

Communication Tips for Technology Professionals



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Technology professionals who are serious about seeing their career elevate beyond the level of bits and bytes will go above and beyond what their peers choose not to do. Noted author and technical futurist Leo Wrobel explains why verbal and written communication skills are key to not only keeping a job but climbing the corporate ladder.

Your training and effort has paid off. You have hired into that first professional position or secured that first big promotion into management. You are now in a place where, as my dearly departed father used to say, you now get paid for what you *know* and not for what you *do*. Pat yourself on the back and take a bow. Not everyone makes it, and these days it is tougher than ever. So now what? Well, for starters, it's back to school again on what will now be the most important focus: communication.

Back in your college or tech school days, classes in management, math, science, and information technology probably occupied most of your time. Perhaps these classes were even easy for you. After all, you did gravitate into your present technical position didn't you? It is likely that you did so because you had an aptitude for it, because you were good at it, and because you enjoyed doing it. These facilitators helped you get hired into the business world and into a technical position where all your hard work as well as your educational years translated into a paycheck. So far so good, right? Then you entered management, and it's not all about technology anymore.

Verbal and written communication is now the most critically important skill to master in your new role. Stated another way, what does it matter *what* you know if you cannot illustrate it in writing or the spoken word to your superiors, subordinates, and peers in the workplace?

What Companies Want

Technology professionals who aspire one day to stop writing code, swapping circuit boards, or administering networks need to develop the skills that allow them to effectively communicate with others. In fact, according to one friend of mine who has worked for years in management hiring, potential employers consider communication as the most technical prowess highest on the list when recruiting. When major corporations call on executive recruiters to recruit technology professionals for their organizations, the recruiter is called upon to help the company to identify candidates with not only technical skills but also exceptionally strong verbal and written communication skills.

Technical skills alone, relatively speaking, are not that difficult to find. In fact, chances are that potential technical employees in places like India, China, and Korea are ahead of you at least in terms of the hard sciences and skills. Exceptionally strong verbal and written communication skills, however, must be developed and refined, and these skills are actually rarer. According to my friend, his search for the right talent is multiplied in complexity due to the need for effective communication skills. Because companies place such value on such skills, a superior competency in this area can be used to differentiate you from the pack and advance your career.

Improving Verbal Communication

While you concentrated on math, science, and computer-related classes in college, odds are that nobody told you to also give your best effort in a speech or debate class.

Why is verbal communication so important? The answer should be apparent: Technology professionals who wish to progress to team leadership and managerial roles will eventually expend much more effort interacting with their team as well as business owners across the corporation. They spend far more time in meetings and other verbal communication settings than they will invest into working with bits and bytes. Consider project-funding requests, for

example.

In many IT departments today, the ability to get funding for a proposed project is largely dependent upon a technology professional's ability to present the business value behind a technology project in a group setting. This skill set encompasses more than classy PowerPoint slides. The decision-makers in finance or upper management (often one in the same) must believe you. You must be credible. Failure to properly communicate in a group setting where your audience is generally made up of higher level managers and executives will frequently result in a lack of funding.

We've all been there. Therefore, make sure you are knowledgeable about the subject you are getting ready to present. Research your facts; practice what you are going to say and how you are going to say it. When you go to make your presentation, let go of yourself and concentrate on your audience. Anticipate their concerns as well as their questions. Go into the meeting primed and ready for success.

Setting aside my wisecrack about karaoke bars, serious technology professionals who wish to overcome a fear of public speaking might consider joining a local [Toastmasters International](#) chapter. These chapters are available across the country and meet on different days at different locations. Chapters exist to help members to improve communication and leadership skills and build self-confidence.

OShocked, Appalled, and Dismayed!: Improving Written Communication

NOTE

Shocked, Appalled, and Dismayed!: How to Write Letters of Complaint That Get Results, by Ellen Phillips Vintage Books, 1997.

Whether you think about it or not, you communicate in writing every day. Don't underestimate even trivial things, like email. Every time you send an email or a corporate memo, you're sending out impressions of who you are, what you do, and how you do what you do. Moreover, you are sending each missive in a traceable written form. Be serious, even in emails.

And for God's sake, if you are indeed serious about your professional imprint, leave the texting and social media home unless it is directly germane to the audience. I don't mean never send a text message, but reserve such informal communication to close in day-to-day tasks, preferably with peers or not superiors or subordinates. Remember, anything that goes out to a broad audience is actually an advertisement for you. Written communication of any kind can be a first impression that cannot be taken back.

Technology professionals who need to improve their written communication skills might consider taking a college level business writing class or two. For example, I took a class in business correspondence during graduate school. For our first assignment, we were given 20 minutes to write the following letter in class:

- Imagine you work for an outfit called Company A. Company A has 250 employees and does \$25 million in business each year. Because Company A is a family-owned business, you know the CEO personally. You also know the Company A CEO's best friend, who is the CEO of another firm, Company B. The two golf together, dine together, and are inseparable friends. Company B is a critical business partner with Company A. Here is your problem:
- Company B is 90 days late on a multimillion obligation to your company. It is rumored that Company B is in serious financial trouble. If Company B declares bankruptcy, it would be ruinous to your firm, perhaps so much as even dragging Company A into bankruptcy with Company B.
- Your assignment is to write a letter to Company B that (a) tactfully seeks information as to the multimillion dollar obligation, (b) respects the sensitivity of a person whom you know is a close friend of your CEO, (c) does not offend your own CEO by virtue of the letter being sent, but which most importantly) alleviates the financial risk to Company A and gets your company's money.

Try this assignment for yourself. The letter you write will give you an appreciation of why your boss earns the big bucks. He or she can probably write such a letter effectively, indicating that they can handle thorny and multi-faceted problems. I have actually used this same exercise as part of the interview process in order to gauge the writing and thought processes of a management candidate.

Summary

Executive recruiters confirm it. The biggest difference between candidates who are limited to OC level jobs and those who receive the choicest offers is the quality of verbal and written communication skills. Isn't this fact alone worth the cost of a refresher college class or joining a professional speaker's organization? Isn't it worth it to elevate your career, compensation and future? We would be *shocked*, *appalled*, and *dismayed* if you believed otherwise.

Seek out opportunities to speak before groups. Do the scripture readings at church or synagogue. Go sing at a karaoke bar if it helps! But also get used to getting up in front of people and presenting compelling arguments that support your position or establish a proposition. The more you do it, the easier it will become.

Technology professionals frequently fail to understand the significant impact of written communication. When sending an email to their boss, for example, they fail to take the time to write in complete sentences or to even check spelling and grammar. You will not lose your job for such sloppiness, of course, but neither will you be considered promotion material. Whenever you send an email, make sure it articulates a cogent point. Be sure that the message you send presents a business case or clearly establishes your proposition. When addressing a superior in an email, it is almost always better to err toward the formal rather than the casual and informal.

Yes, it's *that* important!
