VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION AND ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

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ABSTRACT

This paper discussed the extent to which virtual communication aids organizational effectiveness. The purpose of the paper is establish a relationship between the various platforms of virtual communication such as emails, instant messaging, phone calls, video chats and conferences, etc., and achieving an organization's set objectives. The gains and limitations of virtual communication were outlined. The paper concludes that virtual communication can be useful to employees in carrying out their duties and relating with one another.

KEYWORDS: *Virtual, Communication, Effectiveness, Instant Messaging, Phone Calls, Video Chats*

INTRODUCTION

Communication is an integral part of human existence. The Austrian-American communication theorist, Paul Watzlawick (1921–2007) theorized that "one cannot not communicate". Humans connect to each other through communication. Every person is a part of one social system or the other within which they have various relationships - the family, school, peer group, workplace, etc. – exist, and thrive on communication. Communication helps to build and solidify relationships. Communication is at the heart center of every organization. Workplace relationships and the effectiveness of an organization depends largely on the communication processes of that organization, and the mechanisms that are put in place to encourage and aid communication. Communication progressed and evolved to the adoption of technological devices. Technology has advanced communication and in the process, blurred the boundaries that confine us to a given geographical location. Marshall McLuhan says that the world is becoming a "global village". Organizations are now equipped to carry on their operations with technologies that give them easier, faster and better results. Work can also be virtual – done anywhere, anytime with anyone. Communication in this regard can be referred to as "e-communication", which means the sharing of information through mediated means for the purpose of producing a change in behavior, attitude, thinking patterns, feelings, and/performance of a person, group or organization (Avolio, Kahai, & Dodge, 2001b).

In an era when the advancements in technology is "changing the way we do business" (Rodman 2010: 281), organizations, especially those that operate within various geographical distances are adopting the use of virtual platforms as their means and modes of operations. Influenced by globalization, markets liberalizations and driven by the need for organizations internalization, Borgatti and Foster (2013) opine that virtual communication is the axle for an organization's effectiveness. As a result of the size and workforce and geographical extensions of an organization, departments are created for effectiveness. These departments end up grouping themselves into teams. Teams are groups of individuals who

work together to accomplish a task or series (Havey, 2014). Members of a team in an organization spend more time interacting with each other than they do with other employees of the organization. Sometimes, a team could transcend geographical locations thus making it imperative for members to engage in virtual communication methods. Aver (2012) defines virtual teams as small temporary groups of geographically, organizationally and/or time dispersed knowledge workers who coordinate their work, mainly with electronic information and communication technologies to carry out one or more organization tasks. Carley (2015) describes virtual teams as the modern set of organizations workgroups that employ the digital communications, video and audio links, electronic whiteboards, e-mail, instant messaging, websites, chat rooms, as substitutes for physical collocation of the team members.

Virtual communication has been upgraded and continues to grow as modern organizations' platforms of operations. Cummings and Cross (2013) posit that the rapid changes in the business environment, globalization of the marketplace, a growing popularity of inter-organizational alliances combined with a tendency to design more flexible and versatile organizational structure, accelerated the need for organizations to communicate across geographical, functional, intra- and inter-organizational boundaries. Cohen and Mankin (2015) agrees by stating that the rapid development of communication technology during the last decades, made the distribution and the coordination of work much easier and much faster across time and across different geographical locations.

In contemporary times, organization's interactions are conducted via electronic means giving room for only few inevitable face-to-face meetings or none at all if its members are not within the same natural geographic location, or when the meet is not a prerequisite for the organization's growth. Participants of virtual communication can be from different organizations, coming together to achieve a common objective and are trying to find a common solution to a certain problem, or generally have a common stake in the transaction.

Virtual communication makes work coordination and management flexible in terms of choice of where one works, whether in the office, at home, in an aircraft or the emergency room. "It creates effectiveness, virtual planning, organization and management of company affairs in a networked system that improves the overall organization's performance and success" (Cummings and Cross, 2013 p.16).

Bibow (2015) further explains that virtual communication is used by different organizations for increasing effectiveness in vast activities domains, such as research and development, recruitment, crises resolutions, knowledge management, learning and training, monitoring and upgrading, manufacturing, marketing and others. Virtual communication breaks time and space barriers, they can also maximize the employees' experience from the organization at a minimum cost. Taking into consideration the overwhelming characteristics, virtual communication could be said to be a potential for improving the organizational effectiveness (Trivedi and Desai, 2012).

