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Strategic change in organizational communication: emerging trends for wealth formation in the new millennium

- *This article reviews macro-related changes currently taking place within, and across, organizations and agencies.*
- *It surveys a wide-ranging literature examined against the background of projected important trends and strategic changes in organizational communication. Copyright © 2000 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

Introduction

In the industrial age, wealth was generally created by harnessing physical factors of production toward manufacturing products. In the post-industrialist era, product manufacture and sales are still important—and becoming more important with governments as they seek additional forms of revenue. Post industrialism is also characterized, however, by the central role information plays in wealth formation of various kinds—economic, aesthetic, cultural or other forms of wealth. Information and the communication of that information aids wealth formation in different ways, including providing intelligence for market strategy and investment management

or the sale of information, itself, via Internet services, CD-ROM, consulting reports or other forms. Government, business and hybrid organizations in developed and transitioning nations throughout the world increasingly heed the adage, 'Knowledge is power.'

Communication also has implications for increasing wealth in non-financial ways. For example, increasing environmental, natural wealth can come in economic terms (increased agricultural production resulting from information campaigns targeting soil erosion) or aesthetic terms (public information campaigns to preserve the diversity of wildlife). Wealth formation may even be non-economic as when communication increases cultural wealth by allowing the sharing of cultural heritage and

values through high-tech media, such as satellite television or low-tech media (for example, folk drama).

This paper traces, identifies and describes some of the emerging trends in organizational communication—defined as the conveying of information, attitudes and other forms of meaning within and among organizations—and draws implications for wealth formation of various kinds in the coming millennium.

Trend 1: the shift from internal to external and, increasingly, inter-organizational communication

Internal communication dominated the attention of organization and management theory until the 1960s (Garnett, 1997b) and much of the actual practice of organizational communication decades later. Katz and Kahn (1966) noted the dominance of internal, typically downward, communication channels within organizations. The overall shift from internal-dominated to external-focused organizational communication has been reflected widely (Grunig, 1997; Garnett, 1997b, 1997c; O'Toole, 1997; Lame, 1997; Harris, 1997; Korac-Kakabadse and Kouzmin, 1997). Significant in this trend has been the shift from preoccupation with internal communication to an emphasis in the literature, and in practice, on external communication, primarily aimed at public relations and public information (Garnett, 1997b; Grunig and Hunt, 1984; Grunig and Grunig, 1992) but also aimed at boundary spanning (Thompson, 1967; Harris, 1997) and inter-organizational communication via information/communications technologies (Korac-Kakabadse and Kouzmin, 1997).

The primary focus of communications units within government and business organizations—whether called departments or offices of public affairs, public information, or communications—has traditionally been on external communication. This occurred first with the media via news conferences and briefings, news releases and interviews and, later, adding communication with other stakeholder groups through annual reports, briefings and video.

Part of this trend is the realization that business and government communication is becoming increasingly inter-organizational in

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both theory and practice. Major cooperative effort in this information age, whether hosting and broadcasting an Olympics or mounting emergency responses to the 1999 earthquakes in Turkey and Taiwan, may be extreme examples of inter-organizational cooperation. Yet they are indicative of the reality that most managerial effort is, by its nature, interdependent. The actions and fortunes of one organization will increasingly be coupled with those of others in their organizational set and even beyond that set. It appears increasingly that Limerick and Cunningham's (1993) fourth 'blueprint' will continue to emerge, characterized by loose coupling, search for synergistic alliances, harnessing individualism to achieve cooperation and greater attention to the management of meaning. This fourth blueprint will necessitate better use of boundary-spanning strategies and greater emphasis on communication receiving as discussed later. Economic and managerial success will increasingly depend on external strategies to form resource acquisition, production and distribution networks. Companies, government departments, universities or other organizations that rely primarily on internal resources and communication will increasingly be at a disadvantage.

Trend 2: internal organizational communication will be more direct

Prognosis for a better balance between internal and external communication is guarded. The wave of downsizing among governments and businesses in developed, transitioning, and developing nations has already shown signs of reducing or even destroying an effective

communication capacity in many government organizations (Kouzman, Leivesley and Korac-Kakabadse, 1997). Previous and forthcoming downsizing in communications capacity threatens capability to provide a more balanced approach. Communication units, if they had sufficient numbers and expertise to advise administrators on internal communication design, conduct communication audits and assist in other ways, may, after downsizing, need to have specialists in one field assume additional specialties and some functions may no longer be maintained. At the same time, re-invention, re-engineering and other efforts leading to downsizing have eliminated many staff specialists and managers, especially middle managers, creating the need for new reporting relationships, different information flows and new informal dynamics.

