Certificate

in

Business Administration

Study Manual

Introduction to Business Communication

The Association of Business Executives

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ABE Certificate in Business Administration

Study Manual

Introduction to Business Communication

Contents

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Syllabus

Aims

1. Use written English competently, accurately and appropriately in a variety of business communication scenarios.
2. Present a variety of data unambiguously in both written and graphical form, bearing in mind the fundamental importance of neatness, clarity and accuracy.
3. Understand the principles of business communication, and be able to use the most suitable medium in given situations.
4. Appreciate what are the most common barriers to successful communication and how they can be overcome.
5. Draft all the usual forms of business correspondence from given data.
6. Understand and appreciate current developments in communications technology and the effect that they have on business.

Programme Content and Learning Objectives

After completing the programme, the student should be able to:

1. Written English:

- Accurate spelling and punctuation. Range of vocabulary, correctly used
- Paragraphing
- Appropriateness of tone. Neatness

2. Correspondence:

- Letters, memos, advertisements. Addresses, headings, salutations
- Clarity in describing any situation
- Clarity in stating requests, opinions, etc.
- Common abbreviations. Presentation

3. Principles of communication:

- Structures within an organisation
- Purpose of communication
- Appropriate channels
- Spoken and written
- Barriers and how to overcome them
- Technical terms
- Presentation of self

4. Communications technology:

- Computers and associated technology
- Use of satellites
- Telephones, pagers, networks
- Awareness of its effect on business
- Applications of technology

5. Graphs:

- Line graphs, histograms, pie charts
- Neatness and accuracy
- Clear labelling
- Use of colour
- Identifying trends from data

Method of Assessment

By written examination. The pass mark is 40%. Time allowed 3 hours.

The question paper will contain:

Two sections containing a total of **eight** questions of which **five** must be answered. **At least three** questions must be answered from Section A. The questions in Section A require longer written answers than those in Section B. All questions carry 20 marks.

Reading List

Essential Reading

- Deverell, C. S., People and Communication; Gee and Co
- Smithson, S. and Whitehead, J., Business Communication; Financial Training Publication

Additional Reading

- Murdock, A. and Scutt, C., Personal Effectiveness; Butterworth Heinemann
- Sheldon, R. H., All Businesses Communicate; Peter Andrew
- Bergin, F. J., Successful Presentations; Director Books

Study Unit 1

The Process of Communication

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INTRODUCTION

Communication is something we do all the time, mostly without thinking about it. In business, though, thinking about it is very important because all forms of interaction between people and companies are built and maintained through some form of communication. It is, therefore, vital that communication is effective and the messages between firms and their customers and clients, and those between workers in the same organisation – especially between management and staff – are clear and properly understood.

This course is essentially practical – to help you be ***effective*** in your communication, Before we get into the detail of what makes, say, an effective letter or telephone call, though, we need to examine some underlying principles about the process of communication itself. Understanding these will enable you to take account of all the various components of the process when designing your own communications. You need to be particularly aware of the barriers to effectiveness which arise from these components, and the ways in which you can try to ensure that they do not affect your communication.

In this first unit, we shall also take an overview of the three main media through which communication takes place – the written word, the spoken word and non-verbal forms.

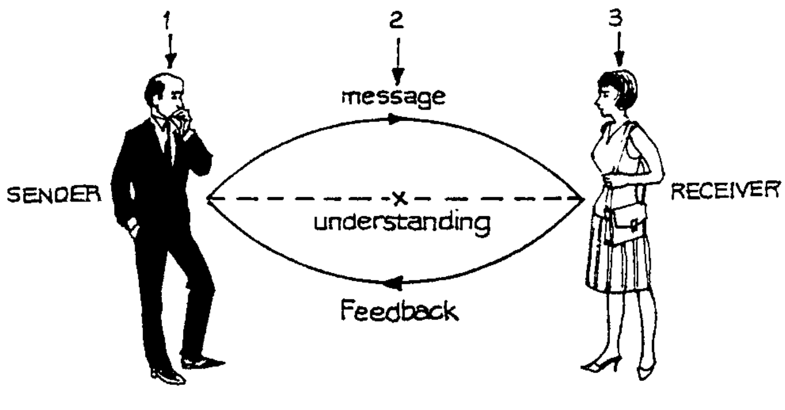
A. THE COMMUNICATION CYCLE

Communication may be defined as:

> "the imparting, conveying or exchange of information, ideas or opinions by the use of speech, writing or graphics."

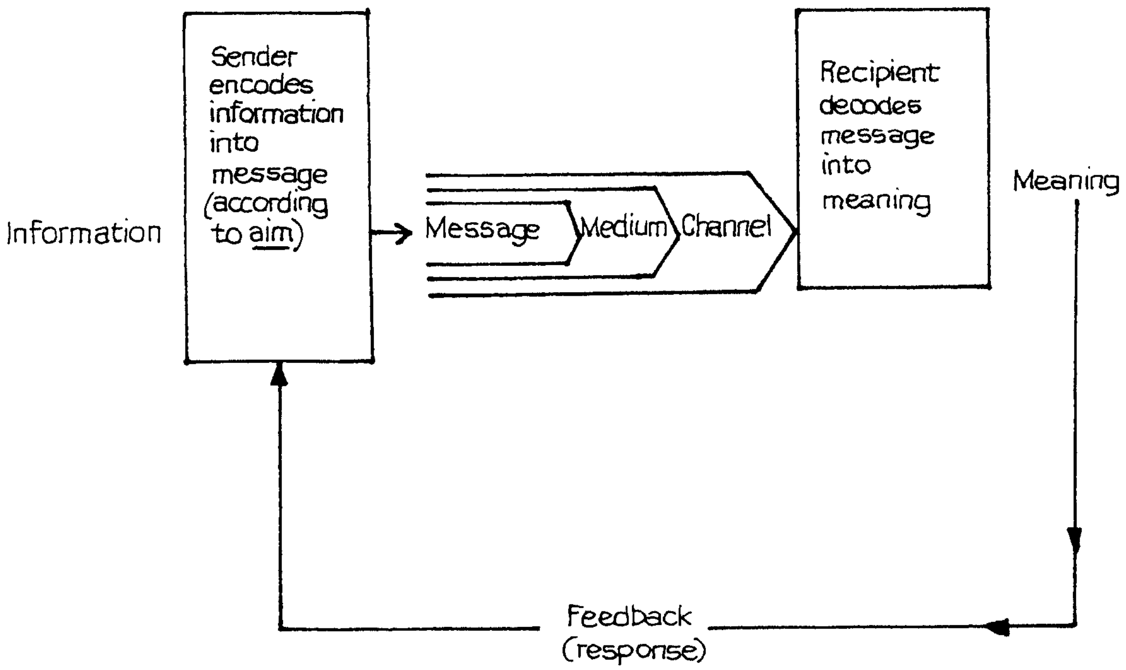
Basic Elements of the Cycle

In any communication process there are three basic elements, though, as we shall see, there are many other components within this which go to make up the whole of the process. The three fundamental ones are:



A sender sends a message to a receiver in such a way that the receiver is able to understand it. Note also the way in which the cycle is completed by the element of feedback from receiver to sender. This element is not always there, but is a key part of the process since, at the very least, it provides the means of acknowledging receipt and understanding.

This is rather a simple view of the process, however, and the study of communication has identified a number of further components within this basic cycle. These are crucial to its success or failure. The following diagram outlines these additional components – look at it carefully before going any further.



Key Components

Probably the easiest way to understand how communication works is to define each of the key terms shown in the diagram and build these definitions back into a complete picture of the process as a whole.

(a) Information

This the raw material of the communication – the actual data which it is intended to convey to the recipient or receiver. Although it is usually called "information", it does not have to be simply factual. It may be an opinion or an idea, or a combination of fact and opinion.

(b) The Sender

The sender is the body responsible for passing on the information. Although it is most usually an individual, it can also be a group of people, such as a committee or a company.

(c) Encoding

This is the process by which the sender puts the information into a form suitable for sending.

- Usually, this will be language, either spoken or written.
- In some cases, such as non-verbal communication or "body language", it could be a gesture or sign.
- In others, such as advertising, it could be a photograph or film with an accompanying slogan.

The way in which the information is encoded is crucial to the correct understanding of the message by the recipient. Indeed, so important is this that the key element in encoding is working out the best way for the receiver to understand the information and then putting it into that form.

(d) The Message

Once the information is encoded, it is known as the message. It contains the meaning that the sender wishes to convey to the receiver.

(e) The Medium

The medium is the larger group of communication instruments within which the message belongs. Generally speaking, there are ***three*** main media:

- written communication;
- oral (spoken) communication; and
- visual communication.

(f) The Channel

This is the physical means by which the message is communicated:

- for written communication, a postal service or a notice-board;
- for oral communication, a personal interview or telephone system;
- for visual communication, a drawing, photograph or film.

(g) The Aim

The aim is the main reason why the act of communication has been undertaken. There are generally three chief aims:

- ***To inform***

  This is the desire to supply factual information, or an assessment or judgment of the value of an item or product.

- ***To Influence***

  This is the desire to persuade the recipient to adopt a particular idea or possible course of action.

- ***To Initiate Action***

  This is the desire to make the recipient respond by performing a particular task.

Within an organisation, all three aims are often present as part of any individual act of communication.

It is important to be clear about the overall aim of the communication because this can affect the way the information is encoded and the media and channels used to convey the message.

(h) The Recipient

This is the object to whom the message is directed. It may be an individual, a group (such as a committee or a firm), or even – as in the case of an advertising campaign – a specific target group among the general public.

(i) Decoding

This is the process by which the recipient interprets the meaning of the message. Note that this may or may not be the same as the interpretation originally intended by the sender – the result of this process is what the ***recipient*** understands the message to mean.

Some understanding of this part of the process by the sender is very helpful because it can influence the way the information is encoded and the media and channels used to convey the message.

(j) Feedback

Feedback is the name given to the information the sender derives from the way in which the recipient reacts to the message. From it, the sender can decide whether or not the message has achieved its intended effect. However, feedback properly refers only to indirect reactions of the recipient rather than any message sent in return. It is thus up to the sender to watch the recipient's response carefully, to look out or "scan" for such reactions when it is possible for them to be directly observed, for example in a personal interview.

(k) Motivation

Although it is not shown in the diagram, motivation is a crucial element in communication. It is the urge or desire to achieve a purpose, alter a given situation, or satisfy a need. If motivation is strong, it is likely that communication will be effective.

These are the principal elements in the cycle of communication. They are completed when the process is reversed and the recipient communicates in response to the sender's original message.

There are, then, many elements involved in the communication process and this makes it more complex than you may initially have thought. The number of elements mean that there is a lot that can go wrong.

B. BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION

Any system which involves the exchange of information, especially when the information is complex and the distance over which it is exchanged is large, has to overcome many barriers. These may be divided into two kinds, i.e. those which are found within the sender and the recipient, and result in part from a difference in attitude or experience between them; and those which result from outside influences in the communication process.

Barriers Caused by Sender and Recipient

When you are thinking about these, don't forget that they are only very rarely created deliberately by either party. More often they arise from incomplete understanding of the information, the situation, or the vocabulary and attitudes of the other party.

(a) Distortion

Distortion is a process which occurs either at the stage of encoding or decoding the message. It comes about when the information is put into form which does not express its true nature in a way that the recipient can fully understand.

We all believe that language is shared by everyone, and that we all use the same words to express ideas; but this is often far from true. I am sure that, like me, you may have succeeded, quite unintentionally, in offending another person by saying something which was "taken the wrong way" or interpreted as an insult instead of a compliment.

Distortion in communication can lead to incorrect understanding of the message, or only partial comprehension of its meaning, by the recipient.

- Where the distortion arises at the encoding stage, the sender is responsible. This is by far the most likely source of the problem, since every effort must be made to frame the message in a way which the receiver can understand.
- Distortion at the decoding stage may arise where the recipient is not paying the necessary attention or interprets the message in a way which the sender could not have anticipated. In such cases, the failure of the communication is the responsibility of the receiver.

It could be the result of lack of concentration in either party, or perhaps even that the ideas are so complex that clear, complete expression of them is very hard to achieve. The latter is often the case when a specialist in a technical field tries to address a non-specialist audience: there is no common language for discussing very complicated ideas, and so the communication fails. However, there are ways in which barriers at encoding and decoding can be avoided, as a later section will make clear.

(b) Inadequate Communication Skills

Communication skills are the abilities to send and receive messages clearly and effectively, with no possibility of misunderstanding. They include the ability to express ideas clearly in writing, in language suitable to the intended recipient and the intended purpose of the communication. They also include the ability to read – not only to read words on a page, but to interpret signs and symbols of all kinds – such as body language – which are presented in a communication exchange.

A major barrier to communication is created when one or the other party fails to possess the necessary communication skills. Messages are incorrectly encoded, or encoded in the wrong medium: alternatively, they may be misread and fail to have their intended effect.

(c) Lack of Listening Ability

The ability to listen is an essential ability for all of us. Unless we have it we are unable to understand what is going on around us, with potentially disastrous results. In the study of communication, however, it is even more important to be able to "listen".

The term is used to include the ability to work out the way in which somebody is responding to an item of communication, with the same meaning as the term to "scan" for feedback.

- Unless the ***sender*** can listen, he or she will be unable to discover the real response of the recipient.
- Unless the ***recipient*** can listen, he or she will fail to grasp the true significance of the message.

This, then, is another cause of communication breakdown.

(d) Attitudes

All of us have certain attitudes towards daily life which have been produced by our education, environment and general experience. If they are extreme, they are called prejudices. Whatever their form, they can distort our awareness of messages in communications and thus hamper the communication process. Attitudes to moral questions, and those induced by different cultural backgrounds, are obvious examples, of the ways in which people may differ. Anyone who wishes to communicate effectively, therefore, must try to be aware of both his or her own attitudes and those of the intended recipient, otherwise a further barrier may appear.

(e) Incorrect Information

As well as the more complex barriers discussed above, there is one which is more straightforward but just as disruptive: the fact that the information may simply be wrong. You could argue that, if incorrect information is successfully transmitted, a successful communications exchange has been achieved. However, this is only a short-term view, since the mistake will probably be discovered, and will have to be put right. This will undermine the recipient's trust in the sender, and may create a barrier in attitude which can hold up effective communication in later exchanges.

(f) Other Barriers

There are three more general elements which can act as barriers to communication.

- Perceptual bias occurs where the recipient has "selective hearing" and selects what they want to hear. This can result in the wrong message being received. For example, smokers may see the warning message on cigarette packets but the message may not be transmitted because a barrier is created which enables smokers to select only favourable messages about smoking.
- Information overload can occur if the recipient of the message receives too much information, or information which is too technical. For example, if customers are given

too much technical information about a product the result is that they will probably not remember or understand the key messages being communicated.

- Contradictory non-verbal messages can occur if the person encoding a message says one thing but their body language says something else. For example, if a sales assistant asks if s/he can help you but then yawns and gazes out the window when you speak, this creates a communication barrier between you both.

Barriers Caused by Outside Influences (Noise)

Noise is the name given to features of the setting in which the communication takes place which interfere with the accurate transfer of information. In literal terms, it can be physical noise, such as heavy traffic, constantly-ringing telephones or people talking to you while you are reading a letter. It can also refer to other kinds of interference such as a poor telephone connection or unreadable photocopying.

The physical environment within which a communication takes place can be very significant, depending on the circumstances. For example, shops take a lot of trouble over the right decoration and lighting to ensure they make the right impression on potential customers and if they get it wrong, it may affect sales. Similarly, the surroundings in a doctor's surgery may affect the effectiveness of communication between doctor and patient. Think about the layout and decoration of the reception area to your workplace or other firms' offices – how does it make you feel even before any form of communication with the receptionist has begun?

C. OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS

Many of the most important barriers to communicating may be overcome by following a few simple rules.

Defining the Purpose

Ask yourself what is the purpose of this communication – what are you trying to achieve. This must be the over-riding consideration. You must make sure that the message achieves its purpose.

Think carefully about what you want the recipient to do in response to your communication.

- Are you trying to change an attitude, or ask for an order for goods?
- Are you simply trying to find out what he or she thinks, or asking for advice?

Defining exactly the response you are seeking can help a great deal, especially if you put yourself in the place of the recipient and ask whether ***you*** would respond in the way you want if you were faced with the letter or memo you plan to send. This is always a good exercise to perform before sending off a written communication, or before adopting a particular approach in oral communicating.

People in business – from shoppers to senior managers – rarely have time to waste on non-essential matters. As a result, it pays to make sure that you know exactly how much you need to convey in your communication. Knowing what ***not*** to say is almost as important as knowing what to say – so cut out all material which is not central to your intentions. This is really another way of saying that you must define your purpose carefully and exactly.

Knowing When and How to Communicate

It is no use writing a long and complicated letter to a member of a large organisation unless you know that this person is the one responsible for making the decisions involved. If you write to the wrong person, or contact him or her in another way, you will only waste time for both of you. Worse still, you may give an impression of inefficiency, which will bode ill for future communication, or annoy the firm involved. Always make sure, then, that you are communicating with the right person.

This also applies to "crossed lines" – the kind of situation where both parties think that the other is someone else. Such a mistake can cause all kinds of misunderstandings, so do make sure that you contact the right person.

Judging the right moment to make a communication is often important in business. Some people deliberately write letters so that they will arrive on a Friday, when people are supposed to be feeling happy with the prospect of the coming weekend. In a business context, making telephone calls first thing in the morning when the recipient is still dealing with the mail would probably be a mistake.

On a different level, tackling your employer in the corridor when you want to ask him or her a complicated favour is probably not a good idea.

Choosing the moment for a communication, both in terms of its psychological rightness to the person involved and in relation to patterns of trade, such as the seasons for ordering particular kinds of goods, is thus a very important way of avoiding barriers of attitude in the recipient or noise in the external circumstances.

For some situations, a written communication is essential: for others, it would be too formal and restricting. Always think carefully about the best kind of communication medium for a particular situation and recipient.

- It may be simplest to make a phone call, but would a personal visit be more effective?
- A letter has the advantage of being permanent and on record, but is there any guarantee that the recipient will act upon it?

These are the kind of questions you need to ask yourself when thinking about beginning the communication process.

Understanding the Receiver

I have left this until last because it is the single most important rule for effective communications. We have seen how distortion may occur at encoding when insufficient care is taken by the sender over the meeting the needs of the recipient. In all forms, the more you know about your target audience the easier it is to avoid barriers to communication.

By considering how a communication might be received you are more likely to shape a message that will not be misinterpreted or misunderstood. In other words, the more you plan to shape the message and consider the effect it might create, the more likely that the communication will be successful and achieve what you want it to.

Of prime importance is the ***purpose*** of your message – how do you want the recipient to react? You need to consider the best way of achieving that response by using language appropriate to the purpose, as well as to the recipient's own vocabulary, background and attitudes.

One way is to think carefully before encoding messages in order to give the full message and not leave gaps that could leave people to make the wrong assumptions. Accuracy and precision in the message is important if it is to be decoded correctly. Successful communication occurs when the barriers of prejudice, bias and unsuitable language are avoided and the information is transmitted using the most appropriate channel in line with the needs of the recipient. Avoid jargon or technical words that may not be understood and try to avoid ambiguity.

It is always important to understand the relationship between the sender and the receiver. Most effective business communication is based on credibility – the receiver needs to feel comfortable with the message, to trust in it (and, therefore, the sender). An understanding of an audience's needs should mean that you are able to have the same "mental picture" of the subject of the communication.

Issues of status between the sender and receiver can also be relevant – the way in which something is said or written may be interpreted differently if the sender is in a superior position.

Following these rules will not guarantee perfect communication on every occasion. There will be times when external "noise" and internal "distortion" will still erect barriers, and times when straightforward disagreement or even failure are the outcome of attempts to communicate. However, if you strive to follow these rules on all occasions, you will find that communicating becomes far more effective as you learn to consider the other person's point of view and assess the real purpose of what you are trying to achieve.

Remember, too, that the purpose behind being aware of the theoretical elements of communication is that you can attempt to avoid the problems and the pitfalls of communication in practice.

Personal Communication Skills

This is one of the simplest ways in which communication may be improved. Communication skills cover the ability to write clear English so that a meaning is expressed directly and without ambiguity. They also include the ability to talk to a wide range of people in formal and informal situations to achieve a range of purposes.

More important, perhaps, are the skills that are often neglected. These include the range of reading skills which are needed for the correct understanding of information and to these we must also add the ability to listen and understand, so that the speaker knows that you are sympathetic and aware of what he or she is saying. A simple awareness of these abilities – particularly the last – as skills which can be developed, will help you a great deal in improving your communication at a business and also a personal level.

D. FORMS OF COMMUNICATION

Message, Medium and Channel

You will remember that, when we were looking at the communication cycle above, we used these three terms above to describe the ways in which information was transferred during the communication process. These three elements are closely interrelated but they do still describe different aspects of the process.

- The **channel** is the physical means by which the information is conveyed.
- The **medium** refers to the nature of the expression of the information – whether it is written, spoken or visual.
- The **message** is the piece of information itself, however it is encoded.

Obviously the last of these three is the most important since the message is the very essence of the communication process but you can see for yourself that it doesn't matter how good the message is if the means of transmission is poor or the language used is hard to understand.

Clarity is essential and this means more than just writing grammatically and spelling correctly (although both of these do help). It means choosing the right medium and, within that, the most effective form for the information you want to convey.

In this section we shall principally be concerned with verbal communication – in its written and oral (spoken) form. We shall also look at the non-verbal communication and the part it plays in the communication process. But first we shall consider the various forms that written and oral communication can take.

Types of Written and Oral Communication

Table 1.1 sets out the main forms of business communication in roughly their order of complexity. Obviously it's difficult to be hard and fast about this since much will depend on the size of your organisation and the particular circumstances existing at the time.

Think of them as a handy reminder to enable you to learn the various possibilities quickly and to jog your memory as to the range of possibilities.

Table 1.1: Types of written and oral communication

Written	**Oral**
Informal note	Unplanned encounter
Memorandum (usually called a "memo")	Planned, informal talk
Letter	Meeting of individuals
Form or questionnaire	Job interview
Written telephone message	Appraisal interview
Notice	Disciplinary interview
Report	Persuasive interview
Press release	Telephone call
Training and procedure documents	Group meeting (including briefing meeting)
	Committee meeting
	Full staff/workers meeting
	Formal lecture or presentation.

We shall briefly review the role of each of these types of communication in the following sections.

Written Communication

(a) Informal Note

This would be sent to a close working colleague to communicate an item of information very quickly.

Its ***advantage*** lies in the speed with which it can be written, and in the fact that it can be left in a prominent place for the recipient to see when he returns to his place of work.

It does, however, have several ***disadvantages***.

- Because it is usually written quickly, extra care has to be taken over expression and handwriting.
- Because it has to be left where the recipient will see it, it may not be confidential.
- Because it is handwritten, there will most probably not be a copy for the sender to keep.
- Because it is left for the recipient to read on his or her return, there is no guarantee that it will be read soon after it is written.

(b) Memos

This is a more formal note sent to a working colleague. Generally typed, it has the advantage that a copy will be kept by the sender. As it is usually very short, though, it has the disadvantage that little explanation can be given for the point made or the instruction given. It is suitable for communicating short, simple pieces of information, but its value is strictly limited.

Some organisations also use a longer memo. This has the advantage that it allows more detailed explanation, but the disadvantage that its length may discourage the recipient from understanding and implementing – or even reading – the full text. The advantage of expressing a point in full depth in writing has to be balanced against potential resistance on the part of the recipient. Possible alternatives would include a telephone call or personal meeting.

Increasingly, E-mail is being used in organisations for both informal notes and memos. This has the advantage of being more private and also more immediate.

(c) Letters

Letters are used to communicate with people outside the company or organisation.

The great ***advantage*** of letters is that they can convey a number of points clearly in writing, and that the sender can keep a copy. They are cheap when compared with the obvious alternatives – telephone calls or personal meetings – and they are confidential, especially if the envelope and contents are prominently marked to indicate this.

The ***disadvantages*** of letters are that they may be misinterpreted, as may any written form of communication, and that they do not allow for complex ideas to be discussed – it is only possible for a letter to put forward suggestions. For this reason, you would probably need a series of letters for a full exchange of ideas and this could take up several weeks. Under such circumstances a personal meeting might be much more efficient as a means of communication.

Although letters are normally used to communicate with people outside an organisation, there is sometimes a case for writing a letter to an employee of the company, where personal matters or issues of confidentiality or discipline are involved.

(d) Forms and questionnaires

The great **advantage** of these documents is that they allow information to be gained from a large number of people in a standard format, which makes it much easier for the data to be brought together and interpreted or acted upon.

There are, however, many.

- Many people find forms very difficult to complete. For this reason great care is needed in their design, since a poorly-worded question may fail to elicit the required information.
- Forms also allow little opportunity for the expression of personal attitudes and individual differences, so many people are reluctant to complete them.

Alternatives to forms include:

- requests for information to be supplied in letter or report form;
- questions asked in person; and
- enquiries by telephone.

The first of these causes problems because many people dislike writing letters; the second because it is expensive and time consuming; and the third because many people understandably dislike giving information to an unknown voice over the telephone. In such cases, you will have to decide which method will be the most effective for your purpose.

(e) Written telephone messages

This is usually recorded on a pre-printed form, giving details of the caller, purpose of call and action required of the recipient.

The ***advantages*** are that the information that the call has taken place is conveyed and that short simple messages can be transmitted effectively.

The ***disadvantages*** are that if the message is taken by someone who doesn't know the caller or understand the nature of his business, information may be written down wrongly. In addition, there is no real guarantee for the caller that his message will ever reach its destination at all.

At best, though, it would be fair to say that they do provide a written record and that at least an attempt at communication has been made.

(f) Notices

Notices are a clear and direct form of communicating items of importance to larger numbers of people within an organisation.

They have the ***advantages*** of visual impact – if properly designed – and of saving time and money in making a large number of separate communications to individuals.

Their ***disadvantages*** arise mainly from the fact that people may get out of the habit of looking at noticeboards if they become cluttered and overcrowded.

(g) Reports

Reports can take many forms, ranging from a single-page form to a bound book of a hundred or more pages. Their value lies in providing an accurate and full examination of a particular event or situation.

Their ***disadvantages*** include

- their sheer bulk, which may discourage people from assimilating them;
- the time and cost involved in their compilation;
- the fact that, because of their depth, they may reach no clear overall conclusion;
- their tendency to show bias in their interpretation of data and recommendations about action compared to other forms of communication – although this is something which professional communicators would be fully aware of and strive hard to avoid.

There are no effective alternatives to reports, though they may take various different forms in details of presentation. Oral presentations may supplement written reports, but it is unlikely that they can convey data in equivalent depth or clarity so that the recipients can fully assimilate it.

(h) Press releases

The press release is used to pass on a piece of information to a newspaper or group of newspapers. Its ***advantage*** is that the data it contains is conveyed in the language of the company, which should minimise incorrect or inaccurate reporting. The alternative – a press interview – is often less effective unless the interviewee is skilled and experienced in dealing with reporters.

(i) Training and procedure documents

Since these represent a form of reference, they must be available in printed form. In this lies their chief merit; they present a consistent policy or stance with regard to certain recurrent features of company life which make them an authority in cases of dispute. The alternative – verbal issue of policies or procedures – is liable to inconsistency between individuals. Their ***disadvantage***, however, is that if they become long and complex they are liable to be ignored by employees, which undermines the structure of the firm and the workers' morale.

Oral Communication

(a) Unplanned encounter

Oral communication in this situation tends to suffer from a lack of control, as we might expect. This can lead to a failure to communicate the desired information or, at worst, to the creation of anger or resentment in the recipient. In consequence, you should use unplanned encounters only for the communication of routine or uncomplicated information, and leave more complex and sensitive issues for transmission under circumstances over which the sender has more control.

(b) Planned informal talk

The ***advantage*** here is that the sender has more control over the encounter, which should ensure more efficient transmission of information. An ***alternative*** would be a telephone call, although this would lack the essential directness of personal contact.

(c) Meeting of individuals

This is a slightly more formal encounter, which will often take place between members of different organisations.

The ***advantages*** are those usually associated with personal encounters, such as flexibility of response to the views of the other individual and the possibility of discussion leading towards a clear conclusion.

Disadvantages include the lack of a record in writing, but this is usually supplied immediately after the encounter by a letter or brief report.

(d) Interviews

Interviews may have various purposes – selection, appraisal, the disciplining of an employee or persuasion, for example in an attempt to secure a contract or sale. Each needs careful and thorough preparation from both participants.

The ***advantages*** of such encounters are the same as those given for meetings of individuals.

Disadvantages include the fact that, because a high degree of skill in scanning for feedback is required in both parties for a successful outcome to be achieved, totally effective interviews are rarely accomplished.

Despite this, however, personal interviews remain very important elements of business communication, for which no real alternative has been found.

(e) Telephone calls

These have the ***advantage*** of speed and immediacy.

They have the ***disadvantage*** that all the other signals which form part of a personal encounter, such as body language and gesture, are absent. There is also the problem that a call may come at the wrong time for the recipient, which may interfere with the communications process.

Alternatives include letters, memos (for internal communications) and personal encounters, all of which have advantages and disadvantages as noted in the relevant sections.

(f) Group meetings

These have all the advantages and disadvantages of personal encounters, magnified by the involvement of a larger number of people.

The main ***advantage*** is that several points of view can be brought together and a conclusion evolved from them.

The main ***disadvantage*** is that too many different views may cause confusion and uncertainty.

(g) Committee meetings

Committees are constituted in a very clear manner, and conduct their meetings in accordance with formal procedures. This formality allows discussion of quite complicated matters in a way which is free from personal involvement while at the same time allowing several opinions to be expressed. Although committees can become unwieldy, they can, when carefully directed by a skilled chairman, be a most effective way of reaching decisions.

(h) Full staff/workers meetings

These have the ***advantage*** of making sure that everyone involved has the chance to air his or her views.

Disadvantages are that large meetings are unwieldy, and that many people are reluctant to speak before their colleagues.

Alternatives include discovering opinions by forms or questionnaires.

(i) Formal lecture or presentation

This form of communication is becoming increasingly popular.

Its ***advantage*** is that it allows one person to present a clear view of a particular topic with considerable immediacy in a manner that is more concise than a written report.

Disadvantages are that there is no guarantee that the information will be assimilated by the recipients, especially where complex statistical data are involved. This deficiency can, however, be remedied by the use of duplicated "handouts" or other printed material.

The use of visual aids in presentations should be regarded as almost essential, since visual media make a greater impact than simply oral, and the two when used together reinforce each other to make an overall effect which is far greater than simple speech.

You can easily think of examples of the truth of this from your own experience. Obviously, practical subjects are the ones which benefit most markedly from this dual approach but even in more academic topics, the use of a few diagrams can often speed up our understanding of a particular concept.

E. CHOOSING THE MEDIUM

In thinking about the various forms of communication outlined above, you are probably starting to see some patterns in the advantages and disadvantages between the written and oral forms. Here we shall pick out the particular characteristics of each.

The Characteristics of Written Communication

(a) Advantages of written communication

Regardless of which kind or form is used, written communication has some advantages over the spoken forms, which you should always bear in mind when deciding between these two media of communication. The main ones are as follows.

- ***Permanent record***

  Written communication provides a permanent record of what has been communicated for both parties. The recipient has the original document, and the sender will usually have a carbon or photocopy for his or her records. This means that there can be no misunderstanding over what has been said at a later date, as is often the case for oral exchanges. This is not foolproof, however, as it is still possible for the sender and recipient to interpret the same message in different ways.

- ***Expression can be controlled more carefully***

  When speaking, it is often difficult to think of exactly the right words to use at the same time. In writing it is always possible to cross out one version and replace it with a better. As a result, it is possible to produce an item of communication which is more carefully created, in terms of the way it expresses the information, how it considers the vocabulary, background and attitude of the recipient, and its general standard and finish.

  Of course, an experienced professional communicator is skilled in matching his or her words, expression and delivery to meet the demands of the situation, however complex or variable it may be. For most people, though, communicating in person raises problems of finding exactly the right word which will convey just the right impression to the recipient.

- ***Personal feeling is removed from the exchange***

  Unless you are writing a letter which is a strongly worded complaint, a letter of sympathy or one of thanks, emotion can generally be excluded from written forms of communication more easily than from spoken ones.

  One of the implications of this is that, if you have a difficult situation to deal with, it may be more straightforward to handle it in writing. This may suggest avoiding a confrontation, or "dodging the issue", by refusing to meet and discuss points in difficult circumstances, but this is not necessarily the case. When feelings are strong, it is often easy to let emotion override fact. Written documents which present the facts of a situation are more likely to be accurate and dispassionate than oral explanations to an interested party, whose strength of feeling may well cause the sender to respond emotionally instead of remaining rational.

- ***A meeting is not needed***

  Because of modern business pressures, the problems of organising a personal meeting tend to be considerable. If you provide your message in writing, the recipient is free to read it whenever he chooses which should ensure that he gives it his full attention.

(b) Disadvantages of written communication

These general advantages of the written form over the spoken form are strong in certain areas. To balance them, however, there are also some disadvantages.

- ***Lacks the personal touch***

  Unless you are highly skilled, written communication lacks the immediacy and human contact of a personal meeting. Some situations, indeed, cannot be handled at all by correspondence because a personal meeting is essential. This is particularly true for job interviews and other kinds of appraisal, such as meetings between possible co-operators in a business project.

  Some situations demand a personal contact because otherwise they would appear discourteous. A letter thanking an employee for fifty years' loyal service, for example, would be a poor substitute for a personal meeting of some kind. So, too, would be a communication in writing to a colleague or employee injured at work and currently in hospital.

  Often, both a written and a personal communication are necessary on such occasions. Not only do they display a degree of human feeling and appreciation, but they make sound business sense in showing that those in authority genuinely care about the workforce and this can only serve to increase loyalty and commitment to the company. The same is true for communications with important clients: the personal touch is both courteous and effective in business terms.

- ***Written words can be misinterpreted***

  As we have seen, it is possible for the recipient, at the decoding stage, to attribute an incorrect meaning to the message, so that the sender's original intentions are not correctly or fully understood. Everyone involved in communications should work hard to avoid such situations, of course, but they may still occur.

  You might argue that misreadings of this kind are the fault of the sender and not really of the medium at all. This is true to some extent, but the form may play a part – for example, you may well feel that when you are dealing with someone you don't know very well it is sometimes "safer" to do so in person. This is because, since you don't know much about his or her attitudes or approach, you are more likely to be able to make any necessary modifications to the message on the spot. This doesn't just save time, it also increases your knowledge of the person concerned which may well, in turn, make passing future messages easier.

- ***Lack of feedback***

  One of the key elements underlying problems with written communication is the lack of any feedback. We noted above how a message can often be modified during a spoken communication in order to ensure understanding. This would be in response to feedback – the sender getting signals from the receiver (either in spoken form or through non-verbal gestures) that the message is not being understood. The communication cycle is completed quickly.

  With written communication, the communication cycle can be completed, but it takes time. For example, the response to a letter can take several days. And during the period in which feedback is awaited (if it comes at all), the message has been committed to a permanent form and cannot be corrected if it does not convey the meaning correctly.

  Note that the increasing use of E-mail is changing written communication in that feedback can now be obtained very quickly. This allows much more collaborative working between individuals or groups, using the advantages of the written form – particularly in respect of drafting materials before finalising the communication.

- ***Written communication is permanent***

  Even in the most honest businesses, there may be occasions when communications need to be carried out "off the record", that is, with no record being kept of what was communicated. Examples of this are the early stages of meetings to discuss contracts or mergers, where written details would give the impression that ideas advanced as mere possibilities were hard and fast certainties. Early stages of this kind clearly need to be discussions, so that everyone concerned can explore possibilities without making firm commitments, and it is only when a clearer idea of a project or relationship emerges that it would be appropriate to put these proposals on paper.

  Meetings which are supposedly unrecorded can, however, be given a more permanent form. Many business people today like to make a recording of meetings using a miniature cassette recorder -so even the most unofficial, "off-the-record" meeting may end up in a permanent form.

The Characteristics of Oral Communication

(a) Advantages of Oral Communication

Used properly and in the right place, oral communication has many powerful advantages:

- ***Feedback ensures comprehension***

  Although communicating by letter allows you to state ideas very clearly, it doesn't provide you with any immediate response from the recipient. True, the reader can write you another letter in reply; but this takes time and the reader may not have completely understood the message contained in your letter. The reader may not lack the ability to understand what you have said in a letter, but however much you may try to make your meaning clear, it is always possible that you may leave out a vital element of the message, or take something for granted, or simply use language which means something entirely different to your reader.

  This is where oral communication can be so much better. If something is said which you do not fully or immediately understand, you can ask questions to make the meaning clearer. Also, you will be "scanning" the listener – watching for reactions which show he's puzzled, or even hostile. If you see this kind of reaction you'll obviously try to clarify what you're saying. In this way, the problem of barriers in communication at the stages of encoding and decoding the message may be swiftly solved.

  In this process of scanning, the non-verbal elements of communication are very important. These are the aspects of communication which take place without the use of words – the gestures, movements and other elements popularly called "body language". We will consider these shortly, but it is important that you get into the habit of considering them as a vital part of personal meetings. What it means is that in face-to-face meetings ideas can be expressed accurately.

- ***Immediacy***

  Oral communication also has the advantage that all the people involved can express their views. This means that they can avoid the delay inevitable in written communication, and views can be exchanged immediately. In a business context, where decisions may have to be reached quickly, this is an obvious advantage. It also means that those who take the decisions will be able to take into account all the points which seem relevant and discuss them, developing some ideas at the expense of others which are less important, and genuinely evaluating the various points of view. This is particularly important in meetings of committees and larger bodies.

  Once everyone has aired their views and all the various arguments have been put forward and considered, the actual decision-making can take place. Again you can see how useful this can be, particularly if time is important. You should also bear in mind that a final decision may rest on information still to be obtained, but at least you can decide to obtain it!

- ***Courtesy***

  Meeting someone in person is a way of showing respect, especially if you have had to travel some distance for the meeting. A personal meeting shows that you are genuinely interested in the person, or in the business matter involved, and this may make all the difference in obtaining an important contract or dealing with some other business concern.

  In addition, personal meetings allow those involved to develop a relationship of trust and understanding, which is most important when working together. They give those in positions of authority within a company a chance to show that they are concerned about the ideas and feelings of their staff if they are willing to meet and discuss issues with them in person, either individually or in groups.

(b) Disadvantages of Oral Communication

Not everything about spoken communication is good, however. Here are some of its disadvantages:

- ***No written record***

  Oral communication does not provide a written record of what has been said or decided. There cannot, therefore, be any reference back to the exact nature of the message and misinterpretations are less easily resolved at a later date.

- ***Time-consuming***

  Personal meetings are time-consuming, and can involve travelling over long distances. This can be tiring and can defeat your aims in two ways – by wasting time and by reducing your positive approach to the personal exchange at the end of the journey.

- ***Emotional involvement***

  Oral communication involves a personal element in respect of both the sender and the receiver. This means that the relationship between the two may colour the interaction and distort the meaning. For example, a junior member of staff may not feel able to question or disagree with a senior manager, or there may be circumstances in which, however hard you try to establish a good working relationship, it will be impossible to do so because of a clash of personalities.

Using Written and Oral Communication

Written correspondence within or between organisations may take many forms. The crucial difference between oral and written communications will be the importance attributed to each. Oral communication will be the basis for almost all negotiations, liaison, team briefings and project management, but written communication will be viewed as an endorsement of oral statements, as having a permanence and contractual status. Written communication can be used as evidence of previous discussions and arrangements. It provides the history of a project or collaboration. It justifies an activity and provides back-up and proof.

We attach an enormously high value to written text. Once written down, words are themselves pinned down, selected, representative, deliberate, permanent and important in their own right in a way that effective oral communication can never be.

If we consider graffiti, for example, it has a real permanence that a joke or throw-away comment could never have. Words are tangible, independent of their authors. We pay more attention to even poorly expressed words in textual form than we would ever give if they were spoken to us. The act of writing renders words "true". It is no wonder that copyright law and libel are major issues of our time.

Written text makes information immediately available to an almost unlimited audience simply by dint of reproduction. Photocopying or printing processes can bring news media into our homes every day which can be referred to again and again.

Whereas oral communication needs to be succinct and clear of purpose, written communication has the scope to elaborate, to justify and to manipulate information deliberately into particular phrases so that many versions are available. When we write to confirm arrangements, we have an opportunity to rephrase and reinterpret meetings or oral communications in a way which we feel is most suitable. There is a distance between the act of speaking and the act of writing.

Similarly, in responding to oral communications we have been influenced by body language, tone and appearance of the speaker, and may not remember all the words spoken but gain an overall impression of the success of the communication and have noted the key points. A written communication is bereft of those interpersonal skills and allows us to judge and interpret the actual words in order to make a considered response.

(a) When to use written communication

We use written communications most frequently to:

- Summarise key issues.
- Invite a response.
- Respond to other written/oral communications.
- Establish a formal basis for the communication.
- Record the process of the communication.
- Provide a source of historical data.
- Express corporate strategy and ideology.
- Lend credibility to our utterances.
- Indicate our intent that the communication be viewed as relevant/important.
- Access a wider audience.
- Ensure the accuracy of the message to all parties concerned.
- Share goals, visions, understanding.
- Present information/data independently of interpersonal skills.

(b) When to use oral communication

Clearly, the times and places where you can use oral communications are large in number and range. Some of the more suitable occasions are as follows:

- When it is essential to meet the person involved to evaluate his or her suitability for a particular task. This is especially relevant to selection interviews, to ensure that you appoint the right person for a job vacancy, but it is also important in other areas, such as deciding which member of a group should be delegated to carry out a particular task.
- When it is important to pool the knowledge of several people to arrive at key decisions. This is true of various aspects of a company's activities, from the board of directors downwards.
- Where you are discussing a delicate or personal matter with an individual employee or client. You may wish to raise matters carefully, while being aware of the person's reaction, in a manner which would be impossible in correspondence.
- Where you need to persuade listeners of a particular course of action, particularly if it involves change. People need reassurance in these circumstances and find discussion comforting even if they can't alter the outcome.
- For a process of negotiation, where a compromise has to be reached between alternative or rival courses of action. This is particularly important in cases where possible issues of conflict are involved, such as grievance or disciplinary procedures, or discussion of conditions of work, rates of pay and other similar matters.
- For informing members of a company or department about new developments in company policy where a full staff meeting will provide the opportunity to pass on information and allow employees to ask questions and discuss the matter.
- To convey information about training or other matters at training conferences, which involve formal presentations as well as smaller discussion sessions to exchange ideas and information.

The Importance of Non-Verbal Communication

When you communicate you may not be aware that non-verbal communication occurs and adds to what you say or hear. For example, the look on your face when you see something you do not like can communicate your disapproval as effectively and perhaps more quickly than you could if you put your feelings into words. If you combine your disapproving look with words that convey your feeling, then you can communicate a powerful message.

Sometimes non-verbal communication can contradict what you say. For example, you may be told that you cannot take your annual leave when you want to and, to avoid being seen as unco-operative you may say "Oh it doesn't matter – I can go on holiday another time", but you may show your true feelings with a look of disappointment.

Non-verbal communication covers a range of factors.

- Body language – This is the main one and includes gestures and mannerisms (particularly of the hands, face and eyes), eye contact, body position, etc.
- Tone – the way one speaks or writes that conveys warmth or interest, etc.
- Appearance – this covers the way in which someone is dressed and generally presents themselves (their image), as well as the style and presentation of any written communication..
- Physical surroundings – this is very much concerned with the layout, decoration, privacy/public nature, etc of the environment within which the interaction takes place.

So, for example, you can project a professional image by using well-designed business stationery, which immediately signals that you are a professional business person working for a legitimate company. Before you actually say something you can establish your positioning by the way you dress, your manner, the appearance of the environment that you work in or place you decide to meet or, by such things as punctuality and the level of hospitality you show people.

Understanding non-verbal communication is important when you are dealing with internal and external customers because it is a powerful tool in your personal communications mix. You can use it to reinforce the message you are conveying and you can use it to conceal messages you would prefer not to communicate.

In addition, you can use it to interpret the messages that others may or may not want to communicate. For example, suppose you were presenting some samples to a client who was interrupted by her line manager asking to see her later – if she asked you to continue with the demonstration but her body language showed that she was pre-occupied, you could interpret that she would rather see her line manger than continue with your presentation. In these circumstances, a good communicator would respond to the situation rather than potentially irritate a client who is too polite to ask you to leave.

Study Unit 2

Principles of Effective Communication

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INTRODUCTION

In the first unit, we considered a number of general strategies for communication, designed to overcome the barriers to effectiveness which arise from the components which make up the communications cycle. Here we shall develop these strategies further by looking in detail at the principles which contribute to effectiveness. These principles underlie all forms of communication – written and oral – and you should be aware of them at all times.

We start by considering planning. Any form of action is generally better for being carefully planned and communications are no different in this respect. Only by taking the time to plan what you are doing are you likely to take account of all the necessary considerations.

We then move on to examine the organisation of the information you need to communicate. Firstly, we look at acquiring and interpreting information through the skills of note-taking and summarising. Both of these are based on careful reading/listening to ensure comprehension of the message and then on expressing the key elements of that message in your own words. These are very important skills in business.

Organising the message itself in order to facilitate understanding is based on the structure of the communication. You need to be able to take the recipient through all the aspects of the message in a clear and logical way so that he/she follows all the points from start to finish. There are a number of devices that can be used to aid this process and you need to be familiar with these in order to structure your own letters, telephone calls, etc. to achieve effectiveness.

Finally, we come to the way in which the message itself is expressed – the language used and the importance of getting the form of expression right in the particular circumstances of the communication.

As you work through this unit, think about the good and bad communications you have experienced and consider how the points we cover here contribute to effectiveness. Remember, too, that you need to bring all the elements examined here to bear in achieve effectiveness in your own communication.

A. PLANNING

Most people, at some time in their lives, will have had the experience of getting up to speak about a subject which they know well and making a complete mess of it! They do not get their points over, they get muddled up in the order of presenting things, they forget bits which they should have covered, etc., etc. The same thing very often happens in examinations when, under pressure of time, people fail to demonstrate their understanding of a subject.

Why does this happen?

The most common reason is lack of planning. You might say that it is nerves in making a speech of some sort, but proper planning can go a very long way to alleviating them – giving you the confidence about what you are going to say and how you are going to say it which helps to overcome the natural anxiety felt by most presenters.

So, the first thing you must do when faced with any task of presenting information is formulate a plan for the communication.

One approach to this is know as ***PASS*** and it highlights four key elements to consider in planning. PASS stands for:

- **P**urpose – identifying the objective or purpose of the communication
- **A**udience – identifying who you are communicating with
- **S**tructure – identifying the organisation of the material you wish to communicate

- **S**tyle – identifying the appropriate type of vocabulary, the degree of formality and the tone of voice to be used

We shall briefly consider the first three of these issues here. Style we shall examine in the final section of the unit. You will note, though, that organisation and structure make up two sections to the unit. This indicates the importance attached to them.

The Importance of Purpose

The basis of all organisation and planning is a clear identification of the aims and objectives you are trying to achieve. Where do these come from?

There are many reasons why you might communicate in business. Generally, in internal communication situations, you will be informing colleagues, line managers or subordinates about something, responding to a previous communication, obtaining a decision or requesting action. In external markets you may be trying to raise awareness in the media, persuading customers to buy or stimulating some other response, such as ordering a catalogue or ringing for more information.

By identifying the purpose or objective of your communication it will immediately focus your mind on what you have to communicate, enable you to accumulate the information you need for the message and consider the best way to put the message over. Also, by being clear about your intention, you are more likely to know if you have achieved your objective.

There is a further benefit of being clear about your purpose in that you should be able not to get bogged down in detail. It is very easy, when bringing together information about a problem or issue, to get lost in the mass of information that may accumulate. To make sense of it, you need to keep in mind the central purpose and look for the general themes and key points which make up your overall approach to achieving it.

The Importance of the Audience

In planning any form of communication – whether it is written or oral – it is essential to start from an understanding of the communication process itself. Think back to the discussion of this in the first unit of the course, and ask yourself what is the purpose of communication.

In any form of communication, what you are trying to do is convey information to an audience. When we say "audience", we mean the recipient or recipients of the message, whatever form it takes. Whatever is said or written must, therefore, take into account his/her/their needs – including:

- who they are;
- what they need to know;
- what they are capable of understanding (not just in terms of intellectual capacity, but also in terms of, for example, the time available);
- what the circumstances of the communication are;
- what will most appeal or motivate them, etc.

It is also important to be aware of your relationship with the audience – how long have you known the person to whom you are writing, is he or she your superior at work, or a new customer, etc.

Understanding these issues can influence communication in a number of ways.

(a) The form of communication

For internal communications the position of the person you are communicating with and how well you know them will determine the style of communication you adopt in terms of the detail, complexity and words used. In order to tell a colleague that you will not be available for lunch for another hour, you may just call into their office or telephone them. In contrast, you may write a memo or send an e-mail to inform staff about a change in the time and place of the weekly sales meeting. To communicate a piece of research, you might write a formal report.

To notify colleagues about new staff joining your department you may call a meeting or write a memo.

(Note that, in addition, the purpose of the communication and the urgency of the matter will determine which communication format and media you will use.)

(b) Vocabulary

Try to match your vocabulary to the reader. Avoid complex and technical terms which may not be understood, but at the same time avoid giving the impression of talking down to your reader. If you are writing to a fellow professional who will understand technical terms, then by all means use them as a way of saving time. Otherwise, use a simple, clear style to explain points briefly and directly.

