



Research Article

Establishing Internal Communication Channels Preferred by the Employees of Public Universities in Western Kenya during Unrest

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Public universities in Kenya have experienced recurrent employees unrest which could be as a result of ineffective internal communication between the university and its employees. During crisis, effective internal communication is vital as it is the only way the organization and employees can dialogue and stop the crisis. Despite vast research on organizational internal communication literature on employees preferred internal communication channels in Kenyan public universities during unrest is lacking. Data was collected by means of questionnaires and FGDs among 374 employees and 114 union officials respectively. The findings revealed that most preferred mode of communication by the employees was staff WhatsApp platform (51.7%). The study recommended that the management of public universities should integrate existing internal communication channels with staff WhatsApp.

Key words: Internal communication channels, unrest/crisis, employees unrest

INTRODUCTION

Guth & Alloway (2008) noted that as channels of communication are becoming more diffused, reaching the public through their preferred media is essential. Communication practitioners perceive internal communication as a challenging area (Fitz & Partick 2004, Welch & Jackson, 2005), which significantly affects the ability of an organization to involve the employees into the environmental changes and understanding its evolving objectives (Welch & Jackson, 2005). Frank & Brownell (1989) defined internal communication as the communication transactions between individuals and/or groups at various levels and in different areas of specialization that are intended to design and redesign organizations, to implement designs, and to coordinate day-to-day activities. While Cheney and Christensen (2001), simply relate to internal communication as employee relations, statements of mission and organizational development. Furthermore, Welch and Jackson (2007), define internal communication as communication between an organization's strategic managers and its internal stakeholders, designated to promote commitment to the organization, a sense of

belonging to it, awareness of its changing environment and understanding of its evolving aims. Cornelissen (2008) defines communication strategy as the general set of communication objectives and related communication programs or tactics chosen by an organization in order to support the corporate strategy in the organization. In order to simplify within this study, employees are recognized as internal stakeholders and the communication among them self, or across different hierarchies sharing the same context and communication channels as internal communication.

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Communication structure in all organizations includes formal and informal communication. Informal communication or grapevine is between people within the organization. Downs and Adrian (2004) argue that it is an inevitable part of the organization that should be seen as a natural consequence of people interacting. Subramanian (2006) characterizes grapevine as a simple glance, smile or signal between people within the organization. Argenti (2009) asserts that face-to-face communication is still the most effective way to communicate with organizations, once the sender makes contact with the receiver the message is received instantly, thus the sender receives feedback there and then. He further explains that the sender has more control over message sent via face-to-face than a written message. Bratton and Gold, (1994) posit that, communication can flow in three directions: downward, upward and horizontally. An example for downward communication is managers communicating with their subordinates, upward communication flows to a higher level in the organization and communication that flows between employees at the same level in the organization is horizontal communication. Hartley and Bruckmann, (2002) noted that, there must be an effective balance between downward and upward communication. Communication should be an equal process between the sender and receiver in order to get the message through. There is no universally accepted definition of a crisis, and ranges of definitions exist in the literature (Coombs 2010). Veil & Sellnow (2014) found that most crisis definitions describe it as events characterized by threat, surprise and short response time. Coombs (2011) provides a widely accepted definition: The perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes. An essential word in this definition is 'can'. Several authors (e.g. Coombs 2010; Benoit 1997; Heath 2010) view a crisis as a perception: a socially constructed phenomenon. In a crisis it is not the facts, but how they are framed and interpreted by stakeholders that matters: if the stakeholders believe a crisis exists, then a crisis exists (Coombs 2011).

The overall aim of crisis management is to prevent or lessen the negative outcomes of a crisis (Coombs 2011). A fundamental feature of crisis management is crisis communication: the dialogue the organization has with its stakeholders before, during, and after the crisis (Fearn-Banks 2007). In performing crisis communication, the main aspects are to provide information to stakeholders, and further to protect and maintain the image and reputation of the organization (Coombs 1995; Fearn-Banks 2007). According to Schmidt (2011), crisis in an organization can take many forms. But whether they are accidental, financial, legal or otherwise, affected organization needs effective communication with both internal and external stakeholders. In times of crisis employees appreciate and increasingly demand feedback options such as face to

face and intranet based two way communications. He further noted that, internal crisis communication should be conducted using established communication channels and venues in addition to those that may have been developed to manage specific crisis scenarios.

Literature on employee communication aimed at establishing their preferred communication channels yielded varied results hence leaving the researcher with the question of which internal communication is preferred by employees especially during unrest. Ean (2010) compared face to face versus computer mediated channels in Malaysia and found out that face to face is preferred. Woods (1999) examined trends in current and preferred methods of communication by employees in an organization in New Zealand, he noted that memo is preferred. Twum (2013) examined employees preference of the organizational internal communication in accompany in Ghana and noted that noticeboard was preferred. Arins (2013) found out that personal meetings are preferred when he evaluated existing internal channels in an organization in United Kingdom. While Wyatt (2007) found out that employees preferred mails on issues of health care sent to their homes. Finally, Mishra, Bynton & Mishra (2014) aimed at establishing the preferred internal communication channels to employees, he did not use employees but focused on the management to establish the channels preferred by the employees.

