COMMUNICATION CHANNELS AND INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION BETWEEN SOUTH AFRICAN AND GERMAN BUSINESS PARTNERS

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Abstract

Good communication skills are vital, especially in business. This study investigated the role of interpersonal communications in managing South African – German business relationships. The objective of the study was to identify which communication channels South African businesses use to communicate with their German business partners, and which are perceived to be the most effective. In order to accomplish the objective, a survey was conducted by means of self-administered e-mail based questionnaires. In addition, a few depth interviews were conducted to help interpret the quantitative results of the study. In both cases, the respondents were purposively selected. Based on the findings, recommendations were provided on how communication can be made more effective to improve South African and German business relationships.

Keywords: Interpersonal Communication, Business Relationships, Global Partnerships, Communication Channels

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1 Introduction

Germany has been one of South Africa's main business trading partners over the past ten years, being consistently the largest supplier of imports into South Africa and being either the third or fourth largest export customer for South African goods. For example, in 2008, Germany accounted for 11.3% of all imports into South Africa and for 7.2% of all South Africa's exports (South African Revenue Services, 2012). Clearly, maintaining sound relationships between South African and German firms is essential to continue such successful and important trade activities.

Managing business relationships is a key ingredient of business success – across all industries (Limehouse, 1999: 100). According to Wang and Ji (2010: 173), business expectations have become a primary concern for organisations, especially those who trade in the global market. Hemamalini (2002: 3) states that besides changing market conditions and new global competitors, the businesses themselves are changing. The challenges of rapid innovation, shrinking product life cycles, falling prices and global competition make it difficult for companies to focus on managing business relationships.

According to Jordan and Eldredge (2003: 44), it takes more than just technology to maintain business relationships. It takes improved business processes and a method for providing the information needed in business in an efficient and effective manner, and that means that proper interpersonal business communication between organizations is needed (Kaufman, 2001: 36). The way business partners communicate with each other can either build or destroy relationships and, therefore, has a direct influence on the effectiveness of business (Bambacas & Patrickson, 2008: 53).

Ridilla (2008: 70) explains that there are three separate forms of business communications that are critical to maintain a positive working relationship between businesses. These are body language, verbal aspects and documentation.

The Manufacturers' Agents National Association (MANA) agency found that 95 percent of all business problems in 2006 evolved from a lack of communication which shows how important communication is to be successful in business (A perfect principal doubleheader, 2006: 47).

Before the problems in communication can be addressed, it is important to first identify how business people communicate with each other and which communication channels they use. Therefore this study set out to identify and examine the interpersonal channels used by business organisations in South Africa to communicate with their German

business partners. First the literature on previous research is presented, then the method used to conduct the study is explained and the statistical findings from the empirical study are presented. Finally, the implications of these findings for the businesses are interpreted and recommendations are made.

2 Literature review

2.1 Building a positive relationship between partners

The most effective means of creating a positive relationship in business is using straight talk; open communication between the business partners is a necessity to keep a positive relationship (Banker to banker, 2007: 27).

Romaniello (2004: 43) declares that closer and more frequent communication between business partners fosters tighter and more successful relationships. However, both partners' support must encourage the creation of a positive relationship. Evenson (2010: 69) indicates that building a positive relationship begins when your business partner gets a first impression of you and your company. Bilanich (2009: n/a) nominates three things that should be done for building strong and positive relationships. First, get to know yourself, second, give with no expectation of return and, third, resolve conflict positively with minimal disruption to your relationships.

2.2 Challenges in building global business relationships

Magrath (1997: 46) indicates that to understand global business partners, their priorities and the knowledge of how to solve global business relationship problems create challenges. Korzeniowski (2001: 40) declares that "International connections are a challenge for every company", and many large international companies are hesitant because they have concerns about the long-term viability. Brown (cited in Handley, 2010) states that global businesses and their relationships can struggle if there is no central person or team deciding what skills are needed. Developing the right international objectives is a critical component to international operations, and to build efficient relationships significant time and effort have to be invested into research and planning (Glover, 2001: 66).

