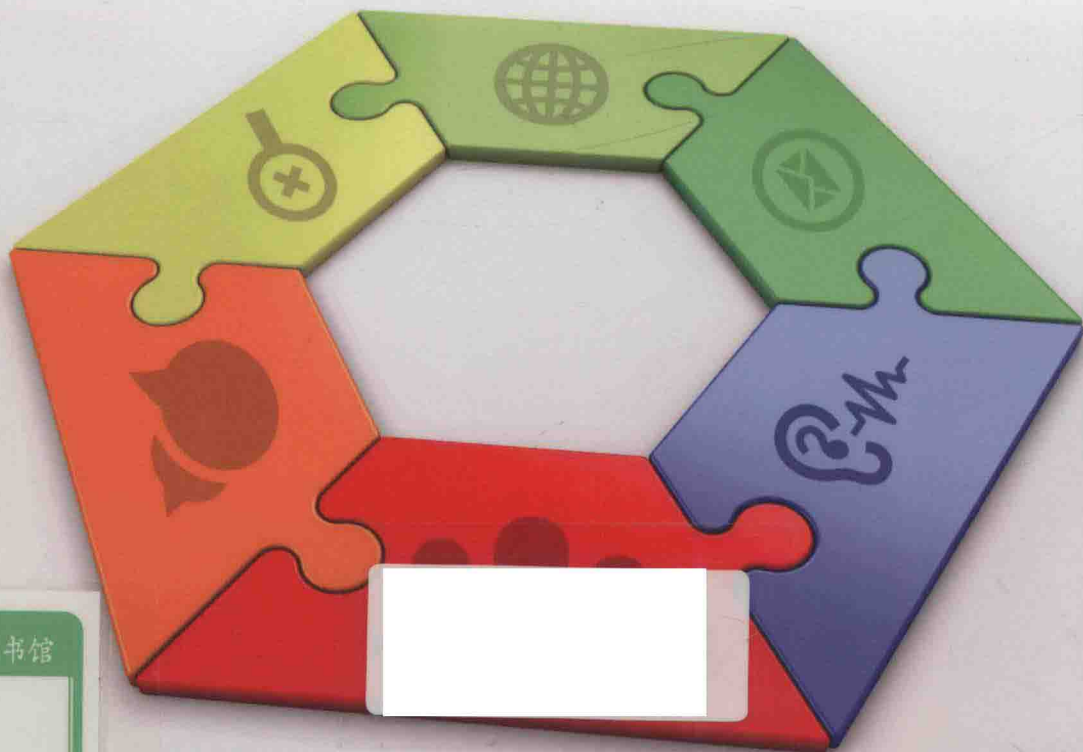


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Six Key Communication Skills for Records and Information Managers

Kenneth Laurence Neal



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Six Key Communication Skills for Records and Information Managers

KENNETH LAURENCE NEAL



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Six Key Communication Skills for Records and Information Managers

CHANDOS
INFORMATION PROFESSIONAL SERIES

Series Editor: Ruth Rikowski
(email: *Rikowskigr@aol.com*)

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For my wife, Joann Milano Neal who has given me so much
encouragement and support throughout my career

List of abbreviations

AIIM	Association for Information and Image Management
ARMA	Association of Records Managers and Administrators
BPO	Business Process Outsourcing
ECM	Electronic Content Management
GAAP	Generally Accepted Accounting Principles
GUI	Graphical User Interface
HR	Human Resources
ISDN	Integrated Services Digital Network
ISP	Internet Service Provider
IT	Information Technology
ROI	Return On Investment
VDN	Vector Directory Number

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Finally, in addition to my wife to whom this book is dedicated, I would like to thank my family. My brothers, Marc and David, have always been and always will be more than brothers to me; they have been my friends. And to my parents I owe a lifelong love of the written and spoken word. From the time they helped me craft my first speech about the Statue of Liberty, I was hooked.

