

Communication – Building the invisible bridge

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ABSTRACT

“You can have brilliant ideas, but if you can’t get them across, your ideas won’t get you anywhere” – This quote by Lee Iacocca, sums up the importance of communication. Being able to communicate effectively is a key aspect everywhere. Apart from programming capabilities, communication skills play a significant role in the success of statistical programmers in the clinical research domain. One big reason for good communication being critical is the remotely distributed and culturally or linguistically diverse global teams. However, the observed trend is that it is quite uncommon to have programmers with the right blend of technical and communication skills. The usual recourse of outsourcing trainings to external faculty or institutions does not seem to help to the desired extent. This paper shares ideas of focused communication training and describes the implementation experience on a sample of appropriately chosen statistical programmers.

INTRODUCTION

Job descriptions of statistical programmers often display “Required: Excellent Verbal and Written Communication Skills”. It is not surprising that in our industry, need for good communication skills are rated as high as the need for good technical skills – at times, maybe higher. In service provider companies, communication is considered to be a key measurement of performance/capability even more as compared to pharma companies. This paper focuses on the specific areas of communication needed by statistical programmers associated in the clinical research field.

Some of the known communication problems in India are - inarticulate written communication, (mis)interpretation of email messages, difficulty in understanding a different accent, weak verbal expressions in teleconferences or in a group, cultural attributes like - hesitation to raise timely alarms, inability to say “No”, awkwardness to be assertive with counterparts and so on. These problems arise mainly in places where English is not the native language. People hailing from such places would have a natural tendency to develop thought in native language and then translating it to English. This gives rise to incorrect English and leads to misreading. Being a practicing technical manager, the author has experienced these pain points from close quarters over several years of working together with various culturally diverse teams of statistical programmers.

Effective handling of the above mentioned problems is what this paper talks about. The usual course of action is to resort to one time professional training on familiarizing with the basics of the language or email communication. These curricula are mostly generic in nature and lack the focused need for the specific problem areas for our programmers. Hence, unfortunately, this fails to yield the desired results. This paper shares views on how to fill this gap of training need vs. actual imparted training. It is established by the implementation of different communication training ideas on a sample of programmers with poor to average communication skills. Some of the training thoughts, beyond the usual programme, are as follows –

- Developing the thought process in English – reading books and discussing in a group
- Email communication – writing and interpreting – based on work life scenarios
- Independent handling of teleconferences – through role plays
- Understanding a different accent - watching movies and discussing scenes
- Understanding client expectations
- Regular internal interactive games to hone these skills
- Solving offline question papers on situation based cases
- Regular English tests – rather than just one time class on basic grammar

This paper shares the experiences of implementation of this training.

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THE OBSERVED PROBLEM

Listed below are some of the desirable attributes often found wanting in communication of programmers –

Communication	Challenges
Email writing	▪ Ensuring all points are covered ▪ Keeping the email brief and concise ▪ Being sensitive about the tone ▪ Avoiding ambiguity ▪ Ensuring to receive prompt reply from recipient
Email Interpretation	▪ Sensing the unsaid appropriately ▪ Differentiating between courtesy and appreciation ▪ Understanding the urgency/intensity of a situation
Verbal communication	▪ Confidence in speaking up while explaining issues ▪ Exhibiting the right tone and attitude ▪ Understanding accent over a teleconference ▪ Getting the question right

These constitute the majority of the obstacles that programmers often stumble upon. It is a pity since it often overshadows strong technical capabilities, resulting in creating an incorrect perception of inferior capability, and reflecting in actual performance. This makes it even more essential to overcome the hurdles.

THE USUAL PATH

In an attempt to train our programmers on communication skills we have tried the following external programmes –

Programme	Schedule	Overview	Outcome	Limitations
English communication	3 months – 4 days a week – 1 hour sessions	English grammar, essay, précis writing, group discussion	Very effective	Follow up is needed else application is reduced.
Email communication	1 week – 1 hour sessions	Email writing generic tips; examples and exercises	This is useful as a generic overview	The tips, problems and exercises handled are nonspecific. Application of the course learning to work life scenarios is not always straight forward.
Professional etiquette workshop	2 full day workshop		Very effective	Continued implementation becomes a challenge.
Enhancing Presentation skills	2 half day workshop		Very effective	Following up with internal sessions would be needed for individual results.