(c) Style and tone

If the intended reader is your superior, then clearly you should adopt a formal, but not obsequious tone. If he or she is a valued client, then you should be respectful – though you should always write with formality and courtesy.

We can summarise the above points as follows.

Unless you are writing a circular or standard letter or notice which will be read by a wide range of people, you should always have a clear mental picture of the reader for whom you are writing. Be aware in particular of the nature of your reader, but cultivate a simple and direct style which avoids jargon or expressions which might cause offence. As a general principle, you will find that this is the best starting point from which to operate when producing business documents, whatever their intended readership. You should, of course, be aware of the particular demands of the individual, but adopting this attitude as a general rule will help a great deal in producing clear, effective communication in writing.

The Importance of Structure

Virtually all communications can be structured along the same overall lines – they need to have a beginning, a middle and an end. This implies a basic structure of "introduction – body of the communication – summary/conclusion".

A very basic maxim underlying this, which works nearly all the time is:

- say what you are going to say;
- say it;
- say that you've said it.

Within the body of the communication, though, there is also a need for structure and order. This is necessary to take the reader or listener through what you have to say, step by step, in a way which enables him/her to identify clearly the points you want to make and follow the progression from one point to the next.

Again, we come back to the basic aims and objectives of the communication – what you are trying to achieve and put over to your audience. This will give you the key points around which the information needs to be structured. From there, the next step is to organise those key points into an appropriate order such that one leads to the next and there is a logical progression through them.

This, then, forms a plan for the communication of information and should be done for ***any and every form of presentation***. Note that this holds true even for the shortest telephone call or memo. It may be done in your head, but will invariably be a conscious process.

For any but the shortest communication, the outline structure should invariably be written out to provide a clear, initial framework around which the communication can be written or presented orally. This is most important in respect of presentations of substance – whether a letter, a report, an essay in an examination or a speech of some sort.

Lastly, here, you will note that this approach provides you with a framework – the skeleton of the communication. The flesh on the bones is provided by the evidence and exemplification you use to support and develop the key points. However, this is the detail and, as we have noted before, it is important not to get bogged down in the detail before you have established a clear purpose for what you are trying to achieve.

B. ACQUIRING AND ORGANISING INFORMATION

Communication is concerned with manipulating information – words and numbers which you wish to communicate to someone else are first of all acquired, then organised to give them meaning in respect of the needs of the receiver, and finally structured into the message itself. Think about the process if writing a letter to a customer who has complained about the quality of goods. You would need to research the background to the problem – at the very least, probably by asking someone for details of the issue – and then decide what information you need to include in the letter, before actually writing it.

Here we shall consider the process of acquiring information in the first place and organising it in the context of what you need to communicate.

Setting out deliberately to research a topic involves two key elements:

- identifying what information you need and where you can get it;
- gathering the information by means of appropriate enquiry; and
- organising the information to make sense of it in the light of the receiver's needs.

Identifying Sources

The first place to start is always to go back a step and ask yourself a seemingly obvious question – why do I need (this) information?

(a) Defining needs

You might answer "in order to do this assignment" or "to pass my qualification" or "to prepare a report for management", etc. We could characterise these sorts of responses as being about achieving certain objectives, or tasks which lead to the achievement of certain objectives.

Considering exactly what you are aiming to achieve as a result of your research establishes the "terms of reference" for the work, and it is important to keep this mind. Maintaining the focus on the overall purpose will ensure that relevance becomes the driving force behind the identification of appropriate sources and the gathering of information from them. Remember that the information you need is not just any old information – you need the right information for the task or objective you want to achieve.

(b) The range of sources

So having established a need, how do you satisfy it? Where do you get your information from?

Suppose you are asked to write a short report on the development of computers. Take a minute to write down as many sources of information about the subject that you can think of.

The list of individual sources is likely to be endless. You might have included such things as:

books	newspapers
journal articles	the Internet
reports	statistics
TV	talking to people
courses	

We can, though, group this endless list into two main forms:

- things that are written down – in books, on computers, etc.; and
- directly from other people, whether face-to-face, at a distance or through the media of television or radio.

This distinction has important implications for the way in which information may be gathered – in order to acquire information, we need to consult documents and/or to consult other people. The better we do those things, the more effective will be our acquisition of information, and we shall examine these below.

(c) Being specific

In terms of identifying exactly what sources are relevant, knowing the range of sources available is not the end of it. You need to be clear about which are the most appropriate and how to access them.

Frequently, you will find that whoever has asked you to undertake the particular task will be able to make suggestions as to appropriate sources. For example, if you are on a course, your tutors usually provide references to appropriate books or journals, and even particular chapters, sections or articles for you to follow up what you learn in taught (or even distance learning) programmes. Or at work, you may be directed to particular reports or files, or to talking to particular people. In such cases, knowing where to start is relatively easy.

However, things are not always so clear. In many situations you can find yourself having to identify information for yourself – at work, on study courses and in your personal life. Even where you are provided with a number of sources to refer to, it may be unclear which to go to first. Where, then, do you start?

The first thing you must do is try to be fairly specific about what information you need – start from your definition of needs and specify the subject of your research in a fairly broad way. You can narrow it down later if you need to. Depending on the nature of the task facing you, you may need to give this some thought in order to be clear about the exact nature of the issue you are dealing with.

Having done this, there are essentially two approaches you can adopt:

- start on your own by consulting written sources, and we shall consider ways of doing this below; and/or
- seek assistance from other people as to where to get the information you need.

This second alternative – involving, essentially asking for help – is often thought of as an admission of failure and many people are reluctant to do it. This is entirely wrong! Seeking assistance is a positive step which builds on your identification of needs. You will find that there are always people willing to help – to share their knowledge with you and to support you.

We could characterise the approach to asking people in terms of the likelihood of them being able to provide the assistance you need.

- Start with people who you know ***should*** know – particular tutors or managers (especially if they set you the task in the first place). You should get extended lists of either specific document references and/or locations of documents to explore, or ideas as to other people to consult who are likely to provide what you want to know.
- You may also ask people you think ***might*** know – particularly people who face, or who may have faced the same task, such as other students or colleagues at work. Again, you could get some specific references or locations, or ideas as to someone else who may, perhaps, know more. This time, though, you might get just a shrug of the shoulders!
- Your last option is to ask someone you think will be able to direct you in general terms – those whose job it is to know where to find information, such as librarians.

(d) Types of sources

Lastly, here, we need to make a distinction between primary and secondary sources of information. This has particular significance in academic study, but can also be relevant to other forms of research.

- ***Primary sources***

  We can think of these as getting the information "from the horse's mouth". It is not distilled by someone else's interpretation or summary, but comprises original thoughts, words, ideas, etc. Thus, in considering the development of communist theory, a key primary source would be the actual works of Karl Marx. In analysing the development of a particular company policy, the primary sources might include the committee report which instigated it and the committee minutes which recorded the decision. In reviewing a customer complaint, the primary source might be the actual letters written or tapes of a telephone call. In analysing the impact of redundancy on workers, the primary source would be the redundant workers themselves.

  It is very often the case that you need to consult primary sources in order to be sure that the information gathered is correct. It is not enough to rely on others' interpretations. This is clear enough when conducting, say, an investigation into a customer complaint, but it also holds true in academic research – there are times when there is no substitute for reading original texts to get the full meaning and flavour of the author's words.

- ***Secondary sources***

  Secondary sources are those which offer summaries and interpretations of the thoughts, words, ideas, etc. of others. Most text books do this, in that they essentially synthesise and bring together the work of others in a particular field in order to present a rounded picture for the student. Whilst they may have a particular slant which is the author's original concept, the work remains an interpretation of existing, established ideas.

  The same may be said for many other written sources of information. For example, letters are invariably an expression of company policy (and, indeed, only certain aspects of that policy). In this case, the letters would be a secondary source. However, note that, in other circumstances, depending on the subject of study, letters may be a primary source.

  Secondary sources are important in that they can provide a quick and easy way into a subject, covering a wide range of thoughts and ideas in a reasonably concise way. It is often the case that this is all that is necessary for a particular piece of research – just the essence of the original ideas may provide the underpinning knowledge that is needed. In addition, it is important to consider the different interpretations and applications of the original which are offered in secondary sources. These can often have great significance.

  However, remember that to gain a complete and accurate picture, you may need to consult the primary source itself.

Consulting Documents

Reading is central to the development of our knowledge and understanding. Written sources of information exist about virtually every subject under the sun and they are the basis for most of the information we need, if presented with a particular task to undertake or objective to achieve. Even on a taught course, you would need to do supplementary reading at some stage.

Written materials are produced in a huge variety of forms and settings. There are books, journal articles, reports, memos, letters, etc., etc. in paper form and there is a wealth of information held in electronic form on company information systems and on the Internet. On virtually any subject you care to name, there will be a vast array of different documentary material which you can consult.

How can we make sense of this and channel our time and effort most efficiently into gathering the information we need?

Let's return to the task of preparing a short report on the development of computers.

As we noted previously, the starting point is always to define the terms of reference and, from there, identify the subject matter in general terms. You should always work from the general to the specific – building up the general picture before concentrating on the detail. In this way, you do not allow the details to get in the way and dictate the pattern of your research, but keep your options open to focus on detail at a later point, as it serves your objectives.

In this case, we could take as our starting point the subject of "computers". From there, we can either ask someone for specific advice on appropriate references, or start to examine what is available ourselves.

(a) Seeing what is available

There are basically four options in starting to research written sources.

- The first option is to go to a bookshop and browse the shelves in the section dealing with the subject under the general terms you identified. This may be alright if you have a really good bookshop you can get to, but even the best bookshops do not carry a particularly big stock of books on specialist subjects like computers.
- The second option is to go to a library, preferably a university or college library if you are after a specific specialist publication or a big range of publications to select from in a specialist area. Even if you are not a registered student at a particular institution, you should be able to use the library facilities there (although there may be a charge if you want to take books out). We shall say a bit more about libraries below.
- The third option is to consult the files of information at work. These may either be written records and reports, or information held in computerised systems. It is likely that there will be some form of index system which will help you establish the particular files to examine, but if not, there will invariably be someone who can point you in the right direction to find what you are looking for.
- And lastly, a vast array of information is to be found on the Internet. Access to the Internet is becoming increasingly widespread, and for those with an appropriate connection, it should be possible to find at least some of what you need in the pages of the World Wide Web. The normal method of finding material on the Internet is to use one of the "search engines" which are accessed from the menu on the screen after you have logged-on to your Internet Service Provider. You simply type in the topic you wish to find information on – for example, "computers" – and wait for what is usually a huge listing of references dealing with that topic. You can make the search more specific by specifying a further search criteria within the first – for example, searching the "computers" references for those also dealing with "history".

(b) Using libraries

Libraries are extremely well-organised places. They are designed to help you access the things you want. The basis of this is the index system used – the Dewey Decimal System. We do not need to go into the detail of this, suffice it to say that each general subject area has a reference number, say 290, and each more specialist area within that general subject has a reference number expressed as a decimal of the general reference number, say 290.692.

All libraries have a comprehensive index of all the publications they contain. You can search this index according to:

- the subject area, which will then give you both the publications under that heading and the Dewey Decimal reference of the area (and you can then go and browse the shelves); or

- the author's name, which will lead you to specific publications by that author, enabling you to follow up further work by the same author.

In the case of the study skills exercise, searching the subject index for "computers" would have been the best place to start.

You can always ask for assistance at libraries – librarians should know more than anyone else about what is in the library (or at least how to find out) and where everything is located. They can also help to extend the search for what you want beyond the confines of the particular library, through the "Inter-library Loan" system to the wider resources of the whole country's network of libraries.

(c) Checking relevance

Having tracked down likely sources of information, you need to establish that the books, articles, files, etc. are relevant to your research.

You clearly need to determine if the publication is going to provide the right information for your task, but it would be surprising if this were the only criterion you identified. Particularly if you have a choice, a number of other criteria come into play. The sorts of things we would consider include:

- is the topic you are interested in precisely covered by the publication – i.e. does it provide the right information?
- does it cover the topic at an appropriate level – is it too basic, in which case, you will not get what you are looking for, or is it too complex or detailed, in which case you will not find it easy to pick out what you want (and probably won't read it!)?
- is the publication arranged in a way which makes it easy to find what you need?
- is the style of writing such that you would want to read it?

You may identify other criteria. We have assumed, for instance, that the publications are accessible in the way in which you want to use them (for example, you can take them away to study). We have also discounted how big the book is – there is always a tendency to favour something that looks as if it contains the right information in a smaller form, but well-organised large publications can be just as easy to use.

The above list, though, contains the main criteria, and also in their order of importance. But how do you check quickly that the publication does in fact meet them? There are a number of ways.

- ***Read the introductory information about the book***

  There is a wealth of information about the content of a publication contained in its title, publication details, introduction and contents, etc. For example, the precise wording of the title and background information about the author can indicate a particular slant on the subject, the publication details will tell you when it was written and you can draw conclusions about how up-to-date it is from this, the back cover and introduction may state its target audience and application (especially in the case of text books), and the contents page(s) will give you a better idea of what is covered and how.

- ***Have a look at any conclusions or summaries***

  Especially in reports, but in many textbooks now, summaries are provided to assist readers in getting an overview of the subject matter.

- ***Read a few pages***

  This can give an indication of whether the publication deals with the subject matter in a way which you can get on with and can easily extract the information you need. The writer's style is important – whilst your reaction is a very personal thing, you need to feel comfortable with reading your source material, if at all possible.

Checking the suitability of source material in this way allows you to concentrate your time on studying relevant information. However, one last point to state is that most publications, even reports and work files, usually contain references to other works – these can provide you with additional sources should you need them, and even books you discard as not meeting your criteria may be useful in this respect. So check bibliographies or other references to further reading.

You can try these approaches the next time you visit a library, or even a bookshop.

(d) Approaches to effective reading

Time is the ever present enemy to reading. Once you have identified the publication(s) which contain information you need in the form that you want it, you need to use your reading time as efficiently as possible. There are a number of approaches to this.

- ***Be selective*** – you may not have to read the whole publication, or at least not in the order it is written. Use the contents listing and index to select the most relevant sections on which to concentrate.
- ***Skim the text first*** – get an idea of the general content of particular sections by flicking through it looking at sub-headings, figures, the first few words of paragraphs, etc. You can get a good idea of what is in it from this, as a basis either for determining relevance or for detailed study.
- ***Concentrate on reading*** – this may seem obvious, but it is surprising how often our concentration wanders, particularly when tackling difficult subject matter. One technique which can help is to use a pen or pencil to track down the page while you are reading (not marking it, of course!) – this tends to keep you focused on the text.
- ***Make notes*** – very few people can remember everything they read in enough detail for it to be helpful, and it is easier to refer to notes, rather than the publication itself, when you start to use the information. Also, unless you have an unlimited budget and can buy every book you think may be useful, it is likely that you will need to return books to a library and will not still have them to refer to. (Note taking is covered in more detail below.)

People have all sorts of different approaches to reading – from very wide ranging and exhaustive to highly selective and specific to a particular topic. Both, and all stages in between, are equally valid. If it works for you – use it. Do not be put off by the approaches suggested by other people if you are happy with your own.

Consulting People

Written sources for research – books, journals, magazines, this study material, etc. – are our main source of information when we need to achieve particular objectives and tasks. They are nearly always accessible and there is a huge range of them about most subjects.

However, we noted previously that information is also acquired from other people. This may vary from other individuals to groups, or from formal presentations to informal conversations. It involves, primarily, the spoken word, but also includes the actions of others.

The main characteristic of these sources of information is the opportunity presented for interaction in the communication process. We can be involved in a dialogue – asking questions to fill gaps in our understanding and to test interpretations of the information received. It is, therefore, a powerful medium for learning and, hence, you are encouraged in certain exercises throughout this course to consult others to help in your learning and development.

So, how do we identify and acquire information from other people?

(a) The range of sources

When we listed the various sources of information available in researching the topic of the development of computers, we identified some – but not many – "people" sources. Examples included lectures and seminars, talking with people, etc.

Remembering that we are concerned with acquiring information in respect of achieving certain objectives or undertaking certain tasks, we can divide these sources into three main categories. This categorisation has a number of implications for the method of enquiry appropriate to eliciting information, and also for the means of accessing the information available.

- First are those situations which are specifically designed to provide, in some formal way, for the presentation or exchange of information. These include lectures, seminars or workshops forming part of a course or programme of study or training, interviews or meetings, public speeches or lectures given by eminent people, and even TV and radio programmes.

  These events are specifically ***planned***. They include situations set up by you – as in the case of an interview with a person or persons identified as having information you need – as well as those arranged by others.

  The main advantage of such planned events is that they can be structured by the organiser or presenter in a way which facilitates the exchange of information. As a participant, you will have advance notice about the subject and participants, and can plan your involvement to get the most out of them.

  As such, the enquiry methods involved will be observation, listening and asking questions.

  A potential problem with events arranged by others is that they do not necessarily occur at the time that you want the information – they may be before you perceive any relevance to the subject, or after your need has passed. Also, you may not be able to be there for the event – it is too far away, something else is arranged for that time or you are ill. These types of situations may, then, be relatively inaccessible compared with written sources. You may be able to record TV or radio programmes, but it is unlikely that you will be able to get a record of a lecture or seminar.

- The second category comprises those situations which exist as formal interactions for another purpose, but which may be used for the acquisition of information about the subject(s) of the interaction and/or the interaction itself. These include committee meetings or operational procedures and working practices.

  These are, then, situations which you turn into opportunities to acquire information. For example, if you were charged with developing new procedures for a particular operation, you would need to analyse the existing working practices. You might also wish to study the procedures used in a different department (or another organisation) and even attend meetings elsewhere to gain information about the way in which these work.

  A feature of such situations is that you are able to plan and structure your own involvement prior to the event. You may also need to obtain approval for attending.

  The essential enquiry method is observation and listening, but there may be the opportunity to ask questions.

- The third category are those situations which arise informally during the course of social interaction, a by-product of which may be the acquisition of information. We could include here such interactions as telephone calls, brief meetings and discussions at work, chats over lunch, etc.

  The essence of these situations is that they are invariably unplanned and unstructured. This does not make them less valuable as sources of information, but it may make the acquisition of information more difficult to control and puts a premium on the way in which you organise learning after the event – particularly in respect of note taking. You also need to be prepared for the other person or persons not to be helpful. You cannot control his/her situation or knowledge.

The main enquiry methods here are listening and asking questions.

(b) Observation

This is essentially concerned with watching what other people are doing – how they operate a machine, the patterns of movement (of people or work) through or around an office, the interaction at a meeting, etc. – as the basis of gathering information about what is happening.

It is usual to classify observation into ***participant*** and ***non-participant***.

- Participant observation is where someone who is not usually part of a situation actually takes part in it, on a temporary basis. For example, a manager might spent a couple of days working on the shop floor as a means of gathering information about, say, the pressures that staff are under. By becoming a member of the group being studied, an outside observer is able to gain quite a high level of understanding of the behaviour and personal conditions of those being observed.
- In non-participant observation, the information gatherer is physically present at the situation, but does not become involved in it – he/she remains a spectator. This allows a detached, objective view to be formed, but lacks the depth of understanding of the motivations, feelings, etc. of the individuals involved in the interaction.

It is important to remember that observation, even non-participant observation, is an active process. It demands preparation and planning, particularly in respect of what it is you are looking for and the aspects to concentrate on. In carrying out the observation itself, there are three key points to the skill:

- concentrate, and focus on what is happening;
- ask questions for clarification, if that is possible; and
- take notes so that you have a full record of what happened.

(c) Listening

If you are going to get the most out of a situation where information is imparted by the spoken word, you generally have one chance and one chance only to acquire the information. This puts a premium on the skill of effective listening.

We shall look at this in some detail later in the course, but for now we shall briefly summarise the key points of this skill (and note that these are the same as those in respect of observation):

- prepare for the event in terms of what you want to get out of it;
- concentrate, and focus on what is being said;
- ask questions for clarification, if that is possible; and
- take notes so that you have a record of the information after the event.

(d) Asking questions

With all other methods of enquiry, the information available is essentially determined by the source consulted – for example, the information available from simply listening is limited to what is said. Questioning allows the enquirer to set the terms of the enquiry and discover (hopefully) the information that he/she wants. It is, therefore, a primary method of eliciting information.

There are two main methods of doing this.

- ***Interviewing***

  This is a personal interaction with the person or people concerned (either face-to-face or via the telephone). People may be interviewed alone or in groups, and the process can be done formally or informally.

  Interviews may be thought of as being structured or unstructured:

  (i) ***structured*** interviews are those where the interviewee is taken through a pre-determined list of questions, in order, albeit with the scope to pursue issues as they arise within that structure;

  (ii) ***unstructured*** interviews are where there is no pre-determined order, or possibly no pre-determined questions, although there may be some key themes which the interviewer wishes to explore.

  (We shall examine interviewing and questioning in more detail later in the course.)

- ***By written means***

  This may be in the form of questionnaires or other forms of written enquiry such as letters, memos, etc.

  Questionnaires allow a number of people to be consulted in a common manner, with all the questions (and, to some extent, the responses) being structured in the same way. It is usual for questionnaires to constrain answers to a number of choices to simplify dealing with responses, although there are also generally some open-ended questions to allow respondents to comment in more detail on certain issues.

As with all other methods of enquiry, it is important to plan carefully in asking questions in order to maximise the possibility of getting the information you want. This is particularly true in respect of written enquiry, where there is no opportunity to seek immediate clarification of answers – you get the answer to the question you ask, so you have to make sure that you ask the right question!

Note, finally, that asking questions is not simply a primary method of information gathering – it also serves the purpose of allowing clarification of understanding within other enquiry methods. This is easy to see in respect of listening and observation where it may be part of the interaction – as in there being some time allocated at the end of a presentation for questions, or where questions are asked about what is happening whilst watching an event. However, questioning should not be ignored in dealing with issues arising from consulting written sources, for example in following up what something means or why certain things were done.

Note Taking

The main reason for note taking is often assumed to be to provide a written record of a spoken presentation or event which can be referred to at a later date to aid recall. Whilst this is undoubtedly true, it rather misses a key point about note taking. This is that:

> the way in which you interpret and record information in taking notes can, in itself, be an invaluable aid to learning and understanding.

When you make notes, from whatever source, you are necessarily sifting, summarising and shortening the full information. This is a key aspect of developing understanding. You are selective about what you record, so you pick out the key points, and then write them down in your own words. "Your own words" might be similar to the way the information was expressed by the source, but are very often different to reflect your own individual way of understanding it.

Thus, note taking serves two purposes:

- to aid understanding; and
- to facilitate recall and/or retrieval of the information.

(a) Note taking and sources of information

It is easy to see the value of note taking in terms of enabling recall or retrieval of information, in relation to lectures, seminars and discussions, or books and other documents which have to be returned to a library or file. However, because of the role of note taking in aiding learning, it should not just be confined to these sources of information. It has a value in relation to any source of information, even books or documents which you can keep to refer to.

You should then, make notes from any source where you are trying to acquire information.

That said, there are slightly different issues in respect of different sources – written and oral ones – and in respect of whether you take notes at the time or afterwards.

- ***Taking notes from written sources***

  The key to effective note taking from a book or other document is to read it in short sections and then pick out the key points to record. It is often the case that paragraphs only contain one real point and the rest is padding – or as authors would say, exemplification and amplification! You need to identify the key point that is buried in there somewhere and record that.

  (Reading and making notes in this way also helps to break up material into manageable "chunks" – aiding both concentration and the following of difficult arguments or discussions.)

  You may also want to pick out certain phrases or sentences that the author uses as being particularly significant or apt. These should be recorded as quotes so that, if you use them at a later point, you can attribute them appropriately to the author.

- ***Making notes from oral sources***

  Taking notes from what people say and do – in lectures, discussion groups, interviews, observations, etc. – has to be a much more instantaneous thing. You do not have the luxury of being able to pause to consider what has been said before deciding what are the key points to record – by the time you've done that, you will have missed the next point. You need to be able to get the information down as it is presented.

  This means you have to try to pick out key points as things are going on. You need to concentrate, and be able to write quickly.

  Many situations – for example, training sessions, meetings and some lectures and interviews – are structured around a prepared programme or agenda which can be used as the basis of your notes. At times, particular visual displays may be used by a presenter to make or record points – handouts, overhead projector slides, flip charts, etc. These can also be used to help in your recording of the event.

  It is not always easy to make effective notes in discussion groups, workshops and interviews, etc. where you are a participant. You have to find the time to make your notes as well as be involved as a speaker. The way in which discussion can flow within such interactions also means that key points can be difficult to identify, or keep changing. A good group leader or chairperson will attempt to structure the flow to keep discussion focused and ordered.

- ***Making notes after the event***

  It is always better to take notes at the time of the experience – the reading, meeting, interview, etc. However, there are often situations which make this difficult, if not impossible. Examples include casual encounters which result in acquiring information unexpectedly, some types of interview, working in different locations, etc.

  In such situations it is important to make notes as soon after the event as possible, so that everything is still fresh in your mind. It is surprising how much we forget in a short space of time.

Records of an event are often formally produced in the form of reports and minutes. This doesn't necessarily mean that you don't have to take your own notes. You may want to check the official record against yours, or at least perhaps keep your notes together with it.

(c) Note taking techniques

Everyone has their own individual styles of note taking. Some people take a lot, others very few. Some prefer to make notes after the event, although most elect to make notes during it (often for the simple reason that they know they'll never get around to it if it's left until later!).

There is no right or wrong way. Whatever suits you, and achieves its purpose in terms of assisting learning and facilitating retrieval, should be fine.

There are a number of general principles behind note taking, and some specific techniques which you can use.

- ***General principles***

  We can identify four general points about note taking which apply irrespective of the source of information, the nature of the research, or the technique you use.

  (i) The fundamental principle is to ***be selective***. Don't try to write everything down, but pick out the key points, words and phrases.

  (ii) Translate into your ***own words*** as much as possible. This helps understanding and ensures that, when you come to use the information later, you do not simply repeat the original form.

  (iii) Use abbreviations – common ones or your own system. As long as you can understand them later, it doesn't really matter how obscure they might be to someone else.

  (iv) Structure your note taking around the ***key points*** in a way which brings out the connections between all the different points. A number of different methods of doing this are considered below, but they all involve identifying and highlighting the most significant issues and linking subsidiary points to them.

- ***Linear notes***

  This is perhaps the most common technique for note taking, mainly because it mirrors the way in which information is usually presented, but also often because no other techniques are known.

  Linear notes consist of headings and sub-headings, often numbered, with subsidiary information below them, written in a linear fashion down the page. Particular points may be linked by arrows or brackets, underlining may be used for emphasis, and the structure or organisation of the notes may be shown by rough indentation in places.

  An example is given in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1: Example of linear notes

Government Action To Make London Stop Growing

1. **1940 Report of Royal Commission on Distrib. of Ind. & Pop** *(Chairman Sir A. Montague-Barlow)*
   a. Ind. had grown too much round London
   b. Other parts of country had suffered as a result
   c. Siting of new industry would have to be controlled
2. **1945 Distribution of Industry Act**
   a. Any new factory or factory extension needed permission from D of T.
   b. Used since to direct ind. away from London
3. **1945 Greater London Plan** *(Prof. P. Abercrombie)*
   a. Suggested surrounding London by 5m belt of fields ("green belt") to:
      i) prevent further growth
      ii) provide recreation for Londoners
   b. Suggested moving 1m+ Londoners across "green belt" to:
      i) 8 planned "new towns" where they'd live and work, not commute to London and
      ii) "expanded towns" at a greater distance
   c. London would not be harmed by the above if:
      i) its declining industries were replaced by new ones
      ii) "The port flourished"
4. **1946 New Towns Act**
   a. First N.T. Stevenage designated
   b. Other 7 "quickly followed"

- ***Spider diagrams***

  This approach shows connections in a different way – graphically. The best way of explaining it is to illustrate it, as in Figure 2.2.

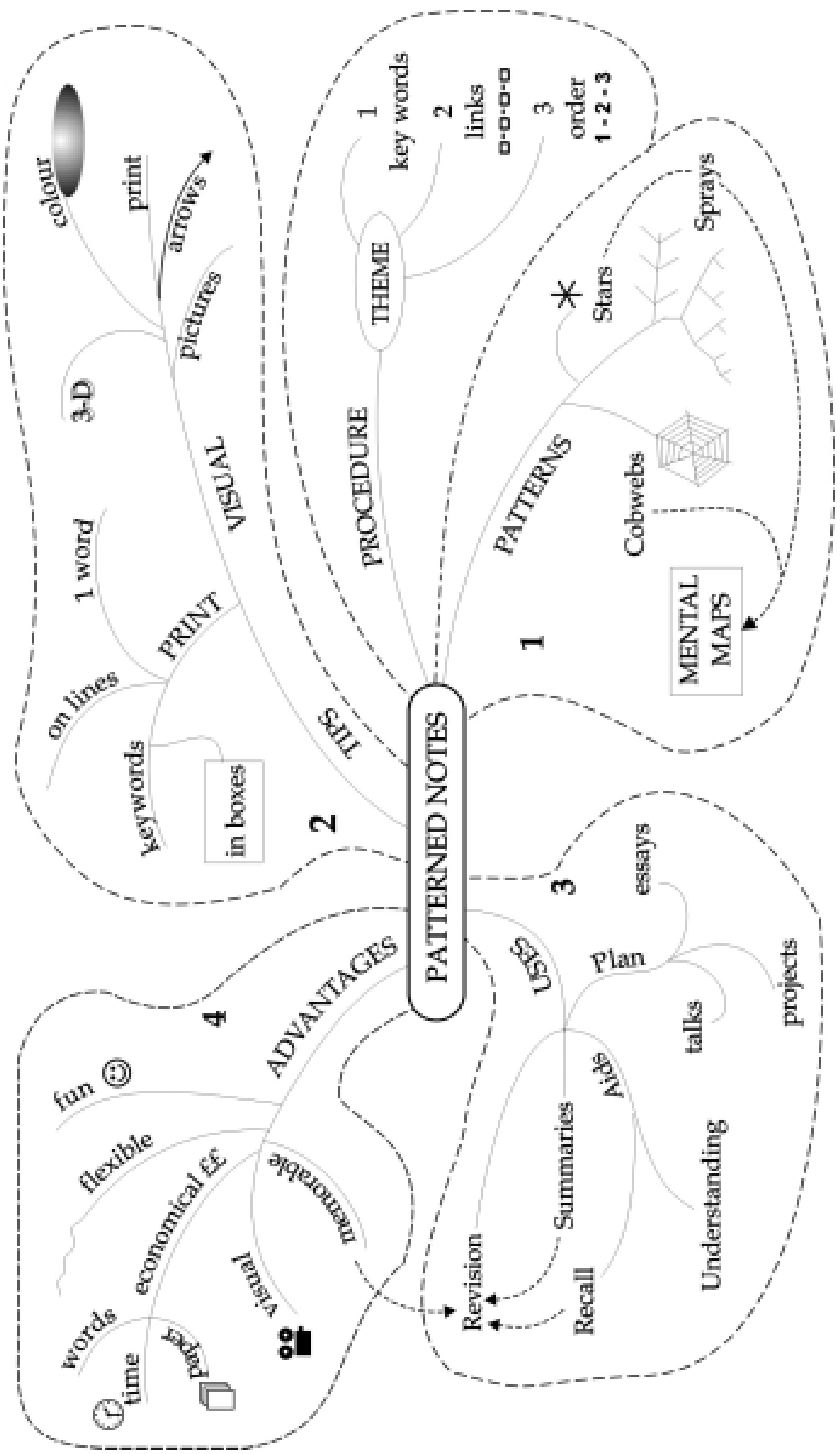
  As you will see, the most important point is identified and everything else is linked to this by means of branches and sub-branches. The technique forces you to be concise and identify points in one word or very short phrases at the most.

  Spider diagrams are particularly well suited to recording unstructured interviews or discussions where there is no clear linear framework to the interaction.

  As the example shows, boundaries can be drawn around particular sections of the "web" in order to highlight groupings. This can be done at the time or after the event, as the notes are reviewed. The technique can actually be usefully applied to linear notes after the event in terms of reorganising and reinterpreting them, and then expressing them in a more graphic form.

If you now look at the diagram in detail, you will see that it provides a breakdown of the advantages, uses and key methods of patterned notes.

Figure 2.2: Example of spider diagram



(d) Common problems with note taking

Everyone has problems from time to time with making effective notes. Once you are reasonably practised in the art, most of these problems come less from your own inadequacies and more from the inadequacies of the presentation of the information in, or by, the source. We can divide these factors into four categories, as follows:

- the structure of the presentation – the clarity with which the information is organised and presented, particularly with regard to introductory explanations;
- the tone and approach of the speaker – the extent to which this engages you as a listener and draws you into the topic, or conversely, distances and excludes you;
- the variety of format within the presentation – the use of different presentational effects, such as graphics, which help to put the information over; and
- your own interest in the topic under consideration (which may or may not be helped by the three former points).

Of these, the most significant barrier to effective note taking is the first – if the structure is poor, it requires you to work harder to establish a structure for your notes. The other points are mainly to do with the motivation of you the listener!

It is useful to be aware of these points, not only to appreciate good presentation when you experience it, but also to assist you when you need to present information – in either written or oral form.

Summarising

Summaries are used extensively in business – for example, as a way of recording information and ideas contained in newspaper or magazine articles to keep in a file of current developments in a field of activity in which a firm is particularly interested. They may also be known as "précis" or "abstracts".

Summarising is a basic skill useful in every branch of study or research. It is closely allied to note-taking in that it uses the same processes of selecting key points, abbreviating the source material and expressing that material in your own words. It differs in that the object of the exercise is to produce a coherent communication in its own right – one that can be clearly understood by others.

We can divide the process of preparing a summary into three stages:

- Reading
- Selecting and making notes of the key points
- Re-writing

(a) Reading

The first thing to do is read the passage which you are going to summarise. Don't write anything at this stage; concentrate instead on gaining a good understanding of the material in its entirety. Unless you do this, you will not have the kind of grasp of the main points which you will need later to become the framework of summary.

You then need to go back, with your understanding of the whole of the material, and re-read the passage again, this time thinking about the key points, how those points are made and what material is essential and what is unnecessary to those key points.

Working out what ***are*** the main points in a passage, of course, is something which only you can decide, but you can make the choice easier by adopting certain procedures.

- Decide whether the points being made are really relevant to the overall meaning of the passage and, if they aren't, you should be able to discount them.

- Look at key elements like the beginnings and ends of paragraphs. These often contain the topic sentence which really sums up the whole of the paragraph. (You have to look at both ends because writers often vary the position of the topic sentence to add interest to what they are writing.)
- Decide whether you wish to include examples – such as statistics – or whether the underlying point they demonstrate is more important. A clear idea of the ***purpose*** of the passage is once more important here.

(b) Selecting

Any summary must by its nature be selective, and the act of selection implies the omission of detail, which makes biased interpretation a strong possibility.

The most important precaution which you can take against bias is to be constantly aware of the danger it represents. If you are, and if you try to remember the need to remain impartial, you should be able to choose and record material without too much difficulty. Here are some points to bear in mind.

- ***Keep an open mind***

  When you are reading a passage to summarise it, try not to decide what its main point is before you have read the whole thing. Too often, people judge each other by first impressions, which later turn out be quite false. Try to avoid falling into this trap when reading books or articles: if you jump to a particular interpretation early on, it will colour your reading of the whole text, and may well give a biased interpretation to your notes or abstract. Always keep an open mind until you have read the whole passage.

- ***Separate your own reactions***

  If you read something which you feel is wrong, or with which you strongly disagree, do not re-write it according to your own beliefs. Instead, add a separate section to your notes in which you point out your objections. In this way, the original article will be presented clearly, avoiding any charges of bias, and you will also have the satisfaction of presenting your own opinions. This is a far more scholarly and reliable way of proceeding – and it is also far more likely to convince the eventual readers that your view is right, since you have presented the opposing view clearly first, and then put forward your own ideas.

- ***Use examples carefully***

  When you have to select an example from a passage, select one which is representative – in other words, do not pick out the single example which proves your own interpretation. For instance, if you are making notes on a passage about trade between the UK and other nations, try to select examples which show trading interest throughout the world, and not just those with Europe or the Commonwealth. When you are selecting information, always stop and ask yourself whether it is really representative.

- ***Express your points with care***

  This may seem an obvious point to make and so it is but you may find it harder than you imagine if you are writing on topics on which you have strong personal feelings. In these cases it is doubly important that you don't include anything which suggests a criticism of the source material, either directly or by implication.

  (i) Words such as "apparently" or "seemingly" used in abstracts can imply that the information is unreliable.

  (ii) Phrases such as "it is claimed that" suggest that insufficient evidence is provided to support a point.

  Take care also that the simple mechanics of your expression do not alter a point made in a passage. For example, let us assume that you come across a passage which says that 17 million people watch a particular television programme when you are writing a report about the possibility of mounting a television advertising campaign.

(i) If you note that "most people" watch it, you are exaggerating the figures, since 17m is not more than half of the population of the UK.

(ii) If you write "many people", then you are underestimating it, since this could really be any sizeable number.

In such a case, the only realistic solution is to give the actual number, which avoids either exaggerating or under-emphasising the figure.

(c) Developing your notes

This is the real essence of summarising, in which you work slowly through the text recording its ideas in your own words. I stress "in your own words" because, if you simply borrow expressions word-for-word from the original, you will not be summarising. Instead, you will end up with a collection of quotations which make little sense as a sequence or argument when they are read together.

When working through the text though, be on the look-out for short sentences and phrases which sum up an idea or main point which you ***can*** quote. Often, such expressions will come at the end of a paragraph, to conclude the passage clearly and precisely. These phrases you can and should quote: they will often express the ideas of the writer simply and directly, and draw together the other points which you have made in your own words earlier in the notes. You should, though, make sure that you enclose such sections in quotation marks, making it clear to the reader that this is a direct quote.

This process is very similar to making notes. You can use headings and sub-headings, and begin each point beneath them on a separate line, giving each a number or letter to identify it. In this way you can see where new points begin, and have a quick overall grasp of the growth of the writer's argument.

Breaking up the original text in this way will help you avoid the problem of simply shortening each paragraph of the original and assist in looking for connections between the points which will allow you to organise the summary in your own way.

When you have taken into account all these factors, you should have arrived at a first draft of your summary in a fairly clear form, albeit in notes rather than a narrative passage. With practice, you will find that these notes will need little or no revision or checking, but at first, and for long complicated passages, it's as well to check your work. Three elements are particularly important.

- Check that you have included all the points which are relevant to your purpose.
- Make sure that you have included nothing which is irrelevant to your needs – unless it helps to clarify the main argument or point being developed. Remember that summaries which are too long take more time to read, and are much less likely to be remembered, so cut out anything which is not essential.
- Finally, check that you have not altered or distorted anything. This could mean anything from a simple misreading of a word to a misinterpretation of figures or statistics, which could seriously alter the meaning of the whole thing. It should also include a check on spellings of names which are unusual, to make sure that everything is accurate and exact.

(d) Writing the final summary

This last stage involves turning your notes into prose – full sentences and paragraphs, using proper English with correct punctuation and spelling. There are a number of things to think about in this process.

- Think about the **order** of the points. Often the book or article will present them in the best way, but sometimes changes are necessary – for example, the writer may begin at an exciting point in the middle of a series of events to catch the reader's attention, and then goes back to the start. For your notes, it will always be clearer to start at the beginning and keep things in a logical sequence.

- You need to make sure that the points are expressed as complete sentences. To do this, you will probably need to add verbs, and words such as "the", "a" and "an" to make it flow more smoothly. Conjunctions – words which link sentences together, such as "and" and "but" – may also be needed.
- You will probably find that the subject headings for each section of your notes can be linked to one of the points beneath them to give a topic sentence which will state a point clearly and simply. The ideal to aim for is a piece of writing which makes its points very clearly and simply. You should avoid overuse of headings in the summary itself – it will usually be too short to need them.
- Try always to avoid slang or jargon. Apart from being out of place in a piece of simple factual writing, such expressions change over a period of time and often fall into disuse completely, so that someone reading a passage in ten years' time may not understand what point is being made.

Drafting and Checking

Finally in this section on organising the presentation of information, we should stress the need to check your work before completing the communication. This is clearly possible for written communications (although there are many examples of letters, etc. which have not been checked and contain gross errors), but can also be done for oral communications where you are able to plan and prepare in advance.

It is often helpful to consider the first attempt at the communication as a draft – not to be actually communicated before detailed re-consideration.

When considering this draft, use the following procedure.

- If you have time, place the draft on one side for a short while, then return to it. Try to forget about it and then approach it with a fresh mind. This will help to judge the material without being influenced by your original ideas and thoughts.
- Place yourself in the position of the intended recipient of the message and then read through it carefully. Assess the material as to whether it gets its message across.
- Make sure all the spelling – particularly any difficult words – and punctuation is correct.
- Consider the general tone of the communication. Is it right for the intended audience? When you are dealing with written communications, a useful trick is to read the material out loud – this helps to spot problems with its flow.

If there is anything which you find unsuitable, change it, so that the communication is more appropriate.

C. STRUCTURING COMMUNICATIONS

Throughout this and the previous unit, we have stressed the importance of structure in communication. Now we need to address it very specifically in respect of how you actually organise communications – whether written or oral.

However, before we get into the detail of this, it is worth considering the question "*why structure*?". What is it designed to achieve?

The objective of structuring is to clarify what you have to say for the recipient. You need to lead him/her/them through your message in a way which will enable them to understand exactly what you want to get across, and to follow the development of your points, one after the other, from the beginning to the end of the communication.

You will also find it very useful to yourself, as you are writing or as you giving an oral presentation, to have a strong structure to follow. Planning the framework of a communication provides the basis upon which you can develop the detail of your arguments and present appropriate evidence, as you progress through it.

We shall look at structuring in two ways here:

- the overall structure of a communication; and
- the devices used to impose structure throughout the communication itself.

You will find that the points made here will underpin the discussion of effectiveness in report and letter writing later in this unit, and in respect of oral communication in the next unit.

Overall Structure

All good business communications have a beginning, a middle and an end. They can, therefore, all be structured along the same overall lines – with an introduction, a body to the communication and a summary/conclusion.

Note that the way in which each of these elements are applied in a particular situation will vary according to the type of communication. When writing a formal business letter or report, or conducting and interview or giving a formal speech, the introductory and concluding phases need to be clearly defined and often have an important part to play in the message. When writing an informal memo or e-mail, or making a telephone call to a colleague, these elements may be almost non-existent – comprising simply a general statement of greeting and farewell. However, you will find that virtually all business communications have the three elements to some extent.

(a) Introduction

It is vital to get off to a good start! The first sentence sets the tone and style for the rest of the communication and you should give it some thought. Often getting that first sentence right sparks off the flow of language for the rest of the communication.

The introduction sets the scene for the message. It orientates the reader or listener to what is going to be said. As such, there are two key points which need to be covered.

- ***Identification of the subject matter***

  You need to clarify exactly what the subject of the communication is about – including, where necessary, some background to the issue(s) and why it is being dealt with. This may also require the clarification of certain concepts and technical terminology where they are central to the message itself.

- ***Definition of your approach***

  You also need to summarise the way in which you are going to deal with the subject matter. This allows you to establish your own particular view of the issues raised and the position from which you will analyse them. In academic terms, it is, in effect, the hypothesis against which you will develop and justify your arguments, evaluate the evidence and, finally, draw conclusions.

  You should also give an indication of the way in which the communication will take the reader/listener through the subject matter, possibly by reference to its structure. This sets up the main body of the communication so that the receiver has an overview of how you will approach it.

Whilst there seems a lot to cover, you do not want to spend too much time on this element – it is, after all, only the introduction. As a general rule, it should only be approximately 5% of the total length of the communication. This means that you need to be reasonably succinct in covering the above points.

It should also be clear where the introduction ends and the main body of the communication begins.

(b) Main body of the communication

The main body of the communication is where you convey all the information of the message. Here you should establish, develop and justify your key points, detailed analysis and/or arguments in relation to the subject matter. Supporting evidence and examples may be used to clarify what you have to say.

It needs to have a logical progression and order which enables the reader to follow your thinking, and this should be supported by structuring as discussed in the following section.

(c) Summary/conclusions

The final phase of any communication should draw together your themes, key points and arguments in making final comments about the subject.

This is a critical element. It will often be the part of the communication which contains the lasting impression – particularly so in respect of oral presentations – and needs, therefore, to be clear, succinct and positive. It should provide a review of the key points and, if appropriate, the reasoning and approach underpinning them. Any conclusions you draw – and any recommendations or statements of action necessary – *must* be supported by the discussion in the main body of the communication.

Most importantly, you must *not* introduce anything new at this stage.

As a general rule the conclusion should be no longer than 5 – 10% of the whole communication, so you will need to be very succinct in drawing things together and making your closing statements.

Structuring Devices

Aside from the overall structure, there remains a need to consider carefully the way in which you approach the main body of the communication. This, after all, contains the information which you have to convey.

The structure of any communication – whether long or short, simple or complex, formal or informal – exists to guide the reader or listener through what you have to say. It helps to make the information and arguments being presented more accessible and clear. Even a short report which is written in a continuous flow of text, like a chapter in a book, can discourage even the well-motivated reader. People feel at a loss with a mass of words and are reluctant to start reading at all. If they do "take the plunge", it can be difficult to follow arguments and to check out and refer to points at a later stage.

Therefore, the structure must be inviting to the reader, and help them to follow the discussion throughout.

There are four key aspects to consider here:

- the flow and development of points;
- headings;
- numbering; and
- lay-out.

Note that, whilst these relate primarily to written communications, the underlying principles are equally applicable to oral communication.

(a) Flow and the development of points

All communications need to have a logical flow from one point to the next. This does not necessarily have to be linear, in that point A follows directly after point B which is then followed by point C. It may be that, for example, there are some points arising from B which are best developed there and then, so the flow may go A, B, D, E and then back to C. What is important, though, is that the reader or listener is able to follow the flow and know exactly where they are.

In this context, never be afraid to "flag" the progression of your argument throughout the communication. This helps both you, as you are writing/speaking, and the reader/listener to maintain a focus on the direction you are taking. so, for example, you can note the relevance of topics to the stage you are at in your discussion, refer back to previous stages, and even to the introduction, to provide an appropriate context to new ideas, or refer forward to where a particular theme may be picked up again.

Structure your work into clear and intelligible paragraphs, each with a coherent theme. Each new line of argument needs a new paragraph, and there should be a clear progression from one paragraph to the next.

Drawing out the development and connections in this way makes the communication flow from point to point in a smooth way. You can also assist this by directly linking paragraphs to each other – for example, setting up the next paragraph by the way in which you end the preceding one, or beginning the next one with a point raised in the previous one, which is then developed further.

(b) Headings

The use of headings and sub-headings act as signposts to the reader. They orientate the reader to the specific subject under discussion, but they also indicate the relationships between different topics by the way in which they are brought together under particular headings. Sub-headings bring out the hierarchical relationships between information – as in this section of the unit, where overall structure and structuring devices are considered as subsidiary aspects of the importance of structure. (This is considerably helped by the numbering, as we discuss below.)

Headings should be concise and as explicit as possible. They are often used to scan a report in order to pick out particular information and vague headings do not make this very easy.

Decisions about what headings to use can be an important part of planning the overall framework of a communication. Establishing the headings may, therefore, be an early step in preparing the communication.

Note that headings are rarely used in business letters with the exception of an opening "title" to the letter.

(c) Numbering

Numbering has two purposes:

- it helps to show the relationships between information – so, for example, sections numbered 1.1, 1.2, etc. are clearly subsidiary to a section numbered 1; and
- it facilities reference to particular parts of the communication, either internally within the text or by readers in discussion of it – as in, for example, "*see paragraph 4*".

There are many different methods of doing this. For example, main section headings may be numbered 1, 2, 3, etc. with sub-sections numbered 1.1, 1.2, etc. Further sub-headings could also be numbered, although the length of number (say, "1.3.7") can tend to get excessive and be distracting.

Some organisations number the individual paragraphs of formal reports in order to facilitate discussion. There are, again, various ways of doing this, including:

- numbering paragraphs sequentially from 1 to 999 or whatever, with headings either not being numbered or using letters for differentiating them;
- numbering the paragraphs as subsidiaries of the headings – so that, for example, paragraphs under section 2 would be numbered 2.1, 2.2, etc.

Whatever the system used, it is important to be clear and consistent throughout.

Note that, as with headings, numbering is not used in letters.

(d) Lay-out

The way in which information is set out on the page can be a considerable aid to the structuring of a document, as well as assisting readability and emphasising meaning.

There are a number of rules and guidelines about laying out material, of which the first is perhaps the most important.

- ***Be consistent***

  If you use a particular device for a particular purpose – for example the use of capital letters for main headings, or the use of bold text for emphasis – stick to that use throughout. Do not switch to another device for the same effect, or use one effect for several different purposes.

- ***Be sparing***

  There is nothing worse than reading a document prepared by someone who has just discovered the range of different fonts, sizes and text effects now available with word processing packages. The overuse of these is very common, but invariably does nothing to enhance either the readability or attractiveness of the document. Large amounts of text in italics or in capital letters is particularly difficult to read quickly.

  Effect is gained by the occasional use of these devices.

- ***White space helps***

  The introduction of white space around text helps to differentiate between sections of text and show relationships between information.

