

## **Research on the Role of Communication in a Diverse Workforce**

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### **Abstract**

*The study reviews the role of communication in a diverse workforce. The objectives were: to identify communication strategies used, establish what constitutes effective communication, establish communication challenges encountered and propose strategies aimed at enhancing communication in a diverse workforce.*

*The study employed an in-depth descriptive design. Data was collected using interview guides and semi-structured interviews. The sample comprised 20 employees and 3 supervisors. Purposive sampling was used to select all the necessary respondents. Data was analyzed by content analysis and presented in descriptions and narratives. Verbatims relevant to the findings were also included.*

*The findings showed that a number of communication strategies are used in diverse workforce. It also found that using correct varying methods of communication constitutes effective communication. The challenges included lack of technology skills for some employees; differences in age leading to miscommunication; heavy reliance on emails which may promote misinterpretation of information; delayed dissemination of information and bureaucratic tendencies which frustrate staff especially the millennials who values quick feedback. The study recommends managers to encourage training in Technology to improve employee communication skills. Managers should encourage interactions among all staff. Management to be open and honest with all staff to promote mutual respect. Varying of methods of communication will make all staff to feel included and valued. The study will inform organization about the impact of communication in a diverse workforce. More research needs to be done on how different diversities as an emerging issue, impact organizational performance.*

**Keywords:** *Communication, diverse, effective, generation, organization, performance*

### **Introduction**

With increased globalization, it has become very challenging for organizations to deal with a diverse workforce emanating from different backgrounds with diverse cultures, beliefs, aspirations and attitudes than ever before. To mitigate such challenges, it has been realized that there is greater need for healthy interactions between management and employees in organizations. It is now common-sense knowledge that in order to survive the 21<sup>st</sup> Century business terrain, an organization's Human Resource Manager must possess skills of dealing with such a workforce. Beyond their strict definitions, diversity and multiculturalism essentially relate to differences among people.

Therefore, because organizations today are becoming more diverse and multicultural, it is important that all managers understand the major trends and dimensions of diversity and multiculturalism (Griffin, 2013).

Communication which is the process by which we exchange meanings, facts, ideas opinions or emotions with other people is at the center of any organization. It is an essential condition of our existence and our most important activity (Bhatia, 2013). People need to communicate for survival either at individual or organizational level. In this competitive world effective communication plays a very critical role in ensuring organizations perform effectively and maintain their market share. Communication skills are important in all human endeavors, including business. Even though communication is so important to success in the work place, there are many individuals who find that there is a limit to their communication skills that they seem to have reached a stumbling block in their progress (Shonubi and Ankintaro, 2016).

## Theoretical framework

The study was guided by Abraham Maslow's theory of human needs states that humans are never completely satisfied, that they crave satisfaction and that needs can be classified into a hierarchy based on importance. At the lowest level, people need their physical needs satisfied, such as hunger and thirst. Then, they need basic security and stability. After physical and safety needs are satisfied, individuals need to belong to a group and have meaningful relationships. Once this need is fulfilled, an individual strives for self-confidence and personal achievement.

Finally, an individual must realize his or her potential or he or she becomes dissatisfied and discontent. This theory helps managers to motivate subordinates in a diverse workplace by ensuring low-level needs get met first. Then, management can pursue overseeing employees as they complete more complex tasks (Brooks, 2006).

Motivation as a process induces people to work hard and enthusiastically to achieve organizational goals. It creates an atmosphere of security, trust and mutual cooperation essential for this purpose. To achieve this, communication is needed because it is a very effective means of building a friendly and trusting environment. The contents of communication, tone, context and timing exercise a significant influence on motivation. Employees need to be kept well informed about the organization and its progress. Personal meetings, company magazines, providing information on the company website are used to create a sense of mutual trust (Bhatia 2013).

Griffin adds that "Belongingness needs relate to social processes. They include the need for love and affection and the need to be accepted by one's peers. These needs are satisfied for most people by family and community relationships outside of work and by friendships on the job. A manager can help satisfy these needs by allowing social interaction and by making employees feel like part of a team or work group" (Griffin, 2013, pg. 240). In a work place, social interactions are enhanced through communication and so without communication an organization is dead.

