



# STRATEGIES OF OVERCOMING COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS IN THE WORK PLACE IN POST COVID-19 ERA

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## ABSTRACT

*Pandemics are not only hazardous to health but they also negatively impact economic and social life. The effect of the latest pandemic, the Covid-19 pandemic, was as deadly as it literally shut down the world. The global impact was both significant and revolutionary cutting across all spheres of human existence as it replaced the physical with a virtual world. This switch to a virtual world brought about a lot of challenges including communication challenges especially in the workplace; how to disseminate information to employees and keep businesses going became a major issue to employers. The study adopted a qualitative research method to examine the various communication challenges encountered in the workplace in post-covid-19 era. The paper analyzed their effect in the business environment and further highlighted strategies to address them. Findings revealed that the traditional model of internal communication is inadequate to cope with the realities in the workplace. The paper therefore proposes strategic mix of communication styles incorporating both the conventional and digital models of communication to tackle communication barriers. It concludes that if adopted, the strategies will not only address the immediate but take care of future needs.*

**KEYWORDS:** *pandemic, post-covid-19, communication, strategies, workplace*

## INTRODUCTION

The world over time has experienced quite a number of pandemics with devastating impacts. The most recent, the Covid-19 pandemic, was as catastrophic and though the worst days are over, its effect is still being felt globally especially in the business world.

Pandemic, according to Rogers (2021) is the outbreak of infectious disease that occurs over a wide geographical area and that is of high prevalence, generally affecting a significant portion of the world's population. It could last for few months or in some cases years but notwithstanding the duration the effect is usually disastrous.

Covid-19, like other pandemics, was by nature highly infectious. The death toll mounted by the day and to arrest the situation governments the world over literally shut down the global community. Consequently, educational, religious, social and economic activities were grounded.

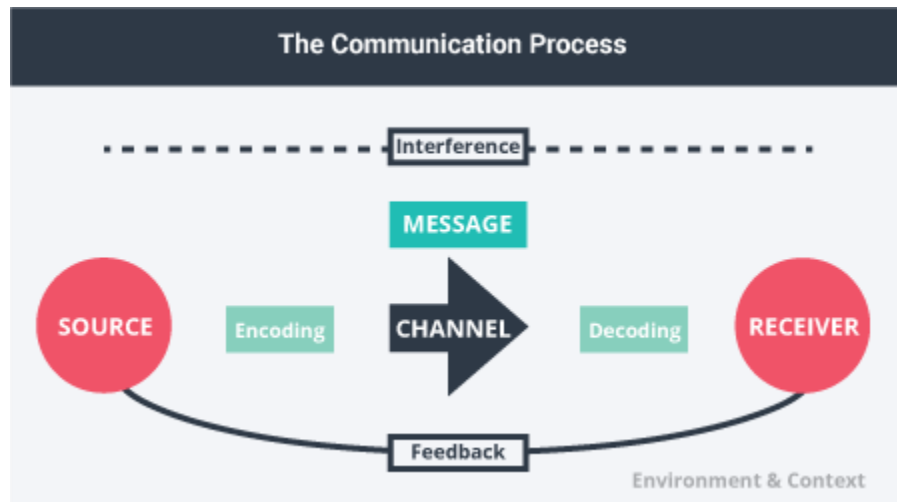
The home became the epicentre of all human activities. The situation demanded lifestyle changes, adaptations and accommodations, not only in the family but more so in social and workplace environment.

The impact of the pandemic on the workplace was quite drastic as it altered the way business is done. Many organizations

devised means to “exist” and conduct their affairs which inevitably led many to operate from virtual offices from the comfort of the homes. However, in spite of the measures adopted organizations to keep the companies going, the major challenge most of them faced was how to communicate their new ideas to their employees. The traditional medium of communication such as inter office memorandum and one-on-one meetings that were the fastest ways of sharing such information were not practicable in the virtual office. Thus organizational survival was threatened as no business could survive without communication which is unarguably the livewire of any organization. It is described as the nervous system of an organization and just as the nervous system transmits signals between different parts of the body and coordinates its voluntary and involuntary actions, so does communication link all the activities in the workplace together and galvanizes employees into action working together towards the realization of a common goal (IntDom, 2016).

It is against this backdrop that Bernard (cited in Marume, Jaricha & Chiunye, 2016) described communication as a major shaping force in an organization noting that its techniques were not only instrumental in the actualization of organizational purpose but poses a problem if not properly handled.

The techniques of communication described by Bernard are suggestive of the elements of communication process which is graphically represented thus:



Source: <https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Communication/>

Communication is effective when it achieves the desired response from the receiver. However, the process of communication is not as simple and so it can breakdown at any point in the communication process leading to confusion and possible disruption of a company's operations.

