Understanding Communication Competencies through Co-Operative Workterm Experiences

Student Perceptions Of Workplace Communications During Co-Operative Workterm Experiences

WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

Communication and relationship building are important components of leadership. 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. 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 judgments to find the best way of communicating. They do this by assessing the actions of supervisors and co-workers through their own perceptual lenses.

This study describes the supervisory communication practices perceived by co-op students to influence workplace relationships. This research examines how co-op students perceived their supervisors used face-to-face situations, and both voice and text based technologies to communicate. Additionally, it explores the expectations and subsequent effect on student perceptions of their relationship when supervisors did or did not meet their perceived communication obligations.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?

Francine Schlosser from the University of Windsor and Rod McNaughton from the University of Waterloo sampled eighty undergraduate students at the University of Waterloo who experienced co-operative work term placements. 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. 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. 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. How did it support or damage the relationship?

The answers to these questions were quantitatively analyzed to provide insight into the potential differences and similarities in managerial practices via face-to-face, mobile voice, and mobile text media.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?
The researchers were able to identify themes with respect to the use of message content and tone, media selection and message timing. The results showed that students appear to value face-to-face communication and 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. Specifically some findings are as follows:

- Message content plays an important role in leader communication competencies and involves meeting employee needs from both relationship and task-oriented perspectives.
- Affective relationship behaviours focused upon similarities and liking outside of the actual job performed. This focus on socialization outside of work requires that both parties be willing to integrate their personal and work “spaces”.
- The process of communicating expectations was 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.
- There is a general preference for face-to-face contact as a way to develop relationships.

**HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?**

This research can be used by organizations responsible for co-operative education. This research finds that in developing work placements, administrators should focus on the supervisor as well as the work role. Interaction with this supervisor is critical to shaping student ideas about appropriate interpersonal communication. Knowing this, program and course design should be modified to provide opportunities for students to strengthen areas of weakness in communication skills through complementary course curriculum.

**CITATION**


**KEYWORDS**

Communication, Co-Operative Workterms, Interaction, Student Perception

**WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW**

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.