

Possibilities and Challenges of Communication in Six Finnish Industrial and Planning Organizations

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I study work-related communication in six Finnish industrial and planning organizations. I analyzed the communication through a comparison of distant and face-to-face examples showing how distance negatively influences communication because the distant communicants don't have same contextual information. Sharing of situational information can help mitigate the negative impact of distance. Face-to-face communication was seen as important in the case organizations, as it enables informal communication and builds trust and commitment. Nevertheless, face-to-face communication does not automatically produce documentation, and proper minute keeping and documentation were demonstrably important.

Keywords: Communication, Industrial and Planning Organizations, Distance, Face-to-face Communication

INTRODUCTION

Face-to-face communication is still valued in the workplace, even though many technological solutions exist to overcome distance. When the distance between workplaces exceeds 30 m, people communicate dramatically less (Allen, 1977; Kraut and Streeter, 1995). Beyond 30 m, distance is not a critical factor. For example, in Armstrong and Cole's study (2002), managers reported that communication with a site 15 km away is as difficult as communicating with one 800 km away. Furthermore, research has shown that face-to-face meetings create trust and commitment, and they decrease misunderstandings. However, face-to-face communications do have negative consequences, such as travel time and loss of productions while in meetings. Spontaneously showing up in someone's office may also disturb his or her work (Kiesler and Cummings, 2002; Nardi and Whittaker, 2002), although it has been shown that many problems are solved and innovations achieved "informally" in ad hoc discussions (see e.g., Conway, 1995; Herbsleb and Grinter, 1999). Informal communication usually happens face to face, and technology does not effectively support it, which makes informal communication across distances difficult (Kraut et al., 2002).

In the findings reported in this paper, the effect of distance on communication is also visible. All the subject organizations had some sort of distance problem, and they all stressed the importance of face-to-face communication. In this paper, I describe and analyze communication in the case organizations through a comparison of face-to-face and distant, technologically mediated communications. In the next section, I present the study methodology. In the sections after that, I present the empirical analysis with descriptions of communicative events in the case organizations. I then draw conclusions regarding research and practice.

METHODS

This study follows an ethnographic approach that allows for the understanding of phenomena from “the insider’s perspective” due to the lengthy fieldwork periods (in this study, 3 months / 10-20 days per organization). Ethnography is a qualitative approach in social scientific and anthropological research. It has no single, standard definition, as researchers use it in different settings and with different theoretical lens. Despite this, ethnographic studies share some general characteristics. For one, ethnographers enter a field to study daily routines in their contexts. Furthermore, ethnography is the joint construction of a researcher and his or her informants about a phenomenon that is the object of research. Ethnographers also use multiple sources of data, and usually, the results include descriptions, explanations and theories. Finally, quantification and statistical analyses usually fall outside the scope of ethnographic accounts (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, 1-9; see also Moore, 1999, 9-19).

I collected and analyzed the data following grounded theory methodology (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), in which simultaneous and rotating data collection and analysis is performed to form general, inductive explanations for a social phenomenon. I chose grounded theory methodology to systematize data collection and analysis. Furthermore, I chose research participants according to purposeful sampling (i.e., working groups were chosen in discussion with the case organizations, and in the case of smaller organizations, all personnel were involved). I also did snowball sampling while in the field: I followed the hints informants gave me to attend interesting events and find right people to speak with. I made theoretical sampling in the later phases of the fieldwork as my knowledge of the phenomenon increased. I constantly analyzed the data by comparing cases, informants and evolving theoretical assumptions. The data consists of observational notes and video files.

The case organizations varied in size, and 10-20 days of observation occurred for each of them. Additionally, the observation reports were presented to the subject organizations for their validation. Subsequently, two development workshops were organized in each of the organizations. In these workshops, observed communication challenges in the case organizations were discussed and concrete development plans were made to solve them. There were 10-20 participants in each workshop; these included employees and managers. Four workshops were recorded on video in two case organizations; the others did not permit video recording. In these cases, comprehensive notes were made in the workshops. Finally, a background questionnaire relating to communication was distributed throughout all organizations, and it received 448 answers (the answer rate per organization varied between 50 and 100 %).

COMMUNICATION IN THE CASE ORGANIZATIONS

Organization 1

Organization 1 is a fast-growing company that employs committed young people who want to develop their careers. They are forthright about problems and see this attribute as an asset. One challenge in this organization is the geographical spread of its functions and some of its teams. The sales department is mainly located 600 km from the head office and has several smaller units abroad. The R&D department is located 300 km from the head office. Human resources is approximately 200 km from sales and 600 from the head office. The department of support, the department of solutions and the department of accounting and finance are together with the head office, and the delivery team is dispersed among many of these locations, including some abroad. Only once a year do the whole staff from different locations meet, at a summer party for the entire organization.

