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Analyzing Oral Communication Apprehension prevailing among Engineers in Engineering Workplace of Pakistan

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Abstract

Communicative apprehension affects job performance of engineers at workplace and it is never in the better interest of organizations. The purpose of this research was to investigate communication apprehension prevailing among engineers in engineering workplace of Pakistan. Five (5) engineers from 2 engineering organizations of Pakistan participated in this study. Purposive sampling method was employed since participants were drawn on specific criteria of engineers with minimum five years' industry experience. All presentations were video recorded to explore communication apprehension traits that affected oral presentation performance of engineers. Data were analyzed qualitatively using oral presentation assessment rubric based on communication apprehension traits. This assessment rubric contained four communication apprehension traits such as oral communication skill, credibility or confidence, gestures or purposeful use of body and appearance of nervous mannerism. The results of the study revealed that due to communication apprehension engineers' possessed poor credulity or confidence, poor gestures or purposeful use of body and faced nervousness that affected their effective oral presentation performance. The findings of this study can be used as a guideline to overcome communication apprehension of engineers through oral communication and oral presentation skill trainings in order to make them productive for organizations.

Keywords: Communication apprehension, Engineers, Engineering Workplace

1. Introduction

Communication apprehension has been broadly discussed term in organizational context because it largely affects employee job performance at workplace. Research over the years reveals that engineers need to possess excellent soft skills such as oral communication skills (Rainy et al., 2005). Undoubtedly, engineers armed with effective communication skills bring various financial benefits for organizations. Thus, employers demand engineers equipped with effective communication skills. Communication skills occupy central position in engineering industry (Grant and Dickson, 2006) and oral communication is one of three competencies needed to be successful at workplace (Maes et al., 1997). Despite significance of communication skills at workplace, various studies indicate poor oral communication skills of modern graduates (Bolt-Lee & Foster, 2003; Reinsch & Shelby, 1997). Thus, modern engineering graduates need to acquire effective communication skills to perform workplace jobs efficiently at workplace.

Engineers experience apprehension at workplace and due to this barrier they change one organization after the other. Apprehensive engineers are never productive for organizations because they play a very limited role at workplace. Thus, employers are never happy from apprehensive engineers due to multifarious role of organizations at global level. The most popular definition of communication apprehension comes from McCroskey (1977: 78) as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or

persons". Communication apprehension can be experienced while giving a speech in presence of boss, colleagues and other employees of organizations. Engineers have to communicate ideas during meetings, conversations, discussions and other client communications. Employees who experience high communication apprehension are less satisfied from jobs (Falcione et al., 1977) and low job satisfaction is correlated to increased employee turnover and higher stress levels (Sullivan et al., 1992). It is not necessary that when an engineer leaves one job then he may get a better job in other organization but in certain instances engineers have to work on lower positions compared to previous job. Employee apprehension impacts on productivity of organizations and employers never bear this loss for organizations. Public speaking is the most stressful job for many individuals (Stein et al., 1996) and various factors impact on effective communication skills of engineers. Organizations need employees who are willing to communicate at workplace (Morreale, Osborn, & Pearson, 2000) and they search for engineers who possess strong communication skills to increase profitability of organizations.

Communication apprehension contains four types of apprehension such as trait-like apprehension, generalized-context apprehension, person-group apprehension, and situational apprehension (McCroskey et al., 1986). Trait apprehension is enduring orientation based on personality and is consistent across variety of variables (McCroskey et al., 1986). Generalized apprehension is similar to trait-like apprehension, because an enduring personality orientation is basis for both types of apprehension. The apprehension level in generalized-context usually differs from one context to another. For example, an engineer can be highly apprehensive in oral presentation but he is less apprehensive in conversations and discussions colleagues. Context apprehension includes four types of apprehensions such as public speaking, dyadic situations (job interviews), small group discussions and meetings or classes (Richmond et al., 1982). Person group apprehension is related with individual reactions to communication with given individual or people across time. This type of fear occurs communicating with boss or colleagues and it is relatively normal to be apprehensive communicating with a person or group of people. On the other hand, situational apprehension exists at very end of communication apprehension and it is experienced communicating with an individual or group of audience in a single situation. Many people experience this type of apprehension and it has been measured as temporary orientation with individual person or group of people. This type of apprehension represents a type of anxiety that engineers face once in a particular situation for instance when a boss calls an engineer to explain certain topic of project.