  You will be aware of the first of these by the use of paragraphs, where the single blank line between them helps to break up the density of text on the page and make the distinction clearer. Additional space around headings can also make them stand out.

  Indentation is another device which can assist structuring – indented text is subsidiary to the text which precedes it.

- ***Take care with bullets and numbered lists***

  Again, these devices can be used to show the subsidiary nature of certain information. However, you should be very careful about using them in business communications, or indeed in academic work. They are, essentially, informal devices which are not generally accepted in these settings.

D. THE IMPORTANCE OF CLARITY

In both spoken and written communication, the way in which we choose our words and the way in which we construct sentences, paragraphs and our speech will have great impact on the successful receipt of our messages. Clarity of language is important in three specific ways:

- the need to convey ideas precisely;
- the need to establish a suitable and positive relationship;

- the need to create a favourable impression – of yourself and/or of the organisation you represent.

The production of well-balanced and accessible material, whether spoken or written, can be facilitated by the clarity of the language – sentence construction, grammar, syntax, and spelling. A number of rules can be identified.

Writing Good English

The English language has immense vigour, range and vitality. It owes these qualities largely to its great flexibility since, as an instrument of communication, it has far fewer rules and patterns than most other European languages, including French and German. However, an inevitable side-effect of this flexibility is that it can become vague or ambiguous unless used carefully.

(a) Keep it simple and precise

The writer George Orwell, in an essay called *Politics and the English Language*, gave six essential rules for precision in language which you should constantly bear in mind:

- Never use a metaphor (e.g. "a lion of a man", "a dream of a car") or a simile (e.g. "as brave **as** a lion", "it goes **like** a dream") which you are used to reading in print. It could become a cliché, and if you gave it a bit more thought you could probably come up with a better description.
- Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- If you can leave a word out, do so.
- Never use a foreign word, scientific word, or jargon word or phrase where a simple, everyday English equivalent will give the same meaning.
- Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- Break any of these rules rather than say something which is downright barbarous.

We can summarise these as follows:

> ***Always write as simply and directly as you can, in language which will be clearest to the largest range of possible readers.***

All Orwell's points are clear enough, but the fifth perhaps needs expansion if you're unused to the language of formal grammar. The ***passive*** is that kind of expression which tells you that something was done, not that somebody ***did*** it.

- "Action was taken early in the morning" is passive.
- "I took action early in the morning" is active.

Why did Orwell prefer the active to the passive?

- It is far more ***direct and forceful***, making clear that people initiate actions, rather than suggesting that actions somehow happen by themselves.
- It is ***more honest***. The active voice leaves no doubt as to ***who*** is responsible for a particular action. When you avoid this in business correspondence, you may give the reader the impression that you wish to conceal something, or to deny responsibility. This can seriously endanger a relationship of trust between writer and reader which is so essential in business communication.

Expressing yourself clearly is important not only in conveying your ***ideas*** but also in establishing ***trust*** between you and your reader – a vital element in business.

(b) Use short sentences and paragraphs

Short sentences are nearly always more effective than long sentences. To be persuaded of this, look at one of James Joyce's most famous books, "Ulysses". One chapter is written as a single sentence. As a consequence it is extremely hard work!

Some suggest that sentences of 12 – 15 words are ideal for business communications. You may have to work on this if your natural instinct is to use longer sentences. Graduates, for example, have been found to use longer sentences than non-graduates. This is probably a consequence of using a great many reference books, which themselves tend to use longer sentences.

To be effective, keep punctuation to a minimum. Use commas only where you need a pause to make your meaning clear. Pay particular attention to the proper use of full stops instead of commas. Full stops divide text into sentences and each sentence should only contain one idea or related ideas. Often you may see a comma used instead of a full stop to link two units of expression which are really separate sentences. This is wrong, and an example will make it clear to you:

> Always make sure that fire doors are closed at all times, failure to do this will allow fires to spread very rapidly.

This passage is wrongly punctuated. It should be punctuated as follows:

> Always make sure that fire doors are closed at all times. Failure to do this will allow fires to spread very rapidly.

Paragraphs should also be short. It has been suggested that for successful business communications, the ideal paragraph length is 6 – 8 lines.

One useful technique for conveying meaning quickly is called ***signposting***. This is where you deliberately aim to get to the point of the paragraph as quickly as possible. For example, take the following sentence, which might open a paragraph:

> "In response to many letters and telephone calls, and following extensive discussions, we have decided to introduce the new product in January."

The important part of the message – the introduction of the product – is right at the end of the sentence. Far better to signpost as follows.

> "The new product will be introduced in January. The decision has been taken following many letters and telephone calls and extensive discussions."

Signposting is effective because when the reader first looks at a piece of writing, he or she often "skims" over the opening lines of each paragraph. In this way it is possible to get the meaning across much more quickly.

Vocabulary

Whatever channel of communication you use, the effectiveness of the message will be largely dependent on the individual words selected to reflect your meaning.

We have a word-based culture which is used for us to communicate all our feelings, thoughts, attitudes and prejudices; or which can be deliberately manipulated to produce puns, double meanings, poetry or prose. We also have perceptions which we use to help us describe events, people, and scenery.

We use an internal selection process based on our education and experience to choose the right word or phrase for every context in which we find ourselves. Often our vocabulary will change according to that of the person with whom we are communicating. We may adopt mannerisms or accents subconsciously in particular situations. What is certain is that we take words for granted and believe that the meaning we attribute to them is the true meaning, our pronunciation the correct one, and the context in which we use them appropriate.

There are a number of basic rules to use in ensuring that this is true.

(a) Avoid colloquial language and slang

This kind of language is used by members of particular groups of people. It is a relaxed, informal language, used mainly in speech and personal letters. In such contexts, the language is appropriate, as it is clear, vigorous and confirms that the user is a member of the group.

In business communication, however, such language is usually unsuitable, mainly because it is imprecise. It's perfectly acceptable when leaving a friend to say "See you" or "I'll give you a buzz", but in a business communication you need to give a clearer indication of when the next meeting or contact will take place. Additionally, if you use slang in business documents you will give an impression of laziness and a lack of respect for your reader, which in turn suggests a lack of care for detail and accuracy in business matters. It is best to avoid colloquial language in business communication.

(b) Avoid clichés

Clichés are words or phrases which have been used so frequently that they have effectively lost any force which they once had. To speak of "leaving no stone unturned" or "establishing a meaningful dialogue", or to refer to "this day and age" or "the calm before the storm" is to use a pattern of words which has really become exhausted.

Instead of clichés, try to use fresh, direct expressions which convey the same ideas but in a more straightforward way. Saying "I will do all I can" is more forceful than "leaving no stone unturned", for example, because it stresses a direct personal intent.

(c) Avoid redundant expressions

Many people feel that expressing a simple thought in a complex group of words makes it sound more respectable or more impressive.

- "At this moment in time" has become a very popular expression, but in fact it means nothing more than "Now".
- "Due to the fact that" is far less effective than "Because".
- "Conducted a full and frank exchange of views" says nothing more than "Discussed" or "Talked".

Always be aware of such expressions. We all fall into the trap of using them at times, simply because, in an age when oral communication through broadcasting is such a dominant influence, it is hard to avoid hearing them. Make a point of rooting them out when reading through any item of business communication which you have drafted. You will greatly improve your communication if you do.

(d) Avoid jargon

There are two types of jargon:

- There is the expression which members of a particular group use simply because it has become the ***custom***. Such phrases include foreign expressions such as "inter alia" instead of "among other things", or fashionable words such as "parameters" instead of "limits" and "discrete components" instead of "separate parts". Expressions of this kind serve only to obscure rather than reveal your ideas, and you should avoid them.
- The second kind of jargon is more positive. In any ***specialised occupation or area of interest***, new concepts will emerge which people refer to by specific groups of words. If a theatre critic talks of an "alienation effect" or a psychiatrist refers to "sensory deprivation", other members of the same group will know what he is describing. Those outside the group may have difficulty in understanding, and they will have to learn the special meaning to participate in the group. Language of this kind is acceptable where it

is the ***clearest*** way of expressing the idea or phenomenon it names and where it is used to other members of a group who will understand it without question.

However, where you are writing as a specialist to a layman – for example, when explaining a legal aspect of accountancy to a client – you should always be careful to explain such terms when you first use them, or translate the terms into ordinary language.

(e) Avoid discriminatory language

We should always ensure that we do not allow prejudice to show in our choice of language, either in spoken or in written communication. This is a basic requirement in showing consideration for the recipient of the message, whether you know them or not.

Problems can occur especially in the field of discriminatory language. This derives from the making of assumptions about the individual or group to which we are referring, based on stereotypical attitudes. The use of sexist or racist language is extremely bad practice, and in some situations may be actually contravening the law. Usually it is easy to see the pitfalls, but indirect discrimination – as the following examples show – can also occur with remarkable ease!

Consider the following statements which are only too common:

- "Let me speak to Mr. Brown's secretary – I am sure that she will be able to help me."
- "Please tell the doctor that he should call as soon as possible."
- "I want to advertise a vacancy for an office junior. She should have good keyboard skills."

In these examples, it is quite possible that Mr Brown's secretary is a woman, and that the doctor is a man. However, it may well not be the case, and the assumption that they are is very offensive. Many office juniors are female, but this is not necessary (and such discrimination in recruitment is unlawful).

The Seven Cs

This approach sets out a range of practical points which assist the need for clarity in respect of conveying the content of messages.

(a) Clear

If the message is ambiguous or otherwise unclear, then the communication itself will be a waste of time and effort. Careful thought needs to be given to the composition of the communication, so that the ideas are ordered and the words and phrases used are clear in expression and meaning. This may mean defining particular technical terms or lesser known concepts or procedures. Short, simple, structured sentences help, as does the use of headings (particularly in reports and memoranda, although there is no reason why they cannot be used in letters to help clarify different topics or, even, in oral presentations).

One problem often encountered is the need to refer to other documents (or, at least, extracts from them) or to background information. The inclusion of such material in the main part of the communication can be extremely confusing. If it is necessary to supply extra detailed information to support a point, this is best placed in an appendix at the back of a report, attached as an enclosure to a letter, or given as a hand-out to support an oral presentation. This ensures that the recipient focuses on the central messages of the communication and does not become distracted by too much extraneous detail.

(b) Concise

Sometimes it will be necessary to spend time explaining a particularly important issue, but brevity – compatible with the complexity of the information being conveyed – will help to get the message home. This does not mean that you should cut corners in conveying the information. It means that you should give careful thought to the most effective and most economical way in which you can express your ideas.

Often, we are tempted to dress up our language to make it sound "important". If we can resist this, we will still be able to produce professional and appropriate communications which are not full of "verbal padding".

(a) Correct

In most business communications, accuracy is of paramount importance. The implications of inaccuracies can be very serious indeed, particularly when recorded in official documents. It is, therefore, vital that all facts and figures should be checked. And, do not lose sight of the need to check the text for errors, especially in figures, names (there is nothing worse than misspelling someone's name on a letter!) and addresses.

(d) Courteous

In any form of communication, it pays to consider it as a personal address to the recipient(s). This applies to communication across the board – to customers or clients, to colleagues, or to subordinates alike. "Tone" conveys much about the organisation, and perhaps about you as an individual, and this can have a great influence on future relationships. Thus, in trying to be brief, do not be curt, do not be afraid to introduce personal references where appropriate (using "I" or "you"), be polite and use friendly language rather than formal "officialese", which is a barrier to communication.

(e) Complete

It can be very frustrating to be on the receiving end of a communication – perhaps something which you have been awaiting with some eagerness – only to find that it gives only half the picture, or half the answers to your questions! It is important, therefore, to ensure that you deal with each piece of information fully.

There may, of course, be occasions when it is impossible to give a complete answer – for example, if you are awaiting information yourself. If this is the case, you need to state that clearly, so that the recipient knows when and how to expect a full response.

Being complete may mean going beyond what were your original terms of reference for the communication. Other information may need to be brought in, in order for the complete picture to be presented.

(f) Consistent

The flow of language is considerably aided by consistency in its use, such as standardising the person and tense used, and sticking to a particular style and tone throughout. There are a number of issues involved in this:

- adopting a consistent and clear usage of non-gender specific phrasing (to avoid the use of "he" all the time which you will find in most older texts), although this can mean using rather convoluted phrasing or an overuse of "he/she" or "(s)he", which can look and sound clumsy;
- choosing between "I" and the more anonymous "we" in formal presentations, both of which have their advantages at different times;
- the convention of business letter and reports being written in the passive tense ("it may be seen that ....") can give rise to phrasing difficulties and also conflicts with the more direct and courteous use of active tenses ("you will see that ...."), but it can be confusing to switch between the two too often.

Where there is a particular "house" style which needs to be followed for all communications within an organisation, this can constrain choice, but there remains the need to be consistent.

(g) Convincing

This last point is often overlooked. It is very important to show confidence and commitment in what you communicate, even though there may be times when you do not actually feel that in what you have to do at work. Doubt, ambiguity and vagueness come through very clearly in all forms of communication. Messages need to be conveyed with conviction or they will not be taken seriously.

Study Unit 3

Written Communication

Contents *Page*

(Continued over)

INTRODUCTION

In this unit we shall examine the main forms of written communication common in business organisations. We shall look at the requirements of the particular form and when each should be used.

Throughout, you need to keep in mind the principles of effective communication detailed in the previous unit – namely, the identification of the intended response to the communication and awareness of the nature of the reader, and the importance of planning, organisation, structure and clarity in getting the message across in the best way. If you keep these principles in mind, you will be able to write effective business letters, memos, etc. which convey even very complicated subject matter and ideas.

A. WRITING BUSINESS LETTERS

Despite the great expansion of electronic means of communication, letters still form a very important element in business communication. They are cheap to produce and deliver, can be written quickly, and provide a permanent record for both sender and receiver. In the great majority of cases, they are the firm's principal means of external communication with other firms or with individuals.

For this reason, a knowledge of the principles of letter writing, the correct layout of letters, and an awareness of the main kinds and uses, is essential to successful communication in business.

Common Features

Whatever their purpose, all letters have several features in common. Most of these are present in all letters, although some will only be included according to the particulars of a specific letter.

(a) Sender's address and other details

All letters must contain the sender's full address, usually somewhere at the top of the first page. Most companies have printed letterheads – sheets of stationery which are printed with the name and address of the firm. This saves writing or typing the details on every letter, and also gives a good impression of the company's standing and efficiency.

However, if you're not using headed stationery, there are two important points to bear in mind.

- Make sure that the address is **complete**, and includes the post town and post code. You will probably have your firm's full address; make sure that you copy it correctly and completely.
- When you are writing as a **private** individual, you should put only the address at the top of the letter, and not your name. The name is only added by people who are in business as individuals, e.g. consultants, artists or writers, but it is not common practice for a private individual to do this.

This section of the letter will also normally include the sender's telephone number, as well as other communications information such as fax or telex numbers, and E-mail address. These allow the receiver to contact the sender by other means if necessary, particularly if he/she feels an immediate or personal response is required.

(b) Receiver's name and address

You include this so that you have a record of the destination of the letter, and also so that, should the letter become opened or damaged in transit, it can be forwarded promptly to the intended recipient.

If you're writing to someone in their capacity as e.g. Sales Manager, include their position, like this:

J Smith
Sales Manager
Bloggs & Co

If Mr Smith is away from the office, someone will open the letter and act upon it, rather than leave it thinking it's personal.

(c) "Confidential" heading

If a letter is particularly confidential, and you don't want anyone else – such as the receiver's secretary or assistant – to read it first, you should type "CONFIDENTIAL" or "PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL" in capitals at the top of the letter. This is usually put above the recipients name and address.

This expression must be clearly visible on the envelope – either by putting it on the envelope itself or by being seen through the window in the envelope through which the address is shown.

(d) Date

You should remember to date ***all*** correspondence. This puts the correspondence in a specific time period and allows both you and the receiver to put letters in order, and have an idea of the development of ideas which has taken place over a period of some months or even longer.

Letterheads usually have a caption for the date to be inserted somewhere near the top of the letter.

(e) References

References are used to enable both the reader and sender to link the subject matter of the letter to previous, related correspondence and other documentation. They allow correspondence to be filed with such related material and, hence, retrieved and referred to at a later date.

Business letterheads usually contain captions for both "Our Ref" and "Your Ref".

- The most common form of "Our Ref" is the initials of the writer of the letter followed, after an oblique stroke, by the initials of the typist, as shown in the sample letters later in this section. Other references could be an account number, a customer reference number linking the letter to an earlier file containing correspondence, or some other form of reference.
- "Your Ref" is usually the number or letter sequence given on a letter to which you are replying – if this is the reason for your letter.

(f) Salutation or greeting

This is the start of the actual letter. It usually contains the word "Dear", but what follows depends on how well you know the receiver.

- When writing a ***general*** letter to a firm, begin "Dear Sirs".
- If writing to an ***individual whom you have not met or corresponded with***, begin "Dear Sir" or "Dear Madam".
- When writing to an ***individual member of a firm whose name you do not know*** – for example, the "Personnel Manager" or the "Export Manager" – you should begin "Dear Sir or Madam".
- If you are writing to ***someone whom you have met or corresponded with for some time***, you should use "Dear Mr/Ms/Miss/Mrs" as appropriate.

It now standard practice in many companies to begin letters to women with "Dear Ms". If you are replying to a letter, you should use the title that is shown there. If none is shown, and you don't know whether the woman is a "Miss" or a "Mrs", it is good practice to use "Ms".

(g) Subject heading

This makes clear in a few words the subject of the letter. Its purpose is to save time and space. It may state a general subject, such as Income Tax Returns 1987-8, or be more specific, mentioning an account or reference number. The heading is usually underlined to make it more prominent, and can either be central or on the left hand side.

(h) Substance of the Letter

Letters should be brief, but they should also contain all the necessary detail and be courteous. We'll be covering this in more detail shortly. You should write letters in fairly short paragraphs, since this helps the reader to assimilate them quickly – an important matter where busy people are concerned.

(i) Complimentary close

This is the formal conclusion to the letter.

There is a simple rule as to exactly which form of expression should be used.

- If the salutation or greeting to the letter was to a named person, the closure should used the expression "yours sincerely".
- If the salutation or greeting was not personal (i.e. as in the form of "Dear Sir"), the closure should use the expression "yours faithfully".

Thus, if you began with "Dear Madam", you should close "Yours faithfully"; if "Dear Mr Jones", "Yours sincerely".

(j) Signature

Typed letters will leave space for the writer to sign immediately after the complimentary close. It is normal practice to also type your name under that space so that the receiver won't have to decipher your signature in order to know exactly who you are. It is also usual to put the sender's position within the company after his/her name.

If you're writing by hand, don't forget to print your name and position below your signature.

You may come across a letter which is signed not by the person whose name is typed at the end, but by another person, with the initials "p.p." before or after it. This stands for "pro persona", and means that someone else, usually a secretary or assistant, has signed the letter on behalf of the writer in his or her absence.

(k) Enclosures

It is quite common for letters to enclose other documents which are related to the subject matter of the correspondence. This is often indicated by "Enc" or lines or asterisks at the foot of the letter, with details of what the other documents are.

Where the letter is really only an introduction to the enclosures and has little or nothing else of substance to say, the letter is referred to as a "covering letter".

(l) Copies

The final point to cover in this section of common features is the possible notification to the recipient that the letter has been copied to another person. This is denoted by the letters "c.c." (literally "carbon copy", from the days of carbon paper being used to provide duplicates when typing documents) followed by the name of the person to whom the letter has been copied. The expression will usually be set out at the very end of the letter, after the sender's name.

Layout

In order to accommodate the above features and show them clearly for the recipient, business letters follow a series of principles in their layout and presentation. There are, of course, individual variations between companies, and there are also different styles of layout. In general, however, just as the components of a letter remain relatively constant, so does the style of presentation.

We show two such layouts over the next pages. Note the positioning of the various common features discussed above and the general form in which the text forming the substance of the letter is laid out. Consider how your own organisation presents its letters.

Figure 3.1: Business letter – paragraphs with first line indents

J.T. Smith plc
14 Green St.,
LONDON,
W24 5TP

Telephone: 020 7999 9284

Telex: GB 47 59382

Our Ref: JTS/HJ

Date: 17th May 20..

Mr. K. Harris,

K. Harris & Co.,
14 Victoria St.,
SOUTHWELL,
SL7 8UY.

Dear Sir,

Account No. 9384756/02938

Yours faithfully,

J.T. Smith
Managing Director

Enc.

Figure 3.2: Business letter – block layout

J.T. Smith plc
14 Green St.,
LONDON,
W24 5TP

Telephone: 020 7999 9284

Fax: 020 7999 9285

Date: 17th May 20..

Our ref: JTS/HJ

Your ref:

Private and Confidential

Mr. K. Harris,

K. Harris & Co.,
14 Victoria St.,
SOUTHWELL,
SL7 8UY.

Dear Mr Harris,

Account No. 9384756/02938

Yours sincerely,

J.T. Smith
Managing Director

Enc.

c.c. G.B. Martin, Lawbridge and Co., Solicitors

Organising the Content of a Letter

In the previous unit we stressed the importance of organisation and structure in all forms of communication. Here we apply these principles to the substance of letters in general. Remember that the objective of organisation and structure is help the reader by making the content easier to take in and the meaning to the message clear.

The most effective letters are those which consist of ***three or four short paragraphs on a single sheet***. It is far easier to read a letter if it is in short paragraphs, especially if time is precious. By dividing your writing in this way you are in effect offering a further courtesy to your reader by making it easier for him or her to grasp the meaning of your writing. This will probably ensure that you receive a reply more promptly.

Although the division of the content between the paragraphs varies according to the nature of the individual letter, you can follow some general principles to make arranging your material less haphazard.

(a) Opening paragraph

Your main concern here is to establish the circumstances, background or reason for your letter. You're half-way there with a good clear subject heading, but your first sentence should expand on this by, for example:

- **thanking** the reader for his letter (and including reference to such items as date, reference and subject to help the reader locate the original);
- stating clearly and concisely the subject of the letter (expanding on the heading);
- saying that you are writing to make an **enquiry**; or
- announcing the **kind of business** in which you are engaged.

This will make clear **why** you have written, and encourage the reader to go on.

When you have established the necessary circumstances, you should start a fresh paragraph. First paragraphs can be very brief: sometimes a single sentence is enough – for example:

> Thank you for your letter of 14 May concerning your income tax return for the year 20...

(b) Main body of the letter

The second and subsequent paragraphs will go into more specific detail about the general matter you established in the opening paragraph. This main body of the letter should summarise the current position, offer alternative views, make clear what services are available, establish what action is to be taken, or perform any similar role in extending and clarifying the bare statement of the first paragraph.

Always remember that clarity is important here. You must give details where they are necessary, and keep out irrelevant material. Planning the letter can often help you distinguish relevant facts from superfluous details. Where the letter is quite long, it is always good practice to draft the letter before finalising it.

(c) Concluding Paragraph

You should draw together the points made in the earlier part of the letter and conclude in a courteous or friendly manner, according to how well you know the reader. For example, you might:

- select one course of action from a number of alternatives offered before;
- ask for more information from the reader;
- give a clear directive to be followed.

Types of Letters

We’re going to look now at a number of different kinds of letters and highlight the different approaches and considerations required for each. Remember always that you need to apply the seven Cs discussed in the previous unit, and organise and structure the letter, with the objective of making the meaning as clear as possible for the reader.

The examples included simply show the main body of the letter rather than including all the introductory details.

(a) Confirmation letters

You probably find that most of the arrangements you make are either face-to-face with someone, or over the ’phone. A letter of confirmation follows-up the conversation and ensures both parties have a written statement of what was agreed. It can be useful for identifying any misunderstandings early on, and for copying to anyone else who needs to be aware of the arrangements.

> Dear Mr Jones,
>
> Following my telephone call to your secretary this morning, I am writing to confirm that I will call to see you at your office at 11.00 am on Thursday 25 March to discuss our revised accounting procedures.
>
> I am sure that my company will be able to offer you an even better service with these new methods, and I look forward to seeing you next week.
>
> Yours sincerely,
>
> H.L. Warner
> Sales Manager

Notice that the letter is very short, but ends in a courteous and positive manner, and that the overall impression is of efficiency and optimism.

Note that this type of letter is now often sent via E-mail because of the speed of receipt.

(b) Letters of acknowledgment

Letters of this kind are sent to acknowledge the receipt of items or enquiries. If you receive a detailed enquiry which you know will take you two to three weeks to answer in full, a letter of acknowledgment is not only polite, but can save the enquirer a lot of time-wasting follow-up letters or calls.

Alternatively, you may acknowledge an enquiry from another company about your services, and enclose a brochure or leaflet giving further information about your own firm.

You could write that sort of letter like this:

> Dear Ms Hyams
>
> Thank you for your letter of 17 January in which you enquire about our company finance services.
>
> I have pleasure in enclosing a leaflet which gives full details of the services we offer, and also supplies some information about the company's history and present size and condition.
>
> Should you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me.
>
> Yours sincerely
>
> H L Warner
> Customer Services Manager

Again the letter is short, simply saying a little about the document which is enclosed and offering further help if it's necessary. The final paragraph is one which will be valuable in letters of many different kinds, and you should remember its phrasing – or develop a similar brief, courteous statement to the same effect – to use in your own letters.

(c) Letters of enquiry

You may need to write letters to other firms to enquire about the supply of particular goods or services. A letter of this sort might be worded as follows:

> Dear Sir
>
> Our company is currently renewing its computer equipment in the accounts department.
>
> I am writing to enquire about the possibility of a representative of your company visiting us to advise about the number and kind of desk-top computers we would need to provide an up-to-date system for our rapidly expanding business.
>
> Perhaps you would like to telephone my secretary to arrange an appointment to call and discuss the matter with me.
>
> Yours faithfully
>
> P L Mackintosh
> Accounts Manager

Here again, the letter is brief but courteous, suggesting a course of action in a polite, but fairly forceful manner which is appropriate to its reader – the sales director of a firm who will be anxious to develop contacts of this kind.

(d) Collection letters

Letters of this kind are less pleasant, since they concern the collection of outstanding debts. They should be firm, but not offensive, making clear the kind of action which your firm will have to take if payment is not made.

> Dear Mr Thomas
>
> **Invoice No 89746**
>
> I see from my records that, despite two earlier reminders, the above invoice for the sum of £847.69 in connection with our services for the year ending 31 December 20.. has not been paid.
>
> I regret to say that, unless payment is made within the next seven days, I shall have no alternative but to institute legal proceedings for the recovery of the amount.
>
> Yours sincerely
>
> P L Mackintosh
> Accounts Manager

Here the tone is firm, but not impolite. The position is stated in a simple, factual manner, so that there is no doubt about the position, and the communication is short and to the point.

(e) Letters of apology

Even in the most efficient businesses, mistakes occur which need to be rectified by making speedy and sincere apologies. In letters of apology, the best course is to accept responsibility for mistakes honestly and without reservation.

> Dear Mr Thomas
>
> **Invoice No 89746**
>
> I was very sorry to learn that payment has in fact been made for the above account, and that our department has failed to acknowledge this.
>
> The mistake was due to an error in our invoice processing department, caused by problems with staff which now have been rectified. I can assure you that such errors will not recur in the future.
>
> In the circumstances, I can only express the hope that you will accept my sincere apologies for the inconvenience which you have been caused. Should you wish for any further advice about this or any other matter, please contact me directly by telephone at the above number.
>
> Yours sincerely
>
> P L Mackintosh
> Accounts Manager

(f) Standard letters

You may find that you will need to write to many people about similar things – the renewal of an insurance policy, the submission of accounts for auditing, or any other matter which occurs frequently in your own area of work. To save time, many companies have files of what are known as standard letters. These are letters which may be used to write to any person when a particular situation arises. Generally, they consist of a letter which has several gaps left in it, for the insertion of the receiver’s name and address and – in the actual body of the letter – the details about an order number, item of information required or any other matter.

In the past, such letters were kept as single typed copies in a reference folder, but now they are generally stored in a word-processor, where they can be called onto the screen, have the necessary details added, and then printed. This has the advantage that they have the appearance of being specially written.

If you have to prepare such a letter, always identify clearly which parts do not form part of the standard and will, therefore, vary from individual letter to individual letter. You can do this by simply leaving gaps, or by placing the information which will change for each use within square brackets.

<*receiver’s address*>

Dear <*name*>

House Contents Insurance

As you will know, your policy for the insurance of the contents of your house, Policy No <*policy number*> falls due on <*date*>.

You will shortly be receiving a renewal invitation from the company about the policy.

I am writing to point out to you the advantages of our “New for Old” insurance scheme which guarantees, on payment of a small additional premium, that any item damaged in the ways covered by your existing policy, is covered for its complete replacement cost.

The advantages of this scheme are considerable. If you would like to take advantage of them, they are available at an additional annual premium of £<*extra cost*> making your total annual premium £<*full cost*>.

Please let me know if you would like to take out this additional protection for your contents. I shall be glad to help in any way I can.

Yours sincerely

H K Young
Customer Services Manager

Here, the information to be completed is identified in the “blanks” to make the insertion of the relevant information easier. This is particularly useful if you’re not the only person who’s going to be using the standard letter, so other users are clear about what to do.

When drafting a standard letter, you have to take particular care that the wording chosen will fit all the intended circumstances. So, suppose the “New for Old” scheme mentioned above didn’t just apply to house contents insurance. You could make your letter useful for a range of policies with a few extra blanks, like this:

<*receiver's address*>

Dear <*name*>

<*type of insurance***>Insurance**

As you will know, your policy for the insurance of <*type of insurance*>, Policy No <*policy number*> falls due on <*date*>.

You will shortly be receiving a renewal invitation from the company about the policy.

I am writing to point out to you the advantages of our "New for Old" insurance scheme which guarantees, on payment of a small additional premium, that any item damaged in the ways covered by your existing policy, is covered for its complete replacement cost.

The advantages of this scheme are considerable. If you would like to take advantage of them, they are available at an additional annual premium of £<*extra cost*> making your total annual premium £<*full cost*>.

Please let me know if you would like to take out this additional protection for<*type of insurance*>. I shall be glad to help in any way I can.

Yours sincerely

H K Young
Customer Services Manager

The use of standard letters with blank spaces for the insertion of individualised data has been greatly enhanced by the development of "mail merge" facilities within word processing systems. Briefly, mail merge allows the linking of the blanks in the letter with fields from a database of information about people. The standard letter can then be "merged" with the database and a series of personalised letters produced.

(g) Circular letters

Circulars are letter which companies send to a number of people at the same time. They may convey information about new facilities, offer the services of a company, or perform any similar function.

Circulars are a further important form of external communication, constituting a form of publicity which, although not cheap, is directed straight to individual people who may become customers. As a result, they are increasingly used as a means of advertising or publicity. You should use them sparingly though, as many people react to circulars by automatically destroying them.

There is an example of the kind of circular a firm might send on the next page.

> Dear Sir or Madam
>
> Welwyn Accountancy Services is a new company devoted to providing the best in accounting and financial services for new and expanding firms.
>
> We offer a full service of tax accounting, management accounting, cost accounting and other financial services on a consultancy basis which is geared to your own needs.
>
> Many small firms and sole traders are finding that our services are just what they need. We can offer a top-line professional service at a fraction of the cost of a company accounts department. Why not contact us to arrange a free, no-obligation discussion meeting? We'll do all we can to help.
>
> If you would like more information, please contact us by phone or letter, or call in at our new offices to discuss things in person.
>
> Yours faithfully
>
> P Wright
> Sales Manager

(h) Complaints letters

These types are letter are, unfortunately, very common in most business organisations and are very important since they deal with matters at the heart of the business transaction.

If you are making a complaint you should follow a 4-step approach:

- Be specific about the facts by giving the information about the "who, what, when, where" aspects of your complaint. In other words, avoid a very subjective, emotional approach which can distract the reader from the facts of the situation.
- Explain the significance of the problem and how it affects you.
- Specify what outcome you want, but be flexible in your approach.
- Close politely and positively.

The following example shows these principles.

27 June 20..

Dear Mr Green,

Re: telephone conversation Wednesday 24 June 20.. – non-delivery of wardrobe

It would seem that you have been unable to trace my wardrobe in your warehouse as a further three days have elapsed since our last telephone conversation and my wardrobe has not arrived.

I have now waited for six weeks and frankly, were it not for the fact that it forms part of a fully fitted (matching) bedroom, would have preferred to cancel my order.

At this stage I would like a guaranteed date of delivery and recompense for the inconvenience you have caused me. I have had to take three days' holiday to date to await delivery of the aforesaid wardrobe.

I would appreciate your earliest attention to this matter.

Yours sincerely,

Mrs J. Brown

If you are replying to a complaint letter, you should not delay your response, even if it is only to confirm receipt of the letter and to explain that you have to investigate the matter if it is a serious complaint. You should show empathy and concern for the customer and if you can make an adjustment, you should apologise and do so. If the matter is not a legitimate complaint then you should explain your reasons why there will be no compensation or adjustment.

28 June 20..

Dear Mrs Brown,

Thank you for your letter dated 27 June 20..

Your wardrobe will, I'm happy to say, be delivered on Tuesday 7 July 20.. at 10.00 a.m.

Unfortunately there was a design fault and the manufacturers recalled all existing wardrobes until this fault could be rectified.

I enclose a gift voucher for £30 for use in any of our stores.

Please don't hesitate to contact me should you require more information.

Yours sincerely,

Mr W. Green

Responding to complaints should:

(a) Be as a result of careful investigation as to the facts/events which form the background or basis for the complaint.

(b) Involve checking the accuracy of statements made and potential responses.

(c) Be viewed as an opportunity to re-establish good relations with the correspondent and his or her organisation.

(d) Be recorded as part of the ongoing evaluation process and internal market research.

(e) Be recorded for the purpose of external market research.

(f) Be proactive, not reactive.

(g) Be viewed as an important function of the business communications process.

Using letters of complaint (or telephone calls) in this way can identify:

- Product issues
- Internal communication difficulties
- External communication difficulties
- Distribution problems
- Personnel and staff development requirements
- Re-evaluation of customer perception and later focus
- An improved system for dealing with external communications

Handwritten Letters

Whilst it is commonly perceived to be more acceptable to send typed or word-processed letters in business correspondence, it is important to consider how handwritten text could be advantageous.

If you feel that you need to convey additional warmth in response, perhaps, to a letter of complaint or to congratulate a colleague on the success of a joint venture, a handwritten letter may be appropriate. Do not, however, be lulled into thinking that a handwritten letter is a less formal document than a typed letter simply because it may be received more favourably, or that it allows less restrained and planned language than a typed letter.

The style and phrasing of a letter must always be appropriate to its content and context irrespective of the typeface or ink used!

Practice Questions 1

1. You are the senior accounts clerk for Johnson and Hickocks, Forster House, 117 Mill St, Hull GL9 7YB. You arrive at work to find the following items for your attention.

   (a) A letter from G Johnson of Johnson Stationery, 27 Mason St, Worksop WP9 5TH, offering to call and discuss your stationery requirements with you at any time in the next fortnight. You are free to see him on Tuesday next week. Write the letter confirming the appointment.

   (b) A memo from Ms C James, the customer services manager, asking you to draft a circular letter to go out over her signature. The circular will offer a new payroll service which involves taking over the payment of staff salaries for small firms, saving them time and effort dealing with the Inland Revenue and the DHSS, and providing their employees with a confidential pay slip every month when their salary has been paid into their bank account. For the employee, the advantages are that the service is rapid and reliable, the money goes straight into the bank and full details of the month's earnings appear on the slip – at only a small cost to the employer.

Write a suitable circular to local employers who might need the service.

2. As J Jones, despatch manager of the T. Owen Ltd., you receive the following letter.

The RR Box Co. Limited
Snow Street
Townley
T41 1QS

6th October 20..

Mr J. Jones
Despatch Manager

T. Owen Ltd
Simpleton
Haxton
H14 5QT

Dear Mr Jones,

Deliveries of Goods

We have been experiencing problems with your vehicles arriving at our goods-inwards department late in the afternoon, and as this causes considerable inconvenience we would appreciate your assistance.

Can you please arrange for the vehicles to deliver our goods on the first day of each week by mid-morning? This would certainly ease the problems we have with our materials-handling equipment.

Will you please let me have your comments as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,

J. Baggs
Stores Supervisor

Prepare a reply to this letter. You have had letters from Mr Baggs before and know that he needs careful handling. However, the response also needs thought because The RR Box Co. Ltd. is a valued customer of yours. However, their premises are 200 miles away from your factory and mid-morning deliveries on a Monday would be possible only if your van travelled through Sunday night. This would add to your costs as double-time would have to be paid. This cost would have to be passed on to the customer

You are willing to do all you can to help, though, and suggest that you improve matters by getting the vehicle loaded on Friday afternoon and left in your secure warehouse over the weekend, so that the driver can leave at 7.00 am on Monday. This should mean that they get there early in the afternoon, if not earlier.

There is no need to include addresses and other items here – simply concentrate on the body of the letter.

Now check your answers with the ones given at the end of the unit.

B. MEMORANDA

Memoranda, or memos as we shall refer to them from now on, are an effective way of conveying a single idea or group of ideas quickly within an organisation, with the additional advantage of providing a written record of the communication. As such they are particularly used for issuing instructions, giving directions about a new procedure, or as “cover notes” with files or other material which you want someone to see.

An important feature of memos is that they are restricted to ***internal*** use. As a result of this they have a particular form and you should never use this form with customers or people who work outside the company.

Memoranda are designed to be read and acted on. They are, therefore, generally short and to the point. However, even though they may be a less formal means of communicating than a letter, there is still a degree of formality in their presentation. You must also remember that they are generally kept and filed as a record of the communication.

Increasingly, internal memoranda are being sent via E-mail, but the principles of their preparation remain the same.

Format

Consider the following sample memorandum.

MEMORANDUM

To: Assistant Manager Date: 15 February 20..

From: S. Foster, General Manager Ref: SF/AM

SUBJECT: **REDECORATION OF MAIN OFFICE**

The main office will be redecorated during the week 12 – 19 March, and staff will not be able to work there.

I’ve arranged for staff to be able to work in the second floor conference room for that week. Please inform everyone involved of the arrangements.

Think about how this differs from a letter and what the common features are in this instance.

I’m sure you noticed there’s no address and realised it’s because there’s no need on an internal communication. There are also no greetings or farewells – no “Dear Mr Jones” and “yours sincerely”. They aren’t necessary in this form of communication.

There are four features which are common to memoranda, as follows.

(a) To and from headings

These serve the same purpose as all the detail about the sender and receiver and their addresses in a letter, but since it is an internal communication, none of the detail is necessary. You only need to note who the recipient is and who you, the writer, are. (It is usual, though, to include the position in the company of the sender and recipient.)

It may be appropriate also to include the sender’s telephone number to facilitate a quick response, if needed.

Memos are often sent to a number of people, in which case the "To" heading may have a number of names against it. Alternatively, memos may be copied to others "for information" – which means they are not expected to act on the subject matter, but should just note that the correspondence has taken place. In such cases, the additional recipients will also be listed against the notation "c.c." (as we saw in respect of letters), usually underneath the "To" heading

(b) Date

The date is important because it makes clear the place of the memo in a sequence of correspondence. It can also settle any disputes about whether the recipient was informed before or after some other action was taken.

(c) Ref

Short for reference, you can use the space for your initials, or an invoice number or a filing location, or anything else you want to link the memo with.

(d) Subject Heading

A very brief subject heading, of half a dozen words at the very most, is essential in a memo. It saves space and adds to the efficiency of the communication by making the topic clear immediately.

Organisation of the Content

The aim of a memo is to convey information economically. You must come straight to the point and leave out anything which is not immediately relevant.

That said, the way in which the main body of a memo is organised is very similar to that of a letter. There should be a short opening paragraph which sets the scene – for example, explaining the purpose of the memo, describing the circumstances which have prompted the memo or explaining the relevant facts. In the second and subsequent paragraphs, the subject will be discussed and instructions given or action identified. It is likely that there will be a final paragraph summarising the key points or giving general advice or encouragement about actions to be taken (especially in longer memos).

Language may not be such a problem in memos as with letters. Being an internal communication, a number of assumptions can be made about the recipients sharing a similar understanding of certain jargon terms and even abbreviations. However, the needs of those expected to read and act on the memo must still be considered. Where memoranda are used to issue company-wide instructions – say, about arrangements for Christmas holidays – the sender must be sure that the language used is appropriate for all the recipients.

Consider all the above points in respect of this example of a longer memo.

MEMORANDUM

To: All Accounts staff	Date: 20 September 20..
From: Accounts manager	Ref: HG/VB

Subject: **Arrangements for move to new buildings**

As you know, the company will be moving to new premises in the Keynes Precinct to open for business on Tuesday 7 October 20..

On Friday 3 October, the office will close at 12 noon. On closure, all staff should make sure that personal belongings are removed from desks, since no one will be allowed to re-enter the office after that time.

All staff will report for duty as usual on Monday 6 October at 9.00 am. Mr Jones, the new personnel manager, will be on hand to show staff the layout of the new building and explain the layout of desks, office machinery and the general facilities of the new office suite.

The computer department has made separate arrangements to occupy the building over the weekend, so that there should be no interruption in the use of the mainframe for those who require it. However, I would like staff to make as little use as possible of this facility in the first days of operation, instead using their own desk-top computers, so that testing of routine and administrative programs may take place.

I should like to ask for five members of staff to be on hand for a short period on Tuesday to guide personal callers to our new suite, so that our service to the public, in particular those making insurance claims for loss or accident damage, will in no way be interrupted by the move.

Finally, may I express the hope that the move will go smoothly and effectively for everyone.

C. USING E-MAIL

With the development of electronic office communications based on computers, the ability to send and receive messages has mushroomed. In most organisations now, internal networks link the computers which sit on most people's desks and it is a simple process to send messages to colleagues through this "Intranet" via electronic mail – E-mail. Further, by connecting to the Internet, you can send messages to any other person with a computer and an Internet connection.

E-mail has become the popular channel of communication that it is for a number of good reasons:

- It is relatively quick, usually only taking a few minutes to communicate with others anywhere in the organisation or, indeed, the world.
- It is relatively low-cost – using the Internet, it is about the same as the cost of a local telephone call to send a message anywhere in the world.
- It is easy to copy a message to many people at the same time for no extra cost.
- It is easy to distribute information such as reports, spreadsheets and other documents by attaching them as electronic files to the messages that you send.
- It is available around the clock, every day of the week.

Writing E-mail Messages

The process of communicating by E-mail is very simple and the format is very similar to that of a memoranda. You need to specify the recipient(s), the date, reference, subject heading and your own details as the sender. The computer will insert the date and your own details.

To simplify specification of the recipient(s), most E-mail systems allow the user to develop, on their own computer, their own address books of external contacts with their E-mail addresses. Within organisations, there are likely to be centralised lists of company staff available within the system. It is also possible to build up commonly used distribution lists of particular groups of people. This makes selecting recipients easy – you just need to pick out the particular persons from the address book or staffing list, or specify a particular distribution list, and the computer will insert the details on the message and ensure the correct routing of the E-mail on completion. The system is also likely to offer the possibility of identifying further people to whom the E-mail should be copied to (for information).

The organisation and structure of the body of the message will depend upon the nature of the communication. Where the E-mail is effectively being used as a substitute for a memo (or a letter to an outside contact), the same structure and formality as would be used in a memo would be needed. In many other circumstances, E-mails are used for quick informal notes or personal messages. Here, the lack of formality means that you can express yourself in, more or less, any way you like – as long as it gets the message across in a way which is appropriate to the recipient.

There is no set rule about using a salutation, such as Dear John or Dear Sir, as the opening line of the text of the message itself. If you are unsure of what to do, it is better to err on the side of caution and include a greeting as the absence of one could make you appear rude. Generally though, E-mails do not require formal greetings in the way that letters do. Similarly you do not need to use a formal closure such as, “Yours sincerely” or “Yours faithfully” unless you have opted for a formal greeting; although most people would sign off with a closing term of some sort, such as just “regards”, followed by their first and last name if they do not know the person, even though it is usually clear who is the sender of an E-mail message. If you do include a formal closure you may want also to include your job title and company contact details.

As with any form of communication, before you send an E-mail message, you should consider what you expect to happen as a result of sending it and also think of the needs of the recipient(s). The same considerations apply as we have discussed before – in the last unit and in the earlier sections on letters and memoranda. In addition, though you should also note the following features which are particular to E-mail.

- Because of the speed of preparing E-mail messages, it is easy to think of them as a cross between a telephone conversation and a letter. Consequently, it is often too easy to send an E-mail which is an unstructured written conversation. Where there is any degree of formality to the message, this should be avoided and the normal rules of formal expression and structure should be applied.
- Although you do not really need to think about layout in conjunction with an E-mail, it is better to avoid sending messages that are one long block of text. It is much easier to read if you use spaces between paragraphs.
- Your message will be one of many that a recipient might receive in a day. Therefore your subject line should be concise, but give an indication of the context of the message.
- It is better to avoid sending a message that attempts to fulfil many different purposes at once, as you risk causing confusion.
- If you are sending attachments you should state that is the case in the main body of the message and provide any details necessary to access and open the attached files. (If you are worried about other people being able to alter an attached document, it is possible to “password-protect” it so that the recipient can only read it.)

- Where you need to connect to the Internet to send a message, it is general good practice to work off-line in planning and preparing the message before sending it. There may be a temptation, where the cost of connection time is an issue, to spend as little time as possible in rushing off and sending the message without adequate forethought.

Do not forget that E-mails are saved and archived. They are, therefore a permanent record of the correspondence and can be legal evidence with as much status as a paper document.

Issues Connected with E-mail Use

The ease of use and speed of communication enabled by E-mail has made it an extremely popular means of communication within organisations and, increasingly between organisations and their external business contacts – customers, potential customers, suppliers, etc. This growth in its use, together with the ease of that use, raise a number of issues for business organisations.

- The first of these is overload. It is very common in some organisations for senders to copy messages to many more people than would have been the case with paper documents. Indeed, there are many instances – often due to poor training in the use of the system – where there is no distinction between proper recipients and those to whom the message is just copied for information. Blitzing other staff with information which is not specifically relevant to them is a waste of everyone's time and can actually be counter-productive where someone takes action on the basis of an E-mail which was not actually designed for him/her. It can also affect productivity in situations where people look at their messages as soon as they receive them (many systems are set to bleep whenever they receive a message). This problem reinforces the need to give proper consideration to the principles of specifying purpose and being aware of the recipient.
- E-mail tends to be treated less formally than business letters or memoranda. There are good reasons for this in the ease of use and the general lack of any great need to spend time on format and presentation. However, this can lead you to write things in an E-mail message that you might not consider including in a more formal letter – language, grammar, punctuation and use of spacing/paragraphs may be sloppy, which can mean that the message is difficult to follow.
- Few people appreciate that an external E-mail message is an advertisement for your company, in the same way that a well-presented letter on company letterhead paper is. A poorly constructed E-mail message can create a bad impression.
- Many organisations find that E-mail can be abused when people spend an inappropriate amount of time sending or receiving unnecessary messages. In some organisations the distribution of jokes and other "social" messages is rife.
- There are occasions when E-mail is not the best way to communicate. It would be inappropriate to hide behind E-mail instead of talking face-to-face – for example, if you needed to discipline a member of staff. Similarly it is not appropriate to use E-mail as a method of passing difficult business issues around where no-one takes responsibility for their resolution.
- A great feature of E-mail is that you can attach files to the messages that you are sending. However, problems can be caused if you send files which the recipient cannot open or if you attach very large files which can occupy the recipient's communication capability for an excessive amount of time.

D. USING AND DESIGNING FORMS

Forms are a means of collecting standard information in a relatively simple way.

One of the key elements of business organisation is making the most effective use of time. As a result, anything which will save time by standardising processes will be of much value. Forms are a fine example of this principle in practice, since using them makes collecting and organising information quicker and more efficient than using letters, personal meetings or other kinds of communication.

In business, there are a number of uses for forms and, consequently, a number of different types – for example, routine forms such as telephone message forms, report forms, application forms and questionnaires – which seek people's opinions.

Form design is of the utmost importance. Again we shall see the principles of effective communication at work – a good form will always rest on a clear idea of its purpose and be clear about the information required if the both the supplier and collector of the information are to make full use of it. Forms can appear impersonal and annoy the person completing them, so you must design them carefully to include only essential questions. They should give clear directions and ask unambiguous questions, leaving enough space for the answers, the layout should be attractive, and there should be no questions which might offend some readers.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Forms offer advantages both for organisations and for the individuals who complete them.

The advantages for ***organisations*** are that:

- They can be planned to cover a specific list of topics or points, so that there is far less risk of nay issues being overlooked.
- They avoid the presentation of unnecessary or irrelevant material.
- They ensure that information about individuals or firms is presented in an identical format, making the processing of that information much easier.
- They make sure that routine communications are actually carried out by providing a simple, convenient format, without which some people might not actually pass on the information required.

These advantages combine to make the form one of the most useful aids to business. It is not surprising, therefore, that almost any major transaction in which an individual has dealings with an organisation will involve the completion of a form.

What advantages are there for you as an ***individual*** in completing forms?

- There is no need to write a long, complex letter.
- All the questions are clearly stated, so that you don't need to think about what information is required.
- The layout of the form indicates the amount of depth or detail required by each question.

As you probably know from your own experience, there are also ***disadvantages*** to filling-in forms:

- Forms can appear impersonal and distant.
- They do not allow much, if any, scope for individual expression.
- They often give the impression of asking for confidential information which is not needed.
- They may be confusing and time-consuming to complete.

