

PROJECT COMMUNICATION WITHIN SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED CONSTRUCTION FIRMS

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ABSTRACT

Communication is considered as a tool in the heart of management in enhancing project targets and Milestones not only in the construction sector but other sectors as well. The construction industry has however been characterized with its massive investment and associated risks. As a result, when main and sub-activities and tasks to be executed on project sites are not properly communicated among project teams and stakeholders, it will vehemently incur additional cost on the project, cause injury from accidents and may delay the entire project completion schedule amongst others. This exploratory study seek to establish the project communication structure used by construction SME's and also to develop a pattern within the communication structure of SME's that will avert uncertainties in a form of barriers to their communication. In order to accomplish the exploratory study, semi-structure interview sessions were conducted among construction professionals and clients via purposive sampling. The targeted population for the study was adequately prepared as a result of the prior notification for the interviews. Findings from the study revealed that most of the construction SME's do not have established communication structure in their operations. Further, the SME's only realized the need for a communication pattern when they encounter complex issues such as dispute on a claim with clients and stakeholders. The study recommends that prior to the execution of projects by SME's, the communication lines must be clearly defined as well as the reporting a system with an in-depth briefing for all team members and stakeholders to be privy.

Keywords: *Communication; Construction; Project; Small and Medium-Sized Firms.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication is an important theme in the construction industry, as has been captured in the literature. As a result, communication is considered as a tool in the heart of management in enhancing project targets and milestones not only in the construction industry but other industries are well. Jeyachandran (2012) asserts that the efficiency and effectiveness of the construction process more importantly depend on the quality of communication (verbal and non-verbal) among the project teams and stakeholders. The need to communicate effectively is the heart of any business such as construction, automobile, pharmaceutical amongst others. No matter the individual's knowledge and skills, if it is not effectively communicated, the ideas will be unable to succeed in their endeavours (Emmitt and Gorse, 2003). Often problems in construction are referred to as communication problems. Latham (1994) and DETR (1998) have established that frequent construction problems that emanate are as a result of communication problems. Communication is as vital to both large and small and medium-size firms. Axley (1994) affirmed that communication is view as a metaphorical pipeline along which information is transferred from one person to another. Further, Awati (2010) affirmed that communication is also the lifeblood of any system of human interaction as, without it, no meaningful or coherent activity can take place (Thomas, 1988). Due to the unique characteristics of the construction industry been labour intensive and the large number of varying ethnic backgrounds of labour recruited for project forms a complex communication environment. Similarly, Construction is a fragmented and dynamic sector with a project based nature, and this makes many stakeholders operate infrequently changing sets of relationships that are contractually driven. The culture shows a reality of conflicts and lack of mutual respect and trust

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(Dainty *et al.*, 2006). As a result, the role of communication in construction projects cannot be over emphasized as various professionals and stakeholders in the construction industry must communicate effectively on any given project for a successful delivery. Communication among small and medium-sized construction firms that lacks managerial skills is a complex activity and, therefore, difficult to be achieved. Communication problems are always associated with these features such as reported late, not having the information, difficulty in accessing information furnished by other stakeholders and also establishing of multiple of communication channel which are not clear to the project teams resulting in further communication problems. These communication problems among SME's are usually characterized with numerous issues during construction project such as hazards, accident, delay of schedule tasks, understanding, waste, delays on the entire project duration and increased in the cost of the project. As the a result, this study seeks to explore the existing communication patterns used by small and medium-sized construction firms on projects and also to determine prudent channels of communication among these firms to facilitate successful implementation of their projects

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication has been defined in the literature in various viewpoints. Perumal and Bakar (2011) established that communication is the process in which information is encoded and imported by a sender to be received via a channel or medium. Fielding (2005) defines communication as a transaction that is People working together to create meaning by exchanging symbols. People have to ensure they share the same meaning when they use words. Similarly, communication is defined as the process require to ensure timely and appropriate generation, collection dissemination, storage, an ultimate implementation of project information (PMI, 2008). According to Barrett (2006) communication is defined as the transmission of meaning from one person to another or many people, whether verbally or non-verbally. The communication process reviews the process of information flow from the sender to the receiver, including how barriers may prevent effective communication. It is important to plan communication because barriers and noise that may influence the effectiveness of the communication (PMI, 2008). Planning communication should include knowing the project structure, what communication plan entails the flow of communication in different directions, and internal and external project communication.

