

# Improving Presentation Skills Among Working Adults: What Helped

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## Abstract

This study reports on levels of professional presenting and related communication apprehension (CA) among working men and women, as measured by the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (McCroskey, 1982). It analyzes self-report data on what participants found most useful in becoming more effective presenters, and what activities had the greatest effect in reducing public speaking apprehension. These included 1) working on a team; 2) working with clients; 3) managing others; 4) making presentations at work; 5) making presentations outside of work; 6) practicing ahead of time; 7) taking a communication course or training; 8) being videotaped; 9) observing effective presenters; 10) receiving positive feedback on one's presentations; 11) receiving negative feedback on one's presentations; 12) helping others with their presentations, including giving feedback; and 13) being a parent. Most helpful activities differed from those associated with low public speaking CA scores.

## Introduction

Kim Newell...was already relatively senior.... But she believed she was years away from being eligible to be an executive vice president...The team encouraged her to deliver a panel discussion at the executives' annual off-site meeting, and even coached her through her talking points. The presentation helped put her on a fast track, and four months later she got a promotion. "I like to think that I was ready for it," Newell says, but without the prompting, "I don't know if I would have that visibility." (Kurtz, 2017, p. 63)

It has been a popular canard to say that people fear public speaking more than they fear death. Yet every day millions of people make presentations, and we continue to feel that they add value to our work experiences, teaching, service, and other areas of life. Research consistently has indicated the necessity of effective communication skills for entering jobs and professions; but additional skills in making presentations have been shown as necessary for promotion to leadership roles in many professions as well.

While business communication educators tend to focus on college students, the complexity and depth of a truly effective communication skill set require a lifetime of development. Most students when they graduate college are not at the peak of their skills or confidence in making presentations or speaking in public (Marcel, 2016; in press). They may continue to develop as they progress in their careers and gain more life experience. The question becomes, then, if so much development happens after graduation, what helps adults to become better at public speaking?

Studies on working adults' presentation skills are infrequent, so we must look at more industry-specific research. A recent study, building on findings by the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) and accounting practitioners, identified the communication skills viewed as necessary for

effectiveness at the levels of staff accountants, accounting managers, and firm partners (Boyle, Mahoney, Carpenter, & Grambo, 2014). While interpersonal skills are essential for business professionals at all levels, Boyle and colleagues found that making convincing presentations was viewed as the most important organizational communication skill for partners to demonstrate. Likewise, IBM's 2013 report "Your Journey to Executive" emphasized the need to take on speaking assignments as part of future executives' efforts to become more visible in their organizations (Stephens and Howell, 2013). Rossetto and Murphy (2010) detail the importance of presentation skills for financial planners. Finally, a host of researchers in information systems and technology fields has emphasized the need for effective presentation skills among both technology students and professionals (Alshare, Lane, & Miller, 2011; Davis & Woodward, 2006; Kennan, Cecez-Kecmanovic, Willard, & Wilson, 2009; Swathi, 2015).

Yet working adults face even more intense time demands than do students. The time needed to build skills can be difficult to find once careers have started. Thus, it would be beneficial to determine which activities have proven most effective in helping to business professionals accomplish two things: to improve their effectiveness as speakers and presenters, and to reduce their communication apprehension in doing so.

This study reports on levels of professional presenting and related communication apprehension (CA) among working men and women, as measured by the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (McCroskey, 1982). Then, it analyzes self-report data on what participants found most useful in becoming more effective presenters and what activities had the greatest effect in reducing public speaking apprehension. These insights will contribute to improving college and graduate school teaching around business presenting and making more efficient the path towards becoming better speakers in adult life.

## Literature Review

### Efforts in a Highly Apprehensive Field: Accounting

One profession which has devoted a great deal of effort to improving professional communication has been accounting. By the same token, there is a strong awareness in the field of the association between excellent presentation skills and promotability. For example, in efforts to improve women's promotion to partner and executive levels, Grant Thornton included initiatives to improve women's "public speaking and communication" (Women Post Gains, 2006, p. 6). El Ramly (2012 p. 18) advised firms seeking to retain "emerging partners" to make sure those candidates engaged "in networking activities, *speaking engagements* and business proposals involving the acquisition of new clients" (p. 18, emphasis added). Lee (2012) noted that along with good listening and interactive skills, public speaking skills must be developed in future partners. Bailey, Dickins, and Scarlata (2013) argued for Masters in Accountancy degree programs to require an advanced business communication course, rather than simply unstipulated accounting electives.