It can be pointed out that most the studies focused on the preferred communication channels but none of the studies was conducted on crisis related issues. Furthermore, none of the studies got similar findings leaving the gap of which particular internal communication would be preferred by public universities in Kenya. Furthermore, there is no documented literature on the employees preferred internal communication channels in public universities in Kenya during crisis. Status of the employees preferred internal communication channel in public universities in western Kenya especially during unrest remains unclear.

METHODOLOGY

This was a descriptive study to establish the channels of internal communication preferred by the employees of public universities in western Kenya during unrest. Fraenkel and Wallen (2009), define descriptive survey as a method that involves asking a large group of people questions about a particular issue. The study employed descriptive survey to explore opinions, on the employees preferred internal communication channels during unrest in public universities in western Kenya. The population for this study consisted of 5674 employees from six accredited public universities in western Kenya. The sample for this study was made up of 374 employees. Out of 374 employees who were given questionnaires, 302 of them returned the questionnaires which provided the data

for analysis, hence n=302 which translates to 81% response rate. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2003), a response rate of 50% is adequate for analysis and reporting, while 60% is good and that and that of 70% and above is very good. The response rate of 81% achieved in this study was sufficient for analysis.

Multistage and stratified sampling procedure was used to select the samples. This was because employees of these public universities belong to different unions i.e. Universities Academic Staff Unions (UASU), Kenya Universities Staff Union (KUSU), and Kenya Union Of Domestic, Hotels, Educational Institution, Hospitals And Allied Workers (KUDHEIHA). According to Kothari (2004), multistage sampling entails two or more stages of random sampling based on the clusters. The population was divided into strata based on respective unions they belonged to within the university. There was questionnaire for employees. Face and content validity of the instrument was assessed by experts from the department of media studies to ensure that the instrument adequately measured the intended content areas of the study. The observations were used as a guide in reviewing the instruments before administering them to the respondents. The reliability of the instrument was ascertained using Cronbach's Alpha. Data obtained from the instrument were analyzed using descriptive method. SPSS version 21 was used to analyze data. Data from questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively while data from focused group discussions were analyzed qualitatively.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Establish channels of internal communication preferred by the employees of public universities in western Kenya during unrest. The respondents were asked to give channels of internal communication they preferred to access information during unrest in the organizations they work for. The findings were as presented in Table 1.

Table 1 shows the employees most preferred to the least preferred channels of internal communication during unrest. The study revealed that the most preferred channel of internal communication by the employees was Staff Whatsapp platform 156 (51.7%) followed by Union Officials at 153 (50.7%) and Facebook 136 (45.0%). Posters followed with 134 (44.4%) while internal memo had 132 (43.7%), short messages scored 129 (42.7%) followed by face to face at 125 (41.4%). University noticeboard had 106 (35.1%) while staff e mail was at 100 (33.1%) then followed by meeting with management at 95 (31.5%). University website and Grapevine were the least preferred channels with 84 (27.8%) and 42 (13.9%) respectively.

Participants in focused group discussions (union officials) reported that they have active respective staff Whatsapp groups which they have been using to communicate to their union members, for that reason Whatsapp remained their preferred channel during unrest.

Table 1: Employees Preferred channels of Internal Communication during unrest

(n=302)

Item	F	%
Staff Whatsapp		
Yes	156	51.7
No	146	48.3
Union officials		
Yes	153	50.7
No	149	49.3
Face to face		
Yes	136	45.0
No	166	55.0
Posters		
Yes	134	44.4
No	168	55.6
Internal memo		
Yes	132	43.7
No	170	56.3
Short messages (sms)		
Yes	129	42.7
No	173	57.3
Face to face		
Yes	125	41.4
No	177	58.6
University noticeboard		
Yes	106	35.1
No	196	64.9
Staff e mail		
Yes	100	33.1
No	202	66.9
Meeting with management		
Yes	95	31.5
No	207	68.5
University website		
Yes	84	27.8
No	218	72.2
Grapevine		
Yes	42	13.9
No	260	86.1

(Source:Field data 2018)

This study did not concur with Wyatt, (2007) who found out that the most preferred mode of communication was mails followed by print materials at work. Mishra, Bynton & Mishra, (2014) also found out that face-to-face communication was important to the employees especially when communicating to the managers. This could be an indication that, public universities employees embrace online oriented communications like Staff WhatsApp platform which was the most preferred communication channel with the highest percentage of 51.7%. With the advancement of mobile technology which has made information dissemination and reception more instantaneous. Platforms have come up and have been adopted by many who find them appealing. One of these

platforms is Whatsapp, whose adoption rate has enormously grown from its inception in 2009, with the current number of users surpassing 1 billion in over 180 countries (Whatsapp, 2016). The use of Whatsapp has penetrated into institutions and organizations (Adika, 2014). Schwarz (2016) noted that departments can exchange information with each other directly via Whatsapp. This is beneficial to the company as it provides benefits in terms of job satisfaction and productivity. This was confirmed by a study Ohio State University and University of California that discovered that instant messaging has a positive effect on productivity. The study also revealed that, the management of the public universities was using noticeboard and internal memos to communicate to their employees during unrest. This clearly shows that they do not embrace internet based communication channels to communicate to their employees during unrest.