2.3 Differences in culture, technology and communication

Culture impacts on behaviour, morale, and productivity at work, and includes values that influence company attitudes and actions (Harris, Moran & Moran, 2004: 4). The primary reason for global business failures is a lack of understanding of foreign cultures and the right communication is the cornerstone to improve such understanding (Kanungo, 2006: 26). Apart from that, different technology standards in different countries can have an influence on building business relationships. Rishel and Burns (1997: 3) explain that strong relationships also depend on the technology standard used by organizations. A study was done at the Computerworld's premier 100 IT leaders conference in 2005 regarding the main obstacles to global strategies for IT companies. These were cultural issues (32%), lack of globalisation plans (30%), political issues (29%) and technological issues (9%). Clearly, therefore, organizations should pay more attention to cultural issues.

2.4 Communication in business

In the words of Ludlow (cited in Kushal, 2009: 2), "Business communication is a process of transfer of information and understanding between different parts and people of a business organization. It consists of various modes and media involved in communication interchanges". Communication is necessary in business and, if it is done effectively, it supports organizational growth, survival and future success (Barnes, 2002: 30). According to Namita (2009: 3) communication is the main ingredient of business because no business can grow and expand without proper communication channels. Ramsey (1994: 45) states that multinational organizations need effective communication if they want to be successful abroad.

2.5 Verbal and nonverbal communication

Kirst-Ashman and Hull (2008: 48) claim that human communication involves both verbal and nonverbal behaviour. Erasmus, Bowler and Goliath (1998: 8) state that success in business often depends on a person's ability to communicate effectively, and effective communication combines verbal and nonverbal communication.

Verbal communication contains oral and written communication between people and involves the use of words in speaking, writing, reading and listening (Erasmus, Albin & Donavon, 1998: 8). According to Hughes (2003: 21), the right word choice and clarity in verbal communication is important and requires attention to personal dynamics.

According to Yuan (2007: 77), compared with verbal communication, nonverbal communication is often indirect and ambiguous and people may use different nonverbal signals to show different attitudes when speaking. Preston (2005: 83) states that nonverbal messages can support or interfere with the verbal messages which are delivered by people.

2.6 Communication channels in business

The communication process is successful only if the receiver understands the message as intended by the

sender. This process sounds simple but it is not always achieved in business (Guffey, Rogin & Rhodes, 2009: 12) because of various reasons, including incorrect encoding and decoding of the message, interfering messages and incorrect choice of communication channel. Harris (2007: 18) states that there are many communication channels which can be used to transfer information. Guffey and Almonte (2009: 34) maintain that choosing the right communication channel depends on the importance of the message, the amount and speed of feedback required, the necessity of permanent record, the cost of the channel, and best practice in the company.

Cabot and Steiner (2006: 64) suggest that different positions and jobs in the company require different communication channels to be used. According to Abell and Codd (2003: 21), choosing the right communication channel is a way to influence the right people in business and helps to establish a credible platform from which to negotiate.

2.7 Types of communication in organizations

Communication is not simply a matter of the face-to-face exchange of information. In organizations, people participate in a number of different levels of communication (Fielding, 2005: 25). According to Lehman and Dufrene (2007: 9), communication in organizations can refer to different audiences and generally can take place on five levels:

- Intrapersonal communication;
- Interpersonal communication;
- Group communication;
- Public communication; and
- Mass communication.

2.8 Interpersonal communication

"Interpersonal communication is the process of message transaction between two or more people to create and sustain shared meaning" (West & Turner, 2008: 10). Weiten, Lloyd, Dunn and Hammer (2008: 205) state that interpersonal communication is an interaction process in which one person sends a message to another while using a certain communication channel. Interpersonal communication is extremely important in business and bad interpersonal skills contribute considerable inefficiencies in companies and other organizations (Ellet, 2006: 101).

