

Too Many Walls, Not Enough Bridges: Cultivating Communication and Critical Thinking Skills Through Networking and Presentation in the Era of Virtual Work

Abstract

In the ever-changing business landscape, more work is now completed in a remote setting than ever before (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). As the skills demanded by employers also continue to change, communication remains a noted deficiency for college graduates (NACE, 2022). To bridge this skill gap, the classroom exercise outlined in this session provides students with the opportunity to practice the critical thinking needed to analyze real world situations and identify management theory in practice. In addition, the exercise also facilitates pathways to industry-appropriate avenues for students to hone their communication skills through professional networking and a culminating virtual presentation.

Keywords: networking, communication skills, virtual work

Introduction

As management educators, one of the bridges we routinely attempt to create for students, and work hard to help students maintain, is the bridge between the walls of our educational institutions and the “real world” of business industry. Inevitably, graduates must also bridge the gap from student life to that of a business professional. Educators work hard to make this transition smooth. As students prepare to navigate this transition, their success depends, in part, on the opportunities with which they have been provided to establish, practice, improve, or enhance connections with real-world industry professionals. It is also important that the skill sets highly sought by employers today are cultivated in our classrooms, while also paying attention to skill areas in which employers believe students are deficient.

Accordingly, a recent survey from the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) revealed that most employers (95.6%) and students (96.8%) cite communication as the most important competency for college graduates (NACE, 2022, 2023). And yet, less than half (46.9%) of surveyed employers rated students' communication skills as very or extremely proficient (NACE, 2023). As educators, we can work to bridge the gap in students' communication proficiency by providing practical opportunities for learners to engage with business professionals and practice communication skills. One such opportunity is networking. When students network with business professionals, they gain unique industry perspective and insight to help build the bridge from classroom to boardroom. In addition, these experiences also enhance students' abilities to identify theory in real-world situations, allowing students to apply classroom concepts as they learn to navigate their own career progression.

As graduates enter the world of business, management educators *hope* that the opportunities provided, connections made, knowledge obtained, and skills learned during

students' educational careers will be leveraged. The activity that will be presented as the focus of this session supports that effort. The activity was created for and tested in an introduction to human resource management course, with the required use of Microsoft Teams software. However, this assignment can be easily adapted for use in any undergraduate business course related to management, human resource management, leadership, or organizational behavior. If Microsoft Teams is unavailable, the exercise may be completed using any other presentation software available (e.g., the presentation features of PowerPoint).

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

Workplace content and context is ever-changing. From 2019 to 2021, the number of individuals primarily working remotely roughly tripled to approximately 28 million – the highest number ever on record (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). By 2022, just over half (58%) of workers surveyed indicated they had the option to work remotely at least one day per week (McKinsey & Company, 2022). As the prevalence of virtual work increases, new bridge-building strategies are being demanded of educators and students alike. For example, communication challenges have been identified as a pitfall to the flexibility and other benefits afforded by remote work arrangements (Nyberg, Shaw, & Zhu, 2021). Furthermore, although employers and students agree that communication is the most important competency for college graduates today, evidence also suggests that students overestimate their communication proficiency: Although 79.6% of students believed they were extremely proficient in communication, less than half of employers agreed (NACE, 2022, 2023). As management educators, we can work together to build a bridge that closes this gap.

The activity presented in this session combines three activities – networking, critical thinking, and communication – that provide students with the opportunity to practice key skills

in demand by employers. Baldwin, Pierce, Joines, and Farouk (2011) provide a useful framework for understanding the connection among these three activities. First, Conceptual Management Knowledge (CMK) is the recognition and understanding of theories, terms, and management principles. Second, Procedural Management Knowledge (PMK) can be thought of as the ability to “know how” to complete a task. Third, Applied Management Knowledge (AMK) is characterized by the ability to not only know how to recognize the theories and terms from class (CMK) and how to complete tasks (PMK), but also to understand when and in what circumstances that knowledge and action is appropriate. Baldwin and colleagues also note that managers of varying experience and education tend to lack AMK. This is problematic, as AMK is required if a student is to know what CMK and PMK knowledge should be applied in each situation. Furthermore, AMK is typically only obtained through experience, making it unlikely that students will gain this knowledge without the aid of an experiential learning opportunity (e.g., Kolb, 1984). Students must learn to leverage all three types of knowledge to further their careers. To best prepare graduates to independently and successfully traverse the bridge from academics to industry, management educators should provide space for students to practice market-relevant skills as part of their educational journey. Toward that end, the exercise outlined in the remaining sections may be used as one approach to provide students with classroom experiences that will help them to jointly leverage CMK, PMK, and AMK, as outlined below.

