

## COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT IN HIERARCHICAL STRUCTURES

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**Abstract:** *This paper analyses the relationship between communication management and hierarchical structures, and between formal organisation structure and organisational communication patterns, providing thorough definitions of the concepts. It analyses the types of organisational structure (hierarchical/tall, flatter, flat, flatarchy, and holacratic) emphasising their strengths and weaknesses. The focus is on communication in hierarchical structure and on how hierarchical structures influence communication, and on possible effects of communication technologies on hierarchical structures. The paper also analyses the types of organisational structures from a double perspective: that of higher education organisations and of students' "organisations" (class, informal group, team, etc.).*

**Key words:** *Communication, hierarchy, management, organisational structure*

### INTRODUCTION

According to literature, **communication management** seems to be hindered by *encroachment* (“assignment of top positions in communication management departments or units to individuals without training or experience in the field”) and *glass ceiling* (“the more or less invisible mechanisms that prevent women – increasingly dominating communication management – from climbing to the top of the organizational ladder”) [19]. According to Stroch (2000, in [10]), “communication should be used strategically in order to build trust, commitment, mutual satisfaction, and mutual control of relationships with all the important stakeholders of the organization”.

**Organisational structure** is defined by specialised dictionaries as “the typical hierarchical arrangement of lines of authority, **communications**, rights and duties of an organisation” [4]. “Organisational structure determines how the roles, power and responsibilities are assigned, controlled and coordinated, and how **information** flows between the different levels of management” [4].

**Organisational communication patterns** are shaped by *formal organisation structure* (configuration, complexity, formalisation, and complexity), *communication networks*, and *superior-subordinate leadership* [11]. Jablin (1987, in [11]) claims that the configuration of an organisation, and, implicitly, **organisational communication**, is determined by:

- “**Span of control** (the number of subordinates reporting directly to a superior): frequency of communication may be affected by the span of control, but mode and quality of communication are not necessarily affected;

- **Hierarchical level** (an individual's position in a scalar chain, ranging from non-supervisory workers at the lower end of the scale to chief executive officers at the upper extreme): Hierarchical level raises the frequency of oral communication episodes; Higher-level organization members have been found to spend more time in message sending and receiving activities than their subordinates, being likely to generate a greater volume of communication; The communication behaviour of organization members may be affected by the interaction of hierarchical level and environmental uncertainty; The increase in communication as one moves higher in a hierarchy appears to be variable across

organizations and work environments; The messages of managers were longer, focused more on work-related topics, and more frequently contained negative affect; The use of electronic mail systems may be determined by hierarchical level; The volume of messages (sent and received) via electronic mail does not vary across levels, but the nature of messages is distinctive; Under conditions of high uncertainty, upper level managers take part in more conversations and meetings than do lower level managers;

- **Organisational size** (the total number of full-time and some percentage of part time employees within an organization): As organizational size increases, the quality of communication between superiors and subordinates decreases; There is no relationship between organizational size and the degree to which information and communication flow freely;

- **Sub-unit size**, i.e. communication networks or informal structure such as: *Total system network* (the communication patterns among all the individuals in the system); *Clique* (a subsystem whose elements interact with each other, to some extent more frequently than with other members of the communication system); *Personal network* (those interconnected individuals who are linked by patterned communication flows to any given individual)."

Research [20] shows that:

- Electronic channels, if used carefully, can flatten the traditional, hierarchical structure of any internal communication;
- Electronic channels, if used thoughtfully, provide employees at all levels of the organization with a sense of hearing things first-hand, from the top;
- E-mail is efficient for *information* exchange;
- Face-to-face interaction is the preference for *communication* among all groups of employees;
- Interpersonal communication is important to employees no matter level of the organization;
- Meetings, though time-consuming, are appreciated as channels for feedback and for providing face time with top managers.

An organisation's objectives and strategy determine its structure. According to specialised dictionaries, there are two main **types of organisational structure** – *centralised* and *decentralised*:

- In a *centralised structure*, most of the power of decision and control of the different departments and divisions are in the hands of top management;
- In a *decentralised structure*, the power of making decisions is shared with the different departments and divisions that may enjoy some kind of independence.

The study of the relationship between organisational structure and communication type started back in the 1960s.

[3] Studied organisational communication in relation to three dimensions of organisational structure: "*complexity* (the degree of personal specialization), *centralization* (the distribution of power), and *formalization* (the emphasis on rules and regulations)", and found that the volume of communications between departments, both scheduled and unscheduled, is higher in more complex organizations; that job descriptions are negatively related to the frequency of interaction in each category except for communications on the same status level within the same department; and that, in decentralized organizations, there is greater interdepartmental communications in all directions (at a higher level, at the same level, and at a lower level in the chain of command) and fewer intradepartmental communications on the same level and downward.

