COMMUNICATION AUDITS

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Abstract

An audit is in essence an objective evaluation of a designated process. The practice is most commonly associated with scrutiny of an organization's financial health, and the principle of communication audits is clearly derived from this area. Communication audits have now featured in the literature for over 60 years. Research in this area reveals that, when implemented systematically, audits provide detailed information regarding the effectiveness of communication channels, sources and structures within organizations.

The rationale underpinning communication audits is that systems must be put in place to provide an objective picture of how well an organization's communication processes are functioning. The term 'communication audit' first emerged in the general academic literature in the early 1950s (Odiorne, 1954), and its use has since been frequently applied in business, human resources and public relations contexts. For example, researchers have drawn attention to its role in not-for-profit organizations (Lauer, 1996), in evaluating marketing communication messages (Schimmel *et. al.,* 2007), as an important ingredient of communication involving health professionals (Hogard *et al.,* 2005), as a means of evaluating levels of trust within the oil industry (Thomas et al, 2009), and as a method for evaluating communication in high technology product environments (Vaananen et al, 2012). Its pedagogical utility in the teaching of management communication has been asserted (Zorn,

2002), as has its value in employee relations audits and the effective management of internal communication in general (Ruck, 2015). Audits can also be readily employed to assess communication with customers, suppliers and other businesses outside the organization.

Communication audits share a number of characteristics with more established audit practices in such spheres as finance, medicine and accounting (Tourish and Hargie, 2009). These include:

1. *The accumulation of information.* In the case of finance, the goal is to check the efficacy of financial accounting procedures by sampling a representative cross section of transactions within the organization. In communication terms, a similar goal is to assess a sample of communication episodes, in order to determine key trends. This is the *diagnostic* phase of the auditing process.

2. *The creation of management systems.* Systems are developed to control the flow of information and resources over a given period. This is the *prescriptive* phase of the audit process.

3. *The comparison of extant practices with publicly declared standards.* A finance audit normally ensures that funds are appropriately managed and that efficient methods of financial management are being applied. Clinical audits monitor the effectiveness and efficiency of medical activity, and contrast both with national and international benchmarks. Communication audits provide similar performance benchmarks, generating a much enhanced ability to measure both performance and the impact of specific measures designed to improve it. This is the *accountability* phase of the process.

Considerable attention was devoted to the issue of communication audits by the International Communication Association (ICA) during the 1970s. A seminal text was published from the work of the ICA towards the end of the decade (Goldhaber and Rogers,

1979). This identified a number of key issues to be evaluated by a communication audit, including:

- The amount of information underload or overload for major topics, sources and channels of communication

- The quality of information communicated between various sources

- Communication relationships, including interpersonal trust, supportiveness, sociability and job satisfaction

- Operational communication networks (including for rumours, social and job related messages), and how they compare with formal networks

- Bottlenecks and gatekeepers of information

- Positive and negative communication experiences

- Individual, group and organizational patterns of actual communication behaviours related to sources, channels, topics, length and quality of interactions.

Other suggestions have been made as to what should constitute reasonable audit objectives in organizations. Cheney et al. (2004) identified various ingredients of organizational communication, which many communication audits therefore seek to explore. These include:

- *Symbols* (including logos, architecture, uniforms etc.)

- *Structures (*e.g. rules, reporting mechanisms, operating procedures)

- *Patterns* of practices (such as the informal means by which news is habitually spread)

- *Discrete messages* (particular announcements, CEO statements, or press releases)

- *Interactions* (such as those that might occur during performance appraisal interviews or disciplinary hearings)

- *Relationships* (such as those between different departments)

- *Narratives* (such as stories about how the organization was born, evolved or survived a crisis)

- *Meetings*

- *Networks* (both formal and informal)

- *Rituals* (such as coffee mornings or celebrations)

- *Myths* or stories (such as 'Jane got early promotion, and you can too')

- *Broad discourses,* (such as a company's firm belief in its ethical values)

It would be difficult, if not impossible, for one audit or audit process to look comprehensively at all of these. Much depends on immediate priorities and needs. Different tools, discussed in the chapters that follow, will be more or less appropriate for the study of the above issues, and the resources of the audit team concerned.