While the above training curriculum maybe useful, but their effectiveness is short lived especially because of two main reasons

- Lack of specificity to kind of communication needed in our scope of work
- Lack of steady monitoring for application of lessons learnt

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We recognized that something additional is needed to bridge the gap of training need vs. actual imparted training. An internal training programme was designed to build this bridge.

OUR PATH

Basing on the already conducted external course, specific internal trainings were developed which were more tuned with the exact kind of work scenarios that one faces in a life of a statistical programmer.

Below is an overview of the internal training programme.

AUDIENCE SELECTION

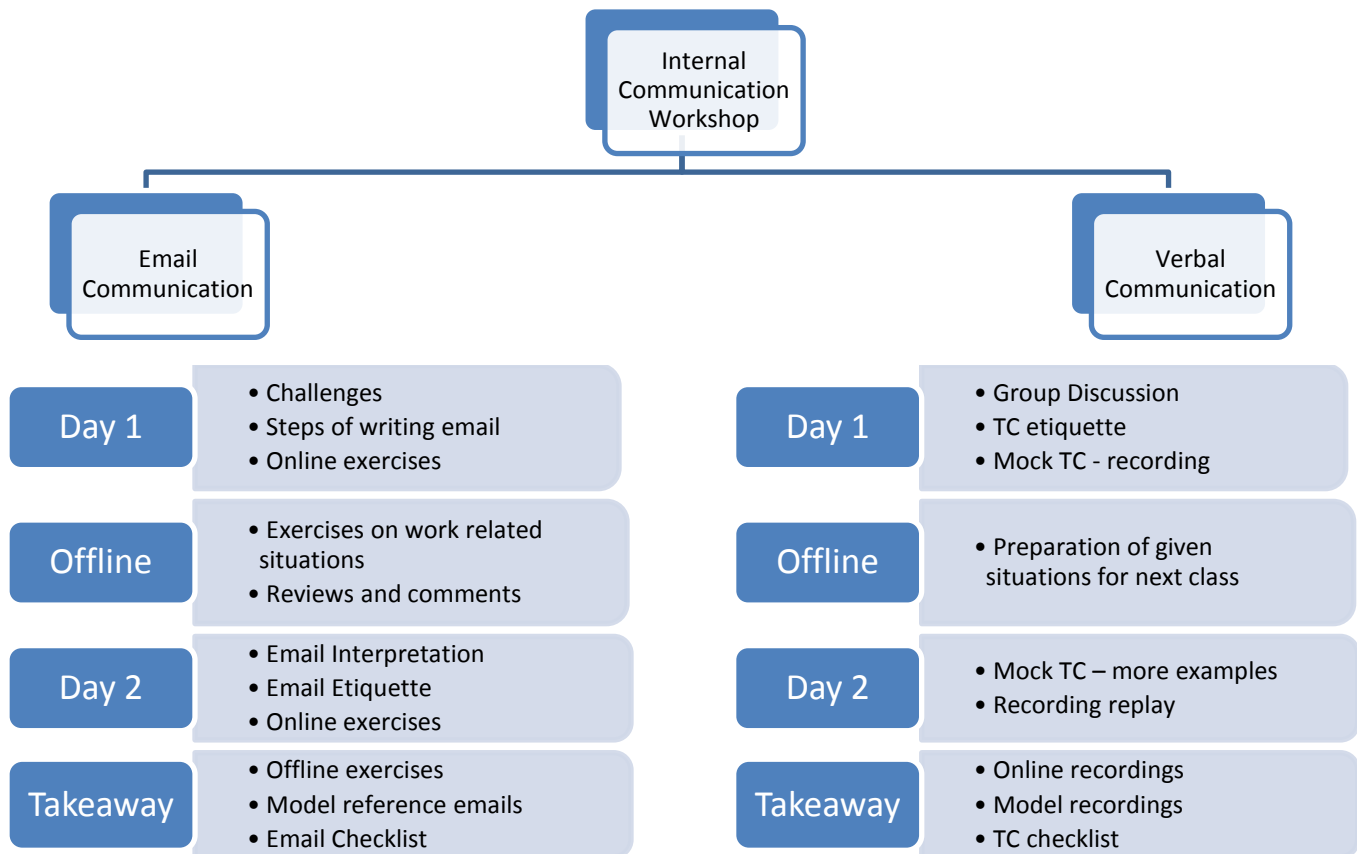
A pilot of this training programme was conducted with 17 team members split in two batches, over a period of 4-5 months. The number of trainees was kept low intentionally for better interaction.