The total implications of downsizing are not totally clear, however. The US government,

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through its National Performance Review initiative, aims to double the supervisory span of control from 1:7, in 1993, to 1:15 by eliminating 272,900 positions in overhead control in budgeting, personnel, audit, procurement, and finance (National Performance Review, 1996). The National Performance Review (1996, p. 217) report stated that

the goal of reduction in the workforce—especially the reduction of management control positions—is not only to save money but to improve the working conditions for frontline federal workers—particularly those who serve the public—and expedite the flow of information between top administrators and frontline workers by reducing decisionmaking bottlenecks.

Indications exist that, at least in some quarters, this strategy is working.

Some US government managers have reported that re-invention-produced down-

sizing has actually improved communication in their organizations. By eliminating sizable portions of middle management, top managers now must communicate directly with operating-level employees—those actually doing the work. This means that operating level employees have greater direct access to top managers for obtaining direction or clearances. The availability of e-mail systems has facilitated direct interchange between executives and operating level employees in these organizations. This experience was reported from only a few agencies, however. Without further, extensive, research the general effect of downsizing on communication capability cannot be accurately determined. It is reasonable to expect some necessary training and trial period for organizational executives in business and government and operating level employees to communicate effectively with each other without the customary phalanx of middle managers to translate and mediate. To the extent that such leaner communication channels can be made to work, they will enable significant reductions in personnel costs and increased profits for business and net revenues for governments and non-profit organizations and, potentially, increased incomes from those remaining employees who can make it work.

Trend 3: a growing focus on organizations receiving advice

Another direction emerging is the increasing commitment to receiving opinions, criticisms, advice and reactions from citizens customers and other stakeholders. Governments in a number of nations have instituted town meetings, telephone hot lines, ombudsmen, citizen's advocates, interactive web sites, e-mail systems, call-in radio or television programmes, surveys, polls and other mechanisms designed to elicit citizen interaction. Many businesses have paralleled this trend, mounting their own customer hot lines, web sites, marketing campaigns and other means of receiving, even soliciting, reactions and ideas from customers or potential customers. The penchant of major government and

business organizations to use polling and focus groups to test market ideas for policies or products is rapidly gaining favour in Australia, Europe and the US.

This trend has hardly been universal, however. Most businesses and governments, generally, still appear to be oriented more to sending information, whether advertising or propaganda, via broadcasts, new releases, reports, videos and other forms. There are clear indicators, however, that in many businesses and governments, increased emphasis on receiving advice has taken its place alongside the historically dominant sending mode.

External and internal forces exist that prompt organizations to pay more attention to listening and other forms of receiving. External forces include a growing tendency for stakeholders, whether shareholders, advocacy groups or others to more actively articulate positions. Tendencies toward more open annual shareholders' meetings or for the declining number of 'rubber-stamp' boards of directors are indicative of this trend. Another force working towards a better balance between communication sending and receiving is the doctrine within the re-engineering and re-invention approaches that stress customer-driven cultures and behaviour as well as worker participation. These forces have led to substantial receiving behaviour although the professional literature in these fields is short on specifics of how this more balanced communication is to occur (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992; Cohen and Brand, 1993). Another force increasing the receiving role has been the proliferation of voluntary association within groups and organizations outside government and business that has become known as 'civil society' (Coston, 1995). While the bonding occurring in such voluntary organizations (Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti, 1993) tends to influence government more widely, these organizations also affect the business sector, such as with the green movement in Europe (Roth, 1991) and elsewhere.

Invention and dispersion of certain technologies allow greater attention to receiving. Interactive technologies that enable television and radio call-in (talk-back) shows; e-mail;

decisionware; World Wide Web; electronic bulletin boards and other computer applications; interactive information and service kiosks, transform these communications media, permitting a more active rather than traditionally passive role for users.