First, this exercise allows students to practice their communication skills by networking with an industry professional. *Networking* occurs as students work to develop and maintain relationships with individuals who could assist in their career or professional development (Forret & Dougherty, 2004, p. 420), and it has been identified as a skill that is “crucial for career and personal success” (de Janasz & Forret, 2008, p. 629). To complete this activity, students

must interview the industry professional with whom they are cultivating a relationship. This provides students with the opportunity to practice networking behaviors such as learning how to approach new people, finding common interest with others, and practicing small talk (de Janasz & Forret, 2008). Practically, it is important for students to connect and build relationships with others who can provide the information and opportunities needed to further students' nascent career progression.

Second, this activity provides students with an opportunity to practice critical thinking skills. *Critical thinking* includes behaviors such as using reasoning and judgment to make decisions, gathering information from diverse sources, and proactively identifying needs and the steps required for action (NACE, n. d.). To promote a successful bridge from student to business professional, it is important that students cultivate the critical thinking skills needed to connect real-world practice to theoretical concepts learned in class. In doing so, students are also building bridges among the three forms of management knowledge: conceptual, procedural, and applied (Baldwin et al., 2011).

Finally, the assignment culminates in a presentation. Here, students practice speaking and writing clearly and effectively, both key behaviors within the *communication* competency (NACE, n. d.). As the final deliverable of this exercise, students are required to orally present their analysis of the networking and application exercises. In line with the shift toward remote work, and to help students hone their communication skills in a variety of contexts, the final deliverable also requires students to use an industry appropriate video conferencing and recording platform to record a presentation. Together, the culmination of all assignment activities provides students with an opportunity to practice both written and verbal communication skills. Connecting with and learning from industry professionals provides students with situational

context, helping them to synthesize information such that they can effectively apply conceptual and procedural management knowledge to a specific situation or context. This experiential learning exercise therefore helps students bridge the knowing-doing (theory-practice) gap.

Learning Objectives

At the conclusion of the assignment, students participating in this activity will demonstrate the ability to:

1. Utilize proper business communication skills to communicate with an industry professional. (Rubric Item #2)
2. Collaborate with an industry professional to complete an interview. (Rubric Item #3)
3. Identify theoretical business concepts in real world situations. (Rubric Item #4)
4. Synthesize feedback to identify overarching lessons or impressions. (Rubric Item #5)
5. Utilize common business industry presentation software. (Rubric Item #11)
6. Deliver a virtual presentation. (Rubric Item #11)

Exercise Overview

This activity will be completed over several weeks and may be completed as an individual assignment or team assignment. If the class size is small, an individual assignment would be most beneficial for students. For larger classes, in consideration of educator time constraints, it is recommended the instructor approach this assignment as a team exercise. This activity can be assigned in traditional face-to-face courses, online delivery modes (synchronous or asynchronous), or any combination thereof, and has been tested in each of these modalities.

The instructor should begin by explaining the value of the activity to students (i.e., practicing skills related to networking, critical thinking, and communication). It would be

beneficial to spend some time walking students through the assignment's learning objectives, as well as the two appendices to ensure students understand the expected outcome of the assignment. The assignment activity is broken down into two major elements: (1) Prepare and (2) Complete Deliverables (see Appendix A).