About the author

Kenneth Neal is a certified Enterprise Content Management Practitioner with over 20 years of corporate communications experience implementing programs for companies such as IBM, BearingPoint, Fujitsu Consulting and Canon Business Process Services, Inc. Ken has published articles on document management topics in such publications as *Business Solutions*, *Information Management*, *E-Document News*, and *Workflow*. He has also presented seminars at the New York Real Estate Institute, National Council on Economic Education, and ARMA (Association of Records Managers and Administrators). Ken's presentations at ARMA conventions have focused on mastering key forms of business communication including written, verbal and formal presentations.

Introduction: why communication skills for records and information managers?

“You can have brilliant ideas, but if you can’t get them across, they won’t get you anywhere.”

(Lee Iacocca)

Communication counts. The rest of this book basically expands on this idea and offers suggestions on how to communicate effectively. My special focus is that communication counts particularly for records and information managers. Why these two groups of professionals? Because records and communication managers have to communicate a complex idea: namely, that their programs can help the organization succeed. If you are a records manager and you can’t clearly get across why implementing a records retention schedule is critical, chances are that your proposal will be passed over. If you are an IT manager, and you haven’t strategically communicated sound business reasons for your organization to improve its website, your initiative may come to a quick end.

Communication drives success

Successful records and information managers understand that effective communication helps them achieve better results because, beyond enabling the ability to clearly get across complex ideas, effective communication ultimately drives financial performance and overall business success.

Watson Wyatt Worldwide’s Communication ROI Study asserts that *effective internal communications benefits companies in a number of ways* (Demitropoulos, 2010). These include keeping employees better engaged in the business, helping companies retain key talent, providing

consistent value to customers, and delivering superior financial performance to shareholders. A key finding of the study was that organizations that communicate well had a 47 percent higher total return to shareholders over the last five years, compared with firms that are the least effective at communication.

In addition to enhancing business performance, records and information managers who are seen as true leaders also know another “secret” about communication: it boosts the morale of their teams. A survey developed by Accountemps[®], a specialized staffing service for temporary accounting and finance professionals, found that better and more frequent communication with staff members is one of the best ways to raise employee morale (Demitropoulos, 2010). As you might suspect, the survey also found the opposite to be true. The absence of open and honest communication with staff tops the list of management mistakes that can wear down employee morale.

These findings indicate that the ability to effectively communicate is more than a skill; it is a powerful tool for records and information professionals. Using this tool they can more easily clarify the strategic value of their departments and programs, increase motivation and the efficiency of their teams and ultimately help sharpen their company’s competitiveness.

Effectively communicating is more challenging than ever

One more reason I believe communication counts is because doing it effectively, whether in business or your personal life, is more challenging than ever. It’s tempting not to worry about communicating effectively because to do so requires concentration and awareness. Most of all it requires attention – in the midst of a mind-boggling array of daily activities, events, information and people that constantly compete for your attention. Here’s just one eye-opening statistic. According to a 2011 *Forbes* magazine article (Malone, 2011), in the 1970s people were exposed to about 500 commercial messages per day. Factoring in today’s technology, that estimate has exploded to about 30,000 messages per day. Let’s pause and take that in for a second – just today, 30,000 messages are vying to enter your consciousness.

And while you’re trying to manage those 30,000 messages, what else are you trying to juggle during your day? According to a 2011 Bureau of Labor

Statistics report (USDL, 2011), if you're between 25 and 54 years of age with children your average 24-hour day consists of the following major activities: working (8.8 hours), sleeping (7.6 hours), leisure and sports (2.5 hours), caring for others (1.2 hours), eating and drinking (1.1 hours), household activities (1.1 hours) and other (1.7 hours). Let's add to the mix that while engaged in these activities you might also be managing email, texting, live chatting, tweeting, blogging, downloading, surfing (most likely the web, not the ocean) and talking on the phone, just to name a few. And if you're a records or information manager, you're probably also reading thousands if not millions of words each week while trying to absorb and manage countless documents and terabytes of information.

It's easy to consider why many of us are just too exhausted to focus on improving our communication skills. Yet, as these demands on our attention will certainly continue to grow and challenge our ability to communicate effectively, what is the alternative? If we don't communicate our brilliant ideas clearly, as Lee Iacocca points out, our ideas are not likely to get us anywhere.