However, Tourish and Hargie (2009) argued that audits generally aim to tell managers and organizations:

- Who they are talking to

- Who they should be talking to

- What issues people are talking about

- From which sources most people get their information

- Whether information reaches people through the media, face to face discussions with managers, internal publications or other communication channels

- The impact of all this on working relationships

- What needs to change to optimise effective communication

In short, a communication audit helps to strip away myths, fears and illusions about the communication climate within organizations, and about the wider culture within which the organization works. In their place, it seeks to provide an accurate diagnosis of the organization's communicative health.

Gildea and Rosenberg (1979: 7) compared communication audits to 'an annual physical', viewing it as 'a sound diagnostic procedure that can pinpoint functions and dysfunctions in organizational communication.' Audits allow organizations to determine whether communication problems are interrelated, and facilitate the implementation of solutions on a company wide basis. Thus, audit measures typically focus on issues such as:

- Who is communicating with whom

- Which issues receive the most attention and arouse the most anxiety

- How much information people are receiving and sending on crucial issues

- How much interpersonal trust exists

- How the overall quality of working relationships can be characterised

These issues are among the core concerns of efforts to establish what has been termed 'organizational climate' (Amernic, Craig and Tourish, 2010). This 'reflects beliefs about the organization's environment that are shared among members' (Dickson *et al.,* 2006: 351). It is the result of interaction between an organization's structure, systems, leader behaviours and employees' psychological needs, and is strongly determined by people's emotional responses to a wide range of issues, including communication. Communication climate is therefore a crucial component of overall organizational climate.

Various attempts have been made to establish the ingredients of an ideal communication climate. In an early study, Redding (1972) identified five dimensions of communication climate as being of particular importance:

- Supportiveness

- Participative decision making

- Trust, confidence and credibility

- Openness and candour

- High performance goals

Creating such a climate involves five key information sharing practices, including communication about job, personal, operational, and strategic issues, alongside robust systems for upward communication (Robertson, 2005). In one sense audits amount to an investigation of organizational climate, which helps managers predict whether storms, earthquakes or sunshine lie ahead. In this way, major improvements in communication can be effected. When such evaluations are turned into quantitative and qualitative data, organizations acquire a clear, comprehensive picture of how things actually are. Communication audits therefore perform useful diagnostic and prescriptive functions in strategic management.

Having said this, Jones (2002: 469), in advocating a more 'interpretivist' perspective, challenges what she sees as an over-emphasis on notions of auditors as expert diagnosticians, bringing a special wisdom to management deliberations. Instead, she urges auditors to 'listen with a trained interpretive ear to a range of organizational choices, provide powerful feedback offered in an open and tentative spirit, and collaborate with members of an organization to frame inquiries, carry out investigations, and generate knowledge about communication.' Of the various methods that may feature in interpretivist audits, it has been suggested that the critical incident technique may be among the most valuable, since it focuses with particular force on how people make sense of organizational life (Hargie & Tourish, 2009). Despite this, there is some evidence that many assessments of internal communication focus on 'processes, channels, and volume of communication, not employee needs for content' (Ruck and Welch, 2012: 297). Interpretivist perspectives are less likely to follow in this path.

They are also more consistent with the growing emphasis on approaches such as sensemaking and language analysis in organizational studies. It follows that communication auditors should pay considerable attention to how meaning is constructed and to language in use – for example, in reports, memos, conversation and formal letters. The interpretive

challenge that this poses is to tease out the implicit, probable or possible meanings likely to be attached to the language concerned by different audiences.