Organization 1 relies heavily on videoconferencing, customer relationship management (CRM) programs, Lync, email and telephones for communication. The human resources manager often works through videoconferencing but thought that it is important to visit all the locations regularly. Furthermore, employees of this organization felt that some meetings are problematic because accurate minutes are not often kept and the decisions made in meetings are not executed. A culture of multi-tasking also exists; people use many communication media simultaneously, such as having a discussion and opening emails in a meeting or speaking on the telephone while having a face-to-face meeting.

The teams in the head office found it difficult to communicate with Sales, and the latter were blamed for many things that caused extra work for others. It seems that other departments did not clearly understand what the sales department does, and this was illustrated in the workshops.

In the first workshop, the participants are from all departments except Sales. Participants think that Sales does not follow the organization's processes, and this harms other departments. For example, Sales does not correctly input information in the CRM program or deliver contracts on time or in the correct form. Some members of Sales are hard to reach and do not answer questions.

Conversely, in the second workshop, one participant is from Sales and the atmosphere is rather different. The member from Sales says that the CRM program is very difficult to use and takes a long time to use, taking time away from the actual sales. In addition, the product is constantly developing and customers often want customized solutions. Sales does not acquire the proper product information from Solutions; things in the catalogues can be very difficult and expensive to make, even though they are in no way separated from the more standard solutions. Thus, in this workshop, participants from other departments are very understanding to the sales department's problems, and the discussion concentrates on the CRM program, which is under development and still quite hard to use in some functions.

Furthermore, in the second workshop, a person representing Sales Support (a function that should support Sales in technical issues), located in the same place as Sales, stresses the importance of informal, face-to-face communication. For instance, he thinks that common coffee breaks are crucial for information creation and exchange. Thus, he feels that he is missing much technical information because he is located 600 km away from Solutions.

Organization 2

Organization 2 thinks that its main competitive advantages are agility and flexibility toward customers. Internally, this requires employees to move back and forth between tasks, an act that is reflected in the working environment. Many tools and materials used in multiple tasks are without a clear place, which causes extra work when employees must find what they need for a new task. In addition, time is short for the maintenance of tools and machines, and some of them are constantly broken and repaired only when in urgent need. The production in this organization is very noisy and employees have to communicate mainly through gestures. Moreover, not all of them are native Finnish speakers, which occasionally causes problems in communication.

Two employees are about to move a heavy metal plate to a processing machine that is quite new to the firm and in constant need of adjustment. The plate has to be exactly at the right place, and the employees are constantly measuring the position, one measure for one side of the plate and another for the other. The employees are shouting measurements to each other, but it is difficult to do this because of the noise and language differences. The Finnish worker is constantly walking to the non-Finnish speaker's side to check the measurement.

This organization's office staff communicates with customers and thinks that it performs well in face-to-face meetings, finding today's email culture challenging. However, at present, the organization's highly competitive market runs almost exclusively through email quotes and orders. Customers don't want to meet face-to-face anymore, which organization 2 sees harmful for making business. Many times the representatives of a customer have not understood technical issues; "they just compare the prices," as the organization's CEO stated.

Organization 3

On the questionnaire, many employees of this organization said that it is the best place they have ever worked. The work objectives are clear, the jobs permanent, and the tasks interesting and versatile.

There is a positive atmosphere in the organization, and monthly meetings are well organized; in every meeting, the "to-do list" is updated and every employees' tasks and task-based problems are discussed collaboratively. Furthermore, documentation of the meetings is systematic. In every meeting, laptops or mobile phones are limited to those who need to present something or to those who must be in call. Silent attention is expected when someone else is talking, and disturbances are regarded as inappropriate. In many meetings, coffee and snacks are provided, and this seems to be in appreciation for the time spent together.

Organization 3 is part of a larger conglomerate. Consequently, information sharing about on-going projects between teams and different subsidiaries of the conglomerate is problematic. This organization is responsible for a system that demands highly precise and up-to-date documentation. The system is also safety critical, which adds pressure to keep it running properly. However, the organization's staff felt it was problematic that employees could not always

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have prompt information about changes made to the system during repairs and construction. Instead, information often comes from informal channels, on paper, for example, even though employees should use the information system.