High level of communication apprehension can damage an individual's communication ability in organizations (Aly and Islam, 2005) and organizations require effective communication to be successful at all levels (Hamilton, 2005; Shockley-Zalabak, 2006). Communication apprehension results in an impact on the communication functions of an organization (Richmond et al., 2005) because it might reduce an individual's personal competence, job satisfaction and job retention (Shockley-Zalabak, 2006). Aly and Islam (2005) reported that job status had an effect on an individual's level of communication apprehension in each of the contexts studied (dyad, group, meeting, and public speaking). Richmond (2009) stated that employees with high levels of communication apprehension are less productive for organizations and do not stay longer period of time in one organization. According to Butler (2004cited in Degner K. Rosemary, 2009) communication apprehension affects workplace contributions. Butler further noted that professionals with high levels of communication apprehension avoid face to face conversations, group work, and public-speaking situations. The research of Sageev and Romanowski (2001) revealed that technical ideas and results are not useful until and unless they are communicated and discussed. Another research conducted by Daly and McCroskey (1984) indicated that 10% of the population are apprehensive during dyadic conversations, 25% experience apprehension when participating in small groups, 40% are apprehensive about speaking in meetings, and 75% are anxious about public speaking such as oral presentations.

2. Methodology

The research approach used for this study was based on qualitative methods in terms of recording of oral presentations. Recordings provided better opportunity to investigate communication apprehension relating to oral presentation performance of engineers. Five engineers from 2 engineering organizations of Pakistan participated in this study and purposive sampling method was used since respondents were selected on specific criteria of engineers with minimum 5 years job experience. According to Westray Valencia (2008: 35) "the important consideration in purposive sampling is sample size and within the naturalistic paradigm, there is no concrete rule for sample size".

Thus, this sample size was enough to conduct this research to investigate communication apprehension of engineers relating to oral presentation performance. No doubt, purposive sampling helps researchers to select appropriate respondents for the study (Creswell et al., 2007). There was no compulsion regarding the selection of topic and participants selected the topic of presentation according to their own choice. The main actors were engineers and there was no participation of this researcher except recording of these presentations. All participants were working as full time engineers in engineering sector of Pakistan.

3. Data Analysis

Data were analysed qualitatively but results were presented quantitatively in terms of percentages for each communication apprehension trait included in the assessment rubric. In order to overcome researcher bias three assessors assessed these presentations. A structured assessment rubric was used to assess communication apprehension of engineers that affected their oral presentation performance. Literature review was surveyed to prepare this assessment rubric. The assessment rubric used for this study was partially adopted from *"Impact of Digital Video on Communication skills in Business Education"* (Leeds Elke M., 2007). Oral presentation traits used in Leeds (2007) study were '*credibility or confidence'*, '*eye contact or absence of reading'*, '*appearance nervous mannerisms'*, '*gestures or the purposeful use of the body* 'and '*vocal variety'*. However, this study partially adopted Leeds Elke M. (2007) assessment rubric to assess communication apprehension prevailing among engineers. In this perspective, the assessment rubric used for this study included '*oral communication skill'* (speaker communicates his ideas clearly, effectively and skillfully), '*credibility or confidence'* (presenter appears credible and knowledgeable about subject matter), '*gestures or the purposeful use of body'* (speaker purposefully uses hands, arms, shoulders and head to reinforce presentation purpose) and '*appearance nervous mannerisms'* (presenter displays non purposeful body movements and nervous gestures). A 5 point likert scale indicating 'disagree', 'strongly disagree', 'undecided', 'agree' and 'strongly agree' was used to compute assertors' responses for each apprehension trait included in assessment rubric.

4. Study Results

The study results provided valuable insights on factors relating to communication apprehension that affected oral presentation performance of engineers. The findings are presented in percentages on the basis of assessors' agreement and disagreement for each communication apprehension trait included in assessment rubric set for the study.