This article compares the different organisational structures and the way communication is managed within them, without neglecting the effect of communication technologies on hierarchy.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Books and articles published in the last 50 years were studied in the analysis of communication in hierarchical structures.

The **comparative method** was used to determine which type of hierarchical structure best suits effective communication.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

Organizational structures, primarily those linked to bureaucracy and hierarchy, often create barriers that impede communication [1]. Moreover, hierarchies tend to distort communication (Leavitt, 2004, in [4]). There are observable boundaries between individuals in structuring communications inside the firm: *organizational boundaries* (strategic business unit and function memberships), *spatial boundaries* (office locations and inter-office distances), and *social categories* (gender, tenure within the firm) [13].

According to [14], there are not two (*centralised* and *decentralised*), but five types of organisational structure – *hierarchical*, *flatter*, *flat*, *flatarchy*, and *holacratic*.

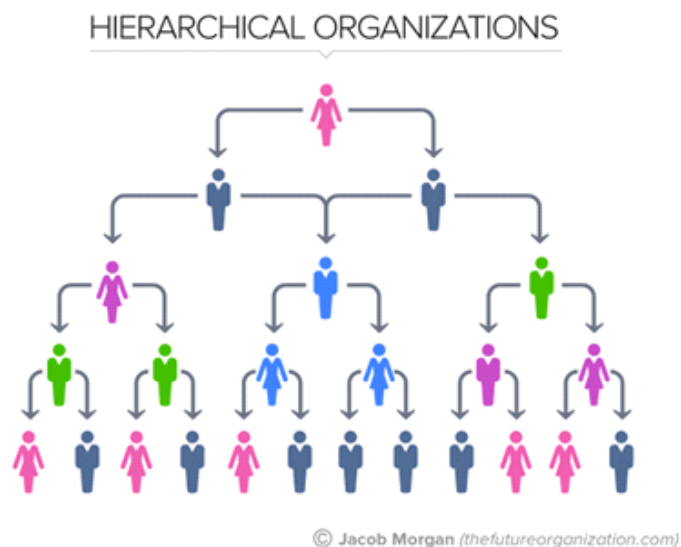
### *Hierarchical organisations*

A **hierarchical organisation** is defined as a “common, pyramid-like organisation where one person is in charge of a functional area (engineering, finance, and marketing) with one or more subordinates handling the sub-functions. In a hierarchical organisation (whether business, military, political, or religious) higher levels imply greater superiority and domination than the lower ones, and the chain of command extends straight from the top to the bottom” [4].

A **hierarchical / tall organisation** (Figure 1) is characterised by [14, 16]:

- *Strength*: Reliable at maintaining the *status quo* (“the existing state of affairs, especially regarding social or political issues” – cf. [15]);

- *Weaknesses*: Bureaucracy-riddles environment; Extremely sluggish environment; Neglected employee experience; Stagnating innovation; Suffering engagement; Virtually non-existent collaboration.



**Figure 1. The traditional hierarchical organisation (from [14])**

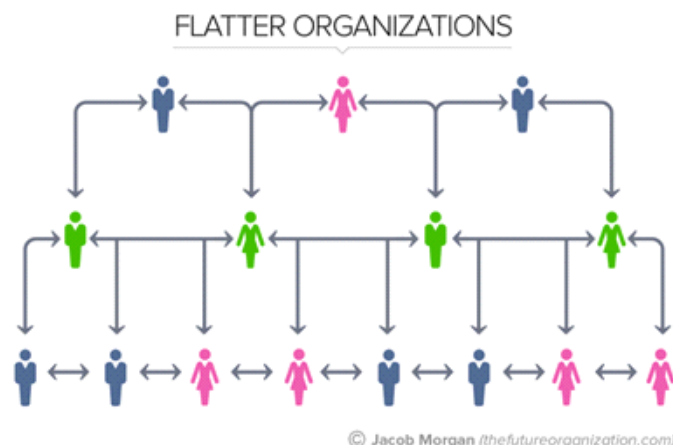
In this type of structure, **communication** typically flows from the top to the bottom (it is a one-way communication). [7] showed that an organisation's optimal level of openness of communication is affected by the effectiveness of recruiting good line managers, by job design, by the monitoring of personnel decisions, and by wage structure. [5] claimed that hierarchical organisations tend to channel communications vertically, detrimental to inter-departmental or inter-agency communication: there are communication barriers when there is no shared jargon for the members of different departments to communicate on the same level. There may also be cases when departments purposefully withhold information from each other. [21] wrote about M-form hierarchy (in which mutually more dependent divisions are grouped together) and U-form hierarchy (in which mutually fewer dependent divisions are grouped together), and found that the latter leads to more informative communication. "Steeper hierarchies can either impede or facilitate intragroup communication, depending on factors such as the level of coordination required by the group's work, and the level of psychological safety in the group" [1]. From an academic perspective, this type of organisation pretty much describes the situation of a nowadays' university, be it in a reformation process. This observation does not apply to student "organisations" (informal group, team, etc.).