Each individual's baseline assessment was collected after the external training but before the start of the internal sessions. The assessment was made on two parameters of communication – Written and Verbal.

Programmers, who had a rating of 2.5 or less on a scale of 0-5 on these parameters, were shortlisted. The ratings were provided by respective project managers.

THE TRAINING PROGRAMME - FLOW

The flow diagram below is an overview of the course of the internal communication workshop programme -



THE TRAINING PROGRAMME – DETAILS

A peek into the course material – all the training sessions were conducted in form of workshops -

Email communication –

- Inputs were sought from trainees on challenges faced in daily email communication

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- Steps of writing an email were discussed with a simple situation like – writing an email to manager requesting for leave
- An incorrect and a model email were shared to establish the do's and don't's
- Different work scenarios were provided both online and offline as exercises
- Individual emails were reviewed and provided with comments
- Model emails for these situations were provided later for future reference
- Examples of the situations are –
 - Responding to client's request to work during official holidays for an urgent deliverable
 - Writing to client after they have pointed out a mistake in the submitted deliverables
 - Communicating to client about their absence in a scheduled call without intimation
 - Following up with client POC on queries raised multiple times earlier
- Checklist provided as a pin up list to ensure important aspects of an email are taken care of
- Different emails were shared and their interpretation was discussed in a group
- Email examples with intentional mistakes were provided for exercises for reviewing

Trainees could relate to the situations mentioned in the points above. Direct feedback on this kind of email communication yielded immediate results by correcting their flaws.

Verbal communication –

The sessions of the verbal communication workshop were recorded and replayed for online discussions.

- Inputs were sought from trainees on challenges faced in their verbal communication during meetings or teleconferences
- Session started with an ice-breaker of a group discussion on a topic that everyone could identify with – e. g. voicing one's opinion in a meeting regarding work from home policy.
- Demonstrating TC etiquette through various mock TCs. TC situations are extrapolated from real work life situation -
 - Explaining to client an issue which has not resolved over email after quite a few iterations
 - Discussion on a concern raised by client on missing the timeline for a deliverable
 - Regular status update call with client POC
 - Discussion with manager over discontent regarding annual performance appraisal
 - Participating in an external audit as a team member

Below is a snapshot of the email and verbal communication checklists that were provided as pin up lists –

No.	Email Checklist	No.	Verbal Communication Checklist
1	✓ Subject line is in sync with email body	1	✓ Be aware of the agenda of the meeting
2	✓ All draft points of email matter are noted	2	✓ Be prepared with your thoughts on your agenda items – make notes of bullet points to carry in the meeting
3	✓ Email body elaborates all the draft points	3	✓ Be settled and ready with the meeting/TC set up 5 minutes before the scheduled time
4	✓ Signature is present	4	✓ Greet and identify yourself when you speak in a group TC
5	✓ Spelling and grammar check are done	5	✓ For TC, choose a location where there is little background noise
6	✓ Indentation and paragraphing are proper	6	✓ Ensure you have fall back options of phone and internet connectivity
7	✓ Email is read atleast twice before sending	7	✓ If you do not understand a question, request to repeat once. Use instant messenger for typing sentences or words where there is difficulty in understanding accent at either side
8	✓ Email clearly states any expectations from recipient	8	✓ Put yourself on mute when you are not talking
9	✓ Tone is appropriate	9	✓ Be attentive
10	✓ Matter is unambiguous	10	✓ Talk slowly and clearly
11	✓ Email is concise	11	✓ Ensure you are close to the mic while speaking
12	✓ No word is in CAPS except for proper nouns	12	✓ Take notes
13	✓ "Red" font colour is not used in case highlighting is done	13	✓ Summarize action items
14	✓ No abbreviations, chat lingo or emoticons are used	14	✓ Share meeting minutes
15	✓ "To" list contains only names who are directly addressed		