However, if a form is well-designed, it can overcome most of the disadvantages we've thought about. People generally don't mind completing a well-designed form, and if they complete it fully and accurately, the business can take the necessary action.

Principles of Design

In designing a form you should remember that the reader will only fill it in accurately if you engage his interest and co-operation from the start. You can do this by:

- including only essential questions;

- giving brief directions about completing the form;
- asking your questions ***simply, clearly and briefly***;
- keeping the form as short as possible.

The key elements are as follows.

(a) Define purpose

Before designing a form, ask yourself exactly what you wish to know. Be ruthless in cutting out any questions which are not essential to this purpose. Every unnecessary question increases the reader's resistance to completing the form – ***keep it short*!**

(b) Give directions clearly

Make sure that the reader knows how to complete the form, by giving precise instructions. Remember, too, to include an address to which the reader should return the form, if this is relevant. Directions should be clear, precise, but above all brief.

(c) Keep questions simple

It is unwise to make assumptions about reading age or vocabulary level. As a result, many public information forms in the UK are designed to be read by people with a reading age of 12. Always keep your questions very simple and unambiguous. For example, instead of saying:

> *"State date on which domiciliary occupation of current premises was initiated",*

say:

> *"When did you move into your present home?"*

(d) Leave enough space for the answer

It is infuriating to complete a form which has three lines blank for "Date of Birth" and one for "Full Address".

Think carefully about layout, making the form as clear as possible and dividing the available space fairly according to the genuine demands of the question.

Always put the form to the test by completing it yourself, or asking someone else to do so, to check whether there is enough space.

(e) Use an attractive layout

Use plenty of "white space", and make the form look attractive. It is often helpful to group questions together under related headings and rule lines between each section. This makes the form look better, and makes it less daunting to complete.

(f) Avoid offending people

Try not to ask for confidential data unless you really need it. Details about marital status, disability and handicaps, or average income are not always needed, so think carefully before requesting them, and then make sure that you say that all information will be treated in confidence.

Avoid making assumptions about your readers. Write "Forenames" instead of "Christian names", so that people of all religious denominations can complete the form on equal terms.

(g) Consider those processing the form

Use a layout which will be clear for people who have to deal with the data when it is completed, as well as for those who fill in the form. You may do this by leaving spaces and heading them "Please leave blank", or "For office use", or in other ways, such as putting a space for the name of the reader at the top right-hand corner so that large numbers of forms can be filed alphabetically.

Remember, however, that obtaining the information is more important than processing it. Faced with a choice between making things easy for the reader and making things easy for the processor, you should always give precedence to the reader. Otherwise, you may well end up with a form that is very convenient to process, but which nobody will bother to complete!

(h) Use the right format for each question

There are various ways in which you can frame questions. Choose the one which is most appropriate to the kind of information you require.

- ***Answer spaces***

  This is the simplest sort, in which a line or more space is left blank for the details to be inserted.

  For names, addresses and questions which demand answers of an individual nature, this is the best approach.

- ***Tick boxes***

  This is a useful approach for questions with alternative answers. It is quick to complete and easy to read when the form is being processed. The disadvantage is that it can only be used effectively when there are a small number of clear alternative answers to a question, as in this example:

  Title (*Please tick box*)

  Mr ☐ Ms ☐ Miss ☐ Mrs ☐ Dr ☐ Rev ☐ Other ☐

- ***Delete where not applicable***

  Here a list of alternatives is given and the reader is asked to cross out those which do ***not*** apply as in this example:

  I do/do not* wish to attend the meeting.

  **Delete where not applicable*

  There are two main disadvantages to this format. One is that it can only really be used where the number of alternatives is small – two or three at most – otherwise the form will be full of crossings-out. The other is that there is a danger that people will either ignore the direction completely, having overlooked the instruction to "delete" which usually appears at the foot of the page, or that they will cross out the ***right***, rather than the ***wrong***, alternative.

  For these reasons, this format needs to be used rarely and with caution.

- ***Ring or underline correct answer***

  This is an alternative to ticking boxes. It can be used where the reader has to select from a group of alternatives, and has the advantage of taking up less space than using boxes.

  Title (*Please ring*): Mr Ms Miss Mrs Dr Rev Other

  Its disadvantage is that it tends to look untidy and, if a reader completes the form in a hurry, it may be difficult to tell which alternative has been underlined or ringed.

- ***Choose alternatives carefully***

  Many of the above answers suggest providing alternative answers for the reader to tick or ring. When you use this type of question make sure that you provide enough alternatives, and that they are appropriate and realistic.

  If you are asking people how often they use an electronic cash dispenser, alternative answers which run "often, rarely, never" wouldn't provide you with much helpful information. You need to be much more specific, with alternatives such as "once or more a week", "once a fortnight", "once a month", "less often". Only in this way will you obtain material which has a clear objective meaning, since ideas of "rarely" and "sometimes" will vary between individuals.

Kinds of Forms

Forms are used for all sorts of purposes in business. The one thing they all have in common is that they are concerned with collecting information in a standardised way. The specific design and layout of a particular form will depend on the type of information it is designed to record and the type of people who are required to complete it.

(a) Routine business forms

Many forms are used for recording routine events in a company. They are usually short, and include no unnecessary information. An example of the most common sort is the telephone message form shown in Figure 3.3.

Figure 3.3: Telephone Message Form

TELEPHONE MESSAGE

For the attention of: . . . .

Caller details:

Name: . . . .

Organisation: . . . .

Tel: . . . .

Message:

Action:

Caller will call back later ☐

Please call him/her back ☐

No action required ☐

Message taken by: . . . .

Date and time of message: . . . .

This is a simple, clear and straightforward form:

- The space is carefully allocated, with the maximum area for the message itself and other details kept short.
- There is no unnecessary information, and space is not taken up by company name and address, which is not needed as it is an internal form, rather like a memo in function.
- It's laid out so that it could take up an A5 sheet, thus saving paper and keeping costs down.

For all these reasons, it is a good example of a routine form, which is easy to complete and easy to read when completed.

(b) Report forms

These are forms on which an occurrence of a routine nature is reported. Some forms of this kind, such as accident report forms, are legal obligations. Clarity of design and layout is, therefore, very important. Remember, too, that someone completing an accident report form may still be shocked and upset at having witnessed an accident, so making it as straightforward as possible is vital if you're going to secure all the relevant information.

Look closely at the sample form given in Figure 3.4 on the next page. Note particularly the separation of the form into sections, which allow for the presentation of the information in a very clear, precise way, and the distribution of space to allow for full, yet concise, answers to be given to questions about the cause and nature of the accident.

(c) Application forms

You will probably be all too familiar with application forms for jobs, as these are the most common kinds of application forms which we all have to fill in. However, there are many other kinds of form which have a similar purpose. They include public forms, such as applications for driving licences, vehicle road fund renewal, passport applications, applications for loans, credit cards and other financial arrangements, travel cards and season tickets, and countless other similar kinds of form.

All such forms are readily available and you probably know what they look like, although you may not be accustomed to looking at them in detail to analyse their design and layout. Design of forms for use by the public must follow all the principles we've thought about but to a greater degree.

Remember that you are asking a stranger to supply information about which he or she may feel sensitive or embarrassed. For this reason, the wording, design and general presentation needs to be made as attractive as possible.

Figure 3.4: Accident Report Form

JOHNSON AND HIGGINS plc

ACCIDENT REPORT FORM

Please complete and return to the Health and Safety Officer as soon as possible after the accident

1 Name of person involved: . . . .

2 Date and time of accident: . . . / . . . / . . . . . at . . am/pm*

3 Names of witnesses of accident: . . . .

4 Describe how the accident happened:

5 What, in your opinion, was the cause of the accident?

6 What ***immediate*** action was taken to aid the injured? Please be as specific as possible. If drugs were administered, say which.

7 Subsequent action

(a) Was doctor called? YES/NO* If *YES* give name and address of doctor:

Dr: . . . .

Address: . . . .

Tel No: . . . .

(b) Was person taken to hospital? YES/NO* If *YES*, tick method of transport:

Ambulance
Taxi
Own car
Other worker's car

In case of last answer, give name and address of owner/driver

Name: . . . .

Address: . . . .

8 Name of person responsible for action taken: . . . .

Address: . . . .

Tel No: . . . .

9 Other relevant information, e.g. action needed immediately to prevent accident occurring again.

10 Signature: . . . . Date/time: . . . / . . . / . . . . . at . . am/pm*

* *Delete where not applicable*

(d) Questionnaires

Questionnaires are forms directed at gaining information about people's habits and opinions. In business, their main use is in market research, an area with which you may have little contact in your career but one of which you should still be aware.

When designing questionnaires, you need to remember all the points made about forms. Start with a polite request asking people to complete the form, and finish by thanking them for their help and giving an address to which the completed form should be returned. It is also a good idea to explain briefly why you need the information, since this will make it seem far less of an intrusion.

The kinds of question used in a questionnaire are rather different from those used in any other kind of form since they are more concerned with the readers' opinions than with their experience, qualifications or other details.

One of the most effective ways of getting opinions is to give a statement and a series of possible reactions to it, asking the reader to tick the one which comes closest to his own feeling. Here is an example:

Tick the box next to the reaction which is closest to your own response to this statement:

"All banks should be open on Saturdays"

Disagree strongly	
Disagree	
No feeling	
Agree	
Agree strongly	

Figure 3.5 shows part of a questionnaire on the use of banks which a bank wishing to examine its facilities might circulate among customers. Notice the use made of different kinds of questions, the stress laid on courtesy and the specific alternatives given in the answers provided.

Figure 3.5: Example of a questionnaire

NATIONAL UNION BANK

The manager and staff are reviewing the facilities provided for customers so that they may be improved. We should be very grateful if you would complete and return this form to help in this process.

You are not asked to give your name, and all information will be treated in confidence. Please return this questionnaire when completed to the National Union Bank, City Branch, 14 Wellington St, SE8 8JH.

1. How often do you visit the bank?

Every day	
Once a week	
Once a fortnight	
Once a month	
Less often	

2. When visiting, do you:

Make withdrawals	
Make deposits	

3. In your opinion, is the number of counter positions:

Too large	
About right	
Too few	
Far too few	

4. Do you find the electronic cash dispenser:

Very useful	
Useful	
Of no use	

5. If you do not use the cash dispenser, is it because:

You do not trust the machine	
You find it hard to operate	
You prefer to have a cheque stub as a record	
Other reason (please specify below)	

6. Please use the space below to make any other suggestions about ways in which the bank service might be improved.

Thank you for your time and interest. We shall consider your suggestions seriously and incorporate them in our plans to improve the bank's service

Practice Questions 2

Your company is planning a residential training course on customer care, to be held at a nearby conference centre. There will be two courses put on, so that all staff will be able to attend. The dates are 14 – 17 January and 1 – 4 February. Design a form to be sent to all staff to gain information about their attendance on the course.

You should aim to find out which course they will attend, whether they object to sharing a room, and whether they require vegetarian meals. You should also find out whether they suffer from any disability which will need special facilities, and if they would be prepared to lead a discussion group – if so, on what subject. You must get details of each person's name, private address, present post and length of service, and whether he or she will require transport to the conference centre, or could take other personnel (state the number possible) in his/her car. To help in planning the course, you need also to ask for suggestions for topics to be covered, and work out some way of discovering how useful staff have found other courses they have attended in the past. Pay particular attention to clarity of layout and design.

Now check your answer with the ones given at the end of the unit.

E. WRITING NOTICES

There are occasions when you need to reach a large number of people as a mass, rather than a series of individuals. Notices are designed to achieve this through providing information in a concise and eye-catching way.

The characteristics of notices are similar to advertisements, although they serve a rather different purpose. However, you should bear in mind the same principles in the preparation of adverts as we consider here in respect of notices.

Once again, we should start by stressing the need to recognise the importance of the general principles of effective communication that we keep going on about. Notices are designed to impart a message – possibly a very important one. You need, therefore, to identify clearly the purpose of the communication and the characteristics of the intended audience.

Design Requirements

The overall visual appearance and impact of your notice is what determines whether people stop and read it, so obviously design is very important. However, you can't plan the design until you've decided on the content

(a) Use a simple message

In general terms, there are three rules to remember when you are developing the content of the message.

- ***Use a simple and direct vocabulary***. You're expecting a large number of people to read the notice so you must make sure they will **all** understand the message.
- ***Keep the notice as short as possible***. If it's too long, people won't read it.
- ***Avoid giving offence***. Don't talk down or sound authoritarian because you will create resentment. Use a direct style and think carefully about the wording.

Note that, in notices, you don't need to write in full sentences as long as you make your point clearly.

(b) Use a clear heading

Any notice you write should have a clear, precise heading which no-one can misunderstand and which captures the attention of an onlooker. There's no point in having the word NOTICE in large capital letters, a five or six word heading is far more effective and shouldn't be too difficult to think up once you've decided on the message.

Although your aim is to catch people's attention, resist the temptation to use a comic heading. You can't be certain that everyone shares your sense of humour, or will see the joke and in any case, the joke will fall flat and even become irritating if your notice is up for any length of time.

(c) Use plenty of space

Advertisers and designers use the term "white space" for the amount of blank paper in a notice or advertisement. Remember that notices may be read by people at some distance from the notice-board – the clearer they are, the easier it will be for people to read them at a distance, which will help to ensure that your message reaches everyone who should be aware of it.

- Always leave plenty of space between lines – the equivalent of missing out one or even two lines of writing in a letter.
- Leave wide margins at both sides, and at the top and bottom.
- Make one or two drafts in which you experiment with putting the main points in different orders.
- Try putting important pieces of information, such as dates, times, places of meetings and similar vital details on separate lines, with plenty of space around them.

Remember that the less cluttered your notice is, the easier it will be to read, and the greater its success will be. Always try to design a notice in rough first, sketching out the main areas of information in different positions until you find a layout that is very clear and direct in appearance.

(d) Highlight important words or phrases

We have already suggested that you should stress key words or phrases by placing them on separate lines. Other ways of making them stand out include:

- using capitals
- underlining them
- using different coloured inks
- placing lines around them.

You can treat days, dates and times of meetings; telephone numbers to ring in an emergency; places to assemble in case of fire; and other words which convey the essence of the message in these ways.

Don't use highlighting too much. If you underline or colour almost every word, only the words you haven't treated in this way will stand out, and the overall effect will be messy and cluttered. Highlight sparingly, treating only the essential words.

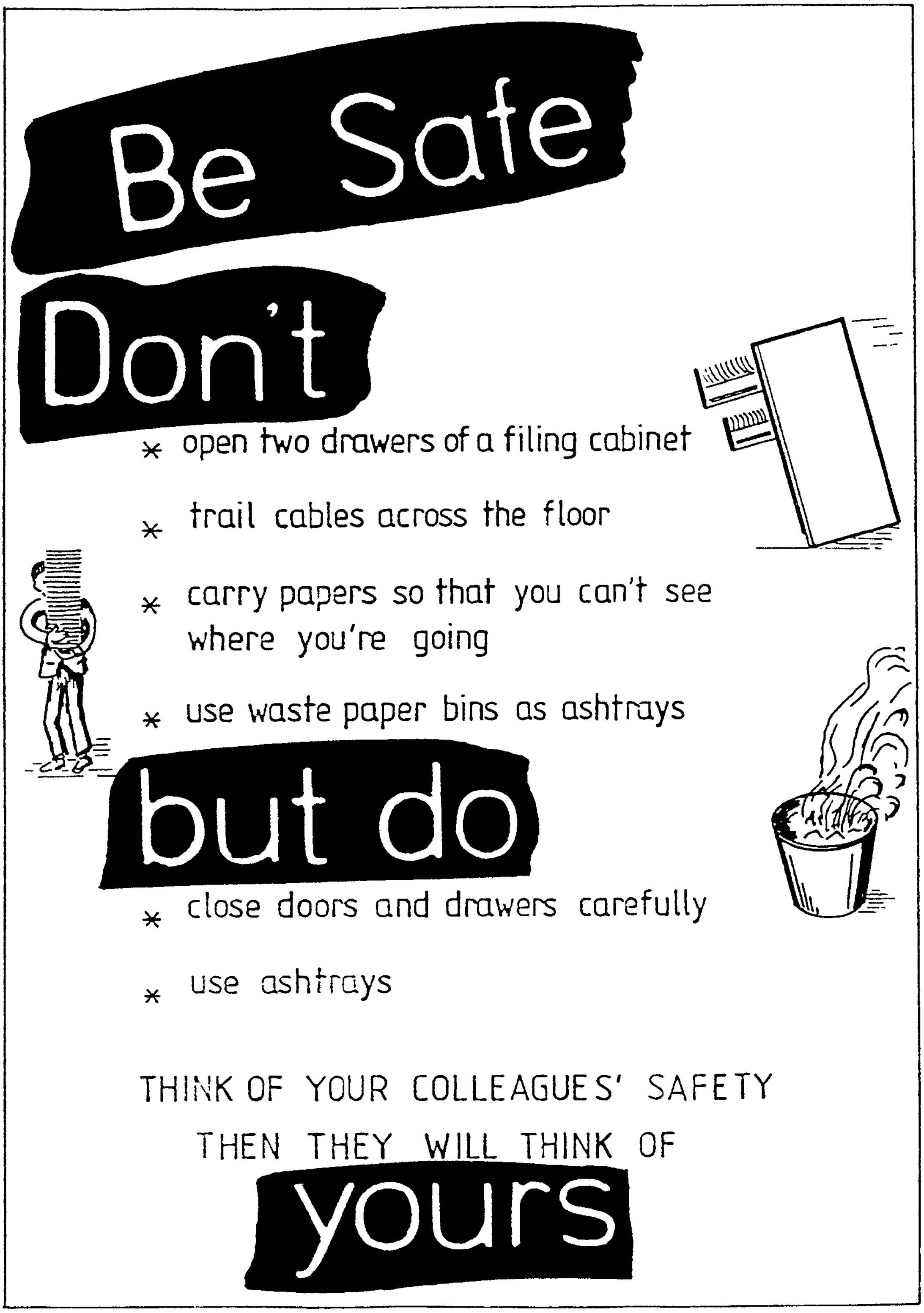
(e) Use illustrations

Illustrations can often be useful in conveying an idea – although they need to be fairly professional if they are to be really effective.

Keep them simple though; your aim is to illustrate a point in the text, not dominate all the space available. Like highlighting, you should use illustrations sparingly to emphasise only the most important points of your notice.

Figure 3.6 shows an example of a notice – designed to heighten awareness of health and safety issues. Consider this in the light of the above points.

Figure 3.6: Health and Safety Notice



Display and Siting

However well you design your notice, it won't achieve its purpose unless you also display it properly. This means having notice-boards in good positions, and arranging notices on them clearly. The following points are relevant.

- Notice-boards should be sited in areas where **all the relevant people will see them**. Avoid putting them in narrow corridors, or on walls next to doors so that they disappear when doors open.
- They should be set at a height where the average person can read them. Remember that men and women have different average heights and take both into account.
- Notice-boards should be kept looking tidy. This means not allowing unauthorised notices to be out up and ensuring that out-of-date notices are removed.
- The board should be divided clearly so that notices about different topics each have their own areas – for example, health and safety, union, staff announcements, urgent and social.
- Make someone responsible for clearing notice-boards regularly so that old notices don't remain for months and obscure new material. Some firms date-stamp notices when they are put up, and make a point of removing them within a certain period.

F. WRITING TO PERSUADE

There are a number of types of communication which are specifically designed to persuade people to take a particular course of action or to adopt a particular view or opinion. The most obvious of these are advertisements and other forms of sales documentation, but the whole area of public relations comes into this category and we shall start here with one aspect of this.

Press Releases

Press releases can be a most important element of public relations within a company. They provide an opportunity for the company itself to issue information which a newspaper may develop for public issue, ensuring that accurate data is supplied – even though it may not actually be used by the editor or journalists concerned.

The art of producing a press release is to place yourself in the position of someone writing for a local or national newspaper.

- What kind of readership are you aiming at?
- What aspects of the "story" will be most interesting?
- Is there any way that you can find a journalistic "angle", for the story, by making it appear striking or unusual, or by concentrating on the involvement of an individual to give "the human interest" of the event?

If you can provide convincing answers to these questions, you should be well on the way to writing a successful press release. And if it is sufficiently successful, your release might well appear in the press almost exactly as it was written. This is clearly an advantage, since it will allow you to present the story as you want it, which can only help the company in its relations with the local or national community, and also with potential customers.

All press announcements should contain certain basic elements.

(a) A date for release

This can be in the form of a simple date at the top of the release or, in more complex cases, where you expect that the paper will need to know of the event in advance to organise its coverage, a statement reading "Not for release before 18 May".

(b) A name and telephone number

Known as a "contact", this is very important. A paper may wish to arrange for a reporter to visit the company, or want to check one or two details in your "copy". If it can't do this, incorrect data might be printed.

Direct Mail

Direct mail refers to letters and other promotional material which is sent to potential customers with the purpose of stimulating their interest in the product or service being promoted. There is a basic formula for designing such material:

- Grab the reader's attention by putting the focus on the reader and their situation.
- Create interest in your product or service by stating how the reader may benefit.
- Stimulate desire by using persuasive language where possible.
- Engender action by explaining what the reader has to do next.

One way to grab readers' attention is to use their name and to personalise the letter by using "you", "your" and "yours". You need to write from the reader's viewpoint in relation to their needs and wants. You should consider their values and expectations, their position and their ability to understand you.

The purpose of direct mail is not necessarily to describe the product, but to persuade the reader to buy or, at least, be interested enough to want to know more. The general approach, then is to convert features into advantages and benefits for the reader, and explain these rather than the features themselves. Sentences should be kept short and simple so that all readers are able to understand the message easily.

At the end of any direct marketing letter, you should be able to answer the question "What's in this for the recipient?" If that is not clear to you and to the reader, then you should look at the letter again.

You may want to consider the layout of the letter to produce emphasis on certain aspects, such as special benefits, offers and the date that any promotional offers end. The following elements all contribute to this:

- headings
- white space
- double spacing
- underlining, italics or emboldening
- graphics
- captions.

Advertisements

Companies generally contract with large advertising agencies if they want full-scale press or television advertising, so unless you work for an advertising agency you are unlikely to be directly involved in writing these sorts of advertisements. One area in which you may be involved, however, is in the wording of advertisements for jobs. This is a vitally important matter, since you will only receive replies from appropriately-qualified people if you make the advertisement vigorous, attractive and, above all, a clear reflection of the actual job involved.

When writing such advertisements, think carefully about:

- The exact nature of the job involved;
- The qualifications needed;
- The size and constitution of the firm or department;

- The kind of person who would work well in your company or situation; and
- Any other relevant details.

You need also to be clear about salary and conditions of service and, if the job is complex, to prepare a job description or account of the company to be sent to prospective applicants along with an application form.

G. INTERNAL COMPANY DOCUMENTS

This section looks briefly at some of the documents you're likely to come across in any organisation and which you may have to write. Different styles are appropriate for each of these and it is important that you know what these are, so we shall look at style as well as content.

(a) Company Rules

As you probably know, these are simple statements of rules or regulations which govern the employment and behaviour of staff.

If you have to draft a statement of company rules, your prime concern must be the clear and precise expression of the rules in language which all employees can understand. You mustn't leave any ambiguities since this may lead to dispute and uncertainty. Clarity and precision of expression are important in all areas of company communication, but you need to pay them particular attention when drafting rules and regulations of this kind.

(b) Job Descriptions

Job descriptions make clear exactly what a job entails by specifying

- The main tasks
- The area of the company in which the employee will work
- The people to whom the worker will be responsible – the Sales Manager, say, or the Senior Accounts Clerk
- People over whom the employee has authority – e.g. junior clerks
- Details of salary grading, where applicable, i.e. where employment is in accord with a nationally-agreed salary scale
- Specific provisions, such as the degree of independence the job entails, limits on the extent of decisions which the employee may take, areas in which advice must be sought from other members of staff, and similar factors.

(c) Statements of procedures

A procedure is the specification for how a particular task or series of related tasks are to be carried out. Most procedures are written out as a series of steps or instructions which are to be followed. They may also include some background information to help those involved in carrying out the procedure understand its purpose and how it fits in with other aspects of the organisation's activities.

Procedural statements do not need to be written in full structured sentences and paragraphs – note form is often quite acceptable. The most important point is that the information is complete and accurate. As such, it is common to use separate, numbered points to emphasise the separate stages in each process. The example set out in Figure 3.7 illustrates this. (Note also the dating of the document and the way in which it needs to be kept up-to-date.)

Figure 3.7: Example of company procedure

Procedures for updating clients' computer record files

(Revised May 1999. Please destroy all earlier versions.)

1. Make sure that all the information you wish to enter is to hand, and accurate.
2. Call up relevant floppy disc from central records.
3. Insert floppy disc and call up customer.
4. Type in new data.
5. Store data by using appropriate keys.
6. DO NOT DESTROY WRITTEN DATA UNTIL YOU HAVE TESTED THAT DATA IS SUCCESSFULLY STORED.
7. Return floppy disc to central filing IMMEDIATELY after use.

A J Smith
Senior Clerk 15 May 1999

Notice that the stages are laid out clearly and concisely, and the most important point is in block capitals. The procedure is signed and dated, and the fact that it is a revised version is clearly stated, along with advice to destroy earlier versions.

(d) Health and safety documentation

Under successive items of health and safety legislation, a company is legally bound to produce various documents relating to the subject and make them freely available to all employees.

- ***Health and safety policy***

  This should be a brief statement, usually no more than a single sheet, laying down the company's policy for promoting the health and safety of its employees.

  Have a look at the example in Figure 3.8.

- ***Other health and safety documents***

  These are much longer and more detailed versions of the simpler policy statements. They contain organisational details and clear procedures for actions in case of accident, fire or illness. They will set out, for example:

  (i) The structure of the company's health and safety organisation;

  (ii) The responsibilities of certain members of staff (e.g. heads of section or department);

  (iii) Procedures for acting and reporting accidents; and

  (iv) General codes of practice for safety.

  It's possible that people's lives may depend on their understanding of the procedures, so there's no room for any ambiguity. To encourage people to read the document, remember to keep it short and simple.

Figure 3.8: Health and Safety Policy Statement

JOHNSON AND HICKOCKS plc

Health and Safety Policy

The objectives of the company's health and safety organisation are to:

(a) establish a healthy and safe working environment throughout its buildings and other properties;

(b) establish and maintain procedures for the prevention of accidents, fires, hazards, and procedures for these to be dealt with should they occur;

(c) establish a code of practice for all potentially hazardous undertakings performed within the company;

(d) offer information and training in first aid and general health and safety matters for all employees;

(e) encourage and develop safety-consciousness and co-operation in all employees;

(f) ensure that visitors, members of the public and those living near the company's premises are not put at risk by any of the company's activities.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS FOR PRACTICE

Practice Questions 1

1. (a) A suggested letter about the proposed appointment would be as follows.

Johnson and Hickocks
117 Mill Street
HULL
GL9 7YB

Tel: 01336 98431

Our Ref: SJS/IL

Your Ref:

Date: 12 March 20..

Mr G Johnson

Johnson Stationery
27 Mason St
WORKSOP
WP9 5TH

Dear Mr Johnson

Stationery Supplies

Thank you for your recent letter, in which you offer to call and discuss this company's stationery requirements at any time in the next fortnight.

I should indeed like to see you to talk about this, and will be free next Tuesday at 10.00 am.

I hope that this will be convenient to you, and look forward to seeing you then.

Yours sincerely

S Smith
Senior Accounts Clerk

1. (b) A possible circular letter to meet the stated requirements would be as follows.

> Johnson and Hickocks
> 117 Mill Street
> HULL
> GL9 7YB
>
> Tel: 01336 98431
>
> Our Ref: SJS/KM
>
> Your Ref:
>
> Date: 12 March 20..
>
> Dear Sir or Madam
>
> **Automated Payroll Service**
>
> I am writing to introduce a new service for small businesses which Johnson and Hickocks is now offering, and which you may find of interest – an automated payroll service.
>
> This service takes over the task of preparing monthly wage slips, leaving you free to spend your valuable time on other matters.
>
> We will calculate the monthly amount for each employee from figures you supply, and pay the amount direct into the employee's bank account. We also make appropriate deductions for income tax and national insurance, and make the necessary arrangements with the Inland Revenue and the DHSS.
>
> For the employee, the advantages are the receipt of a printed pay slip every month, giving full details of earnings, tax, pension contributions and any other deductions. The money goes straight to the bank, preventing the risk and delay of carrying a cheque about until it is convenient to pay it in.
>
> This service costs the employee nothing, and there is only a small fee for the employer. If you would like more details, please contact me by letter or telephone – I shall be happy to do all I can to help.
>
> Yours faithfully
>
> C James
> Customer Services Manager

2. A suggested reply to Mr Baggs may be as follows.

Dear Mr Baggs

Deliveries of Goods

I was very sorry to learn from your letter of 6 October that the arrival of our delivery vehicles in late afternoon is causing difficulties for you.

I am certainly willing to do all I can to help in this matter. However, you will realise that, as there is a distance of over 200 miles between our companies' premises, the only way for us to make deliveries on the first day of each week by mid-morning, as you suggest, would be for our driver to be on the road for most of Sunday night.

As you will realise, this would increase our costs through the necessary overtime payments, and as we would regretfully have to pass these on to your company, I would like to suggest a compromise solution.

I shall ask our despatch department to load the vehicle with your goods last thing on Friday afternoon, and then leave it in our secure warehouse until first thing Monday morning. The driver will then be able to leave at 7.00 am, and should thus be with you soon after lunch.

I hope that this will be a satisfactory solution to your difficulty, and I have given instructions that this procedure should begin next week. If, however, it does not help matters, do please let me know and I shall think again about how we can improve our service to you.

Yours sincerely

J Jones
Despatch Manager

Practice Questions 2

A possible form would be as follows.

Residential Training Course Application Form

Customer Care

Please complete this form and return it before 20 December to the accounts manager

Full name: . . . . Employee no.: . . . .

Address: . . . .

. . . .

. . . .

Current job title: . . . .

Length in current job: . . . . yrs . . . . months

I wish to attend the course beginning on 14 Jan/1 Feb*

I am/am not* prepared to share a room

I will/will not* require transport to London

I can provide transport for people (insert number)

I do/do not* require vegetarian meals

Have you attended similar courses in the past? YES/NO*

If so, have you found them

Very helpful	
Helpful	
Not helpful	

Have you any suggestions for topics to be covered in the training course?

Would you be prepared to lead a discussion group? YES/NO*

If *YES*, state subject

Additional information (e.g. dietary needs, physical handicaps etc., which will be treated in strictest confidence)

* *Delete where not applicable.*

Study Unit 4

Oral and Non-Verbal Communication

Contents ***Page***

INTRODUCTION

Communicating with others through speech comes naturally to us all. We learn the skill at a very young age and rarely have to think too much about the processes involved. However, in business, the various forms of oral communication place particular demands on the participants and it is important to understand both the requirements of the form and the processes which underlie this type of communication.

Again we shall be stressing throughout the essential principles of effective communication discussed earlier in the course. You really should know these by now! However, there is no getting away from the importance of being clear about the purpose of the communication, understanding the audience and organising and structuring the content to best effect. The first part of the unit considers the application of these principles in relation to different forms and aspects of oral communication.

Oral communication is invariably a two-way process involving an interaction of some sort between two or more people. Personal interactions are driven as much by non-verbal communication as the words that are spoken. These non-verbal cues which we all give and are very well attuned to interpreting include body language, appearance and tone. There are other non-verbal elements which also intrude on the communication process. In respect of oral communication, these are the physical surroundings within which the interaction takes place, but we can also characterise elements of presentation and tone in written communication as being non-verbal signals which give their own messages alongside those contained in the text.

You should note that one of the reasons that using the telephone is given so much attention is that it is the one form of oral communication in which there is no intrusion of body language and most other forms of non-verbal communication.

A. BASIC SKILLS OF ORAL COMMUNICATION

Obviously speaking – verbal skills – are a key part oral communication, but this is only one element. Allied to speaking is listening. Further, since most oral communication takes the form of an interaction between two or more people, there is also a feedback aspect to the process. This comes via questioning.

Before we consider these specific skills, though, we need to remind ourselves of one neglected part of the overall principles of effective communication – planning.

The Importance of Planning

You need to plan all kinds of oral communication where you know in advance that the interaction is going to take place. We realise this in respect of having to make formal presentations like speeches, but tend to ignore it for less formal communications. This can be a mistake. Even telephone calls need to be planned in some way if you are to make the communication effective.

The demands of preparation will vary between different kinds of oral communication, but there are certain principles which are basic to all such occasions:

- **Clarify your ideas**

  Make sure that you know exactly ***what*** you have to communicate. If it is actual in nature, check that it is accurate. If it is an opinion, make sure that it is completely defined in your mind, and that you have all the necessary evidence to support it.

- **Know your purpose**

  Set yourself a realistic aim for the meeting or discussion. Knowing what you are aiming to achieve in an encounter will make the whole process far more efficient – although you should take care not to overlook the importance of human contact in your desire to achieve the goals you set.

- **Consider your audience**

  In the same way as you have to make sure when writing that your style is suitable for the reader, you have to try, in speaking, to use language which is accessible to your listener or listeners. Age, background, relationship and other factors have to be taken into account before you start the session, and you should scan for reaction and modify your language where necessary when it is under way.

- **Cut out irrelevances**

  Make sure that you do not confuse the listener by talking about irrelevant matters. Think carefully, and make sure that you keep to the point.

- **Consider non-verbal elements**

  This is something else you must be aware of, so that you convey the right attitude throughout the meeting. (We'll discuss it in more detail later in the unit.)

- **Define actions to be taken**

  Think about what action will be necessary after the meeting and who should take it. You may be unable to do this precisely until the meeting is over, but try to have it in mind as you go along.

Verbal Skills

How we express ourselves with language and respond to others is an important aspect of all oral communication – in face-to-face encounters or over the telephone. We speak to make ourselves understood – to convey our thoughts, ideas and proposals. But verbal communication is also an activity through which we form an actual and immediate relationship with those with whom we communicate in a way that written communication cannot. This immediate and personal relationship with our audience is the arena where much business takes place.

Accuracy in, and an appropriate choice of, language is obviously central to conveying meaning in the way intended. Thus, you need to beware of using jargon or unnecessary technical words, and not using language which either is beyond the understanding of your audience or appears to "talk down" to them. You also need to be thoroughly in command of the language which should be used and be able to articulate your meaning properly at all times.

Verbal communication is not, though, just about which words we choose, but also encompasses a number of other factors.

(a) Pronunciation

Clarity of speech, for example using the correct pronunciation for words and taking time to say words and phrases properly, is essential.

Accents can play a part in this. Take care to speak slowly if your audience do not have the same accent as yourself or may be unfamiliar with it. Affecting particular accents – either "posh" or working class, or even regional – always sounds insincere and should be avoided.

Failure to speak clearly results in ambiguity and misunderstanding. Avoid the following problems of articulation::

- Mumbling
- Hesitancy
- Reading every word like a "robot"
- Missing off the beginning or ends of words

(b) Structure of argument

If you plan what you have to say and understand both the points you intend to make and the potential responses to them, then you ought to be able to express your ideas and proposals clearly and simply.

Your ideas should follow a logical sequence and allow the listener the opportunity to consider each point in turn. A circular or apparently random argument can difficult to follow in oral communication where there is no opportunity to refer back to previous ideas without constant interruptions for questions.

(c) Stress

You may choose to stress important words or syllables, much as you may highlight or underline written text.

Stress may change the meaning of an entire sentence. For example, consider the effect of changing the stress in the following expression:

We **may** need to improve sales by 10%.

We may need to **improve** sales by 10%.

We may **need** to improve sales by 10%.

They way in which you emphasise meaning will have a profound impact.

(e) Tone

The tone of your voice indicates your emotional response and enthusiasm for what you are saying. Consider the following sentence and say it to yourself as if you are amazed, curious, angry, disapproving or sympathetic. The words don't change but your tone and the stress you place on particular words will.

"When did you get back?"

(f) Volume

Make sure that people can hear you, but don't shout or heckle them. The volume of a person's voice usually depends on the distance between speaker and listener and the nature of what he/she is saying.

(g) Rhythm and Pace

There is no need to rush any oral presentation. Plan what you have to say for the time allocated and adopt a pace which allows you to achieve this. Similarly, lengthy pauses between points or phrases are extremely irritating.

Effective Listening

Listening is the other "end" of the communication process to speaking and the process needs both ends to be working for the whole communication to be effective. However, we often pay little attention to the need to develop our skills in listening.

Many people imagine that listening is something that just happens. However, it is important that you distinguish between hearing and listening. Hearing is what might happen when you have the radio playing in the background whilst you do something else. Listening is an ***active*** rather than a passive function. This means engaging your mind and your memory, concentrating and being active in seeking information from the speaker and then organising, interpreting and storing it.

Developing your listening skills puts you in a better position to obtain the necessary and relevant information in business situations. It also helps you avoid time-wasting by asking unnecessary questions and shows interest and understanding to the speaker. Combining these benefits will help you to maintain good relations with both internal colleagues and external contacts. This is particularly important when a customer who is trying to air grievances.

(a) Problems in listening

Poor listening invariable results in misunderstanding. The reverse of this means that good listening must promote understanding. We need, therefore, to identify what causes poor listening.

The major problem in listening is ***not paying sufficient attention.***

Everyone is capable, consciously or otherwise, of "switching off". Your thought processes operate four times faster than most people speak and as a listener you may allow your mind to wander. It has been estimated by some researchers that as much as 80% of a message can be lost in a formal presentation situation.

The causes of inattention include several that are external to the listener:

- The presentation by the speaker – whether in a formal speech or a casual meeting – seems to you to be dull or irrelevant.
- The information being presented uses language which you cannot fully follow – for example it is too technical.
- Information overload – where there is simply too much information to take in.
- Distractions/noise – either physical noise or any other form of disruption to the communication process from the outside.

To some extent these problems are outside the control of the listener, although we could always say that they indicate a need to concentrate harder. However, there are some problems which are under our control, arising from the state of mind of the listener.

- Many breakdowns in communication occur because people do not listen to what is actually said. Rather a process known as ***filtering*** or ***filtering out*** occurs where we hear what we want or expected to hear.
- Prejudices or fixed ideas about things may intrude – if you are listening to something with which you disagree, you may react by pretending to listen but may tune out of the communication and become angry and distracted from the message. Going into a conference with the preconceived idea that the speaker will be boring or predictable is not likely to promote careful listening to his/her message.
- Lack of time – if you are in a hurry or under pressure, your ability to understand a message "first time around" will be affected.
- Emotions and having "other things on your mind" – an anxious, excited or distracted person cannot usually concentrate effectively.

In many instances it is possible to overcome these problems by consciously working on them.

(b) Principles of active listening

The basis of active listening is to develop and maintain a positive relationship with the person or persons speaking. This applies even where there can be no personal relationship as such – for example, when listening to a speech at a conference. Where there is such a personal relationship – say, in one-to-one encounters – it is important to keep the flow of information flowing and this requires action on the part of the listener as well as the speaker.

This type of active listening involves two elements:

- ***Attentive*** listening in order to be able to identify, select and interpret information and meaning; and
- ***Empathetic*** listening to attune oneself with others and to seek common ground on attitudes, feelings and emotions (empathy is "putting oneself in someone else's shoes").

(c) Techniques to improve listening

There are a number of techniques available to enable you to focus properly on the communication and develop empathy with your partner(s) in the communication.

- In situations where it is possible to ***plan ahead***, such as a telephone call which is expected or a training course, write down your objectives or preferred outcomes in advance and make a note as each is addressed or discussed.
- ***Actively concentrate*** on what the other person is saying and make a conscious attempt to understand. This means actively listening for key facts or points, trying to identify and interpret the message in your own words and committing the interaction to memory. Being a patient listener and letting the person speak without interruption helps this.
- Listen for feelings and emotions on the part of the speaker – this helps in understanding the speaker's point of view. As well as listening to what is actually said, you also need to pay attention to what is not said and to observing non-verbal signals. These all provide clues about the speaker's attitudes, etc.
- Shut out your own emotional response to the message if that seems to be interfering with understanding. You need to be open-minded and guard against prejudice and stereotyping.
- ***Take notes*** where possible – this combines the benefit of oral and written communication.
- Be positive in your responses. This involves looking to advancing the communication rather stalling it by disagreement. In dealing with complaints, it is particularly important not to argue and, instead, look for solutions.
- Provide feedback to the speaker. This can be done either by verbal responses or through body language and has a number of effects.
  - (i) Asking questions allows you to check or develop your understanding or seek clarification, as well as letting the speaker know that you are concentrating on – and, at least attempting to follow – his/her remarks.
  - (ii) Summarising your understanding at what seem to be key points or breaks in the communication – perhaps by paraphrasing the message as understood in your own words – allows you to check that understanding as well as providing the opportunity for the speaker to correct misunderstandings.
  - (iii) Using appropriate body language to provide a stream of positive signals back to the speaker. This shows, continuously, that you are being attentive and empathetic with the speaker. The techniques include making eye contact, nodding your head in agreement or making encouraging sounds/statements, such as "mm-hmm", "that's interesting" and "I understand", etc. Remember also the opposite of this – if you sit in a meeting and lean back with your hands behind your head, this conveys lack of interest or lethargy. If, on the other hand, you sit forward and deliberately show interest by eye contact and facial gesture, your listening capability will almost certainly be enhanced and you will develop your relationship with others..

Questioning

We noted briefly above the role of questioning in active listening. It enables you to seek information as part of the interaction involved in oral communication.

The quality of questioning is important. One way of considering this is to note the difference between open and closed questions:

(a) ***Closed questions*** are those which have only a very limited range of responses – often only "yes" or "no". For example, asking someone if they have done something invites just those two alternatives. These types of question tend to close down opportunities for discussion. They should be used sparingly, if at all. They can be useful, though, for determining the other person's position on an issue as a prelude to a follow-up question which does open-up the discussion.

(b) ***Open questions*** invite a more developed response, often involving the speaker's opinions or feelings as well more information or evidence in support of an argument. These questions are of the form:

- **Why** is a course of action being adopted?
- **Who** will be carrying out such a task?
- **When** will actions be carried out?
- **What** has to be done?
- **Where** will we act?
- **How** will a task be approached?
- **What if** certain circumstances arise?

Asking open questions such as those above opens up the conversation to bring about a greater two-way flow of information – remember that communication always works better when the two-way flow can be enhanced as much as possible.

You should also beware of ***leading*** questions. These are questions which, in their wording or their tone, suggest a particular answer and, again they do little to take the communication forward. In fact, they are usually inviting conformation of the questioner's position, rather than opening up the discussion.

Questions are more effective when used to ***clarify*** (i.e. to explain or make easily understood) rather than ***justify*** (i.e. prove or show to be right) a point of view or preferred approach to a problem or issue.

B. USING THE TELEPHONE

Telephones are now an integral part of business communications, but they are complex pieces of equipment which you have to use carefully to benefit from their full potential.

Understanding the Equipment

Telephone systems used by businesses are becoming increasingly sophisticated. It is possible to:

- Transfer a call internally from one extension to another.
- Divert calls to another extension either if you are busy or do not wish to be disturbed.
- Put calls on hold while you speak to another internal extension or even take another outside call on the same line
- Arrange for several extensions or outside lines to be connected for a conference call.
- Program a computerised phone to dial numbers you have to call frequently by using a single digit code, and carry out other similar functions.
- Set up tailored messages to greet callers if you are away from the phone and unable to take the call, Messages may be left and these can be sorted and stored if necessary after listening to them

New facilities are being added to office phones all the time, and there is also the development of mobile phones to consider. These obviously allow you to take and receive calls away from your usual telephone. Other features of these phones are the ability to send text messages, which although not particularly easy to use in constructing anything more that very brief messages, can be very useful for sending or confirming short pieces of information such as meetings times. Some mobile phones offer access to the Internet and hence to E-mail facilities, although the lack of a fully functional keyboard limits the use of this.

It is important that you know how to use the various facilities of your telephone. This will enable you to help callers efficiently, and convey a favourable impression of your firm. It will also enable you to carry out business quickly and effectively.

Making Telephone Calls

Wherever possible, you should adopt the same approach to making telephone calls as to other forms of formal communication. Most business calls have a clear purpose and planning is the most effective means of enabling that purpose to be achieved. The planning framework we considered before is most helpful in this respect – PASS.

(a) Purpose

Sort out the specific purposes of the call in your own mind before even thinking about making it. Write down the overall aim of the call and note the various key points that you need to make to get this overall aim across.

This will also help in gathering all the relevant information necessary. It is important to have that information to hand during the call as you do not want to go off and find it during the course of the conversation – leaving the other person hanging on is very discourteous and off-putting (even a few seconds silence waiting for the caller to return can seem like ages). Thus, if the subject of the call is to arrange a meeting, make sure you have your diary with you, or if you are calling about a particular invoice, have the invoice and any other information relating to it next to you.

(b) Audience

Think carefully about who you are calling as this will influence a number of factors in the call. For example, you need to think about when would be the best time to call – at a time when the other person will be available, one which suits the other person or even possibly at a time which you know will not suit them.

One thing you must remember about telephone calls is that there is no body language to provide signals and cues about the other person and their reaction to you (or, indeed, the same on your part). You need, therefore, to think carefully about what is an appropriate style to adopt for the particular person.

(c) Style

In the absence of any non-verbal cues from body language, the way in which you speak – tone, pitch, pace and volume – and the form of expression used are very important. You should always try to sound interested and enthusiastic by varying the tone and pitch of your voice (speaking in monotones can give the impression of boredom) and add affirmative remarks into the conversation to keep the flow going and provide feedback to the other person.

Other aspects of style include:

- Speaking clearly, in your normal voice – there is no merit in putting on an affected “telephone voice.
- Do not try to speak too quickly or too slowly, as the listener may lose track of what is being said.

- Be careful with pronunciation. Telephone connections can be very poor at transmitting certain sounds at the best of times and confusion can occur between, for example, fifteen and fifty. It can also be difficult to make out words which you have not heard before, such as names and addresses. To avoid these problems, you can spell such words.
- Always be courteous. Remember that you are representing the public face of your company when making telephone calls outside the organisation and you need to give the right impression. Avoid being abrupt as this can seem very disrespectful of the other person.
- Ensure that you are not going to be interrupted during the course of the call.

(d) Structure

The same principles apply as we have seen before – the telephone conversation should have a beginning, a middle and an end.

- The opening section should be used to ensure the other person is aware of the subject of the call, is the right person to deal with it (if you were not certain beforehand) and the two of you are at ease with one another by exchanging some general chat before getting down to the real business.
- The middle section should concentrate on covering the detail of the subject matter clearly and concisely, allowing for any discussion to ensure complete understanding. Having some notes of the points you need to get across, in order, can be very helpful here.
- The concluding section of the call should ensure that you are both clear about what courses of action have been agreed and that there is a common understanding of the subject matter. It is also always good practice to end a call with some general pleasantries so that you part on good terms.

You will generally find it helpful to take notes of telephone conversations as they occur, and these notes may be written up afterwards in a more formal way to provide a record of the conversation. It is sometimes necessary to write a letter formally setting out the content of the call so that it is a matter of record for both parties.

The first part of a call can sometimes seem the most difficult, so the following notes are designed to identify the correct procedure.

- First of all you have to dial the number. Whoever answers the call should identify him or herself, or give the company's name. If this is not the case, you should check that you have the correct number.
- If you have not got straight through to the person you knew beforehand that wanted to speak to, you need to ask for that person. If you do not have a named contact, you need to explain briefly the nature of your call and ask to be put through to an appropriate person who can deal with the subject.
- Once you are through to a specific person, if you do not know them, you must give details about yourself – name, company, company business and your role in the company – and then outline the nature of the subject you are calling about. It is always best to check that the person you are speaking to is indeed the person who deals with this subject.
- Always make sure you are clear about the name of the person you are speaking to – you may need to contact him/her again or refer to him/her in any written follow-up.

Answering a Call

When you answer the telephone you are, to intents and purposes, the public face of the company (or at least its voice!). You do not necessarily know who is calling and what the call may be about, so you need to be prepared for anything.

The most important point to make is that you convey a friendly, courteous and efficient image to the caller. This will start the call off in the most advantageous way and make things as easy as possible.

You should always answer the telephone by giving your name and, generally, the department/section's name. This helps to orientate the caller to you and your work, helps him/her know is they have got through to the right person or section and opens the conversation on a personal note. Few things are more irritating than to be kept waiting for several seconds for a phone to be answered, only to be met with a curt "hallo"!

If you do not know the caller, you need to establish who he/she is, the company they represent or in what capacity they are ringing, and the subject of the call. These are the very same things that we noted above should be given by the caller, but as the receiver, you need to clarify these things at the outset.

From there on, you should try to deal with the call in the most efficient and friendly matter. The following points are relevant.

- If you cannot help the caller, say so, and suggest someone else who can. Try and connect them to that person if possible, and if you cannot, take a message and arrange for the other person to call them back.
- If you can help, do so quickly. Calls are expensive – and apart from this, rapid service will impress a caller with your firm's efficiency.
- If you cannot give any information required immediately, but think you may be able to find it, suggest that you call back. This will save time and money for the caller, and also allow you time to find the relevant material. As in the case of making a call, it is bad practice to leave callers hanging on whilst you go looking for information.
- If you did not get the caller's name, position and number (including extension) when he or she called, make sure that you get them before you ring off. This will ensure that you know whom to contact should the need arise.
- Make notes as the call is progressing and write these up into a formal record of the conversation if necessary.