Employees of a sister organization visit the study organization's customer service office during a coffee break. They discuss many things, including work. Members of organization 3 show their coming orders and ask the employees of the sister organization how their current orders are going. Both groups are critical of management and their preparedness for new orders.

The organization's documentation personnel, who are responsible of keeping the system's documentation updated, are frustrated because they do not acquire information about changes promptly or in the correct form. They need to "listen through doors" if something has been changed, constantly asking about changes and reminding others to bring them information. They would like to have information straight from the work management system but are usually informed face to face, on the telephone, on paper or via email.

Organization 4

Organization 4 sees communication as vital to its success. It also has systematic development practices; if something is to be done, there is always someone named to do it. This organization's cooperating units work in very different environments, and misunderstandings occasionally occur between them. For example, in the construction sites around the world, the days are "constant chaos," while the workshop supporting those sites is much more organized. Often, people on site cannot get to teleconference meetings on time, and they do not always inform the workshop staff about this. Thus, more than once, the workshop staff has waited for hours to conduct a meeting, finding it rude that the on-site staff does not take the time to communicate that they are running late.

I should be at a site-workshop teleconference meeting in the workshop, but it has not started. Every now and then, I visit the project manager's office, and she continually says that the on-site staff are not online yet. She is upset with these recurrent delays because they always keep her from going to the firm's once-a-week recreational activity.

Another challenge in this organization is the communication between supervisors and assemblers, especially on the construction sites. In the questionnaire, employees reported that supervisors are rude, proud and do not listen to them. They also felt that the projects are not well organized. Conversely, supervisors said that employees hide and distort information and are quite stubborn. In the development workshops, this was discussed, revealing that feedback is usually negative. Furthermore, many changes occurred in the projects, due to revisions to the plans, and employees felt frustrated when they needed to reassemble or repair something that should have been ready. Assemblers were poorly informed about what caused these changes, and they thought that it had been bad planning. The picture is not so simple, though, as there are many actors in the construction sites whose work depends on each other, including the plans at the level of site management.

Representatives of this organization, the construction site manager and the final customer are having a meeting about the project's progress. The customer is worried about the many revisions, as the project should be ready as soon as possible. The site manager complains that the organization 4 has not responded to her questions fast enough – the organization's representatives say that they should have gotten the questions half a year ago, during the planning period. Now, lots of stuff is built that has to be redone according to changes in plans. The atmosphere in the meeting is nervous, and the representatives of the organization need to make many phone calls and access printouts to answer the site manager's questions. A safety inspection is due the following week, and many revisions need to be done quickly, before the inspection.

Material management at the construction sites was seen as problematic in this organization. Often, not all the materials needed for an assembly were there on time, and this caused delays for days. No one was responsible for tracking the amount of materials or ordering more, as needed. For example, employees frequently had to wait for racks.

Another company at the construction site provides the racks, and almost all the organizations working on site need them. They are ordered for one place but are sometimes taken away before the work is done, as someone else orders them for another place. Thus, they need to be reordered, and the employees have to wait for them before resuming work.

Organization 5

Every morning, this organization has a team leader meeting with supervisors, then a supervisor meeting, then a production and purchases meeting and, finally, a management team meeting. These meetings last from 10-30 min, discussing the situation from the previous day and the day's agenda. Information is transferred from one meeting to the next, and the management team fills out a specific report form. In addition, after the meeting, the management team often goes for a coffee and informally continues the discussion.

Today, in the management team meeting, a production stoppage from the day before, which lasted more than an hour, is analyzed. The painters from the evening shift two days ago used a slightly off color, and the parts had to be repainted. The painters had tried to call the production engineer, but he did not answer because he had forgotten his phone at his cottage. Two layers of paint had spoiled the surface of the parts, which then could not be used the morning before the meeting. In addition, an important tool was broken, and this increased the delay. On the morning of the meeting, there are more problems with painting; some parts have received the wrong color, probably because the tanks had not been properly washed. The management team thinks that there have been many problems with painting, as its team leader has been on a long sick leave. In general, the sick leave rate has been higher than normal at that time, and production has suffered from a lack of workers.

In this organization, communication challenges relate to changes in products and production problem situations. For example, changes made in the R&D department are not properly communicated to the purchases or storage departments. Furthermore, the use of the wrong parts leads to stoppages in production and the rebuilding of products. This information about stoppages or retooling does not reach all relevant teams; nor does information about quality problems. These situations frequently recur in a year, are repeated from year to year and nothing is done to correct them.