Such skills are already viewed as important in many firms. A 2016 AICPA Private Companies Practice Section survey found that 36% of multi-owner firms reported offering "formal soft skills training" (Tysiac, 2016, p. 28). While many firms have offered development programs and trainings to strengthen communication skills and confidence, not all firms can do this. And presumably not all working professionals will be able to take advantage of such programming. The research question which arises is

RQ1) Which activities do working business professionals say they find most helpful in improving their presentation skills?

### **Communication Apprehension and Business Careers**

The Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA) is the most frequently used instrument to measure CA. Developed by James McCroskey (1982), it is comprised of a 24-item list of statements about communication in groups, meetings, dyads, and public speaking. The instrument was tested on more than 40,000 undergraduates. The scoring norms of low, medium and high levels of CA were derived from that age cohort.

Undergraduate CA patterns have been relatively well studied (see for example Ameen, Jackson, & Malgwi, 2010; Arquero, Hassall, Joyce, & Donoso, 2007; Coetzee, Schmulian, & Kotze, 2014; Fordham & Gabbin, 1996; Ilias, Abd Razak, & Yunus, 2013; Ruchala & Hill, 1994; Simons, Higgins, & Lowe, 1995; Stanga & Ladd, 1990). There has been less PRCA research on adults, but extant studies do offer some insights. At present there are published 26 PRCA studies on adults, analyzing PRCA scores for 13,927 respondents, from the US and several other countries. In these studies, mean total CA scores are significantly below 65.6, the average established by McCroskey for college students, for 83% of respondents. Table 1 shows results from studies stipulating business professions. Here, 88% of business respondents showed reported mean scores below McCroskey's mean.

Consistent with a large body of international psychological research reviewed by Marcel (in press), this suggests the likelihood that, over the lifespan, CA may lessen in intensity, thus enabling people to feel more at ease communicating than they did during their college years. The research question which emerges is

RQ2) Are there specific activities which are associated with lower levels of CA?

### **Present Study**

Based on these concerns, the present study sought to explore what helped to build presentation skills for working adults. This study asked respondents to use a five-point Likert scale to rate the helpfulness of thirteen activities that may have contributed to their development as more effective presenters. These included activities that working adults are likely to engage in on a regular basis, including 1) working on a team; 2) working with clients; and 3) managing others. While not directly part of making presentations, they may increase the general frequency of communicating and potentially enhance confidence as business communicators. Another set of activities are directly related to public speaking. These include 4) making presentations at work; 5) making presentations outside of work; 6) practicing ahead of time; 7) taking a communication course or training; and 8) being videotaped.

A final set of activities is related to presenting but in more passive ways. These include 9) observing effective presenters; 10) receiving positive feedback on one's presentations; 11) receiving negative feedback on one's presentations; 12) helping others with their presentations, including giving feedback. A final item, 13) being a parent, was included to assess in a more general way whether participants felt this emotionally demanding yet rewarding personal activity had any bearing on their success as presenters. The ratings were 1-very helpful to 5-not at all helpful. Participants could also indicate if that activity did not apply to them; if a participant indicated the activity did not apply, the response for that

item was excluded from calculations of its usefulness. A second analysis was conducted to determine whether any activities were more correlated with lower CA among those who found them very useful.

Table 1

PRCA Studies on Adult Professionals

Author(s)	Year	Participants	n	Mean score
Gibbs, Rosenfeld & Javidi	1994	Bank employees	142	64.83
Booth-Butterfield, Chory & Benyon	1997	Working adults	177	63.30
Neupauer	1996	On-air radio and TV personalities	160	61.30
Russ	2012	Textbook retailer managers	156	61.19
Madlock & Martin	2011	Working adults	209	59.91
Pitt & Ramaseshan	1989	Car salespersons	84	58.63
Stark Morley & Shockley-Zalabak	1987	“Other professionals”	153	57.71
Russ	2013	Managers	219	54.80
Cole & McCroskey	2003	Corporate and governmental employees	128	54.28
Pitt, Berthon & Robson	2000	Vehicle fleet sales staff	113	53.99
Pitt & Ramaseshan	1989	Media salespersons	30	53.57
Marcel	In press	Business professionals, lawyers and teachers	2962	52.49
Stark et al.	1987	Communication professionals	131	51.95

### Methodology

Data on CA levels (using the PRCA), frequency and audiences for presentations, undergraduate majors, years of supervising experience, industry, age and gender were collected using an online survey administered through the Qualtrics software platform. Two waves of data were collected. In the first, 31,700 alumni of a northeastern private business university who completed any degree between 1976 and 2016 were emailed an invitation and survey link. A total of 2885 usable surveys were completed from this 2016 iteration. In the second, 12,500 CPAs’ and working accountants’ email addresses from throughout the United States were collected from online state CPA society lists and accounting firm websites. Only small to medium-size firms were included, to maximize diversity in the respondent pool.