2.1. MANAGEMENT OF PROJECT-BASED COMMUNICATION

Project-based communication management consists of the processes required to ensure timely and suitable generation, collection, distribution, storage, retrieval and ultimate disposal of project information. PMI (2008) asserts that managers of projects spend lots of their time in communicating with team members and other stakeholders, either internally within or externally to the organisation. PMI (2008) further established the following process for efficient management of communication for a project:

- Identify stakeholders
- Plan communications
- Distribute information
- Manage stakeholder expectations
- Report performance

Kerzner (2009) argued that effective communication ensures that project members deliver the right information to the right persons at the right time and in a cost-effective manner. Steyn (2008 cited Zulch 2012) supported that effective communication is the key to ensuring coordination and integration of execution of projects. Communication is essential for all business activities. It makes organising possible, and organising is part of the communication process. Effective communication in and between organisations supplies a positive contribution to construction projects that increase production and improve motivation of team members (Emmitt and Gorse, 2003).

2.2. TYPES OF COMMUNICATION

In order to facilitate the understanding of communication within SME's firms, the highlights study on the types of communication within the organisation as affirmed by Emmitt and Gorse (2003).

2.2.1. INTRA-PERSONAL COMMUNICATION

The internal communication process cognition includes the manifestation of information in the brain. Intra- personal communication is characterized by only one person such some researchers do not consider it as a communication.

2.2.2. INTER-PERSONAL COMMUNICATION

This is a conversation that ensues between two or more people to enable individuals to establish and maintain the relationship. This involves the transfer of signals and messages.

2.2.3. MASS COMMUNICATION

This type of communication uses channels such as media, radio, television, and newspapers, large audience, individuals and groups perceive meanings to the message they receive via this medium depending on their culture and norms.

2.2.4. GROUP COMMUNICATION

This communication ensues when messages are conveyed to a group. This is presented in a way that disseminates the message to the entire group or individual.

2.3. COMMUNICATION FLOW PROCESSES

The process of communication includes acquiring all relevant information, interpreting this information and effectively disseminating the information to the rightful persons. Communication is of vital importance to everyone involved in and influenced by projects (Emmitt, 2010). Project team members need to collaborate, share, collate and integrate information and knowledge to realise project objectives. Therefore, it is prudent to understand the process of communication (Hoezen *et al.*, 2003). At its most basic level, communication consists of three components: a transmitter/sender, a transmission channel/medium and a receiver. A fourth element, the medium of communication is the code in which a message is transmitted (Steyn, 2008). The message flows from the source or the sender, encodes (package) the message through the transmission channel/medium by a verbal or non-verbal method, to the receiver that decodes the message Zulch (2012). In order to ascertain effective communication, all components must function to prevent unclear communication during the process (Liu 2009). Uncertain barriers and noise may set in during the process of communication if measures are not established to control it. Flowchart of communication process among small and medium-size firms is shown in Figure 1.

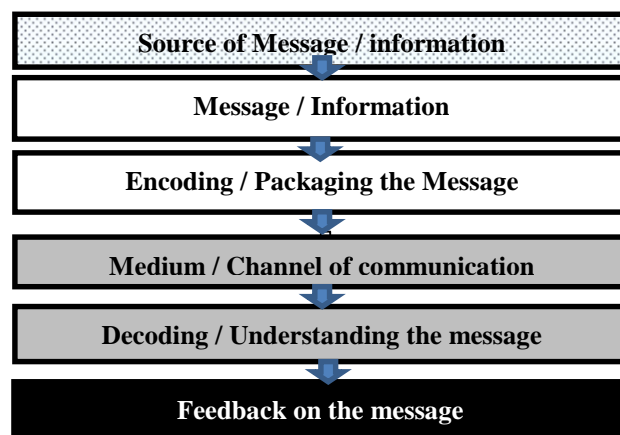


Figure 1: Flowchart of Communication Process (Adapted from Zulch, 2012)

2.4. BARRIERS TO PROJECT COMMUNICATION

Communication barriers are the obstacles that prevent the flow of message to be delivered for a successful implementation of an action. No matter how efficient a communication structure of a firm maybe there are possible of barriers occurring. Guffey (2010) established the following as communication barriers as depicted in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Barriers to Project Communication