Interpersonal communication is the most common context of business and professional relationship building, and interpersonal communication skills are obviously the foundation of success in business (Troester & Mester, 2007: 156). Consequently, aspects of interpersonal communication are important in attempting to understand issues such as long-term bonding and the development of trust (Olkkonen, Tikkanen &

Alajoutsijarvi, 2000: 404). According to Coyle (1993: 4), employees need relationships to realize their potential – in today's workplace relationships require interdependence that can most effectively be achieved through better quality in interpersonal communications. Just (1999: 84) suggests that organizations are no longer relying on power and control, but rather on empowerment and commitment. Moreover, building strong interpersonal working relationships help to create synergy and teamwork within a work group or an organization.

2.9 Communication problems and barriers

Communication is the most important skill for success in business and studies show that people in organizations generally spend over 75 percent of their time in interpersonal communications (Carroll, 2009: ix). According to Sedam (2002: 44), if people talk about communication problems in business, they should look deeper for the cause, such as different behavioural styles, personalities, company policies, structure and culture.

According to Harris and Hartmann (2001: 315), objectivity in receiving and interpreting messages is often difficult to achieve because of communication problems caused by perceptual and psychological reasons or as a result of specific situations. Obstacles and factors which disturb the communication process and, therefore, make the communication incomplete and ineffective are known as communication barriers (Debasish & Das, 2009: 61). Communication barriers are any factors that interfere with the success of the communication process (Krizan, Merrier, Logan & Williams, 2007: 16). According to Qazi and McKenzie (1983: 70), communication slowdowns or breakdowns can result from ambiguous or misinterpreted verbal or nonverbal communications.

Pancrazio and Pancrazio (1981: 31) go further and declare that communication barriers lead to miscommunication and cause problems in communications such as causing defensive reactions, cutting off further communication, diminishing chances to identify options and resulting in confusion or misunderstanding. Sri Jin and Sunitti (2009: 45) define miscommunication as "… a ruined form of communication. What is to be communicated does not get communicated and an obstructed form of message is transmitted".

Considering the importance of inter-cultural communications, this study aimed to identify the interpersonal communications channels used by organisations in South Africa to communicate with their business partners in Germany, as well as to investigate interpersonal communication problems experienced by such businesses in managing their business relationships. To meet this objective, the following issues, identified from the literature, were determined to be key to successful interpersonal

business communications and were used to develop the questionnaire:

- Use of communication channels especially Web 2.0 communication channels
- Familiarity with these communication channels
- Perceived suitability of communication channels
- Interpersonal skills and their role as barriers to communication
- Cultural aspects and their role as barriers to communication
- Language and use of terminology and its role as a barrier to communication

These issues therefore formed the basis of the empirical study and will be discussed in detail in the Results section of this paper.

3 Method

An exploratory research design with both quantitative and qualitative instruments was used to collect the necessary data. The survey method, using a questionnaire, was chosen in order to collect the quantitative data. To develop more understanding of the quantitative findings, in-depth interviews were also conducted.

The target population was South African companies that communicate with Germany on business matters. Within these firms, the research elements were Managing Directors, Heads of Departments, and employees who work in sales, marketing and purchasing, and who communicate with German suppliers or customers. The data was collected during September and October 2011 from firms based in South Africa.

The sample frame was the South African – German Chamber of Commerce and Industry membership list of 500 organizations. A non-probability sampling design was used for the survey. Specifically, the sampling design was a mixture of purposive sampling, census and self-selected sampling. The first step was to select the companies suitable for the study from the South African – German Chamber of Commerce and Industry list. Non-trading organisations and service firms such as restaurants were excluded from the frame. The remaining companies were phoned to make sure that they are qualified and then asked to participate in the survey. From these selected companies, an e-mail based census was done. Finally, the achieved sample was based on a self-selected sampling. A self-selected sample is a form of convenience sample where the respondents determine whether or not to be a part of the sample (Kim, 2011: 41). The final achieved sample consisted of 200 companies.

The questionnaire was developed from the literature on business communications, with questions stated simply to ensure that they were understood by all respondents. To ensure validity, each question was pre-tested. Closed-ended Likert scaled questions were mainly used. In addition to pre-testing, the developed questionnaire was also checked via a pilot-study to test validity. Most of the questions can be seen in Table 5. The data was then collected via an e-mail online survey. The respondents received an Internet link via e-mail, which they had to click on to access the questionnaire.

