

# The business case for investing properly in professional communication skills development

Issued by [Wits Plus](#)

25 Nov 2020

"So sorry, but there is no quick fix for developing professional communication skills." This statement is not music to any organisation or entrepreneur's ears. When a skills gap is recognised, most of us want it fixed - fast.



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Unfortunately, a three-day business writing course, or a two-day presentation skills workshop or a day's training in report writing will not develop or deliver the required skills. The most they can do is provide exposure to the skills. "Yes, whatever, there is only so much money in the training budget this year and we cannot afford for staff to be away from their work for too long" is the standard response. Sure, go ahead; tick the "50 staff trained in Q1 box", but know that your return on investment for "ticking the box" is minimal and that a substantial improvement in communication skills will not be evident in your organisation as there is an immense gulf between exposure to skills and spontaneous daily use of these skills.

## Developing and applying skills requires:

- exposure to them
- recognition of prior learning
- opportunities for practice and production of skills
- review and self-reflection of the learning, including opportunities to make mistakes, interrogate these mistakes and then try again
- redoing and redoing

For many of us, particularly when developing communication skills, undoing prior learning is a major challenge to overcome – we learn communication patterns and habits that need to be changed.

The human brain embeds learning through connections between its approximately 100 billion neurons as neural pathways

and networks. When developing a skill, the human brain physically creates or strengthens pre-existing neural pathways related to the skill. So, looking at something once without embedding it does not result in skills development.

Effective learning is about taking that annoying proverbial “horse to water” and then teaching it “how to drink”. Consider how many times a baby must try walking before getting it right or how long it might have taken you to learn how to drive a car before you were able to do it. Learning a skill may require movement across four stages:

1. unconscious incompetence (you don't know what you don't know),
2. conscious incompetence (you know what you don't know),
3. conscious competence (you know that you know), and
4. unconscious competence (you just do).

Once we're up and walking as human beings, do we ever have to really think about how to walk or do we just do it? If you've been driving for years, do you spend time thinking about how to turn the steering wheel or apply the brakes? The answer to both is probably “no”.

In developing communication skills, a professional should want to achieve at least conscious competence and, eventually, unconscious competence. As an organisation or an entrepreneur, time spent in skills development programmes with thorough opportunity for practice and production of the skills results in a more noticeable, quantifiable, and real return on investment. Professionals who are challenged to develop their communication skills through critical thinking, positive engagement, and relevant and real practice develop self-efficacy; this, in turn, develops personal and thus business confidence and engenders a far greater likelihood of spontaneous daily application of these skills so heavily invested in by their organisation.

Effective skills development means that professional communication is quicker – both in compilation of messages and understanding by the receivers – and senior managers do not have to spend copious amounts of time checking and editing messaging across the organisation. This translates into long-term cost savings and business efficiency. A bit more time spent in skills development therefore yields exponential results and that horse, well, it can see the water and it can drink.

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