4.1 Credibility or Confidence

The results for credibility or confidence indicated that 53% responses were recorded as disagreed, 7% strongly disagreed, 0% undecided, 40% agreed and 0% strongly agreed (Figure 4.1). Thus, results indicate that due to communication apprehension engineers possess poor credibility or confidence during oral presentations.

4.2 Gestures or Purposeful use of Body

The results for gestures or purposeful use of body indicated that 53% responses were recorded as disagreed, 20% strongly disagreed, 20% undecided, 7% agreed and 0% strongly agreed (Figure 4.2). Thus, results indicate that due to communication apprehension engineers used poor gestures or purposeful use of body during oral presentations.

4.3 Appearance Nervous Mannerisms

The results for appearance nervous mannerisms indicated that 19% responses were recorded as disagreed, 6% strongly disagreed, 12% undecided, 50% agreed and 13% strongly agreed (Figure 4.3). Thus, results indicate that due to communication apprehension engineers faced nervousness during oral presentations.

5. Discussion

The first finding of the study indicated that due to communication apprehension engineers' possessed poor credibility or confidence during oral presentations. For 'credibility or confidence' 60% responses were recorded that engineers were not credible or confident during oral presentations. The second finding of the study was that due to communication apprehension engineers did not use appropriate gestures or purposeful use of body during oral presentations. For 'gestures or purposeful use of the body' 73% responses were recorded that engineers did not use appropriate gestures or purposeful use of the body during oral presentations. The third finding of the study was that due to communication apprehension engineers faced nervousness during oral presentations. Thus, for 'appearance

nervous mannerism' 63% responses were recorded that engineers faced nervousness during oral presentations. If the situations is analysed engineers usually do not perform oral presentations regularly at workplace thus, they face communication apprehension during oral presentations. In addition, it tends that employers do not arrange communication skills trainings for engineers at workplace thus; they face communication apprehension during oral presentations. It is envisaged that if the problems of communication apprehension is not redressed properly resultantly, it will affect job performance of engineers at workplace. In view of this it is suggested that industry as well as engineering universities of Pakistan should arrange communication skill trainings for engineers to develop their communication skills. Thus, it will help to increase workplace productivity of organizations and will open many opportunities for job employment for engineers in local as well as global organizations.

6. Conclusion

The results for the study indicated that communication apprehension affected credibility or confidence and appropriate use of gestures or the purposeful use of the body during oral presentations. On the other hand, due to communication apprehension engineers faced nervousness during oral presentations. This clearly shows that communication apprehension of engineers shall affect workplace productivity of organizations. Thus, industrialists and academicians should sit together to formulate a strategy to overcome communication apprehension of engineers to make them profitable for engineering organizations. If the matter of communication apprehension of engineers lingers it should bring bad effects on organizations and they will not be productive which will adversely effect on growing economy of the country. Thus, communication apprehension of engineers is never in the better interest of industrialists' as well as academicians. Thus, these both the parties should put their efforts together to overcome communication apprehension prevailing among engineers of Pakistan.