I am following the quality inspector around the production floor. He states that "there is no day without a rush," as we go to solve a problem with parts on which the paint is not adhering. The reason for this is a specific protection oil that cannot be removed in the normal wash. The quality inspector has to check all those parts, scratching them. Luckily, only one gets rejected; in the rest, the oil is in places where it does not matter. The production engineer joins us, and we go on to the painting department, which also does the washing. They say that it might be helpful to slow down the washing line, which is now running faster than normal. Wash could be more efficient then. It is decided to do this the next morning, whereby two employees are ordered to pre-wash the parts. On the next morning, the problem is discussed in the management team's daily meeting, and they wonder who made the decision to speed up the washing line. Anyway, the slower line has not been helping, and they decide to start outsourcing the washing. They add that this same problem occurred a year ago, but obviously, nothing was learned.

This organization's head office is located in a different continent, and some challenges relate to this. The head office is seen as bureaucratic and old-fashioned; it has to approve many things, such as press releases, which slows down the processes. The members of this organization's management team also commented that it is hard to make changes and develop "bottom up" strategies, instead of receiving development initiatives (or orders) from the top down. Furthermore, a time difference causes some meetings to be held at odd hours for the Finnish members.

The organization's sales occur throughout Northern Europe (sales management is in Finland), and I followed a one-day seminar, in which employees from all the locations were in attendance:

The seminar occurs outside of the city, in the organization's test center. The place is cozy, and attendees are offered coffee and snacks, as well as lunch. During the morning, a selling strategy for a new product is discussed; during the afternoon, that product is tested. The cooperation between different countries seems smooth and discussion is lively during the meeting and at breaks. Ideas are presented and analyzed, and much positive feedback is given. When the product is tested, it is carefully scrutinized, and some development ideas are born. These are later communicated to the R&D department, which consider what could be done with them.

Organization 6

Organization 6 has been growing through the successful acquisition of plants. Three of its units, including the head office, are in one city, and the newest plant is 500 km away from them. The newest plant's business is different from the others, and sometimes, the top management of the organization does not understand (and is unwilling even to try to understand) what the newest plant does.

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Many people in the newest plant tell me that they find it rude that one of the top managers has not visited the plant. He is still deciding many things concerning it. The plant was bought many years ago, “but he still has not even visited it,” they complain.

In general, this organization’s management is quite concentrated in the hands of the CEO and his family, and middle managers reported that it is unclear what they can and cannot decide. They said that some responsibility is given on occasion, but it can suddenly be taken away. Essentially, everything must be given the CEO’s permit or signature, and this slows down decision-making.

A meeting with local management and the head office occurs at the newest plant. Product quality is discussed at length, and the CEO proposes solutions that the local participants comment. Later, the local management tells me how odd it was that the CEO, who is not a specialist in their business, tried to advise them. Then, in the meeting, employee attire is discussed. The clothes have gotten old and the laundry service does not work. Thus, employees have to wash their own clothes, which took time away from their actual work. The day before, when the CEO arrived in the evening and visited the plant, no one was working in the hall. Today, during lunch, he asked the hall’s supervisor where the workers were. They were doing laundry. After the meeting, local managers think that it was useful to show the CEO the problem and address it concretely. A quality manager has asked two laundry services for quotes on a full work-clothing service, and the manager presents them to the CEO in the meeting. The price is almost the same between them, but one has better clothing; one worker has tested them. The CEO says that the quality manager can proceed with the clothing initiative as he sees fit. After the meeting, the local management is happy with this, but they still doubt whether they can get the CEO’s signature on the contracts once he will see the price.

Employees of this organization are quite independent and know their work well. They also inform supervisors and middle managers about problems in the production and propose solutions. In addition, they are flexible with their hours; they can do overtime, if needed, and keep their holidays during seasons of lower productivity. Most employees work in two or three shifts—supervisors in a day shift and managers flexibly. Despite having 7am-3.30 pm working time daily, some supervisors answer the phone if evening-shift employees call.

An employee comes to a plant manager’s office and proposes presently using a holiday scheduled for the following week because there is no work for him at present. In the coming week, there will be. The manager accepts this and organizes the schedule. At the same time, an employee with a birthday cake enters; his birthday will be the following weekend. The manager discusses the planned overtime for that weekend, compromising with the employee, who will come in to work Saturday morning.

ANALYSIS

In organizations 1, 4, 5 and 6, clear geographical distances influenced collaboration. In these organizations, the departments in different locations did not know much about each other; this led to ignorance and doubts between them. People are more likely to assign dispositional attributions (i.e., they tend to think that behavior is determined internally and not by the characteristics of a situation) to dispersed colleagues because distance reduces situational information (Cramton, 2001; 2002).

