, editing and revising business-related documents; 2) planning, organizing, and delivering oral presentations in a business setting; and 3) preparing for professional success in the business world, including career planning, networking, job searching, resume preparation, and job application and interviewing. Written assignments and oral presentations are required.
2. MGT 3253: Interpersonal Communication (for management majors). This course exams the theory and research of communication in personal and professional settings. The course stresses the social context of communication and emphasizes skills, knowledge, and motivation of verbal and nonverbal interactions.

The University of Texas at Dallas offers these two courses in their catalog as current course offerings:

1. AIM 3191: Professional Communications and Ethics I (for accounting majors). This course is designed to develop professional communication skills. Topics covered range from the professional interview process to writing effective memoranda. Students will interact with guest speakers from industry, public accounting organizations, and consulting firms.
2. AIM 3192: Professional Communications and Ethics II (for accounting majors). This course is designed to refine professional communication skills and introduce professional analysis of accounting information management issues that affect the business world. Students will interact with guest speakers from industry, public accounting organizations, and consulting firms.

In summary, current Bachelor of Business Administration program curricula lack significant coverage of social/interpersonal skills.

Social/Interpersonal Skills Survey Methodology

In order to attain the awareness/mastery of current Business Administration students, a survey questionnaire (French, 2006) was adapted by the authors to reflect broader coverage of social/interpersonal skill areas identified as necessary for business students to have. This survey was administered to selected fall 2006 School of Business students on a volunteer basis. The authors selected a cross-section of courses currently being taught in the School of Business. The faculty members teaching these courses were asked to offer students the opportunity to volunteer to take this survey. The authors were able to obtain over 200 completed surveys. The results of the survey were used to produce descriptive data that is found in the findings/interpretation section. The data were assessed in an effort to ascertain the extent of student awareness of social/interpersonal skills. In addition, overall data for each topic area were calculated to arrive at a percentage of correct responses in dining skills, business courtesy skills, cell phone skills, etc.

Findings of the Social/Interpersonal Skills Survey

The surveys were administered the last week of November 2006, and resulted in 216 completed surveys from students taking courses leading toward a Business Administration bachelor's degree with concentrations in Finance, Management, and Marketing

The first question in the survey was to find out what business students thought of having to learn business etiquette or social/interpersonal skills in their plan of study. Eighty-one percent of the students felt that social/interpersonal skills or business etiquette should be included in their program of study. A second question asked students their opinion as to whether there has been a decline of social/interpersonal skills in the workplace. To this question, 62% indicated that social/interpersonal skills have indeed been declining.

The remainder of the survey was divided into five areas for 52 questions. The five areas were Dining Etiquette, Business Lunch Behavior, Business Introductions, General Business Courtesies, and Telephone or Cell Phone Etiquette.

The table below reflects the average of all correct answers for each section. Dining Etiquette, Business Lunch Behavior, Business Introductions, General Business Courtesies, and Telephone or Cell Phone Etiquette.

Table 2: Overall Averages in All Areas	
Topic Area	Average of Correct Answers per Section
Dining Etiquette	63%
Business Lunch Behavior	56%
Business Introductions	72%
General Business Courtesies	62%
Telephone or Cell Phone	64%

The next section will discuss conclusions about the findings listed above.

Social/Interpersonal Skills Survey Conclusions

The contributions of this proposed survey on the awareness of social/interpersonal skills among students in business courses are two-fold. First, the survey will add insight to the research on the social/interpersonal awareness of students within the School of Business. Secondly, this survey offers the opportunity for the authors to evaluate the effectiveness of the UTB School Business curriculum with respect to social skills and to offer insight into changes in curricula as a means of enhancing the experience of students.

The first section of the survey, Dining Etiquette, contained three questions that had less than 30% of the students answering correctly. A 63% overall average of correct responses; however, we might conclude that for this section, current business students have some knowledge of business dining etiquette, but not sufficient knowledge to allow students to interact adequately when dining with business associates or clients.

Business lunch behavior comprised the second section of the survey. In this section, the question that was missed by the majority of the students, at a 78% rate, had to do with a male client or colleague seating a female client or colleague at a business lunch. In the responses given for this question, it seemed as if students were leaning toward answering with politeness or courtesy of a male toward a female in the situation. The students invariably got the answer incorrect; however, it is nice to note that they would appreciate the courtesy and respect that a male might have toward a female, not necessarily in a business setting. On the other hand, the question that most students got correct had to do with who should pick up the check when a colleague or client invites the other person to a business lunch. Eighty-seven percent of the students indicated that the person who invites (whether male or female), pays the check.

