

Mobile Communication Tools in the Management and Governance of Institutions of Higher Learning in South Africa

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Abstract: This paper aims to evaluate the effectiveness of mobile communication tools in the management and governance of institutions of higher learning in South Africa. A sample of 523 participants was chosen to fully represent the staff and students. The methodology adopted in this paper followed a desktop study approach. The lack of effective communication tools is considered one of the reasons why institutions fail to realise their potential. Institutions fail to effectively communicate with stakeholders despite availability of a range of communication tools. It is possible that some of these communication tools are not accessible by some stakeholders. The paper reveals the following important aspects: that employees become happy, cooperative and more productive when the management communicates strategic matters with them on a regular basis, when internal stakeholders are poorly informed, they may lose confidence in the institution, and that could negatively affect their morale more especially when they are not consulted on matters that affect them and the institution and that lack of training opportunities for employees can result in employees failing to meet the employer's expectations in terms of performance. The paper recommends regular training on the use of latest communication technologies as important for organisational communication strategy.

Keywords: Governance, Management, Mobile communication tools, Learning, Teaching

1. Introduction

The lack of effective mobile communication tools is considered one of the reasons why institutions fail to realise their potential. Institutions fail to effectively communicate with stakeholders despite availability of a range of communication tools. It is possible that some of these communication tools are not accessible by some stakeholders. Institutions of higher learning have various communication tools for both internal and external stakeholders. The main challenges that institutions of higher learning face are lack of identification of proper and relevant communication tools, poor communication of strategic plan and ineffective meetings to keep stakeholders abreast of developments within the institutions. When stakeholders are poorly informed they lose trust in the institution, particularly executive leadership, and undermine the success of the institution resulting in their failure to perform in the best interest of the institution. Poor bottom-up communication can result in employees failing to understand the expectations of the institution which could eventually lead to communication vacuum. A possible communication gap is likely to be filled by speculations. There seems to be a lack

of robust evidence demonstrating the impact of communication tools on governance at institutions of higher learning. While effective communication between the institution and its stakeholders is vital for getting the buy-in of stakeholders which leads to effective management and governance, this has not been realised at most universities.

A key aspect of good governance is how the management and stakeholders relate to each other and the communication tools used to share information. It may be difficult for institutions of higher learning to be effective in the absence of communication tools that enable the two-way exchange of information with stakeholders. In the absence of effective communication tools, structures and processes, management may not be in a position of providing relevant service to the stakeholders. The absence of relevant communication tools may negatively affect the identification of the needs of stakeholders. A lack of communication tools in institutions of higher learning may lead to poor consultation and dialogue between the institution and its stakeholders. Thus, stakeholder understanding, and support of institutional policies and plans becomes difficult, particularly by internal stakeholders.

2. Theories of Organisational Communication

According to Miller (2003), Organisational communication is defined as communication that has to do with the way the process of communication can be influenced within an institution. On the other hand, Angelopulo and Barker (2013) consider organisational communication as the process of transmitting meanings and information through various tools of communication, both in and outside the institution. Organisational communication is considered to be amongst other responsible for disseminating information to stakeholders for the purpose of keeping them abreast of developments taking place within their respective institutions. The communication tools that institutions use to communicate messages differ from target audience to target audience. For instance, if the institution would like to communicate with prospective suppliers to express their interest to provide certain services, the most appropriate communication tool will be a newspaper (Miller, 2003; Angelopulo & Barker, 2006; Green, 2010; Angelopulo & Barker, 2013; van der Walt, 2013). However, to effectively communicate with students who are registered within the institution, different types of social media like facebook and whatsapp could be more relevant and effective. This is because the youth make use of smartphones which could enable them to access social network wherever they are. Organisational Theory maintains that institutions, irrespective of their size, comprise of, amongst others, human resource or personnel that is responsible for generating communication for both internal and external stakeholders with the primary aim of achieving organisational objectives. It is therefore important for these personnel to familiarise themselves with the various stakeholder's preferred communication tools so that such tools could be used for various stakeholders. According to Sotelo (2004) organisational communication theory is intended to promote the positive image of the institution by ensuring that stakeholders are well informed. Institutions have communicators who are responsible for educating and informing the public for creating positive attitudes towards the respective institutions. Well informed stakeholders are likely to support the vision and mission of their respective institutions (Galbrath, 2005; Bermejo, 2008; Vacher, 2010; Bouzon, 2010; Lichtman, 2013).

Proponents of organisational theory maintain that when information is communicated with various

target audience it is of critical importance to consider the capacity of the recipients of the information to receive the messages. If this is not considered, the result will be information overload and as such the messages may not achieve the intended objectives. It is therefore imperative to devise strategies of managing the attention of the intended target audience and to keep the audience focused. Identification of proper communication tools is of vital importance (Davenport & Beck, 2002; Galbrath, 2005; Bermejo, 2008; Vacher, 2010; Scott, 2017).