Each was emailed an invitation and survey link starting in May of 2017. A total of 292 usable surveys were completed from this iteration. Of these, 3012 were complete for purposes of this study and were included in the analysis. In both cases, the university’s Institutional Review Board evaluated and approved the research program.

## Results

### Frequency of Making Presentations

Participants were asked how often on average they had made presentations in the previous year. They were asked to include all presentations and speeches, whether for work or outside it. The scale used was as follows: 6 = two or more times per week; 5 = once a week; 4 = 2-3 times per month; 3 = once per month; 2 = less than once per month; 1 = never. T-tests were conducted comparing women in each age group with men in that same age group. Table 2 shows that for every age group, women made significantly fewer presentations than their male counterparts, and reported higher levels of CA in making presentations.

Table 2

T-test Comparisons: Frequency of Presenting in Past Year and PRCA Public Speaking Scores by Gender and Age

Age	Women n	Men n	Women Frequency	Men Frequency	T test	Women PS Score	Men PS Score	T test
20s	425	312	3.36	3.57	.002	17.11	15.11	.000
30s	349	399	3.39	3.91	.000	16.47	15.17	.000
40s	281	349	3.20	3.70	.000	16.18	14.26	.000
50s	273	386	3.09	3.52	.000	16.51	14.00	.000
60s+	68	170	2.50	3.12	.040	16.21	13.37	.000
Mean by age			3.11	3.59		16.50	14.38	

**Scale:** 6 = 2 or more times per week; 5 = once per week; 4 = 2-3 times per month; 3 = once per month; 2 = less than once per month; 1 = never. **PS scores:** 6 to 13= low; 14 to 24 = average; 25 to 30 = high; mean for college students = 19.3.

### Audiences

Participants were asked to report whether they had presented to any of the audiences indicated in the previous calendar year. These included three audiences internal to their firm: within their team, group or department; outside their team, group or department; and to their firm’s leadership. External audiences included clients, business partners and vendors; non-profit and community groups; political groups; professional conferences; and government and regulatory bodies. Table 3 shows that while both men and women reported statistically comparable levels of presenting to internal audiences and to

community and non-profit audiences, men reported significantly more presenting to external, visibility-raising audiences, including company leadership, external clients and conferences.

Table 3

Audiences: Percent Reported for the Previous Year

<b>Levels and Audience Types</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Men</b>
At my level	79.13	82.10
Below my level	66.30	72.29
Above my level	78.93	77.76
My company, my group	80.85	82.34
My company, outside my group	65.113	65.40
My company leadership	58.89	65.99
External clients, business partners & vendors	55.80	67.95
Community including nonprofit & religious	23.06	21.22
Conferences	18.81	30.56
Gov't & regulatory bodies	7.00	11.47

### **Useful Activities for Building Skills and Abilities in Presenting**

Participants rated how useful each of thirteen items was for helping them improve their skills and abilities in making presentations. The items were selected to include both directly related activities, like making presentations in and out of work, and indirectly related communication activities, like working with clients, team members and supervisees. A 5-point Likert scale was used, with 1 being very useful to 5 being not at all useful, and 6 as "I don't do this/not applicable." Table 4 shows levels of participation in each activity, percent of participants responding either "very helpful" or "somewhat helpful" for each activity, and rankings by number of "very helpful" votes by those participating in the activity.

The highest levels of participation, in descending order, were 1) working on a team; 2) receiving positive feedback on my presentations; 3) observing effective presenters; 4) giving presentations at work; 5) practicing ahead of time; 6) receiving negative feedback on my presentations; and 7) helping others with their presentations, including giving feedback. These activities were reported by between 98.8% and 96.2% of participants. The activities with lowest levels of participation, in ascending order, were 1) being a parent; 2) being videotaped; 3) making presentations outside of work; 4) taking a class or training; 5) managing others; and 6) working with clients. The first four ranged between 60.1% and 83.1% participation, while the latter two were reported at 90.9% and 91.3% respectively. Thus overall, more participants have had work experience than classroom training (only 83.1% reported having taken a class or training); only 74.7% reported having been videotaped. Finally, only 79.4% reported having made presentations outside of work.

