

Unit 23: Communication and Employability Skills for IT

Unit code: F/601/7233
QCF Level 3: BTEC Specialist
Credit value: 10
Guided learning hours: 60

Aim and purpose

The aim of this unit is to ensure that learners understand both the personal attributes valued by employers and the principles of communicating effectively whilst developing effective communication skills and addressing their own personal development needs.

Unit introduction

Non-technical skills and attitudes, known as soft skills, are key to employability as well as the technical skills and knowledge required for specific jobs in IT. Soft skills are those skills relating to an individual's ability to communicate and work effectively with others, to use appropriate language, be dependable and conscientious, and to generally behave in an acceptable manner in the workplace. Soft skills complement hard skills, which are the knowledge, understanding and technical skills required to do a job.

In this unit learners will come to appreciate the soft skills they need to develop to become effective employees. Learners will identify and consider their own soft skills and, through practice, improve these skills.

Communication skills are key to success in any sector but are particularly important in highly technical sectors such as IT where the language used can become full of jargon. It is important that learners are able to communicate with non technical staff and understand when different types and vehicles of communication are appropriate.

IT provides specific software packages and advanced tools that can be used to improve the effectiveness of communications. Through this unit learners will be able to improve their general communication skills and ensure that they understand how to exploit specific application packages and tools.

All individuals, whether learners or employees, must accept the need for continual self development to maintain their effectiveness. For this reason, learning outcome 4 involves the use of personal development plans which can be used to capture and track training needs, and the accumulation of new skills and knowledge.

Learning outcomes and assessment criteria

In order to pass this unit, the evidence that the learner presents for assessment needs to demonstrate that they can meet all the learning outcomes for the unit. The assessment criteria determine the standard required to achieve the unit.

On completion of this unit a learner should:

Learning outcomes	Assessment criteria
1 Understand the personal attributes valued by employers	1.1 explain the personal attributes valued by employers
2 Understand the principles of effective communication	2.1 explain the principles of effective communication 2.2 discuss potential barriers to effective communication
3 Be able to use IT to communicate effectively	3.1 demonstrate a range of effective interpersonal skills 3.2 use IT to aid communications 3.3 communicate technical information to a specified audience
4 Be able to address personal development needs	4.1 produce a personal development plan 4.2 follow a personal development plan

Unit content

1 Understand the personal attributes valued by employers

Specific attributes: job-related eg technical knowledge; good working procedures eg health and safety, security; work attitudes

General attributes: skills eg planning skills, organisational skills, time management, team working, verbal skills, written communication skills, numeracy, creativity

Attitudes: preferred eg determined, independent, integrity, tolerance, dependable, problem-solving, leadership, confidence, self-motivation

2 Understand the principles of effective communication

Principles: general skills; interpersonal skills; written communication skills

General communication skills: cultural differences; adapting eg modulating voice, terminology, format; accuracy; engaging audience eg changing intonation, use of technology; question and answer

Interpersonal skills: methods eg verbal exchanges, signing, lip reading; techniques and cues eg body language, use of intonation; positive language; negative language; active engagement eg nodding, summarising, paraphrasing; barriers eg background noise, distractions, lack of concentration; types of question eg open, closed, probing; speed of response

Communicate in writing: guidelines; 'smileys' or emoticons, key messages eg letter, fax, email; grammar; spelling; structure; identifying relevance; proofreading; alternative viewpoints; note taking; capitalisation

3 Be able to use IT to communicate effectively

Communication channels: word-processed documents; presentations; email; web-based eg blogs, vlogs, podcasts, web pages, video conferencing

Software: word-processing; presentation package; other eg email software, specialist software

Review documents: proofing eg thesaurus, spell checkers; proofread

4 Be able to address personal development needs

Identification of need: formal reports eg appraisal meeting notes, customer feedback, performance data; self-assessment (personal development planning)

Records: target setting; appraisal records

Addressing needs: methods eg job shadowing, team meetings, attending events, training eg external, internal

Learning styles: systems eg active or reflective, sensing or intuitive, visual or verbal, sequential or global; identification of preferred style; knowing own; understanding others

Essential guidance for tutors

Delivery

There are two major ways in which this unit can be delivered, one is as a conventional continuous unit, and the other is to run it in parallel with other units to gain the maximum benefit from using naturally occurring evidence for assessment purposes.

Whichever method is chosen, the logical plan for delivering the unit will be the same, just different elapsed times. The plan included in this document follows the sequence of the learning outcomes. Some tutors may prefer to deliver learning outcome 4 early so that learners can create and maintain a personal development plan (PDP) over the period of unit delivery.

The first area of delivery involves the understanding of what attributes are and why some are valued by employers. Start with the job specific attributes which will probably involve some whole class teaching to inform learners, who have little experience of the work environment in IT, about the type of things involved. Learners can then work in small groups to start to build a profile of essential attributes and desirable attributes for working in IT.