The solution: six simple skills

The good news as I see it is that by honing six relatively simple skills, records and information managers, as well as everyone else, can more easily reap the business benefits I pointed out earlier.

Why six skills, and not seven or ten? The answer to this question is based on the many years I have spent directing internal and external communications programs for technology companies, giving presentations, proposing initiatives to senior executives, writing articles, press releases, case histories and many other forms of content. At one point in my career I began receiving invitations to lecture at seminars and industry conferences on how records and information managers can advance their professional lives by improving their writing and verbal skills. These groups, particularly records managers, compete for a slice of the corporate budget pie and, as I pointed out earlier, are challenged to communicate the complex idea of how their programs help drive organizational success.

When I began planning my first presentations, my goal was to craft a workable number of skills that my audience could easily remember. I also wanted my presentations to be more than just technical discussions.

I wanted them to be personal, linked with stories and examples of how these skills assisted me as well as colleagues and friends in advancing our careers and lives. Finally, I wanted these skills to function together, as a system, adding up to much more than any one skill individually. Implemented together, they provide a powerful persuasive force that greatly increases your chance of getting what you want. Eliminate just one skill during a presentation and that force is significantly diminished.

For example, imagine in a presentation to senior management you apply five of the skills but you're not coming across as credible. Your audience is not convinced that you know your stuff, that your records management proposal doesn't appear to be backed by any industry trends or a relevant case history example of how an effective records program helped a company avoid serious risk. Without credibility, the other five skills may not be enough to help you win the day.

Considering these and other elements, I eventually decided to focus on six skills in my first presentation. The number was workable, functioned well as a system, and based on my personal experience represented "the best of the best" in terms of getting results. Consequently, the six skills have been with me in my career, and in my professional life ever since. Now, I hope they will help support your professional journey as well.

In the first six chapters, I will focus on each of the skills: be brief, be clear, be responsive, be strategic and be credible. By including case history examples, personal events and stories from colleagues I will take the skills out of the realm of the theoretical and into the realm of the practical. You can start implementing each skill right away, perhaps as you write your next report or plan your next presentation.

The business case

In the seventh chapter I will highlight one of the most practical applications of applying the skills for records and information managers – the business case. I end with the business case because it is a critical document for records and information managers who want to win support for their programs. While records managers often don't have a chance to attain the status of a hero, here's one brief example of how a manager wrote a good business case, received budget approval by arguing for the project persuasively and then implemented the program, which saved his company substantial money.

The records manager, who worked for a food company, created a business case for a program that would help protect the organization against superfund problems. (A superfund site, according to the 1980 Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act, is a toxic site placed on a list of sites requiring cleanup mandated by the Environmental Protection Agency.) The records manager went before the company's senior leadership team and basically argued: "The program I'm proposing will cost the company \$10,000 but it will help us sleep better at night because we'll be better prepared if we ever face a superfund problem."

The issue, of which senior management was aware, was that the company had a mass of boxes containing insurance contracts that could protect the organization against future insurance claims. The insurance contracts, however, had never been indexed or inventoried. The program designed by the records manager would fix this problem. Sure enough, soon after the program was approved and implemented, the company was sued for a superfund cleanup. Because the company's records were now organized, the records manager was able to produce a contract, dated from 1942 and still in effect, that held the company harmless from the particulars in the lawsuit. The insurance company paid the fine, which totaled between \$4 and \$5 million dollars. Keep this story in the back of your mind as the "records manager and the superfund example." I'll return to it in future chapters. Besides being persuasive, it illustrates several other key communication skills.

Meeting the challenge

Writing and communicating a good business case doesn't always produce such a dramatic outcome. It is, however, critical for getting records and IT programs implemented that can help a company reduce costs and risk as well as streamline operations. While an effective business case embodies all the communication skills we'll be examining, it also represents a challenge for many professionals, not just records and information managers.

Let's move ahead and meet that challenge together.

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