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 18, was used to analyse the data. Descriptive statistics were used, summarising the results mainly in terms of mean values. To test for statistical significance chi-square tests were used.

Regarding the qualitative interviews, a non-probability sample was used. Purposive sampling was chosen because information regarding the research topic and research problem was believed to be held by certain respondents. Six interviews were conducted in this study to gain more in-depth information. The requirement for qualifying for the interview was that the respondent communicated regularly with German business partners and worked for a company based in South Africa.

A qualitative interviewer framework, based on the study aim, was developed to explore some of the quantitative results. Information provided by the interviewees was audio recorded, transcribed, and then the transcription was deconstructed and reconstructed according to the research themes.

4 Results

4.1 Sample demographics

The gender of the participants in the quantitative study shows a reasonable spread. The results can be seen in Table 1, which also shows respondents' ages. Over 70 per cent of the respondents were over 40 years old. This finding was expected because the study was designed to collect information mainly from managing directors or senior managers, who would be expected to be older.

Table 1. Age and gender

Age \ Gender		Female	Male	Total
18 - 30	f	9	10	19
	%	14.1%	15.6%	29.7%
41 - 50	f	15	8	23
	%	23.4%	12.5%	35.9%
> 50	f	10	12	22
	%	15.6%	18.8%	34.4%
Total	f	34	30	64
	%	53.1%	46.9%	100.0%

Like age and gender, work experience was felt to be an important criterion for ensuring representativeness of the sample. The length of employment in years of the respondents showed an even spread, with experience from 1 year up to over 20 years. In summary, 80% of the respondents had worked for more than 4 years and over 40% had worked over 10 years for the company. This relatively high level of experience means that the sample respondents could be expected to be sufficiently knowledgeable about their organizations' activities and communications.

A comparison of the opinion questions in terms of the demographics questions was done using analysis of variance. None of the comparisons were found to be significant. Thus it was concluded that the respondents' opinions about interpersonal communications did not differ between genders, age categories or length of time worked at the company. Therefore, subsequent analyses were only conducted and discussed according to the total results.

4.2 Familiarity and use of communication channels

Table 2 shows the communication channels that South African business people are most familiar with, and the frequency with which each channel is used per day.

There were obviously high levels of familiarity with the telephone, face-to-face and e-mail. However, only about a third (34.4 percent) were familiar with Web 2.0 services, and approximately 47 percent with videoconferencing. In other words, the more modern or sophisticated communications channels are not well known.

Table 2. Communication channel familiarity and use (%)

Channel	% familiar with channel	Times channel used per day							
		Domestic (South African)				International (German)			
		0	1-5	6-15	>15	0	1-5	6-15	>15
Telephone	96.9	-	32.3	43.5	24.2	9.7	72.6	11.3	6.5
Face to Face	84.4	10.5	70.2	8.8	10.5	85.7	11.1	1.6	1.6
Videoconferencing	46.9	85.0	15.0	-	-	84.9	15.1	-	-
Electronic mail	100.0	1.6	6.3	31.7	60.3	1.6	52.4	23.8	22.2
Web 2.0	34.4	79.0	9.7	8.1	3.2	81.7	10.0	3.3	5.0

Table 2 also shows a comparison of how often South African business people use each communication channel to communicate with their domestic business partners on the one hand, and with their German business partners on the other hand.

On average, approximately 80% of respondents did not use videoconferencing or Web 2.0 to communicate with neither their domestic partners nor with their German business partners. This is consistent with the low level of familiarity with these channels. The two most used channels for domestic communication were e-mail, which was used more than 15 times a day by 60.3% of respondents, and face-to-face which was used less often (1 – 5 times a day by 70.2% of respondents). Obviously a high

percentage of the respondents did not use face-to-face to communicate with German firms. Most communication is via telephone (72.6%) and electronic mail (52.4%). In each instance, these channels were used between 1 and 5 times per day.

The findings from the qualitative study suggest that South African organizations use the telephone more often to communicate with their domestic business partners than with their German business partners because the staff in South Africa can usually solve problems. Calls to Germany are made only in urgent cases. Another reason is that people are much better prepared when they make calls overseas (Germany) and therefore less time is spent on the

phone and less communication in general is necessary to solve problems.

