

CHANGE MANAGEMENT IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION LANDSCAPE: A CASE OF THE TRANSITION PROCESS AT A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

Vaneshree Govender*, Renitha Rampersad**

*Faculty of Management Sciences, Department of Public Relations Management,
Durban University of Technology, South Africa
Tel: 27 31 3732558

**Department of Public Relations Management, Faculty of Management Sciences,
Durban University of Technology, PO Box 1334, Durban, 4000, South Africa
Tel: 0799699618

Abstract

The South African Higher Education system in the post-apartheid period had to respond to the various discriminatory practices that existed during the apartheid era. This entailed responding to inequalities in the education system at various levels. With respect to Higher Education there was an imperative to serve society that was based on the principles of equality, equity and inclusivity. One such response was to merge higher education institutions such as ML Sultan Technikon and Technikon Natal to form the Durban Institute of Technology now referred to as the Durban University of Technology (DUT). This paper is concerned with the process of change in the Higher Education context and examines a South African case study. The study was conducted within a quantitative paradigm and the sample population was 400 administrative and academic staff from across the seven campuses. In order to satisfy the research objectives of the study, a self-administered location based survey was distributed and data was analyzed using SPSS. The study revealed that living and coping with change in the work environment is a fact of life for organisations and individuals. The success of any change programme depends on the organisation's ability to communicate effectively with its employees; therefore internal communication plays a pivotal role in any change programme.

Keywords: Change Management, Higher Education, Internal Communication, Mergers

1. INTRODUCTION

The South African Higher Education system in the post-apartheid period had to respond to the various discriminatory practices that existed during the apartheid era. This entailed responding to inequalities in the education system at various levels. As far as Higher Education was concerned, there was an imperative to serve society that was based on the principles of equality, equity and inclusivity. This brought about the merger of the ML Sultan Technikon and Technikon Natal to form the Durban Institute of Technology, in the year 2002, now referred to as the Durban University of Technology (DUT).

This paper is concerned with the process of change in the Higher Education context and examines a South African case study. The paper begins with a review of literature on the South African Higher Education system in the post-apartheid period, and change management in higher education institutions during this time. The theoretical analysis is followed by a case study of the transition process at the Durban University of Technology in South Africa. The merger process revealed numerous challenges one of which was the human resource issue that underpinned the merger

of staff between the two technikons which differed in practice.

2. THE PROCESS OF CHANGE IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

Prior to 1994, South Africa supported 36 higher education institutions, as part of its apartheid legacy. Enforced racial segregation resulted in a plethora of institutions to accommodate specific racial and language groups, which were managed and professionally staffed mostly by white males (Barnes, Baijnath, and Sattar, 2009).

Thereafter, due to the social inequalities of class, race, gender, institutional and spatial nature in South African higher education, in 1994 the South African new democratic government committed itself to transforming higher education and institutionalising a new social order.

Post-1994, there has been a wide array of transformation-oriented initiatives seeking to effect institutional change. This included the definition of the purposes and goals of higher education; funding, academic structure and programmes and quality assurance; the enactment of new laws and regulations; and major restructuring and reconfiguration of the higher education institutional

landscape and of institutions. These initiatives have often tested the capacities and capabilities of the state and higher education institutions and have affected the pace, nature and outcomes of change (Badat, 2010).

The Education White Paper 3 on Higher Education 1997 aimed to comprehensively transform the higher education system (DoE, 1997). The objectives of White Paper 3 were to address problems of equity, redress, democracy, autonomy and efficiency (Elliott, 2005). The South African higher education system during this time was under considerable pressure to provide access and quality education to all (Vandeyar, 2010 in Mouton, Louw and Strydom 2013).

Mergers were said to be politically motivated and included resistance to change and low levels of trust. Many changes were involved in the transformation of higher education in South Africa. These included the size and shape of institutions, the meaning of institutional autonomy and accountability, the nature of higher education, the character of student demographic distribution, management and governance, the role and place of student politics, models of delivery, the notion of higher education between free trade and public good, programme changes and the nature of the academic workplace (Jansen, 2004 in Mouton et al., 2013).

The merger process began in 1999 for some higher institutions, as instructed by the Minister of Education and required by the Higher Education Act of 1997 (Mfusi, 2004). In a relatively short period, 21 universities became 11 institutions, 15 technikons were reduced to five independent institutions and six comprehensive institutions (combination of universities and technikons); 150 technical colleges became 50 merged technical colleges, and 120 colleges of education were either incorporated into universities or technikons (Mouton et al., 2013).

