

Listening in the Agriculture Workforce

Laura Hasselquist
Dr. Tracy Kitchel

University of Missouri

Introduction

- **Studies have identified technical and soft skills need for employment** (Bruening & Scanlon, 1995; Crawford et al., 2010; Leggette et al., 2011; Robertson et al., 2007; Williams et al., 2014)
- **Employers highly value speaking and listening** (Bruening & Scanlon, 1995; Crawford et al., 2010; Svacina & Barkely, 2010)
- **Listening was either the most important or very important skill from the employers' perspective** (Bruening & Scanlon, 1995; Crawford et al., 2010; Svacina & Barkely, 2010)
- **However, listening has been identified as the skill in most need of improvement** (Bruening & Scanlon, 1995; Robinson et al., 2007; Svacina & Barkely, 2010)
- **A current disconnect exists between perception of employees and employers** (Bruening & Scanlon, 1995; Robinson et al., 2007; Svacina & Barkely, 2010)

Contextual Framework

- Listening is a complex process and frameworks where utilized to help us contextualize the process:
 - Communication
 - Information Processing
 - Adult Learning Theory

Contextual Framework Continued

- Communication is dependent upon three factors (Levi, 2014):
 - The Sender
 - The Receiver
 - The Message

Contextual Framework Continued

- Information Processing consists of three components (Newell et al., 1958):
 - Sensory information
 - Short-term memory
 - Long-term memory
- Major Assumptions of information processing (Moors & Scherer, 2013):
 - Active participants in the learning process
 - Highly selective about what they learn
 - Impose own meaning on their experience

Contextual Framework Continued

- **Adult Learning Theory** (Knowles, 1980)
 - Tacit learning from the world around them (Kenner & Weirnerman, 2011)
 - Prefer practical and relevant information (Leib & Goodlad, 2005)
 - Willingness to Learn (Birkenholz, 1999)

Purpose & Objectives

- The purpose of this grounded theory was to describe the traits of listening in the agricultural workforce as perceived by managers
- Central Question: How does listening play a role in the agricultural workplace?

Methods

- Career Services Office in CAFNR identified potential participants
- Purposive sampling was used to create maximum variation regarding: number of employees supervised, field of employment, field of employment, and length in managerial field
- Semi-structured face-to-face interviews took place, were recorded and transcribed
- Data saturation began to appear at five interviews and was complete after seven

Methods

- Open, axial, and selective coding to develop categories and themes
- Constant comparative analysis and memoing used throughout process
- Trustworthiness ensured via member checking, data saturation, rich thick descriptions collection, and an audit trail

Findings

- Five themes emerged based on information provided by the participants:
 - Listening and the direct impact on business
 - Active listening and associated behaviors
 - Coaching and mentoring
 - Barriers to listening
 - Technology and Listening

Findings – Theme 1

- Good listening is important to the company, the manager, and the customer
 - *“Listening is the that percentage that separate you from an average performer to a top performer. It’s the icing on the cake that makes your efforts that much more productive.” -Matt*

Findings – Theme 1 continued

Efficiency & Safety

- *“ To get [work] done they have to follow instructions and be independent. [Be]cause otherwise they’re just asking questions constantly” –Chloe*
- *“When you get someone who pays attention, follows through on things, that person makes themselves so much better they stand out in a good way. . . Now all the sudden [I am] going, wow my day is more efficient because I made one this visit and the issue is taken care of, I am not talking about it three more times.” – Phil*
- *“[Listening] prevents problems. With the pesticides and integrated pest management, pesticide applications first and foremost in safety. . .if they do something incorrectly, there is a potential for injury on the job.” -Megan*

Findings – Theme 1 continued

Responsive Behaviors

- *“You have to satisfy your customer’s wants and needs and you are never going to know if you don’t listen. Good listening prevents problems down the road.” – C.J.*
- *“The really good customer service reps, you ask them ‘hey, who is your favorite?’ . . . Well its this person because I tell them and they take care of it.” – Phil*

Findings – Theme 2

- Listening has a clear set of behaviors managers expect to see
 - Attitude
 - *“They have to be willing to listen, willing to learn something, otherwise it is a waste of time” – Paul*
 - Traditional Nonverbal Cues

Findings Theme 2 continued

Taking Notes

- *“They may open up their iPad, but I think writing notes on a legal pad shows them you are keeping tack”* – Matt
- *“I take a lot of notes; I will even ask permission to take notes.”* – Phil
- *“I’m a list maker. If have certain jobs I want them to get done, I will write them down and then go over it with them.”* -Megan

Findings – Theme 2 continued

Clarifying Questions

- *“A good listening talks less and asks more questions”* – C.J.
- *“[Questions] show action on your part”* – Matt
- *“The most important thing to me is when they ask questions. It just proves they have heard what I said and yet they still have the interest to learn more, to clarify things.”* –Megan
- *“If you don’t know, please aske the follow up questions, it will prevent wasted time.”* – Chloe

