INVESTIGATING ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION AT A CIVIL ENGINEERING WORKPLACE

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ABSTRACT

Organizational communication is the set of communication dynamics found within an organization. It is considered the unique approach of an organization when it comes to communicating internally and externally. This study focuses on civil engineers who are a part of a civil engineering institution and how their organizational communication works. For the research design, the descriptive qualitative design was employed. Data was gathered through an interview lasting ten to fifteen minutes. Thematic analysis was used to process the qualitative information gathered by the researchers. The researchers observed that their communication within their organization is direct. They faced several challenges regarding culture, generational gap, and conversing with foreign workers. Hence, adapting to new cultures and norms brought by the changing times may help in facilitating clearer communication within their organization.

Keywords – organizational communication, civil engineering workplace.

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication is a process that people undergo in their daily lives. It is an important factor for many professions (Wortwein et al., 2015). Within an organization, there exists something known as 'organizational communication'. It is defined as the process of making collective systems involving unique practices to better achieve organizational goals (Mumby, 2013). It is a collection of unique practices, methods of communication, and a set of cultures within the said organization. It could be said that organizational communication, as a whole, affects many factors underneath it—thus making it a complex web of concepts anchored around organization and communication.

This study was conducted at a civil engineering institution in Bulacan, Philippines. This organization has been chosen as it fits with the criteria found within this study. It has years-long experience as a civil engineering firm, taking on numerous projects from its establishment. They would be able to provide a variety of rich experiences that would be helpful for this study. These experiences were acquired through an interview as well as the observation of the researchers.

The researchers' primary objective in this study is to identify the experiences of the chosen interview participants. Furthermore, the connection between organizational culture as well as its other sub-factors will be explored through these acquired data. The said data would be acquired through a set of semi-open interviews with follow-up questions. The findings of this research will state their experiences with communication dynamics within their organization. Related literatures were used throughout the paper to define terms, compare results, and support findings.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aims to determine the experiences of civil engineers within their organization. The participants are civil engineers who are currently based in the Philippines.

This paper aims to evaluate the following questions:

1. What are the experienced communication dynamics of civil engineers within their organization?

1.1. What are the unique communication cultures within the organization?

1.2. What is the communication process used by the civil engineers within their organization?

1.3. What are the communication models used within their organization?

1.4. What are the communication practices used by civil engineers in certain instances?

1.5. What are the problems faced by the engineers in terms of communication?

3. THE REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Organizational Communication

Organizational communication is classified as the various mix of communication approaches, theories, and methodologies applied in an organizational setting (Jones et al., 2004). It is a complex whole connected to the concept of the organization itself—something as broad as the concept of communication itself. Moreover, Iedema and Wodak (1999) stated that communication continuously circulates within an organization. Several acts of communication were then consequently created as a result of it. Interestingly, despite the highly differing social systems that exist in an organization, they are pushed to change as they adapt due to the economic pressure, in turn affecting their organizational communication as a whole to change as well (Scott, 1997; Taylor et al., 2001). Thus, it could be said that organizational communication is the communication dynamics that occur within an organizational and workplace setting.

Organizational Culture

Organizational culture is defined as the collective set of beliefs, values, behaviors, customs, and traditions shared within a specific group—an organization—as it resolves the problems regarding internal integration and external adaptation the new members might face, and as such, it is considered as the proper way to act (Schein, 2010). He also stated that these cultures might be tacit or confusing for some people. Still, organizational cultures are crucial to the performance of the said group as it could positively impact them in achieving their set goals (Eisenberg and Riley, 2001).

In relation to one another, organizational culture is developed by means of communication as well as interaction, making it so that different cultures from the group of staff influence the communication within that organization (Somacescu, 2016). In turn, this creates a unique culture to be found only in that group. It could be either high-context culture which relies on non-verbal cues to communicate or low-context culture which is more reliant to direct verbal communication. However, since there is a diverse culture in an organization, several challenges might occur. Some of them are language barriers, stereotyping, ethnocentrism, and cultural shock (Hussain, 2018)

Communication Practices

Communication practices are defined as occurrences that involve talking, listening, reading, writing, witnessing, or simply an act in which messages are involved within any medium

and situation (Craig, 2005). Some of these practices may vary in terms of a person's own culture (Carbaugh, 2007). There are also practices that are under the scope of organizational culture—things that only the said organization could understand in full. Nevertheless, all of them require good utilization of communication skills in order to increase one's efficiency when they are communicating.