Table 4

## Participation in Activities and Helpfulness Rankings for Improving Presentation Skills

<b>Activities</b>	<b>Reported Participation</b>	<b>% of those participating ranking very or somewhat helpful</b>	<b>Ranking by highest number of very helpful votes</b>
Practicing ahead of time	97.44%	82.25%	1
Observing effective presenters	97.85%	86.61%	2
Giving presentations at work	97.69%	86.46%	3
Receiving positive feedback on my presentations	98.40%	85.25%	4
Working with clients	91.29%	80.91%	5
Working on a team	98.85%	81.17%	6
Receiving negative feedback on my presentations	96.32%	76.22%	7
Helping others with their presentations, including giving feedback	96.25%	80.07%	8
Managing others	90.90%	71.66%	9
Making presentations outside of work	79.44%	69.43%	10
Taking a class or training	83.06%	64.04%	11
Being videotaped	74.70%	50.60%	12
Being a parent	60.09%	53.58%	13
<b>Text and Additional National Sample Answers N = 745</b>			
Teaching, instructing, training	26.31%	73.98%	1
Acting/performing	22.28%	48.19%	2
Coaching a non-work team	22.95%	63.74%	3

In terms of helpfulness for each activity, activities receiving the highest number of “very helpful” or “somewhat helpful” votes were, in descending order, 1) observing effective presenters; 2) giving presentations at work; 3) receiving positive feedback on my presentations; 4) practicing ahead of time; 5) working on a team; 6) working with clients; and 7) helping others with their presentations, including giving feedback. These activities were endorsed as very or somewhat helpful by between 86.6% and 80.1% of participants. The activities receiving the least “very helpful” or “somewhat helpful” votes were, in ascending order, 1) being videotaped; 2) being a parent; 3) taking a class or training; 4) making presentations outside of work; 5) managing others; and 6) receiving negative feedback on my presentations. Here, the first four received between 50.6% and 69.4% positive votes, while the fifth and sixth received 71.7% and 76.2% respectively.

Finally, when assessed solely based on “very helpful” votes, the top six endorsed activities were 1) practicing ahead of time; 2) observing effective speakers; 3) giving presentations at work; 4) receiving positive feedback on my presentations; 5) working with clients; and 6) working on a team.

A second set of analyses were performed to assess correlations between those who reported finding an activity very useful and PSA scores, to determine the extent to which any of the activities listed were correlated with reduced PSA. First, participants were ranked from highest to lowest by their PSA scores. The highest and lowest 476 scores were used to determine patterns from those one or more standard deviations from the norm. Second, in order to assess the effects of frequency of presenting versus non-experience-related factors, participants were further organized from highest to lowest frequency of presenting. Those who reported making presentations at least once per week in the last calendar year but also reporting average or high levels of public speaking apprehension were grouped as “under-performing” relative to their frequency of presenting. Likewise, those who reported making presentations less than once per month (or never) but who also reported average or low levels of public speaking apprehension were grouped as “over-performing” relative to their frequency of presenting.

In terms of activities each group participated in, Table 5 shows results for each group. Compared to all respondents with a mean PSA score of 15.47/30 and presenting about once per month, those with low PSA scores (mean 7.87/30) made presentations slightly more than 2-3 times per month. Close to the average participation on most items, they exceeded averages for working with clients, managing others, and taking a class or training. They far exceeded average (by 6.5%-8.49%) for making presentations outside of work, being videotaped, and being a parent. By contrast, those who had PSA levels that were lower than expected for their frequency of presenting (PSA 15.33/30; presenting less than once per month) resembled the lowest PSA scorers in their levels of presenting outside of work, taking a class or training, and being videotaped. They were less involved than average in observing effective presenters, giving work presentations, and receiving positive feedback, and significantly less involved in receiving negative feedback or helping others with their presentations.