Whenever you take a message on behalf of someone else within the organisation, ensure that you make a written record of the message and pass it on to the person concerned. Most organisations have a standard form for recording telephone messages (see the last unit) and these should always be used.

C. FACE-TO-FACE ENCOUNTERS

Personal face-to-face encounters may be planned or unplanned. Planned encounters may be formal or informal. We shall go on to look at one example of planned meetings – interviews – in some detail below, but we shall start by reviewing the nature of informal, unplanned encounters.

Unplanned Meetings

Although most business communication with other individuals takes place at planned interviews and meetings, much still occurs at times when two people meet by chance – in the corridor, at lunchtime, or at any other time during the working day. These encounters provide just as much opportunity for effective oral communication to achieve a purpose and convey information or opinions of some sort.

There are certainly good reasons for using such encounters in this way but there are also factors which argue against it.

(a) Advantages

Chance meetings have a number of benefits.

- ***Speed***

The great advantage of seeing someone by chance is that it allows you to by-pass “the usual channels”. You can say what you have to say directly, without making an appointment or waiting until the other person is free. This may enable you to clear up a matter straight away, which can only help efficiency.

- ***Directness***

  The lack of time for chance encounters can help those involved to reach a decision speedily – although, as you will see later, this may not always be a good thing.

- ***Informality***

  Some points would appear too important if you were to make them the subject of a special meeting. By raising them in passing, you can avoid appearing mistrustful or inquisitive.

  A related advantage is that, because there is no record of such meetings, they are a useful way of informally gauging people’s reactions to new ideas.

- ***The human touch***

  Having a few words with someone in passing will maintain contact at a human level, which is important when dealing with staff on a lower level than yourself. Simply chatting about the weather will help to develop a relationship of trust, and discussing work-related issues will show that you have a genuine interest in the people who work for you.

(b) Disadvantages

There are, though, real problems with relying on unplanned encounters to achieve a particular purpose.

- ***Lack of time***

  Because such meetings have not been scheduled, both parties will probably be in a hurry. This means that messages can be wrongly expressed and understood, and any decisions you take might not be the best ones. Always be wary of trying to do too much in a situation like this.

- ***Lack of preparation***

  This is the largest single disadvantage. Even if you have all the information at your fingertips, it is unlikely that the other person will. This means that any discussion will be very limited. In addition, it may well prejudice the listener against a fuller, later discussion if the matter was raised in an incomplete way in the first place. The best rule is to avoid raising complicated issues at meetings like these.

- ***Lack of privacy***

  Discussing confidential matters in public places – which is where such encounters will often take place – is not a good idea. It may encourage rumours if snippets of the conversations are overheard out of context. This is never a good thing, so avoid it if you can.

- ***Lack of control***

  In a planned meeting there are various ways in which you can structure the discussion, moving on to new points at the best times. In an unplanned encounter, you cannot do this, and inaccurate or incomplete communication may well result.

- ***Striking at the wrong time***

  For most people, there are good and bad times to discuss certain issues. You may be lucky and raise the issue at just the right time; on the other hand, you may have chosen completely the wrong time for such a matter. The only way to avoid such a problem is to stick to clearly-defined meeting procedures unless you are sure how the person will react. Gauging this is something you will only learn by working with people and getting to know their personalities and general attitudes.

You can see that there are points in favour of chance meetings, and points against them. In general, try to use them only sparingly, when there is real urgency or a point has to be cleared up quickly.

One way of avoiding problems is to mention to the person concerned that you would like to see him/her about something, and then wait to see how this is received. If he/she seems interested, you might begin to develop the subject a little more, but defer a lengthy explanation unless you are sure that the time is right for it.

Overall, chance meetings should be approached with caution. If you are in any doubt, use the more formal channels. They may take a little longer, but they are better planned, and allow you to put across ideas and information more clearly and precisely.

Formal Interviews

The word "interview" refers to any meeting between two people. Generally, however, we use it to describe a meeting between people of different status in an organisation, or, perhaps most often, in connection with selecting the best candidate for a job.

There are many other purposes for interviews, as we'll see in this section. Whatever their purpose or aim, though, they all have certain elements in common, most particularly in terms of their organisation and conduct.

We can sum up the basic principles of conducting a successful interview in six key words – preparation, activation, attention, structure, summary, action. Let's look at these in more detail.

(a) Preparation

An interview is only effective if it is thoroughly prepared for by both parties involved.

If you are organising an interview, you need to prepare for it in the following ways.

- ***Ensure you have the necessary information.***

  (i) Make sure that you have all the necessary data, by going through your files and reading carefully all the relevant matter.

  (ii) Make notes about matters which are particularly important.

  (iii) List the main areas you wish to discuss, or note down specific questions you will ask.

  (iv) Keep the information with you, and make sure that you know it really thoroughly.

  If you do this, you will have a good factual basis for the exchange, which will give you confidence as well as ensuring a secure foundation for any decisions or action which may be taken as a result of the meeting.

- ***Take account of both setting and atmosphere.***

  (i) Plan a time for the interview which suits both people.

  (ii) Make sure that the room is suitable. It should be quiet and well-lit, and arranged properly for the task. If it is a formal interview, you may prefer to sit behind a desk. If it is less formal, you may prefer to sit at a table with the other person involved.

  (iii) Make sure that there will be no interruptions from the telephone or other visitors, by giving instructions that no calls should be put through and using an "engaged" sign on the door. Remember that the interview will only be effective if both people can concentrate and feel at their ease. This is impossible with a constant stream of interruptions.

- ***Find out what you can about the person you are meeting and the subject matter***

  This is essential before conducting an interview – especially if you are interviewing someone for a job; but it is also useful in interviews of other kinds, where you may be appraising an employee's performance over the past year, discussing a new business venture, or something similar. Knowing what kind of person you are dealing with will make things much easier. It also shows that you have taken the trouble to find out something about his or her background, which is in itself a sign of courtesy.

(b) Activation

Your task in an interview is to activate the interviewee. This means making him communicate openly, freely and honestly. You can do this in at least two ways.

- Always try to be encouraging to the interviewee, as he may feel nervous. It is up to you to put him at his ease, so that he can relax and concentrate fully on the meeting.
- Secondly, remember that questions may be asked in two distinctly different ways. A ***closed*** question can only be answered in a very limited way, usually by "yes" or "no". This limits the response which the interviewee can give, and also makes him think about what answer is expected, neither of which will encourage him to speak freely and honestly.

  Instead, try asking ***open*** questions which invite a larger response. "Did you like my proposal to change the accounts procedures?" is a question which can really only be answered by "yes" or "no". If you say instead "What did you think of my proposals?", you are giving him the chance to express his opinions freely (if tactfully!).

  You can practise turning closed questions into open ones yourself. You'll find that closed questions always start with a verb, like the example above.

(c) Attention

It is, of course, most important to make the interviewee feel that he is enjoying your attention.

As we noted above, the skill of effective listening is often overlooked. We are so eager to think about what we are going to say next that we do not pay attention to what the other person is saying, and sometimes we may interrupt before the point is complete. You should always make an effort to listen carefully, making sure that you understand what has been said, and asking further questions to make quite sure if there is anything you do not understand.

Non-verbal communication can play a significant part here too. Our body language – particularly gestures and expressions – can show whether we are really listening to what is being said. You also need to ensure that your body language responses reinforce your verbal ones, not cancel them out or contradict them.

(d) Structure

Your preparation should include planning the contents and order of the interview – the points you wish to make, and the order in which you want to make them. There is no reason why you should not make clear to your interviewee at the start of the meeting what you want to cover, where the best place is to start, and ask whether there is anything further he would like to raise.

It is a good idea to decide how much time you can afford to spend on each of the points you have listed. Arrange for a clock to be clearly visible, and try to stick to your "time-table" unless important matters are being raised which you feel should be allowed to run their course.

(e) Summary

As you complete each point on your list, summarise briefly what you have decided. Make clear what action is to be taken, if any, and who is to do it. This is a very important exercise which takes little time, but greatly increases efficiency: it is very easy to think that the other person is carrying out an important task, while all along he is thinking that you are doing it.

Your final summary will bring together all the decisions you have made at intermediate stages described above, and conclude so that you both know exactly what is to happen, who will carry out what action, and when you will meet again if necessary.

(f) Action

Before you start an interview, you should have a clear idea of what you want to achieve at it. Sometimes this will be fairly obvious as, e.g. in the case of a job interview. At other times it will be less clear. Decide what you think it is reasonable to achieve in the time available, and state this as an aim at the outset of the meeting, when you talk about the points you wish to cover.

Make quite clear, as stated above, what action is to be taken, and who is to take it. If there are any letters or reports to be written as a result of the meeting, try to do them as soon as possible, before you have had time to forget what has been decided. In this way you will make the fullest use of the time spent in the meeting.

The above are the key principles of good interviewing. Make sure that you learn the six key words, and what they stand for, and that you apply their principles whenever you have to conduct an interview.

Opinions vary on the practice of note-taking during an interview. Many feel that taking a few quick notes helps them to remember what has been said, especially in a selection interview. Others feel that writing of any kind is out of place, as an interview is a spoken form of communicating, and writing things down interrupts the contact between the two people and may also make one person feel uneasy.

It is for you to decide what you feel is the better path here. If you feel that note-taking during an interview is inappropriate, you should make full notes at the close of the meeting, while it is still fresh in your mind. The knowledge that you are going to do this will also help you to concentrate harder in the interview itself.

Types of Interview

Formal planned meetings between two or more people are a regular occurrence in business as a means of discussion, planning and decision taking. Here we are concerned with, essentially, one-to-one meetings. Only these can be really characterised as interviews.

There are many types of interview, but again we shall be concentrating on just two here. These are situations which you are more than likely to encounter in most types of work.

(a) Selection interviews

These interviews are concerned with selecting the right person for a job. The general principles discussed above still hold true for this type of interview, but there are a number of specific characteristics which we shall explore.

- ***Additional planning tasks***

  There are certain tasks which have to be completed before the interview takes place – a long time before in some cases. These include the following.

  (i) Preparation of a job description and person specification

  The job description tells you exactly what the person appointed will have to do. It will list the tasks, make clear to whom he will be responsible, and make clear whom he will have authority over. It will also make clear points of salary, conditions of employment and other necessary details, such as length of holiday, pension scheme etc.

  The person specification describes the essential and desirable knowledge, skills and other attributes required for performance of the job.

These two documents form the basis of the interview in that the interviewer should attempt, by questioning, to determine whether or not the interviewee meets the specified criteria.

(ii) Obtaining suitable candidates

The vacant post needs to be advertised and interested candidates for the job will need to complete an application form or send in a CV (curriculum vitae – a summary of their educational and employment history). There will then have been an initial selection process – known as shortlisting – to reduce the number of candidates to a certain number who will be called for interview. Shortlisting is done by comparing the evidence about the candidates from their application forms, etc. with the job description and person specification. As far as possible, the aim will be to select for interview those candidates who appear, on the evidence of their application, to have the potential to do the job.

- ***General arrangement and conduct of the interview***

  All the points made in the general section on conducting interviews are important in selection interviews. Two initial points should, however, be made:

  (i) The aim of the interview is to enable the candidates to make the best possible case for themselves. They need, therefore, to be relaxed and comfortable with the arrangements and conduct of the interview. This should start from the moment they arrive – giving them somewhere to wait and providing refreshments. The general aim should be carried on into the interview by making the questioning as encouraging as possible.

  (ii) A selection interview also gives the candidates an opportunity to assess the organisation to see if they want to work there. The arrangements and conduct of the interview need, therefore, to make a good impression on the interviewees. Opportunities should be provided to enable the candidates to ask their own questions and find out about the exact nature of the job and the organisation.

- ***Questioning***

  (i) Ask open questions to obtain the fullest answers from your interviewee.

  (ii) Do all you can to put the candidate at ease. Begin by asking general, straightforward questions to establish trust before going on to more complex ones.

  (iii) Listen carefully, and show the candidate that you are involved in what is being said.

  (iv) Always encourage the candidate to expand or develop points made and give time for him to ask about the job.

  (v) Keep what you say to the minimum. Avoid lengthy, ill-defined questions and anecdotes. Remember that it is the candidate who should be doing the talking – not you.

  (vi) If a group of people is conducting the interview, make sure beforehand that they all have copies of the application forms and other relevant material. Divide the areas of questioning: one can cover the education and family background; another working experience; the third, suitability for the present post.

  (vii) If you make notes, keep them short.

- ***The decision***

  Once the interview is over, make sure that your thoughts and impressions are recorded in some way as soon as possible. If several interviewers took part, arrange a meeting with them to discuss the candidates. Finally, don't forget that the candidate will be anxious to know your decision! Let him know the result as soon as possible.

(b) Appraisal interviews

Appraisal interviews are held by many companies on a regular basis. Often called "update interviews", they provide employees with an opportunity to discuss their progress within the company and their performance at their job during the past year.

They are likely to cover the following topics.

- ***Possible future steps***

  The idea of promotion, transfer and the general place of the employee within the company is another important area which must be discussed. Without this, employees will feel that no one takes an interest in what they are doing; morale and consequently efficiency, will fall.

- ***Personal development***

  This area will generally cover staff training, in particular the introduction of new procedures within departments. With information technology and other forms of computerisation becoming widespread, it is important that all staff keep up-to-date with new developments. Update interviews provide an opportunity for the individual employee to discuss his or her place within these new circumstances, and for managers to arrange necessary training.

- ***Suggestions***

  Appraisal interviews are not simply a one-way process, and if you have to conduct any, do take care to let workers put forward their own suggestions about improvements in the way tasks are carried out.

When you are conducting an appraisal interview, you should make sure that facilities are available for a relaxed, uninterrupted discussion. Do all you can to put the interviewee at his ease, and make clear that it is not simply a case of being given an "end of term report" on performance. If praise is due, make sure it is given, as this will encourage and renew motivation. It is unlikely that an appraisal interview will be the occasion for disciplinary action, or complaints about the standard of work of the individual. Such matters should be dealt with as and when they arise, so that any ineffectiveness can be quickly remedied before it has a chance to grow and possibly to spread to other employees.

In general, appraisal interviews should be seen as a chance to talk in an informal, friendly way about the past year at work and how its achievements can be built on by the individual and the manager to ensure a consistent development and growth in the future. Make sure that your conduct of the interview reflects these aims, so that the employee feels that management are genuinely interested in what he has done, and how his career can be developed to mutual advantage in the future.

E. NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION AND PERSONAL PRESENTATION

By non-verbal communication we mean the process of communication without words. When we consider this, we tend to think of it in terms of the signals we read from the way someone behaves and expresses themselves during a face-to-face encounter. We can groups all these types of signals together and call them body language, although they encompass aspects of speech which are not strictly of the body in the same way as , perhaps, the amount of eye contact made. Body language sends out very powerful signals and we all learn to recognise them and their meaning at a very early stage in our development – before we can even speak as infants.

However, we should not ignore other non-verbal influences on the communication process and we shall be going on to consider aspects of the physical environment and the presentation of written communication in terms of their impact on the effectiveness of communication.

Body Movements

Although body language does not refer specifically to the whole body, we shall start our discussion of non-verbal communication by considering certain aspects of the way people behave with their bodies as a whole.

(a) Contact

The amount of bodily contact between people tells us a lot about their relationship. Clearly, it will be minimal during a business encounter, but it is still important. A good, firm handshake can signal the beginning and end of a meeting, and also signify trust and good faith between the two people involved. The form and strength of such contact can also be taken to indicate confidence and reflect status divisions between people.

Approach other forms of contact with caution. While some people will respond to a pat on the arm or slap on the back, others may find it intrusive or even offensive, even though you intend it as a sign of friendship.

(b) Proximity

Proxemics is the study of how people use space and movement. For example, by going to the top of the table or the highest seat you can indicate to others how you relate to them. Similarly, how people use yours and their personal space, moving closer to people they like and away from people they dislike, are also strong body language signals.

People need to have their own personal space and feel it disturbing or threatening to have others intrude into this by approaching too closely. However, everyone has different limits about this, and it can vary between different circumstances. You need, therefore, to assess what is acceptable for others and respect their wishes.

By breaching someone's personal space you can intimidate him or her and be perceived as overbearing and insensitive. One acceptable move into someone's space is getting up from your chair to shake someone's hand, which is seen as a sign of respect.

Proximity to others can have important consequences for the arrangement of seating and the layout of rooms where people are going to interact, such as in meetings.

(c) Orientation

By this we mean the direction in which your body is facing. If you face the person who is speaking to you, you give the impression that you are really listening to him. On the other hand, if you face away, then it looks as though you have no real interest in what he is saying.

Be aware of important signs like this when conducting oral exchanges. If someone gets up and walks over to the window during a conversation, it may suggest that he or she is bored with the conversation; but it may also suggest that he is upset or angry and does not want to let you see it.

Look for such responses throughout oral exchanges – and be aware of your own orientation, too. Once again, they can reveal a great deal about your attitudes and opinions.

(d) Posture

This is one of the clearest signs of a person's feelings or response. If you sit forward and look at the speaker, you are showing involvement and active interest, by contrast, if you sit back looking at the carpet, you are indicating boredom or anger.

A person sitting with hunched shoulders and folded arms is being defensive, resisting any new ideas; someone leaning back comfortably, with hands on the back of the head, is thinking in a free, relaxed way, which shows complete trust in the other people present.

(e) Gestures

Some gestures, such as twitching, scratching, doodling and jingling change in your pocket are irritating gestures that could be the sign of a number of things, such as boredom or even nervous self-consciousness. Some gestures, such as yawning, sighing and shifting from side to side on an uncomfortable seat, are almost innate and must be controlled. Similarly, a shrug of your shoulders when someone asks you a question may not only convey that you do not know the answer but also that you do not really care either.

Tapping your fingers can indicate impatience and a clenched fist can indicate anger. You should avoid gathering up your paperwork when someone is talking to you as it can be seen as a rude gesture, although sometimes this can be a useful signal to people that the conversation is over and that you must leave.

Some gestures do not translate the same way in all cultures; for example, nodding your head in some countries can mean “no”.

Head and Face Signals

The face is the most expressive part of the body and the signals that are given through facial expressions and movements are very important.

(a) Nodding and shaking

These are fairly obvious, intentional forms of communicating. However, as well as the usual meaning, shaking the head with a frowning expression may suggest puzzlement or, accompanied by closed eyes, it can suggest anger and frustration.

Nodding and shaking are also important techniques when listening to someone speak. It shows that you are listening carefully and responding to what is being said. Try to develop the habit of using these signs in an unobtrusive way to indicate that you are interested in and understand what is being said. It will give the speaker confidence and help him to express his ideas fully and freely.

(b) Facial expression

This is another obvious sign of feeling – and one which is very hard to control. When listening, try to adopt a neutral expression, smiling in a friendly way to encourage the speaker. When speaking, look for responses shown by expressions:

- Smiles reveal pleasure
- Withdrawn, vacant expressions suggest boredom
- Frowns may suggest anger, but also concentration or deep thought.

(c) Eye contact

It is generally accepted that a person who looks straight into your eyes is honest and trustworthy. This may or may not be the case but, in any event, it is a good idea to look directly at the person you are talking to. Doing this suggests an open, honest nature, although it is wise to avoid an unwavering stare, as many people find this disturbing. At important stages of the conversation – at the beginning, certainly, and at the end – it is a good idea to look at your listener directly, in the eyes if possible.

In a business context, avoiding eye contact can convey disinterest while making positive eye contact shows that you are relating to and connecting with your audience. Sideways glances can show that someone is wary of you and is making a judgement about you.

When you are talking to a group of people, however, make sure that your eyes travel across the room, so that you can look at each person in turn. Arrange the room so that you can maintain eye-contact with everyone who is there. Without this, people quickly become bored, as they feel isolated and left out.

Vocal Signals

The way in which we express the words we speak can give many signals about what we are feeling and can either enhance or diminish the impact of the message.

(a) Tone and volume

The tone of voice, volume and pitch that is used can affect the message being conveyed.

If you speak calmly and clearly with a reasonable volume and pace, you will give the impression of being in control. On the other hand, if you talk very quickly in a high-pitched voice, and frequently run out of breath, you will sound nervous.

Excessive volume can be overbearing, but too quiet a voice will just irritate people because they will not be able to hear you.

A high-pitched voice can be irritating to listeners but it can indicate distress or tension. You should avoid using a monotone voice as it can stop listeners paying attention to what you say. A slow pace can be used to add emphasis and importance to what you are saying. If you speak too quickly, listeners will find it hard to keep up, but too fast a pace can signal your nervousness.

Always listen carefully to the tone of someone's voice – it can be as important as what he is saying in conveying a mood or response. Make allowances, too, for people who are nervous or upset, and try to speak calmly to them.

(b) Paralinguistics

This is a long word for the noises people make when they are listening to someone else speak and wish to show agreement – "uh-huh", "mm" and "oh", for example. Like nodding and smiling, these are a useful way of showing somebody that you are following what he is saying.

Remember that it is not enough simply to listen to what is being said – you must provide feedback to show that you are listening (and that you understand) if the communication process is to be fully effective.

(c) Movement during speech

A more general kind of non-verbal communication concerns movement of any part of the body. If someone is constantly fidgeting with his hands, frequently crosses his legs, taps his feet, drums his fingers or gets up and walks around the room, it is a sure sign of nerves or agitation. Learn to recognise such signs and deal with them sympathetically.

When you are talking yourself, try to remain still. Movement is distracting, and other people's mannerisms can be extremely annoying – head-scratching, beard-stroking or similar movements can be very disturbing when you are trying to listen to a complicated argument.

Dress and General Appearance

The way in which you dress says a lot about the way you regard the people you are meeting. There are invariable "dress codes" – usually just understood, but sometimes actually written down – under which you are expected to dress in a certain kind of way for the situation. Breaking these codes can convey a strong message about attitudes towards the situation.

If you wear smart, clean clothes and in general look the part in terms of the dress code, you will make it clear that you value the company of the people you are meeting and have done them the courtesy of conforming to their values in appearance.

Conversely, wearing dirty and untidy clothes will suggest that you are not concerned about either the other people or their values. It may also suggest a lack of efficiency, since an onlooker might think that, if you take so little care over your appearance, you may be similarly unconcerned about your work.

Dressing formally, but without ostentation, is an important element of non-verbal communication, to convey a smart and efficient image to the visitor.

Other aspect of appearance include demonstrating preparedness for the encounter. This can be seen through examples where behaviour gives signals that imply discourtesy and disrespect.

- If you keep someone waiting for 20 minutes before seeing him, you are really communicating to him that you regard him as a fairly low priority in your day's work.
- If you make it clear during the course of the meeting that you have not prepared or researched the subject under discussion, you are showing that it is not important to you.

All these matters reveal your attitude, just as clearly as what you actually say. They are unspoken and subconscious acts of communication. If you overlook non-verbal elements like these in the way that you prepare for and conduct meetings with others, you will lose the advantages of oral communication because of the bad impression you create by your underlying message.

F. NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION AND THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

The characteristics of the physical environment within which interpersonal communications take place can have a significant impact on the way in which the encounter proceeds. In simple terms, the design and layout of the room and its contents can either help the communication process or hinder it.

Arrangement of Furniture

The layout of a room can be a very important determinant of the way in which meetings of all sorts are conducted.

If you set out a room as a series of separate tables and chairs, with a single desk at the front facing the others, you will create the impression of a very formal setting in which one person – the person at the desk – dominates the meeting, rather like a school classroom.

However, if you arrange it so that all the participants sit around a single large table, you will suggest a coming together of equals. This in itself can make the atmosphere far more relaxed, so that the meeting will proceed in a far more effective manner.

In offices, it is often the case that managers will sit in a large big chair behind a large desk. People who enter this type of office have to sit on a lower chair opposite the desk, thus creating a barrier and signalling the difference in status and authority. It is likely also to suggest a level of formality that is expected from the visitor. You can remove the barrier by changing the position of the desk and placing a chair beside you for visitors, or by having a horse-shoe shape layout of chairs for use when having discussions.

In office situations people sometimes often place objects or furniture to create a barrier or to lay claim to space, in the same way that holidaymakers put their towels on chairs.

Office Design

The aims of office design are to:

- Meet legal requirements in respect of space available per person.
- Minimise the costs of floor space rental, heating, lighting, rates, telephone, etc.
- Use the most appropriate office technology.

- Respond to any status or hierarchical structures within the organisation – for example, there is a long-standing tradition that the more senior the member of staff, the bigger the desk and office space he or she requires.
- Avoid customers, visitors or staff overhearing confidential information.
- Provide an area to meet and greet clients/visitors, etc.
- Have designated meeting areas.
- Reflect the corporate image and status of the organisation (i.e. in decor and general appearance, cleanliness, etc.).
- Seek to achieve a stress-free environment – through such features as providing natural light, relaxing colour schemes, amximising space for staff to work or move around in, etc.

There is, though, a constant tension between the space available, the needs of staff and visitors for space and the cost. However large the space allocated, you are sure to fill it. Offices need, therefore, to be designed to fulfil several sets of reauirements at once, and these needs are then quite visibly prioritised.

Some of the factors which must be weighed in office design, and their implications for communication, are as follows.

(a) Accessibility

How easy is it for people to be able to meet the people that they need to communicate with? This applies to the way in which staff interact – particularly the accessibility of senior staff to junior staff – and the provision of facilities specifically for meetings, briefings, training sessions and presentations, etc. It also applies to the way in which reception areas are organised to facilitate visitors obtaining the service they require. (Reception areas are particularly important since they constitute the first impression visitors receive of the organsiation and the way in which they are received can either impress or put them off.)

We also need to recognise the needs of staff for access to information. Increasingly, this is available at the desk through computers, but the dream of a paperless office through such technology has never materialised. Most offices still have large filing systems and these need to be arranged in a way in which the information they contain can be retrieved quickly.

(b) Space

People need sufficient space for them to be able to access and use all the materials and equipment necessary to carry out their jobs. Thus, desks must be capable of holding a telephone and computer, with enough space left for all the documents and other materials that are used. It is easy to underestimate the amount of room necessary to achieve this.

We mentioned previously the need to allow people their own personal space and this must be reflected in the layout of offices. There is also the question of allowing the quiet and privacy necessary to allow staff to concentrate without extraneous noise and interruption, and to be able to discuss confidential matters without being overheard.

Offices are not just places where people sit at their desks and work. They need to be able to move around comfortably, relax and meet others – either for business purposes or simply socially. These needs must also be met. Again the issue of reception areas needs consideration. If visitors have to wait (which they very often have to do), there must be suitable areas set aside for this where they can sit comfortably and do not feel they are interfering with or intruding on the work of the office.

(c) Ambience

By this we mean the general atmosphere created by such features as noise, lighting, colour schemes, decoration and furnishings. These features all contribute to whether the environment feels a relaxed and comfortable place in which to interact with other people, or a harsh and stressful place which makes communication difficult.

- Factors which can influence this include:
- the use of restful colours for both decorations and office furniture – pastel shades and deep colours are better than bright, strong primary colours;
- soft furnishings and carpets can absorb sound and create a less harsh ambience;
- natural light is better than electric light, but there must be sufficient light available throughout the office and for each individual desk;
- seating of the correct height and support for office work ensure staff are comfortable at their desks;
- offices should be kept clean and tidy – again a feature which is particularly important in reception areas. (Non smoking policies can contribute to this, although some staff will invariably require access to space in which they can smoke).

G. DESIGN AND PRESENTATION IN WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

In the last unit, we examined different types of written communication and their particular requirements. However, the impact that such document have is not simply a matter of the words used. Just as in oral communication, the way in which the words are presented can enhance and develop meaning. In written communication, the use of various devices to achieve this has a similar effect to volume, tone, pitch and pacing of the voice in oral communication.

The ability to employ these presentational devices used only to be available to professional designers and printers, but the widespread use of word processors has meant that they now available to nearly all office staff. However, you need to be careful with their use. It is not uncommon to see documents in which the writer seems to have gone wild with different typefaces, bullets and other forms of text enhancement, to the extent that they lose their meaning and result in a document which just appears messy and is actually more difficult to read.

Text Enhancements

The purpose of the enhancements considered here are to provide emphais and stress to particular words or phrases, and to give some physical form to the structuring of the document. Note that they should be used sparingly if they are to achieve these purposes – just as you would only occasionally raise your voice when speaking, rather than taking at high volume all the time

(a) Use of bold, italics and underlining

These are used to stress or pick out particular words and, occasionally, phrases. For example, throughout this course we have used bold and italics to identify key words within the text. They should not be over-used as their significance will be quickly lost and if applied to large blocks of text tend to make it difficult to read.

Italics are often used for quotations or Latin expressions, such as *quid pro quo* or *per se*.

It is usual to enbolden headings to make them stand out from the main body of the text, thus enhancing the structure.

(b) Indentation

Indentation refers to moving in the left hand margin of the text for either a particular phrase or paragraph. It serves two puroses.

- It separates the indented phrase or paragraph from the surrounding text and lends it additional impact. For example, consider the following extract from an economics textbook:

  John Maynard Keynes was challenged by the policy-makers of his day who felt that his ideas were a recipe for disaster. By borrowing from the banking sector and putting money into large-scale public projects, his opponents believed that serious long-term problems could arise if the government pursued the proposed policies. Keynes was dismissive of this, stating simply:

  > *"In the long run, we are all dead".*

  By indenting the quotation, it carried additional impact, and could even help the reader to remember it.

  This separation of the text from its surround can also help the stuctur of the document. It signifies that the indented section forms a sub-section of the section which precedes it. You can see this throughout this course.

A word of caution, though. Too much indentation, or indentation which does not serve the stated purposes will make the document extremely difficult to read and give it a clumsy appearance.

(c) Capital letters

Putting certain words or phrases into capital letters can be used to emphasise them in much the same way as you might use bold text.

It is a mistake, however, to believe that capitals throughout a document will give it greater force. The average reader can read lower case text much more quickly than text which is in capitals throughout. The reason for this is that the eye follows the upper part of each letter when you are reading. If you mask the lower half of a sentence with a sheet of paper, you will probably still be able to read it. If, however, it is in capitals, it is unlikely that you will read it with ease. The lesson here is to use capitals only occasionally when you wish to stress something.

(d) Typefaces and type size

Modern word processors usually have a very large number of different typefaces (called "fonts") available, as well as the ability to put any of these fonts into sizes ranging from the very small to the huge.

The general rule for most types of document is that you should use just one typeface throughout. There is little reason to keep changing the font and a consistent typeface makes the whole document easier to read. The one exception to this is the title for large documents like reports or for notices. Here it is possible to use a different typeface for effect and to distinguish the heading from other parts of the text.

You shopuld use a typeface which is easy to read. For document with a lot of text, this should normally be a "serif" font like Times New Roman (serifs are the litthe tails on the letters and these tend to make it easier to read at speed). For notices and other documents which need to be eye-catching, other types of font may be used – "sans serif" fonts like Arial are popular for these.

The size of the font should be determined by a combination of readability and the impact it has on the size of the whole document. The size of text is measured in "points". Most letters, memoranda and reports are produced using a font size of 11 or 12 points. This course uses 11 point text. For most fonts, anything below 10 point starts to become difficult for all people to read comfortably. Text larger than 13 points uses a lot more space and gains nothing in terms of readability.

Using a larger font size for headings can help to emphasise the structure of a document. For example, the title could be in 16 point, with main headings in 14 point.

Page Design and Layout

This refers to the way in which the whole of the text appears on the page. It is not concerned with the structure of the document,b ut rather with the overall impact of the message.

(a) Text alignment

Text, as in this course, is normally "left aligned". This means that it has a consistent left hand margin and appears straight on that side. The right hand edge of paragraphs or blocks of text is ragged.

Text may also be right aligned – the opposite of left aligned where the straight edge is on the right hand margin and the left hand edge of paragraphs or blocka of text is ragged. This is rarely used in normal text, but is common for the sender's address in letters.

Justification refers to the setting out of text blocks so that there is a straight edge to both the left and right hand margins. This is common in newspapers. It is achieved by varying the spaces between words – something that used to be done only by trained printers, but is now done automatically by word processing software. The appearance can seem bvery neat, but some odd results can occur where only a few long words make up a line and they end up being spread out widely.

(b) Centred text

Centring text in the middle of a line or a page gives it impact and is often used for the title of a document and for title sections. It can only be applied to small amounts of text since it is not easy to read. It may be used, though, for notices and for the whole of a title page for a report.

(c) Bullets

Bullets are the little symbols inserted before a line or paragraph of text. Word processors offer a number of options for these – you will notice that we have used a small black closed circle.

They are used to give emphasis to a series of points and as such are common in notices and other documents using lists.

(d) Colour

Printing in colour can add impact to short documents such as notices. You must be careful not to overuse variations in colour since this can confuse as easily as emhasise.

(e) White space

White space on a document serves to give emphasis to the black of the text. Such space includes margins at the top, bottom and left and right hand sides of the page, and the space between paragraphs and lines of text.

Allowing plenty of space around the title of a document or the main heading of a notice can make it stand out. Similarly, you should leave space between points in a list. However, beware of leaving too much space. It is important to maintain the link between lines and paragraphs and too much space can make them seem disconnected.

(f) Use of graphics

Illustrations, logos and other visuals can add impact to a document. The graphic should relate to the subject matter of the communication. You must, though, be careful not to make them a distraction from the main body of the text or the message it seeks to convey.

Graphs and diagrams can sometimes convey a message more quickly than words or numbers. They are particularly appropriate for showing statistical information in an easily accessible form and for illustrating the relationship between things – as in an organisation chart.

Study Unit 5

Case Study: Communicating with Customers

Contents ***Page***

INTRODUCTION

In the last three study units we have been considering effectiveness in communications – firstly through general principles and then in both written and oral communication. Here we shall look at a practical example of these issues through a study of dealing with customers and clients.

The first part of the unit examines the ways in which businesses relate to customers through telephone conversations and face-to-face. We shall then consider how you can establish their needs and requirements. We move on to look at how organisations generate enquiries, the nature of those enquiries and the different ways of responding to them. Finally we consider the provision of information to customers and clients.

The case study draws attention to the importance of purpose and audience in communication. These elements have been given a specific focus in respect of dealing with customers through the concept of customer care. This forms an underlying theme throughout the unit.

A. DEALING WITH CUSTOMERS ON THE TELEPHONE

It is important to remember that customers are people. They may be individuals or large companies but at some point the contact you will have is with an individual person. People respond to being treated courteously and this is the most significant factor in all dealings with customers.

The Role of the Telephonist

We have said before that first impressions are very important and often the first point of contact for a customer is an organisation's telephonist. Many commentators believe that the words spoken by telephonists have as much effect on the reputation of an organisation as anything else that the company does!

Telephonists should greet customers in a friendly and helpful manner. However, this should not extend to over-familiarity, but should keep within the limits of politeness. It is also very important that calls should be answered as promptly as possible – long delays can be frustrating for the customer and can reflect on the overall efficiency of the organisation.

A typical opening remark by a telephonist might be:

> *"Good morning. This is Redreed Supplies Limited. Can I help you?"*

This approach has the following effects:

- It makes the customer feel that their call is welcome.
- It helps him/her to establish that he/she has called the correct organisation.
- It allows him/her the chance to state the reason for their call.

Telephonists can be helped to convey a positive image for their organisation by:

- Receiving training in telephone techniques.
- Being made to feel part of the organisation – for example, by visiting and becoming familiar with the various sections or departments.
- Being told what the people on the various extension numbers actually do – this can help in routing calls to the appropriate person if the caller does not know who to ask for or if the person requested is not available.

You will find it interesting to think about the way in which organisations greet you when you call them, or even to make a call into your own organisation to see how they treat callers. Think about the following points.

(a) What does the telephonist says when he/she answers your call.

(b) How long did you wait before your call was answered?

(c) Was the telephonist's manner polite and helpful?

(d) Do you feel that any improvements need to be made in the way calls are answered?

Receiving Telephone Calls

We looked in the previous study unit at how you should answer the telephone and what your opening remarks should be. You should refer back to the study unit on oral communications now in order to refresh your memory.

Some important points that you should remember when receiving telephone calls from customers are:

- If the customer is already known to you, make sure that you greet him/her by name in an appropriate and friendly manner. For example:

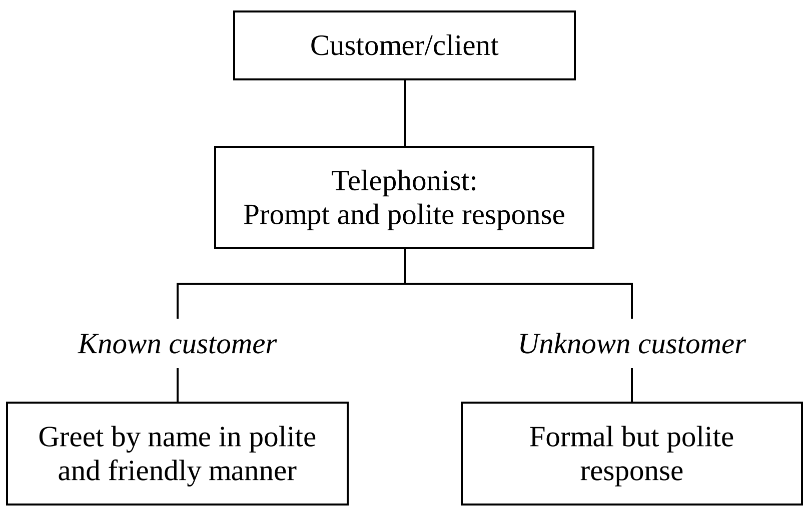
  > *"Hello, Mrs Jones (or Susan depending on the relationship). John Smith speaking. It's a while since we last spoke. How are you?"*

  Whether you use the formal Mrs Jones or the first name Susan will depend upon the relationship between you and the extent of formality you perceive Mrs Jones/Susan to require. With some customers you may move on to using first names very quickly, whereas with other customers it is more appropriate to use formal names until they refer to you by your first name. Overseas customers often prefer to use formal names for a long time.

- If the customer is not known to you, your response will obviously be more formal although you should still try to appear warm and polite. It may be more appropriate to use "Sir" or "Madam" when addressing the customer in this situation. For example:

  > *"Good morning, sir. This is John Smith, the Accounts Clerk speaking. You have been put through to me by the Sales Department. How can I help you?"*

We can summarise the telephone contact between a customer and an organisation as follows:



Making Telephone Calls

You will remember that we looked at how to make telephone calls in a previous study unit. The preparation of a call plan is particularly important when you are making a telephone call to a customer. You do not want to waste the customer's time so you need to have all documents which you may need to refer to ready for easy reference before you make the call.

(a) Calling a customer known to you

The call plan will be based around the following pattern for the call:

- Ask for him/her by name.
- Greet him/her by name (Mr Smith or John as appropriate).
- Give your name and company.
- State the reason for your call.
- Give any facts clearly and concisely.
- Always remain polite even if you get a hostile response from the customer.
- Make notes during the call.
- Thank the customer at the end of the call for his/her time and help.
- Confirm in writing, if necessary, points agreed during the call.

(b) Calling a customer not known to you

The procedures will be similar to those above but remember that you need to adopt a slightly more formal approach to the call. Your opening approach will have to be different.

- State your name and company.
- You may need to ask the customer's switchboard operator who you need to speak to. State the enquiry you need to make and ask to be put through to the relevant person. For example:

  "Good morning. This is Karen Brown of Treadmill Plastics Limited. I would like to speak to the person responsible for bulk purchasing of disposable tableware. Could you please put me through to the appropriate person?"

- When your call is put through you need to repeat your name, position and company and the nature of your enquiry. It is particularly important that you check that you are speaking to the correct person before giving details of your call. For example:

  "Good morning. This is Karen Brown, Senior Accounts Clerk for Treadmill Plastics Limited. I have been put through to you because you might be able to help with an enquiry relating to bulk purchasing of disposable tableware. Could you please tell me whether I am speaking to the correct person?"

- If the person confirms that you have been put through to the correct person you can then give the details of your enquiry. For example:

  "Right Mr Dean. Perhaps you could help me with a query on an order we have received from your company? It relates to your order number P9372 dated 20 June 20-- for 400 cases of disposable knives and forks. I don't know if you are aware of the fact that we offer a 20% trade discount on orders of 450 cases and above. Perhaps you might like to consider increasing your order to take advantage of our discount terms?"

- If the person is unable to help you should ask whether he/she knows who might be able to help you. If he/she does, you should ask him/her to transfer you to the correct person. For example:

  "I'm sorry you can't help. I wonder if you know who the best person is for me to speak to?"

  and then

  "Perhaps you could transfer me to Ms Robinson in your Purchasing Department. Thank you very much for your help."

Referring Customers to a Higher Authority

It is important to know the limits of responsibility for your particular job and, therefore, when to refer a customer to a higher authority and who the appropriate higher authority will be. In the majority of cases this would be your immediate supervisor or manager, but some organisations may specific policies on the referral of certain matters – for example, complaints about the quality of goods supplied.

When referring customers to a higher authority, it is important that you:

- Explain politely and clearly to the customer that you are not authorised to deal with the matter.
- Inform the customer who the appropriate authority is, letting them know the person's name and title if possible.
- Offer to transfer the customer to the appropriate person and give an indication of their availability if you can.

For example:

> *"I'm very sorry Mr Mason, but I am not authorised to negotiate raising credit limits. The person to speak to would be my supervisor, Mrs Jane Clark, the Accounts Manager. Would you like me to transfer you to her? She should be in her office this morning."*

Maintaining Customer Confidentiality

To promote and retain customer trust and goodwill it is very important that you pay attention to confidentiality. It is not easy to keep telephone calls confidential if you are making or receiving them in a crowded office. Some important points to consider are:

(a) Making telephone calls

Consider the nature of the call before you make it and ask yourself if it is confidential. If it is, you can then plan accordingly

- Is the telephone the best method of communication to use? Would it be better to request a private meeting or put your points in a "Private and Confidential" letter? If you decide to hold a meeting, you might consider using the telephone to arrange the meeting, but you need to take care not to disclose too much over the telephone.
- Do you have a separate office from which confidential calls can be made? Remember, though, that your customer may not be receiving the call in a place which aids confidentiality.
- If you have to make such a call, refer to the fact that the matter if confidential and ask the customer if it is alright for him/her to speak.

(b) Receiving telephone calls

Try to discern whether the call from your customer is leading to matters of a sensitive nature. Again, this allows you to plan as the call progresses.

If it is not appropriate to speak because of a lack of privacy, tell you customer this politely. You will then need to suggest either a meeting or that you will ring him/her back from a more private office.

Make sure that you do not discuss the affairs of another customer unless you have their permission to do so or the matter is one of general knowledge.

B. MEETINGS WITH CUSTOMERS AND CLIENTS

Meeting customers on both a formal and informal basis is essential in order to develop and maintain good business relationships. Again, remember that customers are people and respond to being treated courteously.

Let us now look at how to deal with customers in the various types of meetings.

Social Contacts

Many businesses arrange social events in which their staff and customers meet together in a relaxed atmosphere. "Corporate entertaining", as it is often called, can involve visits to Wimbledon, the races, the theatre or major sporting events. On a simpler level, it may involve taking customers out to lunch on a regular or less frequent basis. Often business relationships are improved by these social contacts and business deals may even take place because of the contacts established.

However, the cost of providing this hospitality needs to be balanced against actual and potential benefits to be achieved. This is particularly relevant where overseas customers are involved.

Receiving Customers at your Premises

Meeting a customer in person is a way of showing your respect for him/her. It is important to remember that you are meeting a ***person*** and to focus on that person's needs and feelings. Too often the business matter involved is given priority at the expense of dealing properly with the person involved.

(a) Planned meetings

The key point is to prepare properly for the meeting. This involves the following elements:

- Clarify its purpose and the outcome you wish to achieve.
- Prepare a suitable meeting place. Ensure it has privacy and is warm and comfortable. Arrange the furniture in a suitable way and make sure that coffee or tea will be available for your customer shortly after their arrival.
- Ensure that you are suitably dressed and your overall approach is smart.
- Be on time to meet your customer. If you are not meeting him/her personally at Reception, ensure that the receptionist knows of his/her intended arrival and can direct him/her to you.
- Consider the manner in which to greet and talk to your customer. Will it be formal or does he/she prefer a more informal approach which allows for some light-hearted exchanges? For example:

  "Welcome to our offices, Mr Thompson. Did you have a pleasant journey? Would you like to follow me to my office where coffee or tea is available?"

  or

  "It's good to see you again John. Was the M4 as bad as last time? I'm sure you can't wait for your usual three cups of coffee before we start!"
- Consider your customer's personal needs. If he/she has travelled a long distance he/she may need a little time to unwind before the meeting starts. He/she may also need to use toilet facilities and you should point out where they are so that customers do not need to ask.

(b) Unplanned meetings

Customers may visit your premises without any prior warning. These may be existing or potential new customers. Despite the fact that they may be interrupting you, it is important that they are treated with courtesy and not kept waiting longer than is necessary.

The role of the receptionist is central to ensuring that the situation is dealt with smoothly. The requirements are very similar to those of the telephonist as we considered earlier.

- Receptionists should be trained to greet all callers in a polite and helpful manner. For example:

  "Good afternoon, Sir (or Madam). This is Rackroam Mouldings Limited. Can I help you?"

- Receptionists should try to establish whether there is a particular person that the customer would like to speak to.
- If receptionists are well informed about the duties of staff at their premises, they should be able to suggest an appropriate person to speak to if the customer has no particular person in mind.
- If the member of staff that the customer wishes to see is unavailable this should be politely explained to him/her. An alternative member of staff should be suggested whenever possible.
- If there is to be a delay in contacting the member of staff, this again should be politely explained to the customer and he/she should be offered a seat while he/she is waiting.

Visiting a Customer's Premises

The communication skills which need to be applied are the same as we saw in the above section. Courtesy is particularly important as you are a "guest" on your customer's premises. Any safety rules or other customs must always be followed.

Seeing first hand how a customer operates can be very useful in developing customer care. On visits you should try to understand as much as possible about the operations of the customer and try to relate this to an understanding of their needs and requirements.

It is a common courtesy to arrange an appointment with a customer if your visit is likely to take up quite a lot of their time. It is also helpful to give an indication of how long the meeting will last when you make the appointment.

Visits to Suppliers

It is common practice in many organisations to visit a potential supplier before starting to trade with him/her. Indeed, for some companies, this visit can be more like an inspection.

We need not go into detail here but it is important to realise that the same courteous behaviour should be extended to suppliers as to customers.

C. LISTENING TO CUSTOMERS

Customer care, as a strategy, demands that an organisation should:

- Treat customers as equal partners.
- Consult customers and involve them in designing the process for delivering the product or service.
- Question customers carefully to try to determine their requirements and needs accurately.
- Seek regular feedback from customers on the quality of the service or goods they are receiving.

To achieve these aims it is vital that communication skills are applied so that you are able to:

- Listen carefully to the customer.
- Treat him/her with respect.
- Apply effective questioning techniques.
- Evaluate his/her response to queries on the quality of the service or goods received.

Let us now look in a little more detail at how to listen to customers and evaluate their responses.

Personal Meetings

We looked in a previous study unit at interviewing skills and saw some of the techniques which can be applied to gain information from a customer. One of the main points was that it is important to activate the interviewee – this encourages him/her to communicate openly, freely and honestly.

The main technique for achieving this is the asking of open questions. This can be used to encourage a customer to give his/her views on the service or goods required and whether these requirements are currently being satisfied. For example, you might ask:

> *"Are there any areas of our current service provision where you feel we might be able to provide a better service?"*

This encourages the customer to give their views and makes him/her feel that their contribution will be welcome.

Most important of all is that you must listen to what the customer says. Taking brief notes may encourage him/her to feel that you are paying attention. Avoid being defensive of your service or goods but allow him/her to express his point of view. Also avoid being too critical of their suggestions, even if they initially seem impractical to you. You may find they make much more sense after you have thought about them for a while.

Customer Satisfaction Surveys

These are often in the form of a questionnaire which is given to the customer to complete. This may be:

- After every service performed – for example, British Gas issue a customer satisfaction survey after every boiler maintenance visit.
- At intervals requesting views on the service provided or quality of goods over a period.

These surveys provide important feedback and need to be carefully evaluated. You may remember that we looked at the design of questionnaires in an earlier study unit. Refer back to it at this point to refresh your memory.

Questionnaires are often both:

- ***Qualitative***, i.e. asking how the customer felt about the quality of service or goods;
- ***Quantitative***, i.e. asking for specific performance information such as response times.

You can see an example of such a questionnaire in Figure 5.1. As you can see, it is designed to be simple and require mainly YES/NO answers. It does, though, also give the customer the opportunity to make further comments.

Figure 5.1: Example of a customer satisfaction survey questionnaire

Northbridge University
Department of the Arts
Distance Learning Division

HOW DO YOU RATE YOUR COURSE?

We'd appreciate your help in evaluating the course. Please tick boxes and add comments where necessary.

Subject: ____________________________________

	Yes	No
I was able to get started straight away	☐	☐
I found the course straightforward	☐	☐
I needed to go and look up a few books to help me	☐	☐
There were parts of the course I found hard to understand	☐	☐
If you answered "Yes", can you say which parts were difficult?		
Did you speak to your tutor on the telephone?	☐	☐
If you did, did you find it useful?	☐	☐
My Developmental Assignment was returned to me quickly	☐	☐
If it wasn't, can you say how long it took in days?	☐	
My tutor's comments on my DA were helpful	☐	☐
I have finished the course	☐	☐
If you have finished, can you say how long in hours it took you?	☐	

Date: _____________

If you'd like to add any further comments please enclose a letter with this form.