Good communication practices help people at all levels in the organization to improve their understanding of the organization in its entirety (Rana, 2013). It helps people within those organizations to make effective decisions that support the organizations' goals and objectives, thus doing their work efficiently. Unfortunately, there remain challenges in such settings such as when administrators in an organization are unable to create an environment that promotes open and clear communication (Adu-Oppong, 2014). Such inactive communication practices could result in negative effects on the work culture and the people's productivity.

Communication Flow

Communication flow is the direction in which the message generated from communication 'flows' (Verma, 2013). It could go in two directions: vertical and horizontal. Firstly, vertical communication is held between members with differing levels in the organization. It could flow in either upward or downward (Larkin and Larkin, 1984). On the other hand, horizontal communication is where the information is transmitted from a higher level to several departments on the lower level (Shahim, 2016). The former could only be effective as long as the top managers communicate with their managers, and managers communicate with their staff. Meanwhile, the latter would work only if the independent lower managers could effectively allocate the given resources to them. These two flows are generally the most used communication flow as of today.

Eke (2020) emphasized the importance of efficient communication procedures in the success of an organization, facilitating the exchange of facts, thoughts, and input among members of a company. Choosing the correct flow of communication encompasses not only the employees but the entire organization as a whole, thus this need becomes imperative.

4. METHODOLOGY
4.1 Research Design

This study utilizes the descriptive qualitative design which aims to acquire data that answers the 'who, what, and where' questions in a subjective manner (Kim et al., 2017). It accurately describes the population alongside the phenomena they have experienced. It is suitable for this research due to its main goal as the observations of the researchers were also subject to interpretations (McCombes, 2019). It does not suspend the researchers' opinions but includes them within this study. As such, this design was helpful in interpreting the lived experiences of civil engineers within their organization.

4.2 Participants and Sampling Procedure

In this research, the sampling procedure chosen is purposive sampling. It is a non-probability sample chosen based on the characteristics of a demographic and the study's goal (Crossman, 2020). The participants were chosen on the following criteria: 1.) are currently working as civil engineers; and 2.) have more than ten years of experience in the organization. The participants of this study were five (5) civil engineers who were chosen based on the criteria set by the researchers.

4.3 Research Instrument

In this study, the researchers used a self-made interview questionnaire based on four criteria, namely: organizational culture, communication flow, and communication practices. The interview session was divided into four sections as mentioned on the criteria above. The researchers ensured that necessary data regarding the variables will be tackled, inquiring follow-up questions to satisfy the three (3) variables.

4.4 Data Gathering Procedure

Before conducting the interview, the researchers contacted the organization for permission. Upon acquiring their approval, the researchers mentioned the ethical considerations of the study, ensuring that the participants' personal information will be kept private. All five (5) participants were asked through a semi-structured interview, wherein the researchers asked questions based on their questionnaire, with follow-up questions when necessary. These questions included their unique culture within their organization, their specific communication flow, and their communication practices during specific occasions. The interviews were recorded through note-taking. They were then analyzed to provide the results for this study.

4.5 Treatment of Data

The researchers used codes from Respondent 1 to Respondent 5 to denote the interviewed participants of this study. The interviews were transcribed as it was spoken, and a qualitative approach was taken to expound the answers given by the respondents.

A thematic analysis was utilized to interpret the results. There are five major themes identified based on the questionnaire used in the data-gathering procedure. These are the communication cultures, communication processes, communication models, communication practices, and problems in communication.

5. RESULTS

A total of five major themes and eight sub-themes were discovered during the analysis of the results. These were then divided into several small units that denoted each central finding.

