

# Barriers to communication

You may have experienced the situation of not receiving a message that was intended for you. In organisations, communication is vital. There are times, however, that messages do not reach the relevant person on time. Broken or ineffective communication is a major problem across businesses. It can decrease motivation and productivity and create conflict.

According to [this article \(https://www.continuant.com/blog/2016/01/communication-barriers-in-businesses\)](https://www.continuant.com/blog/2016/01/communication-barriers-in-businesses), 39% of employee time is usually spent on role-specific tasks, and almost 61% is spent on communication: replying to emails, communicating with external and internal stakeholders, and searching for and gathering information.

According to other research, almost 75% of all business communications do not achieve their desired results. This means that workers are spending a lot of time communicating in an ineffective way.

## Types of communication barriers

A barrier to communication in businesses is anything that interferes with the ability of employees to convey information in a timely and accurate manner. There are a number of types of barriers to communication in business.

### Cultural barriers

Most businesses will have employees from different cultural backgrounds; this has increased with globalisation. While this diversity brings new perspectives, it can also lead to cultural clashes. Cultural clashes occur when people have different understandings of 'how we do things around here'. (HL students learned about cultural clashes in [Section 2.5 \(/study/app/y12-business-management-a-hl-may-2024/sid-351-cid-174702/book/the-big-picture-id-39398\)](/study/app/y12-business-management-a-hl-may-2024/sid-351-cid-174702/book/the-big-picture-id-39398).) For example, generation barriers can exist between younger and older workers. Young workers can often adapt to changes in technology more quickly than older workers.

### Linguistic barriers

When internal and external stakeholders speak different languages, this can cause communication difficulties. Businesses that operate in a multinational context will face particular challenges with communication, though translation technologies have

alleviated problems to some degree.

The use of jargon – terminology and technical phrases used by people in certain professions and industries – may also be a barrier to communication. Jargon can be confusing to people who are unfamiliar with it. If the receiver is unable to understand the terminology being used by the sender (such as in technical or legal documents), then they may need an expert to help them interpret it.

## Emotional barriers

Managing or avoiding stress can support good communication. Strong emotions like anger or frustration can affect rational decision-making, cause conflict and hinder the transfer of information in the organisation. A ‘bad work day’ might, for example, impact a worker emotionally, leaving them feeling angry or depressed. This may then hinder their ability to understand what other workers around them are trying to communicate.



**Figure 1.** Strong emotions can become barriers to communication.

Credit: Westend61, Getty Images

## Psychological and physiological barriers

Fear of public speaking, speech disorders, depression and other psychological or physiological issues may make it more difficult for the sender to convey information.

## Physical barriers

Business communication may be affected by closed doors in the office, the inability to talk to or reach senior managers, or faulty equipment. For example, holding a team meeting in a large, noisy, open-plan office may make it difficult for team members to hear the message intended for them.

## Organisational barriers

A business may have complex organisational structures that can delay or hinder communication. When there are many levels of hierarchy, this can delay information transfer and increase the chances of miscommunication. If an organisation has a long chain of command or tall hierarchy, it may be difficult to pass messages through the many different levels.

## Attitude and personality barriers

People in an organisation will have different personalities. Some may be outspoken and extrovert; some may be shy and introverted; some may be ambiverts. Differences in personality may lead to misinterpretation of communication.



**Figure 2.** Differences in attitude or personality can lead to misinterpretation.

Credit: praetorianphoto, Getty Images

## Perception barriers

People in organisations may view or perceive things differently. This should be taken into consideration when making decisions.

## Technological barriers

Many businesses are dependent on communication technology in order to run their operations and communicate with customers and suppliers. If the technology is faulty – for example if a mobile phone is not working, or a computer has a hardware or software problem – the user may not be able to communicate. Similarly, if an internal or external network goes down, users may not be able to use their communications devices.

## Communications skills of the sender and receiver

A message that lacks clarity may confuse the receiver. For example, notification of a meeting that does not specify the start time or where the meeting is located will not be helpful for the recipient.