The institutional restructuring that occurred after 2001 provided the opportunity to reconfigure the higher education system so that it was more suited to the needs of a developing democracy. While various challenges remain, the foundations have been laid for a new higher education landscape. However, differentiation has been and remains a difficult, contentious and challenging policy issue for a number of reasons (Badat, 2009). A decade after these mergers, issues of access, equity and quality in relation to the function remain challenges in higher education (Le Grange, 2011). The fact that transformation in higher education is leaping outward to fulfil the criteria set by international competitiveness and related efficiency criteria can be attributed to globalisation pressures and to deeper factors inherent in the nature of higher education, especially its resistance to change and modernization (Vandeyar, 2010).

3. COMMUNICATING CHANGE MANAGEMENT IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

Organisational capabilities and resources affect organisational responsiveness to change, which in turn determines a specific pattern of change. Change often entails organisational restructuring, developing new job functions, or creating new organisational departments (Mahesh & Suresh, 2009). Although the need for organisational change

is often recognized at higher levels in organisations, developing strategies on how to communicate successful change programs has not been forthcoming (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011).

The case study of the DUT then provides an understanding on how organisations change and what is required during patterns of change in academia.

Organisations operate in changing environments and this change presents both risks and opportunities. The changes that have to be implemented are important to the survival of the organisation. In some cases organisations that do not manage change effectively are not likely to survive. According to Puth (2002: 110), to manage change effectively, an organisation has to have effective internal communication with its members and external communication with its various groups. Change involves communication at all levels of the organisation and in all forms: groups and one-on-one discussions, formal briefings, written proposals, and memoranda. Organisational change, unaccompanied by appropriate communication, can be overwhelming to the organisation and its people.

It is, therefore, essential that management communicate with its stakeholders at a level that is understood by all, as confusions may arise if the information is interpreted differently than what was intended. Confusion is a lack of understanding among employees and usually occurs because management's message is not clearly presented. Ignorance is a lack of information and happens when there are not enough details voiced or employees are intentionally kept in the dark. When these situations occur, employees tend to tell themselves stories to fill in the gaps, and most of the time self-created stories are negative and inhibit the change process. Building an effective communication plan with information, dates, challenges, deadlines, etc. will diminish employee confusion and ignorance simultaneously. The comprehensive communication plan should focus on identifying and anticipating resistance, questions, and concerns that employees will have. By doing this, management can speak with confidence when communicating with employees about current or upcoming change. This confidence and clarity will help convince employees that company leadership is prepared for the future and the change can be a success (Clampitt, 2000).

Locke (2007: 83) indicates that an unusually broad range of issues take on strategic significance in a merger and that organisational culture is critical to the successful integration of staff, students and other stakeholders within a newly combined higher education institution. The DUT was one of the first higher education institutions formed through a merger. There can be no doubt about the importance of communication by leadership during this time of change. Considerable pressure was placed on the leadership of the institution to communicate the change efficiently and various strategies were used. The purpose of this study was therefore to explore what strategies were utilised to communicate change.

4. METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted within a quantitative paradigm which enabled an evaluation of the role of internal communication in a higher education

setting during the transition process. The sample population was 400 administrative and academic staff from across the seven campuses. Employees were assessed via a survey questionnaire. The data was analysed using SPSS.

The following themes emerged from the research questionnaire:

- Theme 1 - Line Management Communication;
- Theme 2 - Tools of Communication;
- Theme 3 - Internal Communication Systems (ICS);
- Theme 4 - Change relating to the Transition Process.

The findings of this study were deduced from 128 responses at DUT, from staff over the seven campuses, therefore the response rate was 32%. The questionnaire used a Likert scale and opened ended questions to determine attitudes with regard to internal communication during the transition phase of the DUT. Data from the questionnaires were analysed using SPSS version 21.0.

The results of all data collected are presented in the form of graphs, cross-tabulations and figures. The study employed specific strategies such as the use of the Likert scale and open questions to ensure that the main objectives were answered by the data collection and analysis processes, which are summarised below. Data collection techniques focused primarily on the questionnaire which focused on staff experiences and perceptions during the transition phases.

