

Face-to-face Versus Computer-mediated Communication: Exploring Employees' Preference of Effective Employee Communication Channel

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Abstract

New communication technologies have changed the communication media use in organisations. It is important to examine the impact of technology in the workplace and how it affects the communication with the employees whether the technology has replaced the traditional medium of communication, which is face-to-face. This paper is an examination of the communication channels use in employee communication of five Malaysian organisations. The objectives of this study were to explore employee perspectives on the various communication channels use in the organisations and to compare the use of face-to-face and computer-mediated communication for employee communication activities. Fifteen in-depth interviews were carried out with communications staff in five organisations in Malaysia by using a non-random sampling. The participants claimed that computer-mediated communication is the most frequently used channel for employee communication in their organisations; face-to-face communication is perceived to be effective for relationship building with managers and dissemination of work-related information to colleagues; and majority of the participants perceived that face-to-face communication is a more effective employee communication channel compared to computer-mediated communication.

Keywords: Face-to-face communication, Computer-mediated communication, Employee communication tool

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Employee communication has become one of the most important contributors to organisational effectiveness (Grunig, 1992) by creating a link between the organisation and the employees through various communication media such as interpersonal and small group communication, traditional print communication, electronic communication, and online communication. Communication is important to keep employees well-informed about an organisation's business vision and strategy as well as to help every individual in the organisation to working together with a common purpose. Holtzhausen (2002) asserted that employee communication is very crucial for organisations.

In recent years, technological innovations and Internet has radically emerged and been introduced in many workplaces. Technological change is one major aspect which has influenced the communication approaches in the organisations, especially the practice of new communication technology in employee communication. Many scholarly discourses have shown that organisations have made a significant shift towards technological adoption in their communication practices (Sproull and Kiesler, 1991; Steinfield, 1992; Davenport & Prusak, 1997; Jonassen & Kwon, 2001; and Arnesen & Weis, 2007). Nonetheless, computer-mediated communication is yet to replace face-to-face communication as effective communication channel (Barkhi, Jacob & Pirkul, 1999; Begley, 2004; van der Meijden & Veenman, 2005; SCM, 2008).

In this era of information and communication technologies (ICT), computer-mediated communication is a basic infrastructure that every organisations need to be equipped with. With the adoption of communication software, it helps the flow of communication among the organisation and its employees and their clients alike. The usage of computer-mediated communication has significantly changed the way organisations and their employees communicate with each other. "The major developments in technology have found communication being mediated in a number of revolutionary new ways...communication was transformed in some way by enabling mass publication and far greater speed and distance" (Thurlow, Lengel & Tomic, 2004, p.26). Miller (2009) claimed that the range of technologies introduced to the workplace in recent years has impact on communication in organisations.

Prior studies on computer-mediated communication have been conducted by researchers on the usage of computer-mediated communication, its challenges, problems and effectiveness (Provenzo, 1986; December, 1996; Nohria & Eccles, 1998; An and Frick, 2006; Heisler & Crabill, 2006; Adams & Galanes, 2009). Besides, the use of face-to-face communication is also been studied (Barkhi, Jacob & Pirkul, 1999; Begley, 2004; van der Meijden & Veenman, 2005; SCM, 2008, 2009).

Yet, most of the researches on the use of computer-mediated and face-to-face communication in the workplace focus in the West countries such as United States of America, little is known about the communication channels use in Malaysian organisations. In addition, the literature of comparing the use of face-to-face and computer-mediated communication is largely centres on students' perception and in education context. Thus, this present study could shed insight as how computer-mediated and face-to-face communication is used in workplace communication.

Looking at the availability of various communication media choices in the workplace, it raises the question on how Malaysian employees perceive the effective employee communication channel by comparing face-to-face and computer-mediated communication. The participants in this study are employees from the communications or public relations department. Communicationw employees play an extremely significant role in directing organisation's internal and employee communications (Wright, 1995) and they spend most of their time performing communication activities in the organisation. With this in mind, the participants are able to provide a better insight on the best employee communication medium.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Employee Communication

“Organisations are increasingly recognising the value of building with employees long-term relationships based on mutual satisfaction” (Shockley-Zalabak, 2009, p. 346). Grunig, Grunig and Dozier (2002, p. 487) stated that “employees are most satisfied with information that helps them make sense of their situation by explaining how their jobs fit into the organisational mission, the organisation’s policies and plans, and the relationships with key constituencies in the organisation’s environment”. Smidts, Pruyn and van Riel (2001) in their research found that effective employee communication strengthen employees’ identification with their organisations and contribute to organisation’s financial performance and sustained success. Other outcomes of effective employee communication includes facilitate engagement and building trust among the employees (Grates, 2006), enhance business performance to influence customer behaviour and directly affects revenue growth and profitability (Towers, 2003).