## Review of literature

Communication is essentially the process by which views and information are exchanged between individuals or groups. It involves the transmission-exchange or sharing of information between individuals or groups through a communication process. The process includes the sender and receiver of the message and the feedback. The sender produces the meaning using pictures, symbols, actions and word processes which the receiver consumes through the five senses namely seeing, touching, smelling, feeling and tasting. Thus, the communication process comprises five basic elements: sender, medium of communication, receiver, message and feedback and the effectiveness of communication is dependent on these factors (Bhatia, 2013).

Diversity exists among people when its members differ from one another along one or more important dimensions. The differences are what obviously reflect the multicultural composition of a community. In the business world, the term diversity is more generally used to refer to demographic differences among people within a culture—differences in gender, age, ethnicity, and so forth. Diversity is not an absolute phenomenon that specifies that a group or organization is or is not diverse. Instead, diversity can be conceptualized as a continuum. (Griffin, 2013).

Griffin adds that diversity is not an abstract concept. It is made tangible every day in every organization wherever two people come together to perform an organizational activity. Dealing with diversity can be complex and frustrating and so to deal with such complexity, managers must have an organized methodology that provides a clear roadmap of navigating through these complexities. The complexity of diversity lies in the fact that no matter how homogeneous a group might be. For example, with all black employees, there still manifests an array of differences for example skills possessed, marital status and geographic region (Griffin, 2013).

Gupta (2013: 36) asserts that diversity in a work place poses great challenges in communication. He stresses: "People no longer live and work in an insular marketplace; they are now part of a worldwide economy with competition coming from nearly every continent. For this reason, profit and non-profit organizations need diversity to become more effective and open to change."

The importance of interpersonal communication and intercultural sensitivity, business practice differences and non-verbal competence are essential for effective organizational communication. They

further stressed that effective human performance in groups or team-oriented environments depends largely on the understanding of messages the sharing of meanings, interpersonal adjustments and adaptations. Clearly, the productivity of a diverse workforce would be almost impossible to increase without effective communication and other forms of human interactions (Okoro, and Melvin (2012).

### Objectives of the study

1. Identify communication strategies used in a diverse workforce in two organizations in Lusaka district
2. Establish what constitutes effective communication in a diverse workforce in two organizations in Lusaka district
3. Establish communication challenges encountered in a diverse workforce in two organizations in Lusaka district
4. Propose strategies aimed at enhancing communication in a diverse workforce in two organizations in Lusaka district.

### Methodology

The study employed an in-depth descriptive design. Data was collected using interview guides and semi-structured interviews. The sample comprised 20 employees and 3 supervisors. Purposive sampling was used to select all the necessary respondents. Purposive sampling was employed with a conviction that the selected respondents would help in achieving the set objectives. The data was collected from 20 employees and 3 managers using the stated method. Data was analyzed by content analysis and presented in descriptions and narratives. Verbatim which were also relevant to the findings were also included.

### Findings of the study

#### Demographic characteristics of respondents

##### Sex of employee respondents

There was a total of 20 employee respondents. Table 1 below shows their sex.

**Table 1.** Sex of employee respondents

Sex	Frequency (f)	Percentage
Female	6	30
Male	14	70
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 1 reveals that there were more male respondents in the organizations at 70% while 30% was the female employees.

##### Age of employee respondents

**Table 2.** Age of employee respondents

Age bracket	Frequency (f)	Percentage
25-35	3	15
35-45	10	50
45-55	6	30
55 and above	-	-
No response	1	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 2 shows that 3 (15%) of the respondents fell within the age bracket of 25-35, while 10 (50%) of the respondents fell within the age bracket of 35-45, 6 (30%) of the respondents falls within the age bracket of 45-55 and 1 (5%) did not indicate their age.

In addition to the 20 employee respondents, 3 employees at management level (supervisors) also participated in the study. Two were from the human resources department while one was a deputy Head teacher at a diverse school.