The Covid-19 pandemic posed a communication challenge especially at the point of deciding on what channel to adopt by companies in the dissemination of information to their employees.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication makes life happen. It is critical to the survival of any business. It is the way that organization members share meaning and understanding with one another (Koontz and O'Donnell, cited in Emojorho, 2010) without which there will be no cohesion in the workplace. Communication is a process incorporating series of actions or steps taken in order to effectively transmit information from one person to another. It is cyclic beginning with the sender encoding a message and ending with the sender in the form of feedback.

Scholars differ on the exact number of components of the communication process. Nordquist (2020) recognized five components of the communication process – the sender, the receiver, the message, the medium and feedback. He also identified Noise and Context as vital factors in the process that could affect how information is transmitted, received and interpreted. Weaver (cited by Drew, 2021) on the other hand distinguished six key elements – the sender, encoder, channel, noise, decoder and receiver while Weiner (cited by Drew, 2021) while elaborating on Weaver's model of communication included "feedback" as the seventh element in the communication process. Dingwall, Labrie, McLennon and Underwood (cited in Olds College OER Development Team, 2015) also cited seven components comprising the source

(sender), the message, the channels, the receiver, the environment, the context (setting), and interference (noise).

Regardless of the disparities in the composition of the elements which are mostly a matter of nomenclature and grouping, the key point is that the elements interact to enable communication flow in any organization.

## COMPONENTS OF THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

**The Source:** This is the initiator of the communication process and is also refers to as the "sender". The source conceives an idea and tries to share it by sending out a message in a form and means which could easily be understood by the intended recipient.

**The Message:** The message is the "big idea" or information which is intended to be shared. The message could be an instruction, an appeal or an opinion designed to spur the receiver into action.

**The channel:** This is basically the medium by which messages are transmitted. The channel could be verbal, non-verbal, written and digital. It plays a central role in the communication process by conveying the message from the sender to the receiver hence without the instrumentally of this component, an idea (message) would remain with the sender

**The Receiver:** This is the recipient of the message. The ability of the receiver to decode or interpret the message depends mostly on the mutual understanding of the code employed by the sender while transmitting the message.

**Interference:** This is otherwise referred to as "noise" which constitutes a hindrance in the communication process. Interference may include poor visual or audio quality or even a noisy environment that could pose a challenge such that the message is lost.



**Feedback:** This is the final stage of the communication process when the message has been duly transmitted, received and successfully decoded to produce the desired response. Feedback is the practical demonstration of effective communication. It could be direct taking the form of written or verbal response or indirect manifesting in an act or deed.

The entire process though dynamic and continuous could be affected by many variables at any given point which would result to communication breakdown. Interestingly, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in the workplace was more pronounced in the choice of the medium of communication.

In pre-pandemic era, the conventional workplace communication usually took the mode of verbal communication, one-on-one meetings, staff meeting and training, inter office memos, bulletin board notices, posters, letters, reports, newsletters, instant messaging and the informal office grapevine. These conventional channels, however, became grossly inadequate during the pandemic as contact restrictions and isolations made such impracticable. Organizations were faced with the challenges of reaching their staff and transmitting information timely hence teleconferencing and videoconferencing, among others, replaced staff meetings.

These channels of communication, however, posed additional barriers to the communication process even up to the post-pandemic era largely because of its undue reliance on technology.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research method using the instrumentality of unstructured interviews with select business owners within Port Harcourt metropolis. A total of thirty respondents drawn from fifteen corporate establishments were randomly selected and the principal officers as well as some junior staff were interviewed to evaluate the various communication challenges they faced, its impact on their businesses and measures taken to overcome them. The data retrieved were descriptively and thematically analyzed.

## DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

This section discusses the prevalent communication channel most commonly adopted in the workplace post pandemic era. The table below captures the general theme around which the interview revolved. The theme is further categorized and subsequently coded to allow for easier analysis.

PRIMARY THEME	CATEGORIES	CODES
<b>POST COVID-19 COMMUNICATION CHANNELS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Personal channel</b></li> <li>• <b>Mobile Channel</b></li> <li>• <b>Digital/Electronic Channel</b></li> <li>• <b>Written Channel</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Effectiveness of each channels</b></li> <li>• <b>Barriers/Limitations of the channels</b></li> <li>• <b>Orientation to staff</b></li> </ul>

The present study highlights the communication channels adopted by most organizations during the covid-19 outbreak and which has subsisted post pandemic era.

In analyzing the collated data from the study, the respondents' answers to the question "what channel does your organization commonly use in its internal communication?" reveal that their choices as it affects communication channels are limited given the new realities in the workplace post pandemic era. The respondents discussed the different channels of communication in their workplace – personal channel, mobile, digital/electronic and written channels.

On the personal communication channel, notably, one-to-one meeting/staff meetings, respondents agree that though it is an effective channel of communication which was commonly adopted pre-pandemic era, it has become almost non-existence having been replaced with other channels mainly because of staff's fear induced aversion to the workplace and other public places. A principal officer in one of the establishments hinted that "...I think I am better off working from home since most of my colleagues have refused to be vaccinated. You know many Nigerians do not believe that the pandemic is real so they are not

bothered but I know it is very real... I still do my bit and effectively complete my tasks so ...” Apart from health, another reason why people prefer working remotely is that of convenience. These practices have made person-to-person meeting impracticable.