Communication Technologies Theory

The theoretical framework that supports this work is the theory of media synchronicity. The theory of synchronicity states that through the use of technological devices for communication, people sync and bond with one another (LittleJohn 2009). Virtual communication employs the use of mediated devices to blur the lines of geographical space, distance and time. Interaction is carried out as easy as it would be if interactants were to be face to face. The theory of synchronicity is appropriate here because it supports the fact that with virtual communication, organizations regardless of location can and

do interact with one another and "develop a synching or bonding" (p.338) with each other as if they were in the same room. According to media synchronicity theory, there are two types of virtual communication: synchronous and asynchronous (Avolio et al, 2001). Synchronous occurs when team members communicate at the same time via video conferencing, teleconferencing or video chats. Synchronous communication media allows individuals to work on the same project at the same time as they interact (Baker 2002). Asynchronous communication involves individuals interacting at different times for example, using emails and threaded messages. The extent to which the media of communicationallow for synchronous communication affects the flow of conversation (Sellen, 1995). Communication technologies which can be said to be more like face to face interactions, such as videoconference, would be closer in conversational style to an in-person meeting (O'Connail, Whittaker, &Wilbur, 1993).

Virtual communication gives employees of an organization a feeling of comfort in their zones so that they speak freely, share smiles, reciprocate emotions, express dissatisfaction, negotiate a decision, challenge a position, and have in-depth discussions on how to move the organization forward. Even though discussants may be at different places (and time zones), human connectivity still abounds.

Virtual Communication

Virtual communication is the sharing of information from one person to another with the use of technological devices. Virtual communication technology is any type of technology that individuals use to interact with one another when they are separated by distance and/or time (Frost, 2018).The need for virtual communication arises when we want to talk to people who are not physically present in front of us. Virtual communication enables users to send messages electronically, see and hear one another (audio and visual) when they converse as if they were in front of each other, and enjoy real time experience like there were no physical barriers. Virtual communication involves the use of emails, instant messaging, phone calls, video chats and conferences, through various platforms like WhatsApp Messenger, Skype, Yahoo!, and MSN. With an internet-enabled device, employees of an organization can utilize voice-over-IP technology and VoIP protocol with audio and video applications to communicate virtually from anywhere, to anyone, at anytime. Virtual communication allows employees to hold meetings despite being in different geographical locations.

Measuring Organization Effectiveness

The yardstick for measuring organizational effectiveness varies from organization to organization. The concept, as asserted by Basil and Arnold (1969), is commonly used to denote goal-attainment. In this respect, the question arises as to whether it is possible to develop a definition of effectiveness and to derive criteria which are both applicable across organizations and can be meaningfully placed within a general conceptual framework. This implies that organizational effectiveness is a functional rather than a structural concept. Effectiveness of an organization has been operationalized to mean productivity. Thorndike (1909 p.534) explains it thus:

A general tendency on the part of personnel and industrial psychologists to accept as "ultimate criteria" of organizational success are the following: organizational productivity, net profit, the extent to which the organization accomplishes its various missions, and the success of the organization in maintaining or expanding itself. Other variable that have been used in various contexts as criteria of effectiveness include "morale", commitment to the organization, personnel turnover and absenteeism, and member satisfactions.

Variable for measuring organizational effectiveness vary depending on the goals of that organization. Still, to measure effectiveness, organizations may juxtapose their productivity level with their set objectives, taking into consideration the means through which they intend to achieve such objectives. Organizational effectiveness therefore, refers to the extent to which an organization as a social system, under defined working conditions with given certain resources and means, fulfills its objectives without paralyzing its means and resources and unethically draining its employees.

Organization and Virtual Communication

It is often taken for granted but the ability to communicate with someone who is millions of miles away is a fascinating manipulation of time and space. Technology has made life easy such that we are able to hear and see someone who is not in the same room with us and share ideas like there were no physical barriers. Organizations are social environments. Tomlinson (2007) refers to it as a mediated socio-cultural experience. Because time and space is a key factor that impacts on organizational effectiveness, virtual communication has become a special tool that organizations use to achieve their objectives.

Never-Ending Information and Ideas Sharing

The importance of communication in an organization cannot be over-emphasized. Communication is thought to directly impact organizational effectiveness (Zaccaro, Ardison & Orvis, 2004). In the past, organizations sent their mails by post and physical presence was mandatory at meetings. The advent of telephone made it possible for individuals to speak to one another regardless of their locations. Emails, a product of the internet, replaced correspondence, enabling people to send and receive mails in seconds rather than waiting for the postman to travel far and wide. With video chats, users can join a meeting or conference from anywhere in the world at any time. This helps the employees to transform inputs (e.g. employees' contributions and skills) into outputs (e.g. solutions) (Cooke & Szumal, 1994). Organizations' success becomes eminent with virtual communication. Work gets done on time, crises are handled immediately they arise, commitment is demanded because of the speed at which information goes back and forth, and employees do not feel the need to wait until an individual is "on seat" for certain approvals or decisions to be made. Information and ideas are shared round the clock and the business does not need to go to sleep if it did not need to.

