



LANGUAGE IN THE WORKPLACE

In 1996, a team of researchers at Victoria University of Wellington began an innovative study of spoken communication in New Zealand workplaces. The aims of the project are to:

- ♦ Identify the characteristics of effective communication between people
- ♦ Diagnose possible causes of miscommunication
- ♦ Explore possible applications of the findings for New Zealand workplaces

To date we have recorded approximately 2000 interactions from 450 participants in 16 workplaces

Where has the data come from?

The project team began collecting recordings of workplace interactions in 1996 in four government organisations. The next year the project was extended to include recordings from corporate workplaces outside the government sector, and later to include factories and small workplaces. Most recently we have recorded data in medical settings and in IT companies.

What kinds of data have been collected?

Volunteers in each organisation taped everyday work-related meetings or discussions in government policy units, management meetings, project teams, factory production teams and small businesses. They also recorded some telephone calls and social conversations, and the project team videotaped a number of larger, more formal meetings from each workplace.

What is effective communication?

Analysis of this data will help identify the features of effective workplace communication. Some aspects of workplace talk the team are investigating include:

<i>Directives</i>	What is the most effective way of getting things done?
<i>Miscommunication</i>	How do people prevent or fix misunderstandings?
<i>Style shifting</i>	How do people adapt their talk to their audience?
<i>Email</i>	What role does email play in workplace communication?
<i>Problem solving</i>	How do people collaborate to solve problems or complete tasks?
<i>Meetings</i>	What structures and processes are typical of effective meetings?
<i>Humour and small talk</i>	How does "social talk" work as a communication tool?
<i>Workplace culture</i>	How is an organisation's culture reflected in their communication?
<i>Knowledge work</i>	How is knowledge created and advanced through talk?

Our results so far suggest that there are no simple rules for effective communication. For example:

- ♦ The most direct and explicit way of getting a message across is not necessarily the most effective.
- ♦ Humour and small talk play an important part in smooth workplace communication
- ♦ Repetition and "recycling" of ideas and information is common in meetings, and assists in conveying information, decision-making and problem-solving.
- ♦ Skilled communicators use a variety of strategies - they adjust their language and methods of communication according to who they are talking with and what they are talking about.

Other areas of analysis include: communication in medical settings, cross-cultural communication, power and politeness in the workplace, issues of gender and ethnicity, communication in factories, strategies for effective leadership

What can our findings be used for?

This research has a number of practical applications in the workplace:

- ♦ Management and communication skills training
- ♦ Communication evaluation and development
- ♦ Mediation and conflict resolution
- ♦ Training resource materials
- ♦ Supported employment
- ♦ Communication skills for workers from non-English speaking backgrounds

The Research Team

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We would like to express our thanks to those who have allowed us to record their interactions

Where can I get more information?

Visit our website to see a list of our publications and the latest project information:
<http://www.vuw.ac.nz/lals/lwp/>

You can contact the project team at:

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