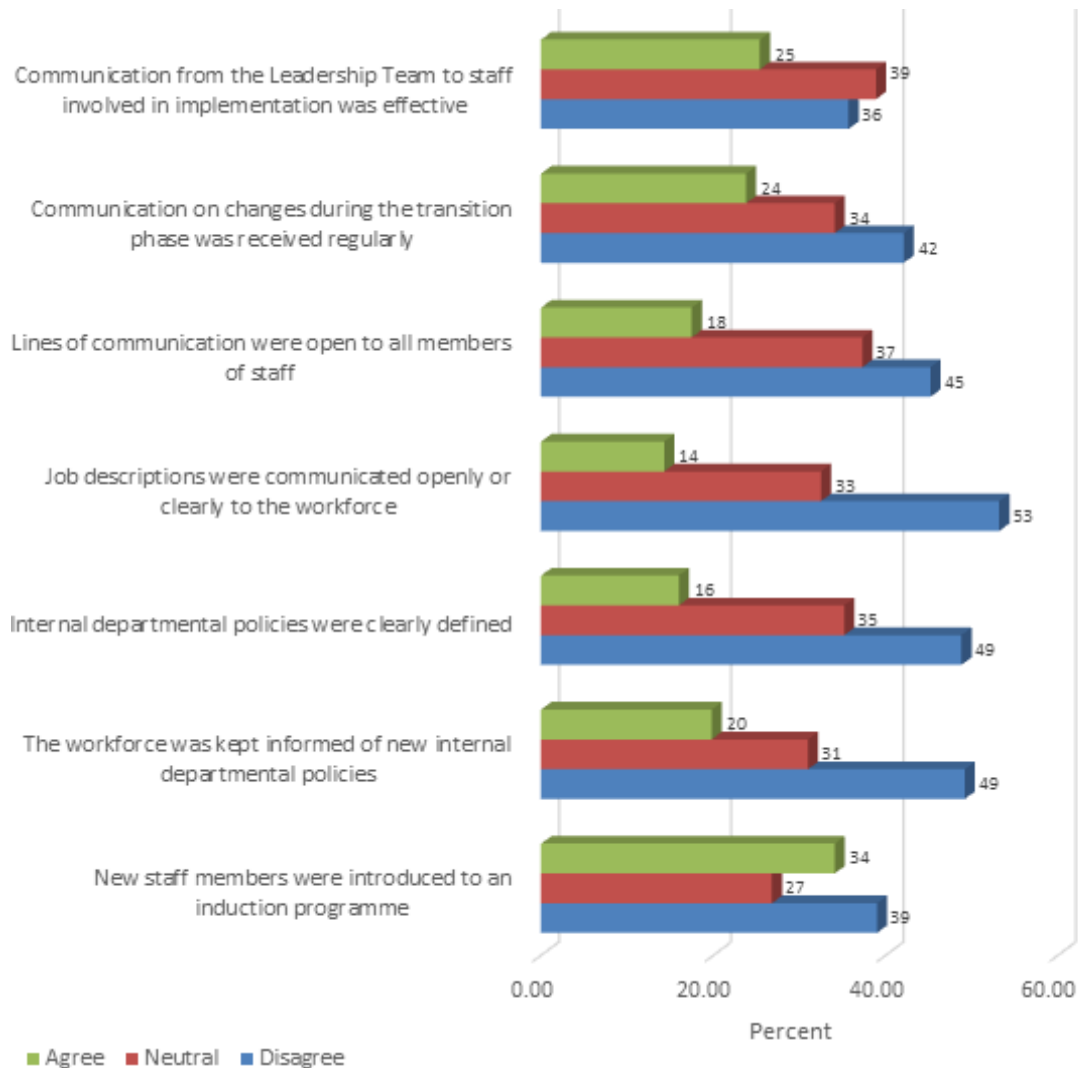
Finally, coherence between different data sources was investigated to identify patterns of meaning and to describe the emerging themes in order to explain specific patterns and phenomena.

5. RESULTS

5.1. Theme 1: Line Management Communication

5.1.1. Figure 1 highlights the summarized scoring patterns of line management communication.

Figure 1. Scoring patterns of Line Management Communication



Only 18% of respondents indicated that lines of communication were open to all members of staff, whereas 37% were neutral in their response and 45% disagreed with the statement. Staff felt that their

line managers were not able to communicate openly and freely with them. This could perhaps be because line managers themselves were uninformed from

their superiors in management and hence felt incapable to provide feedback to their staff.

The question on job descriptions highlighted that only 14% indicated that job descriptions were communicated clearly to the workforce, conversely 53% disagreed and 33% were neutral. Respondents indicated that line managers failed to provide adequate direction due to the uncertainty associated with mergers.

The question on internal departmental policies highlighted that only 16% agreed that policies were clearly defined. A large percentage (49%) disagreed with the statement and 35% were neutral. This does not reflect well on the managerial skills of line managers.

The average level of agreement for this section (Line Management Communication) was 22% and the level of disagreement was 45%. It is noted that none of the statements had a higher level of agreement than for disagreement.