Findings – Theme 2 continued

Non Listening Behaviors

- *“You can tell if someone starts losing eye contact with you, they are looking around the room, they’re tapping their foot, looking at their watch. They’re obviously not listening, they have other things on their mind . . . If they are checking their phone or laptop you might as well just end the meeting.” – C.J.*
- *“Being on your phone when I am talking shows me you don’t care what I am saying. That is a problem.” – Matt*

Findings – Theme 3

- Coaching & Mentoring can help improve listening
 - *“Maybe we leave the meeting and I [will] ask about ‘remember in the meeting you asked this, what did the customer say?’ . . . I want to hear it their perspective. . . . [my goal is to] make them think about it afterwards” – C.J.*
 - Peer to peer communication was another strategy
 - *“I think they just tend to listen to each other better.” - Chloe*

Findings- Theme 4

- Barriers to Listening

- Cognitive ability

- *“We explained to her [many times] and it happened over and over and over. I just think she could not cognitively grasp it.” - Chloe*

- Lack of buy-in

- *“If it is something I don’t agree with . . . I’m like there is no way I’d [do it], I will block it out.” – Phil*

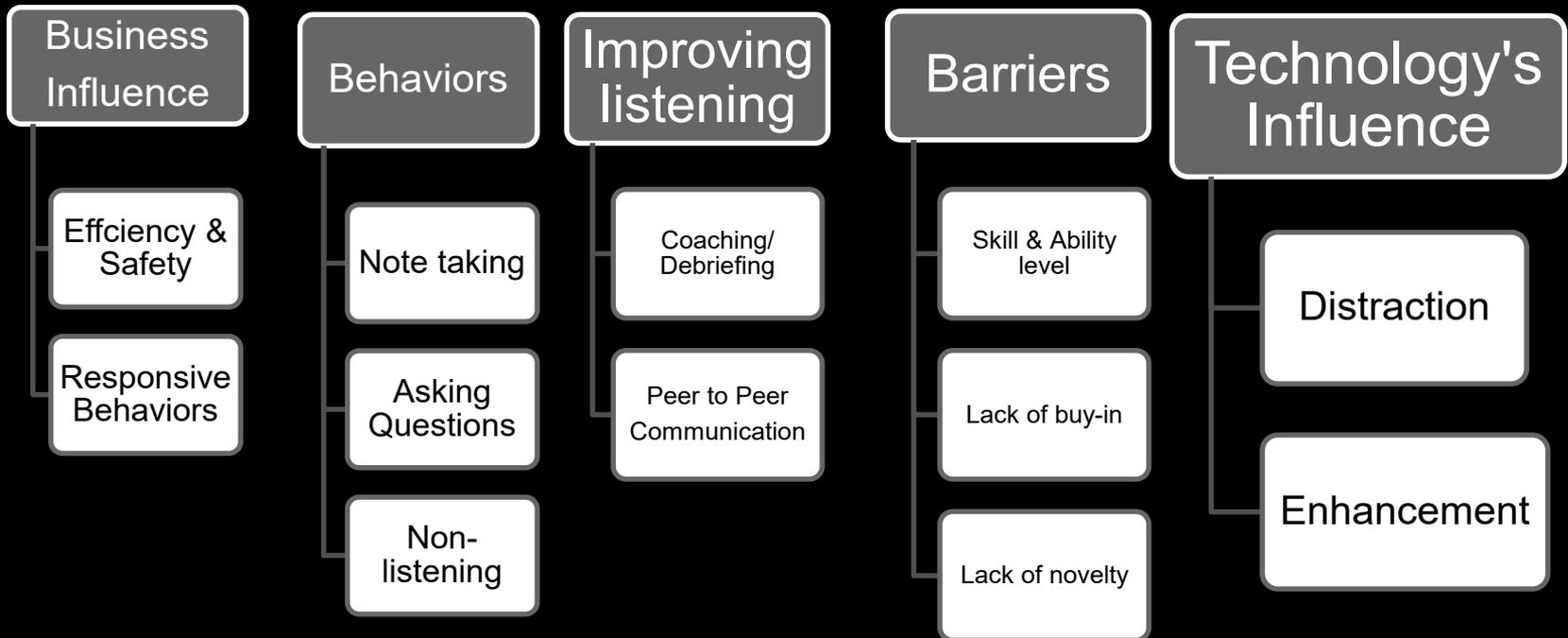
- Lack of novelty of the information

- *“I don’t need to learn this again because I am familiar with it.” – Paul*

Findings – Theme 5

- Technology and Listening
 - Challenges
 - “Technology is enhancing rudeness” – Matt
 - Future Opportunities
 - Current electronic communications are “a lot of one way conversations” – Matt
 - “[the specialist’s] nonverbal cues the customer sees go a long ways. . . It’s a lot better than just a phone call.” –C.J.