You do not have to provide the following information.

Name: ____________________________________ Age: __________

Please return your completed form in the envelope provided. No stamp is necessary. Thank you for your co-operation.

D. DEALING WITH ENQUIRIES

Customers and clients are the lifeblood of business. The way new customers are generated through the process of stimulating interest and getting enquiries is therefore very important. This is essentially the domain of marketing. However, most staff have dealings of some sort with customers and potential customers and, in that sense, are all part of the marketing function of the organisation. Dealing properly with enquiries is a key part of this.

Generating Customers

The methods used to generate interest and enquiries which can be turned into sales to customers will vary according to the type of business and the nature of the goods or services supplied. Most organisations will use several different methods of generating enquiries.

(a) Advertising

Goods or services offered can be advertised in a variety of ways. These include:

- Television and radio – both national and local (and even international).
- Newspapers – again national or local – and magazines of different types.
- Notices or posters in public places
- The Internet

Much of the time you probably don't take too much conscious notice of them, but try looking them more closely and think about some the issues they raise – what makes you take notice, what is the message, how do they vary between the different media, how are similar products advertised, are products advertised in different ways depending on the audience for the advertisement?

(b) Direct mail

This method is sometimes known as "mail shots" and comprises written details of goods or services provided by a company and sent through the post to potential customers. They may be:

- General, which means that they are sent to a large number of people or businesses who may or may not be interested in the goods or services;
- Targeted, which means that information is only sent to those people or businesses which have been identified as having an interest in the type of goods or services you supply. The response rate to this type of mail shot is much higher than for a general one – for example, 1 in 10 compared with 1 in 50 responses.

(c) Leaflet distribution

Special leaflets or cards are prepared to advertise goods or services supplied by an organisation. They are then distributed using one or more methods:

- By hand in public places;
- By hand at special exhibitions or trade fairs;
- Through letter boxes to domestic or business premises.

(d) Exhibitions

These are useful for demonstrating products and meeting new customers because they bring together companies with people who are already interested in the subject of the exhibition. You know a lot more about this type of audience and tailor the communications to their needs.

They can prove to be very cost effective when a company is trying to break into overseas markets. Care must be taken over the design of the stand as its visual impact will be very important in attracting customers.

(e) Telephone sales

This method of generating interest in products and services is now widely used. It can be successful if telephone sales staff are highly trained and adopt a polite and friendly approach. The intrusion is, however, resented by many individuals and business people, and there has been much controversy about the way in which information is provided.

As a consequence, there are now guidelines about what is considered to be good practice in this form of sales technique.

- Callers should ask whether the timing of the call is convenient. If it is not, he/she should offer to ring back at a more convenient time. Calls should not be made after 9.00 p.m.
- The caller's name and that of the company responsible for the call should be given at the start of the call and repeated at any time if requested.
- The purpose of the call should be made clear at the start, and the content of the call should be restricted to matters directly relevant to its purpose. Calls should never be made under the guise of market research nor combined with the offer of unrelated goods and services.
- Callers should not mislead, be evasive, exaggerate or use partial truths, and they should answer questions honestly and fully. Companies should accept responsibility for statements made by their sales staff or agents and take appropriate disciplinary action if breaches of these guidelines occur.
- The caller should always recognise the right of the person called to terminate the telephone conversation at any stage and should accept such a termination promptly and courteously.
- If the caller makes an appointment for someone to visit a customer's home or office, he/she should provide a contact point to allow cancellation or alteration of the visit by the customer.
- Customers should be sent copies of all the relevant documents, including agreements, contracts and statements of their legal rights, if they place an order. A cooling-off period of at least seven days should apply following receipt of such papers during which customers may cancel their order and receive any refund necessary.

(f) Mail order

Mail order catalogues giving details of products supplied can be sent out to potential customers. Often some form of targeting is used to make this a more effective method of generating customer orders or enquiries, e.g. charities selling products by mail order often send them to people who have an interest in some other form of charity work. Details may be obtained by purchasing mailing lists from other organisations.

(g) Direct display in shop

Goods are displayed for possible customers to view; enquiries can be made directly to shop assistants.

(h) "Word of mouth"

A company may gain a reputation for supplying high quality goods or services; enquiries may be generated as a result of recommendations from satisfied customers.

Most companies use a number of these techniques to develop interest and enquires about their products. The choice will depend upon the resources available to put into generating customers and the experience of what works for particular products.

For example, a medium-sized building surveyors partnership set up in 1996 initially used the following methods to generate enquiries from customers:

- Advertisements in trade journals, e.g. building journals;
- Advertisements in local newspapers;
- Trade stands at building exhibitions;
- Telephone calls to local building firms;
- Direct mail to building firms within our region of the UK.

As time has progressed, they found that many new customers were recommended by previous satisfied customers. The most successful methods were soon seen to be:

- Advertisements in trade journals;
- Telephone calls to local building firms;
- "Word of mouth" recommendations.

The first two are successful because they are targeted; in particular building on local contacts within the building industry. The best thing about the last method is that it doesn't cost anything, apart from the costs of entertaining customers occasionally!

Types of Enquiry

We shall now look in detail at the form enquiries can take in practice.

(a) Response forms

Certain forms of advertising also include a form for the potential customer to complete and return for further details. The form can then be returned by post or fax.

Such replies will simply comprise the name and address of the potential customer so that the next stage of promotional literature can be sent – usually a brochure or catalogue. There will be no opportunity for the customer to go into details about his/her particular requirements.

(b) Letters

These may be received in response to a variety of methods of generating interest in products or services, and may be sent by post or faxed. An example is given on the next page (Figure 5.2).

Here, though, it is possible for the potential customer to outline his/her requirements and you need to respond specifically to these, whether or not the enquiry can be fully satisfied by sending catalogue, etc.

(c) Telephone enquiries

Potential customers may call just to ask for a catalogue and brochure and details of prices. They would leave an address to which the literature should be sent.

However, they may telephone because they want to discuss their requirements and ask your advice about how your products or services can satisfy these requirements. We consider this in more detail below.

(d) Personal visits by potential customers

These are usually made because the potential customer wants to view your operations and see either the products or meet the staff who will be providing the service. Personal visits are frequently used when the price for a service or good is open to negotiation.

Figure 5.2: Enquiry letter

Treadmill Builders
18 High Street
Nottingham
NT4 9SR

Tel: 0115 093 1234

Green Plumbing Company
25 West Road
London
EC4 98P

21 November 20--

Dear Sir

Advertisement in "Building Weekly" 17 November 20--

With regard to the above advertisement, we would ask you to send us a catalogue and price list for your bathroom fittings.

We have recently been contacted to erect 500 new houses and might be in a position to place a large order if the quality and price of your fittings is right.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours faithfully

T Grantham
Director

(e) On-line enquiries

Suppliers are increasingly developing Internet sites in which potential customers can have access to information about products and prices using "on-line" enquiry facilities. For example, most publishers offer access on-line to their complete catalogue of books, including forthcoming titles, with details of their content, organised by subject category. There is no charge for access so the only cost to the customer is the cost of the time spent on the telephone line.

Dealing with Initial Enquiries

Dealing with enquiries from customers will require you to apply many of the communication skills you have acquired in previous study units. You need to be able to communicate effectively in writing, orally by telephone and orally in person.

There are some important general principles to be considered in learning how to deal with initial enquiries. Let us look at them in more detail.

(a) Responding quickly and politely

Making an initial enquiry may be the first contact a potential customer has with your organisation. As we said in earlier study units, first impressions count! Make sure that any enquiries are dealt with in a polite manner which will create a good impression of your organisation. It is also very important that enquiries are dealt with promptly. Try to send out brochures, catalogues, price lists, etc. by return of post; this again will create a favourable impression with the customer.

Organisations often have standard policies and procedures to ensure a prompt response to enquiries. These may include:

- A target time of a certain number of working days within which information requested will be sent out.
- A target time of a certain number of working days within which any meeting requested by customers will be held.
- Stocks of catalogues, brochures and price lists are monitored; minimum (re-order) levels are set to ensure that adequate materials are always available to be sent out to customers.
- Any shortages of particular materials are noted and re-ordered immediately.

For example, Madrox is a company supplying plumbing parts to builders and DIY individuals. Most enquiries are received by telephone although some are in writing, usually in response to advertisements. Their standard policies to ensure information is sent out promptly are as follows:

- Literature and prices must be sent out in response to telephone enquiries within 2 working days.
- Meetings requested by customers must be held within 5 working days; the choice of location should be left to the customer.
- The Administrative Assistant will control the stock of literature. Minimum (re-order) levels will be set for each type of literature and new supplies will be ordered when stocks reach this level. All staff should notify the Administrative Assistant in cases of difficulty with obtaining the required literature.
- Price lists will be updated regularly by the Administrative Assistant. Checks should be made before sending out price lists that they represent current prices.

(b) Confidentiality

There are two aspects to ensuring confidentiality:

- ***Is the customer entitled to receive information?***

  There are circumstances under which customers may not be eligible for information:

  If they are major competitors and wish to know more information than is freely available from catalogues and brochures. You need to be aware of competitors telephoning your company and pretending to be potential customers. They are usually looking to gain "inside information" which they can use to gain unfair advantage in the market place.

Your organisation may only supply information to certain companies or individuals, e.g. bona fide traders or members of certain professional bodies.

If you receive an enquiry from a customer who you suspect is not entitled to receive it, you should:

(i) Check with your supervisor or manager that the customer is ineligible.

(ii) Respond with courtesy to the enquirer but state firmly, giving your reasons, why he is not entitled to receive the information. For example:

"I am very sorry, Madam, but the information you have requested in not available to persons outside our company. Full details of our products and prices are available in our recent catalogue. Would you like me to send you a copy?"

- ***Does the customer require privacy when making an enquiry?***

  Requests for privacy are usually made in one of two ways:

  (i) A "Private and Confidential" letter is sent and a similarly addressed reply is requested. This may be done because the customer does not want competitors to know that he/she is making enquiries about particular goods or services. Can you think of any reasons why this might be?

  (ii) A customer might request a private interview to discuss his/her requirements and how you might be able to satisfy these requirements. This is often the case when a customer is thinking of expanding or entering a new market but wants to keep his initial enquiries confidential.

In arranging a private interview of this kind you should:

- Ensure that as few people as possible know about the planned interview; only those staff with a direct input need to be informed.
- If the interview is held on your premises, ensure that a private room is available for the meeting.
- Decide whether you need to withhold the customer's name from your receptionist and arrange to meet him/her yourself.
- Treat any outcome of the meeting as confidential, e.g. any proposals or requests for quotations.

Respecting a customer's need for confidentiality is very important and any failure in this area could reflect badly on your company and discourage future enquiries from other customers.

Assessing a Customer's Requirements

As we saw earlier, some customer enquiries simply consist of a request for more information about your products or services. However, many potential customers are unsure about a number of things:

- Their own particular needs and requirements.
- How your products or services match any identified needs.
- Why your products or services are superior to those of your competitors.

In cases like this, it is usually better to deal with enquiries using oral communication techniques. There are two main methods:

(a) By telephone

If the initial enquiry is by telephone, you might wish to continue the call and invite the customer to tell you more about their needs. If these needs are clearly established, you may be able to describe how particular products or services can meet these needs. You should also be able to confirm the availability of products or services or give an estimate of waiting times.

You may find, however, that the caller is unsure about their needs and requirements. In this case it is better to invite the customer to meet for a "face-to-face" discussion.

(b) "Face-to-face" meeting

This is basically a fact-finding interview with two purposes:

- to enable you to find out more about the customer's needs and requirements;
- to enable the customer to find finds out more about your products and services and how they can satisfy his/her needs.

It is important that you should attempt to establish clearly the needs and requirements of the customer. You can provide guidance and this, if skilfully done, can often lead the customer towards your products or services. Remember, however, to respect the customer and not to try to manipulate him/her to suit your own organisation. Only truly satisfied customers usually return!

It is helpful if documentation is used to record the needs and requirements identified and any action required – such as a follow up supply of a quotation and further details.

Example

Flopisoft plc is a large supplier of computer hardware. John Smith, its Technical Director is having a meeting with Teresa Malin from Northfields Training College. They are discussing the college's requirements for equipping a new business training centre.

As the meeting progresses they identify specific requirements and how Flopisoft plc can meet these requirements. John Smith then completes a Customer Requirements Form in which he gives details of:

- Teresa Malin's requirements;
- How Flopisoft plc intend to meet these requirements.

The completed form is illustrated in Figure 5.3. A copy would be given to Teresa Malin as a record of proposals made at the meeting. (In cases where technical details are complex, some further research may be needed before the form can be completed; the form would then be sent to the customer within 2-3 working days.)

Figure 5.3: Customer requirements form

Flopisoft plc

Customer Requirements Form

No: 6219 *Date:* 27 June 20--

Customer: Teresa Malin, Northfields Training College

Details taken by: John Smith, Technical Manager

Enquiry method: Meeting, 10 a.m. 27 June 20--

Customer requirements:

1. 10 PCs in a network configuration
2. 1 Laser printer
3. Breakdown cover
4. Advice on installation and operation
5. Delivery within 10 days of order

Flopisoft recommendations:

	Quantity	*Description*
1.	10	GXM Slimline PC, network enabled, each comprising: Pentium 4 Processor, 1Gb MHz with 256K cache 128Mb 133MHz SDRAM 20GB EIDE Hard Drive with FLS3.1 Controller 17” VGA colour monitor Integrated Direct AGP Graphics Controller 8/24x speed DVD Integrated FLS 10/185 PCI Ethernet Controller 3.5” 1.44MB Diskette Drive Standard UK keyboard MS Mouse MS Windows XP MS Office XP Professional
2.	1	KXP4455 colour laser printer
3.	11	FL 74-X100 Network/ethernet cabling and relay sets

Also to be provided:

4. Unlimited telephone hotline support for the life of the product.
5. All machines covered by a one year parts and labour, return to base warranty.
6. Optional 24 hour response on-site maintenance can be arranged.
7. Machines available within 5 to 7 working days of order.

Further action required:

Supply detailed quotation to Teresa Malin by 3 July 20--

Matching Products/Services to Customer Requirements

We have considered this above. It is important to listen to the customer and try to establish what his/her actual needs and requirements are; then you can use your technical skills to try to identify products or services which you feel will satisfy these needs. It may be that minor modifications can be made to products or services to better satisfy his/her needs.

Avoid trying to manipulate customers so that their needs perfectly match the products or services you have available. It is better to be honest about what you have available and then try to negotiate with the customer to see how:

- You can adapt your products/services to meet their needs.
- He/she can identify any requirements or needs which are really essential; you might then find that you can satisfy their main needs and requirements.

You may also have to translate a customer's needs into a technical specification relating to products or services. The example in Figure 5.3 gives a good illustration of this. The customer's requirement of 10 PCs was translated into a detailed technical specification. (Don't worry if you don't understand the details of this – it's only an illustration!)

Consider the following example.

An accountancy consultant wanted to purchase suitable office furniture. She already had a desk and chair but was looking for ways of storing papers and books, furniture to house a computer and printer, and comfortable furniture for a section of the office used to receive customers.

She therefore had a fairly clear idea of her general requirements but not down to specific items of furniture. On meeting a potential supplier, he was happy to show the range of furniture supplied, but she found it difficult to get him to listen to her requirements. In particular, he did not ask about the size of her office which would have helped assess her requirements more accurately.

The main problem was that most of the furniture was too large for her existing office space and she would have welcomed being shown a range of more compact furniture designed for small offices.

However, the supplier had just introduced a new range of colour co-ordinated office furniture. Whilst the accountant found it attractive but not really suitable to her present needs, the supplier continued to explain the features of the range and how he had already sold suites to accountants for their offices. It appeared that he was more concerned with image than anything else, which may have been his experience with other accountants, but not this one. He did not get the business!

E. SUPPLYING INFORMATION TO CUSTOMERS

Types of Information Supplied

We shall now look in a little more detail at the types of information supplied in response to enquiries.

(a) Brochures and catalogues

These can range from simple pamphlets to glossy brochures with full colour photographs. Their aim is to inform customers of the range and specifications of products or services supplied. You may like to collect a range of these from different suppliers and compare them. Try to identify features which you feel are particularly helpful to potential customers.

An organisation will need to consider:

- The kind of information to give;
- The cost of production of such material;
- Numbers which may be required;

- Distribution methods.

As in all forms of written communication, such brochures and catalogues should be clear, concise and easily understood.

(b) Standard price lists

These are useful for products or services which are supplied as standard and are not tailor-made for individual customers. They need to be updated regularly and should show the time period for which they are applicable. The prices should clearly indicate if taxes (such as VAT) and delivery are included or not.

(c) Quotations

When goods or services are required to satisfy a customer's exact requirements it is usual for a quotation to be supplied. When quotations are made it is very important that correct prices are used and all calculations made are checked for accuracy. Let us first look at the difference between an estimate and a quotation:

- ***Estimate***

  An estimate may be given orally or in writing. It is a rough guide to how much a particular service will cost. It does not commit the supplier to undertaking the job for the exact amount estimated. Have you ever had an estimate for car repairs and then found that the final bill was double the estimate?

- ***Quotation***

  A quotation may be given orally or in writing. It usually involves provision of a detailed specification to arrive at a precise cost. In general, quotations are a fixed price – see the examples in Figures 5.4 and 5.5 below.

As a fixed price is given it is essential that care is taken when preparing quotations to ensure that all prices and calculations are accurate.

- To prepare a quotation you must:
- List the detailed requirement or specifications;
- Prepare any necessary plans or detailed drawings (computer aided design systems (CAD) are helpful here);
- Calculate a precise cost using price lists or specific costings if product/service is tailored to customers' specific requirements;
- Decide whether VAT is payable and whether the quotation is VAT inclusive or exclusive – if inclusive, calculate the VAT to be levied;
- Calculate any trade discounts to be allowed;
- Indicate terms of delivery, including whether items are in stock or quote a specific waiting time.

Example 1

Let us look again at the example involving Flopisoft plc. The detailed quotation John Smith promised to send to Teresa Malin is illustrated in Figure 5.4.

Figure 5.4: Quotation – Example 1

Flopisoft plc

Quotation

No: Q7961 *Date:* 2 July 20--

To: Teresa Malin
Director,
Northfields Training College
London SW1 6BG

Quantity	*Description*	*Unit Price* £
10	GXM Slimline PCs (as per customer requirement form)	1,090.00
1	KXP4455 colour laser printer	3,795.00
11	FL 74-X100 Network/ethernet sets	210.50

All prices are exclusive of VAT

This quotation is valid for 14 days only.

Example 2

In a case where a quotation requires measurements and design, a plan is often submitted with the costings. Let us look at any example of a quotation provided to a householder by Printen Builders Limited. The customers wanted a quotation for the conversion of their garage into a dining room. A representative of Printen's visited the customers and listened to their requirements before taking detailed measurements. The quotation supplied comprised two parts:

- A plan of the proposed conversion with measurements;
- A quotation in the form of a letter stating the work to be done and the total price quoted.

The written part of the quotation is shown in Figure 5.5.

Figure 5.5: Quotation – Example 2

Printen Builders Limited
17 The Square
Leighton Buzzard
LU7 6 RJ

Tel: 01525 37892
Fax: 01525 69142

19 August 20--

Our Ref: RMP/STR

Mr and Mrs D Davies
22 Bideford Green
Leighton Buzzard
LU7 8RM

Dear Mr and Mrs Davies

Conversion of existing garage to dining room and store

Further to our representative's recent visit to your home, we now have pleasure in submitting our quotation for the conversion, subject to survey, of your integral garage to a dining room and store.

The conversion would provide accommodation constructed as per the attached plan. This comprises:

Store:
Access via new half-glazed softwood door. All brickwork, ceiling and floor as existing except for new wall erected to separate from dining room.

Dining room:
After removal of the garage door a new wall with a hardwood bow window(double glazed) would be built across the opening. A new wall would divide the dining room from the store; a new opening would be made from the hallway and fitted with a softwood door to match other internal doors.

Internal walls to be insulated and plastered. Insulated roof to be re-plastered as required.

Existing garage floor would be screeded and adequate radiator and light sockets fitted. A 13 amp double socket would also be fitted.

All work carried out to meet building regulations and completed within 2 weeks of agreed starting date.

Total price: £5,850 including VAT

The above price is a quotation and cannot be varied by us as long as the specification remains unaltered.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

David Green
Senior Accounts Clerk

(d) Computer-generated information

Many companies now provide their staff with computer terminals that display full details of products supplied, prices and stock availability. When telephone or "face-to-face" enquiries are received, the necessary information can be called up on the computer screen and a copy obtained to give to the customer. This system is particularly useful because:

- It has a very fast response time.
- You can tell the customer whether goods are currently in stock or what the waiting time will be.
- Products or services can be matched to customer requirements.
- Written details can be given to the customer through a computer printout.

Delivery of Information Requested

We shall now look briefly at the actual methods of delivering information requested by customers.

(a) By post

This is the normal method for sending out bulky materials such as brochures and catalogues. Most other information – price lists, computer-generated information, estimates, etc. – can also be sent out in this way, accompanied by a letter which allows a person touch to be built into the communication.

Where there has already been some contact with the customer – for example, a meeting to discuss requirements – the covering letter to, say a quotation allows the sender to build on the existing relationship with the customer.

(b) By telephone

This is for simple enquiries only. It is good practice to follow up a telephone call with a letter confirming details and enclosing more detailed literature.

(c) By fax

This is used where speed of response is essential. It is particularly useful for sending out price lists and quotations.

Difficulties in Providing Information

In the previous sections we have assumed that you are able to respond to enquiries from customers and that relevant information is available. However, nothing ever runs smoothly all the time, so we should look at a few difficulties that you might encounter in practice.

(a) Information not available

There are several reasons why information may not be readily available:

- The product or service may be new and still in the final stages of development. Although you may feel that you can provide the product/service for the customer, suitable information has not yet been produced, e.g. catalogues or brochures my not yet be in print.
- To keep costs down you may have decided to dispense with pre-prepared literature or other sources of information.
- Stocks of literature have not been re-ordered and thus information which is normally available cannot be supplied.

Any reasons for non-availability of information must be clearly and politely explained to customers. An alternative should be suggested, e.g. preparation of an information sheet especially for the customer. For example:

"I'm very sorry, Madam, but at present we do not have pre-printed literature available on our new solar-powered heating system. The product has only recently been tested and approved and therefore catalogues and brochures are in the process of being printed. What I can do is to get Keith Jones, our Technical Manager, to prepare an information sheet for you which would give you technical specifications and anticipated costs."

(b) Enquiries outside the limits of your job responsibilities

You will remember that we have stressed earlier how important it is to be aware of the extent of your job responsibilities and not to exceed them. You may be faced with an enquiry that you are unable to deal with for one of the following reasons:

- It requires a technical input outside your experience.
- Advice is requested which has legal implications that you do not feel competent to deal with – for example, you may be asked how the product satisfies certain environmental protection legislation.
- You do not have sufficient information available to deal with the enquiry – for example, you may not be authorised to provide details of discounts for bulk purchases.

In such cases you must explain politely to the customer that you are unable to deal with the enquiry and then refer them to an appropriate colleague or higher authority.

Study Unit 6

Technology and Communications

Contents *Page*

INTRODUCTION

There has been a revolution in the communication of information in the last two decades. As computers have become more powerful and sophisticated in what they can do, and at the same time become smaller, cheaper and easier to use, it is now commonplace for every business desktop to comprise an electronic workstation. Computers have, therefore, become central to communication, enabling vast quantities of information to be conveyed at great speed.

It is important to be aware that this is what computers have enabled us to do. In other words, computers are a tool allowing us to communicate much more efficiently than in the past. It would be wrong, though, to think that this has changed the process of communication itself. The same rules and principles of effective communication still apply, and we shall consider them in respect of the opportunities that computer technology presents for enhancing the written word. In addition, we shall look at how these communication methods can help us in business, particularly the way in which new channels of communication are changing the way we work. However, first we examine the basis on which the technology has opened up the ability to communicate.

A. AN INTRODUCTION TO THE TECHNOLOGY

There are, essentially, two separate technologies driving forward the revolution in communications:

- the computer both in respect of the stand-alone system sitting on someone's desk and the way in which they are connected to each other in networks and through the Internet; and
- the telephone, where telephone systems have an increasingly sophisticated range of facilities and the development of mobile (or cellular) phones has opened up new ways of using the technology.

Computer Systems

A computer is a system, just like any other system. It comprises inputs and a process which transforms those inputs, and produces outputs. The process is undertaken in the ***central processing unit*** or ***CPU***, contained within the computer itself. The inputs are made by a device such as a keyboard or a mouse, and the outputs are displayed on the computer's monitor screen or on a document produced by the computer's printer.

This system works just like any other system. You put something in – say, typing letters on the keyboard – and the CPU manipulates it and produces some output – say, letters appearing on the screen. And, at a basic level, it really is that simple.

So how does it work?

To explain that, we need to recognise one further thing about the process part of the system. The CPU is potentially very clever, but on its own it doesn't know very much. It has to be told what to do with the inputs in order to turn them into the desired output. This is the role of the computer's ***programs*** – they are a set of instructions which enable the computer to do things.

Programs are held in some form of ***secondary storage***, such as the computer's hard disk or a CD-ROM. When they are needed, they are brought into the computer's main or ***primary storage*** or memory. This is, essentially, part of the CPU itself.

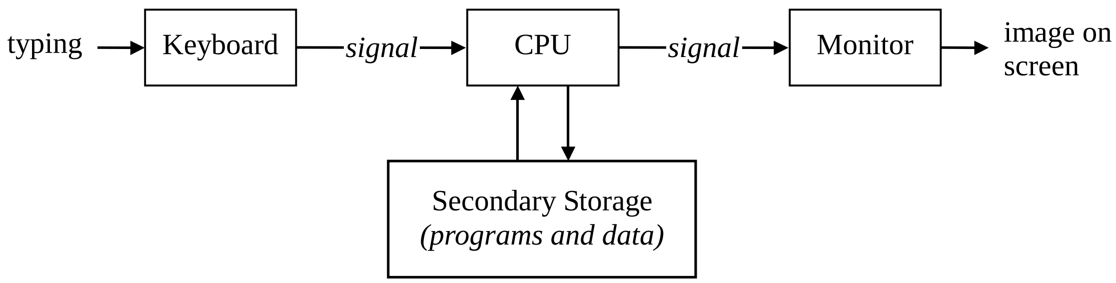
Now . . . . this is how a computer works.

First of all you have to tell the CPU what you want it to do – you choose the program you want it to use (say, a word processing program). The CPU has some very basic programs which enable it to form a link with secondary storage and bring the desired program into its main memory. Once the CPU knows what program it is going to use, you can start the input.

When you press a key on a keyboard, or move or click a mouse, a signal is sent to the CPU. So typing "hello" sends a stream of signals. The signals are received by the CPU and interpreted in accordance with instructions it gets from the program in its main memory. This tells it what to do with the input signals, and it transforms them into two outputs – one you can see and one you can't:

- The one you can see starts as a series of signals from the CPU to an output device which then processes those signals into an intelligible form – images on a screen, in a similar way to a TV.
- The output from the CPU that you don't see is a series of signals which it stores within its main memory or transfers to the secondary storage. These are the data files which contain the work done and they may be saved permanently in the secondary storage by giving them a name (the file name) so that you can access the same piece of work again.

We can summarise the process as follows:



This is a highly simplified account, and you need to know a bit more about the whole process. But don't worry, we shall not be getting too technical. You do not need to know the details of how the signals are sent, how the programs work or how the CPU operates. You do, though, need to know a little more about the input and output devices, some of the features of the CPU, what sorts of program there are, and the storage facilities available.

(a) Input devices

There are six main methods of input as follows:

- ***The keyboard***

  The keyboard is the most widely used device for inputting data into computers.

  The traditional keyboard is a very flexible device since it can be used for a range of purposes, rather than just one (as is the case with a bar-code reader). A keyboard can be used to enter any kind of alphabetical or numeric data, as well as to issue commands and queries, often interacting with information from the computer as displayed on the accompanying screen.

  But the keyboard does have its drawbacks, mainly because it needs people to operate it and people are slow, prone to making mistakes and expensive to employ and train. Other forms of input device are, therefore, increasingly replacing keyboards for entering pre-determined data like the price of a good or account details.

- ***Pointing devices***

  The mouse has become as common as the keyboard in most PC systems, because of the graphical presentation of much information on modern computer screens.

  The "human-computer" interface – or how you view information on a computer screen – used to be a great problem,. In order to be able to communicate with the computer (at least initially, before it had an application running), you had to know what to tell it to do and how such instructions were expressed in a way that the computer would understand. This was far too technical for most people. The use of pictures on the screen ("icons") to represent options, and lists from which particular items could be selected ("menus") changed all that. Pioneered by Apple, the graphical interface is now standard through the use of Microsoft Windows on all PCs.

A ***mouse*** is a small hand-held device with a ball underneath and two or three buttons on the top. When you move the mouse over a surface (such as a desk), the ball moves. This in turn moves a "cursor" – a small arrow – on the screen in exactly the same direction. In this way, the user can position the cursor easily and accurately at any point on the screen. The buttons are used to select an icon or menu item over which the cursor is positioned, and then to execute an activity associated with the icon or menu item.

For portable computers, a mouse is generally inappropriate and is replaced by a ***trackball*** or ***touch pad*** built into the keyboard. The trackball is a kind of upside-down mouse where you move the ball directly with your thumb, rather that pushing it around on a surface. Touch pads register the movement of a finger or thumb across the pad.

Pointing devices enable the user to interact with items displayed on the screen, but they cannot input any original data. This has to be done by some other device, usually a keyboard.

- ***Pen-based devices***

  These devices enable the user to point, write or draw directly on a sensitive screen or other surface using something similar to a pen. A light-pen emits signals which are picked up and interpreted by the screen, whereas other devices work by exerting pressure on a sensitive surface like a graphics tablet.

  The devices are useful for making selections in the same way as pointing devices, and they allow more control in drawing. However, the hoped-for capability of inputting hand-written data has yet to be consistently achieved, because of the difficulty of computers recognising the variety of character portrayed in different (or even the same) people's handwriting.

  Pen-based devices are mainly used in systems dedicated to graphics and design work, or for inputting data in situations demanding equipment which can be hand-held. An example of the latter is the tablet, similar to a clipboard, on which marks can be made by inspectors or other mobile workers as they walk around. The tablet is usually linked to some kind of hand-held portable computer to store the data, which can then be transferred into a main system on return to the office.

- ***Scanners***

  Scanners are devices which can read printed or magnetic data and convert it into electronic signals to be sent to an attached computer. "Read" is perhaps the wrong word, since they do not understand the data itself, but merely recognise a pattern which is transmitted to the computer for decoding.

  Scanners work, in essence, like a photocopier (which some resemble in operation, albeit on a much smaller scale). The document or other item with data on it is passed across a light source or magnetic-sensitive strip, and the resultant pattern – instead of being output as a copy image on another piece of paper – is transmitted to the computer.

  There are a variety of scanning devices available, with the main ones being as follows.

  (i) Image scanners. These operate in a similar way to photocopiers, by taking a picture of the input document and transmitting it as a graphical image to the computer. Thus photographs and drawings, etc. can be captured for use by the computer. Once an image has been electronically stored, it can be manipulated to alter its appearance (make it darker, increase the contrast or even move part of the image within it) and then added to text to make a mix of text and graphics in a printed document, such as a newspaper.

(ii) Optical character recognition scanners. These are similar to image scanners, but the software they use is capable of recognising one or more "fonts" (the style of typeface of a character on a printed document) and correctly identify letters and numbers. There are two main applications for this – to enable the automatic reading of pre-printed data on a document such as an invoice or paying-in slip as part of the recording of a transaction, and to convert text on a printed document into text in the computer, which can then be manipulated within a word processing application.

(iii) Bar code readers. These are now very common in shops and supermarkets. Most products for sale now have a bar code printed on them. This is a series of different width lines and spaces which represent a unique code for that particular product.

Data about each product in the shop is held on computer, including such information as its price, description, and stock level, by reference to this unique code. When the bar code on the item is passed over a reader (or captured by a light pen or similar device), the sale is registered and the information passed to the till.

(iv) Magnetic strip readers. You will be familiar with these. They are the machines which read the black strip on the back of credit cards and other similar plastic cards. They are to be found in most shops and in the "automatic teller machines" (ATMs) outside banks which enable you to draw cash from your bank account without setting foot in the building. The strip on the card in encoded with various details about your account with the bank, credit-card company, shop, etc. When the machine reads this data into a computer, along with details of the amount of the transaction, the computer links up with a computer at the bank, credit-card company, etc., checks the details and determines that funds are available for the transaction. If so, the amount is automatically debited to the account. Sales completed using this system are known as "electronic funds transfer at the point of sale" or EFTPOS.

Magnetic strip readers are not solely used for money transactions. They can also be used to check identification details, or to permit and record movements in and out of a building by staff members and authorised visitors. The magnetic strip on a plastic card can be set up to contain whatever personal information is necessary for the system, and the scanner will identify it.

(v) Optical mark recognition. OMR is typically used for high-volume data entry where the input data is shown as marks in particular places on a document. It is used mainly for market research surveys, time sheets and some order forms. The method of completing the input document is for a mark to be made in selected boxes on the form, such as the start or finish time of an employee at work. The OMR device will read the document in a similar way to an OCR device and identify for the computer exactly which boxes have been marked.

The main advantage of scanners is that they are more or less error-free in recognising pre-determined characters or patterns (the biggest problem being where there is some corruption of the characters or pattern by other marks or folds, creases, etc. in the paper or card). They can also read this data very quickly. When you add the fact that they are cheap to run, scanners can be seen to be very efficient and effective for entering large volumes of data which can be represented graphically.

On the other hand, scanning systems can be expensive to purchase and install. Apart from the scanning device itself, they need specialist programs for the computer and typically require that the whole system to which they are being applied is reorganised around this form of data input. You are then in real trouble if the system breaks down.

Because scanners can only read certain pre-determined characters or patterns, their use is limited to those situations where data can be shown in that form (as, for example, bar codes). However, where there is a high volume of such data to be input, scanning systems are usually well worth the investment.

- ***Video and audio input***

  Video images and sounds can be inputs as well as outputs. They can be electronically stored in a computer in the same way as text or still images, where they can then be manipulated to change their characteristics – for example, to edit the video, change colours, make sound louder or softer, or change their pitch, etc.

  Apart from the use of computers to edit video images and sounds in the making of, say, TV programmes or music, video and sound can also be combined with text and graphics to produce "multimedia" presentations.

- ***Voice recognition***

  This final type of input device is still some way off being a viable proposition in more than limited circumstances. If computers could be made to recognise and, more significantly, understand speech, then we would have the easiest and most natural form of data input. However, there are immense problems with analysing and encoding the meaning of spoken words, not least because of the variety of accents and inflexions, and the ambiguity of language.

  Significant progress has been made, however, in "training" computers to recognise a limited number of words spoken by particular people, and even in the general recognition of certain words (or sounds) made by anyone. Systems using voice recognition are increasingly found where people need to input data without using their hands, as in some product inspection lines or in baggage and parcel handling and sorting at airports or by delivery companies. Development of more general voice recognition for data input as an alternative to the keyboard is still very slow, and error-prone, and this is unlikely to be a real possibility for some considerable time.

(b) The central processing unit

The CPU is the heart of a computer. In a microcomputer it is a tiny component, not much bigger than one square centimetre, but nevertheless comprises tens or hundreds of thousands of components and circuitry to link them together. Fortunately, you do not need to understand the hugely complicated way in which this works. We shall simply two aspects of here.

- ***Type of processor and speed***

  Computers have grown in power – and hence the ability to undertake increasingly sophisticated applications – through the development of more and more powerful processors. Processor power is measured mainly by the speed at which it can execute series of instructions. The faster the speed, the faster the CPU can work. These speeds are measured in megahertz, with 1 MHz equalling one million operations per second. You will probably be familiar with the company name of the market leader Intel and its Pentium series of processors. These, and other manufacturers such as Athlon, have pushed up computing power from around 60 MHz in the early 1990s to well over 1GHz (1,000MHz) and rising.

- ***Main memory***

  Although not strictly part of the CPU, the computer's main or primary memory is usually thought of as part of it because it is integral to its operation. Anything stored in the main memory can be accessed and read by the CPU, and be changed (or overwritten) with new data during the execution of the program instructions.

This type of memory is known as ***random access memory (RAM).*** (This can be contrasted with ***read only memory (ROM)*** which, as its name suggests, comprises permanently stored information which cannot be changed or overwritten.)

Main memory is only a temporary store. Data and instructions are only kept there as long as they are needed. When they are not, or when the storage is getting full, the CPU passes them back into secondary storage. Data and instructions cannot be kept in the main memory permanently. That is because, when the machine is switched off, the main memory is erased.

Clearly, the larger the main memory, the more program instructions and data can be held there for the CPU to access. This will also reduce the constant need to switch instructions and data to and from secondary storage when they are not needed or are needed. As a result, processing will be speeded up.

Modern CPUs are capable of working with increasingly large amounts of main memory. Consequently, the amount of RAM common on most PCs now has risen from the 4Mb common on machines in the early 1990s to 128, 256 or 512Mb available on modern PCs.

(c) Output devices

There are three main types of output device:

- ***Screens***

  All computer systems have some form of screen output device. For all but portable computers, this is invariably a monitor like a TV (and using the same cathode-ray-tube technology) which can produce very clear, high quality resolution images virtually instantaneously. Monitors are also known as visual display units (VDUs).

  Monitors come in a variety of sizes, as TVs do. The standard screen size used to be 14", but larger screens are becoming more common as their prices have dropped, with 15", 17", 19" and even 21" ones being available. The major advantage of such screens is not just that things are bigger on them but that you can see more of documents at a readable size. For example, on a 14" screen, a whole page of standard-size paper (A4) can be displayed but the text on it, at a normal type size such as 12 point, will be completely unreadable, On a 17" screen, that text will be just about readable and on a 19" screen two pages can be displayed side by side very clearly.

  Portable computers use a different technology – liquid crystal display (LCD) – which is inferior to the TV-style monitor but has the advantage of being flat, very thin and light. These screens can be incorporated into the lid of a portable computer, and hence are reduced to the size of the machine’s keyboard.

- ***Printers***

  Virtually all computer systems have printers attached as output devices. These enable permanent records of selected information to be produced. Such paper copies of information are also referred to as “hard copy”, indicating their permanence as opposed to the temporary nature of information on a screen.

  The choice of what is the most appropriate printer will depend upon the user’s requirements in respect of such factors as print quality, range of fonts and type of graphics to be printed, speed of printing and cost (of both purchase and operation).

  There are basically three types of printer available, categorised according to how they produce their output:

  (i) ***Serial printers***. These print one character at a time. The main types are inkjet and dot matrix printers.

  Inkjet printers work by effectively spray painting each character onto the paper. They can provide high quality output, including in colour. They can also produce a wide range of fonts and some graphics. Typical speeds are between four and eight pages per minute for black-and-white printing, which equates very well with laser printers with whom they are now serious rivals. Inkjet printers can also be very small, which makes them ideal for use with portable computers.

Dot matrix printers work in basically the same way as a typewriter, by impacting a print head onto an inked ribbon which transfers the image onto the paper. They are capable of producing a number of different fonts and sizes, but are limited by the size of the print head and the pre-programmed configurations of available fonts. They do not really have any graphics capability. Dot matrix printers can produce good quality output, but it is invariably clear that the characters are composed of a matrix of dots. They print at comparable speeds to inkjet printers. Dot matrix printers are still used in many organisations for producing "near-letter-quality" high-volume output, because they are cheap to run and require little maintenance apart from occasionally replacing the ribbon.

(ii) ***Line printers***. These work by memorising a line at a time and printing that line character by character. They can be exceptionally fast, producing anything up to the equivalent of 30 pages per minute. They work in the same way as a dot matrix printer, but the print head is of a fixed configuration and so no variety of fonts is available. The print quality is low and they can be noisy. They are used for the fast printing of large volumes of information where the output quality is not a factor – for example, producing large internal reports (such as financial statements) and high-volume printing of customer account statements.

(iii) ***Page printers***, the main type of which are ***laser printers***. They work by projecting an image of the whole page onto a rotating drum inside the printer which then attracts ink from a cartridge to form an inked impression which can be transferred to paper. They can produce very high quality output in virtually whatever font and type size is desired, and can print any kind of graphic perfectly. Certain laser printers can print in colour. They are undoubtedly the best printers, but that comes at a cost. They tend to be expensive, costing at least twice as much as inkjet printers and not bringing any real gains in speed. Laser printers for high volume work, with faster speeds and large paper storage capacity, cost well over £1,000, and those capable of producing colour output are even more.

- ***Voice output***

  Talking computers are, technically, not that difficult to produce. Speech is, after all, just sound organised in a particular way. However, the quality of voice synthesisers is not very good, principally because of the difficulty of incorporating tone and inflexion to assist with conveying meaning. This makes them particularly unattractive for interactive use, except in situations where visual output is not possible – for example, for blind people using a computer.

  There are though, an increasing number of applications using voice output to provide information by means of the telephone: for example, giving standard responses to pre-determined types of enquiry about film times and bookings.

- ***Other types of output***

  Information can be output onto a variety of media apart from paper. Video and sound can be produced on tape, and documents can be printed onto film or directly onto image plates for high quality, large-volume specialist printing. Output can also be onto microfilm or microfiche, in which case very large amounts of information are printed in miniature form to enable its storage in a less bulky fashion than if it had been printed on paper.

(d) Storage

You should be well aware by now that there are two types of storage in a computer:

(i) the main memory or primary storage, which is essentially part of the CPU; and

(ii) secondary storage.

We have already touched on a number of points relating to the main memory, so we shall concentrate here on the various secondary storage devices. First, though, we shall consider a number of points about computer memory in general and about the way data is stored.

- ***Memory***

  As we have already seen, there are two types of memory available to a computer:

  (i) random access memory (RAM); and

  (ii) read only memory (ROM).

  Data stored in RAM can be accessed and changed (or overwritten) as a result of processing by CPU. Data stored in ROM can only be read – it cannot be transformed and written back into storage. This makes ROM storage ideal for instruction programs, since it is not possible to alter them by mistake or by design.

  We have also mentioned measurements of storage capacity, or the size of memory, available to different computers several times. It is now time to explain this.

  Memory is measured in "bytes". A **byte** is a grouping of 8 bits which the computer can operate on as a single unit. As the power of computers has increased, so has the amount of data they process and hence need to be stored, either in the main memory or in secondary storage. These stores need to be capable of holding many, many bytes, and it is usual now to talk not of individual bytes, but of thousands, millions or even billions of bytes. The terminology is as follows:

  1000 bytes = 1 kilobyte (or 1 Kb);

  1000 kilobytes = 1 megabyte (or 1 Mb);

  1000 megabytes = 1 gigabyte (or 1 Gb);

  1000 gigabytes = 1 terabyte (or 1 Tb).

  (Strictly speaking, we should say that each 1000 is, in fact, 1024 due to the way in which the binary number system works, but this is again getting too technical.)

- ***Data and files***

  Individual items of data – say the character "z" – are not much use on their own. They are combined with other items of data to form a meaningful whole – for example, the word "zebra". Computers do not, generally, store the individual items, but rather store the whole. They store combinations of data in a whole package called a "file" which is useful for a particular reason – for example, as a package of instructions (a program file) or package of words (a file for a word processing application).

  Files have to be identifiable or the computer would not be able to find them. They therefore have names. For data produced by a user, the name is given by the user when saving the file into the computer's secondary storage.

  The name consists of two parts: a ***filename*** and an ***extension***, the two parts being separated by a full stop (called a "dot"). Thus, a file could be known as "MYFILE.DOC". The file name is the part that the user identifies and the extension is a identifier of what type of file it is – so ".DOC" identifies it as a file for the word processing application Microsoft Word. Generally speaking, the user does not need to add the extension, this being done automatically by the program being used.

- ***Secondary storage***

  The role of secondary storage is to maintain a permanent record of data files and programs which may be made available to the CPU.

  There are a number of different secondary storage mediums, which can be classified in two different ways:

  (i) whether they are a permanent part of the computer's internal structure (the fixed hard disk) or an external object which can be attached to the computer in order to input or receive data;

  (ii) the medium used for storage – magnetic tape, magnetic disks or optical disks.

  Magnetic tape is the oldest form of storage device for computers and is still used, although now only for particular types of application. Tapes have very high storage capacities, usually in gigabytes, and are relatively cheap. They can also transfer data to or from a computer at very high speeds.

  The major limitation on the use of tapes as a storage medium is the way in which data files are stored. They work in exactly the same way as audio or video tapes, which means that data is recorded sequentially along the length of the tape, item by item. This is OK for storing the data, but causes problems when you want to retrieve something. In order to find a particular file, you have to search through the whole of the tape, just as you would to find a particular piece of music on an audio tape. Direct access to one file on the tape is not possible at any great speed.

  As a consequence, tapes are unsuitable for the selective retrieval of data files and are used only where all the data on the tape is going to be required, and required in the sequence in which it appears on the tape. Such situations include:

  (i) the input or output of large amounts of complete data stores, such as the payroll of a large company or the customer accounts of banks or credit companies, this being invariably associated with the use of mainframe computers to undertake the processing; and

  (ii) back-up copies of all the files held on a PC using another medium for its secondary storage, but needing a further copy of the data for security purposes in case the machine fails.

  Increasingly, these advantages are being lost as the capacity of optical disks has developed.

  Data files are stored on ***magnetic disks*** in a very different way to tapes – on "tracks" on the disk. Accessing and reading stored data, or entering data onto a disk, is by means of a "read/write" head which moves across the rotating disk until the correct track is located or a vacant area found for storage. This means that any file can be found very quickly. These principles are the same for the three main types of magnetic disk storage associated with computers – diskettes and the internal hard disk.

  Diskettes are 3½" diameter flexible disks encased in a solid plastic envelope to protect them from damage. They are very cheap and, because of their size and robust nature, are easily portable. Their main use is to store data away from the computer as a security back-up, or to transfer data from one computer to another. However, their capacity is small – usually 1.44Mb.

  A computer's ***hard disk*** is usually its main secondary storage facility. It comprises a single, hard magnetic disk sealed with its own unit to protect it from dust or any other damage. Hard disk capacities have increased hugely over recent years, and memory sizes of over 20Gb are now common.

Magnetic disk technology is limited by the density with which tracks can be packed onto the disk, the speed of rotation and the movement of the read/write head. Optical disk technology does not have the same limitations and hence offers the opportunity of larger storage capacity and faster access.

Data is stored on an ***optical disk*** by means of microscopic pits on the surface of the disk, which is covered with a clear plastic protective coating. These pits can be read by a laser scanning the moving disk at very high speed. The principle is exactly the same as that used on compact disks which store music.

Optical disks first appeared in general use in the mid-1990s as ***CD-ROM*** disks with capacities up to 4Gb. These were mainly used to supply very large programs which, until then, had required many floppy disks to hold the same amount of data. (The programs would be copied onto the computer's hard disk for secondary storage.) Certain types of multimedia applications could not be divided up across a number of disks, so the advent of CD-ROM enabled them to be distributed for the first time.

Originally, CDs were a read-only medium and, unlike magnetic disks, data could not be deleted or overwritten on them, or new data stored. However, that has now changed, with CD writers available at reasonable cost and the full read/write optical disk becoming standard.

As the software and applications for computers has developed, so too has the demand for storage with even higher memory capacities. Most recently, this has seen the introduction of ***DVD*** (digital versatile disks) which can store up to 16Gb. As with the advent of CDs, these are limited at present to read-only uses, but DVD writers will be available very shortly.

(f) Software

Software is the term used to describe ***the programs which instruct the computer to do things***. There are two types of these programs.

- ***Systems software***

  These are the programs which control and manage the operation and performance of the computer itself. The most important part of such software is the "operating system" – an integrated set of programs which manage CPU operations, control input, output and storage activities and devices (or at least some of them), and support the execution of applications programmes.

  By far the most important aspect of this, from a user's perspective, is the management of files. The operating system controls and manages the location and status of all the files stored within the computer – principally, in secondary storage – and enables them to be copied, moved and deleted.

  The operating systems of large mainframe computers tend to be specific to the particular manufacturer. Thus, for example, IBM mainframes usually use an operating system called MVS, whereas DEC mainframes use VMS. Whilst they perform the same roles, these operating systems are not the same; and the applications which run on them have to be specially written to interact with the particular operating system. So we say that machines with different operating systems are "not compatible".

  The issue of compatibility is very important for applications software. Since applications programmes have to interact with the operating system, they can only run on machines using the operating system for which they were written. If every computer manufacturer used its own operating system, applications would have to be specific to particular machines. However, if they all used the same operating system, then the same applications programs could be used on all machines.

This is what happened among microcomputer manufacturers in the 1980s. They all (or nearly all) adopted a standard operating system known as ***MS-DOS***. This was originally developed by IBM for use on its own PCs, but was subsequently licensed to and further developed by Microsoft. The standardisation of operating systems resulted in a huge expansion of the PC market and allowed applications developers to devote massive resources to providing programs which could be used on all the millions of compatible machines around the world.

Microsoft subsequently developed ***Windows*** as an extension of the MS-DOS operating system, providing a very user-friendly graphical interface between the computer and the user. The dominance of Windows as a common basis for almost all PCs has further stimulated the development of applications software.

- ***Applications software***

  Applications software are the programs which direct the computer to undertake specific information-processing activities desired by the user.