Thus, it is essential for organisations to recognise the importance of employee communication and the appropriate use of communication channels in employee communication. The choice of communication media use in employee communication is important. Organisations can choose to communicate either face-to-face or through various forms of mediated communications. The selection of communication tools are based on how effective they are in achieving the bottom-line of the business goal and how they fit in a strategic internal communication process (Kalla, 2005).

Computer, interactive video and other information technologies are very useful in informing the employees about important internal messages as well as gathering their new ideas (Wright, 1995). With the adoption of new communication technologies in employee communication, it has increased the overall level of the organisational communication (Miller, 2009). The electronic communication technologies media use in workplace includes telephone, fax, video-conferencing and internet facilities such as email, intranet and social media. Besides electronic technologies, face-to-face communication is also used in employee communication. Face-to-face communication can be started with formal and informal one-to-one meeting which include eye contact, facial expression, body movement and the tone of message that show the importance of the message. The way to interpret the message will also change based on the differences of the expressions.

2.2 Face-to-face communication

Face-to-face communication is a conversation that one has while being face to face with the other party. This type of communication enables a person to hear and see the non-verbal communication conveyed by the sender and respond with feedback straightaway. Face-to-face discussion also facilitates immediate feedback, contains visual and audio cues, act as a personal source and uses natural body languages. Begley (2004) claimed that face-to-face remains the most powerful human interaction, never replace intimacy and immediacy of people conversing in the same room.

An and Frick’s (2006) research reported that face-to-face communication is faster, easier and more convenient than computer-mediated communication in the educational context. Face-to-face communication represents a high social presence i.e. a quality of a medium to convey

the presence of a sender (Kaushik, David, Kline & Oaks, 2000). Besides, Barkhi, Jacob and Pirkul (1999) claimed that face-to-face communication is an efficient method of communicating in organisations as face-to-face manner resulted in better overall performance. It uses verbal communication, enriched by facial cues to convey information and relay quick feedback to other parties (Barkhi, Jacob & Pirkul, 1999). An and Frick (2006) further claimed that face-to-face communication is best use for communicating ambiguous tasks, making decision and completing complex tasks. Lastly, Van der Meijden and Veenman (2005) in their study reveals that students were more satisfied with using face-to-face communication as compare to computer-mediated communication in a primary school setting.

Tom Crawford, the head of employee engagement at Deloitte, stated that face-to-face communication is still the most effective and compelling provided it's delivered with honesty, clarity and in a time-relevant fashion (SCM, 2008). Angela Sinickas, the president of Sinickas Communications, Inc., further advised not to let face-to-face be eclipsed by technology (SCM, 2009). She claimed that *"all the online communication has not made employees any better informed than they used to be in the days before we started speeding along the information superhighway, though they're getting that information faster and more accurately... not letting two way face-to-face communication get left behind in the dust"* (SCM, 2009, p. 11).

2.3 Computer-mediated communication

The history of computer-mediated communication (CMC) is more than fifty years old and since the mid-1990s, the fast-growing popularity and ubiquity of personal computers has caused CMC to become very attractive to scholarly attention (Thurlow, Lengel & Tomic, 2004). CMC is a form of human communication using computer and internet network and this Internet-based communication takes place on global collection of networks that uses the Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol (TCP/IP) suite for data exchange (December, 1996). It is a type of communication which allows people to combine numerous media in a single message when conversing. CMC is an interactive channel which allows users to be active and engage in a two-way communication, herein, it is an inexpensive way of information seeking for increasing efficiency and productivity (Miller, 2009).

The mediated nature of computer-mediated communication allows greater manipulation and more careful construction of personal information; the delayed nature gives participants the opportunity to review, revise or cancel their communications before the information are sent (Heisler & Crabill, 2006). Steinfield's (1992) study revealed that employees use computer-mediated communication to organise social activities with their peers, play games and engage in entertaining conversation with other internal employees. Jonanssen and Kwon (2001) found that computer-mediated communication appears to support problem solving by eliciting more focused, on-task and purposive communication.

