Formal and Informal Channels of Communication

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Communication

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The Role of Communication in Organizations

key purposes:
- direct action: to get others to behave in desired fashion
- achieve coordinated action

→ systematic sharing of information
  + interpersonal side with the focus on interpersonal relations between people
Communication

- “the social glue ... that continues to keep the organization tied together”
- “the essence of organization”
- a key process underlying all aspects of organizational operations

→ properly managing communication processes is central to organizational functioning
Organizational Structure: Directing the Flow of Messages

Organizational structure:
- the formally prescribed pattern of interrelationships existing between the various units of an organization
- dictating who may and may not communicate with whom
- abstract construction
- depicted in *Organizational Charts*
Organizational Charts

Source: Skript BWL II

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Formal Communication

- The process of sharing official information with others who need to know it …
- according to the prescribed patterns depicted in an organizational chart.
Formal Communication

Efforts at coordination

Instructions and directives

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Formal Communication

- **downward communication:**
  - instructions, directions, orders
  - feedback

- **upward communication:**
  - data required to complete projects
  - status reports
  - suggestions for improvement, new ideas

- **horizontal communication:**
  - coordination of cooperation
Centralized Networks

- One central person
- Unequal access to information
- Central person is at the “crossroads” of the information flow
Communication Structures
Centralized
Communication Structures
Centralized

Wheel

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Communication Structures
Centralized

Chain
Decentralized Networks

- Information can flow freely
- No central person
- All members play an equal role in the transmittal of information
Communication Structures

Decentralized Circle

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Communication Structures
Decentralized

Comcon

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Communication Networks

Decentralized networks

Members can communicate with only two others.

Circle

Comcon

Centralized networks

Members can communicate with only one central person.

Y

Wheel

Chain

Behavior in Organizations, p.305
Network Performance

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Gatekeepers

Problem:
Overload
(too many messages reaching a person at once)

Solutions:
Use gatekeepers to control the number of incoming messages received

Message A
Message B
Message C

Gatekeeper
Message C

Person

Behavior in Organizations, p.320
Informal Communication Structures

- Deviation from the planned communication structure
  - Direction of the flow of information
  - Leaving out people in the communication line
  - Integrating people into the communication line
Informal Networks

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Network Roles

- Bridge
- Liaison
- Isolate
- Isolated Dyad
- Cosmopolites
Formal Structure vs Informal Networks

Communities of practice:
informal collaborative networks

→ Text: E-mail reveals real leaders
Informal Communication

Information shared without any formally imposed obligations or restrictions

if an organization’s formal communication represents its skeleton, its informal communication constitutes its central nervous system

(Behavior in Organizations, p. 307)

**eng. “grapevine”**

- An organization’s informal channels of communication, based mainly on friendship or acquaintance
- origin: American Civil War [grapevine telegraphs]
“Grapevine”

1. a secret means of spreading or receiving information
2. the informal transmission of (unofficial) information, gossip or rumor from person-to-person → "to hear about s.th. through the grapevine"
3. a rumor: unfounded report; hearsay
Grapevine Characteristics

- oral → mostly undocumented
- open to change
- fast (hours/minutes instead of weeks/days)
- crossing organizational boundaries
Grapevine Characteristics

- inaccuracy:
  - levelling
    - deletion of crucial details
  - sharpening
    - exaggeration of the most dramatic details

while the grapevine generally carries the truth it seldom carries the whole truth
Grapevine Figures

- 70% of all organizational communication occurs at the grapevine level
- Estimated accuracy rates: 75-90%
- The incorrect part might change the meaning of the whole message though
- An estimated 80% of grapevine information is oriented toward the individual while 20% concerns the company

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Factors Influencing Grapevine Activity I

According to Gordon Allport:
- importance of the subject for both listener and speaker
- ambiguousness of the facts

Formula:

\[ R = i \times a \]

"R": intensity of the rumor
"i": importance of the rumor to the persons
"a": ambiguity of the facts associated with the rumor
Factors influencing Grapevine Activity II

Employees rely on the grapevine when:
- they feel threatened,
- insecure,
- under stress
- when there is pending change
- when communication from management is limited
Positive Aspects of the Grapevine

- social function
- reduction of anxiety
- release mechanism for stress
- identification of pending problems
- early warning system for organizational change
- vehicle for creating a common organizational culture
- desired information can be circulated quickly to a large group of subordinates (inofficially!)
Coping or Managing the Grapevine

"the grapevine cannot be abolished, rubbed out, hidden under a basket, chopped down, tied up, or stopped"

(Managing the Grapevine, p.222)

→ don’t try to control or restrict it
→ use it to supplement formal channels
“Tapping” the Grapevine

- identify and make use of key communicators (bridgers)
- monitor what is happening in the organization
- use the grapevine to give new ideas a “trial run”
Preventing Rumors

- provide information through the formal system of communication on the issues important to the employees
- supply employees with a steady flow of clear, accurate and timely information
- present full facts
- keep formal communication lines open and the process as short as possible
Formal Media

- Company newsletters
- Employee handbooks
- Company magazines
- Formal meetings
Formal Media

- Letters
- Flyers and bulletins
- Memos
- Faxes
- All-employees mailings
Informal Media

- Face-to-face discussions
- Telephone
- Voice messaging (voice mail)
- E-mail
- Instant messaging (chat)
Informal Dialogues

Characteristics:

- often no formal opening or closing
- first utterance often assumes a common reference to a previous interaction or issue
- conversations generally last only a few minutes
Example Dialogue

A tracking request made by Maureen to Bina about Ian (BOffice35, 9secs).

*Maureen pops her head over the wall of Bina's cubicle.*

1 M: Bina you don't know when Ian's due- oh here's Jane now- know when Ian's back?
2 B: Tomorrow I expect
3 M: Ahh
4 B: Oh yeah he's out today yeah
An intended interaction leading to unprompted advice (ROffice 66, 28sec of 1min:36sec)

*Frank is on the phone across the office from Richard. Frank puts down phone.*

1 R: Is he alright?
2 F: Yeah
3 R: Which one's he's got? there's a restaurant
4 F: I said that I'll do this one initially and then further afield
5 R: Which one's that?
6 F: That's: eighty two whiteladies road it's the offices
7 R: Oh, yeah we act for the landlord on that one. I did a rent review against him on that
8 F: Right ()
9 R: His shop it might be worth checking out he's got a sub-tenant downstairs who's got a clothes shop
10 F: Yeah
11 R: Might be worth trying to get in with them as well
12 F: Yeah alright
Informal Communication and Physical Proximity

Can long distance informal communication be supported by technology?

Physical proximity is crucial for informal communication.

Trends towards telework, mobile work and the globalisation of business are geographically separating workers.
The Nature of Informal Communication I

- mostly brief interactions
- mainly opportunistic (→ coordination, initiation)
- often time-lags between informal interactions (→ maintenance and re-establishment of context)
- occur between frequent interactants who often share large amounts of background knowledge
The Nature of Informal Communication II

- communications in offices more frequent than in public areas
- majority of “roaming” interactions self-initiated
- interruptability (importance of prior activity)
- interactions are very often terminated by a third party joining an existing conversation
- role of deixis
- documents involved in 53% of all Own Office interactions
Literature I

  [http://www.nature.com/nsu/030317/030317-5.html](http://www.nature.com/nsu/030317/030317-5.html)


Whittaker, Steve; Frohlich, David; Daly-Jones, Owen (1994): *Informal Workplace Communication: What is it like and how might we support it?* Human Factors in Computing Systems, Boston, Massachusetts, USA.
Literature III

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- http://www.revisionguru.co.uk/business/communication3.htm
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