Twenty-four percent of the students responded to the following question correctly in the Business Introduction section: When you introduce a younger person to an older person, you should use both first and last names of both people. This response rate seems to indicate that students do not understand introduction protocol as well as they should; therefore, introductions should be stressed within the business curricula to ensure that when faced with an introduction, there would be no question about how to address each person. At the opposite end of the spectrum of answers in this section, 92% answered the question correctly when asked about hand-shakes if a person is introduced to someone, when a person introduces themselves to some else and when a person says goodbye.

In the General Business Courtesies section, two questions ranked last in correct answers. The first question concerns whether men should assist women with their larger bags when traveling together on business trip. Only 18% of the students obtained the correct answer to this question. The second question involved whether, in a business setting, a male should assist a female into and out of a car. Again only 19% of the students responded correctly. Once more, UTB students seemed to perceive that

politeness should transcend the business place and old-fashion chivalry should govern the manner in which a male and female interact. On the other extreme, the question that received 95% correct answers was one that concerned always opening the door for someone carrying packages, no matter if the people carrying the packages were male or female.

In the last section entitled Telephone or Cell Phone Etiquette, only one question received correct answers from 9% of the students. The question was if you must accept calls when dining make sure to alert your host or guest when you sit down and excuse yourself from the table to answer the call and keep it brief. With the popularity of cell phones today, this question strikes at the very heart of business etiquette or even politeness. Today, cell phones can constantly be heard ringing in restaurants. Some people do not understand that their answering the telephone and discussing their business loudly and openly in a public setting may be disturbing to others dining in the area. The answers received to this question seem to be reflective of this trend. Interestingly, 91% of the students had correct answers to the question about a person's behavior when sharing an office with a co-worker who is on the telephone.

Table 2 depicted above indicates a 56% or more response rate of correct answers. Considering the large number of survey participants, almost half, did not respond correctly. It would seem then that the importance of students receiving instruction on etiquette or social/interpersonal skills during their education is high; therefore, the inclusion of social/interpersonal skills within the business curricula is important. The authors concur with and add to the conclusion made by Schaffer and Kelley (1993) that with all the limitations imposed by ASCSB accreditation and the number of business courses that can be offered in the curriculum for a bachelor's degree, modifying existing courses to include a component of social/interpersonal skills may be the only alternative. With the ever-increasing globalization of the marketplace, social/interpersonal skills on the international scale should also be included in the business curricula.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study indicates that social/interpersonal skills are of value within the field of business administration, that current Bachelor of Business Administration program curricula lack significant coverage of interpersonal/social skills, and that current Bachelor of Business Administration student's lack significant mastery/awareness regarding social/interpersonal skills.

It should be noted that the authors of this study do not mean to imply that this data applies to business students across the nation, but simply to our geographic area of Texas. Further research should be conducted to ascertain national data as well as international social/interpersonal skills. Furthermore, the perceptions of business professionals as to current and emerging social/interpersonal skills should also provide opportunities for further research.

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Appendix A

BUSINESS ETIQUETTE SURVEY

- | | | | |
|-----|----|----|--|
| Yes | No | A. | Do you think that business students should learn business etiquette or social/interpersonal skills in their plan of study? |
| Yes | No | B. | Do you think that social/interpersonal skills have been declining in the workplace? |

Indicate whether the following statements are true or false by circling the correct answer.

Dining Etiquette

- T F 1. It is OK to place your elbows gently on the table while you are between courses of a meal.
- T F 2. When served soup that is too hot to eat, you should stir it very gently so it will cool enough so you can eat it.
- T F 3. When a utensil is dropped on the floor, you should pick it up and discreetly wipe with your napkin before you use it again.
- T F 4. When you finish eating, you should gently fold your napkin and lay it on your plate so the server knows you have finished.
- T F 5. As soon as you sit down at the table, you should place the napkin on your lap.
- T F 6. When you are eating meat or salad, you should cut two or three pieces and eat them before cutting any more.
- T F 7. When served rolls, they should be broken or torn in half with your fingers and buttered before you begin eating them.
- T F 8. A fork placed above the main plate is the fork to use with your salad.
- T F 9. Men should move their ties over their shoulders to avoid spilling food on them.
- T F 10. Your glass of water should be to your right.
- T F 11. You may move your utensils, your cup, or your glass to wherever it is most comfortable for you to use.
- T F 12. Your salad fork is usually shorter than the fork you use for your main course.
- T F 13. While you are eating, you should try to maintain the same pace as the people sitting around you.
- T F 14. Coffee is requested only after the main course is finished and before dessert is served.
- T F 15. The small bowl of water (with a lemon or lime in it) brought to you after the meal is used to cleanse your palate, so you should sip it carefully and slowly.