This moves on to general attributes which will again involve some whole class teaching, possibly supplemented by scanning job adverts to identify general attributes which may be in demand. In small groups the learners will then continue to add to the profile they are building.

Attitude is the next attribute to be dealt with this and may be delivered by class discussions, with tutor input, to try to determine which attributes are desirable, which are essential and why they are important. In small groups the learners can add these to their profile.

Delivery moves on to consider effective communication.

The first topic is to look at the general skills required. The various topics, as listed under learning outcome 2. of the unit content, can be distributed amongst small groups of learners who will discuss their understanding of the topic. Thus one group will be discussing cultural differences, another adapting content, a third differentiating between fact and opinion and two others techniques for engaging the audience and question and answer sessions. The groups feed back to the whole class and with tutor input produce a check list. They can then take part in role play situations, peer observed against the checklist. The next topic in this block deals with interpersonal skills. Some basic information can be given out as handouts from which learners can develop a checklist. Learners will be encouraged to use this list and make notes whilst watching television, various tutors, peer groups, etc. Role play can also be used to provide additional scenarios. The class can then discuss and summarise their findings creating a list of useful pointers for use in their own interpersonal skills assessments.

Throughout this unit, learners will be asked to keep a record of anything that gets in the way of making the communication effective. This is the focus of some of the assessment criteria and whilst the delivery concentrates on things which make communication effective, the learner needs to be aware of what negates that effectiveness. Some examples are given in learning outcome 2, but learners may pick up other things during delivery of this part of the unit.

The next major topic, still within effective communication, is communication in writing. Learners should consider a wide variety of examples of writing containing good practice and less good practice. With tutor guidance they will analyse the writing, picking out

elements of good and less good practice. They will also attempt to identify different styles of writing and determine where it would be appropriate to use them.

Learners will undertake small exercises to give them practice writing in different styles and for different objectives, and they will practice proof reading the work of their peers. Tutors will lead discussions and give feedback on the various work produced.

The next major division of delivery concerns exploiting IT to communicate effectively, which can be based on practical application. The first topic deals with communication channels and software. Tutors may have to demonstrate some of the techniques, although learners may already be familiar with much of the software.

Learner exercises in using word processing, presentation, web page production and email software will provide a basis for this section. There will also be exercises in using software to produce blogs or vlogs, or in using VOIP software.

This will be followed by class discussions on the benefits and disadvantages of the software based on learners own experiences.

The final part of delivery in this section deals with the use of various tools which are available. Learners will undertake exercises using the spelling checker and a thesaurus available in their word processor together with one other specialist tool. There are some ideas in the unit content for learning outcome 3.

Learners need to be aware of the pitfalls which occur when relying on the spelling check where if words are spelt correctly, but used in the wrong way, the spelling check will not identify them. The problems with using auto-correct with the spelling check, or in using a grammar checker also need to be emphasised.

The final section of delivery deals with personal development and commences with looking at identification of need. The tutor needs to impart some basic techniques used for identifying development needs. Learners can then look at some example self assessment reports and some appraisal reports to identify the type of material these contain. Role play of various aspects appraisal interviews may also be useful.

The next element of this section is to look at various recording mechanisms including example personal development plans. The tutor may have to provide a brief introduction as to what these things are, but much can be gained by looking at good example material. Learners should undertake an exercise in creating a PDP for themselves. Tutors may prefer to deliver this early in the course so that the maintenance can be ongoing throughout.

Addressing the identified needs is probably a difficult concept for young people with limited knowledge of the world of work and the use of case studies might be one way of addressing this. Case studies concerned with work shadowing, formal training and team meetings will be useful. A role play of a team meeting may also play a useful part.

The final element deals with learning styles, another difficult concept for many learners. Directed research may be a useful way to impart some knowledge of the systems involved. There are a number of well documented exercises that learners can undertake to determine their own preferred learning style. Further exercises and discussions can determine ways in which this knowledge is put to use.

More difficult is to discover how other people's learning styles impact on group working. There will, of necessity, be some tutor input in the form of whole class teaching, and perhaps role plays where one person adopts a particular style within a group and peers can observe how it affects the way the group undertake a particular task.

Outline learning plan

The outline learning plan has been included in this unit as guidance and can be used in conjunction with the programme of suggested assignments. The outline learning plan demonstrates one way in planning the delivery and assessment of this unit.

Topic and suggested assignments/activities and/assessment
Introduction to the unit
<p>Valued attributes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • whole-class exercise – specific job-related attributes • whole-class exercise – general attributes • individual exercise – what attitudes are valued by employers? • whole class exercise – tutor presentation on organisational aims and objectives.
Assignment 1 - Attributes and Barrier
<p>Effective communication:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • whole-class exercise – tutor presentation on general communication skills • directed research – effective communication: interpersonal skills • individual exercise – effective communication: in writing.
Assignment 2 - Effective Communication
<p>Communicating via IT:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • whole-class exercise – tutor presentation on different channels for communication • whole-class exercise – what software helps communication? • individual exercise – tools for improving communication through ICT.
Assignment 3 - Personal Development
<p>Identifying personal development needs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • whole-class exercise – tutor presentation on what personal development is • whole-class exercise – identifying personal development needs • individual exercise – personal development: records • individual exercise – personal development: addressing needs • individual exercise – personal development: learning styles.