Irrespective of the communication tools used at various institutions of higher learning, insults by fellow colleagues at workplace introduce inaccuracies that eventually cause misinterpretation of messages. Yelling at the workplace, more especially by the supervisor, is considered to be inefficient and counterproductive. Curses and insults at workplace reflect bad human relations and staff tend to be demotivated, impacting negatively on the performance of the institution. Organisational communication entails an organised collection of human beings who work interdependently within an institution with the intention of achieving common goals (Richmond & McCroskey, 2009). Organisational communication cannot operate without considering the organisational structure which involves the way organisations function within their external and internal environment (Miller, 2003; Angelopulo & Barker, 2006; Richmond & McCroskey, 2009; Green, 2010; Angelopulo & Barker, 2013; Scott, 2017).

3. Mobile Communication Tools

The mobile communication tools play various roles in the effective management and governance of the institutions of higher learning. Electronic tools of communication create challenges to some of the stakeholders at the institutions of higher learning, more especially those who are not computer literate (Steyn & Puth, 2000; Fielding, 2001; Miller, 2006; Emmanuel & Ngiye, 2011). However, the effectiveness of such communication tools is not evident in the day to day activities. Below are some of the mobile communication tools that are used at institutions of higher learning.

3.1 Tele-Working

This is a type of communication tool that entails a situation where employees work away from the office, through the telephone. There is however

a perception that employees become motivated and productive when they physically interact with colleagues. This implies that working away from the office reduces the bond that exists between and among employees and colleagues. Because of the use of telephone when colleagues are away from their offices, the chances of emotional support amongst colleagues do not exist. In institutions where there is office space shortage, the use of this communication tool is more effective. It is also more effective in institutions that have a multi campus system. Because travelling to the central campus for meetings can be too expensive, meeting through the telephone becomes more cost effective (Mann *et al.*, 2000; Green, 2001; Bakker, van Emmerik & Eunema, 2006).

3.2 Smartphones

The wireless e-mail system enables communication using mobile devices including smartphones. Through the mobile phones, it is possible to send and receive e-mails at any time. The difference between the desktop computer and a smartphone is that the desktop computer is not portable, and it cannot be carried around while the smartphone can rarely be separated from the owner. The smartphones enable the user to receive and send messages promptly. This is because users are always in possession of their smartphones. Making use of smartphones contributes positively to the effective management and governance of the institution of higher learning because employees can work from wherever they are. There is no need for them to be in their respective workstations. Through this system, reports can be prepared and submitted without challenges of being in the workstation. However, the challenge with the use of smartphones is that the users hardly have social or family life. This is since they are compelled to respond and send messages even when they are off duty. This is however good for the employers who want employees to be productive (Green, 2001; Gergen, 2002; Mazmanian *et al.*, 2006).

3.2.1 Pros and Cons of Smartphones

Edwards (2002) states that institutions of higher learning provide smartphones to the employees for increasing productivity while enhancing effective management and governance. When employees use smartphones for official activities, it leads to faster decision-making process. Through smartphones, employees can access data wherever they

are, and this can be regarded as a mobile office. The use of smartphones also increases responsiveness and real time information, because staff members can work remotely. In the light of the fact that smartphones are portable, and employees had to carry them wherever they go, this however leads to the challenge of work-life balance (Edwards, 2002; Taylor, 2003; Baron, 2005; Locke, 2005; Rood, 2005).

It seems to be practically impossible to have acceptable balance of work and personal life. This is because employees are always in possession of their smartphones, they always feel pressure to respond to tasks and messages even when such messages are received after normal working hours. This implies that through the smartphones, employees are made to work long hours. This also leads to work-home interference. This is because employees are compelled to work even when they are at home. There are also instances where users of smartphones do not concentrate when they are in meetings more especially when they are communicating through smartphones when meetings are in progress (Edwards, 2002; Taylor, 2003; Baron, 2005; Locke, 2005; Rood, 2005).

4. The E-Mail in the Management and Governance of Institutions of Higher Learning

Several literatures confirmed that e-mail is considered in many institutions of higher learning as the most prevalent tool of communication. It is therefore important to consider the role of e-mail in the institutions of higher learning. This part of literature will take into consideration the aspects of e-mail that facilitates and complicate the management and governance at the institutions of higher learning. In most work environments, including at the institutions of higher learning, during this era of technology, it has become a habit that shortly after arrival in the workstation, employees tend to open their computers and start checking their e-mails. This demonstrates that the e-mail as a communication tool intrudes the working schedule. Some people are however able to structure their work schedule in such a way that they adhere to the plan, including the time to read and send e-mails (Baron, 2005; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Byron, 2008).