Table 1. Generating of Themes

Code/Labels	Sub-themes	Theme
• The organization prefers talking to their co-workers in an informal and direct manner. • There is a huge difference between the older and younger generations of civil engineers.	• Preferred Modes of Communication • Generational Gap	• Organizational Culture

• Horizontal communication flow is utilized within said organizations as orders come from above and are distributed within departments. • The human resources department serves as the facilitator of the flow of information.	• Facilitators of Communication	• Communication Process
• The engineers within the organization prefer to talk to other people directly because their work is highly technical.	• Linear communication	• Communication Models
• Several communication practices in the organization include team building, Christmas parties, having an order of who to attend on a pre-bidding, and being direct when a problem is encountered in the workplace.	• Traditions within the workplace	• Communication Practices

• The respondents encountered new cultures that made them suffer culture shock such as sacrificing live animals on a newly-built infrastructure. • There are cultural barriers that cause the respondents and other foreign workers to have disagreements or a compromise within the workplace. • Working with foreign subcontractors or their foreign workers within the organization led to language barriers which made the work efficiency lower due to not being able to understand one another.	• Cultural Shock • Cultural Barriers • Language Barriers	• Communication Problems

Theme 1: Communication Cultures

Communication cultures refer to the special culture formed within a certain group. In this case, it is the cultures of communication found within the workplace setting. There are two aforementioned components underneath it, namely: modes of communication and generational gap. These themes were gathered from the interviews conducted in the civil engineering workplace chosen for this study.

Sub-theme 1: Modes of Communication

The modes of communication are the available ways in which a person can communicate with others. It is generally split into formal and informal. The former is used in certain occasions that require formality while the latter is used towards people whom the communicator is familiar with. The interviews made for this study revealed that most of the organization's cultures were affected by their mode of communication. In this case, they employed an informal way of communication. This is supported by the study published by Roy et al. (2023), where informal communication significantly increases employees' perceptions of being informed, as well as their affective commitment, both of which increase job satisfaction.

Sub-theme 2: Generational Gap

Generational gap is the difference exhibited between each generation. In the current context, it is more pronounced. Interaction between people of different generations occurs more frequently, thus sprouting problems from it. Generational gap is one of these problems. During the interviews, it has been noted that there is a huge gap in how older people communicate in contrast to the younger engineers that they have within their organization. They stated that the latter prefer

formal communication more than the former. Other differences were also mentioned such as the younger engineers' willingness to utilize newer technology as well as being more flexible than the older engineers. In this regard, the differences between generations were further discovered and analyzed by Angeline's study (2011). It was found out that each generation has a different perception of each other. For once, Gen X and Gen Y employees tend to look at Baby Boomer employees as inflexible, possibly lowering productivity in the workplace due to them being hesitant to voice their opinions. The results of this study highlighted this problem's impact on the said organizations.

Theme 2: Communication Process

Communication process refers to the ways in which information travels from one person to another. In this study, it has been found that the organization employed the horizontal communication flow. All respondents stated that their orders come from above. Their work is arranged in such a way that they have different departments when it comes to different fields. They also mentioned that they let each department deal with the specific tasks given to them, thus it could be said that they are employing a horizontal communication flow within their organization. A sub-theme was present underneath this main theme: the facilitators of communication.

Sub-theme 1: Facilitators of Communication

The facilitators of communication have been repeatedly pronounced by the interviewed respondents. They mentioned that the human resources who served as their facilitators are one of the major factors as to why their organization could achieve an efficient communication flow. They facilitate communication with those outside their organization as well as engineers who work in different fields. This has been firmly supported by Adu-Oppong's study (2014) which stated administrators develop a positive environment. There are different barriers in the communication process, and by having someone to administer the flow of communication from the higher-ups to the different departments within the company, they can enhance cooperation and maintain proficiency.

Theme 3: Communication Models

Communication models are the ways in which the communicator transmits information to the receiver. It is similar to the modes of communication, but it includes potential barriers and feedback loops. One sub-theme was discovered under this theme: linear communication model.

Sub-theme 1: Linear Communication Model

Linear communication model is a direct way of communicating, often going straight from point A to point B. This is seen from the respondents who mentioned they are more used to communicating straightforwardly. It is stated that it helps in lessening miscommunication as well as it is the method of communication that they are used to within their organization. Thus, it could be seen that they use the linear communication model. The answers received by the researchers also correspond to this method. All of the respondents stated that they communicated in this way to prevent any mistakes from happening. The nature of their work lies in being able to accomplish what was in the contract, including deadlines and quality of work. This has been supported by Brew and Cairns' study (2004) whereas communication models are affected by the culture and the situation of the workplace. Since engineers seek to finish their tasks within a certain deadline, a sense of urgency is present. As stated in the aforementioned study, having a sense of urgency

meant that there was less time for indirect approaches. This perfectly explains why the interviewed organization chose the linear communication model.