### **Communication strategies used in a diverse workforce**

The first objective of the study was to identify communication strategies used in a diverse workforce in Lusaka district. This objective was guided by the research question

*What communication strategies are used in a diverse workforce in two organizations in Lusaka district?*

The study revealed that diverse organizations in Lusaka district used a variety of communication strategies. The first strategy, according to the respondents, was holding of face-to face meeting with employees. Supervisors indicated that face-to face meeting were very effective as feedback was immediate. One supervisor stated that

*In case of slow processors of information, we have an open- door policy where those who did not understand what was being communicated in the meeting can easily go to the supervisor and get clarifications.*

Employees agreed with supervisors that the most used communication strategy was face-to-face but also pointed that it had its own limitations. For example, one of them asserted that

*Although face-to-face strategy of communication is the common and most preferred method, sometimes there is inconsistency in the times of meeting thereby causing a break in the flow of information.*

The second strategy was the use of written information in form of notices, leaflets, newsletters and memoranda. Another supervisor added that

*We ensure to include the traditional method of written information so that the older generation is also include*

### **What constitutes effective communication in a diverse workforce**

The second objective of the study sought to find out what constituted effective communication in a diverse workforce. This was addressed by answering the following question

*What constitutes effective communication in a diverse workforce in two organizations in Lusaka district?*

The study found that using varied methods and channels of communication in a timely manner and consistent manner constituted effective communication in a diverse work force. One employee asserted

*Promoting staff participation in decision making to a certain aggregable level in order for staff to own the organizational goals is another indication of effective communication. Managers should promote an open-door policy in order to reach out to all staff across the age diversity.*

*Effective communication with the use of proper channels of communication to enable staff to be receptive to both positive and negative feedback.*

One supervisor added

*Communication is a two-way thing and this means transfer of information from one person to another hence the need to involve both the managers and staff member, therefore both employer and employee need to communicate constantly.*

The study further revealed that the use of technology through emails and other network-based channels of communication quickens flow of information throughout the organization. One employee pointed out that

*Communication is quicker when technology is used but the disadvantage is that not all employees have the technology skills.*

A supervisor explained that

*Communication was effective when staff in the organization operate as one unit and everybody worked towards achieving a common goal.*

Another manager respondent asserted

*We use the open- door policy to help talk to employees on a one-on- one basis for purposes of clarifying issues.*

### **Communication challenges encountered in a diverse workforce**

The third objective sought to establish communication challenges faced in a diverse workforce by answering the following question

*What communication challenges are encountered in a diverse workforce in Lusaka district?*

The study indicated that there were several communication challenges that were faced in diverse work force. These included lack of technology skills, age differences or generational gaps, which brought about variation in the rate at which employees absorbed, interpreted and utilized information and delegated dissemination of information by management.

One supervisor stated

*Lack of technology skills especially among the older generation is a major challenge and it affects their speed to respond to communication. In other instances, others do not respond to information at all due to miscommunication.*

He added

*The other challenge is age differences since different people look at things differently hence delayed feedback.*

Another supervisor stated that

*Most older employees are used to the traditional methods of communication that is reading and writing and so are not so conversant with e-mails.*

One employee pointed out

*Heavy reliance on emails as opposed to the face-to-face communication has sometimes led to miscommunication and misinterpretation of information.*

Some employees indicated that there is delayed dissemination of vital information in organizations which creates a vacuum between management and the staff thereby fueling speculation and grapevine communication. One employee said

*Delays in information dissemination encourages grapevine which may be true or not and this in the end confuses employees who do not know what to believe.*

### **Strategies aimed at enhancing communication in a diverse workforce**

The fourth objective aimed at finding out proposed strategies aimed at enhancing communication in diverse organizations in Lusaka district. It was tackled by answering the following research question *What strategies aimed at enhancing communication in a diverse workforce can be put in place?*

The study revealed strategies that could be used to enhance communication in a diverse workforce as proposed by the respondents were varied. They included training of all personnel in information communication technology to enable them effectively use modern technological gadgets and accessories, encouraging constant interaction between management and subordinates and using diverse methods of communication.