Assessment

It is suggested that this unit is assessed using three assignments as summarised in the Programme of suggested assignments table.

Some of the evidence required to complete the assignments could be naturally occurring within their work for other units within the qualification. Tutors are encouraged to use such evidence.

Using the scenario of a junior post in careers advice for IT personnel, it is a reasonable assumption that the learner will be expected to help produce information material for clients.

Assignment 1 – Attributes and Barriers

For 1.1, the important point to remember is that learners must explain why the attributes are valued. They do not need to describe the attribute, but can merely state what it is and explain why it is valued. It is expected that learners will address at least one topic from each of the sub-headings in learning outcome 1.

For 2.1, learners must explain the principles of effective communication. The principles are outlined in three subsets – general skills, interpersonal skills, written communication skills. Learners should address each of these areas, choosing two or three points from each to discuss. There is no requirement to laboriously explain every example given in the content.

For 2.2, learners need to describe the potential barriers to communication. To do this, learners should attempt to address at least one barrier from each of the sub-headings in learning outcome 2 (eg a very diverse audience, background noise and using the wrong style is a potential barrier).

Evidence could be presented as an information booklet.

Assignment 2 – Effective Communication

For 3.1, the learner needs to undertake a variety of interpersonal communications ranging from their normal day to day interaction within a group, or in the whole class, through to giving a short presentation (for which peer assessment can be utilised). This type of interaction takes place in their work for the various subjects on the course (and in their lives away from education) hence it is sensible to utilise all of this information for assessing this criterion. Any appropriate and convincing form of evidence will be accepted, a few alternatives being given in the PSA.

Criterion 3.2 is a straightforward demonstration that the learner can use the techniques outlined in the content ie word processing, presentation software and email or specialist software. Evidence may come from this or other units as long as it is clear it is the learner's own work.

3.3 could be some form of 'dummies' guide perhaps to using word processing proofing tools or using presentation software such as PowerPoint. Any technical subject can be used as long as the audience is non-technical or non-specialist. As this is one pass criterion amongst many, a large document (or web based page) is not required and learners should not spend a disproportionate amount of time completing this criterion.

Assignment 3 – Personal Development

4.1 and 4.2 deal with a personal development plan. For 4.1, learners put together a plan, which may be presented in any appropriate format and may be for any length of time as long as the time is sufficient for them to monitor progress. Evidence for 4.2 can come from review points in the plan when learners and tutors may have input and evaluate progress.

Programme of suggested assignments

The table below shows a programme of suggested assignments that cover the pass criteria in the outcomes and assessment grid. This is for guidance and it is recommended that centres either write their own assignments or adapt any Edexcel assignments to meet local needs and resources.

Criteria covered	Assignment title	Scenario	Assessment methods
1.1-2.2	Attributes and Barriers	You are working in Careers Advice for IT personnel. You have been asked to produce a small booklet on valued employee attributes and communication barriers.	Information booklet.
3.1-3.3	Effective Communication	As part of your continued training in your post you are required to maintain and improve your communication skills.	Tutor's observations.
4.1, 4.2	Personal Development	Part of your personal development is to produce a PDP and monitor your progress.	Detailed witness statements and written explanation.

Links to National Occupational Standards, other BTEC units, other BTEC qualifications and other relevant units and qualifications

This unit forms part of the BTEC in IT sector suite. This unit has particular links with:

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
	Employment Rights and Responsibilities	
	Communicating in the IT Industry	
	Working in the IT Industry	

This unit maps to some of the underpinning knowledge from the following areas of competence in the Level 3 National Occupational Standards for IT (ProCom):

4.3 Human Needs Analysis.

Essential resources

Access to a range of software to present information.

Employer engagement and vocational contexts

Any contact with employers to discuss their views on the contents of this unit would be extremely useful to tutors and learners alike.

Indicative reading for learners

Textbooks

Barker A – *Improve Your Communication Skills, 2nd Edition* (Kogan Page, 2006) ISBN-10 0749448229, ISBN-13 978-0749448226

Bolton R – *People Skills* (Simon & Schuster, 1986) ISBN-10 067162248X, ISBN-13 978-0671622480

Websites

www.mindtools.com/page8.html

Functional Skills – Level 2

Skill	When learners are ...
ICT - Using ICT	
Select, interact with and use ICT systems safely and securely for a complex task in non-routine and unfamiliar contexts	using IT to aid communications
ICT - Developing, presenting and communicating information	
Use communications software to meet requirements of a complex task	using IT to aid communications
Combine and present information in ways that are fit for purpose and audience	communicating technical information to a specified audience
Evaluate the selection, use and effectiveness of ICT tools and facilities used to present information	evaluating interpersonal and written communications techniques