An e-mail is considered the most prevalent tool of communication in most institutions of higher learning. The increasing use of mobile devices at

institutions of higher learning has taken the use of e-mail to another level. As indicated above, the impact of e-mail as a communication tool will be twofold. This implies that both advantages and disadvantages of e-mail will be considered. One of the advantages of using e-mail is that there are no distance challenges and that within a very short space of time, one can communicate with someone or other people at the other end of the globe, where other tools of communication like mails sent through the post office could take days and sometime months. Unlike in face to face tools of communication, physical appearance and body language cannot be seen in e-mail. Since the impact of mobile devices in the management and governance of institutions of higher learning is relatively new, the empirical studies are still very minimal (Baron, 2005; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Byron, 2008).

4.1 Challenges of Using E-Mail at Institutions of Higher Learning

It should be noted that the challenges of using an e-mail as a communication tool at the institutions of higher learning cannot be exhausted; hence the following challenges have been identified. It is worth noting that e-mails become ineffective when the messages are too long and complicated.

4.1.1 Lack of Nonverbal Cues

One of the challenges of nonverbal cues is that the chances of misinterpreting the message are very high. This is since the same verbal message can portray a different message depending on the tone used, as well as the emotional expression. The unavailability of nonverbal cues can have some advantages when it comes to the regulation of emotions. When making use of e-mail, it is easy to avoid display of emotions. This is since after typing the messages, the sender can read over the message before it is sent off. This enables the sender to reflect on his/her emotional state and adjust the message accordingly. This implies that the sender can deliberately choose which emotions to be displayed in the e-mail. This however makes an e-mail a very safe and reliable as well as effective tool of communication (Bakker *et al.*, 2005; Bertacco & Deponte, 2005; Middleton, 2007).

4.1.2 Difference Between Sender and Receiver

The e-mail is not only used to communicate with people who are situated far from each other. For several reasons, even colleagues who operate close

to each other prefer to use e-mail as a communication tool. According to Fielding (2006), e-mails are considered to be less time consuming, more reliable and more efficient than face to face communication. One of the reasons why most institutions of higher learning prefer to use e-mail is that some people tend to respond to e-mail the moment they receive the message. This makes the e-mail as quick as a phone call. Middleton (2007) states that due to the increasing use of e-mail, the time that colleagues spend together in the institution of higher learning is perceived to be decreasing. E-mail is also perceived to facilitate employees to be separated in time and place. This implies that the likelihood that colleagues spend time together continues to decrease (Bakker *et al.*, 2005; Bertacco & Deponte, 2005; Middleton, 2007).

4.2 Use of Mobile Technology for Teaching and Learning

The emergence of information technology tools of communication has and continues to contribute immensely in the way in which teaching and learning processes are conducted in institutions of higher learning. This is mainly since such communication tools can facilitate immediate access to information that is critical for teaching and learning. Most institutions of higher learning make use of mobile communication tools for teaching and learning. The University of Venda took a decision to distribute tablets to all registered students for improving teaching and learning in 2015 academic year. This University is rural based which has signalled its intention to be a quality driven, financially sustainable higher education institution in South Africa. The distribution of tablets took place when arrangements were at an advanced stage to introduce e-learning at the University. Therefore, the tablets were intended to provide a wide array of information to students' fingerprints, since information on teaching and learning would be easier to access with the device. The handover of tablets to more than 15000 registered students demonstrated the University's commitment to encourage students to use the latest technological tools in their studies. The distribution of tablets to all students would enhance the quality of teaching and learning as well as students' research skills. For the students to be globally competitive and relevant in this century, the University management deemed it necessary to make available technological tools and the University was confident that the returns

on this investment would be invaluable to students. Most institutions of higher learning use information technology because they believe that such tools have capabilities of improving the accessibility of information, facilitation of effective communication, and the increase of cooperation and collaboration which contributes positively to the enhancement of effective management and governance at institutions of higher learning (Tinio, 2003; Wijekumar, 2005; Sife *et al.*, 2007; Ferry, 2009; Guy 2009; Huang *et al.*, 2010; Utulu, 2012).

In teaching and learning, information technology tools enhance the exchange of information between employees, students and lecturers. The exchange of information takes place through amongst other tablets, mobile phones, computers and many other devices. In some institutions, web-based learning platforms are used, and they are very helpful in addressing the challenges caused by the distance, because this takes place through amongst others, web-based conferencing, message boards, electronic mails as well as web pages. Mobile phones are also very critical in the facilitation of teaching and learning, more especially because they are cost effective compared to other information technology tools (Ferry, 2009; Guy, 2009; Huang *et al.*, 2010; Utulu, 2012).