Research and experience demonstrate the value of stakeholder involvement in creating behaviour change (Berolson and Steiner, 1969; Rogers and Storey, 1987; Garnett, 1996). For example, the television programme 'America's Most Wanted' has led to the capture of dozens of criminals by motivating and enabling citizens to provide leads and information. The effects of these interactive technologies on government's receiving role are augmented by the behaviour of those who promote these interactive media. Interactive, talk-back radio was instrumental in monitoring and fighting the bushfire around Sydney in 1994 (Kouzmin, Leivesley and Carr, 1997). Televised auctions, where viewers can actively participate, have produced increasing sales. Uses of interactive communications technologies will continue and expand. The immense popularity of talk shows, via call-in and studio formats, demonstrates the eagerness of people to take an active rather than passive role in acts of communication, even to the extent of people baring their most personal problems and feelings. Once citizens or customers have tasted action, they will be dissatisfied with a purely passive role.

Shareholders or customers exercising voice via satellite uplink in a corporation's annual meeting is no longer novel. The vision of a citizen being able to participate in national or regional referenda on policy issues, using their interactive televisions (televote), is already materializing in states such as Hawaii and nations such as New Zealand (Durning and Campbell, 1997). Such developments also raise serious issues. Widespread use of such technologies may enfranchise and empower the homebound but may also turn others into 'couch potatoes' who forego more active forms of involvement in civic or commercial life. Approaches that combine use of mass media with personal interaction can help prevent this potential problem. The 'Take a Bite Out of

Crime' campaign by the US Department of Justice, for example, combined viewing programmes on crime prevention with neighbourhood meetings where people could discuss what they had seen and heard while interacting with neighbours (Mendelsohn and O'Keefe, 1981).

Rapid changes in technology, political arenas, economic structure and other forces operating on a global scale will result in an increased need for boundary spanning to understand and adapt to these changes (Harris, 1997). Government and business organizations lacking sensitive boundary-spanning capability, whether systematic or *ad hoc*, will have difficulty thriving in the near future.

Based on this clearly emerging trend toward insistence on mutual involvement and on negotiated, rather than purely, objective meaning sent by organizations, managers and other decision makers in the coming millennium will need to be more attuned to their receiving role than their sending role. To sell products, services or ideas, organizations will increasingly need to involve customers/stakeholders/publics in the process of identifying and shaping goods, services and ideas.

Trend 4: increasing the globalization of communicative capability

According to Col (1997, p. 508), the amount and distribution of information, globally, has changed dramatically in the 1990s. 'Knowledge workers' in every country are generating greater amounts of information, which is becoming more accessible to greater numbers of people via the Internet and other forms of international communication, such as the global and regional television networks. Almost every country is linked to the Internet, with at least a few nodes, and global television is accessible in most urban and rural locations throughout the world.

Other sources attest to this globalizing phenomenon (Korac-Boisvert and Kouzmin, 1994; Korac-Kakabadse and Kouzmin, 1997; Korac-Kakabadse and Kouzmin, 1999). Ruch

(1989) contrasts the information age with the industrial age. He observes that in the industrial age, databases were numerous and scattered, information was shared worldwide via delayed transmission and human knowledge doubled approximately every ten years. In the present information age, worldwide databases are emerging, information is communicated instantaneously and globally, via satellite, and total human knowledge doubles every year (Ruch, 1989). Knowledge explosion and dispersion show no signs of slackening—witness the staggering proliferation of broadcast stations and sites on the World Wide Web. Computer and broadcast communication will increasingly link offices worldwide. In some developing or transitioning nations, communication technology is skipping over generations of technology. In parts of India, for example, telephone service may be unpredictable but many villagers have access to satellite television. Advances in communication technology are occurring so rapidly that speculating about the precise outcome of these advances, except that communicating devices are likely to become smaller and more powerful, is foolhardy.

The globalization of communication will continue to open up sizable new or under-tapped markets for goods and services by stimulating demand via advertising and programming from developed nations. This has occurred in China, India, eastern Europe and other areas. It would appear that two trade-off issues are salient in these instances: the balance between economic wealth formation of the developed, supplier nations and that of the developing market nations. Thus far, global communication has tended to favour wealth formation among developed nations and their multinational corporations. Secondly, there is the balance between economic wealth formation and cultural wealth disintegration as

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homogeneous programming and products (the Disney blitz) undermine cultural distinctions in nations or regions (Yngström, Berleur and Laufer, 1985; Korac-Boisvert and Kouzmin, 1994).