Theme 4: Communication Practices

Communication practices are the traditions employed by a certain organization that helps increase the synergy between employees. It could be written, verbal, or nonverbal. Underneath this theme is the sub-theme: Traditions in the workplace.

Sub-theme 1: Traditions in the Workplace

Traditions are the customs practiced by the people within a group. In this context, it is the traditions present during communication in a workplace setting. Several traditions were uncovered during the interviews of the respondents. For once, they have a tradition of having a Christmas party every year to improve their synergy. Meanwhile, they also have a set tradition on which engineer would attend the pre-bidding of a certain project. As long as it aligns with their field, the select engineers would go. There is also a practice of being direct when it comes to problems encountered within the workplace. Their practice of being very technical and direct greatly affected the traditions held within their organization. This has been supported by the study by Sabar et al. (2023) which mentioned the advantage of being direct when it comes to workplace communication. Since communication plays a crucial role in an organization, it must be easily understood. Moreover, conducting gatherings strengthened their bonds with one another, which also helped improve the effectiveness of communication within the organization. Their traditions are seen as a form of sincerity instead of simply being direct.

Theme 5: Problems in Communication

The problems in communication are connected to the four prior themes. This major theme aims to investigate the occurrences that have possibly hindered the efficacy of communication. Three sub-themes are present underneath it, namely: cultural shock, language barriers, and cultural barriers.

Sub-theme 1: Cultural Shock

Culture shock refers to the overwhelming conflict experienced by a person when exposed to an unfamiliar culture. It was something undergone by the interviewed respondents. According to them, they have problems communicating with their people in a foreign place. Several times, they had arguments since there were times when their cultures conflicted. It occurred both with the foreign workers within their organization and other organizations they worked with. There was a time in which they were culture shocked due to how the foreign workers they temporarily worked with had a culture of having a live animal sacrifice on a newly-built building. They believed that the building would become stronger with it, thus practicing that ritual. This was further supported by the study of Skakni et al. (2021) whereas newly hired individuals suffered from organizational culture shock during their encounters with other cultures. In this case, however, the opposite thing happened—the people within the organization experienced culture shock when working with newly hired foreign workers.

Sub-theme 2: Language Barriers

Language barriers are the problems encountered between two people who do not speak the same language. It was often experienced by the respondents when they worked with foreign

workers who did not understand English. It caused misunderstandings such as directly going to the engineers when there were non-technical problems (i.e., not related to the occupation itself) instead of talking with the human resources first. They misunderstood that reaching out to the engineers first was right when it was not. This has been supported by the study of Jenifer and Raman (2015) in which language barrier is considered to be one of the most common problems in multicultural organizations. Misunderstanding remains prominent since the two people come from different countries, which could lead to a decrease in productivity within the workplace.

Sub-theme 3: Cultural Barriers

Cultural barriers refer to the occurrence in which one person cannot understand the other person from another culture. In this study's case, it is the conflicts experienced by people from high-context cultures and low-context cultures. It has been mentioned that working with sub-contractors is complicated. For once, they are the outsourced smaller companies by their organization, thus they are not familiar with the practices of their organization. Moreover, new Filipino co-workers sometimes had difficulties communicating with the respondents due to the latter's directness. This problem was seen by Eastern foreign workers. Though, they seem to work well more with foreign workers from the West. This was something explained in Hall's study (1976) which stated that the Philippines and other Eastern countries belong to the high-context culture. In this setting, most Filipino employees are used to looking at non-verbal cues, something that is the direct opposite of the communication model employed by the interviewed organization. A study by Yusof and Rahmat (2020) revealed that in the workplace setting, people who are used to high-context cultures were often caught off guard by the directness of fellow workers from low-context cultures. The low context culture is something resulting from the organization's unique culture, hence causing the experiences stated by the respondents. It also explained the reason why Western foreign workers understood the respondents more, for they came from the same low-context culture.