In organization 4, the construction-site members ignored the workshop members instead of informing the latter that they were running late for teleconference meetings. The plant employees interpreted this as rude (dispositional attribution). In addition, the communication with the construction-site manager (located in a different country) was problematic. The construction-site manager had not reacted to the organization’s plans early enough, which led to many revisions and rebuilds. The reasons for rebuilding were not well communicated to the assemblers, which annoyed the latter, which, in turn, negatively influenced their relations with supervisors and managers. The assemblers thought that it was “bad planning” (dispositional attribution). Furthermore, in organization 6, the remote plant workers wanted top management to visit them in person. They did not trust one top manager who had not done this and thought that he neglected them (dispositional attribution). The importance of being someplace in person, at least sometimes, is also reported in many of the articles of *Distributed Work* (Hines and Kiesler, 2002). This act facilitates building mutual situational awareness and understanding, trust, commitment and group cohesion.

In organization 1, the sales department, located 600 km from the head office, was accused of not following the organization’s processes (dispositional attribution). However, when Sales explained the situation from their <https://openaccess.cms-conferences.org/#/publications/book/978-1-4951-2102-9>

perspective to the employees from the head office, both groups started to think together to tackle common problems relating to their CRM system, and the attribution became more situational. Thus, the sharing of situational information moderates the tendency to make attribution errors (Cramton, 2001; 2002) and helps in building cohesiveness in dispersed groups (Armstrong and Cole, 2002).

The members of organization 2 wished for more face-to-face contact with customers. They thought that it would help to know customers' needs and, thus, to offer better quotes. This was also reported in Nardi and Whittaker's article (2002), where informants reported lost business when they could not meet their clients face to face. Sometimes, issues are easier to resolve face to face, and sometimes, face-to-face meetings are necessary to show the customer "that you exist and are working on their stuff". (Nardi and Whittaker, 2002.) Organization 1 heavily relied on videoconferencing, for example, but its members thought that it is crucial to be physically present at informal discussions, in which much information is shared. This is why the sales department of organization 5 held a seminar day; all the Nordic offices of that organization attended to plan a strategy for a new product. The seminar was productive, in no small part because it allowed for informal discussions. Furthermore, in all the case organizations, supervision and problem solving usually occurred face to face; when a situation arose in production or construction, supervisors, managers and quality inspectors would go to see the situation rather than place a phone call. In addition, employees would visit offices if they needed to consult supervisors or managers. This is not nearly as effective across distances.

Nevertheless, there are negative consequences with face-to-face communication. For example, it does not automatically produce a tangible record that can be reviewed later or by other people. The discussed items might not reach everyone who needs the information. A member of the sales support team in organization 1 said that he missed much technical information because he was located in a different office than the source of that technical information. The discussed items can also be easily forgotten, and if something is agreed to, there is no a proof of agreement. In organization 5, many problems were repeated because they were only discussed face to face, and then they were forgotten. Organization 5 had daily morning meetings, in which a specific report was filled, but the report's form did more to account for a situation than it did to support the development of solutions. Furthermore, in organization 1, the decisions made in meetings were not executed because of the poor minute keeping. Conversely, in organization 3, the meeting practice was structured and the minutes were kept precisely; therefore, projects progressed.

In organization 3, the sharing of important information face to face instead of through the work management system was seen as problematic. The documentation workers wanted all the information from the system right away, rather than collecting it in small pieces through different media. Why then did the others not use the work management system? Apparently, they did not perceive the system as useful enough or easy enough to use (Davis, 1989) and would rather communicate face to face. Consequently, it would be interesting to study the following question in future research: why and when would people rather use an information system than communicate face to face? Finally, in organizations 2, 4 and 6, there were challenges other than communicative distance – noise and language differences in the workplace, coordination problems (e.g., racks in the organization 4 case) and decision-making problems. These were minimized in this paper but will probably be studied later on.

CONCLUSIONS

Distance influenced the case organizations' communication, causing attribution errors that hindered collaboration. The sharing of situational information helped to resolve this problem. Employees appreciated face-to-face communication and felt that it was necessary, at least sometimes, to build trust and commitment. If possible, they would handle many issues face to face, either in the office or on the production floor. However, this was also viewed negatively because important things that were discussed informally did not reach everyone who needed the information. Face-to-face communication is also problematic because it does not automatically produce a document. Hence, precise minute keeping and documentation allows projects to progress if done properly. In the case organizations where the minutes were poorly kept or without a useable form, projects were not developed efficiently and decisions were not executed.

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