Trend 5: the increasing multiculturalism and diversity of communication

Related to the globalizing phenomenon are the issues of diversity and multiculturalism. Governments and businesses will, increasingly, need to take diversity issues into account when communicating with other governments, their external stakeholders and their own workforces. Diversity will increasingly come in the forms of race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, age and physical capability that affect international business (Irwin, 1997) and leadership (Korac-Kakabadse and Kouzmin, 1997). A useful body of knowledge has developed that addresses communicating in recognition of diversity (Hall, 1973, 1976; International Association of Business Communicators, 1982; Yum, 1988; Ruch, 1989; Goldman, 1990; Jamieson and O'Mara, 1991; Albert, 1992; Saros, 1992; Wiseman and Shuter, 1994). While these sources specifically address communication issues in managing diversity, an even larger body of knowledge treats diversity more broadly, including implications for communicating (Hofstede, 1980; Henderson, 1994).

Diversity of workforces and publics will continue in most nations. The diversifying of organizational communication can increase government's capacity to deal with increasing pluralism. Modern technologies will increasingly be used to bridge differences in language or physical capability among public employees or citizens. Where it is impossible to have someone on hand in an agency who can speak uncommon languages, services are available to help bridge that communications gap. Some telephone companies now offer language translation service that can be used to translate up to 143 languages and dialects 24 hours a day. Computers that can perform immediate translations will also see increasing use, as will TDDs (Telecommunications Device for

the Disabled) and TTs (Text Telephones)—adapted telephones which allow people who are deaf, hard of hearing or speech impaired to allow telephone communication through a computer-style keyboard. Electronic mail provides access to people with speaking or hearing impairments as do special computers and Braille printers provide access for the blind. E-mail or electronic conferencing can overcome some barriers with government publics while accentuating others. Electronic conferencing systems can have 'a liberating and leveling effect because they blank out race,

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age, gender, looks, timidity, and handicaps' (Roszak, 1986). Ideas and knowledge are more likely to take precedence than rank, status, appearance or other factors. Roszak (1986) goes on to caution, however, that the greater anonymity created by computer conferencing can result in lowered accountability and lead to slurs or offensive material. With much of the technology for permitting greater citizen communication with government, access to such devices and training for using them are keys. Relying on technology, even more advanced future technologies, to communicate with and through diversity would be misplaced, however. Without the understanding that comes with valuing differences, especially differences in cognition and decision making (Maruyama, 1994), technological approaches will address only the most tangible differences, such as language and physical ability.

More effective communicating that transcends value differences and utilizes the strengths of diversity promises to create additional economic and non-economic wealth by more fully involving as employees or customers those previously marginalized because of language, physical limitations, or culture.

Trend 6: the growing diversity and capability of communications technologies

Just as diversity among senders and receivers of organizational communication will increase, so too will diversity among communication media. Some of this increasing diversity will result from invention and innovation (Lame, 1997) of new forms of communication. Renewed, and sometimes innovative, use of existing media will likewise add to this diversity. Diversity of communication media will occur in both high-tech and low-tech forms. Interactive communication via television, radio, film, video-phone and computer will see more widespread and varied use.

Sensor relay systems have been used to detect forest fires in national or state forests before humans spot them; monitor weather conditions and monitor highway traffic patterns. Sensing technologies will get expanded use because they provide instant, or at least quick, feedback and can achieve truly global impact. Remote sensing satellite systems take pictures from space, transmit these pictures in the form of raw data to a relay satellite, communicate that data to a receiver on earth, convert raw data into photographs or computer tapes, remove distortions and aid in interpreting and analysing these pictures (US Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, 1990). Such remote sensing satellite systems will increasingly enable access to remote locations, where access is limited or previously denied, allow for real-time data recovery and enable repeated monitoring to detect changes in condition. Sensing systems and other forms of distortion-resistant communication will also receive more use in the future since messages tend to be relayed in their original form without interpretation (and possible distortion) by intermediaries along the way.

The diversity of media available to businesses and governments for sending and receiving communication will also be broadening through expanded use of more traditional, lower tech forms. Holzer (1997) articulates the value of government's sending and receiving through creative forms such as drama, film,

poetry, novel, art and music. The potential power of stories as communication forms will, increasingly, be rediscovered. Sagas, legends, proverbs, myths, folklore and other types of the story forms have influenced values and behaviour regarding government and administration (Hook, 1950; Young, 1983; Feierman, 1990). Stories are powerful forms of communication because they enable imagery, human

Stories are powerful forms of communication

interest, humour and personal identification with the story. The story's ability to engage as well as inform, inculcate or motivate will appeal to succeeding generations more conditioned to entertaining messages via television and even from newspapers and computer on-line services. Successful organizations will recognize, more fully, the value of stories, myths and anecdotes in building organizational culture (Peters and Waterman, 1982; Garnett, 1992). Organizations in the coming millennium will increasingly need to use humour in the future to 'lighten up' situations made increasingly conflictual by resource scarcity and interest pluralism.