## Form (type) of communication

The form of communication chosen may affect how the message is received. If an inappropriate form of communication is used, it can pose a barrier to communication. For example, displaying an important and urgent message to all staff on a company bulletin board may not reach all employees in a timely manner. In this instance, an instant electronic communication such as an email or text message sent to all employees would be a more appropriate choice.

### Concept

#### Change

Change is an act or process through which something becomes different. Businesses operate in a dynamic world with constant change. Understanding change involves researching and responding to signals (feedback) in the external environment and evaluating causes, processes and consequences.

Dealing with change requires good communication. Firstly, businesses need good communication both internally and externally to know how they should change. And when change is necessary, they need to communicate effectively with employees to avoid confusion, uncertainty and frustration. Communication is necessary for

employees to rethink current operations and move into a new situation. It is important that all employees, from leadership to entry-level employees, develop the competencies required to communicate effectively through change.

### Activity

**Learner profile:** Thinkers  
**Approaches to learning:** Thinking skills (critical thinking)

Consider the types of barriers to communication you have just read about, and which are listed in this table.

Type of communication barrier	Rank
Cultural barrier	
Linguistic barrier	
Emotional barrier	
Psychological and physiological barrier	
Organisational barrier	
Attitudinal and personality barrier	
Physical barrier	
Perception barrier	
Technological barrier	
Communications skills of the sender and receiver	
Form (type) of communication	

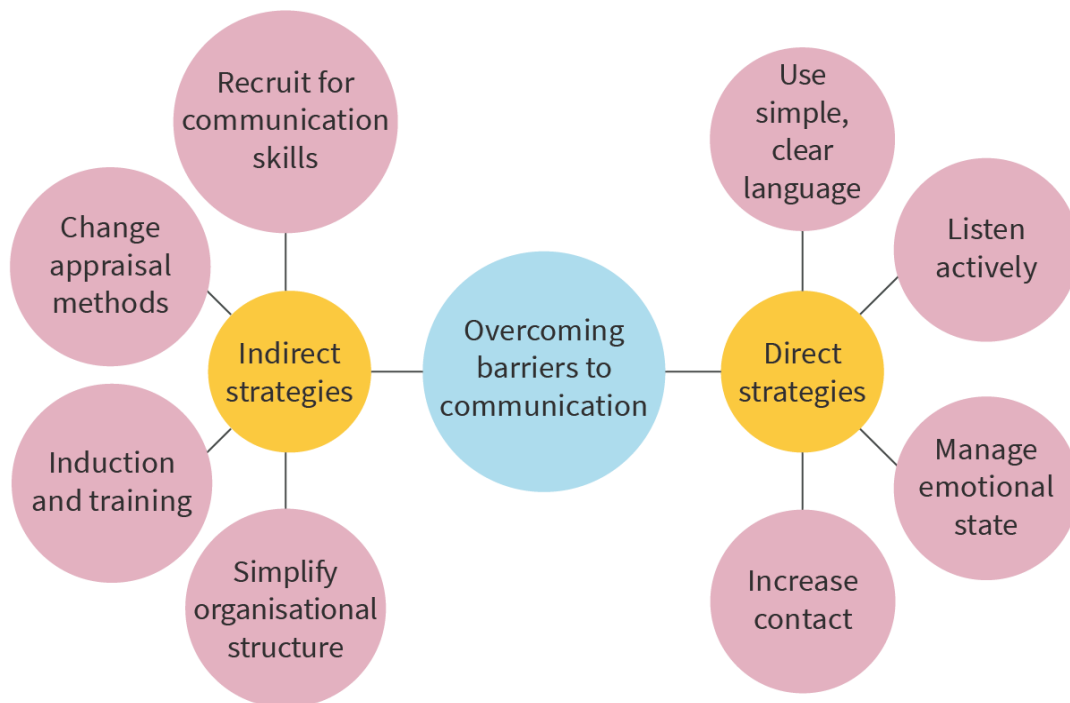
- Copy the table and rank the barriers to communication in order according to how difficult they would be for a business to resolve. (Start with ‘1’ for the

most difficult to resolve.)