Item	Type of Barrier	Impact of Communication Barrier
1	Lack of Communication Skills	When the conveyor of the message does not communicate clearly interns of use of grammatical words, it would mean to the recipients.
2	Overloaded message	When received messages are over loaded it turns out to be difficult to comprehend.
3	Inadequate knowledge of the subject	If the conveyor of the message lacks information, then the receiver will likely receive an unclear message.
4	Extended communication chain	The more extended the communication chain, the greater the chance for error.
5	Inadequate feedback	Inadequate feedback can interfere with good communication.
6	Lack of interest	When the receiver gets the message that he or she is not interested, he or she may hurriedly read or ignore it leading to miscommunication.
7	Communicating complex message	Communicating a complex message without the technical skills or grade will make the message unclear to your receivers.

Source: Adapted from Guffey (2010)

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A number of studies on communication on firm whether large, small and medium size has focused on sole barriers to effective communication and how to control these barriers. However, very little have been done on the existing project communication pattern of small and medium-size firms for a successful project delivery. In view of that exploratory research, technique was adapted to determine existing communication patterns used by small and medium-sized construction firms on projects to determine prudent channels of communication among these firms to facilitate successful implementation of their projects. To accomplish the goal of the study, semi-structured interview session was conducted among construction professionals and clients via purposive sampling. A targeted population size of eighteen was adequately prepared as a result of the prior notification of the semi-structure interviews. However, in all only twelve interview sessions were conducted with the aid of scheduled guide and recorders and were subsequently transcribed. Each Interviewee had a total of eight minutes duration to answer all the scheduled questions.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Three of the construction professionals working with the sampled small and medium-sized construction firms remarked that for communication to thoroughly efficient, it is always prudent that strategic issues would generally be communicated at senior management level rather than to the workforce, in general, this affirms Emmitt (2010) which argued that Communication is of vital importance to everyone involved in projects. Further, two of the interviewees stressed that their firms do not have structured standardized communication format. As a result they adopt, and communicable pattern that is available to the firm during the execution of projects and this sometimes make communication vague and unclear as supported by Zulch (2012). Similarly, another interviewees affirmed that because most of the projects engaged in by these construction SME's are not significant in nature, their management finds it reluctant to formalize

the communication within the firm this usually distort communicated messages. The entire professionals interviewed indicated that their firms' draw-up communication lines only when they tender for public contracts, otherwise their firms do not have any identifiable communication pattern. It was clear from the interviews that though owners of these SME's have managers in charge of the routine operations with an agreed way of communication of their owners, this communication lines are always distorted by the owners when it concern finance matters such as reinvesting into another sector. Some of the interviewees were of the view that they operate in a competitive environment and as such their communication structures make their firm unique opens linkages to win contracts. Further, the interviewees stressed that their structured routes in communication includes the regular issue of company magazines, discussion workshops for all employees and consultation committees.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Communication, as captured in this study, is a prerequisite of a successful project delivery. The study concludes that for a project-based communication to be successful, the following consideration must ensue:

- All the project stakeholders must be engaged in communication meeting
- Establishment of unique communication structure (Communication lines must be drawn).
- Detail explanation of agreed communication structure (Free from complex language)
- Availability of accepted communication medium
- Frequent evaluation of approved communication structure (To eliminate any envisage barrier that will encourage any due delay).

Owners of small and medium-sized firms, as established from the findings, do sometimes distort the agreed communication pattern between them and their stewards. Further, the study revealed that because the small and medium-size firms do embark on small projects and as such managers through the influence of the owners do not value the relevance of establishing a communication structure for such small projects they execute.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

To achieve effective project-based communication among small and medium-sized construction firms, it is significant to manage successfully team communication. A range of factors impact project team communication effectiveness such as the kinds media communication tools use to aid the communication process, large volume of information to manage and to disseminate, the medium in terms of the language to disseminate the message to make it clear and the routine at which communication is done. Further, to accomplish an effective project communication consideration must also be made prior to the execution of projects by SME's, so that communication lines are being clearly defined as well as the reporting system with an in-depth briefing for all team members and stakeholders to be privy this will avert and misunderstanding occurring. There must be collaborations between owners and managers of these SME's so that those owners will have limitation in order not break up any agreed communication structure.

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