Miller (2016) noted that a number of changes have taken place in the process of communication mostly because of changes in technology, these changes in technology have influenced people's choice of channels of communication. Online oriented communications are preferred by employees as they can send and easily receive information anytime anywhere, these are platforms like face book, Whats App etc. During unrest internal based communication channels are considered ideal by the employees as they allow for interactive session among the employees. Unlike information sent by internal memo or noticeboard that dictates that you must go looking for the information physically at the place of work. Bases on the findings of the study, the discrepancy in the employees preferred channels of internal communication, and the channels the management of universities use to communicate to their employees during unrest shows that there is internal communication gap between the management and its publics.

Employees sources of information during unrest

The employees were asked to indicate sources of information during unrest in the organizations they work for, the employee's responses were presented in Table 2.

Table 2 shows the findings on employees sources of information during unrest. It revealed that 239 (79.1%) of employees got information through grapevine, followed by 208 (68.9 %) from staff WhatsApp group. 197 (65.2%) of employees got information through notice board. Union officials had 176 (58.3%) while 130 (43.0%) of respondents got information through internal memo. 103 (34.1%) of the respondents who participated in the study got information from supervisor and 84 (27.8%) got information from website. Facebook and twitter scored 3.3 and 0.3 respectively.

Table 2: Employees sources of information during unrest in public universities in western Kenya

Item	F	%
Grapevine		
Yes	239	79.1
No	63	20.9
Noticeboard		
Yes	197	65.2
No	102	34.8
Supervisor		
Yes	103	34.1
No	199	65.9
Facebook		
Yes	10	3.3
No	292	96.7
Twitter		
Yes	1	0.3
No	301	99.7
Website		
Yes	84	27.8
No	218	72.2
WhatsApp		
Yes	208	68.9
No	94	31.1
Union officials		
Yes	176	58.3
No	126	41.7
Internal memo		
Yes	130	43.0
No	172	57.0

Key:f-frequency, %- percentage

Source: Survey data (2018)

From the findings it is revealed that employees depend most on grapevine as source of information. A number of participants from group discussions acknowledged this. However, as the mediators during unrest, they felt that they as union officials always try to minimize grapevine by meeting with the management for clarification.

This finding concurs with Mallet-Hamer, (2005) who asserted that; majority of employees received information through grapevine. In addition, Adrian (2004) argues that grapevine is an inevitable part of the organization that should be seen as a natural consequence of people interacting. Subramanian (2006) also characterizes grapevine as a simple glance, smile or signal between people within the organization.

Mallet-Hamer (2005) also noted that when employees were asked about the overall satisfaction of communication within the organization they thought that their supervisor's communicated well. In contrary, the current study when the respondents were asked about their satisfaction with the communication within their organization, they felt that it was of poor quality. That is, its unreliable and not timely 144 (47.7) refer to Table 10. This was supported by the following statement from a respondent:

Respondent 179: “The truth is, the quality of information here is very bad! The thing is that the information we get is not timely and reliable. We lack information that’s why we strike.”

Findings of the study also revealed that employees depend mostly on grapevine during unrest, this greatly interferes with the authenticity of the information shared amongst employees as grapevine cannot be justified and it causes rumor which can aggravate unrest. The grapevine while being passed from one person to another also gets distorted as each and every person decodes and encodes same information differently. The supremacy of grapevine here is can be explained by the fact that the universities management does not release or pass needed information within the required time.

White et.al (2010) posit that complete timely information prevents rumors, since rumors occur when there is insufficient and incomplete information which causes people to speculate. The employees of public universities in western Kenya who were the respondents in this study noted that they received information through grapevine. The study also revealed that grapevine was the employees least preferred channels of communication during unrest refer to Table 1. But was their main source of information during unrest, this was because the information they required from the management was usually not timely leaving room for grapevine to reign.

Grapevine is an informal communication system of an organization which is not controlled by management and is perceived by most employees as being more believable and reliable. Subramanian (2006) noted that grapevine causes rumors, rumors cannot be stopped but its spreading can be controlled through the good timing of the official transmission of information. Therefore, the management should stop speculation by giving timely information this will stop rumors and subsequently minimize unrest.

CONCLUSION

The study established that the most preferred mode of communication by the employees was staff Whats App platform. Employees source of information during unrest was also sought, the data indicated that, employees got information through grapevine. It could therefore be concluded that employees of public universities in western Kenya preferred Whats App but got information through grapevine during unrest.

RECOMMENDATION

Management of public universities in western Kenya should consider integrating other forms of social media/new media with the existing ones like noticeboard to

communicate to their employees during unrest. This can be done by constant evaluation of internal communication channels in the organizations.

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