Review of the interactions reveal that both mobile and digital communication channels are most commonly adopted in the dissemination of information in the workplace in post pandemic era. Respondents listed mobile channels like SMS text messages, instant messaging App (WhatsApp) as more frequently used channels especially among team members. This is captured in the following excerpts.

“...my office has a WhatsApp platform which was created during the pandemic but which we have continued to use. Most updates are posted on the platform and so whenever I want to know what's going on, I check the platform...sometimes I also receive SMS notifying me of events in the office but prior to the pandemic, such notifications are posted on the notice board, but now, we rely on SMS.”



Whatsapp is also used for team communication as a respondent reveals "...whenever I wish to communicate something to my team, I simply post it on the platform I created for just that purpose which is more convenient for me..."

Digital communications such as emails, intranet, chat tools and videoconferencing (e.g. zoom) are preferred in higher level communication in the workplace. An executive intimated that zoom has been effective in bridging the gap of face-to-face meetings. According to her "with zoom meetings, it's like sitting in the conference room...we still see ourselves and share ideas at our convenience"

From the responses garnered, it is observed that written communication incorporating internal memos, letters, and newsletters are almost being bypassed in post pandemic communication. This is deduced from the following excerpt

"...internal memos are out of the question...everything is digital...just send a mail, even newsletters are emailed or dropped on our whatsapp page and letters? Except the occasional ones informing staff of their promotion but even that one is emailed to the staff. I think the only letter you receive now in hard copy is possibly a termination letter..."

The responses affirm that post pandemic communication channel is increasingly more digitalized. However, when asked of the effectiveness of these digitalized communication channels, respondents were of the view that the channels are not totally effective or foolproof. The study reveals the major limitations posed by these digitalized channels to include (1) delayed feedback (2) challenges in reaching everyone at the same time (3) limited real time input from staff team members (4) poor internet connectivity (5) limited access to the company's email network, laptop or Smartphone.

Investigation reveals that most staff especially of the lower cadre have limited access to the company's email network, computer and or Smartphone. Consequently, this group of staff is easily excluded in the digitalized medium of communication. The following excerpts demonstrate this point.

"...most times, I don't even know what's happening, I don't receive mails and I lost my phone so the small one I have is not Whatsapp enabled. It is one of my friends that gives me information..."

Poor internet connectivity poses a bigger challenge in digital communication. Many respondents complained of missing vital information due to connectivity issues. According to one of the respondents "... most times the connection and the audio quality is so poor that I simply switch off in frustration because it makes no sense..."

Staff contribution at meetings is not as easy in this medium because the coordinator may miss a raised hand and if "...you are centrally muted, there is nothing you can do to draw

attention unless the coordinator unmutes you...so you end up not making any contribution at all"

Respondents also complained about delayed feedback which slows down decision making and negatively impacts productivity in the workplace.

Staff attitude is another major challenge in post pandemic communication. From the responses two factors that drive staff attitude emerge; (1) the old school factor (2) financial capacity.

The old school people are technologically backward and not conversant with zoom meetings or such like. They can neither organize one nor can they effectively make presentations through this medium. The following excerpt encapsulate this position "...to tell you the truth, I am old school, I am still struggling to familiarize myself with all these zoom meeting and stuff".

Financial capacity also limit some set of people from accessing internet based communication channels which is expensive; hence, they suffer "exclusion" in getting first hand information but have to rely on third party delivery which may not be as accurate.

## RESULT

The analyses show that post pandemic communication channel tends towards digital. Two major reasons attributed to this trend are (1) it is cost effective and (2) it is convenient. To convene a meeting is just a click away which cuts off the logistics usually associated with meetings (planning, travelling, refreshment etc), its cost implication and the attendant risk. Comparatively, the cost incurred in videoconferencing is minimal. It is without stress and the risk almost non-existence. The only thing required is a good internet connection.

Regardless of the advantages of digital communication, however, it is limiting and cannot therefore effectively replace other channels.

Given this scenario, a harmonized model of communication strategy incorporating personal, digital and written communications should be embraced in the workplace to address all communication barriers and integrate all the staff into the system with equal and unfettered access to information.

## CONCLUSION

Communication takes place everywhere whenever two or more people interact. It is a *sine qua non* to human existence and progress in life. It is simply the nucleus of all human activities and is therefore indispensable. Beyond the message (information), the channel of delivery is equally as important to guarantee effective communication. Consequently, any medium that is not all encompassing and which cannot also be easily accessed by all the intended receivers is inadequate for the required purpose of promptly galvanizing people into action for the actualization of a common goal. Organizations should



therefore incorporate a harmonized communication style to ensure all staff have first hand information. This strategy does not only take care of the immediate but also addresses future communication needs.

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