

Segment: Basic Principles of Communication

Topic: Meaning and Process of Communication

Meaning and Process of Communication

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Meaning and Process of Communication



Introduction

Communication is an important component of success in our personal and professional lives. It is the key to building favourable relationships. It is a part of 'soft skills', as opposed to the domain or technical knowledge, which is a part of 'hard skills.' A formal study of business communication is important since the average business executive today spends a good part of his/her time on the job communicating in some form or the other.

Telecommuting is a work arrangement in which employees work from a remote location usually their homes and communicate with their company using electronic means. It is flourishing both in Australia and other countries. Telecommuting may significantly decrease interpersonal communication requirements and is, therefore affecting effective communication.

Meyers, N., & Hearn, G. of the Queensland University of Technology surveyed about 39 telecommuters working for 12 different Australian organisations. The participants were working in the following different categories:

- Administrators
- Computer system designers
- Journalists
- Legislative drafters
- Managerial consultants
- Project workers
- Public relations consultants/executives
- Sales-marketing personnel
- Solicitors

About 46% of the participants in the survey were female telecommuters. Meetings were considered important formal office communication and were conducted based on the following three situations:

- Complexity of task and required feedback
- Management predictions for contacting their telecommuters
- Need for the currency of information

Thus, the meetings were expected to happen zero times or weekly.

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The satisfaction levels of telecommuters varied across the three situations. For example, the sales-marketing telecommuters, met with their superiors weekly, to share what they were doing and set goals for the week.

About 18% of the participants found meetings either difficult to attend or a disturbance to their work-at-home schedule.

Also, the lack of communication on the meeting schedules made few telecommuters miss the meetings.

Daily telephone or other forms of contact was the main means of communication for nearly 30% of telecommuters. Daily communication through channels like e-mail, a telephone was viewed as an important way of communication for sales-marketing telecommuters. Once the communication patterns were established, the telecommuters began to use two-way communication.

Other participants of the survey pointed out that co-workers were reluctant to call them at home. Consequently, they sometimes did not receive critical information on time. Some participants pointed out that they did receive memos even though they were absent. Memos were considered an important part of formal communication and could be related to another interview theme: timeliness of communication. Timeliness of communication is more important for telecommuters since they lack proximity and a quick referral to co-workers as well as other information.

(Source: <http://www.teleworkaustralia.net.au/doclibrary/public/Research/AJCArticleMeyersHearnTelecommuting.pdf>)



Learning Objectives

At the end of this topic, you will be able to:

- define communication
- describe the characteristics of communication
- describe the key elements in the communication process.

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1. Communication – Meaning

Communication in simple terms is a transfer of information between people, resulting in a common understanding between them.

Communication has been defined differently by different writers and behavioural theorists.

Some popular definitions are as follows:

- According to Newman and Summer, “Communication is an exchange of facts, ideas, opinions or emotions by two or more persons”.
- According to Allen Louis, “It is the sum of all the things one person does when he wants to create an understanding in the mind of another”.
- Bellows, Gilson, and Odirone define communication as “A communion by words, letters, symbols or messages, and as a way that one organisation member shares meaning with the other”.
- Hoben defines communication as “The verbal interchange of thoughts or ideas”.
- In the words of Anderson, “Communication is the process by which we understand others and in turn, endeavour to be understood by them. It is dynamic, constantly changing and shifting in response to the total situation”.
- According to Berelson and Steiner, “Communication is the transmission of information, ideas, emotions, skills, etc. by the use of symbols, words, pictures, figures, graphs, etc.”.
- In the words of Fotheringham, “Communication is a process involving the selection, production, and transmission of signs in such a way as to help a receiver perceive a meaning similar to that in the mind of the communicator”.

From all these definitions, it is clear that communication has the following characteristics:

- **It is unavoidable** – It is impossible not to communicate, since we communicate unintentionally all the time, even without the use of words. Our body language, the way we dress, the importance we give to arriving on time, our behaviour, and the physical environment in which we work, all convey certain messages to others.
- **It is a two-way exchange of information** – Communication is sharing of information between two or more persons, with continuous feedback.

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- **It is a process** – Each message is part of a process and does not occur in isolation. This means that the meaning attached to a message depends on what has happened before and on the present context. For example, your boss's response to your request for promotion will depend on your past relationship with him, as well as his mood at that particular moment.
- **It involves a sender and a receiver of information** – Any communication starts with a sender of a message and requires a receiver to attach some meaning to that message.
- **It could be verbal or non-verbal** – communication could be through the use of words in spoken or written form, or through the use of body languages such as gestures and facial expressions.
- **It is successful when the receiver interprets the meaning in the same way as that intended by the sender** – The receiver may not always attach the same meaning to a message as the sender. When the message is wrongly interpreted, communication is a failure. This may be due to several reasons, which we will examine later in this topic.
- **It is a dynamic process** – Communication involves sharing of thoughts and experiences in a meaningful manner while assimilating, processing, and responding to the person one is talking with. The mode and manner of communication may vary according to the situation.
- **It enables understanding** – Communication enables people to understand the necessity for change, the reasons for performing certain things, the method of implementing processes, and the importance of their actions.