- Compare your list with that of another student and discuss why you ranked the barriers as you did. Discuss any differences in your ranking with your partner.

## Strategies to overcome communication barriers

The barriers to communication explained above can hinder the operations of a business. There are a number of strategies, both direct and indirect, that businesses can take to improve communication in the organisation.



**Figure 3.** Overcoming barriers to communication.

### Direct strategies to improve communication

These are strategies that employees can use themselves in their day-to-day interactions to improve communication.

- **Using simple and clear language.** Written and spoken communication should use clear language so that everyone

understands the message. Jargon should be avoided, until and unless it is understood by everyone involved.

- **Active listening.** Employees at every level should be active listeners. Asking questions and repeating what the communicator has said to confirm understanding are two important ways to listen actively. Body language can also improve the quality of information conveyed between colleagues.
- **Managing emotional states.** When people feel overwhelmed, they may communicate frustration or anger along with the information they wish to convey. This can cause misunderstandings and even conflict, so managing emotional states at work is important for communication.
- **Increasing contact.** Managers and employees who spend more time together may be able to better judge when and how to use formal and informal communication appropriately. Establishing constructive relationships opens the channels of communication, increasing feedback that can then be used to improve the organisation.



**Figure 4.** Active listening, for example repeating back what someone has just said to confirm understanding, can improve communication.

Credit: Jose Luis Pelaez Inc, Getty Images

## Indirect strategies to improve communication

There are a number of changes that a business can make to the organisation that should also improve communication:

- **Recruiting for communication skills.** You learned about the recruitment process in [Section 2.4.5 \(/study/app/y12-business-management-a-hl-may-2024/sid-351-cid-174702/book/methods-of-recruitment-hl-id-39418\)](/study/app/y12-business-management-a-hl-may-2024/sid-351-cid-174702/book/methods-of-recruitment-hl-id-39418). Human resource managers should include good communication skills in the person specification for open positions in the organisation. They could even formally test communication skills, where certain skills are very important for the job.
- **Induction and other training.** In [Section 2.4.7 \(/study/app/y12-business-management-a-hl-may-2024/sid-351-cid-174702/book/training-id-39420\)](/study/app/y12-business-management-a-hl-may-2024/sid-351-cid-174702/book/training-id-39420), you learned about various training methods, including induction, off-the-job training and on-the-job training. When an employee joins a business,



induction training could help them understand the expectations around formal and informal communication in the organisation. Where cultural or linguistic differences may be an issue, the business can also provide training to raise cultural awareness or training in the use of translation software. As communication methods change, for example as they did during the COVID-19 pandemic, businesses can offer training to expand the skills of their employees.

- **Simplifying organisational structure.** In Subtopic 2.4 (</study/app/y12-business-management-a-hl-may-2024/sid-351-cid-174702/book/the-big-picture-id-39054>), you learned about organisational structure, including tall and flat structures. When organisations get too ‘tall’ the many levels of hierarchy and long chains of command can impede communication. When this occurs, businesses may consider delayering to simplify organisational structure.
- **Changing appraisal methods.** In Section 2.4.4 (</study/app/y12-business-management-a-hl-may-2024/sid-351-cid-174702/book/appraisal-hl-id-39417>), you learned about appraisal methods. A move to more formative appraisal can improve feedback in the organisation, resulting in more consistent and effective communication between employees.



**Figure 5.** Training in new technologies is important to ensure that communication continues to be effective through change.

Credit: Luis Alvarez, Getty Images

**Activity**

**Learner profile:** Thinkers

**Approaches to learning:** Thinking skills (critical thinking)

The list in the table below indicates some situations that can arise as a result of barriers to communication. Copy the table and complete it by identifying ways to overcome these barriers.

Situation arising from communication barrier	How to overcome these barriers
Lack of understanding	
Speaking a different language	
Aggression and anxiety	
Inability to complete tasks	

Situation arising from communication barrier	How to overcome these barriers
Cultural differences	