

The informal communication as a mechanism to support the processes of knowledge management in the organization: a critical theoretical view

*Zina HAMOUDA **

University Salah boubnider – Constantine 3, Laboratory of Media and Communication Studies(Algeria), zina.hamouda@univ-constantine3.dz

Djamel BENZEROUK

University 20 August 1955 – Skikda, Laboratory of Media and Communication Studies(Algeria), d.benzerouk@univ-skikda.dz

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Abstract:

The formal communication is one of the key factors for the organizations activities. However, this does not negate the role of the informal one, as it allows the fast spread of information, ideas, and principles, and promotes psychological satisfaction that helps the employees perform their tasks optimally. On the other hand, the knowledge and its relevant processes are a natural outcome of the process of communication between people inside the organizations, and a main source that helps the organization impose itself in the market and establish tight ties with its internal and external environment. Based on what was said, this study aims at showing the importance of informal communication inside the organization, and at discussing its roles in supporting the processes of knowledge management; which are as important as those of the formal communication.

Key words: communication; informal communication; knowledge; knowledge management; knowledge management processes.

*Corresponding Author

Introduction

Communication is vital for the organizations regardless their nature, as it has social and functional roles that facilitate communication between the workers, achieves common understanding, serves the organization interests, and ensures the achievement of the strategy and qualitative and quantitative information flow. The organizational communication has different aspects. In this regard, in order to ensure the serious work

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and respect the hierarchy and rules, the workers communicate between them formally. Nevertheless, they may not find the psychological and social circumstances or the personal gains that foster the formal communication; therefore, they resort to the informal communication.

In this regard, the exercise of formal and informal communication inside the organization brings about knowledge and information that foster survival in the market. Under globalization and knowledge society, the managers must focus on knowledge management, treatment, storage, and exploitation. Since the communicative context in the organization influences and is influenced by the internal processes, we sought to shed light on the relation between communication and knowledge management processes. Besides, we shall focus on the informal communication, which is characterized with many problems and may be seen as positive or negative based on how it is dealt with. In so doing, we raise the following question, “does the informal communication support the knowledge management processes? How?” From this question, sub-questions arise, as follows:

- What is the informal communication and what are its features?
- What are the knowledge management processes and what is their importance for the organization?
- How does the informal communication affect the knowledge management processes?

1. Introduction to informal communication:

1.1 Definition of communication:

Literature provides different definitions to communication. In this context, the term is derived from the Latin “communis”, which designates “common” in English. When we communicate, we establish a common message with a person or a group and try to share knowledge, ideas, or attitudes¹. This definition insists on the common denominator between individuals and groups, which is conveyed in the message that holds common meanings of the symbols exchanged between the two parties. Besides, communication refers to the process or method through which information and ideas are exchanged between people within a given social context that may have different sizes and relations. In addition, it may be a typical dual relation between two people, a small group, a local society, or the whole human community².

Despite that these definitions are different, they complement each other because communication is a mechanism that helps the individual achieve interaction with another individual or a group to create common ideas, information, or meanings. This common point creates a big possibility for harmony and long relation between

The informal communication as a mechanism to support the processes of knowledge management in the organization: a critical theoretical view——Hamouda /Benzerouk individuals, groups, or communities. As for the organizational context, communication takes another dimension, which manifests in achieving the public interests of the organization that require collaboration and adoption of common goals, ideas, information, and principles. Moreover, the communication inside the organization facilitates decision making.

1.2 Definition of the informal communication:

As previously said, communication in its organizational dimension plays human, social, relational, and professional roles that enshrine the interests of the organization and ensure its existence in the market regardless its nature, size, and location. The organization is a social unit that cannot achieve its goals without continuous cycles and a permanent movement of formal and informal communications. Besides, the social interactions are necessary and represented by the dynamics of development and growth in the different organizations³.

Every communicative situation targets different goals, mainly the exchange of information between people and changing their behaviors to achieve a good performance. Besides, the main requirement for the organizational stability is the organizational climate that helps achieve the job satisfaction, maintain the high spirits, increase understanding between workers and the supreme administration, and build trust and respect inside the organization or between the organization and its environment. This can be achieved through the exchange of information and the explanation of the organization general goals⁴.