Discussion



Discussion

- Listening plays a direct role in business. Employees who listen and are responsive to customers have a positive impact on business (Ramsey & Sohi, 1997)
- Participants expect to see traditional nonverbal cues associated with listening, notetaking for better memory retention (Annis & Davis, 1975; Fisher & Harris, 1973), and asking clarifying questions (Singer & Dolan, 1982) to reassure the sender the message has been cognitively processed

Discussion

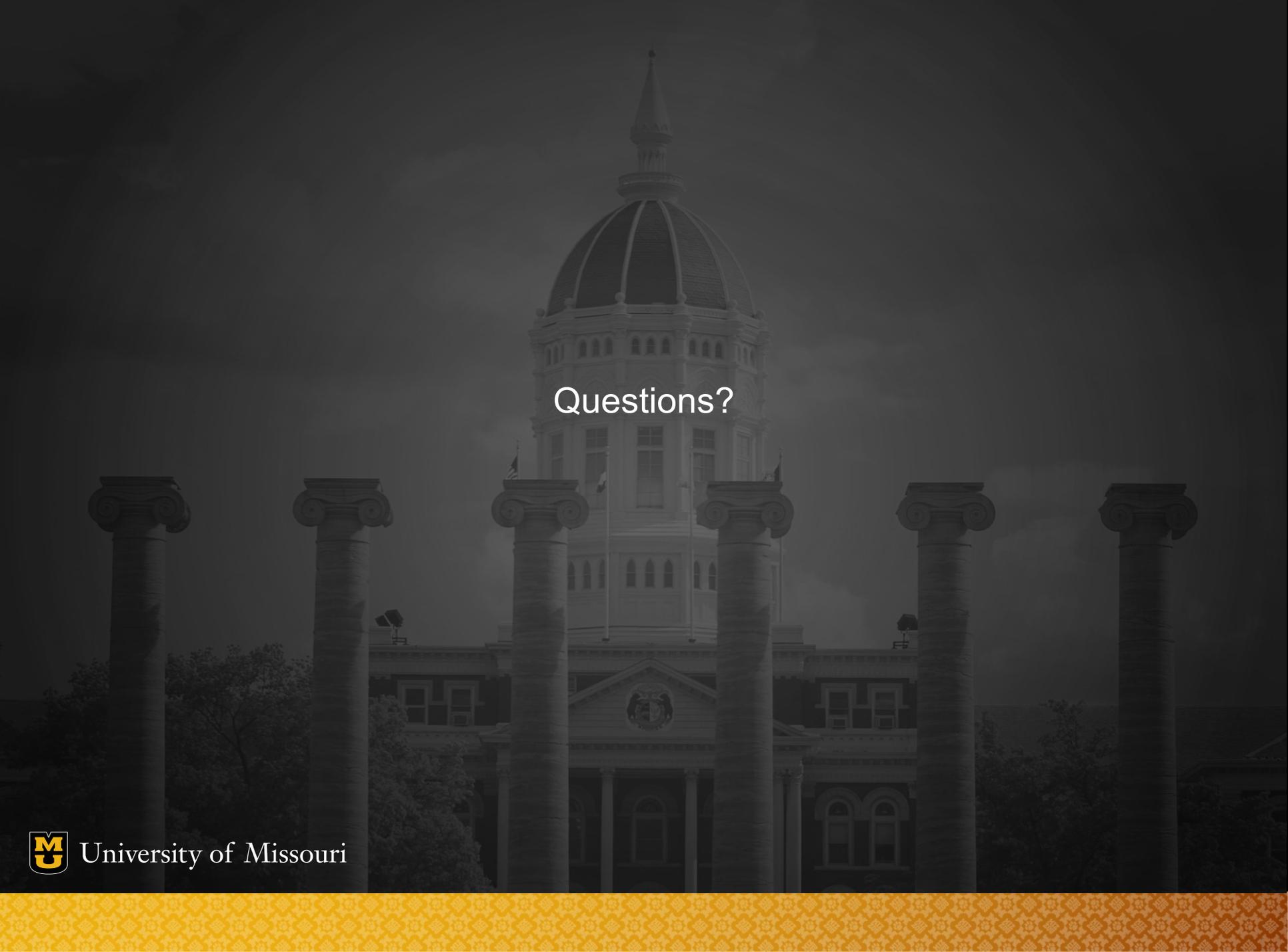
- Managers provide mentoring or coaching for employees to improve their behaviors and skills (Kram, 1988)
- Barriers to listening do exist including: cognitive ability (Levi, 2014), attitude/mood (Forgas & Koch, 2013), perceived lack of relevancy (Leib & Goodland, 2005)
- While technology can be frustrating, it has the potential to enhance the way we communicate with one another
- Several themes focused on failure to encode information into long term memory (Newell et al., 1985)

Recommendations for Practice

- Make new employees aware of the positive influences listening has on the business
- Students/new employees should be made aware of nonverbal cues employers expect to see. Particular influence should be placed on the importance of taking notes and asking clarifying questions
- Managers should be made aware of the benefits of coaching and mentoring of new employees to develop their listening skills
- Information should be conveyed in a simple and straightforward manner to ensure it is cognitively accessible to the receiver

Research Recommendations

- Identify why encoding information into long term memory is a commonly missed step and ways to overcome it
- How have individuals become better listeners over time?
- How does the concept of novelty influence employee attitudes and behaviors?
- What is the financial cost associated with a lack of listening?

A grayscale photograph of the University of Missouri building, featuring a prominent central dome and a portico supported by six large columns. The image is dimly lit, with the text 'Questions?' overlaid in the center.

Questions?