Lower levels of participation (associated with higher average PSA scores) for the under-performer and high PSA cohorts were making presentations outside of work, taking a class or training, being videotaped and being a parent. For the highest PSA cohort (23.5/30; presenting slightly more than once per month), additional deficient participation compared to average emerged in giving work presentations, getting positive feedback, working with clients, receiving negative feedback, helping others with presentations, and managing others. For under performers (17.3/30; presenting more than once per week), participation resembled the low PSA cohort’s pattern in practicing ahead of time, giving work presentations, getting positive feedback, working on a team, getting negative comments, helping others with presentations and managing others. The greatest contrasts with low PSAs were that this under-performing cohort, whose level of PSA is higher than expected for the frequency of presenting, had lower levels of presenting outside of work, taking classes or trainings, being videotaped, and being a parent.

A final analysis was performed to ascertain which activities were most associated with lower PSA scores. Results were tabulated by calculating the percentage of those choosing “very helpful” or “somewhat helpful” out of the total number who participated in that activity.

Table Six compares the results for the same four cohorts with percentages for all participants. For the low PSA cohort, every category had significantly higher levels of very or somewhat helpful votes than average. Strikingly, under-performers did as well, except for being a parent. However, the top-six rated activities had slightly less overlap. Both cohorts rated observing effective presenters, giving work presentations, receiving positive feedback, and working with clients among their top six. But low PSAs also included non-work presentations and helping others with presentations, both to a very substantial extent above average, whereas under-performers included practicing and working on a team instead (also significantly higher than average).

Table 5

## Percent Participating in Activities by Scoring and Frequency Cohorts

Activities	Participation by All	By Low PS Scorers	By Over Performers	By High PS Scorers	By Under Performers
Mean PS Score from PRCA	15.47	7.87	15.33	23.50	17.34
Mean frequency of making presentations	3.45	4.23	1.63	2.56	5.50
Percent participating					
Practicing ahead of time	<b>97.44</b>	<b>97.69*</b>	<b>96.29†</b>	<b>96.22††</b>	<b>98.50**</b>
Observing effective presenters	<b>97.85</b>	<b>99.16**</b>	88.65†††	<b>97.48†</b>	93.62††
Giving presentations at work	<b>97.69</b>	<b>98.95**</b>	<b>94.76††</b>	<b>94.12††</b>	<b>97.64</b>
Receiving positive feedback on my presentations	<b>98.40</b>	<b>99.16*</b>	<b>94.32††</b>	<b>94.12††</b>	<b>99.70**</b>
Working with clients	91.29	96.01**	<b>91.05†</b>	87.60††	93.39**
Working on team	<b>98.85</b>	<b>99.58*</b>	<b>96.29††</b>	<b>97.69††</b>	<b>100.00**</b>
Receiving negative feedback on my presentations	<b>96.32</b>	96.22	88.21†††	<b>89.70†††</b>	<b>97.90**</b>
Helping others with presentations, including giving feedback	96.25	<b>98.32**</b>	84.28†††	<b>91.18†††</b>	<b>98.50**</b>
Managing others	90.90	95.80**	<b>92.14**</b>	87.18††	93.39**
Making presentations outside of work	79.44	86.76***	89.08***	63.23†††	75.68††
Taking a class or training	83.06	87.60**	87.99**	77.31†††	81.68††
Being videotaped	74.70	83.19***	84.93***	61.97†††	72.67††
Being a parent	60.09	66.60***	62.01**	53.99†††	54.65†††

**Key:** \*\*\* =  $\geq$  +5% difference compared to average for all; \*\* = +1-4.99%; \* = < +1%. ††† =  $\geq$  -5% difference compared to average for all; †† = -1-4.99%; † = < +1%. Numbers in bold = top six for column.