One supervisor indicated that

*There is need for organizations to encourage more training in information and communication technology so that all employees of different generations including those that are not conversant with computer skills acquire skills to better deal with communication in the organization.*

Another supervisor added

*This is a digital age. Therefore, people need to move with the age. We have a deliberate program to help people who are completely computer illiterate to acquire skills.*

Employee respondents indicated that managers should encourage interactions between management and staff paying particular attention to non-verbal cues.

One employee said that

*The other strategy is for management to be open and honest with all staff regardless of the age bracket in order to promote mutual respect.*

The other proposed strategy was that using a variety of methods of communication besides face-to-face meetings with all staff so that they could feel included and valued.

One supervisor said

*We encourage face-to-face meeting with individual employees to allow them to seek clarifications on matters they did not understand well through the emails. This is to take into consideration the different literacy levels of people.*

The other proposed strategy was that management needed to share information with all the staff concerning any changes in the organization so that everybody is aware of the happenings in the organization stating that this would create mutual respect and trust in the organization and makes all employees comfortable to discuss matters openly.

## **Summary**

The insights of the findings pertaining to the role of communication in a diverse workforce in two organizations in Lusaka district are summarized as follows

The findings were that diverse organization in Lusaka district used a variety of communication strategies which included face-to-face meetings use of emails, WhatsApp and short messaging systems (SMS).

The study further revealed that using varied methods and channels of communication and consistently constituted effective communication in a diverse work force. It was further revealed that the use of technology through emails and other network-based channels of communication quickens flow of information throughout the organization. Communication challenges were also as well as strategies aimed at enhancing communication were highlighted.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Communication strategies used in a diverse workforce**

The study established that organizations in Lusaka district used a number of strategies to communicate with employees. The use of a variety of communication methods which included face-to-face, phone calls, social media and newsletters was seen as a way of reaching out to different and diverse employees. This is in line with what Luthans writes

“A variety of communication methods will be needed: spoken and written, direct and indirect. Face-to-face communication to individuals or groups is both direct and swift and it provides an opportunity to gauge the reactions of people who can respond on the spot and ask questions. But it should be supplemented by written material or intranet communications where the information is particularly important or complex” (Luthans, 2011, pg. 256).

The world is rapidly changing bringing on board a lot of advancement in technology. This means that there must be proper communication between managers and subordinates. The varied communication strategies are also cardinal in fostering relationships that spur positive attitudes in organizations.

### **What constitutes effective communication in a diverse workforce**

The study established that using correct but varying method and channels of communication in a timely manner and consistently constitutes effective communication in a diverse work force. The use of different channels of communication ensures that communication is achieved simply because people respond to methods of communication differently. The more methods the managers employ, the more effective communication becomes.

The business community all over the world knows the values of time and so all communication is meant to be suitably timed. This is supported by Armstrong who mentioned that “One important approach to communication is that, to be effective, communication needs to be clear, easily understood and concise. Information should be presented systematically on a regular basis and be as relevant, local and timely as possible” (Armstrong, 2012, Pg. 246).

In addition, the study has found that promoting staff participation in decision making to a certain aggregable level in order for staff to own the organizational goals is another indication of effective communication.

Managers promoting an open-door policy in order to reach out to all staff across the age diversity. Effective communication with the use of proper channels of communication to enable staff to be receptive to both positive and negative feedback. This is supported by Palmer and Hartley who write

“Open door policies for example encourage employees to air out their grievances and to make suggestions directly to their superiors. The aim is to make management accessible and ‘employee friendly’; team briefings are a system of communication within the organization where the leader of a group provides group members (up to about 20) with management-derived information. The rationale behind is encourage commitment to and identification with the organization. Ideally, they should result in information cascading down through the organization; Quality circles are small groups of employees that meet with the supervisor or group leader in an attempt to discuss their work in terms of production and quality. For success the leader must be willing to listen and act upon issues raised by QC members and members must feel their participation is real and effective. The communication therefore is two-way”. (Palmer and Hartley 2012, pg. 333)

Open-door policy should be promoted as it encourages employees to approach higher level management on any matters that concerns the organization and other employees. It bridges the gaps among different employees and managers.