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Biographical Notes

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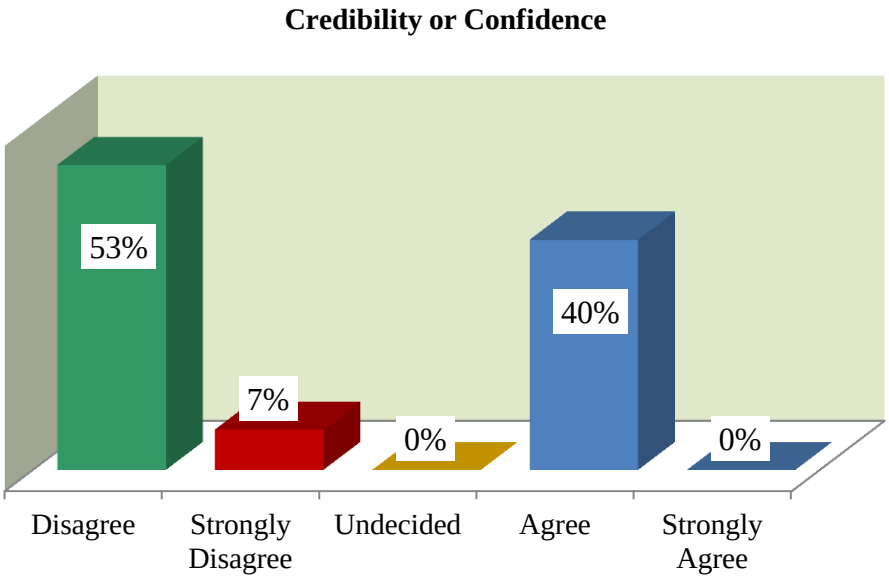
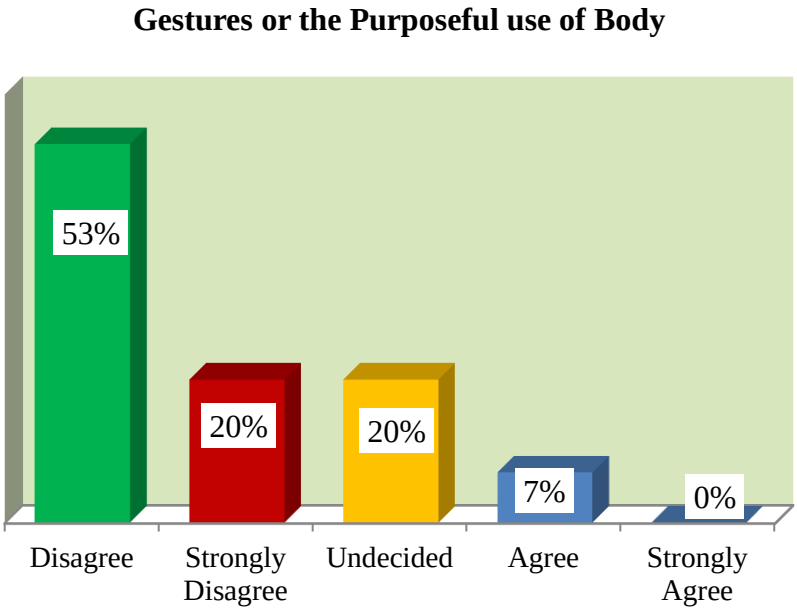
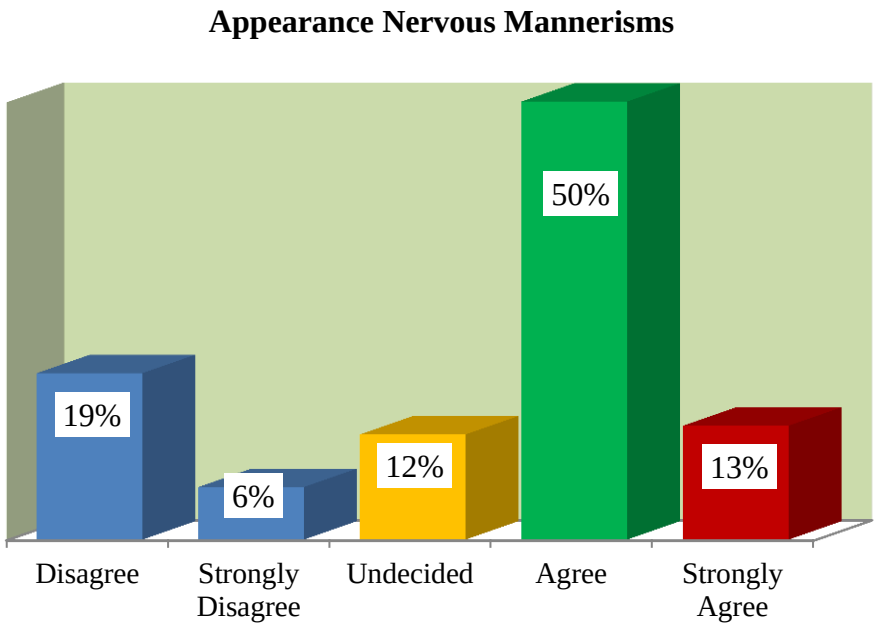


Figure, 1: Poor credibility or confidence as communication apprehension of Engineers



Figure, 2: Poor gestures or the purposeful use of body as communication apprehension of Engineers



Figure, 3: Appearance of nervous mannerisms as communication apprehension of Engineers