Table 6

## Helpfulness Rankings for Improving Presentation Skills

Activities	All	Lowest PSA Scorers	Over Performers	Highest PS Scorers	Under Performers
Mean PS Score from PRCA	15.47	7.87	15.33	23.50	17.34
Mean frequency of making presentations	3.45	4.23	1.63	2.56	5.50
% of those participating ranking very or somewhat helpful					
Observing effective presenters	<b>86.61</b>	<b>92.37***</b>	<b>82.27††</b>	<b>88.15**</b>	<b>93.62***</b>
Giving presentations at work	<b>86.46</b>	<b>96.60***</b>	<b>89.63**</b>	<b>84.82††</b>	<b>95.47***</b>
Receiving positive feedback on my presentations	<b>85.25</b>	<b>91.31***</b>	81.48††	<b>86.83**</b>	<b>90.36***</b>
Practicing ahead of time	<b>82.25</b>	87.96***	<b>88.21***</b>	<b>87.99***</b>	<b>89.02***</b>
Working on team	<b>81.17</b>	87.55***	<b>83.45**</b>	<b>82.77**</b>	<b>87.69***</b>
Working with clients	<b>80.91</b>	<b>93.65***</b>	<b>88.49***</b>	<b>83.69**</b>	<b>89.71***</b>
Helping others with presentations, including giving feedback	80.07	<b>91.24***</b>	66.84†††	76.50††	86.89***
Receiving negative feedback on my presentations	76.22	85.59***	73.51††	72.36††	82.51***
Managing others	71.66	83.11***	80.09***	71.32†	78.13***
Making presentations outside of work	69.43	<b>96.60***</b>	<b>83.33***</b>	60.80†††	74.60***
Taking a class or training	64.04	72.66***	79.16***	68.21**	70.22***
Being a parent	53.58	67.19***	63.73***	56.42**	53.30†
Being videotaped	50.60	66.67***	71.46***	52.54**	57.44***

**Key:** \*\*\* =  $\geq$  +5% difference compared to average for all; \*\* = +1-4.99%; \* = < +1%. ††† =  $\geq$  -5% difference compared to average for all; †† = -1-4.99%; † = < +1%. Numbers in bold = top six for column.

Comparing the two cohorts who present least often, differences are more marked. Both groups affirmed practicing, working on a team, and working with clients more than the average. Both groups were also least likely to affirm the helpfulness of helping others or receiving negative feedback. Over-performers, however, were significantly more likely than average to see value in managing others, presenting

outside of work, taking a class or training, being videotaped, and being a parent compared to both the average and high PSAs. High PSA scorers, while slightly more observing than average, were least likely to find presenting at work or outside of work helpful relative to all other groups and the overall average.

## Discussion

This study of working adults aged 21-65+ explored two research questions: 1) which activities do working professionals report finding most helpful to their development as effective presenters; and 2) which of these activities were most associated with low PSA scores. As predicted by Marcel (in press), the average PSA scores for all participants was significantly below McCroskey's college student mean of 19. Since McCroskey's mean score has been associated in other studies with respondents reporting never having made a presentation in the past calendar year (Marcel, 2016; in press), this suggests that frequency in presenting as well as age and experience may have a bearing on PSA scores. When comparing men and women by age cohorts (by decade), this result was found for each decade: those reporting more frequent presenting on average also report lower PSA. When comparing audiences reported by women and men, the largest differences, with men reporting higher percentages in all cases, in descending order were in 1) presenting to other professionals at conferences; 2) external clients, business partners and vendors; 3) company leadership; 4) those below one's level inside one's organization; and 5) at one's same level in one's organization. That the largest differences came with external audiences is a finding worth noting as we look at specific helpful activities.

For respondents as a whole, the highest levels of participation in queried activities were reported (in descending order) in 1) working on a team; 2) receiving positive feedback on one's presentations; 3) observing effective presenters; 4) giving presentations at work; 5) practicing ahead of time; 6) receiving negative feedback on one's presentations; and 7) helping others with their presentations, including giving feedback. These activities all had participation levels above 96%. These primarily relate to workplace presenting but working on a team was the most prevalent non-presenting activity. Working with clients and managing others were both reported at above 90%.

Regarding non-work activities, 83.1%% reported having taken a class or training while 74.7% had been videotaped while presenting. While 97.7% reported making presentations at work, only 79.4% reported presenting outside of work. The national cohort were asked specifically about their participation in teaching, instructing and training; acting or performing; and coaching a non-work team. These answers were combined with write-in answers from other respondents. While 74% of those who had engaged in teaching activities reported them very or somewhat helpful in developing their presentation skills, acting or performing got only 48% positive votes among those participating. Coaching a non-work team fell in the middle of these, with 64% finding it helpful. By number of most helpful votes, however, teaching came first, followed by acting and then coaching. All these activities were reported by 22-26% of participants. Overall this suggests that working professionals are engaged in a wide variety of activities both at work and outside it where they are making presentations, and to a wide range of audiences.

Ranked by the highest number of "most helpful" votes by those participating, the top seven activities rated most helpful in developing their skills as effective presenters were 1) practicing ahead of time; 2) observing effective presenters; 3) giving presentations at work; 4) receiving positive feedback on one's presentations; 5) working with clients; 6) working on a team; and 7) receiving negative feedback on one's presentations.