Different classifications tackled the types of communication, mainly the classification that divides the communication inside the organization into formal and informal. The latter is less discussed because it takes place far from the organizational and professional frames of the organization, and takes a social and human nature; however, its influence may exceed the formal. It is defined as that communication that is exercised under human and social relations far from the formal context inside or outside the organization. It is vital in the formation of the informal organization and promotes positives motivating roles. However, it may have negative effects if the personal interests are prioritized or conflicts emerge⁵. Thus, according to this definition, and unlike what we previously said about the possibility of the informal communication to compete the formal in unifying efforts, transferring information, and bringing closer the attitudes, the random use of the informal communication may have negative effects on the organization as a whole. Furthermore, this communication may take place outside the organization, where common topics are discussed regardless the aim, as stated in the definition by Ketfi (2016) who sees that the informal communication is the one that includes informal interactions between coworkers during the exchange of ideas and attitudes regarding the topics related to their jobs, or when exchanging information about their jobs or a common interesting topic in

The informal communication as a mechanism to support the processes of knowledge management in the organization: a critical theoretical view——Hamouda /Benzerouk informal meetings and occasions⁶. To sum up, the informal communication takes human and social nature and allows the exchange of information, ideas, and experiences between the individuals or groups in a fast manner. Besides, it creates comfort, as it takes place far from the protocols and complexities of the formal communication.

1.3 The characteristics of information communication:

As the other types of communication inside the organization, the informal has different features, as follows:

It is a spontaneous expressive method that provides a high number of information that is very rapidly transferred. Besides, it helps achieve psychological gains thanks to the possibility of exchanging information, ideas, and attitudes far from the formal problems and harassments⁷. In addition, it is changing because it is linked to the fast continuously changing trends of people, and is not limited to a given space since it may occur inside and outside the organization and provide an emotional satisfaction after the professional pressures. Regardless its space and time, the informal communication is characterized with spontaneity, as people recurrently exercise it when discussing topics and solving problems which they may not be able to discuss or solve in the formal context.

Additionally, the ability to satisfy the urgent need to orally express what is in our minds alleviates the stress resulting inside the organization from the formal authority exercised by the formal administration. The speech about the informal communication nets does not necessarily imply chaos and unrapprochement; rather, the rapprochement of ideas, experiences, attitudes, and language may ensure the stability of the information organization, as is the case of the formal communication. This is what Simon & Martin stated in their work “the Organizations”, as there are two factors to form the informal communication nets, namely the efficiency and use. In this regard, the possession of language and a common experience makes people more likely to establish informal communication nets. On the other hand, people who use a given tool in their jobs lean to reusing it in the social context. Thus, this communication is not a mere pot for rumors, as it may be necessary for the organization coherence and achievement of social characters and interests⁸. Besides, it has negative outcomes, mainly the distortion and falsification of information. The risks that may happen under the informal organization are many and big, as they include the falsification of events, exchange of distorted information, spying, and propaganda⁹. These negative aspects need to be solved so as not to devalue the informal communication. Moreover, other aspects like the informal communication may lead to the informal organization, in addition to other aspects found out by Flippo Edwin in the 1960s, namely:

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- The marginalization of the workers, what pushes them to gather outside the formal context.
- The failure of the formal communication in unifying the efforts and achieving cooperation.
- The social pressures and ideological and political affiliations¹⁰.

In the same vein, this communication can be affected by different factors, including:

- Communication: this factor is basically related to the quality of information spread to the members of the organization. If the information satisfies their needs, they shall respect the orders of the higher administration. Thus, there is a need for hidden organizations if the information provided to the members is not transparent and may pave the way for the emergence of informal groups that shall spread rumors.

- The process of supervision: the role of the supervisor is not limited to giving orders and adjusting behaviors, as he has to focus on the psychosocial aspects of the members and assign them with tasks that suit their potentials and aspirations to establish good connections with them. The reliance on the formal method without care for the psychosocial aspect encourages the emergence of informal groups to satisfy the needs unavailable in the formal organization.

- Participation in decision making: the exclusion of the members from decision making encourages the emergence of informal groups to exercise pressure on the official organization and hinder decision execution; this creates struggles and conflicts¹¹.