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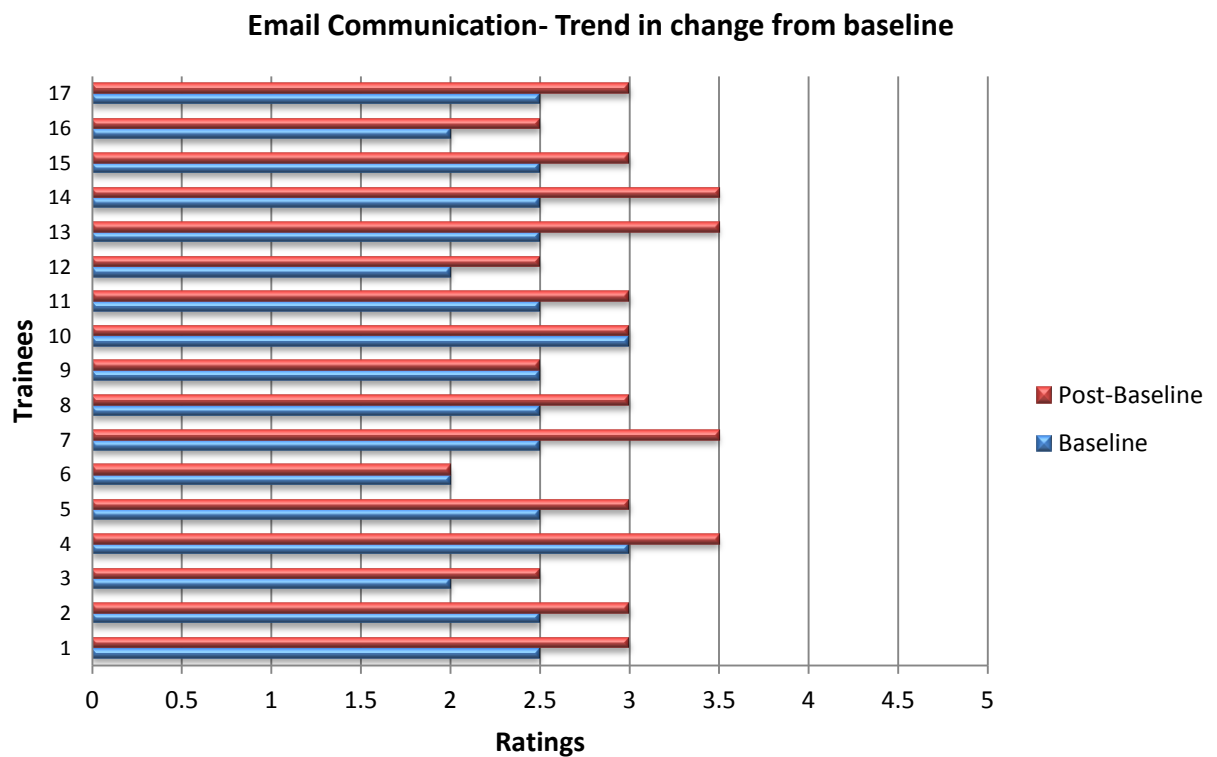
16	✓	"cc" list contains names who indeed need to be in the loop		
17	✓	"bcc" is not used		
18	✓	A received email is acknowledged promptly		

After the above curriculum, the trainees are being monitored for their actual work emails for a period of 2-3 months. A mentor is assigned to them during this period. The improvement is an ongoing assessment by the mentor and the manager till the end of a total of 4-5 months after the conduct of the training.