### **Communication challenges encountered in a diverse workforce**

Communication is very significant in every organization. It is the engine that makes organization parts to work in harmony. However, in the quest to champion communication with or among employees there are challenges that are encountered. The study established that lack of technology skills among some staff hampers communication. In addition, the study established that differences in age also pose communication problems since different people look at things differently hence delayed feedback.

The study further found that other challenges included heavy reliance on emails as opposed to the face-to-face communication which sometimes led to miscommunication and misinterpretation of information. Delayed dissemination of information and inconsistency in the times of meeting staff are more challenges established by the study and these create a vacuum between management and the staff thereby breaking communication. At times there is no sense of urgency in relaying information by managers sometimes resulting from bureaucracy tendencies frustrates staff especially the millennials who values quick feedback.

### **Strategies aimed at enhancing communication in a diverse workforce**

The findings of the study revealed the strategies that can be used to enhance communication in a diverse workforce. Some respondents indicated the need to encourage more training in Information and Communication Technology so that all employees of different generations including those that are not conversant with computer skills acquire skills to better deal with communication in the organization.

Managers encouraging interactions between management and the staff paying particular attention to non-verbal cues was also seen as an enhancer to effective communication.

Management to be open and honest with all staff regardless of the age bracket and promote mutual respect. As supported by ACAS Guide (2005) which states: Effective communication generates trust as organizations take the trouble to explain what they are doing and why. It should be emphasized, however, that these three benefits of good communications will only be realized in full if employees are given a voice – the opportunity to comment and respond to the information they obtain from management.

Sharing information with all the staff concerning any changes in the organization so that everybody is aware of the happenings in the organization. This is modified by Brooks (2006) who said: Every manager in an organization must take employee relations seriously as these are a vital part of any change management program. If any change is proposed in terms and conditions of employment, HR processes such as contingent pay, working methods, or organization (including mergers and acquisitions), employees need to know what is proposed and how it will affect them. Failure to communicate effectively breeds employee resistance to change which often arises as a consequent of people not knowing the organizational happenings and what the introduced change implies for them

Using a variety of methods of communication and having face-to-face meetings with all staff so that all staff can feel included and valued as well as creating mutual respect and trust in the organization in order that all employees are comfortable to discuss matters openly.

According to Maslow’s motivation theory, management through effective communication can induce people to work hard and enthusiastically achieve organizational goals. Application of the theory

can help management to realize the employees' communication needs in order to create an atmosphere of security, trust and mutual cooperation essential for this purpose. To achieve this, communication is needed because it is a very effective means of building a friendly and trusting environment. The contents of communication, tone, context and timing exercise a significant influence on motivation. This is supported by Bhatia (2013) who mentioned that employees need to be kept well informed about the organization and its progress. Personal meetings, company magazines, providing information on the company website are used to create a sense of mutual trust

Viewing this theory from the perspective of age diversity, employees' self-confidence and personal achievement come with effective communication. It is assumed that people of different age groups value communication dependent on the mode, context, timing and value attached to the particular message.

The role of communication in a diverse workforce in organizations appears to be positively significant. The objectives of the study have been achieved and the research questions have been fully answered by the analyses conducted. The answers to the research questions are in the affirmative, confirming that communication plays a very significant role in organization. For instance, age diversity has an effect on employee performance; a young employee can be more productive because of the strength, being up to date with new technology and skills to carry out tasks. On the other hand, an older employee can perform his task well because of the accumulated experience over the years of service and the skills to perform. From findings it is discovered that organizations that have generational diversity enhance their performance due to the young and older generation complimenting each other's strengths and weaknesses.

## Conclusion

The findings showed that a number of communication strategies are used by supervisors in diverse workforce and these are face-to face and use of technology like phones and computers. The study also found that using correct but varying method and channels of communication in a timely manner and consistently promoting staff participation in decision making to a certain aggregable level constitutes effective communication in a diverse work force.

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