2. An introduction to knowledge management:

2.1 Definition of knowledge management:

The emergence of knowledge management is one of the contemporary intellectual trends in administration, as it represents the knowledge accumulations that allow the members of the organization to widely participate in the activities of their organization relying on the knowledge dimensions and the available accumulation¹². The expression “knowledge management” refers to the efforts of the organizations to manage some or all the knowledge as one of the resources just like the fixed assets and human force¹³. These definitions show the importance of seriously dealing with knowledge that is the outcome of dealing, analyzing, and organizing information and data obtained in the official context in its personal, social, professional, or environmental dimension.

2.2 The aims of knowledge management:

Knowledge management aims at:

- Collecting and storing explicit and implicit information, and using it to perform the different processes inside the organization.
- Establishing an intellectual base that can be referred to in solving the issues inside the organization, and sharing it to improve the individuals' level.
- Increasing innovation by encouraging individuals to launch initiatives and develop, learn, and create bigger value in their fields.
- Making the organization more flexible thanks to the use of knowledge in developing and launching new services and products.

2.3 The knowledge management processes:

- Diagnosis: the structure of the knowledge system in the organization requires the diagnosis of knowledge and its use or detection; i.e., whether it is available in the minds of the workers, in the systems, or in the procedures. To create knowledge that is diagnosed, the organization must identify the size and quality of the available knowledge and compare them to the size and quality of the required knowledge to determine the efforts needed for the organization ongoing knowledge investment. Then, the sources of knowledge that supply the elements of the produced value are chosen. Later, knowledge is acquired, organized, and delivered to the workers¹⁴. The phase of diagnosis is one of the processes on which the rest of phases are build, as it identifies who shall diagnose, the nature of target knowledge and information, and how the information shall be organized and used by the organization later. The aim of this phase is not limited to the search for, and access to, information; rather, it is about the organization to move to correct paths where it can be used.

- The process of acquisition: many scholars, including (Lim et al., 2003), pointed that the sources of knowledge acquisition may be internal, and that knowledge may come from participation of experiences and practices, attendance of conferences, dialogues, communication between work groups and the director or customers, or from the financial and economic data. Besides, knowledge may come from external sources thanks to the technological developments, including internet. Moreover, the organization gets knowledge from the marketing surveys, the academic researches, the industrial experts, the counselors, or the new workers¹⁵.

Regardless the sources of information, it must be stored for the longest period and delivered to the workers to yield an added value. The question of empowering the individuals to access information inside the organization is one of the topics that raise core issues related to the nature of information that can be shared, the people concerned with empowerment, and the possibility of achieving real benefits after empowerment. In order to ensure the environment that encourages empowerment and information sharing, the organizational culture that encourages this must prevail and

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be supported by the legal frames that protect the process, the individuals, the information, and the knowledge.

- The process of generation: the concept of knowledge management is based on the processes of knowledge formation through the use of the accumulation of knowledge that is available in the organization to generate a new knowledge and take advantage of the interactions between the knowledge holders inside the organization and the markets and the competitive environment to generate a new unprecedented knowledge¹⁶. Besides, knowledge generation takes place through the participation of work teams in new practices that help identify the problems and find innovative solutions¹⁷. The process of generation is the outcome of the diagnosis and acquisition because the acquired knowledge must find a place in reality, through either providing new ideas, changing thinking patterns, reshaping the relations, and regulating the limits and prerogatives.

3. Communication and knowledge management:

Communication has a key role in pushing people to sharing knowledge and experiences they acquired, mainly the knowledge stored in the brains after intellectual, social, and emotional experiences. The informal communication is the median in this regard. Many organizations lost much knowledge and heritage due to internal conflicts or death of experienced people. This confirms the need for insisting on the increasing role of informal communication in all the processes of knowledge management. In this context, the informal communication helps build human relations among the workers, know and spread information and ideas that can be mentioned formally, and correct wrong information¹⁸. The speed and spontaneousness of communication in the informal communication is a qualitative addition to people and the organization because the informal communication allows access to the real balance of information and knowledge, mainly those stored in minds. In addition, the same communicative aspect may contribute to inheriting ideas, experiences, and knowledge from one generation to another inside the organization despite that the paper or electronic documentation of these ideas and experiences is inevitable.