  It is usual to distinguish between general-purpose programs and application-specific or dedicated programs.

  Dedicated programs are those which have only one particular business purpose, such as payroll processing or accounting, and can only be used for that specialised application in a business.

  General-purpose programs are those which perform particular types of common information-processing activity (such as word processing or database management) which can be used for a variety of different purposes or applied in different ways. There are four main types of general purpose program:

  (i) ***word processing*** – which allow the creation, editing and printing of documents by electronically processing text data, and is a key element of office automation systems;

  (ii) ***spreadsheets*** – which allow the manipulation of figures according to their mathematical and other relationships (for example, adding, multiplying, comparing, etc.), and are a key element of decision support systems;

  (iii) ***databases*** – which allow the storage and retrieval of data and records and their manipulation, and are a key element of transaction processing and management information systems; and

  (iv) ***graphics*** – which cover both the graphical representation of numerical data and the creation, editing and printing of images for presentational purposes, and are an aspect of office automation systems.

  It is possible to obtain integrated packages combining all four main types into one “suite” of programs, which all act in a similar way and facilitate sharing data between them. Such integrated packages invariably have graphics programs (concentrating on presentational applications) which are inferior to specialist ones, although for the purposes of most users they are perfectly acceptable.

Computer Communications

At one time, computers were very large machines located in one part of a big organisation and undertaking specific tasks. The only form of communication they had with the outside world was the reams of paper they produced, in such forms as internal financial reports, invoices and wage slips. At the very most there would be only a few terminals scattered around the same building, through which data could be entered.

Before too long, though, two particular communication needs arose:

- the need to transfer data from one (mainframe) computer to another, principally in respect of the paying of employees (where information needed to be communicated between the computers of the employer and its bank); and
- the need for terminals to be located far from the main computer, as in airline agents communicating with the airline's central computer for booking seats and flights.

The spread of personal computers has increased the scale of communications enormously – within organisational systems, between organisations and between individuals. Computers of all kinds are now regularly connected up to other computers. How is this done, and what are the flows of data and information between them?

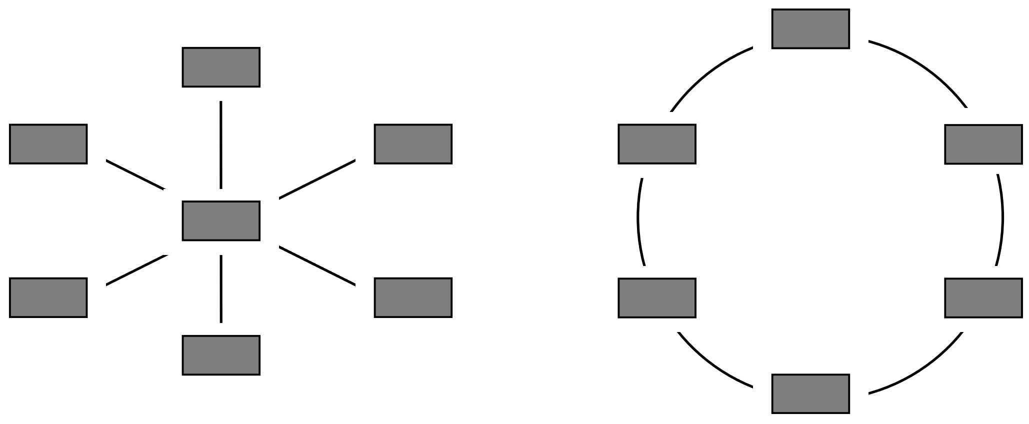
(a) Networks

A computer network is any grouping of computers which are connected to each other and are able to exchange data. So, a network can be just two microcomputers or the worldwide Internet.

There are, basically, two ways in which groups of computers may be connected:

- in the form of a star, where there is one central computer and a number of satellite computers (sometimes in a "master-slave" relationship, as when a central mainframe computer is served by a number of terminals); and
- in the form of a ring, where all the computers are linked together and data can be easily exchanged directly between all of them.

Figure 6.1: Star and ring networks



Star formation *Ring formation*

The technicalities of how this is done, and the problems of transferring data between incompatible systems, need not bother us here. However, we do need to be aware of certain features of the network connections.

Networks can be classified into two types – local, and wide, area networks – based, essentially, on the geographical location of the computers being connected.

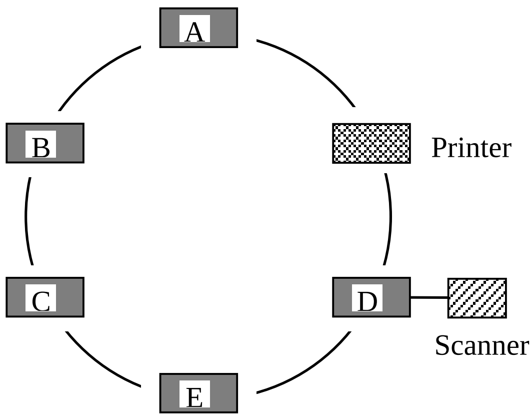
- ***Local area networks (LANS)***

  LANS link together computers over small distances, usually in the same building, by direct cabling between them.

One feature of such networks is that devices can then be shared between users. Figure 6.2 shows a network of five PCs and one printer. All the computers can use the printer to produce output documents.

A device which provides a service to the other computers on the network is known as a “server”. So, the printer in the network shown in Figure 6.2 would be a “printer server”.

Figure 6.2: Shared devices on a LAN



Devices can also be connected to the network through one of the linked computers. In the example in Figure 6.2, one of the PCs (PC D) has an image scanner attached as an input device. The data entered by this device becomes available to all the computers on the network, so if the user of PC A wants to include a photograph in a document he or she is producing, the photograph can be scanned at PC D and the file containing the electronically stored image may be accessed back at PC A.

It is also quite common for one of the computers on the network to act as a “file server” for the other computers. This would normally be a PC with a much larger secondary storage capacity or a minicomputer. Files which are to be stored for general access by all the computers are kept on this file server, which then acts in effect as a further secondary storage facility for the other computers. The file server may also contain all (or some) of the applications software used by the network.

- ***Wide area networks (WANs)***

  WANs link together computers (and sometimes other devices) over longer distances, where direct cabling is not possible or where the distance may cause corruption of the data as it travels the cable.

  In this case, some other communication medium is necessary. This usually takes the form of linking into the public telephone network. However, the lines used for telephones are not always (or even often) capable of handling the very large quantities of data which people are interested in transmitting between computers. They lack sufficient “***bandwidth***” to enable the smooth and fast transfer of data. Hence, there are demands to upgrade the standards of telephone lines computers. Cable technology, based on optical fibres, offers one solution to the problem. Other methods are the use of radio waves bounced off of satellites in space.

  In order for any data to be transferred between computers through a WAN, the data has to be converted from the type of electronic signal used by computers into a different type of electronic signal which can be transmitted through the telephone system or via a satellite and, once it is received by another computer, it has to be converted back again. This is done by a device called a "***modem***" which is usually located inside the computer.

Otherwise wide area networks operate in exactly the same way as LANS. Indeed the two can be combined: so PC E in Figure 6.2, for example, could be located several miles away (or even in a different country or different continent) from the rest of the network.

A network – whether it is a local or wide area network – which is dedicated to the needs of a particular organisation and enables information to be shared over it is called an ***Intranet***.

(b) The Internet

The Internet is, essentially, just a particular example of a wide area network into which ***any*** computer can be connected.

- ***How does it work?***

  The easiest way to understand this is to consider how you, as a PC user, might get connected.

  The first point is that you, as a PC user, cannot connect your computer directly into this WAN. The WAN that comprises the Internet links together large scale computers which are capable of handling the volume of data to be transmitted and able to provide the services which most people want from the Internet. These computers are generally the computers of large companies, government departments and agencies, universities, etc. There are also a large number of companies set up specifically to enable those with smaller computers to access the Internet – these are known as "Internet Service Providers" (ISPs). Examples of such ISPs are AOL, Demon, Freeserve, BTInternet, Virgin.net, etc. For a monthly fee or, in some cases, for free, these providers will let you connect with them in order to gain access in the WAN that is the Internet.

  If you are PC user in an organisation which itself is connected to the Internet, it is likely that the LAN or WAN of that organisation will also give access to the Internet. Thus, if you were a student at a university, Internet connection would simply be one of the facilities offered over the university's own network.

  If you are not in such an organisation, you would need to connect via an ISP. This is the way in which most individuals and small companies connect. All you need is a computer with a modem and a web browser – a particular piece of software which is capable of reading the information available on the Net (the main ones being Microsoft's Internet Explorer and Netscape Navigator) – which most computers now have as standard.

- ***What does it do?***

  The main uses of the Internet are the sending of E-mail and accessing the World Wide Web. There are a number of other specialist services available through the internet, but these are the main uses.

  We shall examine E-mail in a later section, so here we shall concentrate on the features of the Web.

  The Web comprises pages of information which may be accessed by anyone connected to the Internet. This information is put there by companies, government departments and agencies, educational institutions, all sorts of different groups and individuals. It may be designed for commercial reasons – to advertise or actually sell goods and services over the Net (e-commerce) – for entertainment or purely to share particular information with anyone interested in that subject. Most of the information is available free of charge, but in some cases you need to register with the information provider in order to access it (for example, many journals are available on-line only by subscription).

Organisations (and sometimes individuals) making pages of information available on the Web have what is known as a "***web site***". This is simply a series of ***web pages***, linked together.

Telephone Systems

The developments in computer technology have been mirrored in telephone systems. Indeed, the technology is the same in many instances, particularly in respect of the development of communications media with the use of new forms of cabling, radio waves and satellites.

We can distinguish telephone systems according to whether they are based on land lines for connection or use radio signals to facilitate mobile use.

(a) Land line systems

There has been an explosion of new facilities available on telephones, originally through the internal systems within organisations and, increasingly now, available within public telephone systems. These include the following.

- The ability to transfer calls direct to another phone on the same system.
- The ability to be told if another call is received whilst you are already making a call one the same line.
- The ability to hold one call whilst taking another on the same line, and to switch between those calls.
- The ability to divert calls to another phone – either if your phone is busy (and you do not want to be disturbed), if your phone is not answered after a certain number of rings or if you know you are going to be away from your phone.
- The ability to leave messages using an answer phone or through voicemail facilities.

(b) Mobile phones

Mobile phones have experienced huge growth in recent years. They enable all the benefits of telephone communication without the necessity of being tied to a land-based telephone. They can, therefore, be used anywhere.

In addition to all the facilities available through land line telephones, mobile phones offer two additional facilities.

- The ability to send text messages using letters corresponding to particular numbers on the keypad. This can be very useful for sending very quick messages, but the nature of the keys and the difficulty in selecting individual letters makes this a very cumbersome means of sending anything but short notes. It is mainly used for personal, as opposed to business, purposes.
- The ability to link to the Internet. The latest mobile phones – known as WAP phones – can connect to the Internet and enable the user to access web pages as well as sending and receiving E-mails. Again, there are problems with this in that the viewing size of the screen on a mobile phone is extremely small, limiting the amount of information that can be displayed, and the limitations of the keypad make typing E-mails very difficult. However, the ability to receive E-mails when away from a computer does have benefits in speeding up communications.

(c) Pagers

Pagers are small devices which certain people may carry with them in order to be alerted about a need to do something or contact someone. Paging systems do not actually use telephones as such. They enable individuals to be contacted by a central service – in most cases, the employing organisation, but systems are in use by other groups – and for a very short message to be left. The person receiving the message may be required to telephone someone immediately on receipt (as in hospitals where paging messages are used to contract particular doctors as necessary).

(d) Fax or facsimile

A forerunner of email, this is just a method of sending a hard (paper) copy of a document over the telephone line. It allows letter type communication without the built-in delay of actually transporting the specific piece of paper from the communicator to the recipient.

Fax machines convert the document into electronic form for transmission via the telephone system and the machine at the receiving end converts the signal back into text and prints an exact copy of the original document. Fax machines may be dedicated pieces of equipment or they may be dual purpose, also being normal telephones. Most computers also have the ability to act as fax machines, sending and receiving documents.

B. TECHNOLOGY AND WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS

All organisations – whether public or private, manufacturing or service, etc. – rely heavily on the written word as their main means of communication. Increasingly, the method of producing those written words is being computerised and this offers immense possibilities by way of enhancing messages and, thereby, making them more effective.

The technology has made a tremendous difference to the range of opportunities available to improve the production and presentation of written communication. It is now easy to produce drafts and correct them quickly, and to include graphics, colour, different letter fonts, etc. all within the one document.

However, these possibilities must be seen as what they are – tools to enhance the work produced. No matter how sophisticated the presentation of any document, there still remains the need for careful thought and preparation – for precision, clarity and structure – and this cannot be undertaken by the technology itself. Underlying effectiveness are the same principles of good written communication that we have seen previously in respect of letters, etc.

Moreover, effectiveness in the use of the enhancements available is itself based on principles of good practice.

In the following sections, we shall review some of the ways in which computer applications can help to enhance the presentation of written materials. We shall also consider some of the pitfalls.

Word Processing

Most written documentation produced in modern businesses is prepared by the use of word processing applications. It is now common for all individuals at the workplace to have their own desktop computer and to be expected to produce their own letters, memoranda, etc. – rather then sending them to a central “pool“ for preparation. The ability to use a word processing application is, therefore, a basic skill required in many organisations today.

Word processing applications are computer programs used to create and print written documents. Once text has been input to the document, the program allows for any changes – correcting mistakes, adjusting the layout, deleting sections, moving blocks of text, etc. – to be made quickly and easily.

One of the outcomes of this is that written materials often go through several drafts before the document is finalised. Far from speeding up the process of communication, it can in fact slow it down! This also gives rise to the explosion of paper that has accompanied the introduction of word processing into organisations – rather than the promised paperless office. There are a number of obvious inefficiencies built into this process which should be minimised. Care should be taken to ensure that redrafting is kept to a minimum – aim for just a first draft and a final version.

There are many different types of word processing application available, although the two main programmes used on PCs are Microsoft Word and Corel WordPerfect. Most of these packages have a range of features which go a long way beyond the simple input and editing of text. Whilst most of these features are of a very specialist nature, certain elements are commonly used in business communication.

(a) Templates and boilerplates

These are features which standardise the style and content of business documents.

Templates provide a pre-designed framework for the insertion of text into a document, such as a letter or memorandum. They set out the margins, position of text on the page, font size and style, etc. which is applicable to the particular document. This can be important in preparing, for example, letters to be printed onto pre-printed stationery containing the company's name, address and details, etc. As we have seen previously, letters in particular are important in forming an impression of an organisation, and it is not uncommon for a great deal of time and expense to be put into the design of stationery, including the way in which the words appear on the page.

Most organisations use standardised documents to some extent. These are usually letters, but may be other documents such as agenda, which contain the same information for all the recipients and/or need to be prepared over and over again. The standard text is usually personalised with particular details applicable to the individual recipient (name, address, etc.) or applicable to the particular occasion, such as an individual meeting.

The standard text is called *boilerplate* text.

There has been a move away from the heavy use of completely standardised letters commonplace only a few years ago. People are no longer happy receiving materials which do not apply in full to their own particular circumstances. As a result, boilerplate text is often provided as a series of optional paragraphs each containing different text suitable for common specific incidences. The development of mailmerge facilities also allows increasing amounts of personal detail to be included.

(b) Mailmerge

Mail merge is the facility to automatically add personal details to a document. The personal information is drawn from a database held elsewhere within the computer.

The technique works by inserting special "fields" into the main document, into which the personal information will be placed. These fields are given names which correspond to the field names in a database containing details of the recipients. The database may be specially prepared for a particular mailing, or may be an existing database within the organisation.

You will probably be familiar with the use of mailmerge facilities for inserting names and addresses onto letters, and possibly the insertion of other details such as account balances or payments, etc. However, increasingly sophisticated information can be added from large data files, including locations, dates of previous correspondence, contact names and even short phrases appropriate to the individual.

(c) Editing facilities

Word processing packages offer a wide range of facilities to edit the text once you have keyed it in.

- It is possible to select individual words, groups of words or whole paragraphs and ***delete*** them, ***move*** them to a different position in the document or ***copy*** them for insertion elsewhere or even in another document. It is also possible to ***paste*** copied text or graphics into the document (either from a different position in the same document or from an entirely separate document).
- The whole document can be searched to ***find*** particular words and, if wanted, to ***replace*** them by different words.

- The whole document can also be automatically ***checked*** for spelling mistakes or against particular forms of grammar. You need to be careful about the use of a spell checker. It only detects spelling mistakes, so a word that is incorrectly spelt but the incorrect spelling forms another correctly spelt word would not be detected – for example, typing "then" or "thank" when you meant to type "than ". This means that you always need to read through and check your work yourself.
- Finally, it is possible to obtain certain ***statistics*** about the whole document – for example, number of words, time spent editing, etc.

(c) Formatting

Most word processing applications provide a wide range of features for formatting the appearance of the text on the page. There is often a strong temptation to make excessive use of these with the most inappropriate results. Remember, though, the maxims we stressed earlier in the course about keeping communications clear and simple. The objective in using any enhancement is to aid the clarity of the message. They should be used, therefore, to underpin structure and emphasis, not just for effect.

Formatting can be applied to either words and phrases or to a whole paragraph.

- ***Words and phrases***

  Individual words or phrases can be formatted by applying different ***fonts*** or font enhancements to them.

  Fonts are the style of the letters as they appear on the printed page. Most word processing applications offer a large choice of different fonts – some a bewildering range. However, it is rare for a document to need more than one font, or at the most two (with a different one being used, perhaps, for a main heading).

  Structure and emphasis can be enhanced through the use of different font sizes and through applying **bold** or *italic* characteristics to words or phrases. Headings in both letters and reports are invariably emboldened. A hierarchy of headings can be given visual emphasis by the use of different sizes, with the size reducing from the first level headings to the lowest level. (However, it is rare for there to be a need for anything greater than a one or two point difference between the largest heading and the size of the main text.)

- ***Paragraphs***

  Apart from applying styles to the characters on the page, it is possible to format how each paragraph appears. Again, it is important to use this feature carefully and consistently to support the clarity of the communication. In many organisations, the paragraph style – position on the page, alignment, etc. – will be defined by the templates used for particular types of document.

  The main formatting features include:

  (i) ***Alignment*** – running either from the left hand margin or to the right hand margin, centred between the margins (which is often used for main headings) or "justified" where the text is aligned precisely to both the left and right hand margins, with some compensatory adjustments to the spacing between words.

  (ii) ***Indentation*** – whereby the left (or right) hand margin for a particular paragraph can be set further in than the page margins, one particular feature being the "hanging indent" where the indentation is not applied to the first line (as in these paragraphs).

  (iii) ***Tab stops*** – whereby text can be consistently aligned at particular intervals across the page by the use of the "tab" key on the keyboard. Tab stops are set at specified measurements from the left hand margin and may be set to align text running from the left at the tab stop, to the right at the tab stop, centred around it, or at a decimal point (for figures). (Setting out large amounts of text or figures in tabular form may be more easily achieved by using the "table" feature of the word processing application.)

(iv) ***Bullets*** – the insertion of a symbol before the paragraph, used to give emphasis and pick out individual points in a list.

(v) ***Numbering*** – the automatic numbering of paragraphs which follow each other, creating a numbered list.

Working with Graphics

There is often a need to present information graphically in documents, as well as in oral presentations. We shall consider some of the basic rules for using visual enhancements in this way in the next unit. Here we shall briefly consider how the technology may be used to produce them.

(a) Drawing

Simple line diagrams with text can be produced in the main word processing applications. These have features which enable straight and curved lines of different widths (with or without arrowheads), rectangles and circles to be drawn. The latter two shapes can usually be filled with a variety of shadings or even colour (if you have a colour printer).

More complex drawings can be produced in specialist drawing applications like CorelDraw or Adobe Illustrator. These are professional graphics packages although they are relatively easy to use. There are other, less comprehensive, applications available which will meet the requirements of most self-drawn diagrams.

The process of transferring material from one application (say, CorelDraw) into another (say, WordPerfect) is called ***importing***. Most modern word processing applications support this. Many also support a form of transfer known as ***embedding***. Under this, a link is formed between the two files such that if the item that has been embedded is changed in either of the applications, it is automatically updated in the other application.

(b) Charts

Numerical information is invariably easier to assimilate if it is presented graphically – in the form of graphs, bar-charts, pie-charts, etc.

Again, the main word processing applications have the facility to produce such charts from tables of figures. However, it is often the case that the information is held on a spreadsheet elsewhere. Spreadsheets also have the facility to produce charts of varying types from selected data, which can then be imported or embedded into the written text.

(c) Clip Art

Many applications provide libraries of images which can be imported into documents as illustrations. Such libraries of images are also available to buy separately. It is possible, therefore, to access a very wide range of pictures under just about any subject under the sun and to use them to "jazz up" your work.

The problem with this is that most of these clip art images are of low artistic quality and look exactly like what they are – cheap and cheerful pictures, often in the form of cartoons. It is highly doubtful that these enhance the professional presentation of written documents.

Desktop Publishing

Desktop publishing (DTP) is specialist software used for integrating text and graphics on a page. It essentially a "page make-up" tool, rather than an advanced form of word processing. Thus, it is less concerned with the editing of the text or the creation of the graphics (both of which are available in DTP, but not as extensively as in specialist wp or graphics software). Rather, it provides the facility to place paragraphs of text and graphics in precise locations on the page, and to format the text and, to a lesser extent, the graphics as well.

This makes it ideal software to use for the preparation of newspapers, magazines, brochures, notices, etc. – anything where text and graphics need to be mixed in a complex way. It is also possible to specify various page sizes and constructions, allowing folding layouts to be adopted.

Electronic Publishing

This refers to the way in which documents of any description are produced and published for their audience to read entirely through computers.

The way in which documents used to be published, and still are in many circumstances, was for a "master" page or pages to be produced on paper – either from a word processor or DTP package, or by a typist or designer/artist. This would then be used by a printer to copy onto the pages of the final publication, producing as many pages were necessary, in a similar way to photocopying. In the newspaper and magazine industry, there was an intermediary stage where the complex designs of the pages were converted into metal plates to be used on the large scale printing presses.

Electronic publishing techniques have changed this completely. There are three ways in which this can be done:

- by sending the word processing or DTP file to a printer who will then print the document on paper direct from the electronic file;
- by saving the document file onto a CD-ROM, thus allowing the reader to open the file on their own PC and read it there; or
- by making the document available to be read on the Internet – either as a web page or as a file that can be opened on a web page and/or downloaded to be read on a computer off-line.

The effect of electronic publishing is that the document can be reproduced as many times as are necessary with no loss of quality and appears exactly as the originator intended it. It has also speeded up the process of preparing documents for print and reduced the cost. There has, therefore, been an explosion in the amount of material widely available, the complexity of design and the quality of production. This can be seen clearly in the magazine market.

Web Design

It is not our intention here to go into the design and preparation of web pages and web sites – which are the domain, in business at least, of professional designers – but merely to note two features of their construction.

- The purpose of web sites and web pages is to communicate. They are a means of conveying a message and should, there, follow the principles of effective communication that we have stressed throughout. They should be prepared with a clear view of the purpose of the communication and be structured to facilitate use and understanding on the part of the reader. Each page should deal with one message.

  There are many bad examples of web design on the Internet. These are mainly the result of these principles being ignored and the pages being made unnecessarily complicated by overuse of design features and/or covering too many ideas.

- It is normal to link pages together by the use of "hyperlinks". These are words, phrases or icons on the screen which, when you click on them with a mouse, send the reader to a different page. This may be a different page on the same web site, in which case the hyperlinks enable the reader to access different parts of the site in the way that he/she wants, or it may take the reader to a completely different site. There are two reasons that the links may take the reader to a different site:

  (i) to access related information which it is thought may be of interest to the reader; or

(ii) to take the reader to the site of a company which has paid to advertise on the first site – for example, many on-line magazines contain links to sites advertising or offering for sale products which may interest the readers of those magazines.

C. TECHNOLOGY AS A CHANNEL FOR COMMUNICATION

Most of us are now familiar, at least to some extent, with the use of computers to produce printed materials. As such, they represent a tool which can help us develop high quality documentation as part of the communication process – both written and oral.

However, as computers have become more universal and are being linked up to each other – either within organisations (as an **intranet**) or on a world-wide basis (as the **Internet**) – new opportunities for communication have been opened up. The channel for this communication is the computers themselves in that information can be passed directly between users.

We shall look at two aspects of this:

- E-mail – which is essentially the passing of written documents directly between people via computer, but has its own particular features; and
- what we could call "virtual interaction", whereby a number of different users can interact via the computer – in writing, by voice or, increasingly, face-to-face through videoconferencing.

The first of these two aspects is now well established, but the latter has only recently emerged and is only now developing in use.

E-Mail

There are two key distinctive features about electronic mail as a channel of communication which condition the way in which it is used and, hence, how messages are formulated on it:

- the speed of the message, and the potential response – E-mail is a more or less instantaneous means of sending written messages between computer users, with the message being delivered at the recipient's address within seconds of it being sent (although that does not always imply that it is read at the same time); and
- the text of the message is designed to be read on a computer screen, and sometimes in a smaller window within the screen – which means that it is not suitable for long, involved communications.

E-mail thus lends itself to short, "to the point", one subject messages. These are very often confirmations, requests for information, requests to get in touch, notifications of arrangements, etc.

We examined the writing of E-mails and noted some of issues of their use in the unit on written communication. Here we shall add to that by reviewing some of the technicalities of the process of sending E-mail.

E-mail is simply correspondence between two or more users over a network. Where the network is a LAN, WAN or intranet, the network is tightly controlled and the e-mail correspondence will be virtually direct. E-mail is also sent over the Internet, using the services of an ISP.

When an e-mail message arrives at its destination server, it is stored in an area of that server which the user calls their mailbox. It will wait there until the actual recipient logs into their ISP's e-mail system. There are two types of system used for mailboxes:

- Messages can be retrieved to the users' own computer where they can be opened, read, edited and so on.

- Messages remain on the ISP's server and the user opens and reads them there. This method has the advantage of making the mailbox accessible from any computer when the correct user name and password are entered.

An e-mail address usually takes the following form:

MyName@myISP.com

The first part (MyName) is the personal identifier for the person concerned. It is often the person's full name as one word or separated by a full stop (always called a "dot" in Internet speak) – for example, "JohnSmith" or "John.Smith" or "J.Smith". However, where there are several people with that same name on a particular ISP, the name may be given additional characters to make it specific to one person – for example, "JohnSmith1" or JohnJSmith", etc.

The @ symbol is just a separator.

The second part of the address is the name of the ISP server to which the user is registered. It always takes the form of the domain name followed, after a full stop (dot), by an extension – "com", "co.uk", "net", etc.

When an e-mail message is sent, the local mail server first examines the second part of the address to identify the ISP server to which the message is addressed. If this is the same as the local mail server then the message is forwarded directly to the appropriate mailbox. All other messages are sent out over the Internet to the destination ISP server. It is then directed to the recipient's mailbox at that server.

Virtual Interaction

Up to now, the only truly interactive forms of communication have been face-to-face and via the telephone. All forms of written communication – even E-mail – involve a delay in the interaction, such that there is no immediate feedback which can influence the communication process.

However, the increasing sophistication and power of computers, the software available and the lines of communication between them, is making interactive communication through computers a reality. Thus, "virtual" interaction is possible – interaction which takes place entirely through the computer, with the participants being in any location. The common element is that there is a sharing of information in "real time" (i.e. with no delays).

We shall briefly consider three aspects to this new channel of communication.

(a) Written discussion

This is the most common form of virtual interaction at present.

In the world of the Internet, the process is known as "chat" and there are many "chatrooms" on the Internet where it is possible to converse with others on just about any subject under the moon – from aardvark hunting to xylophone techniques, the list is endless. In business, meetings with people in many different locations can be held by the same process.

The interaction is essentially the same as via a telephone, except that the conversation comprises a series of written messages, rather than speech. Messages are typed and appear on the screen of both sender and recipient(s) instantaneously, and can be responded to at any point in the interaction.

(b) Videoconferencing

Videoconferencing enables two or more people in different locations to see and hear each other at the same time, sometimes even sharing computer applications. A communications technology as rich as this offers new possibilities for a variety of purposes.

Placing a video call is like making a phone call. After you connect, you see the other person in colour video and you may be able to transfer files.

A videoconference system must have audio-visual equipment such as a screen monitor, a camera, a microphone and an output speaker. The system also needs a communications link. A broadband satellite link with studio-quality equipment gives an excellent full-motion video connection. However, this is very expensive. Modern communications have generated an interest in video systems that transmit information via the Internet, which are more realistically priced. However, the bandwidth available through most systems based on standard telephone connections is insufficient to allow the smooth and continuous transmission of the quantity of data involved in on-line audio and video. The must efficient and effective methods involve the use of an ISDN connection, offering higher bandwidth through the telephone system and providing generally acceptable standards for high-quality videoconferencing. Videoconferencing may also take place over a closed network such as a LAN where the quality of the connection is good.

There are two principal types of videoconferencing systems – the normal PC computer systems which displays the video in a small section of the computer screen, and room sized systems which have one or two large screens and usually display all the local audience as well as the remote audience. The camera can be anything from a tiny camera on top of the computer to a high-quality camera with remote pan and zoom features. The controls available allow users to adjust the volume, and sometimes even pan and zoom the camera.

The benefits of a videoconferencing system are fairly self-evident. As a communication medium, it stands out in a number of ways.

- First of all, it's almost like being there. The visual connection and interaction between participants enhances understanding and helps participants feel connected to each other. This goes a long way toward building relationships in a way that e-mail or the telephone cannot. A videoconference system can be further improved by including video or audio clips, graphics, animations and computer applications.
- It has also been found to heighten the motivation of learners.
- It will improve the participant’s communication and presentation skills as each participant is very aware of the person at the other end.
- It increases connections with the outside world, especially where a live visit is not possible except on rare occasions. Videoconferencing is usually easier than visiting, so communications can be more frequent, saving time and resources.

(b) Collaborative working

Chat and video conferencing allow the interactive exchange of thoughts and ideas between individuals. However, the increasing sophistication of computers systems and software allow people in different locations to actively work together:

- by calling up and sharing information held on computer files – displaying information such as graphs of sales figures as a part of written discussions or within video conferences;
- by collaborating on the same computer application – for example, the development of a written report. Modern word processing systems, for example, allow for documents to be reviewed, commented upon and amended by others and have sophisticated version trackers to enable one person to maintain control over the process.

This can allied to audio or full video links between the collaborators, thus adding a personal dimension to the work.

All these forms of what might be called “desktop conferencing” demand a certain etiquette in terms of the way in which the interaction takes place. It is essential that all participants respect the contributions of others, allow them to have their say before responding and do not attempt to dominate the interaction.

Study Unit 7

Visual Communication

Contents *Page*

INTRODUCTION

In this study unit we will look at the role of visual displays in the communication process. Whilst some forms of communication are exclusively (or very nearly exclusively) visual, we are concerned more here with the integration of information presented visually with the written and spoken word.

Thus, we shall not be going into details of the role of logos and visual messages in advertising. Rather, we shall consider the ways in which pictures and diagrams can be used to enhance effectiveness in communication, with particular reference to the presentation of numerical data in visual form.

Presenting statistical data in an effective visual way is an important and powerful skill in business communications, whether it is used in reports, presentations or meetings. Although it is possible to manipulate and present data so that it conveys a false impression, the purpose here is to demonstrate how to communicate data using graphical means for impact without distortion and so that your audience will not misinterpret the facts.

A. PRINCIPLES OF VISUAL PRESENTATION

The most important point to grasp at the outset is that ,although the use of grahical forms of presentation can greatly enhance many different forms of communication, not every document or oral presentation will need them or be more effective because of them. Using graphics in order to appear more professional but without reflecting the purpose of the communication is time-wasting and costly. It also makes you appear more concerned with trivial presentational issues rather than the detail of the subject matter – they can detract from, rather than enhance, communication and, unless they are well produced and relevant, they are a waste of everyone's time. The more sophisticated the technology, the worse the disaster if anything goes wrong.

If you are planning a document or oral presentation, then, you need to ask yourself:

- Would this communication be improved by using images to put across any of the information?
- What would be the most appropriate format?

Do ***not*** ask yourself:

- What graphics shall I use?

The difference is a subtle one but the message is clear. Only use visual images if they will enhance the communication and are appropriate.

Exploiting the Characteristics of Visual Images

The key characteristics of visual presentation are as follows.

- They can encapsulate a wide range of information in one image
- They are good at displaying relationships
- They are easily understood and are not dependent upon a particular language
- They can be easily remembered
- They can break up text or lengthy speeches and provide a different experience for the audience
- They can encourage interest in the communication
- They can be used to promote corporate identity

Visual presentation, including the use of pictures, diagrams, icons, logos, charts and graphs, can be quickly assimilated and can make information much easier to comprehend. People are adept at speed-reading visual messages and find it easier to interpret figures shown pictorially. Graphics can be used to explain relationships and actions that would be difficult to convey concisely in words – consider the saying "a picture can paint a thousand words". Examples of this include: an organisation structure chart for a company based in several locations; a flow diagram outlining a business process; or instructions for assembling furniture.

Visual messages used well create impact and a striking image can attract the attention of an audience. Information presented visually is also more likely to be retained in the receiver's memory.

Remembering the Audience

Never forget that you have included visual presentation to enhance the message and help your audience understand it. It does not matter what type of images you use, the following criteria must be met:

- Select images which reflect the nature of communication and represent a dimension of the subject under discussion/being presented – they should always seem to naturally support the communication, rather than clash with it.
- Where the image is used to convey information, make specific reference to it and explain its meaning if necessary – do not simply assume understanding.
- Opt for simplicity and clarity rather than complexity and confusion. Using different colours to highlight areas of particular relevance, especially on maps and charts, or to distinguish between different types of information greatly increases clarity
- Ensure that the image is sufficiently large and clear that it can be easily read – in some cases, the words on diagrams are so small that they are almost impossible to make out.
- Care is taken not to use offensive images– for example, do semi-clothed people actually sell cars? – or ones that could upset your audience or even endanger them (such as flickering lights or strobe effects).
- Where images are used to stimulate interest, use them in situations where the intended audience needs to have their attention drawn to (or drawn back to) the communication – for example, to catch the eye on notice boards, to break up large blocks of text or to reawakwn interest in an oral presentation at low attention periods (such as after lunch, before a break or towards the end of a session).

B. ILLUSTRATING RELATIONSHIPS AND FLOWS

Diagrams are an extremely efficient way of showing the relationships between elements in a system and the way in which things flow through those elements. Describing in words the way in which, say, a central heating system works can take many paragraphs and end up being very complex. However, the elements of the system and the process by which flows through it are very simple to illustrate. Drawing a diagram can save time and enhance understanding at the same time.

Here we shall examine three applications of these types of diagram in the workplace:

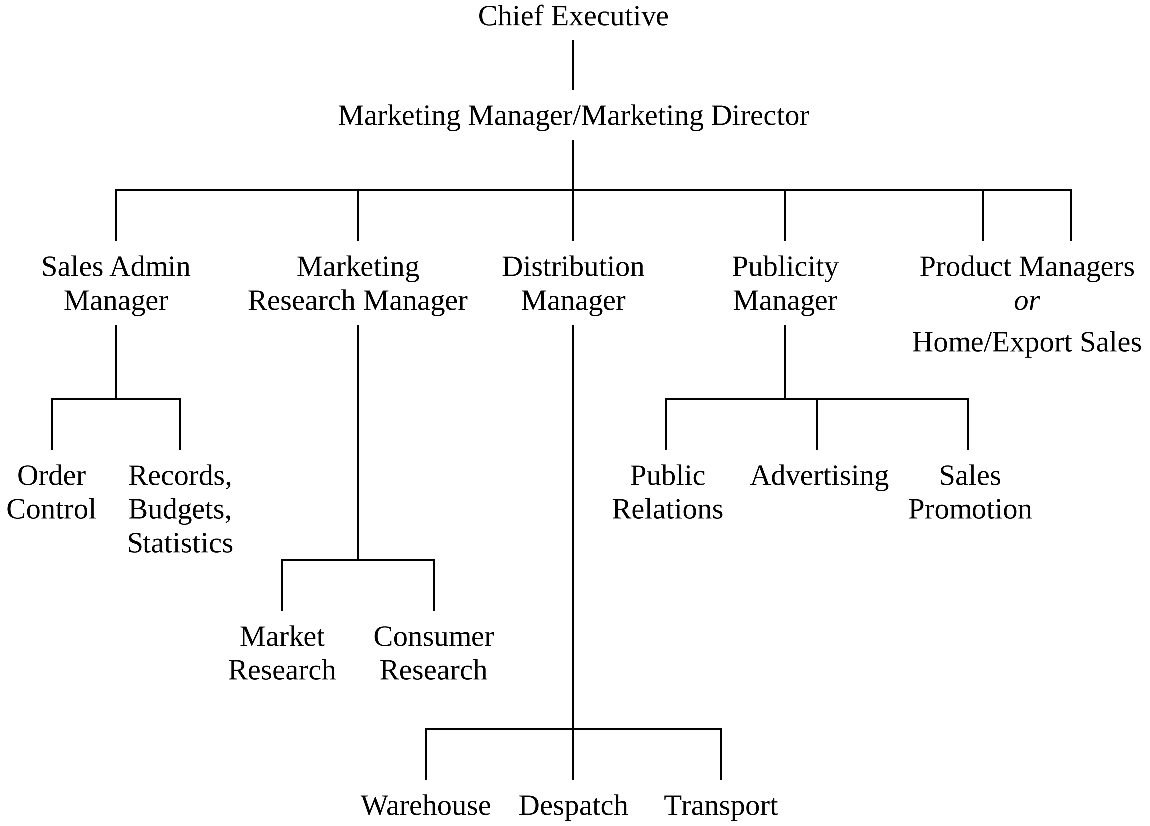
- organisation charts, which illustrate the relationships between staff in an organisation;
- Gantt charts, which track the flow of work over a period and are used to help plan projects; and
- flow diagrams which represent the way in work or information flows through a particular organisation. We shall also consider briefly a development of flow diagrams – algorithms. These are flow diagrams which incorporate decision points where the consequent flows depend on the decision made.

Organisation Charts

Organisation charts, or "organograms", are used extensively in business to simplify and illustrate the way in which organisations, or particular parts of them, are structured. Thus, they show the hierarchical relationships between different levels and divisions in, say, a marketing department. This is very useful for seeing, at a glance, the distribution of management authority and reporting relationships between staff.

Consider the following example.

Figure 7.1: Organsiation Chart – Marketing Function



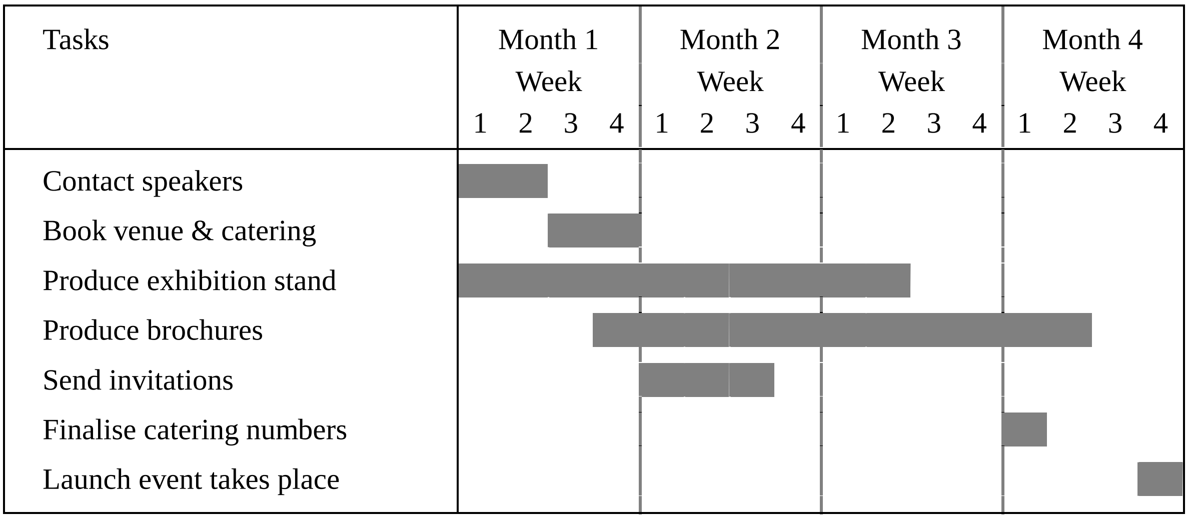
Note, though, an organisation chart does not show all the lines of communication. It simply shows the hierarchical structure. It can be adapted to show horizontal connections and relationships, but then it loses the simplicity with which it illustrates structure.

Gantt Charts

These are planning aids which show, graphically, an estimated and/or actual time schedule for the completion of a series of tasks in a project.

Figure 7.2 illusrates this be reference to the planning of a product launch by means of an exhibition. Note that the steps may overlap in some cases , or one task may depend on the completion of another.

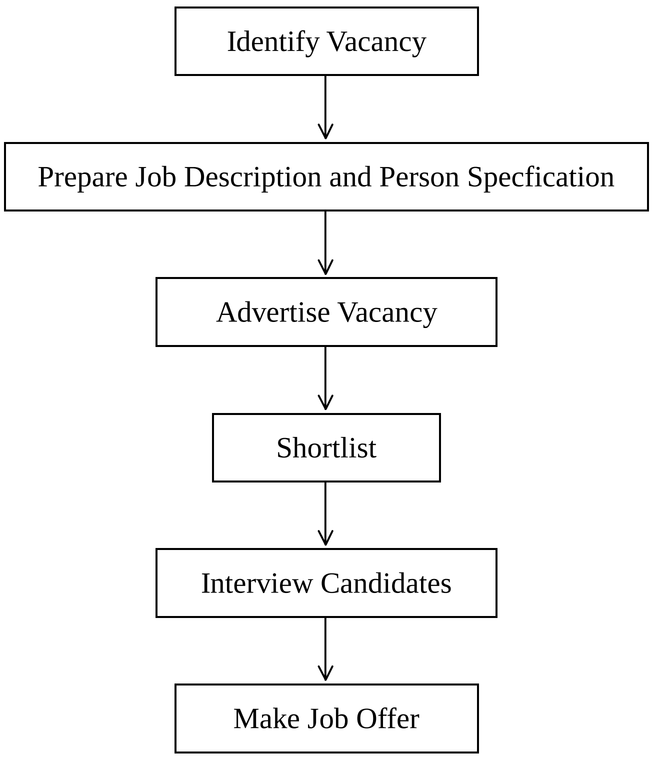
Figure 7.2: Gantt Chart



Flow Charts

These are used to show the way in which the series of events or stages in a process are linked. The example in Figure 7.3 illustrates this for process of recruiting new staff..

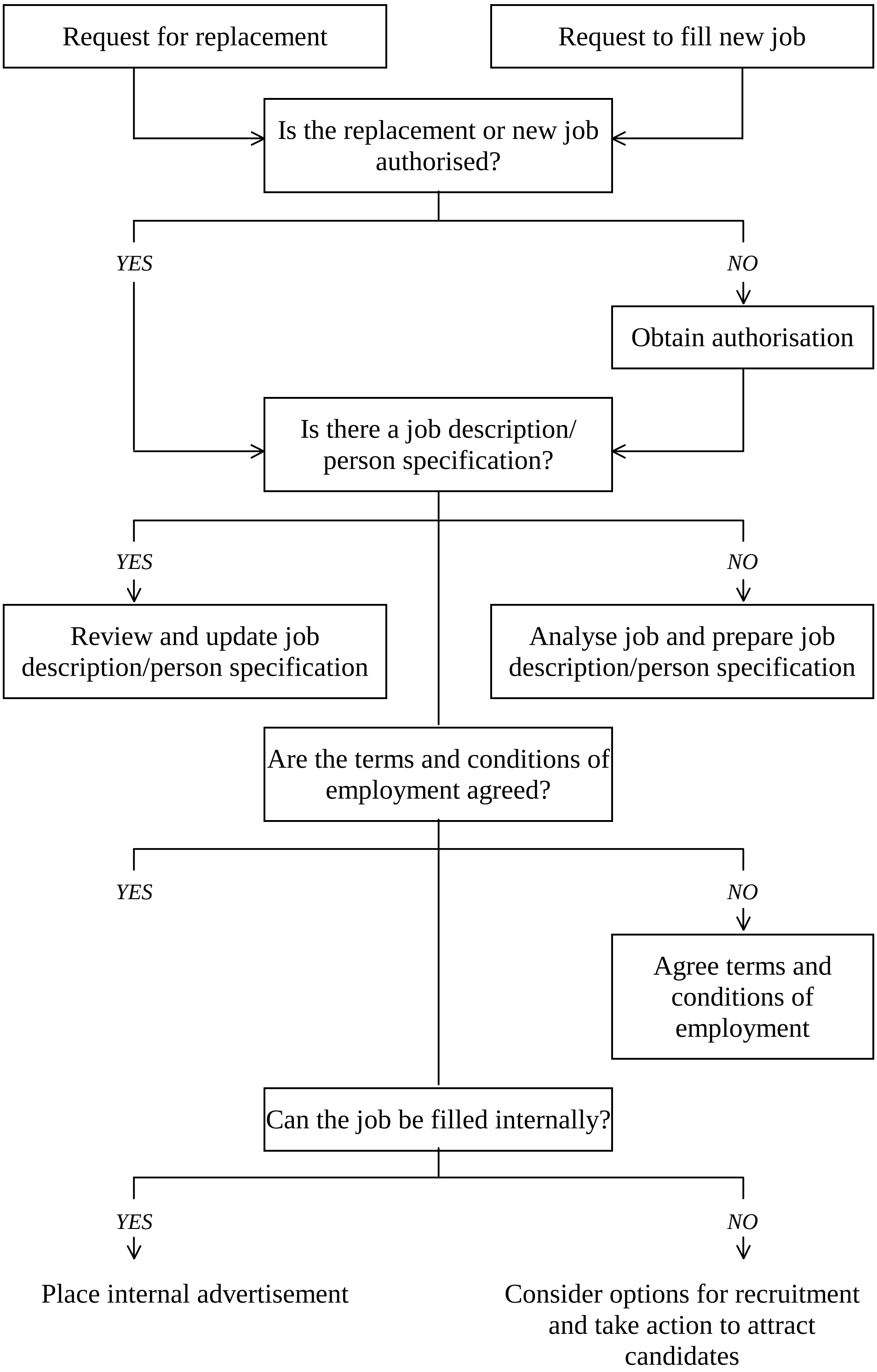
Figure 7.3: Flow Chart – Recruitment Process



Flow charts are very useful as instructional aids and as references for ensuring that all of a series of operations are carried out. They are used extensively in manuals to illustrate the stages involved in completing a particular procedure.

A variation on flow charts is the algorithm. This introduces the concept of decision points within the process and identifies the different flows which take place as a consequence of a particular decision being made. Algorithms are used extensively as aids to determining particular courses of action. For example, the process of arriving at a quotation for car insurance follows an algorithm in which the decision points are requests for information about the person's type of car, past history of claims, use of the car, etc. Figure 7.4 illustrates this in respect of a more detailed analysis of the initial procedures in the recruitment process.

Figure 7.4: Algorithm for determining recruitment actions



C. GRAPHICAL PRESENTATION OF NUMERICAL DATA

Business information is very often expressed as numbers. The basis of much of this information is raw data about the activities of the business – money, sales figures, production levels, etc. There are various ways of analysing this raw data to make it more meaningful and you will be familiar with the main statistical methods used for this purpose.

The numerical information obtained from statistical analysis can be very detailed and there is often too much of it to absorb in a short time. In situations like this, it is necessary to be able to select the most important data, summarise the key points and where appropriate use visual presentation techniques to make the information user-friendly.

There are a variety of ways to display data visually:

- Tables can be used for recording and displaying a wide range of numerical data.
- Bar charts help to compare changes in relative quantity.
- Line graphs help to show trends and moving averages over time so are useful for planning and forecasting.
- Pie charts help you see proportions of a whole.

Nowadays it is much easier to generate graphs and charts with a professional appearance on a computer, using spreadsheet or database software. However, you should be aware of how each of these methods can be used and you should be able to produce them without the aid of a computer.

We shall examine their role in communication in the next sections, but first we should review the general rules about the graphical presentation of numerical data.

Basic Principles

There are a number of general rules which must be borne in mind when planning and using the graphical methods covered in this unit.

- Graphs and charts must be given clear but brief titles.
- The axes of graphs must be clearly labelled, and the scales of values clearly marked.
- Diagrams should be accompanied by the original data, or at least by a reference to the source of the data.
- Avoid excessive detail, as this defeats the object of diagrams.
- There should be a key or legend relating any shading or pattern used on a chart to what it represents. In addition, or in place of a legend, labels can be used to mark what each bar, segment or line represents.
- All bars and charts should display the source of information.
- It is also advisable to cross-reference all graphs and charts within the text, such as see Figure x or see attached Appendix y.

As well as these general principles, you also need to be aware of the pitfalls that can occur and ensure that you do not produce graphical displays that distort the meaning of the data.

- You need to use the correct form of presentation for the type of data.
- Information can be distorted if the axis on graphs and charts does not start from zero – for example, trends in the top part of a chart may be more exaggerated than if you see the whole picture with zero at the bottom left hand corner.
- Distortions can also occur through varying the scale on the axes or comparing diagrams which use different scales. For example, if you expanded or compressed the y axis (vertical axis) you could make a curve showing sales steeper or flatter, which could affect the way that sales

performance is perceived. Spreading out or compressing the distance between values on the x-axis (horizontal axis) could cause the same effect.