RESULTS

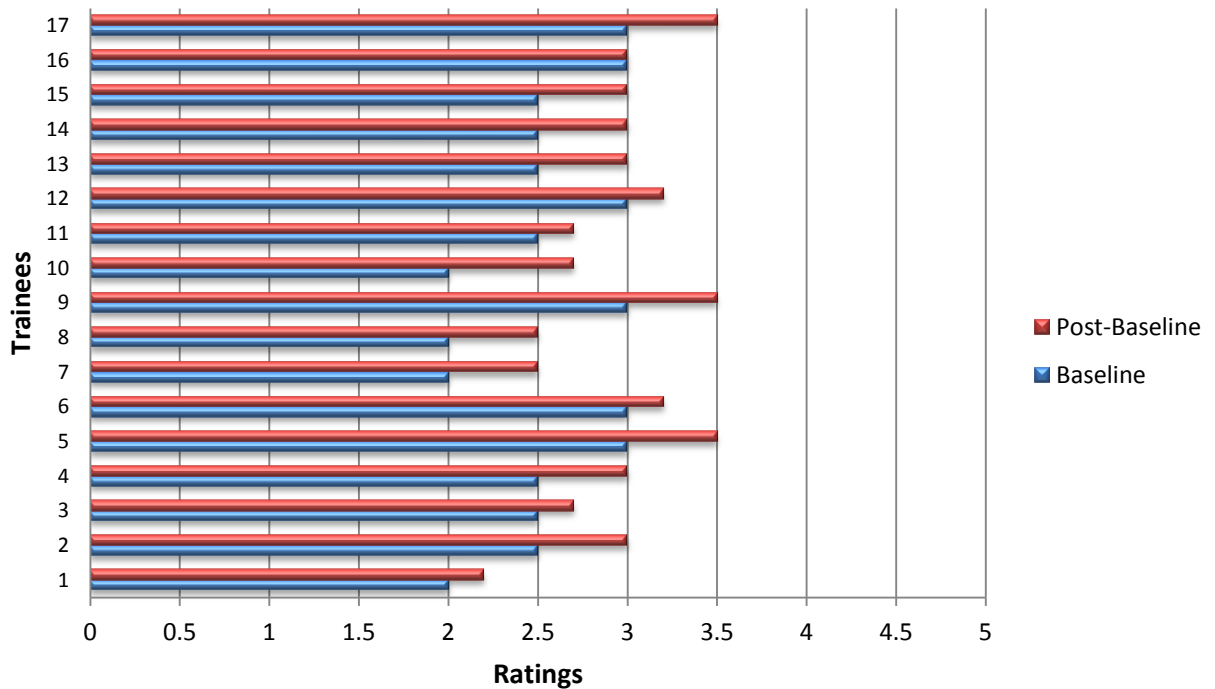
Assessments are made after the training phase, on the same baseline parameters of communication – written and verbal.

While the pilot of this exercise is ongoing, encouraging results are already indicated. Following charts depict the individual progress trend –



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Verbal Communication- Trend in change from baseline

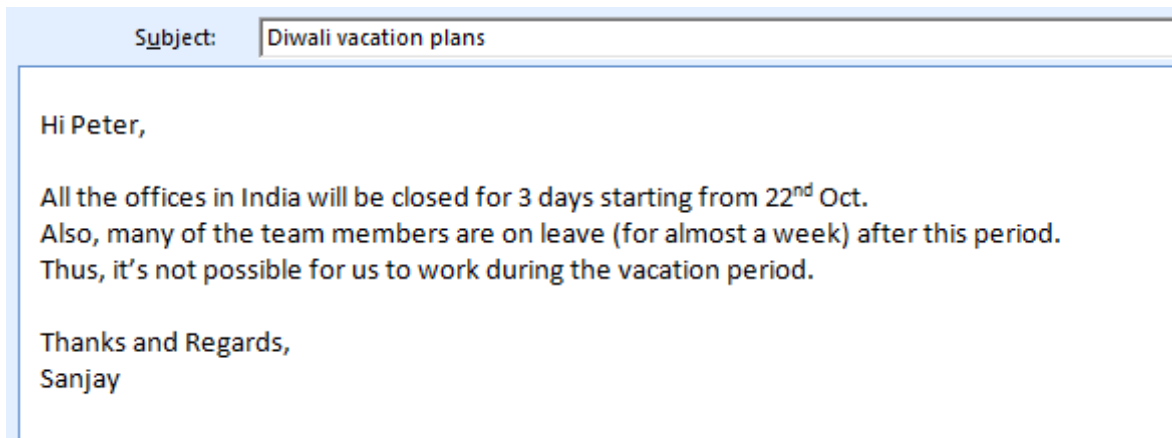


This is an interim projection of the likely outcome. An average of 0.5 shift up in scale for email communication and 0.4 shift up in scale for verbal communication is observed.