The three highest levels of disagreement were based on the following:

- Job descriptions were communicated openly or clearly to the workforce (53%)
- Internal departmental policies were clearly defined (49%)
- The workforce was kept informed of new internal departmental policies (49%)

Neves and Eisenberger (2012) indicate that employees who had open lines of communication with managers were more likely to build effective work relationships with those managers. Also, employees who had open lines of communication had enhanced performance and had seen an increase in productivity. Further literature (Gopinath & Becker, 2000) indicated that employees who reported positive and open communication with managers were better able to cope with major organisational changes, such as layoffs and mergers.

5.1.2. Chi-square test: Line Management Communication

A traditional approach to reporting a result requires a statement of statistical significance. A *p-value* is generated from a *test statistic*. A significant result is indicated with “*p-value* < 0.05”. The Chi-square test was performed to determine whether there was a statistically significant relationship between the variables.

To determine whether the differences were significant, chi-square tests were done by variable (statement). The null hypothesis tested the claim that there were no differences in the scoring options per statement. The results are shown in table 1.

Since all of the sig. values (*p-values*), except the first and last, are less than 0.05 (the level of significance), it implies that the distributions were not even. That is, the differences between agreement and disagreement were significant (highlighted in yellow). It is noted that the category of “Neutral” also contribute to the *p-value*.

The relevance to this question implied that except for the first and last sig. values (*p-values*) from table 1, staff at the merged institution felt that communication was not received regularly, lines of communication was not open to staff, job descriptions were not clearly defined, internal

policies were not clearly defined and the workforce was not informed of new policies.

Table 1. Chi-square test for Line Management Communication

	<i>Chi-Square</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>Asymp. Sig.</i>
Communication from the Leadership Team to staff involved in implementation was effective.	3.762	2	.152
Communication on changes during the transition phase was received regularly.	6.333	2	.042
Lines of communication were open to all members of staff.	15.476	2	.000
Job descriptions were communicated openly or clearly to the workforce.	28.619	2	.000
Internal departmental policies were clearly defined.	20.368	2	.000
The workforce was kept informed of new internal departmental policies.	16.619	2	.000
New staff members were introduced to an induction programme.	2.780	2	.249

5.2. Theme 2: Tools of Communication

5.2.1. Figure 2 highlights the summarised scoring patterns of tools of communication.

69% of the sample population stated that internal communication was mostly via electronic mail. The internal electronic notice board was considered an effective mode to communicate from 58% of the respondents; however 42% of respondents preferred a face to face communication.

Turner *et al* (2010) are of the view that email provides a persistent record of its messages, but does not convey non-verbal signals. Face-to-face communication, on the other hand, provides a wealth of information about the communicating parties, gleaned from facial expressions, body language, verbal pauses, and other sources, but generally leaves only an imperfect trace (in participants’ memories) of exactly what was said.

DUT began an internal “hardcopy” newsletter called the Conduit and 33% of the sample population stated that it was an effective communication medium that documented the activities of the university, however 35% disagreed. 54% of respondents indicated that during times of crisis (student/staff protest action) the fastest source of information was the grapevine/rumour mill. Fortado (2011) indicates that informal communication is far from just idle chatter. Employee’s actions are based on their interpretations of events. The grapevine shaped employee sentiments about the organisation and specific people. It would be irresponsible to ignore these social facts.

5.2.2. Chi-square tests: Tools of Communication

To determine whether the differences were significant, chi-square tests were done by variable (statement). The null hypothesis tested the claim that there were no differences in the scoring options per statement.