- 1. Prepare.** First, students will complete several steps to prepare for the culminating presentation. These steps include (1) identifying a professional working in HR (or any other business area of interest, as dictated by the course in which the assignment is being taught) and communicating with that individual to request an interview. (2) Next, students will interview the business professional by asking a series of questions. (3) The information obtained from the interview will then be used to help students think critically to identify three specific concepts from the textbook or course. Though this will mostly likely take the form of conceptual knowledge (facts), students with higher levels of critical thinking skills may be able to extend the concepts identified into the procedural knowledge domain (Baldwin et al., 2011; de Jong & Ferguson-Hessler, 1996). (4) Then, students are asked to identify three broader, overarching impressions they were left with following the networking experience. This is where applied management knowledge (AMK) is generated, as students must consider “when and under what circumstances it would be appropriate” (Baldwin et al., 2011, p. 585) to employ the conceptual and procedural knowledge gleaned from the networking and reflection experience. The instructor may wish to provide some general guidance to students as they work to identify theoretical concepts and overarching lessons or impressions.
- 2. Complete Deliverables.** The second major element of this assignment is to complete the deliverables. The exercise culminates in a virtual presentation. Students will prepare a

PowerPoint presentation that includes all elements required of the assignment rubric (see Appendix B for instructor grading rubric). Students will then navigate commonly utilized software in the business world to virtually present their presentation.

While the assignment instructions are written for the asynchronous virtual presentation format, educators, especially those with students who lack access to asynchronous virtual presentation software, may wish to move the presentation to a face-to-face or synchronous virtual format. To score the activity, educators may use the included activity scoring rubric (Appendix B). However, feedback delivery may vary. Some educators may wish to deliver feedback in the form of a simple upload of the scored rubric to the LMS (online classes) or handing a copy of the scored rubric to the presenter(s) (face-to-face classes). Other educators may wish to deliver feedback by creating and posting a feedback video to the LMS or scheduling a face-to-face meeting to provide assignment feedback.

Session Description

The proposed overview is designed with a 45-minute session in mind (see Table 1). However, the session could be adapted to fit whatever length works best with this year's conference program. If the session length is extended, participants will be provided with an opportunity to brainstorm potential modifications or applications of the assignment and/or reflect on ways to incorporate this kind of skill building exercise into their specific class environments and share their thoughts in small groups.

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Table 1*Proposed session overview*

Time	Session Format
5 minutes	Welcome attendees, introduce presenters, and provide a brief overview of the session.
15 minutes	Discuss the rationale for the assignment, assignment requirements, and potential team and course format modifications.
15 minutes	<p>Facilitate a question-and-answer session in which attendees may ask the presenters questions about the activity or communicate feedback.</p> <p>In the event no questions are posed, and organic conversation does not ensue, the presenters plan to engage the attendees by asking the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Would you consider using this type of experiential learning activity in your classroom? <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. If so, why? b. If not, what is your greatest concern? 2. What do you believe would be the biggest challenge you would face in attempting to incorporate this or a similar assignment in your classroom? 3. Would you more favorably consider assigning this activity in a face-to-face or online setting? Why? 4. Do you think this kind of activity is best completed individually or in teams? Why?
5 minutes	Discuss student feedback from classroom application of the activity, including potential modifications for future use.
5 minutes	Summary and wrap-up

Appendix A: Presentation Assignment

Introduction and Purpose

As a future business professional, it is important to engage and network with industry professionals as part of your educational career. Industry professionals are a great source of information and support for navigating your own career path. This experiential learning assignment was created to (1) facilitate communication and networking with industry professionals, (2) assess your ability to recognize theoretical concepts in real-world scenarios, and (3) provide a safe space for you to practice virtual presentation skills as you present the culminating presentation assignment.

Presentation Assignment

Prepare:

1. *Identify a professional* working in HR who is willing to have a conversation with you about their career experiences. In the instance you cannot find someone working in HR, please identify someone who is a leader or manager in their organization. You are highly encouraged to utilize LinkedIn to identify and connect with a professional working in the HR industry. Please be sure to utilize your best business communication skills.
2. *Interview the professional* you identified. The interview must be completed in a face-to-face setting (virtual face-to-face if necessary)! You should feel free to ask additional questions, but please ask the industry professional, at minimum, the following questions:
 - a. What is your name, title, and organization in which you are currently working?
 - b. Can you briefly summarize your career progression and positions held?
 - c. As it relates to employees you have either supervised or led, what has been your greatest professional accomplishment?
 - d. As it relates to employees you have either supervised or led, what has been your greatest professional disappointment?
 - e. What do you believe is the role of the human resource professionals in your organization?
 - f. What have your employees or followers struggled with the most in terms of company HR practices?
 - g. What did you do, as the manager or leader, to support the employees or followers struggling?
 - h. In your opinion, what is the most impactful (good or bad) initiative, policy, procedure, practice, etc. your company extends to employees?
 - i. Can you describe the hardest people-related issue you have had to deal with as an HR professional, manager, or leader?
 - j. If you could give one or two pieces of advice to an aspiring HR professional, manager, or leader, what advice would you provide?
3. *Analyze the feedback provided and identify and define three specific course/textbook terms* (not general course concepts) that relate to the feedback provided by the industry professional. It is important for students to be able recognize theoretical concepts in real world situations so that you can apply those theories and concepts as you navigate your

own career progression. Please be sure to define the textbook terms as part of the presentation.

4. *Reflect and identify three over-arching lessons learned or perceptions gained* from this conversation. These lessons learned or perceptions gained should be big picture concepts that one may take away from your presentation and/or perceptions gained as it relates to the industry, the profession, or the company. Please be sure to include rationale for these choices.

Complete Deliverables:

1. *Create a PowerPoint presentation* that captures all elements listed in the rubric below. I encourage each of you to reach out to me with questions. Please remember that the slides should include key words or phrases and should never include paragraphs of information.
2. *Practice presenting and recording your presentation utilizing Microsoft Teams.* Please be careful ensure all required elements of the presentation outlined in the rubric are also present in your recording. Please note that any information not present in the recording will not earn rubric points, even if those items are present in your submitted PowerPoint.
3. *In Microsoft Teams, complete the final recording of your presentation for submission.* Once you feel comfortable, please record your presentation for submission. Please note that you are required to use Microsoft Teams for recording this assignment. Please see the “How-to guide” for step-by-step instructions that walk you through the Teams process.
4. *Watch the presentation* you intend to submit for grading to ensure all elements are included in the recording. If you believe you will not score well in any area – re-record!
5. *Grade your own presentation utilizing the rubric below.* To grade your presentation, highlighting the text in the box that best represents your work. I want to see your own assessment of your work. If you are disappointed with your score, please feel free to re-record! You will upload your scoring as part of the final submission, so please carefully grade your work!
6. *Upload your presentation recording (in MP4 format), your PowerPoint presentation, and the self-scored rubric below* to your individual assignment link in Blackboard before the due date and time provided in the course schedule. The professor will grade your presentation recording and submitted materials utilizing the rubric below.