Besides, computer-mediated communication is a form of asynchronous communication which has the advantages of eliminating problems created by barriers of time and space; cost-effective; fairly easy to use; as well as the potential of being more personal and customizable (Provenzo, 1986). According to Sproull and Kiesler (1991), computer-mediated communication has democratized the workplace as it reduces information gaps by providing a tool for peripheral employee to be connected to all people within the organisation. The computer-mediated communication technologies include computer conferencing, e-mail, online chat, database utilities, multimedia and Web-based environments. These technologies

are used for strategic planning, assessment, product evaluation and project coordination (Adams & Galanes, 2009) as well as for people to easily communicate directly with one another across time and space (Nohria & Eccles, 1998).

2.4 Research Questions

The two research questions guiding this study are:

RQ1: What are the media use to communicate with the employees in the workplace?

RQ2: Comparing face-to-face and computer-mediated communication, which medium preferred by employees as effective employee communication channel in Malaysian organisations?

3.0 METHODOLOGY

Qualitative interviewing was the methodology used in this study with the attempt of comparing face-to-face and computer-mediated communication as an effective employee communication channel in five Malaysian organisations. Though qualitative interview uses a smaller non-random sample, it provides a wealth of detail which increases a researcher's depth of understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006).

3.1 Data Collection and Data Analysis

This study used non-random sample, namely an available sample. An available sample "is a collection of readily accessible subjects for study" (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006, p.90). Even though a non-random sample would not provide an accurate cross-section sample of likely target audiences, the available sample "can be helpful in collecting exploratory information and may produce useful data...in pretesting questionnaires or other preliminary or pilot study work" (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006, p.90-91) which was effective to provide insights on how Malaysian communications employees perceived an effective employee communication channel.

The selected organisations are from the services industry with medium and small in size. Two organisations were public relations and advertising agencies, a local bank, a food and beverage Company and a property agency. In total, fifteen in-depth interviews were carried out with the communications staff of five Malaysian organisations. The interviews were conducted at the participants' offices with an average duration of 30 to 45 minutes per session. All conversations during the interview were recorded using a radio cassette recorder and later transcribed for analysis.

The participants were asked for their use of face-to-face and computer-mediated communication in the workplace and which medium best use as effective employee communication tool in their organisation. Six open-ended questions were asked which include the types of communication channel use in the workplace, purposes of usage and the frequently use channel, comparing the use of face-to-face with computer-mediated communication by discussing its advantages and disadvantages, the employees' preferred channel of communication in the workplace and finally which medium is best use as effective employee communication tool.

The data from the interviews were analysed following Miles and Huberman's (1994) data analysis approach (cited in Creswell, 2007) in which the researcher manually summarise the raw data into coding and themes; make comparisons among the interviewees' responses and finally interpret the displayed data as according to the research questions set in this study.

4.0 RESULTS

4.1 Participants' Demographic Profiles

The participants are currently working in the public relations or communications department of services industry in the Klang Valley. There were seven males and eight females aged 24 to 35 years old. All participants have a bachelor degree in communications or mass communication with two to ten years of working experience.

4.2 The Communication Channels Use in the Workplace

The first research question addressed the media use for employee communication in the workplace for transmission of work-related information, communication between managers and subordinates and among colleagues. From the interviews, the frequently used channels for communication in the workplace are summarized as follow (in descending order): computer-mediated communication, face-to-face communication, electronic media and print media.

The interviewees claimed that their organisations mostly use computer-mediated communication for disseminating work-related information to employees who are working in different area and time zone; receiving updated information from the management; and as reminders or black and white proof of communication. The frequently used computer-mediated communications are e-mail, instant messaging, intranet, and corporate website. One of the participants stated that *"my manager normally sends us information and instruction through email because it is more convenient and easy"*, while other participants said: *"I used to email my fellow colleagues as well as my manager as a reminder for any up-coming activities and as proof of communication"*; and *"due to locality and different working time zone, CMC is more frequently use"*.

Face-to-face communication, on the other hand, is used for communicating sensitive issues; building interpersonal relationships between employees and managers; and for project collaboration. The participants said: *"If it is a crisis or something sensitive which requires urgent attention, face-to-face communication will be preferred"*; *"face-to-face is a necessity to avoid any misunderstanding"*; and *"for project co-ordination, face-to-face will be more effective because it is rich in content and it save time when I need to receive feedback from the participants"*.

Other employee communication channels used in the organisations include electronic media such as telephone and mobile phone as well as print media such as newsletter, memorandum and notice, and written letter. Electronic media is used for giving verbal instructions to employees off-site; and for employees to communicate urgent matters with their managers. Some of the comments by the interviewees include: *"I will use the mobile phone when there is an emergency"*; *"telephone is used for communication with colleagues who are not*

available physically"; and *"but if we are far apart, telephone is the best way to communicate"*.