Figure 2. Scoring patterns of Tools of Communication

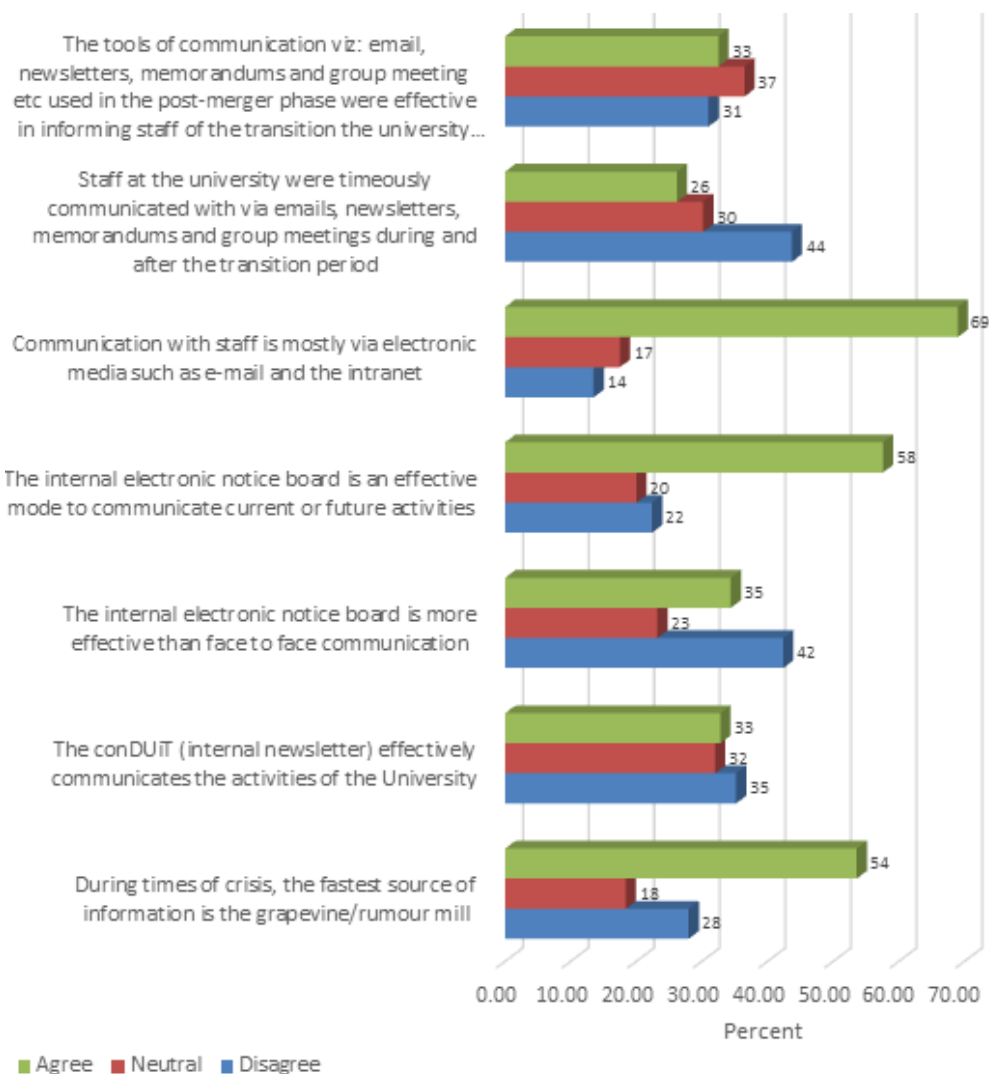


Table 2. Chi-square tests: Tools of Communication

	Chi-Square	df	Asymp. Sig.
The tools of communication viz: email, newsletters, memorandums and group meeting etc. used in the post-merger phase were effective in informing staff of the transition the university was going through.	.619	2	.734
Staff at the university were timeously communicated with via emails, newsletters, memorandums and group meetings during and after the transition period.	6.333	2	.042
Communication with staff is mostly via electronic media such as e-mail and the intranet.	72.619	2	.000
The internal electronic notice board is an effective mode to communicate current or future activities.	33.232	2	.000
The internal electronic notice board is more effective than face to face communication	6.976	2	.031
The conDUiT (internal newsletter) effectively communicates the activities of the University.	.208	2	.901
During times of crisis, the fastest source of information is the grapevine/rumour mill.	24.832	2	.000

Four of the six p-values in Table 2 tested less than 0.05. All but (two) 2 of the statements showed skewed patterns. In some instances these are positive (higher levels of agreement) and in other cases it is negative (higher levels of disagreement) with regard to the Chi-square test for Tools of Communication.