Trainees found the exercises relevant and useful. Some of the before and after emails are produced below -

Subject: Responding to client's request to work during official holidays for an urgent deliverable

Before training –



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After training -

Subject:	Ready to work during Diwali vacation for a snapshot
Hi Peter, Thanks for giving me an opportunity to work on this snapshot. Could you please let me know the timeline and number of deliverables of this snapshot? Because, I will be on vacation for two days only (i.e. 23rd and 24th Oct 2014). If due date of snapshot is same as vacation date or deliverables are in more number then I will cancel my vacation, otherwise I will request to my manager to allow me work from home option. Could you please send me the details of this snapshot? Thanks and Regards, Sanjay	

Subject: Communicating to client about clashing timelines of two simultaneous projects

Before training –

Subject:	Timelines
Hi Min, The timelines set for project P221 will not be achieved since we already have project P222 lined up with identical timelines. Thus, please let us know the new timelines. Thanks and Regards, Preeti.	

After training -

Subject:	Give priority to work on studies P221 and P222
Hi Min, Thanks for your message. I hope you are doing well. Currently I am working on two studies namely P221 and P222 simultaneously. Timelines for both the studies are clashing. I would request you to give the priorities on both the studies. It will help me to plan my work accordingly. I will try my level best to complete the work with the priorities set by you. Thanks and Regards, Preeti.	

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While there may be a lot of scope for improvement in polishing the language, the primary intention of getting the points across effectively is slowly seen to set in. The continual mentor assessment also proves to be beneficial.

UPCOMING MODULES

Looking at the active participation of attendees in the above modules, it is worthwhile to move ahead with some more skill trainings.

Some of the thoughts are –

- Presentation skills –
 - o Could be done through simulating a kick-off of a study – study docs and data understanding
- Understanding a different culture accent –
 - o Watching movies and discussing scenes

These ideas are at their nascent stage and there are implementation plans in the near future.

MERITS

The merits of the programme turned out to be –

- Very interactive – less of presentations and more of discussion
- All the examples were highly relevant to routine work
- The samples of good and bad helped in distinguishing the do's and don'ts
- Individual review comments on offline exercises provided the needed attention to handle different styles/personalities in a more focused manner
- Mock of real life scenarios for teleconferences or meetings made it instantly effective
- Recordings of the mocks during verbal communication served as a huge benefit where people could refer to their own body language/tone from the other side of the table

CHALLENGES

The difficulties in implementing this course are mainly the following -

- Because of the emphasis on individual attention; trainer time needed is more. And usually the trainer would be one among the experienced leads which makes their availability a concern.
- The batches need to be smaller for effective interaction. Hence many iterations of the same session would be needed if the target audience is large. Recordings would not serve the purpose because of the interactive nature of the programme.

However, the above problems could be overcome with an experienced dedicated in-house trainer. In fact, the positive outcome of this training led to the belief in our organization that such a dedicated trainer is an important addition rather than an overhead, of course if the size of the teams warrants it.

We also owe it our customers for raising timely communication concerns which pushed us into thinking of an effective alternative.

CONCLUSION

It may be worth giving the idea a try, especially with the kind of risks we run into because of concerns raised due to communication issues.

The author of this paper is conducting such trainings first hand and is optimistic of its effectiveness in bridging the gap. These kinds of targeted trainings could actually build a strong team of statistical programmers who would not only be technically competent but would be confident in independent communication with counterparts.

This will be an essential ingredient in setting our teams apart from programmers of other organizations.

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