As Table 2 shows, South African business people have very little face-to-face contact with their German business partners. Based on the qualitative interviews, the two main factors seem to be money and time. Flights are so expensive and time-consuming that people try to solve problems via e-mail and telephone.

Another salient point highlighted by Table 2 is that videoconferencing and Web 2.0 technology are rarely used by South African organizations. This finding is surprising since videoconferencing is a cheap, immediate, comfortable and direct communication channel. The qualitative interviews suggest that South African business people stick to old habits (telephone and e-mail) with which they feel comfortable. Furthermore, South African

organizations seem to not really know how to use this new communication technology, and in addition, connections for overseas calls sometimes break down or have a time delay, which makes speech awkward. Service providers often have problems in guaranteeing a stable connection, which is necessary to use videoconferencing properly.

With Web 2.0 being an important future channel for business communication, a more in-depth investigation was warranted. Table 3 illustrates that few respondents had an opinion about Web 2.0 services. Over one third do not even know if their company uses or offers Web 2.0 services for communication. Furthermore, nearly half the respondents do not have an opinion on whether Web 2.0 technology is going to play a bigger role for business communication in the future.

Table 3. Opinions about Web 2.0 communication channels

Questions / % responses	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Our company uses Web 2.0 to communicate with German business partners.	12.9	33.9	53.2
Web 2.0 Technology will be more important for efficient communication with global business partners in the next 5 years.	35.5	41.9	22.6
Web 2.0 Technology will not be allowed for communication by the companies because it is developed more for private use and not for business.	27.0	46.0	27.0

Some interviewees indicated that Web 2.0 services certainly have potential for business communication, but companies are uncertain and hesitant about their use. Some felt that employees might use it more for private than for business issues. Moreover, data security was also an issue; companies do not like to publish important or confidential information on the web. The fact that 70% of the sample was over 40 years old could be a reason for the lack of knowledge about, or interest in, Web 2.0 services. A survey of younger employees may produce a different result.

In general, South African organizations use their communication channels less often to communicate

with German business partners than to communicate with their domestic partners. According to the interviews, this is natural because South Africa is where the selling and buying takes place (rather than in Germany). Therefore, more communication with the domestic partners is necessary on a daily basis.

4.3 Suitability of communication channels

Table 4 represent the opinions on how suitable or applicable the various communication channels are for South African organizations to communicate with German businesses.

Table 4. Suitability of communication channels

	Inappropriate	Less suitable	Suitable	Most suitable
Telephone	-	1.7%	55.0%	43.3%
Face to Face	14.3%	22.4%	24.5%	38.8%
Videoconferencing	2.9%	42.9%	51.4%	2.9%
Electronic mail	-	4.9%	19.7%	75.4%
Web 2.0	25.0%	28.6%	46.4%	-

Overall, respondents felt that the different channels are generally appropriate. However, some channels were more favoured than others. These include telephone, face-to-face and e-mail. Moreover, despite the uncertainty previously mentioned, about

half the respondents think that Web 2.0 and videoconferencing are suitable for communication. As discussed previously, these communication channels are hardly used for communication, which is

consistent with the fact that about half perceive them as unsuitable.

4.4 Opinions regarding communications

Table 5 provides a summary of the opinions of the respondents regarding interpersonal communications and barriers to such communications. These means were all found to be significant with p values of 0.000. Most questions had a spread of positive and negative answers, with the means hovering around the mid, neutral point of 3 (between 2.5 and 3.5). In most cases, the respondents disagreed with the statements about communication barrier causes (e.g. making

promises that cannot be kept, remembering the conversation context, problems in summarising the conversation, interruptions due to technological problems or time zone difficulties). The only factor that emerged as a fairly strong communication barrier was the different cultural backgrounds and traditions (mean of 3.5469). Although most means hover around the mid-point of 3, the relatively high standard deviations indicate that there were a fairly high number of respondents who did believe significant communications barriers exist. For example: 'German business partners not understanding what is said' (x=2.8281, SD=1.12058).