5. The Pros and Cons of the Use of Communication Tools

The different tools of communication have both positive aspect and drawbacks. Although most institutions of higher learning are perceived to still prefer to use face to face communication tool, since committee members are involved in many other committees, some meetings do not take place due to amongst others the committee's inability to constitute the quorum. When people participate in face to face communication, the gestures and body language enable the recipient of the message to interpret the message in the way that it is intended, and sometimes messages are interpreted differently (Bakker *et al.*, 2005; Bertacco & Deponte, 2005; Middleton, 2007). One of the non-face to face tool of communication is the telephone. According to Fielding (2008), one of the disadvantages of face to face communication is that making too many calls can be too expensive and time consuming. The other challenge of using telephone is that it is impossible to always reach all the relevant parties or target audience at the time that is convenient to all of them.

Although it is possible to use conference call instead of participants travelling to the central meeting place, the challenge becomes when some facilities or telephones are not capable of conference calls (Bakker *et al.*, 2005; Bertacco & Deponte, 2005; Middleton, 2007). Bertacco and Deponte (2005) state that although many institutions of higher learning are rarely using fax as a communication tool, the advantage of using fax is that documents are transmitted as exact copies of the original which are easy to read. In some institutions, the use of faxes can be too expensive. In most institutions of higher learning, e-mails have become a very popular and effective tool of communication (Bakker *et al.*, 2005). Using the internet, messages could be sent from one person to a group of people. One of the advantages of e-mail is that the messages can be saved for future reference. The other advantage is that e-mails are cheaper than telephone calls and the response rate is faster than using traditional mail which could take days at the post office. Since e-mail is easy to use, it is used by many people and most recipients tend to receive messages that they struggle to handle, which leads to the overload of information. One of the disadvantages at the institutions of higher learning is when service staff who do not have access to e-mails primarily because they operate in a different environment like in the field, tend to miss out on important information sent through the e-mail which they do not have access to (Bakker *et al.*, 2005; Bertacco & Deponte, 2005; Middleton, 2007).

In many institutions of higher learning, the use of discussion database as a tool of communication is prevalent. This type of communication tool allows members to post documents to an intranet. This tool of communication makes provision for documents tracking in an effective manner. The discussion database is one tool that enables senior managers and professors at institutions of higher learning to effectively monitor and evaluate the progress of projects. Although the discussion databases are helpful, the software is too expensive. If the discussion databases are not kept current, the information may be useless. In the light of the fact that the discussion database makes use of the internet, the quality of the internet connection influences the ability of this communication tool. Slow internet connections can contribute to the delay in transmitting messages and this could lead to confusion (Bakker *et al.*, 2005; Bertacco & Deponte, 2005; Middleton, 2007).

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

To keep internal stakeholders abreast of the developments taking place within the institution, there is a need for open lines of communication between management and staff as well as students. This would further ensure that there is effective sharing of information. This is of paramount importance specially to get the buy-in from all strategic stakeholders. Indeed, some stakeholders do not have access to mobile communication tools used within the institution, like information communicated through e-mail without making provision for those who do not have access to e-mails like service staff and some students to equally receive the information. More often some stakeholders receive information through grapevine. To control the flow of information through the grapevine, timeous and accurate communication must take place. Communication strategies and policies are not clearly defined and not known. It is therefore the responsibility of the Department of Communications and Marketing at universities to ensure that there is full participation of all the members in policy formulation and that such policies should be made accessible and known by all. Communication at universities is mainly through e-mails and that the universities monthly Newsletter are mainly written in English which makes it difficult for service staff who cannot read English, to follow and understand the information published in the Newsletter. To address this situation, it is important to engage service staff so that they could express their views on how they could read and understand the articles published in the Newsletter. The staff especially the service staff at universities preferred face to face communication rather than electronic communication. More often university staff are communicated to mainly through an email. Electronic, mobile communication tools would be better and more up to date communication tools to use in the future, for effective management and governance at the university.

Some stakeholders, particularly internal service staff had limited communication from Management during the performance of their respective responsibilities. During times of change, employees have a delicate sense of insecurity. Feelings of isolation further exasperate their sense of insecurity. However, if employees are made to feel a sense of belonging to the organisation, this gives them a sense of purpose, which in turn has a positive effect on employee morale, productivity and confidence

in one's employer. From the analysis UNIVEN staff revealed that effective internal communication can enhance effective management and governance hence improving productivity in the Institution. It is therefore evident that mobile communication tools contribute immensely to the effective management and governance at institutions of higher learning.

Based on following conclusions the following are recommended:

- Information should be consistently shared with all stakeholders using relevant tools which are accessible by the respective target audience.
- Line managers should ensure that information is promptly communicated with relevant stakeholders in their respective schools and directorates
- To improve communication and better understanding of activities taking place within the institution, the University should consider making use of social media such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram to communicate with staff and students

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