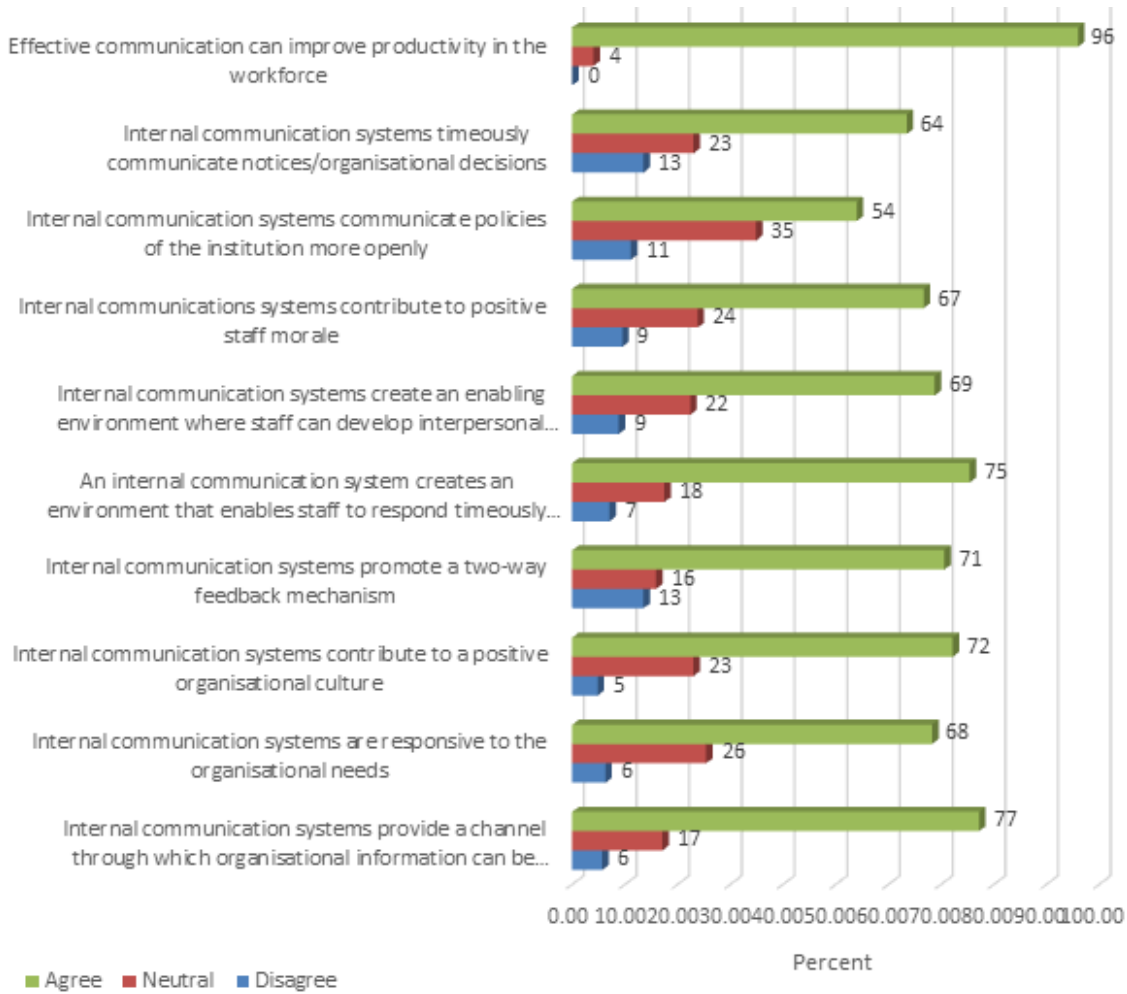
There is a significant relationship between the statements that scored less than 0.05 implying that tools of communication did play a significant role in the dissemination of information during the transition period. There is also a significant relationship between channels of communication, namely: electronic mail, electronic noticeboard and intranet.

5.3. Theme 3: Internal Communication Systems (ICS)

This question highlights the summarised scoring patterns of Internal Communication Systems.

The majority of staff (77%) who participated in this study stated that ICS contributed to a positive organisational culture and ICS provided a channel through which organisational information can be shared between management and staff, however, staff felt that ICS was not timeously communicated.

Figure 4. Scoring patterns of Internal Communication Systems



The respondents of the DUT strongly agreed that effective communication can improve productivity on the workplace as 96% of the sample population agreed with the statement.

The sample population was divided as to whether ICS communication policies in the organisation where open or not. 54% thought that Internal Communication policies were more openly available. The researcher speculates that staff did not trust nor fully understand the policies forwarded from management. Furthermore, the following statistic of almost 72% of the sample population agreed that ICS contributed to a positive organisational structure, however, the time factor was considered to be of paramount importance when presented with ICS from management. As many as 75% of the population said that ICS could create an environment that enable staff to respond timeously.

The majority of participants (77%) believed that ICS provided a channel through which organisational information can be shared between management and staff, only 6% disagreed and it may be assumed that this percentage had issues of trust between management and staff. Only 17% wished to remain neutral. This percentage was disconcerting to the researcher because it displayed evidence of apathy from the sample population.

The average level of agreement for this section is 71%. The highest level (96%) relates to the belief of

respondents that better communication can improve productivity. The lowest level of agreement relates to “Internal communication systems communicate policies of the institution more openly” (54%).

White and Stafford (2009:) indicates that the competitive advantage of strategic internal communication are the obvious benefits of employee satisfaction and productivity. In addition, well-informed employees are able to make a positive contribution to a company’s external public relations efforts. “Employees can be an organisation’s best ambassadors or loudest critics, depending whether and how they get information.” Howard (1998 cited in White *et al* 2009). Effective internal communication can enhance corporate reputation and credibility, because employees are viewed as particularly credible sources by external stakeholders (Dawkins, 2004; Hannegan, 2004). Put simply, employees are the face of an organisation and have a powerful influence on organisational success.