- T F 16. It is appropriate after you have finished eating to brush away the crumbs carefully that invariably land at your place setting.
- T F 17. You should always tip 15% to 20% of the total cost of the meal, even if the service is poor.
- T F 18. It is not appropriate to ask to taste someone else's dish.
- T F 19. It is appropriate to blow your nose with the napkin if needed.
- T F 20. It is appropriate to talk with your mouth full if asked a question.
- T F 21. It is ok for women to put lipstick on at the table so long as everyone has finished dining.

Business Lunch Behavior

- T F 22. Men or women should never remove their jackets or loosen their ties unless the host or hostess does.
- T F 23. Junior executives (male or female) should help senior executives (male or female) with their coats.
- T F 24. At a business lunch, a male companion should seat the female companion.
- T F 25. Whoever invites a colleague or client for a business lunch is the one that pays for it.

Business Introductions

- T F 26. When you introduce a company executive to a customer or client, you should say the client's name first.
- T F 27. When you introduce officers of the company, always use their titles even if they are retired or no longer hold those positions.
- T F 28. "Fine" is all that is necessary as a response when asked "How do you do?"
- T F 29. Men and women should always extend their right hand when being introduced.
- T F 30. You should introduce everyone within earshot (secretaries, receptionists, clerks, associates, etc.) to everyone else within range as you escort someone through your offices.

- T F 31. You should shake hands when introduced to someone; when you introduce yourself to someone else; and when you say goodbye.
- T F 32. If someone introduces you by your nickname or mispronounces your name, it is appropriate to correct the person making the introductions.
- T F 33. Unless they request it, never call a client or business associate by their first name.
- T F 34. When making introductions, introduce people in this sequence: business rank first, client second, boss third, and then colleagues.
- T F 35. When you introduce a younger person to an older person, you should use both first and last names of each person.

General Business Courtesies

- T F 36. Both men and women should rise to greet a client, office guest, or anyone they are meeting for the first time, whether the guest is male or female.
- T F 37. You should always open the door for people carrying packages, whether you are male or female.
- T F 38. If a woman is in the lead, she should open the door for the man.
- T F 39. If you are nearest the door on an elevator, you should step off while people in the rear exit.
- T F 40. When using an escalator, a man should follow the woman.
- T F 41. When using the stairs, a man usually precedes the woman going up and follows her going down.
- T F 42. A man should go around to the passenger side and assist a woman into and out of a car.
- T F 43. Men should assist women with their larger bags when they are traveling together on business trips.
- T F 44. Only men have to rise when a guest from outside the company enters a room.
- T F 45. You should never keep anyone waiting longer than 10 minutes.
- T F 46. When you enter someone else's office, it is OK for you to sit.

T F 47. It is OK to use a pen or pencil from someone else's desk if yours is not handy.

T F 48. A sign of good business manners is the art of listening.

Telephone or Cell Phones

T F 49. When you share an office with a co-worker who is on the telephone, try to keep busy while the person is talking and never comment on what you have just overheard.

T F 50. Using a speakerphone in a two-person conversation annoys or offends the person whose voice is broadcasted particularly when they do not know it is on speakerphone.

T F 51. You should leave your cell phone in your briefcase or your pocket, turned off when dining.

T F 52. If you must accept calls when dining, make sure to alert your host or guest when you sit down and excuse yourself from the table to answer the call. Keep it brief.

*Survey adapted from Christine French, Newcastle High School, Newcastle, WY

Table 3: Lowest and Highest Percentage of Answers in each Section	
Dining Etiquette 40% of the questions in the survey	
Low/High Scoring Percentages	Question
16%	When served soup that is too hot to eat, you should stir it very gently so it will cool enough so you can eat it.
94%	It is appropriate to talk with your mouth full if asked a question.
Business Lunch Behavior	
22%	At a business lunch, a male companion should seat the female companion.
87%	Whoever invites a colleague or client for a business lunch is the one that pays for it.
Business Introductions	
24%	When you introduce a younger person to an older person, you should use both first and last names of each person.
92%	You should shake hands when you are introduced to someone; when you introduce yourself to someone else; and when you say goodbye.
General Business Courtesies	
18%	Men should assist women with their larger bags when they are traveling together on business trips.
95%	You should always open the door for people carrying packages, whether you are male or female.
Telephone or Cell Phone Etiquette	
9%	If you must accept calls when dining, make sure to alert your host or guest when you sit down and excuse yourself from the table to answer the call. Keep it brief.
91%	When sharing an office with a co-worker who is on the telephone, try to keep busy while the person is talking and never comment on what you have just overheard.