DATA GATHERING

This normally proceeds in two phases. A small number of preliminary first round interviews familiarises the audit team with staff or customer views, as well as management concerns. Typically, a segmented sample of respondents will be randomly selected. Feedback obtained by this approach helps in the design of final questionnaires, if this is the main method to be used. A number of typical issues should be explored in preliminary interviews. The bulk of these are applicable to both internal and external audits:

- How decisions are made

- Communication channels

- Communication relationships

- Communication obstacles

- Organizational structure

- Feedback and responsiveness

- Key issues facing the organisation

A pilot test is vital before the main audit exercise is embarked upon. This makes it possible to detect shortcomings in the design and implementation of the data collection methods. Information technology has, of course, greatly simplified the process of survey data gathering. The pilot should not become so elaborate that it develops into a main study in its own right. For example, Tourish's (2007) study of upward communication in organizations, which eventually led to 105 interviews in four organizations, had a pilot study consisting of three interviews.

Data collection methods

The most comprehensive overview of audit data collection methods can be found in Hargie and Tourish's (2009) edited text. Traditionally, questionnaires have been favoured. These have multiple advantages, including ease of administration, and the accumulation of quantitative benchmarks against which future progress can be measured. However, the original ICA audit is exhaustive, time consuming for respondents and so imposes a cost burden on organizations that seek to utilise it. Various shorter questionnaires have therefore been developed (see Clampitt, 2009, for an overview). In addition to questionnaires, Hargie and Tourish (2009) have reviewed the utility of other audit measures including interviews, focus groups, log sheets and diary analysis, the critical incident technique and communication network analysis. Each has strengths and weaknesses, and the choice of method depends on such consideration as timeliness, cost, ease or otherwise of access, and whether breadth or depth of data analysis required.

Dissemination of findings

Once the audit has been completed a report is prepared, which should comprehensively describe and evaluate communication practices. It should be noted that this presents both opportunities and dangers. Audits often arouse increased interest and expectations. As a general rule, people recognise that everyone likes to sing loudly about their successes, while remaining mute about their mistakes. Thus, if an audit is followed by silence it will be widely assumed that managers are busy burying dreadful secrets in the basement. A key principle when confronted with bad news, if this is what emerges, is that it should be shared openly and quickly, thereby enabling those involved to at least gain credit for their honesty (Payne, 1996). The audit report, together with a related action plan by senior management, should therefore be available for all employees to read, and a brief and digestible summary should be widely circulated.

ETHICS

Those involved in conducting audits should also follow rigorous ethical standards. The following key ethical guidelines are commonly accepted by organizational communication scholars and should be borne in mind by auditors (Seeger et al, 2009):

- *Do not harm others*. The principle of *non-maleficence* should be followed. For example, no individual should suffer in any way during the collection of data or in the presentation of the report. Guarantees of anonymity or confidentiality must be adhered to.

- *Act professionally at all times*. Auditors themselves have to be appropriate ethical role models, practising what they preach. This means that all commitments given should be honoured.

- *Treat others justly*. The integrity of individuals needs to be recognised. All respondents should be treated equally, regardless of their position or power in the corporate hierarchy. Individually must know what is expected of them and how their responses will be processed.

- *Be open and honest*. The purpose and objectives of the audit should be made clear to all those involved. It is also important that the audit results are told as they are, and that no attempt is made to camouflage negative findings.

Recurring staff worries which tend to arise during audits include confidentiality, how widely available the results will be, and the time commitment required of audit respondents. The most difficult of these issues is confidentiality. Respondents are often wary of honestly expressing their views, in case what they say will be used against them at a later stage. It may be necessary to address these issues during initial communications with audit participants. The following general rules help:

- *Participants should be assured, orally and in writing, that their responses will be treated confidentially.* These assurances should be reiterated on a number of occasions - the more publicly, the better. The steps proposed to ensure confidentiality should be explained in detail. Most importantly, these promises should be kept,

- *Wherever possible, participants should be selected randomly.* This reinforces the message that the aim of the exercise is not to single people out in any way.

- *Only the audit team should have access to questionnaires, tape recordings or anything else that could identify individual respondents.* All such materials should be destroyed at the conclusion of the audit. This policy should be communicated clearly to all participants.

- *Care should be taken, in writing the report, to ensure that it does not inadvertently enable readers to identify particular respondents*. For example, if only one person works in the payroll department the report should not cite comments, good or bad, from 'a payroll respondent.'