5.3.1. Chi-square tests: Internal Communication Systems

To determine whether the differences were significant, chi-square tests were done by variable (statement).

Table 3. Chi-square tests: Internal Communication Systems

	<i>Chi-Square</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>Asymp. Sig.</i>
Effective communication can improve productivity in the workforce.	106.794	1	.000
Internal communication systems timeously communicate notices/organisational decisions.	53.286	2	.000
Internal communication systems communicate policies of the institution more openly.	34.857	2	.000
Internal communications systems contribute to positive staff morale.	66.857	2	.000
Internal communication systems create an enabling environment where staff can develop interpersonal relationships.	74.224	2	.000
An internal communication system creates an environment that enables staff to respond timeously to notices.	102.333	2	.000
Internal communication systems promote a two-way feedback mechanism.	79.000	2	.000
Internal communication systems contribute to a positive organisational culture.	92.048	2	.000
Internal communication systems are responsive to the organisational needs.	76.000	2	.000
Internal communication systems provide a channel through which organisational information can be shared between management and staff.	109.073	2	.000

All of the p-values from the above statements are less than 0.05. It is observed that the levels of agreement are much higher than disagreement (right skewed). This shows that there is a significant relationship in the way that respondents rated internal communication systems.

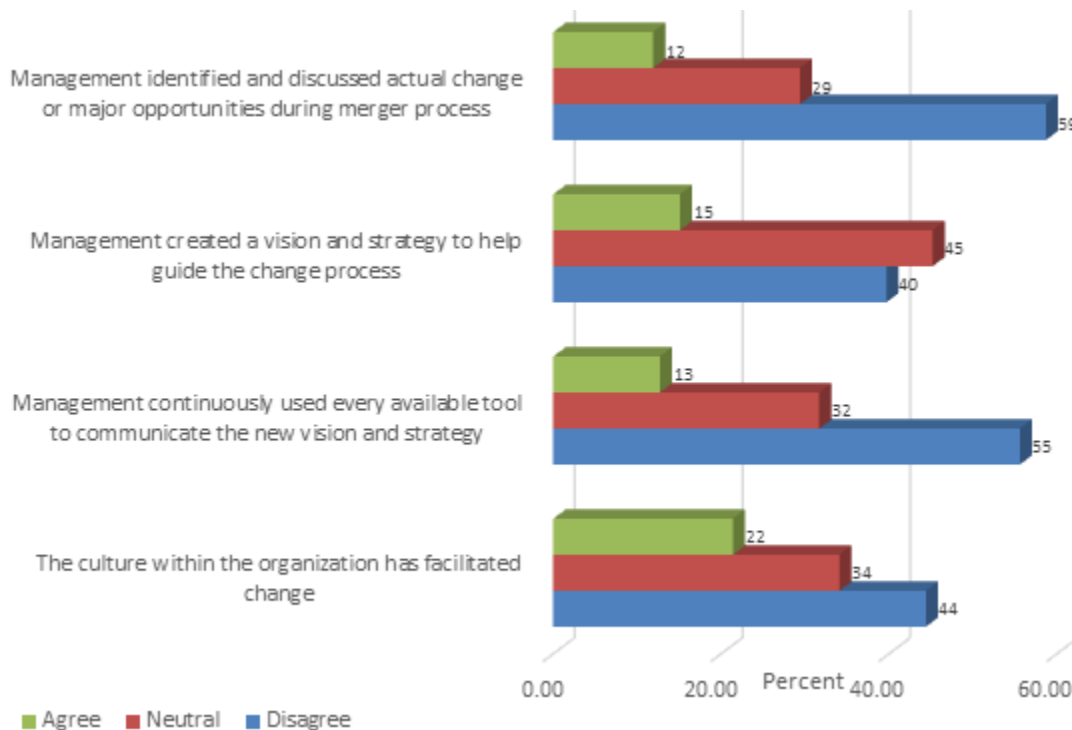
Respondents were positive and in agreement that internal communication systems improve productivity in the workforce; timeously communicate notices/organisational decisions, communicate policies of the institution more openly; contribute to positive staff morale; create an enabling environment where staff can develop interpersonal relationships; creates an environment that enables staff to respond timeously to notices; promote a two-way feedback mechanism; contribute to a positive organisational culture; responsive to the organisational needs and provide a channel through which organisational information can be shared between management and staff.

5.4. Theme 4: Change Relating to the Transition Process

This highlights the summarised scoring patterns of change relating to the transition process.