These suggest several interesting insights. First, most participants have internalized the value of practicing, observing good speakers, and receiving both positive and negative feedback as means of improving one's own presentations. These are valuable ideas that can certainly be conveyed back to students in our classrooms. Experience has indeed born out these basic nostrums, which nevertheless may be hard for undergraduates especially to appreciate or engage in. Second, participants report, in effect, that context-specific presenting—that is, at work, to work colleagues—has been highly valuable in helping them to improve their presentation skills. This suggests that specific contexts and situations, rather than generalized training, are viewed as most relevant and helpful. Third, both working with clients and on teams is perceived to be of value in helping improve one's presenting skills. We could speculate that developing an understanding of one's audiences and improving one's interpersonal skills are viewed as part of being an effective presenter. Thus, not all improvement will come simply from working on messages or practicing, valuable as those elements are.

Trying to ascertain which of these activities was affirmed as helpful by both the least and most apprehensive speakers, we also had the opportunity to determine which activities were associated most often with either low or high PSA scores. First, we looked at participation levels. The lowest and highest PSA scorers (one or more standard deviations from the mean,  $n = 476$  each for high and low PSA) differed markedly in the activities in which they engaged. Although both groups practice, observe good speakers and work in teams at very similar levels, on every other measure they differed significantly. Differences in working with clients and managing others were in the 8% range, while measures of non-work presenting, taking a class or training and being videotaped were in the 10-23% range. Thus, not only do high PSA scorers present less often (barely once per month versus 2-3 times per month) and have far higher PSA scores (23.5/30 vs 7.87/30), they are less involved in classroom learning (including videotaping) and outside presenting. These differences represent opportunities for such individuals to improve their confidence in presenting by pursuing these activities.

In trying to tease apart the effects of personal characteristics and frequency in presenting, I also analyzed cohorts whose PSA scores were either higher or lower than what would be expected for their level of presenting frequency. Those with low frequency (less than once per month) but average or low PSA (mean: 15.33;  $n = 458$ ) were found to engage in less observing, receive negative feedback least often of all cohorts, and were least frequently helping others with their presentations. They were, however, like low PSAs, far more engaged in outside presenting and being videotaped than others, and somewhat more likely to have taken a class or training. Additional analysis shows that 60.7% of over-performers are aged 40+, while only 50.7% of the study population is of that age. This suggests that the element of *accumulated* experience may be a factor in keeping PSA in check, even when recent levels of presenting have fallen.

Among those with high frequency (presenting at least once per week) but still registering high or average levels of PSA (17.34/30;  $n = 333$ ), we should note that their average scores are still significantly below McCroskey's mean PSA score of 19.3 ( $t = -12.18$ ). Like high PSAs, they participate significantly less in presenting outside of work, taking a class or training, or being videotaped, though not as significantly as high PSAs. Age-wise, 61% of under-performers are 20-39 years old, while comprising only 49.3% of the study population. This again suggests that, despite a high level of presenting, accumulated age and experience presenting have not yet fully consolidated into expected reductions in PSA.

Overall, then, a picture emerges. Those activities which are viewed as most helpful in developing skills as an effective speaker are somewhat distinct from those which are most strongly associated with lower levels of PSA. While the top seven noted above help improve one's capacities as a presenter, three

things appear to be most helpful in reducing PSA: presenting outside of work; taking a class or training; and being videotaped. Thus paradoxically, those who have the highest levels of PSA are precisely those adults who may benefit the most from expanding their presenting practice to non-work settings, taking classes and trainings, and seeing themselves on video.

### Limitations

This study did not utilize any measures of personality traits or other means to specifically compare with the effects of age and experience on PSA. Thus, it may have over-stated these effects. Although 9.2% of the study population was drawn from a national population, the remaining respondents all earned at least one business degree at the same northeastern university. Thus, the experiences of this study population may be more homogeneous than the national US population.

### Conclusion

Becoming an effective presenter is an important element in career advancement and requires development beyond what undergraduate education alone can achieve. Forecasting to students, both graduate and undergraduate, the highly effective activities that will aid them as they continue to build this important skill will serve them well in their careers. Integrating the highly useful activities identified into individual career advice, and into programming and educational recommendations made to working adults, may more efficiently improve their presentation skill sets. Finally, engaging in the three activities most strongly associated with lower PSA scores—presenting outside of work, taking a class, and being videotaped-- may also help to reduce PSA. Thus, we can affirm both the value of experience and of instruction in enhancing and building this invaluable lifelong skill.

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