- *Audit instruments should be administered well away from the gaze of managers.*

Normally, these procedures are sufficient to ensure that this problem is eased. However, it remains one of the strongest arguments in favour of using external rather than internal auditors. If a manager turns up to administer questionnaires or conduct interviews, or if the person concerned is viewed as being close to managers, confidentiality assurances have low credibility.

THE UTILITY OF COMMUNICATION AUDITS

Communication audits have the following methodological strengths:

- They permit auditors to identify the interpretations of reality held by all important actors in organizational life. This extends to customers and clients, increasingly recognised as having a vital contribution to make to the business planning process.

- Depending upon the method utilised, people are permitted to voice their views and feelings in their own words, while also recording on objective measurement scales their responses to communication issues which can be analysed extensively. By one means or another, audits explore individual perceptions of communication. Such perceptions sometimes disclose a harsher communication reality than senior managers had hoped or planned for. However, in the long run, organizational effectiveness is impossible without positive feelings towards the communication processes within the organization concerned, and with the external publics it serves. Audits bring the reality of how people feel to the fore. In many cases, this will be overwhelmingly concerned with acknowledging the existence of effective communication. Where problems are revealed, managers will have the advantage of knowing what obstacles they must overcome to move the situation forward.

- Common understandings of organizational life are identified. Despite the fact that audit participants will inevitably have many different perceptions, they will also agree on enough issues to facilitate the development of a strategy which will lead to improvements in communication climate.

- The understanding that participants have of communication episodes can be compared to formal organizational channels and systems, to explore the gaps that exist between imagined and real practice.

CONCLUSION

The communication audit approach to measuring and evaluating organizational performance was very popular, and generated a large volume of academic publications, in the 1970s. However, the number of publications declined in the 1980s and was reduced to a trickle in the 1990s. In essence, the lack of academic interest in audits occurred for two main reasons. Firstly, the primary focus for organizational analysts in this period was on theoretical

frameworks rather than applied concerns. Secondly, interpretive approaches were the driving force behind organizational investigation, influenced by a reflexive philosophical perspective on communicative enquiry. As a result, the audit approach tended to be perceived as positivist, scientific and prescriptive. It was viewed as being counter to the emergent intuitive approaches, and seen as a pragmatic management tool that would produce few new conceptual or epistemological insights into organizational functioning.

However, although there was a dearth of academic study in the latter part of the 20th century, practitioners were not deterred and indeed the audit approach became widespread in organizations. Innumerable consultancy companies now offer auditing as a core part of their business. Similarly, the process of auditing has always been included on most organizational communication courses, with students carrying out real-world audit assignments as part of their degree programmes. In this way, and despite the absence of academic research, the audit momentum was maintained. Perhaps not surprisingly, given this breadth of interest, the academic study of audits gathered pace at the turn of the century. The publication of a new Handbook on audits by Hargie and Tourish (2000) no doubt contributed to this. This was followed by a new edition of an established audit text (Downs and Adrian, 2004). Book chapters (e.g. Kazoleas and Wright, 2001), audit research papers (e.g. Hargie et al., 2002, 2003; Quinn and Hargie, 2004; Hargie and Dickson, 2007; Dickson et al., 2008), and critiques of audit methodologies (Gayeski, 2000; Dickson et al., 2003) followed.

The second edition of Hargie and Tourish's Handbook was published in 2009. Google Scholar identifies 109 publications between then and 2015 with 'communication audit' in their title, and over 100,000 with 'communication audit' somewhere in their text within the same time period. This resurgence of interest reflected the recognition that the audit is not just a positivist and top-down management tool, but that the equally valid interpretations of employees must be fully considered in the design and operationalization of audits. One

outcome from this has been the development of collaborative audit approaches (Jones, 2002). Increasingly, the audit is no longer regarded as simply a mechanistic exercise that is 'done to' employees, but rather one that can be 'done with' them as a collaborative venture. We anticipate continued academic, pedagogical and practitioner interest in communication audits in the decades ahead.

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