#### *Flatter Organisations*

A **flatter organisation** (Figure 2) is characterised by:

- *Strengths*: It is the most logical, practical and scalable approach to deploy within an organisation; There is a strong focus on challenging the status quo around the traditional management model; There is a strong focus on collaboration; There is a strong focus on communication; There is a strong focus on improving the employee experience;

- *Weaknesses*: There is less time to build and use lateral communication chains; There is still some form of hierarchy.



**Figure 2. The flatter organisation (from [14])**

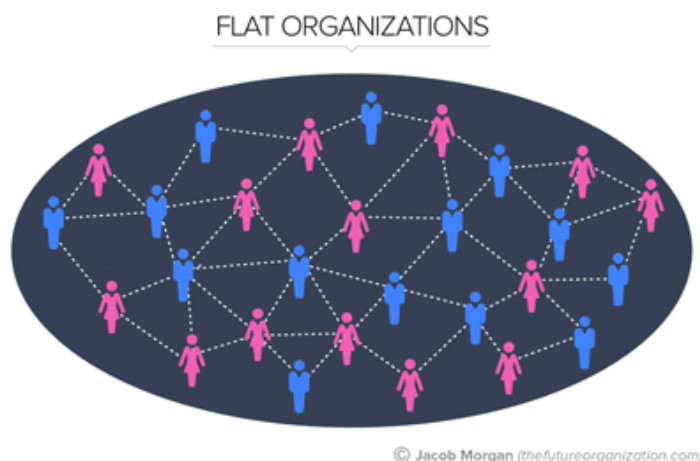
In this type of organisation, the lines of **communication** are opened up (it is a two-way communication): there is no particular order of communication, communication paths are shorter, and communication is speedier and more accurate and effective [12]. For [16], companies with flat organizational structures can more easily communicate with employees at all levels because: Barriers between top-level managers and front-line employees are removed; Communication is faster and more effective; Communications flow across the organization instead of from the top down; Informal communications and honest critiques occur between peers more easily than from managers to subordinates. To

solve the problem of horizontal communication channels, [2] propose minding two simple rules for organizing communication nets: equalitarian networks (preferred over hierarchical), and at least two channels of communication with the rest of the group per person. From an academic perspective, this type of organisation would be ideal for universities, but faculties' resilience could hinder its establishment. As for student "organisations" (be they class, informal group, team, etc.), they would welcome the adoption of this type of "organisation".

#### *Flat Organisations*

A **flat organisation** (Figure 3), also termed **matrix structure** ("a 'mixed' organizational form in which a normal hierarchy is overlaid by some form of lateral authority, influence, or communication", e.g. *Syngenta*) [17], is characterised by:

- *Strength*: Everyone is seen as equal;
- *Weaknesses*: Accountability and reliability are issues; Informal hierarchies automatically get created based on seniority; It is not practicable or scalable for larger organisations; It tends to develop cliques.



**Figure 3. The flat organisation (from [14])**

In this type of organisation, **communication** is open but challenged by cliques ("small close-knit groups of people who do not readily allow others to join them" – cf. [15]). According to [6], "flattening a hierarchy will increase the perceived responsibility of subordinates ('responsibility-alleviation' falls), but decrease the perceived responsibility of superiors ('responsibility-diffusion' rises)". From an academic perspective, this type of organisation is not a good choice given that universities are large organisations and that faculties are not really all equal. In exchange, student "organisations" (be they class, informal group, team, etc.) seem to be more willing to adopt this type of "organisation".

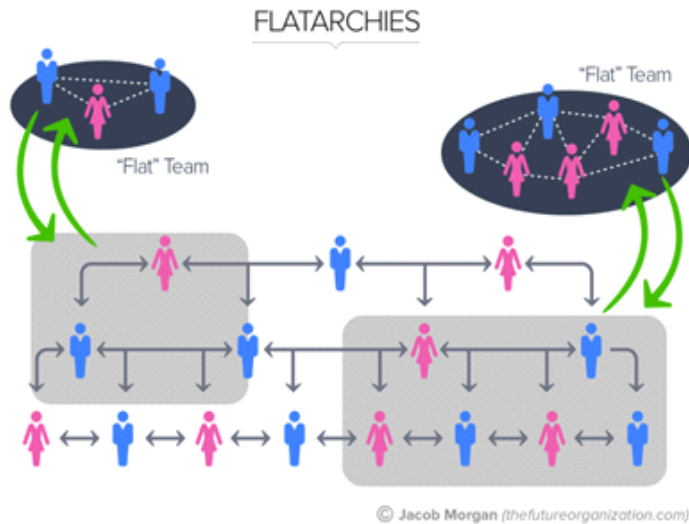
#### *Flatarchies*

A **flatarchy** (Figure 4) is characterised by:

- *Strengths*: It allows *ad hoc* teams; It can work within any type of company; It focuses on innovation; It is dynamic in structure; It is quite powerful;
- *Weaknesses*: It is a more temporary structure that creates isolated pockets of new structures when needed; It is more disruptive than other types of structure; There is hierarchy.