Appendix B: Presentation Assignment Rubric

Presenter's Name: _____	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
1. Introduction: Presenter introduced themselves and provided a succinct introduction of the presentation. (Up to 5 points)	Introduced themselves and provided a succinct introduction of the presentation. (5 points)	Introduced themselves and provided an introduction of the presentation, though not succinct. (3-4 points)	Did not introduce themselves <u>or</u> did not provide a succinct introduction of the presentation. (1-2 points)	Did not introduce themselves and did not provide a succinct introduction of the presentation. (0 points)
2. Industry Professional Identification and Communication: Thoroughly discussed how the industry professional was identified and the communication methods utilized from first contact through the interview process. (Up to 10 points)	Thoroughly discussed how the industry professional was identified and the communication methods utilized from first contact through the interview process. (10 points)	Discussed how the industry professional was identified and the communication methods utilized from first contact through the interview process. (5-9 points)	Did not discuss how the industry professional was identified and/or the communication methods utilized from first contact through the interview process. (1-4 points)	Did not discuss how the industry professional was identified or the communication methods utilized from first contact through the interview process. (0 points)
3. Industry Professional Networking: Articulated a thorough discussion of the person interviewed, their career progression, the industry in which they work, as well as the questions and answers asked in the interview. (Up to 15 points)	Articulated a thorough discussion of the person interviewed, their career progression, the industry in which they work, as well as the questions and answers asked in the interview. (15 points)	Articulated a discussion of the person interviewed, their career progression, the industry in which they work, as well as the questions and answers asked in the interview. (10-14 points)	Articulated a discussion of the person interviewed, their career progression, the industry in which they work, and/or the questions and answers asked in the interview, but elements may be missing or deficient. (1-9 points)	Did not articulate discussion of the person interviewed, their career progression, the industry in which they work, or the questions and answers asked in the interview. (0 points)
4. Course Connections: Accurately and thoroughly described at least three ways in which the course concepts (specific terms, not general ideas) relate/connect with information learned from the industry professional and included the definition of concepts presented as part of the discussion. (Up to 20 points)	Accurately and thoroughly described at least three ways in which the course concepts related to or connected with information learned from the industry professional and included accurate definitions of concepts presented. (20 points)	Described at least three ways in which the course concepts related to or connected with information learned from the industry professional and included accurate or mostly accurate definitions of concepts presented. (11-19 points)	Did not accurately or thoroughly describe at least three ways in which the course concepts related to or connected with information learned from the industry professional and/or did not include accurate definition of concepts presented. (1-10 points)	Did not accurately and thoroughly describe a connection to course material and did not include an accurate definition of concepts presented. (0 points)
5. Reflection: Appropriately identified and thoroughly discussed three over-arching lessons learned and/or perceptions gained from the interview. These lessons learned or perceptions gained should be big picture concepts that one may take away from your presentation and/or explanation of perceptions the presenter gained through this process as it relates to the industry, the profession, or the company. Please be sure to include rationale for these choices. (Up to 15 points)	Appropriately identified and thoroughly discussed three over-arching lessons learned and/or perceptions gained from the interview. The presenter included logical rationale for these choices. (15 points)	Identified and discussed three over-arching lessons learned and/or perceptions gained from the interview. The presenter included logical rationale for these choices. (10-14 points)	Discussed over-arching lessons learned and/or perceptions gained from the interview. However, the presenter did not include three and/or no rationale for these choices was provided. (1-9 points)	Did not identify and present overarching lessons learned/or perceptions gained. (0 points)
6. Conclusion: Appropriately concluded the presentation, ensuring no new information was presented. (Up to 5 points)	Appropriately concluded the presentation without any new information presented. (5 points)	Concluded the presentation, and no new information was presented. (3-4 points)	Concluded the presentation, but new information was presented. (1-2 points)	Did not conclude the presentation. (0 points)
7. References: Included a Reference(s) page that detailed, in proper APA format, all sources used to create the presentation. (Up to 5 points)	Included a Reference(s) page that detailed, in proper APA format, all sources used to create the presentation. (5 points)	Included a References page that detailed all sources used to create the presentation, though errors were present with APA format. (3-4 points)	Included a References page with all sources used to create the presentation, but APA format was not utilized. (1-2 points)	Did not include a References page. (0 points)
8. Professionalism: Presenter presented professionally with poise, confidence, and enthusiasm. (Up to 5 points).	Presenter presented professionally with poise, confidence, and enthusiasm. (5 points)	Presenter presented mostly professionally with poise, confidence, and enthusiasm. (3-4 points)	Presenter presented, but lacked professionalism, poise, confidence, or enthusiasm. (1-2 points)	Presenter lacked professionalism, poise, confidence, and enthusiasm. (0 points)
9. Time: Presenter presented for at least 5 minutes. (Up to 5 points)	Presenter presented for at least 5 minutes. (5 points)	Presenter presented for at least 4 minutes. (3-4 points)	Presenter presented for more than 1, but less than 4 minutes. (1-2 points)	Presenter did not present for at least 1 minute. (0 points)
10. Presentation Delivery: Presenter was visually present throughout the presentation. (Up to 5 points)	Presenter was visually present throughout the entire presentation. (5 points)	Presenter was not visually present throughout some or all of the presentation. (0 points)		
11. Assignment Submission: Presenter submitted the presentation as outlined in the Complete Deliverables section of this document. (Up to 10 points)	Presenter submitted the presentation as outlined in Complete deliverables section of this document. (10 points)		Presenter did not submit all three documents as outlined in the Complete Deliverables section of this document. (5 points)	
Total Points Earned:	/100			