Table 5. Summary of opinion questions

Opinion questions	n	Mean	Std. Dev.
GENERAL			
German business partners often send unimportant and unnecessary e-mails.	64	2.1406	.79417
Face-to-face communication is the most efficient way to get results when dealing with German business relationships.	64	3.2500	1.02353
While talking on the phone, one should also be interested in the person and not only in the business issues.	63	3.6984	.81587
German companies use Videoconferencing too often and neglect therefore the personal face-to-face contact with the South African business partners.	64	2.5937	.92099
INTERPERSONAL SKILLS – BARRIERS – ABILITY TO UNDERSTAND WHAT OTHER PEOPLE SAY			
Good interpersonal skills of business partners positively affect the communication efficiency.	64	4.4531	.58905
German business partners often don't understand what is said.	64	2.8281	1.12058
German business partners often make promises they cannot keep.	64	2.2187	.91667
German business partners often have difficulties in remembering the conversation context (includes face-to-face and telephone).	64	2.2656	.92996
INTERPERSONAL SKILLS – BARRIERS – SIGNIFICANCE OF ORAL SKILLS			
German business partners always have a positive attitude and are kind.	64	3.2813	.89918
German business partners often have problems in summarizing the conversation.	63	2.3333	.78288
German business partners often have trouble in structuring the conversation flow on the phone.	64	2.5000	1.05409
INTERPERSONAL SKILLS – BARRIERS – SIGNIFICANCE OF WRITTEN SKILLS			
Written responses from German business partners are always on time.	64	3.3750	.91721
The written context from German business partners is often not structured.	64	2.5000	.94281
The grammar of written messages from German business partners is often wrong.	64	2.8906	1.02535
CULTURAL ASPECTS – BARRIERS			
I often don't understand the foreign language terminology that German business partners use.	64	2.6250	.96773
Different cultural backgrounds and traditions affect business communication. (Differences such as: just now and Afrikaans: now now).	64	3.5469	.94162
The communication flow with German business partners will often be interrupted because of technology problems.	64	2.4375	.83333
Different time zones make it difficult to define the right business hours for communication.	64	2.2344	.97170
A noisy and disruptive environment often disturbs the communication flow.	64	3.0313	1.16794

4.5 Bivariate analysis

This section covers the bivariate analysis that involved the comparison of two variables of relevance related to Web 2.0. Cross tabulations and chi square tests were used for this analysis.

4.5.1 Cross tab of Web 2.0 today and tomorrow in business

The respondents were asked if their company was using Web 2.0 for business communication and how they think Web 2.0 will change in business communication over the next five years. A Pearson chi-square test (p – 0.000) showed that there is a statistical significant relationship between the two considered variables.

As already indicated in the univariate analysis of this chapter, Web 2.0 is little used by South African organizations for business communication. However, it is interesting to know what South African organizations think of the future development of Web 2.0 in business communication. The majority of the respondents disagreed with the statement that their company is using Web 2.0 for business communication but they think that Web 2.0 will be more important for business communication in the next five years, as Table 6 shows. South African business people are quite confident that Web 2.0 will be more useful for business communication in the next five years.

Table 6. Use of Web 2.0 in business in the future

		Web 2.0 Technology will be more important for efficient communication with global business partners in the next 5 years.					Total
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	
Our company uses Web 2.0 to communicate with German business partners.	Strongly disagree	5	1	6	4	0	16
	Disagree	0	5	6	4	1	16
	Neutral	0	2	13	6	0	21
	Agree	0	1	0	1	4	6
	Strongly agree	0	0	1	0	1	2
Total		5	9	26	15	6	61

4.5.2 Cross tab of face-to-face communication and language/terminology

A cross tabulation (shown in Table 7), between whether 'face-to-face is the most efficient way to communicate with German business partners' and 'if the language/terminology is often misunderstood', showed a significant relationship (p = 0.02) between the two considered variables. This is consistent with the univariate analysis, which showed that many respondents disagreed with the statement that face-to-face is the most efficient way to communicate with German business people, and that the majority also disagreed with the statement that they do not understand the language or terminology that German business partners use.