The traditional print media on the other hand, is used for announcing human resources-related matters such as warnings and promotions, awards and activities; and as reminder and proof of communication after face-to-face interactions. The interviewees claimed that *"my head of department will use memo to disseminate work-related information and letter is used for human resources matter such as promotion"*; *"the traditional media such as memo is used as a reminder for us to complete our task on time"*; and *"we use letter when issuing warning letter or to demote a staff"*.

4.3 Employees' Preferred Medium of Effective Employee Communication Channel

The second research question addressed the issue of the effective employee communication channel as preferred by communications staff of five Malaysian organisations. During the interviews, the employees discussed the advantages and disadvantages of using face-to-face and computer-mediated communication in the workplace.

In summary, nine out of fifteen interviewees claimed that face-to-face communication is the best medium for effective employee communication. Three interviewees however, agreed that computer-mediated communication is an effective employee communication channel, and the remaining three interviewees recommended a combination of both face-to-face and computer-mediated communications should be used for better effect.

Majority of the interviewees perceived that face-to-face interactions are best used for employees to build interpersonal relationships with their managers and also for managers to transmit work instructions and daily operations to their employees. One of the interviewees described: *"I think face-to-face communication can bridge the gap between the managers and the employees"*. Another interviewee claimed that *"face-to-face communication is quicker, more accurate and able to give immediate response when transmitting information to employees besides for employees to better understand the manager's instructions"*.

Other comments include: *"face-to-face is best use for understanding supervisor's instructions compared to email"*; *"face-to-face is quick and more accurate in transmitting information"*; and *"traditional face-to-face meeting provides me clearer picture of my task and strengthening my relationship with my boss"*.

Based on the findings of the interviews, the advantages of using face-to-face communication were instant feedback; rich of non-verbal cues such as gestures, eye contact and tone of voice; personal focus; easier to solve problems; bridging the gap between the managers and the employees; and able to reduce misunderstanding or misinterpretation during communication. However, the disadvantages of face-to-face communication, as according to the interviewees were increasing decision time for solving problems; the unavailability of subjects; and lack of time for consideration when making decision or communicating with the employees.

Finally, three interviewees claimed that computer-mediated communication had a number of advantages over face-to-face communication such as speed of interaction; communicating in remote area or in different time zone; provides black and white reference or as reminders after face-to-face interactions; and to deliver routine information to vast employees such as work instructions and job function. On the other hand, the disadvantages of computer-

mediated communication were insufficient infrastructure of the new media in the organisation; difficulty of access in some organisations; and lack of non-verbal cues especially facial expression and tone of voice.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The results of this study provide an interesting insight that the most frequently used channel may not be the participants' preference of effective employee communication channel. The participants claimed that computer-mediated communication is the most frequently used channel for employee communication in their organisations while face-to-face communication is perceived to be effective for relationship building with managers and dissemination of work-related information to employees. Finally, the interviewees perceived that face-to-face communication is a more effective employee communication channel compared with computer-mediated communication.

Despite the proliferation use of technology in organisations, communications employees still preferred face-to-face communication and perceived it as an effective employee communication channel. When the interviewees were asked on the preferred channel for employee communication, majority of them quoted face-to-face communication because of its advantages of direct feedback, two-way communication, multiple information cues and good for relationship building and project collaboration. This study has shown that even though CMC has been pervasively used in the workplace as a communication channel, yet traditional media such as face-to-face interaction still plays an important role in workplace communication.

This highlights the need for a better understanding of the role communication technology plays in employee communication. The management needs to use appropriate communication media when communicating with the employees or to communicate work-related information throughout the organisation.

5.1 Limitations and Recommendations

This is a study on five service-oriented organisations in the Klang Valley, thus, it is limited in its generalizability to other types of organisations in Malaysia. Nevertheless, the findings from this study could help shed insights into the employees' preference of the use of new communication technologies in the workplace as compare to the traditional communication media. Therefore, similar studies could be conducted with the rank-and-file employees of various types of organisations in Malaysia.

Another limitation relates to the methodology use in this study. The use of only one method with a non-random sample may significantly bias the results of the study which may lead to inaccurate estimates of the populations from which the sample was drawn. However, this study served as a pilot study for future research. Consequently a mix approach of methodology with a random sample can be recommended for better validity of the results.

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