We can see the roles of informal communication in the processes of knowledge management, namely diagnosis, acquisition, and generation. Nevertheless, this communication cannot achieve its results without the guarantees or the organizational climate that encourages people to share their beliefs, experiences, and values, which must be used to achieve outcomes that affect the development of the organization internally and externally because everybody in the organization contributes to enriching the knowledge accumulation.

On the other hand, it is necessary to transform the knowledge obtained from the informal communication to plans, projects, and effective administration methods that

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lift up the internal and external environments of the organization. Besides, the knowledge paths that do not serve the organization must be contained. The knowledge transfer needs organizational procedures, a good organizational culture, and other official mechanisms like reports, training manuals, planned meetings, learning, seminars, and discussions that take place outside the formal context. Here, we must insist on the integration of these mechanisms to transfer and share knowledge¹⁹.

Due to the big importance of knowledge sharing and transfer in knowledge management, we must shed light on the role of communication, as different communication channels are necessary to get knowledge easily and share it in the administrative units and departments. The easy communication and the different channels facilitate knowledge access, transfer, and use²⁰.

The speech about communication leads us to speak about the formal and informal communication channels and their relation with knowledge management. Despite the high importance of the formal communication tools inside the organizations in fostering interaction, mutual understanding, and knowledge transfer, we cannot deny the need for the informal ones. The negative outcomes of such communication, like the spread of rumors, the disruption of decision making, and the creation of personal and professional struggles can be contained when the managers know the social, psychological, and professional concerns of the workers and master the paths of knowledge that flows informally to promote the common interests.

The negligence of the informal communication may have negative outcomes on knowledge management in all its phases, as we may witness difficulties in the rapprochement between the higher and lower authorities and in the exploitation, control, filter, and renewal of knowledge. To take advantage of the informal communication, it is necessary to change the negative attitude towards it and supervise the inevitable activity exercised by people in the informal organization, mainly regarding the different paths of knowledge and its management. For the diagnosis, the organization may systematically collect information and knowledge from its workers; however, it may achieve the same gains and more far from the formal organization. This may take place in the organization, in public spaces, etc. Regardless the space and time, trust must be granted to the individuals and their contributions must be valued. As for the process of acquisition, many professional experiences are transferred informally according to the emotional and psychological state of the information provider. In this regard, many individuals who refuse sharing information and experiences fear losing their interests and positions, do not feel motivated because the proposals are not taken into consideration, or want the status-quo to persist. As for the process of storage, many information and experiences are stored informally in the minds.

Based on what was said, we can sum up the responsibility of the administration towards the informal communication as follows:

- Knowing the effect of businesses, behaviors, and decisions inside the organization on the informal communication to take suitable decisions and succeed.
- Studying and analyzing the channels of informal communication to take advantage of them.
- Interpreting and explaining the data, information, and trends of the informal communication in all the administrative levels.
- Identifying the influential workers in this communication so that the administration can deal with them all when needed and supply the correct information and facts²¹.
- Increasing the influence of formal communications on making changes to serve the members.
- Encouraging the workers to express complaints and concerns without reservation.
- Excluding the concept of formality in its rigid meaning by ensuring a mutual interaction in performing the tasks²².

Results and discussion:

Our findings show that:

- The informal communication is one of the important aspects of communication in any organization. It is characterized with the irregular flow of information and knowledge and the low trust between the workers.
- The process of knowledge management is very important in this changing world, where knowledge is vital for dominating the market.
- The organization must focus on, and take advantage of, the informal communication as the other communicative aspects.
- The informal communication affects the nature of information and knowledge exchanged between the workers inside the organization. However, it may provide a knowledge balance that supports the activity of the organization if the stakeholders manage to control its negatives.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the organization includes different communicative aspects, mainly the formal and the informal. In this regard, it has to deal with both of them equally, as they have different, but complementary, roles. The informal communication raises debates about its advantages and drawbacks, and the organization must show wisdom and adopt a clear communicative strategy to take advantage of its positives and contain its negatives. In this context, the informal communication may establish good relations and provide information that is not found in the formal. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on it and integrate it with the other aspects of communication to achieve the general aims of the organization.

The challenges that face the organization in dealing with the informal communication have increased with the adoption of modern technologies and social media that supply the audience with wrong information on the organization. Thus, it is necessary to accept this communication with its advantages and drawbacks and know the influential workers to integrate them in taking decisions and avoid the spread of fake news that hinder the work of the organization.

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