Only 12% of respondents agreed that management had identified and discussed actual changes or major opportunities, 59% of the respondents disagreed and 29% of the respondents were neutral.

Figure 6. Scoring patterns of Change Relating to the Transition Process



When questioned whether management created a vision and strategy to help guide the change process only 15% of the staff agreed with the statement, 40% of respondent disagreed with the statement and 45% of the respondents were neutral.

Majority of the respondents (55%) disagreed with the statement that management continuously used every available tool to communicate the new vision and strategy, 13% of the respondents agreed with the statement and 32% of the respondents were neutral.

The general pattern shows higher levels of disagreement (average = 50 %) than levels of agreement (15%).

In the view of the above Gilley *et al* (2009) are of the view that organisational leadership behaviours have a direct influence on actions in the work environment that enable change. Leaders may function as change agents by creating a vision, identifying the need for change and implementing the change itself. Organisations remain competitive when they support and implement continuous and transformational change Cohen (1999 cited in Gilley *et al* 2009). On the other hand Guo and Sanchez's (2005) report on environmental barriers bear's reference that Managerial philosophy can promote or inhibit effective communication. Managers who are not interested in promoting intra-organisational communication upward or disseminating information downward will establish procedural and organisational blockages.

5.4.1. Chi-square tests: Change relating to the Transition Process

To determine whether the differences were significant, chi-square tests were done by variable (statement). All of the differences are significant.

Table 4. Chi-square tests: Change Relating to the Transition Process

	<i>Chi-Square</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>Asymp. Sig.</i>
Management identified and discussed actual change or major opportunities during merger process.	42.333	2	.000
Management created a vision and strategy to help guide the change process.	19.476	2	.000
Management continuously used every available tool to communicate the new vision and strategy.	34.857	2	.000
The culture within the organisation has facilitated change.	10.048	2	.007

All of the p-values from Table 4 are significant as they scored less than 0.05. It is observed that the levels of disagreement are much higher than agreement (left skewed). This shows that there is a significant relationship in the way that respondents rated change relating to the transition process. It is noted that the category of "Neutral" also contribute to the p-value.

Respondents disagreed with management's communication role during the transition phase and felt that management had not identified and discussed actual changes or major opportunities during the transition process.

6. INTERPRETATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of the study indicated that certain practices are consistent with the literature reviewed while other practices lack a strategic communicative approach. The majority of the respondents were of the view that line management communication was not open and upward communication was not encouraged during the transition process. Majority of the respondents indicated that they would like

management to take a far more effective role in communicating with them.

Most of the respondents indicated that electronic media was the most popular internal communication tool used; however some staff members still preferred if Management communicated face to face with staff. Another popular internal communication tool was the grapevine/rumour mill.

The majority of the responses to internal communication systems (ICS) agreed that effective communication increased productivity in the work place, increased morale amongst staff and contributed towards a positive organisational culture. There were very few responses that disagreed with the aforementioned.

A vast majority of the respondents indicated that Management did not communicate openly during the transition process. Staff believed that they were not communicated with and that Management did very little to create a vision and strategy to help guide the change process.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations can be made:

- The study revealed that during the transition phase there was a need for open lines of communication between management and staff to ensure that there was effective sharing of information. This is of paramount importance especially during times of crisis.
- The study revealed that during the transition process in times of crisis the grapevine/rumour was the fastest form of communication. In order to control the flow of information through the grapevine/rumour mill, timeous and accurate communication must take place.
- The study indicated that during the transition process departmental policies were not clearly defined. It is therefore the responsibility of policy makers at the DUT to ensure that there is full participation of all the members in policy formulation.
- The study revealed that during the transition process the majority of the respondents believed that the intranet and electronic mail at the DUT was utilised optimally, for the purpose of internal communication. This is good practice and it is therefore imperative that the intranet should provide timeous and up to date information.
- The study revealed that during the transition process there was an absence of information, with regard to job profiles. It is the responsibility of the line manager together with the Human Resources Department to ensure that there is a clear understanding of the job description of all staff members.
- The study revealed that during the transition process although it was not logistically feasible to continuously hold "face to face" meetings, it was determined that staff especially the older generation preferred face to face communication rather than electronic communication.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The success of any change programme depends on the organisation's ability to communicate effectively with its employees; therefore internal

communication plays a pivotal role in any change programme.

Literature has revealed that managing employee communication as a strategic process is vital to an organisation's survival and growth, therefore, organisations that have effective internal communication systems thrive.

If change is managed properly employees have a solid understanding of why change is happening and effective communication in this instance is an integral part of this process. Change management has highlighted that employees undergo significant levels of anxiety, stress and damage to their morale during a merger process.

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