2. Communication Process

Let us now look at communication as a process and discuss its key elements.

Irrespective of the setting in which communication takes place or the number of people that are involved, all communication consists of certain key elements. The communication model shown in figure 1 illustrates each of these elements.

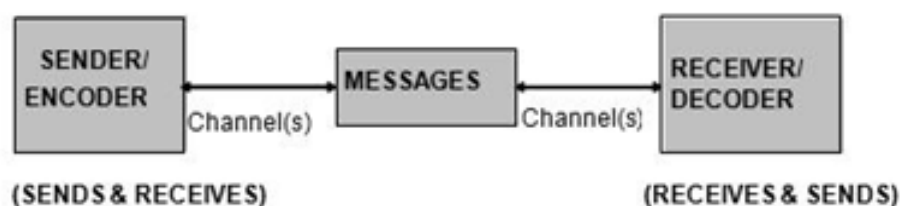


Fig. 1: Communication Model

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The elements involved in communication are:

- **Sender or encoder** – This is the person who transmits a message. For example, a manager writing a letter to a consultant after a meeting or a sales manager making a presentation to the sales team. Here the manager is the sender.
- **Receiver or decoder** – The person who notices and decodes or attaches some meaning to a message. Decoding may not always be accurate, and a wrong meaning may be attached to a message. For example, a friendly joke might be taken as an offence, or feedback given to a subordinate by a superior might be taken in the wrong sense.
- **Message** – This is any signal that triggers the response of a receiver. Messages may be intentional (as in the example of the sales presentation by a manager to the sales team) or unintentional (non-verbal signals such as yawns that convey the message of boredom).
- **Channel** – This refers to the medium or the method used to deliver the message. As a business executive, you will often have a choice of channels. For example, you could communicate with a customer through a letter, email or telephone.
- **Feedback** – Most communication is two-way. Receivers generally respond to messages. For example, students may ask questions during a lecture session and an employer may tell an employee that he has to think about his proposal. This response to a sender's message is called feedback. This kind of feedback is oral. Sometimes feedback can also be given in a written form. For example, a manager can send a written response to a customer's letter of complaint. At other times, feedback could be non-verbal, as in smiles and nods of appreciation during a talk or presentation. Even failure to respond could be considered as feedback, since it may indicate a lack of interest or indifference to the sender's message. Due to the element of feedback, people are simultaneously senders and receivers of information in face-to-face communication.
- **Context** – This refers to the setting in which the communication takes place and could sometimes determine the success or failure of the communication. Context can be classified as follows:
 - **Physical context** – This refers to the physical surroundings. For example, a work or social environment, in which the communication takes place. Asking your boss for a promotion

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might be received differently, depending on whether the communication takes place in your office, your boss' office, at a company party or over lunch at a restaurant.

- **Social context** – This refers to the relationship between the sender and the receiver. Taking the same example, asking for a promotion is likely to be received differently, depending on how well you get along with your boss and whether you are personal friends or not.
- **Chronological context** – This refers to time related factors that could influence communication. For example, is your request made first thing in the morning or at the fag end of the day? Is it made during or after work hours? Is it made at a time when the company is going through problems such as a strike in the factory, or major losses?
- **Cultural context** – This refers to the similarity of backgrounds between the sender and the receiver, such as age, language, nationality, religion, and gender. These factors could influence communication favourably or unfavourably.

Each of these key elements contributes to the success of communication. In other words, communication can go wrong if any of the following elements go wrong:

- The wrong person sends the message. For example, a junior accountant in a company writing a letter to a bank, asking for a loan for a project worth several crores, is not likely to get the bank's approval.
- The message is unclear or badly worded. There may also be too many messages, leading to confusion and information overload.
- The wrong channel of communication is chosen. Placing an advertisement for a liquor product in a religious magazine, for example, is not likely to be received favourably.
- The message is wrongly interpreted, i.e., the receiver attaches the wrong meaning to the message.
- The feedback is not adequate to ensure understanding.
- Physical, physiological, or psychological noise distorts the message.
- The communication takes place in the wrong physical, social, chronological, or cultural context.

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3. Summary

Here is a quick recap of what we have learnt so far:

- Communication in simple terms is a transfer of information between people, resulting in a common understanding between them.
- Communication has been defined differently by different writers and behavioural theorists.
- From all the definitions, it is clear that communication has the following characteristics:
 - It is unavoidable
 - It is a two-way exchange of information
 - It is a process
 - It involves a sender and a receiver of information
 - It could be verbal or non-verbal
 - It is successful when the receiver interprets the meaning in the same way as that intended by the sender
 - It is a dynamic process and
 - It enables understanding
- The elements involved in communication are:
 - Sender or encoder
 - Receiver or decoder
 - Message
 - Channel
 - Feedback and
 - Context

4. Glossary

Telecommuting	A work arrangement in which an employee works from home for a business and communicates through the use of a personal computer equipped with modem and communications software.
Decoder	A device or a person undoing the encoding to retrieve the original message.
Encoder	A device or a person which converts the message into some chunks of messages known only to it.