Table 7. Face-to-face as most efficient and language/terminology

		Language/Terminology: I often don't understand foreign language terminology that German business partners use.					Total
		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	
Face-to-face communication is most efficient way to get results when dealing with German business relationships.	Strongly disagree	0	0	0	0	1	1
	Disagree	1	8	5	2	0	16
	Neutral	2	10	7	2	0	21
	Agree	1	7	4	5	1	18
	Strongly agree	1	4	1	2	0	8
Total		5	29	17	11	2	64

Obviously, South African business people understand the German language/terminology quite well and, therefore, probably do not need to meet German business people in person to clarify misconceptions. In this case, the difference between being effective and efficient must be explained. It

might be that face-to-face is the most effective way to communicate but with the background of time and cost, it might not be the most efficient way from an economic point of view.

5. Conclusion

The objective concerned the communication channels used by South African organizations to communicate with German businesses. The result of the research shows that the main communication channels used by South African organizations are e-mails, telephone and face-to-face communication. According to Sussman, Adams, Kuzmits and Raho (2002: 315), these are the main communication channels in business. According to the literature, e-mail is used mainly because messages can be sent quickly and inexpensively across the time zones or borders; telephones are also used for gathering or delivering quick information and face-to-face conversation takes place when business people need to be persuasive (Guffey and Almonte, 2009: 35). These insights from the literature review are confirmed by this study, which found that South African business people mainly communicate via e-mail and telephone.

Videoconferencing is hardly used by South African organizations to communicate with German business people. Bigger companies use videoconferencing occasionally. According to the literature, this channel would be used when group consensus and interaction are important but the members are not available personally (Guffey and Almonte 2009: 35). Although videoconferencing provides a comfortable and cheap communication channel over distance, this study has found that this communication channel is not used by South African organizations to communicate with their German business partners. Lack of knowledge and different technology standards play a role in why videoconferencing is not in standard use for communication in South African companies.

In relation to Web 2.0 and business communication, there is little literature available because this area is still relatively new. The study confirmed that many people do not know what Web 2.0 is, or whether their company is using this channel for business communication. Even after being given a definition of Web 2.0:

> *"Web 2.0 is the term given to describe a second generation of the World-Wide-Web that is focused on the ability for people to collaborate and share information online",*

many respondents answered the questions concerning Web 2.0 with neutral answers. This shows that people are relatively ignorant about this particular area and that Web 2.0 is not adequately considered for business communication.

6. Implications of the study

This research has clearly shown the importance of interpersonal communication in business. Due to the complexity of all the factors that influence communication, research in this particular area is justified. In addition to making a contribution to knowledge about interpersonal communication between South African and German businesses, it has also contributed to knowledge about the use of Web 2.0 in South Africa, an unanticipated benefit. Web 2.0 is generally in demand for business communication, and this study has highlighted that the benefits of its use are probably being missed by South African businesses.

In addition to increasing awareness of the advantages and disadvantages of this new communication channel, companies should also ensure that their employees know more about their business partners and their communication habits to make business communication as efficient and effective as possible. Companies should carry out workshops and training in the company on interpersonal and inter-cultural communication in business, and on effective and efficient ways of conducting business communication. Such training in communication could be offered on a generic basis, or could be specifically related to certain countries – in this case, communication between South Africa and Germany.

7. Limitations and further research

Three limitations of this research were that many respondents did not know much about Web 2.0 (as indicated by the large number of neutral responses), and the small sample size of only 64 respondents. For an exploratory study, this was sufficient, but for reliable answers for a conclusive study, this was insufficient. A third limitation was that the problem was only viewed from a South African perspective.

Further research is needed in the area of Web 2.0 technology for business communication. The question of whether Web 2.0 can be used for efficient and effective business communication needs to be explored further. Furthermore, the same study could be conducted in Germany to explore the problem from a German perspective. German business people may have a completely different opinion.

A final recommendation for further research is to expand the sample size. A bigger sample would provide more reliable and valid conclusions. In conjunction with the increase sample size, differences in the communication behaviour of smaller and bigger companies, and differences in the various demographic factors could be investigated.

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