- Computer packages offer you the facility of producing graphs and charts that have a three-dimensional appearance. However, sometimes the cosmetic benefits of blocking out areas of graphs and charts can be outweighed by the problems of readability. The problem is that it is difficult to see the how the 3-D lines and bars line up against the relevant scale so data values are difficult to determine.

Bar Charts

Bar charts are the most common method of presenting information in a visual way. They consist of one or more bars in which the bar length indicates the quantity of the item it relates to (as specified on the y axis).

There are different types of bar chart. The bars can be presented vertically or horizontally, but can also be stacked in component bar charts and grouped in multiple bar charts. Bar charts should not usually have more than 12 bars or the chart can become confusing.

Figure 7.5: A Simple Bar Chart

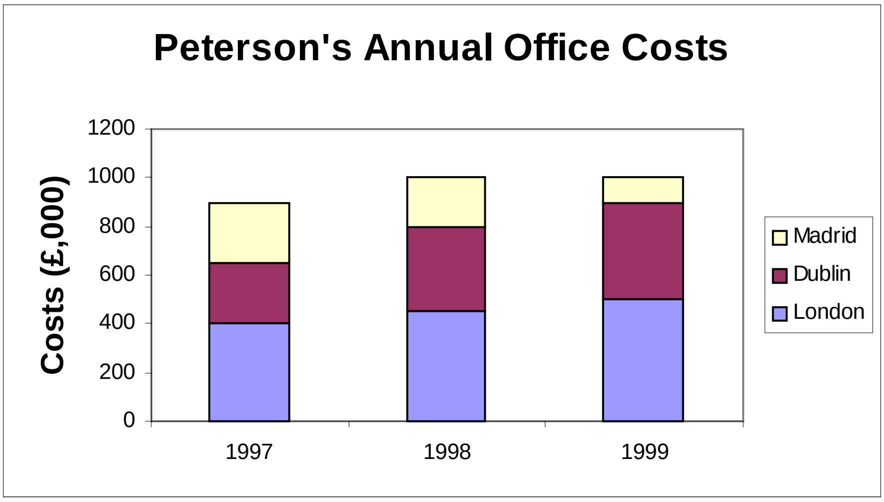
Source: XZY Management Consultancy

Simple bar charts are used to show the quantity of several items which may be compared. For example, in Figure 7.5 it is easy to see the difference in office costs and identify that costs are rising by looking at the differences in the bar lengths on the chart.

A component bar chart (Figure 7.6) breaks down the total quantity represented by each bar into its components. This allows us to seem the make of any overall quantity – adding information to the basic bar chart. In Figure 7.6, we can see that the total of office costs is made up of the costs of offices in three different locations. It appears that the London office is the most expensive, that is not very clear.

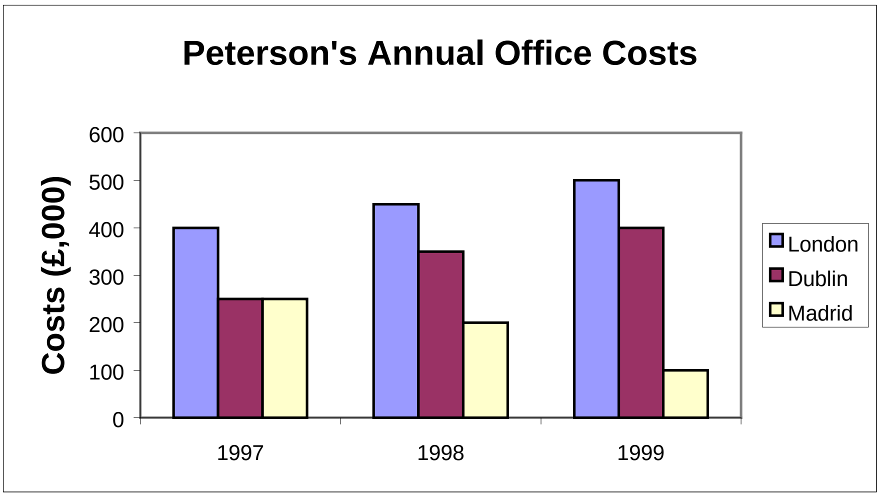
A further development is the multiple bar chart. Here, two or more separate bars are used to present sub-divisions of information (Figure 7.7). Unlike the component bar chart, the overall quantity is not shown, but it is easier to compare the totals of the different divisions. Thus, in Figure 7.7, we can see clearly that cost of the Madrid office is falling whilst those of Dublin and London are rising.

Figure 7.6: A Component Bar Chart



Source: XZY Management Consultancy

Figure 7.7: A Multiple Bar Chart



Source: XZY Management Consultancy

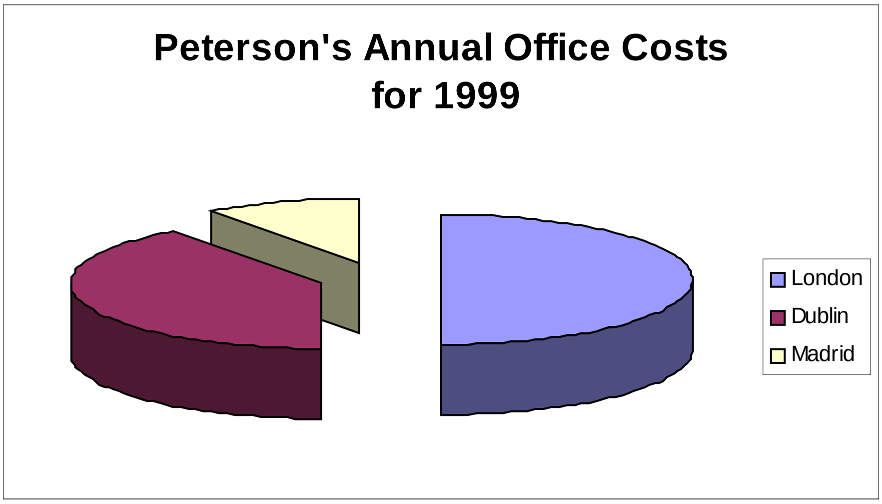
Pie Charts

Pie charts are used to show the relative size of different items making up an overall total (of 100%).

Figure 7.8 illustrates the data from one year as shown in Figures 7.6 and 7.7. It is a very effective means of illustrating proportions of a whole where there is no necessity to compare tnat whole with another. If you wish to emphasise a particular segment, it can be exploded as in Figure 7.9.

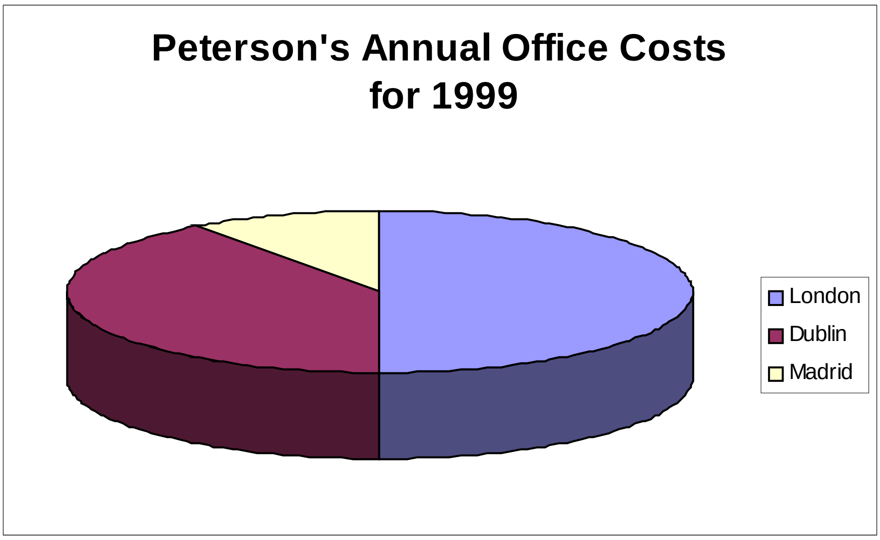
Ideally, pie charts should have no more than eight sections, with the largest segment usually shown running clockwise from the top of the pie. Each segment should be labelled, sometimes including a value and a percentage share. The overall total is also usually stated.

Figure 7.8: Simple Pie Chart



Source: XZY Management Consultancy

Figure 7.9: Exploded Pie Chart



Source: XZY Management Consultancy

Line Graphs

These are used to show how one variable changes in relation to changes in another. The second variable is known as the ***independent*** variable – i.e. the variable which causes change in the other variable. That other variable is the ***dependent*** variable – i.e. the variable which changes according to changes in the other. The independent variable is shown on the x axis and the dependent variable is on the y axis.

Line graphs are very effective at showing movements over time or against other varying circumstances, such as changing price or different production quantities. They can illustrate trends very clearly and, by showing data from a number of different situations on the same graph, allow camparisons to be drawn. Line graphs should, though, have no more than four line types, otherwise they become confusing for the reader.

When drawing a graph, follow this procedure for constructing the framework.

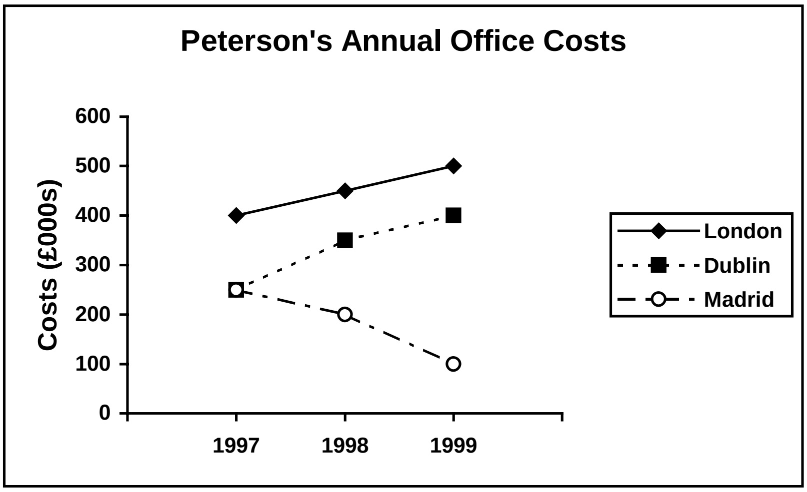
- Determine the range of values which will need to be shown on each of the axes. You should start by considering the x axis since the range of values for the independent variable will determine the range of values needed for the independent variable on the y axis.
- Draw the axes and mark off the scales along them. The aim is usually to draw as large a graph as possible since this will make it easier to plot the co-ordinates accurately, and also make it easier to read. Remember that the scales must be consistent along each axis, but do not need to be the same on both. If you are using graph paper, use the thick lines as your main divisions. If you are not using graph paper, use a ruler to mark the scale and select easy-to-identify measurements for the divisions (such as one cm for each main unit).
- Give each axis a title, number the main divisions along each scale and give the whole graph a title.

Now you are ready to start plotting the graph itself.

In the example here, Figure 7.10 shows the changing office costs over three years from our previous examples. The downward trend of office costs in Madrid and the upward trend for London comes out clearly.

The trends can be extended into the future by extrapolating the direction of the line to forecast the likely figures for the following year.

Figure 7.10: Line Graph



Source: XZY Management Consultancy

Histograms

Histograms should not be confused with bar charts. Bar charts are used for discrete or non-continuous data and so are best drawn using a separate bar for each item that is being represented. Histograms are used to display continuous data such as earnings, mileage, examination marks, heights of people etc. and as such, to indicate the continuous nature of the data, there is usually no gap between the bars.

For example, if you were to show the monthly gross earnings of employees in a histogram, you would first group the information together to produce a frequency table.

The gross monthly earnings data is as follows:

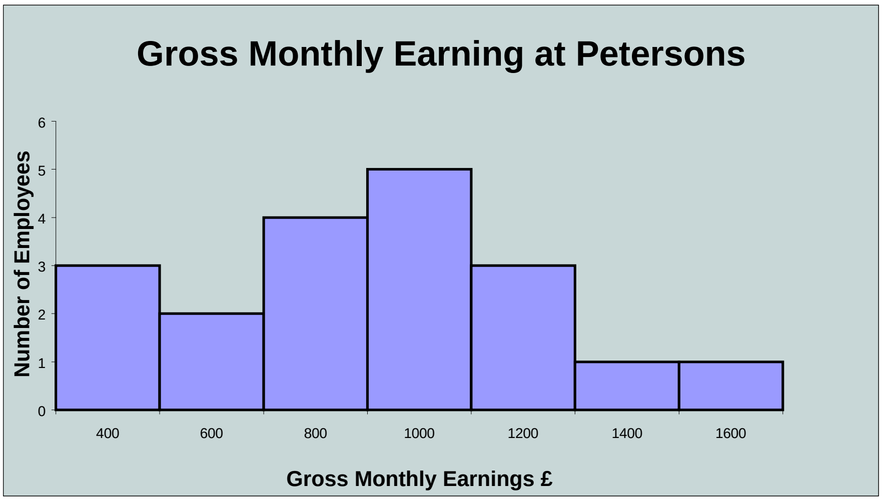
£750	£550	£500	£900	£400	£1,200	£1,400	£1,200	£1,250	£100
£1,500	£1,800	£900	£700	£400	£1,200	£900	£1,100	£1,200.	

This can be grouped into the following frequency table:

Monthly earnings (£)	Number of employees
400 – 600	3
601 – 800	2
801 – 1,000	4
1,001 – 1,200	5
1,201 – 1,400	3
1,401 – 1,600	1
1,601 – 1,800	1

Having organised the information into the frequency table, it is much easier to plot the figures on a histogram. Histograms can show the distribution of information. In the example in Figure 11.7, there is a normal "bell curve" distribution with a few people at the lower and higher ends of the scale and most people in the middle salary range.

Figure 7.11: Histogram



Source: XZY Management Consultancy

Practice Questions

1. Assume you have information about the following topics which you wish to communicate to colleagues at the next Sales and Marketing Meeting. Choose and prepare an appropriate visual presentation method for each of the following:

   (a) The sales figures of three different recipes of frozen pizza over the last four years.

   (b) The performance of individual sales staff over the last six months.

2. Draw a pie chart to show the following data relating to the market share of the six top-selling small cars in 1997. The data is taken from Car Market, May 1998.

Model	Rover 200	Renault Clio	Vauxhall Corsa	Peugeot 306	Nissan Micra	Ford Fiesta
Cars sold	40,000	60,000	80,000	50,000	38,000	125,000

3. Draw a bar chart to show the following data relating to the recall of car advertising in the past month. The data is taken from Car Market, July 1998.

Nissan	33
Vauxhall	38
Rover	17
Ford	44
Renault	27

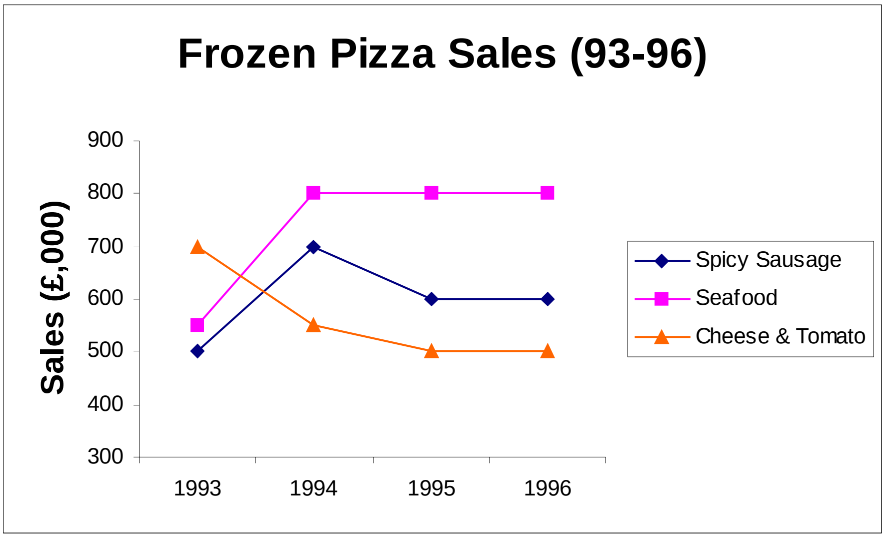
4. Draw a multiple bar chart to show the following data relating to the number of cars owned per home in 1997. The data is taken from Car Market, May 1998.

Cars per home	All homes	Head of household aged under 45	Head of household aged 45 – 64	Head of household aged over 65
One	70%	65%	58%	80%
Two	25%	30%	30%	18%
Three	5%	5%	5%	2%

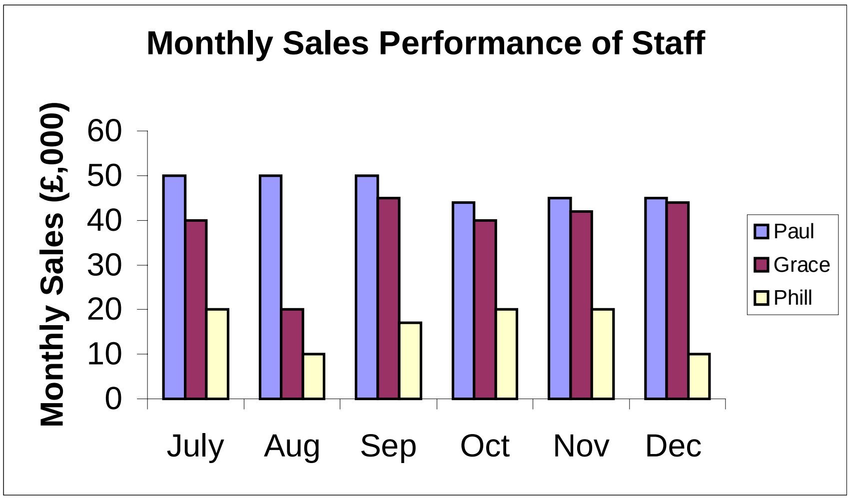
Now check your answers with the ones given at the end of the unit.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS FOR PRACTICE

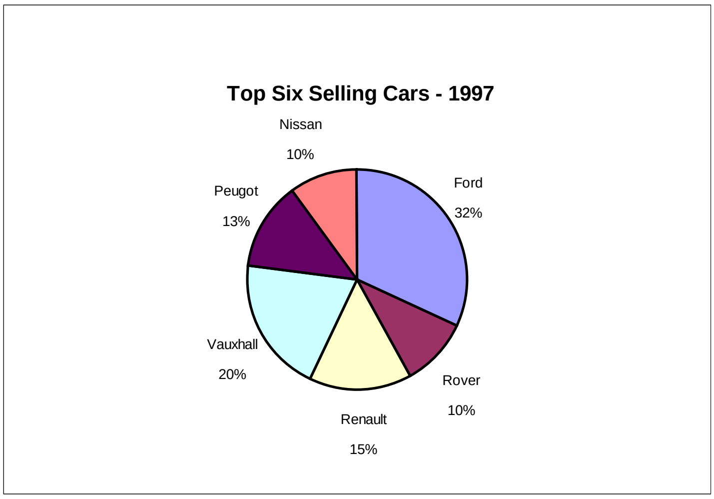
1. (a) A line chart could be used to illustrate sales of frozen pizza over time.



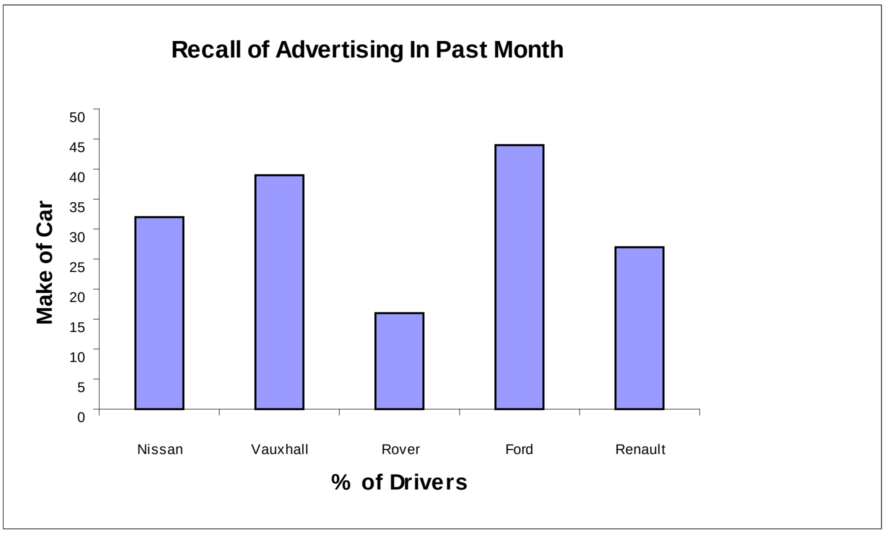
(b) A multiple bar chart could be used to show the sales performance of staff.



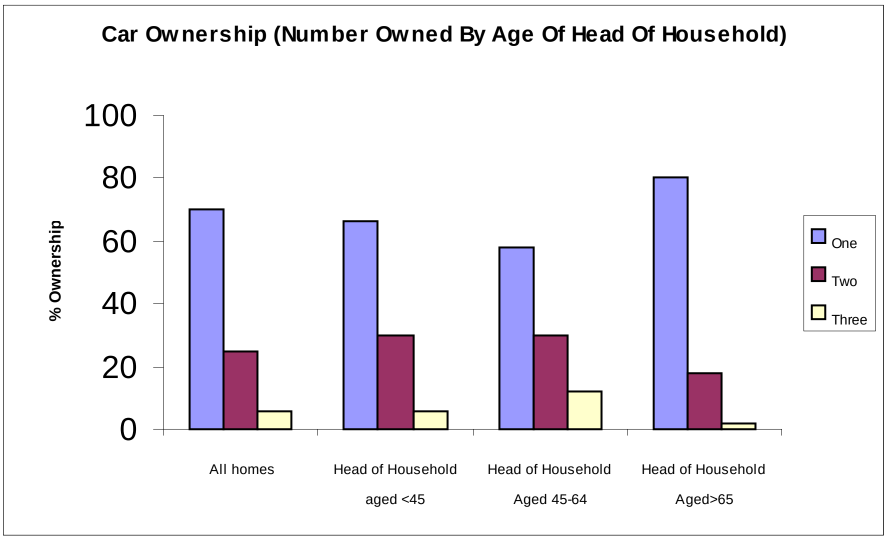
2.


Top Six Selling Cars - 1997
Nissan
10%
Ford
32%
Peugot
13%
Vauxhall
20%
Rover
10%
Renault
15%

3.


Recall of Advertising In Past Month
Make of Car
50
45
40
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
Nissan
Vauxhall
Rover
Ford
Renault
% of Drivers

4.


Car Ownership (Number Owned By Age Of Head Of Household)
% Ownership
100
80
60
40
20
0
All homes
Head of Household aged <45
Head of Household Aged 45-64
Head of Household Aged>65
One
Two
Three

Study Unit 8

Communication in Organisations

Contents ***Page***

INTRODUCTION

Every organisation has its own ways of communicating, whether formal or informal, efficient or inefficient, effective or ineffective. The management expert, ***Chester Barnard***, argues that communication is a crucial means of co-ordination of groups and parts of an organisation. ***Koontz*** states that communication is essential if changes and improvements are to be made in an organisation. Business information must be communicated to those who have need of it to perform their work functions effectively and efficiently. Resources cannot be allocated and managed without proper communications. So an understanding of communication systems is fundamental to the whole organisational process.

This study unit examines the principles of organisational communication and assesses how they work in practice.

A. THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATIONS IN ORGANISATIONS

Communication may be defined as:

> *"the activity whereby an individual or group conveys, consciously or unconsciously, information to another individual or group and, where necessary, evokes a response."*

This definition stresses that communication is the process of transmitting or exchanging **information**. Information is central to organisational activities and operations and ideas, instructions, directions, reports and explanations are all examples of the kind of information that flows through the communication system of an organisation.

If we are to appreciate the importance of good communication for organisations, we must grasp the functions and goals that the exchange and transmission of information serve.

Why Organisations Need Communication

There are many reasons why business organisations need efficient communication in order to survive – not least because the lack of such exchange of information and opinion can have very disruptive consequences.

- Departments can begin to feel isolated from the rest of the firm.
- Individuals may lose interest in the way the organisation is developing.
- If workers are not kept informed about changes in policy about matters such as staffing policy and conditions of service, it is quite likely that industrial action of some kind may result, which can be damaging for all concerned.

Information is necessary at every level of the operation of a company.

- ***Senior management*** is concerned with making policy decisions, and need complete, up-to-date information about the firm's trading position, financial status and production capacity, as well as the development of new projects.
- This has to be supplied to them by ***middle management*** who are concerned with the day-to-day running of the concern. In turn, managers need information about matters such as production targets and financial matters in order to keep the firm in business.
- They also need information of another kind, which they can pass on to the ***workers*** beneath them in the hierarchy. Such information is related to the firm's policies and objectives, so that the workforce can be encouraged to feel a sense of commitment to the firm, and to feel that the firm, in turn, has a commitment to them.

The reasons why communications are needed may be summarised in overall terms as follows.

(a) To bring about change

Information needs to be passed from one section or level of an organisation to another in order to effect change in the actions of the receivers.

This can be at the level of influencing the way individual activities are carried out – with instructions or discussions about the quality of work or standards expected.

At a broader level, it can also be concerned with the provision of information about new developments and changes in working practices. If changes such as relocations are going to happen, then releasing this information must be done in a careful and honest way, without allowing rumour or resentment to build up. When such situations do occur, mutual trust between management and workers at all levels is essential, and this can be achieved in no small measure by the existence over a long period of a clear system of communications.

(b) To sustain stability

The other side of this coin is that, when things are satisfactory, people need to know that they are going to continue in the same way.

If staff are to be interested in and loyal to the company, then it needs to know what is going on within the company structure. No one can be expected to work with complete dedication unless he or she feels that his or her work is appreciated, and the best way of showing this is for the company to take the worker into its confidence as regards aspects of company policy. In this way, an atmosphere of trust is generated which encourages commitment to the firm.

(c) To lead people into a common purpose

This makes explicit what is implied by the previous two points in that organisations need all staff – from top to bottom – to share the same objectives and be working in common cause to the same ends. Chester Barnard argued that co-ordination in the pursuit of defined objectives was the most important function of communication.

(d) To integrate the activities of management

This is a wide-ranging function in that it makes communication responsible for:

(i) Linking the levels of the organisation together.

(ii) Linking the sections and departments of the organisation to each other.
((i) + (ii) = structural integration).

(iii) In addition communication integrates the functions of management to see to it that all the things management do are pulling in the same direction towards achieving organisational goals.

The first and second points here – (i) + (ii) – lead to ***structural integration*** within the organisation. Point (iii) brings about ***functional integration***.

(e) To establish links between an organisation and its environment

All organisations need a two-way flow of information with sections of their environment – for example with customers, suppliers, governments, the community, etc. They need to know the needs, requirements, pressures and changes that are taking place among these groups, and also to communicate their own role in responding to and providing for those needs and requirements.

(f) To sustain discipline

Although the idea of discipline could be said to be "old hat", there are nonetheless certain issues of working practice which need to be maintained. A workforce which feels that the management has no interest in them will feel little inclination to follow rules about work procedures, statutory breaks and similar issues; discontent and a lack of interest will develop. You can avoid this by keeping people informed about what is going on.

(g) To forestall rumour

Rumour can cause untold problems in a company if it is allowed to run unchecked. Suggestions of takeovers, relocations to distant towns and mass redundancies are immensely destructive in terms of morale, and they are bound to flourish unless the workers feel that they can really believe the management – a feeling which is most successfully created by keeping them in touch with what is happening at the firm.

(h) To satisfy statutory obligations

The law requires companies to communicate various items of importance to their employees and to outside bodies. Broadly speaking, the internal requirements relate to areas concerned with Health and Safety and employment protection, dealing specifically with matters such as contracts of employment, disclosure of conditions of employment and information drawn directly from the Health and Safety at Work Acts. Externally, organisations need to supply information to the tax authorities, shareholders and government departments.

Organisation Theory and Communications

All the major organisational and management theorists have stressed the importance of effective communication to the success of organisations.

(a) Classical theorists

Both ***Fayol*** and ***Taylor*** saw the need for good communication; in their case the stress was on communications along the chain of command. It is crucial in the classical model of organisation that all levels in the organisation know what is expected of them, and that higher levels know how well subordinates are achieving targets.

(b) Human Relations Approach

Elton Mayo and his followers placed great stress on full communication between management and workers. They argued that management should take employees into its confidence whenever possible. Many motivation theorists developed this point, seeing good communication as a motivator for higher performances.

(c) Systems and Contingency Theories

Probably the most widely applied theoretical approach to communication is systems theory. We do not need to look far to see why this should be so:

- Firstly, the comparison of organisations with organisms, like the human body, leads to an analogy between the nervous system and senses of the body and the communication system of an organisation – both are crucial for the well-being of the system as a whole.
- Secondly, the systems approach model, resting as it does on objectives, functioning parts linked together, and feedback to reveal progress, is an ideal model to apply to the study of communications.

Contingency theory makes its contribution by arguing that, just as there are many possible forms of organisational structure and culture, so there are many different forms of communication system. In true contingency theory style it is argued that there is no one best form of communication system, so management should select the type of communications that are appropriate for the conditions and objectives applicable at any given time.

B. COMMUNICATIONS SYSTEMS

Large organisations usually have clearly-defined systems of communications, so that every member knows whom to approach for information and discussion purposes. We need to draw an initial distinction in respect of the direction of the communication process:

- Communications which flow through the hierarchical structure of an organisation – both from those at the higher levels of the organisation to those at the lower planes, and also in the reverse direction – can be said to take place up and down the main lines of communication and is known as ***vertical communication***.
- Communication can also take place between employees of equal status within an organisation, perhaps within a department, or between managers of different sections. Communication of this kind is known as ***horizontal communication***.

These are ***internal*** communications, but we also need to be aware of the need for ***external*** communications.

Further we also need to distinguish between formal and informal communication:

- ***Formal communications*** are those which take place through the established lines of communication within the organisation and include both vertical and horizontal internal communication.
- ***Informal communication*** is that which takes place through the social networks formed by individuals and groups within the organisation. Typical of this is the "grapevine". The key feature of this form of communication is that it is not under the control of the authority structures within the organisation and rumour and gossip can flourish to the detriment of the formal needs of the company.

We shall examine all these features in the following sections.

Vertical Communication

This is the flow of information between levels of authority in the organisation – characterised by lines of communication following the structure as shown by the formal organisation chart. When the flow is from the top levels to lower levels we talk of ***downward vertical communication***, and when the flow is from lower levels back to the top we talk of ***upward vertical communication***.

The effectiveness of upward/downward communication within an organisation is vital to morale and efficiency, particularly affecting industrial relations and the ability of the organisation to respond effectively to change from both within and outside.

(a) Downward vertical communication

Downward vertical communication follows the line of command – decisions made at the top have to be communicated and explained to the lower levels. Decisions taken at the top of an organisation are broadly stated policies in line with organisational goals, but as these decisions become translated into action they must be detailed and specific. The nature of messages therefore changes as they move down the organisation – decisions have to be broken down to explain just what it is that has been decided and what the implications of this are for the level concerned. Broad policies become converted into orders and instructions.

This process can present difficulties for communication systems. If the instructions are too brief they may not carry the exact meaning of what is required of the subordinates; on the other hand, if they are too detailed they may be so cumbersome that subordinates are confused. Another problem is the time it takes for instructions to reach the bottom of the organisation, and the accuracy of the instructions. Each level of the organisation must receive, interpret, and develop in more specific form and then pass on the information, so clearly there is considerable room for error.

Downward communication ensures that tasks are delegated and that action and facilities are co-ordinated, but information can get lost or be altered during transmission through the chain of command.

(b) Upward vertical communication

Upward vertical communication involves the reverse of the downward process. What starts as detailed specific information at the lower levels has to be compressed into broad policy terms; the implications of the data have to be abstracted and passed on upwards. The messages flowing upwards are not orders or instructions – rather they are likely to consist of information on the progress being made at the lower levels, details of requirements of resources, problems being experienced, etc. Although not orders, these upward-flowing messages may exert pressure on management and affect policies because they reflect grass-root findings within the organisation, and management must take account of the attitudes of people and groups at the lower levels. This upward flow of information helps employees to relieve tension and share the pressures of the normal work situation, giving subordinates a sense of participating in the enterprise.

The upward flow of information also faces problems. At each stage, detailed specific data has to be compressed, key details abstracted and then the reduced message passed on; there are considerable risks in this process that something of importance may be filtered out. Sometimes any criticisms and problems tend to be watered down as the information passes along, because those at one level do not wish to antagonise the people above them in the organisation – people do not like to be the bearers of bad news to their superiors. The time element is also crucial.

The type of management style (autocratic, democratic, paternal) will either help or hinder the transmission of accurate information from bottom to top.

(c) Types of vertical communication

The main forms of vertical communication are the issuing of written memoranda and personal meetings between staff and their managers. However, there are also a number of other formal means used to facilitate the exchange of information.

Those which reflect the downward flow of information include:

- ***Training and induction documents and meetings***. On the engagement of new employees, the personnel manager or his or her assistant will brief them on policy and other matters of importance. Documents or, in larger firms, a handbook of procedures will be issued.
- ***Handbooks of procedures***. Details of company policies concerning conditions of service, holiday entitlements, pensions, sports and social facilities, and related matters may well be recorded in documents which are given to employees.

  Copies of the firm's health and safety policy will also be distributed, to ensure that all employees are aware of essential procedures. Regular fire drills will be arranged and carried out with the advice of the firm's safety officer.
- ***House journals and newsletters***. These are distributed to each employee and contain material ranging from news of company events and policy to items about sporting fixtures, retirement of employees and similar matters. Letters and articles from employees are often also included.
- ***Notices***. These are a clear and direct way of making announcements, provided that:

  (i) notices are placed on official notice-boards at certain prominent places in the company's premises; and

  (ii) the notice-boards are cleared regularly and do not become crowded with information, so that they are difficult to read and are ignored. Some firms adopt a policy of dating each notice, and removing it after the expiry date.

- ***Full meetings of employees***. These are necessary to explain complex and new developments or changes of policy. It is difficult to arrange them at a time when all staff can attend, and holding them in company time may be the only possible solution. If held, they should be well prepared with full notice given, and opportunities for questions and discussion amongst the staff provided in their planning and organisation.
- ***Inter-departmental tours***. In a large organisation, workers may be quite ignorant of the work performed by members of other departments. This can be easily remedied by the arrangement of tours, so that each member of the firm can see what other workers do. This will increase the employee's sense of loyalty to the firm as he or she will become aware of his or her place within a larger pattern of things.

  This is often done as part of induction training, but can also be useful when there has been any form of change within the organisation.

There are less formal means of facilitating upward vertical communication. The main ones are:

- ***Suggestion schemes***. Your firm may have a scheme whereby you are invited to suggest ways of improving procedures. In some companies cash incentives are offered for contributions which improve productivity or safety and, as well as benefiting the company in these ways, such schemes also encourage workers to think about their jobs, so enhancing commitment and a sense of involvement.
- ***Grievance procedures***. If you have a complaint or grievance, a clear procedure should be available for it to be heard, first by a manager or supervisor and then, if no solution can be found, by someone of higher authority, right up to one of the directors.
- ***Staff surveys and opinion polls.*** Should a new development be under consideration, such as the introduction of flexible working hours, the management may well conduct an opinion poll, after first conducting an information campaign through leaflets, notices and talks. Opinions of some or all of the employees will be sought, and the results tabulated and released, and used in the process of decision-making about the proposed change.

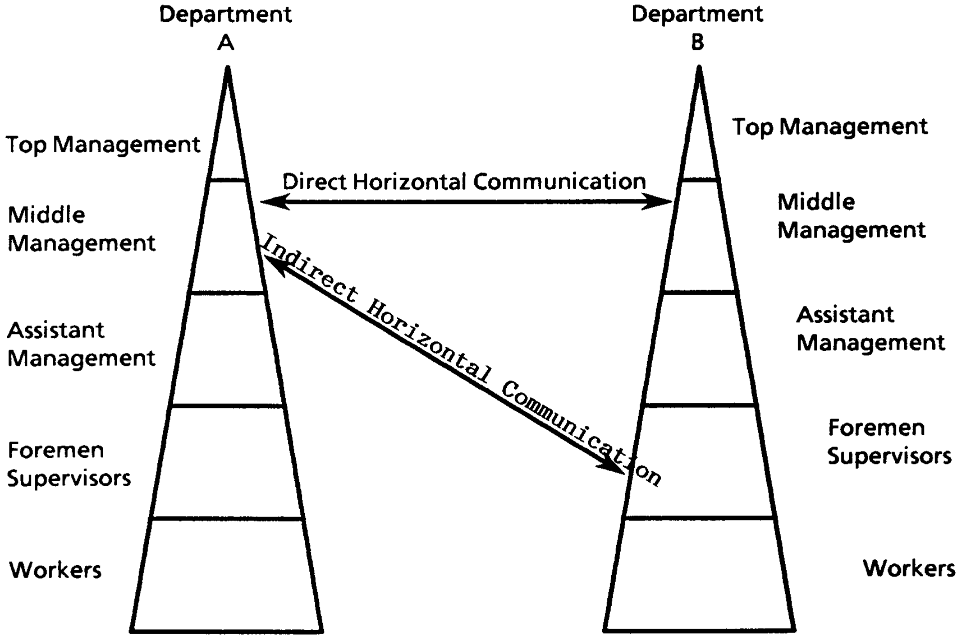
There may also be forums where both downward and upward vertical communication is facilitated. These are usually through meetings of management and worker representatives (trade unions) and are often referred to as ***joint consultative committees***. Occasionally, company or departmental-wide seminars about aspects of company policy may be held in which staff at all levels come together to discuss possible new developments, or to listen to an outside specialist and then talk over the ideas raised, on an equal basis.

Horizontal/Lateral Communications

Horizontal communication refers to the patterns of information flow between individuals in different departments or divisions within the same organisation. This form of communication may cut across the levels of authority as shown in the organisation chart, but is generally part of the formal lines of communication. Typically, it is characteristic of "staff" relationships.

There are various forms of horizontal communication, as illustrated by Figure 8.1.

Figure 8.1: Forms of horizontal communication



(a) Direct horizontal communication

This refers to the flow of information between individuals of similar rank or position, in different departments. In our example it is shown between middle management levels in the two departments, but it could be between any level in Department A and the similar level in Department B.

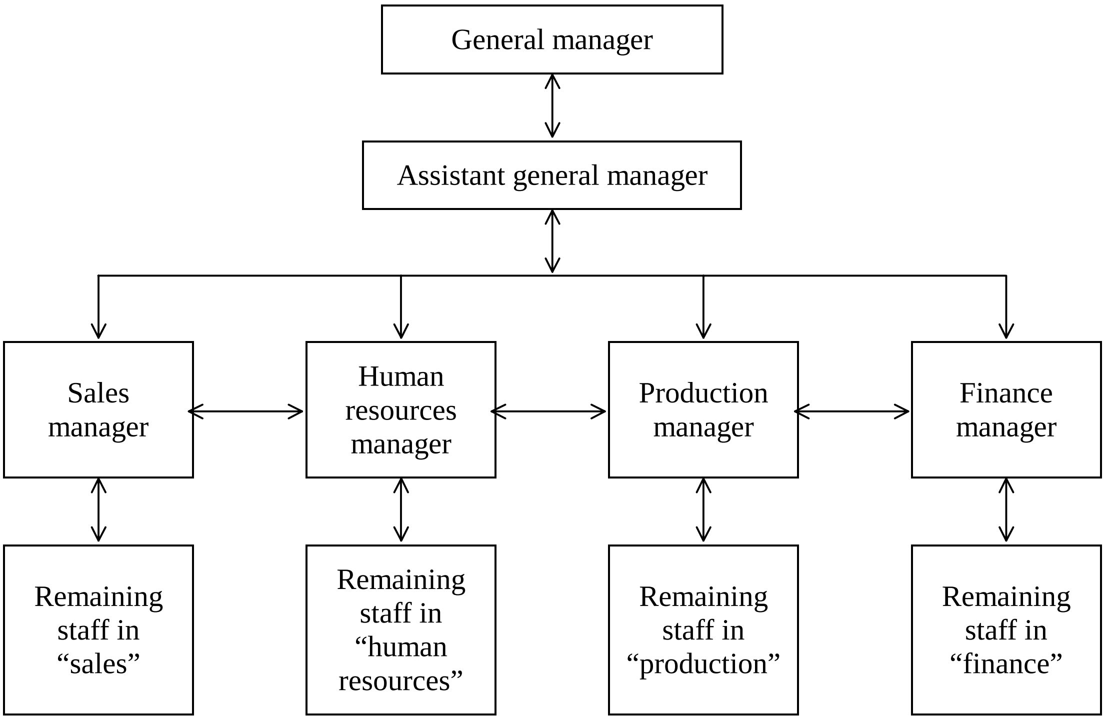
This type of communication ensures co-ordination of activities and goals and increases co-operation between line managers and functional sections of the organisation.

Things can go wrong through interdepartmental rivalry, with managers jealously guarding their own department boundaries to preserve status or power. Managers on the same level of command often have little understanding of the aims and objectives or the problems of other functional areas; production and marketing, for example, may be in conflict because of different goals and objectives – each having different priorities. Hence the vital importance of:

- Liaison teams
- Planning/control meetings
- Establishment and discussion of corporate plans and budgetary control for the whole organisation.

Figure 8.2 illustrates the lines of communication that functional managers may use, both vertical and horizontal.

Figure 8.2: Organisational communication chart

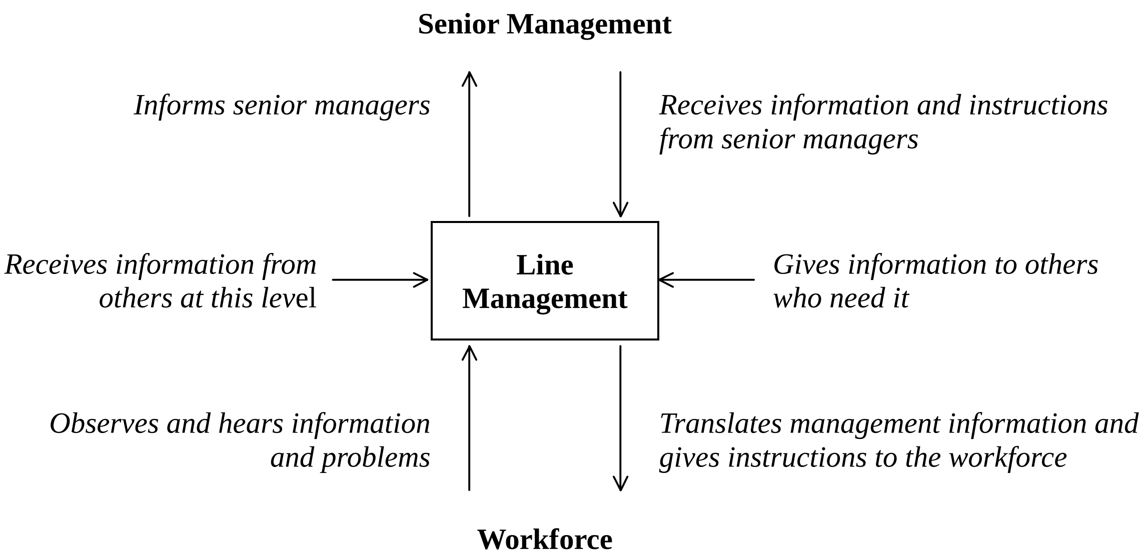


(b) Indirect horizontal communication

This refers to communication between one level in one department and a different level in another. In Figure 8.1, this is shown between middle management in Department A and foremen or supervisors in Department B.

You can see from Figure 8.3 that, in terms of this type of communication system, managers have a very important place at the centre of a communication web.

Figure 8.3: A Communication Web



The main forms of formal communication to facilitate horizontal communication are ***co-ordinating committees***. These are meetings of members of various departments to share knowledge, exchange ideas and develop co-operative procedures. They may take place at the level of departmental managers, or at any level within the departmental structure. Senior management in organisations often have a formal ***management team*** which meets regularly to ensure a common corporate approach is reflected in the aims and objectives of different departments.

Formal and Informal Communications

We noted above the distinction between formal and informal communication.

(a) Formal communication

Whereas vertical and horizontal patterns of communication are the formal paths along which information can flow, formal communication also refers to any message sent and received via official channels using the established office communication channels and communications media, such as a written memo, letter, report, notice or some form of formal verbal communication (such as an official warning for misconduct).

The advantages of formal communication are that it carries authority, and can convey a mass of complex detail. It is usually stored as a permanent record. Its main disadvantage is that it is often misunderstood because of the complexity of language and the use of jargon and may not be the best method for motivating subordinates and communicating to small, closely-knit groups.

(b) Informal communication

This is usually verbal, and is often used to pass unofficial information between individuals and small groups. Unlike official communication, it has no legal force. It is an important element of the “grapevine” which exists in every workplace.

Individuals concerned with the formal passing on of information may also pass along at least part of it to people they know informally within the organisation, in the form of gossip. The possession of information that is not yet known to other people can make an individual socially important in the eyes of fellow workers.

The grapevine does not carry with it the stamp of authority, and for that reason is often very powerful in motivating or demotivating small working groups. It is for this reason that management needs to use informal communication to ***persuade and educate*** – particularly in situations in which change has to be introduced into the workplace.

The grapevine can function to speed up or spread information widely within the organisation. It can be useful for the organisation if it wishes to spread information informally to test the reaction of workers without making an official announcement or order. However, it can also be dysfunctional (i.e. act against the best interests of the organisation) by making known information which should have been kept confidential, or which is incomplete or distorted.

There are certain key positions in the grapevine structure, and many of these are held by people in relatively low organisational positions, e.g. secretaries have access to a great deal of written material.

Management can use the informal network of communication as follows:

- By passing information to “key” people in the organisation – not necessarily senior personnel, but the informal leaders, the opinion-setters. This is particularly useful when complex and controversial plans for change are mooted. The opinion-setters can discuss the issues with others and so aid the educational and persuasion process in favour of the desired change.
- By using informal groups in a semi-formal capacity to “brainstorm” new ideas. Again brain-storming groups do not have to be senior staff.
- To sound out opinion before action is taken.

- To encourage "open door" availability at all levels of staff to discuss issues that are worrying them.
- To encourage participation in decision-making and to get feedback about current situations and problems at the workplace.

External Communication

Organisations have communication links with both their input and output connections. For example, a manufacturing firm will have communications with its suppliers of raw materials and spare parts, and with all its customers (e.g. wholesalers and retailers) who handle its products.

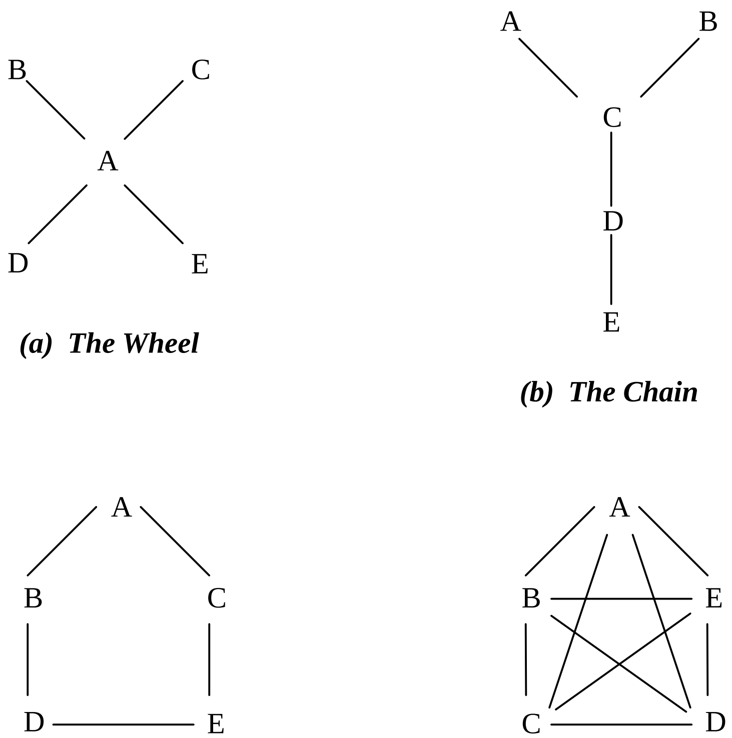
As organisations grow, the number of communication links with the **outside environment** increases. It is important that the external communication system should be integrated with the internal system. For example, an order received from a customer (external communication) has to be processed and executed within the organisation (internal communication), then the documents of sale, invoice, etc. have to be sent to the customer (external communication).

Communication Networks

Another way of classifying communications is into types of network. Communication networks are the patterns of individuals or groups who are the transmitters and receivers of information in a given organisation. Some patterns of communication are restricted, e.g. confidential financial information is made available to very few individuals. At the other extreme some sorts of information need to be disseminated widely and this results in a large, complex pattern.

Examples of communication networks are set out in Figure 8.4.

Figure 8.4: Communications networks



(a) The Wheel

(b) The Chain

(c) The Circle

(d) All Channel

It is not unusual to find differences between the organisational structure and the communications network in an organisation.

When modern managements decide upon the pattern for a given type of communication network they can draw on the "need to know" concept. This view argues that a network should contain only those individuals or groups who ***need*** to have a given type of information in order to achieve their objectives.