Finding synergistic ways to link high-tech and low-tech communication media promises to pay particular dividends. An intriguing example was the development of CyberTracker Software. This software was developed by enabling experienced bushman trackers in South Africa to code-in symbols of animal tracks, bent grass and other signs that only experienced trackers understand. This most traditional of human knowledge and forms of communication is thus made available via Pilot Palm Field Tracker Computer to less experienced people to use in detecting poaching, identifying hurt animals that need medical care and where they are likely to be found, controlling pests and other functions. This harnessing of modern with traditional technologies is expanding eco-tourism, helping conserve wildlife and enhancing the self-respect of

trackers who, though unable to write, now have the satisfaction of sharing their considerable expertise with others and preserving the cultural wealth of traditional societies.

Trend 7: movement towards a more managerial approach to organizational communication

Communication functions within business and government organizations have tended to be means-oriented rather than ends-oriented (Garnett, 1997a). Communication staffs primarily have journalism training and have traditionally focused on the quality of communication *outputs* (wording of news releases, cinematography of promotion videos) rather than management *outcomes* (return on investment, change in recycling rate). A number of communication units within organizations were marginalized by not taking a managerial viewpoint (Grunig, 1992). Because of pressure from management and because of their own sense of professionalism, many professional communicators have worked to gain a greater managerial focus and administrators to gain a better understanding of, and appreciation for, communication. Communication units with a managerial perspective are able to contribute toward strategic planning, policy and programme implementation, boundary and environmental scanning, stakeholder analysis, product and issue marketing and agenda setting (Garnett, 2000).

Conclusion

A crucial part of this broader, more balanced communication focus is greater emphasis in assessing the results of organizational communication efforts. This will occur in spite of the fact that results of communication have been difficult to measure (Dozier and Ehling, 1992), requiring knowledge, creativity, persistence and resources. Overall there has been reluctance to measure communication results because of the political and administrative risks involved in potentially showing

inadequate performance. Relatively few communication units possess the expertise and resources to perform skilful evaluations. Other functions (procurement and personnel) have attracted more evaluation efforts because of the greater potential for economic savings. Impetus to evaluate administrative communication comes from other factors; ones that will ultimately prevail.

Increasing scarcity of resources will put pressure on managers to examine their performance in using resources wisely. The cry for accountability in management that demands demonstrated results will continue and intensify. When forced to demonstrate results of their efforts, or face cuts in personnel and budget, communication units will increasingly add capacity for evaluation. While appreciation of the subjectivity in communication is growing among scholars, such thinking has limited effect on practising managers and communicators who tend to view communication as objective reality and will be forced to evaluate it as such. Specifically, the phenomenological, critical and post-modernist views that stress the subjective, interpretivist side of communication will only have marginal impact on executives and managers who find these views difficult to understand and accept.

Some of the techniques currently available for assessing communication will get more use. These include communication audits (Goldhaber and Rogers, 1979; Downs, 1988; Falcione and Adrian, 1997), benefit-cost analysis (Ehling, 1992) and compensating variation technique (Ehling, 1992). Other assessment methods will, of necessity, be added to the current repertoire.

By taking an increasingly managerial, results-oriented focus, communication units will be more closely linked with organizational outcomes and able to show value-adding in terms of economic and non-economic wealth formation. Some communication units (by whatever name) will need to add staff trained in this managerial approach and some will need to re-tool existing staff. The combination of greater expectations of managerial and outcomes relevance and the greater capacity

to meet these expectations promises to make organizational communication more accountable and more contributing to organizational results.

These seven trends in organizational communication are hardly the only trends emerging. They are crucial trends, however, in their influence on organizational and inter-organizational performance and the ability of business, government and third-sector organizations to enhance economic and non-economic wealth.

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This article draws from an extensive, earlier exploration of communication trends (Garnett, 1997c).

Biographical notes

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