In this type of organisation, a combination between hierarchical organisation and flat organisation, **communication** flows from the top to the bottom, is open but challenged

by cliques. Some of the strengths of this type of organisation would be beneficial for any university, but its specific weaknesses do not recommend it for higher education institutions. Innovation, dynamism, and power are the strengths for which students would embrace this type of “organisation”.

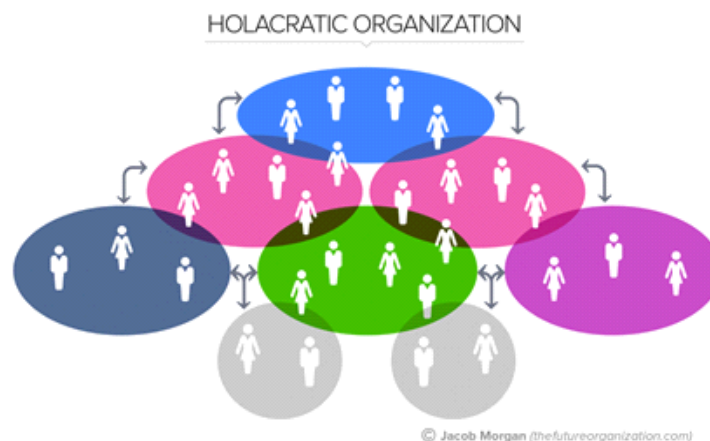


**Figure 4. The flatarchy (from [14])**

#### *Holacratic Organisations*

A **holacratic organisation** (Figure 5) is characterised by:

- *Strengths*: Decision-making is distributed; Everyone is given the opportunity of working on what they do best; Information is openly accessible; Issues are processed within the organisation during meetings;
- *Weaknesses*: It is viable for small- and medium-size organisations; There is still some hierarchy.



**Figure 5. The holacratic organisation (from [14])**

In this type of organisation, **communication** is easy and of the two-way type. Despite its strengths, this type of organisation is not recommended for higher education institutions because it does not fit large organisations. However, given the size of students’ “organisations”, we believe they would gladly embrace it.

### Effects of Communication Technologies on Hierarchy

Communication technologies can have effects on hierarchy, according to [9] (Table 1). According to Leavitt [2], while one-way communication is most suited for fast transmitting of simple commands, two-way communication is preferred in the long run, when accuracy and efficiency are preferred over speed and simplicity.

**Table 1.**

**Potential effects of communication technologies on hierarchy (after [9])**

|                       | Bottom up (↑)                          | Top down (↓)                                |
|-----------------------|--|---|
| Access                | Open access                            | Restricted access to relevant information   |
| External monitoring   | Countercheck management positions      | Violating privacy                           |
| Information storage   | Transparency                           | Information overload                        |
| Internal monitoring   | Traceable collaborative work           | Surveillance                                |
| Outgoing information  | “Polyglot” external communication      | Public relations monopoly                   |
| Permeability          | <b>Overleaping of hierarchy levels</b> | Communication triage                        |
| Scope for development | Use of creativity enabling software    | High regulation by use of digital templates |
| Skills                | In-house trainings on new technologies | Digital divide                              |
| Specialisation        | <b>Reduction of formal hierarchies</b> | <b>Emergence of informal hierarchies</b>    |

### CONCLUSIONS

*The following conclusions can be drawn from the analysis above:*

- *Communication management* is hindered by encroachment and glass ceiling;
- *Communication* is part of any organisational structure;
- *Organisational communication patterns* are shaped by formal organisation structure, communication networks, and superior-subordinate leadership;
- *Organisational communication* is determined by span of control, hierarchical level, organisational size, and sub-units size;
- There are *three observable boundaries between individuals in structuring communications inside the firm*: organizational boundaries, spatial boundaries, and social categories;
- There are *five types of organisational structure* – hierarchical, flatter, flat, flatarchy, and holacratic, each of them with strengths and weaknesses;
- *Flat and flatter organisations* are increasingly preferred at global level due to their efficacy;
- *Communication technologies* have potential effects on hierarchy.

**The types of organisations** analysed above show that there are strengths and weaknesses in each of them from the perspective of both higher education institutions and students’ “organisations” (class, informal group, team, etc.). University managers should weigh both strengths and weaknesses when deciding the type of reform – and, implicitly, of communication – to embrace for their institutions.

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