Time and Place Shifting

Virtual communication has given organizations more control over space and time. Nowadays, people no longer have to wait for a considerable length of time to receive a reply to their mails. Time shifting is the ability to connect with people, with the aid of technology, at any time. As soon as an email is sent out, it is received in moments and reply can be sent within the same moment. An employee may read his emails on his mobile device while on transit, and carry out his duties online after or before working hours. Place shifting enables the employee to work and connect with his organization from anywhere, using technology. Time and place shifting is both convenient and suitable for employees to function effectively.

Crossing Boundaries

Meyrowitz (1985) acknowledged that virtual communication compressed distances and transcended physical boundaries by allowing us to reach out to people that were far away. He also reasoned that virtual communication also transcended

social boundaries. Technology has given organizations the avenue to rise above the challenges of achieving their objectives that are caused by the limitations of physical boundaries. For example, back in the day, a headhunter would have had to travel as far as required to meet with a potential employee. Now, with virtual communication, the meeting can be easily arranged on a videoconference with stakeholders and participant(s) interacting from various geographical locations. Teleconferencing can also be used to pitch ideas to management, carry out training sessions for employees, plan activities and resolve organizational disputes. The implication is that boundaries of geographical locations that would have necessitated the travel across locations have been erased by the adoption of virtual communication technologies.

Localism, Virtual Communities and Teams

Technologies have altered our sense of space in other ways as well. It is a lot easier for organizations to expand their branches to any part of the world because of virtual communication possibilities. This supports the concept of virtual communities and teams. There are multinational organizations that have members organized in virtual communities who in turn group themselves into smaller teams, and work with each other effortlessly to achieve organizational objectives. A Human Resources Manager of Schlumberger Nigeria for instance, is "friends" with other Human Resources Manager of Schlumberger in other countries. These employees may not have met each other but are connected through technologies. They talk on the phone, chat, send one another emails, and when crises ensue in any of their bases, they commune via video or teleconferencing and brainstorm on how manage the situations. Rheingold (2000) posits that communities no longer need to be geographically based and people are now virtual neighbors (cyberspace). Work teams reach one another with much ease and assist each other to meet up with set objectives. He further states that virtual communication can become a powerful antidote to the loss of traditional community values which may stem from working too hard in a busy world, and help to establish and uphold an effective working relationship between employees of common interest

GAINS OF VIRTUAL COMMUNICATION

It communication facilitates discussions from anywhere in the world. It takes away distance and pulls down walls and barriers.

It saves time and cost of travels.

Promotes literacy and capital development among employees; users are obliged to upgrade themselves.

Allows for turn-taking in discussions.

It tends to make employees more task oriented and exchange less social-emotional information.

Individuals who have no business being in the meeting are not invited.

It is a semi-formal conversation setting, therefore group members can take the time necessary to compose clear and complete messages and prepare answers to arising questions.

Negatives of Virtual Communication

It is a mechanistic approach to conversations.

It imposes constraints on communication that are likely to affect performance – there is hardly any room for extensive tough negotiations or reasoning.

Participants are easily distracted and/or may not be fully focused on the conversations.

Takes away interpersonal communication.

It is constrained and fully dependent on the functionality of technology.

Communication is timed, causing it to be more task oriented and exchange less social-emotional information, slowing the development of relational links (Chidambaram, 1996).

CONCLUSIONS

Organizations that have employees who work together in one way or another but are separated by distance and time, and therefore cannot meet face to face as regularly as they should; utilize virtually communication to carry out their objectives. Virtual communication grants the organization the same speed and effectiveness that it would enjoy in traditional face to face meetings. Technology allows multiple modes of communication in virtual conversations, such as para-verbal (tone of voice, inflection, voice volume) and nonverbal cues (eye movement, facial expression, hand gestures, and other body language) (McGrath, 1990). These cues help to regulate the flow of conversation, facilitate turn taking, provide feedback, and convey subtle meanings. As a result, virtual communication is a remarkably orderly process. However, being equipped with even the most advanced technologies is not enough to make an organization effective, since the internal group dynamics and external support mechanisms must also be present for set objectives to be achieved (Cottrell, 2013).Work gets done when there is less room for anything else. Virtual communication demands seriousness from employees such that conversations are streamlined and focused on work-related issues. Barriers of distance and time is erased, and communication can be initiated at any time of the day.

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