6. DISCUSSIONS

The researchers found out that all of the respondents with the same years of experience as civil engineers encountered similar things as one another. Working for more than ten years allowed them to face more things as opposed to the younger generation. The respondents emphasized this difference between the younger and older generations within their organization. The culture of communication of the two generations greatly differed. It could be seen from the older generation's informal mode of communication that they are more at ease due to their time within the organization as well as the closely-knitted culture that was already culminated before the younger engineers came. The latter's choice of formal communication may have stemmed from their nervousness as well as adaptation to the culture within the organization. It is tied to the fifth major theme which were the problems in their communication, namely: culture shock, culture barriers, and language barriers, with culture shock being the most common occurrence.

The second, third, and fourth major themes found through thematic analysis could be said to be linked to each other. Linear communication worked well within their company due to their tradition of being direct. This attitude was also done by the facilitators of communication, the human resources department. This efficient division of workforce greatly reduces the possibility of making mistakes, in turn fulfilling the needs of a technical field such as engineering.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study suggested that cultural contexts are greatly affected by the field a person is working into. It was repeatedly emphasized that the interviewed organization chose to be direct as their occupation as an engineer requires more technicality. Being direct is their way of accomplishing work efficiently, thus their communication is shaped to be that way despite living in a high-context country. It could also be noticed that their traditions, model of communication, and the information flow are shaped by this aspect. Moreover, the engineers within this organization are also more prone to language barriers and culture shocks due to their tendency to often work with other foreign organizations on select projects. Moreover, the ages of the respondents emphasized the generational gaps present between old and new-generation engineers. The perspective of the latter was seen through the respondents' answers. This generational gap is something that continuously appeared as time passed by, evident by the swift changes of the current era. Thus, it could be concluded that organizational communication is greatly affected by the place the organization was in, the differing generations present in the workplace, and the cultures encountered by them.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

In the problems identified in this paper, several strategies have been identified to improve communication effectiveness within the organization. As a starting point, it is very crucial to raise awareness about the importance of clear communication. The importance of respectful communication can be emphasized through training sessions and workshops, especially in diverse workplaces. The person managing the foreign organization should know deeply about its culture as well as its structure and share it with the manager of the other organization they are working with, and vice versa, to minimize the culture shock and misunderstanding between the two organizations. It is also suggested to have regular seminars that cover topics like cultural sensitivity and language barriers. These sessions can equip employees with the skills they need to navigate communication in a diverse environment.

Another important recommendation is to encourage flexibility in communication style. Employees should be open to different approaches and willing to adapt to different situations. This flexibility promotes inclusivity and diversity in communication. Furthermore, fostering a culture of consideration is key. By being mindful of others' perspectives and respecting cultural differences, conflicts and misunderstandings can be reduced. Lastly, considering a language policy could be beneficial. Establishing a specific language for workplace communication can minimize language barriers and ensure clarity for everyone involved.

9. IMPLICATIONS

In the current context, it is crucial to identify the communication used by organizations. It may not be visible to the naked eye, but several changes may have been undergone as time passed by. It is one of the emphasized concepts within this study. By knowing their organizational communication, they could come up with better responses to the problems as well as adapt to the changing times. A better approach to certain problematic situations could be created. Moreover, the efficacy of communication within the workplace could be enhanced through the findings of this study.

The results also suggested that organizational communication is greatly influenced by occupation. The respondents in the engineering occupation have a sense of urgency to fulfill the deadline within the contract, leading to them being more direct. It suggests that different occupations may have different organizational communications, hence having distinct cultural contexts, traditions, flow, practices, and problems. This complexity further suggests the importance of knowing the said communication within one's organization.

The places in which their foreign co-workers came from were also shown to affect organizational communication greatly. Since they come from differing cultures and languages, they encounter cultural and language barriers. Even co-workers who came from other provinces of the Philippines are no exception. They practiced traditions viewed as eccentric by other co-workers such as animal sacrifice. Thus, it imposed the need to be more open-minded and culturally inclusive of their other co-workers; that is, to adapt to the changes posed by these problems.

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